Creating Thriving Towns: What is the future for Wales' towns in the aftermath of the pandemic?

Towns are a vital part of everyday life for many people in Wales. Bustling market towns, commuter burbs, seaside towns, picturesque tourist attractions, post-industrial towns: 40% of the population lives in these small and distinctive places.[1] They are integral to the fabric of the country and act as a focus for living, employment, services and leisure. Each has its own history shaped by a unique constellation of forces and many local people are incredibly proud of their town. But while a vital component of the Welsh landscape, over the past few decades they have been repeatedly buffeted by wave after wave of complex problems. The rise of online shopping, the growth of out of town retail, convenience culture, increasing personal mobility and the closure of services such as banks, libraries, post offices and schools have posed questions about what our town centres are for. Broader societal challenges such as the climate and biodiversity crisis, demographic change, the legacy of austerity and technological disruption will be played out in our towns and have potential to exacerbate existing inequalities. While some towns will adapt to survive, others face uncertainty or decline.

Although the long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic remains unknown, it has the potential to compound and accelerate the challenges many towns face. Lockdown and restrictions on movement shut down town centres, increased online retail's market share and dramatically impacted the hospitality and tourism sectors on which many towns depend.[2] It is likely that we will continue to see the closure of many restaurants, pubs, cafes and shops as the long-term impact of the pandemic becomes clear. Almost 50% of retailers are at risk of failure, including many of our well-known national brands.[3] The crisis has revealed further inequalities between home owners and tenants, the employed, self-employed and gig workers, between old and young, and between the vulnerable and healthy.[4] The long-term economic, social and political impact will be felt in many of our already fragile towns centres.

A time for change?

It is easy to look the raft of challenges towns face and feel disheartened or a sense of inertia. But things can change, and they can change quickly. While the damage the pandemic has caused to individuals, businesses and communities cannot be underestimated, there are some positives emerging from this sudden change to our lives. The imposed lockdown restrictions have forced people to think and act more locally, rediscovering

[1] Michael Woods, 'Market Towns in Rural Wales: a Differentiated Geography' in Paul Milbourne, *Rural Wales in the Twenty-First Century – Society Economy Environment*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, p.151.

[2] This has particularly affected coastal towns; in places such as Aberystwyth, Llandudno and Porthcawl over 40% of the workforce is employed in sectors most affected by lockdown. See The Centre for Towns, *The Effect of the COVID-19 Pandemic on our Towns and Cities*. <https://www.centrefortowns.org/reports/covid-19-and-our-towns> (accessed 07 August 2020) p.16.

[3] Bill Grimsey et al (2020), *Build Back Better: Grimsey Review COVID-19 Supplement for Town Centres*, <http://www.vanishinghighstreet.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Grimsey-Covid-19-Supplement-June-2020.pdf> (accessed 30 July 2020).

[4] Julian Dobson, *A Critical Hope is the Foundation to Build Back Better*, <http://urbanpollinators.co.uk/?p=2683> (accessed 10 Aug 2020).

their immediate surroundings in ways they have not before. Communities adapted rapidly to the impact of lockdown by setting up online activities and conversation; collecting and distributing food for those in greatest need; or sharing shopping with neighbours. Daily walks or exercise in local parks and green spaces have taken on a new meaning. More people are working flexibly (or are furloughed) at home, are commuting less and spending more time with their families and in their communities. This shift may be prolonged; life might remain more local while the prospect of travelling remains daunting and the virtual becomes increasingly dominant.[5] A recent survey revealed 40% of people are feeling a stronger sense of local community and 39% are more in touch with friends and family as a result of the pandemic.[6] With 85% of people wanting to see at least some of these changes they have experienced during the pandemic continue afterwards,[7] local places and town centres could reap the benefits.

New understandings of living, working and leisure offer the opportunity to explore what our towns are for and how they can be reimagined with local people at their heart. The pandemic could prove to be the shock our town centres need, a once in a lifetime opportunity to redefine our social values and capitalise on an attitude of change. As we shift from crisis management to long term recovery there is an opportunity to radically rethink what our town centres are for and how they can be reimagined to survive and thrive. Perhaps, as Bill Grimsey describes, the pandemic has *"paved the way for a post-retail landscape to emerge."*[8] A broader focus on *"health, education, culture, housing, leisure, art and crafts, along with some shops"*[9] could provide the foundation for town centres as places to be rather than places to buy.[10] But what could this look like, and how can we bring our imagination and creativity to bear on the challenge?

Imagining alternative futures

In our town, things did eventually turn out alright. The initial shock of the pandemic virtually shut the town down, but it brought us closer together. People helped each other out, going to the shops for those who couldn't leave their homes, distributing food parcels, the weekly clapping… we found out more about the people around us than we had for a long time. As we emerged from the lockdown and the town started to open up, people started to ask questions about the future. Food, energy, work, homes… what initially started as a small group meeting occasionally grew to include many of the community leaders and groups. The council helped us open a 'Lab' on the high street for the community to share ideas and discuss what our town centre was for. It's evolved in the past so why not again now?

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[5] Long Crisis Network (2020), *Our Covid Future: The Long Crisis Scenarios*, London: Local Trust, <https://localtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Our-COVID-future_The-Long-Crisis-scenarios.pdf> (accessed 08 August 2020)

[6] RSA, *Brits see cleaner air, stronger social bonds and changing food habits in lockdown*, <https://www.thersa.org/about-us/media/2019/brits-see-cleaner-air-stronger-social-bonds-and-changing-food-habits-amid-lockdown> (accessed 08 August 2020).

[7] RSA, ibid.

[8] Bill Grimsey et al, ibid.

[9] Bill Grimsey et al, ibid.

[10] Julian Dobson (2015), *How to Save our Town Centres: A Radical Agenda for the Future of High Streets*, Bristol: Policy Press.

We thought hard about those who had suffered most: elderly people in care homes or isolated alone, the young... we worked with our local housing association to explore how we could integrate different groups into the town centre. Some small sites were identified- garages and back land plots mostly- and small clusters of homes were built, first for downsizers and then affordable homes specifically for young people. We identified a boarded-up guest house on the high street and applied for community ownership. We'd seen in Germany the idea of multigenerational meeting houses; with the support of local organisations we opened a community-run centre with a nursery, meeting room and social care to offer mutual support to all ages.

We had a few empty shops before but more after. Many businesses just didn't open up again, particularly the chain stores. Those that recovered quickest were the specialist shops, the shops that did what they did best. A community-led business renovated an empty building, creating three flats and new spaces for local independents; a zero-waste shop opened there too.

The pattern of working from home gradually reduced but it did continue as our digital infrastructure improved. People still felt isolated from colleagues working on their kitchen tables though. Our local business group came up with the idea of creating a shared workspace in the town centre where people could come and work together. With our local authority's support it was a roaring success. It led to other spin-offs: a community-run workshop and a business start-up centre have been vital in getting people new skills and into work, particularly in the booming green and retrofit industries. Other businesses thought hard about what they do and became more entrepreneurial. A local café worked with an artist to create a covered outdoor space in their yard for film showings, events and activities. Another group set up a cooperative with local farmers to buy and distribute fresh produce supported by a pedal powered delivery service around town.

Temporary pavement expansions, planters and cycle lanes were installed during the pandemic. Some of the parking on the square was relocated to allow seating to spill out on to the pavement. The town council helped fund new awnings so people could sit out in all seasons, we have rugs on the chairs during winter. The square felt like the heart of the town again and a monthly market started. The temporary street installations just didn't get removed. We tapped into funding to extend the short-term measures to make walking and cycling to the school and health centre on the edge of town safer. These routes were lined with edible plants and fruit trees planted by the pupils. Over time people moved around town differently.

I wouldn't say what we have done is perfect; there are still constant challenges. But it's a start. I think we have come a long way.

From words to action

This is not a story about a real place and how it has changed. It is likely to be very different to the story others would tell about their towns. But while a work of fiction each of the projects is based on real life examples.[11]

[11] A high street lab, workshop and studio, CoLab Dudley, runs from a shop on Dudley High Street; Mehrgenerationenhauser (multigenerational houses) are a government supported initiative found across Germany; low carbon downsizing homes and homes for the young have been built in Abergavenny and Chepstow respectively, run by Monmouthshire Housing Association; three flats and three shops including a zero-waste shop have been created in the renovated Corn Exchange in

As Rob Hopkins, founder of the Transition Towns movement describes in 'From What is to What If', such stories are essential to overcome 'wicked problems' such as the impact of the pandemic, climate change and biodiversity loss, inequality and the collapse of retail:

> "We live in a time bereft of such stories - stories of what life could look like if we were able to find a way over the next twenty years to be bold, brilliant and decisive, to act in proportion to the challenges we are facing and to aim for a future we actually feel good about."[12]

I believe that as built environment professionals we have a vital role in telling these stories. In 'Transforming Towns: Designing for Smaller Communities,' I argued that increasing political interest in smaller communities make this is an ideal time for designers to lead the way in considering the future of town centres.[13] There is considerable opportunity to apply our ingenuity, creativity, imagination, collaborative skills and problem solving to take the lead in shaping the future of these sensitive environments.

Much of the strategic framework needed to support this shift already exists. In committing local authorities to improving social, economic, cultural and environmental well-being, the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act can be its foundation. In the wake of the pandemic, more than 80% of people believe health and wellbeing should be prioritised over economic growth.[14] The town-centre-first approach embedded in Welsh Government's Transforming Towns initiative proposes locating public services in town centres, reusing vacant buildings and sites and enhancing landscape to increase town centre footfall.[15] Alongside these strategic policies, the development of 'Place Plans' led by local communities creates opportunities for local people to influence the future of their places, producing place-specific visions, managing services and building small developments. Local people know their places best and are well placed to make policy specific to the opportunities and challenges faced by individual communities.[16] Together, these policies create an environment in which transformation can happen but to capitalise on the desire for change we need to act. As

Crickhowell; business hubs are found across Wales, eg: Carmarthen, Newtown, and IndyCube co-working spaces; the café with a covered yard for events is Fennelly's in Callan, Ireland; food co-operatives operate in Capel Dyserth and Aberporth; e-cargo bikes have been used to deliver food in Lewisham; temporary street adaptations are occurring across the UK; Incredible Edible have created edible spaces around Todmorden and Mini-Holland in Waltham Forest has boosted walking and cycling rates through green active travel routes.

[12] Rob Hopkins (2019), From *What Is to What If: Unleashing the Power of Imagination to Create the Future we Want.* London: Chelsea Green Publishing, p.4.

[13] Matthew Jones (2020), *Transforming Towns: Designing for Smaller Communities,* London: RIBA Publishing.

[14] Simon Youel, *New Polling: Only 12% Want UK to Prioritise Economic Growth Over Wellbeing* Positive Money <https://positivemoney.org/2020/05/new-polling-only-12-want-uk-to-prioritise-economic-growth-over-wellbeing/> (accessed 15 August 2020).

[15] Welsh Government: *Transforming Towns: Support to improve town centres* <https://gov.wales/support-improve-town-centres> (accessed 15 August 2020).

[16] Matthew Jones & Amanda Spence (2019), 'Planning for Well-being: A critical perspective on embedding well-being in community-led planning processes in Wales', in Jones, Rice & Meraz, *Designing for Health: Home City Society*, Delaware: Vernon Press, 2020.

Bill Grimsey describes, *"for those communities and towns that have not already started building plans to transform their place, they need to start now."*[17]

There are examples of places using imagination to take the future into their own hands. Over the past decade Ruthin Town Council have developed a vision to guide the future development of the North Wales market town[18].Founded on extensive public engagement which culminated in Ruthin Future Week, a now annual week of public engagement events and activities, the plan sought to identify priorities based on an evidence-based approach to design. The resulting town plan proposed a series of small-scale affordable interventions creating maximum impact from minimum means combined with longer-term transformational projects requiring more complex funding and delivery. In 2018, the plan was revisited in response to changes in policy, the consolidation of council assets and vacancy of important buildings. The updated framework aimed to create a compact, walkable town with new homes for first time buyers and the elderly in town to encourage all ages to live well in the town centre. Community support and a creative vision has enabled the town council to pursue significant projects such as the community asset transfer and refurbishment of the Old Court House into a community hub combining an event space, co-working and tourist information and a successful bid to host the North Wales Velodrome. Since the pandemic, a temporary one-way system to create wider pavements and increase accessibility has been proposed, measures initially outlined in the plan. Close collaboration has allowed the town council to take the lead in imagining the future of their town, founded on evidence-based design. As Gavin Harris, Mayor of Ruthin describes:

> *"Since its inception in 2010, the Ruthin Future initiative has played an increasingly important role in the strategic development of Ruthin Town Council's projects and ambitions. Whilst we don't have the resources or administrative capacity to deliver all projects at the same time, each incremental improvement builds into the plan and brings added value to other connected initiatives."*[19]

A way forward?

> *"If we wait for governments, it will be too late. If we act as individuals, it will be too little. But if we act as communities, it might just be enough, and it might just be in time."*[20]

We are at moment of profound change. As we move from recovery to transformation, a shift is needed away from retail to a broader vision of town centres as the focus of their community with civic functions at their heart. They are familiar and often historic places that could be rejuvenated by new ideas on how to live, work,

[17] Bill Grimsey et al, ibid. p.10.
[18] Ruthin Future has been developed by Ruthin Town Council working with the author at Design Research Unit Wales and Coombs Jones Architects and Makers
[19] Gavin Harris quoted in Matthew Jones (2020), *Transforming Towns: Designing for Smaller Communities*, London: RIBA Publishing, p.139.
[20] Rob Hopkins, ibid. p.6.

trade and socialise, enabled by changing technologies and contemporary thinking. Bringing together a wide range of uses and activities in a town-centre-first approach can create vibrant, multi-layered places rich in social interaction. Public life can be supported by adapting squares, streets and parks, expanding and connecting active travel routes and integrating green space in new development. Space is needed to test out new ideas and take risks. These could be temporary prototypes, meanwhile use of vacant property, incremental actions, small scale acupunctures or larger transformations, but all need to be underpinned by constant reflection on '*what the town centre is for.*'[21]

Any change needs to be 'local first' and created in collaboration with local people, groups and anchor institutions. These organisations know their places best and are invested in their long-term future. While Place Plans offer one route toward future planning led by local people, we need to develop a wider array of tools and practices to meaningfully include the breadth of local voices. Alongside more traditional developer-led redevelopment, alternative approaches such as community wealth building, co-operatives and local entrepreneurship offer opportunities to place control with local people. Local initiatives need encouragement and nurturing. Communities cannot be expected to deliver long-term change alone; they need support and guidance. Sharing ideas, working together and effective leadership are vital in keeping good intentions going. Local authorities and town councils can support this by acting as enablers, open to creative opportunities such as community asset transfer and short-term use of premises.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, creativity and imagination is vital in crafting, sustaining and implementing long-term visions for our town centres. Thriving towns for all are possible: now is the time to bring our creativity and ingenuity to bear on the challenge.

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[21] Dan Hill, 'What is the High Street For?' In Mayor of London (2019), *High Streets: Adaptive Strategies*, London: GLA, p.30. <https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/ggbd_high_streets_adaptive_strategies_web_compressed_0.pdf> (accessed 12 August 2020).