

FUTURE CITIES SERIES: CHANGE IN DIRECTION OR FULL SPEED AHEAD FOR THE TRANSPORT INDUSTRY?

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Technology and green concerns were already reshaping metropolitan transport. The pandemic will accelerate the process.

Modern transport has allowed us to travel further and faster, and in much greater numbers. It has shaped where we live, how we work and how we have fun. Developments in transport usage have in turn been shaped by external drivers; technological innovation, economic developments, government intervention and now a global pandemic have all played a major role in changing how we (and goods) travel.

This article is part of our Future Cities Series where our experts explore the pressures facing our cities in the post-Covid era and map out the key issues and industry themes in re-thinking urban life.

Even before Covid-19, our attitudes towards modern travel were evolving. The current pandemic will only accelerate trends that have already appeared. The interconnectivity offered by home IT and the internet, and the ever more important drive to achieve net zero emissions, have kept policy makers and analysts busy in recent times. We have been encouraged to cycle more, walk more, use public transport, work flexibly and rethink our air miles.

BACK TO NORMALITY?

The immediate effects of Covid-19 on the transport industry are still being revealed. Guidelines on social distancing are being reconciled with the need to open up the economy and allow people to resume normal life. Governments worldwide have indicated that businesses will need to continue flexible working practices where possible and are encouraging populations to avoid public transport. Limits on occupancy will inevitably need to be put in place where travel is essential – the UK government for example has deployed thousands of transport marshals to prevent services becoming overcrowded (acknowledging that even a fully restored service would only be capable of carrying one fifth of normal capacity with social distancing in place), while a reservation system was introduced on the Beijing Subway to combat overcrowding. Improved infrastructure for cycling, walking and other forms of micromobility are being urgently put in place to prevent the road network being overwhelmed by cars and taxis as citizens avoid rush hour on public transport (a trend which has already been observed across the world).

GOODBYE COMMUTE?

As businesses and workers adapt to flexible working, the daily rush hour commute may be consigned to history. Major employers and users of office space, such as Barclays and WPP, have already indicated that they are considering long-term rethinks on location strategy and flexible working. No longer obliged to be near city centres, office workers living in densely-populated cities may decide to move to more rural or suburban areas, in turn boosting regional economies and increasing the need for more localised public transport that is not predominantly focused on moving people into and out of city centres during rush hours.

Changes in transport use will draw a focus on interconnectivity between transport modes, greater timetable and fare flexibility, and user experience for longer distance travel. “Smart buses” that alter their routes based on demand would reduce reliance on private vehicles and improve accessibility. Within an ever-growing sharing economy, greater rates of cycling and the development of autonomous electric vehicles will add to a shift from mass transit. Pop-up bicycle lanes set up in cities during the Covid-19 pandemic will need to be maintained and extended further in line with net zero policies – both Paris and Milan have already announced plans to keep certain roads closed to cars post-lockdown to make more space available only to cyclists and pedestrians. Fiscal policy may be re-examined to create a more universal “polluter pays” tax that encourages more sustainable forms of transport.

WHO FOOTS THE BILL?

Substantial investment will be required – there will be an increased demand for improved broadband and mobile data access, infrastructure for charging electric vehicles, technology enabling the widespread use of autonomous vehicles and smarter transport, and greater intercity rail capacity as populations become more decentralised. Covid-19 has already caused financial strain on transport operators as well as significant demands on the public treasury. In such a context, private finance will play an important role in developing and financing the infrastructure needed to meet our changing needs.

SO, FULL SPEED AHEAD?

None of these developments are new news; Covid-19 will be a catalyst for transport trends that have been developing for some time. However, as future capital projects are being paused and reconsidered in the current climate, it is clear that governments should use this opportunity to ensure that the transition is managed through a clear, whole-system approach in order for the many competing objectives – encouraging sustainable economic growth, achieving net zero, maintaining public wellbeing and improving the interconnectivity of public transport – to be achieved.

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