

The future of city centres

City centres often generate higher incomes, higher property values and more turnover per person than the rest of a country. The more people you concentrate in a city centre, the more business there is for the shops, hospitality trade, personal services and the rest that congregate near the crowds.

Great cities have extra income from commuting workers, local residents, tourist, business visitors, foreign investors and the rest. Homes have been a lot dearer in Westminster than Wokingham or Walsall because so many well off people and businesses congregate where the crowds are. People stream into central London to see the sights, use the shops, transact business close to one of the world's great airports, next to one of the world's most famous shopping centres, and in one of the world's leading business districts.

We are about to find out if all this can be sustained against the backdrop of a huge fall off in business activity. London has lost most of its millions of tourists, many of its visiting business people, most of its commuting workers and some of its richer resident population who have retired to homes in the countryside. Its economy has taken a huge knock. Rents go unpaid. The shops that do open have nothing like the volume of trade to justify the very high rents. Many offices stand empty, with tenant businesses asking themselves when is the next break clause in the agreement and how much space will they want in future?

There are those who say this will be temporary. Give us a vaccine or better covid treatments in the autumn, relax the social distancing rules, and turnover will reappear and offices will fill up. There are others who say something has snapped. Office workers want to work from home more often.

Bosses with the detached house 30 miles out and the ghastly rail commute might also come to see the advantages of not always having to get the 7.05 to London. When will the international tourists return?

The retail sector has definitely taken a big hit from mass defections to online forced by lock down. Not all of that loss will be won back as and when we return to "normal". It is difficult to judge just how much office space companies will want post covid. It may be that we have witnessed peak office, which means reducing central city capacity in hospitality, sport and leisure.

The levelling up of the UK may have just witnessed a major levelling down of London, which has for so long outstripped the rest in productivity, incomes per head and private company formation.

Wrong death rates?

I am glad to see others and the media now picking up the obvious point that the UK death rate figures are likely to be overstatements of the true position.

I first raised this matter on 11 April in my proposal to the government that they "Review the data". In that posting I set out the various ways officials had been changing the basis of compiling the death figures, with each change designed to add numbers to the totals. I warned that it was probably leading to double counting, that death figures on any given day included deaths on previous days often stretching some way back, that anyone with Covid 19 symptoms could be put down as a Covid 19 death though they may have died of something else, and some were said to have CV 19 when there had been no test to prove that. A death certificate could cite CV 19 as part cause of death based on some CV 19 like symptoms with no test, whilst also citing another more likely cause of death as well. Without a test there is the possibility that people had misreported common colds, flu, catarrh or allergies as well as something serious that killed them.

On 1 June I took this up again in my blog discussion of Death rates. I said "There are differences in how the figures are compiled. The UK has gone out of its way to maximise deaths attributed to CV 19 by including care home and community deaths when other countries concentrated on hospital deaths. The U.K. has also recorded many care home and community deaths as CV 19 when no test was taken to see if the patient had it, and when it may have been other serious medical conditions they suffered from that killed them."

I urged the government to ask for more accurate and consistent data from the experts, as these figures were being used to determine policy on lock down and to help derive the transmission rate which officials thought so important. As we move into the era of local lock downs precise and locally specific information about infection and death rates from the virus become even more critical to policy making. I have been surprised at some of the public scientific advice based on wide spreads for the possible transmission rate, in turn related to death and infection figures based on different data collection and definitions over time.

City centres, the virus and work patterns

The Prime Minister is clearly concerned that if we continue with homeworking for the many, with social distancing for hospitality, and bans on live events, the economies of our city centres will be gravely damaged for as long

as this lasts. The longer it lasts, the less likely that it will bounce back to the levels of city wealth and income we saw in January.

Even though the national lockdown has been relaxed, the current rules advising people against public transport and telling employers to require homeworking wherever possible means greatly reduced business for bars and restaurants, shops and personal services in city centres. The longer it goes on the more likely the many small businesses that populated these areas will give up, and the more likely the large chains will look to cancel more of their leases on expensive city centre properties.

The PM has come up with compromise with his scientific and medical advisers, who urge caution and want the effective city centre lock downs to continue through the proxy advice to avoid public transport and busy pavements. He says from August individual companies should decide if they can provide safe working back in the city centre office, having consulted their staff. To do so might well mean a reduced staff in the office at any one time. It may well mean staggered hours to avoid peak hours on trains , buses and tube. It will mean social distancing at work, limits on using lifts, more cleaning and the rest.

It underlines the cruel dilemma government faces. The economic advice is straightforward. Liberalise everything, give incentives to get back to work, and seek to inject a V shaped recovery into an economy gripped by a deep recession . The medical advice is also clear. To be safe, to fend off a second wave, keep up as much social distancing and isolation as possible. Do not encourage large numbers on public transport, and do not allow anything like full complements in offices.

Where would you strike the balance? Would you go for jobs and growth, or for greater security?

More money for Councils

The government has recognised that Councils have incurred higher costs as a result of the pandemic and policy responses to it. Parliament has approved two tranches of £1.6bn each and a third tranche of £500m this month to help Councils meet their greater obligations. I have supported the case for Wokingham and West Berkshire as have other MPs for their areas.

In total West Berkshire is receiving an additional £8,597,006 and Wokingham £8,302,714. The share of the latest tranche is £1,015,669 to Wokingham and £1,037,936 to West Berkshire.

There is also a scheme for government to reimburse Councils for the bulk of the loss of income they have incurred from facilities like car parks during the lock downs.

Refuelling an electric car

One of the things that makers of electric cars need to improve to encourage more potential buyers of them is their range and how easy it is to refuel them. Because the battery needs so much power to recharge it can typically take 12 hours to recharge a near flat battery from a domestic mains supply. It means some use electric cars as short distance transport to and from home so they can rely on the long overnight charge.

If they wish to travel longer distances owners need to plan ahead to see where there are fast chargers available, or whether there are overnight facilities where they are going that would allow the usual long overnight charge. Some of the charge points now available do not have the right connectors for every type of electric car. Tesla has their own network. Apparently you can face the need to download an app, supply a lot of data and enter into a supply contract with monthly sums if you wish to recharge at some charge points. This is more intrusive and complex than simply buying a few litres of fuel for card or cash.

Gradually more charge points will be installed, and possibly more will accept the range of vehicles and charger links they have on them. There is then the issue of how long it takes to put enough charge in to the vehicle to continue your journey. I can refuel my vehicle in five minutes to give another 450 miles range from anyone of around 20,000 filling stations. This is convenient. Even with a fast charger you will not get anything like 450 miles of range for 5 minutes at the filling station.

There is also the issue of effective range. The electric car will give you an estimate of how far you can travel before a new charge. This may prove optimistic. If you get into heavy traffic, if it starts to rain and you need wipers, if you need the heater or if the light wanes and you need lights, your effective range can contract visibly.