



OPINION

European Economic and Social Committee

The importance of public transport for Europe's green recovery

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[own-initiative opinion]

TEN/774

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1. Conclusions and recommendations

- 1.1 The EESC acknowledges that public transport has a key role to play in Europe's post-pandemic green recovery. The pandemic has acted as a catalyst, showing that public transport provides both a service which is in the public interest and frontline workers and vulnerable groups with access to jobs and services. The EESC calls for mobility to be recognised as an individual right and as a public good that has to be available to everyone, since it guarantees access to economic, social and cultural life. Providing sufficiently staffed, accessible, affordable, safe, quality public transport services for everyone must be a priority objective for the EU.
- 1.2 Mindful of the importance of public transport for individuals, users and workers, the EESC reiterates its call (EESC TEN/766 opinion on *New EU Urban Mobility Framework*) for a **participatory approach** to public transport planning at regional, national and European level. This is the only way to ensure that recovery strategies and measures meet the needs and expectations of all those who run and use public transport.
- 1.3 The EESC notes that developing a **high-quality service** is essential for the post-pandemic recovery of public transport. **Good working conditions** as well as motivated and well trained staff are essential for delivering this level of service. The EESC calls for local, regional and national policy makers to develop - and for EU policy makers to fully support - **business models** leading to better innovative and attractive transport system ensuring both high quality service and adequate conditions and social protection for employees.
- 1.4 Public transport is a **labour intensive service** with green jobs that cannot be delocalised. Public transport operators are one of the biggest employers in urban areas, offering employment for a wide range of people and contributing to the inclusion of migrant workers in the labour market. To preserve the social character of the sector, the EESC calls for decision makers to include mandatory service quality and social criteria in public transport service contracts, such as the application of collective agreements and adequately addressing the situation of staff following a change of operator. The EESC also calls for policy makers to ensure that strong social dialogue mechanisms are in place in order to make the sector economically and socially sustainable. The EESC also calls for full compliance with public procurement procedures (Regulation 1370/2007 or Directive 2014/23).
- 1.5 The EESC draws attention to the fact that achieving sustainable mobility **needs strong political commitment** from all actors and at all levels. The EU institutions must play a strong role of political leadership and guidance, setting clear goals and objectives and making the necessary funds available. The EESC therefore calls on the European Commission to set measurable and ambitious targets to shift from private car use to collective transport and active mobility.
- 1.6 Sustained investment is crucial for ensuring that policies geared towards sustainable public transport and thus the green recovery are successful. Significant financial resources were made available to the EU Member States via the Recovery and Resilience Facility, and many of them undertook to invest in their public transport systems. The EESC calls on the Commission to monitor and report on how these commitments are being met and to ensure that green recovery goes hand in hand with keeping and improving jobs, quality of service and social inclusion. The

EESC calls on the Member States to set up participatory mechanisms to consult users and the social partners on how these funds, vital for the recovery of public transport, are used. The EESC points out that all EU and public funds allocated to developing transport solutions should include criteria on inclusiveness, accessibility and sustainability of transport.

- 1.7 The EESC therefore calls on policy makers to implement the digital transition processes meant to achieve sustainable and just transport for all, in an inclusive and participatory manner.
- 1.8 The EESC invites the European Union and the Member States to contribute to the shift towards greener modes of transport by making those modes more generally attractive. Raising awareness about the environmental impact of transport and personal mobility choices is also important in promoting the shift to public and sustainable transport. The EESC therefore calls on the Commission to dedicate 2024 to public transport, its users and workers.

2. Background

- 2.1 Transport and mobility are an integral part of Europeans' daily lives, enabling the mobility of people across all sections of society, in all corners of Europe. At the same time, to achieve climate neutrality, the European Green Deal has set the target of a 90% reduction in transport emissions by 2050. All transport sectors have to contribute to this reduction. The Green Deal states that "multimodal transport needs a strong boost", as this will increase the efficiency of the transport system.
- 2.2 In its Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy, the Commission makes sustainable interurban and urban mobility a flagship project, emphasising the need to make "mobility fair and just for all" and to increase the modal share of collective transport, improving seamless multimodality in urban and sub-urban areas. The strategy also points to the increasing demand for new and innovative solutions, including services accessible on demand and collaborative mobility. The strategy prioritises the need to improve the framework for urban mobility.
 - In its Urban Mobility Framework¹ (UMF), the Commission points out that urban mobility contributes 23% to the **growing share of transport in the EU's energy use** and greenhouse gas emissions; cities face the biggest challenges in terms of **air quality**, with concentrations of NO₂ and PM₁₀ exceeding EU limit values; **congestion levels** in EU cities have stagnated or worsened since 2013, with considerable costs to society and negative impacts on commuting; **urban areas account for 38% of all fatalities and serious injuries in road transport in the EU**; over 70% of Europeans live in cities and expect solutions for better and safer mobility, congestion, air and noise pollution; and 30% live in villages, small towns and peri-urban areas, and are often dependent on private cars to reach nearby urban nodes;
 - urban public transport infrastructure and services need to be adapted to ensure better accessibility, including to better serve an ageing population in many cities as well as persons with disabilities or reduced mobility.

¹ Urban Mobility Framework, [COM \(2021\) 811 final](#).

- 2.3 The Commission also stresses the urgency of dealing with climate change, and the role it plays in social inclusion and people's well-being, especially for disadvantaged groups. The Commission has therefore made building a **stronger public transport network one of the goals of its UMF**.
- 2.4 Over the last few years, the **pandemic** has been a game changer for economic growth and its supporting rules and mechanisms. It **has exposed pitfalls and brought into focus values in the development of the EU single market**. However, it has also created opportunities for faster implementation of policies such as the Green Deal, revealed the importance of placing people at the heart of the recovery process as reflected in the **Just Transition** concept, and prompted the Commission to adopt its largest financial aid programme, aimed at mitigating the social and economic impacts of COVID-19, the **Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF)**, with the green transition and digital transformation as two of its six pillars.
- 2.5 In public transport, the pandemic has impacted jobs, public transport users, operators and public authorities. In its Conclusions on the Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy, the Council of Ministers pointed out that public transport was seriously affected by the COVID-19 crisis and that the policy response to the crisis should aim to restore confidence in and improve the resilience of public transport, accelerating its sustainable transformation and modernisation, while ensuring affordability given the essential role of public transport in social and territorial cohesion.
- 2.6 The EESC highlights the hugely important fact that throughout the pandemic, public transport demonstrated its value by providing much-needed mobility for frontline workers and disadvantaged groups. Migrant workers and women account for a high proportion of these groups and are known to be heavily reliant on public transport to access workplaces and basic services. Eurobarometer data for 2020 show that significantly more women use public transport than men. A European Parliament study on *Women and transport*, while pointing to the lack of gender segregated data on gender mobility patterns, provides interesting insights into this type of choice².
- 2.7 **The EESC also acknowledges the increased costs and decreased resources faced by providers of transport services and public authorities due to the pandemic**. Although COVID-19 prevention measures led to increased costs, and the significant drop in numbers of users left companies with greatly reduced revenue, local, public and government authorities understood that keeping public transport functioning was part of their duty to serve communities, and particularly to serve the people who serve others.
- 2.8 **This own-initiative opinion aims to provide key recommendations on the recovery and future development of sustainable, robust, inclusive, accessible and resilient public**

² *Women and transport*, European Parliament, FEMM Committee, December 2021 [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/701004/IPOL_STU\(2021\)701004_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/701004/IPOL_STU(2021)701004_EN.pdf), p. 34–35 "Evidence should be considered in the context of women's mobility needs. As mentioned in previous sections, women more often work part-time, care for children and relatives, live longer, are less likely to have a driving licence and to own a car, and use public transport and walk more frequently than men. They have more complex daily mobility patterns compared to men. At the same time, women often exercise limited control over household finances as they are more likely to be the second earners in a household (Borgato et al., 2021; Rastrigina and Verashchagina, 2015). In general, women are more likely to be at risk of poverty and social exclusion (EIGE, 2020) as they are more likely to belong to vulnerable groups and affordability is a crucial element for their mobility".

transport after the COVID-19 crisis, ready to serve generations to come, in view of the ageing demographic in the EU³. It will focus on the issues of financing, attractiveness and its role in the green recovery of the EU, centred around public transport workers' social conditions. The shortage of personnel in all transport sectors shows a clear need for this approach.

3. General comments

- 3.1 **The EESC recognises that public transport is a significant part of the answer to Europe's green post-pandemic recovery.** Not only does it provide an answer to climate concerns, it also contributes to quality of life by addressing congestion. "Up to 2020, public transport in urban areas counted almost 60 billion passenger journeys per year in Europe, with numbers on the rise. (...) Congestion already costs the European economy 1% of its GDP, €100 billion per year."⁴
- 3.2 The EESC notes that the pandemic has **reshaped people's behaviour, and re-focused public and local authorities' attention on the societal value of public transport.** However, public transport was one of the sectors that was hit hardest by a drastic drop in the number of users, and has taken the longest time to recover. This happened while people turned towards active mobility and private car journeys as a way of avoiding infection. While increased active mobility is a salutary trend and needs to be encouraged, the question of the increased use of private cars needs to be seriously considered by European policy makers, and by national, local and regional authorities.
- 3.3 The EESC acknowledges that despite maintaining the continuity of public transport during the pandemic, **employment in the sector has been hard hit.** In Europe, before the first lockdown, the sector provided direct jobs for two million people⁵. Importantly, public transport provides secure local jobs, of a wide variety, from less qualified to highly qualified profiles, and employs staff with very diverse backgrounds⁶. However, a considerable proportion had to be placed on governmental temporary unemployment schemes and many chose not to return to their jobs. This is particularly the case in Member States with low social security benefits and collective bargaining coverage.
- 3.4 Consequently, the EESC warns that there is a critical **shortage of staff** across all transport sectors in Europe, public transport included. Job quality and job security have become key criteria for jobseekers, and social security and collective bargaining coverage are key guarantees in this respect.

³ [Ageing Europe – statistics on population developments – Eurostat.](#)

⁴ ETF & UITP Joint Statement for COP 26: [Tackling climate action with public transport is one of the EU's largest economic opportunities of the 21st century.](#)

⁵ [Relaunching Transport and Tourism in the EU after COVID-19](#), May 2021, research commissioned by the TRAN Committee of the European Parliament and carried out by the Policy Department for Structural and Cohesion Policies, Directorate-General for Internal Policies.

⁶ ETF & UITP Joint Statement for COP 26: [Tackling climate action with public transport is one of the EU's largest economic opportunities of the 21st century.](#)

- 3.5 **The EESC welcomes the efforts by public, regional and government authorities to maintain the necessary level of public transport service throughout the pandemic** in complex circumstances that required financial support and investment in COVID-safety protocols. We acknowledge that the relevant authorities had to resort to drastic limitations in vehicle capacity⁷, introduce digital solutions to reduce direct contact between users and workers, increase spending on health and hygiene equipment, and offset the fall in revenue caused by the sudden and persistent reduction in the number of public transport users.
- 3.6 At the same time, the EESC regrets that COVID-safety protocols in the transport sector were not always adopted in an inclusive manner, with consideration for all affected persons. For example, in certain cases, public transport became unavailable to persons with disabilities and older persons due to the reduction or suspension of assistance provided to passengers with reduced mobility⁸, and the fact that digital solutions failed to take account of people with lower digital skills, those unable to afford digital devices or electronic communication services, and were not developed in line with EU accessibility policies and supporting standards.
- 3.7 **The EESC points out that post-pandemic strategies are now needed to make public transport attractive and enable more people to make use of it.** As highlighted by EESC opinion INT/909: "we now have the opportunity to ensure a fair recovery and rebuild our economies rapidly in order to make them greener, fairer and more resilient to future shocks⁹." This call is reiterated in EESC opinion TEN/728, which notes that "a green transition must both be socially just and preserve the competitiveness of European transport, including through full implementation of the European Transport Area, with full implementation of the Single Market¹⁰."
- 3.8 In the light of the above reasoning, **the following key ingredients are needed to make public transport more attractive:**
- **Availability**, translated into sufficient capacity of public transport modes to cope with increased demand, especially in rural, peripheral areas where there are often fewer options for people;
 - **Sufficient staff benefiting from proper conditions and training**, stable, quality jobs and a full range of rights and benefits;
 - **Connectivity** - increased and effective - with different transport modes, within and between urban and non-urban areas, to provide all passengers with seamless intermodal travel, including between different geographical regions;
 - **Affordability**, for all members of society. To ensure this, cost calculations of public transport should take into account affordability for persons experiencing socio-economic

⁷ In 2020, in the first lockdown, Milan and Barcelona reduced vehicle occupancy to 25% and 50% respectively, Ireland to 20% and Portugal to two thirds – [COVID-19 and urban mobility: impacts and perspectives](#), September 2020, research for the European Parliament TRAN Committee, Policy Department for Structural and Cohesion Policies, Directorate-General for Internal Policies PE 652.213.

⁸ [EDF Recommendations on exit measures for transport services in light of Covid-19](#).

⁹ [OJ C 429, 11.12.2020, p. 219](#).

¹⁰ [OJ C 341, 24.8.2021, p. 100](#).

- poverty and exclusion. Targeted schemes to support the most socio-economically disadvantaged groups should be explored in close consultation with relevant communities;
- **Accessibility**, allowing for seamless and independent use by everyone, including persons with disabilities, older persons and people with (temporary) reduced mobility;
 - **Safety of users and workers**, centred around gender and intersectional dimensions. Inclusive public health measures are equally relevant for safe travel, as demonstrated in the past years. Public transport workers require a safe working environment, free from violence and harassment.
 - **Quality** in terms of convenience, journey times, assistance from sufficient levels of staff, accessible digital solutions, information about transport options and schedules.
- 3.9 The EESC points out that **in the pre-pandemic years** the PSO Regulation (EC) 1370/2007 introduced possibilities to open public transport services to private operators via competitive tendering and public service contracts, concluded under the general EU public procurement rules. As the pandemic proved the strategic role played by public transport as regards society and mobility and since public transport is facing an unprecedented shortage of staff, the EESC stresses the need for public service contracts to offer protection in terms of social and employment conditions, in order to retain skills in the sector.
- 3.10 Public transport is a service from which society as a whole, in all its diversity, has to benefit. With this in mind, it is crucial to keep procurement processes transparent and ensure participation of workers and users alike in procurement decisions.
- 3.11 The EESC appreciates that, in order to mitigate the social and economic impact of COVID-19, the **Commission** launched the **Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF)**. Regulation (EU) 2021/241 lays down conditions under which the Member States can access EU RRF grants. They have had to submit national plans, and commit to spending 37% of the EU grants on climate investments and reform, and 20% on digital transition. Clean mobility stays at the core of these plans. The EESC points out, however, that the implementation of these measures will have an impact on both society and workers, and hence, it cannot be done behind closed doors. All social stakeholders should be involved in the development of policies for greener and more sustainable public transport¹¹. Likewise, public stakeholders should be able to effectively monitor implementation of public policies and the spending of relevant public funds.
- 3.12 **Inclusive participation in public transport development solutions should be promoted** to enable all stakeholders including public authorities, services providers, public transport users and accessibility and urban planning experts to play a role¹². Best practices of co-creating public

¹¹ The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability requires that "In the development and implementation of legislation and policies to implement the present Convention, and in other decision-making processes concerning issues relating to persons with disabilities, States Parties shall closely consult with and actively involve persons with disabilities, including children with disabilities, through their representative organizations." – [Article 4.3 CRPD](#). Additionally, the EESC opinion [OJ C 341, 24.8.2021, p. 100](#) notes that "The EESC, as already stated in its 2012 opinion, would like to encourage an open, continuous and transparent exchange of views on the implementation of the White Paper between civil society (business, employers, employees, users, NGOs and academia, etc.), the Commission and other relevant players such as national authorities at different levels. This will improve civil society buy-in and understanding, as will useful feedback to policy makers and those carrying out implementation."

¹² In line with the recommendations made in the EESC opinion [OJ C 275, 18.7.2022, p. 18](#): "The EESC believes that it is necessary to involve all stakeholders, including social partners, in order to find both significant and viable solutions in the field of maritime transport greening."

transport solutions should be promoted¹³. A "universal design" approach according to the UN CRPD¹⁴ to developing services should enable use of such services by the widest diversity of users, including persons with disabilities, older persons, and persons with reduced mobility.

- 3.13 The Commission Communication on Fit for 55 notes that "Many citizens, especially younger people, are ready to change their consumption and mobility patterns when empowered by relevant information in order to limit their carbon footprint and to live in a greener, healthier environment"¹⁵. Making these modes more attractive to everyone will contribute to the shift towards greener and more sustainable modes of transport. Raising awareness about the environmental impact of transport and personal mobility choices is important. However, promotional measures alone will not have the necessary impact unless these challenges to available, affordable, accessible and safe public transport are addressed properly. Although many people are aware of the urgent environmental need to use greener transport, they will not be able to make a valuable contribution to the green transition if they simply cannot afford or access greener transport. This will be a huge lost opportunity for the EU.
- 3.14 The EESC would like to highlight the fact that **COVID-19 triggered a more rapid integration of digital technologies into public transport**. It is more than likely that these trends will be maintained and encouraged via the deployment of the EU RRF and the NRRPs. While digitalisation can contribute to the efficiency and sustainability of public transport, as well as benefit transport users (e.g. digital journey planners, real-time transport information), care should be taken to ensure that the digital transition does not come at the cost of labour opportunities for transport staff and in-person support services for users, or increase the mobility gap between transport users who can and cannot benefit from digitalisation due to inaccessibility and unaffordability of digital services and lower digital skills. The EESC therefore calls on policy makers to implement the digital transition processes meant to achieve sustainable and just transport for all, in an inclusive and participatory manner.

Brussels, 26 October 2022.

Christa Schweng

The president of the European Economic and Social Committee

¹³ See for example, [TRIPS "TRansport Innovation for disabled People needs Satisfaction" project](#).

¹⁴ [Article 2, CRPD](#).

¹⁵ [Fit for 55, COM \(2021\) 550 final](#).