

Institute for Public Policy Research



ANCHOR, BELONG, CONNECT

THE FUTURE OF TOWN CENTRES

**THE FINAL REPORT OF THE LIVERPOOL CITY
REGION TOWN CENTRES COMMISSION**

**Sarah Longlands, Marcus Johns
and Anna Round**

February 2021

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NOTE

This report has been produced by IPPR North, who provided research support to the commission and acted as its secretariat. IPPR North is the dedicated think tank for the north of England, with bases in Manchester and Newcastle.

IPPR North and the Liverpool City Region Town Centres Commission present this final report to stimulate public debate and improve policymaking related to town centres. Individual members of the commission agree with the broad thrust of the arguments made here, but they should not be taken to agree with every word or recommendation. Commissioners serve in an individual capacity, and this report should not be taken as representing the views of the organisations to which they are affiliated.

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FOREWORD

My ambition as metro mayor of the Liverpool city region is to create a globally competitive, environmentally responsible, and socially just economy for everyone who lives here. I want to make our society fairer for everyone who lives here. I want to reimagine the pathways to employment, health, and happiness for the most vulnerable in society. Our town centres are both the heart of our communities and the gateway to delivering on our shared ambitions.

Our city region is linked through a diverse network of towns – each shaped by its own history and community. We know that the role of towns is changing fast, which has been accelerated by the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. While challenges are undoubtedly significant, we will seek to harness the entrepreneurialism, ambition, and creative curiosity of our region to enable confidence to return to our high streets, to the bars and restaurants, to businesses and workplaces, to schools and universities, and to the whole economic ecosystem. But we also need to imbue our young people, our residents and our visitors with confidence that our town centres have a strong future, with people at the heart of shaping change.

Throughout history, we have seen that periods of great upheaval can also provide opportunities for profound change. The coronavirus pandemic may prove to be one of those moments after which nothing remains the same – and nor should it. I do not want us to return to business as usual or the old way of doing things. For too long, too many local people have been shut out of our economy and prevented from enjoying the same opportunities as others. I want to reverse that.

This report presents our challenges with honesty and openness, but also provides us with opportunities for our places and communities to rebuild a new, progressive, and resilient economy – capturing the individuality and unique attributes that make each town the heart of its community.

As we plan for recovery across the Liverpool city region, this report provides us with many ideas and opportunities to ‘build back better’: to reshape and diversify our towns in a way that is greener, fairer and more inclusive. Our challenge is to embrace those ideas and find practical ways to make them happen.

Steve Rotheram

Mayor of Liverpool City Region

1. INTRODUCTION

IPPR North were commissioned to manage the Liverpool City Region Town Centres Commission, which was established in January 2020. IPPR North's role included chairing the commission, providing the secretariat, and conducting qualitative and quantitative research within the limitations of the restrictions required to manage the pandemic.

This report constitutes the final report of the commission. But it is by no means the last word, and we recognise that Liverpool city and the many towns throughout the region face a period of great uncertainty and challenge.

Given the extraordinary challenge that Covid-19 presents to town centres at this time, IPPR North in agreement with the commissioners and Liverpool City Region Combined Authority have decided to publish this final report.

We have done this in the hope that it can make a small contribution to the wider conversation about the future role and recovery of our towns and cities.

As we say in the report, town centres, are not just physical places but anchor, belong and connect to us in ways that are both tangible and intangible. As we try to see a future beyond Covid-19, we must come to terms with how town centres have changed and the challenges and opportunities that this presents for all of us. We hope that this report contributes to that task.

THE COMMISSION AND ITS EVOLVING PURPOSE

The Liverpool City Region Combined Authority, led by Mayor Steve Rotheram, established the Liverpool City Region Town Centres Commission in January 2020. The commission met seven times during 2020.

With a membership that reflects a wide range of stakeholders across the city region and beyond, its remit was to create a new vision for town centres in the city region, identifying ways to secure their long-term prosperity and stability, and achieve transformative change. As several local authorities prepared bids for the Towns Fund and numerous regeneration projects progressed, the combined authority asked the commission to consider how it could support the highly diverse town centres that are at the heart of its communities.

Change came faster in 2020 than anyone could have foreseen. Shortly after the commission's second meeting, the UK entered the first lockdown as the Covid-19 pandemic changed the lives and livelihoods of people across the globe. Measures to control infection, including the short-term lockdown, longer-term social distancing, and ongoing restrictions at the time of writing have had (and are still having) a profound effect on the many functions of our town centres. Consumer demand was reshaped almost overnight, and times are especially hard for the retail and hospitality businesses that are a major presence in town centres, as well as for the arts, culture, leisure, and transport sectors. Despite 10 years of austerity, local councils and public services have worked hard to respond to the emerging needs of their citizens in this extraordinary situation.

Covid-19 also necessitated some rethinking of the commission's workplan and activities. Meetings moved online instead of in selected town centres across the city region, and discussion shifted focus from a longer-term vision for town centres to more immediate concerns for their survival, and their recovery and resilience in a post-Covid-19 future.

THE COMMISSION'S WORK

In total, the commission met six times to discuss the following themes.

- How town centres support a sense of place and belonging.
- How policy decisions on the environment, planning, and infrastructure can best support town centres.
- How town centres can operate as hubs for business and civil society.
- How town centres can respond to Covid-19 during the crisis (and how they're already doing so).
- How town centres can prepare for the recovery from Covid-19.

Meetings were informed by guest speakers, research updates from IPPR North, and information sharing among the commission outside of formal meetings. This is presented in full below.

The interim report of the commission, presented in June 2020, acknowledged the need for radical rethinking in the light of Covid-19 and its consequences. Town centres still need a new vision and a plan to achieve it, but this will come after a period of rapid and radical shifts including a major economic shock and a need to reshape – physically as well as theoretically – the majority of businesses and their environment. The future of town centres will be a post-Covid-19 one, and the pandemic is likely to have permanent ramifications.

The interim report set out a snapshot of the economic and social impact of Covid-19 on the Liverpool city region and on town centres nationally, with some mid-term recommendations for planning the post-Covid-19 recovery. An accompanying annexe presented IPPR North's analysis of the social and economic context of 17 town centres in the Liverpool city region, some further background, and a bespoke 'Town Centre Vitality Index' (TCVI). The TCVI provided a useful tool for establishing a 'baseline' of the vitality of town centres on a range of measures, and for evaluating the outcomes of interventions and projects.

In this final report, we present an overview of conclusions to date. It provides a concluding statement of the work of the commission, which can be read alongside the interim report. It is informed by interviews with stakeholders from **five** case study town centres (selected using typologies identified in the TCVI).¹

During the preparation of this final report in the autumn of 2020, the Liverpool city region entered tier 3 restrictions following a second wave of the virus, which was shortly followed by a second national lockdown in England in December 2020. There is still little indication of how or when Covid-19 might be over in any meaningful sense, although the progress being made with the vaccine rollout does suggest provide some hopeful signs for the future.

But it *will* be over, and one certainty is that there will be no 'back to normal'. A year of disruption cannot be unwritten. More positively, the imperative to *build back better* is gaining traction among political and business leaders, and more

¹ These are: Birkenhead, Huyton, Runcorn, St Helen's, and Southport. We conducted interviews with local authority officers, business and civil society leaders, and also spoke with stakeholders in the city region's health, housing, creative and transport sectors.

importantly within communities (Ferguson 2020). This report sets out some of what needs to happen for that to become a reality in Liverpool city region's town centres.

THE LIVERPOOL CITY REGION TOWN CENTRES COMMISSION

The commission has 11 members, who worked collaboratively with the Liverpool city region and IPPR North.

Dr Alex Singleton – professor of geographic information science at the University of Liverpool

Bronwen Rapley – chief executive of Onward Homes

Claire McColgan MBE – director of Culture Liverpool

John Csizmadia – relationship Director, Lloyds Banking Group

Kim Cooper – senior town planner, Arup, and founder of Ideas for Liverpool

Laura Pye – director of National Museums Liverpool (NML)

Liam Kelly – chief executive officer of Make CIC

Pam Thomas – cabinet member for an inclusive and accessible city, Liverpool City Council

Phil McCabe – development manager for Merseyside and Cheshire, Federation of Small Businesses (FSB)

Dr Sarah Longlands – director of IPPR North and chair of the commission

Vidhya Alakeson – founding chief executive of Power to Change

2.

THE COMMISSIONERS' VISION: BUILDING A FUTURE FOR TOWN CENTRES

This vision statement outlines the commissioners' vision for the future of town centres across the city region. Its key themes and arguments guided recommendations in the interim and final reports. The full statement has been agreed by all 11 commissioners.

BEYOND COVID-19: BUILDING A FUTURE FOR TOWN CENTRES ACROSS THE CITY REGION

When we joined this commission in January 2020, we knew that town centres faced many critical challenges. Their traditional economic model was being disrupted by transformations in shopping and leisure patterns, and many have been forced to re-evaluate and repackage their offer to local communities, as well as to rethink their very purpose. Our task was to understand what this meant for town centres in Liverpool city region, and to articulate a vision for a future where town centres thrive sustainably.

At the outset, we could not have foreseen the Covid-19 pandemic or its impact nor how this would accelerate many of the town centre trends that had prompted the research in the first place. The crisis has changed the parameters of the research and refocussed the commission as we've sought to understand the impact of Covid-19 and the future role of town centres beyond the pandemic.

The consequences of Covid-19 for town centres are severe – particularly because of successive lockdowns and the prospect of disruption continuing well into 2021 and beyond. But responses to mitigate Covid-19's impact must not lose sight of the challenges that came before. The crisis is accelerating many trends that were already established, as well as presenting new challenges. However, it has also spurred a willingness to innovate and explore ideas. For example, over the past few months we have seen a growing digital presence for many town centre businesses, and, with so many people working at home, there has been a trend for people to shop, exercise and eat out (when possible) closer to home in town and district centres.

Locally and nationally, responses to Covid-19 must help build the foundations of a better civic model of town centres which are diverse, vibrant, environmentally sustainable, and resilient. This means accepting that not everything that we valued about town centres pre-Covid-19 can be saved. However, the solutions to the challenges of survival and longer-term revival are most likely to come from within town centres themselves. The public sector, the private sector, and civil society must all come together in partnership to mitigate the worst impacts and collaborate to create a different trajectory of change for our town centres and the people they serve.

We have identified three key roles that town centres play.

1. They **anchor** social, cultural, and economic value.
2. They **belong** to communities, providing a local focus in the city region.
3. They **connect** people and places within and beyond our city region.

In these roles, town centres are important *individually* to their local communities, and *collectively* in supporting the wider economy, community, identity, and social life of the city region.

FIGURE 2.1: THE ROLE OF TOWN CENTRES IN THE LIVERPOOL CITY REGION

The commission has identified three key roles for town centres to play in the future, which are: to anchor, to provide belonging, and to connect



Source: Authors' representation

ANCHORING

Town centres anchor social, cultural, and economic value

Town centres have traditionally served local communities by meeting a range of different needs – social, economic, and cultural. They have played a role in creating diverse outcomes, including local prosperity, health, and wellbeing.

At a time of crisis and upheaval, local centres provide a sense of continuity and help to meet local needs. During Covid-19, this has included providing communities with access to a convenient centre for everyday retail, and spaces for leisure and socialising, as well as public information about the crisis. This has been achieved both face-to-face and through an increasing digital presence.

Town centres are important economic anchors. They support local jobs, employment, business and social enterprise, and their economic role is often reinforced through public and community ownership that can help to build community wealth which is retained locally.

Both before and during the Covid-19 crisis, strong collaborative working across various anchor institutions has provided crucial local leadership, and should continue to play such a role in the future. This includes local councils, universities, colleges, football clubs and other large public institutions, but should also include often overlooked anchor institutions like hospitals, high schools, museums, or other relatively large organisations with deep and lasting ties which anchor them within town centres.

Many standard metrics for town centre success do not take full account of the vital anchor function of town centres. To reflect the full range of value generated by town centres, appraisals and evaluations must be inclusive, and consider how town centres affect the health and wellbeing of communities as well as how they generate economic prosperity. And economic measures need to consider how much of the wealth generated is retained within local communities.

The anchor role of town centres must be supported through increased public investment. However, for decades, funding streams have been capital intensive while revenue funding has been hollowed out. Town centres need ongoing revenue investment to maximise local social, economic, and cultural value.

Some of this must support improvements to the apparently small things which matter hugely to people: the quality of the public realm, general cleanliness, and repairs to small-scale damage and wear-and-tear. Too many large capital-intensive regeneration projects have been followed by poor upkeep and inadequate management due to poor revenue funding. This neglect can lead to deterioration of the public realm, increased perceptions of crime, a loss of enthusiasm among stakeholders, and less desire to spend time in those places -which further reduces footfall and activity. After many of these trends become apparent, in many cases, further regeneration projects are then proposed to ameliorate these issues caused by a lack of *ongoing* input and upkeep.

Despite the challenges for many town centres in the city region, all play a part in anchoring economic and cultural value. For this reason, we advocate for an asset-based and strength-based approach. This is about working with the strengths that a town already has, rather than concentrating on its apparent weaknesses. This is not a rose-tinted perspective, but one that accepts the challenges and aims to build on economic and cultural value that already exists to create a unique identity for each town centre, for the benefit of local people they serve.

Crucial to a strength-based approach is a thorough understanding of a town including good data on characteristics such as town centre footfall and live occupancy. However, often this data can be difficult to access and without it, it can sometimes be difficult to make the case for future investment.

There are no easy answers to these data problems. Flexibility, leadership, creativity, openness to informal discussion and innovative ways of working are all essential, along with willingness to experiment and collaborate. These can help unlock new ideas and uses for town centres in the region.

Recommendations for anchoring social, cultural, and economic value

1. National funding for town centre improvements, for example, the Towns Fund Programme, should include substantial revenue, as well as capital funding to help maximise the potential outcomes of town centre investment schemes. This is more important than ever in the context of Covid-19. If this is not forthcoming from central government, negotiations with government and alternative means of raising such funding should be investigated.
2. When capital development schemes are being proposed and implemented in town centres, project partners (including combined and local authorities and civil society organisations) should also invest directly in local skills, training, employment support and local businesses, including community businesses. This can help to maximise the potential value of new capital investments helping to maximise local economic and social benefits, particularly given the economic impact of Covid-19 on local economies.
3. The combined authority should work with partners to improve evaluative methodologies to help capture the benefits of revenue interventions. This should include learning lessons from evaluations of structural funds, such as the European Social Fund, which funded revenue projects during the UK's membership of the European Union. This should be explored by the combined authority, in partnership with and drawing on good practice from other organisations including combined/local authorities, local enterprise partnerships across the country and other agencies who seek to capture the wider benefits of revenue interventions, for example, the Arts Council or the Heritage Lottery Fund, to understand best practice.
4. The combined authority should develop the case and argue to central government for the replacement of land value uplift in economic appraisals and evaluations, because it is a measure that disproportionately withholds investment in places within the city region and across the north of England. Core aims of interventions – including holistic social, cultural, and economic benefits and thriving people and places – are not accurately or adequately evidenced through analysis of land value which is a narrow measure with which to understand the value or success of an intervention.
5. Investment is required to develop capacity and expertise that can improve data gathering in areas such as footfall, occupancy data, and other metrics which highlight the health of a town centre. The Town Centre Vitality Index developed by the commission should be maintained, updated, and continuously improved by the combined authority, considering its role in potentially aiding benchmarking, and evaluating. This will also allow it to be used by local authorities, community organisations and the private sector to potentially evaluate the effectiveness of improvements over time.
6. The combined authority should investigate (in partnership with central government) the potential for local devolution of planning powers to help support town centres – for example, to regulate problematic uses and facilitate meanwhile uses and other changes of use. This should accompany a more strategic approach to planning and development locally which encompasses a co-produced vision and objectives for each town centre by local partners including civil society organisations, the local private sector, public sector, and local citizens.
7. The combined authority and local authorities should extend community wealth-building approaches to support the regeneration of town centres, particularly in procurement processes of local anchor institutions.
8. The combined authority should develop a new town centre microfinance scheme which offers small scale grants and loans for entrepreneurs that deliver local benefits, including social and environmental value, community

cohesion, and the potential to improve local quality of life. It could seek to obtain funding for this from central government or explore alternative means to raise funds for this locally.

9. The combined authority and local authorities should support and encourage a range of pop-up spaces for entrepreneurial local businesses, community activities, learning, health creation, and other uses that support local economic and social wellbeing.

BELONGING

Town centres provide a local focus for belonging in the city region

Town centres arouse passionate debate because they are touchstones for community morale and identity, regardless of their 'official' economic success or failure. Across Liverpool city region town centres represent a rich network of people and places. This local diversity contributes to our sense of collective identity as Liverpool city region.

Preserving a sense of belonging means that, as we work towards change in town centres, we must remain authentic to a town centre's individuality: its own unique history and identity.

Town centres must also reflect diversity within communities – for example, through inclusive design in the built environment and streetscape, and how that civic space is managed – such as considering how temporary placements like A-boards are barriers to disabled people when improperly placed. It means addressing cases where the physical and social infrastructure has been designed, or is being managed, without taking account of the needs of people with limited mobility, vision, variations in perception or mental health issues.

A sense of belonging also depends on active participation in processes of change, so we must continue to explore how local people, community organisations, businesses, and the public sector can work together. And that active participation must take place *throughout* the change process, not just in an initial or endpoint consultation exercise. We must find new ways for people, businesses, and organisations to have a real say in the future of their town centres and high streets. In doing so, we must revisit our understanding of what a local economy is, recognising that a future town centre needs engagement from the public sector, the private sector, and civil society in helping to create broad economic outcomes that go beyond GVA. That means recognising how the public sector and civil society play an active *economic* role in town centres.

Building and strengthening a sense of belonging involves building and strengthening levers of control for communities – including actual ownership of assets and land within the town centre. It also requires that their voice be listened to and acted on in decision-making. Town centres should increasingly be owned by those who have an interest in their success – like local authorities, local businesses, and community organisations – working together as a community and providing agency over their future.

Democratising ownership and democratising the future of town centres is not just representative, but it is participative too. The mayoral model is well placed to use the convening role of mayoralities, to explore what participation is possible in town centres, and to highlight the benefits of such an approach when compared to the

traditional and inadequate approach of ‘consulting on views’ seen in decision-making about town centres to date across the UK.

The extent to which people feel ownership also depends on a clear connection between the economy of the high street and local jobs, education, health, and environmental outcomes that can be felt by the people who live locally.

Recommendations for town centres that belong to and are places of belonging for local communities

10. The combined authority, local authorities, and other stakeholders should develop and implement a set of ‘best practice’ principles for inclusive design in town centres *and* in transport infrastructure, and implement this robustly for all new projects and initiatives, as well as promoting better inclusion in the development of and process of formal planning applications.
11. The combined authority and its local partners should showcase pilot projects from within the city region which demonstrate how collaborative approaches led by civic partners can help to generate positive and new outcomes for town centre vitality and promote these both nationally and regionally to obtain further investments and share best practice. This could include piloting the development of representative and inclusive citizens’ juries, focussed on one or more town centres in the city region who are in particular need of support in a post Covid-19 context. Then, using learning from this to explore and debate the city region’s wider ambitions around a Building Back Better programme (Liverpool City Region 2020c).
12. The combined authority should continue to support initiatives such as sPark It Liverpool – which reimagines parking spaces in Liverpool and seeks to reclaim streets for people (alongside movements such as Transition Towns and Incredible Edible) in order to encourage wider community participation in planning the future of town centres and trialling new practices. This could be achieved by embracing new ways to capture and hear local people’s ideas – such as using online public-access maps where residents can log ideas, town centre idea canvassing, or ideas open days in town halls across the city region – all encouraging people to submit their ideas for their town centre and conveying them to local politicians and other stakeholders.
13. The combined authority should examine, potentially through its new Liverpool City Region Land Commission, how the process of land use planning in the city region can be democratised further, particularly in helping to rethink and reimagine future town centres, drawing on experience from Scotland and elsewhere.
14. The combined authority and its local partners should examine how, through procurement, planning conditions, and by working with partners in further and higher education, new town centre regeneration schemes can help generate positive outcomes including employment and skills development. New town centre schemes should be an opportunity to showcase excellence.
15. The combined authority and local partners should improve town centre digital connectivity including support for town centre businesses and organisations to get online. The combined authority and partners should build on existing initiatives to offer support and where necessary, funding support to organisations to improve their transition to online trading and communication. This work could include rationalising the number of different digital platforms and apps – such as multiple apps for parking, multiple apps for parking, various approaches to digital track and trace, and so on.

CONNECTING

Town centres connect people and place within and beyond the city region

Town centres are traditionally spaces where people come together; to shop, socialise, or visit attractions. Footfall is the lifeblood of town centre vitality. But Covid-related restrictions and social distancing have forced businesses, public services, and community organisations to find new ways of connecting with clients and customers. This includes greater use of online content including social media.

Covid-19 has also seen a dramatic fall in confidence and an increase of fear. Many people are fearful of visiting their local town centre and worried about being around other people, let alone large crowds. First and foremost, government at all levels must reduce risk and tackle the pandemic. However, restoring confidence in town centres longer term will take time and effort. Faith needs to be restored in public transport. In the future, public spaces will need to make more effort to help people feel safe and welcoming as they return, or they will fail.

Town centres have the potential to connect people in new ways. The city region faces significant challenges including poor health inequalities, climate change, high unemployment, and fuel poverty. Given the imperative of improving access to health and social care and the NHS' need for more space, moving services into town centres, including into empty spaces vacated during the pandemic and subsequent economic downturn, could improve access to services and actively create better health and wellbeing, as well as helping to prevent the concentration of vacant units often seen during economic decline. Town centres could become local hubs of action and connectivity to information and support, as well as giving people a chance to have their say on how the city region should tackle these issues in the long term.

Town centres often include a significant amount of outdoor and open space, which is underutilised and the pandemic has placed a premium on the availability of local open and green space. In addition, successive lockdowns have restricted travel and therefore encouraged a more active use of local outdoor space – including more walking and cycling, and more use of pavements, and paved areas by hospitality businesses, promoting al fresco dining and socialising.

However, buildings and units are likely to be affected too – especially as some businesses will close during the pandemic. When thinking about the recovery, particular thought will need to be given to empty spaces and empty buildings, and how cycles of inactivity and further vacancy can be avoided. This will require more creative thinking about meanwhile uses,² cheap or peppercorn rents,³ and how public services that are targeted at local communities – from healthcare to training – can be located within them efficiently and rapidly, stoking activity and footfall.

Vacant units are not the only issue. Vacant land is far too often left to deteriorate and blight local communities. More action needs to be taken to ensure landowners are taking responsibility for their land and, whatever their future plans, are contributing to the town centre and the local community at all times. This means effective and locally engaged management of land, alongside more temporary uses including pocket parks, ad-hoc performance spaces, and other creative ways to activate and manage vacant land. When landowners fail to do so, local authorities and civil society organisations should be able to step in and act, at no cost. Landowners are not only custodians of the land they own, but also of its contribution to the wider town centre.

2 Meanwhile use is a term used to describe the temporary use of vacant property for projects that deliver economic, social or environmental benefits.

3 A peppercorn rent is a very low or nominal rent which may be used in the context of a town centre to help encourage the use of otherwise empty retail units with the intention of boosting footfall.

Increasingly, town centres are also places where people live. Building more homes in town centres creates activity complementary to retail and office use, helping to breathe new life, activity, and footfall into certain areas and particularly bolstering activity at evenings and weekends. Town centre housing will play an increasingly important role in the regeneration of our town centres. To achieve this, it must sustain public consent by being attractive and well-designed housing, as well as spacious and affordable. It must also be accessible and adaptable to people with limited mobility; a group whose needs are poorly met in the current housing stock and who therefore have limited choice about where to live. For these citizens in particular, housing in town centres can help to reduce isolation and support greater social inclusion. Moreover, town centres need to be attractive places to live – with ready access to green space and a sense of safety and security paramount to achieving this.

Town centre housing will only contribute positively to town centre regeneration if it is of sufficient quality. Permitted development rights⁴ are a threat to housing quality, good health, and community consent to increasing population density in town centres. Residential development in town centres must be delivered strategically and with the local community's consent. Its overarching goal should be to provide housing that contributes to a desirable town centre, rather than seeking to maximise density and land values. Town centres will not thrive with a mix of different uses without local oversight of housing quantum and housing quality.

Town centres offer a physical connection to local services, but they are also hubs that connect to each other across the city region and beyond. This includes public transport, service provision, housing, and sometimes urban development patterns rooted in geographical features such as clusters of close neighbouring coastal towns. Within local authority areas, historical and cultural ties can also foster a strong sense of connection between individual town centres.

In general, public transport is good within the Liverpool city region, but investment and planning is needed to improve connectivity between certain places – so that travelling from one town centre to another in the city region is easy and affordable, across and switching between various modes like rail, bus, ferry, and bike hire. This should include enhanced walking and cycling provision which improves both ease of access for pedestrians and cyclists to the town centre and promotes walkable and bikeable town centres. Transport provision should work at all scales and geographies, seeking to serve a diverse range of needs – including access to services and to arts, culture, and leisure, as well as retail, events, and activities. It involves economic connections for work, for knowledge sharing, for innovation, and for learning too. Travelling needs to feel safe and accessible for different groups of users. And the whole system needs to be integrated and designed so that it can improve air quality, promote environmental sustainability, and foment physical activity.

⁴ Permitted development rights refers to the physical alterations that you can make to a building without having to apply for planning permission to your local authority. Instead they are granted by parliament. The Planning White Paper 2020 sought to extend the number of permitted development rights leading to some concerns that this may result in a decline in the quality of residential and/or commercial premises.

Recommendations for town centres that connect people and places in the city region

- 16.** As the pandemic passes, town centres will need to work hard to restore confidence and attract people back, not just for retail but for new activities, events, and attractions too. The combined authority and local authorities should explore the role of events, markets, and other activities that could draw people back into town centres when safe to do so.
- 17.** Given the disproportionate impact that the Covid-19 pandemic is having on the city region, town centres will play an important role in helping to connect people to better health outcomes. Creating better health in town centres should involve activities, events and support provided in-situ, which would provide a way of bringing a new sense of purpose back into town centre spaces. This should include the use of vacant units for uses in line with the needs of local health services to deliver preventative care as well as treatment in primary care services.
- 18.** As unemployment rises, there is an urgent need to support people who lose their job as a result of the pandemic, and young people in particular. The city region, working with local partners, should support the development of town centre-based hubs which offer new opportunities for employment support, skills development, and retraining, including links with local further and higher education. This should include a specific focus on sectors that offer good quality future jobs, like the green economy, and meet the combined authority's strategic economic goals as expressed in the local industrial strategy and other key policies.
- 19.** The combined authority should seek to play a coordinating role to aid in the strategic, temporary use of different potential uses from healthcare to spaces for start-ups and entrepreneurs to grow ideas. This should also involve negotiating with landlords of vacant units to impress upon them the mutual benefits of reactivating spaces and maintaining activity in town centres in the short-term and how it will feed into longer-term vitality in town centres.
- 20.** As local plans are updated, local authorities should consider health and wellbeing explicitly in their core planning policies and how town centres (and spatial planning) contribute. If national change is needed to make such policies efficient and enforceable, the combined authority should seek to negotiate with MHCLG.
- 21.** The combined authority, working with partners should cooperate to deliver a programme of opportunities and potential small grants or low-interest loans for local businesses to implement or improve outdoor seating and dining arrangements – building on the huge success of the Liverpool Without Walls programme and considering its economic benefits.
- 22.** Local authorities should continue to assess viability of housing in the redevelopment of town centres. However, in some cases where the market is as yet unproven, it is likely that public investment will be needed to help de-risk schemes for the private sector. This should be done in a strategic way.
- 23.** Local authorities should seek to create and enforce planning conditions which guarantee that vacant land hosts meanwhile uses that contribute positively to the town centre, as far in as national planning policy allows and where policy does not allow, by engaging the combined authority to negotiate such uses with the landowner.

BUILDING A FUTURE

Town centres are important places for local communities. They will continue to be a vital part of daily life, as they always have been. As we look towards the long-term recovery from Covid-19 and the changing role of town centres in the modern economy, we need to rethink and rearticulate their place in a changed world. The sudden change in all our behaviour in light of Covid-19 is akin to pressing a reset button on what the town centre of the future should be. We do not yet know what will emerge next. However, it is communities who will provide the answers for their town centre and the social, economic, and cultural role they play. The three key roles we have outlined offer a core framework for policymakers considering town centres across the Liverpool city region and the rest of the country: **anchor, belong, and connect**.

NEXT STEPS FOR THE WORK OF THE COMMISSION

The Liverpool Town Centres Commission has fulfilled its work programme but its work is not necessarily complete. Given the scale of the challenge now facing the city region, the commission is willing to continue to play an advisory role to support the combined authority to implement its recommendations as part of the city region's wider recovery. The commission would also be willing to continue to be an advocate for Liverpool city region's town centres nationally and internationally.

The commissioners would be willing to offer their services to the mayor to provide ongoing support as a *sitting commission or advisory group*, ideally supported with some secretariat capacity in the combined authority.

3.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES PRE- AND POST-COVID-19

Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, Britain's town centres were the subject of considerable concern. Warnings that the 'death of the high street' was imminent have been sounded for several years. Towns have epitomised the feeling of being 'left behind' by the growth of prosperity elsewhere – most markedly in cities or in prosperous rural areas. Often, they were places that suffered with the decline of a particular industry that had provided the bulk of their employment. Developments such as the growth of online retail and changing patterns of consumption also raised challenges for town centres

Prominent in this discussion was the decline in the standard 'retail offer' of many high streets. Before the pandemic, Company Watch rated nearly half of all retailers as being 'in serious risk of failure', and almost one-fifth as 'zombies' (companies with negative balance sheets). Hospitality was in an even more perilous state, with 59 per cent of pubs and restaurants at serious risk of failure, and over one-quarter seeing their balance sheets in the red; chains were performing particularly badly. Investment in retail property in town centres had fallen by 42 per cent since 2014, and by 78 per cent in shopping centres (Ferguson 2020).

The impact of Covid-19 on the retail and hospitality sector has been widely documented. The pandemic has to some extent accelerated trends that were already present and forced the hands of stakeholders. During our qualitative research, many of our interviewees agreed that if things are to get better for town centres, seeking a return to an earlier time is simply not realistic. Rather it is important to "look outwards, change perceptions and shift [your] view" (stakeholder interviewee).

The disruption and damage caused by the pandemic means that recovery will be long, hard, and expensive. But it has forced change and at times has made people question assumptions about previously accepted ways of living and working. Within our towns and cities, many more people are working from home. Walking and cycling have become more common as modes of local travel; the value of green spaces and parks has increased; and, perhaps most vitally for town centres, it has encouraged more people to shop, eat out, and spend time in their local areas. Optimists also point to increased community cohesion and greater interest in social connections and action – although Covid-19 has also deepened many existing inequalities.

Town centres have not been short of reviews, commissions, and advice since the Portas review almost a decade ago. The Grimsey review reported in 2013 and 2018, and a 'High Streets Task Force' was established in 2019, following publication of the Timpson review in the previous year. Many of our observations echo those earlier publications, reinforcing the view that Covid-19 has, to a large extent, intensified existing difficulties.

In an update published this summer (Grimsey 2020), Bill Grimsey argues that town centres will need three things in order to recover from Covid-19:

1. a huge shift in power away from central government to local communities and a renewed focus on localism
2. dynamic and collaborative leaders, willing to embrace change
3. a huge expansion of green space, parks, and town squares, with places no longer designed primarily around cars.

This vision has a great deal in common with that the views we heard from stakeholders in the Liverpool city region. To bring about these changes in town centres requires significant change, not just to the built environment of town centres and their mix of occupants, but also much broader underlying shifts: economic, social, cultural, and environmental. The post-Covid-19 era feels in some ways like the worst of times to try to achieve these. But with the world as we knew it turned upside down, it could also be the right time to act.

In the next section, we build on the key questions which commissioners have been exploring in each of our sessions since the onset of the pandemic. IPPR North has supplemented these discussions with interviews with a range of stakeholders from across the city region, looking in particular at five case study town centres. Where appropriate, we have included recommendations for the future, aimed particularly at the city region, but we recognise that these must be implemented in partnership with partners in local government, civil society, the private sector, and central government.

4.

WHAT ARE TOWN CENTRES FOR, POST-COVID-19?

This section draws together the qualitative research undertaken by IPPR North subsequently of the interim report and the publication of the Town Centre Vitality Index. It builds on the commissioners' discussions, their vision, and the interim report of the commission.

WITHOUT PEOPLE, THERE IS NO TOWN CENTRE

Interviewees were unanimous that town centres should be designed to meet the needs of people, reflecting the diverse needs of their local communities. In practical terms, that means:

- town centres that are attractive, accessible, welcoming, and safe for different groups of people
- an offer that includes businesses people need and want to use, but also services (health, education, administrative), activities and experiences
- places, services and design that facilitate social connections and 'togetherness', including active participation of civil society such as charities, community, and voluntary groups in the 'life' of the town
- civic spaces to meet, connect, hold events, and have fun
- design and systems that support health (mental and physical) and wellbeing.

Primary motivating factors should not include commercial or administrative interests above those of community, or 'generic' visions that do not reflect the residents, history, or needs of a particular area. The creation of health and wellbeing was seen by our interviewees as a vital role of a town centre; it should make life better for the people who use it. This theme runs through much of the discussion that follows here, especially in relation to public health, transport, and decarbonisation.

Town centres were also seen as places where 'people come together', rather than where they come – primarily – to shop. This translated into several more specific aims, including social opportunities at different times of the day, and the need to attract people into the town centre for a variety of activities – retail being just one of these.

Some interviewees reported that town centres had seen something of a revival during lockdown, with more people using the shops, pubs, and restaurants that are 'on their doorstep', rather than travelling further or heading into Liverpool city centre. The presence of convenience stores, as well as some services (such as health practitioners and local authority offices), had drawn people to their local high street. Footfall is down everywhere, but town centres have generally done better than the city centre. Interest in smaller and independent businesses was also said to have increased. In that sense, town centres have provided a renewed focus for belonging in the city region, providing a sense of continuity as people's geographical focus has shrunk as a result of the coronavirus restrictions.

Moreover, the dramatic rise in working from home during the pandemic has provided additional support to town and district centres. It's currently unclear whether or not there will be a longer-term shift to home working, but if there is a shift in behaviour, with more people working more regularly from home as part of decentralised working, or if more people work permanently from home, then there will be an impact on town and city centres. Largely, this could provide additional support to town or district centres near to which many people live, while potentially having a negative impact with fewer people working full-time in city centres and supporting businesses and activity there. Though some are predicting such a shift already, it is far too early to tell.

However, optimism about how long this would last was fairly cautious. Over the long term, town centres need to balance the needs of different groups of people who live nearby and make up the diverse communities that surround them. For example, in some areas, older and poorer populations live alongside more affluent commuters. Young people need to feel welcome and to have opportunities to build a stake in their local area, while older residents need places that are accessible and feel safe. The physical and social infrastructure of town centres should also meet the needs of people with mobility, sensory and/or perception variations.

Some residents will also need to be persuaded of the need to change long-established habits. This may be especially problematic for town centres where people use the town centre purely to shop, rather than to take part in community and social activities. These areas will need a very strong offer to 'pull people in' again.

While there was a little bit of optimism about towns picking up some additional loyalty as a result of Covid-19, it is important not to play down the real concerns among many towns in the city region, particularly those traditionally reliant upon tourism, events and conference income, including Liverpool city centre. The loss of this income will be significant in many towns, and there are real concerns about the potential legacy of the pandemic, should events permanently move to an online format. This is not only because of the impact on venues but the wider knock-on effect on hotels, food and drink offer, and retail.

DIVERSE USES – BEYOND RETAIL AND HOSPITALITY

The need to diversify the offer of the town centre beyond retail and hospitality is recognised across the city region. Interviewees acknowledged that there is some conservatism about how people will use town centres, and resistance to the idea of change. But the response to this was to expand their functions, and to demonstrate the value of this. Where diversification is underway, there is hard evidence that people respond positively to this and are more likely to visit their town centre.

Town centres for housing

An important theme of town centre diversification is about encouraging more people to live there, and a comprehensive plan for town centre housing can help to revive town centres. People invest – their money, their time, their engagement, and their emotions – in the places where they live. Yet many town centres have relatively little residential property and tend to be home to populations who move on after a fairly short period. Finding ways to increase and diversify the supply of housing in or very close to town centres was a priority for many of our interviewees: "It's better for people to live in a neighbourhood with everything, rather than a green belt site near a motorway junction". Models for place development of this kind include the '15-minute neighbourhood', in which actions across different policy areas bring together most (if not all) of the regular needs of residents within a short walk or bike

ride of their home (Sutcliffe 2020). Liverpool city region is already working with Sustrans on a similar project, 'Liveable Neighbourhoods'.

A particular challenge is the need to increase the quantity of accommodation that is suitable for *families*, who will settle for the long term and put down local roots. Their needs include facilities such as childcare and schools, health services, and family-friendly activities (some of which are among the plans outlined elsewhere in this report), as well as convenience and basics retail. New housing must also be accessible for people with limited mobility – a group whose needs are poorly met in the current housing stock and who therefore have limited choice about where to live. Town centre living also offers important opportunities for groups such as older people who can benefit from living close to multiple amenities and aspects of community life, reducing the risk of isolation.

Another key issue is access to outdoor and green spaces for people who live in flats. The greening of town centres is important *generally* as a way to improve the social and physical environment, but it has particular benefits for people who make their home there. Town centres also need to feel like places where individuals and families can feel safe and included across different seasons and times of day.

Interviewees noted that the UK does not have a strong history of providing good quality apartments for families. This is an area where innovation and learning from other nations could be important in changing the nature of our housing stock and the way that people use it.

If town centres are to provide a higher proportion of housing, then planning authorities will need to develop new ways to work closely with private and social housing developers to overcome financial viability and land ownership challenges.

Increasing the amount and variety of housing in town centre may help to increase high street footfall (including for the evening economy) and build demand for additional town centre businesses such as food and drink outlets and leisure/entertainment services. But the challenge is that where there is no existing residential market, the market is untested and unproved, making investment riskier. Huyton town centre, for example, currently has no housing and not a single resident. But the town centre businesses could potentially benefit from more residential use, particularly as the town has a train station offering direct access to other parts of the city region, Manchester and beyond. However, to help 'make the market' the public sector may be required to move first in order to de-risk the investment and in doing so, leverage in future private finance once the market has been proven.

Town centres as a focus for civic ownership

A larger role for community ownership in town centres came up less in our discussions but has been a growing theme of the wider debate on town centres nationally. Research suggests that towns which higher rates of community and public ownership on the high street can mean fewer empty units (Brett and Alakeson 2019). Furthermore, it has been suggested that the income these types of organisations generate, tends to be 'sticky' and are more likely to support local employment and businesses in their supply chain (ibid). The Grimsey review from earlier this year also highlighted the importance of town centres as 'civic spaces'. In Birkenhead, there was a sense of pride about how many socially focussed businesses per head there are and a feeling that this ethical economic approach was potentially a unique selling point for the town, which could spread to other places across the city region.

This embedding of local community finance within town centres has much in common with the concept of ‘community wealth building’, which argues for a people-centred approach to local economic development where economic benefits are ploughed back into local economies (CLES 2020). Typically, this can work through public, social, and private anchor organisations using their financial stake in an area to help support local job creation and growth, local businesses (through for example, the procurement supply chain), and changing the way in which local financial investments are made – for example, local authority pension funds – to more directly benefit the local economy. The move towards community wealth building can also include a focus on widening ownership of the economy through growing locally rooted businesses.

Town centres as a focus for creating better health

The theme of health ran through many of the interviews for this project. Long-term issues of poor health in the population of the Liverpool city region have been highlighted by the Covid-19 pandemic. This is an issue of social justice, as well as a vital part of building economic and social resilience for the future. Health was seen as both an essential component of a thriving economy, and an important outcome of policy: “We need to be brave enough to say ‘no’ if the economic case is good but the social case is weak”, in the words of one interviewee.

Inclusive design needs to be used in active travel to support and encourage the participation of disabled people with limited mobility and/or vision, variations in perception, or mental health issues.

Town centres can support health in various ways. Infrastructure design is part of this, with opportunities to encourage active travel and reduce transport-related emissions that lead to poor air quality, but the possibilities go further. The mental health benefits of spaces and activities that encourage people to interact and make social connections were mentioned on several occasions during our research, with town centres seen as having an important role in reducing loneliness and isolation. The focus on creating distinctive town centres that foster a sense of identity contributes to this aim.

Innovations that could improve both physical and mental health included the promotion of healthy social activities (such as healthy cooking demonstrations, meeting points for walking, cycling or running groups, and support groups for stopping smoking or losing weight), and small-scale infrastructure for exercise, such as outdoor gyms or basketball hoops. Business promotions for healthy food and activities could also help. Civil society organisations and community businesses have a strong track record of supporting better health and wellbeing and can play an important part in this work. With appropriate partnerships, town centres and spaces within them can help to address the social determinants of health.

The shift towards a stronger role for small businesses with a community and/or creative focus could also help to improve initiatives for health. Interviewees noted that this type of firm often has a stronger interest in the health and wellbeing of their employees and of the wider community than some larger or chain companies.

We found support for a ‘health in all policies’ approach. This takes account of the impact on health of policy decisions across a range of portfolios including employment, housing, education, economy, and transport (Greszczuk 2019). This approach has the potential to create and embed health in places and to make a long-term difference to outcomes for people living and working in an area.

Using arts and heritage to animate town centre space

Cultural, heritage and creative activities have a major role to play in attracting people to town centres and fostering a sense of belonging. Creativity and the arts contribute to the distinctiveness of places and are important in helping to build a brand that attracts visitors and investors and creates civic pride.

As discussed above, creative and/or community businesses⁵ – from crafts to digital – are taking up residence in greater numbers. Some town centres have established projects designed to foster these sectors; since Covid-19, as rents have fallen and spaces have become available, they have seized the opportunity to move in. In some town centres new creative businesses are forging links with more traditional manufacturing or retail firms, initially fostered through proximity. Others are providing activities and services that encourage people to come to town centres and to socialise once there, such as classes and demonstrations. Overall, **attracting businesses of this kind adds both economic and social value to town centres.**

Investment in culture and creative activities was valued in all the town centres where we conducted interviews as an important part of fostering distinctiveness and a sense of belonging. It brings local communities together and pulls in visitors from further afield. Interviewees noted that the pandemic has had a detrimental effect on provision and that work would be needed as part of the recovery to lay new foundations for future activity, but that this also brought opportunities to innovate.

- Large-scale projects can have a major impact on the local economy as well as on wellbeing. For example, the proposed Shakespeare North Playhouse (currently under construction) is being credited with attracting new property and business investment in the town centre.
- Community-based projects are valuable in bringing communities together, and in building a sense of identity. This may be linked to learning about the history of a particular place, for example where projects are developed around local assets.
- Young people in particular talked about the value to them of interactive creative projects.

Public art is another worthwhile site for investment. They have a strong track record of making places attractive and distinctive. In some cases, they are credited with helping to reduce anti-social behaviour, as they engage people with the places where they are located. Several town centres have used projects such as art installations, murals, graffiti walls, and other formats to help support local identity and pride. For example, the regeneration of New Brighton used public art extensively.

DISTINCTIVENESS: 'THIS COULDN'T BE ANYWHERE ELSE'

One size fits all plans for developing town centres are of little use. The people-centred nature of effective development, and the importance of local and independent businesses, mean that any attempt to follow a generic blueprint is unlikely to work. Town centre managers report that earlier masterplans drawn up to provide a blueprint for regeneration were often fairly generic, bearing little relation to local heritage, history, and identity. This is often the reason why they had only limited or short-term impact.

A distinctive retail offer depends heavily on a strong presence of independent businesses. This is particularly important at a time when many national chains are retreating, often to be replaced by entrepreneurial independents with

⁵ Community businesses defined by the Power to Change as being locally rooted, trading for the benefit of the local community, accountable to the local community and with a broad community impact,

a determined voice and a real stake in the local area. Independent retailers may start out through traditional business routes. However, the social and community enterprise sector is an important force in regeneration of many town centres in the Liverpool city region. Collaborations with the community and voluntary sectors, and/or with cultural and creative organisations and institutions are also important drivers. Investment from within the community can lead to a locally anchored, socially responsible, and authentic mix of businesses. Local authorities can support these collaborations through formal projects, through facilitating access to appropriate business support and facilities, and through an open and informal dialogue with local businesses and *potential* businesses.

Interviewees noted that having a sense of distinctiveness can feel more challenging for town centres whose primary purpose is to provide everyday services. Covid-19 had brought this issue to a head in some areas, forcing the question of the *purpose* of a town centre and making it clear that no place can be ‘all things to all people’ (stakeholder interviewee).

For example, the town centre in Huyton is understood locally as the ‘village’; this provides it with a sense of distinctiveness, especially as more people reconnect with the town centre as they spend more time in the local area due to Covid-19. This chimed with a wider view among our interviewees that Covid-19 had generated a sense of locality placing greater emphasis upon what is ‘on your doorstep’. Town centres can learn more about how this has played out in their local areas in order to inform and inspire a future vision for their role.

Markets and market days were repeatedly named as a route to distinctiveness, which is highly valued by local people. However, the *form* of markets needs to be specific, sustainable, and matched to community interests. An emphasis on localism and environmental responsibility could be a way to strengthen distinctiveness while also boosting the local economy and local opportunities for employment, as well as supporting outcomes such as decarbonisation and health. The idea of the town centre as a flexible ‘market space’ is under consideration in several towns.

RELATIONSHIPS TO OTHER PLACES: PUTTING TOWN CENTRES ON THE MAP

The relationships between places across the Liverpool city region was a key theme that emerged throughout our interviews. This tended to be understood in a relatively local way, relating to smaller clusters of two or three towns within individual boroughs. The strength of connection between places often reflected historical ties as well as physical proximity and transport networks.

Where town centres work in partnership and seek complementarity, they do well. Stakeholders’ experience showed that competition is rarely fruitful, and some expressed frustration over the ways in which competitive funding bids could undermine attempts to work collaboratively. But the concern about competition related also to competing retail offers; for example, between out-of-town shopping centres and town centres, or between town centres and the city centre. Ironically, it was noted that, while shopping centres can take people away from town centres, they themselves are often in decline and can find attracting inward investment difficult. Local leaders must answer the hard question, “do we let malls fall by the wayside in favour of town centres?” (stakeholder interviewee).

Some town centres do not necessarily see themselves as part of a wider city regional identity, although the Covid-19 crisis has heightened awareness of the mayor and the Mayor’s Fund, which has been targeted at town centre businesses

and was described as very important. Longer-term, though, there is some work to be done to demonstrate the value of the city region as a collective identity to encourage better collaboration. An example of this work already taking place in this area is the combined authority's efforts to boost the region's social and community sector through the social and solidarity economy reference panel (Liverpool city region 2020).

SUSTAINABLE PROSPERITY FOR TOWN CENTRES

Resources are vital (money, people, and skills)

Resources to support the economic sustainability of town centres are vital. This includes direct funding (capital and revenue), as well as skills, capacity, and management. Many town centres are rich in ideas and vision for their future, but lack the money, time, and people to carry it through. Austerity has left local authorities with diminished capacity, which may shrink further as the bill for Covid-19 mounts and EU funding becomes unavailable.⁶

Capital funding has been easier to access, mainly through national programmes which have prioritised towns in recent years. However, revenue funding is much scarcer. The need for revenue funding to ensure the long-term sustainability of projects is 'desperate' – a situation made even more urgent by Covid-19. Worse still, for those areas that have secured town deals, the lack of revenue funding may undermine their plans, especially, as one interviewee put it, "when projects lose their shininess". This in turn can damage engagement with communities.

"the public don't understand the difference between capital and revenue funding – they don't understand why you can build a building but not maintain the high street"

Stakeholder interviewee

Having sufficient resources enables town centres to have more control. In Birkenhead for example, partners have invested in "getting control of the things we need to control to make a change" – for example, using Future High Streets programme funding and Towns Fund investment. These projects provide leverage to shape the market by creating demand, opportunity, and diversity in investment. Public money is used to 'pump prime' places. Over time the leverage works by crowding in alternative sources of funding from the private and social sector.

Large scale capital projects also need good management capacity. This is often in short supply, with too few people and insufficient skillsets. In some towns, civil society has been central to town centre redevelopment, often through the hard work of volunteers. This includes developing funding bids, holding consultation events with residents and businesses, and managing and deploying community owned assets. Many civil society organisations have continued efforts to engage with residents during Covid-19, both online and face-to-face.

However, this activity is often seen as separate from the local authority- or business-led work of town centre regeneration. Many civil society organisations are keen to do more, including taking on more responsibility for assets in town centres, but are unclear as to how to be heard and taken seriously by local partners. And a local economy can only bear so much voluntarism, or provide so many volunteers; ultimately, people need an income.

⁶ It was also noted that business support schemes via EU funding have been notoriously difficult to use for town centre businesses because of state aid rules. Subsequently, the government's replacement to EU funding, the Shared Prosperity Fund, may provide opportunities to more directly support town centre businesses.

Case study: Birkenhead's Creative Cluster

In 2017, the Festival of Beautiful Ideas was held in Birkenhead. The aim was to bring people together to share their ideas for how to make Birkenhead a better place to live and work. The festival was commissioned by Wirral Council, which provided £6,000 of funding and secured the same sum from the local chamber of commerce. The council commissioned The Beautiful Ideas Co. to deliver the festival – a community interest company that makes small-scale investment for a diverse range of grassroots projects, and specialises in regeneration and placemaking.

Festival participants were invited to bring an idea or a business plan. They used these to bid for funding (from the £12,000 festival fund) that would allow them to move their proposals on to the next stage. Over 60 ideas were submitted in the course of a week of events and 'hack days' in diverse spaces across the town centre. Four 'focus areas' (Wirral Eats, Wirral Makes, Wirral Spaces, and Wirral Plays) brought people together for formal and informal meetings.

Five ideas received funding, and three new collectives have since emerged from the funded projects. These include the Wirral New Music Collective, which has developed the Future Yard venue. This 350-capacity space aims to bring national and international performers to Wirral, and offer opportunities to local musicians. Building on the Wirral's long and diverse musical heritage, Future Yard has already staged a socially distanced and digitally streamed show.

Wirral Council and Make Community Interest Company have also built on learning from the Festival to open Make Hamilton Square, a hub for the arts, culture, and creative entrepreneurs. Located in a formerly empty building, Make Hamilton Square includes a café and a community garden as well as a café, studio spaces, and meeting venues. It will offer opportunities around creative entrepreneurship, craft skills and STEM learning. Residents in the complex include social enterprises that took part in the original Festival. Birkenhead's first music festival is another successful initiative that builds on the 2017 event.

The festival represented a highly effective partnership between local government, the private sector, community interest and social trading companies, and local and community organisations. It was supported through high level buy-in from Council members, and from widespread and diverse community involvement.

The initial investment of £12,000 was relatively modest. However overall projects that grew out of the 2017 festival are expected to deliver over £3 million in social and economic value. The financial impact of Birkenhead's 'cultural renaissance' is estimated at around £2,290,000 in 2020, which could rise by another £500,000 with the full opening of Future Yard. An estimated annual £910,000 in social value is also projected as a result of 'social, maker and creator activity' in Birkenhead.

More information is available from Kindred (2020) at:
<https://kindred-lcr.co.uk/case-studies/birkenhead>

Economic marginality and viability

The traditional town centre economic model tends to rely heavily on rental income from retail, with associated assumptions about land value. For many areas, even in the 'boom times' town centres generate only marginal returns.

“Even in the best of times, you are ‘wrestling with viability’ ... it’s a slog trying to get investment into [name of town].”

Stakeholder interviewee

This leaves them vulnerable so that the slightest change can have a disproportionate impact.

We found a tension between what communities want and need, and what markets can deliver. The UK's regional inequalities show a pattern of private investment tending to flow into better-off places and neglecting others. In addition, much recent policy has stressed the importance of self-generated income both for public sector and community-based organisations – a trend which has been exacerbated by austerity. As a result, many local authorities are now heavily invested in their town centres because of the potential returns that this can generate for the authority.

With retail in decline, many town centres face high vacancy rates. This leaves them vulnerable to predatory behaviour by opportunistic finance companies, absentee landlords and concentrations of businesses such as betting shops, amusement arcades, and fast-food outlets; some local authorities have found a particular demand for premises from gambling firms. Greater devolution of planning powers to the combined authority could make it easier to regulate potentially problematic sectors. Where problems have become acute, structural changes to the high street are under consideration, including replacement of traditional retail space with other uses such as community premises and/or housing. The Liverpool City Region Local Industrial Strategy explores this theme.

A community wealth building approach is very strongly endorsed by some local areas as a way to strengthen prosperity and overcome the challenge of marginality/viability. In place management, community wealth building treats local land and property as wealth creators and an asset base from which communities, rather than global investors, can benefit. It includes:

- strong social value targets
- diverse local and community ownership of land, property, and natural assets
- financial practices that include leveraging local government and anchor institution investments (pension funds, investments in green infrastructure, and establishment of local state holding companies)
- utilising capital and financial standing to support survival and growth of businesses and sectors that contribute positively to the social and economic fortunes of local people – for example, through mutual credit networks and establishing local state holding companies
- jobs and procurement practices that support local businesses and employment, and that seek to localise supply chains.

Other opportunities include the development of local community value charters, and wider use of community asset transfer. At present, the 'community right to bid' allows community groups to bid within a limited time window for assets that become available. But pulling together the funds is challenging for many groups, and where bids rely on creativity and diversity of income streams, this assumes that the money is available within the local economy in the first place. Potential bidders also need clearer information about the processes and the support available for making a bid.

The government have also announced a new ‘right to regenerate’ to turn derelict buildings into homes and housing. This means that public land could be sold to individuals or communities by default, unless there is a compelling reason the owner should hold onto it (MHCLG 2021).

One option that can support entrepreneurship within communities is the wider availability of small-scale loans and microfinance. These can be the catalyst that turns ideas, enterprise and community spirit into viable businesses that can grow over time and provide jobs and social value. Such funding is especially important in areas where, in the words of one interviewee: “current wealth and assets don’t match up to creativity, ambition and potential”. People from households with limited wealth and assets often cannot afford the risk and the ‘leap of faith’ involved in starting a business – but their town centres cannot afford to miss out on their contribution.

Also, non-monetary support can be provided through local government and through partnerships. This includes access to premises (that might otherwise go empty), to business support and networks, to shared assets and to mentoring.

Businesses and town centres

Many of the conversations about businesses and town centres reflected on the experience as a result of Covid-19. In many areas national brands seem to be ‘retreating’ from town centres, making retail and other spaces more affordable. In turn, smaller independents are seizing the opportunity to occupy attractive town centre premises. In some cases, they are working together, collaborating and thus having a greater impact. Creative and cultural are especially likely to coalesce in informal but fruitful partnerships.

A depressed or volatile economy could even act as a stimulus to open buildings up to innovative, creative, and novel businesses, as low land value and high vacancies bring opportunities for entrepreneurs. Local authorities can support this in different ways, from meanwhile uses all the way up to full-scale arts strategies working with major funders. Doing so, however, requires a willingness to take risks and to work in new ways. It also demands an open-minded approach, which does not allow preconceptions about the ability or aspirations of local people and organisations to limit participation.

Pop-ups were a popular suggestion as a low risk way of bringing new businesses into town centres, and to support entrepreneurship. Pop-up spaces and meanwhile uses provide opportunities to try things out and experiment with different business formats. This is valuable for retailers and for activities and events, including arts and culture, sports, and affordable activities for young people, families and older residents. For example, the 2021 sPark It Liverpool initiative will help to explore and debate the many ways in which streets and spaces in city and town centres can be used.

Another role of pop-ups in former retail spaces is skills development. Upskilling and reskilling for a changed economy will be vital in the wake of Covid-19, as the labour market undergoes rapid change. Fast access to good-quality learning opportunities and careers advice has the potential to make a big difference to people’s opportunities and quality of life, and town centres can make this easier, especially for young people.

“if young people are hanging around in the town centre, then put the opportunities to develop skills there.”

Stakeholder interviewee

Partners in making this a reality could include civil society organisations, schools, colleges, and universities, and the private sector.

Many local authorities have experienced increased engagement from town centre businesses as they seek support with Covid-19 regulations. This includes a significant increase in requests for support to move businesses online, which has moved “from a ‘nice to have’ to a ‘must have’” for surviving the pandemic. Digital offers a lifeline for connecting with existing customers, and also provides a way to build a new client base via social media. Within town centres, the role of town centre managers who possess intimate knowledge of the business mix in an area has been pivotal in building relationships and supporting businesses.

ENVIRONMENT, PLANNING AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Adapting physical fabric of town centres

Most town centres have been designed around an economic and spatial model in which retail is the primary use. As the economic and use value of retail declines, this has direct consequences for the physical fabric of town centres. New entrants may need less space than retail once did, and some buildings may be hard to fill. Those which remain empty for long periods may create problems which call for ‘drastic’ measures such as compulsory purchase or demolition.

In addition, some buildings may be owned by speculative investors who have purchased them when prices were low and have little interest in developing new or community-focussed uses. Contacting these landlords (who may not be based in the local area) can be difficult and time consuming, and even once contacted, they are often unwilling to engage, to invest or even to sell.

Despite these challenges, stakeholders felt that retail buildings have the potential to become a new kind of asset: “we don’t have leisure spaces, but we do have empty shops”. But realising this potential requires work and investment, and it can be hard to make the argument on the basis of economic returns. Where local authorities themselves own buildings, they can ‘lead by example’ in repurposing premises. A sustainable future for town centres, however, cannot depend on hard-pressed local authorities to lead every regeneration project.

In some places, social and community organisations have successfully led town centre regeneration. This may not be easily replicable everywhere, but it could be fruitful in town centres with a strong track record of civil society engagement and well-established community organisations. Pilot projects in town centres with particularly challenging issues could be supported by modest amounts of pump priming funding.

Generally, the shift in town centres needs to be towards multifunctionality, with greater flexibility and openness to new partnerships and innovative approaches. Social and community value also need to be considered as well as economic returns. Changing the use of existing buildings is already an active discussion within the city region, with proposals for new leisure, community, and even residential spaces in the pipeline. There may also be opportunities to use the planning system to shift ground floor premises from retail to new purposes, as part of a wider strategic plan for town centres.

Transport

Transport is essential to connections within and beyond the city region. Covid-19 has radically changed the ways in which people use transport, with infection control measures and home working drastically reducing the use of buses and trains. However, we found agreement that transport will have a vital role in a post-Covid-19 city region. There was also a consensus that, across the

city region, public transport connectivity is generally good, but that integration could be significantly better.

Merseytravel is in the hands of the Liverpool city region, which provides clear opportunities for the authority to explore new ways of integrating services to improve access not only to jobs and retail, but to leisure, culture, and services. However, the city region does not yet control its buses, which are pivotal to the fate of many town centres. Work is ongoing at a city regional level to explore implementation of devolved powers to franchise the bus network (on a similar model to London). This could help drive improvements in the network.

Fears around public transport use have brought a shift to sustainable, active, and affordable modes of transport, such as walking and cycling. Liverpool City Region Combined Authority's Building Back Better Recovery Plan has already set out plans for further investment in infrastructure for these modes, and there are opportunities for town centres to invest heavily in making them highly accessible by sustainable transport (Liverpool City Region 2020c). This will help to attract people and families for leisure and recreation, as well as boosting health and reducing pollution.

Transport infrastructure must also be inclusive, and changes to transport infrastructure should follow a clear set of principles for inclusive design that meets the needs of people with people with limited mobility, vision, variations in perception or mental health issues. This should encompass facilities on public transport, adequate parking for disabled car users, and the impact of changes to street use (such as increased occupation of outdoor spaces to comply with Covid-19 restrictions) and increased provision for active transport.

Natural environment and decarbonisation

As well as the short-term crisis of Covid-19, we face a long-term climate emergency. At the same time, Covid-19 has sharply raised awareness of the importance of green spaces and of sustainable forms of transport.

Climate change and access to green space were high priorities for many interviewees, and particularly for young people. We found support for policies such as the following.

- Low carbon building practices, with town centre stakeholders and local authorities leading by example in their construction and their procurement processes. This could also help to build demand for low carbon products and skills for the low carbon economy.
- Encouraging businesses and events that encourage the consumption of activities and experiences rather than products (for example, arts and heritage events, festivals, or sports activities), or that promote sustainable, local, and low-carbon consumption.
- Local heat and renewable energy networks using the built environment of town centres.

These themes are emphasised by other reviews, such as the Grimsey review (2020), which emphasises the importance of accessible green space (including the '20-minute neighbourhood' concept).

In some town centres, communities are already exploring what can be done locally to tackle climate change. The Transition Town movement and Incredible Edible network are both very active across the city region. Partnerships for change in town centres should consider the role of these organisations and include decarbonisation and sustainability among their social value aims. Owners of buildings and other spaces should be encouraged to consider

opportunities for greening – for example, through developments such as vertical gardening, living walls, and so on.

The planning system: A creative force for positive change?

Often, the UK's planning system is seen as an obstacle for the regeneration of town centres – and indeed, it can sometimes appear contradictory.

On the one hand, town centres need a permissive approach which provides greater flexibility in how buildings are used and designated. Their survival relies on opportunities to experiment and to diversify the ways in which buildings and land are used, with the freedom to fail and change course, as necessary. For example, innovations that create a more people-focussed and sustainable environment should be encouraged. On the other, the planning system is a legal process of land use regulation, which must reconcile a range of competing values and interests in town centre land use. In the context of Covid-19, the government has sought to simplify and speed up decision making – for example, new regulation on permitted development rights which enable the demolition of existing buildings to be replaced by housing in town centres. While the economic incentives for property developers and owners are clear, there are risks from this policy in terms of the quality of buildings that are created as a result and the potentially negative impact on the integrity of an already weakened high street economy.

But strategic planning, done well, can also be a powerful tool to bring competing interests together around a shared vision of the future. This requires planning authorities to be explicit about the importance of person-centred outcomes in the planning process – and to be strong leaders in ensuring that it is delivered. Physical change in town centres can be a key driver of change, but not always in ways that are expected. Assumptions about how buildings can improve economic and social outcomes can be problematic, and overly dominant particularly if they are done to people rather than with them.

Planning can be a joint venture; a participatory process where the outcome is more about an exploration of the future role and purpose of place, than any single or iconic physical construction. In Scotland, for example, local design-led 'charettes' have been extensively used. In these, local residents, designers and businesses collaborate on a future vision of their town, culminating in a set of actions and/or a masterplan for the future. In doing so, they not only come up with practical options for the redesign and reuse of their town centre, but they also build partnerships for thinking more creatively about land, value, and the built environment.

Planning also has an important role to play in making places inclusive and accessible. The *National Design Guide* (MHCLG 2019) sets out definitions of accessibility and inclusion which should underpin an approach to the built environment and transport systems that supports these goals. The guide also recommends that all planning applications should be accompanied by a brief design and access statement that: "provides a framework for applicants to explain how a proposed development is a suitable response to the site and its setting, and demonstrate that it can be adequately accessed by prospective users" (MHCLG 2019). Developments within the city region should adopt a set of definitions and a requirement that accessibility be built into *all* new programmes and initiatives, as well as formal planning applications.

WORKING TOGETHER

How towns can provide a focus for community voice across the region

“It’s not about leadership, ownership and control, it’s about being the stewards of complex systems”

Stakeholder interviewee

Stakeholders across the city region, including local government officers and business and community leaders, were clear that engagement with the communities who live in and around town centres is vital in securing their future. That means working with the diverse groups who use town centres to give them a voice in decisions, and sometimes brokering the conversations that are necessary to make sure that diverse needs are met in ways that are inclusive and practical.

Town centres were seen as a potential focus for initiatives to raise awareness of local democratic processes, through pop-up meetings, displays, or events, and possibly also through vox pop and public meetings. This could include work to raise awareness of the benefits for towns of the city region, and ongoing projects related to this. Engagement activities could be built into other projects, for example alongside arts, heritage and other events, or alongside public services. Integrating awareness and participation with informal activities provides a way for people to learn more about how decisions are made and how – potentially – they can get involved.

An integrated approach could also help to reach a wider range of audiences, including those who can be harder to engage. Working within town centres to reach out and speak to people ‘where they are already’ offers an opportunity to bring together diverse voices. This could involve making contacts with existing community groups and in spaces where different people come together.

Strengthening participative democracy through, for example, citizens juries, could also help support the mayoral project. As our research has suggested, Covid-19 has raised awareness of the role of a directly elected mayor and how it can help provide a greater voice for the region.

Deep and sustainable engagement is worth having, but building and maintaining it takes time and money. Projects need to include funding for the work involved in building and maintaining social links, platforms, and networks. They also need to secure the specific skills and resources that will work best in particular places.

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APPENDIX A: ABOUT THE COMMISSION

TOWN CENTRES

17 town centres from across Liverpool city region's six constituent authorities were identified at the beginning of the commissions' work as town centres of focus for research and discussion.

- Liverpool city centre
- Widnes town centre
- Runcorn town centre
- Halton Lea town centre
- Huyton town centre
- Kirkby town centre
- Prescot town centre
- Southport town centre
- New Brighton town centre
- Bootle town centre
- St Helens town centre
- Earlestown town centre
- Birkenhead town centre
- Liscard (Wallasey) town centre
- Heswall town centre
- Moreton town centre
- West Kirby town centre.

The interim report drew together key information on each of the 17 in the Town Centre Vitality Index. The interim report concluded that there should be five town centres taken forward for further qualitative study with local stakeholders. These five town centres were:

- Birkenhead
- Huyton
- Runcorn
- St Helens
- Southport.

The commissioners were also provided with working papers on defining town centres which highlighted the working boundaries for data gathering in these town centres and the methodologies used to create comparable geographies.⁷

⁷ Available on request.

ABOUT THE COMMISSIONERS

Dr Alex Singleton – professor of geographic information science at the University of Liverpool

Alex is a professor of geographic information science at the University of Liverpool, and a director of the ESRC Centre for Data Analytics and Society and the ESRC Consumer Data Research Centre. He founded the Geographic Data Science Lab at the university and pioneers urban analytics research at the intersection of geography and data science. He has written four books and has over 50 journal publications, with a body of work that has both developed and applied geodemographic analysis to map the spatial and temporal dimensions of social inequalities, and utilising such data to measure and monitor the performance of retail settings. His work involves extensive collaboration with industry, government, and the public sector.

Bronwen Rapley – chief executive of Onward Homes

Bronwen is the chief executive for Onward Homes, a housing association owning and managing over 35,000 properties across the North West. Bronwen has worked extensively within the housing and regeneration sector for over 25 years. She has delivered a number of large regeneration projects and led the investigation and enforcement team of the social housing regulator. At Onward, Bronwen drives the vision, to make a positive difference in the communities Onward serves.

Claire McColgan MBE – director of Culture Liverpool

Claire's current appointment is with Culture Liverpool – an organisation that builds on the successes of Liverpool's year as European Capital of Culture in 2008 to deliver an international culture brand for the city region. Claire has taken a leading role in cultural policy since 2009, delivering national and international events including the Giant Spectaculars, Three Queens, and Liverpool Mersey River Festival, drawing millions of people to the city region. Additionally, Claire played a formative role as executive producer of the European Capital of Culture. This followed her role in developing a successful Creative Communities programme, which was vital in securing funding for Liverpool's 2008 Capital of Culture bid.

John Csizmadia – relationship Director, Lloyds Banking Group

John has over 30 years' experience dealing with major corporate clients and has worked for a number of key funders – including Barclays Capital, where he was a part of the successful European real estate team. As well as managing clients from a variety of sectors, John brings substantial real estate experience to his work on the Liverpool Town Centre Commission. He has been involved in finding funding solutions for projects ranging from city centre hotels, apartment schemes, shopping malls, and the development from scratch of an airport on a former a Ministry of Defence site.

Kim Cooper – senior town planner, Arup, and founder of Ideas for Liverpool

Kim is a senior town planner in Arup's planning, policy, and economics team. She has worked on many policy and development management projects within Liverpool, the North West, and across the UK. She is passionate about inclusive planning and her aim is to use planning to make sure everyone has the same access to quality places, resources, and opportunities. Kim is chair of the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) for the North West region, vice-chair of the national RTPI Education and Life-Long Learning Committee, and a member of the Liverpool City Region Local Enterprise Partnership Built Environment Board. She is also the founder of 'Ideas for Liverpool', a collective of young professionals who are working together to improve their city. For the last seven years, Kim has organised grassroots community walking tours in Liverpool as part of the global initiative

'Jane's Walk' - in memory of walkable cities advocate Jane Jacobs. Kim is named as one of the 'top 50 influential women in planning' by *The Planner* magazine and is also named on the Northern Power Women 'future list'.

Laura Pye – director of National Museums Liverpool (NML)

Laura joined National Museums in Liverpool in 2018. Her previous roles include head of culture for Bristol City Council and interim cultural manager at Warwickshire County Council. Laura managed a range of teams including museum and archives, archaeology, and ecology at Warwickshire Council, with her early career based predominately in the North across Liverpool, Lancashire, and Yorkshire. National Museums Liverpool manages multiple venues across Liverpool city region including Museum of Liverpool, Lady Lever Art Gallery, and Sudley House. Its aim is to create memorable experiences, for everyone, challenging expectations.

Liam Kelly – chief executive officer of Make CIC

Liam co-founded Make CIC in 2012, a social enterprise with the vision to see people turn their passions into prosperity. Make's core service is operating spaces for creative people to work, learn and socialise, across the Liverpool city region. More recently, this offer has expanded to include a bespoke commissions agency, called Made By Make Ltd, which fulfils extraordinary projects using the skills of Make CIC's associate residents and members. Liam is also deputy chair of the LCR Built Environment Board and chairperson of the Baltic Triangle Area Company – a representative business group in one of the UK's fastest growing creative and digital clusters. Through collaboration, the Baltic District has become a booming and vibrant creative and digital-led economy, hosting a range of internationally acclaimed festivals, galleries, music venues, and food outlets. More recently, Liam has joined as a member of the Birkenhead Town Deal Board, supporting Wirral Council to develop a vision for the future of Birkenhead and ultimately to secure Town Deal investment.

Pam Thomas – cabinet member for an inclusive and accessible city, Liverpool City Council

Pam became an elected member of Liverpool City Council in 2010 and cabinet member in 2017, sitting on the transport committee of Liverpool city region 2015–18. She is a disabled woman who has a history of community activism in the area of equality; Pam deals with removing disabling barriers in systems and practices rather than seeking solutions through awareness of personal limitations of mind, body, or senses. Holding a PhD in inclusive design from the School of the Built Environment at the University of Salford, Pam has conducted post-doctoral research and has related publications, and is a reviewer for the international academic journal *Disability and Society*. She has also been employed and worked as a freelance researcher and consultant in local government and third sector organisations which are controlled by disabled people.

Phil McCabe – development manager for Merseyside and Cheshire, Federation of Small Businesses (FSB)

As a member of Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) since 2012, Phil supports volunteer activists, researches and promotes policy, and has previous experience of project managing Liverpool city region's International Festival for Business in 2016. He is an active representative of the Liverpool City Region Business Group – a collaborative group of leading business organisations in the Liverpool city region which has welcomed programmes such as LCRCA's 'Households into Work' initiative. Additionally, Phil was previously appointed as PR manager and senior policy advisor for Forum of Private Business (FPB) – a national business support group.

Dr Sarah Longlands – director of IPPR North and chair of the commission

Sarah leads IPPR North, IPPR's dedicated think tank for the north of England. She argues that town centres have a vital role to supporting people and places in the North. Sarah is an expert in local and regional economic development with a PhD in urban studies from the University of Glasgow. Before joining IPPR North, she worked as director of policy at the Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES), where she led on the CLES's programme of place resilience. Her early career was in local government in the North East, where she developed a strategy and delivery plan for town centre regeneration in South West Durham.

Vidhya Alakeson – founding chief executive of Power to Change

Vidhya is the founding chief executive of Power to Change, set up in 2015 to support the growth of community businesses in England as a vehicle to create prosperous and vibrant communities. Vidhya has an extensive policy and government background including a previous appointment as deputy chief executive at Resolution Foundation – a think tank that researches the living standards of low- to middle-income families. As a board member of More in Common and a trustee for The Young Foundation, Vidhya advocates passionately for better connected and more sustainable communities by challenging polarisation and inequality across the UK. She has also recently been appointed to the board of the High Streets Taskforce – established by government to support high streets and town centres to thrive.

APPENDIX B: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE INTERIM REPORT

THE WORK OF THE COMMISSION AND THE INTERIM REPORT

The Liverpool city region (LCR) established its Town Centres Commission in January 2020, with the aim of developing a new vision for town centres across the Liverpool city region. This initial brief was rapidly overtaken by the Covid-19 crisis, which – alongside its immense social, economic, and health impacts – brings particular challenges for town centres.

In the interim report of the commission, we brought together some reflections on the issues faced by Liverpool city region's town centres as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and associated measures to control infection rates. We also set out some preliminary recommendations for responses to support the long-term sustainability of town centres, minimising risks and mitigating impacts in the short term (including the continuation of new regulations associated with Covid-19), and building on learning and potentially positive changes that emerged during the (first) lockdown period.

Responses to Covid-19 were still at an early stage, and so both our observations on the potential impacts for LCR's town centres and our recommendations should be read as those of an interim report, both in relation to the work of the commission overall and in relation to this crisis. Similarly, the status of the extensive research was inevitably changed. Rather than providing a comprehensive framework for future planning and a baseline against which to evaluate interventions, The interim report offered a snapshot of the circumstances of the selected town centres pre-Covid-19, and an account of the challenges, assets, risks, and opportunities that they took into the pandemic.

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 AND LOCKDOWN ON LCR TOWN CENTRES

The Covid-19 pandemic has *already* had a substantial impact on people and places in LCR, including the following.

- **Health impacts:** LCR already had a number of health challenges going into the outbreak, with relatively poor rates of general health on a range of indicators compared to the English population as a whole. Like many large cities with high rates of deprivation, it has seen both Covid-19 case and mortality rates above the English average. This in turn puts a high level of strain on communities, services, businesses, civil society, and households. The longer-term impacts on physical and mental health are likely to be severe.
- **Economic impacts:** Data on the economic impact of Covid-19 is still emerging, but early indications suggest that this will be dramatic and overwhelmingly negative. Sectors that are of particular importance to many of the town centres across LCR and in our selected sample may be especially at risk; these include retail, leisure, hospitality, and tourism, as well as transport, light manufacturing, and civil society. Some features of the LCR economy may make it particularly vulnerable, for example relatively *low* sectoral diversity, low job density, high unemployment, low qualification levels, and relatively

low rates of new business survival and growth. However, the region has strong governance systems, including the combined authority, and also good rates of business creation, entrepreneurship, and anchor institutions (such as its universities).

- **Social impacts:** Covid-19 has a disproportionately negative effect on many groups who are at risk of exclusion, vulnerability, and/or deprivation. For example, death rates are higher for disabled people and for people in more deprived communities, frontline occupations, and from minority ethnic groups; there are also particular challenges for households with children, especially those headed by a lone parent. LCR is at risk of increases in poverty, and child poverty in particular. However, and far more positively, social action, mutual aid, and the formation of bonds between neighbours and communities have all helped to ease the strains of lockdown and the pandemic itself; these will be crucial to the recovery in LCR, as elsewhere.

SUPPORT AND FUNDING FOR LOCAL AUTHORITIES

Central government has provided some support and funding for local authorities to date, in order to help them to meet the challenges of Covid-19. This has been very welcome, and has included support for some of the key sectors in the LCR, as well as for community initiatives. However, experts warn that additional funding and local powers to use this will be needed to avoid disastrous consequences for local authorities. This is especially true because they must manage the impacts of Covid-19 using budgets and services that have seen a decade of austerity and cuts. In addition, the funding formula for aid specific to the Covid-19 crisis has changed in ways that are disadvantageous to regions such as LCR where deprivation is high.

Within LCR, the combined authority has already played an important role in developing local responses to the crisis, with several key initiatives announced by the mayor. These include emergency support for businesses and community organisations, changes to travel to improve safety and security, and a crowdfunding campaign to help frontline organisations.

INTERIM RECOMMENDATIONS

The interim report set out some draft recommendations for longer term actions and recovery. These were grounded in the following principles.

1. Town centres are important foci for civic pride, action, and identity. Their use has changed over time, but people still recognise their 'existence value'.
2. LCR has a diverse range of town centres, each with its own challenges and opportunities. Programmes of policy and support that apply *generically* to town centres, both nationally and across the city region, are therefore of limited value unless they are accompanied by a substantial component of local discretion and opportunity for local stakeholders to shape the ways in which they are enacted in particular places. For this reason, local actors – including civil society organisations, high street businesses, local authorities, and community groups – should lead on the delivery of support for town centre recovery and transformation.
3. The LCR can play an important role in helping to co-ordinate post-Covid-19 recovery efforts, ensuring that existing resources are used as effectively as possible, and supporting towns in convening key stakeholders, institutions, and assets to hasten recovery. This includes encouraging work across different policy 'silos'; for example, transport, housing, and health.
4. Covid-19 and its economic and social impact will have a very significant effect on the future trajectory of town centres. It will challenge the commission and stakeholders across the LCR to think radically and imaginatively about the purpose and role of town centres now and in the future, and to act accordingly.

Our recommendations are as follows.

Recommendation 1: The LCR should convene a Town Centres Covid-19 Recovery Group (building on the established Town Centres Panel). This group will provide a forum to communicate and collaborate across LCR.

Recommendation 2: The strategy for post-Covid-19 recovery should give equal weight to both economic and social renewal in town centres.

Recommendation 3: Town centre recovery should develop strong civic partnerships to include a recovery across the public sphere.

Recommendation 4: Issues of governance and ownership in town centres should be addressed in the town centre recovery phase.

Recommendation 5: Environmental factors, including place quality and decarbonisation, should be at the heart of town centre recovery.

In addition, we make the following recommendations for central government.

- Government should increase local authorities' control over traffic management including relaxing regulations around zebra crossings to allow temporary crossings to be rolled out, giving powers to designate pavements as one way, and providing a pot of funding for extending pavements and closing roads to allow local economies to recover.
- The government should give combined authorities timetabling and fare-setting power over public transport in their area including buses and trains, to help encourage people back onto public transport and prevent a severe increase in car use post-Covid-19 (this has been seen, for example, in China). Government will need to work with combined authorities to fund public transport networks at a time where increased frequency and reduced capacity is required to maintain distancing.
- Government should announce a moratorium on the loss of publicly accessible space for development, whether privately or publicly owned, while social distancing is in place. Public squares, parks, and plazas should be protected from development during this period.
- Government should meet with representatives from the hospitality industry, retail, trade unions, and landlords to discuss bringing forward a programme of rent relief for the next nine months for small, independent traders to prevent mass market failure.
- Government should explore a 'stock buying' grant scheme to enable hospitality businesses to restock during a time period of little to no cash flow.
- Government should maintain use-class flexibility to allow town centre businesses to perform delivery functions and other additional uses into the future.
- Government should extend the job retention scheme for town centre businesses, sectors, and uses that are unable to re-open fully in the short term. This should be proportionate to the degree of capacity reduction required to meet social distancing guidelines.
- Government should permit local authorities to co-opt vacant retail units to use as flexible space, varying from additional floorspace for nearby businesses to training hubs and civil society centres, with a longer-term option for local authorities to purchase the units through rental payments.
- Government should redirect international expenditure on marketing the UK as a tourism destination for the next year towards local authorities and combined authorities to promote local places and town centres.

APPENDIX C: THE TOWN CENTRE VITALITY INDEX

As part of the evidence base for the commission, IPPR North created a baseline (pre-Covid) data tool for assessing town centre vitality: the Town Centre Vitality Index (TCVI). This research was provided to the commissioners to guide their deliberations, rooting them in baseline evidence. It was also presented to the Liverpool city region combined authority for future use.

The TCVI is a unique tool developed to support the work of the commission. It could, however, be further revised in the aftermath of Covid-19. This would allow ongoing updating and tracking over the long term for diverse purposes, including identifying trends in the eventual recovery from Covid-19 and assessing the impacts of policy interventions in the future.

Unfortunately, it will be a significant length of time before sufficient data is available to allow analysis across the full breadth of metrics on the TCVI which can identify the impact of Covid-19 on town centres.

The TCVI metrics were designed to give a holistic view of town centre wellbeing. They include:

- the population of retail and food and beverage businesses, capturing much of the traditional activity on the high street, alongside diversity of offer and the presence of independent businesses
- workplace profile, which highlights the role of town centres as employment hubs
- footfall, which is a fundamental indicator of success that describes how many people are in town centres and when
- amenities and services, looking at the role of town centres in providing services from education and health to leisure
- demand and deprivation, which describes the catchment area and considers the relative ability of those areas to support town centres
- place-based assets and environment, analysing the historic, natural, and significant assets of town centres including green space and air quality.

Some common findings from the TCVI as presented in the interim report were as follows.

- The profile of the retail, food and beverage offer is very different across this group of town centres, but the improvements are seen in the vast majority. This suggests that Covid-19 recovery may progress very differently depending on the mix and nature of businesses in these sectors prior to the pandemic and lockdown.
- A minority of town centres have a major role in supporting employment and entrepreneurship, and in the majority these activities are declining or stagnant. Increasing activity in these areas offers a way to improve vitality, attracting people to town centres as places to work and building other activities and services around this. Changes around working patterns and spaces associated

with Covid-19 must be considered; opportunities for innovation could be an important part of a recovery programme.

- Overall access to amenities and services is fair or good in the majority of these town centres; it is improving in almost all of them. In particular, access to healthcare provision and to leisure facilities is strong. These strengths may help to underpin a recovery from Covid-19.
- The town centres included in this project have a diverse profile in relation to measures of deprivation. However, in most cases, the proportion of people living in deprivation is either steady or increasing rather than reducing. This has important implications for demand in local economies, which may become acute in the wake of Covid-19. Emerging evidence suggests that hardship has increased in many communities, which creates potential risks for local economies as well as for residents as the country emerges from lockdown. Approaches to recovery must be sensitive to local needs and conditions.
- The trend towards improvement in place-based assets and environment across these town centres suggests that interventions including local investment, environmental schemes, and place improvement are proving effective. Again, these offer opportunities for asset-based approaches to Covid-19 recovery.

The TCVI helped us to identify common challenges and areas where they diverged ahead of the qualitative research programme.

Though the tool was drawn up as a baseline (and pre-Covid-19), several local authorities in the city region submitted further information for it after its inclusion in the interim report. Keeping the TCVI updated is a key task for measuring success holistically, and the combined authority should continue to monitor its town centres by building on the TCVI, updating it with new information and scoping in all of the city region's town centres.





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