



## Rethinking our streets: policy responses to Covid-19

### Background: The current situation<sup>1</sup>

Use of public transport and motor vehicles in London have been dramatically reduced as people follow 'stay at home' instructions in response to the crisis that the Covid-19 emergency has caused in our society. The effects of these changes include the freeing up of large amounts of highway space and a notable reduction in air pollution, which is especially welcome at a time of an epidemic which attacks people's respiratory system.<sup>2</sup>

Some motorists have taken advantage of released highway space to speed, sometimes to a reckless extent. The Metropolitan Police report that the crashes that are occurring have been increasingly speed related and there have been some reports of police forces 'letting drivers off' for speeding.<sup>3,4</sup> This avoidable behaviour increases the burden on the NHS and emergency services at a time when they are struggling with Covid-19 demand and with staffing issues. NHS and other key workers who are cycling or walking to work (sometimes in an effort to avoid potential exposure to Covid-19 on public transport) are being exposed to increased road danger, along with NHS and other volunteers who are seeking to support the most vulnerable in our community.

The essence of current government advice<sup>5</sup> is to stay at home as much as possible, to stay local and to avoid non-essential travel.<sup>6</sup> Practising 'social distancing' while outside is a core element of behaviour, entailing, in the UK, seeking to stay at least two metres away from other people who are not in the same household.<sup>7</sup>

Keeping physically active is essential for health, including lung health. The desirability of walking, cycling, and running during the Covid-19 epidemic have been emphasised by the government's medical advisors. People will also need to continue to walk (or cycle) to their local shops and essential work.

The 'two metres' advice has highlighted the lack of highway space given to children and adults walking, running and cycling, especially on narrow pavements or those given over to pavement parking. This has necessitated people walking and running in the road when passing others, in order to maintain social distance. The level of vigilance needed, alongside existing stress about Covid-19, has contributed to making walking much less pleasant and more dangerous than it could and should be.

Even in London, a substantial proportion of the public realm consists of parks, commons and other green spaces, as well as 'blue spaces' such as canal towpaths. Some of the infrastructure within these spaces is not ideal for allowing social distancing, and some parks in London have been closed (with some re-opened), reducing the public space available for residents. Whatever the rationale, closures are likely to disproportionately affect children, and people generally in more deprived communities. The situation is subject to change but to date there have been limited restrictions in London's Royal Parks to support

1 This discussion paper summarises our perspective as at mid-April 2020, based on our observations and available evidence, in an extremely challenging and fluid policy situation.

2 'Coronavirus lockdown sees air pollution plummet across UK' <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-52202974>

3 <https://twitter.com/SuptAndyCox/status/1243271225507446785>; <https://twitter.com/SuptAndyCox/status/1246366875405213696>

4 <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/speeding-drivers-let-off-by-overstretched-police-0zg0xrtk5>

5 <https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus>

6 [www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-outbreak-faqs-what-you-can-and-cant-do/coronavirus-outbreak-faqs-what-you-can-and-cant-do](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-outbreak-faqs-what-you-can-and-cant-do/coronavirus-outbreak-faqs-what-you-can-and-cant-do)

7 From a public health Covid-19 perspective, the objective is to get the R0 (the basic reproduction number) as low as possible - and to sustain it at that low level for as long as possible. Behaviour change therefore needs to be supported as fully as possible, in order to enable communities to sustain it.

social distancing, e.g. some car parking restrictions, Richmond Park closed to cars (though more recently also cyclists); and a weekend traffic closure for Hyde Park. We contrast these small changes with the decision made to make Vancouver's iconic Stanley Park fully car-free with effect from 9<sup>th</sup> April.<sup>8</sup>

**To aid our community response to Covid-19, we ask decision makers to urgently consider innovative and agile ways to adapt our streets both during the lockdown and as we emerge from it in due course. Opening up our streets to people would in itself help to reduce the pressure on parks and other shared green spaces. Our streets, green spaces and 'social infrastructure'<sup>9</sup> can do more to support people's health and wellbeing; and additional capacity would reduce potential pressure points between different users of streets and spaces. In the spirit of learning and sharing during this global pandemic, we see other cities' emergency responses to Covid-19 as examples of good practice which could be replicated in London and across the UK.<sup>10</sup>**

### Short-term approaches to changing our streets

In thinking about the 'how', we emphasise the need for agile measures. The following suggestions are just some of the interventions that could help re-balance our streets in support of the community's response to Covid-19. Speed is of the essence; timely action that may be imperfect is likely to be of more benefit than carefully crafted measures that cannot be implemented without lengthy delay. Tailoring legal and regulatory tools available to local authorities will be vital, noting that some London councils have been quick to use existing powers to amend car parking enforcement, e.g. Wandsworth.<sup>11</sup> We think that communications from TfL and Local Authorities could be used to support the changing demands on our streets, e.g. reminding motorists to be aware of the possibility of encountering more people walking and of children cycling in the road.

**Ideas and possible solutions. We propose the following interventions as a starting point:**

#### 1. Re-allocate under-used road space for active travel (walking, cycling, running, scooting).

**The Idea.** Protected cycle lanes as in 'early mover' Bogota<sup>1213</sup>, in Berlin<sup>14</sup> and Budapest<sup>15</sup> are a simple, low-cost way to enable cycling on main roads, taking advantage of the current low levels of traffic on these roads. In support of walking, we propose urgently enhancing the programmes that improve the capacity to cross the road, reallocate space for pedestrians (eg removing parking outside shops as people are queueing), and introduce street 'closures'<sup>16</sup>.



Creating space for people queueing in Barnes, LB Richmond (Twitter Charles Campion<sup>17</sup> (@charliecampion))

<sup>8</sup> Vancouver's Stanley Park to "... go fully car-free as of tomorrow, closing the main Stanley Park Drive & access roads, for safe #PhysicalDistancing and environmental benefits." <https://twitter.com/BrentToderian/status/1247572794939805701?s=20>

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/draft\\_london\\_plan\\_chapter\\_5.pdf](https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/draft_london_plan_chapter_5.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> <https://twitter.com/ibikebrighton/status/1247481438104104960>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.wandsworth.gov.uk/health-and-social-care/public-health/coronavirus/transport-and-parking/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.smartcitiesworld.net/news/news/bogota-expands-bike-lanes-over-night-to-curb-coronavirus-spread-5127>

<sup>13</sup> <https://twitter.com/RachelAldred/status/1247809908411633667> and <https://twitter.com/RachelAldred/status/1247827729212485632>

<sup>14</sup> <https://twitter.com/dvalts/status/1247842990221135872>

<sup>15</sup> <https://twitter.com/PatrickDuce/status/1247807344517369856>

<sup>16</sup> Guardian article about changes to streets: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/11/world-cities-turn-their-streets-over-to-walkers-and-cyclists>; Data on initiatives collected by Tabitha Combs, a lecturer at the University of North Carolina at:

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1c6OmxkUwNjoajYaRgqEjc14PtyGtushhQY7wNaZdjKk/edit#gid=724539482>

<sup>17</sup> <https://twitter.com/charliecampion/status/1248587675898204160/photo/1>

This is something that is being taken up currently, for example, in New York,<sup>18</sup> Boston<sup>19</sup> and Denver<sup>20</sup> and could be relevant in both the short- and longer-term. Measures to reallocate road space for active travel will also help to slow down the remaining traffic.

**How.**

- We suggest that readily available, simple temporary infrastructure, such as cones, removable tape, bollards or crowd control barriers, could be installed on main roads to provide protection for people walking and cycling. A model for rapid action is already available in London, whereby wands have been used during construction works to create temporary cycle lanes. We would aim for similar measures be rolled out more widely across London and other UK cities, using the same legal mechanism.



Cycle Lanes Bogota<sup>21</sup>

- In London, TfL directly controls all traffic signals and could, depending on resources, adjust signal timings and operation to support social distancing, inhibit transmission of Covid-19, and reduce road danger. For example, reducing 'wait time' at busier crossings would reduce the build-up of people waiting at the crossing, enabling safe social distancing to be maintained. Wherever possible, operating signalised crossings with automatic pedestrian cycles so that the 'call' button does not need to be pressed would reduce risk of Covid-19 transmission.
- Reducing expected crossing speeds to the new DfT recommended 1.0 metres per second would increase pedestrian comfort levels and safety.
- Timing a succession of signalised crossings to enforce speed limits would immediately de-incentivise speeding by motorists.
- In order to help increase the amount of safe space for socially distanced recreation, parks (including the Royal Parks<sup>22</sup>) should be closed to motor vehicles.



Running, walking and cycling on roads closed to traffic in Hyde Park (Saturday 11<sup>th</sup> April)

<sup>18</sup> [https://twitter.com/LDN\\_LS/status/1244690008033951746](https://twitter.com/LDN_LS/status/1244690008033951746)

<sup>19</sup> <https://twitter.com/BlincTransport/status/1245800084278829060>

<sup>20</sup> <https://twitter.com/MayorHancock/status/1246193113611280386>

<sup>21</sup> [https://twitter.com/nico\\_estupinan/status/1239526925174964224](https://twitter.com/nico_estupinan/status/1239526925174964224)

<sup>22</sup> [https://twitter.com/LDN\\_LS/status/1249025919685181440](https://twitter.com/LDN_LS/status/1249025919685181440)

## 2. Rapid roll-out of mode filters to stop rat-running.

**The Idea.** The filtered street environments of De Beauvoir in Hackney have proved amazingly effective in creating a safe social distancing recreational environment (in effect, a network of walking-friendly routes, which enable people to exercise outside without having to go far from home),<sup>23</sup> with reports also of the benefits of the existing Waltham Forest low traffic neighbourhoods emerging too. While individual street closures are of value, bringing together the closures of a number of adjacent streets will have a greater effect as it minimises the impact on individual streets and enables everyone (and especially children) to move around and enjoy their neighbourhood safely on foot and by bike.



Safe social distancing – De Beauvoir, Hackney

### How.

- We suggest a needs-led approach to installing mode filters, with priority given to localities with characteristics such as high population density, a large proportion of high-rise flats, low levels of access to green space, low levels of car ownership and/or a high proportion of children and young people. Installation of low-tech bollards (for example) to create mode filters, protecting the neighbouring street network from through traffic but maintaining access to all properties, could be done quickly and at very low cost. Support in rapidly deciding where to locate mode filters is available both from TfL and from voluntary sector groups such as the members of the Healthy Streets Scorecard coalition<sup>24</sup>, with online resources readily available.
- A widely cited source of opposition to widespread installation of mode filters has been TfL concern about the potential knock-on effect on the main road network, and particularly on buses. We suggest that any such concerns would be unfounded currently, given the greatly reduced volumes of traffic on main roads at present.

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<sup>23</sup> [https://twitter.com/LDN\\_LS/status/1247089512565690369](https://twitter.com/LDN_LS/status/1247089512565690369)

<sup>24</sup> <https://twitter.com/HSScorecard>

### **3. Shopping Streets** (based on the concept of School Streets).

**The Idea.** Walking and cycling to the shops is a necessity for many, especially given the lack of capacity of online delivery to meet demand during this period. The aim to develop a programme (with supportive councils) of 'closed' streets around shopping streets, town centres or high streets that 'bake in' the idea of walking and cycling in comfort and safety to local shopping hubs. This could help give local shops a competitive edge over online delivery, greatly benefitting local economies.

#### **How.**

- Building on the idea of School Streets, that is, temporary timed 'closures' of streets to through-motor traffic, we propose the introduction of streets specifically focused on local commercial centres. The objective would be to enable people wishing to access local shops, banks, post offices, outdoor markets and other social infrastructure comfortably and safely on foot or by bicycle.
- Taking road space away from motor vehicles and giving it to people walking and cycling would facilitate social distancing during the current period. In London, boroughs and TfL are well placed to identify these locations, which would complement mode filters and a general reallocation of road space (and time) to people walking and cycling.

### **4. Enabling capacity for increased active travel**

**The idea.** In the months ahead when aspects of the lockdown are relaxed, in particular areas and for different people, to enable extra journeys on foot and by bike, we would welcome tactical and temporary measures: as well as additional temporary routes for active commuters, providing improved access to 'end-of-trip' facilities, not least in summer, such as access to secure bike parking; and to showers and changing areas in fitness studios, which would otherwise still be closed for workouts and classes.

#### **How.**

- The ability to find and access the locations is possible using currently available technology, looking to optimise existing capacity and infrastructure.