

Transformative times have arrived

Stephen Joseph reflects on the ways in which Covid-19 has impacted transport and which changes he expects to become more permanent

Well, what a difference a few months makes. My previous welcome note was written in what now seems an unimaginably distant pre-Covid-19 world, in which we could freely meet and talk to each other, streets were full and there was a problem of overcrowding on public transport. That, at least, is still with us, but in such a different context – how to stop buses, trams and trains being overwhelmed with people while still maintaining social distancing.

The virus has upended almost everything, and transport is no exception.

As I write, the aviation industry is on life support, with bailouts, some with conditions attached, keeping it aloft.

Road traffic is massively down, and cycling and walking up, while public transport use is also well down. Car sales have collapsed to their lowest point for 70 years.

However, as many commentators have pointed out, locking down was, in some ways, the easy part. The real questions are now arising on routes out of the lockdown and – importantly for this magazine – what the legacy will be.

One clear immediate issue is about increased travel with social distancing. Public transport is going to find this difficult

– capacity may be as low as 15% of normal, especially once the need for queueing at stations/stops and interchanges is considered. Enforcement of social distancing will have to be by consent and social norms – it will not be possible for transport staff or police to enforce this.

So, a generation of messaging from the Government and local authorities encouraging people to use public transport, has had to go into reverse. While there are differences between the four nations in the UK on coronavirus messaging, they are united in advising people to avoid public transport unless they have to use it.

What is going to happen instead? Clearly, many people have discovered the delights of Zoom, Webex etc., and are working from home. This seems likely to continue, and many of these people are in white-collar jobs that (at least in the cities) might involve train and tram travel.

It's less clear what will happen to those in manufacturing and construction jobs, for whom being on-site is an absolute prerequisite. Many of these will commute by car; those that don't have their own cars will have to look for other options. This might mean public transport (especially if their employer can arrange shifts so their travel is outside peak hours) or, potentially, sharing cars.

But, there are new options coming on to the horizon. As readers will know, Smart Transport, itself, has migrated online and we have turned the sessions from the 17 March conference into webinars.

I know many have joined these and found them interesting. We added one to the list, in association with the University of Hertfordshire, to look at transport responses to Covid-19 outside cities. This

was both because there had been a lot of coverage of what cities have been doing, but with less coverage of responses elsewhere, and also because we had found some interesting initiatives in practice.

In the webinar, we heard from Vancouver-based tech start-up, SpareLabs, which has been using data to design micro-transit services to bring keyworkers to work, incorporating tracking and tracing of those on the vehicles to allow follow up if any develop the virus.

At the other end, we heard from Beate Kubitz, a contributor to *Smart Transport*, who has set up an e-cargo-bike delivery service in her Pennine village, linking small businesses with customers.

We also heard from a bus operator in Kent who has turned his network over to demand-responsive services, linking key workers, but also those without cars from villages needing to get to shops etc. (for more detail, see page 74).

All this suggests employers might be able to use smarter transport to get employees to work, even away from the big cities.

Alongside all this, cycling has taken off. Bike shops report huge demand with waiting lists for bikes. The UK, unlike some other countries, has allowed people to leave their homes for daily exercise and this, alongside the absence of traffic, has seen old bikes dragged out and renovated and new bikes bought as well as people enjoying the ability to cycle and walk with their families without intrusion by road traffic.

This is one area where the changes prompted by the virus seem likely to last.

Around the world, we've seen cities from New York to Bogotá and Milan to Paris put in temporary bike lanes, as well as widening pavements and taking out traffic ►



ABOUT THE CHAIRMAN

Stephen Joseph is the chairman of the *Smart Transport* Editorial Board and was chief executive of the Campaign for Better Transport for 30 years before taking up a position as advisor to the charity last summer. He has also been

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► lanes so people can walk around while socially distancing. After a slow start, cities in the UK have begun to follow suit. London and Manchester have speeded up existing plans, some London boroughs have put in 'pop-up' cycle lanes and wider pavements, while other cities – Edinburgh, Brighton and Leicester come to mind – have also installed temporary cycle and walking spaces.

▲ **Commuters and shoppers using cycle paths in Brighton**

That this is the start of something more permanent came with an announcement from the Transport Secretary Grant Shapps on 6 May of a £2 billion funding package including a £250 million fund for emergency measures.

▲► **Freight in the UK has an alternative recovery plan**

In a way, the most important part of the announcement was not the funding, but the accompanying statutory guidance, which required local authorities to come forward with proposals for enhancing active travel. There will also be a new inspectorate and clear standards for new cycling provision, as well as "school streets" and GPs prescribing active travel.

► **Welsh Active Travel Act, with 20mph limits. The main A5 road running through the village in the Conwy valley at Betws-y-Coed in North Wales**



The other UK nations have all made similar provision, though not in quite the same way. Wales is following up its previous Active Travel Act with default 20mph limits, while Scotland announced funding for pop-up walking and cycling routes and for employers promoting cycling.

15%

of normal capacity is the figure for public transport if social distancing is enforced

Right now Governments and cities have no choice. Unless they do this, they face the threat of being overwhelmed by cars. With public transport running at low capacity, cities have to take space from cars and get as many people as possible onto bikes or walking if they are to function at all.

But, although many of these schemes are temporary, it seems likely that many won't disappear once the virus has gone.

The Department for Transport (DfT) announcement is explicit about this, and many cities abroad have made it clear that they see this as part of a wider and long-term policy on how people travel.

As I have mentioned in previous *Smart Transport* articles, this 'Healthy Streets' agenda has been part of many cities' strategies. Now Boris Johnson and his transport adviser Andrew Gilligan are indicating that this is shared by national Government, too.

The upsurge in walking and cycling is also driven by a wider public feeling.

During the lockdowns, people have experienced cleaner air and streets you can walk and cycle in – and even let your kids walk and cycle in.

Surveys suggest that many want to keep things like this and are saying they will want to cycle and walk more. So, whereas such measures might in the past have faced a lot of opposition, they are more likely now to get general support.

Anti-cycling and jogging comments, although present in the lockdown (people have posted on social media pictures of "cyclists stay away" signs in villages), appear to be relatively isolated.

This mood is feeding through to wider change. Although the growth in working from home and remote meetings won't stay as high after the lockdown eases, it will

lead to some permanent changes. Those with enough space at home will want to stay working there at least some of the time.

Many business meetings, in particular, may migrate online permanently. This will have much wider economic effects; private sector members of *Smart Transport*, like ALD and Enterprise, who work with many companies, are reporting that many of their clients are seriously considering reducing their office space, introducing more flexible working and hot desking alongside more remote working.

The 9-5, five-day/week commuting jobs, already reducing before Covid-19 came along, seem likely to reduce much further and faster after this. Other sectors may do more remotely – doctors have found that online consultations can work well for many, while universities are also teaching and assessing online.

This is not to say that everything can be done online. As various people have pointed out, hairdressers need personal contact, while those with school-age children (and often the children themselves) are looking forward to a return to school.

More widely, when it's safe to do so,

people will want to get together. They will want to see friends and relatives, meet up in pubs and cafes, and go to sporting events and theatres and concerts. They will also want to go on holiday, here and abroad.

Nonetheless, the virus does herald some really profound changes in travel demand, and transport planning will have to adapt to it. More than ever, past trends will be no guide to what will happen in the future.

This makes it really difficult for anyone trying to make plans, whether in the public or private sector. Some city authorities are working on scenarios based on journey purposes – education and personal services (schools and hairdressers) might be relatively robust, 'VFR' (visiting friends and relatives) will come back strongly, but other journey types, notably commuting and business travel, and leisure too, might change dramatically.

Freight may be different also – the UK Government's recovery plan talks of the country becoming self-sufficient in medical supplies, and there is much talk of shorter and more local supply chains and a reverse of some of the globalisation seen in the past (though this might be limited if it means higher prices for consumers).

So conventional transport modelling and appraisal, already under pressure as this and previous *ST* issues have shown, face further challenge. And, alongside all of this, is the climate change agenda. Not only has this not gone away, it's been strengthened by the onset of Covid-19.

Just after the lockdown started, the DfT issued *Decarbonising Transport: Setting the Challenge*, which included this statement from Grant Shapps in his foreword: "Public transport and active travel will be the natural first choice for our daily activities. We will use our cars less and be able to rely on a convenient, cost-effective and coherent public transport network."

I was quoted by the BBC as saying this was "gob-smacking", and I stand by this.



£27 bn
investment in the strategic road network now being questioned

► **London Heathrow Airport's third runway plans in doubt**

▼ **Many retailers that have migrated online may not return to the high street**

No previous transport secretary, even John Prescott, has said anything like this.

It does present a huge challenge though, in terms of future transport investment. The Government was defeated in the Appeal Court over its support for the third runway at Heathrow, on the grounds that ministers had ignored the Climate Change Act and associated policies when deciding on this.

Next in line could be the Roads Investment Strategy, a £27bn investment in the strategic road network. Not only is this facing a similar legal challenge, but many commentators have suggested that this money could be better spent – the chief executive of the Committee on Climate Change has suggested the money might be better spent on upgrading broadband connections across the country to enable more remote working.

The AA president, Edmund King, drawing on surveys of its members which show more are planning to work at home and walk and cycle rather than drive, has suggested that previous infrastructure spending plans should be questioned.

British Airways chief executive, Willie Walsh, has said he now doubts if the Heathrow third runway will happen, and we've seen demands from former Bank of England governor Mark Carney, along-

side others in the climate finance world, to limit bailouts to airlines, or at least tie them to green objectives. In fact, the French Government in its Air France bailout has prohibited it from competing with high speed rail.

Besides all this, we will need public transport to be there once we can use it safely. It, too, may have to change – fares reform, with universal smart cards and simple zonal fares, may be imposed.

More public control and co-ordination will be needed – old arguments about bus franchising and integrated networks may disappear. And it will be supplemented by other forms of transport: demand responsive services, micro-transit, e-bikes and also e-scooters (the UK is to fast-track hire schemes for these).

The phrase "the new normal" is already much overused in talking about the virus and world it is heralding. But, in the case of transport, it really is the situation that the world after the virus will be very different.

Changes that were already on the way, on decarbonisation and healthy streets, have been given an impetus, and new travel patterns have formed. How this shapes up is anyone's guess, but it does mean that the *Smart Transport* programme will have an important and increasing role. [ST](#)

