



**After Covid-19:
Six Positive Changes
(but only if we start now)**

Professor Ted Cante (CBE)

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This Discussion Paper provides a **personal perspective** to the emerging debate about the steps needed to deliver a sustainable future after Covid-19. It has been written by Sustainability First Founder and Patron, Professor Ted Cante. The views in this paper do not necessarily represent the views of Sustainability First, or its Associates.

Ted Cante has worked in a variety of roles at national, regional and local levels over the last 40 years. Ted led the Community Cohesion Review Team from 2001 and continues to develop the national programme. He was Chief Executive of Nottingham City Council for 11 years and held director roles in several other councils; Under Secretary of the AMA for 6 years; Deputy Chair and Board member of the Environment Agency for nine years, and has also chaired other task forces including, the LG Construction Task Force, a Faraday Partnership and a NHS Hospital Trust. He was Chair of the charity, Sustainability First from 2001 to 2018. Ted has also held academic professorial posts and has authored two books and written and lectured extensively. He is currently Chair of Belong- the Cohesion and Integration Network and the Nottingham Castle Trust.

We would welcome feedback. If you have any comments – or would like to discuss Sustainability First's Bridging Corona to a Sustainable Future Project – please contact Sustainability First's Director, Sharon Darcy at: sharon.darcy@sustainabilityfirst.org.uk.

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Executive Summary

Sustainability First Founder & Patron: Professor Ted Cante (CBE)

It is more than possible that nothing will change after this pandemic.

Our government – and many businesses, public services and people themselves – will be desperate to turn the clock back. In fact, there are already many clarion calls to urgently get the economy going again, alleviate the months of hardship, repay our debts, and to have the freedom once again to travel in all directions.

We may be a little slower to embark on cruise ship holidays, but the planes will soon take to the skies again and we will get back into our cars from Day 1, whether for the daily commute or to re-build our depleted social and leisure habits. We may soon forget our neighbours even exist – and gradually retreat from any inessential encumbrances that threaten to hold back the return to our renewed busy lives. And shops will soon have a bonanza of orders as we re-stock our wardrobes with stuff we will probably never wear, unless we plan for change now – and prevent a return to ‘business as usual’.

However, there is no sign of any such planning yet, our politicians seem to be focused on just the next few days.

As a first step, we need to urgently establish a high level ‘**After Covid-19**’ **Planning Group**’ focused on real and practical action, supported by wide-ranging community consultation programmes.

The whole process needs to be open and transparent to gain the trust and ownership of the wider public – of what will be difficult, and in some cases, painful changes.

The following paper gives a brief overview of the six changes that this ‘**After Covid-19**’ **Planning Group**’ could begin to plan and implement now:

- A Health Service for a Health Crisis
- Climate Change and Pollution
- Acts of Kindness, Cohesion and Integration
- Paying the Cost – More Austerity?
- Universal Basic Income is Not a Done Deal
- International Co-operation or Nationalism?

The final section outlines the work Sustainability First is undertaking as part of our new ‘Bridging Corona to a Sustainable Future’ programme.



1. A Health Service for a Health Crisis

Let's start with the obvious. Many countries have been caught out by the pandemic. In the UK, years of underfunding has meant that the NHS has struggled to cope with existing levels of demand, let alone the extraordinary surge resulting from Covid-19. In terms of staffing, equipment, testing capacity and bed spaces, the NHS has been found wanting. And the same applies to social care.

In the UK, the presence of free, accessible and national health system has, at least, meant that it has been possible to immediately begin to gear-up through a massive injection of resources. And suddenly, former staff have been brought in from retirement and student doctors and nurses moved on to the front line; temporary hospitals have been built, new ventilators commissioned and PPE sourced from all corners of the world. But it has been a struggle and could never be an adequate substitute for well-planned and resourced contingency plans.

The actions needed are clear and obvious:

- Funding needs to be long term, and with a sufficient level of spare capacity across the entire system. This means every hospital, rather than operating at full capacity as they do now, will need additional wards kept in reserve, as well as stockpiles of supplies, equipment and PPE for all emergency and care services.
- Contingency planning – much reduced in recent years – needs to be reinstated and, unlike previous plans, actually implemented. An early response to any health-related threat must be made ready and developed to a level to cope with all or most emergencies. Health research and science capacity also needs to be expanded to cope with new and different threats, whenever they appear.

- Staffing, at all levels, has to be reviewed, in both health and in the social care system, with long term capacity planning, including training, and the recognition that levels of remuneration require fundamental reform in both sectors.
- Health and Social Care now need to be fully integrated, this issue has been ducked for far too long.
- The crucial role of the NHS, as key service should now be enshrined in law as an essential component of the relationship between the state and its citizens, along with the requirement to provide and plan for future emergencies.
- (And government need to learn the wider lesson that 'experts are not just for a health crisis' and base more of their policies on evidence).



2. Climate Change and Pollution

It is ironic that this emergency has resulted in more action to tackle another emergency – our climate - in a period of just a few weeks, than all of the national and international agreements over the last two decades. We have cut production, consumed less, and curtailed more travel, than ever thought possible. But the restricted arrangements are unlikely to continue, as the demands of a sustainable planet will unfortunately be set against the prospect of a wrecked economy.

And never mind that we now also have more cleaner air in cities than for many decades, resulting in better health for everyone - that will also be trumped by economic necessity.

But practical action is possible. We can achieve both economic and environmental objectives at the same time, or at least to find a much better balance.

It will be very challenging, and it will require immediate interventions to ensure that we do not simply return to past practices. Most of all, it will demand great leadership and vision.

The most immediate and easiest (though not easy) place to start is with travel, by building on the short-term measures imposed upon us and creating longer term sustained change.

- As a first and immediate step, employers should be required to develop work-at-home plans for as many employees as is possible, for implementation under whatever form of return to work we have. This should include public, private and voluntary sectors.
- Second, we have to find other means to hold on to the changes in the way we travel and slow down the reversion to 'business as usual'. It could mean implementing a transitional year retaining some travel restrictions, while more sustainable transport systems and lower use regimes are put in place. We could also use the year to build support through

mass community participation - perhaps using the energy of young people in schools to work with their families and communities to develop local ideas and support.

- But more restrictions will be needed too. For example, we might expect that, at least during the transitional year, all domestic flights are curtailed and international flights restricted to half that of the pre-Covid level. Flights for business use could be limited in the longer term by requiring a declaration that a 'virtual' meeting is not possible and by imposing a limit of such flights for each business. Similarly, every individual could be limited to just one long-haul or two short-haul flights per year.
- Further, travel by car could be limited to two days per week, or every other day by use of odd and even number plate systems, as developed by some polluted cities, with the use of electric vehicles to be exempted. Public transport subsidies could be increased, perhaps with free travel for the under thirties to incentivise the change.
- In addition, businesses need to look for other ways to reduce vehicular use, for example, delivery vehicles could be required to collaborate instead of competing, and develop an area-based commissioning service so that deliveries are no longer on the basis of fleets of vehicles passing each other on the same street.
- All of this could be underpinned by a new travel tax system geared to a fuller carbon reduction for implementation after the transitional year. This will mean much higher prices for travel by air – aviation fuel is currently exempt from tax and this anomaly needs to be immediately rectified. It will also mean taxing petrol and diesel use much more heavily, penalising higher users and owners of less efficient vehicles. At the same time, the additional tax raised can be used to offset much greater subsidy and investment in public transport and cleaner vehicles to incentivise the switch.
- Of course, much more needs to be done to tackle climate change more generally, by de-carbonising businesses, agriculture and homes. This needs to follow on from the immediate gains resulting from travel restrictions.



3. Acts of Kindness, Cohesion and Integration

Pro-social behaviour has begun to displace anti-social forms and kinder words have also begun to outstrip the abuse and hatred spread through social media. We have begun to re-engage with our neighbours and look out for vulnerable people. The restrictions have forced us to once more see the human face of others nearby, rather than live behind the remote anonymity of modern technology.

Commuting to and from work, often covering many miles, has meant that we have spent relatively little time in our communities and our busy lives have made it difficult to create real social networks in our local areas.

Yet, communities have shown a great willingness, along with Boris Johnson, to re-discover the meaning of 'society'. People did not need to be told or instructed, they have organised support systems for themselves and use the power of social media for many good causes. The 750,000 NHS volunteers have tapped into the latent desire to work together and to help others.

But unless we take action to ensure these new arrangements become habitual, we are likely to simply return to our separate lives. So what can be done?

- People have self-organised and generally only need low levels of support, along with recognition and encouragement. To try to ensure continuity when our busy lives return, we will need some form of 'nudging'. This needs to be facilitative, not imposed from above. Local communities could perhaps be supported with small allowances to identify vulnerable people, arrange shopping and visiting; create gardening clubs to share plants and tools; arrange skills swops (e.g. music teaching, DIY projects), develop social events, etc. Or they could go further, taking over statutory services like street cleansing or park management.

- These could, in turn, be supported by an enriched local government, sharing ideas, developing good practice, providing training and supporting local enterprise – with much more devolution from central government.
- To give local groups more power and real meaning, schemes of 'deliberative democracy' could be organised around these areas, ensuring that they also contribute ideas.
- And to avoid insularity, the areas could be encouraged to build bridges to different communities and to challenge prejudices towards others – the best way of doing so is through interaction, across boundaries.



4. Paying the Cost – More Austerity?

But there is a problem that our politicians have not yet even begun to address. We now have government debt levels never seen in peacetime; and we will need more investment in our health and other public services. Without a clear strategy, politicians will simply reach for previous policies – more austerity – and these new measures are likely to be more severe and to last even longer.

There is also the danger that more of the financial burden is transferred from older generations to the young through long term debt repayments.

We need to plan for very different approaches.

- One option is that of a one-off tax, along the lines imposed on all Germans to pay for unification - the so-called 'solidarity tax' or *Soli* – which lasted roughly 20 years for most Germans and still continues for the more wealthy. We now need our own, a 'covid tax' or *Coli*.
- Another *Coli* option would be some form of 'wealth tax', related to assets, rather than income, which would disproportionately impact on older and more wealthy people.
- Alternatively, or additionally, VAT could be entirely re-cast and developed into an environmental impact tax (ENVIT). This would move the tax-take towards consumption, with much higher levels imposed according to carbon intensity of products or services - aircraft flights, goods produced from or by fossil fuel, or wasteful energy use. This would also be consistent with the objective of gearing up to tackling climate change, especially as subsidies are needed to de-carbonise the entire economy. Options could of course be combined – but a *Coli* does need to be planned for now - before we revert to 'business as usual'.



5. Universal Basic Income is Not a Done Deal

Universal Basic Income(UBI) has emerged as a possible means of better managing future crises, as well as a fairer system of wealth distribution. However, the costs of general application at even modest levels are prohibitive and the question of how to maintain a work incentive remains unresolved.

Nevertheless, the massive state support through underwriting wages, business grants and loans and the huge increases in means-tested income support, together with existing state pension provision, does begin to suggest that a de-facto basic income is emerging.

And the sheer enormity of assessing and paying benefits within a reasonable period of time to massive numbers of people who suddenly find their income has disappeared remains a major practical issue which a pre-existing level of basic support would negate.

There is also the underlying issue of a growing divide between rich and poor which might be partly addressed by a basic income scheme and the question remains as to how we now properly value what have become our key workers – the delivery drivers, care workers, shop assistants and the many other essential low paid workers.

- A UBI Commission now needs to be established. This would review the evidence from the small number of other countries that developed limited UBI systems – with mixed results - as well as begin to consider possible future schemes. Even if a fully comprehensive scheme is not possible, there may be ways of raising thresholds to limit the need for massive and complex means-testing of families and individuals.



6. International Co-operation or Nationalism?

It must now be blindingly obvious that not only is 'no man an island' but nor is any country. Even if a vaccine is developed, no country will ever be safe, from this or any other pandemic, until all countries have it. The interdependence of countries in terms of supply lines is now also much clearer than ever before and it is particularly evident that the richer countries depend upon food, manufacturing and raw materials from across the world.

On the other hand, we do have to recognise that the globalised system of finance and capital, trade and media, has now become widely challenged and freedoms and controls have to be more aligned. And as climate change develops, the interdependence, and the resulting mass movement of people, will threaten to de-stabilise every continent.

Any response will be fundamentally about leadership, though there are some practical steps that could now be taken to at least promote a more rational debate.

- It has been too easy for politicians to garner support by blaming other countries, international agencies and unspecified global forces. It is of course true that many international pressures are beyond the control of individual countries, so this requires more considered and intelligent leadership.
- Politicians rarely initiate debates about the role of agencies such as NATO, the UN or the WHO. But this is what is now required so that the public are better able to understand their positive – and negative – contributions and feel some sense of ownership and influence.
- Politicians also need to recognise that they have fuelled some of the concerns about global businesses, including social media, finance and trading companies, by being far too timid in taking action, continually suggesting that their country is powerless to act. The lack of action by government owes more to the fear of a loss of investment from these global concerns. Action has had to be forced upon them – for example over the irresponsible material posted on social media, or the lack of tax paid at a national level by global businesses. There is still much more that can be done by nations, individually and collectively.
- The acts of kindness shown to neighbours in local communities now also needs to be reflected in our dealings with other countries. The 'citizens of nowhere' narrative developed by Theresa May was not only unhelpful, but confused 'citizenship', which is about place and the contract between government and its people - taxation in return for services, democratic rights, respect for the laws of the land etc - and the recognition of a common humanity around the world. National and international perspectives can be entirely compatible with each other, but can only thrive where based on mutual respect. As the pandemic has shown – and climate change will dramatically reinforce – there is no alternative, shared problems can only be resolved with collaboration.



7. Sustainability First – Bridging Corona to a Sustainable Future

Sustainability First is a think tank and charity that promotes practical, sustainable solutions to improve environmental, economic and social wellbeing. We are a trusted convenor on public utility issues and have a strong track record of bringing stakeholders together in multi-party projects in the public interest.

Sustainability First's **Bridging Corona to a Sustainable Future Programme** is helping to reconcile the focus on GDP with the need to secure economic, social and environmental wellbeing in the round to ensure the sustainability of essential services and critical national infrastructure – such as energy, water and communications.

We are therefore:

- **Working with others to build a coalition for sustainability now** - to ensure that recovery is smart, fair and green.
- **Helping support strategic thinking in policy, regulatory and company activity** – so that decisions are focused on the most significant distributional impacts and priorities within and between generations; and consider when radical approaches should be followed – rather than nudged.
- **Testing new and innovative ways to give people a sense of agency 'During Corona'** – developing positive visions of what we can all do for the world 'After Corona' - to help bring about the change in mindset and cultural shift needed for a more sustainable future.
- **Helping ensure economic support strategies 'During Corona' are conditional** - as far as possible, on joined up, people centred and pro-green approaches, so that sustainability becomes the new normal in procurement and planning.

- **Learn from the corona crisis** - collect evidence of real-world approaches to disruption and reliability that may be helpful and relevant for addressing the climate crisis and the resilience of the natural world

Current Activity

- We have launched the [Sustainability First Art and Essay Prize](#): Both competitions aim to invite original, radical ideas and visions in response to the question *'How do we build from the current corona crisis towards a more sustainable future?'*
- **Personal perspectives**: Over the coming weeks, we will be featuring blogs and other outputs on how to reconcile economic, social and environmental wellbeing in the crisis and beyond in areas such as vulnerability and regulation. This Discussion Paper is the first of these.
- **Publications**:
 - Briefing: ['Risk and uncertainty during the corona emergency. Checklist of boards and executive teams to support strategic thinking.'](#)