



Expert perspectives

Flexibility in action: a sustainable approach to transport

**Keith Budden is Head of Business
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His areas of expertise include low carbon vehicles, energy efficiency, renewable energy, climate change, sustainable development and environmental policy. He currently works at Cenex, the Low Carbon and Fuel Cells Centre of Excellence, which helps private and public sector organisations to develop environmentally sustainable strategies for growth.



Reducing emissions in business

Budden is clear that the most effective way of reducing emissions is simply to travel less. Progress in flexible working technologies will help people and their organisations to achieve this target quicker.

He believes this will lead to improvements in environmental impact, economic performance and our quality of life. An important question so far has been: how can we encourage private investment in schemes that support these goals?

“On the transport hierarchy – reduction [of vehicles] is the first priority.”

Accelerating existing trends

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused such drastic changes in our society. It has increased the trend towards flexible working. So fewer people are travelling to work, which has a positive impact on the environment.

“Most people like working from home for a bit, most people haven't been given the chance. The COVID-19 crisis caused that to happen rapidly.”

People are beginning to see the value of travelling less, relying on software such as Teams to collaborate and host meetings, instead of travelling long distances. To some extent, adapting to flexible work is an issue of trust. Traditionally, managers wanted to oversee people's work. Now we're all learning to view work in terms of objectives achieved, rather than time spent.

Taking on transport

The main sources of carbon emissions in the UK are the power industry and transport. While both industries are working to decarbonise, transportation still accounts for 26% of national emissions. We need to think about how we can radically improve our relationship with transport.

“Even with lockdown, there's only a 7% drop in overall emissions – carbon is locked into our systems and our goods.”

Budden says we need to reconsider our investment priorities. The COVID-19 pandemic will encourage this rethink as airlines and train services will have to reinvent themselves, to help passengers avoid infection. He points to [comments made by Edmund King](#), President of the AA, who recently suggested that – rather than spending £27 billion on road networks – this money might be better invested into a national broadband infrastructure.

With the right tools, people can achieve just as much working flexibly at home as they could in the office, or travelling for business.

Lockdown won't last

Budden doesn't believe that we won't travel for work in the future. There are still benefits in socialising and being open to chance experiences. However, once the restrictions on travel have been relaxed, it will be important to bring more of an awareness to where we are working and why.

This will require a change in business culture and behaviours at an individual level, and it could have a much wider impact on society.

“We have to repurpose home working and business travel so that they're doing it in a deliberative way rather than a default way.”

Reforming city living?

As cities continue to transform, now with fewer offices and shops as a result of more widespread connectivity – these spaces could be repurposed. Flexible working improves people's access to their work from anywhere, which could lead to more localised and informal workspaces becoming established.

As COVID-19 requires public transport to adapt, and we start to use public spaces differently, our workspaces might become more commonly accessed by walking or cycling.

For example, the Mayor of Bristol has announced [plans to pedestrianise large swathes of the city centre](#) – removing traffic to encourage more sustainable use of spaces as people begin to socialise within the city once more.

“If you require people to travel into an office or call centre in a city on public transport they don't think is safe, working inflexible hours in a rigid system, then they're probably not going to want to work for you for very long.”

Getting on board with flexible working

Employers need to quickly make the move to more longer term flexible working. This means investing, rethinking the working week and prioritising homeworking and teleconferencing. As the environmental agenda becomes even more pressing, Budden suggests, this is the sensible thing to do.

He points out, if an organisation requires people to travel into a city office, using public transport they don't think is safe, they are likely to look for an alternative job. And, as flexible working becomes more common, those people will have wider access to those alternative jobs. Flexible working could cause a nationwide redistribution of people's living and working spaces, which could also have a significant impact on our use of transport and carbon emissions.

“It's about how wisely you invest to make sure your business is fit for the 21st century, and that you're a business people want to work for.”

“Reduced carbon, less congestion and clean air – it's a triple whammy. What's not to like?”

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