

Moving to a Better Normal for Birmingham and West Midlands

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As we move from lockdown to restart, the issue must surely be how we move to a 'better normal', not simply a 'new normal'.

Covid-19 has helped crystallise some questions for us as a society. Do we really need to travel to work daily, wading through congestion and sitting in traffic jams? Zoom and Teams, although around for some years, have been a revelation to many. Better air quality really does make a difference, it's not just a nice to have. It's saving and improving people's lives.

As many as 3k people die prematurely across the West Midlands and an estimated 29,897 associated life-years are lost through poor air quality. It would be very sad if our longer-term response to the virus moves us in the direction of abandoning public transport in favour of the car given that cars are more resistant to coronavirus transmission.

This week our Prime Minister advised those who cannot work from home to return to work encouraging those able to commute by bike or walking to do so, whilst suggesting it was best to 'avoid public transport'.

On 9th May Grant Shapps, Secretary of State for Transport, issued new network duty guidance to local authorities under the [Traffic Act](#), stating this was a 'once in a generation opportunity to deliver a lasting transformative change in how we make short journeys in our towns and cities'. He recognised that in 2017-18 'over 40% of urban journeys were under 2 miles – perfectly suited to walking and cycling', referring to this as 'active travel'.

The Transport Secretary called for measures to be implemented ‘as swiftly as possible, and in any event within weeks’ to change travel habits before the restart takes full effect.

Recommendations included: installing pop-up cycle facilities; using cones and barriers to widen footways; encouraging walking and cycling to school; reducing speed limits; introducing pedestrian and cycle zones whilst restricting motor vehicle use to ‘specific streets’; using modal filters to restrict car access; changing junction design to accommodate more cyclists; drawing on ‘Whole-route’ approaches to create corridors for buses, cycles and access only on key routes into town and city centres along with bringing forward permanent schemes already planned, for example under Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plans, which can be constructed relatively quickly.

Over the weekend Grant Shapps and our West Midlands’ Metro Mayor, Andy Street, launched a £2 billion package to boost cycling infrastructure including a trial of e-scooters in Birmingham. With cycling making up a meagre 1% of all mileage by road vehicle traffic in the UK and cycling in and around Birmingham accounting for around 2% compared to say Copenhagen where 50% of all journeys are made by bike, this option this is not going to solve all our commuter challenges although a great ‘direction of travel’ for our city-region.

The West Midlands recorded the UK’s second lowest percentage of adults cycling at least once a month, around 13%, compared to 58% in Cambridge. Birmingham is re-tendering for its proposed bike hire scheme – the first one having been awarded to Germany’s Next bike who pulled out three years ago.

Adrian Williams, MD of Pashley Cycles employing 50 people in Stratford upon Avon, provides the bikes for the London and Edinburgh hire bike schemes. In response to the current challenges he comments:

“I joined Pashley 26 years ago and for the past four years we’ve been investing in the bike hire business – a new venture for us – with the bank looking over our shoulder at our accounts. We were effectively a 90 year old start-up! The ridiculous thing is if we were a start-up we could probably have raised investment money, but not at 90 years old. We did it ourselves (with the help of a bank overdraft).

However, the investment paid off as this year we started out with our biggest order book for hire bikes and also Pashley's staple products which customers can purchase through "Click and collect". This has worked really well.

Our sister company Moulton has also seen orders pouring in from the Far East.

Over the next couple of years we will see our turnover double from £4m to £8m. Nevertheless, in recent weeks we have been very careful to abide by Government guidelines. We ordered face masks, hand gel, etc., and developed a clear plan for safe working very early on. Some of our key customers, Serco and Royal Mail both said they really wanted us to keep going to support key workers."

Adrian notes on the real changes taking place in terms of travel habits. In London, he observes, people are queuing '100 at a time' outside bike shops so they can cycle to work. With no one wanting to go on the bus or the tube, Pashley have been offering special discounts on purchases by key workers.

"At last people have got a taste of what it's like not to be dominated by cars. Clearly for anyone travelling by bike the biggest fear is that you might be injured. So it's essential to have safe cycle routes and bike superhighways so people can feel they can travel safely. We have been in an automotive world for a long time. Hopefully this is the time when we can grasp how lovely it is to walk and cycle around without pollution, noise and danger of cars. Perhaps this is the start of a road to a better lifestyle."

For [Birmingham and Coventry](#), about to launch their first trials of e-scooters there are clearly lessons to be learned from other cities but we have some way to go in the provision of safe and separated infrastructures. In Paris, Mayor Anne Hidalgo, set up a code of conduct for riders, along with hundreds of dedicated parking spots working with the scooter companies in a bid to end anarchic parking. She also targeted reducing the number of providers with a combined fleet of 15,000 from January 2020. E-scooter operators have acknowledged that to thrive they need a combination of existing infrastructure, regulations, and behaviours.

The Paris experience shows that almost half of e-scooter rides by locals replaced walking, with just 8% replacing trips made by car. There are infrastructure challenges too in terms of devising e-scooter operator contributions to sustainable mobility solutions for unless users can be brought back onto public transport, or revenues from private operators diverted back into shared infrastructures, the long-term sustainability of these schemes will remain unclear.

With newer solutions being trialled, public transport operators are grappling with the challenges posed by social distancing which does not deliver viable returns. It's hard to see how we as a nation can keep our public transport operators afloat when their revenues have collapsed to around 5-10% of normal levels. As pointed out by John Collingridge in the Sunday Times, by keeping people 2m apart a normal 12-carriage train typically carrying 1000 commuters has room for around 200. A London Underground carriage takes 21 as opposed to 125 and a double decker bus 18 compared with 75. Current operating models were not designed for these capacity levels.

In Manchester Metrolink's future remains uncertain despite the £11.6m government bailout which covers only 73% of the shortfall. Although their combined authority CEO stated that cash reserves could be drawn upon to make up the rest of the shortfall, it would only form a short-term stop-gap, which led to Mayor Andy Burnham writing to government to ask for a new funding deal to support their light-rail system carrying 44m passengers a year.

Phil Evans, MD of Premetro Operations, is the operator of the Stourbridge Shuttle, the ultra light railcar that is self-powered (with no overhead wires) and typically transports some 2000 people daily on the short journey from Stourbridge Bus Station to the mainline Junction almost a mile way. For him the move away from mass transit systems, promoted for years and years by government, is a worrying development. He observes:

“The emphasis on personal transport and segregation will be with us for some time. It's probably only the widespread use of a vaccine that will reverse current thinking. For us as operators of the Shuttle in Stourbridge we cannot take more than 8 people at any one time when we are used to taking up to 60 people. Our crews are wearing PPE and

we have 3 breaks in service each day when the vehicle is fully sanitised. But we have seen a drop from 2000 people a day to 100 on average, or 5% of our regular numbers. I can't see many operators surviving this unless the government takes a stake in these businesses so we are ready for when we emerge into the Post-Covid world.”

We must be careful not to lose our public transport capacity built up painstakingly drawing on the scarce resources available to our regional transport authorities who have been forced to make critical funding choices over infrastructure options for metropolitan areas.

With research suggesting that poor public transport in Birmingham is reducing its 'effective size' by almost half compared with similar sized cities with more connected infrastructures such as Lyon, with significant tram investment delivering reliable peak travel times for commuters, we must surely consider providing masks, gloves and gel at bus and train stations and seek to draw on best practice exemplars from around the world to control the virus effectively whilst ensuring our citizens are safely able to continue to move around practically and effectively.