



Peri-urban areas and Covid-19: Impacts, challenges, recovery and opportunities

June 2022

NETWORK STATEMENT

The PURPLE network recognises that the COVID 19 pandemic has affected all places and all people but has done so in a wide range of different ways. In this Statement, adopted by PURPLE at its 35th General Assembly In June 2022, member regions have arrived at a shared position as regards its understanding of the ways in which the pandemic has impacted upon peri-urban areas of Europe, and how those impacts might best be understood, learned from, and used to shape future policy and action.

PURPLE regards the pandemic as an event which has caused policy actors and service providers of all types to reappraise the varying roles, functions and assets of different kinds of places, and to reconsider the relationship between places, interests and actors of different kinds. This applies, by definition, to territories of all types, but is especially relevant when considering peri-urban areas across Europe given that these are places where urban and rural characteristics and lifestyles co-exist, combine, and come to form a distinct territorial type in their own right.

The pandemic's effects and impacts have taken, (and continue to take), different short and longer-term forms. It remains impossible to be definitive as to what these continuing impacts will be, and which manifestations and measures will prove to be lasting as opposed to temporary. Nevertheless, short-term effects have been dramatic, and considerable resource has been devoted to trying to determine how future resilience to pandemics can be built into place-making arrangements at the same time as optimising recovery strategies. In short, what is being done now, and what has been done over the period 2020- date, by way of responding to the pandemic, will shape the present and future.

The pandemic has served to bring numerous existing issues and concerns to greater prominence, it has also brought new challenges and opportunities into focus, and shone a light on the interplay between human activities and the different types of places where those activities take place. PURPLE believes that there are lessons to be learned, and opportunities to be capitalised upon which, whilst of key importance to peri-urban places, actors and interests, are also of potential lasting and global benefit if developed and supported appropriately.

This statement sets out the thinking of the PURPLE network as of June 2022.



PURPLE believes that the Covid pandemic and the steps taken to counter its effects at international, national, regional and local levels have:

1. Shone a light upon the ways in which we think about the respective roles, assets, needs, and potential, of urban, peri-urban and rural areas and how these might be better aligned with each other so as to build in greater resilience and to harness economic and social recovery
2. In doing so, stimulated debate and activities on many aspects of those interrelations and interdependencies between the urban, peri-urban, and rural – topics which PURPLE has been addressing since its creation in 2004
3. Highlighted the value that individuals and communities place upon peri-urban locations as settings where people work, live, and spend leisure time
4. Brought to greater prominence in both policy work and public thinking, the attractiveness and importance of physical spaciousness and open space – key and defining features of peri-urban settings as testified to by much of PURPLE’s work over the past decade and more
5. Underscored the vulnerability and challenges faced by larger population centres of different sizes, at the same time retriggering debates about how urban centres look and are designed, and what might take place there as opposed to in other types of locations
6. Highlighted the importance and contribution (real and potential) of rural areas, especially as vibrant, resilient and attractive locations in which people work and live, but, whilst giving relatively little thought to what might actually be considered a peri-urban as opposed to rural setting
7. In many ways, brought out the distinctiveness of urban, peri-urban and rural places and their respective natures, but, at the same time, not made those distinctions an overt starting point for recovery/resilience interventions within new policy instruments such as Next Generation EU (NGEU)
8. Served to stimulate reflection on the part of many European citizens as to where and how they wish and need to spend their work and leisure time – with many opting (or aspiring) to spend more time in peri-urban settings post March 2020
9. At the same time, and realising that many people do not spend their entire time in places of one particular type, triggered similar shifts in how people divide their time between urban, peri-urban and rural settings
10. At the same time, again, highlighted at least some of the ways in which activities and functions very much associated with urban centres, can, and have, been occurring in peri-urban areas – serving to bring into focus both the existing extent, and the future potential growth, in the role of peri-urban settings as part of larger functional areas
11. Made manifest, (given that much of the focus on sufficiency and security referred to above has focused on larger population centres), the key importance of peri-urban areas outside those population centres as the source of natural and created resources – peri-urban assets upon which PURPLE has always argued that cities and other places rely
12. Shone a light on the need to recognise and support the role that peri-urban settings and activities play, not only for the benefit of those within the immediate geographic area, but as part of broader functional areas, and indeed across non-adjacent areas



More specifically, PURPLE considers that the pandemic, and the responses to it, have:

- I. Reignited debates as to the real nature of functional areas and the differentiations between urban and peri-urban settings and roles – points upon which PURPLE has again long been arguing for greater clarity, consistency of approach, and recognition
- II. Led to a far greater emphasis being placed on “localness” and “place” in times of dramatically curtailed levels of mobility – bringing greater focus upon economic and social self-sufficiency, particularly, but not solely, in terms of food and energy security
- III. Focused and accelerated much existing thinking and work on the scope for remote working, travel-less working and combined living-working – all entwined with considerations around greater development and take-up of digital technology
- IV. Generated a number of possible scenarios for the future where, for example (and hugely pertinently from a peri-urban perspective), more paid work is undertaken outside main population centres and where people choose to live as well as work outside those larger settlements, - very often in peri-urban areas
- V. Prompted thinking and research about the sorts of population shifts that changes in work locations might trigger, and how these in turn present challenges to policy-making and public service provision in areas with growing populations
- VI. Triggered speculation and scenario planning as regarding the location of future building, be it residential, or commercial (retail, office, industrial), and the impact of same on local housing and commercial property markets
- VII. Exacerbated existing challenges to public authorities in delivering public infrastructure and services at a time when usage levels were impacted upon in the most dramatic way in most people’s living memory
- VIII. Led to a reshaping of commercial activities across many economic sectors, with new types of business opportunities emerging, with changes to labour market structures, and greater thought given to the location and relocation of business activities



In summary and conclusion:

- ❖ PURPLE has long addressed multiple issues around peri-urban land use/development and challenges in terms of managing “growth” in peri-urban areas in a coherent way with due regard to the need for adequate housing and mobility infrastructure etc. In this regard the pandemic has served as an accelerant to already identifiable trends and patterns with which PURPLE was already much concerned. It is to be hoped that this focus is retained and that its importance continues to be recognised
- ❖ The pandemic has served as a reminder that beyond the immediate health crisis, its consequences bring new challenges and risks for public authorities at all levels as well as for local communities and individuals. For peri-urban actors this particularly applies in contexts such as potentially lasting shifts in workplace locations and in where people spend (or divide) their time
- ❖ For PURPLE, as a network of public service providers in peri-urban areas, the point above serves to demonstrate the importance of ensuring that service providers are supported with adequate legal and policy instruments, as well as direct physical resource, to do what they do best - design and implement infrastructure, systems, and services, for peri-urban residents and businesses and others with broader social, economic and environmental benefit
- ❖ PURPLE believes that events relating to the Covid pandemic have highlighted the need for greater “territorial cohesion” in the planning and delivery of general services. This has led, concurrently, to greater consideration being given to structuring services and systems across urban, peri-urban and rural settings so that access to services is more equitable and delivered more efficiently. This is to be welcomed and built upon
- ❖ PURPLE’s belief is that whilst considerable resource has been made available to address recovery and resilience, such measures have, to date, often not been underpinned by any coherent territorial approach. PURPLE believes that that represents a missed opportunity to an extent, but that there is also time and opportunity to take corrective steps in at least some instances
- ❖ In PURPLE’s view, this increased focus on greater territorial cohesion needs to take full and explicit account of the peri-urban. It needs, though, to be developed further and reflected in the ways in which larger-scale governance arrangements are arrived at, public programmes and investments are shaped, and funding support mechanisms designed and implemented
- ❖ The peri-urban contribution in addressing and mitigating against many of the negative impacts of the pandemic, has only to a degree been understood and recognised, leaving further work to be done in this regard – not only in terms of recognition and reward but also in terms of channelling new learning and expertise in the future
- ❖ Careful monitoring and analysis is required as to the optimum amount/type of future built development (residential and commercial) in peri-urban areas, in light of possible shifts in trends as to where people look to live/work, and where commercial operators look to locate their premises of different kinds
- ❖ Peri-urban public authorities such as those who constitute the membership of the PURPLE network, have a key role to play in the context of all that is described above. This role needs to be understood, recognised and fully taken in account in inclusive ongoing and future planning for pandemic recovery and resilience-building post-pandemic