

# NORWICH RESEARCH PARK IN FOCUS

Changing Lives. Rethinking Society



## FOCUSING IN ON THIS ISSUE:

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## CHANGING TIMES or UNCHANGING TIMES?

In previous editions I have explored some of the things we have been learning, about ourselves, each other and, about our world – society in general; I have also questioned our thoughts about the way ahead, about going forward to something new and better, not ‘back to normal’.

We have been through some of the most challenging times many of us will have experienced, and in recent weeks we have seen a keenness in some to, maybe, believe everything is fine again. But now, here we are once again seeing the confirmed cases rising and tragedy for more families. This crisis is not yet behind us; the time for change to a safe-virus free world has not yet

arrived, but the time for change in how we think about ourselves, each other, our world – society in general, is here.

History tells us that pretty much every generation has one time when the world is thrown in the air. Is this our time? There is no doubt that 2020 will be recorded as the year of the global pandemic – and history will judge us on what we did in response, and what we learned and did because of that learning.

A few weeks back I had a great conversation with a young entrepreneur 43 years my junior. Whilst talking to him I suddenly became aware that when he is my age, were he to have a similar conversation with a 17 year old

entrepreneur this would be in 2063, and that young person would be in the prime of their life in the 22nd Century. For my generation, the ‘Millennium’ seems like only yesterday, but that conversation made me realise the future is only tomorrow. Today belongs to us, tomorrow is our legacy – but it belongs to those who come after. That is why we have a responsibility now to prepare the ground for a better world.



# MOVING FORWARD

I have spoken for some years about how in an advanced modern society, we continue to think about work as we did in the last Millennium. “Work-Life Balance” has become no more than code for being at work and not being at work, we still say 9 to 5, and (prior to lockdown) we always “went to work”, spending too long commuting in tin boxes with wheels. I have argued that we need new language, but more importantly we need new ways of working.

Whether through deeply embedded culture, or an unintended unconscious bias affecting trust, home working for most of those who could was not the norm. Now with change thrust upon us, home working for many became the new norm within no time, technologies such as Zoom became as common as the telephone. Has this been an unwelcome reaction to a crisis, or a realisation of the possible? Is this a temporary response, or has deep seated thinking changed?

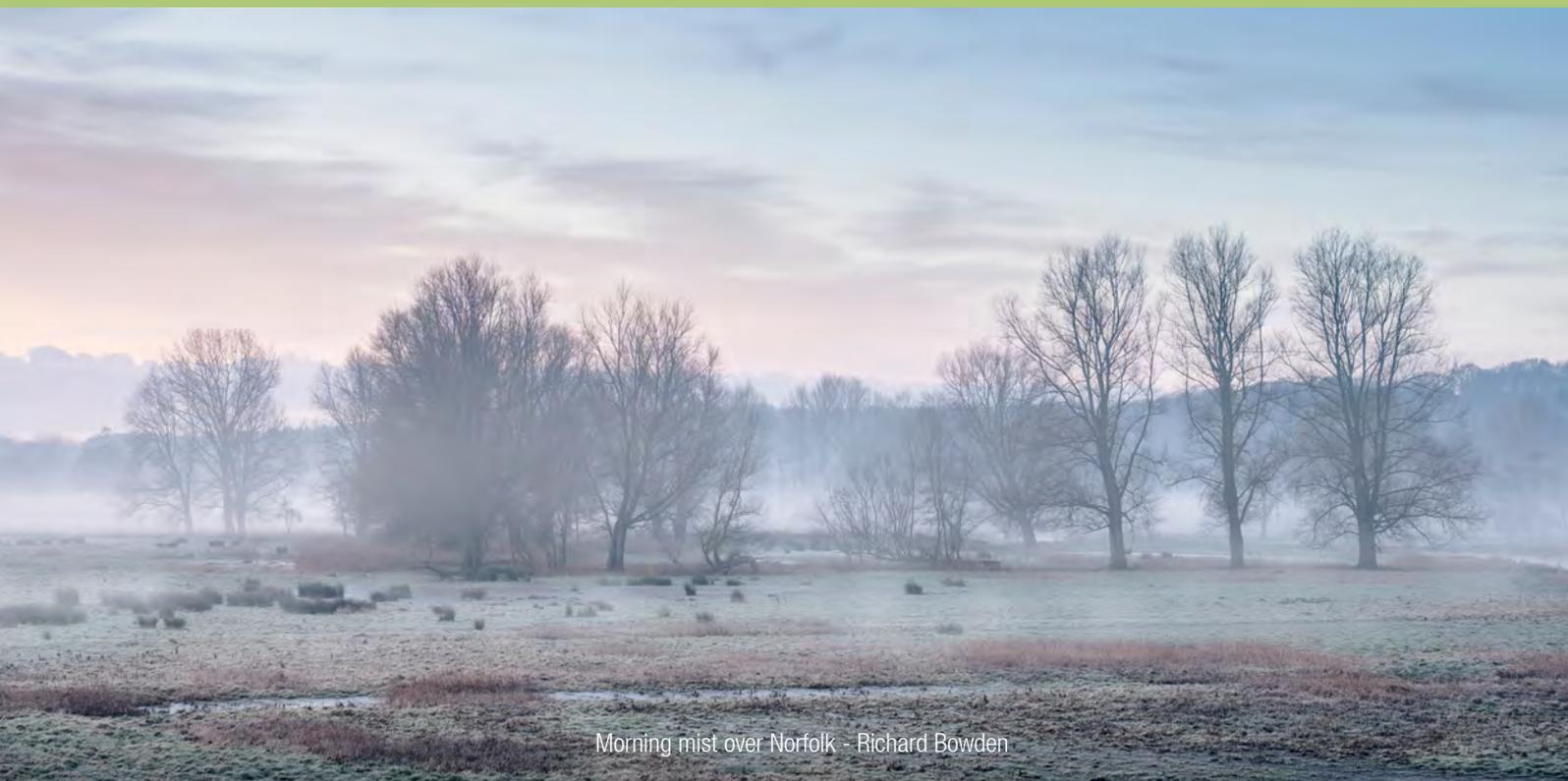
There are of course practical considerations, it is one thing to use the dining room table as a temporary desk, but what might permanency look like? Could this be the moment we truly embrace the paperless society; without the paper files to fall back on, or the big office printer? Perhaps we have become more comfortable with the already possible alternative, read on screen, file electronically.

Perhaps there is an opportunity to have a new discussion on the environment in which we live and work, and how we wish to use it? Average commute times were running at around an hour per day in the UK. That equates to the waking hours of around 14 days per year – that’s two whole weeks! What could happen if we took even half of that time back? That could mean up to half the cars on the road at rush hour, it could mean half the number of office desks

needed, it could mean a significant reduction in environmental pollution, better air quality, a serious move towards net zero emissions.

Nothing is easy, nothing straight forward. Change brings a need to think about the potentially negative impacts. For example if we only need half of the desks, what does that mean for offices? Potential savings for business, yes, but a need to think about the transfer of that office space to the home or to walkable distanced shared work-hubs. We would need to have a plan for the space no longer required, and the impact on business who create, own, and support that office space.

Could space be repurposed as a part of an answer to another great tragedy of our society – homelessness. Could we use some for economic progress, such as business start-up and acceleration space, or creating those local shared business hubs,?



Morning mist over Norfolk - Richard Bowden

# FILLING the GAPS – MAKING it WORK

Those whose work can be done at home have become comfortable with many consequences, no commuting, relaxation of dress codes (how many others have suits unworn for many months, and have worn the occasional business shirt with unseen shorts on the Zoom calls?!), the flexibility of work fitting better with life because they are in the same place. Technology platforms have given us continued ability for meetings, for conferences and webinars.

If we look at these elements as pieces in a jigsaw, the opportunity to build that new picture is there, but we would find there are pieces missing. We have missed the corridor or coffee queue conversation, the sense of how our friends and colleagues are from their physical presence and our interaction. These have not adequately translated to our new ways. When we email each other, we write “hope you are well” or some such phrase, but do we ask the question outside of that business email.

Prompted by the “ASK” campaign begun by entrepreneur, Kieran Miles, we have been learning that “How are you” has no question mark, it is just a replacement for “Hello”; we need to put the question mark back, mean it when we ask, encourage the honest answer and give time to engage. Without the physical meet we have lost the unsolicited and unplanned opportunity, and we must replace that if home working is to be sustainable.

Whilst it may be very hard for us, we could reflect on how often during lockdown have we picked up the phone or connected on a video platform with colleagues, our team members, or our wider networks, for no other reason than to ask them how they are? Reverse the question; if you were to write down how many people called us just to ask would it be a long list? In all honesty my list would be short. Reverse the question back again, and is the list of those we asked a longer list?

We cannot, and must not assume all is well. The job may be being done superbly, and we may know that physical health is fine, but there are no signposts here to the level of mental health or wellbeing. The isolation from lockdown has made mental wellbeing more important than ever before, and the risks around this have risen disproportionately, and even as lockdown eases.

If homeworking is to be sustainable we must have this piece of the jigsaw, without it the picture will not be complete. Again, there is good news, Kieran’s campaign is a call to arms, and there is some great work being done on Norwich Research Park itself by Dr Helen Fitzhugh and her colleagues at UEA. In collaboration with several universities across the UK, the ProPEL initiative, is producing plain English briefings, blogs, webinars, and more, to help in this important area. Look out for the ‘ProPEL hub’ website, twitter account and podcasts.



**A**wareness  
**S**upport  
**K**eeP Going



## MUCH to DO

In this issue I have continued the theme of looking forward to creating something better, using what we knew before, combined with what we have learnt from the present crisis – but being constrained by neither. An increasing number are seeing the once in a lifetime realisation that we can do better.

Beyond the pandemic the great global challenges remain, feeding the world, climate change, healthy aging and more. At Norwich Research Park, we already had fantastic people doing and supporting truly globally leading science in these areas. This great work will continue – at pace – but with the opportunities of a newly defined future. Ways of working can be different, work:life balance can achieve its true ambition, and wellbeing can take its proper place in our thinking. There is much to do, but for our own sake, and for the sake of those who come after, we must not, dare not, miss this opportunity.

As an integral part of Norwich, The City of Stories, we at Norwich Research Park are writing a story for the future that will see a better world, using great science to find answers and opportunities, where we are showing how science can play that crucial part, and how being a community celebrating and supporting everyone will do great things for humankind, and will secure Norfolk's place as a global leader in science and innovation. Our story is titled "Mission2020, Vision2030, Ambition2050", future issues will tell more.



**Forward Together**