

Power down to level up: resilient place-shaping for a post-Covid age



Contents

Executive Summary	2
Introduction	6
Part 1: the rebirth of place	10
The recent history of place in local government policy	15
What do we mean by place-shaping?	17
Leadership	18
Total Place	20
Localism and the Big Society	20
Community rights/neighbourhood planning	22
Place shaping and city regions	23
Part 2: return of place-shaping	26
Case studies: Locally led place-shaping in action	28
Conclusion: towards resilient place-shaping	39

Executive Summary

It has become commonplace in 2020 to say that the Covid-19 pandemic has shone a light on severe problems and iniquities in the delivery of local services. But it is true.

It is also true returning to pre-Covid “normality” is not an option, nor is it really desirable.

Crisis issues in council finances, social care, children’s services, housing, homelessness, high streets and local growth, did not spring up overnight. LGIU and others have been shouting about these things for years and trying to get decision makers to pay proper attention. We understand that this is challenging. There are no easy solutions. Tackling the problems will involve choices and trade-offs. But that is politics.

If we don’t take this opportunity to empower communities, so that they can flourish in the future, then when will we?

At present, central government is concerned with issues of council structure and is pursuing a strategy of reorganisation that will reflect central government priorities, not those of local communities. This is a distraction from the important, longstanding problems that the government has so far refused to engage with: a finance settlement for local government; the crisis in adult social care and children’s services; and the unanswered problems of English devolution.

At its root, this is a longstanding crisis of governance.

The UK, remarkably centralised in comparison with similar economies around the world, has a moribund system of governance. Its outdated and inadequate constitutional framework, which wouldn’t be (and isn’t) looked upon as a model worth following elsewhere, is supported by a set of assumptions, ideas and beliefs that dominate in national political discourse. These hold that Whitehall knows best. Ministers hand down decisions that must be delivered across a varied and diverse geography by local authorities, regardless of local circumstances, assets, or democratic support.

This is blind to the importance of place and it should be reversed. In this paper we show how local councils have already demonstrated their capacity for effective place-based leadership, without input from Westminster. This is despite decades of chipping away at their power and institutional resilience by central government.

But this requires a reset of the balance and location of power between central government and local communities. This paper makes that call again. It was necessary 10 years ago, when the then Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, said in a speech to the Queen’s Speech Forum:

“If you want people to feel connected to their communities. Proud of their communities. Then you give people a real say over what happens in their communities. And the power to make a difference.

“So we are determined to wrest control from the bureaucrats, the quangos, and central government departments. Taking power pushing it as far away from Whitehall as possible...”

The argument was not even new then. It came on the back of “double devolution”, the trialling of Total Place and a string of commitments from governments and parties in opposition. Not to mention royal commissions from decades past that have recommended shifting power out of Westminster towards communities.

Since 2015 we have seen deals struck with selected English city-regions and these are indeed important developments. But we are still waiting for the real change to happen across the country. It is desperately needed now.

Central government must wake up to the nature of the challenges as they play out in local areas. They must realise that our power hoarding model of governance is not only embarrassing internationally, but fails even on its own terms to deliver changes and strengthen communities.

If they won't find ways to reset the balance and location of real power throughout the country now, in the light of our collective experience during the past six months, then when will they?

Surely our collective imagination can stretch beyond a system that merely copes with crisis and feeds an ambition to return to “normal”. The imperative to redress the power imbalance is to allow us to move beyond crisis management towards resilience, flexibility and adaptability.

But more than that, it is to support and empower local communities to flourish.

Recommendations

On the basis of our findings in this report, we believe the following steps and actions will help to promote empowered and resilient places throughout England:

- 1. Build thriving neighbourhoods:** Use ward-level data to shape the policies and priorities that improve social wellbeing for citizens in particular communities. Place-orientated strategies will need to span whole cities and towns to address challenges from infrastructure to public service provision. Yet what makes the greatest difference to citizens is improving the quality of the local environment, giving them a say in the decisions that affect their lives. There is little point in devolving power to cities and regions only for it to be hoarded by a political elite at the centre in in the town hall. The Social Progress Index will help to achieve improved outcomes for residents, particularly those living in the most vulnerable neighbourhoods.
- 2. Greater fiscal freedom:** More fiscal devolution can be achieved through a place-shaping precept, while ensuring measures such as business rate relief are place-targeted and controlled by local councils rather than imposed in a place-blind fashion by central government with no regard for local circumstances. The entire local government finance system will need to be rethought in the aftermath of the pandemic.
- 3. Citizen-centred public services:** Ensure local services build relationships with citizens and communities, recognising that the capacity and power of good governance comes from the relationship between citizen and the state in a particular place. Local councils should be at the forefront of advancing relational models of governance, not doing what Whitehall does centrally, but organising power and resources to reflect local needs: giving citizens powers to tackle problems in their local neighbourhood from fly-tipping and graffiti to anti-social behaviour, while using the community fund and the community asset ownership agenda. Research suggests that currently three per cent of citizens are involved in local neighbourhood projects, but 60 per cent would like to be indicating enormous untapped potential: projects such as <http://www.participatorycity.org/every-one-every-day> are dedicated to enabling community participation.
- 4. Cutting Whitehall red tape:** Build on and expand recent experiments in single pot spending so that councils can fully use their capacity and expertise. Whether in Total Place, or city-region devolution deals, these innovations have been shown to yield positive results. Remove centrally imposed ring fences giving councils the power to direct local spending across places. Cut unnecessary central targets and performance oversight in public services.

- 5. Promote a sustainable local economy:** The key post-pandemic priority will be jobs given the impact of the crisis on key sectors of the economy, and the winding down of the government furlough scheme. Initiatives such as Kick Start will offer guaranteed training or a work placement to 16-24 years olds. The programme should be place-focused, with local councils having a key role in matching job opportunities with unmet needs in communities and neighbourhoods, using a social progress or 'thriving neighbourhoods' index as identified above. Other examples include establishing business incubator programmes that encourage local businesses which meet community needs and reflect local heritage; and collaborative childcare schemes: <http://www.participatorycity.org/everyone-every-day>

- 6. Strengthen local public health:** The most important public health lesson of the Covid-19 crisis is that an effective test and trace system must be place-focused and locally led – with local public health directors in the driving seat. Again, public health strategies have to reflect the circumstances and needs of particular places, using ward-level data to determine how to curb infection spread, tackle existing health inequalities, while building greater health and economic resilience in the local population. While preferable to Whitehall centralisation, even city-wide approaches lack the necessary granularity to deal with a public health emergency. It is essential that public health initiatives and plans reflect ward-level circumstances in each local authority across England.

Introduction

“Place” has made a major comeback in recent years.

Place plays an important role for an increasing number of local councils as a strategic lens and a blueprint for local leadership. Recognition of place is vital for community wellbeing, particularly as disruption and complexity grow in society, politics and the economy in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Yet governance in England is experiencing a period of further centralisation which is in danger of smothering local efforts at place leadership and forging economic and social recovery after the crisis. Councils managing the shock of Covid-19 in local areas lack the powers, resources, data and infrastructure they need from Whitehall to do their job. Instead, many policy levers are jealously guarded by central government. This follows the disruption and uncertainty created by Brexit, which has so far been met with centrally mandated initiatives like the government’s “levelling up” agenda.

The financial hit for local government of the current crisis will be huge. Councils expect to spend an extra £4.4bn than forecast this year, while their non-tax income will be £2.8bn lower. This means an enormous £7.2bn additional financial pressure, on top of what was already a fraught and precarious position¹. They also expect business rate and council tax collections to fall dramatically. The £5.2bn of additional central government grant leaves a significant gap of £2bn across the sector.

The Covid-19 pandemic has shone a light on the pathologies that still prevail in the UK, from rising inequality to the stubborn persistence of low wage work. The crisis has also emphasised the importance that citizens attach to the places and neighbourhoods where they live.

Across the public policy landscape, there is a recognition that governments need to focus less on the narrow goal of financial efficiency, and more on the resilience of our economies and societies. The aim of levelling up and building back better in local communities will only be achieved with a local, place-focused approach to governance. Local councils need the resources and levers to undertake place-shaping that promotes the wellbeing and resilience of communities and citizens across the UK. The question addressed in this paper is how to promote the decentralised focus on place where the current direction of travel emphasises greater managerialism and centralised control?

Drawing on case studies and analysis in this paper published thanks to an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded partnership between LGIU and Queen Mary, University of London, we conclude that to make an effective argument for refocusing UK governance on place, we need to

¹ <https://www.coronavirusandtheeconomy.com/question/how-coronavirus-affecting-local-government-finances>

overcome entrenched orthodoxies about where local capacity lies, the nature of power in the modern state, and how we best measure policy success:

Local capacity and partnerships drive innovation and ensure community wellbeing. The case studies show that, despite a decade of austerity, there is capacity and appetite for strategic leadership in local government. Councils are building partnerships and networks, listening to local citizens and working out how best to use the policy tools they have. By contrast, the effectiveness of Whitehall’s centralised governing style is limited. This situation predated Covid-19, but has been laid bare in the crisis.

Place-shaping builds on a new understanding of power. The approaches highlighted in this paper demonstrate the application of a particular understanding of the nature of power and how power can be used in local governance. Partnerships, collaboration and horizontal decision making feature in different forms at the local level. Meanwhile, Whitehall still tries to function on a more traditional model of power based on top-down decision making, centralisation and pulling the ministerial levers of state.

We need different metrics and frameworks to demonstrate the value of place. There is a need for a clearer understanding of what success looks like in place-shaping. The case studies presented here show some of the diversity of approaches. They are distinct but have a common thread in building community wellbeing. To capture and demonstrate the commonalities will require stronger, clearer measurement frameworks. There are fruitful approaches being developed for this. Diana Coyle², for example proposes replacing GDP-orientated measurement frameworks with efforts to measure the “assets” that exist in a particular place, while CLES (the national organisation for local economics) have built a framework around “community wealth building”. London Borough of Barking and Dagenham are developing a ward-level “social progress index” that measures the wellbeing of citizens in a particular locality across three dimensions: basic human needs; foundations of wellbeing; and opportunity. The aim is help build thriving neighbourhoods using ward-level data to make more informed decisions about priorities and policy.³

The case studies below highlight diverse approaches to place-leadership. Each offers different lessons and insights. The common theme is their commitment to expanding local government’s role in improving the wellbeing of local places – what we call resilient place-shaping:

- Cornwall Council – Focused localism
- Colchester Borough Council – Local development and identity
- Innovation in Scotland and community wealth building in North Ayrshire

² <https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/publications/measuring-wealth-delivering-prosperity/>

³ <https://www.lbbd.gov.uk/social-progress-index>

- Kirklees Council – Local democracy and place-based working
- Greater Manchester City Region – Devolved city leadership
- Kent County Council – Community support during the pandemic

The understanding of place will help to address crucial public policy questions, notably the future of cities in the wake of the pandemic. The “levelling up” agenda may be reformulated into a concerted effort to get cities moving economically again to fire up UK growth. But if cities are once again the driving force of the UK policy agenda, where does that leave local government’s capacity for place-shaping? And how does place help us to make not only cities but towns and rural areas liveable spaces that contribute towards wellbeing and environmental sustainability?

Another concern is that while many councils have been effective and innovative both in response to austerity and dealing with the Covid-19 crisis, there may be insufficient capacity for innovation in the current under-resourced local government system. Similarly, there is an open question about whether there is a lack of appetite for innovation in parts of the local government sector, especially in the light of the enormous financial and resource challenges presented by the pandemic. A decade of austerity and cuts has understandably reinforced attachment to the status quo in some areas.

Another immediate question is to what extent does place-orientated policy help to deal with the strains exposed by the 2016 Brexit referendum? While England was left out of the devolution settlements of the late 1990s, the last 20 years has seen various experiments with different institutional innovations. Mayors, localism, city-regions, Total Place budgeting, citizens assemblies – all had or have potential to strengthen place-orientated policy. But they are ad hoc and largely asymmetrical. Is this inevitable or is there potential to develop a coherent plan that supports local place leadership across England?

The research for this paper, conducted with Dr Patrick Diamond of SPIR, Queen Mary, University of London and supported by grant funding from the ESRC builds up an understanding of the recent history of place-shaping in English governance. Through a series of interviews, site visits and seminars with LGIU member councils, a set of ideas and case studies are developed that demonstrate locally distinct approaches to “place” and place-shaping.

We argue that “place” is making a comeback as a strategic framework for local authorities to shape and organise their services and agendas. The reorientation around place will be essential in rebuilding the country when the coronavirus pandemic eventually subsides, reimagining the role of local government and its relationship with communities.

But in order to work, resilient place-shaping must be locally led. We are not attempting to define a framework that councils should adopt in order to “do” place-shaping. As the recent history of centrally-led initiatives demonstrates, it is not effective or sustainable when directed in this way. Instead, we highlight a range of case studies showing different ways that councils are using the idea of place. It is exciting precisely because it is a bottom-up, decentralised approach to governance. Central government should support it with resources and decentralised powers, not by imposing more performance frameworks and targets. The pandemic has graphically exposed once again the limitations of a one size fits all centralised approach to governance. The tables have turned. Central government should examine how it can best work with local councils and support them to achieve a wide range of economic, social and environmental goals.

Moreover, continuing the tentative programme of devolution initiated by previous Westminster governments will be crucial in ensuring the capacity exists for local place leadership. The UK’s centralised governance structure, particularly concerning England, frustrates local leadership and solidifies inequalities in regional economic growth (Carrascal-Incera et al 2020)⁴.

The paper will first discuss the reasons for the rebirth of place in local government, not least of which is the immediate crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic. It will then address the recent history of centrally directed attempts at place-shaping, beginning with the proposals in the final report of the Lyons’ Review in 2007. It will chart the development of place-focused policy during the 2010s, spelling out a strategy for resilient place-shaping in English local governance into the 2020s. New impetus behind place-shaping will require greater emphasis to be given to measuring success, using a broad range of indicators and making smart use of data. This approach should build on recent efforts to create new local well-being measurement frameworks that utilise the latest developments in data science.

4 Carrascal-Incera, A., McCann, P., Ortega-Argilés, R., & Rodríguez-Pose, A. (2020). UK Interregional inequality in a historical and international comparative context. *National Institute Economic Review*, 253, R4-R17. doi:10.1017/nie.2020.26

Part 1: the rebirth of place

The Municipal Journal (MJ) reported that place-shaping was “the phrase of 2006”, and the Lyon’s Review in 2007 commissioned by the then Labour government promoted the leadership of place as a flagship local government concern. Government White Papers followed, initiatives like Total Place and the Big Society came and went, as Ministers and governments changed. In the intervening period, Whitehall certainly appeared to have lost interest in place.

Over the last 10 years, place has had far less of a role. Austerity led the centre to refocus on a narrow measure of public sector efficiency in dealing with local councils. George Osborne’s mayoral and Northern Powerhouse agenda underlined a divergence from place-based thinking given its narrow concern with economic growth through city-regions. Yet for all that, place has become increasingly embedded in the way local government leaders think and act.

Local authorities are taking the lead in reimagining a place-shaping agenda that was previously guided, or restricted, by centrally determined goals. Rather than a top-down vision of place-shaping, driven by a restricted set of Whitehall priorities and small, piecemeal pots of funding, this time it is emerging from the bottom-up, in innovative new ways in local areas, as the leadership of local authorities devise strategies to shape their approach to governance in an era of acute crisis.

Now, as we begin to look ahead to the rebuilding and recovery from the initial phase of the coronavirus crisis, the framework of place, and the role of councils and place shapers or leaders of place, will be essential.

This question of place goes right to the heart of what local government is for, raising important questions about its constitutional role and the relationship between people and the state. There is a long-standing view that the role of councils is fundamentally transactional. Councils exist to deliver centrally mandated services, and to implement policies that are largely determined by central government. But through the lens of place-leadership, it is clear that councils have a much more expansive role in promoting wellbeing across communities, ensuring participation and representation, shaping local identities, and aligning economic growth with environmental and social concerns. The focus on wellbeing and life satisfaction indicators has been particularly important in shifting attention from narrow measurements of local GDP, prosperity and property values to wider concerns with the physical and psychological health of the whole population in a given area or place.

By responding to the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, many local authorities have shown their capacity and desire to act as leaders across places. Central government has at times struggled to keep on top of the crisis, to provide the clarity and coherence of advice and guidance, or even to ensure that adequate infrastructure is in place in terms of data sharing to facilitate effective public health interventions, or the distribution of critical resources such as personal

protective equipment (PPE). The economic interventions of the Chancellor, Rishi Sunak, have been widely praised. Yet the furlough scheme, an important intervention, and restaurant discounts won't be enough to revitalise places throughout Britain ravaged economically by the virus.

The highly centralised governing style has limited the effectiveness of Whitehall's response. There is clearly a role for central government in particular areas of public policy: for example, shoring up the economy through relief for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and the furlough scheme required the muscular force of the central state. But elsewhere, the top-down centralised operating style of the UK state appears to have undermined the effectiveness of the Covid-19 response. Public health has been a particular point of concern. Also evident have been ongoing tensions between the centre and the devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, and the city-region mayors in England. Whitehall thinks and acts as if the UK is a unitary state but it has not been once since the late 1990s. Our territorial politics are in flux.

On the other hand, there have been numerous cases of success in governance at the local level. This effectiveness highlights the importance of place in the approach to governance. It highlights the strategic leadership capacity that now exists in local government, despite a decade of cuts. As the case studies in this paper show, local authorities have been busily creating new capacity, driving policy innovations, and evolving new forms of partnership with civil society and the private sector. Councils have used Covid-19 as a critical juncture to make progress on other agendas where past progress has been slow, such as modernising local public transport systems and promoting adaptation to climate change.

More fundamentally, these approaches affirm a new understanding of the nature of power and how power should be used to shape local governance. Whereas 'old' power emphasises top-down policy-making, hierarchy and centralisation, making policy by driving it from the centre, 'new' power focuses on partnership, collaboration and horizontal decision-making, creating networks to shape delivery and policy.

English local government has shown itself increasingly drawn to championing new power, but Whitehall and Westminster are still attached to 'old' power. This is not a problem that is confined to moments of crisis. The Covid-19 pandemic has thrown many of the shortcomings of the UK state into sharp relief. But they were already there and had been for decades, despite successive constitutional reforms over the last twenty years and efforts to change the mind-set of Whitehall.

Place-shaping is not an entirely new agenda. But it is gaining pace and momentum due to current trends and shifts in the economic and social landscape:

Central government has vacated the space – due to Brexit, austerity and a lack of capacity. Covid-19 has exemplified the weakness of the centre. There are numerous tasks in a public health emergency that the centre is ill equipped to manage. It lacks knowledge of particular localities, and is often distanced from street level implementation. Public service reform such as health and social care integration is best undertaken using a locally determined place-based approach. Councils are developing their capacity so that they can step in and play a more expansive role. As is apparent in our case study of Colchester District Council, there is a sense in many councils that “if we don’t do it, these things won’t get done”.

England’s unfinished constitution – England is a missing piece in the devolution jigsaw. While Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have devolved administrations, there is a serious imbalance in England. Attempts at establishing elected authorities in England broke down following the North-East assembly referendum result in 2004. More recent deals with combined authority city-regions have sought to address this governance gap, but the picture remains uneven, even asymmetric. Without a well-defined constitutional role, English councils have started to carve one out for themselves. Place has provided a useful framework in the absence of any other compelling rationale.

Culture and focus in local government – local government increasingly sees itself as a partner and enabler working alongside civil society. It works in partnership with anchor institutions from the NHS to local universities, and other actors in the public and private sector to achieve a range of cross-cutting aims. This strategy is driven by necessity in many places. The dire financial situation in which councils find themselves after a decade of cuts and rising demand for services means that doing more with less, engaging in partnerships and embracing new platforms and technologies is not just a nice idea. It is essential in delivering the most important public outcomes.

The importance of place in public policy – for decades public policy relating to economic and social inclusion emphasised the importance of interventions that were designed to support individuals through programmes such as welfare to work and skills/retraining initiatives. However, the evidence indicates that the places and localities in which people live and work are hugely significant in shaping outcomes. The physical fabric of place is important, but so too is the sense of identity that place provides. The recent literature in economics further illustrates that place has a huge impact on individual outcomes.⁵ Those who live in poorer places tend to perform worse on household income, employment, indicators of social cohesion, and so on. Yet individuals are ‘sticky’ in their attachment to place. They move around much less frequently and willingly than economists previously thought. Regeneration and growth strategies that rely on excluded individuals moving to ‘high growth’ areas have been repeatedly shown to fail. This point highlights that place is crucial to devising effective local

5 Banerjee, A. & Duflo, E. (2019) *Good Economics for Hard Times: Better Answers to our Biggest Problems* London: Allen Lane

industrial strategies, and solving the challenge of persistently weak productivity. What matters is the quality and richness of the economic and social fabric in the places that people live. Place shapes the individual's sense of motivation and self-worth. As the Nobel prize-winning economists Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo have demonstrated, workers in western countries do not simply move to where the best jobs and industries are located. They are tightly bound to where they live, underpinning their sense of place. And there are barriers to the free movement of people, not least the imposition of costs such as housing and childcare (where parents often rely on other family members). Public policy has to directly address inequalities that relate to place, not only to individuals and households. It should do this by rebuilding the spirit of locality and community.

So called “left behind” places – the 2016 Brexit referendum highlighted the increasing political importance of so-called “left behind” places and has helped to forge the “levelling up” agenda, such as it is, that helped to secure Boris Johnson’s substantial majority at the 2019 general election. There has undoubtedly been greater emphasis on left behind communities, more often towns outside urban centres, post-industrial communities and coastal areas, in the government’s rhetoric since 2016. Across the political spectrum, there is near unanimous agreement that greater attention ought to be focused on designing policy interventions to improve economic and social outcomes in these areas, although there are numerous tensions and disagreements over what constitutes an effective policy framework. Westlake (2017) argues that policy-makers are confused about what economic problems they are trying to solve. For some policy-makers, what is required are place-based industrial strategies that effectively stimulate reindustrialisation. However, other economists doubt whether this can be delivered in places that have experienced long-term decline in industrial capacity. Instead, the goal should be to make such places attractive for commuters to live as satellite towns for larger, more productive and economically dynamic cities.

Covid-19 – all the above factors are exacerbated by the immediate, long-term and still uncertain impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Although the virus struck the whole of Great Britain, its impact has varied significantly across places and communities. This situation reflects the distribution of structural deprivation and vulnerability within the UK population. Some local economies will inevitably find it harder to recover and adapt to the structure of the post-pandemic world. Local councils are using a vast array of levers, not only to forge an emergency response, but to enable faster economic and social recovery. Any viable UK economic and social post-pandemic strategy will have to be fundamentally place-focused.

The importance of wellbeing – is now increasingly acknowledged in English local governance. It was first enshrined as a priority in the 2000 English Local Government Act. One crucial way of understanding the importance of place is grasping the centrality of wellbeing – how place promotes individual and collective wellbeing, and how wellbeing enhances the quality of place. The

Covid-19 pandemic has exposed the limitations of measuring policy success through the narrow lens of financial and economic indicators. Research indicates that wellbeing is also enhanced by enabling local people and communities to participate in the process of taking decisions that affect their lives. If what matters in public policy is what can be measured, advances in the measurement of wellbeing driven forward by experts such as Professor Richard Layard and colleagues at the LSE could help to put wellbeing and place-shaping at the centre of the policy agenda.⁶ There are lots of very practical ways that local authorities can organise services and local democratic structures to enhance the wellbeing of citizens.

However, at present there is an implementation gap: local leaders almost universally acknowledge the importance and significance of place.⁷ Yet place is still not at the centre of strategy and delivery in many English councils due to barriers and constraints, from silo-driven centralised Whitehall departments to struggles in joining-up services locally due to misaligned incentives.

There are challenges that local government must face, which are playing out over distinct time frames. The response to Covid-19 is an all too immediate challenge, and one which will continue to expand in as yet undetermined ways. Meanwhile the end of the transition period at which the UK leaves the European Union is just around the corner, which will have implications for communities and councils across the country. Many of the issues and challenges that have come to the fore since the referendum vote, particular in so called 'left behind places', are refocusing attention on place, but have also been taken up in the government's "levelling up" agenda. Then there is the more long-term and indeed global challenge of climate change, sustainability and adaptation, which will require concerted action at the local level, linking up regional, national and global strategies. The [Sustainable Futures](#) pillar of our [Post-Covid Councils](#) framework collects and collates a raft of excellent work on this topic.

Underpinning all of these issues is the ongoing crisis of funding and the uncertain position of local government within the UK constitution. In Westminster there is incomprehension, misunderstanding and often ignorance of what local government does. On the one hand politicians and policy makers all too often assume that councils are a junior partner, there to implement policy efficiently with a dwindling pool of resources. On the other hand they consistently fail to heed the lessons, experience, innovation, expertise, insight, networks and connections that local government professionals provide. This has been demonstrated most clearly and tragically during the government's response to the Covid pandemic.

⁶ See the recent ONS data: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/datasets/wellbeing-local-authority/editions/time-series/versions/2> Accessed 21 July 2020.

⁷ <https://www.pwc.co.uk/industries/government-public-sector/local-government/insights/local-state-we-are-in-2019.html> Accessed 21 July 2020.

Councils have a direct connection with local places. They are intertwined with local networks and communities in a way that is just not possible for central government to emulate. Furthermore, councils have the detailed knowledge of local areas and local identities, with the impetus to develop strategies around these, harnessing the value of physical and social assets for public benefit. Narratives of “place” and “place-shaping” draw attention to the social and physical fabric of communities and are sensitive to their collective experience, whether in urban environments, high streets, town centres or rural areas. Places are economies where we earn our living, communities where we relate to others, and the centrepiece of our identity and belonging.

Yet there continues to be a disconnect in the way that governance is structured and public policy delivered in the UK because sensitivity to place is often not recognised in central government. Viewed from Whitehall, English governance is all too often “place-blind”. Public spending is allocated (and accountability maintained) according to the silos around which Whitehall departments are organised that often make little sense to local delivery. The Industrial Strategy White Paper⁸ in 2017 made repeated references to the distinction between different places and communities. Yet it fell flat by failing to provide a flexible or generative framework for place-based governance. It assumes, moreover, a model that fits with a relatively narrow range of “smart cities” and regions with agglomeration potential, rather than respecting the diversity of place.

The recent history of place in local government policy

The importance of “place” in the work of local government is not new, as many working in, and leading, councils around the country know. More than a decade ago, the *Municipal Journal* described “place-shaping” as “the phrase of 2006”. So what is tied up in the idea of “place”, where did it come from, and why has the concept of place proved so enduring?

Place-shaping evolved through local councils. The concept highlights an essential and recurring characteristic of local government in the UK, namely its contested, ill-defined position with the constitutional and governance architecture.

There are two dominant positions within most of the writing and thinking on local government. The first is transactional and construes councils as predominantly public service delivery vehicles. From this perspective, which arguably dominates much of Whitehall thinking, targets, frameworks and regulations are defined centrally, according to the will of central government, supported in Parliament while drawing legitimacy from manifestos endorsed in general elections.

Even vigorous supporters of greater decentralisation, such as Michael Heseltine, decry the idea that local government should be the site of political or popular

8 1. HM Government *Industrial Strategy: Building a Britain fit for the Future*

legitimacy beyond adopting the powers needed to deliver and implement effective policy. Political parties make national commitments regarding spending and taxation, he argues, which cannot be undermined by lower tiers of government. To some degree, English local government itself has embraced this role. Local councils increasingly see themselves as efficient providers of services led by a small team of political and administrative leaders who focus on ensuring value for money and customer responsiveness. Many city-region mayors have chosen to focus on their primary role of driving local economic growth with a very limited role for social policy. The legacy of the new public management of the 1980s on the culture of local authorities is clearly felt here.

The alternative tradition of local government gives far greater weight to councils' role as "governments". They have a much broader remit to promote and protect the wellbeing of local communities, a duty that was enshrined in the legislation of the 2000s, particularly in the 2004 Localism Act.

This more expansive view of local government is rooted in the Fabian tradition of 'gas and water socialism', and the ideas of civic republicanism. It has been bolstered by intermittent landmarks like the Redcliffe-Maud report in 1969 and the Layfield Inquiry in 1974-6. The Lyons Review in 2007 and the commitment to place-shaping sits squarely in this tradition. As well as statutory service delivery, in this view a council's role is to convene local partnerships and citizen engagement while encouraging inward financial investment. Even more than this, councils have an essential function in addressing what Mark Sandford calls 'orphan policies'⁹. These are issues that all too often fall through the cracks of public policy and require tailored, integrated and collaborative strategies, which often need local leadership. Mental health, air quality and environmental adaptation, homelessness and skills development are all striking examples. These issues relate directly to the wellbeing and cohesiveness of local communities.

The focus on "place" as a category for local governance did not appear out of thin air. Commentators and analysts looking at British politics and policy making had for a long time talked up a shift away from government as a set of institutions, and towards governance as a set of networks and relationships with and within communities¹⁰. Beginning in the late 1980s and picking up steam through the 1990s, governance developed into a dominant paradigm for the academic analysis of politics and policy making.

Through academic experts such as Gerry Stoker, the governance concept exercised a direct influence on policy-makers and government thinking. During the Labour governments after 1997, there was a much greater rhetorical emphasis on community leadership and community wellbeing which marked a shift in focus away from the more traditional role of councils as deliverers

⁹ Mark Sandford, "Has devolution to England's cities worked?", in *Has Devolution Worked?*, ed. Akash Paun and Sam Macrory, Institute for Government, 2019; Sandford *Two masters: the dilemma of central-local relations in England*

¹⁰ (Stewart and Clarke, 1996).

of a prescribed set of public services. The emphasis of policy making and implementation shifted away from elite ‘policy communities’ comprising a limited number of privileged actors, to looser ‘policy networks’ where many different organisations and players potentially had a role. Growing importance was attached to breaking the public sector monopoly over delivery and giving a bigger role to the private sector and the VCS. The role of leadership was shifting from ‘rowing’ where local authorities directly controlled services, to ‘steering’ where they set the strategy but relied on autonomous providers to deliver what the centre required. Many of the ideas within the literature on governance consciously shaped the thinking underpinning Sir Michael Lyons’ review and the focus on place emerged.

What do we mean by place-shaping?

Place-shaping has different meanings in different contexts, but was developed both as a rhetorical device and a set of policy tools for municipal leadership. It emerged in the Lyon’s Enquiry into the financing of English local government, which delivered its final report in 2007. Sir Michael Lyons based the premise of his report on the argument that the decades long restructuring and repurposing of the economy into a globalised and interconnected economy made “place” more, not less, important in achieving economic success and social cohesion.

In the report, Lyons argued that: “The modern role of local government can be described as “place-shaping” – the creative use of powers and influence to promote the general wellbeing of a community and its citizens.” In contrast to the utilitarian focus that proliferates in English political philosophy and social sciences, the focus on place harks back to a set of ideas in the civic republican tradition, promoting the common good, wellbeing and the social and physical fabric that tie communities together.

For Lyons, place-shaping clearly envisaged an expanded and expansive role for councils, underpinned by a set of principles and functions. These included:

- building and shaping local identity;
- representing and maintaining the cohesiveness of the community;
- regulating harmful and disruptive behaviours;
- supporting debate and ensuring all voices are heard in the community;
- resolving disagreement around local priorities and new developments;
- building a successful local economy and managing economic change, partly through making the area attractive to new investment and skilled workers;

- working with other bodies to respond to complex challenges such as natural disasters and other emergencies.

These principles highlight the changing purpose of local government contained within the idea of place-shaping. It marks a shift away from the instrumental view of a council as a provider of services, towards an expansive and political role engaged in issues of wellbeing, community, identity, and economic empowerment.

“The powers and freedoms which local government can exercise are an important part of enabling councils to play this role. However, I am clear that effective place-shaping is as much about the confidence and behaviours of local government as it is about statutory powers and responsibilities.”¹¹

Leadership

In part place-shaping involves reimagining the core competencies of civic leadership.

Strong civic leadership is arguably a core element of good community governance. Resilient place-shaping requires the mobilisation of diverse actors within the community, connecting partners and active networks with organisational frameworks and capacities of local institutions. Hierarchical approaches are increasingly recognised as less effective than more collaborative approaches to achieving common goals across places: new rather than old power.

Leadership should be concerned with furthering these common aims by bringing together political, institutional and community forms of action. Hambleton and Howard call the point where these elements overlap the “innovation zone”¹². Nurturing this type of collaboration within places enables and empowers different forms of civic action and helps to develop problem solving and innovation. Hambleton writing shortly after Lyons¹³, argued that place leadership should mean that councils are the convener, the focal point, for this collaboration. Beyond convening they should advocate for and reflect the needs of the community, helping to articulate a sense of purpose and identity.

As the case study of Kirklees Council indicates, there are many dimensions to place and community. The long term implications of complex issues from climate change to economic development, mean that councils are responsible for the interests of future communities too.

¹¹ Lyons Inquiry into Local Government (2007) “Place-shaping: A shared ambition for the future of local government” London: Her Majesty’s Stationary Office p.174

¹² Hambleton, R. & Howard, J. (2012) “Place-Based Leadership and Public Service Innovation” *Local Government Studies* 29 (1) pp.47-70

¹³ Hambleton 2008

Leadership and democratic renewal were, rhetorically at least, essential components of Labour's reform agenda in local government after 1997. However, despite a rhetorical narrative of community leadership, partnership civic renewal¹⁴, and a flurry of white papers including *Modern Local Government: In touch with the people* in 1998, and *Double Devolution or Double Dealing* in 2001, and *Strong, Prosperous Communities* in 2006, the incoming Labour government retained many of the centralising tendencies of the post-war administration¹⁵. For all the emphasis on local leadership, the view that central government was the only agent capable of coordinating the massive investment and renewal that was needed throughout the country was firmly entrenched in the party and among Ministers (Davies 2009: 406). Crucially there was no serious attempt at easing restrictions on councils' borrowing during this period, which severely limited their capacity to act in areas such as housing. Government reforms also marginalised the role of local education authorities in service planning and provision, while the notion of 'earned autonomy' meant that councils had to demonstrate they had achieved centrally defined goals around modernisation, leadership and efficiency in return for limited flexibility and freedoms.

The proposals for increased local autonomy that emerged from the Lyons Inquiry in 2007 were more modest, practical and less radical than those of the Layfield Inquiry 30 years earlier. In particular, Lyons' recommendation that councils adopt a "place-shaping" rather than a service delivery role reflects the position taken by writers in the governance literature¹⁶ (Orr & Vince 2009). As the Minister for Communities and Local Government in 2006, David Miliband outlined a plan for "double devolution", in which power would be passed back to councils, but also to local people and communities¹⁷. This approach envisaged closer partnership between councils and third sector networks, facilitating greater participation among local people. Many of the ideas within the literature on governance were pertinent, but the entrenched centralising and place-blind approach of central government in Whitehall prevented substantive change. Central government was unwilling to relinquish control of many significant functions, though it expected councils to give powers to neighbourhoods. Moreover, there was little serious attention paid to what actually constituted a neighbourhood or a community, and how they might take on extra powers and responsibilities.

Despite the rhetoric of double devolution and new localism, Lyons' proposals for greater local financial autonomy were largely ignored by the Labour government. Councils were induced to become more competitive and streamlined in order to earn their autonomy from the centre¹⁸. So far as they

14 Davies, J. (2009) "Localism" in Matthew Flinders, Andrew Gamble, Colin Hay, Michael Kenny (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of British Politics* Oxford: OUP pp.404-422

15 Lowndes, V. (2002) "Between Rhetoric and Reality: Does the 2001 White Paper reverse the centralising trend in Great Britain?" *Local Government Studies* 28 (3) pp.135-147

16 Orr, K. & Vince, R. (2009) "Traditions of Local Government" *Public Administration* 87 (3) pp.655-677

17 <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2006/feb/21/localgovernment.politics1>

18 CLG Select Committee 2009

demonstrated good results through competence, efficiency and responsibility, councils would be granted a greater degree of freedom to administer affairs locally. Changes were made to streamline local government accordingly, so that it would deliver better results for central government, particularly in terms of leadership and structure. Council leaders were granted a degree of freedom and flexibility, but only within a strict framework determined by the centre. There was a range of initiatives in the New Labour era that sought to engage local leaders in a top-down process of civic renewal and community engagement. Total Place budgeting was a prime example.

Total Place

Total Place budgeting was one of the more significant centrally directed initiatives of this period.

The programme, under New Labour, established a framework where the collective spending across a geographical area could be administered locally. This was intended to encourage greater participation and more effective, joined-up use of public money. It aimed to put the citizen at the heart of public service design, uncovering waste and duplication while freeing up resources. Following a series of pilots, it was found if the approach was to work, Whitehall departments would have to devolve decision making over their services to the local level. This approach proved challenging. Indeed the framework and processes within which spending decision had to be taken ensured that they would not be out of step with a pre-determined set of ideas in the Treasury.

As with previous centrally-led attempts to administer programmes on a geographical basis, Whitehall departments dominated while their inflexibility frustrated change¹⁹. The Coalition's reforms to health care in 2012 involved restructuring Primary Care Trusts, introducing Clinical Commissioning Groups and centralising a fragmented system through the creation of NHS England. Additional complexity and uncertainty undermined the attempts at consistency, efficiency and partnerships. Despite setbacks, the Coalition Government decided in 2011 to support 16 Community Budget pilots. The aim was for these pilots to develop and demonstrate the value of place-based thinking and partnership working, but only in specific service areas related to families with multiple needs. Sadly the pilots did not get picked up and supported, despite demonstrating success in local areas. While the ideas behind Total Place and Community Budgets were sound, they were either undermined by the institutional structures and mindset of Whitehall policy makers that directed the initiative; or the aims were restricted to a centrally defined set of targets and outcomes.

19 Grint, K. & Holt, C. (2011) "Leading questions: If 'Total Place', 'Big Society' and local leadership are the answers: What's the question?" *Leadership* 7(1) pp.85–98

Localism and the Big Society

Austerity in public spending was central to the government's policy agenda following the 2010 and 2015 elections²⁰, with the stated aim of eliminating the public deficit and returning the economy to a pattern of sustainable growth²¹. This programme of retrenchment in the public sector also provided the immediate context restraining local government policymaking²². Meanwhile, imperatives around public finances and economic growth provided the centrally defined framework for the city-regions and devolution agenda that would be spearheaded by George Osborne in the Treasury.

Localism, a prominent rhetorical idea during this period, was initiated from above in a largely top-down process that sought to address cost and efficiency, as well as streamlining decision-making. At the same time, however, localism became a prominent idea in British political debate during the 2010 election, presented as an alternative to Labour's more centralised and state-managed approach to governance. For David Cameron's Conservatives the "neighbourhood" was seen as one of the geographical sites where renewed civic and economic action was said to be necessary²³. Shortly before he came to power in 2010 Cameron outlined the concept of the "Big Society", whereby community and voluntary groups within neighbourhoods would be given the means to take a more active role in their local civic life, while government itself took a step back.

The Localism Act (2011) enshrined in law a number of "community rights" and gave councils "general power of competence" to act in any way they could to benefit those communities. However, the implementation of this legislation was highly conditioned by the effects of the financial crisis and adoption of a programme of austerity, not to mention the tendency towards centralised control, a persistent feature of British politics, which significantly limits the scope for devolution of powers²⁴.

Crucially, however, local government played a relatively minor role in early localist initiatives. The "Big Society" agenda was about bringing power closer to communities or neighbourhoods rather than channelling resource through local arms of the state.

Under the Coalition and Conservative governments, one critical responsibility given to local government was the implementation of huge cuts in public

20 Gamble, A. (2015) "Austerity as Statecraft" *Parliamentary Affairs* 68 pp.42–57

21 Berry, C. & Hay, C. (2016) "The Great British rebalancing act: the construction and implementation of an economic imperative for exceptional times" *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 18 (1) pp.3-25

22 Lowndes, V. & Gardner, A. (2016) "Local governance under the Conservatives: super-austerity, devolution and the 'smarter state'" *Local Government Studies* 42 (3) pp.357–375

23 Wills, J. (2016) *Locating Localism: Statecraft, Citizenship and Democracy* Bristol: Policy Press

24 Richards, D. & Smith, M. (2016) "Devolution in England, the British Political Tradition and the Absence of Consultation, Consensus and Consideration" *Representation* 51 (4) pp.385-401

spending, alongside responsibility for a new programme of economic growth²⁵. Local government was a 'non-protected department'. Following the Comprehensive Spending Review of 2010, between 2010-11 and 2018-19 the sector witnessed a real-terms reduction in funding of 49.1 per cent²⁶. Combined with increases in demand for many local government services, notably social care and housing, councils have been under significant pressure to realign spending priorities to ensure they can maintain statutory services. Meanwhile, local government has been realigned as an arm of the state through which spending cuts could be channeled, with central government increasingly measuring councils' value by the capacity for efficiency and value for money²⁷. Encouraging voters to judge their council on these narrow metrics was nothing new; indeed it was one of the Thatcher government's aims in introducing the Poll Tax.

So much for their role as leaders of place.

Community rights/neighbourhood planning

Legislation in the form of the Localism Act 2011 gave communities the right to nominate assets that they felt were particularly valuable. They could nominate them to be listed as Assets of Community Value, placing a six-month moratorium on sale or redevelopment. The community group in question would also be given the chance to raise the capital and put together a bid to buy the asset.

The legislation was a positive development as it presented an opportunity for councils to engage and to help give power to local people, enabling them to make decisions that shape the places they live in. However, the 2011 Act does not give sufficient powers at the local level to fully ensure that community assets are protected. For example, local pubs have been extremely popular as assets of community value. Yet despite being listed as such, and despite councils using the planning tools at their disposal, only a handful of pubs have been successfully defended from threats of redevelopment or change of use²⁸.

25 Diamond, P. Richards, D. & Smith, M. (2018) "Re-centring the British Political Tradition: Explaining Contingency in New Labour's and the Coalition's Governance Statecraft" in Nick Turnbull [ed.] *Interpreting Governance, High Politics, and Public Policy: Essays commemorating Interpreting British Governance* Abingdon: Routledge pp.19-38

26 NAO (2018) *Financial Sustainability of Local Authorities 2018* House of Commons

27 Lowndes, V. & Gardner, A. (2016) "Local governance under the Conservatives: super-austerity, devolution and the 'smarter state'" *Local Government Studies* 42 (3) pp.357-375

28 LGIU Public Houses report

Place shaping and city regions

Place has also played an important role in the city-regions agenda, which through the 2010s developed into a more substantial set of government-backed devolution deals. These deals passed responsibility for place-based coordination and the convening of different partners and funding streams to Combined Authorities, mostly led by directly elected mayors. On the whole this has enabled interesting and innovative approaches to policy and delivery, while the mayors have begun to play an increasingly important political role, representing distinctive places and making valuable interventions into the national debate.

However the question remains: what was the question that mayors were invented to answer? The strategy behind city-regions and devolution, led as it was by the Treasury in central government, has remained opaque and largely ad hoc. They were sometimes viewed as a solution to unbalanced economic growth and low regional productivity, at other times as the key to effective decision-making. Meanwhile, many hoped they would improve democratic participation and fill in the gaps of sub-national governance. Local government was left in the dark about what the strategy was, and what framework central government was really using to strike new deals.

The first wave of city deals were announced in 2012, followed by a second in 2013-14. It soon became apparent this would be the focus of a Conservative government²⁹. The first devolution deal was struck with the Greater Manchester Combined Authority in November 2014, followed by deals with Cornwall, Tees Valley, West Midlands and Liverpool City Region after the 2015 general election. Rather than rushing to put together a national framework, or a coherent and prescriptive program for devolution to English city regions, the government pursued an ad hoc deal-based approach³⁰. Local authorities were asked to come forward with clear and ambitious proposals for combined authorities that could take on greater spending and organisational powers from central government.

Place-shaping was among the principal aims of Combined Authorities that have agreed devolution deals since 2015. There were targets around high profile infrastructure investment, economic growth, transport and efficiencies in public services. In addition, directly elected mayors set out plans to draw together networks of local actors and use soft power to convene joint working and strategic planning among disparate public sector institutions across the framework of geographical places³¹.

29 O'Brien, P., & Pike, A. (2015) "City Deals, Decentralisation and the Governance of Local Infrastructure Funding and Financing in the UK" National Institute Economic Review 233 (1) pp.14–26; NAO (2015) Devolving Responsibilities to Cities in England: Wave 1 City Deals House of Commons

30 Sandford, M. (2016) "Signing up to Devolution: the prevalence of contract over governance in English devolution policy" Regional and Federal Studies 27 (1) pp.63-82

31 Sandford, M., & Dempsey, N. (2017). Metro-Mayors and devolution deals, house of commons library. Retrieved from <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/key-issues/metro-mayors-and-devolution-deals/>

Leadership was an essential facet of these deals, which reflected many of the concerns about executive leadership that energised the Blair government's stance towards local government. In some ways, elected mayors were envisioned by central government as a non-political, technocratic role. Mayors were valued for their capacity to get things done, to convene partners and attract inward investment. The mayor should be 'visionary', capable of taking risks and of tackling embedded policy challenges. As importantly, mayors operate against the background of constraints: they have to get the agreement of all the leaders across a Combined Authority; and they have to distribute Cabinet portfolios to potential opponents who may try to block or disrupt their policies.

Their successes so far, however, have also been driven by their wider and more political attributes. Successful mayors require an awareness of local identity and a concern for promoting and developing the wellbeing and cohesiveness of place. Local governments bore the brunt of spending reductions. But councils were also subjected to changes in their scope for action, the efficiencies they were expected to make and their relative power vis a vis local communities.

This was done while maintaining a tight rein on decisions that might be made locally, sticking to long-existing restraints on local government, including borrowing restrictions, targets, auditing and the requirement of holding a public referendum to increase council tax. In analysing recent changes in the structure of the local state against the backdrop of deep austerity during the Coalition government from 2010-2015 and Cameron's Conservative government that followed it, Lowndes and Gardner (2016) aver that the government attempted to justify the "paradox" of devolving a range of powers to selected parts of local government while severely reducing the money available by calling for a "smarter state."

However, as Lowndes and Gardner themselves acknowledge (2016: 366-7), local authorities and the state generally were absent from Cameron's rhetorical vision, which lauded the role of local people, local areas, neighbourhoods and communities. They also note "local government is also being 'written out' of services that were previously its core business" (2016: 367). Academy schools are a striking example of where local councils were further marginalised in the Cameron years. Social care is another given the growing emphasis on outsourcing to private providers. But rather than a simple 'roll-back' of the state, the "smarter state" approach entailed different parts of government doing more for less. It relied on similar processes and procedures as New Public Management had in the 1990s (Stewart 2000; Moran 2003; Bell & Hindmoor 2009: 71-96). This was despite the Conservatives' apparent aversion to the centralising regulation and accountability mechanisms involved in New Public Management (Dommett & Flinders 2015).

What has emerged since is actually a simultaneous top-down and bottom-up process. Local authorities can work together to propose new arrangements; but central government has shown that it has a prescriptive idea of the form of policy and delivery it is seeking (Prosser et al 2017; Richards & Smith 2016a; Stewart 2014).

The concern with institutional structure continues to dominate in the city-regions and devolution debate. Rather than promoting citizenship or participation, central government is largely animated by maintaining control through reporting mechanisms and accountability frameworks. These are entirely tangential to place-shaping. Indeed, they can frustrate attempts to join up actors across a place as our case study of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority shows. Even where place-shaping is demonstrably successful, it is often due to the ability of specific authorities to navigate and negotiate the different institutional cultures and boundaries within central government.

Part 2: return of place-shaping

In this section, a set of case studies demonstrate some of the ways that place has been adopted by local government in distinct settings. It does not provide a framework, but demonstrates how a shared proximity to local communities and a common approach towards wellbeing indicate the potential for reimagined and revitalised local government.

As mentioned at the outset, the return of place-shaping is driven by several interlinked factors:

- **Central government has vacated the space**
- **England's unfinished constitution**
- **Culture and focus in local government**
- **The importance of recognising place in effective public policy**
- **So called "left behind" places**
- **Covid-19**

The Institute for Fiscal Studies³² finds that we cannot divide the country easily between places that are resilient to the effects of Covid-19, and those that are not. The impact is felt in so many different ways in terms of population health and wellbeing, demographics, local economic factors, and levels of deprivation. While there are some local authorities that are particularly vulnerable in "multiple dimensions", including some seaside towns and areas such as the Isle of Wight, the response and the recovery depends on the capacity of local tiers of government to understand and work with local communities.

There were numerous calls recently for a consideration of the variation and distinctiveness of places to be taken into consideration, as plans are developed for moving beyond the crisis. That means that the response must be place-led. It is fundamentally about values. The phrase "Building Back Better" is now routinely heard throughout policy-making circles in central government. But how we do this begs major questions about the kinds of places that we want to live in, how communities relate to the state, and people to each other. Sustainability and thick, community-based resilience must all be core considerations for the immediate future. LGIU has recently presented a range of opportunities and challenges for sustainable futures as part of our Post-Covid Councils framework, with a wealth of potential links to place-based governance. The challenge is to develop resilient place-shaping.

32 [Institute for Fiscal Studies \(2020\) "The geographic impact of the COVID-19 crisis will be diffuse and hard to manage": <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/14884>](https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/14884)

We are still a long way out from discerning the full implications for Covid-19. Local economies will be crucial for widespread recovery, however. Given the uneven spread of the physical and economic impact of the virus, local context is key. Links with anchor institutions will also be a vital piece of the puzzle. A recent LGIU members' briefing, written by David Marlow, sets out the challenges and opportunities for engaging with institutions such as universities in recovery planning.

But all of these challenges pre-date Covid-19. Tomaney and Pike³³ argue that the decline of social infrastructure is an overriding concern for people in many so called "left behind" places. For many, there is "a palpable sense that the [local] town is deteriorating." The way local people experience and perceive this problem is regularly at odds with both local and national government's mindset. Wellbeing is linked to a variety of factors beyond narrow economic growth indicators from housing, health, education and transport infrastructure to social infrastructure, parks, high streets and community facilities.

Jennings, Lent & Stoker³⁴ find three types of place-based policy making underway in recent years:

- Deciding – which refers to the site and nature of local decision-making. It builds on ideas about the value of devolution and linking policy to local knowledge and accountability;
- Coordinating – which involves local government's convening role. It taps into the combined effort from networks and local agencies;
- Promoting – which involves asserting the virtues of a particular place, shaping community identities and supporting cultural capital.

They argue that there is a fourth rationale for place-based policy thinking: "matching". Matching is currently missing from a lot of local policy practice. The concept "rests on the view that we need place-based approaches that more strongly match policy responses to the circumstances and contexts of diverse places." Councils should aim to "match policy responses on industry, welfare and culture to the circumstances and context of a place." This model requires cooperation between local, regional and national actors to align the resources and frameworks for bespoke action.

33 Pike, A. & Tomaney, J. (2020) *Levelling Up?* *Political Quarterly* 91 (1) pp.43-48

34 Jennings, W. Lent, A. & Stoker, G. (2018) "Place Based Policy Making After Brexit: In Search of the Missing Link" NLGN: <http://www.nlgn.org.uk/public/2018/place-based-policy-making-brex-it-search-missing-link/>

Case studies: Locally led place-shaping in action

Two main themes arise from the place-shaping strategies adopted by local authorities and a Combined Authority in the case-studies reviewed below.

First, place-shaping strategies can be used to generate greater public value as well as value for money in service delivery. This public value is derived from combining budgets and integrating services, assets and relationships that generate outcomes which are important to citizens.

Second, place-shaping potentially creates more resilient economies and societies. Strengthening the economic and social fabric of places ensures that individuals, households and localities are better able to withstand unanticipated shocks. Resilience entails greater emphasis on prevention, tackling problems 'upstream', which in turn relieves pressure on already stretched public budgets.

Together, these approaches create more resilient place-shaping.

Kirklees – local democracy and place-based working

Place-based working is at the core of Kirklees Council's planning, community engagement and service delivery, and the principles run throughout the 2019-2025 Economic Strategy. It has also been important in the way the council has worked with communities in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The council has made a concerted effort to promote real participation since the report of the Kirklees Democracy Commission (*Growing a stronger local democracy, from the ground up*) in 2017. A cross party working group is overseeing the recommendations of the Democracy Commission, which was an extensive piece of work carried out by Kirklees Council and the University of Huddersfield, supported by a range of community and academic partners. Since then new ideas like using the Place-Standard tool, borrowed from Scotland, have been hugely influential. "It allows you to engage with people on a geography that they understand", says Jo Scruton, Principle Planning Officer.

The tool is an important aspect of the implementation of the Local Plan, shaping recommendations and ambitions around in-depth conversations with people. For Kirklees place-based working is intelligence-led, participative, asset and strength-based, and seeks to design services with and around people and communities. The Huddersfield town centre regeneration programme is one such example, engaging a broad swathe of the community in discussions to shape the Huddersfield Blueprint. The approach has enabled a lot of intelligence gathering and input of perspectives on priorities and strategies for making the town cleaner, safer and better set up for walking and cycling. A citizen engagement reference group helps to keep local people engaged as the plans are implemented.

The council sees its role as facilitating and supporting conversations within communities. Most of the place-based conversations are led by community organisations, with citizens often working closely with their ward councillors. Kirklees Council provide infrastructure and support where it is needed, but are careful not to dominate where they are not wanted. Place-based working also facilitates action that allows small towns, villages and rural areas to fulfil their potential, to promote themselves positively and to maximise connections between their success and that of Huddersfield and North Kirklees. Using the Place Standard approach to engage with businesses and communities in individual local places means that citizens and the council can together identify issues, opportunities and ways forward. For example green infrastructure and natural flood management in local places can contribute to Kirklees' goals on health and recreation, the environment, quality of place and flood prevention.

It is about much more than planning and the built environment, though, and has implications that cut across the whole council area. For Carl Whistlecraft, Head of Democracy and Place Based Working, "this is the most significant change for the organisation. We can really trace a strong line back to [the Democracy Commission]. If we'd not done all that work we wouldn't have approached place-based working in the way that we have. So in terms of outcomes and impact, and there have been other things don't get me wrong, but in terms of the fundamental, almost generational change it's the main achievement I think: genuine dialogue, based on place." This role was important during the lockdown and response to Covid-19, where new mutual aid groups were forming and different levels of need and vulnerability were quickly apparent in the community.

Conversations allow you to recognise different ideas of place and community. Hannah Eliot, Transformation Service Manager, says that place is not just about geography. There are many different layers in an area like Kirklees. Rachel Spencer-Henshall, Strategic Director of Corporate Strategy agrees and argues that, "many, many different "places" emerge when you really engage with people. Kirklees' place-based working goes beyond geography. It tries to apply a non-paternalistic, person-centred framework in areas like public health and listening to communities. The public sector is not set up well for this kind of working, Spencer-Henshall says, but they are building towards it through partnerships, training and embedding a culture of going outside of the comfort zone to understand the borough. The essential element is people says Steve Brennon, Place Programme Director in Health and Care, "if we make it about people then we can get beyond worrying about structure and geography".

More information on Kirklees Council's Place-Based Working strategy can be found here:

[How Good Is Our Place?](#)

[Growing a stronger local democracy](#)

[What we're learning from the citizens of Ashbrow and Fieldhead](#)

[We are with you – Community Response in Kirklees](#)

Innovation in Scotland and North Ayrshire – Place Standard Tool, Place Principle and community wealth building

The Place Standard Tool³⁵ was devised in Scotland as a framework for discussions about place with local communities. It provides prompts for conversations with different population groups and a structure for methodological consideration of different aspects of an area. The tool collates and presents the physical attributes of a place, including the built environment, transport, infrastructure and public space. This approach also enables consideration of the social and democratic dimensions, with particular emphasis on perceptions of inclusion, participation and identity. It has been put into practice by councils across Scotland, including Angus, Western Isles and Clackmannanshire. Our case study of Kirklees Councils also shows how the tool has been adopted and adapted by an English authority, becoming a cornerstone of its place-based working. In Scotland the use of the tool has involved a range of activities from regular community workshops around specific themes, to online and interactive GIS mapping.

In addition to the Place Standard Tool, in 2018 the Scottish Government adopted the “Place Principle”³⁶. In doing so, the government declared its commitment to partnerships and collaboration that break down silos across places “where people, location and resources combine to create a sense of identity and purpose”. This is “at the heart of addressing the needs and realising the full potential of communities”. While this is a positive commitment, critics in the Scottish Parliament and elsewhere have highlighted that real budgets and powers must back it up to give it practical weight.

That being said, innovative work has been established across Scotland, including around community wealth building. According to Joe Cullinane, leader of North Ayrshire Council, community wealth building means “working in partnership with communities and businesses to build a more resilient economy that works for local people, which supports fair work, encourages local spend by public bodies, uses the land and property the public sector owns for the common good, and supports new ownership models such as co-operatives, all of which helps to keep the wealth generated locally.”³⁷ Cllr Cullinane says it is “the cornerstone of our economic recovery plan” from the Covid-19 pandemic. As well as launching an £8.8m Investment Fund and employing staff to support community wealth projects, the council has assembled a panel of economic and community experts to put together a transformative programme.

35 <https://placestandard.scot/guide/quick>

36 https://www.improvementservice.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0026/9548/place-principle.pdf

37 <https://lgiu.org/community-wealth-building-in-north-ayrshire/>

Colchester – development, growth and identity

For Colchester Borough Council, the idea of place-shaping encapsulates the approach to planning, economic development, the built environment, local skills and, crucially, community cohesion and wellbeing.

“We are concerned with how we build communities from the start”, says the Chief Executive, Adrian Pritchard. There are several ambitious new developments in the borough at various stages of planning or development. Central to the plans are connectivity, facilitating active travel and enhancing Colchester as a pleasant place to live. Part of this is about the physical environment and open spaces. The council is particularly keen to develop decent and green infrastructure, energy provision, water, waste and drainage.

But there is a further dimension to place-shaping. The council is heavily invested in the sense of local identity, building on and harnessing the social assets and the history of Colchester as a place. The Roman walls, the Norman keep, Colchester Castle, not to mention the wonderful Victorian Jumbo Water Tower, sit comfortably alongside the new gallery and community arts centre, as well as a range of heritage buildings repurposed for community hubs, cultural groups and incubating start-up businesses.

To put plans into action, the council draws on the policy tools that are available to a district council, including a capital programme of £110m. There are three arms’ length companies which are integral to the place-shaping approach adopted by the district council. Colchester Amphora Energy, Colchester Amphora Homes and Colchester Amphora Trading.

Over five years the council is directly delivering 350 new affordable homes, using HRA borrowing of up to £75m. The recent increase in borrowing headroom is a significant enabling factor for councils to meet building targets, but also to connect different elements together across places, as LGIU argued in a recent report with the District Councils Network. On top of this, Colchester Amphora Homes is delivering 420 mixed tenure homes over the same period, of which 30 per cent will be affordable housing. This is part of a £95m development that the arm-length company is leading. One of the largest aspects of the development is the new CNG Sports Park. There is also a geothermal energy project underway in the north of the town.

Colchester’s partnerships are crucial. Working with parts of the state sector, including health and the police, as well as voluntary sector bodies such as Community 360, shaped how the town responded to the Covid crisis as a place. It is something the council wants to retain, so that communities can support themselves and build in the networks and activities that local government might not be able to fund in the future. The council has also worked closely with Tendring and Braintree councils in the North Essex Garden Communities partnership. The first planned development is in the top ten garden communities

nationally and the borough has ambitions to go much further in the future if it is able. The principles underpinning the plan mean that the development should be led by the infrastructure that ensures they are well connected as places. Sustainable forms of travel will be integral to the plans, as will goals around jobs development and the forging of improved east-west links.

There has been a shift over recent years away from expecting central government grants and towards a mindset that “we’ve got to bid for pots of money”. It is the task of place-shaping to bring these allocations of money together and to use the spending and capacity available for the coordinated and strategic benefit of the local area. This approach will be even more critical in the years ahead as pressures on public spending mean that councils will have to justify to taxpayers every pound of money spent. But it is also the role of place-shaping council to take the lead in promoting the wider wellbeing of local communities in whatever way it can. This means acting where central government is absent, notably in areas that are vital for economic growth and community cohesion, like internet connectivity. Pritchard is clear that “We can’t wait for national providers to bring fast broadband in, we’ve got to create that”. Getting the infrastructure in first is essential, rather than retro-fitting development. This mind-set changes behaviour from day one.

The council emphasises long termism in what it is trying to do. This is not without its challenges for a district council in the current financial situation, not to mention upheaval related to Covid-19. The council is looking at delivering way beyond the next Local Plan phase. This approach better enables long-term place shaping, as they are clear that they do not want to be reactive.

This is “ambitious stuff for districts”, he says.

Cornwall – focused localism

Articulating a coherent idea of the Cornish identity, the assets and the values that it can build on, and a compelling sense of how this fits into a wider idea of political and economic geography is central to place-shaping in Cornwall. Harnessing the government’s rhetoric of “levelling up”, the leader of Cornwall Council, Cllr Julian German, remarked that “tapping into the distinctive potential of rural areas is long overdue; and it is replete with natural and social capital ideally suited to power, connect, feed and support the country.”³⁸

Cornwall Council helped to develop the new grouping of Britain’s “Leading Edge” councils. These are 12 local authorities that are largely rural and do not include a major city and collectively they seek to articulate a role as “turbine’s for powering and feeding the country”, not as ‘hinterlands’ that seek to benefit from the growth and benefits produced elsewhere.

Since 2009, when it went Unitary, place-shaping in Cornwall has developed from bottom-up, community-led initiatives that the council has facilitated by providing infrastructure, capacity and access to funding where necessary. A series of cultural, planning and economic development projects have developed into distinctive local approaches that are built around strong networks between the council, local communities and Towns and parishes. “It’s often around an issue in a clearly identified local area. I would call it ‘focussed localism’ often but not always around economic growth”.

Community level networks and town and parish councils are an essential component of the success of the unitary council and the progress of devolution so far, the council’s officers report. It is very much driven from the bottom-up. Andrew helped set up the localism team in 2009, following unitarisation. Central to the team’s work were the new Community Network Panels, which brought together elected members and town and parish councils, plus stakeholders in an area every few months. These were not formal decision-making structures, but local networks that helped tease out important local issues and identify local solutions, and worked particularly well in many areas.

A good example: quite soon after unitarisation when two young people tragically lost their lives in Newquay, a range of public organisations were brought together and galvanised towards addressing some long standing issues of anti-social behaviour, economic growth and inequality in the area. The RNLI, police and health services, as well as the council, collaborated to develop the Newquay safe initiative which as well as dealing with many of the short term ASB related issues helped in the long term to help develop significant regeneration plans.

“Newquay Safe brought everybody together around a really tangible high profile issue” Andrew says. Newquay was an example of a seaside town that was down on its luck. “Out of that there was very little investment, none of the

³⁸ Foreword to “Land of Opportunity: England’s Rural Periphery” NLGN paper

regional businesses were going near it because it had quite a bad reputation.” The local safety campaign brought a lot of focus to the town, brought residents and agencies together around a common theme. Now many of the key big chains are in Newquay, there’s quite a lot of investment coming in, and there are very few derelict sites left. The impetus for a change in direction “came out of a community safety issue, it was nothing to do with place-shaping or regeneration, but it brought people together. Newquay Safe was the trigger for the regeneration of Newquay.”

There is a set of embedded place-shaping projects across Cornwall that are led by local groups and focused on tying in economic regeneration with wider community goals. The Penzance Regeneration Forum for example is coordinating a detailed plan for using High Street and Town Deal funding, creating links with a geothermal energy project at Jubilee Pool and promoting the area as a tourist destination.

The St Austell Bay Economic Forum, despite some setbacks, has formed itself into a Community Interest Company, chaired by the boss of the St Austell Brewery. The organisation has secured Coastal Community Funding, which it has geared towards greening the area and is tied in with links to local assets like the Eden Project. The long term goal is about “giving St Austell bay an identity. Its previous identity was the declining china clay industry. It’s not ignoring it, but it’s reshaping it around greening, healthy active lifestyles and creativity.” The council has facilitated links with groups in Sheffield who are doing similar work on local identity attached to the steel industry.

Meanwhile, a group called Better Bodmin was set up to improve the identity and sense of place in the town. Building on existing industry, they have used funding and support to aim to make the area a hub for agri-food, providing jobs and training. The aim is also to make the area into a destination for locals and visitors to Cornwall alike, as the bypass built in the 1980s has made it “a place that didn’t know what it wanted to be”.

The council tries not to impose a model of place-shaping, but rather to support groups to develop their own local priorities and method of working. It’s very much a place-led process: “We only work with a place that wants to work with us. We’ve not going to go into a place and say this is what you’ve got to do, because its just a waste of time and effort and it creates animosity.” Each of the projects supported so far have been different, but, as Andrew says, ‘there are things they’ve got in common and we’re trying to build confidence, and say to the areas “you can do this”. It’s about setting up a framework and network of support: “Part of my role is how do we start this place-shaping so all of Cornwall is covered by some form of place-shaping process.” When asked how much the central government localism and place-shaping agendas from 2010 onwards continue to play a role, he replies “very little”. What endures is the local energy and commitment and the strategies and frameworks developed within Cornwall.

Greater Manchester city region

The idea of “place” is driving forward the governance and policy changes in the Greater Manchester Combined Authority.

The aim of the devolution deals from a central government perspective was to boost local economic growth and make savings in public spending through efficiencies and better integration of service delivery (GMCA 2017). At the local level, a range of policy decisions are now made and implemented on a “place basis” through a new GM-wide system of governance. The directly elected mayor acts as a figurehead for the city-region. While the office itself has limited hard powers, it is the soft power, convening power and public profile that facilitates a more place-focused leadership. The elected mayor is a visible and political actor who projects ‘the power of place’, using collective agency to solve problems while challenging Whitehall’s decision-making. Meanwhile, the leaders of the ten local authorities that make up the GMCA sit in a cabinet alongside the Mayor.

The Combined Authority and its partner institutions oversee the city-region’s economy, health and care system, enabling Manchester to establish a distinctive policy trajectory. This responsibility includes commissioning health and social care services together on a “place basis”, that is to say with shared targets across the “place” of GM, rather than within individual service areas. The aim is to integrate these areas of policy with other spheres of local authority activity, including skills, infrastructure, spatial planning and employment. This creates the opportunity to tackle some of the social determinants of health and wellbeing in a more coordinated and efficient way.

The programme is pursued across the urban area, which necessitates cooperation and harmonisation among the ten local authorities, pooling budgets and making decisions in partnership with a diverse range of public agencies and providers. A senior policy adviser at the GMCA argued: “One of the key strengths of GM has always been the partnerships and collaboration across the ten local authorities in that geography and the other partners within that...What we’ve done is we’ve harmonised those into a single entity now.” The capacity built up across Greater Manchester also facilitates place-based policy. A focus on evidence and local engagement is coupled with a pragmatic sense of the language necessary to take the argument forward in Whitehall.

Barriers to further implementation often come in the form of “place-blind” centralised frameworks and targets. These targets can lead to confused and complex lines of accountability, particularly for reporting on NHS and health targets. Targets also create obstacles to the successful integration of services across the city-region. The regulatory bodies in health care are based on monitoring organizational performance and have not transitioned towards effective reporting on a “place” basis. This approach can act as a barrier to reform, as the recent Greater Manchester Independent Prosperity

Review (GMCA 2018) argued. It “can push individual organisations back into sector silos.” By maintaining traditional targets around delegated services, central government frameworks, “can serve to limit the integrated approach to implementing devolution GM is seeking to achieve.” (2018: 40).

Planning across the city-region, with integrated and multi-year budgets that have clear potential benefits for policy delivery, is crucial for communities. Previously, a council chief executive argues, “there was no vision, there was no long-term plan about demand management”. The locality plans have changed that, they argue: “It’s not like that now. It’s longer-term, it’s more planned, it’s more of an on-going dialogue. The Locality Plans are a shared vision, with everyone signing up to it, the council, the hospital, community providers, mental health providers, GPs. It’s a system approach rather than just a contract”. Each local area was brought into this GM-wide programme of reorganising health on a “place” basis.

In a recent paper, Alan Harding, a key adviser to the GM mayor, summarised some of the key lessons he has drawn from working at the heart of the Greater Manchester project:

- **First, geography matters, but only up to a point.** While the Greater Manchester area defined as a result of the 1974 local government reforms has proven durable, it has done so only because significant effort has been put into making it relevant to a range of interests that, in other places, have not cohered around a definition of “place” they found useful.
- **Second, and directly related, ‘narrative’ matters.** What has united the broad set of stakeholders who supported the development of Greater Manchester governance is the belief that they are all in this together, that they can achieve common benefit from a common set of purposes, and that they gain strength from acting together.
- **Third, change is best driven by coalitions of the willing, not by grand designs.** Many of the small steps taken towards the self-organization of Greater Manchester were made by a subset of interests, not as a result of wide-ranging consensus. But the gains they made improved the prospects for broader support later.
- **Fourth, leadership matters.** Coalitions of the willing have to be galvanized into existence and persuaded to take risks if they are to realize mutual gains.³⁹

39 Harding, A. (2020) “Collaborative Regional Governance: Lessons from Greater Manchester” IMFG Papers on Municipal Finance and Governance No. 48, University of Toronto

Community Support Across Kent During the Pandemic

Across Kent and Medway a joint, community-level and place-based response to the pandemic helped to maintain local wellbeing.

Community hubs brought everything together for the initial response across the county. They were ahead of the curve on this, with local coordinated work on the ground to support the vulnerable already in place before the government made its lockdown announcement in March, and the hubs established and operating within three days of the announcement.

The Joint Kent Chief Executive Group, including all of the councils across Kent and Medway, was the first point of call for coordinating this response, and it was already meeting three times a week. District councils led this outreach work and they manage the community hubs in their areas. This is a different model to many other places in the country, but they have the connections and the local knowledge to make it work. They know the community groups and the areas street by street.

The County Council supports the districts where it can, particularly by helping tackle capacity issues. It also provides communications, promotion and contacting support and provides a county-wide triage service. As part of Kent Together, this community-led work across Kent and Medway is jointly branded between all the councils. It is focused on the places and the communities, not the institutions. The joint response to Covid-19 has strengthened relationships between the councils but also those with the voluntary and community sector.

Within three days community hubs were up and running across Kent and Medway and staff had been redeployed to where they were needed most immediately. Each hub works on a different model, with different staff and officers. The services they provide are similarly varied, including befriending, outreach and dog walking. The voluntary sector was crucial, and from the early stages the councils sought to build on the capacity within the community.

The service has been winding down, though in some areas, such as Folkstone, there are hubs still in operation. There is a big challenge, though, in terms of what comes next and how wraparound services can continue.

Community Wardens

Community wardens had existed in Kent for around twenty years before evolving into the role that was so crucial during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. By that point they were no longer just focused on safety, low level crime and anti-social behaviour, but had become a much wider service for promoting residents' wellbeing. Wardens are a trusted community presence, working closely with Adult Social Care and other community focused council services.

This involved developing the training and support provided for wardens, as it requires a different set of skills. Wardens needed a better understanding of community development, social care and behaviour change, for example.

Wardens know where to go, they can signpost residents towards the right services, support them and advocate for them when navigating different parts of the public sector. “It’s about keeping the threads together”, says Shafick Peerbux, Head of Community Safety at Kent County Council. They were a crucial asset, therefore, during the pandemic, as they knew where the problems and issues were, informing decisions long before central government issued any guidance. Wardens helped to make sure those in need or who were isolated had enough food, or could still access medical supplies during the lockdown. Here they worked closely with the Community Hubs. They helped residents access the hardship fund and other services, coordinating with voluntary groups, charities and local businesses that were all pitching in to provide support. “It was a really local response and their knowledge allowed us to support parish councils, community groups at the neighbourhood level. We could just do a lot of the things that they needed,” says Peerbux.

Shafick goes on to say that “community wellbeing tends to get forgotten in stories about responding to the virus.” This wellbeing is exactly what the Community Hubs and the Community Wardens seek to strengthen. The telephone buddy system that many wardens run is still in place and they are still checking in on residents, particularly those who are isolated or with specific care needs, online clubs and social inclusion programmes are still running. They also provided guidance for residents going back into town centres and community facilities, or raising awareness of scams and other forms of harassment that unfortunately prevailed over the lockdown.

Conclusion: towards resilient place-shaping

This paper argues that place-shaping provides local authorities with a strategic lens and blueprint to lead in an era of disruption and complexity. The key question is how best to promote the resilient place-shaping agenda in English governance in the climate created by the twin shocks of Covid-19 and Brexit. This concluding section summarises the key lessons and next steps that are required to further advance the place-shaping agenda across local government.

The first lesson is that there is the need for a clearer understanding of what success looks like in place-shaping. Stronger, clearer measurement frameworks are needed. Diana Coyle proposes replacing GDP and efficiency orientated measurement frameworks with efforts to capture and measure the range of 'assets' that exist in a particular place, drawing on Sen's capabilities approach. So the impact of policy on place is not measured by growth or spending or headline poverty statistics, but the balance-sheet of economic, social, physical, environmental and human assets that define a particular place.

The second lesson is place will be particularly important in thinking through the future of cities in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. Interestingly, the Johnson government's focus may end up being very different to the electoral concern in 2019 with levelling up – the government is desperate to get cities moving economically again after the pandemic to fire up UK growth. The future of cities will be back on the UK policy agenda, and place is critically important in working through how to make cities liveable spaces. The concept of the '15-minute' city will be crucial. The 15-minute city aims to treat urban spaces as a series of villages or settlements around which people organise their lives. Place-orientated policy may help to deal with the strains revealed by the 2016 Brexit referendum, particularly the sense of disconnection felt by provincial England, which was missing from the devolution settlement of the late 1990s.

Finally, it is important to note that the UK and England over the last 20 years have been through a long governance experiment with different institutional innovations that can help to strengthen place-orientated strategies including the creation of mayors, localism, and city-region deals. To observers, the changes feel messy and confusing in their asymmetry. That has proved difficult to avoid. What is now required is to tangibly strengthen the impact of English local government by using the lens and tools of resilient place-shaping to remake our economies and societies.

Recommendations:

On the basis of our findings in this report, we believe the following steps and actions will help to promote empowered and resilient places throughout England:

- 1. Build thriving neighbourhoods:** Use ward-level data to shape the policies and priorities that improve social wellbeing for citizens in particular communities. Place-orientated strategies will need to span whole cities and towns to address challenges from infrastructure to public service provision. Yet what makes the greatest difference to citizens is improving the quality of the local environment, giving them a say in the decisions that affect their lives. There is little point in devolving power to cities and regions only for it to be hoarded by a political elite at the centre in in the town hall. The Social Progress Index will help to achieve improved outcomes for residents, particularly those living in the most vulnerable neighbourhoods.
- 2. Greater fiscal freedom:** More fiscal devolution can be achieved through a place-shaping precept, while ensuring measures such as business rate relief are place-targeted and controlled by local councils rather than imposed in a place-blind fashion by central government with no regard for local circumstances. The entire local government finance system will need to be rethought in the aftermath of the pandemic.
- 3. Citizen-centred public services:** Ensure local services build relationships with citizens and communities, recognising that the capacity and power of good governance comes from the relationship between citizen and the state in a particular place. Local councils should be at the forefront of advancing relational models of governance, not doing what Whitehall does centrally, but organising power and resources to reflect local needs: giving citizens powers to tackle problems in their local neighbourhood from fly-tipping and graffiti to anti-social behaviour, while using the community fund and the community asset ownership agenda. Research suggests that currently three per cent of citizens are involved in local neighbourhood projects, but 60 per cent would like to be indicating enormous untapped potential: projects such as <http://www.participatorycity.org/every-one-every-day> are dedicated to enabling community participation.
- 4. Cutting Whitehall red tape:** Build on and expand recent experiments in single pot spending so that councils can fully use their capacity and expertise. Whether in Total Place, or city-region devolution deals, these innovations have been shown to yield positive results. Remove centrally imposed ring fences giving councils the power to direct local spending across places. Cut unnecessary central targets and performance oversight in public services.

- 5. Promote a sustainable local economy:** The key post-pandemic priority will be jobs given the impact of the crisis on key sectors of the economy, and the winding down of the government furlough scheme. Initiatives such as Kick Start will offer guaranteed training or a work placement to 16-24 years olds. The programme should be place-focused, with local councils having a key role in matching job opportunities with unmet needs in communities and neighbourhoods, using a social progress or 'thriving neighbourhoods' index as identified above. Other examples include establishing business incubator programmes that encourage local businesses which meet community needs and reflect local heritage; and collaborative childcare schemes: <http://www.participatorycity.org/everyone-every-day>

- 6. Strengthen local public health:** The most important public health lesson of the Covid-19 crisis is that an effective test and trace system must be place-focused and locally led – with local public health directors in the driving seat. Again, public health strategies have to reflect the circumstances and needs of particular places, using ward-level data to determine how to curb infection spread, tackle existing health inequalities, while building greater health and economic resilience in the local population. While preferable to Whitehall centralisation, even city-wide approaches lack the necessary granularity to deal with a public health emergency. It is essential that public health initiatives and plans reflect ward-level circumstances in each local authority across England.

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