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The world turned upside down?

What if the 'normal' we had before Covid isn't there anymore?
How will public transport respond to a fundamental realignment?

► There's a risk that the short horizons of the Covid crisis, Zoom fatigue and the desire for a return to normality tricks us into thinking that the normal we last saw in March is still there. That our main task is to claw our exhausted way back to it. That's certainly the inexorable logic of HMT 'recovery plans' where the funding rug is pulled as soon as 'normality' can be glimpsed on the horizon. But what if the normal we had isn't there anymore? The pandemic turned our world upside down but will it fully right itself afterwards?

There's a big debate going on around whether Covid has triggered a fundamental realignment between the relative strength of core cities, secondary towns and cities and the suburbs. To some extent I'm going to cop out on this on the grounds that it's too early to say. But there sure are a lot of powerful signals out there amongst all the noise. A lot of this relates to who can work from home and who can't. The new Covid divide between the blue collar and the loungewear economy. Between the stay at home Covid aristocracy and those who have never taken part in a Zoom work call. Between those who travelled to work throughout the worst of the pandemic and those that sat it out.

This plays out geographically. Centre for Cities research that shows that London, Reading and Edinburgh have among the highest shares of workers able to work from home (more than four in ten) whereas in Barnsley, Burnley and Stoke just two in ten workers are able to do so. This could also be a

reason why town and city centres serving less prosperous areas have done better for footfall - relative to both more prosperous areas and core cities (as office workers stay home, and fit in more on-line shopping in the process).

After Covid many of those who can work from home are going to want the best of both worlds. The logical consequence for those jobs that can be done anywhere is hybrid working with offices repurposed as people places that you might actually want to spend time in so that deeper collaboration can happen than via Zoom. There are signs too that the flight from expensive city centre living in small spaces is starting earlier in life and in greater volumes. Bringing with it the potential for a revitalisation of fading suburbs as more people seek the space to work and enjoy the good life whilst bringing as much of the trappings of hipster city life with them as possible. This also ties in with the idea of the 15-minute city or cities of villages. Instead of each part of a city or a city region having one job to do (dormitory, retail, work) everywhere does everything with shops, workhubs and services within easy reach.

Some are embracing this hoped-for shift

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- including C40 cities (which represents the world's superstar cities). The Welsh Government has set an ambition for around 30% of the workforce to continue working from home, even when coronavirus restrictions have eased. It sees potential long-term benefits in reducing congestion, air pollution and improving work-life balance. It is also looking into developing a network of 'community-based working hubs' - office-like environments within walking or cycling distance of homes, shared by public, private and voluntary bodies. It says that the "intention is to develop a hybrid workplace model, where staff can work in the office, at home, or in a hub location". This offers the potential for more of a 'goldilocks' economy where economic activity and vitality is dispersed throughout conurbations rather than what we've had - which is piping hot core city economies and stone cold secondary centre economies.

But is this a vision that only works for a certain type of person who can enjoy and afford it because it fits how they work like a glove? Which leads us onto the possibility of what *The Economist* and others has described as 'the 90% economy'. More fragile and less innovative, due to the retreat from a vibrant public sphere. And more unfair, both because of higher unemployment but also as the blurring of work and home responsibilities increases gender divides and disadvantages for younger workers.

We can see the evidence of some of these trends in real time during the pandemic. More people have been using buses than trains. The light rail systems that specialise in transporting lower income and blue collar industrial workers have been doing way better on patronage than those that don't (ie the West Midlands Metro and Croydon Tramlink). In fact more widely what the Covid crisis has demonstrated is what was always true: A core role of public transport is moving those on low incomes (including low pay key workers) as well as blue collar workers.

If fewer trips are going to be made by those who can work and shop from home then catering to this solid base becomes more important. Couple that with higher levels of unemployment then what does this mean for the fares we charge and the nature of the public transport offer? In core urban areas should we be looking at something cheaper

“A mini-Switzerland for public transport - with nature and the planet the winner too”



Mini-Switzerland:
A visualisation of new Newport West railway station with bus and active travel interchange, part of a green alternative to the £1.4bn M4 scheme

for this base to use? Steadier rather than spectacular? A simple to use, green and low cost utility which means the low paid can get to work and which is part of the plumbing for modern decarbonising economies. A service that reflects the civic identity of the place it serves rather than something that shouts in many voices at the public, in an unconvincing way, about how it's a BMW equivalent product at a taxi-equivalent price?

How does all that square though with the pressure that is coming from the Treasury to show willing on making public transport worse, and more expensive, as a blood sacrifice in return for their frustration for them having no choice but to provide additional revenue support during the pandemic? Fare increases always make the Treasury feel better - a little win to shows who is top dog in Whitehall office politics.

If revenue support is in short supply, and the consequences of this are a steepening of the trajectory of local public transport decline, does this pave the way for a fresh push on road user charging? The three factors that suggest it might are the climate imperative, the state of local and national finances and the decline in VED (Vehicle Excise Duty) revenue as the

vehicle fleet transitions away from petrol and diesel. The last two factors are playing on the Treasury's mind in particular, which is why they have started to float the concept.

Perhaps the ultimate endgame which would play to public transport's advantage would be a MaaS (Mobility as a Service) payment platform which would combine payment and information options for road use, public transport, car hire, taxis, new mobility options and active travel. Factoring in the environmental and social costs would help incentivise behaviour in a way which supported wider goals around best use of available road space and decarbonisation objectives.

Short of that lofty and potentially enraging goal there are more immediate ways in which the Department for Transport budget could be reframed in a way which gives public transport more of a fighting chance. And that's to transfer some of the funds out of Highways England bank account which are currently being wasted on a zombie national road programme, set to consume a mind-boggling £27bn over the next five years in England alone. There's £350m in there just for scheme development (reanimating brain dead road schemes that have been kicking

around since the 1970s). You wouldn't need to spend £3.50 on consultancy advice to know that these schemes will funnel more traffic onto urban roads (which we are supposed to be repurposing for buses and active travel) as well as generating yet more dystopic car dependent and carbon intensive sprawl.

The Welsh Government has taken the right approach to all this through commissioning a study on the alternative to the £1.4bn M4 scheme in South East Wales which lays bare just how transformational using road building cash could be for public transport in the sub-region. New stations, a single integrated ticketing system, an enhanced regular interval bus service - all there for the taking. A mini-Switzerland for public transport - with nature and the planet the winner too. That really would be the right way to turn the world upside down. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

▶ Jonathan Bray is the director of the Urban Transport Group. Throughout his career in policy and lobbying roles he has been at the frontline in bringing about more effective, sustainable and equitable transport policies.