

Build Back Better is a must in our local communities says councillor

by Independent councillor for Sighthill Gorgie Ward, Cllr Ashley Graczyk.

Edinburgh Council is currently in the process of rolling out temporary measures to support people walking, wheeling and cycling through our streets as lockdown eases. However, I regret to say that we have not acted as swiftly, decisively or indeed effectively as other areas.

Internationally, we have seen Paris transformed. A visionary Mayor has seized the opportunity to permanently change the balance of city streets in favour of pedestrians and cyclists with bold new infrastructure. Closer to home, colleagues in Aberdeen and Glasgow have acted quickly to bring pavement-widening planters and segregated cycleways to locations across each city. The pavement structures used in Aberdeen feature large planters, a seating area and create extended walking surfaces level with the pavement.

My own ward includes Gorgie-Dalry, one of eight town centres in Edinburgh. It is a densely-populated, vibrant residential area, home to a diverse community of Scots and international residents from all over the world. It is also a polluted Air Quality Management Area, so we need to do all we can to encourage as much active travel as possible.

After waiting for two long months for measures to be installed in what is one of the most public-transport dependent areas of the city, I was appalled to see this week that the 'measures' consist of traffic cones scattered along our main roads. This

is just not good enough. Other areas such as Morningside have semi-permanent wands protecting walkers and cyclists. At an absolute minimum, we need to implement sustainable measures which prioritise walking, cycling and wheeling safely and support social distancing.

We should also be using this opportunity to deliver new public spaces, new public amenity and building infrastructure to create healthier and safer streets. Other cities such as Aberdeen have done this very effectively with similar funding. If this cannot be achieved with a generous funding pot of £5 million from the Scottish Government, some very serious questions have to be asked about value for money, procurement processes and Edinburgh Council's use of public funds.



Cllr Ashley Graczyk

I believe we should prioritise people over vehicles across our city. Several streets could be dead-ended quickly and simply, pavements widened and segregated cycling lanes installed, maintaining access for residents but prioritising the use of the space for walkers, wheelers and cyclists. Newly-created spaces could easily be augmented with street trees and planters to provide increased amenity and become much needed green pockets of relief in the medium term.

One local arts and culture organisation in my area, Gorgie Collective, is actively engaged in improving our public spaces. They recently installed a beautiful public artwork in White Park on Gorgie Road. Entitled the Harlequin Fence, this colourful ceramic sculpture features natural forms and is brightening the day of all those passing by. I have seen local people of all ages stop to admire it.

We need more ambitious changes and creative projects like this bringing a sense of place to our local areas. We have the chance to 'build back better' and create public spaces that are people-sized, with more amenities, seats, trees and green

spaces. This is vital for the health and wellbeing of whole communities. We should be bold, far-sighted and ambitious. We can implement temporary changes now and build on these to improve our public spaces permanently once it is safe to do so.

This crisis has already brought us significant and lasting structural change. Let's use it. Let's improve and reimagine our communities and public spaces and make them safer, greener and fit for purpose. To meet our immediate needs during this crisis, and for a better and healthier future for everyone who lives here.