How Can Norwich Build Back Better?

September 2020

Section 1.   Introduction

'How can Norwich Build Back Better?' was an online participatory event organised by Green New Deal Norwich, with support from Norfolk Network, Norwich & District Trades Council, and The Norwich Radical, who acted as co-hosts on the day. Our intention was to create a space for people to meet and share experiences and ideas about a better future for Norwich, some of which we hope will be taken further by participants. The purpose of this report is to capture the main findings and enable the views and ideas gathered during the event to feed into the work of local decision-makers.

After a brief introduction from each of the co-hosts, the 37 participants were split into facilitated breakout rooms to discuss their experience of lockdown due to coronavirus, particularly changes we've experienced that point to a better way of living. Participants returned to the main session to share thoughts about what kind of city they would like Norwich to be, before returning to breakout rooms to discuss how to create that vision of Norwich in reality. This report captures the core themes that emerged.

Section 2.   What we've learned from lockdown

This section is a summary of the first breakout session.

What's been hard about lockdown?

In a discussion about what has been hard about lockdown, key themes were: stress and mental health due to uncertainty, loss of income and structure, being online constantly and an acute awareness of increased social inequalities and suffering; loneliness and the loss of human contact; and a lack of community resilience plans. There were also issues particular to the elderly, parents – especially mothers – of school children and those with limited computer and online access. Financially, some people feel they are just surviving, and there is concern about the erosion of democracy.

What has changed during the last six months, locally and globally?

The following themes emerged regarding changes since lockdown began.

Community cohesion

People have experienced many acts of kindness and a shared sense of purpose. Communities rallied as people checked on neighbours, making sure that there was access to food and medicine. There is a new awareness of and respect for local shopkeepers and key workers, and a greater appreciation for local businesses and initiatives. People have felt greater agency for doing things at grassroots level, rather than waiting for council or official permission, and a greater awareness of vulnerable groups and individuals.

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Environment

The last six months have seen a surge in valuing nature and the outdoors. Parks and green spaces became more important for exercise and pleasure, and those without access to gardens and parks have particularly suffered from lockdown. There is greater interest in where food comes from, with people buying more locally and growing food at home or in community farming schemes. More people are making environmentally friendly choices, such as shopping less for unnecessary 'stuff'. At the same time, the surge in people in the countryside as lockdown eased led to distressing amounts of rubbish left, particularly on the beaches.

Transport

Reduction in road and air travel led to cleaner air, a quiet and calm urban environment, and more individuals and families out cycling and walking. It was noted that some cities had pop-up bike lanes, but not Norwich.

Anti-racism

There has been a huge surge in public support for Black Lives Matter, anti-racism and defunding the police. While this may have been triggered by the murder of George Floyd, the pandemic has emphasised myriad social and economic inequalities along racial lines. People are increasingly aware of how racism intersects with environmental problems.

Democracy and society

While communities seem stronger locally, nationally there is a feeling of increasing divisiveness. Some fear that the government is using Covid-19 as a distraction while curtailing democratic rights, civil liberties and public services and pushing through a no-deal Brexit. There are concerns about ever increasing disparities between the rich and poor, even as these inequalities are fuelling a rise in right-wing populism. And there are concerns about the inefficiency and moral standards of leaders.

What positive changes do you want to keep?

These were the predominant themes regarding changes people want to keep.

Less traffic

Participants spoke a lot about enjoying the quiet of lockdown when road and air traffic dramatically reduced, and even grief as the traffic returned. There's a strong desire now for reduced traffic, more public transport and for making active transport easier, as it was when cars were off the roads.

Slower pace of life

Most groups discussed a desire for a slower pace of life: more time with family, time to listen to and connect with people, quiet time alone and walks in nature. There is a strong recognition of the pleasure of a simpler, active, healthy life.

Less materialism

Another common theme was less materialism, with an emphasis on repairing and making things while making more considered purchases limiting the purchase of nonessential goods.

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Communities valuing and taking care of each other

Tools like Mutual Aid and WhatsApp facilitated an amazing sense of community, as people shopped and looked out for each other. People want to build on this increased local / grassroots agency as well as their understanding of race inequality. People also want to maintain increased support for the local economy: veg box schemes, corner shops, etc.

Section 3. The kind of city we want Norwich to be

Participants were asked what three words would describe the Norwich they wanted to see. This word cloud presents the words suggested.

Section 4. Our vision for Norwich

This section reflects our discussions from the second breakout session, focused on changes participants want to see in Norwich.

Transport- rethinking the role of the car and our streets

With a vision for more child-friendly streets that encourage cycling and walking, suggestions regarding transport included:

- rentable cargo bikes
- extended park-and-ride with eco shuttle busses
- flexible public transport to order, with smaller shuttle buses covering wider county
- free public transport
- going car-free within the outer ring road
- eco transport for those with mobility issues safer cycling
- electric car charging infrastructure.

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Food resilience and biodiversity

This popular topic included these ideas:

- a local food strategy for Norwich that addresses food resilience, food poverty, biodiversity, food waste, health and well-being, and community cohesion
- support for growing food – including fruit and nut trees – in parks and on other council-owned land, brownfield sites, and space currently used for parking
- support for rewilding, foraging and plant-based diets
- no more pesticides and herbicides council-owned parks and open spaces
- support greater awareness of ecosystems, the cycles of the seasons for plants and wildlife and rewilding.

Community spaces for sustainable lifestyles, collaborative working and connecting

Many people spoke of the need for more community spaces that could act as a focal point for sustainable lifestyles, real participation and collaboration across communities, organisations, agencies and professionals. Some specific suggestions were:

- sustainability hubs that provide a 'library of things' (e.g. tools, cargo bikes), skill sharing, cycle repair, seed swaps, childcare, cooking classes and community meals, where possible co-located with work hubs
- repair facilities at tips
- repair skills workshops, including mending and altering clothes
- more use of outdoor spaces for the arts and community events
- improving outdoor spaces to be open and inclusive and facilitate change encounters and connecting, e.g. a seating terrace and fountain in Chapelfield Park
- rethinking unused spaces in the city
- more shared cultural and community events.

Energy sustainability

- More support from the council for community energy schemes and mass building retrofits to help with fuel poverty, insulation, jobs and carbon emissions, especially for housing associations and poor-quality rented housing
- Improved building regulations for new builds, including a requirement for energy production
- Local competitions for businesses and possibly families/households around sustainability /low impact lifestyle.

Local control – devolution of power

- Proactively engaging citizens through greater use of participatory democracy such as a Norwich Citizens' Assembly and participatory budgeting
- A bottom-up approach to local engagement in smaller communities
- Residents taking action at local level to be the change we want to make; not waiting for permission, but making things happen ourselves.
- Closer dialogue with elected members who are in the position to make key decisions
- More collaboration between all political groups on the council

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Committing to anti-racism

- Covid and the climate crisis affect people differently. Recognising that vulnerable groups are hardest hit could lead to active bridge building from very white spaces to BAME people and communities - this could be embedded in diversity policies, as a condition for grants
- Actively inviting People of Colour to predominantly white community spaces and building bridges between communities
- Greater support for Black History Month
- Noting the role of the police in community cohesion, call for Norfolk Constabulary to engage in anti-racism education and to be involved in Stand up to Racism events, to improve understanding of our diverse communities and the needs of all residents

Rethinking work and income

Covid-19 has allowed us to completely re-think working habits and the relationship between paid work and income. Suggestions in this area were:

- a 4-day work week
- a universal basic income trial in Norwich

Reshaping how we connect in the face of an ongoing pandemic

- Continued use of video conferencing to maintain better contact with people a long way away and reduce commuting
- Internet connectivity must be improved across the UK to support working from home.
- Local work hubs to support working away from the office, but also not at home, to help people delineate work time from home time and to ensure social contact for people who live alone. Ideally, these would be walking or cycling distance from home and free or affordable.

Section 5. Conclusion

In asking 'How Can Norwich Build Back Better?', we have seen a great appetite for change toward a better future locally, one that is focused on social and climate justice. The pandemic has shown the world what is possible in terms of pace and scale of change, and that barriers to change have only been the lack of a collective will and a shared vision. The ideas presented in this report begin to map out a vision for Norwich. We invite our Members of Parliament, the Good Economy Commission, the city and county councils and any interested residents to engage with us in developing these ideas further and putting them into action.

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