



ADAPTING TODAY  
FOR A NEW TOMORROW

# THE NEW NORMAL

## WHAT WILL RAIL TRAVEL BEHAVIOUR BE LIKE POST CORONAVIRUS?

Coronavirus will have far-reaching effects on attitudes to public transportation, travel needs and funding. AECOM's **Shamit Gaiger** says the railway industry needs to start preparing for a totally transformed transport environment. For an industry that is obsessed with timetabling, it can't afford to be late in its response.

**N**ormal life has stopped for millions of people in the UK — and for most of us it will never be the same. The economic shutdown has massively impacted transport behaviours, and will continue to do so, even when travel restrictions are lifted.

Network Rail and operating companies have reacted and continue to react incredibly well to the challenges in keeping key workers and freight moving during the lockdown. But that's not the only challenge imposed by the coronavirus crisis. Passenger numbers have dropped by

90 percent, with the resultant drop in revenues, and the network has been temporarily nationalized.

In addition, train and freight operating companies are having to continually revise emergency timetables brought in literally overnight, to fit in with travel patterns, both for passengers and freight. In ordinary times, timetable changes can take months or even years.

But what will happen when the restrictions start to be lifted? Will people's travel patterns change, and are there lessons we can learn from the incredibly agile work we've seen in producing timetables adapted to fit the immediate needs of the users?

## -20%

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### Preparing for the future starts now

Coronavirus has upended the world's operating assumptions, and it will be no different for railways. Some predictions point to a 20 percent reduction in overall trips on public transport after travel restrictions are lifted, including a 27 percent drop in commuter travel as the trend towards home working endures. Some people, worried about infections, may simply never return to public transport.

Looking ahead, there will be difficult choices to make: where, when and how will service resume? What short, medium and long-term strategies are needed for the safe return to operations? And in the longer term, what sort of a service will post-pandemic populations require? How will attitudes towards public transport have changed? Are there any investments that should be brought forward?

Previous expectations and assumptions will need to be rethought. ➔

## The climate challenge

A major cause of concern is that fighting coronavirus impacts our ability to fight the other crisis we are facing: the climate emergency. If pressing economic needs affect planned investments or regulatory approaches, this could make the fight against emissions much harder.

In China, where the outbreak began, we have seen an increase in car sales as people start turn to private vehicles due to understandable safety concerns. And in the UK, appetite for public transport is on the wane. According to the latest consumer research by Auto Trader, the UK's largest marketplace for new and used cars, nearly half (48 percent) of respondents said they would be less likely to use it once the current restrictions have been lifted. The research found that more than half (56 percent) thought that owning a vehicle will be more important in the future.<sup>1</sup>

On the flipside, we have seen significant behaviour changes, such as teleworking and greater reliance on digital technologies, that have reduced transportation demand and therefore emissions. Reducing the need to travel, particularly for commuters, need not be a bad thing for the railways. Indeed, if managed correctly it could bring significant environmental gains - but only if the industry is proactive to ensure that there is not a modal shift towards private vehicle use.

## What we need to do?

With the right choices, however, there is an opportunity to strengthen the railways for the future. The government has a stated objective of increasing usage of sustainable forms of transport including public transport, walking and cycling. To achieve this, several things need to be done including:

- / Support the reduction in the need to travel — and the resultant environmental gains — that the trend towards homeworking is ushering in.



- / To incentivise behavioural change, the industry should collaborate with external partners with a view to creating potential for additional near-term business-model disruptions, as well as offering greater incentives for accelerated change. Address the short and long-term health and hygiene concerns of passengers and communicate with them on how those concerns have been addressed. Passengers need reassurance now, and a failure to address this could impact their trust in the system for years to come.
- / Provide part time and flexible travel cards for commuters who change their working travel habits.
- / Capitalise on the level of collaboration across the different agencies — public transport, health and emergency services, schools — we have seen that the nation is a system.
- / Lead the way in building a recovery that is focused on green growth, social parity and improved resiliency.
- / The rail industry has demonstrated its resiliency in the last few weeks in response to the coronavirus. This ability to be agile and adapt will set the industry in good stead for the future.

Although no-one can be sure what the immediate future holds, we have to start the planning now to get the procedures in place to best serve passengers and to make the railways the popular choice of transport. For an industry that is obsessed with timetabling, let's make sure we are not late in our response.

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