

Glasgow Centre for Population Health

Response to Town Centre Expert Review Group's call for evidence on town centre revitalisation

August 2020

This is an organisational response from the Glasgow Centre for Population Health, Third Floor, Olympia Building, Bridgeton Cross, Glasgow G40 2QH.

We have focused our response on topics most relevant to public health and to areas where we have knowledge and expertise. In the main our comments relate to transport, air pollution, regeneration, wellbeing economy, placemaking, climate change and community resilience. We also comment specifically on the impact and implications of COVID-19.

1. What are the challenges and opportunities facing town centres in Scotland and how should these be addressed?

Even prior to COVID-19, many town centres were struggling to remain vibrant and support business survival, in part due to the draw of large out-of-town retail centres and, more recently, due to the long-term effects of the 2008 financial crash and subsequent austerity policies. The immediate short-term impact of lockdown and the slow and uncertain easing of lockdown restrictions have added further layers of issues, not least the growth of online shopping¹. Public transport services have been reduced and perceptions of risk related to COVID-19 when using buses and trains are likely to deter many people from using public transport.

Air pollution, which has fallen as a result of lockdown measures reducing motorised road travel (and thus emissions), remains a pressing issue with 38 current air quality management areas (AQMAs) in Scotland's towns and cities and plans for four low emissions zones in Scotland's four largest cities². In the longer term there is the potential that in order to avoid crowded places and the perceived risks of COVID-19 transmission, people choose to relocate to the countryside in significant numbers, thereby reducing the footfall of town and city centres.

Nevertheless, until Coronavirus struck, recent housing trends had shifted the other way: with more people choosing to stay in cities (pre-COVID) – in line with global urbanisation trends³ – rather than move to the suburbs, and aspects of urban regeneration have supported this. More compact cities and towns can reduce the need to travel – thereby reducing pollution and carbon emissions – and can help make local shops and businesses more viable⁴. The recent significant increases to the active travel budget should enable walking and cycling routes to be built across Scotland, providing attractive safe alternatives to the car. It is now easier for local authorities to bring in a Workplace Parking Levy which, alongside other measures to restrict car use, can help make city and town centres more attractive and liveable places to live, work and relax in.

One of the impacts of COVID-19 mitigation that looks set to persist is home-based working which is likely to be maintained at much higher levels than ever before, accompanied by the adoption of virtual meetings. The knock-on impacts of this may include reduced commuting and rush-hour congestion, and boosts for local economies if more people work more often where they live⁵.

Parks have played a vital role during lockdown, providing people with respite and space for outdoor exercise and relaxation, and they perform other important functions: as part of off-

road active travel networks, absorbing pollution, cooling cities, helping maintain biodiversity and providing spaces for play and outdoor learning⁶. Their role within towns and their connection with town and city centres merits greater prominence.

Placemaking, which is noted in the Town Centre Action Plan (TCAP) year 2 progress report⁷, offers an approach to engaging communities in the redesign or creation of communities, but is weakened by the fact that it is not a statutory requirement for community redevelopments.

It is important to make the distinction between town centre areas and neighbourhood centres (or smaller town centres) which accommodate different retail uses. Many large retailers face an uncertain future and city centres will need to transition to accommodate alternative uses⁸. The continued need to social distance will put pressure on the viability of the hospitality sector and some shops, and we believe it is important that the Scottish Government and local authorities do all they can to support businesses to continue to operate safely.

In the recent [Grimsey review](#), an independent review on how to 'build back better' after the COVID-19 pandemic, the authors advocated a return to localism, greater leadership and the creation of spaces for people ahead of cars as the key components of recovery⁹. While changes in retail behaviour may threaten the viability of shops in city centre areas, local centres will face different challenges and opportunities. With people being forced to remain within their own locality for an extended period due to lockdown restrictions, neighbourhoods have benefited from an increased willingness of some residents to support local shops and amenities. The recent upsurge in community activism and social solidarity provides hope that more locally-sensitive economic policies could take root in some areas. Linked to this is the concept of 'community wealth building', a people-centred approach to economic development which aims to redirect wealth and economic benefits back into local communities¹⁰. This approach provides an alternative to traditional economic models, which tend to place organisational profits ahead of local interests. There is growing national, regional and local-authority level support for community wealth building approaches, with much to be learned from a number of English towns and cities¹¹, as well as North Ayrshire¹².

Despite this, the desire to see a shift towards localism is unlikely to be a universal trend, and it will not happen in some areas without fiscal support and policies which allow local retailers, businesses and community enterprises to operate viably.

It is also worth noting that continued job losses (of which many are already occurring in the retail sector¹³) will reduce the proportion of the population with the disposable income to spend in their area. In light of the unprecedented nature of the changes brought about by COVID-19, there is a strong rationale for quite radical change in how we view urban centres. This may mean questioning the dominance of economic growth as the main metric of success. The green recovery movement is gathering pace and is seen by many as the only path to progressing in a way that meets economic, social and environmental needs. [A recent letter to the First Minister](#), signed by 82 Scottish organisations, outlined the wish for a move away from an emphasis on economic growth to ensure greater commitment to wellbeing, fairness and actions that support sustainability and accelerate efforts towards carbon neutrality¹⁴.

In the recent Climate Emergency Response Group's Green Recovery Report to the Scottish Government, place-based measures were advocated through a City and Town Infrastructure Transformation Programme, which would build on existing temporary measures to increase and facilitate further walking and cycling in urban areas, re-purposing public sector buildings to meet emerging needs, using planning powers to expand the space available to food and

drink premises to use adjacent land and funding to support widescale citizen engagement in the development of new plans for urban areas¹⁵. We welcome this ambition.

While we know that densely populated areas help to support community services and allow for walkable neighbourhoods – both of which are important for improving population health¹⁶ – the temporary and potentially long-term need to social distance may cast doubt over whether compact urban areas are still fit for purpose. However, we feel strongly that the public health benefits of physical activity – including reduced obesity, improved mental health and reduced risk of non-communicable disease – need to be balanced with the risks associated with viral infection. This is not to downplay the threat of COVID-19 and the disproportionate impact it has on many protected groups, but instead to stress the importance of ensuring safe social distancing and other appropriate measures. The challenges for the future design of urban centres, therefore, is not to simply reduce density, but is to ensure that space is shared equitably and places are flexible enough to accommodate changing circumstances.

COVID-19 brought into question the sustainability and resilience of our existing food system as well as highlighting and exacerbating the impact of income insecurity on food poverty and health inequalities¹⁷. The increased uncertainties and challenges in accessing food resulted in an increased interest in locally produced and sustainable food for some people – particularly those from households with secure incomes. However, this also highlighted the inadequacy of local food production and supply to meet this increased demand, and the reliance on complex, often global, supply chains which, when disrupted, have a dramatic effect on our local food security. The shortages in food supply and the impact of the Coronavirus restrictions on employment and incomes inevitably impacted most severely on those from low-income households who did not have the funds to source more expensive alternative food products or access different outlets. What was observed was an increase in meal skipping and a shift to lower cost, lower nutrient food alternatives, high in fat, salt and sugar for many low-income households⁸. Also starkly highlighted was the importance of the provision of nutritious food in school settings to those children from low-income households, and the detrimental impact to children of not having access to such provision particularly when family incomes are disrupted or uncertain⁸.

Experiences and learning from COVID-19 have highlighted the importance of linking activities to tackle poverty with work to improve local food economies in our towns: we need increased support for and investment in a local food economy, increased local food production including use of local growing spaces to produce food, more equitable, affordable food provision, employment of more local people in the local food economy, and use of our local public and private food spend to invest in this local food economy^{18 19}.

There were reports of people trying to reduce their food waste by planning, storing and preparing food in ways that minimised waste during the first few months of COVID-19 restrictions²⁰. However, there were also disruptions to food waste collection services, resulting in increased food waste and environmental health concerns. More generally there is an increasing recognition that the food system as it currently exists is unsustainable – not only are the carbon emissions relating to the food system estimated to be around a third of global carbon emissions, and thus contributing substantially to climate change, but the way we currently grow, produce, process, transport and dispose of food is causing soil erosion and depletion, water pollution, and loss of biodiversity which together threaten the security of our future food supply. Moving forward it is important to build a new sustainable food system which includes sustainable urban agriculture, which reduces environmental impact, and a

focus on a more sustainable diet with more plant-based components (vegetables, legumes, and so on) and fewer animal products, which will reduce carbon emissions.

Any plans to improve the vitality of urban centres should consider the role of food production, affordable, equitable food provision and the potential viability of food cooperatives and food-based social enterprises which are able to generate some income, while also supporting the needs of the community.

2. What are the barriers to developing town centres suitable for their communities and how can these be removed?

The predominance, and planning in favour of private car use benefits the more affluent but creates environmental problems, such as air and noise pollution, and contributes to community severance and on-street safety concerns. A different approach is needed for town centres, one that puts people first rather than cars, and prioritises affordable, accessible and sustainable transport that can be accessed by all.

Planning can play a role in facilitating business operation through the allocation of additional space where social distancing is difficult to maintain. The need to social distance in town centres could potentially lead to conflicts between different users. The guidance produced by Scottish Government, *Safer Public Places for Scotland: Urban Centres and Green Spaces*²¹, provides suggestions possible interventions to enable safe social distancing.

Urban design has an impact on physical activity levels, travel patterns, access to healthy food, social connectivity, quality of life and mental and physical health outcomes. While the relationship between the environment and health is often complex and works alongside other factors, planning decisions have a significant and lasting impact on social and economic conditions.

People travelling out-of-town for work, and larger organisations purchasing from suppliers elsewhere, both mean the economy of towns suffers. Community wealth building approaches can support SMEs to grow local supply chains, employing people from within towns, and investing more back into the local economy than larger, extractive organisations tend to²².

To what extent has the Town Centre Action Plan (TCAP) delivered against its stated ambitions? In what areas has delivery been successful? In what areas is there room for progress and/or barriers to overcome?

We are not in a position to answer these questions.

3. To what extent are the stated objectives and policy challenges TCAP seeks to address relevant for the new challenges for our towns?

We believe that the objectives and challenges in the TCAP while important are too narrow and should be linked much more clearly to key sustainability and health goals such as reducing carbon emissions, improving air quality, promoting opportunities for more physically active travel and providing affordable and sustainable transport options for all.

We recognise that economic factors are the biggest determinants of population health and that the health and wellbeing of the population of town is a driver of the local economy: TCAP could be explicit about the value of a strong and inclusive economy in supporting health and wellbeing, and vice versa.

4. If TCAP were to be revised, what additional or replacement areas and objectives would you recommend should be included and how should these be addressed?

The TCAP objectives need to be more clearly balanced with sustainability and public health goals, including the aims to reduce carbon emissions and air pollution. Links to active and sustainable transport policy and investment should be made. Additionally, the transport system we have created, alongside our generally sedentary lifestyles, is contributing to low levels of physical activity among adults and children and elevated levels of overweight and obesity across our population. Town centres can exacerbate or ameliorate these issues.

The notion of a circular economy, aimed at eliminating waste, is gathering pace and fits with the move towards a green recovery. How to minimise waste should be a key principle in thinking around how town centres are repurposed. Socially productive use of land and property should also be a consideration – larger businesses / employers may own land and property that is not being put to best use e.g. vacant and derelict land – how can this be developed as community assets?

Town centres should be viewed from the perspective of what best supports the interests of the population it serves. Therefore, although there will be a strong emphasis on retaining businesses, some consideration should be given to the social value of existing businesses: at the very least, retailers in town centres should be expected not to make the population's health worse, but ideally serve some community benefit.

5. Can you provide details and contacts of any examples of excellent practice in town centres which you believe have wider potential?

The Sauchiehall Street 'pilot' avenue, part of Glasgow City Council's [Avenues](#) programme, forms the first part of a city-wide redevelopment of Glasgow's streets. Pavements have been widened, road space for motorised vehicles halved, a segregated cycle path introduced, street furniture removed and an avenue of trees has been planted. As well as being visually more appealing, this space prioritises active travel modes much more now and is a much more pleasant space to travel through and linger in.

The [South City Way](#), a walking and cycling route connecting the southside of Glasgow with the city centre, is another example of a street redesign, which supports more sustainable travel options and has the potential to re-vitalise shopping and retail on Victoria Road.

6. Is there anything else you would like to add?

The Scottish Government adopted 'Place Principle' requests that all those responsible for providing services and looking after assets in a place need to work and plan together, and with local communities, to improve the lives of people, support inclusive growth and create more successful places²³. We believe this should continue to be the main guiding principle for how decisions about urban centres are made.

There are a range of transport-related changes that if implemented together, or in some sort of complementary combination, could have a favourable impact on levels of walking, cycling and wheeling in our towns and cities and related positive impacts on carbon emissions, air pollution levels and local economies.

These include:

- reducing road speeds to 20mph or lower and restricting through traffic in order to protect the most vulnerable road users and to make streets feel safer²⁴
- introducing bus gates to encourage public transport and reduce through traffic by private cars
- reducing private parking and enhanced use of pavements by retailers, cafés and restaurants without creating undue street clutter
- integrated walking and cycling routes to create a safe and accessible active travel network
- supporting bike share and car share schemes, taking care to make sure these are made available across all communities²⁵ and not in a way that skews availability to favour more affluent areas²⁶
- integrating transport options across all forms of sustainable transport e.g. tickets that can be used on a bus, train or subway, or to hire a bike.

The COVID-19 pandemic offers an opportunity to refocus town centres and rethink transport. The current temporary redesign of road layouts implemented under the Spaces for People programme offers an opportunity to test out changes²⁷. These include road closures, widening of pavements, removal of parking spaces, implementation of 20mph limits and new segregated cycle lanes. These should be regarded as pilot schemes to be assessed for their effectiveness and those that are deemed a success should be made permanent.

In regenerating our town centres we need to avoid the threat of returning to high levels of air pollution and congestion. We need to ensure that town centres are sustainable and, where possible, reduce their carbon emissions.

The Place Standard Tool is a well-recognised tool for encouraging community participation in placemaking processes²⁸. The tool is currently being updated with greater emphasis on climate change and global health challenges and will be a useful resource for re-imagining how town centres could function in the future.

We would advocate that the TCAP is clear on the role of town centres as supporting both people and business. As such, the mutually reinforcing relationship between a healthy population and a strong and inclusive economy must be made explicit. Town centres that support the movement of people, and opportunities for them to be active, alongside businesses that have community benefit principles / deliver social value are needed for recovery and renewal. Creative thinking is likely to be required regarding the use of empty shops and repurposing them for community spaces may be an option.

Green infrastructure is important for carbon capture, water management, biodiversity and wellbeing²⁹. It can provide the basis for remodelling urban centres into areas which provide all services required for health and wellbeing within a 15-minute walking distance³⁰.

Climate change is a major threat to health. It is also a threat multiplier in that existing social, environmental and economic stresses are likely to be exacerbated, particularly for the most vulnerable in society with fewer resources to cope. Planners can help to facilitate actions necessary to mitigate climate change. These include ensuring flood defences are upgraded, increasing the number of permeable surfaces within built-up areas and employing integrated 'green' and 'blue' infrastructure that serve to manage the flow rate and volume of surface run-off to reduce the risk of flooding and water pollution³¹. Planners can also help by supporting local food production and reducing levels of harmful transport and industrial

emissions through encouraging the switch to cleaner energy sources and providing a networked infrastructure that enables active travel.

The Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015³² and the subsequent revised National Standards for Community Engagement³³ aim to increase participatory democracy and allow people more of a say in developments. Involving communities in decision-making processes can help to increase satisfaction with outcomes, improve mental wellbeing and help to build community capacity.

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