



ADAPTING TODAY  
FOR A NEW TOMORROW

# POST-PANDEMIC: OUR CITIES WILL CONTINUE TO THRIVE

The pandemic of 2020 has posed an incredible challenge for our cities, affecting how people live, work and socialise within them. As restrictions ease, some are questioning how these changes — some of which will be permanent — will shape the pull of cities. AECOM city experts **Andrew Jones** and **Stephen Gleave** identify three ways of ensuring our urban places continue to be vibrant, thriving spaces.

**T**hroughout history, cities have endured devastating shocks from war to terror attacks and financial collapse. That they endure as places where people aspire to meet, and exchange ideas and experiences shows how valued they are — and will continue to be. As we emerge from the challenges of coronavirus, we should take heart from past experiences.

Take London for example. In the mid-19th century, recurring cholera epidemics provided the opportunity for London to address a chronic odour problem that in

the summer of 1858 saw the newly built Houses of Parliament vacated. Fleeing lawmakers empowered the Metropolitan Board of Works — London's first unified authority — and its chief engineer Joseph Bazalgette to build the city's first sewer network, heralding dramatic improvements in public health and our urban infrastructure that are still paying dividends today<sup>1</sup>. In very different circumstances, in 1996, Manchester city centre was blown apart by the biggest bomb on the UK mainland since the Second World War, causing £700 million of damage<sup>2</sup>.

The need to rebuild acted as a trigger to accelerate existing plans for the transformation of the city centre, and to secure public investment for essential infrastructure including the Metrolink tram system. Both cities weathered these shock — and many others — with the right planning and investments, and grew back stronger. There is no reason to think that coronavirus will be any different.

As we deal with the specific challenges of the pandemic however, we must not forget to address the existing economic and urban challenges. ➡

The UK2070 Commission, an independent inquiry chaired by Lord Kerslake into city and regional inequalities in the UK, launched its final report just before lockdown. It presents a clear vision for the need to level up the country for the renewal of the whole of the UK, highlighting the inequity between cities, their suburbs and regional towns across the country <sup>3</sup>.

Adding to existing relative deprivation and lack of opportunity, coronavirus has hit the poorest hardest, both in terms of health <sup>4</sup> and economy <sup>5</sup>. The Commission's findings are therefore more important than ever if we are to build back a better and more equitable society.

It is also likely that as a result of increased remote working and altered travel behaviours, we are likely to see a shift towards more polycentric cities — urban areas organised around multiple centres. Revitalised localities with aligned digital and transport infrastructure investment must form the basis of a broader national renewal plan. In the context of a recession we will need to channel our investments intelligently.

We've identified three responses we think cities should embrace to support growing back better. First, investment closer to where people live to support more relevant, and balanced growth. Secondly, a consideration of new travel

and communication patterns; and finally, joining these up with a renewed emphasis on green infrastructure. Connecting them is a need to consciously move away from how we have grown cities in the recent past by placing greater value on economic, social and environmental balance, putting people first.

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## THINK GLOBAL, ACT LOCAL

After decades of global integration and connection, the crisis has driven us to appreciate the distinctive character of the places we live in — not to mention the convenience and efficiency of avoiding the daily commute. If people spend more time and money locally, this could lead to more deep-seated change. We see a new global perspective emerging, made up of collections of connected towns, suburbs and villages across a city region, each place contributing to the collective economic growth and cultural life.

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### Consider every place a work space

Having busted the myth that working in the office is necessary for productivity, workers are likely to demand the flexibility to work where it makes most sense — whether that be at home or in a local café or co-working space. Adapted homes and new typologies of residential development are already being designed to accommodate for this. Every town centre with digitally-enabled public real estate can be a centre for employment not just for small companies but also for employees of corporates working remotely.

### A new purpose for hard hit town centres

If we commute less frequently, demand on local services, retail and civic infrastructure close to where we live should rise. The pandemic presents an opportunity to inject vitality into local town centres, which have been hard hit by the decline in retail. Rediscovering facilities relevant to local people and providing newly attractive uses for redundant real estate could herald a renaissance of the wider city or town, not solely the centre.

### The city centre is not dead

For a more balanced economy, the future will be more about city regions gaining their economic and cultural cohesiveness from working more effectively as a network of connected places and not just focusing on the vibrancy of the city centre. For the worker who uses a local co-working space for two days per week, they may also spend time and money in local town centres yet, once a week still come to the city centre for leisure or face-to-face collaboration. So, we expect smaller cities and parts of cities and towns to grow, but to tie them all together, connections to flourishing city centres and central business districts will remain critical. In all cases the ability to connect physically and digitally between these working and living environments will be essential. →





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### NEW, LOCAL, TRAVEL PATTERNS NEED TO BE PRIORITISED

Connectivity will continue to be crucial in terms of unlocking opportunity, both economic and social. But travel behaviours will have changed, and our investments must reflect the new city.

#### Buses and bikes

If we are spending time locally and working in different locations, investment in buses, trams and bikes will be fundamental to prevent additional car travel.

Strategic transport investments such as HS2, Northern Powerhouse Rail and Crossrail will connect city economies and communities inter-regionally to support levelling up of the UK whilst supporting decarbonisation and decongesting roads. Whilst these major infrastructure projects will grab headlines, the subtler interventions in our cities and towns will have as big an impact.

#### Reclaim the streets

Active travel will also be key. One offshoot of the crisis has been a newfound appreciation for walking, cycling and running. Now is the time to reclaim spaces from cars, making permanent the widened pavements, new cycle lanes and pedestrian priority to accelerate a 'healthy streets' agenda.



Already, city leaders have plans, contentious only a few months ago. Birmingham's proposal to ban private cars in the city centre <sup>6,7</sup>, the City of London's plan to pedestrianise Bank junction <sup>8</sup> and Manchester's investment in a cycling and walking network <sup>9,10</sup>, are all pre-pandemic initiatives. The Mayor of London's 'Streetspace' programme and TfGM's £5 million investment <sup>11</sup>, ahead of central government funding, of temporary coronavirus measures, put cyclists and pedestrians at the heart of the city's movement — and could change behaviours permanently <sup>12</sup>. Smart City travel tools have a major role too. In Dublin, a new platform called My Mobility Hub — designed by AECOM for Smart Dublin, Dublin City Council, Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council and Enterprise Ireland <sup>13</sup> — encourages people to make greener and healthier travel and record their sustainability score.

Each of these innovations has the potential to change the use of our streets for good. If cities jump on this now, before cars come back, there is an opportunity to make lasting change in the way we use cities and towns.

#### Re-think Transit Oriented Development (TOD)

With a renewed emphasis on local centres, our approach to urban travel and commuting will adapt. Rather than employment and entertainment focused in city centres, we expect to see nodes of connectivity between urban communities. On their own, local centres will continue to struggle, but as part of a comprehensive urban network, they have an opportunity to thrive. Such an approach must also inform the levelling up agenda.

Under-used land surrounding suburban and peripheral stations — much of it in public ownership — should have a viable new life sustaining a network of Metro Transit Oriented Developments, maximising the amount of residential, business and leisure space within walking distance of public transport. As well as supporting local town centres, this could help address the UK's housing shortage. Strategic regional rail projects also have an integral role to play in helping the country level up, creating regional transit-oriented corridors to link smaller towns and communities into a city region network. ➔

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## A CLEAN, GREEN CITY AT THE HEART OF DEVELOPMENT

Our third recommendation is to harness the current appreciation of the environment to support the drive towards zero carbon. While offices, bars and restaurants have been shuttered, even ardent ‘urbanistas’ have come to appreciate natural environments close to home. Demand for quality urban green space and a clean city will endure. City dwellers will also want to keep hold of the improvements in air quality we’ve seen in lockdown.

Tightening public finances have reduced spending on greenspace. In cities which have seen accelerating land values, too little land has been set aside on developments for open space. At the height of lockdown, where many were restricted to their homes for most of the day, some began to speak of a two-class society: the ‘garden haves’ and the ‘garden have-nots’<sup>14</sup>.

We have already explored the opportunity to make permanent the temporary changes to streets with a new focus on people and cycling. To have a real impact, these interventions need to be placed in the context of wider plans that elevate the quality of public realm across our cities.

### Public space and public health

There is a strong case to reappraise the recent past and develop approaches to urban green infrastructure at all levels. Starting with space standards in homes, we also need to rethink access to private space in high density urban projects, investment in generous and clean urban public realm, a resurgence of civic parks, urban wild space and access to the rural hinterland.

Many cities are well advanced with this thinking. For the Greater London Authority, AECOM has been updating the All London Green Grid (ALGG), a strategic plan for green infrastructure across the capital. The ALGG framework is developing a series of catalyst projects that can be leveraged to deliver a comprehensive network of green infrastructure to benefit people and habitats as well as for wider environment mitigations. It puts a lens on the multi-purpose benefits of green and blue infrastructure across the capital.

### Green infrastructure at scale

In common with urban living and transport, the value of green infrastructure will need to be considered at the local level and the city region scale if post-coronavirus growth is to be balanced and sustainable. Other benefits include urban cooling, flood alleviation, encouraging biodiversity as well as helping us lead healthy lives.

In AECOM’s recent work across the Oxford — Milton Keynes — Cambridge Arc for the Ministry of Housing, Community and Local Government (MHCLG) and Homes England<sup>15</sup>, we addressed the need to identify strategic green infrastructure

as a priority, not just to support local needs but also for the growth of a sustainable London.

Green infrastructure is not the leftover space after urban development. Post-coronavirus, the environment needs to be valued equally alongside transport and urban growth priorities. There needs to be a joining up of strategies for urban growth, transport and environment. A reassessment of the green belt policy<sup>16</sup> is also required so that its purpose reflects our future national priorities rather than functioning as an urban growth collar.

### So where does that leave us?

Our city regions have a big challenge ahead of them as the pandemic recedes, but this should not be just a crisis response. We must set our sights high and strive for a more cohesive society, more attuned to the world around us. Some of the behavioural changes we are witnessing are an opportunity to revitalise places that were flagging, particularly the suburbs and town centres across the UK’s major cities. New thinking is required to accommodate both the new ways people will live and work and how we see infrastructure — green, grey and digital — and what we will demand from it. **WL**



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