

A Just Now: Redux

Distributed access for thriving communities



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In 2023 I released **A Just Now: Equity and transport in a changing climate**. In this 2026 revision I emphasise the opportunity we have to transform the way we live, right now. Building communities doesn't have to mean decades-long masterplanning. By redirecting investment so that people can meet more of their needs close to home, we can bring people out into their neighbourhoods. Meeting one another, talking and socialising together is the foundation of trusted community.

For decades, transport professionals have promoted a need for integrated planning - land use and transport together - and lamented our collective failure to deliver. But a need for transport is really a need for access. In this redux I encourage *distributed access*: providing more ways to participate closer to where people live - as central to our work in the 21st Century.

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Why a redux?

The consumption crisis

We are living within a crisis of human overconsumption. For the last few decades, extractive consumption has accelerated. As a species we are losing our habitat and our health: problems such as pervasive microplastics, acidifying oceans and an unstable climate are threatening communities worldwide. No efforts to promote reuse of materials or changes to the way we power our machines has led to any downward pressure on runaway pollution and destruction. Quite the opposite: geopolitical stability is threatened, viruses and disease are spreading, and inequality is worsening.

Too many people are consuming too much, with wide-ranging and disastrous consequences. One of the problems underpinning runaway breakdown of human society is the detachment of information from reality. For most of human history, we gained all of our insights into the world from the ground, water and air around us, and from people we lived among. We could test what we saw, we developed science, we debated evidence with one another. We learned who to trust because we grew up with them, and we knew them.

Now, much of the information we digest is from digital worlds. Online media are increasingly controlled by algorithms and by artificial intelligence. A digital universe growing by feeding only on itself and its myriad, unknowable biases: all 'governed' by corporations obliged to deliver financial return on investment. We have lost our way in the world, because we do not live in it like we used to. Our detachment from the biophysical world and from in-person connection with people we live among is a problem.

The consumption crisis and transport

The ways that we learn about the world and each other, both consciously and unconsciously, have become increasingly complex. Alongside changing information formats, our neighbourhoods have changed too. The rise of the automobile has led to an incredible dominance of cars as means to access opportunity. There are estimated to be over 1.6 billion cars in the world in 2026, with over 80 million new vehicles being created year on year. With an average mass of over two tonnes, the total mass of cars exceeds that of humans by a factor of over 500. Cars require large volumes of raw materials. Tyre particulates pollute our water. The construction and operation of cars is extractive and polluting, regardless of how they are powered.

The consumption crisis is a mobility crisis too: we consume too much mobility. Relatively wealthy people are traveling more miles each year, and many are trapped in expensive car dependence. Oversized mobility consumption has contributed to the overall crisis, including all of the population health problems associated with car-centric planning.

Our neighbourhoods are no longer defined by water supply or gathering places, as they were for centuries, but by road maps. A Just Now requires a rapid undoing of car-centric planning. And it starts with local access.



Distributed access at the centre of modern transport policy

The simplest way that people can move is to walk. Walking, including with mobility aids such as a wheelchair, is at the top of any published transport mode hierarchy. Urban planners and transport engineers alike realise that it is the most equitable, accessible, and economically worthy way to help people move. The more we promote walkable local communities, the more inclusive and *just* our neighbourhoods will be. But it is not enough to create accessible streets: people need a reason to walk. This is where distributed access arises as the policy response of our time.

Mixed-use development, with homes, education, workplaces and shops in walkable proximity, is recognised as an effective and healthy way to design urban environments. The more that people can meet all of their needs close to where they live, the more they will walk. The more that people walk in their own neighbourhood, the more chance encounters they will have with people they live among. The more we talk with our neighbours, the more we can trust them. This is the counter to information curated by online algorithms: information shared amongst people, in-person, in the real world.

But to get there, we do not need to shift everyone into multi-use towers that have apartments and offices on top, and shops and services below. We can bring services to people instead. Examples of distributed access are already around us. They include:

- The ice cream van
- Farmers markets
- Co-working spaces and cafés
- Mobile libraries: books, tools, and other resources
- Crop swaps to share excess produce
- Clothes swaps to counter fast-fashion
- Mobile health services and screening
- Local fairs, gigs and fundraisers

Many children are already educated through distributed access. Home-based childcare and playcentres are community-centric shared learning, often with direct parent and caregiver involvement. Local primary schools are distributed access. We do not usually require children to travel across town or to another city for education. The school community is already a place of social and cultural local connection.

Distributed access is not a dramatic paradigm shift. We have a lot of distributed access already, just under the radar of most contemporary planning. Perhaps the reason we don't already see local access as central to planning is that local government infrastructure departments are set up to *manage assets rather than to promote access*. This century there is an obvious ecological cost to the amount of mobility we consume. we ought to find opportunities where it makes sense to bring access to where people live. We could shift our planning processes to be community-focused right now, if we choose to.

Just as we have a lot of examples already of distributed access in the 21st Century, the 20th Century was characterised by local access as ubiquitous. Here, a woman who grew up in mid-19th Century New Zealand describes what access to food meant for her family.



“The first time I ever answered the telephone, it was Mr Canning, the grocer - he would ask Mum what she wanted. It was always kind of the same.. butter, sugar, you’d hear her say it, and the groceries would be delivered. He was a quintessential grocer, he had overalls on, or an apron. He would pack it in paper, he had a van, it would turn up in a carton. Sometimes Mr Canning would bring a little treat, a few lollies or something.

“The milk arrived from the milkman every day. The butcher was round the corner, mum would sometimes send us. I didn’t know where people bought vegetables from, I thought everyone had a garden. We had fruit trees. We’d get a box of oranges from Auntie Isabelle from up north, she’d send it down on the train each year. You never bought jam or anything, Mum made all of that. Mr Finlay and Mr Guthrie across the road, they’d put a sign up and sell tomatoes and we got them. It was really, look after your neighbourhood.”

Mary, 74, describes some aspects of distributed access

A return to investment in local access would help to create more inclusive communities, when accompanied by a focus on accessible local walking networks. After all, transport only exists for access. Mobility has always been a way to connect people to what they need (including the need to move their own bodies; to exercise). The more people participate in everyday activities as close to home as possible, the less they will travel by car. Less car travel has positive impacts on asset management and many other policy areas. Benefits include the following:

- Fewer car miles travelled is the number one way to improve road safety outcomes: less driving leads to less crashes
- Local economies result in less demand for goods to be shipped around the world: a genuine local economy grows and is regenerative
- Less travel results in less maintenance on road infrastructure because pavements last longer
- More resilient communities are more inclusive: the shorter the distances are that people need to travel, the more people can afford to do that, with dignity and in support of their good health.



How to create A Just Now: Policy framework

From an infrastructure planning perspective, it is possible to redirect mass infrastructure project budgets towards local access *right now*. There is no law that says cities must assume continued traffic growth in coming decades: the billions currently earmarked for large highway improvements and even mass transit can be challenged, and reassigned into distributed access.

The remainder of this document describes the actions to accelerate inclusive distributed access. They build on the priorities presented in the original white paper, A Just Now (2023).



Figure 1 A Just Now: Policy priorities

1. Understanding trips not made

To prioritise investment in access, we need to understand who is not participating. It is curious that many transport authorities know very little about who is not making journeys that would contribute towards a good life. In other investment areas, such as road safety, failures are readily measured and mapped. The transport sector knows a great deal about crashes, understands where they are likely to happen, and why; to whom, and under what conditions. The same goes for understanding traffic congestion, and vehicle tailpipe pollution.

But when it comes to inclusion, we seem to rely on infrastructure standards to deliver universally accessible streets. We do not test what impact those standards have had on people's ability to get where they need to go. So we cannot know, with any precision, where our networks are inaccessible, and whose trips are too expensive, painful, stressful, or plain impossible to be attempted. This evidence gap is a form of survivorship bias: an assumption that 'it works well' because there are many people using a path or accessing a facility, and failing to ask who is not there. This bias is a huge problem for disadvantaged and minority communities who are not accessing what they need, and it is a problem for transport authorities interested in delivering A Just Now.

To prioritise investment in access, we need to understand who is not participating, and whose journeys involve stress, pain, or difficulty of any kind. We can and must measure these outcomes.

Trips not made, or journeys not taken, are the most useful insights to drive investment in inclusive access. We can ask:

**Is there a trip you have not made in the last week, because of a transport problem?
If yes, please describe the trip you did not make.**

The more we ask these questions, the more we can find patterns in people's answers, to direct investment towards equity of access.



As well as asking in a survey, on-street conversations can yield useful stories. In local shops, at schools or at events, people can be asked how they got there, where they came from, and what else they would like to participate in close to where they live.

The impact of trips not made on people's wellbeing is central to the investment story: who is missing out, and what can be done about it? Amplifying the voices and stories of marginalised people is a powerful way to pierce the politics of decision-making with powerful evidence of why inclusive distributed access is so important and urgent.

A useful insight from measuring trips not made is that it can bring infrastructure barriers to the fore: trips not made because there is no way for a specific person, with their unique characteristics and traits, to get where they would like to go. Improvements to local street accessibility and to other transport options for people who forego the most trips, are the most urgent transport interventions in creating A Just Now.

What to do to understand trips not made:

- ***Recognise the importance of an outcome measure for inclusive policy: who is not making journeys that they need***
- ***Ask people about trips not made, in surveys and on streets***
- ***Collect statistics, collect stories***
- ***Use new understanding to prioritise and improve local street accessibility***



2.

Creating Just policy

Strong policy is Just policy: promoting equity and inclusion at the highest levels within a framework of distributed access. An effective counter to ever-increasing consumption, including of mobility, is to focus on community-centric growth. Growth that measures what matters: wellbeing, regenerative natural environments, shared guardianship, and genuine democracy.

At a national level, shared policy goals that promote local access can help address multiple challenges at the same time. Environmental metrics include a reduction in vehicle-miles travel (whatever the vehicle fuel source), and greening streetscapes. More trees in urban environments create neighbourhoods adaptive to climate change, as well as making spaces where people want to walk, and to dwell. By planting trees and investing in nature, we can measure the return in air and water quality as well as improved equity of local participation: more people making the local trips that they need, in healthy ways.

Asset management metrics include a shift in costs from large-scale infrastructure to facilitate mass individual mobility over long distances (that is, car-centric planning), to local priorities for accessible streets.

A fraction of the budget of a large infrastructure project could improve several neighbourhoods' small details that make local walking trips easier and more attractive: quality paths and road crossings, and smooth kerb cuts for people traveling with small wheels, such as wheelchairs, prams, and scooters.

Road safety is improved when people meet their needs close to home, because exposure to risk is reduced. Efforts to improve the forgivingness of roads and streets should continue, but the denominator of the crash risk equation (risk per mile travelled) can be immediately improved by reducing miles travelled through fewer, shorter trips.



Safe walking infrastructure also reduces the risk of falls on public streets, which are under-represented in traditional road crash reporting. Many people are acutely aware of risk of falling, which limits local walking trips. Infrastructure improvements that help people's confidence when choosing to walk are crucial.



Alongside promoting local access, it is important that shared vehicle travel is supported for people who need it. Community and public transport options, particularly buses and community vans, can best support this transition to distributed local access. Community transport, run by not-for-profit groups, has broader social benefits because it is centred in, and supports, strong community through its involvement of local volunteers in its planning and operation. Accessible parking for those who cannot walk long distances remains crucial.

Public health has much to gain from improved local access. Walking is already the recreational activity that most people report participating in. People's mental and physical health benefit from walking. The more that people walk, the healthier local streets are because of a reduction in the danger, community severance and pollution created by car traffic. Local walking trips also foster chance encounters and conversations with people. In short, walking (including with a mobility aid) is good for individuals, and is a pillar of healthy trusted community.

What to do to create Just policy:

- ***Shared objectives across policy areas: environment, road safety, health***
- ***Redirect infrastructure budgets to improve local paths and road crossings to enable more local walking trips***
- ***Continue to support shared public and community transport, and accessible parking for people who cannot walk long distances***

3.

Authentic engagement

Before we had extensive data about road crashes, people affected by them advocated for safety improvements. Those advocates remain, but they are part of a comprehensive, data-led science of road safety.

When it comes to inclusion, we do not yet have enough data about trips not made, to prioritise the investment needed in accessible streets. Further, many of the people who need higher quality walking networks are not represented by the workforce: children, older people, disabled people, and a range of marginalised groups have no pervasive voice in government transport departments. And when it comes to community design grounded in a changing world, people's stories matter a lot. Authentic engagement will always be central to A Just Now.

National, regional and local partnerships are central to shifting our approach from infrastructure planning, to the community support that underpins local access. Different people have different skills, experiences, and connections. Authentic engagement means working across different sectors. For example, those in local government could spend time working in the offices of local community service providers, to learn about what is going on there, and feed that back into investment planning.

Authentic engagement also means seeking out the views and experiences of those who find it more difficult to engage with traditional methods. The more that democracy itself is distributed, the more diverse views could be captured. For example, going to local school fairs and community events, with the infrastructure of authentic engagement – sausage sizzles and bouncy castles – is an approach far more likely to be effective than relying on people engaging with traditional planning processes through formal submissions.



What to do for authentic engagement:

- *Identify the most urgent beneficiaries of inclusive local access, in each community of interest*
- *Go to local communities and ask people what they need, as a regular planning approach*
- *Build local needs and stories into infrastructure planning priorities*



4.

Local focus

To understand what is needed to promote local access, we need to get out on streets as planners and look around.

Bearing in mind what communities say they need, we can ask: what can be distributed, in what ways can we take the activities to communities? Mobile infrastructure, starting with what people are familiar with – food trucks, mobile libraries, coffee carts on cargo bikes – are a soft and practical way to introduce local access to communities. Once people become familiar with walking to their local park, plaza, or other place to spend time doing useful things, then more can be added depending on what local people want. Art, music, education, play, work, gardening: the options for distributed access are endless.



Change means stopping some things and starting others. It is within the agency of transport professionals to stop processes that do not provide reliable direction for a future we want to be part of: we know that forecasts of traffic volumes decades into the future is unreliable, and that it perpetuates a car-centric focus. We can stop doing that. Instead, we can use local models, simulations and the engagement discussed above, to direct investment now towards what we know creates more liveable communities.

With a local focus, needs become clearer. Accessible streets means that paths and road crossings must be safe, obvious, and include step-free choices. The more that we investigate local communities and understand what they want, and need to access, the more certain we can be that our investment priorities will provide a return, in real terms: people's wellbeing can improve right away. Audits of infrastructure, and a shift from long-term traffic modelling to immediate accessibility assessment provides a tangible, sustainable approach to achieving demonstrable return on investment right now.

A local focus right now does not mean removing anybody's ability to use a car, or to be able to park it. More efficient use of multi-tonne machines means we use them only when they make the most sense for a trip. Creating opportunities for people to do things that they want to do, within walking distance of their homes, is a carrot rather than a stick. Meanwhile, provision of accessible parking, accessible vehicle pick-up and drop off, and understanding local freight logistics remain very important.

The goal of a local focus is to build community, and for transport planners to believe that this is their role. Far from an abstract job in charge of models and networks, transport is intrinsic to the ways people actually live: we can shape environments that support interaction and exchange between people in the real world. We can work with communities to build places where people are supported to walk, and to dwell; to have chance conversations that lead to local friendships, resilience, and support. As local community grows, local access can once again become a natural way of living. The milkman, gigs in parks and the icecream van do not need to be consigned to idealistic nostalgia. That village story is within reach of us all.

What to do for local focus:

- ***Build on local authentic engagement to prioritise audits of local streets, identifying infrastructure improvements***
- ***Give community building mandate to transport staff, leading to collaboration between different government and community partners***
- ***Continue to write the story of local community thriving, informed by community voice and by the experiences of the transport and built environment professions working together on shared goals***



Conclusions

More and more people are realising that the problems facing humanity are interconnected: at their root are simply that for too long, too many people have consumed too much from the earth. The consequences of our consumption and pollution seem far away: we socially and temporally discount problems that are far away in space and time. In contrast, the short term neurobiological rewards (how we feel) when we consume are immediate. Those short-term emotional feedback loops and temporal discounting are manipulated by for-profit media and corporations that pollute online worlds and who sell to us.

An excessively consumptive society has accelerated a detachment from the ground we live among and from those we live with. The shift described in this paper is one of professional identity, and a new focus. But the community changes are not so dramatic as to be out of reach. In each neighbourhood we already have distributed access of different kinds. The opportunity is to meet each community where it is, and build what it needs to create local environments where a walk becomes a compelling way for people to access what they need to thrive.

In this paper I have described four focus areas that combine to deliver A Just Now.

- Understanding trips not made to prioritise investment in local access
- Just policy means finding shared objectives between government departments and with community
- Authentic engagement with each community is essential because our transport profession is not as diverse as the communities we work for
- Local focus can mean shifting infrastructure budgets towards widespread quality improvements of local streetscapes, rendering them truly accessible for all.

We each have a role to play to counter the consumption crisis that is threatening human life on this planet. The most effective antidote to detachment from these problems is local togetherness: one step at a time towards **A Just Now**.



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