Will changes to working patterns drive interest in the 15/20-minute neighbourhood?

1 Executive Summary

With a growing number of towns and cities across the UK – from Glasgow to Ebbsfleet – expressing an interest in introducing '15/20-minute neighbourhoods', this briefing examines whether the post-COVID changes to working patterns will add further weight to the arguments in support of their roll out.

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2 What is the '15/20-minute neighbourhood'?

The '15-minute' city is derived from the concept of 'neighbourhood units' developed by American planner Clarence Perry in the 1920s. The 15-minute (or 20-minute) city is a decentralised urban planning model based on four pillars: proximity, diversity, density and ubiquity. The model is one in which cities are designed in a way that the necessary facilities and amenity for daily needs are in a neighbourhood that would take not more than 15 minutes by walking, cycling or using public transport. In other words,

"…instead of sucking workers, shoppers and students into congested city centres, the 15-minute approach devolves the provision of day-to-day needs to a neighbourhood, so nobody needs to travel more than 15 minutes to earn a living, buy food, see a doctor and educate their children."[1]

Many C40 cities are already aligning their planning with this model. Examples of cities across the world adopting the 15-minute neighbourhood include:

- Portland, USA - 20 minutes cities [2]
- Melbourne, Australia - 20 minutes city [3]
- Singapore - 20 minute towns[4]
- Paris, France - La Ville Du Quart d'Heure (The quarter-hour city)[5]

2.1 Examples of 15/20-minute neighborhoods in the UK

In the UK, there are relatively few examples of interventions and planning policies that foster 15/20-minute neighbourhoods. However, the low traffic neighbourhoods being pioneered in Waltham Forest and Sheffield – and those planned for Manchester, Bristol, Glasgow and other cities – are encouraging if tentative first steps.

With the example of Waltham Forest, the Council surveyed more than 1,200 local residents in early 2022; asking what they feel is important to their health and happiness locally – and how accessible those things are. The Council has now formally committed to creating 15-minute neighbourhoods, working with The Young Foundation, to build on the survey responses and continually engage with residents as the scheme is rolled out. [6]

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[1] https://www.smarttransport.org.uk/insight-and-policy/latest-insight-and-policy/what-is-a-15-minute-neighbourhood
[2] https://www.portlandonline.com/portlandplan/?a=288098&
[3] https://www.planmelbourne.vic.gov.au/current-projects/20-minute-neighbourhoods
[4] https://singapore.uli.org/20-minute-towns/
[5] https://sustainableurbandelta.com/15-minute-city-paris-urban-farms/
[6] https://www.walthamforest.gov.uk/get-involved/15-minute-neighbourhoods-have-your-say

3 What does the current data on high street footfall and remote working tell us?

3.1 Residents are spending more time at home and in their local community

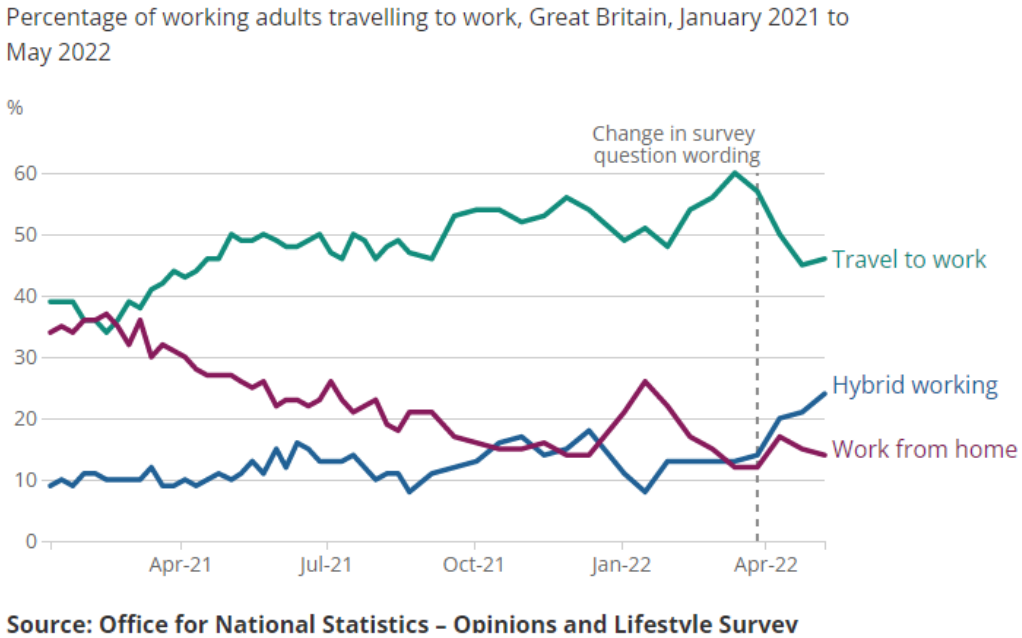
Having collated and analysed anonymised phone data from more than 500 UK high streets between 2019 and 2022, analysts Placemake.io and Visitor Insights found suburban and small-town high streets have welcomed increased footfall as fewer employees commuted to major cities and worked from home. Seaside towns also proved to be busier than before COVID, whilst Fridays have become almost as quiet as weekends in the City of London.[7]

The data from Placemake.io confirms the findings of earlier polling from the High Streets Task Force 2020-21 Review of High Street Footfall, which found smaller places fared best, with 100% of districts and 44% of towns reporting a recovery of their pre-pandemic footfall.[8] More importantly, from the view of an advocate of 15-minute neighbourhoods, the data from the HSTF survey also shows that multifunctional centres recovered more quickly than those reliant on retail.

3.2 Hybrid working is here to stay

The legal requirement to work from home, introduced by the Government in March 2020, led to millions of UK workers rediscovering their local towns and high streets. However, there remained doubts as to whether this shift in working patterns would be a temporary one.

Figure 1: Percentage of workers hyrbid working has risne slightly suring spring 2022



[7] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-64118190
[8] https://www.landscapeinstitute.org/news/high-streets-task-force-footfall-review-2021/

A February 2022 poll by the Office for National Statistics would allay these doubts. The ONS's 'Opinions and Lifestyle Survey' found 84% of workers who had to work from home because of the coronavirus pandemic said they planned to carry out a mix of working at home and in their place of work in the future. The survey also found that while the proportion of workers who planned to hybrid work has not changed much since April 2021, that hybrid working pattern has shifted more in favour of spending most working hours at home [see Figure 1].[9]

4 Will the decentralisation of jobs help realise the 15-minute model?

Until 2020, millions of workers in and around large cities spent hundreds of hours a year commuting. "The arrival of Covid" in the words of SmartTransport's Mark Sutcliffe, "ruthlessly exposed the fragility of the daily migration into the city centre whilst also revealing some possible solutions." One of the solutions put forward by urbanists and planners is the 15-minute neighbourhood model.[10]

Some commentators have regarded the pandemic-induced changes to working patterns as an example of "levelling out" rather than "levelling up" the UK. By 'levelling out', it is meant that, while city centres have seen a decline in high street footfall, many towns and suburbs have seen an increase. For example, the Placemake.io data referenced in *1.3.1* shows that the number of visitors to Kirkby town centre had risen by 160% since 2019, the same year the town featured in a Daily Mirror poll listing it as the country's worst shopping destination. The increase is the highest across the UK at a time when high streets have declined in other areas over the same period.

The data indicates residents are spending more time at home and in their local community and finding they can do a lot without venturing too far out. This kind of behaviour change – of people spending more time in their local areas – is in perfect alignment with the aspirations of those who advocate for the 15-minute neighbourhood. Whereas pre-pandemic the notion of people living, shopping and working within a 15-minute radius seemed farfetched, the pandemic has finally made the concept not just realistic, but a good idea.

As anyone familiar with marketing will tell you, the best time to convince someone to try a new service or product is when there's a big change in their life. Eric Engstrom, a planner at the forefront of Portland's 20-minute neighbourhoods, regards the pandemic as affording a "huge opportunity" for those who advocate for 15-minute neighbourhoods "because everyone's had their commute disrupted and their routine disrupted."[11]

Edinburgh City Council has taken Engstrom's words on board in their plans to develop a strategy for 20-minute neighbourhoods in and around the city. In plans announced in June 2022, the

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[9] https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/ishybridworkingheretostay/2022-05-23

[10] https://www.smarttransport.org.uk/insight-and-policy/latest-insight-and-policy/what-is-a-15-minute-neighbourhood

[11] https://www.wired.co.uk/article/15-minute-neighbourhood-covid

planners explained "the global health crisis has highlighted even more strongly how important 'liveable' neighbourhoods are."

5 Other socio-economic factors and developments to consider

5.1 The great green office crunch

As a result of homeworking, office occupancy levels in England remain stubbornly close to 30 per cent, which is half pre-pandemic norms. Pre-COVID, many large multinationals and corporations were quietly beginning to question whether they needed so much office space in expensive city centre locations. Though the pandemic has been the predominant factor in accelerating these reviews, new environmental regulations are also making their impact felt.

According to estate agency Savills, three-quarters of the UK office market falls below minimum energy efficiency standards which are set to be in place by 2030.

"Savills estimates the cost of upgrading a building from today's standards to 2030 requirements to be roughly £40 per sq ft, on top of normal refurbishment costs. Leading landlords in the West End or City of London, charging as much as £100 per sq ft, might be able to absorb the cost. But for owners of buildings in smaller towns, charging more like £20 per sq ft, bearing that cost is impossible." [12]

Higher environmental standards may therefore force even more office owners to sell up or downsize, further accelerating the growing trends towards remote working. Alternatively, companies may plan to have local satellite offices near where people live, thereby reducing the daily commute. In either case, the impetus for policy makers to introduce more 15-minute neighbourhoods will increase.

5.2 The need to avoid entrenching and exacerbating inequalities

The growth in the popularity of the 15-minute neighbourhood, helped enormously by the jump in the number of people hybrid working, does not mean that the model should be seen as a fait accompli. In the words of the TUC, "not everybody can work from home, and it is important that the UK does not become a nation of those can and those who cannot work flexibly."[13]

What this means is that planners must give due consideration to the likes of frontline workers, tradespeople and others who can not work from home, when designing 15-minute neighbourhoods. The ONS survey referenced that it found that lower earners were less likely to report hybrid working, and that workers earning £40,000+ were the only income group for whom hybrid working was the most common working pattern.

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[12] https://www.ft.com/content/995973f4-05a0-4964-8c18-d5c88d1a91d5
[13] https://www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2022/11/Working-from-home-and-hybrid-working-bargaining-guide-and-model-policy-v9.pdf

Just as working people need a say on what works for them – and what doesn't, local residents need a say on what works for them – and what doesn't. Any initiative therefore needs to understand its impact on all members of communities, ensuring that it doesn't widen inequality of access, and disadvantage those with mobility problems and other disabilities. It is important planners also consider the safety of women, and that the 15-minute neighbourhood does not embed inequalities by driving up rents and forcing out poorer residents.

To their credit, most councils interested in introducing a 15-minute model have pursued, and continue to pursue, extensive consultation with residents in the form of focus groups and questionnaires.

Councils sometimes have a statutory requirement to consult their residents and this is especially true for issues such as planning, or redevelopments. Statutory consultations are bound by legal requirements, such as Best Value legislation, and indeed councils need to give consideration to the Public Sector Equalities Duty; public bodies generally face strict rules governing their conduct. Therefore, local planners need to be mindful that if they fail to run a statutory consultation in line with those rules, they could be liable for a judicial review. Planners need to make sure that they check the guidelines surrounding specific consultation plans.[14]

6 APSE Comment

Across the UK, an ever-growing list of local authorities are drawing up plans for adopting the 15-minute neighbourhood model. And it is easy to see why: The jump in the numbers of people hybrid working, as well as council environmental targets, means the concept is not just realistic, but a possible means by which to significantly contribute to carbon reduction targets. On the other hand, regard must be given to the carbon impact, which is not controlled by employers, of the emissions generated through individual households with perhaps just one person working at home, but with a relatively large footprint in terms of their own heating and lighting to facilitate home working.

Significant changes to working patterns and subsequent increases to footfall in local towns has meant, in a lot of areas across the UK, it is less a case of introducing the 15-minute neighbourhood model and more a case of embedding it. Nevertheless, there are also concerns that the viability of some public transport links will be placed at risk. If less workers are using transport to commute those that still need to, such as healthcare workers or trades people, could face a severe reduction and / or an increase in transport costs and in some cases a loss of local transport services if they are not well used.

Skepticism towards 15-minute neighbourhoods therefore exists at many levels, particularly

[14] https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/leadership-workforce-and-communications/comms-hub-communications-support/resident#:~:text=Councils%20sometimes%20have%20a%20statutory,how%20they%20should%20be%20conducted.

amongst the business community and those with impaired mobility. Therefore, it is important local planners take very seriously any criticisms levelled at their schemes; ensuring they regularly consult local residents and assess any risks to safety and mobility with great care and due diligence.

Young workers also need to be considered. There is a social justice question here whereby older more settled workers may have the space in which to create a safe working environment. This is contrasted by a rise in the number of young renters who are reliant upon Houses in Multiple Occupation; often providing little by way of home working space. Furthermore, whilst there are marginal offers of tax relief for home working, this does not compensate for the shift in costs of heating and lighting during working hours from employers to individuals. Again, the impact on younger workers needs to be considered as they are often in lower paid and less secure employment.

Employers also need to consider the health and wellbeing of staff who are required – rather than choosing – to work at home. Different duties apply in each of those circumstances. One possible solution to this would be to increase the availability of home working hubs within local neighbourhoods.

Planners also need to be conscious of their role as stewards of place in ensuring these new forms of neighborhoods do not simply entrench or exacerbate existing inequalities. In the words of 15-minute neighbourhood pioneer Engstrom, there is a risk the model "could result in gentrification or less affluent communities being left an hour's car journey away…The more thoughtful implementation of this has to be: 'how can it be used to improve existing communities?'"[15]

A major concern within this debate is decent affordable housing. Without decent housing – and access to decent amenities and greenspace - all of the other ambitions for a fairer society, where our communities have a decent place in which to raise their families, look after their elderly relatives and access cleaner, greener and smarter local places, with buoyant local economies, starts to fail. An investment in high quality social and affordable housing, alongside other forms of housing, is not only an investment in the infrastructure of place but in its culture, environment, community and economy. Wider society has never been more in need of investment in its fundamentals than now.

Local councils have a stewardship role in safeguarding local places. They are best placed to know the needs of the local area. Housing can be a powerful anchor that cements the ambitions of our local areas. We will not achieve our objectives unless we can be assured of policy coherence from central administrations. That means ensuring that councils are at the very heart of housing policy, reinforcing their role as stewards of local place.[16]

APSE and the TCPA's most recent report - *Rising to the climate change challenge: The role of housing*

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[15] https://www.wired.co.uk/article/15-minute-neighbourhood-covid

[16] https://www.apse.org.uk/index.cfm/apse/research/current-research-programme/delivering-affordable-homes-in-a-changing-world-ensuring-councils-can-meet-local-housing-need/

and planning within local councils[17] - found councils are frustrated and hindered by planning regulations and policies which fail to empower them to be able to do more in tackling harmful developments. Indeed, in many cases planning regulation and policy has been detrimental to bridging inequalities and delivering climate action; think permitted development rights and ongoing fossil-fuel reliant new builds.

So, if 15-minute neighbourhoods are to be a success, central administrations must ensure local councils are entrusted to work in the interests of local communities and given the powers to reject approaches which work against their communities.

If you would like to get involved in APSE's upcoming research on this issue with the TCPA please feel free to get in touch with me, Matt Ellis on the email below.

Matthew Ellis, Acting Principal Advisor
Email: mellis@apse.org.uk

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[17] https://www.apse.org.uk/index.cfm/apse/research/current-research-programme/rising-to-the-climate-change-challenge-the-role-of-housing-and-planning-within-local-councils/

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Association for Public Service Excellence
3rd floor,
Trafford House,
Chester Road, Manchester M32 0RS.
telephone: 0161 772 1810
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