

What effect is the coronavirus pandemic likely to have on the network infrastructure sector both in the short-term and long-term? How has the sector responded to the crisis so far and what more could it do to support public services and keep people connected?

The coronavirus has obvious implications for business continuity across the entire economy. Data centres, consolidating the IT functions of organisations from government to SMEs, are a critical part of their customers' operational resilience, so the sector is in the spotlight right now. Government is taking a close interest: there is a new dedicated team and data infrastructure was added to the key workers list in March.

In principle our sector is well positioned to deal with new challenges: identifying potential risks and managing them is what data centres do, and operators are aided by physical characteristics like security, relatively low footfall and high levels of automation. True to form, operators reacted quickly to limit routes for infection and protect employees whilst ensuring that facilities remain adequately staffed. Operators were implementing precautionary measures like shift segregation, reduced customer footfall, visitor screening, new cleaning protocols and detailed decontamination routines long before formal requirements were in place. Operators are also managing ongoing risks such as supply chain shortages, staff absence and deferred maintenance.

But the short-term challenge extends beyond business as usual. Operators must also handle major perturbations in customer demand. The level of digital communications, especially online conferencing, has risen dramatically. Record traffic is passing through Europe's largest internet exchanges. Schools are delivering lessons through remote learning tools. Online shopping and delivery services are at capacity, and those self-isolating are using social media to stay connected to friends and family. Government updates and announcements are arriving by internet, broadcast, telephone and social media.

Longer term is tricky to predict: organisations that have temporarily moved activity to online platforms for remote working may choose to retain some of that functionality - so demand may not drop back down, and a "new normal" may emerge. On the other hand a recession may reduce capacity required by some of our traditional enterprise customers. Overall though, and taking into account the number of construction projects currently underway, the demand trajectory seems to be relentlessly upward. So both short and long term, BAU within digital services is not about maintaining the status quo but about accommodating ever-changing requirements.



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