

JOINT NILGA – SOLACE POLICY PAPER

Transformation Policy Guidance for Renewing Urban & Rural Centres Post Covid

A. Introduction

NILGA, the Northern Ireland Local Government Association, is the representative body for councils in NI. NILGA is council owned, politically led and develops policy guidance, co-ordinates evidence submissions, fosters strategic and cross government partnerships, represents, develops and supports local government as a key part of modern, democratic governance.

SOLACE is a national organisation made up of Council Chief Executives and senior managers. In Northern Ireland, the 11 Council Chief Executives work together to develop and implement services across Northern Ireland. SOLACE has set up an economic recovery group across the 11 councils with the intention of feeding into regional thinking and implementation.

This paper has been developed jointly by both organisations to offer a council wide view on the necessary and urgent transformational change required in the governance of our cities, towns & villages.

B. Context

Urban centres and villages are places where people come together for shopping, entertainment, socialising, dining and living. In 2018, way before Covid-19, the Grimsey Review¹ stated *“The wholesale change needed to revitalise our town centres and give them a fighting chance of survival will only come, however, when there is an acceptance that the old order of things is crumbling before our eyes. We still rely on old models that are not fit for the 21st century and this is holding back change”*. We have witnessed our cities, towns and villages become deserted over the past three months and the fight for survival of all who operate in them will continue indefinitely as we adapt to the out workings of the global pandemic.

Many of our businesses have been forced to innovate or face collapse during the pandemic, in particular the hospitality and retail sectors, who have moved towards new service and delivery methods including click & collect, online deliveries, cook at home, digital marketing & sales. We have seen a proliferation of technology-based solutions which consumers have readily embraced, as well as the evolution of a positive community spirit and a desire to shop locally. Combined with the acceleration of digital delivery and take-up; COVID has created fundamental shifts for our town and city centres which requires central and local government, along with businesses, the community and voluntary sectors to work together to respond, adapt and reimagine their centres, including use of retail, leisure and culture.

The initial key need for our **urban & rural centres** will be inspiring confidence for shoppers and visitors to return. Making our centres hygienic and safe, creating an accessible place and a compelling offer to attract people back, alongside clear guidance and visible reminders on social distancing, is paramount. A recent survey of the public in one council area found that:

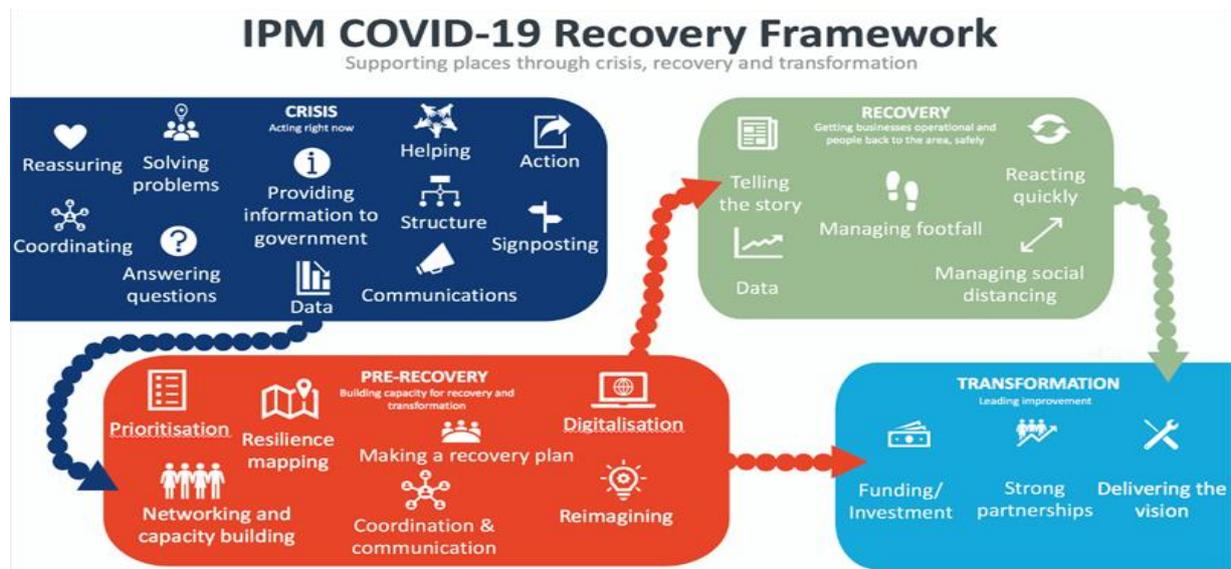
- 80% of respondents said they would shop locally more often post Covid

¹ <http://www.vanishinghighstreet.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/GrimseyReview2.pdf>

- 63% said they were uncomfortable using public transport, 57% were uncomfortable about using cinemas, theatres and pubs and 52% said they were uncomfortable about using gyms & leisure centres.
- 94% said they would prefer to limit the number of customers in shops
- 85% said they would like to see more cleaning of public areas and reminders about social distancing on display

Councils, Chambers, Bid Companies, city / town / village centre groups, sectoral groups and individual businesses are now faced with the colossal task of reactivating local places as destinations for shopping, socialising & visiting and ensuring those who visit feel safe. Set against the backdrop of worrying economic forecasts and poor retail confidence, this is a challenge that will require a multi-sectoral response.

The Institute for Place Management’s Covid-19 Recovery Framework² recommends a four-stage model to support places through crisis, pre-recovery, recovery and transformation. Having moved past the immediate crisis stage, councils are currently focusing at operational level on the **pre-recovery and recovery stages** of this model, however they emphasise that there is an opportunity for transformation of our urban & rural centres, provided the correct governance, partnerships and funding are in place.



C. Regeneration – the Legislative Context

The fragmented delivery and funding of urban regeneration across Northern Ireland is unlike no other region of the UK nor Ireland. It is – despite some excellent examples of partnership - hampering local development by preventing councils from progressing key schemes in their areas. We must move away from the transactional funding approach and take a **local, place-based** approach to regeneration, with councils driving this.

² www.placemanagement.org/covid-19

The **Department for Communities** is tasked with leading on urban regeneration schemes in cities and towns – these have included masterplans for urban areas, environmental improvements to the local streetscape & buildings (including privately owned commercial properties) as well as marketing & promotional campaigns. They are delivered jointly with councils on a contractual funding basis, alongside the Department for Infrastructure which has responsibility for streetlighting, roadworks & road improvement schemes.

In villages, the **Department for Agriculture, Environment & Rural Affairs** is responsible for funding environmental improvement schemes, which tend to be managed and delivered by councils through the EU's Rural Development Programme.

Councils are best placed to lead place-shaping in their local areas. They deliver a range of neighbourhood and economic services to improve the attractiveness of cities, towns and villages including planning, building control, street naming, street-cleaning, public toilets, planting & floral displays, marketing & promotion, management of open spaces, events, cultural animation, small environmental improvements, coordination of town centre groups and the coordination & management of funding bids to the Departments. However, it is worth noting that local economic development remains a discretionary function in Northern Ireland, with no direct funding from central government. As such, it is principally resourced from council budgets, with some match funding coming from external sources (particularly EU funding).

Despite several attempts to introduce a **Regeneration Bill** at Stormont which would see the transfer of regeneration powers from the Department for Communities to councils, this has not yet happened. Giving councils the ability to fully lead / perform a place-shaping role, alongside the appropriate budgetary & resource transfer, would complement the existing planning and economic development functions of councils and thereby help councils unlock faster and more fully development, regeneration and infrastructure priorities within their local places at a time when this has never been so important.

Investors are seeking a one-stop shop approach to bringing forward development schemes in liaison with local councils instead of having to engage with multiple agencies, something they are able to do elsewhere in the UK. Councils and retail sectoral groups see the value of neighbourhood services being managed by the council rather than several department and agencies. They know that services can be joined up more effectively at local level and that better decisions are made at the local level, resulting in better outcomes for citizens.

The 2018 New Policy Institute report “Devolution within Northern Ireland”³ said that “*regeneration powers, still held centrally, restrict NI councils to identifying capital investment proposals within narrow geographical boundaries. Elsewhere in the UK, where these powers are devolved, this restriction does not apply. For example, disused canals and pathways within and beyond the principal boundary can be linked together in a common-sense way, benefiting local wellbeing, tourism and the economy*”.

While it is imperative to focus on the immediate challenges to respond and manage the impact of COVID on our communities in towns and cities; it is also important to take a strategic place-based approach to economic and social recovery of urban & rural centres. The extent of economic recovery of these areas will depend on sustained investment in the physical and economic infrastructure and supports.

³ <https://www.nilga.org/media/1574/npi-report.pdf>

An example of a **place-based approach** is the Belfast 'Bolder Vision Connectivity Study', a joint Belfast City Council, Department for Infrastructure and Department for Communities vision to transform the centre of Belfast and involves a significant rethink of how the city's streets and places are used to make them attractive, healthy, vibrant and accessible. It is aimed at building resilience and tackling a range of challenges faced by the city centre with a key objective of attaining sustainable and inclusive economic growth. This Bolder Vision for Belfast sets out how a green walkable, cyclable network of streets and places to reanimate and connect communities to the city centre, revitalise the city's economy and improve health for all. The impact of COVID has reinforced the need for central and local government to fully endorse their commitment to this vision and the delivery phases to provide the frame of reference for the renewal of Belfast city centre. The critical delivery phases and development of shared short, medium and long term interventions will require sustained commitment as well as joint and innovative investment in order to reimagine spaces and active travel.

D. Key challenges in the short term

It is essential that central and local government work together to meet the challenges facing urban and village centres, find ways to cut through bureaucracy and provide direct and indirect financial support. Councils need unfettered powers in how and where they invest in our city, town and village centres and funding criteria should reflect this.

We welcome the announcement by the Communities Minister⁵ on 11 June on support for cities and towns and look forward to working with the Department to ensure that the council proposals for this scheme can be taken forward at speed. We hope that a similar initiative can be extended to rural areas and villages via DAERA as a matter of priority. The councils have a strong track record of managing and delivering revitalisation schemes in their local areas, in conjunction with traders' groups. Any scheme must be designed and managed with local input, rather than a one size fits all approach across Northern Ireland. In the current climate and the summer period upon us, grants to business must be quickly expedited, be unburdensome with a minimum of paper work and must address urgent business needs.

Most councils have established or plan to establish new coordination groups to deal with urban & village recovery, focusing mainly on communication, public safety, accessibility, animation, innovation, use of public sector assets & skills. The composition of each group varies, but in the main membership is drawn from council officers (from economic development, environmental health, community development and planning), chambers of commerce, Department for Communities, Department for Infrastructure, BID companies, shopping centres and community planning partners such as PSNI, Libraries NI, Translink, Public Health Agency, Volunteer Now. Some councils are also establishing overarching 'borough wide' recovery groups for their areas which elected members and other bodies such as Tourism Northern Ireland and Invest Northern Ireland are represented.

We believe that funding allocations from the government departments can be effectively managed by these council led groups and that councils co-ordinate these as local resource management best

⁴ <https://minutes3.belfastcity.gov.uk/documents/s85123/Item%203%20b%20Appendix%20One%20-%20A%20bolder%20vision%20for%20Belfast.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/news/hargey-supporting-town-and-city-centres-their-recovery>

requires, for example a dedicated staff resource if best, could be made available for these, making use of the departmental / council match funding available. Councils can lead in terms of advice and guidance through their Economic Development, Planning, Environmental Health and Building Control teams, but this will certainly involve local business representatives who are best placed to advise on local business needs.

Making safe use of space

Councils are actively considering how they can enhance the cleanliness and safety in urban areas, including:

- Disinfection of street furniture, touch points & areas of high footfall
- Hand sanitiser stations at key hotspots
- Enhanced street washing regimes
- More frequent commercial waste collections
- Enhanced cleansing of public toilets

The primary issue for councils is how to manage the safe movement of people in urban areas. Many towns have narrow footpaths which would not accommodate people queuing and two way pedestrian movement. While consideration could be given to operating one way systems, this may not work in every location and there is no guarantee it would be adhered to.

If we are to reactivate our bars and restaurants, additional outdoor space must be allocated to assist them meet social distancing guidance. Councils and the Department for Infrastructure must carry out local assessments on what is viable, but this should include temporary street closures, removal of on-street parking spots and applying greater flexibility to the on-street café legislation.

The Department for Infrastructure must work with councils to bring forward place-based solutions for town centres. Suggestions for consideration include:

- Creating wider pavements to allow for social distancing guidelines
- Offering more cycle lanes and cycle parking in town centres
- Introducing additional pedestrian areas
- Providing additional outdoor facilities for hospitality businesses
- Providing on street seating areas to cater for elderly & disabled

Resources and budget will be required to support these measures and either the Department for Infrastructure should be given ring-fenced budget or an allocated budget should be made available to Council to support the re-opening of the cities/towns and villages.

Pavement cafés

The introduction of pavement café legislation has made use of communal outdoor spaces prohibitive for most small hospitality businesses in towns due to costs of planning permission, licencing, and architectural drawings. Having to take social distancing guidelines into consideration at the same time will reduce the cost effectiveness of such investments.

We welcome the recent correspondence from the Minister for Infrastructure on which encourages councils to be flexible in their approach to granting pavement café licences and all councils are considering how this can be put into practice, in terms of waiving fees, providing flexibility during the consultation period and granting temporary licences to cover the current situation. We would

welcome further flexibility within the legislation to allow use of on-street parking spaces, communal civic spaces and adjacent privately owned spaces for these purposes.

Support for local traders

It is estimated that over 40,000 businesses in Northern Ireland have been able to draw down grant support from the Department during Covid-19. This is exceptional and to be welcomed. For others, they remain frustrated at having “fallen through the gaps”. Businesses such as:

1. Those where the company owner or director is the sole employee
2. Those falling outside the NAV criteria (this affected a significant number of businesses, particularly those within the tourism sector)
3. The majority of social enterprises (unable to access the Hardship Fund)
4. Ineligible B&Bs operating from home
5. Multiple outlet retailers who can only benefit from one grant payment regardless of the number of properties they have

We believe a Discretionary Support Fund should be established to help those businesses who have not been eligible for other grant schemes.

The extension of the rates holiday for the retail, tourism & hospitality sectors for 12 months has been widely welcomed, however ongoing financial support will be required if we are to see our urban areas flourish. We would highlight at this point that if we are to enter further (regional or local) lockdown periods, all previously offered support in the form of grants and rates relief will have to be revisited.

By way of benchmark, we would highlight a scheme in France, the 60/20/20 scheme whereby the government pays 60% of rental costs, the landlord reduces rent by 60% and the commercial tenant pays 20%. This could also have the effect of regenerating vacant properties which blight our high streets. We also realise that Treasury at national level will have to be called upon in such instances as those highlighted above.

As we embark on a phased recovery period, councils, retailers & service providers in town centres will, as is widely recognised, require financial support to meet outgoings for PPE (Sanitisers, visors, masks & gloves), queue management, as well as for investment in canopies, coverings and outdoor dining equipment. The Department for Communities’ Covid-19 Recovery Revitalisation Scheme must be able to offer such support to meet actual business needs. NILGA & SOLACE await further details on this Scheme but would contend that it should not be limited to capital expenditure, but it should be fully flexible to cover coordination & management costs, marketing & promotional campaigns, events, technological innovations to help with local service delivery and social distancing requirements.

The success of all government interventions to support businesses depends on the demand in the economy as well as how businesses can adapt and continue to trade while complying with public health and social distancing requirements. COVID 19 has therefore reinforced the need to improve the digital capacity of local businesses, with the impact of social distancing fundamentally changing how businesses engage with their staff, suppliers and customers. This will require an integrated approach that addresses the issues of business, including skills development, capacity building and financial support; but is vital for business survival and future growth.

We have asked the Department for the Economy to “flex” the Local Economic Development element of the ERDF programme to allow for Covid-19 risk assessments / health & safety audits to be eligible for funding. We note that in England, the ERDF programme is funding social distancing measures in

urban areas and have requested that the Department considers the feasibility of using the ERDF funding in this way in Northern Ireland.

E. Recommendations

In 2018 the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee's report on Devolution & Democracy in Northern Ireland' said an Assembly Committee should be established to review local government finances and **devolved powers**. We would urge the Assembly to commence this work with haste once immediate Covid-19 responses and recovery is underway.

1. We would strongly recommend the establishment of a **Northern Ireland Urban & Rural Centre Forum** bringing together town / place managers, practitioners, departments, and statutory agencies to provide guidance and best practice. This forum could act as a coordinating body to pool departmental budgets. There is a clear role for local elected members to play in this body in terms of political scrutiny and as place-shapers of their areas. Such a Forum would draw on existing initiatives and be a policy guide as well as a co-ordination body, rather than be an additional layer of bureaucracy.
2. Our towns, cities and villages are blighted with vacant property and sites which are often an eyesore and a magnet for anti-social behaviour. While the investment landscape remains uncertain, there is an opportunity to work with developers and landowners to consider '**meanwhile use**' for social, community, trading, and entertainment purposes. This could be facilitated by councils taking on temporary management of those sites and properties as long as the legal provisions and protections are in place.
3. Councils are best placed to develop & coordinate local **place-based marketing campaigns** to promote local shopping and the safety measures taken in their destinations. Older people are more likely to shop local and have a vital role to play in supporting the renaissance of local shopping, particularly in rural areas.
4. At this time of year, councils increase the level of **animation & events** in their urban / rural centres to increase footfall, including festivals, outdoor markets, floral displays, busking and street theatre. We are welcome moves by the Department for Communities to agree a budget for each Council – but would stress that this budget needs to be confirmed urgently and the administration process must be straightforward and efficient.
5. All **large-scale events** have been cancelled this summer and early Autumn, but councils are thinking about how they can reimagine animation & events to attract visitors. We must plan ahead and would urge Tourism NI to work with councils to develop a unique event offering in the province in 2021.
6. Our towns and cities have a role to play in catering for visitors and tourists but as international tourism is expected to drop off for the rest of 2020, regional & local tourism campaigns can be jointly coordinated by councils and tourism partnerships, focusing on providing **exceptional day trip experiences** and the virtues of local gems / staycationing. We must focus on value over volume, maximise expenditure from day trips and provide animation, local street ambassadors and manageable events in our towns and cities to attract visitors. Tourism NI is already working

with councils and the industry on plans for a summer staycation campaign, this must be adequately resourced.

7. **Reimagining our urban centres** is vital for recovery. Councils are actively considering the repurpose of council buildings, parks, pitches, leisure centres and theatres. They are also working with external groups such as churches and religious buildings and libraries to encourage the repurposing of their facilities. Such innovation will depend on third-sector input to aid repurposing building use. We must use this time of disruption to test and try new ways of doing things which can strengthen the resilience, viability & vitality of our businesses, communities and places. We have an opportunity to reimagine our urban areas in line with green recovery initiatives, including more tree-planting to demarcate areas, the imaginative use of civic spaces and making areas more family & pedestrian friendly. Paris in the longer term is aiming for “quarter hour city” where most daily needs are within a short walk, cycle or public transport commute. This is achievable within much of Northern Ireland’s urban areas and would help regenerate local economies. Lessons should be learnt from the recovery work undertaken in the aftermath of the Bank Buildings fire in Belfast to draw families and visitors into cities & towns & cities. Initiatives such as bicycle hire (along with adequate infrastructure) should be available more widely and we note the recently passed legislation to allow electric bikes will allow those more rural areas to develop schemes which may have previously been unviable.
8. Overcoming reluctance to use **public transport** will be a challenge for all urban centres. The Department for Infrastructure and Translink must continue to work to address this, but at the same time explore how the growth in active travel, particularly cycling, can be capitalised upon. The dominance of cars within our town centres will come under pressure as businesses and communities demand use of shared space for socialising, travelling, and dining so there is an opportunity to create more out of town park & ride schemes. The importance of connectivity and accessibility within and to our urban centres for the region cannot be understated.
9. **Pilot pedestrianisation & cycle lane** projects in Belfast and Derry reflect the Department for Infrastructure’s intentions in this field and we would welcome the widening of these pilot schemes to all council areas. New Zealand has created a “tactical urbanism fund” for emergency bike lanes and footpath widening⁶ which councils can bid into - the Executive must ensure that similar schemes here are adequately funded. Several of the councils have pedestrianisation proposals in their regeneration masterplans / local development plans and others are currently analysing which local areas would lend themselves to pedestrianisation. The Department should engage with all councils to bring forward new pilot areas as a matter of urgency. We have an opportunity to showcase how pedestrianisation can contribute to improving environmental conditions and lifestyles and we must grab it.
10. The role of urban areas is vital for driving regional economic recovery; and **connectivity** to these places is essential. Clear and substantial work must be delivered to ensure that rural communities are not cut off from accessing villages, towns & cities - a full public transport service should be reinstated now that urban areas are reopening, rather than facing a return to single car journeys in such areas. We must be cognisant of the aging population in many of our rural villages and determine how we can work with the community & voluntary sector to provide support since they

⁶ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/carltonreid/2020/04/13/new-zealand-first-country-to-fund-pop-up-bike-lanes-widened-sidewalks-during-lockdown/#69c8e43a546e>

are primary deliverers of community networks / programmes which can encourage people to return to commercial areas.

11. Local decisions on rescinding **car parking charges**, similar to that in operation in Cork would assist in enticing visitors back to our town centres but this must be balanced with the moves towards encouraging active & sustainable travel. Currently councils are responsible for off-street car parking and the Department for Infrastructure oversees on-street carparking which private sector operators control many city and town car parks. A joined-up approach is required to explore how this could be offered to all car park controllers, while at the same time continuing to support the growth of active travel modes. The provision of digital systems to alert visitors of busy periods and encourage visits during 'slower' times could be a means of managing visitor flow safely.
12. Citizen behaviour has changed and there is an appetite for less commuting and more homeworking. This will entail greater reliance on digital skills and require investment in reliable and **high speed broadband** provision in rural areas. Lessons must be learnt from the planning process around Project Stratum which must now be delivered efficiently. We would call on the Department for the Economy to bring forward plans for Stratum 2 at speed and to engage with councils to ensure this scheme is fit for purpose.
13. Pre-Covid, urban based retail was facing the challenge of online shopping and the crisis has driven retailers hoping to survive to explore online retail & service delivery. Further support for the **digitisation** of retail should be provided (including improving digital skills & capacity as well as financial support for businesses to invest in digitisation). As we move through the recovery stages, keeping up to date with safety standards and practices will be essential for retail & service providers – support to assist with this should be provided and there is merit in exploring how this can be provided centrally to realise economies of scale, rather than eleven councils replicating the same information.
14. There has been a blurring of lines between sectors in terms of who is best placed to deliver schemes during the pandemic and we believe there are opportunities to empower the **community & voluntary sector** to do more, particularly around maintenance of heritage properties in urban & rural areas. We should explore how other regions have been able to do this successfully (e.g. through the High Streets Fund in England).

F. Conclusion

We have an opportunity to reshape our cities, towns, and villages, as well as to redefine the central-local government partnership on regeneration. Together, we will only deliver the outcomes of the programme for government if we are transformative and innovative in our partnership working.

A localist spending review with place-based budgets, in tune with the needs of the local economy / communities, is the way forward and should be embraced, through councils, by the Executive.

NILGA & SOLACE would welcome opportunities to engage with the Assembly's Departments & Committees on the issues & recommendations raised in this paper (mindful that one Department may seek to be the primary interface for same, nonetheless this involves several departments and their agencies equally) so that policy formulation and delivery can reflect the urgency involved in pulling

this document together – and delivering a co-designed, properly resourced economic recovery and transformation. Failure to do this will make N. Ireland’s competitive deficit even greater.

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