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Is what cities need what people want? An evaluation of "Spaces for people" in Aberdeen city centre, in order to ensure post-pandemic-induced people-first approach to future sustainable public life.

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2021

IS WHAT CITIES
NEED
WHAT PEOPLE
WANT ?

AN EVALUATION OF 'SPACES FOR PEOPLE' IN ABERDEEN CITY CENTRE,
IN ORDER TO ENSURE POST PANDEMIC INDUCED PEOPLE-FIRST
APPROACH TO FUTURE SUSTAINABLE PUBLIC LIFE.

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'Is what cities need what people want? An
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‘our ordinary surroundings, (...) have an immediate and continuing effect on the way we feel and act, and on our health and intelligence’

(Hiss 1999 quoted in Hollander p.17)

Due to the unprecedented global pandemic and subsequent measures to control spread of COVID19, cities have had to quickly re-evaluate the importance and use of public, accessible places around us, and acknowledging that the quality of outdoor spaces shapes our quality of life. In the summer of 2020, the Spaces for People programme was implemented throughout Scotland to help people engage (walk, cycle, commute, meet, shop) with city centres more safely in light of the coronavirus pandemic. In Aberdeen, the programme introduced—among other things—widened pavements, outdoor seating, marquees, planting and the partial pedestrianisation of Union Street (from Market to Bridge Street).

Although the programme was implemented in the interests of public health, it saw the introduction of changes which might otherwise be used in urban design terms to create more people-friendly spaces. In that sense, they would support people to meet, relax, socialise, and interact with each other and with the city, with potential benefits for mental and physical health. It has also been argued that attractive places can increase footfall, helping to increase the economic prosperity of the area.

Therefore, this research explored whether such a programme could become a catalyst for a post-pandemic revival and transition to a healthier, more resilient Aberdeen.

**‘Urban spaces,
landscapes, and
buildings...
profoundly
influence our
well-being’**

(Goldhagen, 2017, p. xxiii)

The pandemic revealed how important outdoor spaces are to mental health and wellbeing. As cities went into lockdown, many fundamental elements of our lifestyles changed suddenly and dramatically. Remote working, home schooling, social distancing and travel ban measures were necessary in the fight against the virus. However, the relative lack of socialising and outdoor meeting took a significant toll on many people’s mental wellbeing.

In turn, cities changed to reflect this shift in lifestyle, attempting to reintroduce what was once lost. Spaces for People—a Scottish infrastructure programme implemented to make public spaces safer during the pandemic—introduced urban planning measures that were never present before. It placed people as the central priority since the goal was to protect public health through social distancing. In Aberdeen, said measures included widened pavements, pop-up outdoor seating, café marquees, pocket green spaces and pedestrianizing the busiest part of Union St. These interventions brought about behavioural changes where people had to learn the city anew, adapt how they use the space and make alternative travel and lifestyle choices (Zecca et al., 2020).

As a result, not only were these outdoor spaces a vital part of the mechanism to fight and control the virus, but they also provided respite, a much needed break from staying at home and a collective sense of community despite social distancing.

While sometimes being seen as one of many other restrictions placed on people’s lives, another deviation from what is ‘normal,’ Spaces for People did adopt a people-first approach, an urban planning concept that has many benefits. Placing people rather than vehicle movement at the heart of design goes hand in hand with mental and physical wellbeing, creating a sense of community. Therefore, this research analyses Spaces for People from an urban planning point of view, not as a temporary public health response to Covid-19. It explores lessons learned that can be implemented in the future to create a healthier, economically resilient, and attractive city centre.

This research explored the effects of the 'Spaces for People' programme in Aberdeen with the objective to identify any positive effects it brought and which could be sustained. This, in turn, can provide a catalyst for permanent transition to a healthier, more sustainable city where walking and cycling are the new norm.

It assessed whether the pandemic-induced innovation and solutions can be adaptable and practicable to achieve better outdoor spaces and an urban future with improved wellbeing of citizens. In doing so, it explored where Spaces for People has succeeded and improved the public realm and quality of life and, where it failed, to signal improvements to such interventions in the future.

It also potentially provides a springboard to a structured debate on the pedestrianisation of Aberdeen's city centre. Therefore, the study investigated the impacts of Union Street's partial pedestrianisation and other measures implemented in Aberdeen's city centre, exploring how spaces have been used during and post-lockdown to deliver people-first public spaces.

The researchers drew information from Aberdeen City Council documents, policies and statistics, to help establish whether the transformed built environment could have a positive impact on citizens' wellbeing.

Fig. 01 _ Aberdeen_Union Street 09/10/2020 [Author owned]



‘In a way all movement involves intermittent walking. Pedestrianism is everywhere, even when using those big mobility machines’

(Urry 2007, p.63)

This report’s area of study is the centre of Aberdeen (identified as the ‘heart of Aberdeen’ in the ACC Masterplan 2015) - a key space that could motivate and assist the rest of the city to realise its potential and benefit all the citizens as ‘downtown is the only part of the city that belongs to everybody’ (Speck 2012, p.260).

Known locally as the Granite Mile, Union Street in Aberdeen has historically acted as the spine for many city activities. It plays a key role in the social, civic, commercial and cultural life of Aberdeen. It is architecturally unique with historic buildings running along both sides that provide variety and interest in the city centre. Despite being a key urban space in Aberdeen, Union Street can be regarded as being part of a continuing debate about the role and nature of the contemporary ‘high street’, subject to changes in demand for retail, leisure, transportation and commercial activities.

In addition, large plots of city centre land are occupied by shopping centres (Union Square, Trinity, Bon Accord, St Nicholas Shopping Centre – see Fig. 02 below), wherein there has been a shift in the loci of activities that remain in the city. Those centres - after opening hours – may also act as a barrier to pedestrians due to required detours in navigating the city on foot, changes in levels, external steps and blocked routes. The built environment and connectivity between key areas in the city play a huge role in shaping the coherent vision and character of the city (Bradbury et al 2007). Urban identity is also defined by the accessibility and permeability of spaces that set the walkable environment.

The omnipresence of car usage and its impacts on safety, pollution in the city centre, traffic noise as well as social alienation due to vehicle use - have frequently been associated with declining the ‘liveable’ and social aspects of street space (Jacobs 1961/2011; Sheller and Urry 2000; Sustrans 2020a). Inadequate pavement capacities and unattractiveness of the experience of walking in the city centre in the car-centric environments have contributed to the pejorative connotations with the city centre in Aberdeen, for they create an environment where pedestrians and cyclists feel unsafe (Bradbury et al 2007).

Yet, '[i]n a way all movement involves intermittent walking. Pedestrianism is everywhere, even when using those big mobility machines' (Urry 2007, p.63).

Aberdeen, particularly its city centre, is facing a major economic and cultural shift, highlighted in the 2015 ACC masterplan. One of the masterplan's main aims is to change perceptions about the city from being an oil and gas city to a sustainable, vibrant business hub. This includes diversifying the business sector, providing new job opportunities and increasing the number of dwellers within the centre. The masterplan also aims to highlight Aberdeen's cultural uniqueness by revealing its distinct urban and cultural character. This in turn can strengthen the city's tourism.

This vision has remained largely unchanged during Covid-19. In fact, the pandemic has strengthened it and revealed the importance of the city centre as a hub for social and commercial exchange. This has been echoed through Aberdonians' dismay and campaigns against the closure of its largest department stores, John Lewis and Debenhams, due to the pandemic (Hall 2021)

The preservation of the high street and street life in the city centre depends on foot traffic, an element that was lost and replaced with online shopping during lockdown (Sustrans 2020a). Therefore, the city centre needs interventions that increase foot traffic in order to realise the Masterplan (2015) vision.

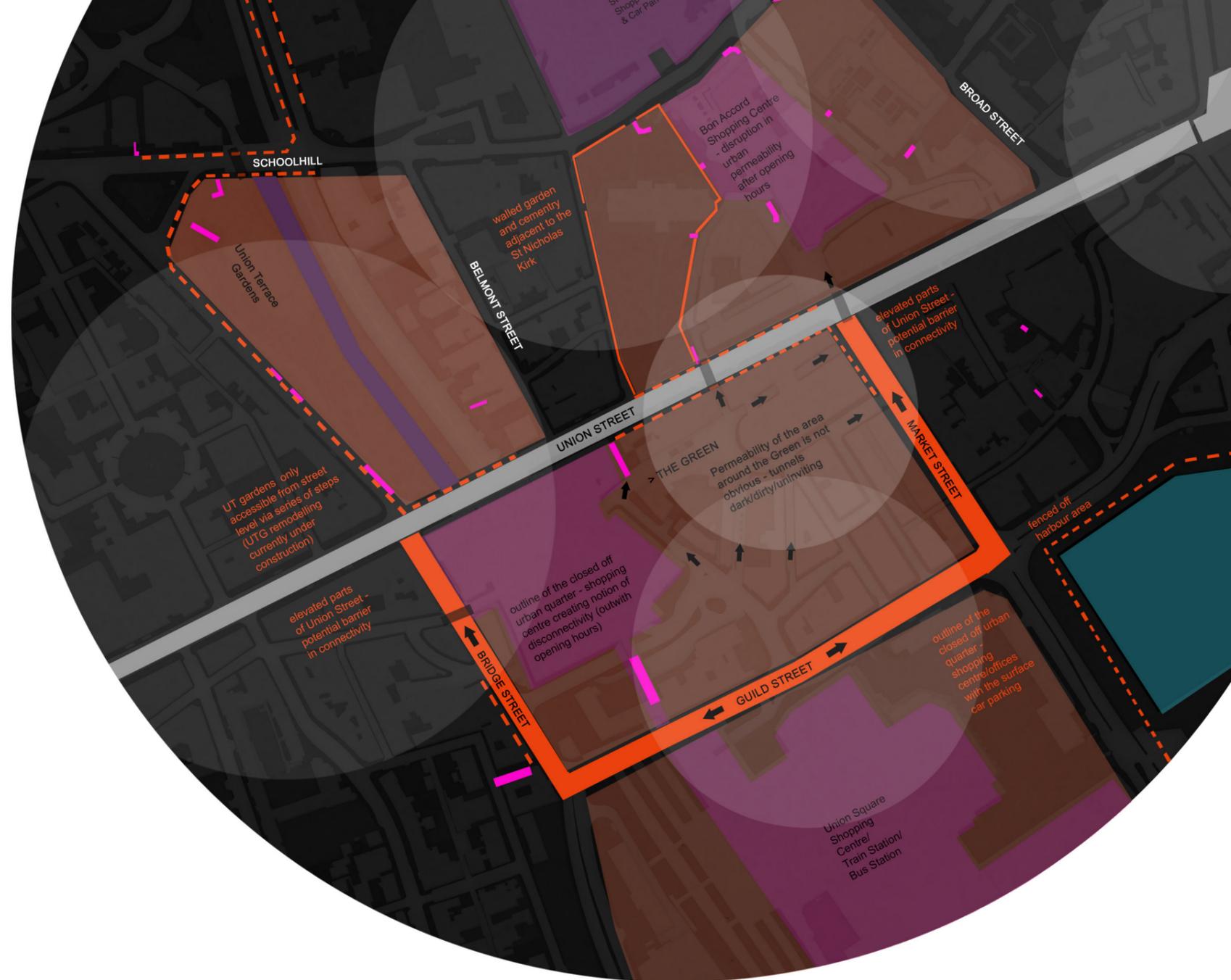


Fig. 02 _ Aberdeen_Disconnectivity map [PORTIS 2020]



4. SPACES FOR PEOPLE: AN OVERVIEW

- cafe seating / Marquees
- ▲ Planters
- Widened pavements
- Pedestrianised area
- Timber seating

Spaces for People was a nationwide initiative whose aim was to make cities safer for commuting on foot and exercising during the pandemic. Managed by Sustrans and funded by the Scottish government, the programme came into measure upon guidelines from NHS Scotland regarding public health safety, as many Scottish streets are not wide enough to accommodate the imposed 2m social distancing measures. Thus, it allowed local councils to introduce infrastructural and planning interventions to implement public health measures with minimal disruption to people's daily businesses (Sustrans 2020c).

In Aberdeen, said interventions included widening pavements on Union St and George St and introducing new bus stops, planters, outdoor seating, and cycling lanes. The scheme also included the pedestrianisation of Union St from Market St to Bridge St. (Fig. 03 map with locations of planters, benches and other features). Spaces for People will be in place until the Scottish Government, in consultation with NHS Scotland, deems it safe to lift social distancing measures (Aberdeen City Council 2020a).



Fig. 03 _ Map of Aberdeen City Centre 'Spaces for People' interventions [author owned]

‘our ordinary surroundings, (...) have an immediate and continuing effect on the way we feel and act, and on our health and intelligence’

(Hiss 1999 quoted in Hollander p.17)

Major global events such as pandemics and economic and military crises have far-reaching social, economic and environmental consequences, thus shaping societies and the way people experience everyday life (Gehl, 2020). They also highlight cities’ shortcomings in fostering physical and mental health and creating resilient economies.

Nevertheless, such crises provide an opportunity for enacting positive change. For instance, Spaces for People was introduced to restore some semblance of normality in people’s lives following the strict lockdown imposed in March 2020. As lockdown saw the closure of all nonessential shops and restrictions on all nonessential outdoor activity, the programme provided Aberdonians with a way to shop, meet and navigate through the city safely despite the ongoing threat from the coronavirus. Thus, Spaces for People has revealed the value of outdoor public spaces in our urban realm.

People-centred interventions play an indispensable role in improving the quality of life and setting the groundwork for a sustainable and climate-ready future. The programme created an alternative way of life that seemed unconceivable before. Suddenly, there were places to socialise, to interact outside and to engage with the city on a deeper level.

It is vital ‘to learn that our ordinary surroundings, built and natural alike, have an immediate and continuing effect on the way we feel and act, and on our health and intelligence’

(Hiss 1999 quoted in Hollander p.17).

In the same sense, it additionally provided insight into what a pedestrianised Aberdeen could look like. Instead of the vehicle-dominated Union St that residents have adapted themselves to, the pedestrianised area provided a much needed respite from noise and traffic pollution, allowing people to enjoy the safety of walking without nearby traffic.

**‘Walking is a basic right for any city dweller (.)
While only some people use cars, public transport, or bikes, nearly everyone walks, and walking is free.’**

(Gomes 2020)

‘Walking is a basic right for any city dweller. It is not just good for health and non-polluting: the social and economic benefits are very considerable. Walking highlights the senses and relaxes the mind. It is the one activity that gives you a full appreciation of all the dimensions of urban space. While only some people use cars, public transport, or bikes, nearly everyone walks, and walking is free.’

(Gomes 2020)

Therefore, it can be argued that Spaces for People is a resilience measure against the likely economic recession, social isolation and poor mental and physical health resulting from lockdown. It is a conscious decision recognising that the quality of outdoor spaces shapes the quality of citizens’ lives and is synonymous with public health (Chang et al. 2016; Ding et al. 2016; see Fig. 04). Therefore, such a programme can become a catalyst for a much-needed post-pandemic transition to a healthier, more resilient Aberdeen. It is a wealthy opportunity for analysis and reassessment of the current urban environment in the city.

5. POST PANDEMIC TRANSITION



Fig. 04 _ Aberdeen_Spaces for People June 2021 [author owned]

‘Every day
I walk myself
into a state of
well-being (...)
I have walked
myself into my
best thoughts,
and I know of
no thought so
burdensome
that one cannot
walk away
from it’

(Kierkegaard quoted in Gehl 2010, p.v)

Historically, high streets were the main social and commercial hubs in cities, places where people can come together and socialise, run errands and enjoy themselves (Sustrans 2020a). However, in the 20th century, cities have witnessed a steady decline in the usage of high streets. At the time, prioritising car movement over pedestrians was thought to be the most efficient traffic management strategy (Historic England 2018). In recent years, online shopping and shopping centres have also posed significant challenges to the vitality of high streets (Sustrans 2020a).

However, these proved to be an impediment to creating cohesive and engaging spaces in cities; vehicle domination leaves the city disconnected, unsafe for pedestrians and lacking in character. In turn, high streets have become more like motorways: traversed through rather than inhabited and experienced (Sustrans 2020a). The quality of outdoor spaces shapes our quality of life (Weijis-Perrée et al. 2021, Gehl 2010). Cities devoid of human-centric, inclusive civic spaces do not meet citizens’ intrinsic social and cultural needs to sustain good mental and physical health. By moving through, walking, inhabiting, interacting and engaging with spaces, we create special bonds with our cities. When the city centre provides a variety of activities to happen, including a mix of shopping, socialising, artistic murals and moments of pause or respite, it creates a thriving environment where people want to be.

‘Every day I walk myself into a state of well-being and walk away from every illness. I have walked myself into my best thoughts, and I know of no thought so burdensome that one cannot walk away from it’
(Kierkegaard quoted in Gehl 2010, p.v)

‘Public realm represents a complex space of social interaction that is generally open and accessible to all citizens, and its quality is seen as key to urban livelihood’ (Gehl, 2021). Since most of said public realm consists of streets, they are key to creating diverse, sustainable and thriving communities as mentioned before. This means placing people at the heart of urban planning and design as opposed to vehicles (Bradbury et al 2007).

‘City Planning and Management are of particular importance for reducing the burden of unhealthy environments.’

(Aberdeen City Council 2020 p. 45)

In Aberdeen, Spaces for people has provided just that. Many places acquired new characteristics where people can linger, pause, watch other people walk by, listen to street musicians or have a coffee and read a newspaper (Fig. 04 photo collage). Pedestrianisation and widened pavements have largely contributed to this new, welcoming environment. Providing more room for pedestrians has flipped the street hierarchy, placing people’s needs over vehicle movement. Thus, the very aspects of active travel that formed an integral part of the Covid-19 discourse are also an integral element for creating liveable, sustainable cities (Sustrans 2020a).

It is worth noting that Aberdeen was already on the path to enhancing its urban realm since before the pandemic. Its proposed 2020 Local Development Plan (LDP) details the city’s strategy for carrying out the visions in Scotland’s National Planning Framework (NPF3) for creating:

- a. sustainable place
 - b. resilient place
 - c. low-carbon place
 - d. connected place
- (Aberdeen City Council 2020c)

It is now more important than ever to create resilient cities, for it has proven necessary in the face of crises such as global pandemics or economic recessions. The LDP’s translations of these visions for Aberdeen, in addition to the city’s 2015 Masterplan, are necessary for our recovery from the impacts of the Coronavirus pandemic and subsequent lockdowns.

The LDP has an overarching theme encompassing health and wellbeing: policies either directly address health concerns (such as policies WB1-5) or promote it implicitly through placemaking, active travel, and sustainability.

‘City Planning and Management are of particular importance for reducing the burden of unhealthy environments.’
(Aberdeen City Council 2020 p. 45)

‘access to natural and planned open space with varied and safe opportunities to play and meet has a positive impact on physical activity levels and mental health’

(Aberdeen City Council 2020c, p. 45)

Many of the wellbeing Policies in the plan address pollution levels in Aberdeen, both air and noise. Aberdeen City Centre (covering areas from King St. to Holburn St.) is declared as an air quality management area (AQMA) because it currently exceeds the EU’s mean objective for Nitrogen oxide (NO₂) and the national mean objectives for both NO₂ and particulate matter (PM₁₀). This is due to emissions from road traffic. As a result, the plan champions policies and measures to promote active travel (walking and cycling), reduced dependency on cars (particularly high-emission vehicles), and quality placemaking design that increases walkability in the city.

In addition, Union St. is a designated noise management area (NMA), an area in which noise levels (predominantly those emitted from transport) need to be managed. It is worth noting that one of the masterplan (Aberdeen City Council 2015) objectives (4. A Living City for Everyone) is to promote city centre living as a measure to transform it into a livelier place. Both noise and air pollution are impediments that make living in the city centre unattractive to residents.

In addition to the reduced air and noise pollution levels, pedestrianising Union Street creates a more physically and mentally healthy environment by fostering active travel and promoting the creation of outdoor social spaces. This has already been witnessed and, for the most part, achieved through Spaces for People, as mentioned before. The local development plan also supports this transition under the Health and Wellbeing Policies, stating that *‘increased access to natural and planned open space with varied and safe opportunities to play and meet has a positive impact on physical activity levels and mental health.’* (Aberdeen City Council 2020c, p. 45). The significant potential positive impacts on psychological well-being through walking have also been highlighted in the context of global awareness of improving ‘mental health and wellbeing’ (United Nations [UN] 2018, World Health Organization [WHO] 2018).

Therefore, pedestrianisation and support for walking is a key element to be taken from Spaces for People that can be implemented permanently, creating a positive urban impact on the city centre.

7. ECONOMIC PROSPERITY IN CITIES

Attracting residents to live in the City Centre, as highlighted and promoted by the Masterplan (Aberdeen City Council 2015), is a viable way to create a more vibrant and economically resilient Aberdeen. There is a need in the city to diversify beyond the oil and gas industry, revamping the city into a trade, innovation and business hub (as per the masterplan's Objective 2. Growing City Centre Employment Base). Likewise, increasing tourism and visitors to the city is a contributor both to Aberdeen's economic strategy and attractiveness as a place to live and work (Objective 1. Changing Perceptions). Achieving these objectives relies on increased footfall in the City Centre, and as such, the masterplan proposes Union St.'s pedestrianisation as a crucial measure to attract said foot traffic. In fact, pedestrianisation also achieves objectives 4, 5, 7, and 8 of the masterplan, which call for increased city centre living, promoting the city's unique identity, leading the way in sustainable living and development and fostering culturally distinctive events (Aberdeen City Council 2015). All contribute to a more resilient economy. In fact, a CABA (2007) study has found that the better the quality of a street's design, the higher the residential market prices.

The masterplan goals go hand in hand with the LDP's Vibrant City Policies (VC1-VC12). Those said policies recognise that most of Aberdeen's retail space and activity are concentrated in the City Centre. The area is also the main shopping destination for Aberdeenshire dwellers. Therefore, it needs to maintain its competitiveness by creating an attractive visitor experience (Aberdeen City Council 2020c). This can be achieved by creating a safe and accessible place for visitors who already shop in the city centre on foot due to the dispersed parking availability throughout the centre.

In addition, the City Centre can become more attractive to visitors by diversifying its functions. This means including more mixed-use spaces such as outdoor seating and open space, functions that encourage people to stay longer after working hours, venues and events and overall, a place that prioritises people and their wellbeing over cars and traffic. Indeed, it can be argued that the pedestrianisation of Broad St is a positive achievement and an asset already contributing to the culture and tourism scene in Aberdeen, as recognised by the LDP (Aberdeen City Council 2020c). Lingering on foot and finding safe, car-free streets to wander around the city and visit various attractions increases the amount of time

7. ECONOMIC PROSPERITY IN CITIES

visitors spend at the retail and cultural core and increases footfall, which in turn sustains businesses. Indeed, this existential crisis in terms of the purpose of town centres requires us to identify interventions which might help to turn the tide, especially in the light of increasingly online retail during lockdown (as discussed by Carmona 2021).

Finally, walking and cycling are cheaper and more sustainable modes of travel. Therefore, the number of people choosing these transport methods in the City Centre is increasing (Aberdeen City Council 2020c). Consequently, a place that promotes these active travel methods is keeping up with the times and adapting to people's changing needs, thereby attracting them to stay. The pre-pandemic City Centre was not well-adapted to this change in people's lifestyles, for it still prioritised cars over active travel options.

Public consultations for a revised Sustainable Urban Mobility Plan (SUMP) for Aberdeen revealed that privately-owned petrol cars dominated the City Centre prior to the Spaces for People programme, thereby not providing those who wish to adopt active travel modes with an opportunity to do so safely. Nevertheless, 88.4% of people were in favour of reducing car traffic in the City Centre to allow more space for cyclists and pedestrians (Aberdeen City Council 2019). It is important to foster this willingness that people have to change their lifestyles because not only is it contributing to their mental and physical wellbeing but it is also more sustainable and involves no carbon emissions. Spaces for People, with its pedestrianisation measures and increased outdoor public spaces, has already paved the way for this much needed change to take place in the City Centre, as mentioned before.

It is worth noting that Aberdeen's 2015 Masterplan was already ahead when it comes to re-imagining the city as a resilient place. The Life After Lockdown Sustrans (2020a) briefing paper highlights that '[t]he recovery of our high streets from the pandemic will have a vital role to play in local and national economic recovery' and recommends reimagining our city centres and reprioritising high streets as 'places for people' by 'repurposing large office buildings for new uses, looking at housing provision, or remodelling public spaces to make more room for meeting, eating and retail. Many European cities are increasing outdoor space for use by restaurants and cafés'. These proposals are all currently present in the masterplan, and Spaces for People can be used as the first step to realise them.

10. SOMETHING HAS TO GIVE - FROM TEMPORARY TO PERMANENT MEASURES

'Streets are the dwelling place of the collective. The collective is an eternally wakeful, eternally agitated being that—in the space between the building fronts—lives, experiences, understands, and invents as much as individuals do within the privacy of their own four walls ... More than anywhere else, the street reveals itself in the arcade as the furnished and familiar interior of the masses'

(Benjamin 2002 quoted in Jensen 2013, p.68).

The notion of 'street life,' that is, pedestrian culture created through chance encounters with 'the everyday collection of streets, blocks and buildings' (Speck 2012 p. 10) is crucial to the consideration of walkability. Urban inhabitants look for excitement, economic opportunities—a public realm that continuously rewards the senses and street life that auto zones cannot provide (Speck 2012). However, the arguments for building walkable cities extends beyond the social, economic and aesthetic value as they now very much encompass our health, both physical and mental aspects of it. Therefore, a broad spectrum of interventions needs to be facilitated to support active lifestyles in an urban context.

'Reducing road space for general traffic and reallocating it to pedestrians or cyclists or buses (...) could significantly increase the attractiveness of these modes, and facilitate more efficient use of the road network. Yet proposals for such changes are usually controversial.'

(Cairns et al. 2001)

Furthermore, research on the notion of 'traffic disappearance' has unequivocally proven that taking away designated road space for cars substantially reduces overall traffic levels. In 100 case studies from across the world, approximately 60 provided enough evidence for detailed analysis, and the key findings were as follows:

'a. When road space for cars is reallocated, traffic problems are usually far less serious than predicted.

**‘[t]he quality
of resulting
streetscape
may be
critical
to its
acceptability’**

(Cairns et al. 2001)

b. Overall traffic levels can reduce by significant amounts.

c. Traffic reduction is partly explained by recognising that people react to a change in road conditions in much more complex ways than has traditionally been assumed in traffic models’ (Cairns et al. 2001).

A more recent study by Hagan and Tennøy (2021) concerning interventions in Oslo regarding the reallocation of road space suggested that travel experiences improved for walking and cycling, and that the potential effect on tourist visitor numbers could be positive. Therefore, drivers’ behaviour can potentially be distributed and controlled, with traffic levels reallocated through the use of smart technology, interactive maps and applications that search for the fastest, most efficient routes through the city, adjusted to individual user needs. Since the study has shown that traffic issues are less than usually anticipated, permanent pedestrianisation of Union St, as suggested in the 2015 masterplan and implemented with Spaces for People, is a feasible step towards creating a healthier, more sustainable and more economically resilient Aberdeen.

Nevertheless, *‘[t]he quality of resulting streetscape may be critical to its acceptability,’* (Cairns et al. 2001).

Close relationships can be found between outdoor quality and activity patterns in public spaces. As Whyte (1980) suggested, simple and subtle changes to the physical environment, such as the renovation of a single space or a change in street furniture, can improve the use of space and type of activities in the city. Similarly, as vehicular traffic tends to increase concurrently when new infrastructure is built, the duration, variety and character of outdoor activities develop where a better physical framework is provided (Gehl 2010). Where an improved city space is planned and designed with particular attention to human dimension, the invitation to walk around and stay in the city is created, and city life as well as the multitude of social and recreational opportunities are strengthened.

10. SOMETHING HAS TO GIVE - FROM TEMPORARY TO PERMANENT MEASURES

It is therefore important to assess the successes and failures of Spaces for People with regards to street furniture and their ability to provide quality outdoor places. Despite its appeal in terms of using timber, a natural material, and plant pots, the seating infrastructure was met with dismay by many Aberdonians. Comments on the ACC (2020b) Spaces for People website expressed concern for the lack of designated cycling lanes, disabled access and poor seating layout.

Comments on the West End of Union Street highlighted how expanding the bus lanes and placing the timber seating has blocked bicycle lanes, forcing cyclists to share traffic lanes with cars. The placement of said timber benches is also too close to traffic, making their users feel unsafe with their backs too close to speeding cars. Finally, blocking public transport completely from Market St to Union Terrace has negatively affected those with mobility issues as they cannot reach their destinations without walking. The East End was met with similar concern, particularly for the lack of cycle parking and inaccessibility to cyclists (Aberdeen City Council 2020b).

Nevertheless, the pedestrianised area was a welcome change, for comments frequently suggested making pedestrianisation permanent. Similarly, comments on the area around Castlegate proposed using the square for outdoor café/restaurant seating (Aberdeen City Council 2020b).

It is worth noting that none of the comments complained about reduced driving space for private cars, only public transport and cycling. Therefore, it is likely that people's concern does not stem from a general unacceptance to change but rather from a genuine concern for health, safety and inclusivity. The haste with which the programme was required to be implemented meant that some critical issues were not considered such as cycling lanes, the location and orientation of seating and accessibility. This is understandable since the programme's aim is to protect public health from Covid-19 pandemic. However, these issues are key to

10. SOMETHING HAS TO GIVE - FROM TEMPORARY TO PERMANENT MEASURES

creating an attractive, inclusive and liveable city centre as they affect the quality of the space.

Consequently, while the idea of increasing outdoor meeting and seating spaces is successful, there is room for improvement when it comes to the design of said interventions and their relationship to the street and vehicular traffic (see Fig. 05). For example, Union St can be prioritised for public transport, pedestrians and cyclists. This is similar to the approach adopted for Broad St and can help create spaces where people feel safe to socialise, interact and experience the city.

In addition, the Manual for Streets guide gives a few pointers for creating inclusive, safe and enjoyable walking and cycling experiences. Both walking and cycling routes need to form a continuous network that links origins to destinations. They also need to be unobstructed by barriers or street furniture (Bradbury et al. 2007). Thus, the timber benches can be shifted in such a way that allows for continuous cycling routes. Their orientation can also be changed; if rotated 90 degrees, the seats can provide unimpeded views to the whole length of Union St and without users' backs facing traffic, thereby providing a safer and more enjoyable experience.

10. SOMETHING HAS TO GIVE - FROM
TEMPORARY TO PERMANENT MEASURES

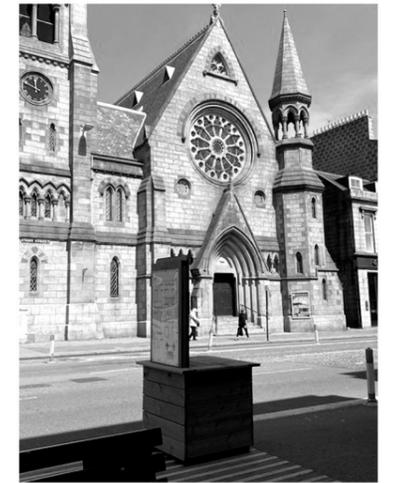


Fig. 05 _ Aberdeen_Spaces for People June 2021 [author owned]

11. CITIES AND SPACES FOR PEOPLE: CASE STUDIES



Fig. 06 _ Copenhagen before pedestrianisation [Gehl 2011, p.154]



Fig. 07_ Copenhagen pedestrianised area [Gehl 2011, p.154]

As the previous chapters have shown, Spaces for People does have the potential to provide long term benefits, albeit with adjustments to recognise issues of behaviour, aesthetics and purposeful design. The following case studies demonstrate the extent of positive effects that people-centric design can have on Aberdeen and provide further insight into how such a change can be implemented.

11.1 Copenhagen

In 1962, Copenhagen pedestrianised one of its most central streets, Strøget. At first, the decision was met with dismay, with claims that 'city activity just doesn't belong to the northern European tradition.' However, Strøget is now one of the busiest streets in Copenhagen, bustling with street life and activity (Gehl 2011; Fig. 06 &07).

To confirm the success of such 'radical' interventions, Gehl conducted studies, the most recent being in 2006, to analyse street usage weekly and during festivities. Information gathered included bench usage, walking speed/pace and weather and lighting influence on street activity. The study revealed that Copenhagen has witnessed a significant increase in social and recreational activities in its centre. The number of pedestrians has tripled since 1968 and so has the number of pedestrianised streets from 1969 to 1986 (Gehl and Svarre, 2013).

In addition, the studies found that Danish society has shifted from using outdoor space for necessary activities only (going to school, grocery shopping, commuting) to centring its outdoor space around social and cultural activities. 'Culturally distinctive' is a goal for Aberdeen's Masterplan that aims to shift the Aberdonian landscape into one bustling with life and cultural activities. There is no doubt that pedestrianisation plays a role in achieving that, as is the case with Copenhagen, a city similar in weather to Aberdeen. (Gehl, 2011 and Gehl and Svarre, 2013)

11. CITIES AND SPACES FOR PEOPLE: CASE STUDIES

In addition, Gehl's study revealed that social activities are spontaneous. When the built environment facilitates life outdoors, social activities can take place. Physical planning cannot directly influence people's behaviour; however, it can provide them with opportunities for which social interactions can take place.

11.2 Bury St Edmunds

Bury St Edmunds was one of four cities to take part in the Historic Core Zones project, an initiative studying traffic management solutions in historic centres. This historic market town faced problems such as increased vehicular traffic, increased demand for car parks and on-street parking and insufficient pedestrian and cycling spaces. This in turn has created conflict for pedestrians (Historic England, 2018).

As a result, the town pedestrianised three of its main historic streets and adopted 20mph zones in the historic core (Historic England, 2018). It also created pedestrian-priority spaces on one of the town's most important public squares, Angel Hill. Car parking was reduced, creating a more pedestrian friendly square. This then connected pedestrians directly to the town's primary shopping streets and tourist attractions. Places where vehicle and pedestrian routes overlapped were designated shared spaces, resulting in reduced traffic speeds and increased pedestrian safety (Poole, 2015).

This historic Core Zone project has concluded that the participating four cities had come up with varied strategies that can be applied to other UK cities. This case study again reveals the benefits of pedestrianisation, particularly in historic city centres (Historic England, 2018).

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11.3 Dundee

Dundee's Spaces for People infrastructure provides a comparative parallel to that of Aberdeen. Similar to Aberdeen's Union St, its

11. CITIES AND SPACES FOR PEOPLE: CASE STUDIES



Fig. 08 _ Dundee before pedestrianisation [Sustrans 2020d]



Fig. 09 _ Dundee - Union Street now [Sustrans 2020d]

namesake in Dundee is home to an array of local businesses, cafes and restaurants, albeit being quite shorter and narrower. Therefore, pedestrianisation and outdoor furniture were prioritised for the street in anticipation of shoppers' return post-lockdown. However, implementation of said measures was done differently from Aberdeen. Throughout the pandemic, Dundee City Council and Sustrans engaged with residents and traders through online workshops whose purpose was to help solve key issues such as delivery and emergency access (Skinner 2021).

In the beginning, the introduced measures were temporary: traffic cones and road signage to alert drivers to the street's pedestrianisation. However, they were soon replaced with timber outdoor seating and planters (Skinner 2021).

Dundee City Council further collaborated with residents by enlisting local artists to design a vibrant street mural. This made the street even more attractive to pedestrians and cyclists while also warning vehicle drivers about the street's new pedestrian status. Local graduates and residents volunteered to help the artists bring the mural to life. In addition, Bonnie Dundee, a volunteering group that undertakes greenery-related activities in the city, maintains the infrastructure (Skinner 2021).

Much to their surprise, local traders noticed that although minor changes were made to delivery pickups, the scheme has not affected them negatively. In fact, pedestrians have been sharing pictures of the vibrant, attractive street on social media, thereby creating more publicity for the area and the shop owners (Sustrans 2020d). As such, they were in favour of the new changes, with one remarking that "business is better since the street's been pedestrianised ... When it was open to traffic ... you couldn't see the shops." Another pointed that "we've now got a community in the street that we did not have before" (Sustrans 2020d).

Seumus Skinner, Sustrans senior communications officers, shared the traders' views, noting how the attractive interventions have

11. CITIES AND SPACES FOR PEOPLE: CASE STUDIES

created “a stronger sense of urban space, immediately more attracting in character” (Skinner 2021, p.10-11).

It is therefore no surprise that 77% of Dundee residents think that high streets need to be prioritised for socialising, walking and cycling (Sustrans 2020d). In addition, many of the comments on Dundee’s Spaces for People Comments website advocated for improvements to cycling infrastructure (Dundee City Council 2020a), similar to the comments on Aberdeen’s website. As a result, Dundee has placed a second bid to fund more Spaces for People infrastructure, including cycle lanes, pocket parks, improvements to cycle and footpath connections, safer school routes and upgrades to the Green Circular, Dundee’s scenic cycling route (Dundee City Council 2020b).

Dundee saw Spaces for People as an opportunity for future positive change, a pilot project for future interventions. Mark Flynn, convener of Dundee City Council’s City Development Committee, pointed that “Improvements to the infrastructure encourages people to get out and use cleaner, greener and healthier ways of making essential journeys, not just in the current circumstances but also in the future” (Dundee City Council 2021).

In addition, the project was an active collaboration among the council, stakeholders, residents and traders (Skinner 2021). This is key when adopting a people-centric approach. Residents and business owners were involved in and had input on the final outcome of the project, resulting in health promoting, economically resilient spaces that create a sense of identity.

12. ABERDEEN: THE BEGINNINGS OF A VIBRANT PLACE

Aberdeen has already invested in many people-centric urban measures prior to the pandemic, such as the removal of private vehicles on Broad St, creating a pedestrian priority zone, and the Art Gallery, Music Hall and Union Terrace Gardens renovations. In addition, the city has many volunteer groups committed to making it a better place for all, including Vanguard and Aberdeen Inspired who are behind projects such as Nuart, Aberdeen Lettering and the beach cable car proposal.

In addition, art has been made more accessible to people with festivals such as Look Again, organised by Gray's School of Art and Aberdeen City Council. The monthly Belmont St food markets also contribute to creating a vibrant, social environment. New projects such as the upcoming STAXX will launch in 2022 to create social hubs using shipping containers.

Yet, there is room to improve Aberdeen's public realm even further using the lessons learned from Spaces for People both in Aberdeen and other cities. The common thread among the aforementioned projects is that they take place in pedestrianised or semi-pedestrianised areas in the city. It is therefore believed that pedestrianisation can help deliver more of these projects and create a more enjoyable experience for the ones that already take place. Pedestrianised areas such as Broad St and even Belmont St have demonstrated great potential in contributing positively to Aberdeen's urban environment. They have created pockets in the city where people feel safe to gather and socialise.

As of now, 47 retail premises along Union St are vacant, an occurrence that has been taking place prior to the pandemic and is further exacerbated by it (Findlay 2021). While activities such as the aforementioned festivals do help increase interaction within the city, it is also important to consider the quality of the place in which these activities occur. This is where Spaces for People comes into play. Permanently pedestrianising Union St's East End and Schoolhill has a high potential in strengthening cycling and pedestrian networks, and with the renovation of Aberdeen Market

12. ABERDEEN: THE BEGINNINGS OF A VIBRANT PLACE

going underway, connecting the City Centre to the train station. Another benefit would be providing more space for pop-up seating and social spaces. Finally, as previously mentioned, such an intervention has a very likely potential in increasing foot traffic, therefore supporting more shops to open along Union St.

The Dundee case study highlights the importance of consulting with residents and business owners and including them in the decision-making process, for it can help make any changes within the City Centre more acceptable and welcome. Residents contributing to the discussion, and better yet, to the implementation of projects through volunteering, can help them feel that they are a part of it, that they own their place. With Gray's School of Art, Nuart, Aberdeen Inspired, Vanguard and the Scott Sutherland School, Aberdeen is not short of people who are passionate about their city and willing to contribute positively to its urban realm. With Spaces for People and the projects that have already taken place, Aberdeen could be on the verge of a true renaissance.

‘Urban spaces are not just buildings but ‘a theatre for human events’, which brings people together or drives them apart.

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‘Urban spaces are not just buildings but ‘a theatre for human events’, which brings people together or drives them apart and makes for a vibrant setting for our interactions, which we need for survival. We always pay a steep price when design happens otherwise: empty, dead space that harms our physical and mental health, individually and collectively.’

(Hollander and Sussman 2021, p.212)

‘Spaces for People’ interventions are currently associated with Covid-19 and can understandably have a negative connotation in peoples’ minds. Moreover, the haste with which the interventions were implemented means that some aspects were not able to integrate with wider issues of public participation, urban design and planning, leading to the rapid elimination of cycling lanes along Beach Esplanade (see Densham 2020) and placing seats with their back to the street (see comments in the Appendix B). It is therefore important to not take a step backward by removing [more] cycling lanes or pedestrianisation from streets, as creating inclusive spaces that support active mobility encourages people to use these transport methods more often without feeling that they are in danger due to factors generated by excessive vehicular traffic. That is, the delivery of people-friendly public spaces requires an intention driven by that goal, rather than the short term need to protect public health.

Thus, it is argued that the invitation to walk and cycle more in the city needs to become a natural and integral part of daily routines and an unnegotiable element of any future sustainable and health centred urban policies (Living Streets 2018).

An unforeseen reflexive tipping point has been created due to the Covid-19 pandemic where ‘the quiet and slow city, the immobility, allows speculation as to whether this might entail opportunities for learning and listening to other alternatives where cultural change is

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dead space that
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(Hollander and Sussman 2021, p.212)

a pathway toward sustainable mobility’ (Freudental-Pedersen, Kesslerling 2020). Could the notion of human – scale, car-optional somewhat walkable city where people want to be, created in Aberdeen?

In the cities around the world in the last year and a half a significant increase in walking and cycling has been reported (Gehl 2021). In Aberdeen as well - less cars on the streets allowed for these activities to happen and indeed be enjoyable. Streets were filled with families cycling together, people walking (with many holding hands). Let’s just imagine that this post – fossil culture of ‘slowness’ rather than speed and efficiency is sustained; a city with well-designed public spaces, where parking areas are strategically replaced by parklets, a city with widened pavements, more greenery and places to pause and watch the city go by... Urban spaces in post Covid timeframes could potentially be ‘reclaimed and (...) reconquered’ (Freudental-Pedersen, Kesslerling 2020) to create new city layouts to foster social interaction, support local businesses, encourage active mobilities, resilience and engagement with the city.

Who needs to be convinced to this vision? What cities need is what people want...

More inclusive and responsive solutions are vital in achieving successful projects. The opportunity our city has right now is unparalleled. Yet, it is vital to acknowledge the even greater challenges in creating good spaces for people by considering the pandemic disruptions and consequential behavioural changes (Sustrans 2020b, Wood and Obordo 2020).

The collaborative approach from designers, city planners, business owners and citizens to provide feedback and potential direction is very valuable. To make spaces more liveable, the city must strategically and practically commit to achieve a balance between needs and wants in terms of urban realm.

WHAT
CITIES
NEED
IS
WHAT
PEOPLE
WANT . . .

Space planning in the pandemic and post pandemic timeframes as well as its consequences are still difficult to assess (Freudendal-Pedersen & Kesselring 2021). When the unexpected happens, it is somewhat difficult to look towards the future with hope and certainty; however, the pandemic has provided learning opportunities for futureproofing our cities from similar unexpected occurrences (further discussed by Gomes 2020).

Therefore, to return to the pre-pandemic ways of living and planning spaces would be arguably foolhardy and inconsequential. Temporary urban solutions seemed essential to deal with crisis, yet these can lead to positive radical shifts in city space.

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

(Sustrans 2020a).

Now is the time to consider closely the shared spaces around us, that are as varied as the people who use them. They provide a foundation for improved co-living conditions, and a basis upon which society can collectively rethink mobility, public transportation services and potentially improve, expand their network in order to contribute to more fair, safe and inclusive cities.

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APPENDIX A :

1. THE CITY CENTRE EXPERIENCE

What public spaces do you feel are missing from the city centre? (select all that applies)

- Green spaces
- Seating/meeting spaces
- Children’s play areas
- Café Culture
- Cycle lanes
- Other

What activities, if present, would make you spend more time/enjoy your time more in the city centre?
(open-ended)

How do you think the city centre should look and feel like? (open-ended)

Do you think it feels that way now (with Spaces for People implemented)? (yes/no)

2. SPACES FOR PEOPLE:

How enjoyable did you find the experience of walking down the pedestrianised area of Union Street compared to the unpedestrianised section? (1-5 scale)

Do you feel Spaces for People has improved or worsened the City Centre in making it a more vibrant, accessible and sociable space?

- Improved
- Worsened

In what way? (open-ended)

Would you like to see any of the following changes implemented by Spaces for People made permanent? (select all that applies)

- Pocket green spaces
- Pop-up outdoor seating areas
- Wider pavements
- Pedestrian/cyclist priority
- Marquees
- Other

Do you think the current pedestrianised area of Union St (from Market St to Bridge Street needs to stay pedestrianised? (yes/no)

What other areas do you think need to be pedestrianised?

- Schoolhill
- Belmont St
- The Green
- Thistle Street
- Union Terrace
- None

What areas within the city centre do you think need to be revitalised? (open-ended)

What measures do you think need to be taken in order to revive the high street post-Covid? (open-ended)

3. HEALTH AND WELLBEING IN ABERDEEN:

On a scale from 1 (least) to 5 (most), how polluted do you feel Aberdeen's City centre is (in terms of air quality and noise)?

Has this affected your experience of being in the city centre? (yes/no)

In what way? (open-ended)

What do you feel can be done to reduce air and noise pollution in Aberdeen? (open-ended)

Do you feel that the presence of cars in the city centre is a health and safety concern for pedestrians and cyclists? (yes/no)

APPENDIX B:

RELEVANT COMMENTS FROM THE ABERDEEN SPACES FOR PEOPLEG COMMENTS WEBSITE

West end of Union Street:

There's nowhere to cycle on union street now. Where the bus lane is now blocked with wooden benches for the homeless and junkies. The lanes also have cable management bumps that make cycling impossible. The only option I have it to cycle with the traffic slowing down everyone and making it much riskier for drivers to overtake me. Terrible

The benches that have been installed on union street are far too close to traffic. I have seen a toddler sitting on the bench- standing up and almost falling onto incoming traffic. When someone sits on the bench they are literally 2 feet from moving traffic including large buses. Not safe.

As I have a problem walking any distance I will not bother travelling into town till the buses can go up and down the length of Union Street. New restrictions are great for able bodied people

There needs to be a dedicated cycle lane and dedicated entrances for cycles to the new "pedestrian area" on union street. Barriers restrict access for cyclists - no thought to cyclists. Why?

Pedestrianised area:

Close street to vehicles

Looking good and working well. Make permanent

East End:

Not enough cycle parking in City centre. Make the traffic lights have one crossing without having to stop in the middle of the road. Outside Archibald Simpson

Castlegate:

Permit outdoor seating associated with adjacent bars/restaurants