Podcast: Megatrends in the West Midlands – Transport

Music followed by introduction by Rebecca Riley, Associate Professor at City-REDI and WMREDI, University of Birmingham:

Rebecca Riley:

Welcome to the Redi podcast. I'm Rebecca Riley, Associate Professor at City-REDI and WMREDI, University of Birmingham. In our first series of podcasts, we'll be looking at megatrends in the West Midlands. WMREDI has developed evidence examining the impacts of COVID 19 on the West Midlands region by producing economic impact monitors and a state of the region report with policy partners.

The WMCA commissioned further work to look at the megatrends identified in the state of the Region 2020 Report. This process has highlighted potential for the acceleration of existing trends by the COVID 19 crisis, culminating in new scenarios for future economic activity, life and places.

Some examples of megatrends we explored include business models and operations, work and training, future health and greenspaces local living, changing city centre business districts, just cities, Generational conflict, urban responses and economic shocks, future mobility and tactical urbanism.

There is a gap in policymakers understanding of whether these trends will continue altering the structure of society and businesses in the longer term. These podcasts and the larger program of work it's part of will help us explore selected trends and scenarios with policymakers locally and nationally in more depth, helping them formulate economic recovery policy, which takes account of these changes.

The scenarios identified could have significant economic consequences and scarring effects of vulnerable groups and places as a result of impacts on human, social, physical and natural capital. This research examines these impacts and trends, developing future scenarios in greater depth in order to identify, along with policymakers, those policies which may be more effective in restarting the economy, encouraging recovery, and creating long term renewal by encouraging positive trends and mitigating negative effects.

I hope you enjoy the series and for a more detailed look at megatrends, please download and read the associated provocations and report on the topic - Megatrends in the West Midlands.

More music followed by a discussion between Dr Magda Cepeda Zorrilla, a Research Fellow at City-REDI / WMREDI, University of Birmingham and Mike Waters, Director of Policy, Strategy & Innovation - Transport for West Midlands

Dr Magda Cepeda Zorrilla:

Welcome to the City-REDI Podcast. In a series of podcasts, we will be examining megatrends in the West Midlands. Megatrends are major movements, patterns or trends that have transformative impact on business, economy, society, culture and personal life. This episode will be looking at

transporting within the West Midlands. We'll be discussing key trends, impacts and opportunities for West Midlands cities.

I am Dr Magda Cepeda Zorrilla, Research Fellow at City-REDI, University of Birmingham and today will be talking to Mike Waters, Director of Policy, Strategy and Innovation, Transport for West Midlands. Thank you for joining us, Mike. Can you please tell us a little bit about yourself and your organisation?

Mike Waters:

Yeah, sure. We're the Transport Authority we represent the Transport Authority for the West Midlands Conurbation. That's about 3 million people covering the cities Coventry, Birmingham, Wolverhampton and the other boroughs and districts in the area. And my team has the privilege of attempting to set a coherent policy and strategy for the region, for transport that integrates with land use and energy and digital and so on.

Dr Magda Cepeda Zorrilla:

Thank you very much Mike. I would like to start this this nice chat. Just a little bit about a challenge that the Transport for West Midlands is facing in terms of the potential emptying of the cities after the coronavirus pandemic. What are your thoughts on this? Is there a trend in terms of from working? Is this equal opportunities for everyone in the region?

Mike Waters:

I mean, homeworking is clearly a thing and it's a significant change to the way people are living. But we do need to remember that homeworking only applies to a proportion of the employed community and themselves are actually only a small proportion of the overall travelling community. So to 3 million people, commuting is not actually our biggest transport headache.

It's not the main reason for car or passenger travel. Freight logistics is a huge part of that. What we've seen with remote working is a massive increase in e-commerce with that freight and logistics movements and trips to and from our strategic towns and centres only actually account for about 15% of all trip making. So, the majority of making anyway isn't to from the centre this is it's actually in the suburban and orbital movements for the communities. Where it has had a really significant impact with the homeworking, in is in the centres where the public transport network is heavily geared commerciality of public transport, network, bus, metro and rail is all geared around serving the centres. And that is what has been disproportionately hit. So, we've seen some real challenges to the economics and the economic viability of public transport. And that then has a knock-on effect on overall behaviours.

Dr Magda Cepeda Zorrilla:

Even though we are out of the pandemic, there's still some remaining, you know, I don't know, like issues happening about the people still getting sick. So, I would like to hear what is the transport for West Midlands doing in terms of ensuring people safety in the public transport?

Mike Waters:

The first thing I suppose is the fact that actually it is perfectly safe to travel on public transport and actually that's been there's been limited evidence that it was riskier. So, it was much more of a public perception piece. I think what we were seeing a slight challenge on now is because many particularly were seeing this on the train services because in response to the pandemic, in essentially a quasi-nationalized rail network, now the government has taken over the specification of rail timetables. We've seen a reduction in in services and a reduction in the amount of roll in stock actually out there. And what we're actually seeing now is some quite strong overcrowding on a number of these services, which I think doesn't help people feel comfortable.

That reversion to two very overcrowded services in the rest of the public transport network, we're inherently more able to flex up. So you know, the bus services are growing to accommodate demand. We've seen bus services back up to over 80% of pre-COVID travel. And so I actually I think the perception is actually borne out by what we're observing with behaviours on the ground. But generally but obviously communicating that people should just remain respectful of one another. And this just goes back to a constant running campaign we have, where, frankly, the vast majority of people are respectful and kind and courteous to each other.

But obviously you get the odd incidents and that stands out. So, we're just working with colleagues across all of our transport operators to reassure people and be there to help them.

Dr Magda Cepeda Zorrilla:

Well, that seems very, very important. This actually connects a lot with something I wanted to ask you about. What can be done in the in the West Midlands to help to reduce this trouble and these journeys to work? And then how about the case of the 15-minute CITY for example, or the 20 minutes neighbourhood that are now it's been a lot in the news in France and other cities in Europe. What is there what are the views for from the region in terms of achieving maybe something like that here?

Mike Waters:

We've been looking at this really closely with our partner authorities, the city authorities and local authorities. We actually think it does have terrific potential. One of the reasons I think as a concept, it's exciting is it starts to break some of the traditional silos that transport has operated within to really start to look at that community area in a more cohesive way, looking at what you need for a sustainable neighbourhood. That bridges over into what services are available for the local community, how viable is it for people to go about and live their lives and interact with their built environment in that local 15 minute area?

And actually, I think there's a lot that has got to kind of happen to make that a genuinely viable proposition. I think through the lockdowns, people have actually had their eyes open in many cases to the possibilities of the social and personal benefits of living more locally. I see there's a slight difference when we talk about a 15-minute city, but obviously by definition you kind of focus in on the centre there and the change we probably need to see to make a reality is actually increasing the densification of living in the centre and with that comes some land use change is. So, whilst we might see less office for an active city in the centres, what we need to see is an evolution of that retail model being less about serving workers in their lunchtimes and their breaks and drinks after works finished. To much more of a rounded living environment with which the entertainment and so on working in the centres.

But the really big opportunity from a transport perspective, going back to the fact that most of our trips occur outside the main centres, is actually looking then at those local centres, those low suburban areas, and working out what services, what facilities need to go in to make those genuinely sustainable 15-minute communities. So, this is much about what we're doing for local services and facilities. Practically things like mobility hubs, parcel lockers, more access to things like bike hire, even a scooters micro-mobility all of these initiatives I think can help people, but they need to be linked in to a very much community led initiative where we've got that mix with the local retailers and services and the social services all need to come together in one carry and plan. Practically as well, just basic stuff with low traffic neighbourhoods trying to get some of that permeability that a lot of the suburban area was built in discreet sort of housing estates and actually can be quite hard to go what might only be a few hundred meters as the crow flies. But you just can't make that walk. You almost have to get in your car and drive out of on the housing estate and go around the arterial road network to drive into the next one. But the end-to-end journey was probably only a few hundred meters apart. And so there are some real challenges in the built environment about building in that that permeability, reallocating space to support more community space, more mobility, hub space, and actually make that walk and cycle thing feel a lot safer and more sustainable.

Dr Magda Cepeda Zorrilla:

Well, that's just really, really interesting and I agree with you. I was wondering, you mentioned about a community led initiative, Transport for West Midlands was recently awarded with 17 million government grant for active travel. I was wondering if there is an initiative for, you know, kind of the support in this community, co-designing in policy, co-designing the changes for maybe the 15 minutes city or the 20 minute if possible, if this grant, consider allocating funding for that more community direction.

Mike Waters:

We've been really fortunate in the West Midlands. It's thankfully not just the active travel fund, which we've been successful in securing money for. We are in the process of securing quite a chunk come on into the public transport environment through the bus service improvement plan. And there's this 90 million of revenue support coming into the region over the next few years on that.

And then there's another billion plus pounds coming into the region for the wider transport infrastructure, which also includes a good chunk of active travel, walking, cycling, public transport, road space reallocation and the basics of just maintaining the highway network. So, over the next five years, we're actually got a huge capital program to bring to bear at the heart of all this is actually engaging and making sure we're really clear that for each scheme there is high quality community engagement. That's a clear objective for the region and a condition of the funding.

I think actually the big conversation is wrapped up with a parallel thing where we've been refreshing the statutory local transport plan. So this is the plan that has some genuine legal weight that sets out what the region is seeking to achieve with its transport network overall.

And we've been consulting on that, that consultation, the consultation draft was approved earlier this year and with not long closed the public consultation on that and around analysing the results. But that sets out six big moves on. One of those big moves is all around behaviour change and it's all about a dialog with the with the 3 million people the transport needs to serve in the region to try and understand better what they need to change in order to get more from their built environment, which helps us on this journey towards a viable, 15-minute sustainable neighbourhood and what we are clear, once we can invest a lot and are going to invest a lot in the infrastructure, we're just building the infrastructure alone is not going to be sufficient to elicit the kind of scale of behaviour change that we need if the region and indeed this is a reflection of a wider challenge that the whole country is going.

If the region is to respond to the big challenges of climate change, decarbonization, of the transport system, addressing some of those social inequities around who has access to opportunity. And there's an inequity in terms of the impact as well of some people's travel behaviours on the other communities. So generally, the poorer communities that are faced with the biggest social challenges are also the ones that are most adversely impacted by the negative impacts of an excess reliance on the car, which we see.

You know, we're looking for a transport system that meets the challenge of the behaviour change course, climate change and all of this that requires a huge, huge step change in the way that we all interact and behave without built environment and in particular, make those travel choices. This is not a built it and they shall come, we do need to put a lot more into the cycle that where we do need to make the footways a lot better. All of that will happen. That alone is not enough to make people feel confident to make those big changes about the way they choose to live and get around their environment. So we're going to have to challenge as a region, we're going to have to embrace some quite, quite deep challenges, I think, and want to do that willingly.

Dr Magda Cepeda Zorrilla:

Individually, through changes in behaviour about not driving in the short journey, you can avoid driving. I mean, you can improve your health by just walking a little bit. Mike, I want to ask you something interesting now is regarding actually distribution of car use. How can it be compatible use through this entire use when we also want to reduce CO_2 emissions by introducing electric cars? Where your views on this? What is Transport for West Midlands position regarding electric cars and car reduction? Because I see a little bit of imbalance. You know, if you want to reduce car use and produce car use, but then introducing electric cars to reduce emissions, it doesn't really help in terms of reducing congestion and other condemning pollutants from the cars. Not only CO_2.

Mike Waters:

I mean, we've got to do several things at once and they're not incompatible. It is clear we need to rapidly electrify the transport system as a whole. So that's not just cars, it's the bus network. All modes. And obviously provided that electrification agenda or if it's hydrogen and we've got a big hydrogen initiative as well, but that provided the fuel source can be generated sustainably from green sources, then clearly that helps both the emissions at the point of use and air quality is a huge issue in the dense urban area with profound health impacts.

So if you can remove the emissions at the point of use, that has a direct and immediate benefit on the health of residents in the area because the air quality improves in that, that's a massive factor. But also it is helping the decarbonization provided the energy source is green. Notwithstanding that, you're quite correct the overall shift in behaviour change means that we do need to become less reliant on private single occupied vehicles, irrespective of the drive change and the source of energy in those.

At the moment, we have an excess of reliance on that with mode share of nearly 70% private car. And I think there's quite a few things we can do that are not incompatible with electrifying the transport system. So it may not up to me that for many journey circumstances a car will remain necessary. And that's not necessarily a bad thing.

Can that journey be shared with somebody? Do you need to own that car because ownership tends to drive it? Well, I've got it. I'll use it every day. But actually the cost to total cost of ownership for a vehicle is I'm actually sat unused on the drive or on the road for well over 90% of its life, over 90% of the time that you are not saying you are not using it. And yet that costs huge amount to the household and that money could actually be better utilized for the benefit of the household. It could be going into the local economy as opposed to going into to a global vehicle supply chain, actually having access to a car club, being able to just hire a car and maybe use a taxi instead on that one occasion instead of being locked into ownership.

And one of the things we're aware is and one of the challenges with the electrification agenda is the first movers, the early adopters of electrified vehicles tend to be the more affluent. These are more expensive vehicles at the moment. There's a barrier to entry for ownership. And yet many of the cars in the park, the cars out there in the being used on the road at the moment are actually the older cars that are owned and run by households for whom that total cost of running that vehicle is disproportionate amount of that, their overall disposable income.

So I think there's a real need to help move away from this model of needing to own a vehicle, which isn't to demonise using a car. The car will remain absolutely essential if you've got to go and pick up your Gran, and she's got mobility issues and then you've got to go and fit the shopping in it and then pick up kids from two different schools and really complex.

Car is probably going to remain an entirely appropriate, reasonable use and we would want people to have access to a car when they need access to a car. That doesn't necessarily need to be the need every single day of the week. And so some days we can take the bus instead or the kids can get a lift with a friend or neighbour or whatever it is that works for your life. What we trying to introduce is more flexibility, more choice to give people more realistic and viable options.

So which is why we things that the higher the e-scooters flexible ticket pricing so you get a best value guarantee on your public transport trip. You can buy a cohort and then use those and be guaranteed the best value fares.

And something we're bringing forward which has the most awful name is called 'mobility as a service' which is can be thought of a bit like Netflix for transport or whatever where you can consume whatever is the appropriate choice of transport on demand, against one single account. So you could be a taxi one day, it could be hiring in a car, the next it could be the bus for the next two days, and then it might be walking and cycling and that that menu of choice is made much easier and accessible without needing to own the car and then pay that access overhead for it, and then not using it for over 90% of the time.

Dr Magda Cepeda Zorrilla:

Yes, I agree with you. Definitely. Having the car just parked there it becomes a burden for the families and the domestic economy. Hopefully we can see these changes. Maybe before we finish, I would like to ask you if you could think of a time frame, maybe a short term, medium term, long term? Well, when can we see changes for better in terms of active travel and behavioural change?

I know you, though, have you know, you know, you know the future. But if in your view, what do you think the time frame for seeing changes more towards sustainable transportation and sustainable way of living in the West Midlands.

Mike Waters:

I mean we've come a long way already in a short period of time in the region where sort of for the last 20 or so years, you know, prior to the, the combined authority be informed, there was relatively little investment going in or strategic investment into the system. Well, what we've already seen is extending that tram that were opening rail stations.

We've seen quite a lot of investment secured and gone into to cycling already. Of course, that's only the start of the next five years is going to see this this huge excess of £1,000,000,000 invested doubling the bus network, loads is going to be say stay in touch.

Dr Magda Cepeda Zorrilla:

Well, thank you very much, Mike. It's been really wonderful having this conversation with you and share it with everybody here in the City-REDI podcast.

Mike Waters:

No problem. I enjoyed it.