

Managing Streets During Lockdown

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On 24th April UDL held a virtual event looking at how different cities are managing streets to support their covid-19 responses. We heard about how cities are closing streets to vehicles, widening pavements, creating temporary cycle lanes, reducing parking, managing drop off/pick up facilities and creating space for queuing.

The following note comprises the main points raised at this event, and other information taken from similar sessions run by NACTO in north America.

Signs showing fast food pick up areas in Auckland

Photo credit: Cllr. Chris Darby, Chair of Auckland Planning Committee (C/oAuckland Design Office).



Potential Lessons for London

1. **We should be re-evaluating priorities for use of street space at this time.** In particular, we should consider their role in allowing people to carry out essential journeys and exercise while physically distancing.
2. **We should be thinking about the role of streets during lockdown release phases.** As some people go back to work, and some shops/services reopen, we should have plans in place for changing the way some streets are used. Priorities for each lockdown stage should be set out clearly.
3. **Temporary changes to streets do not need expensive technical equipment.** The cities we heard about are using traffic cones, construction barriers, even bunting to widen pavements and cycle lanes. Redeployed traffic wardens and other staff are helping keep kit in place.
4. **We should be proactive and balance potential dangers.** Current reduced traffic flows and behaviour changes, alongside Covid-19 related health risks, call for revised processes and safety checks to support quick street closures or alterations.
5. **Clear objectives for changing streets should be agreed.** These might change from street to street and could include improving access to heavily used parks, to create outdoor exercise space for those who need it most or to ensure emergency services have the access they need.
6. **We should be using data to inform our approach.** Geographic information on things like lack of access to open space, highly reduced traffic counts, housing density, deprivation and pedestrian overcrowding should inform where streets are changed, or not.

7. **We should provide information and advice for street users during all lockdown phases.** For example, some communities may want to hold dance or exercise sessions in their streets, or introduce physical distancing play streets. It is probably best to support them to do this in appropriate and responsible ways.
8. **We should consider restarting delivery of pipeline schemes using temporary measures**
The current situation offers opportunity to use experimental and temporary approaches to move existing approved schemes forward and test their performance.



Temporary creation of more walking and cycling space in Auckland
Photo credit: Cllr. Chris Darby, Chair of Auckland Planning Committee (C/o Auckland Design Office).

More detailed notes:

Essential Travel, Recreation and Exercising

Transport authorities seem to be focusing on how to manage streets to allow for **safe essential travel**. This includes understanding where key workers need to get to and from, and ensuring these routes are served by safe cycling space, public transport or are free flowing for traffic. New York, like London has been working to ensure bus services remain available and safe, waiving fares to help isolate drivers.

Authorities are also looking at how to **ensure safe access routes** to parks, rivers, lake frontages or other areas that people wish to use for exercise and recreation. For example, Denver were concerned that the walking and cycling spaces in streets around their lake were becoming over

crowded. So they have closed or reduced vehicle lanes in these particular streets to allow active travellers more space. They have been monitoring behaviours and crowding levels and feel the closures have been helpful.

But streets are also important public places for **recreation and non-travel exercise** and the approach used or suggested in some areas includes space for physically distanced stationary activities too. These include rearranging street layouts in Auckland to allow priority parking and queuing areas for food takeaways, ad-hoc exercise classes being held in the carriageway and promoting play streets which include social distancing measures. Denver where clear they wanted to create additional recreation space with physical and mental health benefits.

We watched a video of an exercise class in London. Although all the exercise mats had been spread out with 2m distancing during the session, at the end everyone got up, and took the mats to the instructor's car – milling around together and using the communal equipment. Some basic advice on how to safely manage this type of activity might have been helpful.

Data, Monitoring and Management

There are understandable concerns about moving too fast and changing streets without due diligence. In particular there is worry around looking to solve physical distancing problems but instead causing other safety issues. There are concerns over how people might behave in changed streets, how to manage temporary closures and fallout from less community engagement than would normally be used.

However, NACTO and New Zealand explained that by using good data to inform clear decisions, proactive and visible management of these streets and monitoring of temporary changes to ensure they could be changed again if problems arose, it was possible to move fast while still being responsible.

Denver spent a week organising their first changes. They started by overlaying maps showing pavement overcrowding, residential densities, areas a long way from parks, social deprivation and existing traffic reduction levels. This helped them priorities and show which streets would benefit most from Covid-19 related treatments such as full closures, closing half the vehicle space and using what is left for access/parking/deliveries, pavement widening or the creation of cycle lanes. From their mapping they identified 15ish corridors and designed up schemes for each. They had good data on traffic volumes and only changed streets with 90% odd drop in volumes.

Denver are using existing cameras, volunteers, repurposed highways and parking control staff and their contractors to monitor how people are behaving. So far they have not found problems with speeding traffic or and have seen that people observe physical distancing. They are also using these systems to highlight when barriers have been moved and arrange for them to be repositioned so local people do not have to touch them.

Thinking about Lockdown Release

New Zealand are using an interesting approach to their lockdown management with stages of relaxation expected over the coming weeks/months. They hope some businesses will reopen, and some people to start returning to work soon, and wish to plan-ahead so pavements and bike lanes will be spacious enough to allow for resultant travel without overcrowding.

During their first lockdown stages they introduced pavement widening simply by using cones to show the wider area in some cases. But they are also using temporary decking or tarmac to create more robust, but still temporary solutions that will be useful as their lockdown release stages progress. They entered their third lockdown stage on 27th March, with changes to main roads/high streets introduced.

Building on Past Programmes

Cities who are actively managing their streets in response to Covid-19 lockdowns seem to be places that were already introducing Slow Streets, Tactical Urbanism, Play Streets and similar programmes to rebalance space and priority from motor vehicles to active travel.

This may have meant they had politicians, officers and communities already open to changing how streets worked and readier to adapt to lockdown responses.

It has also meant some cities could adapt existing programmes for their current response. For example, Oakland has been promoting its 74 miles of slow streets as routes to use for active travel journeys – encouraging lower car use and speeds through messages that these are prioritised for active, essential journeys in for essential travel.

At the same time, some have been keen to badge their current approaches as something very different from what has gone on before. Language is important and in Denver they didn't want to talk about open streets, closed streets or similar for fear of encouraging social gatherings. Instead they are calling their approach temporary recreation streets, and they feel the public understands how they should behave in these areas.

In London, the group Carfreeday is calling for the processes of creating Play Streets to be streamlined and for these projects to be given priority now.

A Legacy for the Future

The Gaudian newspaper recently published an article about how Milan wishes to capitalise on the current situation to change the ways streets are used in the future. Although most of the people we heard from at the UDL session are focused on how streets relate to lockdown life – some seem to be thinking about how to harness current behaviours and actions to reduce car dependency and dominance in the future.

The premise of Tactical Urbanism, which many cities have been taking forward, is to make temporary changes that can become permanent once tested out. Some see a silver lining to our current situation is far as the massive reduction in travel, and in particular motor vehicles, allows for wider testing of interventions which would prevent car use rising to pre Covid-19 levels.

In New Zealand people are taking much more exercise now than before the lockdown. Auckland city authority would like to find ways of encouraging this increase long term.

Home working may become a much bigger part of everyday life, reducing the number and length of journeys a city has to accommodate. The relationship between city structures, density and land use distributions to life after Covid-19 was touched on, but as it is such a massive topic, UDL suggested it

was left for a future event (we will be holding sessions on this, and future transport issues, throughout 2020).

Leadership, Political Will and Public Behaviours

Cities which have acted quickly seem to have strong, visionary leadership to galvanise programs and deal with the difficult decisions and trade offs required. At a time when everyone is under stress, and many politicians and senior officers have numerous problems to deal with, plummeting budgets and reduces staff teams, it is understandable that leadership can seem in short supply at times. There may be room for bottom up leadership to help here, if given support and the right information.

At the NACTO seminar there was talk about messaging and managing behaviour. It was suggested that there are 4 high level principles for getting your message right

1. **Using social norms** – we take cues from others on how to behave – like standing on the right escalators. These are especially powerful in new situations, like now. So we can use social norms to highlight positive behaviours – e.g. saying – ‘people are using these streets to keep 2m apart’. It can also be good to use phrases like ‘protect your neighbours – protect yourself’ when explaining changed schemes
2. **Harnessing automatic responses to our environment.** If everything looks and feels the same we can revert to old habits. We are being asked to act differently – keep 2m apart – so we need to design in visual cues to stop people reverting to old, established behaviours. E.g. make walking one way on one side of street using arrows on ground and highly visible reminder signs.
3. **Framing.** We respond differently to same contexts depending on how they are being described to us. We need to distinguish current Covid-19 responsive streets from other names or concepts for play streets, closed streets or whatever – which bring up ideas of behaviours we don’t want now. We should highlight the positive in our messaging, for example, ‘use this street to take a safe, distancing, walk’. Avoid jargon like ‘no though traffic’.
4. **Collect feedback from residents.** Lived experience makes people the true experts, and relaying their experiences can help spread good behaviour to others.

Sharing ideas and information

NACTO have set up resources to help share information between city authorities. You can find more information, and recordings of their webinars at <https://nacto.org/program/covid19/>

UDL are happy to run further events on this and related topics. In particular about planning and placemaking after lockdown, streets and transport after lockdown and how homes and neighbourhoods performed during the lockdown. If there is anything you would like us to do please email info@urbandesignlondon.com

Sharing experiences and ideas is going to help all of us. There is no point in reinventing the wheel at this time. With this in mind here are some more points about Oakland and Denver’s work, taken from their talk at a [NACTO webinar](#) on 22nd April. NACTO are also running an [international forum for government officials](#)

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