

Life after lockdown: briefing paper 2

Reinventing the high street for Covid-19 recovery



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This paper is the second of a series of Sustrans briefing papers exploring how the Covid-19 pandemic is affecting people in relation to transport and movement, neighbourhoods and places. We seek to offer solutions in response to the crisis that help better prepare us for life after lockdown and a 'new normal' that supports healthier, fairer places, and improves the lives of people.

Authors: Emma Cooke, Megan Streb and Tim Burns, Sustrans

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Introduction

Local high streets, towns and city centres have faced significant challenges for many years, including competition with out-of-town shopping centres and the increase in online shopping. High street decline has been extensively documented,¹ alongside a succession of programmes and funding to reinvent them.²

High streets may always struggle to compete with out of town and online shopping purely on price and convenience. High streets are therefore increasing focus on improving experience as an attractive place to dwell, shop, see friends, and run errands.

High streets are increasing focus on improving experience

In many places, however, a tension exists between the role of a high street as a destination and as a place for movement for people. Large numbers of motor vehicles can put people off wanting to spend time and relax in high streets. However, unless they are pedestrianised most street space in a typical UK high street is still allocated to vehicles, including parking.

The need to physically distance is challenging this practice. If people are to shop without the risk of infection then they must have space to move around safely. If space doesn't exist to safely shop and move around high streets, they are unlikely to survive. At the same time, with reductions in capacity on public transport, we are likely to see a greater demand for driving in many areas. Linked to this is a potential reticence among shoppers to head back to physical shops and habits that may have formed during lockdown for online shopping.³

If space doesn't exist to safely shop and move around high streets, they are unlikely to survive

As we come out of lockdown the challenges for high streets may be greater than ever before.

City leaders and business organisations are rapidly developing strategies to recover and reopen city centres and high streets.

How will a socially distanced high street actually work in practice? Can high streets balance the need for footfall against the need for social distancing? And what strategies exist for retail, leisure and offices to reinvent themselves?

To ensure the future success of local high streets and city and town centres Sustrans recommends the following:

- Reprioritise high streets as places for people
- Create a welcoming and safe shopping environment with more space
- Take advantage of the increased use of local high streets
- Reimagine our town and city centres
- Ensure equitable access

The impact of lockdown on high streets

On 23 March 2020, UK high streets, town and city centres effectively closed for business. Most retailers, offices, restaurants, coffee shops, cultural and leisure destinations shut their doors, as only essential stores were allowed to stay open.

Technology has meant that whilst many office-based businesses have been disrupted, working from home has been possible and a new ways of working have materialised. The impact on retail and hospitality has been much more widespread and damaging. Many have looked to new business models, offering take away options, online delivery or digital services. Others have furloughed staff to financially survive the past three months.

13% of all businesses in Great Britain are located in the immediate vicinity of a high street⁴ and many more are found in city and town centres that depend upon the shops and services present. The recovery of our high streets from the pandemic will have a vital role to play in local and national economic recovery.

High streets will have a vital role to play in local and national economic recovery

Reopening for business

The start of a new phase of lockdown is about to commence. In Northern Ireland and England, many non-essential retailers have been allowed to reopen their doors from 12 and 15 June, respectively. In Scotland and Wales, decisions are yet to be taken on reopening although they are expected relatively soon.

There are a number of important factors for retailers and the wider business economy associated with high streets and city centres as they begin the process of reopening:

Social distancing on the high street and new online shopping habits

Guidance from the government, to ensure social distancing, is to keep at least two metres apart from other people, especially when indoors. As shops and high streets begin to reopen strict measures and guidelines will need to be in place to help people adhere to social distancing. This means the capacity of shops is likely to be reduced and managing social distancing outside on the existing pavement space along our high streets will be more challenging.⁵

There may also be concerns and reluctance from the public to visit high streets. Although cases are declining, Covid-19 is still circulating across the UK and people are wary about close contact with others, especially inside buildings. Coupled with this are new habits for online shopping that have been increasing since the beginning of lockdown.⁶

A potential increase in local shopping

Across the UK people have been travelling less and living more locally. This means some local high streets may be benefiting from higher visitor numbers. A recent survey suggested 59% of consumers in Britain have used more local stores and services to help support them during lockdown.⁷ These trends are likely to continue with reduced public transport capacity and government advice to stay local remaining in some devolved nations.

59% of consumers in Britain have used more local stores and services to help support them during lockdown

Many local high streets are found along main roads often with high levels of people passing through. This is important as people stop off and increase trade. However, physical space is limited and often the available pavement space may be insufficient for social distancing. More pedestrian space is required, however this will entail the removal of space from the carriageway, including space for car parking.

A reduction in the use of city centres

In a city or town centre traditionally footfall is highest as a result of having the best public transport connections, alongside larger numbers of shops, offices, and attractions. In addition city and town centres are normally much larger than local high streets. Instead of shops located along a single road they occupy multiple roads and spaces. This makes it easier to separate out parts of a city centre that focus on movement (transport corridors and hubs) and those that focus on shopping and socialising.

Since lockdown began however, many people who used to work in our city and town centres are now working from home, and tourism is much diminished. In addition, reduced public transport capacity means just getting to the centre can be challenging for many people.

Research from the Centre for Cities suggests towns and city centres across the UK are seeing different impacts in terms of footfall.⁸ This appears to be linked to their relative 'success' prior to lockdown. Those places that attracted more visitors or workers from further afield appear to have been more heavily impacted as people tend to stay local. This includes many big cities like Cardiff, London, and Birmingham. Some smaller town centres appear to have had less reductions in overall footfall, although footfall was lower before the pandemic.

High streets of the future – what needs to happen?

We make four recommendations to help high streets, city and town centres recover from Covid-19.

1. Reinvent high streets as places for people

Historically, the high street performed as a 'place' – a social and commercial hub, where people would meet, run their errands and make use of the small, local shops and services that lined the street.⁹

This function has diminished over time. As car ownership has grown, high streets have become clogged with motor vehicles. People no longer see the high street as a commercial or social destination in itself, but rather a place of movement, a route along which to travel to get to a destination elsewhere.¹⁰

People have been relegated to often narrow pavements, with trees, benches, shop displays, café tables and shoppers all sharing a small space adjacent to the noise, fumes and dangers of the carriageway. Before Covid-19 many of our high streets were unpleasant places to linger, now it has become clear that this space is not conducive to the physical distancing requirements currently in place.

High streets would not exist without customers and footfall.

So our biggest priority must be to ensure enough space exists for people to be enticed back to the high street. People must feel welcome, comfortable and safe. This goes both for while they are inside shops, and outside on the pavement.

Evidence suggests investments in the public realm and the reallocation of space for walking and cycling has proven to work economically for local retailers and businesses in many ways.¹¹

Data from Living Streets suggests where the pedestrian experience has been improved footfall has increased between 20 and 35%. This is against a 22% decline in footfall across the UK between 2007 and 2017.¹² A study in Leicester found shop vacancy rates were five times higher on streets with high levels of traffic, and that retail turnover in pedestrianised areas generally out-performs non-pedestrian areas.¹³

There is also public support for reallocating space. Our 2019 Bike Life report showed that, even before the arrival of Covid-19, 75% of residents living in 12 UK cities and urban areas were keen to see more space made available on their high streets for people socialising, cycling and walking.¹⁴

To provide more space for people, we recommend the removal of on-street parking where necessary from high streets with the exception of disabled access. Glasgow is removing a third of its city centre on-street car parking spaces (700 in total) to increase space for people walking and using the city.¹⁵

In addition, wherever feasible, we would also recommend removing excess car lanes to help speed up bus services and create additional space for walking and cycling. The London Borough of Lambeth recently widened the footpath on Brixton High Street to create more space for social distancing.¹⁶

High streets cannot compete on price with other options, they must prioritise and sell themselves as places that are unique, attractive to visit, dwell and socialise in. We believe if local high streets, town and city centres are to survive and flourish they will do so again primarily as places.

Investments in the public realm and the reallocation of space has proven to work economically for retailers

There is public support for reallocating space on high streets

2. Take advantage of the increased use of local high streets

During lockdown we have seen a huge increase in the number of people working from home and living locally. And it seems likely that this practice will continue as lockdown eases.¹⁷

Without the daily commute to a larger town or city, more people will be spending more time in their immediate local area. This could provide opportunities for some local high streets.¹⁸

In fact, some smaller retailers have reported increases in sales since the beginning of lockdown, as people have chosen them over large supermarkets.¹⁹ And the High Streets Task Force has highlighted that during lockdown people have been making more use of centres close to them, rather than travelling further afield.²⁰

Steps should be taken to capitalise on this trend in the future. Having a larger number of local high street centres makes accessing local everyday services easier for more people. It also enables more local journeys, enabling people to leave the car at home and encouraging walking or cycling.

As more people stay local, there is an opportunity to invest in other elements that make high streets special. For example, re-establishing the role of a high street as a hub for social connection and reinforcing and celebrating its roots and unique character could go a long way to encourage people to stay local and spend their money where they live.

The 2018 Grimsey Review recognised the importance of these factors: “Local authorities should appoint high quality design teams to create and enhance spaces for civic and social use. Design should celebrate the historic character and local identity with high quality streets and public realm.”²¹

With the increased potential for people to stay local, now seems a good time to put this recommendation into practice, to instil a sense of pride and belonging in the local area.

Cities and towns should also adopt a 20-minute neighbourhood planning principle, where all vital services are within a short cycle or walk. Melbourne’s 20 minute neighbourhood planning tool encourages development that ensures more people have access to their everyday needs and services within a 20-minute return walk from their home.²² The availability of local high streets is vital to this.

People living more locally could provide opportunities for local high streets

Cities and towns should adopt a 20-minute neighbourhood planning principle

3. Reimagine our town and city centres

For city centres, the picture may look quite different. With fewer people heading into the city to work, there may be a shift in the way our city centres operate. Cities may need to diversify their offers, with more options for eating out and socialising, as people have fewer social interactions in their working days.²³

Reimagining buildings and space in city centres will be important. This could mean repurposing large office buildings for new uses, looking at housing provision, or remodelling public spaces to make more room for meeting, eating and retail. Many European cities are increasing outdoor space for use by restaurants and cafés.²⁴

Cardiff City Council's proposed Cardiff Recovery Strategy highlights the need for businesses in the city centre to be flexible in welcoming people back to the city.²⁵ Flexibility will be needed in opening hours, in the use of public outdoor space and in licensing arrangements.

The strategy also reinforces the need to focus on making the city centre the 'place to be'. It states that the measures implemented should 'avoid an overwhelming sense of control and restriction' and should ensure that the city is still a fun, exciting environment. The strategy proposes to use space in Cardiff Castle's grounds to introduce a marketplace, with room for people to socially distance.

This supports the argument for taking a place-based approach to recovery; local authorities should ensure that the public realm is not diminished by any measures put in place to reallocate space, but instead work to ensure they enhance it.

With restrictions on overseas travel likely to be in place for a while to come,²⁶ people will be spending more of their leisure time in the UK. Steps should be taken to ensure that people can safely and enjoyably reach our city centres to make the most of the increase in domestic tourism that was seen in the UK, even before the pandemic hit.²⁷ Enabling safe travel between transport hubs, including train and bus stations and park and ride (cycle), alongside safe connecting cycle routes into the city centre will be important.

4. Ensure equitable access

It is imperative that while we work to reinvent our high streets we do so in such a way that ensures equity of access.

30% of retired people²⁸, and 46% of people in socio-economic groups D and E in the 12 Bike Life cities and urban areas²⁹ do not have access to a car. This group includes many of the essential workers that the country has so relied upon over the last few months.³⁰

This means we must not give up on public transport. Instead, we must make it easier for public transport to be reliable. By reducing private car traffic on our high streets and in city centres, local authorities can reduce the congestion that is so often the cause of unreliable bus services.³¹

In Bristol, plans are being brought forward to close one of the main routes into the city, allowing public transport, taxis, cycles, motorcycles and pedestrians to use it.³² We encourage the introduction of more bus gates in our city centres and high streets to ensure the steady flow of public transport.

We must not give up on public transport: instead we must make it more reliable

Walking and cycling to high streets must also be both safe and appealing. Measures should be taken to ensure that there is safe infrastructure for active travel, with enough room to allow for social distancing. And ample space must be made for people to park their bikes, particularly as we have seen such an increase in cycling since the start of the pandemic. Local authorities and businesses must make it easy for people to continue new travel behaviours.

Walking and cycling to high streets must be both safe and appealing

Finally we need to ensure social distancing measures and guidance in high streets and shops is inclusive for all people, especially disabled people.

Current social distancing signage, for example, cannot be read by many people who are blind or partially sighted. We need to ensure the changes we are making in response to social distancing are fully inclusive. Without this we risk taking away the independence and freedom of many people, and increasing the inequalities that already exist in society.

We need to ensure changes are fully inclusive

Final thoughts

Covid-19 presents big challenges to businesses and local authorities seeking to rebuild the local economy after lockdown. It is clear that there is work to do if we are to encourage people to overcome concerns of entering shops, and to support local businesses.

However, we are also presented with some exciting opportunities. With more and more people staying in their local areas, there is potential for a rejuvenation of the local high street on a level that we have not seen before.

There is potential for a rejuvenation of the local high street

By reshaping our spaces, making more room for people, and remembering the value of 'place', we have an opportunity to ensure our high streets, town and city centres become destinations where people really want to be.

By celebrating what makes our places unique, by being bold in implementing measures that put people first, and by making sure people are safe and feel it too, we might actually be able to use this opportunity to make our high streets better than they were before.

Addressing how people get to and around our high streets, towns and city centres is an essential part of ensuring the necessary safety. Reallocating road space away from private vehicles and keeping equity of access front of mind will be vital.

Of course, none of us knows how this will all play out in the longer term. But this feels like a once in a lifetime opportunity to create positive change.

If we are bold, agile, and open to learning, we will maximise that opportunity and give ourselves the best chances of success.

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