



An opportunity for
**AGILITY, INSIGHT
AND INNOVATION**

Speculating about the nature of changes to come

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We face great uncertainty due to Covid-19 and indications are that to survive and prosper, communities around the country will need to respond with agility, insight and innovation.

MANY professionals are speculating about the nature of changes to come, without any reliable evidence. Knee-jerk responses include suggestions that cities will no longer densify, that public transport is doomed, and so on. After September 11 many were declaring the death of the tower block, yet in the interim a countless number of tower blocks have been built, and the underlying drivers for consolidation and intensification are varied and strong. Even without a vaccine in sight, public transport use is starting to pick up again and some are returning to their former town and city centre locations, partially in support of local retail businesses, and partially due to their preference for the interpersonal social and business interactions. Other businesses, however, are decentralising due to a positive on-line experience during lockdown and many shops are abandoned. It is just too early to tell where the balance will settle.

Many premature solutions are on offer and some are seizing the moment (don't waste a good crisis) to further their pre-existing agendas without proper analysis of where we are heading. Some argue for higher environmental standards to progress climate change responses, while others want lower environmental standards to progress employment opportunities, or to

enable faster construction outcomes.

This direct tension between the economy and the environment was also starkly illustrated during lockdowns around the world. As economies falter and unemployment grows, transport emissions fall, birdsong volumes increase and emboldened wildlife venture into urban areas. This dilemma is succinctly captured in George Monbiot words; "...*Capitalism collapses without growth, yet perpetual growth on a finite planet leads inexorably to environmental calamity*".

The social benefits of growth also have their limits. Michael Green's *Social Progress Indicators* work illustrates that while countries' social wellbeing initially improves as they get wealthier, the benefits flatten out after a while. First World health issues such as obesity kick in and, presumably, downstream benefits diminish as the rich get super rich. Given these mixed blessings and predictions of declining growth, it follows that we need to strengthen our expertise in approaches that are less reliant on growth, and focus on those local challenges exacerbated by Covid-19 that we can be certain of such as:

- A weakened economy will result in fewer resources.
- Increased unemployment will induce greater social stress.

- The vitality of city and town centres will be at risk.
- The capacity to address environmental and climate change needs will be weakened.

Local leadership

While central government pulls the big levers, Local Authorities (LAs) are best suited to lead on the ground. To be effective they will need to move quickly to develop a connected-up big picture response and take their communities with them. While initiatives that address immediate needs should be fast-tracked, a piecemeal response in the absence of a bigger plan should be avoided as community support will deteriorate over time.

The challenges vary with the scale of the LA. Our metropolitan cities have to contend with large councils as well as a number of stand-alone agencies (transport, economic development, urban regeneration etc.). Significant effort is required to ensure day to day integration between these to counter the tension between their singular objectives. However good integration does occur on multi-agency projects when explicitly set up with that aim from the outset.

Ironically, while regional cities, towns and districts, generally have fewer resources, they appear to have a higher propensity to produce integrated outcomes. For a start you can usually fit most of the key discipline leaders in one room. Regional communities, who regularly confront adversity, are often more resilient. They make do with less, are innovative and appreciate the value of working together.

Connecting the big picture with local needs

Our new-found Covid-19 challenge is compounded by disillusionment with the complexities of the RMA, and the absence of big-picture strategies with a spatial dimension. More innovative LAs have resorted to informal approaches of their own to remedy this vacuum with varying degrees of success. A promising emerging response is the adoption of the so-called Blueprint processes which has been developed here and is now used by some in Australia. It is an informal strategy driven by LAs and delivered quickly, usually between 6 and 12 months. It articulates a clear direction that is easily understood and endorsed by the whole community. Its key attributes are that it:

- Aligns district-wide and local responses.
- Connects all council strategies, District Plans, Long Term Plans etc.
- Provides a spatial framework.
- Addresses governance issues.
- Determines a strategic sequence of well-defined actions.

To achieve buy-in and deliverability they are co-produced with council staff, elected members, and stakeholder representatives. External technical expertise further enriches the outcomes. To achieve durable popular support, the public and local communities are drawn into the creative and prioritisation phases. To ensure real change occurs, the costed priorities and timelines are formally endorsed by the Council.



Fig 1: Where District/City-wide and Local Blueprints fit in



OFTEN ONE OR TWO KEY SHORTCOMINGS STAND IN THE WAY OF TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE. *These may vary from insufficient land or infrastructure, lack of affordability, reputational issues, the lack of health services, poor quality schools, or transport limitations, and so on.*

These essentials are echoed by Clive Morgan (GM Community Growth, Waikato District Council): “It was inspiring to see the way in which our communities came together to tell us their aspirations for their towns. As Council we often find it difficult to engage with our communities, but the Blueprints struck a chord and we were able to hear from large numbers of them. We heard their voice strongly and now have a clear direction and list of initiatives that we know are meaningful to our communities.”

A strategic sequence of actions

Often one or two key shortcomings stand in the way of transformative change. These may vary from insufficient land or infrastructure, lack of affordability, reputational issues, the lack of health services, poor quality schools, or transport limitations, and so on. A good strategy identifies and prioritises ‘trigger’ strategies to unlock these, with the expectation that

other supporting initiatives will become more viable.

The Tamworth Blueprint 100 unambiguously prioritises unlocking infrastructure investment as its ‘trigger strategy’ which will enable job creation and amenity improvement initiatives. With new businesses more revenue will enable more amenity improvements, and so on.

The ubiquitous use of so-called ‘Big Moves’ does little to methodically establish a strategic sequence. One approach is to identify those initiatives that best combine being *transformative* and being *deliverable*. Deliverability relates to the ability to attract funding, gain political and public support, achieve consent, and so on. Transformative-ness relates to how impactful, efficient, balanced and enriching an initiative is (Figure 2), the sequence of these attributes matter, with *impactful* weighted highest.

A methodical form of prioritisation occurs when these criteria are combined as illustrated in Figure 3 where initiatives ‘A’ and ‘B’ will make a big difference while having a good chance of being implemented. Initiatives ‘G’ and ‘H’ should be abandoned, as should ‘C’ and ‘D’ unless they are of symbolic value or provide a quick win to get momentum going. Initiatives like ‘F’ could be game-changers but will need supporting initiatives such as ‘E’ to help make them more deliverable.

The success rate of any strategy can be considerably enhanced by such a dual criteria approach as witnessed by Liam Hodgetts, former GM Strategy at New Plymouth District Council: *“After a few years we are halfway through implementing our Blueprint’s eight cornerstone strategies and plans, including District Plan changes, the Regional Economic Development*




	IMPACTFUL	Transformational Significant scale Systemic change
	EFFICIENT	Less space/resource/energy Less consumption/waste Right thing in right place
	BALANCED	Addresses multiple objectives Resolves competing objectives Mitigates or compensates
	ENRICHING	Fun Inspirational Symbolic

Figure 2: Criteria for Transformativeness (copyright Urbanismpus)

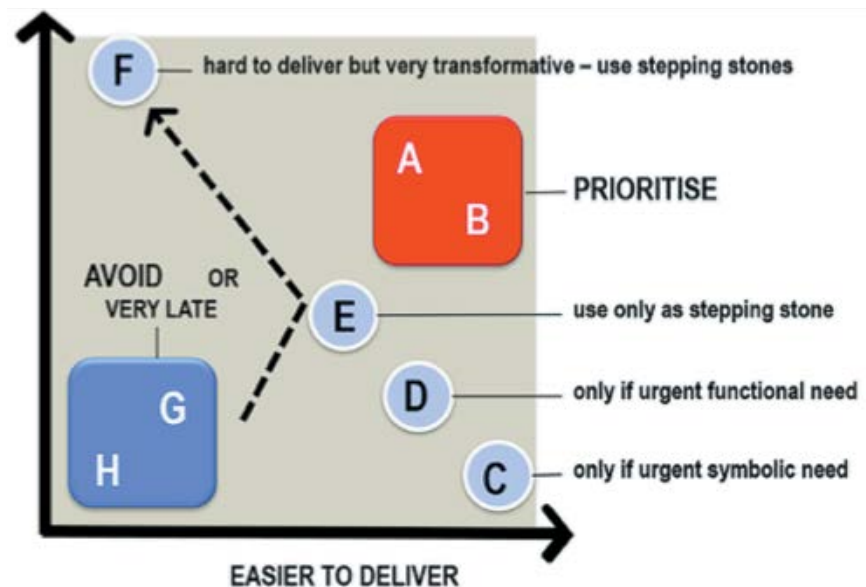


Figure 3: Prioritisation (copyright Urbanismpus)

Strategy and our CBD revitalisation programme. The Taranaki Traverse project has featured in the Crown Infrastructure Partners Covid-19 Stimulus Bids.”

Breadth and depth of issues

An effective strategy responds to the regional context and weaves together a wide range of issues both at district/city-wide and local level.”

This multi-dimensional complexity can only be dealt with through extensive mapping and modelling in an iterative process best facilitated in workshop format. Maps district/city level and concepts at precinct level play a big part, from these transport modelling and land budgets for employment and residential uses can be calculated. The viability of retail provision and community facilities can be determined.

When these are all considered concurrently it is possible to determine efficiencies, leverage off synergies, resolve tensions and identify any gaps that need to be filled.

While the process addresses significant complexity, the aim is to achieve an elegant, transformative outcome as explained by Paul Bennett (General Manager, Tamworth Regional Council): *“The Blueprint 100 has redefined the future of the Tamworth Region, it is transformative in every sense – infrastructure, transport, housing, industry, investment, health, education and heritage – all seamlessly integrated into a clear strategy that has been embraced by our community. Blueprint has now been adopted as Council’s policy to drive our development and growth over the next twenty years.”* Brent McAlister² helped introduce this Blueprint to Australia where it complements the NSW government’s recent requirement for *Local Spatial Plan Statements*.

Covid-19 related responses

An additional value of an encompassing strategy as described above is that it strengthens the ability to respond to unexpected opportunities such as large-scale investment, as well as to shocks such as natural disasters. The Greater Christchurch Urban Development Strategy produced in 2006 proved useful after the 2011 earthquake when the region required a major reset. Some LAs with existing *Blueprints* report similar benefits in their responses to Covid-19. However, moving forward a heightened response will be required to social and local employment issues, the survival of our town and city centres. It will also be vital to ensure environmental and climate change challenges receive the attention they warrant.

Environmental and climate change challenges

A grave risk of the financial and associated social crisis is that it detracts from global environmental issues, such as the loss of biodiversity, species extinction and climate change. Beyond good environmental practices, which are now well understood, professionals will be challenged with seeking win-win outcomes wherever possible and tasked with ensuring environmental issues remain on the agenda.

While the availability of clean energy is a matter for central government, local initiatives can significantly determine carbon production. Any measures that reduce travel, especially car use, and consumption will help. The value of an integrated approach as described above should not be underestimated. By essentially ‘putting the right stuff in the

right place’³. The early origination of North West Town in Waitakere determined that the integrated transport, land use, and infrastructure planning approach would save 7.5 million vehicle km travelled per year, reduce vehicle operating costs by \$2.25 million and avoid 3,375 tonnes of CO₂ from vehicle emissions. The *Blueprint’s* transformative-ness criteria (*especially impact, efficiency, and balance*) will serve as a helpful guide in this regard.

New focus on social stress

With a likely increase in poverty there will be a strong focus on the basic needs at the bottom of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. More aspirational well-being and elevated self-actualisation initiatives may well be given a delayed priority. Fundamentals such as education, health and employment will be key. Kāinga Ora’s role in improving social housing conditions, creating neighbourhood uplift, and reducing social concentrations will be seminal. Objectives which will only be fully realised if delivered in partnership with LAs.

We will need, more than ever, to understand the social consequences of different planning and design approaches. Many towns and cities are unwittingly making their poor poorer, simply due to a lack of understanding of the significance of the *proximity* of fundamental resources (health, education, and jobs) to their citizens.

Social issues often lose out when outcomes are negotiated with other disciplines because they are difficult to represent graphically when compared to maps that depict the mix of uses, transport networks, and areas of high ecological value. While the distribution of community facilities and how they are performing is relatively

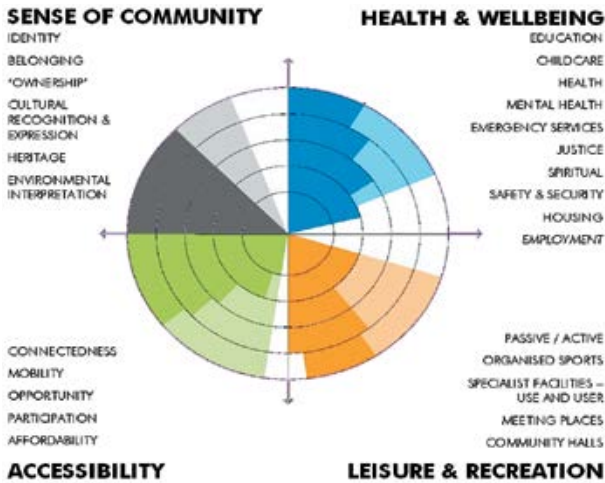


Figure 4: Social attributes of a local community or centre (Copyright Urbanisplus)

easy to represent, the non-physical elements such as 'ownership, recognition, opportunity etc.' are more difficult, they are judgments that need to be informed by local knowledge. Figure 4 depicts the social attributes of a local community or centre, the rings represent the scale of effect (national, regional, district or local). For instance, the reach of Ngaruawahia's community facilities may be localised, while its cultural relevance is national. The darker shading represents the current condition, whereas the lighter shade represents the future potential. The diagrams are informed by detailed written appraisals.

When the social attributes are depicted as a network, as in Figure 5, the social dimension can be on an equal footing with other disciplines. Areas of synergy and tension can be identified and resolved. Deficiencies can be addressed, such as where public realm improvements are needed. Links between centres that offer different attributes can be strengthened so these attributes can be shared more readily, and resources are not duplicated.

Mobilising local energy and innovation

While LAs can provide cohesion from the top down, innovation and energy are to be often found at local community level. With diminished resources LAs need to reset their relationships with local communities, entities, and entrepreneurs. One *Blueprint* outcome was an agreement

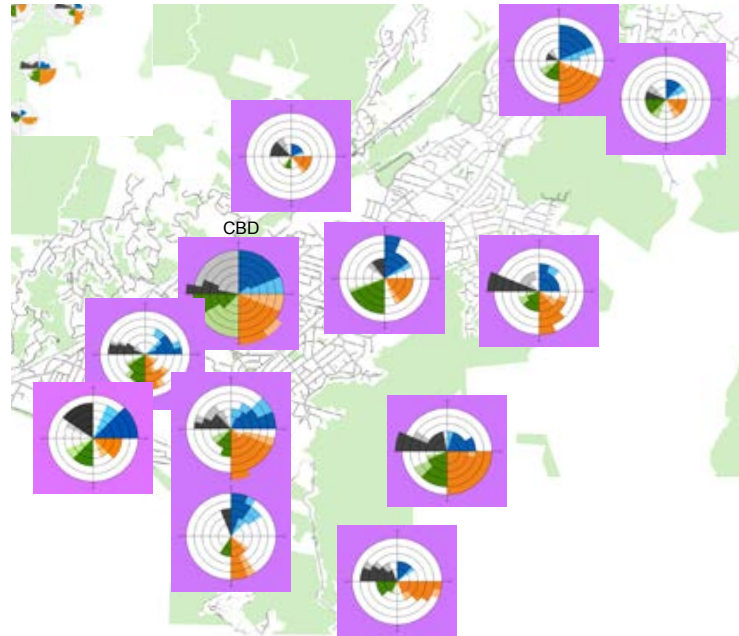


Figure 5: The social network depicting different current and potential future local attributes (Copyright Urbanisplus)

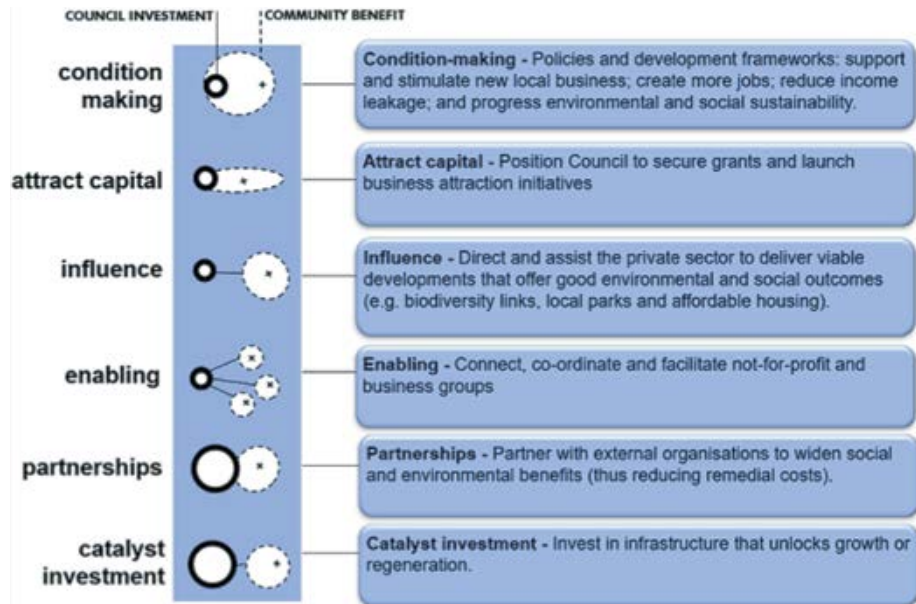


Figure 6: Leverage techniques (copyright Urbanisplus)

to devolve more decision-making to local boards who, based on a good business-case, get to take over selected projects. In other instances, the approach has been to *leverage* off the work done by not-for-profit entities whose objectives are in accord with the LA's policies. The assumption is that if people in the community are offering

up their own time to do things, they are probably serving legitimate needs in that community. The purpose is for LAs to assist (not take over) by applying a range of leverage techniques as described in Figure 6. Little or no capex is involved.

Workshop-based sessions with not-for-profit entities have delivered significant

leverage outcomes, ranging from biodiversity, youth, cultural and business support initiatives. In Lismore (NSW) the local economy and suppliers are now several million dollars wealthier by benefitting from the regional hospitals and universities annual spend of over \$20 million which traditionally mostly leaked to Sydney. Council enabled the process and provided IT support for a website. Similar opportunities must abound around New Zealand.

Local employment initiatives

While the government is responding to Covid-19's employment impacts at a national level, there is much that can be done at a local level. A proactive approach toward business attraction initiatives, removing regulatory barriers, providing incentives, and public realm improvements can all play a role towards:

- Retaining wealth where it is leaking to elsewhere.
- Attracting new businesses.
- Enabling local businesses to function more efficiently.

Having an aligned approach to job and wealth creation is critical. Economic development strategies often lack a spatial dimension, and urban planning and urban design often lack the operational strategies to back the intent. An aligned approach by Dunedin City Council enabled their Warehouse Precinct which attracted some \$52m in private investment on the back of just \$1.1m council investment. Historic buildings were saved, and new jobs created.

Town and city centres

A good centres strategy will identify the strategic emphasis specific to each of its centres, as indicated in Figure 7. For some, town/city centre regeneration is the priority. Here the competitive threats of online shopping, shopping malls and large format outlets are now being compounded by the effects of Covid-19. Every tool



Figure 7: The Waikato District Blueprint's district-wide centres strategy with different strategic emphasis for each centre.

available will be required to ensure these centres, which are often at the heart of their communities, survive and prosper.

An obvious start is to target missing anchors and outlets. The Marlborough District Council facilitated Kathmandu's move to Blenheim and helped to ensure Farmers remains in the town centre. They were also strategic in the location of the new library and arts centre, so it attracts traffic into town off the State Highway. At Picton the library draws visitors past the shops.

Improving transport links will widen the catchment and increasing town centre housing will improve perceptions of safety and activity. An attractive public realm can serve as a destination in its own right. Markets and events should be arranged so they support the centre. The arts should

also be considered as an economic driver. In smaller centres passing trade can be vital, but the associated parking strategies should balance convenience with blighting the quality of the street.

The opportunity

Every community is affected differently and will have more challenges ahead, yet to be navigated. Those communities that apply their resources and skills with agility, insight and innovation may yet, despite this crisis, leave a positive legacy for their people, and for nature.

NOTES

¹ Now Chief Planner, Wellington City Council

² General Manager Development, Wellington Shire Council, Victoria, Australia

³ See 'Urban Economics by Design Down Under' at: <http://www.urbanismplus.com/quality/>