Our Unique City
Our Past, Our City, Our Future

A Civic conversation about our urban future

Post Covid-19 pandemic: our future after Coronavirus

thecockburnassociation
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For everyone who loves Edinburgh
The Cockburn Association was founded in 1875 to promote and encourage the care and conservation of Edinburgh’s unique architectural and landscape heritage. The Association is one of the oldest conservation, planning and architectural advocacy organisations in the world. It takes its name from Lord Cockburn (1779-1854), a renowned Scottish lawyer, judge and literary figure, who can justly claim to be one of Scotland’s first conservationists. His 1849 publication *A Letter to the Lord Provost on the Best Ways of Spoiling the Beauty of Edinburgh* provided the inspiration to establish a popular organisation and it remains as relevant today as when it was first penned.

Amongst the Cockburn Association’s many activities is the hugely popular Doors Open Days event in September each year, which enables local residents and visitors to access buildings not usually accessible to the public.

It is headquartered in a small office in Trunk’s Close in the historic Old Town, forming part of Moubray House which the Cockburn saved from demolition in 1910.

The Cockburn Association’s objectives are to promote and encourage the following objects by charitable means but not otherwise:

i. the maintenance, improvement and promotion of the amenity of the City of Edinburgh and its neighbourhood;

ii. the protection, preservation and conservation of the City’s landscape and historic and architectural heritage.

Membership of the Association is open to everyone who loves Edinburgh, full details of how to join can be found at: [http://www.cockburnassociation.org.uk/become-a-member](http://www.cockburnassociation.org.uk/become-a-member)

Alternatively, perhaps you might consider making a small donation to support our continuing conservation work? [http://www.cockburnassociation.org.uk/donate](http://www.cockburnassociation.org.uk/donate)
The dramatic, global impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic mean we need to reimagine the future of Edinburgh. The virus is changing economies, attitudes, and ways of living, while exposing inequalities in health and access to space that were previously glossed over. What endures is the quality of Edinburgh as a place, its landscapes, its buildings, its institutions, its uniqueness. These must be the foundations on which to build our future: that future must be more green, more inclusive and more inspired by conservation than Edinburgh was in 2019.

Our Unique City: Our Future after COVID-19 is an open invitation to all citizens, indeed to all who love Edinburgh, to share ideas about the path we want for our city in the years ahead. As Edinburgh’s leading civic organisation, the Cockburn Association has a responsibility to take a lead and offer evidence and ideas. We do not claim a monopoly, nor seek to suppress or belittle the contributions of others. Yet we firmly believe that a kneejerk attempt to “get back to normal”, to recover by reheating the growth trajectory of the past decade, would be a dangerous strategy. Like “generals fighting the last war”, it will fail because many things have changed. What has not changed is the climate emergency; any recovery that does not address that is no recovery at all.

Our Unique City: Our Future after COVID-19 builds on the Cockburn Association’s 2019 public information and consultation initiative, Our Unique City: Our Past, Our Present, Our Future, which explored trends and future choices about development in Edinburgh. Six discussion papers covered the city’s national and international context; the residential city; the prosperous city; the connected city; the expanding city; and the heritage city. The work was presented to the Edinburgh Civic Forum and at three open “soapbox” sessions, as well as featuring in talks given during the week of Doors Open Day and to various local groups around the city. That 2019 initiative sought to inform consultation on the new Local Development Plan for Edinburgh, City Plan 2030. Choices for City Plan 2030, the consultation on the first stage, ran in the first four months of 2020. Like the 2019 Our Unique City papers, Choices for City Plan 2030 has been overtaken by events.

Our Unique City: Our Future after COVID-19 presents the Cockburn Association’s reflections on the issues that Edinburgh and its region will face once the immediate crisis of COVID-19 is over. Each of the six original papers have been reconsidered, and a commentary offered on what will have changed as a result of the 2020 shock imposed by the viral pandemic. Edinburgh’s civic voice needs to be heard as the capital attempts to recover. Thinking within the City Council for the new Local Development Plan was done before COVID-19 changed our lives. Our Unique City: Our Future after COVID-19 is the contribution by the Cockburn to the necessary process of rethinking our common future. We invite you to read it and then have your say on our social media platforms.
Chapter 1: Edinburgh’s international and national context

*The world has changed in a matter of weeks, yet many of the old economic drivers, locally, nationally and internationally, will shape the post-crisis period. This is both a strength and a weakness. Without them there can be no short cut to getting people back into work or into education. But they are not our only, nor our most resilient assets. They can mitigate but not resolve the problems. There is an urgent need to explore bolder solutions.*

A summary of what we said in 2019

Edinburgh, with its universities and financial sector was exceptionally well placed to make the transition to an information society and knowledge economy. Key steps were taken in public policy that helped the city to capitalise on these advantages. The BioQuarter, led by the development of the Royal Infirmary and the University of Edinburgh’s Queen’s Medical Research Institute is an example. Similarly, the traditional prestige of an Edinburgh address for the financial services sector has been enhanced. Higher education is a key sector of the Edinburgh economy. Mixed reality technologies, e.g. using 3D holograms, may make “hands-on” learning available in remote locations, intensifying global competition.

There has been strong growth in tourism and hospitality in Edinburgh and internationally. Demand from China and other East Asian countries, growth of budget airlines and Airbnb have changed patterns of tourism.

National Planning Framework 3 (2014) looked for further growth in the Edinburgh region. The city-region Strategic Development Plan proposed that over the next 20 years, most growth will take place in and around Edinburgh and in “indicative Long Term Growth Corridors”.
The international and national context 2020 and beyond

Since 2019, four significant changes have taken place that introduce new uncertainties about how the Edinburgh city region will develop in the 2020s. The most glaring of these is the COVID-19 crisis. It is difficult to predict the full consequences, but the economic impact, globally, nationally and locally is likely to be severe. The Fraser of Allander Institute anticipates that the Scottish economy could shrink by 20-25%, with construction particularly hard hit (though real estate less so) and services overall down by 15-20% (https://fraserofallander.org/scottish-economy/coronavirus-quantifying-the-impact-on-the-scottish-economy/). There are likely to be more business failures, unemployment, falling wages and reduced spending power across Scotland, Europe and the USA.

This will also have a fiscal impact, reducing tax revenue and increasing costs of welfare, in addition to the high costs incurred to governments by the emergency measures. What is not so clear at present is the risk of subsequent waves of COVID-19 before a vaccine becomes widely available, or how governments would respond.


It is important to remember that this is first and foremost a public health crisis. It could well have long term impacts on public confidence, e.g. on being in crowded spaces. The crisis has also thrown into relief the connections between health risks, low paid workers delivering face-to-face services, housing quality, and mental health. Unless policy makers address these with new determination, the crisis of 2020 could leave a long lasting legacy. Within Scotland, one consequence is probably going to be increased priority in spending on the NHS. If there is renewed austerity in government budgets, local government could again be a prime victim.

During the period of lockdown, exceptional measures have been taken. This could lead to a new willingness to embrace unorthodox policies during the recovery. In addition, there has been comment on a new sense of community cohesion forged by lockdown and gratitude to essential workers. Some also discern an emergent localism, as travel and extended supply chains look risky.

The second contextual change concerns the climate emergency. Neither the emergency itself, nor the need for decarbonisation, have changed. During 2019 there seemed to be increasing momentum behind the climate campaign, inspired internationally by the advocacy of Greta Thunberg, and the planned UN meeting in Glasgow. The Scottish Government declared that there is a climate emergency and that it is essential to restrict the rise in temperatures to below 1.5C before 2030. It set a target of net zero emissions by 2045. Similarly, the City of Edinburgh Council declared a climate emergency, and set a more ambitious target of being “net zero” carbon by 2030 (https://www.edie.net/news/6/Edinburgh-unveils-plans-to-become--net-zero--carbon-city-by-2030/). Will these ambitions be pursued with determination, given the hardships imposed by an economic recession? They should be: the climate emergency is a fixed point in what has become a more uncertain world.

Thirdly, the oil price has fallen steeply. Brent Crude fell from $71 in February 2019 to around $25 in mid-April 2020. This makes petrol cheaper and car travel marginally more attractive, but also is damaging to the Scottish economy in general, and to the North East of Scotland in particular. While oil prices are volatile and can go up as well as down, that volatility combined with the dramatic fall in
price underlines the economic importance of the Edinburgh region to Scotland as a whole. This is likely to shape decisions by the Scottish Government.

Last but not least, the UK left the European Union at the end of January 2020, though the terms on which it will continue to trade with the remaining 27 countries remain a subject for negotiation. This adds to the economic uncertainty, along with questions about how migration policies might operate. Edinburgh has been an attractive destination for migrants, and EU nationals have been particularly important in hospitality, health and social care, universities and IT.

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**The Cockburn Association says:**

- **Uncertain times should be reflected in City Plan 2030. The climate emergency is more certain than a return to the growth dynamics of the past decade.**

- **Despite its economic strengths, Edinburgh is likely to go through a period of recession, with business closures, increased unemployment and reduced spending power amongst citizens and visitors.**

- **City Plan 2030 should be based on delivering the City Council’s “Net Zero-Carbon” by 2030 target.**

- **While setting out a long-term strategy, because of current uncertainties City Plan 2030 should be carefully monitored and formally reviewed after 5 years.**

- **We will use the Edinburgh Civic Forum to explore with Community Councils and local groups from across the city ways in which local assets and amenities can be conserved and enhanced to provide a focus for community health and wellbeing.**

- **To speed recovery a strategy is needed to reduce leakages from the local economy, promoting instead activities and developments that will recycle spending within the city.**
Chapter 2: The Residential City

Because it is a great place to live or visit, for many, Edinburgh has become an unaffordable place to live. It attracts speculative investment that diminishes choice for people in the city, while taking away the returns. The house building industry should no longer be relied upon to deliver affordable housing. To cut back on carbon the city needs to shift the gaze from new house-building to conservation and improvement of the existing stock, and from a reactive, numerical target driven approach to being proactive for delivery of high quality living environments for all.

A summary of what we said in 2019

Edinburgh is the least affordable city in Scotland, with average house prices 6.12 times the average earnings. Rented accommodation has also become increasingly expensive. Scottish Government data showed that rents for 2-bedroom accommodation in Lothian had increased by 33% between 2010 and 2017. Much of the land on which housing will be built in the 2020s already has planning permission. There is concern over inadequate space standards in the new housing stock.

Loss of long-term private renting to short term holiday lets is rapidly eroding the supply of affordable housing, particularly in the city centre. A residential city centre with a wide variety of tenures and house types is one of Edinburgh’s most important assets.

Many of Edinburgh’s listed buildings are in residential use, but there are concerns about a backlog of maintenance and repairs in tenements.

The Residential City 2020 and beyond

Edinburgh is our home, but that home has not been cared for sufficiently in recent years. A good example is the 12,000 Airbnb listings in the city, a much higher level in relation to population than in London (https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-47910700). The COVID-19 virus has been far more effective than the Scottish Government or the City Council in shutting down unauthorised conversions of whole properties to short term holiday lets. Since the crisis began, many investors have sought to offer their properties to traditional long term renting (https://www.edinburghnews.scotsman.com/news/people/edinburgh-sees-more-new-rental-listings-london-airbnb-exodus-continues-2519290).
The Planning Act 2019 has provided planning authorities with powers from 2021 to declare the whole or parts of their area as control zones for short-term lets. In those zones planning permission would be required for conversion of whole properties to short lets. This is an option favoured in Choices for City Plan 2030, the consultation on the new Local Development Plan.

However, there will be pressure from lobbyists who will argue that continued light touch regulation will help tourism and the wider economy to “get back to normal”. That normality was having a devastating effect on housing supply in the city. Party flats, noise and a drifting array of strangers on a stair represent a serious loss of amenity for long term residents. International investor landlords complicate common repairs, and drain money out of the local economy. This is not the way to look after the Residential City.

The Cockburn believes that, on balance, the explosive spread of investor-led whole property short term lets within Edinburgh, as in many other tourist cities globally, was deleterious. Edinburgh as a whole should be declared a control zone and operate a licensing system. There must also be enforcement, which could be one source of new jobs.

The isolation to contain the spread of COVID-19 has highlighted the problems of space shortages within many homes, and the value of accessible public open space. Inequalities are marked in this respect across the city, and the pre-COVID-19 trend towards the proliferation of student housing and Build-to-Rent has added to the legacy of accommodation that is inadequate for normal daily living, let alone for enforced isolation in the home. The Cockburn calls on the Scottish Government urgently to review housing standards and the exemptions afforded to student housing and to Build-to-Rent housing. In addition, we support the propositions that the new Local Development Plan should require “New purpose-built student accommodation to be located on a direct walking, cycling, or public transport route to its intended university or college; deliver market and affordable housing as part of the mix; be built for, and managed by, one of Edinburgh’s universities or colleges; and, deliver a maximum of 10% studio flats.”

City Plan 2030 provides an opportunity to undertake the kind of fundamental rethink required post the immediate COVID-19 emergency. The consultation on the new plan gives scant attention to the role that conservation needs to play in the future of Edinburgh. This partly reflects the perversities of the funding and taxation regimes, where capital projects are favoured while repair work has to pay VAT. If the carbon reduction targets are to mean anything, a serious change is needed. City Plan 2030 should unambiguously embed carbon reduction into every policy, and Local Place Plans should put conservation first. There should be a strong presumption in favour of the conservation of public open space, and any equalities impact should identify areas of open space deficiency in relation to access to available private open space. A major priority should be a repair and upgrade programme for public sector
Modernising is worthwhile in a number of well built, functional communities: for example, Pilton has some excellent 1930s structures that currently lack repair. The aim should be to create jobs, capitalise on the embedded carbon in existing buildings, and maximise recirculation of investment in the local economy.

The Cockburn supports the proposal to increase the proportion of affordable housing in any development from 25% to 35%. This is because of the evidence that one consequence of the city’s pre-2020 success in attracting national and international investment into domestic property has been to make the city unaffordable to too many people on whose services we all depend. The COVID-19 crisis has revealed that so many of those who truly are “essential workers” are poorly paid. As we have seen, many better paid jobs can be done remotely from home, but there are others who work long and anti-social hours and need to live close to their work. This is not easy to do in Edinburgh. A post-COVID-19 plan must seek to address their housing needs, and not revert to the pre-crisis norms. As real estate experts expect that house prices may not be hit as much as might be expected (though sales may be slower), a clear prioritisation of affordable provision is essential. During the recovery period, housing developers are likely to try to negotiate downwards obligations for provision of affordable housing, on the grounds of the viability of a scheme. Significant investment in social housing will be needed. This will stimulate the local economy, address chronic inequalities and avoid the kind of economic leakages that have been such a part of the Help to Buy scheme. If private investment in housing is squeezed by deflation and lower incomes, public investment will be needed to fill the gap and maintain employment.

A gap in the analysis of housing in Choices for City Plan 2030 concerns housing for the elderly. This reflects an existing blind spot in which only affordability is addressed. In contrast the Mobility Plan states that 20% of the people in Edinburgh in 2014 will be aged 65 or over; not all of these will be living in the social rented sector. Older people are more likely to face a range of health issues, some of which may be exacerbated by the effects of COVID-19 or similar viruses. Attempts should be made to support adaptations of existing properties to better meet the needs of elderly people, but also to ensure that new housing makes a contribution too. Meeting the housing needs of the elderly can create jobs while also retaining community links and reducing demands on health and care services.

The 2019 Scottish Planning Act requires the needs of older people and the disabled to be taken into account when preparing a Local Development Plan. It is also worth noting that Edinburgh has been closing and selling off its public conveniences: an aging population and a successful tourist industry make this an ill-judged policy. The 2019 Planning Act requires a Local Development Plan to include a statement on policy and proposals with respect to public conveniences. City Plan 2030 should address this.

Emergency measures that followed the virus found ways to get homeless people into accommodation. Homelessness is not addressed in the City Plan 2030 consultation, but the plight of these vulnerable people remains. They are also stakeholders in our city.
Perhaps the most fundamental concern that a new plan for Edinburgh faces is the forecasts for **future housing demand**. National Planning Framework 4 is expected to address the issue in 2021, but the City Plan 2030 consultation takes a figure of 20,800 affordable homes and 22,600 market homes as being required. Furthermore, it says, albeit with some caveats “it looks like we have enough land with consent and within the urban area to deliver our new homes without releasing new greenfield land.” There are strong grounds for questioning whether the scale of house building in Edinburgh will now match, far less overshoot, these figures. Brexit has been rather forgotten as COVID-19 dominates. However, part of the in-migration to Edinburgh has been from EU countries, and as yet the Westminster government is saying that there will be an immigration points system that will seek to exclude those declared to be “low skilled”. It is difficult to discern what this will mean for in-migration to Edinburgh, but clearly it represents a material change from the pre-2020 situation.

The economic impacts of the COVID-19 closures seem likely to impede a recovery of the house construction sector for some time. The 2008 financial crisis saw many small building companies close, thereby exacerbating dependence of a few national/international housebuilding companies. Will all of these survive this crisis if banks press for repayments on borrowings? Sub-contractors are probably more vulnerable, and the supply chains of labour, and particularly of materials, are likely to be disrupted. Combining these factors with the number of existing planning permissions suggests that **there is likely to be sufficient land with planning permissions already to satisfy the capacity of the industry to deliver**. There is no market case for major greenfield land releases at the present time, and **the carbon impacts of new development mean that repair and maintenance of existing properties should be the priority**. Caring for the city and its residents in this way is better, and more environmentally responsible, than seeking to market its homes as investment opportunities. It should be part of a strategy to create new, green jobs. Edinburgh should be actively looking at what is being achieved in green building in leading European cities, and demanding nothing less here.

**The amenity of the area around all our houses needs to be given more attention.** The lockdown has shown how important it is to have local greenspace, especially in areas short of private open space. The health benefits of an attractive local environment should be available to all citizens. This requires green networks, as *Choices for City Plan 2030* recognises, and design for walkability as supported in the Mobility Plan. These principles need to be embedded in a plan for recovery, but will probably require some form of social distance proofing. A Queensferry to Joppa linear, green path could be an inspiring project for a new future, with potential benefits to areas in the north of the city where cumulative disadvantages show up in poorer health and life expectancy. Jobs, health, green – it ticks a lot of the boxes that need to be addressed in the 2020s: connect into West and East Lothian too and it could be a way for City Region Deal or similar funds to deliver on cohesion.

Less ambitious, but also important, **Edinburgh should be promoting “tactical urbanism”,** small, local, community-led actions to improve public spaces. The council could invite people to identify plots of land that could be used for “guerilla gardening”, e.g. growing fruit, vegetables and flowers, produce that is then free for people to take. In the immediate aftermath of the
health crisis, Edinburgh will be a more unequal city than it was before. More radical practices, small and large will be needed to turn that around. The sense of community solidarity built during the crisis, together with a willingness to redirect resources and do things differently should be the springboard.

The Cockburn Association says:

- **Caring for Edinburgh as a home for its citizens should be central to planning and management in this decade. A conservation driven approach is the greenest way forward, and one that can create jobs and improve health and well-being for all.**

- **Unauthorised short-term lets need to be returned to our housing supply.**

- **Attempts to negotiate down developer contributions to affordable housing provision should be refused.**

- **Scottish Government should capitalise on work of the Scottish Land Commission and bring forward proposals to allow public bodies to acquire, assemble and masterplan areas for new housing, along the model that works in German cities.**

- **New housing development should be required at least to match leading European standards on green design and building.**

- **High value should be attached to the health and well-being aspects of open space and greenery, and reflected in ambitious projects but also in small, local upgrading, e.g. through “tactical urbanism”.**

- **City Plan 2030 needs to be a proactive and strategic plan if it is to take Edinburgh forward not backwards.**
Chapter 3: The Prosperous City

Before the pandemic, Edinburgh was a prosperous city, but the growth policies had widened inequalities within the city and beyond. It will enter the recovery period with important economic strengths that can be built upon, but also with even deeper inequalities than before: jobs and wages will have been lost, which will have a negative economic multiplier effect, particularly on private services. The public sector jobs, notably in health, education and public administration will have an important role to play in this decade. In addition, a proactive response to the climate emergency should be the priority for job creation and business growth, rather than a nostalgia for the pre-crisis era.

A summary of what we said in 2019

The paper recognised that Edinburgh is a prosperous city, well placed for the age of the knowledge economy. Following the City Council’s 2018 Economic Strategy, which called for “good growth”, the Cockburn highlighted the fact that despite the wealth in the city, 80,000 residents live in relative poverty. The paper also stressed the need to move to a low carbon economy and pointed to the forthcoming Local Development Plan as a way to address such issues. Local food networks, infrastructure and smart city technologies were discussed. The main conclusion was “In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis the city prioritised ‘jobs and growth’ without sufficient concern for the quality of that growth or for who were the beneficiaries.” This concern is very relevant to questions about the form that the recovery from COVID-19 should take.

The Prosperous City 2020 and beyond

Perhaps the biggest challenge when looking beyond the immediate public health crisis will be how to rebuild the economy. Understandably, there will be enormous pressure to “Get back to normal” as quickly as possible. Businesses will have closed, incomes of many households will have collapsed, and unemployment, for long so low in Edinburgh, will be an issue once again. However, as explained above, what was “normal” before the crisis left many people in economic difficulties, and was not in tune with the need to transition to a zero carbon city. There was a failure sufficiently to account for the general wellbeing of our population.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the Centre for Cities (https://www.centreforcities.org/blog/what-does-the-Covid-19-crisis-mean-for-the-economies-of-british-cities-and-large-towns/) suggests that Edinburgh will ride out the COVID-19 crisis better than other Scottish cities. This reflects an economic structure in which over 90% of the city’s exporting jobs are in areas not expected to be badly affected as demand recovers. Employers are more likely to be prepared to hang on to
specialist staff, and also the demand for their products and services will not drop dramatically, even in a depressed global economy. Edinburgh’s resilience is partly due to specialised skills within sectors like finance and insurance and higher education. The BioQuarter, with its emphasis on health, looks increasingly a smart investment.

Though financial services and the insurance industry are likely to recover quickly, will they make more use of home-based teleworking? If so, what are the implications for future demand for office floor space and for travel patterns? Choices for City Plan 2030 expects the strong demand for office space to continue, but will it? Most of the city’s office supply is mid-market, but small and medium-sized companies are the ones least able to ride out the economic disaster of COVID-19. More fundamentally, since homeworking reduces travel, and new office development adds to emissions, shouldn’t the City Council encourage the city’s businesses to move towards homeworking where possible?

There must be a question mark over the trajectory that higher education will follow. The universities are big employers in Edinburgh, and their students bring money into the city, supporting other service jobs, for example, while also supplying a pool of flexible labour for such jobs. There were already concerns about the possible impact of Brexit on university income from EU students and EU research projects. The crisis has hit universities in two main ways: the replacement of face-to-face tuition by on-line teaching, and the likely loss of high fee-paying international students, particularly from the Far East. While a dip in international student numbers could have serious impacts for cash flow within universities, as noted in Chapter 2 construction of new student accommodation had become a problem.

The virus has given added impetus to some fields of research in which Edinburgh has existing strengths. These include health, but also data science and artificial intelligence both of which are likely to figure prominently in devising means to adapt to challenges posed by pandemics. In addition, as the Cockburn has argued, conservation and greening the city’s economy should be central to Edinburgh’s recovery strategy. City-university-business-civil society connections need to be made if this route to prosperity is to be capitalised upon.

In contrast to this optimism, retailing was already struggling nationally before the crisis came. In Edinburgh, there were hopes that the new St. James complex would boost shopping trips to the city, but also concern that it would be the death knell for good quality retailing on Princes Street (c.f. the conversion of the former House of Fraser store at the West End to become the “Johnny Walker Experience”). With department stores looking a dated business model, businesses failing and consumer spending likely to be depressed by wage cuts and unemployment, more empty shops appear likely. Choices for City Plan 2030 acknowledges that “there is spare retail capacity within the city”: however, the statement that “Edinburgh’s city centre and town centres are in a healthy condition with very low vacancy rates in comparison to many across Scotland” suggests a complacency that now may need to be reconsidered.
Similarly, the proposal that “Outwith local centres, small scale proposals will be permitted only in areas where there is evidence of a lack of food shopping within walking distance” now sounds too reactive, especially since we know that a sudden virus can make it difficult for some to reach the shops. Rather than reacting after the event, could a new city plan for a world that may still require social distancing explore how and where to **promote integrated centres combining retail with residential, office, small manufacturing / workshops and key services (e.g. health, childcare, youth support etc.)**? In other words, plan to make sustainable communities an essential part of a new Edinburgh, and not just an empty phrase. Local Place Plans, produced by local people and other stakeholders, might be a way to work up such ideas.

Small shops and small businesses are most at risk from going out of business as a result of the emergency measures to tackle the virus. High priority should be given to finding ways to support them and to grow new businesses to take over from those that are lost. For example, temporary food and drink outlets that “pop up” during the summer and winter festivals have taken trade away from all-year-round Edinburgh based businesses. Consolidation of existing commercial assets should now take priority over a “big ticket” events-led approach to economic development.

If there questions over the future of retailing, what lies ahead for the tourism industry is even more critical. Tourism is discussed in Chapter 6, and the issue of short-term holiday lets was addressed in Chapter 1. Suffice to say that in late 2019, the consultation on the Edinburgh 2030 Tourism Strategy already observed with understatement that “In addition to the benefits that tourism brings to the city, we recognise that it can occasionally pose challenges for the city too.” “Overtourism” was a problem, but once the industry was brought to a halt in the spring of 2020 it became clear that economic over-reliance on tourism was also a problem.

Commendably, *Choices for City Plan 2030* talks about the need for carbon neutral buildings. However, this misses the bigger picture which is that the construction sector is a significant carbon generator, and so conservation of existing buildings and green space is the best route to a greener future. To chase prosperity through a new carbon escalation would be a short term plundering of lasting prosperity.

The crisis has prompted a flurry of ideas about how economic rebuilding might embrace a transition to a more environmentally friendly economy, or how the discovery of local support networks might be the basis for community wealth-building, an approach that has received some support from the Scottish Government ([https://www.gov.scot/policies/cities-regions/community-wealth-building/](https://www.gov.scot/policies/cities-regions/community-wealth-building/)). In contrast the current narrative informing City Plan 2030 is not proactive, but rather sees the Plan as a way of reacting to initiatives led by developers. Discussion at the Edinburgh Civic Forum recognised that the Plan has many good intentions, which were welcomed; however, the fear was that these would flounder at the implementation stage. Such reservations look stronger now that the need to revive the economy is so great. Good intentions, e.g. on supporting office development in “accessible locations”, look insufficient to be able to prevent development in places that are not accessible by public transport.

Similarly, though the “Choices” consultation makes mention of “inclusive growth”, it is unconvincing in what it has to say. There is a bland reference to the City Region Deal and little else, with no line of argument running through the document to suggest that the social and economic divisions that scar Edinburgh are something to be addressed. Issues of gender and ethnicity (e.g. in
relation to housing need, economic opportunity, community safety etc.) are not mentioned at all, and disabilities are only addressed in relation to parking restrictions. Far from being marginal, the issue of inclusion is now fundamental to any debate about how Edinburgh is to go forward from this public health crisis, in which the least affluent citizens have kept essential services operating.

In summary, public infrastructural investment is a key to sustaining Edinburgh as a prosperous city. It acts as a signal for - and encouragement to - private investment. It was what made great international cities of the nineteenth century: often in the aftermath of disaster, economic and physical, urban infrastructural projects were undertaken, with lasting benefits for generations to follow. The concern today must be that years of constrained funding, loss of expert staff, and casual reliance on a seemingly ever swelling number of tourists and students have left the city council with neither the structures, the attitudes, nor the ambition to rise to the new challenges that 2020 has brought.

A sense of ‘community’ and solidarity is a neglected component of what makes a city prosperous. After isolation and distancing we must nourish interactions. To do that, as a city we should invest locally in infrastructures - social, physical and cultural. It amounts to a hand break turn from the previous direction of travel. The emergency has created a necessity and an opportunity to take a hard look at where we have come from and where we want to get to. Leadership and vision are needed, quickly.

The Cockburn Association says:

• **A proactive economic strategy is needed, but it must be built on making Edinburgh carbon-neutral by 2030, and a more inclusive city.**

• **This needs expertise, wide stakeholder involvement and solidarity: we challenge the city council to bring together people with knowledge and ideas from universities, business and civil society.**

• **More localism should be part of that strategy, with more homeworking and a more dispersed approach to jobs and services at integrated centres around the city.**

• **The City Region Deal should be re-examined in light of the changed situation and new needs.**

• **City Plan 2030 needs to embed inclusivity as an integrating theme that can also contribute to greening Edinburgh and to job creation.**
Chapter 4: The Connected City

The City Mobility Plan and Choices for City Plan 2030 both make positive statements about supporting active travel. How strongly will these aspirations be turned into action? Covid19 has drastically cut traffic and so also improved air quality. However, it has also created a crisis in public transport because of fears of infection in confined and crowded spaces. This has serious implications in Edinburgh, particularly in relation to sustaining bus services and suppressing car use in the city. The potential role of electric vehicles and driverless vehicles is a further complication to be addressed.

A summary of what we said in 2019

Walking is the main mode of travel for over a third of Edinburgh residents - the highest percentage in Scotland. Pedestrian measures must be disaggregated from, and become the primary element of, “active travel” programmes. More focus should be given to street design, public spaces, design and maintenance of paving, decluttering, litter clearing, regulating road works and addressing the precedence of pedestrian flows at junctions. These matters are undertaken by a range of unconnected agencies for whom, in many cases, it is not their main priority. A major objective will be to move transport away from carbon-based energy. However, while electric vehicles might work well for those with fixed routes and depots, provision of car charging points in tenement areas is problematic.

Smart city technologies could be used, e.g. intelligent waste bins to raise the standards (and therefore environmental quality) of streets; for identifying and repairing potholes and road faults; for better management of temporary diversions.

The Connected City 2020 and beyond

Connectivity has been central to major cities like Edinburgh. Flights have put us within travelling distance to faraway places, and brought the world to our streets; trains, buses and cars have safely conveyed thousands each day from homes elsewhere in Scotland to work here before making the commute home to places where accommodation is more affordable. New ideas have been germinated in conversations over a coffee or a restaurant dinner. Suddenly, this dense network of contacts has become a mortal threat: people stay at home, wear masks and keep two meters apart from their friends. Digital connectivity thrives. How will this somersault shape the future of Our Connected City?

The City Mobility Plan has run in parallel with Choices for City Plan 2030. It proposes a wide range of measures to reduce car use in Edinburgh, and so improve air quality and reduce emissions. There is welcome broad consistency between the two documents. The City Mobility Plan provides some good
analysis of inequalities in accessibility and affordability of movement within the city, highlighting, for example, areas with high numbers of people but low access to public transport: almost one in three citizens live in areas with poor public transport. The need to address climate change shapes much of the City Mobility Plan thinking.

Both documents propose to support walking and cycling links, but Choices for City Plan 2030 stops well short of the kind of prioritisation to the pedestrian environment that the Cockburn and others have called for. Walking and cycling infrastructure are not sufficiently disaggregated from each other in either consultation. In aspiring to create "places for people, not cars", as with other important issues, Choices for City Plan 2030 suggests setting targets, and while the City Mobility Plan necessarily is aspirational, there are concerns that it is more a collection of projects than a plan, and uncertainties remain about delivery. Both documents project action into the future, and rely on others to deliver: targets can be missed as easily as they can be set. If the city council’s net zero carbon target is being taken seriously, then more direct action and regulation will be necessary.

The COVID-19 lockdown has crystallised the strategic choices that Edinburgh needs to make. Is there the political will required to turn well intentioned statements about sustainability and inclusion into realities? For example, the drastic reductions in traffic during the lockdown have improved air quality. This is another area where getting “back to normal” should not be endorsed uncritically, and the proposals for Low Emission Zones should be carried through. It is worrying, for example, that the Scottish Government has postponed action on Edinburgh’s Low Emission Zone because of the disruption from COVID-19.

Internationally, the lockdowns have triggered a flurry of local government efforts to reallocate road space to pedestrians and cyclists, e.g. by widening pavements or creating new cycle lanes. Such innovations make places safer, greener and more inclusive. Here in Edinburgh they pose two questions. Is there the political will, and if there is, will the detailed design be of a high quality? We raise the second question because design was given no thought in the Summer Streets interventions during the 2019 Edinburgh Festival.

There are also concerns that new norms of social distancing may undermine efforts to promote walking and use of public transport, and drive a modal shift towards private car use. Since that will impact on the land use aspects (e.g. housing locations, shopping patterns, business parks etc.), such a shift would undermine many of the intentions of City Plan 2030 and the Mobility Plan. This risk needs to be addressed by clear, and credible policies that are much more decisive than those in the consultations. For example, pavements need to be widened, restrictions on impediments to pedestrians need to be enforced, and there needs to be an active public information campaign to persuade people to trim back overhanging hedges that squeeze functional pavement width.

Similarly, there is a risk that the “back to normal” pressure will trump plans for items like a work place parking levy or steps to reduce risks for pedestrians and cyclists. Designing the city around the needs of the disabled and children would focus much more attention on affordable but valuable improvements, and better maintenance, rather than on new traffic infrastructure.
A Spatial Vision diagram in the Mobility Plan illustrates the intention to change the patterns of movement in the city. Currently the city centre is the prime focus, but the vision is for more orbital connectivity between suburban locations, with the centre being given over more to pedestrians, cyclists and public transport. This fits with the idea that the waterfront, the Bio-Quarter and the west become the main new growth areas, and it also helps connect some of the areas currently poorly served by public transport. It recognises the complexity of travel patterns in today’s economy where people juggle more than one job and have several roles. New orbital bus routes can help, providing they connect destinations that people want to go, which in turn could require the proactive focus on decentralisation and local centres discussed in Chapter 3. The City Plan needs to identify sites for the transport hubs proposed in the Mobility Plan, and the Council needs to be proactive in developing them.

The Mobility Plan proposal to prevent bus routes running through the centre seems unnecessary, and risks adding to the “theme park” tourist vision for the centre. If orbital connectivity is desirable, and a north-south third tram line is desirable, as the Mobility Plan suggests, then it seems inconsistent to extend cross-city public transport journey times by requiring people to change buses in the city centre. Over and above all this will be concerns about ridership levels on the trams and buses if people are afraid of risking contagion.

Large amounts of capital is being invested by the global automotive industry in the development of driverless electric cars. Road testing of a number of different technologies is underway and it is likely we will see their introduction before the end of 2030. The impact on the city will be enormous. The price of renting a driverless vehicle may be so low that along with fast availability many vehicle owners may elect to give up their cars with the obvious impact on parking requirements. The type of vehicle rented will be appropriate to the passenger’s requirements, e.g. a small vehicle to carry one person. Road congestion will be reduced and integrated technology, vehicles continually talking to each other, will significantly improve traffic flow. There will also be the obvious impact on carbon emissions as well as other benefits. The city should start planning now for their introduction and ensure it is best placed to exploit the opportunities when they become available. How might charging points be made available in tenement areas without creating further clutter on the street?

Neither the City Plan nor the Mobility Plan, nor their integration, will be a sufficient means to address the challenges of mobility, because Edinburgh is not an island, but rather the core of a functional region. Dealing with traffic inside the city does not resolve the problems posed by traffic arriving there from beyond the city boundary: some of the worst congestion currently is along radial routes connecting out of town commuters to the city itself. The capacity of Waverley station is important, but any station development must respect heritage assessments, and focus on mobility not retailing. Better rail and bus connections, and perhaps a Fife-Leith ferry, are needed, though again concerns over a return to public transport will need to be resolved. For the immediate future the global fall in oil prices, along a reflationary cut in fuel tax, could make petrol cheaper, and hence car use a more attractive option. Given the existing pressures on the limited space in the city centre, it is not easy to see how or where additional vehicles could be accommodated there. Extra congestion and air pollution would impose additional unwanted costs.
For connectivity at national and international level, the expansion of the airport has been significant over the past two decades. It is hard to discern how the plans for continued airport growth can be compatible with reducing carbon emissions. All the signs are that the aircraft industry has been very hard hit by the current pandemic, with carriers seeking government subsidies to survive.

Understandably a quick bounce back is desired by the industry and its many employees, but that seems unlikely in the short-term, environmentally damaging in the long term, and risks recreating ideal conditions for transmission of global pandemics. Planning for the decade ahead should not bank on the airport or the budget airlines to restore the previous growth dynamic.

A community wealth building approach could contribute to reducing carbon by reducing supply lines and travel distances. It might also help find new uses for empty retail premises. A smart approach to rebuilding the economy of the Edinburgh city region after the crisis would include policies in City Plan 2030 and in a regional spatial strategy to support more local supply chains, e.g. in food and services; working from home; walkability improvements; and a mutually reinforcing interplay between orbital routes, local jobs and services hubs and tackling areas where poor accessibility and affordability of public transport exacerbate other inequalities.

The Cockburn Association says:

- **How connectivity is planned and managed 2020-2030 will significantly impact on economic recovery, the zero-net carbon city and reducing existing inequalities.**

- **Restoring bus use to previous high levels should be a priority. Ways to reassure passengers that buses are safe to use will be crucial, especially for the elderly and other vulnerable groups. Concessionary travel for young people should be brought forward.**

- **Streets are good indicators of the quality of a city. Edinburgh’s streets let the city down. Maintenance and good design can improve the pedestrian experience and reduce risks, thereby contributing to health and well-being. Street improvements should come first, not last, in physical infrastructure for our future.**

- **We support greater orbital connectivity, but that is not purely a transport matter. It needs to be a key component of a decentralised community wealth building / neighbourhood development approach, and an exploration of ways to reduce supply chains.**
Chapter 5: The Expanding City

The scale of expansion of Edinburgh that was envisaged before 2020 now looks more questionable because of the likely medium term impacts of the pandemic and of Brexit. Higher densities may meet with consumer resistance because of fears of contagion and the risks of being locked in without access to a garden, especially for households with children. Carbon reduction requires that brownfield land is prioritised for reuse before greenfield land is sacrificed. However, areas of public open space within the city should not be seen as development opportunity sites.

A summary of what we said in 2019

The amount of projected new development means that the coming decade will stamp a significant imprint on the city for many generations to come. Edinburgh has been expanding significantly, and household projections suggest this strong growth will continue, while planning policy will seek to steer that growth into corridors to the east, south east and west. Green belts contribute significantly not only to the visual setting of the city but provide for local food networks and accessible recreation opportunities. Properly managed they can also aid biodiversity and help to mitigate adverse climate change effects through tree/woodland safeguard and enhancement. The perception is that Green Belt policies are not being followed properly and require stronger protection. There is general support for development on vacant and brownfield land first. The failure of past plans to deliver such development, while also conceeding permissions for development on greenfield sites around the edge of the city has contributed to a loss of public confidence in planning. The UK has some of the meanest space standards for new housing in Europe. Modern housing estates contain little amenity space.

The Expanding City 2020 and beyond

The Residential City (Chapter 2) has explored some of the housing issues. Choices for City Plan 2030 puts forward three options on where new housing should go: 1) 17,600 units in the urban area, delivered by the Council and its partners; 2) 27,900 units on greenfield land through market housing; or 3) A blend of the other two options, with 11,000 units on urban land and 6,600 on greenfields. As previously indicated the Housing Need and Demand Analysis needs to be revisited in the light of the economic changes brought by the pandemic and the uncertainties over the impact of Brexit. For example, there are suggestions more homeworking and fewer trips to the office could result in people being willing to commute further in order to get more space in and around the home, e.g. a two hour journey twice a week from a distant small town, instead of a one hour trip five times a week. This could extend the geography of Edinburgh’s housing market.
The climate emergency and the Council’s carbon reduction targets clearly point to the need to prioritise reuse of brownfield urban land. The consultation recognises that Option 1 will involve a step change in the way the development of new housing in Edinburgh is done, with challenges, e.g. in respect to infrastructure such as schools. However, a step change is what is now required.

The City Plan consultation speaks of “Housing Led Mixed Use Areas” which are identified on a map. It is very important that such sites both recognise the important health and well-being role of public open space, and also actively embrace a community wealth building approach. There should be a proactive stance to support community assets and land ownership as the means to develop such sites; mixed uses by themselves stop short of securing the more local supply chains, not least in food and services, that can help places become more environmentally and socially sustainable. The COVID-19 and climate crises mean we need to raise the bar on ambition for how land in and around the city is used.

In addressing expansion there must be integration with the Mobility Plan. Infrastructure should come first, not chase development. For example, development in the south east of the city should be contingent on the area being served by the north-south tramline envisaged in the Mobility Study, with developer contributions to the infrastructure costs. Unless a plan-led approach is taken, major new developments are likely to increase traffic volumes and congestion in adjacent parts of the city, undermining many of the good intentions in the Mobility Plan.

In the main areas of expansion identified in Choices for City Plan 2030, there are statements that developers must “provide a robust greenbelt edge” and masterplans. These should be matters where the Council’s Planning team should be taking the lead, as is common across Northern Europe, rather than reacting to what developers come forward with. Choices for City Plan 2030 promises joint working with local communities to create Place Briefs for all new housing sites. If this really is done at an early stage, and backed by the Council in negotiations with developers, it could make a difference. We repeat what was said in Our Unique City: Edinburgh should aspire to be a European leader in terms of imaginative and sustainable development rather than just another place for standard houses and layouts that volume house builders can roll out in their sleep.

It is still too soon to draw firm lessons about how the public health emergency will affect people’s preferences about where and how to live. There has been some speculation connecting infection rates with higher housing densities. For any firm conclusions to be drawn much more research is needed to explore other co-correlations with density, which might include socio-economic status, ethnicity, employment etc. Furthermore, East Asian countries, where residential densities are high, seem to have had success in limiting infections. It is also important to remember that density can be achieved in different ways through good design. If some consumer resistance to higher densities does become apparent, it might translate to demand for more opportunities to live in smaller towns, perhaps even new garden cities. Such tendencies could reshape the geography of the Edinburgh
housing market and the functioning of the city region. Meanwhile expansion on to greenfield land around Edinburgh will require careful assessment; conservation of good agricultural land, trees and landscapes; avoidance of flood or other risks; and identification of clear benefits to existing communities and travel patterns. For example, the potential for growth to create a secondary school for Kirkliston would strengthen the case for release, while there is scope to consolidate mixed use development around the new Royal Infirmary.

The Cockburn Association says:

- **The assumptions underpinning current assessments of housing need and demand in and around Edinburgh need to be reassessed to take account of the depressed economy that is likely to be a feature of the first part of the decade.**

- **Development on brownfield land should be the priority, to protect agricultural land, trees and landscapes and make use of existing infrastructure.**

- **We support the intention in City Plan 2030 for “a robust greenbelt edge”, but believe it is the job of city council planners to define that edge.**

- **In identifying “Housing-Led Mixed Use Areas” City Plan must attach proper value to the health and well-being aspects of public open space, as revealed by the lockdown forced by the pandemic.**
Chapter 6: The Heritage City

_Heritage and tourism are tangled in Edinburgh in complex ways. Our tangible and intangible heritage has drawn ever increasing numbers of visitors, and in turn the city has sought to stay competitive in the global market by fabricating more attractions, to the point where the authenticity of the heritage has itself been compromised. Suddenly, festivals are cancelled, cruise ships are docked, hotels are empty. Whose “heritage” and whose city will be affirmed during this decade?

A summary of what we said in 2019

The challenge for Edinburgh is that its branding as a visitor destination based on festivals and international tourism risks undermining its identity and uniqueness. The problems are most acute in the 4.2 sq.km World Heritage Site in the centre of the city. The Tourism Strategy was on track in its target to increase visitor numbers from 3.27M per year in 2012 to 4.8M by 2020.

Edinburgh’s neighbourhoods also have their own identities, as recognised by the fact that there are 50 Conservation Areas in the city. However, outside the World Heritage Site, management plans only exist for Leith and Inverleith.

The demise of House of Fraser and the disposal of its premises at the West End encapsulates much wider trends in the sector, as well as posing some fundamental questions about the future of Princes Street itself. New “experiences” or “lifestyle leisure” complexes are appearing.

The Heritage City 2020 and beyond

Much has happened since those thoughts were aired. The 2019-20 Christmas Market went ahead without planning permission and left East Princes Street Gardens in a disastrous mess for months. The Big Wheel may have turned for the last time. In West Princes Street Gardens, Summer Sessions again erected screens along the south side of Princes Street, and blocked off memorial benches forcing pedestrians into the busy road, while the so-called Quaich Project prepares plans that will enable a doubling of the crowd capacity for concerts compared with the current Ross Bandstand numbers. In January 2020, some 850 people turned out at the Cockburn’s “City for Sale?” public summit to vent their frustrations at the way the city handled these developments.
In November 2019 a consultation was launched on the new **2030 Tourism Strategy**. Belatedly, and with understatement, it recognised that: “the city has traditionally focused on driving tourism growth, however in the light of what we know about tourism in a growing city, it’s time to adapt our approach by working to make the growth work for the city”. It talked of “difficult decisions” that might have to be made “in the future”. Despite these concessionary statements, the consultation responses revealed discontent.

Then came COVID-19, the shutdown, empty hotels, short terms lets being converted back to long term renting, cruise ships with infected passengers and the cancellation of the 2020 summer festivals. Recovery is likely to take time. As argued in Chapter 2, the priority now should be to seek to retain existing Edinburgh-based small and medium sized businesses which are most at risk from the economic disaster of COVID-19 and the changes it will bring. Such enterprises should be recognised as part of Edinburgh’s heritage.

**Choices for City Plan 2030** has surprisingly little to say about managing the pressures that a decade of strong promotion and growth of tourism has put on the public spaces in the city. What it does say gives little sense that there are serious issues to be addressed. It proposes a new policy that would “provide support for... Edinburgh’s festivals and cultural offering across the city” as a way of promoting “good growth”. This is simply not good enough. As the 2019 Christmas Market saga demonstrated, such “cultural offering”, especially in the World Heritage Site, must be a concern for the statutory planning system. As the Executive Director of Place commented when the Outline Business Case for West Princes Street Gardens was being discussed, the Council has lots of policies and strategies which can contradict each other, meaning officers have to decide which to prioritise. Unlike the Tourism Strategy or the Economic Strategy, the Local Development Plan is a statutory document, and so it is important that it has clear policies in relation to use of land and buildings.

**There should not be unqualified support for unspecified cultural offerings across the city.**

The damage to grass and the soil compaction that is caused by holding big events in greenspaces, not to mention the carbon emissions, means that there should be a presumption against such development in the Plan. Like other activities, culture and heritage “offerings” need to fit the carbon reduction targets. There should also be policies to disperse culture and tourism around the city, partly to protect the living environment in areas currently most pressured, but also to make events more accessible and inclusive to all parts of the city, supporting the neighbourhoods in line with proposals we have outlined in previous chapters. Local culture should be part of local development: a music industry at cheap local venues nurturing and showcasing new talent is an example.

To be clear, the Cockburn values the Festivals and the cultural and economic contribution they make to the city. However, we share the view of many that the 2020 lockdown and cancellations provide a chance to rethink the way, and the places, in which their growth has imposed diseconomies and has disregarded important concerns, notably the climate emergency, the right to housing and residents’ rights to amenity, and now the world of pandemic risks. Both in summer and in the winter, we
believe there is a case for a more polycentric pattern of venues, and smaller events if social distancing is continued. It is notable that the Film Festival and the Science Festival, and indeed the Cockburn’s own annual Doors Open Day, are all popular in the city: all take place at different points in the year, spreading the load, and none of them has been seen as problematic. There are lessons to learn from the way their success and popularity.

There needs to be a greater understanding of the economic impact of the previous levels and format of tourism. What changes are required to increase its absolute contribution to the city’s economy, and how to better disperse the benefits? Changes are required to obviate the adverse consequences of tourism, which though unintended can no longer be ignored. For example, festivals should be dispersed through the year, to reduce the stresses of the peaks in August and Hogmanay. Setting Edinburgh in an international context and welcoming artists from many countries are now parts of our heritage, but there is scope to do much more to celebrate the local heritage of every part of the city, e.g. through walking or cycling trails, and a cycle of local events.

Heritage will remain central to the qualities that make Edinburgh Our Unique City. It should be central to the new Local Development Plan, which in turn should take priority over the various other plans and policies.

**The Cockburn Association says:**

- **We will oppose planning applications for the 2020 Christmas market.** We would support a network of local Christmas events in buildings or on hard standing areas around the city, as a way to reduce leakage from the local economy and to support neighbourhood development and local small businesses.

- **To protect the heritage of the Waverley Valley and the gardens as traditionally a space for all, all the year, we will also oppose the proposal to create a major performance arena and “Welcome Centre” in West Princes Street Gardens.**

- **City Plan 2030 should establish capacity limits on the most crowded areas in the city centre during festivals, and use these to guide planning decisions.**

- **City Plan 2030 should propose a decentralised approach to cultural venues, linked to neighbourhoods and hubs and protection of parks and other greenspace.**

- **The city’s conservation areas are heritage assets that should be strongly embedded in City Plan 2030 policies.**
Summary: Go Forward, not Backward

In 2020, like cities around the world, Edinburgh entered unknown territory. A global pandemic, businesses closed, major gatherings cancelled, and uncertainty over what might follow created an unprecedented set of challenges for everyone. It is difficult to chart a way ahead, but what is certain is that there should be no way back. The climate emergency has not been devoured by Covid 19: rather the public health crisis has provided insights into what will happen if existential threats are treated as something that can be ignored until they stare us in the face.

In Edinburgh, as elsewhere, the “Covid 19 Experience” has shown that we all depend on each other, that our health can hang by a thread held together by “unskilled” workers who can barely afford to live in the city, that too many houses are too small, and that our public parks and coasts are integral to well-being, especially for the young or those without private gardens. We have found that some can work from home rather than commuting to an office, that students can be taught without being on campus, that streets can be traffic free and the air can be cleaner and the skies bluer. If we take a moment to reflect, we might ponder what makes our city special, and how can we best conserve those qualities in difficult times.

There will be voices, who may well have the ear of national and local officials and politicians, who will call for Edinburgh to “get back to normal” as quickly as possible, albeit with less jobs, poorer wages, and a new round of austerity to rot the public realm. Instead, Edinburgh as a city marked by innovation and a high quality living environment needs to find new ways of going forward. Conservation of the fabric of the city – caring for Edinburgh - is the best foot forward, the essential way to “make do” during hard times, but also to take the climate emergency seriously and to create new jobs and build community wealth and health. Our Unique City is an attempt by Edinburgh’s oldest and most authoritative civic amenity organisation to contribute to that process of renewal. If crucial decisions about the future of the city are taken behind closed doors, with privileged access for lobbyists and publicists, Edinburgh will be diminished: by 2030 the damage will be irreparable.

The Cockburn Association does not expect everyone to agree with us, but we do call on “Everyone Who Loves Edinburgh” to join in our conversation.