

Intergenerational views on the future of transport

Glenn Lyons, 11 June 2023

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On 8 June 2023 the 16th event in the PTRC Fireside Chat series took place. Throughout the series we have always ensured gender balance on our panels. On this occasion, with the topic of interest being to explore different generational perspectives on the future of transport, it was inevitable that our panel composition should reflect multiple generations.

George Orwell said “Each generation imagines itself to be more intelligent than the one that went before it, and wiser than the one that comes after it.” Meanwhile Gloria Steinem said “We need to remember across generations that there is as much to learn as there is to teach”. Taken together it seems evident that we would all do well to recognise a tendency towards egocentric thinking and make a conscious effort to listen to and learn from others. Indeed, what a privilege it can be to speak to elders who have trodden the path before us and also to speak to those younger than ourselves who sense how the path may be changing. Yet how often do older professionals nod in agreement that it is important to hear from earlier career professionals and then fail to go beyond hearing to truly listening? Younger professionals can also at times fall short of listening too to those longer in years.

I had the pleasure of chairing the online discussion with the panel above in which we explored their views on the future of transport and matters of age and perspective. If you weren’t in the audience on the day, you can watch the recording of the event on [YouTube](#). What follows is a summary account of the event which I hope captures the key points that arose. Any misrepresentation is my own.

An 'executive summary' set of teasers

1. Gloria Steinem said "We need to remember across generations that there is as much to learn as there is to teach".
2. Active travel makes children (and adults) happy – and then before you know it, having your driving licence taken away in later life can feel like your life is over.
3. 16-24-year-olds stress the need to get 'buses right' before moving on to more innovative transport topics. And make public transport cheaper.
4. Rosie Lyons (aged 11): "Because of what we're doing now, we're affecting everybody else in the future. We're here not worrying about it but people in a good 50 years' time, if there are going to be people in 50 years' time, are gonna be worrying about it then. They're gonna be thinking if we had, if people had, done something before then we might have actually had a chance to have a better earth."
5. From half a century of professional experience it is apparent that the transport profession evolves and responds too slowly in a changing world.
6. We may need to start teaching 'polymathematics' at universities – we need professionals to be more medieval – able to not only specialise but be conversant with a wider sphere of understanding (better systems thinkers).
7. What's the burn (motivation) that keeps emerging professionals in the transport sector? Perhaps we should take more trouble to ask them, unlike the way it was in the past: "anybody who was 50 would have been very unlikely to listen to anybody in their 20s".
8. "Agency is removed from the old and agency is not given to the young".
9. Younger people today, who have grown up amidst a deluge of information, can have an appetite for being well informed and have good 'bullsh*t detectors'.
10. How many more shocks and how much bigger do the shocks need to get before government and the public wake the hell up and start making fundamental changes to address climate change?
11. How much more might the way we interact as humans change as we move through generations and the metaverse potentially makes its way into the mainstream in the future?
12. "When I was a child in in the 60s my parents had a very real fear of nuclear annihilation to do with a cold war" – can this offer some comfort to the Gretas and Rosies of this world – i.e. that fear has been known before and a way through has been found?
13. 70% of children think adults are not doing enough to tackle climate change "so let's make sure we are doing as much as we possibly can", "recognise that the children are watching".
14. There can be much wisdom on little shoulders but to benefit from it you have to actually listen rather than only hear, and sometimes busy and preoccupied parents can be guilty of doing the latter rather than the former.
15. We would all do well to recognise a tendency towards egocentric thinking and make a conscious effort to listen to and learn from others.
16. Let's embrace more reverse mentoring in our professional and personal lives.

Setting the scene

I had two bonus contributions to include in my introduction for this Fireside Chat.

The first came from my colleagues Sarah Collings (Senior Research Fellow in Transport and Young people, Sarah.Collings@uwe.ac.uk) and Kiron Chatterjee (Professor of Travel Behaviour, Kiron. Chatterjee@uwe.ac.uk) in the Centre for Transport & Society at UWE. The second was from my 11-year-old daughter Rosie.

Transport to Thrive

The text below comes from Sarah (research lead) and Kiron (project manager) and shares insights from a project considering those aged 16-24.

Context

The experiences and needs of adolescents and young adults are not often well scrutinised in transport policy and research.

Yet this age group has notable and distinct needs from the transport system:

- they are more reliant on public buses than older age groups with two in five 16–24-year-olds using buses frequently¹,
- two out of three young people in this age group do not have access to a car¹,
- most 16 to 24 years olds experience a series of major changes such as leaving education, starting employment, and moving house. These are times when transport needs are likely to change and be prominent in young people's lives².

Over the past two years, the Transport to Thrive project has been talking directly to young people. We have worked with a panel of young advisors aged 16-24 who have guided us throughout the project.

We have also held research interviews with eighteen 18-year-olds from urban, suburban, and rural areas to explore the role that transport plays through a major life change, leaving compulsory education.

The Transport to Thrive project wanted to share three reflections from this engagement, to challenge today's discussion on future transport:

First, don't forget the basics, don't forget buses.

Young Advisors told us that we should focus on bus policy as a top priority. This reflected the challenges they faced in making basic journeys due to expensive or inadequate bus services.

They stressed the need to get 'buses right' before moving on to more innovative transport topics.

When asked what the single most helpful thing policy makers could do to support the 18-year-olds we interviewed, most young people responded saying cheaper public transport.

¹ Chatterjee, K. et al. Access to Transport and Life Opportunities. Department for Transport, 2019. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/access-to-transport-and-life-opportunities>

² Clark et al. Life Events and Travel Behaviour: Exploring the Interrelationship Using UK Household Longitudinal Study Data. Transportation Research Record: Journal of the Transportation Research Board Vol. 413, 2014. <https://uwe-repository.worktribe.com/output/812583/life-events-and-travel-behavior-exploring-the-interrelationship-using-uk-household-longitudinal-study-data>

Second, value and plan for the spectrum of journey types that young people want to make to reduce motivation for future car ownership.

We asked school leavers at interview how they saw themselves travelling in 10 years' time. Almost all young people saw car ownership as a part of their future.

For many, owning a car was less important for day-to-day journeys, but more so for leisure, weekend, and one-off trips.

By not valuing and planning for these types of trips in our transport system, we will fail to tackle the drivers of car ownership.

Third, better understand how transport supports young people's futures and factor this into design

Unsurprisingly, our interviews with young people showed how public and active transport had been fundamental to the choices young people had throughout adolescence for life-defining opportunities such as colleges, work experience, and part-time employment.

However, our interviews also highlighted more nuanced pathways through which public and active transport impacts young people.

Notably, for many young people we spoke to, the act of making journeys independently improved their confidence and life skills. Having the chance to make new and longer journeys improved self-esteem and expanded horizons.

Transport plays a crucial role in supporting young people's transition to independence. We should be thinking about how a future transport system can recognise and support this.

Links to project:

- Webpage: [Transport to Thrive - Sustrans.org.uk](https://www.sustrans.org.uk)
- Fair Bus Fares for Young People policy briefing: [Fair Bus Fares for Young People Policy Briefing | Research, Business and Innovation blog \(uwe.ac.uk\)](https://www.uwe.ac.uk/research/business-and-innovation/blog/fair-bus-fares-for-young-people-policy-briefing)

An 11-year-old's perspective

At 7am one morning, without prior warning, I asked a still sleepy Rosie Lyons "Rosie, what are your thoughts as someone aged 11 when you imagine the future of transport?". What she said in response is set out below.

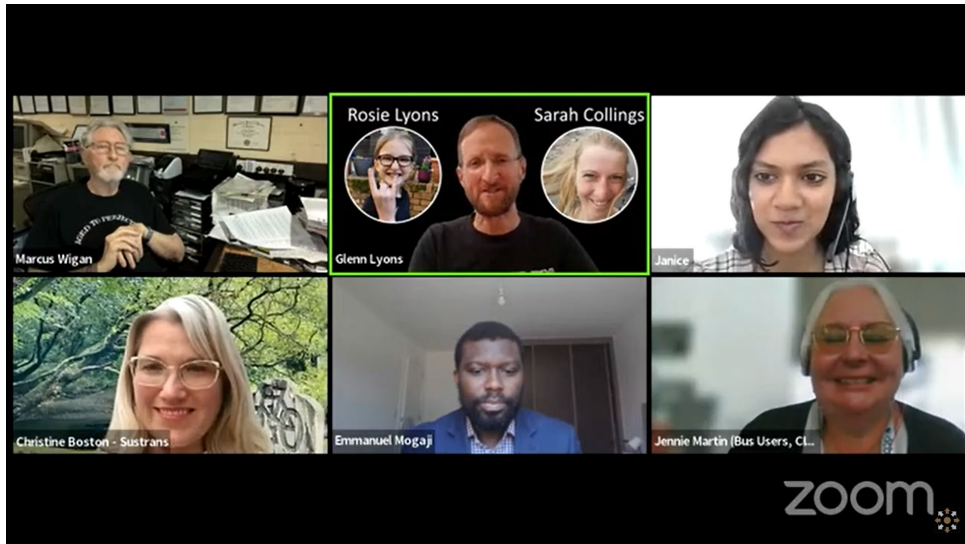


"I don't know, you've put me on the spot....."

In like a good 40 years' time, who knows, we might be on the verge of everything going away, to the point where NOTHING would be here.

Because of what we're doing now, we're affecting everybody else in the future. We're here not worrying about it but people in a good 50 years' time, if there are going to be people in 50 years' time, are gonna be worrying about it then. **They're gonna be thinking if we had, if people had, done something before then we might have actually had a chance to have a better earth.**

And right now transport.... everyone's putting out these fumes from their cars which equally means we're putting out fumes into the world and then if we had a more sustainable way of transport – like biking, going on a train – we would equally have more years to live on the earth, this amazing planet that humans CAN live on."



Over to our panel



Christine describes herself as a woman of midlife who also cares for her four-year-old son and 75-year-old mother who lives with dementia. She is also a passionate advocate for active travel and sustainable and inclusive transport with a vision of a transport system that allows all people - regardless of age, background and economic status – the opportunity to leave the car at home. Her son – and other school **children – want attractive, safe places where walking and cycling can bring them joy, safe from the motor car** – “*when we ask children how active travel makes them feel, ‘happy’ is always the top response*”. Meanwhile Christine shared an experience about her mum’s life that speaks to the importance of access and independence to so many older people: “*my mum was assessed for her dementia – she was made aware that her driving licence could be at risk, and she said to me ‘if they take my licence off me, my life will be over’ – that is how she felt and three weeks later this is what happened*”. Christine considered this **a sad reflection of a transport system that cannot offer people independent travel beyond the private car**.

Christine left me with a sense that, if we are not careful, we go from young children who cherish the joy of active travel to an addiction to the car that in later life comes back to haunt us.



It was late evening for Marcus over in Australia. 70 years separate Marcus and Rosie in age. He says he retired 16 years ago – though by all accounts he remains a lifelong learner and scholar, with an illustrious set of qualifications across multiple disciplines to his name. He has over a half a century of working in the transport profession and many of the topics under debate in the present he recognises from the past. Yet he observes that **progression of topics and their application has been frustratingly slow to come into the transport profession and sector**. Amongst multiple examples, he points to that of the immense expansion over time of data and its availability and affordability with great opportunity now, for instance, to develop digital twins, and yet it does not seem apparent that transport authorities are supported by the profession to take advantage of this. He **wants to see the transport profession and sector adapt and change more quickly**, taking advantage of planning approaches in other fields.

My strong sense from Marcus was that he has witnessed a transport profession enriched by a growing array of disciplinary perspectives over time as well as witnessing the perennial problems faced in the sector alongside the frustration that being able to adapt and to seize opportunities for improvement have come too slowly. A question from the audience followed – so how do we speed things up? Marcus believes the answer may lie in drawing upon multiple disciplines order to make more coherent and compelling cases to influence the political decision making.



By comparison to Marcus, Janice is at a much earlier stage in her professional encounters with the transport system. Now based in the UK, she grew up and worked in the UAE in the field of Intelligent Transport Systems, before now focusing upon future mobility. She wanted to outline three themes in relation to the Fireside Chat topic: burn, concern and learn. **Burn – she asks “*why am I still in this role and what is keeping me going?*”** In beginning her answer she quotes philosopher Simone Weil: “to be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul”. In turn Janice refers to the notion of being uprooted when a person feels unable to take part in society. **She is motivated as a professional (her ‘burn’) to help ensure no-one is excluded or uprooted (because of transport).** Concern – this for Janice resonates with the work from Sarah and Kiron with the idea that **our sector can get distracted by shiny things – new and exciting innovation potential – and neglect the basics people need.** People want to join the bandwagon chasing hyped developments. *“I was just wondering, how would it be like if we had the same fervour to put in bus lanes or bus priority measures; what would a national bus priority strategy look like?....It makes me wonder whether we are forgetting the boring basics”*. Learn – she is keen to understand from older generations what her generation should be doing differently because it seems **we have known for some time what needs to be done but we struggle to get them done** (linking back here perhaps to what Marcus had said).



Emmanuel is an academic researcher with an interest in transport services. He describes himself as a middle-aged man with children (youngest five and oldest eight) – children who experience the joy of cycling to school referred to by Christine. By working at a university he also engages with millennials. He reflects upon how young people’s experiences can differ – the prospect of millennials at universities experiencing cycling in a campus environment compared to cycling in the city; and his upbringing in Nigeria where he only once went on a train as it was not the done thing and yet now as investment in rail has increased, younger people today experience the excitement of going on a train. **There is much to understand in terms of diversity of populations and cultures and their awareness of and appetite for different transport options.** As an academic in a business school, Emmanuel sees transport very much as a service which in turn means **a need to understand transport’s customers – to segment them in order to better align service provision with customer need.** He recognises how he has changed over time and now wants to look forwards to helping his children and others to have positive transport experiences that shape their future attitudes and behaviours.



Jenny joined us from a transport trade show and observed a group of apprentices near her that she imagined *“being sent out here to mingle with us older ones”*. She is semi-retired and continues to engage enthusiastically across a number of roles. Jenny reflected upon her younger years growing up on an estate that has been designed and built in an era when *“it wasn’t envisaged that anybody living on that estate would own a car”*. It was a true 15-minute city. Yet now she sees the

imposition of a car-centric society on our built environment. Meanwhile there is what she refers to as a plague of illegal e-scooters, noting that *“people aren't using them illegally because they want to break the law, they use them illegally because they're a really good travel option for them - it just happens that nobody got round to regulating and legislation in time - it's just run away from us”*. This seemed once again to hark back to the frustration from Marcus about progress. Jenny looks back and recalls that when she started work there was a deference to older colleagues, regardless of ability and education – *“anybody who was 50 would have been very unlikely to listen to anybody in their 20s”*. Thankfully, she senses this has now changed considerably with it being acceptable to listen and learn across generations.

Onwards with the conversation

Diversity of needs and perspectives

From the round of contributions above I was struck but **the diversity of needs and experiences people can have from the transport system and how perhaps this compounds the problem of providing a future transport system (beyond the private car) that can meet everyone's needs**. Both Marcus and Christine emphasised the importance of co-design if we are to have some success in addressing this, particularly given a transport sector workforce that is not particularly representative of the wider population. How might we also continue to draw upon a diversity of perspectives across disciplines to foster positive change? Emmanuel reflected also upon how university business school students seem to show a growing concern about sustainability and protecting the environment, perhaps giving some optimism that this could be channelled in their studies towards addressing change required in the transport sector and in the behaviours of individuals. This relates back to the possibilities that could emerge if cross-disciplinary links are fostered.

Bullsh*t detectors

Marcus observes that **younger people today, who have grown up amidst a deluge of information, can have an appetite for being well informed and have good ‘bullsh*t detectors’ or nonsense filters**. He gave the example of young teenagers on climate marches he has taken part in who had actually read the IPCC reports and had formed coherent views about the issues concerned. He wants to see a younger age for being eligible to vote *“because agency is removed from the old and agency is not given to the young”*. So, did Janice feel she had a nonsense filter? The example she gave in response was an expressed frustration at the target setting in the sector that does not seem to be matched with action with teeth to realise such targets.

Fears from the past helping those with fears today?

Jenny reflected upon when she had been Rosie's age. *“When I was a child in in the 60s my parents had a very real fear of nuclear annihilation to do with a cold war and which very much permeated down to us children as these things always do, even if the parents do try to hide it which I don't think mine particularly did. But the children do catch this sort of thing and perhaps it's worse for children because it's harder for them - they don't have the frame of reference [that adults do]”*. Having lived through the Cold War, Jenny feels less paralyzed by fear of climate change – she believes something can be done about it rather than throwing our arms up in despair. This is not to make light of the challenge we face but to try and offer **some comfort to the Gretas and Rosies of this world that fear has been known before and a way through has been found**.

We then moved the conversation into the panel's reactions to the questions that I had posed for the event itself.

What are you most hopeful and fearful for when looking to the future of transport?

Janice is hopeful that change is possible and she senses changes already even if they fall short of what is needed. Yet she is concerned that such **inadequate change only seems to arise from extreme situations** such as Covid-19 and the cost of living crisis prompting highly subsidised bus fares. She wonders **how much more extreme things need to get before governments and the population take really seriously the need for fundamental change**. She is also fearful that fixation on climate change could in turn mean "*that social inclusion might take a backseat*" making a just transition elusive. As Janice talked got a sense of successive shocks like a defibrillator being applied to a slovenly humanity to mobilise it into action and change. Perhaps enough shocks will finally weaken the grip of the current system and way of the world that we find ourselves in.

If you had ultimate decision making power, what sorts of policies would you introduce now as a steward over the future?

Emmanuel was motivated by this question but took it in a different direction, reflecting upon how **we fixate on technology-enabled change in the transport sector and yet perhaps a key territory to keep an eye on is the ever-advancing digital age with the prospect of an emerging 'metaverse' in which we may feel we move about and engage with others without going anywhere**. As someone who loves The Matrix film trilogy (for what it tells us about the illusions many people are under), I am minded to feel we may indeed be well on the way to a very different sort of existence that might seem unthinkable today and perhaps have seemed incredible years before (though Marcus reminded us of work on machine learning several decades ago). I have a mother in her 80s who has steered clear of the internet and a son approaching 30 who even as a teenager was playing games in virtual online worlds. **With the passage of time and between generations can come some very different notions and norms for how we interact as humans**.

What is the transport profession most in need of to be match-fit for the future?

Jenny saw in political direction and public behaviours during Covid-19 as well as during the London 2012 Olympics that when such direction to people is given with an expectation of fundamental behaviour changes, such changes can and do happen, without civil disobedience arising because people rebel against it. **Humans are very good at adapting (and innovating)**. The question is, have we been able to learn from this to put it into practice again to help address the challenges we now face? It is not clear we have. So what of professionals and what we need from them for the future? Here Jenny believes there is a cross-cutting issue that needs addressing. She took us back to the Middle Ages and through the Renaissance – a period where professionals needed to have a grasp of a repertoire of abilities in different disciplinary areas to allow them to excel in what they did. She suggested that it was by the end of the 17th Century when professionals started to form and specialisation came in – people went narrower and deeper in their area of expertise. I think perhaps Jenny was suggesting that **collectively we may have lost some of our ability to be system thinkers**. Given the pressures faced by the transport sector now we need to be more medieval according to Jenny. "*I used to think that it was enough just to have multi-disciplinary teams or maybe to have a generalist in charge of the team, I used to think that was enough. But I don't so think so anymore. I think each individual needs to be a specialist absolutely in their chosen topic but also pride themselves and consider themselves to be a better professional the more understanding they have of the adjacent topics*".

What inspires you when looking to older or younger peers for insight?

Christine is inspired by opportunities for intergenerational collaboration that is able to *“compare and combine the wisdom of the past with fresh ideas for the future which ultimately means better decision making when it comes to tackling complex challenges”*. She sees passion and energy in younger generations for social and environmental change that inspires her and may inspire other generations to rethink. Meanwhile **with experience of older generations comes the wisdom of how to navigate the systems we are in to be able to effect the sorts of changes aspired for and overcome institutional barriers**, as well as the change to share lessons regarding why things may have not worked in the past. Christine values the importance of mentorship as well as the diversity of perspective different generations – including young children - can bring to thinking through addressing problems and opportunities together. Her comments took my mind back to **Rosie – she has so much wisdom on little shoulders but to benefit from it you have to actually listen rather than only hear, and sometimes busy and preoccupied parents can be guilty of doing the latter rather than the former**.

What frustrates you when receiving insight from other generations?

Drawing upon his lengthy career and series of contributions to knowledge, Marcus pointed across several areas to work he did 30-50 years ago that still gets cited which in some respects gives him a sense of **how slowly ideas seem to propagate** in areas such as modelling, environmental impact measures, family expenditure, time use budgeting, artificial intelligence, road pricing, and major project analysis. But this is also a reminder of the value of looking back to appreciate *“the seeds that have been sown that have not flowered yet”*. Marcus also wanted to endorse Jenny’s point above about being more medieval. *“You don’t just dump six different little pegs of different disciplines into a room and have a manager. You need to have the cultures collide. It’s when that happens that creativity occurs and change happens”*. Marcus feels more needs to be done to draw upon fields of human resources and organisational psychology to better foster effective collaboration and innovation. As Marcus was speaking, an audience member had made reference to polymaths (people who know a lot about a lot of subjects). I found myself **wondering whether there is such a term as ‘polymathematics’ and whether perhaps the transport sector needs universities to run degree programmes in polymathematics to help create more medieval professionals?!**

Reverse mentoring and closing words

As our time together started to run out, I invited our panel members to consider any notable experiences of reverse-mentoring they could recall as part of their closing remarks.

Jenny recalled strongly a mentor much younger than her who had taught her (i) how hard it was to be an upper-class African person living in England *“because of all the assumptions that the native English people put up on you when they see you”*; and (ii) informed by her degree in international development that Africa doesn’t want aid or assistance, it just *“wants you to trade with us the way you trade with everybody else”*. What has this got to do with transport? Nothing, as Jenny pointed out, but **this reverse mentoring encounter had helped her grow as a person**.

Marcus was clear: *“I have to say quite honestly I don’t pay attention to age at all. I’ve learnt from every age”*. He went on to say *“we do have a lot to learn from the way children are actually marshalling concerns. I’m hearing from more and more children (or what I regard as children in their early twenties) deciding not to have children given the environmental forecasts that they can see and the levels of instability. There are major shifts in perception and behaviour that we can learn from if we listen to them and I’m actually finding it fascinating listening”*.

For an example of reverse mentoring, Christine wanted to go with an experience from just a few weeks ago where an event focused on active travel involving children really hit home for her how important active travel and public transport are for many people to socially connect with others in their community. Sustainable travel also has a major part to play in responding to the climate emergency. **Christine reminded us that 70% of children think adults are not doing enough to tackle climate change “so let’s go away from this event and make sure we are doing as much as we possibly can”.** I said in the event itself that I would go back and sense check with Rosie whether she is in that 70% and whether her dad is in the category of not doing enough. I’ve just done that. **I asked Rosie whether she thought adults were doing enough to tackle climate change? “NO” was her emphatic response, then qualified by “some people are, but not enough people are”.** I then went back and asked her if I was doing enough. She said “yes”, then qualified that with “*but you and the people you work with need to influence lots more others to do enough*”. Damn, she’s a wise one!

Emmanuel was left with a strengthened sense of how important it was to see children challenging his own behaviours from when he was young and now as a parent. “*At that age they are beginning to recognize that we could do something different and I guess that’s something I’m trying to also recognize saying, okay, if you like to do these things then I might as well support you ... children can also motivate us to do what is right and that aligns well with what Rosie was saying in terms of, okay, what will life be in 50 years’ time when we are all gone what will they be saying about us - I guess those are the guys that drove all the vehicles and destroyed the planet for us ... recognize that the children are watching*”.

Janice had loved the discussion during the Fireside Chat and was left wondering whether **perhaps we need to create something akin to a transport planner’s handbook that could capture the wisdom of those with greater years of experience and be a source of advice for the emerging professionals nearer the outset of their careers at this time of reckoning.**

At a point where the centre that I set up with others - the Centre for Transport & Society at UWE – passes 20 years of age, I found the intergenerational conversation an important reminder that the ‘and society’ part of that title really matters. We need to look outside transport as well as look across the generations. After all, travel is a derived demand and when we look at people’s needs and desires, many of them want boring things. They don’t necessarily want shiny, sellable things which might ‘make Britain Great again’ and carve out a ‘new economic powerhouse’ for us, but will leave people wanting in their daily lives and through their life course.