Enduring Urban Appeal

Don't write off the city just yet. The much-hyped Covid-19 induced flight to the country may not have been purely a media invention, but it certainly doesn't tell the whole story. While almost half the people questioned in our survey (45%) said they would move closer to nature to benefit their mental health, it's urban living that holds the greatest appeal.

Almost a third of respondents (29%) said they wanted to live in a big city. A town was the choice of 17%, and 12% said they would prefer a small city. Villages are the biggest loser - favoured by just 10% - suggesting that the past few years have seen a loss of faith in rural life. Their appeal has fallen by more than half since our 2016 survey when they were the most popular choice, picked by 21% of respondents. In the same survey, just 12% said they wanted to live in a big city. It's quite the turnaround, and one that suggests that the Covid-19 pandemic has made us more afraid of isolation than claustrophobia.

For a few affluent people lucky enough to have office jobs they can do remotely, the immediate reaction may have been to abandon the city for the country in search of more space, fresher air and the reassuring sound of birdsong. Figures from a survey from August 2020 by the London Assembly[2], a governmental body, found that one in seven Londoners, or about 14% of the city's population, said they would like to leave the capital within 12 months as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

For the majority, the pandemic seems to have reinforced the desire to be in amenity-rich locations where they can walk to the shops, be part of a community and within easy reach of friends and family.

"The experience of the last year may have sped up some decision making. People who would have been moving out of a big urban area in three or four years may have decided just to get on with it, but there's no sign that it has changed people's attitudes completely. If someone wanted to live in the city before, they're still going to want to live there now," says Louis Harding, head of London residential for Strutt & Parker.

"THE CULTURE, FASHION AND NIGHTLIFE THAT MAKE LONDON, FOR EXAMPLE, A GREAT CITY AREN'T JUST GOING TO DISAPPEAR"

"The culture, fashion and nightlife that make London, for example, a great city aren't just going to disappear."

In our survey, 76% of respondents said access to shops and amenities was an important motivation for moving home, citing grocery stores and local shops as the most important amenities to have within walking distance, ahead of schools, restaurants, GPs and pharmacies. This might suggest that instead of a buzzy city centre, it's the surrounding suburbs and urban villages that have the most appeal, which is backed up by the increase in footfall on local high streets during the pandemic.

Louis Harding thinks that more suburban areas could receive a bit of a boost. "We have seen people moving out of prime central London to areas such as Chiswick, Wandsworth and Richmond to get a bit more space and be closer to parks," he says.

For Jason Beedell, research director at Strutt & Parker, whichever part you go for, the key attraction of a city is the combination of convenience and community. "In a city, you're guaranteed culture, good transport and somewhere to go out after 8 o'clock in the evening. Rural living can be expensive - you'll need to have a car, and probably use it a lot. Some villages are fantastic, with a thriving pub and a shop, but many aren't. And while living in the countryside is fantastic in spring when the sun's out, it may not be for everyone when the weather is a little less inviting," he says.

Kate Eales, head of regional agency at Strutt & Parker, says our growing need to feel part of a community is one of the most obvious effects of Covid-19 and it's one she expects to continue into the future.

"Instead of wanting to go and live off-grid, people want to feel part of a community. When everyone went out to clap for the NHS on a Thursday during the first lockdown, they were also saying hello to the neighbours, checking they were alright and providing help where it was needed."

"People think cities can be unfriendly, but it can be easier to create that community spirit in an urban environment, rather than a village. You're more likely to meet like-minded people where there's a bigger population. And thanks to technology, there are so many more ways to stay connected digitally and organise activities, whether it's through apps or social media. It gives you a lot more choice than the local pub or village hall," she says.

Desired new primary home location

London	20%	Scotland	6%
South East	11%	East Anglia	6%
South West	9%	North East	5%
North West	9%	Wales	4%
Yorkshire and the Humber	9%	I don't know	4%
West Midlands	7%	Outside the UK	3%
East Midlands	7%	Northern Ireland	1%