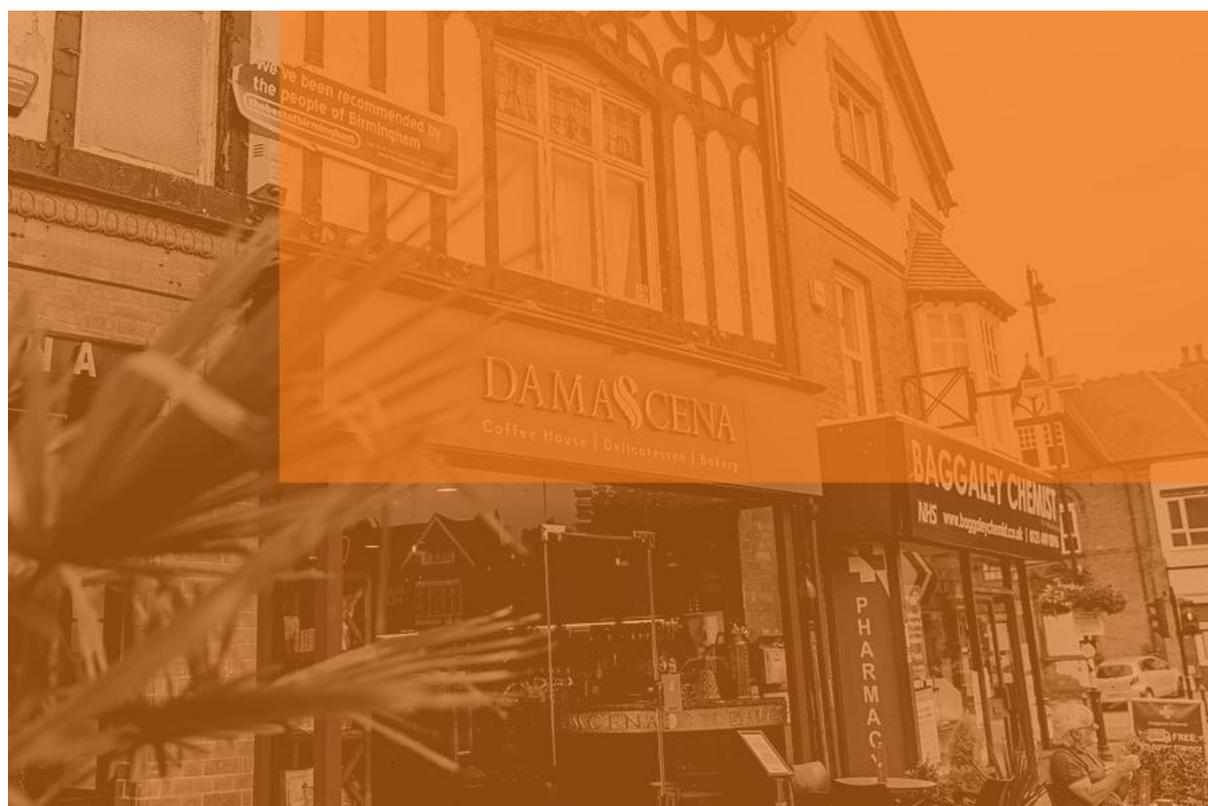


# Megatrends and the West Midlands 2021: Local Living



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## Summary

Covid-19 has contracted the psychology of space, restricting people to their homes and making the local increasingly important. Intersecting with increased climate consciousness and a growing obesity crisis, the immediate impact of the pandemic could see a surge in local living habits, with an increasingly localised homeworking economy and a newfound economic spend in neighbourhood centres. These trends are consistent with the 15-minute city concept being explored in cities such as Paris and Melbourne prior to the pandemic. The 15-minute city is a planning principle that stipulates all daily needs should be met within a 15-minute walk or bike ride from the home. This principle redefines how we see our streets, promoting a localised model of urban life that prioritises local businesses and institutions, strong communities and neighbourhood bonds, and mobility choices that are better for our planet and ourselves.

## Key Policy Messages

- Local living means shorter journeys, creating more opportunity for walking and cycling and reducing dependence on automobiles. As well as being environmentally beneficial, active travel brings dramatic physical and mental health benefits. Improving bike lanes and pedestrian spaces will be vital to recovering from the inactivity and mental strain of lockdown, securing a green, healthy, and happy recovery.
- However, fears over the safety of public transport could see the pendulum swing back towards personal car use. Disincentivising car dependency will be crucial in preventing an environmentally damaging and socially harmful recovery from the pandemic.
- The steep increase in home working has bought local high streets and urban centres new custom, whilst large city centres have seen a dramatic decline in footfall. High streets will need to become interactive and experiential mixed-use venues, with independent commercial offerings that can rival online megabrands. A high-quality public realm will be key to creating high streets and urban centres that people want to spend time and money in.
- Spending more time at home has increased local consciousness and camaraderie among neighbours. Covid-19 has reminded us why our local community is vital, and this strong neighbourhood identity should be carefully nurtured to ensure a localised social support system to assist our pandemic recovery.

## Introduction

The pandemic is predicted to have a dramatic effect on pre-lockdown working habits, with 74% of businesses intending to continue remote working (Gartner, 2020). With up to 29% of workers in Birmingham being able to work from home (Magrini, 2020), city centres will see a sustained decrease in footfall during the week. Even for those still commuting, the pandemic has restricted the spatial scale of daily life, confining exercise and leisure time to the home and its immediate vicinity. These new modes of living entail shorter distances – what the French call ‘hyper-proximity’ – that could redefine our cities. Localised service delivery and increased pedestrian and bike infrastructure are central design principles of the ‘15-Minute City’, and they hold the potential to restructure our neighbourhoods into active, self-sufficient and community-oriented spaces.

40% of global transport emissions come from cities, and continued car-dependence would see urban growth add another 26% to global CO2 emissions in the next 30 years (International Transport Forum, 2018). Yet the 2020 lockdown saw swathes of cars removed from our streets, with temporary activations increasing pedestrian space, and bike lanes and low-traffic neighbourhoods giving citizens new ways to travel and explore their city. The smart mobility solution of the post-

pandemic city will not be electric vehicles or public transport solutions, but instead the creation of a city where walking and biking are the easiest and fastest way to get around. Short car trips under 5 miles made up 70% of all UK car journeys pre-pandemic, proving the feasibility of this large-scale transition to human-powered mobility (Living Streets UK, 2021).

Shifting less than 2% of car miles to walking and cycling is estimated to provide the UK with health benefits of £2.5 billion a year (Living Streets UK, 2021). This active travel is especially important for ageing populations, as the NHS Long Term Plan aims to create active and mentally resilient populations that can remain independent at home for longer. Data proves that neighbourhoods that have embraced walking and cycling experience less congestion, cleaner air, improved health and wellbeing, stronger community bonds, and a bigger average spend at local shops and restaurants (Chris Boardman, 2020). Ultimately, the trends towards local living and active travel that the pandemic has inspired are good for cities and good for people.

However, this transition to local living does present risks for city centre economies. Increased reliance on online-shopping and the forcible closure of retail and hospitality have accelerated the already worrying decline of British high streets. According to the Centres for Cities High Street Tracker, Birmingham is in the bottom 10 UK cities for footfall recovery in the city centre, with an overall city centre recovery index of just 16% compared to pre-lockdown levels (Centre for Cities, 2021). Mixed-use development will be key to keeping Birmingham's city centre vibrant and diverse, as retailers will have to appeal to increasingly ethical consumers, keen for a unique shopping or dining experience that they can't buy online. This trend suggests that independent and bespoke local urban centres may see a post-pandemic upswing, whilst shopping centres and out-of-town retail parks may lose-out to online retailers.

The majority of citizens think that the pandemic has strengthened our communities, with the number of respondents who believe that Brits 'look after each other' rising from 24% to 46% between February and September 2020 (More in Common, 2020). Two thirds of Brits now believe that they can make a difference in their community - a 16% increase from pre-pandemic levels – evidencing a growing desire for local-level political action. The pandemic has seen an increase in political support for local government initiatives that prioritise the local community, most notably the imposition of rent controls and the provision of housing for the homeless. Demand for political decentralisation and stronger local institutions have gained high-profile status, with Greater Manchester Mayor Andy Burnham highlighting the imbalanced postcode lottery of the UK's tier system. There is an opportunity for post-pandemic communities to sustain this momentum, prioritising local community interests above centralised government objectives.

## Key Issues & Trends

Even before the pandemic, a growing consciousness of the **climate crisis** was sparking a 'war-on-cars,' with urgent calls for more environmentally friendly transport options within our cities. Urban governments globally have introduced congestion charges and low- or zero-emission zones, and reduced space for cars and parking across the city (Transport for Below 2 Degrees, 2020, p.37). The pandemic has seen a steep fall in public transport usage nationally, but a rise in walking and biking, paving the way for a green mobility revolution. Fear of close-proximity and contagion will likely prompt a long-term aversion to public transport. Efforts to rebuild confidence in public transport are hugely important, but in the meantime walking and cycling will be critical to ensuring a green transport recovery.

These trends towards active travel intersect with our **national health crisis**. Today's children are the first generation not predicted to live as long as their parents, and pollution, obesity and inactivity are huge contributors to this (Joe Irvin, 2021). Local living means that active travel habits and regular exercise can be included in daily journeys, such as walking to the shops or cycling to work. If achieved on a city-wide scale, this behaviour change would represent a revolution in health and well-being. Shorter journeys and reduced dependence on cars would also target the **mental health crisis** provoked by the pandemic. Regular exercise and time outdoors are proven to reduce stress, anxiety and depression, representing a very real solution to the psychological strain the nation is experiencing.

Increased **consumer ethics** will also impact city centre recovery and local spending patterns. The rise of the local neighbourhood centre as a shopping, eating and socialising destination has led to a bifurcation towards localised consumer spending. There has been a sustained shift to ethical buying habits, with a determination to shop local and support British businesses in the wake of **Brexit**. This trend could see a growth in local, independent businesses that bring high streets a unique retail offering to counter generic online shopping and out-of-town retail parks. Local high streets that are authentic, human and unique are likely to fare better with Gen-Z consumers, who are committed to environmental protections and supporting local industry (WM Redi, 2020, p.4). We are likely to see shifts away from global supply chains, and towards sustainable products adapted for the needs of the local community.

The pandemic has shone a light on existing **inequalities**. As citizens have been confined to their homes, discrepancies between living conditions, access to greenspace and local amenities have become starker than ever. Existing travel options only exacerbate inequalities within the region. The negative externalities of Birmingham's road networks, such as noise and air pollution, are disproportionately experienced by economically vulnerable groups, most of whom don't have access to their own car (Living Streets UK, 2021). With fears of contamination persisting and white-collar workers continuing to work from home a few days a week, public transport usership is likely to remain low. Reduced public transport demand, especially during rush hour, will render existing models expensive and ineffective ways of moving people. It is the blue-collar workers without access to their own car that are most likely to feel the effects of this. Walking and cycling instead represent a truly equitable mode of transport that allows people to be mobile regardless of income. If promoted as part of a multimodal mobility system, in tandem with localised living patterns and a redesigned public transport system, they offer a viable and equitable replacement to existing reliance on automobiles (Transport for Under 2 Degrees, 2020, p.39).

## Possible Future Scenarios

The pandemic holds the potential for a new approach to urban planning that sees the city designed not around cars, but around short journey on foot or by bike. Cities such as Melbourne, Paris and Barcelona are already implementing these local living principles, and the results have been dramatic. In Barcelona, cars have been removed from large parts of the city, with residents encouraged to spill out into the streets for socialising, eating, entertaining and other local services (O'Sullivan, 2020). In Paris, the city is focusing on creating 15-minute neighbourhoods, and is already seeing communities that are healthier, more connected, and economically stronger. Birmingham could join these pioneering cities in promoting dramatic behaviour change interventions. Experts agree that continued reliance on the personal car is unsustainable, and cars will ultimately have to be legislated out of the urban environment (Transport for Under 2 Degrees, 2020, p.9). Embracing active travel

for short daily journeys could be a solution to the city's physical and mental health challenges, simultaneously meeting Birmingham's climate goals, regenerating local economies and addressing issues of inequality across the West Midlands. We should promote the city itself as a transport solution, bringing people and services into closer proximity and encouraging self-sufficient and resilient neighbourhoods. The West Midlands region has significant interests in the automotive sector, so investment into electric vehicles and innovative R&D projects will be key to protecting these important industries from our transport transformation.

Despite cars being the least sustainable mode of transport in terms of emissions, safety, space required and equity of access, 45% of experts predict that they will still be a dominant mode of urban transport in 2050 (Transport for Under 2 Degrees, 2020, p.39). There is a serious risk that the use of outdated zoning patterns, which promote the physical separation of the city's functions, will lead to a recovery where the car is the only viable mobility option. A persistent fear of contagion will exacerbate this car-centric lifestyle, as people avoid busy public transport and flock to the relative safety of the sprawling low-density suburbs. This would be catastrophic for the climate agenda, as well as for the health crisis. If urban sprawl and outdated zoning patterns are the chosen response to the pandemic, walking and cycling will not be viable as modes of transport. It is essential that all planning and development decisions are made in consultation with local government departments, as the built environment will shape our ability to meet health, environment, economic, transport and education goals moving forward.

This move to local living, working and socialising has the potential to permanently destabilise city centre spending patterns. The pandemic has accelerated trends towards online shopping, so unless shopping districts can offer services and goods distinct from what can be purchased online, the decline of the high street is likely to continue apace. Diverse commercial offerings and mixed-use developments within city centres will be crucial to creating vibrant destinations and networking hubs that attract people back into the city centre. Meanwhile, burgeoning local neighbourhood parades could revitalise peripheral urban communities. Given the limited scale of most local neighbourhood centres, it is unlikely that their resurgence will seriously challenge the dominance of city centres within the regional shopping hierarchy. Local high streets do, however, hold serious potential for rejuvenating the local job offering and strengthening place identity and community bonds.

The pandemic has threatened our most basic social tendencies, and it is possible that this social isolation and mental health burnout will be permanently sustained. Vulnerable sections of society, such as the old and unemployed, have experienced severe isolation and loneliness during lockdown, and this is likely to have a lasting effect on their wellbeing. Yet there are widespread predictions of a quarantine rebound effect as restrictions are eased. People will be hungry to escape lockdown and be close to one another again. Sustaining the strong community support systems of the pandemic will be key to recovering from the social impact of lockdown – especially for vulnerable communities such as the elderly and the sheltering. Permanent fears of contagion within busy urban centres could reinforce tendencies towards local living, creating a city of villages within which local communities are bonded and neighbour and family ties are strong (Klaus, 2020).

## Implications

It will be important to monitor changes in travel patterns, with a particular focus on short daily journeys. Planning policies should be localised and targeted, introducing active travel infrastructure with the aim of reducing the overall number of vehicles on the road. Up to 78% of people in the UK

support measures to reduce road traffic, whilst 65% support reallocating road space to cycling and walking infrastructure (Gov.uk, 2020). Planners in Birmingham should capitalise on the momentum of the government's active travel fund and Johnson's hopes of a 'walking and cycling revolution,' before the pre-pandemic reliance on cars once again becomes the norm. Changing these travel habits will require dramatic shifts in behaviours, lifestyles, and cultures, so that the car is no longer seen as a status symbol, but as an expensive and unhealthy polluter. Improving bike lanes and greening pavements will support and encourage these changing behaviours, with the potential to revolutionise how people move through their city.

The summer of 2020 saw streets being used in entirely new ways, with outdoor eateries and pop-up cultural events in the road. Birmingham's Places for People programme has introduced Low-Traffic Neighbourhoods that make dramatic changes to road uses through temporary activations, prioritising residents, pedestrians and cyclists by cutting rat-running and through-traffic. Transferring road space from cars to people has created new opportunities for local communities to reclaim public space, blurring the boundary between private and public. New innovations such as pocket parks, road planters and outdoor markets have helped neighbours to bond and allowed children beginning to play out in the street. These temporary changes could be made permanent, sustaining strong local communities and reclaiming roads long-term for the need of local residents.

Increased pedestrianisation will not only strengthen communities, but can also contribute to local economic growth. Research by New York City Department of Transportation (2009) shows that pedestrians and cyclists visit high streets more often, linger for longer and spend more money than drivers. Improvements to public space, combined with increased active travel and a localised home working economy, can bring a revitalisation of local neighbourhood centres. Smaller cities and towns have seen faster economic recoveries during the pandemic, as they are sustained by a local customer-base rather than out-of-town commuters (Quinio, 2021). If neighbourhood centres can capitalise on this wave of local-living and build loyal customer bases within the community, it could represent a permanent shift in shopping and socialising habits across the city.

As a large urban centre reliant on inflows of visitors and commuters, Birmingham city centre will likely see a permanent decline in footfall and spending (Swinney, 2020). Policy measures must be implemented to counter this trend. A rise in hot desking and the reduced need for office space will transform city-centre real estate. Offices will become networking hubs of collaboration and creativity, with significant implications for their layout and design. It will become increasingly important to diversify business-district offerings, with mixed-use developments, specialised services and affordable residential development that draw people back into the city (Sim, 2019). The unique heritage and place-identity of districts like Digbeth and the Jewellery Quarter will become increasingly attractive and should be replicated across the city where possible. Meanwhile, bricks and mortar retail will have to diversify its offering, with unique and immersive experiences that can rival online retail. 55% of experts believe mixed-use zoning that blends residential, industrial and commercial uses within a single district is the most effective way to decarbonise our transport sector, proving the multiple benefits of this planning approach (Transport for Under Two Degrees, 2020, p.43). Creating well-designed, multi-functional and adaptable urban spaces that people want to physically be in will be key to post-pandemic recovery. This will limit harmful urban sprawl and reduce traffic volumes, whilst maintaining Birmingham's diversity and vitality, creating a city centre in which people want to spend time and money.

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## Appendices

[Forbes: The Rise of the Neighbourhood Centre](#)

[Transport for Under 2 Degrees: Global Foresight Study](#)

[Foreign Policy: The Future of Cities & Urban Life After the Pandemic](#)