

What is the new normal post COVID-19 for travel behaviour?

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Normal life as we once knew it has stopped for millions of people in the UK. From those furloughed or working at home, through to those who still need to leave their homes to get to work, behaviours when it comes to transport has massively changed.

Trains have arguably never been so critical to the UK – transporting key workers and freight but yet at the same time passenger numbers have dropped by over 90% as the country adheres to government advice.

In response to this, 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.

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

Shamit Gaiger holds many roles in the rail industry, but among those includes leading the Strategic Advisory practice in AECOM and a Board Trustee for the Campaign for Better Transport.

Shamit has written a piece for railbusinessdaily.com about how the current situation presents an opportunity to accelerate the changes to travel behaviour post COVID-19 towards more sustainable forms of transport.

“We have seen a significant planned reduction in demand for travel across the UK, particularly on the railways, with numbers down over 90%.

Network Rail, train and freight operating companies have reacted and continue to react incredibly well to the challenges in keeping key workers and freight moving during the lockdown.

But what will happen when the restrictions start to be lifted? The railways have a choice whether to go back to the previous timetable or recognise that we need to do things differently.

The Coronavirus has upended the world’s operating assumptions – so we need to reconsider:

- Which of our previous expectations/assumptions need to be rethought?
- What might society, customers and passengers value in this new world?
- Which prospects that seemed unlikely or years away could be accelerated?

There are some quarters that predict there could be 20% fewer trips on public transport after travel restrictions are lifted, rising to 27% for those who use rail to commute. This could be because people work more flexibly and from home and initially there could be concerns about catching infections.

Will more people turn to using cars?

According to the latest consumer research by Auto Trader, the UK’s largest marketplace for new and used cars, nearly half (48%) of UK public transport users said they would be less likely to use it once the current restrictions have been lifted.

‘Transport distancing’ was even more of a concern for younger consumers, with 66% of 18-24-year-olds claiming they’d be less likely to use it.

The research found that more than half (56%) of those who took part thought that owning a vehicle will be more important in the future.

For those living in a city centre, and typically more dependent on public transport, this increased to 64%. (The research, which was conducted between the 14th – 17th April, consisted of three separate surveys targeting different consumer demographics; in total over 3,000 consumers were surveyed.)

Key messages from the Auto Trader survey:

- ‘Transport distancing’ likely to drive car sales, with 56% of UK driving licence holders who don’t currently own a vehicle, now considering one post lockdown.
- People are put off using cramped public transport, with 48% less likely to use it.
- More than half of consumers think owning a vehicle will be more important after lockdown.

A second crosscurrent is that governments and citizens may struggle to integrate climate priorities with pressing economic needs in a recovery. This could affect their investments, commitments, and regulatory approaches—potentially for several years, depending on the depth of the crisis and hence the length of the recovery

But there is an opportunity there for the railway. We just need to make sure of accelerating a modal shift towards public transport and active travel.

We have seen significant adjustments, such as teleworking and greater reliance on digital channels, that could potentially endure long after the lockdowns have ended, reducing transportation demand and emissions.

We need to proactively act and ensure that the move is not towards the car.

This is now an opportunity like no other to accelerate government's objective to increase modal shift to more sustainable forms of transport including public transport and active travel.

We could potentially accelerate the change for passengers and customers travel behaviour over the next years and get the outcomes we expected to achieve over the next ten years, by capitalising on the change we have seen and building on the emerging societal expectations, values and needs.

What we need to do?

There are several things that I think we need to do, which includes:

- Building upon the mindset and behavioural shifts that are likely to persist after the crisis (such as working from home) to reduce the demands we place on our environment—or, more precisely, to shift them toward more sustainable travel sources.
- Collaborate and create potential for additional near-term business-model disruptions and broader transition risks but also offer greater incentives for accelerated change.
- Address short and long term health concerns of our communities, passengers and customers. Importantly, communicate with passengers and customers the way in which these concerns have and will be taken seriously.
- 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 – we have seen that the nation is a system. This needs to continue and as an industry we need to proactively provide communication to customers on the end to end journeys taking into account their new needs and expectations of hygiene.
- Lead the way in building a recovery that is focused on green growth, social parity and improved resiliency.

The rail industry has demonstrated its resilience 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.

Once the restrictions start to be lifted, we will continue to have an important role to play and hopefully we

will all work together as well as we have done, particularly since the Coronavirus problems started.

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."

Shamit Gaiger, Director of Strategic Advisory at AECOM, Board Trustee at Campaign for Better Transport.