



Auckland Congestion Report 2020

GUIDING LIFE'S JOURNEYS FOR OVER 110 YEARS.
New Zealand Automobile Association



February 2021

Breathing Space

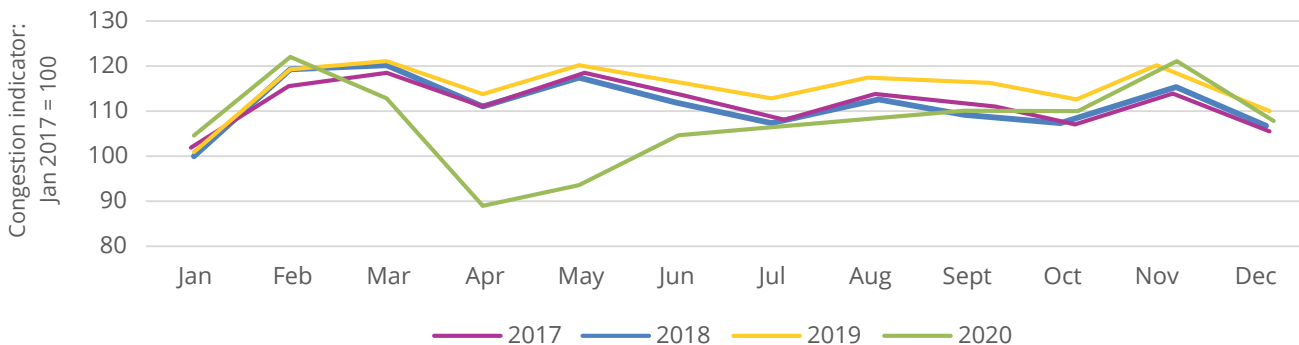
The AA Auckland Congestion Report is an annual review of congestion trends in Auckland, based on Google travel-time data.

2020 Key points

- * After congestion's welcome absence from Auckland life for much of 2020, it has now largely returned to pre-Covid levels
- * But congestion patterns have changed – different parts of the network are now feeling the impact in different ways
- * While congestion has come back, it hasn't returned to the trajectory it was on pre-Covid – which was one of relentless growth – and it's unlikely to do so for some time yet
- * We need to use the breathing space to re-assess the current approach to congestion, so that we are in a stronger position when the demand pressure kicks in again

Covid halts congestion's march (temporarily)

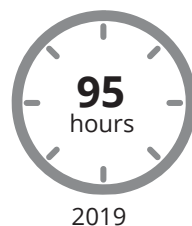
Morning peak congestion on the Auckland road network (indexed)



As expected, AA data shows congestion levels in Auckland plummeted in March 2020, as New Zealand went into lockdown. Congestion was largely non-existent through the middle months of the year, making the year an outlier and reversing the trend of relentless growth since around 2013.

Until Covid-19 hit, 2020 was shaping up to be the worst year covered yet by the AA's congestion monitoring.

Time lost to congestion over the year by the average motorway user

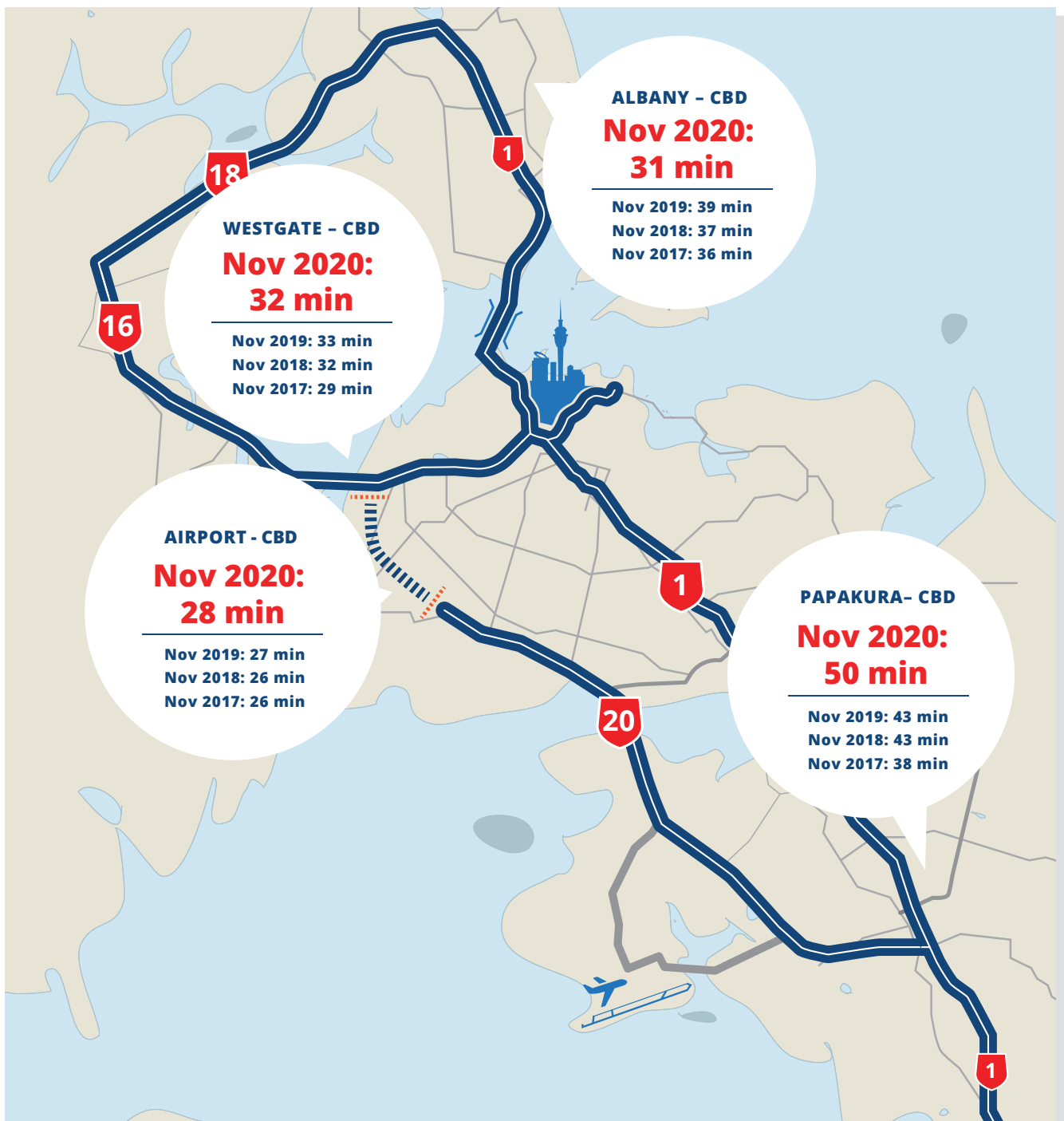


Congestion back, but not as we knew it

While congestion had by November climbed back to levels approaching those of the previous year (in general terms, at least), it wasn't a return to the status quo – congestion has come back more strongly in some parts of the network and receded in others, and new patterns have emerged.

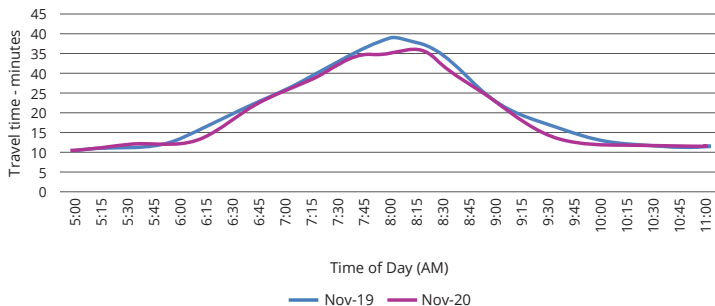
On Auckland's Northern Motorway, travel times are still significantly better than they were before Covid-19. But on the Southern Motorway, congestion levels are now significantly worse. This could well be connected to the effect working from home has had on the transport system, and the relative abilities of people in the North and people in the South to work remotely.

Morning peak travel times in November

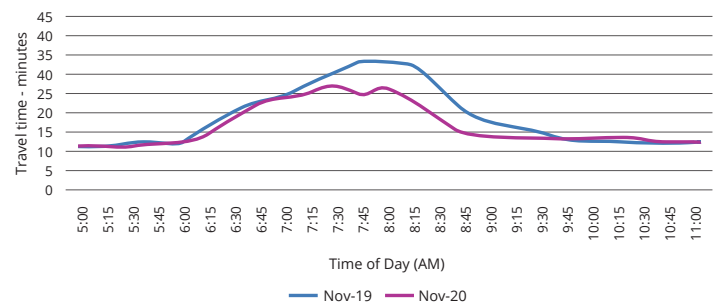


Meanwhile, on a number of routes, congestion levels on Mondays and Fridays – particularly Fridays – are lighter than before Covid, but roughly the same on other days of the week. Again, this is a clear indication of the ongoing impact of working from home.

Typical weekday travel times on Northwestern Mway, Nov 2019 v Nov 2020



Typical Friday travel times on Northwestern Mway, Nov 2019 v Nov 2020



What happens next?

Congestion levels have largely returned, but they are still some way below where they would have been if not for Covid-19 (i.e. had the growth witnessed in 2017, 2018 and 2019 continued through 2020).

The Government’s estimates point to a relative lull for the short to medium term, before an eventual return to BAU. Whether this breathing space lasts for months or years will depend on a number of factors, including:

***The speed of economic recovery.** Economic activity closely correlates with the amount of driving that takes place on the network, and therefore with congestion levels. By way of example, following the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, softer economic activity suppressed the amount of driving for four or five years

***Population growth.** Auckland’s population growth is certain to slow, following the drying up of migrant arrivals to New Zealand. Interestingly, while growth was steady over most of the last decade, there were signs that it was easing off prior to Covid-19 – actual growth in 2018 was significantly below forecasts. Meanwhile, in Northland and Bay of Plenty, growth was higher than forecast. This suggests that a spill-over of Aucklanders into Whangarei and Tauranga (as a result of factors like house prices and congestion) is well under way

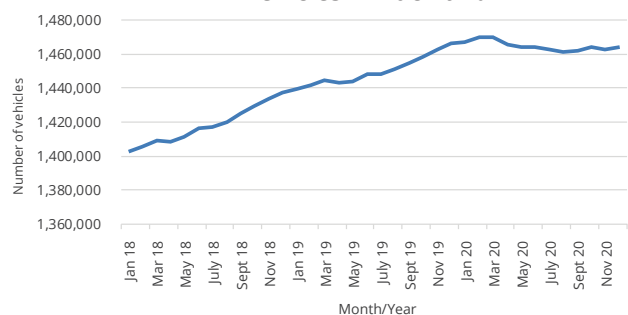
	2018 Forecast population (medium)	2018 Actual population (Census)
Auckland	1,700,000	1,590,000
Northland	176,000	181,000
Bay of Plenty	304,000	313,000
New Zealand	4,865,000	4,793,000

Source: Stats NZ

***Working from home.** Though rates have declined since the April-May 2020 lock-down period, the number of Aucklanders working from home remains high (around 18% in late 2020). Working from home delivers obvious transport benefits: not just a reduction in demand levels on a day-to-day basis, but also a crucial layer of resilience when things go wrong on the network. Had it not been for the number of Aucklanders working remotely (and the number able to make the switch when the need arose), the partial closure of the Auckland Harbour Bridge in September last year would have paralysed the city’s transport network, rather than just bringing it to its knees

***Growth in the vehicle fleet.** After growing by around 30,000 in both 2018 and 2019, the number of vehicles registered in Auckland largely plateaued in 2020

Vehicles in Auckland



Source: Waka Kotahi NZTA

Key issues

With the breathing space that Covid-19 has provided, now is the perfect time to reflect on the wider approach to dealing with congestion. Here are five key issues that need to be addressed:



1. What's the objective?

The Government and Auckland Council have indicated that, towards the end of this decade (when the 10-year transport programme is complete), congestion will be held at 2016 levels. But it's very difficult to see how this can be achieved – the transport programme is well behind schedule, congestion levels have already climbed significantly since 2016, and travel demand is set to resume its upward march as soon as Covid-19 is behind us. The outcome needs to be reviewed and updated and, more importantly, we need to see firm congestion targets set for Auckland, and progress measured against them. These targets should guide the approach and set public expectation.



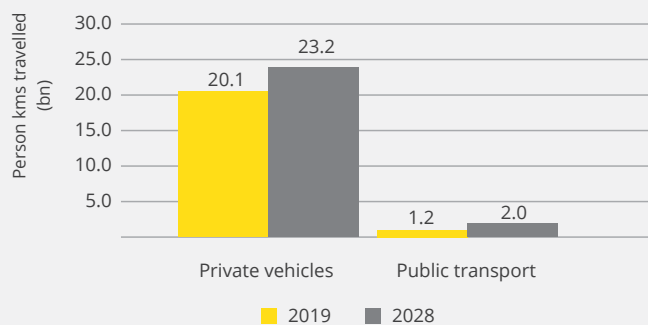
2. Driving continues to increase

Despite a steady increase in public transport (PT) patronage, the absolute number of users is dwarfed by that of general traffic users and – 2020 notwithstanding – the amount of driving that Aucklanders do continues to spiral upwards. Even with massive PT investment over the coming years, no fundamental change is expected in these patterns.

The goal of mode shift (getting people out of cars and onto PT) is a crucial one, but it can't be pursued at the expense of adequate investment to address the pressures facing general traffic – too many critical road projects in Auckland are being crowded out.

The ongoing predominance of car use reinforces the view that, when it comes to addressing Auckland's transport emissions, by far the greatest gains will come from de-carbonisation of the vehicle fleet.

Total distance travelled on the Auckland transport network 2019 vs 2028



Figures drawn from Auckland Transport, Ministry of Transport, Auckland Council and Statistics New Zealand data



3. What role for congestion charging?

Congestion charging shapes up as one of the most important single steps that can be taken to address congestion, and the longer there is uncertainty about whether, how and when it will play a role, the more of a handbrake it places on Auckland's de-congestion strategy. Congestion charging can't be allowed to drift – any discussion at the parliamentary level needs to go hand-in-hand with proactive and sustained public engagement.



4. Funding model severely strained

Delivering everything that's needed will be next to impossible without changes to the current funding model. Rail projects need to be pulled out of the transport fund, and returned to Crown funding sources (which is where they sat previously). At the same time, much more needs to be done with rail projects to generate new revenue streams that can help cover construction costs. Value capture (e.g., purchasing and re-zoning land around stations and then selling it off at a profit) is used to fund sizeable chunks of rail projects overseas, and must be better used here.



5. A changing transport landscape

Recent changes to travel demand in Auckland – congestion levels on different sections of the motorway network (relative to pre-Covid levels), working from home, and the spill-over of Aucklanders to Whangarei and Tauranga – need to be much better understood, in order to inform the strategy further ahead. We also need to better understand the degree to which planning rules are leading to increased car use and increased congestion – constrained land supply has helped fuel sky-high property prices, in turn pushing the bulk of Auckland's intensification to outer parts of the city, further from centres of work and study.