



CALLING TIME ON RUSH HOUR IN A POST-PANDEMIC WORLD

Coronavirus restrictions are not going to end suddenly. As restrictions are eased and people return to work outside of their homes, we will need a new approach to transport. We should be planning for that approach in earnest now. **Joe Seymour**, AECOM's Head of Streets and Traffic, explores the shift in travel and how we should address it.

Coronavirus brought the world to a juddering halt and will have far-reaching effects on the way we work once current restrictions on movement are eased. Very few are missing their commute, but it will resume over the coming months as the restrictions ease. To facilitate this, transport authorities should be tackling some crucial questions now: How do we get the country moving again, taking social distancing into account? What behaviors do we encourage? What changes to our infrastructure will we need?

Changing behavior in transport

Many are suggesting that social distancing will need to be in place for some time and as a result our traditional commuting patterns may no longer be viable, particularly for public transport users. Although some may choose to drive to avoid crowded stations and public transport, a significant rise in private vehicles is clearly not the answer. So what needs to change? Just as policymakers have worked hard to flatten the curve of viral infection, we need to flatten the peak hours of our future commute, boost cycling and reassure commuters that appropriate measures are in place. ➔

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The first question that everyone should ask themselves each day will be: “Do I really need to travel?”. When the answer is no, employers should adapt, offering flexibility over working at home over the long term.

Before the pandemic struck, working hours were already becoming more flexible, with research by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development finding that 54 per cent of workers ¹ had the option to operate outside of typical nine-to-five office hours. This will have to increase further, and workers will need more IT capability at home, but of course we are already living this new template daily with widespread videoconferencing from home becoming the new norm.

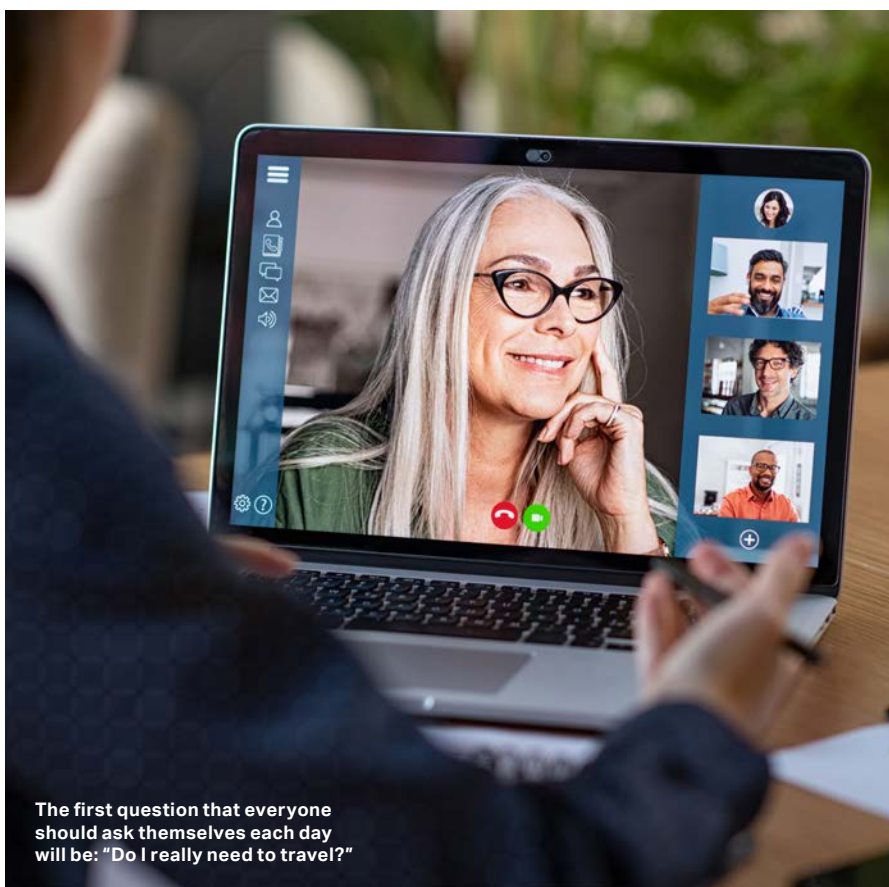
For those who need to travel, core hours will need to be broader. Social distancing on public transport will substantially reduce the capacity of existing vehicles and will only be possible if the number of people using the transport network at peak hours is reduced. We need people travelling to work from early in the morning to early afternoon, spreading the stresses on the system in both directions. We will also need those that can to use alternative modes of travel, such as walking and cycling.

Transport authorities are already exploring different options for reducing crowding, with Transport for London (TfL) ensuring that some national rail services do not stop at the busiest interchanges at peak times. TfL is also exploring ways to slow the flow of passengers onto platforms and open different routes within stations.

Technology may allow commuters to avoid busy times on public transport. Existing apps like Citymapper can play a role in identifying which train carriages might be especially busy and information can be displayed on platform screens.

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This could be greatly expanded to help manage the numbers arriving at public transport stations.

Millions of people are walking and cycling more near their homes as part of the daily exercise routine. According to the Automobile Association, there was only 20 per cent of the usual traffic on the UK’s roads recently, and with fewer cars on the road, many people are using the lockdown to gain confidence in cycling. This newfound hobby could be an opportunity for authorities to promote this mode of travel on the return to work and free up space on public transport for those that do not have the option to use a bicycle.

Use of the bicycle will also be boosted by the recent advent of electric motors as an alternative. Research by Evelo electric bikes ² shows that a commute of 10 miles or more would be challenging for some on a traditional bike, but could take only 30 minutes on an electric bike, which is an excellent if slightly expensive alternative. Electric bike sales are already on the rise, with around 50,000 to 60,000 sold a year, and Halfords predicting a 30 per cent rise in e-bike sales. ³ In my view, the promotion of cycling should be a key component of our return to work strategy. ➔



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How infrastructure can 'nudge' people towards sustainable, safe travel

Changing commute times and choices of transport are just two parts of the puzzle. These social distancing shifts will have to be sustainable and backed by new infrastructure that can support rising economic activity. Transport authorities and local authorities need to develop a connected, inclusive network of sustainable transport and altered infrastructure.

Protected cycle routes, as distinct from cycle lanes marked only by painted lines, will also be vital for encouraging less confident cyclists on to the roads. There is significant evidence that the

creation of segregated cycle lanes encourages cycling among a wider demographic and will be key to giving less experienced cyclists the confidence to travel a reasonable distance to work.

Many cities are looking into coning off traffic lanes and marking out safe places at traffic lights for cyclists during this initial stage of the pandemic, but maybe we should be considering leaving these in place throughout the period when social distancing is required. Removing the cones and handing back lanes to motor vehicles, particularly in a period of reduced economic activity, could have the unintended consequence of increasing the numbers of people driving to work as a result of the reduced traffic congestion.

We will also need more parking for bicycles at our destinations and could consider removing some on-street parking spaces and providing temporary Sheffield stands — a simple bike stand — to create a huge amount of cycle parking in our urban centers and help promote economic activity. Employers can play their part by providing more changing rooms and showers for cyclists.

A massive kick start for sustainable travel

Joining all these thoughts together creates an opportunity. With proper planning now, commuting habits can change for the better. Air pollution levels have plummeted across cities around the world and that's just one of the benefits.

As the lockdown is eased there will be a relatively brief period to nudge commuters towards better travel habits. If people start driving to work again in cities where that is viable, we risk winding the clock back a decade or more and losing the shift we have already seen towards more cycling. But if we get it right, the new transport infrastructure will contribute to a more sustainable future and healthier communities. [WU](#)



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