



THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH  
Edinburgh Futures Institute

EFI Design Lab | Case Study



## Edinburgh Futures Institute Design Lab

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Collaboratively exploring  
the future of the high street

# Future of the High Street

**Understanding the challenges for Scottish local high street businesses and residents in the face of Covid-19, and the opportunities to make small changes that will help reinvigorate high streets.**

*Future of the High Street* is an Edinburgh Futures Institute Design Lab project delivered in partnership with architects New Practice looking to explore the challenges exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic or the opportunities arising on Edinburgh’s local high streets. The project worked with high street businesses to co-develop a toolkit of ‘tweaks’ for overcoming the challenges, leveraging the opportunities identified and piloting two suggested ‘tweaks’ in practice.



Cover image credit: Jenny Elliott  
Image right: credit: Jenny Elliott



# Covid-19 and the high street

High streets across Scotland have faced a number of challenges in recent years – none greater than the Covid-19 pandemic, which brought its own set of diverse and unprecedented shifts and challenges, not just for the businesses that operate on these high streets, but also for residents who use them.

The *Future of the High Street* project wanted to understand these challenges and explore the opportunities for high streets to once again become successful, vibrant and liveable places. The project was part of a series of co-development Design Lab projects – a programme created by Edinburgh Futures Institute to insert design thinking into research and innovation – and led by Jenny Elliott, Chartered Landscape Architect, Urban Designer and Smart

Image right credit: Jenny Elliott

Places Lead at Edinburgh Futures Institute. It combined citizen engagement and co-design with rapid prototyping, urban data and research to intervene on high street challenges on the Gorgie-Dalry high street and Dalkeith town centre.



# Conversations with high street stakeholders

**“It’s very easy to assume what the challenges might be, but we wanted to really understand them from the experience of the people living with those challenges at the moment.”**

**Jenny Elliott**

Future of the High Street

The *Future of the High Street* project was unique not only in their methodology of combining research and practice with design outcomes that respond to data-driven insights and stakeholder engagement, but also in their hesitation to pre-define the challenges Gorgie-Dalry high street and Dalkeith town centre are facing.

The project process consisted of several phases: an engagement phase, focusing on gathering insights from high street stakeholders – residents, businesses, organisations – to understand challenges and opportunities; a design phase to build and refine the chosen solutions to these challenges and opportunities; and a pilot phase to test them. Each of these phases were carried out through co-design, meaning high street stakeholders took part in determining what each of these phases encompassed and delivered.

Several things emerged from this co-design process - not only an understanding of what these stakeholders’ challenges really were, but also ideas on whether the solutions to these challenges should be digital or physical.

For example, in the case of the Gorgie-Dalry high street, some stakeholders involved in the co-design stage expressed the need for a rest stop on the high street. In Gorgie-Dalry a strong sense of local identity and keen support for maintaining the aesthetics of the high street were also highlighted. To address both of these, the co-design process determined the solutions needed to be physical, not digital.

# Piloting two high street 'tweaks'

The *Future of the High Street* team combined urban data, such as pedestrian flow, with their understanding of different points of views on the challenges and opportunities for the high streets, to co-develop a toolkit of six high street 'tweaks' – small, achievable changes that could deliver a meaningful impact.

The team prototyped and tested two of these 'tweaks' – one on the Georgie-Dalry high street, and one in Dalkeith town centre – to see how they responded to the specific challenges of each high street and how they changed the way people used public space. In Dalkeith, they piloted a Tactical Urbanism Kit with a selection of deck chairs, benches and tables to evaluate demand for street furniture in public spaces.

On the Gorgie-Dalry high street, the 'tweak' they tested consisted of trialling three

locations for bench seating, coupled with commissioning illustrators to draw sketches of high street businesses' frontages and create window illustrations. This addressed both the issue of rest stops and supported Gorgie-Dalry high street's sense of local identity and aesthetics.

Findings show that public life and dwell time increased. In Gorgie-Dalry for example, there was a 43% increase at the seating pilot near Orwell Terrace, and overall place quality increased 29% at pilot locations. Going forward, project partners New Practice are working with City of Edinburgh Council and One Dalkeith, a community development trust, to permanently take forward the tweaks to benefit the communities and their businesses.

**“These first two high street tweaks were prototypes of what a longer term legacy might be, but we also wanted to do something there and then to address the challenges that were shorter term for some of the businesses.”**

**Jenny Elliott**

Future of the High Street

# The role of Edinburgh Futures Institute Design Lab

The Design Lab's objectives provided parameters for the *Future of the High Street* to work within, including their focus on high streets in the Edinburgh region in the context of supporting Covid-19 recovery. The *Future of the High Street* team also benefited from being part of a collective of research teams within the Design Lab programme, as they supported and offered each other expertise.

Get in touch and find out more about  
EFI and the Design Lab projects:

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Funded by:



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DDI Data-Driven  
Innovation

The EFI Design Lab is part of a new programme alongside the Urban and Regional Data Platform to support the recovery and long-term sustainability of the Edinburgh City and Regions. Initiated over the last year, using Data Driven Innovation (DDI) Programme and SFC (Scottish Funding Council) funds awarded to the University of Edinburgh and distributed by DDI, the programme is led by the Bayes Centre and Edinburgh Futures Institute. The Design Lab encompasses four demonstrator projects that showcase the key themes and objectives of the Lab, including using data driven innovation with design and co-creation, prioritising multidisciplinary approaches and cross hub participation, creating and demonstrating local/regional impact, and evidencing an economic focus on Scotland's post-COVID-19 low-carbon economy aspirations. Image right credit: Edinburgh Futures Institute

