

# No place like home

If fewer people travel to city centres for their work, are urban and transport plans likely to go into sharp reverse? asks **Mark Smulian**

Every so often there comes a historical process or technological innovation whose consequences will obviously be profound, but which can barely be guessed at during their early stages – think the 1980s deindustrialisation or the arrival of the internet.

Two have come together with the Covid-19 pandemic: a large shift to working at home coupled with the technological means to do this suddenly becoming widespread.

The pandemic lockdown forced people into home working who might otherwise never have done so, sometimes using Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Google Hangouts and other means of online communication with groups of colleagues and clients.

And this does not just refer to work.

With shops closed, many buyers turned to online retail giving the UK's beleaguered high streets another shove towards economic doom, while closed cinemas, theatres and venues drove increased use of online home entertainment.

What nobody knows is whether the changes will prove permanent, though plenty are thinking and speculating.

If these changes are embedded, could more home working and, as a consequence, less commuting undermine the economic basis of public transport and the viability of associated infrastructure projects?

Were that to happen, would it be any more sensible to insist on 'defending' current provision than it would have been a century ago to 'defend' municipal horse troughs in the face of motor traffic?

Even if progress was limited, some places achieved modal shift from cars to public transport. So, will that go into reverse if people are scared to use buses and trains for health reasons and, anyway, travel less often for work, shopping and entertainment?

While the overnight switch to home working for the pandemic saw many obliged to commandeer kitchen tables as best they could, any long-term shift could see people move beyond urban areas – since they would have no need of quick daily access to a workplace – and want a larger home with a specific workspace to free up table space in the kitchen.

Planning policies based on sustainability aimed at encouraging 'densification' could be under threat as people move beyond green belts and demand more land for larger homes thus threatening an urban sprawl.

It's as well to be wary of blithe predictions – anyone recalling 1960s futurism will now be wondering where they mislaid their personal flying module. But, while it's too early for firm evidence, there are plenty of survey results that could be bad news for public transport.

Smart Transport's own reader survey found no respondent who thought public transport use would increase and 94% who thought fewer people would use it, while 69% of respondents expected fewer people would move to cities, and only 7.7% thought more would do so.

Business services firm Deloitte found 70% of staff in financial services considered home working a positive experience, with



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Mark Smulian** is a freelance journalist specialising in local government, law, travel, transport, housing, construction and planning. He has featured in a wide range of publications including the *Local Government Chronicle*, *Civil Service World*, *Law Society Gazette* and the *Sunday Telegraph*. He is also a former editor of *Housing Today* and news editor at *Inside Housing* and *Surveyor*.

76% saying not having to commute was the best thing about this, while the same proportion felt they had become more productive.

Has the stage been set for more and more companies adopting agile working?

Although 55% expected their offices to reopen over the summer months, those who intended to work from home at least once a week increased from 41% before lockdown to 77% and for two days or more from 12% to 43%.

Polling among 500 business leaders for the London Chamber of Commerce and Industry told a similar story.

Even when the restrictions end, 37% said they would conduct a greater proportion of meetings virtually and the same proportion would permit employees to work from home more often, while 13% would abandon offices entirely.

Consultancy Go Travel Solutions looked at how travel behaviour had changed during the pandemic, when walking and cycling increased and use of other modes fell.

But while bus and train use were down by 36% and 45% respectively among the 800 respondents, car use was down by just 4%. Post-pandemic, 47% expected to travel less often.

Of the 633 respondents who had been able to work from home, 385 said they would continue to do this more often than before the outbreak, again with the absence of commuting the most popular reason, cited by 69%.

Robin Pointon, managing director of Go Travel Solutions says: "Given the levels of uncertainty, we need to exercise caution in believing perceptions of the future will become the reality.

"However, what the research reflects is that Covid-19 will make an unprecedented impact on workplace travel. This is not just a change on the here and now but in the months and potentially years to come." ►

# 77%

of office workers intend to work from home at least one day a week





► We can perhaps add to a slump in commuting the impact of fewer physical shopping trips to town centres, kicking away two substantial sources of public transport revenue.

Accountancy firm BDO says its High Street Sales Tracker showed an 18.3% fall in sales of all kinds in May, while online sales jumped by 129.5%.

All this could demand some major rethinking by transport planners. For years plans have proceeded on the basis that some areas were primarily residential and people travelled to and from them for work, retail, education, health and amenities, usually into urban centres.

If one aimed to cut car commuting into a city centre, the solution might be parking restrictions coupled with an improved bus service or even installation of light rail.

This starts to look different if, say, people commute into the centre only three days a week for work and rarely visit for retail since they buy online.

Local plans, though, are there to guide medium-term development in each area and cannot be easily adjusted.

So, it will indeed be problematic if a local plan has been designed to increase

**18.3%**  
fall in high street sales in May

▼ Covid-19 accelerated the shift from high street shopping to buying online

transport capacity to places where fewer people now need to go, or calls for retail-led regeneration where few retailers now wish to be, or for offices complexes where employers no longer want so much space because their employees are at home.

Martin Tugwell, programme director at England's Economic Heartland, likens altering a local plan to trying to reverse the direction of a supertanker.

He says: "Covid-19 has accelerated trends like internet shopping and home working and those may drive more people away from high streets and town centres and we will need to reimagine what those are for, possibly with more residential and entertainment and less retail."

"That may be not an entirely bad thing if it encourages more active travel to social and entertainment facilities in a central area where there is more residential and it could mean less need for car commuting; we could perhaps do something quite creative."

"That, though, will not be in the local plan. Plans assume people would want to come to city centres and

plans are there for 10-15 years and, like a supertanker, it takes time to slow them down and turn them."

Some planning issues that could arise include reallocating space from retail or employment to residential and allowing space for freight logistics, given the huge increase in demand for home deliveries of goods.

Tugwell says: "There are trade-offs of many kinds. For example, there may be less demand for 100,000 sq ft supermarkets but more for smaller ones that would not need 44-tonne trucks to deliver to out-of-town centres."

"Rather than planning 500 homes on the outskirts of towns we could build in town centres and create social space there."

Local plans, as they stand, may be largely redundant. Tugwell says: "We need to think about how we get faster growth and yet the environment in which local plans were produced is potentially different from the one we will have."

"Assumptions were made about people's daily lives and where they are located that may no longer hold, but there is still a need to change attitudes so that those who have the choice to use a car use public transport instead, at least for shorter journeys."

Simon Strachan, head of technical programmes at Midlands Connect, fortuitously found the Covid-19 restrictions coincided with a review of regional strategy, which was considering the impact of increased home working on demand for roads and rail capacity.

He says: "People have realised they can work from home and it's right to expect that when we get to the other side of this (pandemic), things will not be quite the same. The need for big offices may be lower."

"A lot of this will come from the private sector, if it decides it does not need offices. That may not change fast because people have long leases, though they may see a chance for lower overheads if staff work more from home."

Rather than respond to economic forces, Strachan thinks there could be an opportunity for planning and transport professionals and local authorities "to think about the scenario they want to happen rather than wait for it to be done to them".

He says: "There could still be an opportu-



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"I think Covid-19 will accelerate trends already in progress and maybe exaggerate them," Holmes says.

"We have seen bus patronage decline in the Sheffield city region and that may worsen given warnings about using public transport."

She thinks demand for office space in city centres will fall, but not vanish, as "working from home removes the agglomeration benefits which we know to be important where people meet each other – and those are very powerful – so I think people will still want to meet but offices might have more meeting spaces and fewer rows of desks".

Holmes adds: "Public transport system patterns might change as some ►

nity for local authorities to reimagine space and 'bake in' what they want to see happen; perhaps they might reallocate road space for walking and cycling, at least for shorter trips," he says.

Strachan senses modal shift might reverse in the short term until a vaccine or treatment for Covid-19 restores confidence in using crowded public transport.

"Car traffic could increase, though there may be fewer people travelling to work, and city centres could see empty shops and offices but those that are a regional resource should be resilient, while smaller places may suffer."

Shifting work patterns could damage city centres but help outer areas if people work more often from shared offices spaces and coffee shops near their home, make purchases from neighbourhood shops and use a local pub rather than a city centre one for after-work drinks.

This potential shift in local economies would considerably affect public transport provision.

He says: "We could see people working fewer hours in offices, but they may choose to stay at home on Mondays and Fridays – so they feel they have had a longer weekend – but then there would be a crush on Tuesdays-to-Thursdays with more people travelling. That three-days-a-week crush may make transport finance difficult, so it is not a panacea."

Jenny Holmes, assistant director for strategic transport at Sheffield City Region Combined Authority, says the degree to which Covid-19 changes work and travel habits depends on how long restrictions last. The longer people have to get used to not using public transport, the less likely they will be to return.

▲ Government advice to avoid public transport, where possible, may increase car usage to the detriment of authorities' clean air plans



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▶ people go into work less often, but we still need it to be inclusive for those who cannot work at home."

She fears these changes may create difficulties in making a case for public transport investment and that, even if spaces are redesigned for walking and cycling, these modes will not be practical for all journeys.

"Car use is a possibly increasing trend, but we can't have increased car traffic if we are to meet emissions targets unless there was a strong move to electric cars, and, even if there was, that would not solve congestion. We need fewer cars doing short journeys."

Like Strachan, Holmes sees potential for outer urban areas, which she calls a 'distributed' city centre, as with fewer trips into work there is a challenge for office and retail, "but we may see stronger local centres".

Sam Li, senior innovation officer at Transport for Greater Manchester (TfGM), also expects to see local areas gain at the expense of city centres.

"Home working may be an opportunity for other towns," he says. "If we are not trying to get such large numbers of people to and from the centre of Manchester every day, they may, instead, use local flexible office spaces and coffee shops and then buy

37%

says they are more likely to conduct meetings virtually in future

things from local retailers in centres like Bolton and Bury, so it could help to regenerate those."

Li thinks no one can yet make more than an informed guess at the future of transport both because pandemic restrictions remain partly in place and it is too early to assess their impact.

"It is difficult to get hold of data yet about home working so there are a lot of assumptions being made about the impact, but we need more data than it's possible to get so far," he says.

"We need to know if employers are still going to have three floors of offices with people working 9-5, or just one floor of mainly meeting rooms with people working remotely or dynamically. There are a lot of offices being built in Manchester and we need to understand any affects on those."

He says the conurbation has seen some increase in car use, which is partly why mayor Andy Burnham has launched Safe Travel Greater Manchester, a campaign to explain how to travel safely and promote active travel.

Li fears though "people may just buy a cheap old diesel car and use it to make their journeys for as long as diesels are permitted; we just don't know yet".

Kate Morris, who leads transport and engineering

consultancy AECOM for Europe, the Middle East and Africa, is based in Leeds and has been involved in talks with city and business leaders on the pandemic's impact on transport and planning.

She says: "Most large employers have been forced to reassess if people can work from home and have decided that many people can, and so, as city centre office space is expensive, people will look to cut office costs."

AECOM, itself, has consolidated its offices and could see half its floor space surplus to requirements, Morris says.

"You might see firms having hubs in outer centres in cheaper locations rather than one city centre office."

Morris thinks intensified demand for more flexible working will affect public transport and notes some offices were "dead" as a result on Fridays even before the pandemic.

"The problem is, you can't run a public transport system easily with services from Monday to Thursday as we've been used to a pattern of weekday and weekend services and changing that will cause difficulties," she says. "There could be a three-day peak midweek which would be difficult to serve."

Leeds has unsuccessfully tried to put a business case to Government for a tram system and such shifts in work and shopping patterns could make schemes like that even less likely.

Morris says: "It may be hard to justify expensive linear services if fewer people are commuting to work, and buses may be better, but social exclusion will also be an issue for those unable to get to work if they cannot work from home."

She detects "nervousness among transport planners" over progress in modal shift away from cars stalling or even reversing, and says: "If you suddenly get a Government diktat that people should drive, then modal shift could be lost and it is very hard to change transport behaviour."

Amid so much uncertainty there are voices that believe the pandemic will benefit large cities, but not with the property mix that was previously standard.

One such is investment management firm Schroders, which in a statement by Hugo Machin, its fund manager for global cities, and Tom Walker, co-head of global real estate securities,

declared: "Global cities can still thrive despite Covid-19's impact."

Their argument is that, although fewer people will be travelling to work in cities each day, "the interactions they have with colleagues and clients in the city's urban core will be of greater importance."

"So, rather than diminishing the power of global cities, these changes will potentially make them even more valuable."

Schroders says that before the pandemic demand for property in cities was increasingly for data centres and warehouses, while shopping centres were declining and demand for office space was weaker.

It says: "Data centres and warehouses have already replaced the need for shopping malls. The reality is warehouses are beginning to physically replace retail parks; the value of warehouses close to large, affluent populations is now greater than the value of retail outlets."

"Transactions by large internet companies reflect their need to be able to distribute from where people use to shop from. This is a profound shift in land use."

These changes would mean that offices "will suffer a collapse in demand, already witnessed by retail assets, in all but the most interconnected locations", with those in secondary locations most at risk of being repurposed as "with higher numbers



of people working from home, it will make no sense for businesses to maintain these types of offices".

Schroders says urbanisation had been a long-term trend since the earliest days of the industrial revolution and "economic activity is not going to move back to rural areas and the strongest cities, such as London and New York, will continue to create economic opportunities".

It is, though, very early days. As Li says: "The key thing is to find out who will lead these changes before we can really understand what will follow."

"Will it be employee-led and based on lifestyle, or employer-led and based on costs?"

Such is the lack of certainty that all these speculations could come to nothing.

If Covid-19 is brought under control, people may revert to work and travel patterns with any changes barely noticeable.

But, there could be a future of more home working and shopping, less travel – but more car travel within that – and larger homes with workspaces creating a suburban sprawl.

Transport and land use planners, as yet, have little in the way of hard facts to go on. But, once they do, some radical rethinking may be needed. **ST**

▼ A sight we may be seeing more of in the offices of the future – rows of empty work desks

TURN OVER FOR THE PEER REVIEWS



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