

The infrastructure to “stay local” in post-COVID Sydney

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Article #1 of the NSW WEN fortnightly blog series in partnership with the NSW Economics Society of Australia and the National WEN.



Cities, as we know, are the centre of pandemics. With the highest population of people and the largest transmission, Sydney is at the forefront of COVID-19 in Australia. As our policymakers and local communities work to practice social distancing and “flatten the curve”, there are some important changes to the way we live that are likely to continue to impact the shape of our city, once we’re on the other side of COVID.

With regulations and behaviour shifts in place, it is now apparent that a radical break in “normal” living is underway. Photographs of near-empty landmark sites and thoroughfares offer clear evidence of this recent change. New habits are being formed. For example, working from home, outdoor exercise, and more at-home meals and one-on-one meetings rather than larger social gatherings. The question is whether these have sticking power. It could be reasonable to expect that the longer current restrictions are in place, the more likely residents are to adapt to our current ways of living. While behaviours will likely transition away once we have the freedom and safety to do so, we will probably take some of these new patterns with us.

I can imagine that working from home will become a bigger proportion of the standard work week for those Sydneysiders in office jobs. The great, forced experiment we’re undergoing right now is likely an important proof point that this can work, so instead of going into the office every day of the working week, perhaps people will opt to do so only one or two. At the more extreme end, this could mean de-densification of Sydney, with some parts of the workforce using remote working capabilities to move out from the centre, spreading out in smaller towns in regional NSW. A more likely, middle-of-the road outcome could be residents that stay put but work more flexibly- with neighbourhood hubs growing in importance. At EY, where I work, we already had flexible working

prior to COVID and I've now been working at home full-time for two months. It's gone well and I can see an expanded role for at-home work once restrictions dissipate.

To support this emerging pattern of residents' behaviour, the design and development of place in Sydney is very important. If there are, say, 25% more people in a neighbourhood park every day of the week; frequenting local shops and using mass transit sparingly on those days, it will drive different demand for public infrastructure and services.

Effective places would support the increase in local activity post-COVID, by providing residents with sufficient amenity to stay local, while respecting greater social space needs. For example, access to and design of parks, with ample pathways and bike paths, open space and handwashing facilities. With a return to the local high street, precincts of shops and other services could be revived, and the design of streets, parking and pedestrian thoroughfares would need to be reviewed. If people are staying local, they may walk more- so upgrading and widening footpaths could be important.

These ideas are amplified should some students, such as in university or TAFE, opt to do more of their study from home through online platforms; if telehealth stays; if more shopping is done online; or if more Sydneysiders forgo the gym and continue exercising outdoors. All of these shifts would contribute to momentum for "stay local", and with it, changing demands on place.

While we are in lockdown right now, we are not stagnant. Important behavioural changes are forming and can be the channel to improve environmental, health and safety outcomes in the economic recovery post- COVID. 'Staying local' can be a significant, and positive, consideration for policy, for example in planning for infrastructure investment. There are also bigger considerations for economic reform, including land use, zoning and taxation systems, that we can expect to see emerge in the time to come.