



The Centre for  
Cross Border Studies

# Briefing Paper

## The Impact of COVID-19 on Cross-Border Movement on the island of Ireland

August 2020

## Introduction

In light of the current Covid-19 public health crisis, and as part of the Centre for Cross Border Studies' ongoing research into the impact of the virus on the island of Ireland and connections between the two jurisdictions, this Briefing Paper examines the pandemic's effect on cross-border traffic flows.<sup>1</sup> This analysis uses data on the number of cross-border journeys recorded by Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII) and available on the TII website.<sup>2</sup> The data has been taken from a total of 12 TII traffic counters located in close proximity to the Northern Ireland/Ireland border, focusing on journeys recorded in the first 6 months of 2020 and compared with the same period in 2019. While we are making certain assumptions with the statistics available, they nevertheless give us a picture of the impact Covid-19 has had on the amount of movement between the two jurisdictions on the island of Ireland.

Reference	Traffic Counter Location
Site 1	N01 North of Jn20 Jonesborough, Ravensdale, Co. Louth
Site 2	N53 Between NI Border and Castleblaney, Drumgoose, Co. Monaghan
Site 3	N12 Armagh Road, Between N02 and R213
Site 4	N02 Between NI Border and Emyvale, Mullinderg, Co. Monaghan
Site 5	N54 Between Butlers Bridge and Clones, Clonoony, Co. Monaghan
Site 6	N03 Between Belturbet and George Mitchell Bridge at NI Border, Belturbet, Co. Cavan
Site 7	N87 Between Ballyconnel and NI Border, North of Swanlinbar, Co. Cavan
Site 8	N16 Between Enniskillen and Sligo, McNear Court, Co. Sligo
Site 9	N03 Between Belleek and Ballyshannon, Templenew, Co. Donegal
Site 10	N15 Lifford to Castlefinn, Inchenagh, Co. Donegal
Site 11	N14 Between Lifford and Letterkenny, Drumbuoy, Co. Donegal
Site 12	N13 Between Bridgend and Burnfoot, Co. Donegal

Table 1: TII Traffic Counters Used

While recognising the need for the restrictions and supports that have been introduced on the island of Ireland, and strongly supporting the measures taken by the governments in the respective jurisdictions to ensure the safety of the public, the Centre for Cross Border Studies also recognises the impact these have had on people's everyday lives. It is important to note that the figures shown in this study are not just a number but represent a cross-border journey. The reasons for crossing the border are not extraordinary – taking the kids to school, using the closest airport, going to work, visiting family, buying the weekly groceries, delivering parcels, supplying goods, all of which have been affected by the Covid-19 crisis.<sup>3</sup> As restrictions are eased it is important to realise how significant the nature of the border on this island is and the importance and benefits of cross-border cooperation in

<sup>1</sup> This Briefing Paper was authored by Mark McClatchey, Administrative Research Assistant, Centre for Cross Border Studies.

<sup>2</sup> The TII Traffic Data website presents data collected from the TII traffic counters located on the National Road Network. [https://www.nratrafficdata.ie/c2/gmapbasic.asp?sgid=ZvyVmXU8jBt9PJE\\$c7UXt6](https://www.nratrafficdata.ie/c2/gmapbasic.asp?sgid=ZvyVmXU8jBt9PJE$c7UXt6)

<sup>3</sup> Border People, "Brexit and cross-border workers on the island of Ireland" (October 2018), <https://borderpeople.info/site/wp-content/uploads/2018-10-17-Border-People-Brexit-Briefing-Cross-Border-Workers.pdf> [last accessed 25/07/20]

the recovery from the pandemic. These things also should be considered in the knowledge that we are nearing the end of the Brexit transition period.

## General Traffic Volume

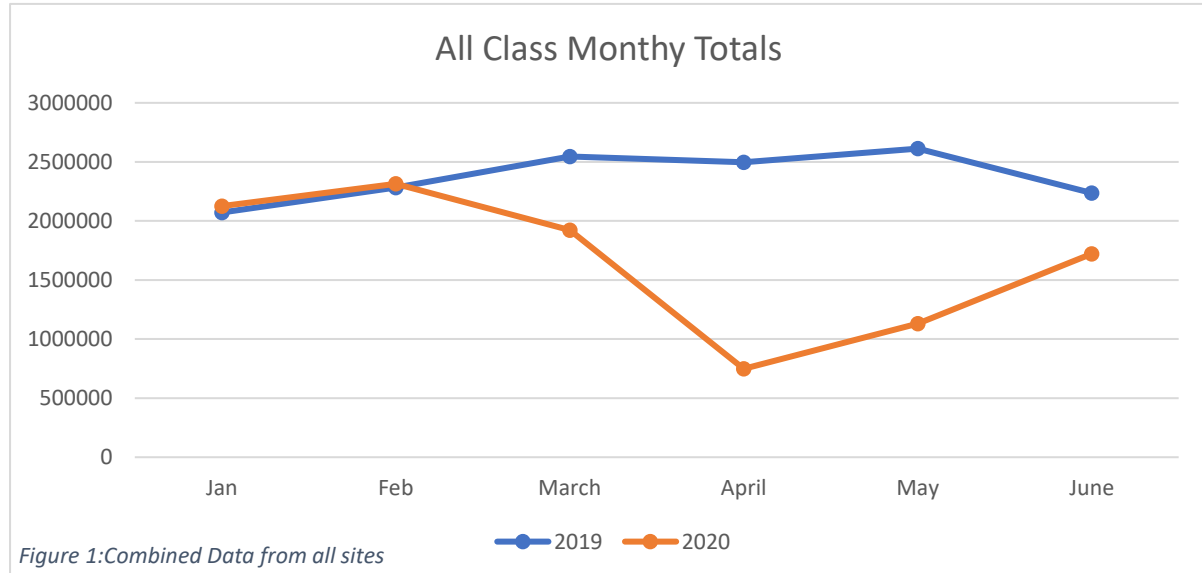


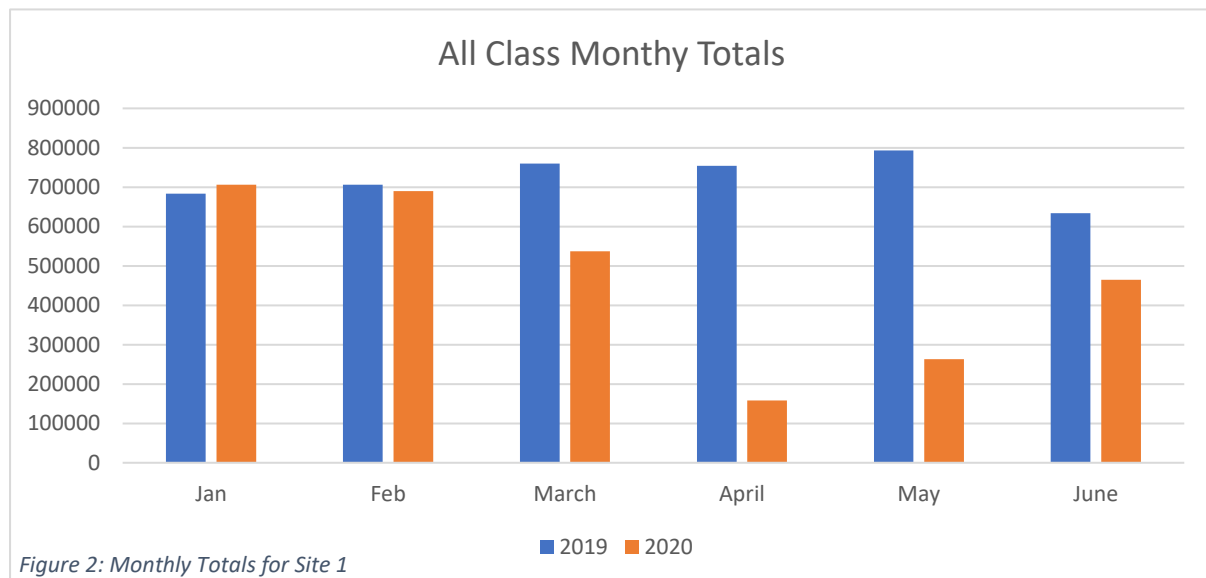
Figure 1 shows the total number of all class traffic journeys recorded across all 12 sites on a monthly basis from January to June in 2019 and 2020.<sup>4</sup> As the graph shows, there has been a significant decrease in the amount of recorded journeys across all TII Traffic counter sites along the border since March 2020. This decrease reflects a broader downturn in the amount of traffic on roads on the island due to the Coronavirus crisis and the restrictions implemented by governments in both jurisdictions. There has been a 28.8% decrease in cross-border traffic, with 3,882,291 less journeys recorded in the first 6 months of 2020 compared to the same period from 2019, despite the data showing a small increase in the number of cross-border journeys in both January and February 2020. Quarter 1(Q1) of 2020 showed a 7.8% decrease when compared with Q1 in 2019, with Quarter 2(Q2) showing a much greater reduction of 50.8% when compared with the previous year.

The largest decrease in the number of journeys recorded in any single month occurred in April when lockdown measures and restrictions were at their most rigorous, resulting in a 70% reduction in the total number of all class journeys, with 4,861 less cross-border journeys being recorded on a daily basis. This can be taken as a sign of the effectiveness of the strong and clear government 'Stay at Home' message in both jurisdictions and the public's adherence to the guidelines. In a statement on the 24<sup>th</sup> April, Northern Ireland Minister of Infrastructure, Nichola Mallon, praised the public for their compliance and determination to slow the spread of the virus with her Department's data showing a reduction of between 60% to 70% on Northern Ireland roads between the 23<sup>rd</sup> March and the 24<sup>th</sup>

<sup>4</sup> TII Traffic Counters distinguish between different vehicle classes. Classes included: Cars, LGV, HGV, Buses and Caravans.

April.<sup>5</sup> The Central Statistics Office (CSO) in the Republic of Ireland reported a similar trend, with a 70% decrease in the volume of traffic for the 6 week period from the 29<sup>th</sup> March to the 2<sup>nd</sup> May.<sup>6</sup>

The busiest cross-border traffic counter point is located along the Belfast-Dublin corridor on the N01 North of Jn20 Jonesborough, Ravensdale, Co. Louth, between the border cities of Newry and Dundalk. Figure 2 shows the total number of all class traffic journeys recorded from this site on a monthly basis from January to June in 2019 and 2020.



Data recorded here shows a severe decrease in the number of cross-border journeys with a reduction of 79% and 66.8% in April and May respectively from the previous year. What is unique to the data from this site is that it is the only one of the cross-border traffic counters examined to show a decrease in traffic volume for February 2020 (2.6%). February data for Site 1 shows a reduction in the 7 Day Daily Average of 1.6%, but an increase of 1.1% in the Workday Daily Average when compared with 2019. This would suggest that while people were continuing to commute across the border during weekdays, they had already started to reduce their journeys at the weekend. Government advice to work from home where possible was not introduced until the 12<sup>th</sup> March in the Republic of Ireland, and the 18<sup>th</sup> March in Northern Ireland.<sup>7</sup>

Interestingly the data recorded at Site 1 shows a difference between the Northbound and Southbound decrease in journeys for February 2020 compared to the rest of the sites examined across the first six months of the year, where the decrease in North/South flow has retained parity. Site 1 February data shows a greater decrease in Northbound traffic (3%) than those journeying Southward (1.8%). A

<sup>5</sup> Department of Infrastructure, “Mallon Praises Public on 70% Traffic Reduction in Lockdown - Commits to Reimagining our Places in an Ambitious Recovery Plan” (24<sup>th</sup> April 2020), <https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/news/mallon-praises-public-70-traffic-reduction-lockdown-commits-reimagining-our-places-ambitious> [Last accessed 26/07/20]

<sup>6</sup> Central Statistics Office, “Transport Bulletin 01 March 2020 to 27 June 2020” (3<sup>rd</sup> July 2020), <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/br/b-tb/transportbulletin01march2020to27june2020/> [Last accessed 26/07/20]

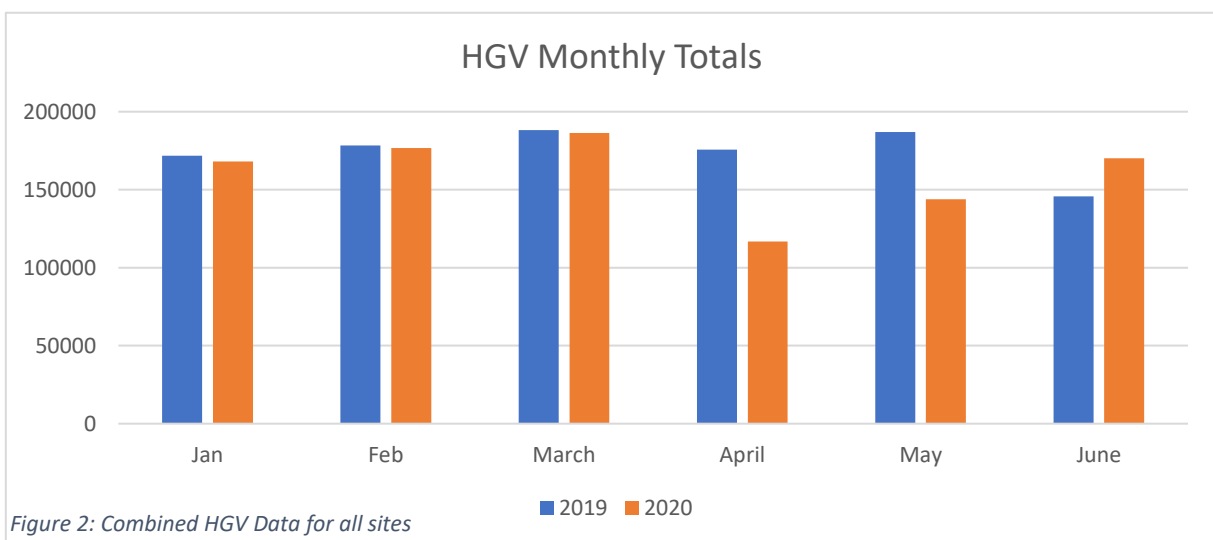
<sup>7</sup> Centre for Cross Border Studies, “Approaches to the COVID-19 Pandemic: Bordering on (non-) cooperation” (April 2020), <https://crossborder.ie/site2015/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Approaches-to-the-COVID-19-crisis-Bordering-on-noncooperation.pdf> [last accessed 28/07/20]

possible explanation for this is the differing governmental messaging in the two jurisdictions, with the Northern Ireland Assembly following the UK government’s guidance during the early stages of the pandemic.<sup>8</sup> The introduction of lockdown measures at different times or in different ways in the two jurisdictions on the island of Ireland has inevitably impacted on the lives of citizens living and working in the Northern Ireland-Ireland border region, as well as on wider cross-border mobility, as can be illustrated in the cases of the closure of educational settings and regulations on the wearing of face coverings.<sup>9</sup>

## HGV and LGV

While there has also been a decrease in the volume of Heavy Good Vehicle (HGV) cross-border journeys recorded, this has not been to the same level as other classes, with HGVs also quicker in their return to pre-Covid volumes. The CSO in the Republic of Ireland has reported that since the first relaxation of some lockdown measures on May 18<sup>th</sup>, the number of HGV journeys recorded at selected sites has been increasing.<sup>10</sup> This would support the data from across the 12 cross-border TII sites included in this study.

Figure 4 compares the number of HGV cross-border journeys recorded in the first 6 months of 2019 and 2020.<sup>11</sup> June 2020 has been the first month to record an increase in volume of HGV cross-border journeys, showing a significant increase of 16.7% when compared to the previous year. There was an early decrease in the number of HGV journeys recorded, with volume down by 2.2%, 0.9% and 1% in January, February and March respectively, which may have been an early indication of the effects of the pandemic in other countries involved in the supply chain. The volume was most affected in April



<sup>8</sup> Ibid

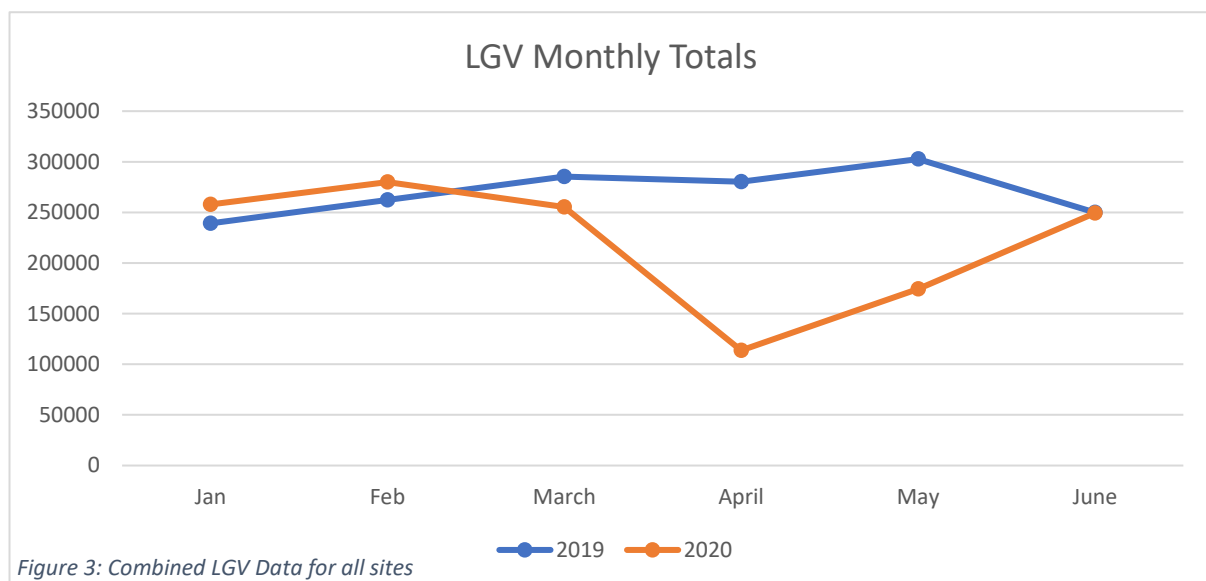
<sup>9</sup> Centre for Cross Border Studies, “Submission to the House of Lords Select Committee on Public Services inquiry, “Public services: Lessons from Coronavirus” (7<sup>th</sup> July 2020), <https://crossborder.ie/submission-to-the-house-of-lords-select-committee-on-public-services-inquiry-public-services-lessons-from-coronavirus/> [last accessed 29/07/20]

<sup>10</sup> Irish Examiner, “Covid 19 impact: Plunge in rail, bus and air transport” (27<sup>th</sup> July 2020), <https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/arid-40022975.html> [Last Accessed 28/07/20]

<sup>11</sup> HGV figures included combined totals of Articulated and Rigid Trucks. Buses and vehicles pulling trailers do not fall under this category.

with a decrease of 33.5%, before starting to recover with a smaller deficit of 23% from May 2019. Maintaining supply routes for the increasing demand on freight has been aided by an agreement reached between the UK, the Republic of Ireland and France to keep vital freight routes open for goods such as food and medicines during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>12</sup>

Figure 4 shows the number of cross-border Large Goods Vehicle (LGV) journeys recorded across all 12 cross-border sites. As the graph shows, LGV volumes have displayed a similar speed to HGVs in their return to a pre-Covid level, with just 630 LGV cross-border journeys recorded in June 2020 compared to the previous year. LGV data also showed a significant increase in the first two months of the year, 7.8% and 6.7%, in January and February respectively before a 10.5% reduction in the number of journeys in March, followed by severe decreases in April and May of 59.5% and 42.3% respectively.



The UK’s Road Hauliers Association Northern Ireland policy manager, John Martin, has urged the UK and Northern Ireland governments to offer more help for struggling operators to get through the crisis and drive economic recovery during a briefing given to the Northern Ireland Committee for Infrastructure. An RHA survey carried out in April 2020 of 1,200 operators across the UK reported that volumes had fallen drastically because of the pandemic.<sup>13</sup> The Northern Ireland Department for the Economy has responded to this request stating that it is not within its remit to approve such support and it is a matter for the Department of Infrastructure and HM Treasury.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> UK Department of Transport, “Freight transport in the context of COVID-19: joint statement by the United Kingdom, France and Ireland (24<sup>th</sup> April 2020), <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/freight-transport-in-the-context-of-covid-19-joint-statement-by-the-united-kingdom-france-and-ireland> [last accessed 25/07/20]

<sup>13</sup> Road Hauliers Association, “Northern Ireland’s hauliers need more help from Stormont, RHA tells officials” (27<sup>th</sup> May 2020), <https://exportandfreight.com/northern-irelands-hauliers-need-more-help-from-stormont-rha-tells-officials/> [last accessed 25/07/20]

<sup>14</sup> Department for the Economy, “Letter from Diane Dodds, Economy Minister for Northern Ireland” (19<sup>th</sup> June 2020), <https://www.rha.uk.net/getmedia/c11a3d06-ebaa-4650-9fc5-bd6898a90412/CORR-1446-2020-Final-Letter.pdf.aspx> [last accessed 30/07/20]

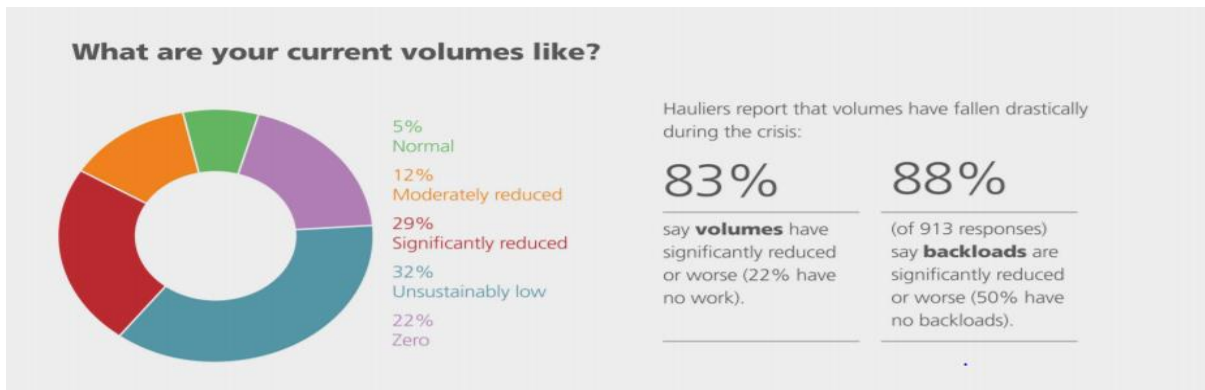


Figure 4: Results of RHA Survey, April 2020

The decision of the Northern Ireland Infrastructure Minister, Nichola Mallon, to reinstate specialist vehicle testing and extend driving licences in Northern Ireland on 1<sup>st</sup> June 2020 has been welcomed as a vital step in supporting the recovery of the logistics industry in Northern Ireland.<sup>15</sup> Similarly in the Republic of Ireland, the announcement of the appointment of a dedicated Minister for International Transport and Logistics, Hildegard Naughton TD, has been welcomed with the Freight Transport Association of Ireland stating, “With climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic and the UK’s departure from the European Union, there has never been such pressure placed upon supply chains and logistics in Ireland before.”<sup>16</sup>

## Public Transport

While TII Traffic data records the number of bus journeys at its sites, unfortunately it is not possible to distinguish between those buses used for public transport and those for private use. Instead the number of cross-border bus journeys recorded will be used with other sources to help analysis of the impact of Covid-19 on cross-border public transport.

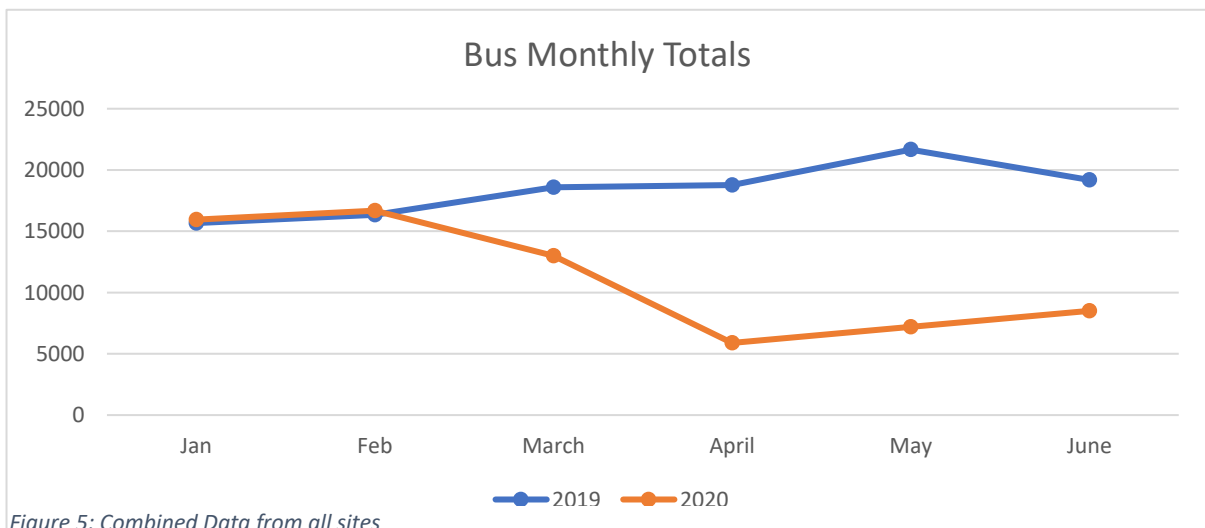


Figure 5: Combined Data from all sites

<sup>15</sup> Logistics UK, “NI Infrastructure Minister announcements provide vital support for logistics” (26<sup>th</sup> May 2020), <https://logistics.org.uk/media/press-releases/may-2020/ni-infrastructure-minister-announcements-provide-v> [last accessed 25/07/20]

<sup>16</sup> Freight Transport Association Ireland, “Irish Government Heeds Industry’s Call for Minister of Transport and Logistics” (29<sup>th</sup> June 2020), <https://www.ftai.ie/irish-government-heeds-industrys-call-for-minister-of-transport-and-logistics> [last accessed 25/07/20]

Figure 6 is the total number of cross-border journeys recorded across all sites. After displaying increases of 1.8% and 2.1% in January and February respectively, severe decreases were recorded in March (30%), April (68.6%), May (66.8%) and June (55.6%) when compared to 2019 figures. Unlike HGVs and LGVs, cross-border bus journeys are showing a much slower recovery to pre-Covid levels.

Translink provides rail and bus services across the Irish border both on its own and co-operatively with ROI partners, Iarnród Éireann and Bus Éireann. It operates the Enterprise cross-border rail service along the Belfast-Dublin corridor, carrying approximately 942,000 cross-border passengers every year. Enterprise is jointly operated with Iarnród Éireann (IE) under a cross-border agreement. There are normally 18 scheduled Enterprise services per day, along with many bus and coach services which also run along and across the border, in rural areas. Translink operates approximately 18 cross-border coach and bus routes for passengers in both NI and the ROI which includes the provision of 72 cross-border bus journeys per week-day, carrying in total more than 450,000 passengers every year.<sup>17</sup> In response to the pandemic, Northern Ireland’s Infrastructure Minister, Nichola Mallon, approved a reduction in the service timetable for cross-border coach and Enterprise rail services on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020.<sup>18</sup>

Figure 7 is taken from the Northern Ireland Department of Health’s Mobility Report, which measures the time visitors spend at certain locations. Visits and time spent at public transport hubs such as bus and train stations had been falling consistently in Northern Ireland since the 10th March. As of the 21st July time spent at public transport hubs in NI was 26% below normal levels, while the UK activity was 43% below normal levels.<sup>19</sup>

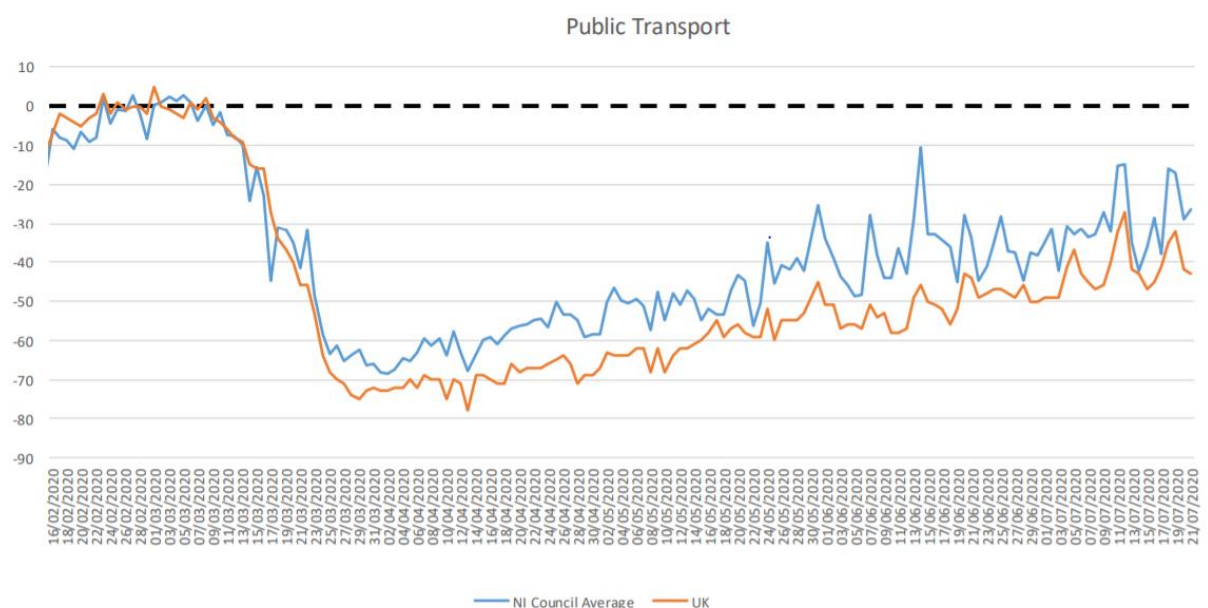


Figure 6: Time spent at NI public transport hubs

<sup>17</sup> Written evidence presented to House of Lords European Union Committee, “Brexit: road, rail and maritime transport” (21<sup>st</sup> May 2019), <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/eu-internal-market-subcommittee/future-ukeu-transport-arrangements/written/90612.html> [last accessed 27/07/20]

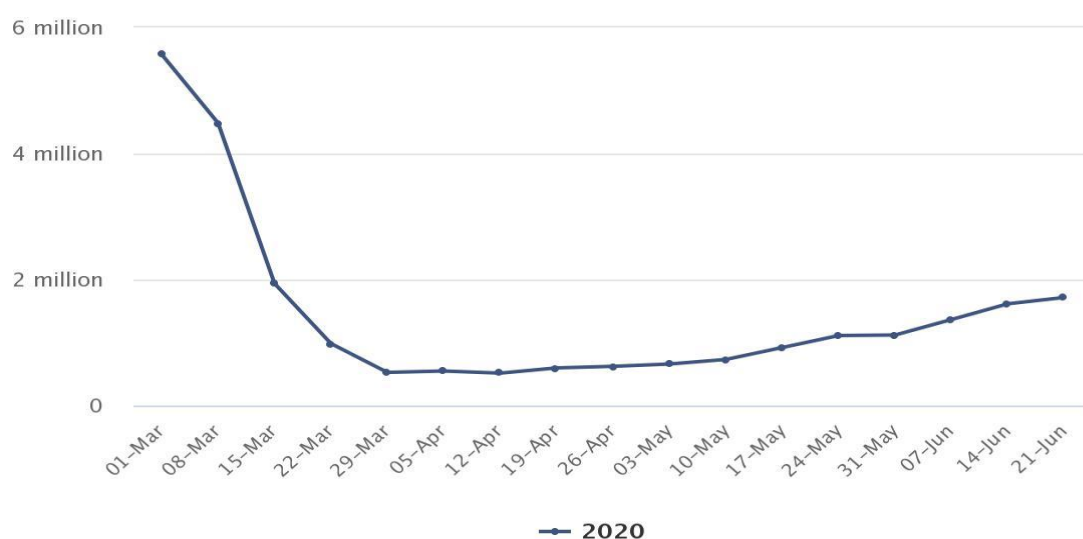
<sup>18</sup> Department of Infrastructure, “Minister announces reduction in public transport services as response to COVID-19 outbreak” (23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020), v-<https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/news/minister-announces-reduction-public-transport-services-response-covid-19-outbreak> [last accessed 28/07/20]

<sup>19</sup> Northern Ireland Department of Health, “COVID-19 Mobility Report: An Assessment of Social Distancing in Northern Ireland” (21<sup>st</sup> July 2020), <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/covid-19-mobility-reports-210720.pdf> [last accessed 28/07/20]



Similarly, in the Republic of Ireland, public transport services have been operating at a reduced level from the 1<sup>st</sup> April, with close to 80% of normal services continuing. The National Transport Authority (NTA) had already reported passenger numbers on public transport falling to between 25% and 30% compared to the equivalent levels in 2019 in the middle of March before the reduction in services.<sup>20</sup> NTA reports that the number of passenger journeys on public transport has fallen dramatically since the start of the Covid-19 crisis. Figure 8 shows the severe impact that the pandemic has had on passenger numbers in the Republic of Ireland, falling to their lowest weekly volume on the week beginning 29<sup>th</sup> March at 525,830 journeys, just 9% of the number of journeys for the week of 1<sup>st</sup> March.<sup>21</sup>

Figure 5 Passenger journeys by public transport per week



Source: CSO Ireland

Figure 7: National Transport Authority data<sup>22</sup>

The CSO have reported much slower levels of recovery to pre-Covid levels in public transport than other traffic classes, with rail journeys having been hit particularly hard due to social distancing measures and the public’s reluctance to return to using communal transport.<sup>23</sup> Despite an increase in services at the beginning of June, passenger capacity remained restricted to just over 20% of pre-Covid levels, although this has increased to close to 50% since 29<sup>th</sup> June with the use of face masks on public

<sup>20</sup> Transport for Ireland, “COVID-19 – Passenger Numbers on Public Transport Services” (17<sup>th</sup> March 2020), <https://www.transportforireland.ie/news/covid-19-passenger-numbers-on-public-transport-services/> [last accessed 28/07/20]

<sup>21</sup> Figures for week being 12<sup>th</sup> April were lower, 514’000 but these included Easter holidays.

<sup>22</sup> Central Statistics Office, “Transport Bulletin 01 March 2020 to 27 June 2020” (3<sup>rd</sup> July 2020), <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/br/b-tb/transportbulletin01march2020to27june2020/> [Last accessed 20/07/20]

<sup>23</sup> Irish Examiner, “Covid 19 impact: Plunge in rail, bus and air transport” (27<sup>th</sup> July 2020), <https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/arid-40022975.html> [Last Accessed 28/07/20]

transport mandatory from the same date and legally enforceable from the 13<sup>th</sup> July.<sup>24</sup> This policy has been mirrored in Northern Ireland with the use of face masks compulsory in public transport from the 10<sup>th</sup> July.<sup>25</sup> Regarding enforcement of the policy on cross-border routes, An Garda Síochána have confirmed that the new legislation in the Republic of Ireland will be applied to cross-border passengers.<sup>26</sup> This is a noticeable change of approach by the Republic of Ireland as legislation restricting people's movement during lockdown was not enforceable on an all-island basis, meaning that intensive efforts to encourage people to refrain from unnecessary travel within the Republic of Ireland could not prevent people from Northern Ireland insistent on travelling for leisure purposes into the jurisdiction, placing the potential for increased pressure on public services at a local level.<sup>27</sup>

## Conclusion

The Covid-19 crisis has had a severe impact on cross-border traffic flows with cross-border journeys down 28.8% in the first 6 months of the year, falling by 70% in April when restrictions in both jurisdictions were at their most severe. Despite the lockdown, or perhaps because of the increased demand created by it, the number of HGV cross-border journeys has not fallen by the same extent as other vehicle classes and has returned to a pre-Covid level at a much faster rate and displayed a significant increase of 16.7%, in June 2020. LGVs have recovered at a similar pace, almost returning to pre-Covid levels in June. Cross-border public transport has been the most adversely affected, with cross-border bus journeys decreasing by 39% during the first half of 2020 and public transport in both jurisdictions showing a much slower return to pre-Covid levels. This trend is likely to continue as public transport is continuing to operate on reduced timetables and with diminished capacity due to social distancing measures.

The Centre for Cross Border Studies would urge departments in both jurisdictions to explore the possibilities of "joined-up thinking" in any recovery planning for the pandemic. There is also, now more than ever, a need for cross-border impact assessment to be carried out on any policies to maximise their potential benefits by identifying opportunities to make positive cross-border connections. This is something which the Centre for Cross Border Studies has continually recommended.<sup>28</sup> The Covid pandemic poses enormous challenges to all citizens across this island – and across these islands –

---

<sup>24</sup> Transport for Ireland, "Minister Signs Regulation Making Face Coverings on Public Transport a Legal Requirement" (12<sup>th</sup> July 2020), <https://www.transportforireland.ie/news/minister-signs-regulation-making-face-coverings-on-public-transport-a-legal-requirement/> [last accessed 29/07/20]

<sup>25</sup> Department of Infrastructure, "Mallon announces face coverings to be mandatory on public transport from July 10" (2<sup>nd</sup> July 2020), <https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/news/mallon-announces-face-coverings-be-mandatory-public-transport-july-10> [last accessed 29/07/20]

<sup>26</sup> Belfast Telegraph, "Belfast cross-border rail travellers insist NI should follow Republic's lead and toughen face mask penalties" (14<sup>th</sup> July 2020), <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/health/coronavirus/belfast-cross-border-rail-travellers-insist-ni-should-follow-republics-lead-and-toughen-face-mask-penalties-39365200.html> [last accessed 28/07/20]

<sup>27</sup> Centre for Cross Border Studies, "Submission to the House of Lords Select Committee on Public Services inquiry, "Public services: Lessons from Coronavirus" (7<sup>th</sup> July 2020), <https://crossborder.ie/submission-to-the-house-of-lords-select-committee-on-public-services-inquiry-public-services-lessons-from-coronavirus/> [last accessed 29/07/20]

<sup>28</sup> Centre for Cross Border Studies, "The need for regulatory cross-border territorial impact assessment: Challenges at the Ireland-Northern Ireland border" (December 2019), <https://crossborder.ie/site2015/wpcontent/uploads/2020/01/CCBS-Briefing-Paper-The-need-for-regulatory-cross-border-territorial-impactassessment.pdf>

which demand intensive coordination and cooperation between sectors and between jurisdictions. The structures for North-South cooperation are there and they need to be employed to their fullest extent in order to properly address the of the pandemic, to accelerate the economic recovery that is desperately needed in both parts of this island and to protect from further damage as the transition period comes to an end and the Northern Ireland/Ireland Protocol starts to be implemented.