

Opinion – Transport Convener on Spaces for People

by Cllr Lesley Macinnes, Transport Convener.

As the results of a public consultation on the temporary Spaces for People measures as well as the results of a piece of market research commissioned by the council are made public later today, the Transport Convener offers her thoughts on the measures.

Some 17,600 individuals responded to the public consultation, making this one of the highest responses to any council consultation.



Councillor Lesley Macinnes, Scottish National Party. Photo: Martin P. McAdam www.martinmcadam.com

Cllr Macinnes writes: “It’s now more than a year since we began introducing Spaces for People measures to help people to make journeys by foot, bike and wheelchair safely while physically distancing.

It was inevitable that introducing changes in so many parts of the city would give rise to differing reactions, with people expressing both concerns and positive comments.

We're now considering the results of both a major consultation and market research on the changes we've made, and whether people would like any of them to be kept more permanently. Before we move to the next stage, I want to take this opportunity to comment on some of the key issues that have arisen since the start of the pandemic.

Some people have asked us why we've been making these changes. Last year, in the depths of lockdown, we had very little choice. As the nation came to terms with a 'new normal' where 2 metre physical distancing is needed, the way we moved around the city changed drastically. People were stepping on roads to give one another space, cycling along busy routes to avoid public transport or squeezing onto narrow pavements to take daily exercise.

Throughout the course of the last year our approach has evolved with the changing situation, and strands of the programme reflect that. From the beginning, when we created Spaces for Exercise, so people could get to places like Silverknowes prom safely (and they did, in great number), to our city and town centres schemes to add space on busy high streets. Restrictions outside schools helped limit crowding as pupils returned to full-time learning and Travelling Safely measures provided much-needed cycle space on busy roads as alternatives to congested off-road networks, along with a scheme to remove obstructive street clutter from our streets.

Both the Scottish and UK Governments have encouraged and funded local authorities across the country to make temporary changes to facilitate active travel. Through the Scottish Government, via Sustrans, we've been awarded £5.25m in total specifically to provide additional space for physical distancing in the pandemic – and I want to be clear that we *can't* spend this money on filling potholes or elsewhere.

To those who question Sustrans' influence over our decisions – Sustrans is a respected, national charity and we value their

input highly. But these decisions are very much our own. It's our responsibility to protect citizens' safety, to support businesses to thrive and to give children and families space to enjoy safe, pollution-free routes.

This is an entirely new situation, and I know that some of the road layouts have taken time to adjust to. But we're also in the midst of a crisis. We've followed guidance set by the Scottish Government to help us get these emergency changes to protect public health on the ground quickly – in fact, we've gone further than expected to engage with key stakeholders on every single scheme. As a result, we've tweaked and improved many of the measures along the way.

It's thanks to the efforts of our dedicated Spaces for People team that we've been able to respond to community concerns. Each intervention is carefully risk assessed, taking blue badge parking and loading into account, and is closely monitored once in place. People's safety is our priority, and we notify emergency services about every intervention, addressing any access issues if necessary.

As restrictions are eased alongside the rapid rollout of vaccinations across the population, some may ask why we still need interventions like these in place. While there is much to be grateful for, we're not out of the woods yet. The fast-spreading Indian variant of the Covid virus still threatens to set back best laid plans to fully exit lockdown. Large sections of society, many of whom don't own a car, still feel nervous to set foot on public transport. And as businesses reopen with restrictions in place, queues will become commonplace on our streets.

That these changes are helping to people to walk, cycle and wheel more easily aligns with our strategic policy goals too. Our ambitious ten-year City Mobility Plan focuses on sustainable travel, while projects like City Centre Transformation will facilitate travel by foot, wheelchair or

bike. Our commitments to become carbon neutral by 2030, to significantly improve air quality and to encourage healthy, active travel will benefit from people choosing to walk or cycle over private car journeys.

Of course, we recognise some schemes have caused disruption and we want to minimise that for residents and businesses. This is a difficult balance but we're trying again to get it right.

We have no intention of pushing through any permanent schemes under the cover of Spaces for People. We want to bring the people of Edinburgh along with us. That's why we would be using Experimental Traffic Regulation Orders to implement any longer-term changes, meaning we can continue to involve local people in their operation and evolution once in place.

Many of the changes we've made, it's worth noting, are as a result of our Commonplace consultation last year and have been informed by residents' suggestions for improvements. The 17,600 responses we received to the latest consultation, along with the findings of in-depth marketing research conducted with a representative cross-section of residents, will be invaluable as we progress to the next stage of the programme.

This insight, along with the expertise of our officers, who are working to a defined set of criteria approved by elected councillors in committee, will help us to understand where we can make schemes better, how they can be changed to suit more people and where, in some areas, they can be scaled back."