

Roundtable

Designing the future – the impact on Kent & Medway’s built environment of developments in transport technology

Tuesday 16th October 2018

Quarterhouse, 49 Tontine Street, Folkestone, CT20 1BN

Attendees: Alexander Jan, Arup - Annalie Riches, Mikhail Riches - Brian Horton, Horton Strategic - Chris Lamb, DSE - Louise Reid, Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council - Rob Neave, Medway Council - Mark Aplin, Dartford Borough Council - Mark Bottomley, BPTW - Matt Hogben, KCC Highways - Neil Edwards, Kent County Council - Rebecca Burden, Dover District Council - Robert Rummey, Rummey Design - Sogand Babol, DSE – Faye Murray, MLM – Nick Lee Evans, Lee Evans Partnership

This roundtable focused on managing mobility and growth in Kent and Medway in light of technological developments, with a focus on the role of existing settlement densification. The conversation was prompted by Alexander Jan, Arup’s chief economist, and Annalie Riches, a founding director at Mikhail Riches and member of the VeloCity team – who placed first in an ideas competition exploring growth in the Cambridge-Milton Keynes-Oxford corridor.

Alexander skilfully set the context with a comprehensive overview of the current economic context, short and long-term trends, and emergent scenarios for the area. This was supported by understanding from Arup’s research ‘A 2050 Picture of Kent and Medway’, a document produced in collaboration with Kent County Council.

In Kent, there is spatial, demographic and income diversity, while it is also a pro-growth area. These conditions contribute to its status as a microcosm of the country as a whole. Presently, the area is experiencing population increase of around 20,000 people a year. Between 2018 and 2050, it is anticipated that there will be a 30% increase in the population which is equivalent to an increase in housing need of 315,000 homes. It is also expected that there will be an 80% increase in the over 65’s – much higher than the UK average – the rise of which signals opportunity, and an emergent demographic with specific needs to be catered for.

The study revealed short and long-term trends for Kent. Unusually, while the economy and employment has been rising, rail demand has been falling - for the first time since privatisation. There has been a 2% reduction overall in the last year, with an 8-9% percent reduction in those commuting to London. People are less wedded to commuting 5 days a week. This can largely be attributed to our changing relationship with technology. Now, historically unproductive time is becoming more productive. Time once taken for travel is now productive time for working. We are decoupling from our predictable behaviours and therefore, modes of transport. These influences have resulted in a reduction of permanent employment space, and an increase in employment density in the same amount of floorspace.

The varied scenarios for Kent are understood in the context of growth as both a certain and uncertain influence. Growth in e-commerce, an ageing population, a shift to multi-modal transport, and increase in leisure in place of retail activity is deemed certain. Employment growth, and a resultant rise in disposable income can be considered uncertain on the basis of the economy. Meanwhile, the sharing economy and the role of the autonomous vehicle is rapidly evolving.

Annalie developed the discussion with an explanation of the VeloCity, putting forward that changes in mobility should be understood in relation to the existing, intensified and new settlements - and therefore demographics - that use those networks.

VeloCity proposes unlocking economic growth through the densification of existing settlements along the Oxford and Cambridge corridor. This project demonstrates that through the provision of movement corridors that support 'slow' and active travel, the case can be made for counteracting suburban sprawl, while providing much needed housing in places that people live and thrive within. The research for the project identified the comfortable distances that people can travel by bike, applying this principle to 6 villages that are historically connected by the car - a condition which is characteristic of the rest of the country. The project team then imagined a future for those villages, where growth and densification was planned for in the context of 'slow' travel, such as walking or cycling.

It was generally agreed that a critical mass is what is needed in existing low-density villages, in order to counter the sub-optimal way our rural settlements have historically been built, on the principle of an extensive road network, schools, and essential facilities serving a limited population. However, we would do well to note that village life and politics is parochial, therefore while there is loneliness and isolation, illogically, there is also resistance to change backed by well-resourced and connected individuals. The group concurred that for an initiative like VeloCity to work, and the built environment to benefit from the rationalisation of the road networks, there needed to be a mind-shift to counter the fear of living at higher densities, which is both an urban and rural conversation. Added to this, people will need to be encouraged to stop using their cars in tandem with a range of other influencing factors, such as a concurrent uplift in facilities such as broadband.

One participant noted that positive change will not be captured in a mind-shift in the population, but rather the problem is with elected members who do not accurately reflect the view of their constituents. This struck a chord with the rest of the group.

Another participant agreed that this is the most common challenge that has arisen in their council, and often the perception of lobbyists and politicians is contrary to the views of the population, most commonly on the topic of parking, congestion and healthcare. They insightfully commented that through challenging the commonly held opinions of members, change can be achieved, but this can only happen through effective research, evidence, information and precedent-setting. Seeing is believing. The group continued that plan-making is often outdated, and as well as educating decision-makers, the challenge is also how to take into account the future today, all while discussing the diverse modes of cycling, vehicular and rail travel at the same time. The consequence of this is an urgent need for cultural change across the board, from elected members, to professionals, to the electorate.

People are receptive to progress. The shifting perception of the public toward accepting technological advances is highlighted best in the shift toward the rise of electric cars in recent years - albeit supported by government initiatives. The fear of electric autonomous vehicles is the next obstruction to overcome, and in that argument we should all bear in mind the vast opportunities presented by these technologies. A shift to mobility as a service will be liberating for those who are less mobile in the first place, but also the affordability of the technologies is a redeeming quality. There will be increased mobility for those who cannot afford, or simply cannot drive. On this basis, the sharing economy could present a significant opportunity to reduce total car ownership altogether, although we should note that accessibility of the service itself will also be a consideration. Arguably, less dense populations could take advantage of these technologies more rapidly than other places.

At a strategic level, there were further calls to make it intangible to park, encourage developers to be more innovative, or focus on the financial incentives for change. Alexander drew to light an encouraging example of an approach based on financial incentive proposed by Enterprise/Stagecoach in a joint initiative, where if one were to surrender their car, one could use their services - for a period of time - for free. This focussed the group on the need for innovative and entrepreneurial leaders to pursue these initiatives. It is not only the case that people need to be receptive to progress and behaviour change – the change itself has to be viable commercially. Within this, the complexity of transactions should not be underestimated. There was a cautionary note from another participant that while charging infrastructure is often imposed on developers, we should be cautious of overprovision in charging infrastructure and remain mindful of the spatial range of electric and autonomous vehicles.

Kent County Council is already making advances partnering in national strategies. The A2/M2 Connected Vehicle Corridor project is focussed on creating a 'Wi-Fi road' which can connect vehicles and infrastructure by embedding services within vehicles, for example providing roadworks and traffic signalling information. More broadly, Highways England are also focussed on taking capacity out of the existing motorway network through the provision of lanes for autonomous or semi-autonomous vehicles.

In summary, the way we live, work, and therefore move around is changing dramatically. The discussion emphasised the need to consider not only certain demographic change, but how developments in technology will impact different groups in our society – through how those technologies are accessed, how affordable they are, who they are used by, and how. A compelling argument was made for the densification of existing settlements to support improvements to our networks on the basis of 'slow' and active travel – which will have evident benefits for our wellbeing as a society. However, to develop with technology, there needs to be a comprehensive, cultural shift. Resistance from politicians needs to be countered. We need to educate decision-makers and sell a compelling vision of our future settlements and cities supported by technology, challenging their perceptions through exposure to careful and considered evidence, information, and precedent, both on-paper (like VeloCity) and built. This will need innovative and progressive cross-disciplinary teams across authorities, project teams, developers and service-providers. The challenge will be overcoming the silos that we often operate in, and therefore, there is a need for platform or forum for this conversation to evolve within.