

Merton's Active & Healthy Travel Response to Covid-19

Introduction

Major events shape our society and the way we experience everyday life.

London's 'great stink' in the summer of 1858 was the result of untreated sewage building up in the River Thames. It prompted parliament to close, caused outbreaks of cholera and was a public health emergency. The response to this crisis was the creation of the Victorian sewer network and the Thames Embankments which still serve London to this day.

The events of September 11th 2001 changed the way we travel through airports. More recent terror attacks in many major cities around the world continue to shape how we travel, how we use public space, and how authorities design in security and safety measures in our public realm.

For better or worse, design decisions made in response to major events can impact our daily lives for decades after. Coronavirus is one of the greatest global crises for a generation and social distancing will re-shape how people travel, meet and use our streets and public spaces.

The natural desire in many policy areas may be to seek a return to the status-quo pre-Covid-19. Whilst this may be true for health, education and the economy this is not necessarily the case for environment and transport objectives.

Pre-covid, our borough, and London as a whole, was suffering from poor air quality and traffic congestion. We had ambitious but challenging objectives across a number of Council strategies aimed at reducing emissions and promoting active travel;

- Merton's Air Quality Action Plan
- Merton's Public Health and Wellbeing Strategy
- Merton's Climate Emergency Action Plan
- Merton's Transport Strategy

More recently, Transport for London have launched the London Streetspace plan to radically overhaul London's streets to accommodate a possible ten-fold increase in cycling and five-fold increase in walking when lockdown restrictions are eased.

Merton is fortunate to have good public transport accessibility; but with London's public transport capacity potentially running at a fifth of pre-covid levels, thousands of journeys a day will need to be made by other means. If Merton's residents switch only a fraction of these journeys to cars, our borough risks grinding to a halt, air quality will worsen, and road danger will increase.

To respond to this situation, Merton Council will repurpose some of our borough's streets and key locations to serve this unprecedented demand for walking and cycling in a major strategic shift to meet our long terms sustainability and active travel goals.

Context

Merton's Transport Strategy (Local Implementation Plan 3) is the council's main transport strategy and sits alongside the council's Local Plan and other future strategies to support sustainable and active travel choices.

The LIP3 contains an overview of the challenges and opportunities in delivering the Mayors' Transport Strategy locally in Merton; a set of borough transport objectives; a short and longer term delivery plan and a series of targets set by Transport for London that we are working towards achieving.

The Coronavirus pandemic is a public health emergency and it has transformed the context within which Merton's transport strategy now sits.

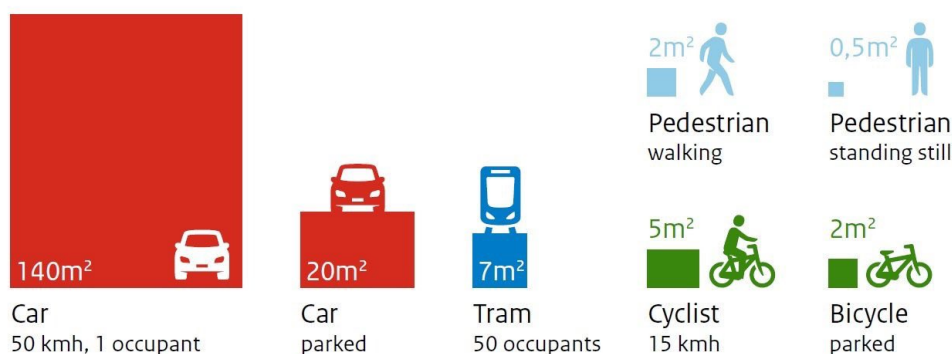
- The need to impose physical social distancing measures in order to reduce virus transmission has introduced new demands on how road space is allocated to pedestrians and cyclists.
- Significantly reduced levels of motor traffic has encouraged many people to turn to walking and cycling, but issues remain with road danger as the police have recorded an increase in speeding.
- Local businesses are struggling to survive and will need to find new ways to reach their customers or accommodate queuing outside premises.
- Vulnerable people are shielding at home and many are now relying on the council and voluntary sector partners to provide them with essential supplies.
- The need for key workers to access workplaces safely when public transport services are significantly reduced, has highlighted the currently lack of high quality routes for cycling.

The need to support social distancing measures in order to reduce virus transmission has brought into sharp focus some of the inadequacies in how space is allocated on the public highway.

We must use our road space more efficiently. Creating more space for walking and cycling is the optimum way of moving people safely with social distancing.

As we prepare to ease lock-down, we need to avoid public transport being overloaded and actively seek to avoid a return to pre-covid road congestion levels by creating more space for pedestrians and cyclists.

When street space is at a premium and with the need to support social distancing, it's worth noting which travel modes are the most space efficient.



Measures suitable to address many of issues above are identified in Merton's LIP3, but now the need to act quickly and at scale has become more pressing – with immediate action required in some cases and consideration of further measures in the medium term.

Merton's Transport Strategy seeks to radically change the status quo and promotes modal shift (away from motorised vehicles) and is a key element of the Council's climate change response and our air quality action plan. Transport emissions account for almost a quarter of Merton's carbon emissions. Therefore, when planning our response to the current situation a key consideration should be avoiding a return to pre-existing motor traffic levels. This move will require traffic restraint, together with measures to further promote and enable sustainable forms of travel.

Public Realm Observations

1	There has been a significant drop in town centre and high street activities
2	The public realm is being used more for recreation, play and exercise
3	Commuting and mobility have decreased significantly
4	Local places that offer activity, such as parks and playgrounds are more popular than before
5	Some places are too popular where social distancing rules are difficult to follow
6	The need for outdoor exercise and access to nature is now more valuable
7	More families and children are using our streets for play and cycling than before
8	Overall mobility has decreased, but pedestrian movement is increasing at the neighbourhood scale

The recent changes in how people use our streets and spaces presents an opportunity to redefine our streets for the long term; meeting the objectives of Merton's Health & Wellbeing, Air Quality, Climate Change and Transport Strategies.

Sector	CO2 Emissions (kT)	% of Merton's CO2 emissions
Industrial/ commercial gas and electricity	184	30%
Domestic gas and electricity	284	47%
Transport <i>(of which over 99% is road transport)</i>	137	23%

Working Principles:

In context of Covid-19, key principles for our transport strategy response are:

1. Support vulnerable people

Large numbers of people identified as particularly vulnerable to Covid-19 require support. This is already happening as part of Project Shield, with deliveries of essential supplies being co-ordinated across the borough. The requirement for this is likely to continue for some time. Any changes to the kerbside or parking suspensions will need to consider the need for vehicle access for vulnerable households.

2. Support compliance with government guidance

'Lockdown' and social / physical distancing are the main tools currently available to reduce virus transmission. The need for social distancing is likely continue well into the recovery period or until such time as other tools become available such as vaccines.

3. Enable essential journeys to be made safely

Key workers still need to travel during the lockdown period. As restrictions ease, other groups are likely to travel for work and trip making will increase. Journeys both on public transport and by road need to be managed to ensure safety and to maintain low levels of private motor vehicle traffic.

4. Support the local economy

As restrictions ease and businesses re-open those that rely on footfall and face to face customer contact – markets for example – may find conditions particularly difficult. New options linking businesses and their customers may be required and bike based local delivery services may have a role to play.

5. Respond for now and plan for the medium and longer term

There are urgent actions that need to be taken, principally to support vulnerable people and protect public health by enabling social distancing and reducing road danger. Beyond this we need to consider how to manage the transport network as restrictions are eased and eventually lifted and then through the recovery period. We therefore need a phased approach to our highway response.

Phased Approach:

A number of response phases are identified and considered appropriate in the context of Merton's transport strategy and covid-19.

Immediate action: (Crisis)

Create space for pedestrians to queue on footways adjacent to key businesses. (local food stores, pharmacies, GPs etc) by reallocating road space immediately in front of premises to support social distancing on the footway.

Servicing and loading to premises will need to be considered

Short Term: (Pre-recovery)

Create wider pavement space for pedestrians in high footfall locations and prepare for more businesses re-opening. This will involve reallocation of on-street parking bays and may also include accommodating a rise in motorbike delivery services in town centres and high streets.

Create space for cyclists along key routes in the borough.

Medium Term: (Recovery)

Plan with public transport providers, space to queues outside at rail stations and underground stations to support social distancing.

Plan for pupils returning to school, promote measures for greater walking and cycling routes to schools. Identify and fill gaps in Merton's cycle network and install temporary cycle priority schemes.

Long Term: (Transformation)

In supporting the modal shift to walking and cycling, seek to make permanent, wider footways and cycle lanes to achieve the objectives of the transport strategy

Key interventions

The first tranche of specific interventions are listed in Appendix A and will be kept under review as stakeholder engagement increases and we move through the stages of recovery.

Example measures from other London boroughs include;

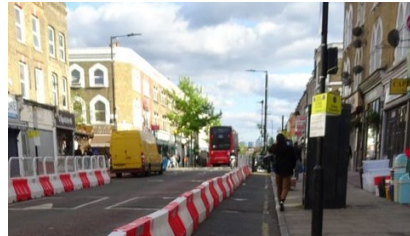
Parking suspensions for footway widening



Reallocating lane-space to widen footways



Pavement widening in town centres



Temporary Cycle lanes



Modal Filters to reduce speeding and rat-running



Delivery

We are developing a prioritised, costed plan for proposals in Merton (Appendix A) and this will be dependent on funding being available. At present, due to the financial position at TFL we do not have the TFL LIP resources that were available to deliver the Mayor's Transport Strategy.

Merton Council will fund and implement the first phase of priorities using existing Highways budgets and we will be bidding for TFL for resources to deliver more significant high impact projects as part of the Mayor's #StreetspaceLDN initiative.

The level of funding from TFL will determine how many additional transport interventions we can deliver. We will also consider the use of Merton's Community Infrastructure Levy to respond quickly to the need to implement these schemes. Further ideas will come forward from local residents and community groups, which we welcome and will consider as the interventions are rolled out.

Costs

The estimated cost of delivering Merton's programme for the next 6 months is c£80,000 including the cost of equipment, engineering and design resources, making Experimental Traffic Orders, managing the communications and consultation throughout and maintaining the temporary measures on-site. It is proposed that this is funded initially from the Council's existing Highway budget, pending further funding from TFL or Community Infrastructure Levy.

Legal considerations

Any measures, particularly changes to the highway, must be carefully considered and sit within the existing policy framework, including our approach to road danger reduction and the relation of this to the Covid-19 public health emergency.

While it is considered that proposed interventions do not require additional legal provisions, it is recommended that a borough-wide traffic order is made in order to cover a range of interventions and remove the need to make traffic orders for each one.

Such an order must be made on the basis of protecting the public from danger. Urgent measures such as narrowing / reducing traffic lanes to increase footway space do not require a traffic order and can be implemented under the highway permitting process. There is considered to be an increased risk of challenge when bringing forward changes to the highway with reduced levels of public engagement, but minimum requirements will be met as below.

Stakeholder engagement

Bringing forward highway changes ahead of schedule will require a change to planned engagement approaches. The Council will continue to meet legal requirements relating to statutory consultation and will engage with key local stakeholders, but it will be necessary to accelerate this process since it is an emergency response to Covid-19 and 'in depth' engagement will not be possible without prolonging timescales.

The initial phase of intervention locations has been developed through a combination of officer observations, feedback from business groups, local councillors and picking up residents' concerns via social media.

Street trials and experimental measures may be used as part of an ongoing engagement process. Emergency services will be key stakeholder who will be closely involved in the development of schemes and consulted with as part of the statutory process.

Governance

The Director of Environment & Regeneration will oversee and agree the response in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Housing & Transport in consultation with the Cabinet Member Adult Social Care, Health & Environment

Ward members to be notified of proposed measures in their areas. The Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Housing & Transport be responsible for decisions relating to programme scope and development as part of the road management portfolio function.

The Assistant Director for Sustainable Communities will be responsible for delegated decisions relating to project implementation. Day to day decisions to be taken by the Head of Future Merton as part of the project team.

Action Plan

Officers are currently preparing a full list of schemes to be brought forward and technical review / feasibility will then be required for these.

Key actions / approximate timescales are expected as follows:

What	When
Mobilise team	27 April
Identify emergency footway widening (first tranche)	30 April
Review data and local knowledge to set priorities for Cabinet Member	6 May
Letter to TFL seeking support	12 May
Bid to TFL for StreetspaceLDN funding	15 May
Prepare Traffic Orders	End of May
Engage Stakeholders	From end of May
Prepare digital communications	End of May
Implement phase 1 measures	From end of May
Implement medium term measures	From June onward

Appendix A: Priority short term interventions