Life after lockdown: briefing paper 2

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

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 benefting 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.

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.

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]

People living more locally could provide opportunities for local high streets

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

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.

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