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Recovery and district centres

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Given under lockdown people are beginning to rediscover their locality (see [Gary Warnaby's IPM blog piece](#)), and [using centres within walking distance of their homes more often](#), it is timely to reconsider the role and function of smaller, and specifically district centres, in recovery planning. With people noticing the [health and environmental benefits](#) of reduced commuter traffic, adding to the [well-documented benefits](#) of walking and cycling, we might now reinforce such positive developments through a commitment to strengthening centres close to people's homes, to embed ties to localities developed during lockdown. Furthermore, IPM research into 18 district centres in Greater Manchester suggests that around 150 businesses on average are located in each one, although the largest centres accommodate over 300. With 70 smaller, significant local and suburban centres across the GM region, collectively they make a significant contribution to the local economy. Moreover, if predictions come to fruition the 'New Normal' will involve more people working from home, place leaders now need to think more seriously about the potential for district centres to become more than just places for convenience shopping and personal services.

Rebalancing the economy and society through stronger district centres

So far, debates on how to revive high streets and centres mainly concern larger town and city centres, with little commentary or guidance for smaller centres, even though before lockdown, there is [evidence](#) people already wanted more from their local high street. This silence is perhaps not surprising, given the paucity of research and policy support for district centres. Sitting near the bottom of the retail hierarchy, perhaps many decision-makers assume they are not important, or will simply sort themselves out. Even though local people can easily identify where their local high street is, researchers and planners seem unable to define the nature of them, and sometimes cannot even precisely locate their boundaries. Tellingly, we are not even sure exactly how many local high streets there are in the UK, with best guesses somewhere between 5000-7000. The creation of Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) in district centres has simply been dismissed as unviable in the UK, even though [Amsterdam has created 65 neighbourhood Business Investment Zones](#) across just one city. Ultimately, [national guidance](#) to protect centres from out-of-town retail clearly has not worked, having [a detrimental impact on local centres](#). Greater clarity is needed, therefore, on how place management structures can be developed at a local neighbourhood scale.

Whereas we might find [thriving district centres spread across London](#), providing a wide range of services with good mass transit connections (although not everywhere in London), outside the capital many communities are underserved by their local centres. With the closure of local pubs, withdrawal of multiple retailers from many high streets, and the challenges now facing restaurant chains, simple activities such as going for a family meal, or to relax over a drink with friends, entails travelling elsewhere, and for some, or not at all. This inequality is amplified given [one in ten deprived areas in England & Wales are "food deserts"](#), with over 10 million lacking access to basic items such as fresh food within walking distance of their homes. Lockdown shines a light on how the planning system needs to better support communities who rely on walking to their nearest centre for everyday essentials and groceries. Additionally, if places are committed to mitigating climate change and improving air quality, we can no longer tolerate a situation whereby people have to travel to large out-of-town stores to access everyday needs, when such items could be available locally, precluding the need to get in a car and drive. By readdressing this imbalance during recovery, robust and multifunctional district centres might then reduce the need to travel, reduce leakages

from the local economy, and ultimately contribute to more liveable, pleasurable, and sustainable communities.

[Restoring vitality and viability in district centres: the Manchester approach](#)

The challenges facing district centres is the focus of two projects involving a partnership between the Institute of Place Management (IPM) and Manchester City Council, [Vital and Viable Neighbourhoods](#) and the INTERREG funded project, [Area Based Collaborative Enterprise \(ABCE\)](#). These projects aim to develop a better, evidence-based understanding of the key factors the local authority and its partners can influence to create more vital and viable local centres.

[Understanding your place and building local capacity](#)

Through the Vital and Viable project, the City installed a network of automated [Springboard](#) footfall counters in 10 of Manchester's 17 district centres, complemented by in-depth studies in five centres. Through this data, we were able to establish each district centre aligned with a [multifunctional footfall signature](#), although the volume of activity between each centre varied greatly. In addition to establishing the functionality of each centre, the data also provided a measure against which to monitor the impact of interventions. For example, we were able to demonstrate how additional market days in Harpurhey (North Manchester) and [Gorton](#) (East Manchester) aligns with sustaining and even growing footfall. In addition, the data reveals how the [trialling of late night opening in Withington](#) (South Manchester) contributed to a 30% increase in footfall compared to an average Friday, with local traders reporting record takings.

At a strategic level, the data also underscores Manchester's objective to create a community hub in [Harpurhey](#), a district centre serving relatively deprived catchment. That said the co-location of a shopping precinct, traditional market, and large grocery store serves the retail needs of the community quite well. The area, however, has benefitted from investment and regeneration targeted at creating new health, leisure and public facilities in the district centre. The accumulation of these services and employment anchors in one place generates synergies between co-located activities, making Harpurhey contrary to external perception, the busiest district centre in the city out of the ten we are monitoring. The transformation of Harpurhey into a multifunctional centre, demonstrates the successful application of a "community hub" in an area where private development is not forthcoming.

Whereas many major centres across the UK have footfall counters, it is rare to find them in district centres. The approach taken by Manchester to fund a network of counters, therefore, is highly innovative, generating hard evidence to support decision-making. In addition, the sharing of data locally in Withington, for example, has proved vital in consolidating and building capacity of local collaborative networks.

[Post-COVID recovery: Withington Case Study](#)

Lockdown, rather than rendering this work redundant, reinforces the need to extend and develop support for district centres. In this context, Manchester is now in a good position to make informed decisions about how to support district centres post-COVID. A good example is that with the footfall counters still running, we were able to establish that footfall in the city's district centres fell by 53%, compared to the national figure of 84%. Although still a significant drop, this figure resonates with reports from other local authorities, where local convenience stores are continuing to provide everyday needs, and have remained busy to serve both local communities and key workers. This does not just include national chains, but also smaller convenience and independent food traders. In Withington, for example, the independent greengrocers, bakery, and a store selling package free items all report doing well, with suggestions local residents who found empty shelves in the big supermarkets started using the local traders instead.

Furthermore, we are beginning to see local independent traders in district centres work together. In [Withington](#), for example, the IPM recommended that local traders work collaboratively to form a traders association and set up a unified social media presence. Subsequently, this has enabled traders to respond proactively to lockdown, to self-organise and promote both home-delivery services and online sales for both food and non-food items. Indeed, under lockdown it appears the audience for this network has grown, which can only help with recovery of the district centre. The network has also been supporting businesses access government support, taking some pressure off the local authority. It is important that local authorities begin to reach out and enter into dialogue with new and emerging local business networks, like the one in Withington, in relation to recovery. In short, district centres have proven to be relatively resilient during lockdown. Consequently, through the ABCE project, we are now beginning to map local capacity elsewhere, by identifying key place based stakeholders, networks and partnerships across all 10 centres where we have footfall counters.

The neighbourhood teams working for Manchester City Council in Withington have now begun to apply the [IPM's Recovery Framework](#). During the initial *crisis* phase, this involved liaison with the police and environmental health to assist those businesses remaining open with maintaining social distancing rules. In terms of *pre-recovery*, the city has quickly put in place road closures, the temporary closure of loading bays, pavement widening, and changing traffic signal priorities, focused on particular pinch points in and around the district centre; measures now replicated in other parts of the city. The City is now exploring the reinstatement of street cleaning, entering into discussion with local traders about social distancing in-store and in public areas outside stores, and exploring further road closures. The framework is also guiding *recovery* plans, with the City aiming to undertake an audit of local businesses to establish their intentions to reopen, to collaborate with traders to explore using public space in the Village for street trading, and to promote the phased reopening using existing social media channels. Ultimately, Withington can use its access to real-time footfall data to monitor the recovery.

With strong and effective local collaborative networks already in place, Withington has been able, not only to manage the impact of lockdown, but also to begin rebuilding momentum that had existed before lockdown focused on *transformation*. With good relations with external partners involved in the regeneration of the centre, Withington can quickly review and augment its vision in the light of the broader impact of COVID19.

Adapting places like Withington to manage social distancing, as many smaller centres in the UK are finding, is a particular challenge. Whereas larger centres can at least utilise unused parking rows or take out traffic lanes, this is more difficult in a smaller centre without disruptive measures to the road network. Furthermore, larger centres may also benefit from extensive car parking space, civic squares and pre-existing pedestrianised retail streets. Again, these assets are often not present in a smaller centre like Withington, which has required an extensive and disruptive programme of road closures to manage social distancing. Arguably, then it is smaller centres that need to make more extensive use of the [practical guidance on temporary measures](#), than their larger counterparts. Additionally, there is perhaps greater potential to make transformative change in smaller centres, through the permanent adoption of some temporary measures to create more usable public space. With improvements to appearance, walkability, recreational space, and place experience, such interventions could underpin a vision of how to reinvent a district centre as a multifunctional destination, where locals and visitors might wish to dwell and linger, other than simply drive to, park and drive away.

Words of warning

These positive developments, however, are muted. So far, it is not yet known precisely what the impact of lockdown will be on small businesses and local traders. The immediate effect was quite a shock with most businesses having to close. Whereas national initiatives have helped tie businesses over in the short term, it may be that restart costs for many will be too much, as is reflected in the recent wave of companies in the retail and hospitality sector going into administration.

Ultimately, the work with IPM underpins [Manchester City Council's Local Plan](#) review, to accommodate new policy guidance, which will emphasise how the city can encourage businesses, service providers, community groups and other actors to work collaboratively to improve the vitality and viability of district centres

What is not under question from the above, is the importance of district centres in planning policies and sustainable development. District centres, just as any other type of centre, need to steer away from mono-functional, retail-focus, [to emerge as multi-functional ones](#), supporting leisure and recreation, employment, tourism, heritage, culture, housing, employment, education, health and wellbeing, as well as retail, thus becoming resilient to anticipated future economic changes. As such, there is a clear requirement for centres to adapt to ensure that they meet this challenge, and for policy and decision-makers at a national and local level to give greater consideration of how they can support such transformation.