

Junction Safety and Capacity

I recently received this answer to my Parliamentary Question on junction safety and capacity:

The Department for Transport has provided the following answer to your written parliamentary question (81475):

Question:

To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, what funding is available for local authorities to improve junction safety and capacity and to remove bottlenecks to make it easier for people to get into town centres by car and van. (81475)

Tabled on: 28 August 2020

Answer:

Rachel Maclean:

Local highway authorities, such as Wokingham Borough Council, have a duty under Section 41 of the Highways Act 1980 to maintain the highways network in their area.

The responsibility for improving junction safety and capacity is also a matter for the relevant local highway authority. The Department for Transport is allocating over £1.7 billion for local highways maintenance and improvements in 2020/21 through the Transport Infrastructure Investment Fund to local highways authorities in England, outside London. Of this Wokingham Borough Council will receive over £5.1 million. It is entirely for each authority to determine how their share of this funding is utilised to meet local needs.

A new commuting model?

Many companies are saying they are looking at more staff working some days at home and some in an office in the centre of a city. One of the issues that arises is how will people travel to and from the office, and what will that cost? Will the nationalised railways respond with attractive new tickets and offers which allows people flexible choices of when to travel, with a suitable discount for being regular users?

I started researching this article by going onto one of the big well known rail ticket sites. They ask the right questions there, and offer a cost comparison for people wanting to commute for fewer than 5 days a week. They of course can only compare costs against the background of the present

ticketing offers. They show that the railway has not yet bothered to think through what a part week commuter might like.

The worked example I was offered showed this for the daily costs of travel:

3 day commuting Anytime day return £48.90

Weekly season £39.53

Annual season £33.83

Traditional 5 day commuting

Anytime Day return £48.90

Weekly season £23.70

Annual season £20.24

As these figures reveal, there is a substantial discount offered on high ticket prices for daily commuting 5 days a week. If someone now wants to commute three days a week they still have to buy the full 5 day a week season ticket, but get a much smaller effective discount on the daily fare. I guess these figures do not allow for holidays which means the actual daily cost on the season ticket is higher.

The railway needs to do better than this. People may now be flexible not only about which days they go into the office, but also which times. There may be a willingness by employers, particularly all the time social distancing applies, to allow or support staggered hours. The railway has always claimed commuter fares even on season tickets have to be so high because it is all peak travel. This imposes high peak costs on the railway which needs high capacity for just a few hours a day. This new pattern of reduced days and a wider range of times allows the railway to flatten the peak, which should lead to economies to pass on to users.

If the railway wants its business back it needs to do better by commuters. One of the main reasons people do not want to return to five days a week in the office is the high cost rail service which often let them down.

UK sovereignty

There seem to be some misunderstandings about what government and Parliament did sign up to as we set out the Withdrawal Agreement and Political Declaration.

As far as I am concerned I strongly supported Clause 1 of the EU Withdrawal Agreement Act 2018 which simply repealed the European Communities Act 1972,

the source of all EU power in the UK. The Act then went on to recreate EU powers for a transitional period which I was less happy with.

The EU Withdrawal Agreement Act 2020 contained the all important Clause 38 to reassure people like me that the UK is going to be an independent sovereign state from the date of exit. That Clause as enacted says

“It is recognised that the Parliament of the UK is sovereign. In particular its sovereignty exists notwithstanding...” the provisions of the 2018 Withdrawal Act that had reimported EU powers. “Accordingly nothing in this Act derogates from the sovereignty of the UK”

This was a crucial reassurance, reflected in the Political declaration which committed both parties to negotiating a future relationship that reflected this UK sovereignty. No-one reading either document could be in any doubt that the UK was not signing up then or now to anything which meant the European Court of Justice would decide our fate, nor to anything that meant we had to follow EU laws. The UK did not offer up its fish as some further concession.

The Political Declaration said “It must also ensure the sovereignty of the UK and the protection of its internal market, whilst respecting the result of the 2016 referendum including with regard to the development of its independent trade policy and the ending of free movement of people between the Union and UK”. It went on to explain a Free Trade Agreement with no tariffs would be at the heart of the new relationship.

I find it very odd that some are now making silly allegations about the UK and international Treaties when the UK placed this central point at the heart of all our dealings with the EU over Withdrawal Agreement 2019/20. Either the EU assists in good faith to secure this with a deal, or it will have to accept that the UK can confirm all of this again in primary legislation by way of amendment to the detail of the Withdrawal Act . We can stress again we end Transition EU powers at the end of the so called Implementation period. So far it is the EU that has resiled from the Withdrawal Agreement by not accepting UK sovereignty and not offering the tariff free Free Trade Agreement they signed up to in the Declaration. .

No deal is better than a bad deal

Mrs May had the right approach and the right slogan when she first embarked on negotiations over the UK's exit from the EU. “No deal is better than a bad deal.” If she had stuck to that we would now either be completely out with no deal, or more likely out with a Free Trade Deal to protect EU tariff free entry to the UK market and vice versa.

Once she dropped this important statement and revealed a continuous wish to

give in to most demands the EU made she left the UK unable to get any kind of decent deal. The EU perceived the UK as weak and willing to recreate many features of its membership without the votes or voice. This was all much chronicled here as elsewhere, as delay followed concession and concession followed delay.

UK voters showed their massive disapproval in the European elections which should not have been needed had we simply left as planned, and went on to confirm their clear wish to leave the EU with or without a Free Trade deal in the General election of 2019.

The new government has rightly insisted on three things . They do not wish to stay in the single market and customs union which we are still in during transition. They are not trying to recreate something like membership of the EU through a comprehensive partnership or Association Agreement. They will leave without an agreement if the EU does not want a Free Trade Agreement. As they say in vivid language, they do not want the UK to become a vassal state. The UK is not seeking any special privileges from the EU and is only suggesting similar trade arrangements to other independent countries like Canada and Japan.

It is crucial to success that the government adheres to this sensible position. It was rightly reminding the EU of it in statements by both the Prime Minister and the Chief UK negotiator this week-end. Brexit means taking back control of our laws, our borders, our fish and our money. The UK is offering a Free Trade Agreement which is of more benefit to the EU than to us, though both would benefit from it. Instead of continued posturing and refusal to discuss this issue the EU should take advantage whilst the offer is still there. The UK government this time does have to get on with No deal if the EU does not want to talk about proposals that are mutually beneficial.

Where should you work?

In the current debate about the return to the office I have only one firm conclusion. It is not the job of government to tell the private sector how to organise their workplaces or how to run their companies.

It is the job of government to lead the management of the public sector. Ministers appoint the most senior managers, like the bosses of Network Rail , the Environment Agency and all the other nationalised businesses and quangos. Ministers direct the work of the civil service. They do need to make decisions about how many staff need to attend an office, and where that office should be, on the advice of the senior managers.

It is clear Ministers and the heads of the civil service think the core civil service is needed in person in the central offices of the state. The task is now set for civil service managers to bring that about. It is also the case

that where public service is falling behind in meeting demand for licences, permits, passports and the rest compared to pre pandemic levels there needs to be an urgent review of working practices to ensure good service levels.

It looks as if parts of the private sector have decided that the five days a week commuting model into a central City office is not a good one for some of their staff. In many cases staff can work from home given ubiquitous digital technology. Many staff are trusted to work from home, and can be monitored in detail by the use they make of their computer, on line conferences, email and phone. Sensible companies want enough good quality output more than they want someone to sit at a given desk for specified hours. Companies seem to be saying they want a new settlement where some people attend the office all the time and some part time. Some meetings will take place by on line call, and some in person around an office table.

For any given individual there is a reward if they have trusted status and permission to work from home some or all of the time. They save a lot of lost time and money on commuting. Quite often employees reward the company by working additional hours or hours not within their formal contract to get the work done well from a home setting. If the employer lets you supervise the plumber or pick up your child during the working day, why wouldn't you take a call from a customer in the evening?

What has emerged from lockdown is just how much many commuters dislike the travelling part of their old lives. Poor train and bus services that let people down with cancellations and delays, and crowd people on uncomfortably is neither a good start nor a good end to the work day. The collapse in demand for public transport brought on by anti pandemic controls is being seen by many as a bridge to not having to travel daily even after the virus has subsided as a threat.

There remain many employees who do not have the option of homeworking. Most of the much damaged tourism, leisure and hospitality industry requires staff to assist the public at the place of service supply. Public sector offices helping the public may need the maintenance of physical offices with staff to carry out the work, as well as on line options for many to use.

I would be interested in your views on what the new settlement might look like. How much flexible and homeworking will there be in a year or so's time, assuming the virus threat continues to retreat?