

Hub of the matter



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“You’re on mute” was not part of my vocabulary before Covid-19 lockdowns; something I doubt I am alone in. Now it feels as if the phrase will never leave me; and again I doubt I am alone in thinking that. You could very well argue it should actually have been part of my working life before Covid-19; that I should have been getting out less and holding virtual meetings more.

As I write we are in another set of national lockdowns, which will surely intensify the trends of staying local and thus travelling less, and particularly to, from and for work less, into the long-term. Yet we must also assume, I think, that although 2021 is currently looking a lot more like 2020 than we all had hoped, normal service in terms of freedom of movement will return in phases throughout the year. A multitude of habits will have been broken, formed and re-formed in the meantime.

As I have discussed before, this has had its upsides and its downsides from the point of view of making transport sustainable in environmental terms. The Committee on Climate Change’s sixth carbon budget report was an early Christmas present of deeper insight for those with their sights set on net zero greenhouse gas emissions, those who remember that target is meant to be hit by 2050 at the latest rather than by New Year’s Eve 2049. Its surface transport sub-report is well worth reading, and I was delighted to see it make multiple and positive references to shared transport such as schemes to share cars and bikes.

A quick game of cloud/silver lining with lockdown impacts shows an intensely mixed picture. While transport emissions have fallen, the proportion of trips made by car has increased and the proportion by public transport has fallen; while many have welcomed the extra family or personal time that the lack of a commute has brought, others have felt pushed into the costs, physical inactivity and environmental impacts of private car ownership; while organising discussion events that include different audiences has become much easier, including those on lower

incomes or other measures of socio-economic deprivation; and while micromobility lanes and low traffic neighbourhoods have come, some have gone again or been partly rowed back on.

Humans have throughout history travelled to and from work and leisure, and will continue to do so once lockdowns end. Yet surely there is a potential diminution of travel and switch to more sustainable means underway that we can harness?

One powerful way to do this is to build mobility/community hubs, which I have written about before in these pages (*LTT* 08 Nov 19). Such hubs are where shared, public and active transport modes come together with some element of public realm improvement to make them recognisable as hubs. If that sounds like a long list, it can be satisfied by a bus stop, shared car parking bay, some cycle parking and a hub sign in the one place.

The community and place aspects to this shot up the agenda in 2020, powered by the lockdown revolution in travel patterns. Just what is an essential journey has been put through wartime-like tests several times over, and of course there are fewer destinations open to go to even once lockdowns have at times eased, and habits are notoriously sticky once formed. This deepens the opportunity to integrate existing or planned community facilities in with transport options and

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potentially tackle all three elements of the avoid/shift/improve rubric of cutting transport emissions.

Also rising fast up the mobility hub agenda is the role of logistics, which can fit in from pick-up and drop-off lockers, through to cargo or e-cargo bike-based micro-consolidation and distribution hubs, through potentially to macro-scale logistics hubs. More stuff is coming to us, rather than us going to it, but suitable land and suitable modes for the distribution of this stuff will increasingly need to be found if we are to avoid gridlock and bend that emissions curve downwards.

I think the power of these hubs is twofold. First, they provide a clustered, clearly communicated, tailored set of ‘carrots’ – helping people find and use sustainable transport options. Secondly, and partly as a result of that first point, they can enable the removal or lack of construction of those mortal enemies of sustainable transport such as free or cheap parking, roads that function well for vehicles only, insufficient residential or workplace density – all of which make collective journeys via public, community or shared transport options such as lift-sharing a challenge or even an impossibility.

We are, happily, now starting to see hubs and

plans for hubs come to fruition across the country. We have pulled together a map on our website of all hubs we are aware of that are in gestation (<https://tinyurl.com/y5wss42y>)

At CoMoUK we also provide a quarterly discussion space on hubs to which all are welcome (drop me an email), as well as an introductory guide, which defines six types of hub.

Excitingly, we have now developed an accreditation standard for hubs (<https://tinyurl.com/y56p6wqx>) and the launch of the first CoMoUK accredited hub is I think not far away.

This accreditation draws on our expertise and experience over the years in accrediting bike share and car club operators. It takes account of the fact that some hubs – for example in smaller locations in rural areas – are very unlikely to even have a plethora of facilities. It is designed so that it can be used to assess a hub that is being built or has been finished, but also for those still on the drawing board. Work we are undertaking at the moment on the business models of hubs will sit naturally alongside accreditation as, we hope, useful resources to those seeking to take a hubs approach.

An important realisation during accreditation design was that even though a hub may have the exact same ingredients as another hub its context and thus overall offering to users and other stakeholders will always be unique, which in a commoditised world feels refreshing. For example the rail station may be on site, or ten minutes’ walk away. Thus each hub needs to be seen in its own particular setting.

Part of the point of any accreditation scheme is to deliver good, appropriate standards of user experience; to promote and give confidence in the concept; and also to hopefully shortcut some thinking time by saving the hub wheel from being fully reinvented each time. Because we feel it is important to keep hubs’ components and their use under review and to check they are well maintained we will be limiting the validity of our accreditation to two years.

We foresee that researching user and indeed non-user experience of hubs will be important to keeping them fresh and learning fast, particularly in the post-Covid era. So we also see accreditation as working symbiotically with such research and aim to design and run some ourselves in the future if that would fulfil a need.

There is a reason such hubs are popular in a growing number of comparator countries – they work. While none of us want to be on mute or indeed online so much longer-term, for all our futures there are some activities that we will need to turn the volume down on and some we need to turn the volume up on in transport. Hubs can help us do both. **TT**

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