

UNLOCKING POTENTIAL IN A CRISIS: A REVIEW OF LOCAL AUTHORITY RECOVERY PLANS IN RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Under the challenging circumstances brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, local authorities have shown their agility and adaptability to develop plans that addressed recovery and renewal, with a focus on people, place and economy. This rapid review draws together the available evidence on the plans developed by a sample of local authorities in England. It considers the key themes found across the responses as well as the ways in which local authorities adapted their ways of working to drive innovation, and provides a number of case studies to explore this in greater depth. It also illuminates some of the constraints that local authorities faced, which have implications for their future ability to respond to crises.

KEY FINDINGS

- Key policy areas of **business and economy; net zero; place and spatial inequality; and socio-economic inequalities** feature prominently across the identified local authority recovery plans.
- These policy areas are interrelated within local authorities' plans, with **many policy objectives taking a co-benefit approach**, involving environmental, social and economic benefits.
- A key theme was **addressing existing inequalities that were exacerbated by the pandemic**, such as improving employment, skills, and welfare offers.
- The pandemic served as a juncture for local authorities, with recovery plans seeking to both **capitalise on positive trends brought about by the pandemic** – such as active travel, remote working, and digital connectivity – and to **advance previous agendas**, for example on environmental or net zero objectives.
- Changes were identified in how policy agendas were designed and implemented as a result of the pandemic, and that included shifts towards **greater levels of collaboration and whole system approaches**. This involved greater collaboration across departments within local authorities; partnerships between different local authorities; and partnerships with bodies such as local enterprise partnerships and chambers of commerce, local services such as transport and health services, the voluntary sector and the local community through civic engagement.
- **Many local authorities lacked the resources to fully fund their recovery plans**, which meant that funding requests to central government was a core element of their response. In many cases, recovery plans were not fully funded, and the scope of implementation was limited. This has highlighted that, despite devolution initiatives, England's system of local governance remains a multi-level patchwork, with local authorities' dependant on central government for funding.

PRINCIPLES FOR THE FUTURE

Based on the policy review and in-depth case studies the following principles have been developed as recommendations to support local authorities in the acceleration of policy change in the recovery from a crisis.



GREATER DEVOLUTION	The UK Government should devolve greater powers to local authorities including giving them increased ability to determine how to make use of existing funding and raise additional funds in order to pursue their strategic local priorities.
FLEXIBLE AND NON-COMPETITIVE FUNDING	The UK Government should ensure local authorities have access to more flexible funding opportunities that are not timebound, ring-fenced or competitive, as has been the case for Levelling Up Funding.
COLLABORATIVE WORKING	Local authorities should prioritise increasing collaborative working , including seeking input from local businesses, services, and community groups to develop their strategic plans. In particular, where a crisis situation requires swift policy change and adaptation, it is essential to include all interlocking levels of governance and neighbouring local authorities in developing a collective strategic response.

THE POLICIES PLANNED ACROSS THE LOCAL AUTHORITIES TO ENABLE RECOVERY FROM COVID-19

Policies included in local authority recovery plans have been grouped by key strategic areas of priority including **net zero**; **place and spatial inequality**; and **socio-economic inequalities**. This is then followed by other important areas that were also frequently discussed in the recovery plans: **the economy and business**, **the health of residents**, **the challenges facing younger populations** and **reforms to local authorities**.

ACTIONS REPORTED WITHIN LOCAL AUTHORITIES SINCE THE PANDEMIC

- Increasing collaboration both across and within local authorities, and with local services and groups, leading to an increasingly ‘whole system approach’ to policy development and implementation.
- Reforming the council’s organisation – increases in hybrid working, online services and staff engagement.
- Improving institutional trust and democratic participation through civic engagement.

POLICY AREAS	COMMONLY CITED POICY PLANS
 <p>NET ZERO DISCUSSED ACROSS 26 PLANS</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Growing the green economy by producing more green professions. • Supporting circular businesses with reduced waste and low carbon supply chains. • Tackling fuel inequality by retrofitting, providing renewable energy sources and developing zero carbon new builds. • Increasing access to and regenerating green and aquatic spaces. • Regenerating brownfield sites to build new homes. • Supporting active travel and greener transport and reduce air pollution. • Adapting infrastructure to deal with climate change consequences. • Identifying funding and developing partnerships for low carbon and renewable climate focussed projects. • Delivering training and improve skills on environmental sustainability. • Retaining major shifts to home working to reduce travel pollution. • Engaging residents in tacking climate change.
 <p>PLACE AND SPATIAL INEQUALITIES DISCUSSED ACROSS ALL 28 PLANS</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Investing in infrastructure and repurposing unused buildings to modernise urban centres. • Supporting levelling up by enhancing the affordable and social housing offer. • Improving connectivity through transport infrastructure links. • Improving access to necessities to enable local living e.g., through the development of 15-minute neighbourhoods. • Working with diverse communities and those most affected by the pandemic to co-develop community activities. • Developing and rejuvenating local attractions in the community. • Achieving diversity and inclusivity within the area. • Establishing cultural, community and developmental funding.



**SOCIO-ECONOMIC
INEQUALITIES**
DISCUSSED ACROSS
26 PLANS

- Focussing on employment and skills support with an emphasis on those that are unemployed, at risk of redundancy, disabled, have health conditions or who face other barriers.
- Taking the 'No Wrong Door' approach to employment to ensure people seeking work can easily navigate and access the support they need.
- Supporting the education and childcare sector, by supporting access to childcare, free school meals and other child poverty focused activities.
- Improving advice services and securing funding for crisis support and socio-economic services.
- Improving welfare services and access to necessities to support deprived communities and combat homelessness.
- Enabling digital access for all - improving infrastructure, providing grants and training.
- Motivating employers to take socio-economic action and create better employment that pays the Real Living Wage.



ECONOMY AND BUSINESS
DISCUSSED ACROSS
24 PLANS

- Delivering programmes that help local businesses grow, including supporting local supply chains.
- Supporting the development of start-ups and young enterprises and enabling low-cost, long-term let opportunities for SMEs and creatives in empty and low-use spaces.
- Making fit-for purpose business accommodation available.
- Supporting the tourism, cultural, hospitality and creative sectors.
- Enhancing job creation and maintenance through the development of new transport networks, infrastructure, hospitality and tourism attractions.
- Developing higher skilled roles for residents.
- Improving global connections, building local partnerships, and securing funding.



YOUTH
DISCUSSED ACROSS 22
PLANS

- Providing wellbeing support and mentoring for young people in developing social and employment skills.
- Linking education and employment to lead people out of poverty (e.g., No Wrong Door).
- Providing business mentoring to help young people with entrepreneurships and start-ups.
- Enhancing local support for children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).
- Providing skills and employment support in the form of training programmes, work experience and youth hubs that can share advice with young people.



HEALTH
DISCUSSED ACROSS 22
PLANS

- Reducing health inequalities by preventing conditions such as obesity, diabetes, and improving access to services.
- Providing affordable healthy food locally.
- Investing in mental health and wellbeing services.
- Investigating why health and social care costs are different between similar authorities.
- Investing in training to build a sustainable and sufficient workforce in the health and social care sector.

THE GEOGRAPHIC REPRESENTATION OF THE INCLUDED LOCAL AUTHORITIES

The 28 plans for COVID-19 recovery included in the review were published within nine different regions of England cited in the map in Figure 1. The local authorities were selected based on their variation in characteristics including regional location, political leadership, population size and level of deprivation. The figure below illustrates the geographical spread of the included plans.

CASE STUDY FINDINGS

Interviews were also conducted with five employees that were involved in the development or implementation of the recovery plans, from the local authorities listed below.

- Greater London Authority (GLA)
- Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership
- South Tyneside Metropolitan Council
- South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority
- West Midlands Mayoral Combined Authority

Across the case studies, there was agreement that the pandemic led to a sense of a need for policy acceleration rather than a policy reset. Accelerated policy areas included increases in flexible working, improved digital connectivity, increased focus on net zero, and an increased focus on addressing inequalities by incorporating access to better skills, jobs and connectivity (physical and digital) and thereby enabling healthier communities and a better quality of life.

“The way we saw this was as a COVID iteration of the policies [from the previous plan] which was more about job numbers and gross value added, than improving people’s lives and transforming the economy. The new plans [the recovery plan] focus more on inclusive growth and better jobs”

The most discussed changes were approaches to collaborative working to develop and implement recovery plans. All the representatives discussed that this had led to cultural changes across their authority in creating and maintaining partnerships. This is exemplified by the GLA and London Councils which established the wide-ranging London Recovery Board in 2020 to coordinate governance bodies, business, unions and the third sector to lead the societal and economic recovery to the pandemic. The London Recovery Board has now evolved into the London Partnership Board to address London’s challenges.

“One positive lasting legacy of the devastation of COVID, [is] that we’ve been able to find better ways of working together because there was a collective imperative”

Representatives discussed that their recovery plans had been developed as an ‘ask for funding’ to the government. They underscored that authorities have seen a significant reduction in funding over the past decade. They also discussed the need for more flexibility with funding opportunities. This included ensuring funding was not strictly ringfenced to specific deliverables, not timebound and not competitive in nature especially regarding levelling up funding. The need for further devolution was also discussed to gain further power and responsibilities, enabling greater access to funding to be able to implement more of the projects within plans.

“We got a pot of money that was not ring-fenced for a change, and this is a good example of how devolution should work in practice”

“Levelling Up Funding shouldn’t be competitive. It should be allocated according to need”

Ultimately, the plans have been and continue to be implemented to varying extents, some authorities did not get the funding required to implement plans, whilst some did, and some were able to repurpose alternative funding to gradually implement their recovery plans. It is important to note that the plans were not developed in isolation and many of the policies included were related to existing policy agendas. As society has moved beyond the context of pandemic recovery the plans are still being used to inform subsequent strategies.

Figure 1. The regional spread of plans included within the review

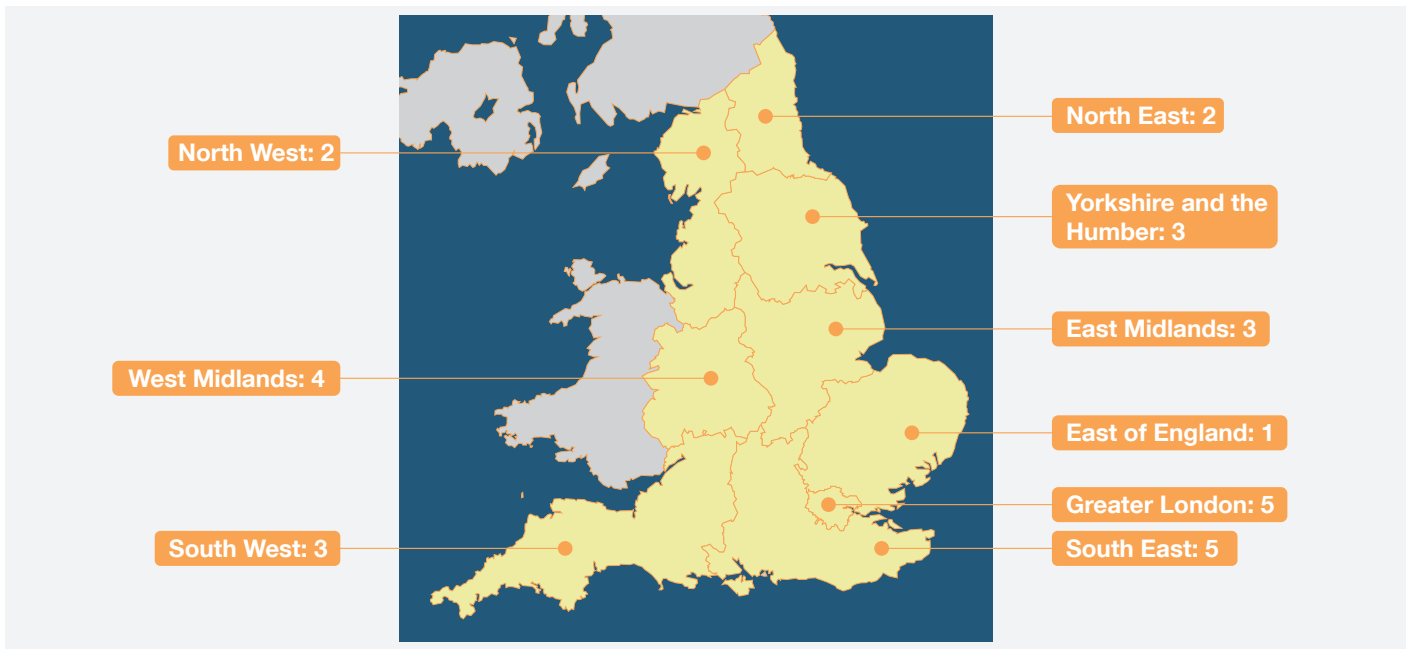
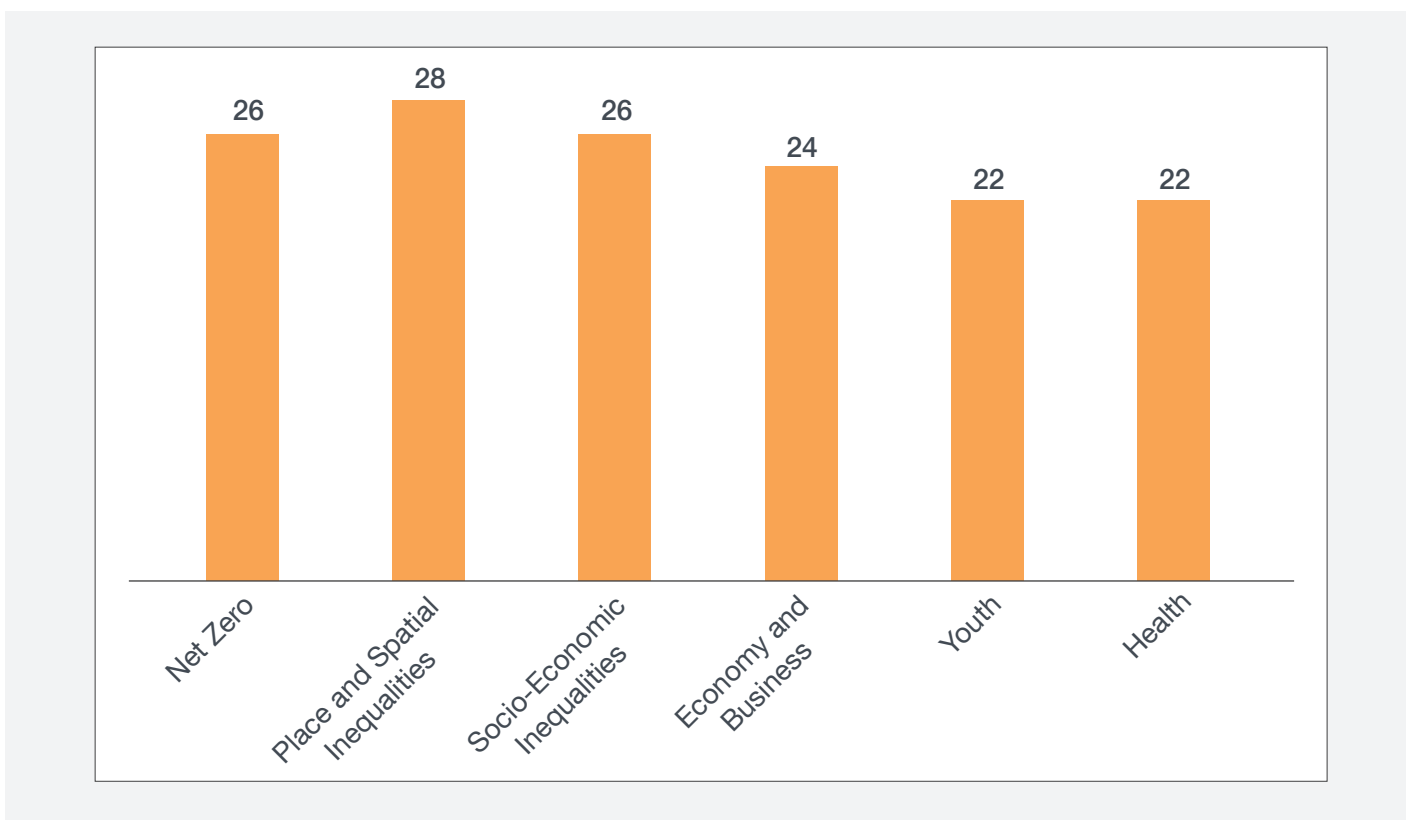


Figure 2. Number of plans that discuss key policy areas identified



THE LOCAL AUTHORITIES INCLUDED IN THIS REVIEW

LONDON AUTHORITIES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • City of London Corporation • Greater London Authority • Harrow Borough Council • Lewisham Borough Council • South London Partnership (Kingston upon Thames, Croydon, Merton, Richmond upon Thames, Sutton)
COMBINED AUTHORITIES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority • West Midlands Combined Authority • West of England Combined Authority
METROPOLITAN DISTRICT COUNCIL AUTHORITIES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bradford City Council • Sheffield City Council • Solihull Borough Council • South Tyneside Borough Council • Wigan Borough Council
UNITARY COUNCIL AUTHORITIES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bath & North East Somerset Council • Cornwall Council • Isle of Wight Council • Middlesbrough Borough Council • North Northamptonshire Council
COUNTY COUNCIL AUTHORITIES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lancashire County Council • Nottinghamshire County Council • Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership • West Sussex County Council • Worcestershire County Council
DISTRICT COUNCIL AUTHORITIES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adur District & Worthing Borough Councils • Broadland District & South Norfolk District Councils • East Lindsey District & Boston Borough Councils • Rother District Council • Wychavon District Council



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