Bystanders or innovators?

How local authorities can use place making to drive the green recovery

Contents

APSE

APSE (Association for Public Service Excellence) is a not-for-profit local Government body working with over 300 councils throughout the UK. Promoting excellence in public services, APSE is the foremost specialist in local authority front line services, hosting a network for front line service providers in areas such as waste and refuse collection, parks and environmental services, leisure, school meals, FM services, housing and building maintenance.

APSE member authorities have access to a range of membership resources to assist in delivering council services. This includes advisory groups, briefings service, training, not-for-profit consultancy support and interim management as well as APSE Performance Networks data benchmarking service and APSE Energy a unique network for municipal energy and renewables work. Working on a tripartite basis APSE brings together senior officers in local Government alongside elected members and trade union representatives.

APSE hosts one of the UK largest research programmes in local Government complimenting its work on frontline services with the strategic policy issues faced by local councils.

The Town and Country Planning Association

The Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA), founded in 1899, is the UK's oldest independent charity focused on planning and sustainable development. Through its work over the last century, the Association has improved the art and science of planning, both in the UK and abroad. The TCPA puts social justice and the environment at the heart of policy debate, and seeks to inspire Government, industry and campaigners to take a fresh perspective on major issues, including planning policy, housing, regeneration and climate change.

The TCPA's objectives are:

- To secure a decent, well designed home for everyone, in a human-scale environment combining the best features of town and country.
- To empower people and communities to influence decisions that affect them; To improve the planning system in accordance with the principles of sustainable development.

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This report aims to reflect the opinions of a wide range of local authorities, charities, researchers and private companies, but not every detail contained within it will reflect the opinions of all the contributors to this work. It should, however, reflect the overall spirit of the debate and capture most of the key points raised.

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Foreword

As we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, we all recognise that there is still a long-way to go to truly recover from the health and economic impact of this unprecedented episode. Local councils have done their utmost to assist local communities, through supporting businesses and residents.

Whilst this support has of course been broadly welcomed, it has also thrown into sharp focus the vital role of local councils in place-shaping. Local knowledge was fundamental in the initial response to the pandemic, understanding the nuances of local relationships within communities; the role of different actors and agencies that needed to work together to meet the needs of local people. However, as we emerge from the point of crisis to the point of recovery, vital questions are now being asked about how we plan for the long-term. Steering communities through the economic and social turbulence, that will inevitably stem from the process of recovery, will be part of every council's long-term vision.

But the ability of local councils to positively intervene in local areas cannot be taken for granted. As this research paper explains in many ways, we are seeing council powers diminish in a flurry of deregulation which is to the benefit of private developers, with different priorities to those of local councils and local councillors. Permitted Development Rights, in England, are driving a coach and horses through the ability of local councils to properly plan and shape local areas for the benefit of everyone within communities. This paper rightly calls for a rethink to the deregulation of planning, and for a much more robust role for local councils being able to say no to developments which do not work in the interests of local people and local businesses.

Councils are already committed to innovative approaches to make local places better for local people; they have rejected the role of bystander, viewing it as critical to intervene in a place-shaping role which enhances the social, economic and health and wellbeing outcomes for local people. Nowhere more so than the role of local councils in securing decent affordable homes is this interventionist approach a vital component in place making. But alongside this we are calling on both central Governments across the UK and local councils themselves to reject the poor standards of developments which fail to enhance the outcomes for local people.

The places of tomorrow need to be cleaner, greener places; supporting our climate and protecting ecology. They need to be shaped by quality homes, that are fuel efficient and meet the needs of all within the community, from older people to growing families, and those for whom home may now also be, in part at least, their workplace. The places of tomorrow should encourage walking and cycling more, and create access points to sustainable public transport; services that communities rely upon from GP surgeries to local parks, should not be the preserve of middleclass suburbs but available to all. A better future shaped by a place-shaping vision is possible. But for that to be realised we have to ensure local councils are entrusted to work in the interests of local communities and given the powers to reject approaches which work against their communities. Councils can deliver on a greener road to recovery.

Cllr Mark Pengelly, APSE National Chair

Executive summary

The three crises

The success or failure of the national economy depends on decisions made in villages, towns and cities across the country.

Local authorities are on the frontline of some of the great public policy crises of our time, not least climate change and the global pandemic. These come together in calls for a 'green recovery' from the pandemic, which delivers good jobs and economic growth, but not at the cost of the environment or people's wellbeing. Effective local place making and housing delivery will be central to balancing these objectives.

But for several years, our APSE-TCPA surveys have highlighted the impacts of a less well understood crisis, which has been quietly undermining many local authorities' efforts to plan effectively during business-as-usual conditions, let alone as part of a green recovery. It is a crisis of governance and of capacity: across the UK local planning services have seen deep funding cuts, while, in England, the planning system has been increasingly centralised and deregulated. The expansion of Permitted Development Rights, and the slum housing it has produced, are perhaps the most vivid manifestations of this crisis.

With the expansion of 'Class E' use class on 1 August 2021, coupled with the new permitted development rights, the scope of new developments which can be carried out without planning permission is significantly extended. This means that, local authorities in England will have less power over their built environments than they have had since the creation of the planning system. Just when we need local authorities to be more proactive than ever in shaping their places and communities, one of their most powerful tools for doing this has been blunted.

Bystanders or innovators?

This governance crisis is entirely avoidable. Indeed, funding cuts across the UK, and weakening local planning in England has been a proactive choice of the UK Government for more than a decade.

They can also be seen as part of a long term-shift in local planning. In the post-war era local Government had a generally interventionist role, building thousands of homes and directly investing in infrastructure and the built environment. Then, as its power to directly intervene in development was diminished by successive Governments, it came to rely on its regulatory powers to control the quality of new private sector development. Now much of this regulatory power has also been stripped away.

So, what can local authorities do now to craft healthy and sustainable places as part of the green recovery? Before local authorities can answer this question, they need to ask and answer another:

Are they bystanders or innovators?

The choice for many councils is to either accept the status quo – which means being part of an increasingly passive local public sector, reliant on limited private investment and focused on using the limited regulatory powers it has – or to seize the initiative by being more directly involved in shaping the future of their places and communities. This implies the application of what APSE have described as 'municipal entrepreneurialism' to their processes of development and place making. In practice, this means using models of local development and place making which go beyond the formal town and country planning system. It means delivering high-quality places and homes through all the regulatory tools councils have at their disposal, and using new, entrepreneurial, and public sector-led models to ensure developments are viable, responsive to community needs, and high-quality.

Our approach

This report examines how three very different local authorities – Cornwall Council, North Ayrshire Council and Birmingham City Council – have successfully done this, the different routes they took, and the challenges they faced. We also look to a fourth case study – Wales and its Future Generations Act – to examine how national legislative frameworks can drive and harness local innovation.

From these case studies we develop a series of 'components' for successful alternative approaches to local place making as part of the green recovery, and recommendations to central Government on how it can better support local innovation in this space. These are summarised below.

Our conclusions and case studies are underpinned by a high-level comparative review of planning reform and national green recovery strategies across the UK, and a survey of 216 councillors and officers, largely from local authorities in England. This survey focused on identifying the key barriers both groups face in delivering national policy objectives and high-quality places.

Key recommendations

The core components we identify are linked to the concepts of 'visions', 'pathways', and 'first steps'. These ideas structure our analysis, and broadly correspond to local communities' ideal vision for a place, the broad transformations a place needs to undergo to reach that vision, and the first, practical changes that need to be made to start such a transformation, respectively. They are:

1. Corporate ambition and strategic vision.
2. Defining priority actions in a delivery plan.
3. Defining delivery mechanisms and delivery partnerships.
4. Measuring success and evolving the approach.
5. Creating knowledge and skills partnerships.
6. Community dialogue.

While there are some inspiring examples of local authorities' success, these are often in spite of, rather than because of, central Government policy in England. For a genuinely transformative green recovery there needs to be a new and lasting settlement between central and local Government; which puts in place the funding and powers the latter needs to spur the development that actually delivers on local and national priorities.

This is not a unique conclusion. Indeed, it is something that the APSE Local Government Commission 2030 report 'Local by Default' powerfully argues, and something which our last six years of APSE-TCPA survey data makes clear. But it is extremely significant.

Assuming that the additional resourcing that local planning authorities need across the UK will not be forthcoming, we make five recommendations to national Governments on how they work more effectively to support alternative approaches to local place making as part of the green recovery. These are:

Recommendation 1: An enabling national strategy

A clear national strategy and vision on the objectives of post-pandemic recovery and the role to be played by local Government is a vital foundation for local action.

Recommendation 2: Support for innovation

National Governments have an extremely important role to play in supporting information sharing and technical support amongst local authorities.

Recommendation 3: Support for skills and innovation

If local authorities are key to the post-pandemic recovery, then national Governments must see funding skills and capacity building as equal to 'hard' infrastructure investment.

Recommendation 4: A moratorium on centralising local powers in England

Despite strong concerns from local Government in England, a range of place making powers continue to be centralised – something most evident in the expansion of permitted development rights. This national shift to the centre has significantly weakened the capacity of local authorities to deliver the positive innovation highlighted in this report. Government should restore the powers it has removed or at least signal a moratorium on further power being removed.

Recommendation 5: Encouraging the corporate social responsibility of anchor institutions

Some aspects of enabling local action sit with local anchor institutions like the NHS or universities. At present, their engagement in local transformation is patchy despite their power to support transformation.

1. Introduction

Background

Previous reports

APSE and the TCPA have been collaborating for more than six years to track the housing crisis and provide guidance on how local Government can deliver high quality homes and places. Our ongoing partnership has produced a series of reports covering a wide range of topics, including housing delivery, in *Housing the Nation* (2015), and again in *Homes for All* (2016); local authority housebuilding and partnership delivery, in *Building Homes, Creating Communities* (2017); homelessness, in *Delivering Affordable Homes in a Changing World* (2018); the many links between housing and wider social and economic resilience in *Housing for a Fairer Society* (2019); and planning and delivering housing for health and wellbeing, in last year's *At a Crossroads: Building Foundations for Healthy Communities* (2020).

A confluence of crises: The pandemic, climate change and local governance

A lot has changed since we started the series, with both Brexit and the pandemic representing generational challenges to Government at all levels. But for local Government, the *key* place making challenges over this period have remained the same. The housing supply crisis we documented six years ago in *Housing the Nation*[1] remains. So do the climate and health crises. Meanwhile, across the UK many local planning services have been in a state of serious under-resourcing since the imposition of austerity in the early 2010s.[i] In England particularly this has combined with an overly centralised decision-making system. Indeed, we have identified cuts to local Government as perhaps *the* crucial barrier to effective place making in England in all six reports, and our core high-level recommendation to national Governments have been consistent over five years: Give councils the powers and resources they need to plan effectively, and national Government will have a better chance of meeting its own policy ambitions.

With the advent of the pandemic, it is clear that many councils across the UK, and particularly in England, are now at the frontline of responding to three interlocking crises:

The first and most immediate crisis is the economic impact of the pandemic. The UK's GDP declined by 9.1% in 2020,[2] and the Bank of England has forecast that the UK is going to enter its deepest recession in 300 years.[3] The economic impacts of the pandemic on high streets, towns and cities will vary greatly and according to the employment share of different sectors in their areas.[4] But in some places it will be huge and long-term, as recession bites, some labour and retail markets collapse, and housing markets readjust. Overall, the pandemic is likely to worsen existing inequalities and bring to the fore inequalities that were less of a concern previously.[5] Locally-tailored and led responses will be crucial to addressing the specific issues faced by the worse effected areas,[6] and ensuring that the national policy response does not inadvertently make inequality worse.[7]

The second crisis is the climate crisis. The drive to reduce greenhouse gas emissions continues to be a global priority, and ahead of COP26 demonstrating climate leadership is a national priority. In April 2021, the UK Government committed to cutting its greenhouse gas emissions by 78% by 2035.[8] Yet, while greenhouse gas emissions from national energy supply have declined steeply since the 1990s, emissions for two of the sectors of which local Government has significant influence – transport and heating homes – have remained stubbornly level. Local authorities are on the frontline of reducing emissions in these sectors, as well as adapting their communities to the unavoidable impacts of climate change,[9] and ensuring that already disadvantaged communities do not bear its brunt.[10]

The third place making crisis facing many local authorities is endogenous. In other words, it is not about the social, economic or environmental challenges they face, but rather their internal, institutional, challenges. It concerns the limited resources and powers they have to respond to climate change and the pandemic, or even deliver high quality places in a 'business as usual' environment. **In short, it is a crisis of governance**.

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i Planning services in Wales saw budget cuts of 50% between 2009 and 2019, gross expenditure to planning authorities in Scotland diminished by 42% in real terms between 2009 and 2021, and England saw a matching decline between 2009 and 2019.

The way these crises combine is starkly illustrated by the continuing expansion of Permitted Development Rights (PDR) in England. As we discuss in more detail later, this has occurred despite a mountain of evidence demonstrating PDR's negative outcomes for place making, local resourcing, democracy and residents' health and wellbeing.

Indeed, PDR has centralised and eroded local decision-making power to the point that councils now have very little control over most changes to their existing built environments (see page 21), just as they need to take an increasingly active role in supporting their communities' efforts to rebuild and respond to climate change.

The ultimate irony is that the Government justified these changes as being necessary to spur economic growth following the pandemic.[11] Just as innovative, active and entrepreneurial local authorities are more needed than ever before, their most powerful policy levels are being removed.

Alternative approaches to local development

The three crises severely test the effectiveness and legitimacy of 'traditional' approaches to local development and place making – **by which we mean models of development that are based on private sector-led investment, steered by the formal town and country planning system** – in many places.

This is because such traditional approaches often rely on powers and resourcing (whether private sector investment or local Government capacity) which are now extremely limited. It is also because there are increasing concerns that purely private sector-led developments are delivering unacceptably poor place making outcomes in many areas, and particularly those which are already least well-off. This dilemma was pressing long before now, especially in such 'left behind' places. But as many have argued, the pandemic provides an opportunity to create a 'new normal', which does not rely on traditional models of local development. Many local authorities have applied alternative approaches to the way the council operates like Preston City Council[ii] that has developed the Preston Model, based on the principles of the Community Wealth Building approach.

Moving to a new normal means developing alternative models of local development which, in contrast to the traditional model we describe above:

- Goes beyond the formal town and country planning system, to deliver high-quality places and homes through all the regulatory tools councils have at their disposal;
- Uses new, entrepreneurial, and public sector-led models to ensure it is viable, responsive to community needs, and high-quality; and
- Breaks down traditional relationships between communities and development and moving to models in which the former lead and enable the latter.

The choice for many councils is to either accept the status quo – which means an increasingly passive local public sector, reliant on limited private investment and focused on using the limited regulatory powers it has – or to seize the initiative by being more directly involved in shaping the future of their places and communities. This implies the adoption of what APSE have described as 'municipal entrepreneurialism' to their processes of development, place making and housing delivery.[12]

ii Preston City Council developed the Preston Model which is based on the principles of the Community Wealth Building approach. See: https://www.preston.gov.uk/article/1339/What-is-Preston-Model –

This report and its structure

This report provides a toolkit of 'principles' and 'first steps' (see below) for local authorities looking to take alternative approaches to local development, which drive the green recovery in innovative and genuinely transformative ways.

The various data sources underpinning this report are described in Box 2 on the following page.

Chapter two (page 9) explores the current context for local Government housing delivery and place making in terms of a) national green recovery, planning and housing policy, and b) the key barriers local planners and politicians face when trying to deliver effective local policy for each of these areas. Our analysis of local barriers focuses on data from a survey of 216 councillors and officers from across the UK.

In **chapter three** (page 26), we turn to our case studies of councils which have taken innovative approaches to local development. These are Cornwall Council and their climate change strategy, North Ayrshire and the 'kindness economy', Wales and the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act and Birmingham Municipal Housing Trust. Each illustrates multiple different principles, visions/pathways/first steps, but focuses on a key theme, whether it be the importance of research partnerships and holistic analysis (in the case of Cornwall), or the multiple benefits the direct delivery of housing can bring (as in Birmingham).

Finally, in **chapter four** (page 38), we range across our case studies, desk-based policy analysis and survey to draw out our key recommendations to local and national Government. These concern the broad principles and specific first steps that local authorities can adopt as part of an innovative approach local development within the green recovery, and the changes central Government must make to 'scale up' and normalise the innovations identified.

In the remaining part of this chapter we introduce our analytical framework for this report, which is built around the concepts of 'visions', 'pathways' and 'first steps'.

Box 1: What is Municipal Entrepreneurship?

APSE have published extensively on the concept of 'Municipal Entrepreneurship'. This is an approach to public service delivery that focuses on

> *"…innovative ways of working [to intervene] in local markets for the benefit of local communities; and to develop collaborative networks with local stakeholders rather than crude forms of competition."*

Building the capacity of local communities, institutions and associated networks is a key concern of municipal entrepreneurship. So too is the use of procurement power and other supply-side tools.

See 'The New Municipalism: Taking back entrepreneurship' (APSE, 2018), 'Municipal Entrepreneurship' (APSE), and 'What's so new about New Municipalism?' (Thompson, 2010) for more information.

First steps, pathways, and visions

It is important to visualise the links between the small, practical, policy changes made in our case studies, and the much grander long-term ambitions towards which they move. To do this, we orientate our case study and analysis chapters around the ideas of 'first steps', 'pathways', and 'visions'.

Visions

We use **'visions'** to mean the very high-level and ambitious imaginings of how the local economy of a place would look in an ideal world.

In such challenging times having a vision may seem frivolous. But in fact, visions are more important than ever: Having clear visions of an ideal outcome of the green recovery helps to not only direct strategy and action but, in the mirror, they provide, identify what is really wrong and what needs to change now.

We can see the power of visions by looking to history – Ebenezer Howard's radical and utopian vision of the Garden City, for example, played a key role in driving social reform, including the creation of the planning system itself. Utopian thinking has always been an important means of driving change in the present, whether or not the vision itself is eventually realised in its original form.

Pathways

'Pathways' represent the broad direction of travel towards the vision identified. They are made up of high-level changes which need to happen 'on the ground' in a particular place over time. There may be many ways of achieving a vision, they may be more or less ambitious, and they may overlap, but pathways give a sense of the types of change needed to transform somewhere in line with one's grand ambition. We use the term to describe the overall approaches taken in each of our case studies.

First steps

Finally comes the actionable and practical '**first steps',** which councils can take to move along the pathway described towards their vision for their local area. First steps are the nuts and bolts of this toolkit, as they comprise the report's key recommendations to councils. They are a) drawn from our case studies – there are concrete examples of all being done in practice in the UK, and; b) specific, individual, changes councils can make within their resource limits.

Crucially, first steps are not necessarily specific to a pathway. Indeed, they may open up several pathways, all of which move towards a vision. This flexibility is important because it enables robust decision making in the face of uncertainty.

Box 2: Research methods

This research draws on:

- A high-level desk-based review of national place making policy in England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland.
- Analysis of 4 case studies. These case studies were selected to ensure geographical diversity, and that they represent different challenges and opportunities for planning in the context of austerity, climate change and Covid-19
- Responses to a survey of 216 councillors and officers from different local authorities across the UK. The majority of respondents were based in England, but there was a good balance of representation of councils under different political control and between councillors and officers (see annex);
- Five interviews with local authority officers and experts in the field to contribute to case studies, explore best practice and barriers to housing delivery
- Roundtable with 16 experts in the field, from across the UK. Individuals were selected to ensure a wide range of expertise. The roundtable tested the outcomes of the publication.

2. The state of play: Survey results and policy context

Introduction

This chapter explores the housing and planning policy context in which local authorities across the UK are operating as they attempt to plan for a green recovery, with a focus on the key barriers they face to effective policy delivery. In doing so we draw on desk-based analysis of policy documents and survey results.

While our survey responses were well-balanced in terms of their local authorities' political control, and numbers of officers and councillors, the vast majority were from England. For this reason, and because the policy barriers local authorities in England face are so extreme, we focus much of the following survey-based analysis on that nation.

Much of our survey data is longitudinal, meaning we can identify trends across previous years, and develop a sense of how Government policy – or perhaps more pertinently, isn't – changing key policy barriers over time. However, the breadth of the data we collected means that our discussion here can only be snapshot of our findings. Please consult the appendices for more details.

Our analyses of Scotland (page 21), Wales (page 22), and Northern Ireland (page 24) follow and draw more heavily on our desk-based analysis of policy and legislation.

England

Last year's report came to a clear conclusion about local planning and housing delivery in England: The Government's continuing pursuit of deregulatory planning reform, and overwhelming focus on the private market delivery of new housing, have failed to give local authorities the policy levers they need to deliver on the Government's key policy objectives, for housing delivery and affordability, climate change, urban design and health. Summarising our survey findings, we concluded that:

> "…'more of the same' has done little to address the urgent housing and place making policy issues the country faces, and over the last four years our surveys have recorded rising concern amongst those working on the frontline of delivery about the impact of these planning reforms on place making." (p. 21)[13]

This is not to say that councils did not support the Government's key planning/housing policy agendas – 2020's survey results provided clear evidence that councils in England have embraced the design, wellbeing, and climate change agendas, and these were often corporate priorities. But a lack of resourcing and a centralised system meant that there is a clear implementation gap across all these policy areas.

All evidence this year points to more of the same, with the Government's policy response to pandemic largely reinforcing, rather than providing a break from, several years of deregulatory planning reform.

Policy context

Trends in planning and housing reform

The planning and housing systems in England are in a state of simultaneous flux and continuity, with the former, on the face of it, being dominant. Indeed, the August 2020 white paper Planning for the Future,[14] committed the Government to a 'fundamental' reform of the planning system, away from the current 'discretionary' model (shared with Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland), and towards one influenced by zonal approaches.

The Government's lack of detail about key proposals in the white paper, mixed signals about how profound its reforms

really will be, and a lack of official response to the consultation on the white paper at the time of writing, make it difficult to predict what the contents of the reform legislation will be. However, Box 3, below, contains the Government's own summary of its proposals.

Box 3: 'Planning for the future – Modernising planning to get Britain building' – MHCLG,

"In the proposed new system, local areas will develop plans for land to be designated into three categories:

- *Growth areas will back development, with development approved at the same time plans are prepared, meaning new homes, schools, shops and business space can be built quickly and efficiently, as long as local design standards are met.*
- *Renewal areas will be suitable for some development – where it is high-quality in a way which meets design and other prior approval requirements the process will be quicker. If not, development will need planning approval in the usual way.*
- *Protected areas will be just that – development will be restricted to carry on protecting our treasured heritage like Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and National Parks.*

Communities will be consulted from the beginning of the planning process – and help shape the design codes to guide what development can happen in their local area.

The reforms will mean:

- *Much-needed homes will be built quicker by ensuring local housing plans are developed and agreed in 30 months – down from the current 7 years it often takes.*
- *Every area to have a local plan in place – currently only 50% of local areas has an up-to-date plan to build more homes.*
- *The planning system will be made more accessible, by harnessing the latest technology through online maps and data.*
- *Valued green spaces will be protected for future generations by allowing for more building on brownfield land and all new streets to be tree lined.*
- *The planning process to be overhauled and replaced with a clearer, rules based system. Currently around a third of planning cases that go to appeal are overturned.*
- *A new simpler national levy to replace the current system of developer contributions which often causes delay – this will provide more certainty about the number of affordable homes being built.*
- *The creation of a fast-track system for beautiful buildings and establishing local design guidance for developers to build and preserve beautiful communities.*
- *All new homes to be 'zero carbon ready', with no new homes delivered under the new system needed to be retrofitted as we achieve our commitment to net zero carbon emissions by 2050."*

Source: *Planning for the future explained*, Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/907469/One_Pager_v4.pdf

A response to Planning for the Future from the TCPA can be found here: https://www.tcpa.org.uk/commonground

While the White Paper reforms may bring significant change in terms of the planning system itself, the rationales underlying these changes are the same as those which have guided planning reform over recent years. These include:

- An extremely strong focus on private market-led housing delivery;
- The loosening of local planning controls and obligations as a 'regulatory barriers' to the delivery of more housing;
- A push for greater 'certainty' for developers in terms of securing planning permission for development; and
- Greater central Government control over different aspects planning policy, including local house building targets, design, and approaches to development management (see Grant Butterworth's contribution to the May/June edition of the Town & Country Planning Journal for more information[15]).

These themes are also evident in the Government's consultation on changes to the current planning system,[16] also announced in August 2020. This proposed four major changes, to be implemented before the new 'white paper' system comes into force, which relate to:

1. **Increasing the threshold for developer contributions on smaller sites** as a way of supporting the SME developers who disproportionately work on such sites.
2. **Permission in principle** ('PiP'), which "…separates the decision about the principle of whether housing development should be approved from a later technical details consent process."[17] and was introduced in the Housing and Planning Act 2016. This consultation focused on expanding it to major developments.
3. **Standard method for calculating housing need.** This change is too detailed to describe here (please see the House of Commons research briefing Planning for the Future: Planning Policy Changes in England in 2020 and Future Reforms[18] for a concise summary), but it would have resulted in a significant increase in identified housing need in many local authorities, and critics argued that this was particularly the case in areas which the Conservative Party attracts strong support. It provoked a strong political backlash inside and outside of Parliament, and the Government announced in December 2020 that it would not continue with this proposal, but amended the pre-existing standard method by increasing the uplift required for local authorities in the largest urban areas in England (see Changes to the Current Planning System[19] for more information).
4. **Planning for 'First Homes'**. First Homes is the policy successor to Starter Homes (which controversially saw no take-up at all). It is planned to provide discounted market housing to first-time buyers,[20] and will require that at least 25% of all affordable housing units secured through developer contributions in a local authority area are First Homes.[21] It demonstrates that the principles describe above also apply to the Government's key demand-side housing policies, and not just its supply-side measures,

Design (i.e.the aesthetics and 'character' of new buildings) is also a current policy priority for national Government in England. Following the publication of the National Design Guide[22] last year, it launched the National Model Design Code[23] in January 2021. The Government has also announced funding for 14 pilot authorities to develop local design codes based on the National Model Design Code. However, with each council only receiving £50,000 to carry out the work, funding for this is extremely limited. The Royal Town Planning Institute have argued that the Government needs to establish a £81m national Design Quality Fund for local authority training, developing expertise and policy design, if it is to effectively deliver on its design agenda.[24]

The continuing expansion of permitted development rights

The continuing expansion of permitted development rights and their use to deliver housing in England is a topic we have covered in several APSE-TCPA reports[25], and it again warrants particular focus this year. Indeed, it represents another area of policy consistency, in as much as the most recently proposed expansion of PDRs will come into force before the Government's 'white paper' reforms and continue to influence development and planning the system as a whole, afterwards.

In 2013, the Government expanded PDRs to enable, for the first time, new homes to be converted from commercial buildings without the need for planning permission. These allowances were expanded over time. This lack of local scrutiny and control has demonstrably led to the creation of poor-quality, unsustainable homes, some of which directly undermine the health and wellbeing of their residents. Some PDR developments have been described as 'slums of the future', and have

lacked windows, any access to green space, and been in unsuitable locations like industrial estates.[26],[27] Such poor-quality housing clearly has consequences for residents' wellbeing. But by removing controls on development or reducing them to 'yes or no''tick box' decisions, the quality of whole places and their ability to support healthy, fulfilling lives is undermined.[28]

Despite these impacts, on 31 March this year, the Government announced a further expansion of PDRs for conversions to or from residential use, by applying it to all 'class E' uses[29]. This new class covers commercial, business and service uses, meaning that planning permission is no longer required for most changes. A comprehensive overview of these changes, and those made to PDRs over recent years, has been provided by the House of Commons library.[30]

The upshot is that local authorities in England now have very little control over most changes on their high streets, their urban centres, or to prevent changes they view as unsustainable or damaging to people's health. It is not an overstatement to say that local authorities in England now have less power over developments in their local areas than any time since the creation of the planning system.

The Government made these changes despite an overwhelmingly negative response to the Government's consultation from the public, expert groups, charities, developers, and local authorities.

Resourcing and institutional structures

Ongoing under-resourcing in English local authorities has now been an issue for a decade, and there is little in the Government's reform proposals which aims to address this. Between 2010 and 2019, city councils reduced spending on planning and development services by 41%[31] . A 2019 study by the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) found that net expenditure on planning by local planning authorities (LPAs) in England during that year was just £900 million, more than half of this being recouped income (mainly via fees), meaning the total net investment is just £400 million.[32]

This has important policy consequences at the local level. The RTPI argued that this has seriously undermined many LPAs' ability to proactively make policy, pinning them into a reactive way of working that is focused on managing development, and is reliant on development as a source of income (forcing them, in some cases, to prioritise business models towards development and fee generation rather than place making outcomes per se).[33] The RTPI identified three broad implications for this lack of resourcing:

1. Insufficient funding to deliver normal services;
2. Lack of investment in place-based solution to wider social issues; and
3. Challenges to local planning authorities and civic planning more generally.[34]

National-level green recovery policy and local place making

While the pandemic has shown how interventionist the Government is willing to be in other policy spheres, for planning and housing it has given no signs of departing from this deregulatory and private sector-led agenda. Indeed, the Government justified the expansion of PDRs by pointing to the need for urban centres to adapt to decreasing retail demand.

This is reflected in the position of local place making and decision-making in England's core national green recovery strategies: The Ten Point Plan for a green Industrial Revolution[35] and Build Back Better: Our Plan for Growth.[36][iii] Both documents largely focus on steering national-level investment towards a 'shopping list' of infrastructure projects, in contrast to Wales and Scotland's national-level green recovery strategies, which explicitly highlight the role of planning and local place making (as discussed below).

While Building Back Better makes brief reference to the development of a Spatial Framework in the Oxford-Cambridge Arc and a series of Freeports, The Ten Point Plan says little about the roles and powers of English local authorities in driving a green recovery, even in relation to policy subjects which are largely in their domain, such as the planning of cycling and walking routes.[iv]

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iii These strategies are supported by a series of funds into which local authorities can bid to support local projects, including the Levelling Up Fund, UK Shared Prosperity Fund, Towns Fund and High Street Fund.

iv Via reference to National Bus Strategy, the creation of Active Travel England.

The range of sector-specific, planning-related national-level strategies and policy papers which support the green recovery vary greatly in terms of the extent to which they reference local powers and resourcing. Gear Change: A Bold Vision for Cycling and Walking,[37] for example, specifically raises these issues under the theme 'Empowering and encouraging local authorities', while the Energy White Paper[38] makes only brief reference to their role across its 166 pages.

Survey results

Overview

This year's survey findings point to ongoing concern from English local authorities about their ability to deliver through the system. Perhaps most notably, 70.1% of respondents in England described their local authority's need for affordable homes as 'severe'[v], with less than 1% describing this as 'not substantial'.

While proactive development is clearly important for the public interest, so too is local authorities' confidence to refuse developments which may prove unacceptably harmful. When asked to rate their confidence on a scale of '1' (not at all confident) to '5' (extremely confident) with regards to their ability to turn down planning applications on the grounds of poor **social outcomes**, one in five respondents in England felt 'not at all confident' ('1'), and almost half chose 'not at all confident' ('1') or 'not very confident' ('2'). Similarly, just under half (49.5%) of respondents said they were 'not at all confident' ('1') or 'not very confident' ('2') about turning down an application based on poor **health and wellbeing outcomes**. This is remarkably similar to last year, when 56% of respondents gave this response.[vi]

Box 4: Councillor and local authority officers in England response to "How confident is your local authority about turning down planning applications on the grounds of poor design?

Answer	Not at all a barrier	Quite a barrier	Neutral	Significant barrier	Extreme barrier
Poor design	10.31%	15.46%	20.62%	34.02%	19.59%
Poor environmental outcomes (including those relating to climate change)	7.92%	29.70%	27.72%	23.76%	10.89%
Poor health and wellbeing outcomes	16.83%	32.67%	29.70%	11.88%	8.91%
Poor green space provision	7.92%	18.81%	29.70%	31.68%	11.88%
Poor social outcomes (including health inequalities)	20.79%	28.71%	29.70%	12.87%	7.92%

v This is a remarkably similar figure to last year's survey, in which 67.9% respondents from English local authorities described their need for affordable homes as 'severe'.

vi More positively, when asked to rate their confidence to turn down applications on the grounds of poor design, more than half (53.6%) of respondents in England chose '4' or '5'. This represents an increase of about 20% on last year (when 30.7% of respondents chose these options), and may suggest that the Government increasing national policy emphasis on urban design is increasing confidence across the sector.

Similarly positively, when asked to indicate their confidence about turning down applications based on poor green space provision, 43.6% of respondents chose '4' or '5'.

Our survey also provided insights into councillors and officers' views on the local policy making context in England, and how this drives such a lack of confidence. Continuing from last year, we asked respondents to score the extent to which under-resourcing, lack of skills, national-level policy and national political leadership are variously a barrier to effective policy delivery out of five, with '1' meaning that the respondent felt that the factor was 'not at all' a barrier to effective policy delivery, and '5' meaning they felt it was an 'extreme' barrier. We asked them to do this in relation to the following twelve local policy topics:

1. Urban design and aesthetics
2. Health and wellbeing
3. Climate change adaptation
4. Climate change mitigation
5. Green space/ infrastructure
6. Housing delivery (market)
7. Affordable and social housing delivery
8. Reducing inequality and injustice
9. Local sustainable transport
10. Housing stock retrofit
11. New communities
12. Alternative approaches to local development

Below we discuss each of the types of policy barrier – under-resourcing, lack of skills, national level policy and national leadership – separately.

Box 5: The percentage of respondents in England that chose a rating of 1 (not at all a barrier), 2, 3, 4, or 5 (a great barrier) for different potential barriers to the delivery of alternative approaches to local development.

ENGLAND	Degree to which each factor is a barrier					
Score	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**N/A**
Under-resourcing	4.72%	6.60%	31.13%	27.36%	24.53%	5.66%
Lack of skills	6.60%	11.32%	31.13%	22.64%	21.70%	6.60%
National level policy	6.60%	13.21%	28.30%	25.47%	16.98%	9.43%
National leadership	4.72%	3.77%	34.91%	27.36%	29.25%	0.00%

Please see the Annex for more information.

National-level policy

This year's survey results reflect our desk-based policy analysis. Roughly a third of respondents in England rated current national-level policy as either an 'extreme' ('5') or 'strong' (4) barrier to deliver across nine of the twelve policy topics, and for five policy topics (climate change mitigation, market housing delivery, reducing inequality, local sustainable transport, and housing stock retrofit) more than half of respondents chose a score of 4 or 5. This suggests little improvement on last year, when the majority of responses for all policy areas were scored either '4' or '5'.

Box 6: Councillor and local authority officers' response to "To what extent is current national-level policy a barrier to effective delivery in each of following local place making policy areas?"

Answer	Not at all a barrier	Quite a barrier	Neutral	Significant barrier	Extreme barrier
Urban design and aesthetics	12.26%	15.09%	26.42%	24.53%	17.92%
Health and wellbeing	7.55%	10.38%	31.13%	27.36%	20.75%
Climate change adaptation	4.72%	9.43%	24.53%	33.96%	25.47%
Climate change mitigation	4.72%	5.66%	27.36%	34.91%	25.47%
Green space/ infrastructure	8.49%	8.49%	32.08%	27.36%	21.70%
Housing delivery (market)	4.72%	5.66%	27.36%	34.91%	25.47%
Affordable and social housing delivery	17.92%	16.04%	16.04%	22.64%	23.58%
Reducing inequality and injustice	2.83%	6.60%	16.98%	27.36%	42.45%
Local sustainable transport	4.72%	2.83%	28.30%	33.02%	27.36%
Housing stock retrofit	2.83%	8.49%	21.70%	32.08%	29.25%
New communities	9.43%	4.72%	26.42%	24.53%	25.47%
Alternative approaches to local development	6.60%	13.21%	28.30%	25.47%	16.98%

Perhaps unsurprisingly, respondent's views on PDR were particularly strong:

1. 74.7% of respondents in England were against the further expansion of PDR via the recently announced changes to 'Class E';
2. The majority of respondents in England continue to consider homes delivered through Permitted Development Rights as potentially damaging to the health of residents – six times as many (64.3%) said they thought this was true, compared to those that did not (9.8%)[vii]; and
3. 61.1% of respondents felt that PDR disproportionately effects vulnerable individuals, versus just 10.8% who said they didn't think this was the case.

We also asked our respondents what they thought the impacts of further expansion of PDRs via 'Class E' would be. As well as highlighting the impact it would have residents' health and wellbeing, they highlighted its potential to undermine local economies by 'substantially' eroding high street offers and 'exporting' jobs to unsustainable out of town sites, while pushing up the value of remaining employment space. Others expressed concerns about its potential to undermine local plan policy by 'destabilising Local Plan strategy', enables developments to 'bypass' affordable housing and infrastructure contribution requirements, and in the words of one of our survey respondents:

vii This represents a 19% decrease from last year, but a 12% increase from 2019.

"In some cases, it also removes the potential for high quality comprehensive redevelopment, by providing short-sighted landowners with a quick fix and financial return, instead of looking fully at the potential redevelopment of a site…"

The overall picture across subsequent APSE/TCPA surveys is one of ongoing and deep concern about the impacts of PDR 'on the ground'.

Box 7: Councillor and local authority officers' responses for 3 years to: "Do you think homes created through permitted development rights could be, or are, dangerous to health and wellbeing of residents?"

England						
	2019		2020		2021	
Answer	**Total**	**%**	**Total**	**%**	**Total**	**%**
Yes	52	49	130	79	86	60
No	23	21.5	22	7	14	10
Don't know	32	30	20	14	43	30

Box 8: Councillor and local authority officers' responses for 3 years to: "Do you think that vulnerable people are likely to be disproportionately affected by development delivered through the use of permitted development rights?"

England						
	2019		2020		2021	
Answer	**Total**	**%**	**Total**	**%**	**Total**	**%**
Yes	53	49	117	68	91	61
No	22	20	20	11	16	11
Don't know	33	31	36	21	42	28

Under-resourcing

Between 18% and 33% respondents gave under-resourcing the maximum score possible ('5') as a barrier to local policy delivery in all policy areas except health and wellbeing. In fact, 30% more respondents chose the maximum score ('5') or the second highest score ('4') than the lowest or second lowest ('1' or '2') for 10 out of 12 of the policy topics. For climate change adaptation and local sustainable transport, this difference was more than 50% (50.9% and 61.3% respectively).

Unsurprisingly, under-resourcing was regarded less of a barrier to policy on the delivery for market rate housing delivery, with 37.7% of respondents regarding it as 'not at all' or 'slightly' a barrier to delivery for this policy area. Only 2.8% of respondents regarded under-resourcing as an extreme, or 'somewhat' a barrier to these policy themes.

Box 9: Councillor and local authority officers' response to: "To what extent is under-resourcing a barrier to effective delivery in each of following local place making policy areas?"

Answer	Not at all a barrier	Quite a barrier	Neutral	Significant barrier	Extreme barrier
Urban design and aesthetics	7.55%	7.55%	25.47%	30.19%	29.25%
Health and wellbeing	7.55%	10.38%	31.13%	36.79%	13.21%
Climate change adaptation	0.94%	14.15%	18.87%	36.79%	29.25%
Climate change mitigation	2.83%	13.21%	21.70%	34.91%	27.36%
Green space/ infrastructure	5.66%	14.15%	28.30%	32.08%	19.81%
Housing delivery (market)	12.26%	22.64%	26.42%	17.92%	19.81%
Affordable and social housing delivery	4.72%	17.92%	13.21%	33.96%	28.30%
Reducing inequality and injustice	4.72%	10.38%	36.79%	26.42%	19.81%
Local sustainable transport	1.89%	5.66%	18.87%	35.85%	33.02%
Housing stock retrofit	2.83%	8.49%	25.47%	23.58%	33.02%
New communities	3.77%	16.98%	27.36%	27.36%	18.87%
Alternative approaches to local development	4.72%	6.60%	31.13%	27.36%	24.53%

National political leadership

Our respondents in England viewed national political leadership as an even greater barrier to effective local policy delivery than under-resourcing. More than one in five respondents saw it as an extreme barrier ('5') to all but three – health and wellbeing, affordable and social housing, new communities – policy themes. Indeed, more than 40% of respondents rated national political leadership as a '4' or '5' for all policy topics, and particularly large numbers (almost 60%) regarded poor national political leadership as being a '4' or '5'.

Box 10: Councillor and local authority officers' response to: "To what extent is national political leadership a barrier to effective delivery in each of following local place making policy areas?"

Answer	Not at all a barrier	Quite a barrier	Neutral	Significant barrier	Extreme barrier
Urban design and aesthetics	3.77%	7.55%	30.19%	25.47%	23.58%
Health and wellbeing	9.43%	11.32%	31.13%	28.30%	19.81%
Climate change adaptation	4.72%	8.49%	34.91%	27.36%	24.53%
Climate change mitigation	4.72%	7.55%	27.36%	33.02%	27.36%
Green space/ infrastructure	4.72%	6.60%	26.42%	33.96%	28.30%
Housing delivery (market)	6.60%	9.43%	31.13%	27.36%	25.47%
Affordable and social housing delivery	19.81%	12.26%	25.47%	16.98%	25.47%
Reducing inequality and injustice	3.77%	3.77%	27.36%	24.53%	40.57%
Local sustainable transport	4.72%	4.72%	26.42%	27.36%	36.79%
Housing stock retrofit	3.77%	3.77%	39.62%	23.58%	29.25%
New communities	5.66%	10.38%	40.57%	26.42%	16.98%
Alternative approaches to local development	4.72%	3.77%	34.91%	27.36%	29.25%

Local skills – a rare positive?

In contrast, respondents were most positive about the ability of national policy on affordable/social housing, and urban design and aesthetics, to support local policy delivery. This perhaps suggests that the Government's recent publication of the National Model Design Code, and strengthening of language on design in the NPPF, are beginning to bear fruit. As we argued in last year's report, progress is possible where the Government actively engages the sector and responds to the priorities of those delivering policy 'on the front line'.[viii]

While bearing in mind the potential for respondents to be over-confident about their own ability, local authorities were least concerned about skills being a barrier to effective policy making across these themes. This was particularly the case for policy relating to green space, infrastructure, market housing delivery, and affordable/social housing, all which saw at least 30% more respondents giving the lower scores ('1' or '2') than the highest ('4' or '5'). Respondents were also confident about their skill in delivering local sustainable transport, and health and wellbeing-related planning policy. In 2020, respondents answered with more neutral answers. The neutral option ('3') scored highest for eight out of eleven policy areas, but with a more positive than negative tendency: the second overall highest scores were for '4', followed by '2'.

viii See: Theme 1: Central Government needs to acknowledge the vital role of the public sector in delivering healthy places, and empower them directly. At a crossroads: Building foundations for healthy communities, p. 21. https://www.apse.org.uk/apse/assets/File/At%20a%20Crossroads%20Complete%20Version(1).pdf

Box 11: Councillor and local authority officers' response to: "To what extent is a lack of skills a barrier to effective delivery in each of following local place making policy areas?"

Answer	Not at all a barrier	Quite a barrier	Neutral	Significant barrier	Extreme barrier
Urban design and aesthetics	9.43%	21.70%	20.75%	25.47%	18.87%
Health and wellbeing	9.43%	31.13%	27.36%	21.70%	7.55%
Climate change adaptation	9.43%	17.92%	26.42%	24.53%	17.92%
Climate change mitigation	10.38%	20.75%	23.58%	23.58%	17.92%
Green space/ infrastructure	16.98%	30.19%	32.08%	13.21%	3.77%
Housing delivery (market)	23.58%	28.30%	29.25%	8.49%	5.66%
Affordable and social housing delivery	19.81%	30.19%	28.30%	12.26%	5.66%
Reducing inequality and injustice	8.49%	25.47%	32.08%	19.81%	10.38%
Local sustainable transport	11.32%	26.42%	29.25%	16.98%	9.43%
Housing stock retrofit	8.49%	17.92%	31.13%	25.47%	9.43%
New communities	9.43%	16.98%	32.08%	19.81%	12.26%
Alternative approaches to local development	6.60%	11.32%	31.13%	22.64%	21.70%

Awareness and utilisation of alternative approaches to Local development in England

Despite the relatively positive picture concerning local skills, local authorities across England clearly feel that resourcing and national policy (and, underlying both of them, national political leadership) seriously undermine their ability to deliver high-quality places and homes. This picture is clear. But how and to what extent are English local authorities innovating to deliver place making in response to these barriers?

Our survey asked respondents whether they were a) aware of different alternative approaches to local development; b) agreed with alternative approaches to local development;[ix] and c) were actively deploying alternative approaches to

ix We defined 'alternative' approaches as being those which focused on either direct delivery, social value or the social economy. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development defines the social economy as:

"…a set of associations, cooperatives, mutual organisations, and foundations whose activity is driven by values of solidarity, the primacy of people over capital, and democratic participative governance."

https://www.oecd.org/fr/cfe/leed/social-economy.htm

Importantly, and in line with recent academic work on the subject, local authorities are central to our definition of the social economy. Indeed, while the social economy is a powerful tool for councils to achieve their place making objectives, the indirect and direct support of councils is also crucial to the development of flourishing local social economies and/or were based on direct delivery from councils. This is in contrast to 'traditional' or 'typical' approaches to local development, which we characterise as being built around private sector investment, steered by councils via the formal planning system.

local development. The picture is clear here too: While awareness of concepts relating to alternative approaches to local development varies (a significant proportion of respondents were strongly familiar 'social value', 'community land trusts', and 'community wealth building', while very few were familiar with 'anchor institutions', 'participatory budgeting', the 'foundational economy', or 'doughnut economics', for example) respondents' support for alternative approaches was high across the board. In England, 82% of officers and 75% of councillors said that, in principle, they support the use of such approaches to local development (versus 0% and 4% respectively).

Box 12: Councillor and local authority officers' in England response to "In principle, do you support the use of alternative approaches to local development?"

	Overall response	
Yes	78.3%	101
No	2.3%	3
Unsure	19.4%	25
Total	100.0%	129

However, this support in principle does not follow through into planning practice– only 4% of respondents in England said that they were using alternative approaches. And, while 53.5% of respondents felt that 'alternative approaches to local development like those listed are a practical alternative to conventional approaches to place making and housing delivery', 37.2% were 'unsure' about this statement.

Box 13: Councillor and local authority officers' in England response to "Do you think alternative approaches to local development like those listed are a practical alternative to conventional approaches to place making and housing"

	Overall response	
Yes	53.5%	69
No	9.3%	12
Unsure	37.2%	48
Total	100.0%	129

More negatively, more than half (56.6%) of respondents said that their local authority was not using alternative approaches, and 75% of respondents said that they were not aware of any local authorities which use alternative local development approaches. This discrepancy between the self-reported use of alternative approaches to local development, and the reporting of others' use, is interesting, and suggests that there could be lots to gain in improving knowledge exchange.

Box 14: Councillor and local authority officers' in England response to "Is your local authority currently using alternative approaches to local development?"

	Overall response	
Yes	43.4%	56
No	56.6%	73
Total	100.0%	129

Box 15: Councillor and local authority officers' in England response to "Are you aware of any local authorities which use alternative local development approaches like these for place making or to deliver housing?"

	Overall response	
Yes	28.0%	37
No	72.0%	95
Total	100.0%	132

The devolved nations

Overall, there is a clear perception within the sector that many local authorities in England are under-resourced and increasingly under-powered, with the expansion of PDR being landmark moment in the shift away from local authorities being proactive creators of places and communities, at least through the planning system. To reassert some control over the quality of place making in their communities, many have explored alternative approaches to local development, but these same issues are undermining their ability to do so.

If a key trend in planning and housing policy in England has been deregulation and centralisation, then at the UK-level, the key trend has been the divergence of policy. Both the Welsh and Scottish Governments have seen powerful, locally-led and holistic planning as being crucial to the delivery of a range of national policy priorities, and to their 'green recoveries' from the pandemic. As such, they have developed national legal and policy-making contexts which promote local proactive planning, and encourage alternative approaches.

Nonetheless, resourcing and delivery 'on the ground' remain huge challenges in these nations, while planning in Northern Ireland faces its own, unique, governance challenges.

Scotland

Planning and housing reform

Local authorities in Scotland face similar resourcing pressure to those in England, with gross expenditure to planning authorities in Scotland falling by 42% in real terms between 2009 and 2021.[39] Local planning departments have lost a third of their staff over this period, and planning application fees currently only cover 66% of their processing cost.[40]

Scotland's planning system is also going through a period of change, though it is less radical than England's, and focused on development planning. Place making and coordinating the delivery of national priorities at local level are noticeably higher priorities in the developing Scottish system.

Most significantly, the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019 received royal assent in summer 2019, and brought several significant changes to the Scottish system, including a defined statutory purpose to "…manage the development and use of land in the long-term public interest."

The Scottish Government are now consulting on and conducting research into building policy around various provisions in the Act,[41] and at the time of writing, this includes Local Place Plans. These are part of a suite of changes intended to improve early public engagement in the planning process, which also includes guidance on the use of mediation, pre-application consultation, and community participation in the creation of local development plans. The Act describes Local Place Plans as "…being proposals by community bodies about the development or use of land and setting out why those bodies think Local Development Plans should be amended." The new regulations on Local Place Plans will be in place by the end of 2021.

The Scottish Government are also current conducting extensive consultation on the fourth National Planning Framework, or 'NPF4', in line with the act.

The overall approach the Scottish Government has taken to consulting and collecting evidence on both NPF4 and the Act more widely stand in strong contrast to the opaque planning reform process in England.

Finally, the Royal Town Planning Institute have raised concerns that the Act is set to exacerbate the already serious under-resourcing in the Scottish system, and undermine the delivery of otherwise positive policy goals:

> "…the implementation of the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019 will place up to 91 new duties and responsibilities on planners without resources required to undertake them: 66 new and unfunded duties will be put on planning departments with a further 25 responsibilities placed on Scottish Government. This could cost between £12.1m and £59.1m over a ten-year period. This also means that despite demand for planners to support approaches to improving public health and community planning, a lack of resources is restricting their ability to do this."[42]

The role of local place making in national green recovery policy

The Scottish Government's November 2020 position statement on NPF4 explicitly positions local place making and planning as being central to an effective green recovery.[43] This theme continues throughout its wider national green recovery policy.

The Scottish Government's core statement on its national green recovery strategy is Securing a Green Recovery on a Path to Net Zero: Climate Change Plan 2018 – 2032 – update'[44]; a development of its pre-pandemic climate change policy. It directly references the Government's work on NP4 and significance of effective local development and place making in driving a green recovery:

> "…[the NPF4 position statement] strongly signals a need to have climate change as a guiding principle for all plans and decisions. It signals key outcomes that planning policy can further support: reducing emissions, building resilient communities and supporting the wellbeing economy. From opportunities around 20-minute neighbourhoods and peatland protection, to emissions efficient design and town centres, our preparation of the next generation of planning policy is a significant opportunity to work across the sectors of this Plan update to help deliver it, rapidly providing a coherent vision for carbon conscious places."[45]

The document also emphasises the importance of a 'place-based approach' and the Government's 'place principle' to the green recovery. The later recognises:

> "1. Place is where people, location and resources combine to create a sense of identity and purpose, and is at the heart of addressing the needs and realising the full potential of communities. Places are shaped by the way resources, services and assets are directed and used by the people who live in and invest in them…"
>
> "2. A more joined-up, collaborative, and participative approach to services, land and buildings, across all sectors within a place, enables better outcomes for everyone and increased opportunities for people and communities to shape their own lives."[46]

Overall, an analysis of the Scottish Government's green recovery strategy by the Scottish Parliament, which compared its proposals to those endorsed by academics working in the field, found broad correspondence.[47]

Wales

Planning policy and reform

Under-resourcing is also having a major impact on the effectiveness of local planning in Wales. Indeed, a 2019 report by the Audit Office Wales found that 'insufficient capacity and reducing resources are eroding planning authorities' resilience', and that is was undermining the delivery of national planning policy and the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act, which places significant additional burden on local authorities.[48] This is concerning: Alongside the Planning (Wales) Act the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act comprises the key policy framework for local planning in Wales.[49]

The Wellbeing of Future Generations Act has been on the statute books since 2015, but as our detailed case study on page 36 outlines, it is now beginning to shape local planning policy and developments. We provide a more comprehensive description of the Act in that case study, but the Act defines sustainable development as:

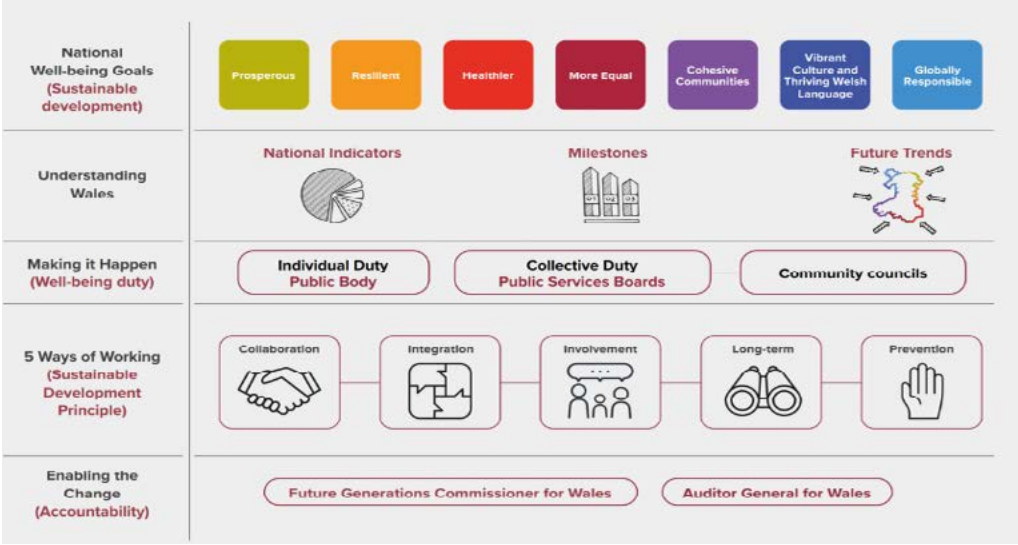
> "…the process of improving the economic, social, environmental and cultural wellbeing of Wales by taking action, in accordance with the sustainable development principle, aimed at achieving the wellbeing goals."[50]

It requires that:

> "The action a public body takes in carrying out sustainable development must include: a. setting and publishing objectives ("wellbeing objectives") that are designed to maximise its contribution to achieving each of the wellbeing goals, and b. taking all reasonable steps (in exercising its functions) to meet those objectives."[51]

These wellbeing objectives are summarised, alongside the architecture the Act introduced, in Box 16 below.

Box 16: Wellbeing of Future Generations Act Architecture, from Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 – Essential Guide (Welsh Government)



Aside from the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act, the Welsh system also looks set to go through a period of change, with Welsh Labour, who control the Welsh Government after the May 2021 elections, committing in their manifesto to more effectively integrate land use, housing and transport planning.

In November 2020 the Welsh Government accepted the majority of a report from the Law Commission into how to improve planning law in Wales.[52] The new administration is yet to introduce legislation to bring about the consolidation, but when passed, it is likely to drive further divergence between the English and Welsh planning systems.[53]

The role of place making in national green recovery strategies

The Wellbeing of Future Generations Act clearly has significant consequences for Wales' national green recovery strategy, and like national planning policy, provides its strategic direction.

Wales' position on a green recovery is summarised across several documents, but it is clear that while place making projects are central to it, there is less of a focus on local authority-led place making, planning, and development than found in Scotland's national green recovery strategy and position statements. National Resources Wales'[x] Green Recovery: Priorities for Action[54] report provides suggests a series of concrete projects and plans for action which sit somewhere between England's nationally-driven shopping list of major projects, and Scotland's more flexible local place making-focused strategy.

x National Resources Wales is a Government-sponsored body with no immediate equivalent in England or Scotland. It was formed in 2013 through an amalgamation of the Countryside Council for Wales, Environment Agency wales, and the Forestry Commission Wales. As well as managing the nation's natural resources, since May 2020 it has played a significant role in the development of Wales' green recovery policy/strategy, as part of the Green Recovery Task and Finish Group.

Northern Ireland

Planning reform

The situation in Northern Ireland is very different to that in the other parts of the UK, it being much smaller having given plan making powers to its local authorities as recently as 2015. Central Government and its agencies in Northern Ireland still retain powers over transport, housing and the heritage/the historic environment. The RTPI recently argued that this centralised decision making has weakened the ability of local authorities to make locally-relevant decisions, and has weakened their expertise on key policy making themes, leading to more delay and complexity in the planning system.[55]

In addition, the long suspension of the Assembly, albeit now functioning again, has had a profound impact on policy development and there remains an absence of any legal duties or strategic policy on health and place making.

Despite these institutional challenges, Community Planning represents an area of planning policy innovation in Northern Ireland, that has the potential for significant impact on the future of the system and supporting local alternative approaches to development.

It was brought about as a result of the Local Government (Northern Ireland) Act 2014[56] and its aim was to improve the connections, between partners, to provide a more strategic plan to improve the wellbeing of an area. In the words of the Northern Ireland Department for Communities:

> "Community Planning aims to improve the connection between all the tiers of Government and wider society work through partnership working to jointly deliver better outcomes for everyone. Community plans identify long-term priorities for improving the social, economic and environmental wellbeing of districts and the people who live there."

Each council area produces its own plan informed by a Community Planning Partnership, which also includes the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, amongst many other partners. The partners are able to develop and implement a shared plan for promoting the wellbeing of an area, improving community cohesion and the quality of life for all citizens.

Underpinning this approach is a clear aim of integration by the partners, to inform outcomes and delivery. For example, the Community Plan in Mid Ulster makes a specific reference to ensuring local people are able to access more affordable housing.[57]

Whilst Community Plans are more limited in terms of their policy weight than Local Plans, used by housing authorities for planning matters in England, they are nevertheless a useful resource to bring a more holistic and strategic focus on a place making outcomes, and the sheer diversity of policy objectives they can incorporate makes them an interesting example of policy innovation.

Green recovery policy in Northern Ireland

The Northern Ireland Assembly did, however, carry a motion in June 2020 which commits the region to "…a just and green transition to a more highly-skilled, regionally balanced and sustainable economy…"[58] potentially providing a foundation for future policy development. Although Northern Ireland lags behind other parts of the UK,reflecting the impact of the Assembly suspension on policy making, this is nevertheless a welcome development and signals a step in the right direction.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided a high-level account of national planning policy across the UK, and how this relates to each nations' green recovery strategies.

The overall picture for planning reform is one of divergence, particularly between England's system and those in Wales and Scotland. Northern Ireland's system is still developing, but taking steps towards the coordinatory model undermining those in the other devolved nations. Broadly, each nation's policy contexts can be placed on a spectrum, from those which view the planning system and local place making as key deliverer and coordinator of a range of national priorities 'on the

ground' (particularly Scotland, and to a lesser extent Wales), through to England, where the Government predominantly views the planning system in terms of its impact on the quantity of new private market homes built. Our survey made clear, yet again, the impact local planners and councillors feel this having on their ability to create healthy, successful, places.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the extent to which each nation's green recovery strategies emphasise planning and local place making broadly correspond to this spectrum. Wales, and especially Scotland, have put forward coherent and powerful visions for how places will develop and planning will be used as part of a green recovery. England's core national strategy is largely a shopping list of national projects. And again, Northern Ireland is an outlier: It is yet to announce any form of formal green recovery strategy.

Finally, if there is a shared theme across all of the nations, it is the under-resourcing that local authority planning departments have experienced over the last decade. In the following chapter we explore how councils in four differences places across England, Scotland and Wales have innovated to overcome this and other policy barriers in pursuit of great places.

3. Case studies

Introduction

Examples of councils and their partners innovatively delivering services in the shadow of austerity and deregulation abound. However, academic research tends to focus on small and specific cases while being highly theoretical, and research by charities and think tanks tends to focus on regeneration, retail, community cohesion and procurement, rather than place making or housing. Across both of these bodies of work, particular case studies (such as the 'Preston Model') tend to reappear, with little sense of their actual long-term and day-to-day impacts on places or communities.

To broaden out the debate, and ensure that they are both informative and provide actionable learning, we focus on examples which meet the following criteria:

1. They relate to, consider, or directly influence place making, urban redevelopment and/or housing;
2. In various ways they represent genuine departures from 'business as usual';
3. They relate to long-term solutions and transformations – we are interested in approaches to local development which build towards long-term change in the role of local Government as custodians and makers of place;
4. They demonstrate specific, actionable and realistic 'first steps' (see page 8 for a summary of what we mean by this term) which are possible within current policy and resource constraints;
5. These first steps link to broader 'pathways' (see page 8) which could support the delivery of a wide range of councils' and communities' visions; and
6. They have the potential to be scalable – i.e. the underlying principles could be rolled out across the UK as a coherent programme of action.

The four case studies represented in this chapter illustrate both different approaches to securing health, wellbeing and climate outcomes, *and* different stages in the journey from setting an overall vision to achieving real practical change on the ground through specific 'first steps'.

The first two examples, from Birmingham and Cornwall, are the furthest advanced. The North Ayrshire case study is perhaps the most ambitious local attempt to rethink an entire corporate approach to securing health and wellbeing, based on the kindness economy. Our fourth case study, Wales and the Future Generations Act, examines the national rather than local level. It provides insights into how cross-cutting legislation can join-up local objectives and support innovation, and the practical challenges in doing this.

We and provide links to further information in our references and summarise 'key lessons' at the end of each case study.

Case Study 1: Birmingham Municipal Housing Trust

Context

Birmingham Municipal Housing Trust (BMHT) first featured as a case study in the 2015 APSE-TCPA report *Housing the nation: Ensuring councils can deliver more and better homes*[59]. That report highlighted Birmingham City Council had made a strategic decision to take control of the delivery of affordable homes in the context of the twin challenges of homelessness and declining social rented stock due to the Right to Buy scheme.

Since 2009 the Trust have built 3,000 homes for sale and rent, making it one of the largest housebuilders in the city but there are still 12,000 people on the housing waiting list who are in need of social housing. In the 2019/2020 financial year, BMHT built 131 homes for rent and 89 for sale and have agreed a 10-year development programme: the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan for the period 2019-2029 includes a new building programme of 2,708 new homes for rent and sale at an estimated cost of £346 million. As part of the programme, BMHT are also planning to deliver 94 modular homes[6061].

How they did it (ambition and vision)

Birmingham Municipal Housing Trust was established in 2009 to bring forward local authority-owned sites for council homes and market sales. It was funded as the Council's own development delivery vehicle to realise the ambition of its corporate housing programme. The properties are a mix of social rent (average rent in 2018/19 of £100 per week) and affordable rent (social rent + £3 per week, equating to approximately 70% of market rent). The houses are different types and sizes of homes, with construction costs ranging from £85,000 per unit for a flat to £185,000 for a 4–5-bedroom house. Each scheme is appraised financially and submitted as a full business case to the cabinet of the council.

The programme started at a small scale in 2009, building 129 homes to test the approach of the local authority and build up necessary in-house expertise and skills. By 2019, the council built over 900 new homes, 494 for rent and 438 for sale. The financial freedoms and flexibilities under their self-financing model provided major stimulus to the programme[62].

BHMT has benefited from a considerable land bank which is now substantially developed and a clearance and demolition programme was approved in February 2017, providing additional sites. The Council also continued to appropriate development land opportunities from the general fund to the housing revenue account to augment its land supply. The modular homes are introduced as part of a programme that will enable HRA sites which are unsuitable for traditional forms of house building to be used for housing development.

Securing Health and wellbeing outcomes

BMHT house standards are high and as a consequence have additional costs in comparison to lower quality private development. These standards include Code for Sustainable Homes level 4 equivalent, Secured by Design, Building for Life and Lifetime Homes.

The 10-year programme looks to build new homes with quality, sustainability and design at the heart of their construction. The new properties will be constructed to Lifetime Homes Standard[63], will have highly efficient insulation, energy efficient boilers and heating systems and will feature Sustainable Drainage systems which will deal with drainage issues and promote biodiversity at each site. The proposed new homes will work in line with the Council's emerging "A Waste Strategy for Birmingham" policy document by developing plans that aim to reduce the amount of waste that is created, reusing and recycling and recovering energy from any remaining waste where possible.

How are they doing it?

Birmingham City Council is one of the largest local authorities in Europe and is unique in its scale but other local authorities can learn from their experience and delivery of housing as BHMT is a critical part of the jigsaw that constitutes the local authority. Political buy-in and clear leadership have been crucial to deliver housing and important in what the future of the city would look like.

The funding of BMHT comes from a complex and overlapping range of resources[64]. The initial injection of money came from the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) subsidy reform which made It viable for the Council to build new homes for the first time since the 1970s. Current and past funding sources include public funds like HRA borrowing subject to headroom limits, other HRA resources like receipts from land sales and right-to-buy receipts. The Council also seeks funds from Homes

England, West Midlands Combined Authority and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government where opportunities arise for grant funding and borrowing approvals.

Other income includes recycled surpluses from market sales (by the end of March 2018, £20 million had been generated through house sales surpluses) and section 106 funding has also contributed to the programme. The delivery of the market sale element is enabled by a deferred receipt to the Council, which is then utilised to offset the construction costs of the social rented properties. There is no developers profit achieved on BMHT schemes – any surpluses created from the homes for sale are reinvested into new homes for rent or into community benefits such as road improvements or Public Open Space.

The challenges

The major challenge for BMHT is the viability of the schemes. On one hand, funds available from central Government have been reducing and constructions costs have been increasing. This has meant that cross-subsidy through mixed tenure schemes have had to become an integral part of the model. Many of the sites being developed are challenging due to their small size and poor condition, and are affected by contamination or other adverse circumstances. Over the past few years BMHT has been developing sites which were available following clearance but many of the sites identified for the future programme have not been previously used for residential purposes and therefore there will be increased development costs.

The key benefits

This programme has had a series of tangible benefits beyond the provision of housing that is so needed in the city. For example, obsolete housing areas have been regenerated creating pride in the locality, reducing problems like derelict sites and fly tipping. This links with the council's commitment to work with and within neighbourhoods and communities to tackle such issues. The programme has enhanced the reputation of the City Council in difficult times, especially the brand reputation of BMHT.[65]

Relating directly to the recovery of the local economy, the new housing programme has created an investment worth over £2.12 billion in the local economy in six years. The Council supports local SMEs through a specific procurement routes for delivering housing, including their new modular homes programme.[66]

BHMT has created many job and training opportunities for local residents through the development and construction process, with over 300 training and apprenticeship placements by 2016. The training programme, the 'Building Birmingham Scholarship', was launched in 2013 and involves the council working with all its construction partners to support young people to get the skills to get into the house building industry through different career paths – from building to developing housing programme. For every home that gets built by BMHT, £500 are put into the scholarship programme. The idea is that the council invests in young people and supports their future career aspirations creating a sense of loyalty, it has helped the Council with retention, succession planning and institutional memory.

Key Findings

The BMHT example demonstrates the value of local authorities taking direct control of the delivery of homes, producing multiple benefits for the health and wellbeing of residents in terms of housing affordability, design standards, quality of the built realm and opportunities for employment and skills.

While this effort was supported by the remaining regulatory powers of the City Council, its ability to deliver these high standards depends primarily on the adoption of a different economic model which is not dependant on the limitations inherent in a private sector-focused delivery model. BMHT is an example of how tangible benefits can be returned both to the local economy while providing a range of wider benefits in terms of healthier lifestyles and regeneration.

It is, however, significant that while it is possible to quantify the direct economic benefits there has been a less systematic approach to understanding the tangible financial benefits of securing places which enhance health and wellbeing.[xi]

xi For more information see the Birmingham Municipal Housing Trust Delivery Plan 2019-2020, Birmingham City Council, May 2019, here: https://bit.ly/3haBefu and innovation in Council Housebuilding, Housing Quality Network, Aug. 2018, here: https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Innovation%20in%20council%20housebuilding%20-%20full%20document.pdf

Case Study 2: Cornwall Council – Responding the climate Emergency

Cornwall Council is a leading local authority in addressing climate change across all the major projects that the local authority is leading, including housing delivery. In January 2019, the Council declared a Climate Emergency. Since then, it has set an ambitious agenda to pursue environmental sustainability: it has committed to a 'Carbon Neutral Cornwall' by 2030, has applied a Biodiversity Net Gain target for all major planning applications[xii] and has engaged 3,000 residents[xiii] on what they think should be the Council's climate change priorities. The Council has incorporated the Doughnut economics model as the foundation of their vision and has adopted a new decision-making framework (the Decision-Making Wheel) to ensure environmental factors and social benefits are considered in planning all major projects across the local authority.

The partnership with the University of Exeter

Cornwall Council's partnership with the University of Exeter has contributed to the success of their approach. The research capability of the University of Exeter was applied to analyse what a carbon neutral future could look like and what they need to get there[67]. The University set out a series of scenarios to form the basis for discussions with stakeholders and further work with the University. Each scenario provided an illustration of a:

- Cornwall baseline: a 'do-nothing' counterfactual scenario
- Carbon neutral Cornwall by 2030
- Carbon neutral Cornwall by 2050

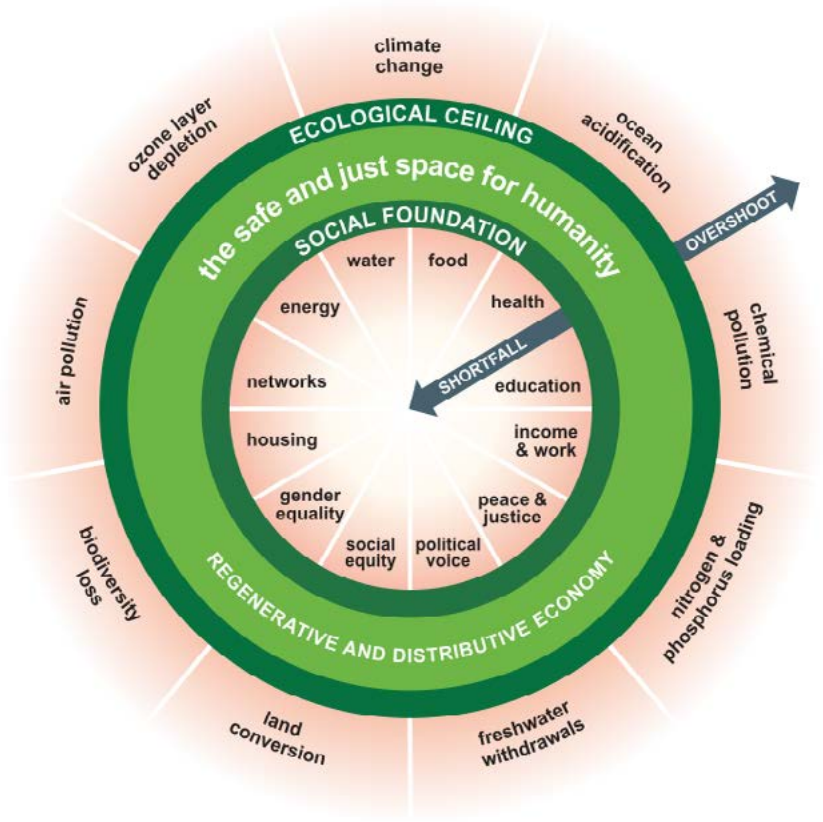
Using the outcomes of the Carbon Neutral Scenario work, the Council worked with communities to identify a blueprint for the future and set out a road map to guide their journey. Their emerging Climate Cornwall Carbon Neutral Action Plan sets out the first phase of their journey. Importantly, the blueprint and road maps will help the Council appraise their choices when decisions are made to ensure they make progress towards their climate goals.

The University also helped the Council understand how to apply the Doughnut economics model at the local level as it is a model used generally at a national level. The University helped the Council to apply the Decision-making wheel to policy making a Council-wide level, developing metrics, identifying priorities and setting benchmarks as a scoring system. Academics from different disciplines were involved in this process and help collect the right data to find the appropriate indicators.

xii From 1st February 2020 Cornwall Council applied a minimum 10% net gain requirement to all major planning applications (typically 10 houses or more, as well as larger scale commercial, industrial, and agricultural applications).

xiii For more information on community engagement see: https://doughnuteconomics.org/stories/3

Box 17: 'Doughnut economics'



Doughnut economics is a model that seeks to meet the needs of all people within the means of environmental sustainability. It is a visual framework – shaped like a doughnut – which brings planetary boundaries, creating a safe and just space between the two, in which humanity can thrive in a living planet.

In contrast to the growth economy, its starting point is to change the goal from GDP growth to thriving in the 'Doughnut' and recognises that the economy is embedded within, and depends on, society and the living world.

This model is increasingly being applied to local authorities, cities, businesses and all kind of organisations. At the heart of that experimentation, the design of the organisation and the way decisions get made, asking questions about purpose, networks, governance, ownership and finance.

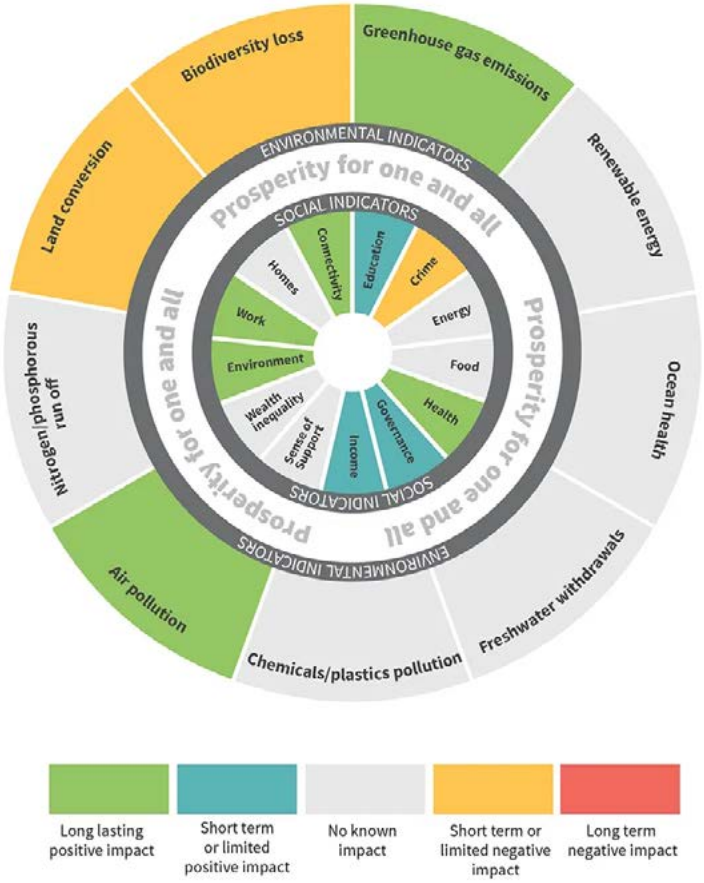
For more information: https://doughnuteconomics.org/about-doughnut-economics

How is the Council doing it?

In July 2019, the Cabinet unanimously approved a Climate Change Action plan that sets out the details of the operational aspects of achieving the vision. The report sets out their approach to governance, the resourcing of the programme both in terms of funding and staffing, their communications strategy and the direct next steps that will be taking as part of the Action Plan. The report signifies the start of the journey and a commitment to deliver what is possible through direct delivery, a commitment to work and the level of engagement towards other across systems to co-design solutions to the challenge of climate change.

A comprehensive body of work was led by the Council to review how the decision-making framework can be used to develop their future strategy and policy development. This enabled the Council to incorporate holistic sustainable thinking processes in the way they debate and come to major democratic decisions. There is clarity that the Council has a role as a leader of a whole system approach to enable, influence, communicate and develop asks to facilitate a journey towards a carbon neutral Cornwall and drive a conversation with their partners and communities.

Box 18: The 'decision-making wheel'



The Wheel has two parts: the inner wheel focusses on social and economic issues like homes and wealth, the outer wheel focusses on environmental issues like greenhouse gas emissions and biodiversity.

Cornwall Council was aware of poverty and chronic areas of deprivation so when making decisions about climate change, councillors wanted to consider socioeconomic determinants. The Council adopted the Doughnut economics model and the Decision-Making Wheel as a tool to make decisions in the Council.

The Decision-Making Wheel is based on Doughnut economics and was adapted to Cornwall Council's policymaking context. The wheel is used for all cabinet level decisions, including cabinet reports, it is used as a graphic summary and it highlights responsibility of Project Managers.

The wheel is used as holistic impact assessment in which each segment has a set of questions. It is designed to make people think about net impacts of their decisions in these areas. Users then score each segment according to a RAG rated system.

To ensure that the tool is used appropriately, it is accompanied by detailed guidance with questions about each category tailored in collaboration with representatives from key departments across the Council. An Officer in the newly created Carbon Neutral Cornwall Team has been placed in charge of developing and embedding this tool and is currently training all relevant staff in its use through meetings, conferences and lunch & learn sessions.

For more information:

Cornwall Council Decision Making Wheel, Cornwall Council, here: https://bit.ly/3hyRyFB

Cornwall Takes the Wheel, Circular Online, May 2020, here: https://www.circularonline.co.uk/case-studies/cornwall-takes-the-wheel/

This agenda has been politically led and, to date, supported across all parties in the Council which has enabled its realisation. At the same time, officers have been and developing their skills to achieve this agenda for years before the Climate Emergency was declared. More recently, the Cabinet members at the local authority recognised that that the Covid-19 recovery and renewal process was a chance to accelerate the council's work on delivering its climate change action plan. The local authority is led by cabinet members that believe that the recovery from Covid-19 must have climate change at the heart.

Resource implications are significant to achieve the ambitious climate change programme, the funding mostly comes from the Council which has invested £17 million to fund the core aspects of the programme. Some parts of the programme are funded by Central Government or from specific funds like the 'Whole House Retrofit' programme (more information below). The large investments both in funding and staff resourcing demonstrate the strong commitment of the Council to the climate change agenda. This commitment has made Cornwall Council a leader in England towards tackling the challenges faced by climate change despite limited resources and the austerity context in which they operate.

How does this affect housing and the built environment in Cornwall?

As part of the response to the Climate Change Emergency, Cornwall Council is producing a Climate Change Development Plan Document[68] to complement and strengthen the delivery of the policies in the existing Local Plan. As of April 2021, it was in the pre-submission phase. The document sets out new guidance to promote renewable energy, environmental growth, and energy-efficient homes, increasing employment opportunities and generating their own energy. These decisions are influenced by Decision-making Wheel and following the principles of Doughnut Economics.

What is already being done?

One of the actions of the Carbon Neutral Cornwall programme is to stop providing gas a source of energy in all their new homes and ensure that sustainability is prioritised in their capital projects. The Council demonstrates leadership through ensuring that climate impacts are considered when they lead on building.

The Council has adopted the Net Zero Buildings Commitment within all capital build project assessments by applying the steps to achieve net zero buildings in line with the UK Green Business Council's framework[69] to ensure the sustainability of the project. Actions to ensure sustainability include that the Council will mandate projects to be built up to a certain standard, voluntarily conduct sustainability assessments, consider the impact of transport, and suggest sustainable alternatives and consider options for off-site carbon reduction via local offset schemes.

Cornwall Council is working with Cornwall Housing (Cornwall Council's housing management company) to pioneer the 'Whole House Retrofit' programme of social homes to demonstrate how Cornwall's existing social homes can be made near zero carbon. Improvements are being made to the energy efficiency of existing homes through a £4.2 million fund from the Department of Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (BEIS). This is a collaboration between Cornwall Housing, Cornwall Council and SSE Energy Solutions (the energy provider). Energy efficiency measures will be retrofitted to 83 of the poorest performing homes for the time being[70]. In the long-term, the Council is looking at Cornwall Housing's estate of 10,285 homes and how economies of scale can reduce costs by 2025 and what is the best approach to adopt it Cornwall-wide.

At the same time, the Council is progressing in their affordable housing programme[xiv] and have plans to not use, for the first time, gas in their new affordable housing developments developed by Treveth in Liskeard (Council-owned site), Bodmin, Newquay, Launceston and Tolgus. This affordable housing programme will build more than 600 new homes and the first homes will be available from Spring 2022. The ambition to build highly insulated and energy efficient homes is outlined in a pattern book of designs created by developer Treveth, in line with Cornwall Council's commitment to tackle climate change[71].

The Council is also improving energy performance in private sector homes by supporting householders and landlords to

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xiv Cornwall Council has a target to build 52,500 homes at an average rate of about 2,625 per year to 2030 to help deliver sufficient new housing of appropriate types to meet future requirements. Particularly meeting affordable housing needs.

See Cornwall Local Plan: Strategic Policies 2010-2030. See: https://www.cornwall.gov.uk/media/ozhj5k0z/adopted-local-plan-strategic-policies-2016.pdf

reduce emissions from homes and community buildings. The Council is looking to encourage solar panel installations on suitable roofs in combination with energy storage solutions. The Council currently has an allocated £6 million of funding to invest in renewal energy, including solar panels: the Cornwall Council Solar Framework is currently out to tender. One of the lots of funding, is focussed on fitting solar panels in domestic rooftops and uses suppliers based in the South West to support the local economy.

Additionally, building on their work with the Cornwall Housing model and the supply chain that has been developed, the Council is looking to offer loan funding for Whole House Retrofit and other home energy improvements to private sector landlords to help tackle the approximately 4500 private sector rented homes in Cornwall which do not meet the Minimum Energy Efficiency Standard (MEES).

Key lessons

The Cornwall Council case study provides an important example of how a local authority can develop an overall corporate response to the climate crisis until then deliver on that commitment through a series of defined policy actions. Cornwall's work on climate and renewable energy has a long track record so as an authority they were already well placed to achieve action on climate change. It shows that local authorities can use their powers – with the right tools and the right vision – to create a change in the way they function.

Cornwall Council is an example of how climate change is an issue that transcends political parties and shows the importance of leadership and political buy in to achieve an ambitious agenda. Officers at the Council also highlighted the importance of setting a strategic framework with clear messaging that brings together the climate and the ecological emergencies when interacting with stakeholders. Throughout the process of setting up the agenda, it was crucial that stakeholders have a role in the system and that they all share the same narrative – both to communicate internally and externally.

Defining aspects of the success of their approach was the knowledge partnership with the University of Exeter which provided technical assessments of carbon responses and help build additional confidence and credibility in the policy development process. Equally, important was the programme of facilitating community dialogue around important policy measures necessary to deliver on the strategy. Resulting actions led by the council play an important role in reducing carbon emissions it also produced multiple other benefits on agendas such as fuel poverty, affordable housing provision and regeneration and wider local economic benefits. This was achieved through a blend of traditional regulatory tools including planning, the use of direct delivery vehicles and of community partnerships. It is significant that the reputation of the authority for climate awareness and technical innovation is now well established on a positive part of the authorities overall corporate identity.

Case Study 3: Kindness in North Ayrshire

Context

North Ayrshire Council is found on the West coast of Scotland, around thirty minutes from Glasgow. Whilst areas of wealth can be found in North Ayrshire, with a local history and natural landscape that attracts thousands of tourists each summer, there are high levels of poverty and inequality in some communities, with a legacy of deindustrialisation, lack of economic growth and high levels of unemployment. In 2018, North Ayrshire remained the fifth most deprived local authority in Scotland, with the second highest level of child poverty. Tackling these inequalities is a key ambition and strategic priority for North Ayrshire Council, and to direct regeneration to the most deprived communities.

What did North Ayrshire Council do?

In 2017, the Carnegie Trust – an independent charity which aims to improve wellbeing by influencing public policy – published research highlighting the importance of everyday relationships for individual and community wellbeing and identified the factors that might enable or inhibit 'kindness'.

Building on this research, the Carnegie Trust established the Kindness Innovation Network (KIN), bringing together people and professionals from across Scotland, including North Ayrshire Council, to test practical approaches to encourage kindness in their organisations and communities. Kindness in this sense means more than a 'random act' of kindness such as buying someone a coffee, but people going beyond their autonomy to do the right thing in response to inequality.

In March 2018, North Ayrshire Council and the Carnegie Trust agreed to work in partnership with them to support the Council's existing work on tackling poverty and inequality. Their invitation was driven by the Council's objective to reframe its relationship with communities and how it could do things differently to improve outcomes. There was no external funding package to fund activities around kindness, rather the funds came from the Council. The Council saw it as an investment in the staff to achieve that vision[72].

The 'Kindness in North Ayrshire' developed into a two-year project, exploring how the practical application of kindness could contribute to the vision and objectives set out in the Council's 'Fair for All' strategy, and how using kindness as a value could reset the relationship between citizen and state, to drive forward community wellbeing. Four key themes were identified throughout the project and a range of activities were carried out to test ideas, including pop-up tea stalls, library sleepovers and a 'kindness rocks' movement. The 'Why not?' theme explored the barriers to opportunities to working together; 'Unlocking spaces' aimed at creating welcoming public spaces; the 'Kind organisations' theme looked at how people treat themselves and each other; and 'Noticing kindness' recognised the visible opportunities for greater kindness.

What are the key outcomes?

As a result of the project, the language of kindness is becoming embedded in policy and collective vision for North Ayrshire Council, most notably through the North Ayrshire 'Kindness Promise' which is endorsed by senior leadership and staff across the Council, with a sense that this has helped a shift in attitudes and behaviours.

Time is still needed for the conversation around kindness to filter down throughout the whole Council, but the latest Council Plan for North Ayrshire includes a 'Fair for All' vision, and a mission of working together to improve wellbeing, prosperity and equity in North Ayrshire. Issues of equity and fairness run throughout the Council Plan and drive its priorities, with the Plan also stating how the Council values a 'North Ayrshire which has kindness and community spirit at its heart'[73].

How did they achieve it? Importance of corporate buy-in

The 'kindness' project came about a real interest in making something significant by key officers at the Council[74]. Key officers reached out to senior leadership and the Chief Executive, who understood the relevance of the project to meet the needs of the Council: the Council needed a kinder approach from an organisational level.

The key officers achieved political buy-in and executive leadership from the start of the project by identifying people that could champion this approach and presented the work to elected members to ensure they had an understanding of their work. This allowed for real change in the culture of the Council, enabled officers to pursue research and eventually

impacted the way the Council delivered services. Senior leaders in the governance of the council made a public statement showing that they supported the project which then impacts the way the community perceived the project. One of the officers at the Council said: "For people at that level of seniority, to be embracing kindness as a key driver of the work that we're doing locally is significant for the community"

How does this vision relate to the built environment/place making policy?

The kindness language has also permeated the way the Council and the Community Planning Partnership (CPP) approaches regeneration. The CPP includes representatives from Police Scotland, the National Health Service, the Health and Social Care Partnership, Public Health, Ayrshire College, the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and the Leisure Trust. Because kindness transcends all the activities, in the context of communities and spatial planning, is about a people centred approach rather than growth and capital. The CCP's 'Fair for All' approach has influenced the Local Development Plan for North Ayrshire. The Local Development Plan was adopted in November 2019 and sets out how development and investment will be guided over the twenty-year plan period. The vision for the Plan is that every person is valued and should have the best opportunities to live their life to their full potential. The Plan includes Strategic Policy 4 which recognises that due weight will be given to proposals that address the priorities identified by local communities, including an assessment of whether proposals promote equality and opportunity and inclusive growth, in line with the Fair for All strategy. Community planning is at the heart of the decision-making process in North Ayrshire, with six Locality Planning Partnerships each setting out their priorities for their specific communities in the Plan[75].

The Council has also launched an ambitious Strategic Housing Investment Plan aiming to deliver more than 1,700 high-quality, energy-efficient affordable housing over the next five years, potentially one of the biggest affordable housing programmes in Scotland, if not the UK.

Key challenges

It is recognised that radical service change for North Ayrshire Council is yet to be achieved, as system change and restructure is complex and a long-term process. Resetting the relationship between the Council and communities requires a whole system approach, with kindness yet to be visible in every aspect of the local authority. The presence of competing agendas and priorities across different Council services, while not mutually exclusive, has slowed this process of change. However, the most recent report from Audit Scotland highlighted that North Ayrshire has a clear strategic direction and is a sector leader for embedding community empowerment in everyday business.

Key learning

Of all the case studies we examined, North Ayrshire Council represented the most ambitious attempt to reset the relationship between an authority and local communities by adopting a comprehensive set of corporate objectives. The individual policy actions which flow from these objectives, around housing, climate and regeneration are more familiar and, as the case study illustrates, it will take time to understand if the concept of kindness has led to wider systemic change.

However, a very clear contrast can be drawn between those authorities adopting high level commitments to economic growth and the kind of holistic and comprehensive ideas embedded in the kindness economy. North Ayrshire was an attempt to adopt a vision in depth, supported by coherent and ambitious set of ideas and principles. There is no doubt that the knowledge partnership between Carnegie UK and North Ayrshire Council was a critical factor in the success and credibility of this approach. It is hard to see how an authority with limited resources could sustain such ambition without support of a trusted and credible partner. It is clear that understanding the need for such a partnership and then identify a credible and trusted partner is a critical component of any strategy designed to secure wider objectives all health wellbeing, climate change and regeneration.

Case study 4: Wales and the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act

Context

In 2015, the Welsh Government passed the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act which placed a legal duty on all public bodies in Wales to safeguard future generations and consider the long-term impact of their decisions[76]. The Act is one of the first pieces of legislation in the world which is concerned with the wellbeing of stakeholders who do not yet exist, and is based on the principle of sustainable development, encompassing social, economic, environmental and cultural factors. The Act is overseen by the Future Generations Commissioner and requires public bodies to develop a set of wellbeing objectives which show how they will contribute to the overall vision for Wales, set out in the seven national wellbeing goals. There are also 'five ways of working' that public bodies need to think about to tackle long-term challenges, including collaboration and involvement.

How does this relate to built environment/place making policy?

Planning Policy Wales (PPW) sets out the land use planning policies of the Welsh Government, with the latest Edition 11 published in February 2021 embedding the goals of the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act[77]. The primary objective of PPW is to ensure that the planning system in Wales contributes towards the delivery of sustainable development and improves the wellbeing of future generations under the Act. The Future Generations office has worked closely with the Welsh Government to ensure that the seven wellbeing goals and five ways of working are fully integrated into planning policy in Wales. Therefore, local planning authorities are under duty at all levels of the planning process, from plan-making to decision-taking, to maximise their contribution to the wellbeing of communities, with a specific focus on taking a 'place making' approach to planning and design of development.

Examples

In Cardiff, the development of their Planning for Health and Wellbeing Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPG) sets out supporting information for planners and developers to ensure planning decisions contribute to the health and wellbeing of communities, in particular contributing to the objectives of the Future Generations Act[78]. Cardiff City Council recognise the crucial role local planning policy has to play in addressing health inequalities and the SPG ensures a strategic link is made to the Future Generations Act. In addition, there are examples of the Planning Inspectorate in Wales is now using the Act to determine planning application appeals, on the grounds that the development does or does not align with the wellbeing goals of the Act[79] [80].

In South Wales, Blaenau Gwent Council have recently published their Decarbonisation Plan (2020-2030) to support the Welsh Government's ambition for the Welsh Public Sector to be carbon neutral by 2030[81]. The Decarbonisation Plan recognises the link to the requirements of the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act, and includes 'collaboration' (one of the five ways of working), as a key approach to decarbonisation by working with multiple partners to address sources of carbon emissions. One of the latest outcomes of this collaborative approach has been the first Climate Assembly to be held in Wales, hosted in partnership by local Housing Associations and the Council, who invited communities in Blaenau Gwent to discuss their views on climate action[82]. A set of recommendations came out of the Assembly and were passed, which will now be considered by the Housing Associations and Blaenau Gwent Council as they prioritise their decarbonisation strategies[83].

Key challenges

Whilst the Welsh Government's Planning Policy Wales is clearly aligned and fully integrated with the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act, a number of challenges have been identified.

A review by RTPI Cymru found there has not necessarily been any formal training or resources given to planning professionals regarding help implement the Act's requirements, while local planning authorities are under increasing pressure to deliver multiple services with fewer resources and smaller budgets[84]. Indeed, a recent study by the Audit Office Wales concluded that many local authorities are struggling to deliver their statutory responsibilities.[85]

There are also concerns that requirements under the Act will become a tick box exercise, and that the decision making process of planning consents on the ground will not reflect the real objectives of the Act. In addition, the Future Generations Report 2020 highlighted that the different stages at which Local Development Plan revisions are taking place across Wales presents a challenge[86], as most Local Development Plans in Wales were adopted prior to the existence of the Act and there are expectations that plans will not be fully aligned until post-2030.

The Wellbeing of Future Generation Act gives a glimpse into the potential for holistic and ambitious strategies, based on strong visions, to drive transformative change and enable local innovation. But it also presents a stark reminder to national Governments of the importance of resourcing and ensuring that local partners have the capacity to deliver effectively on grand ambitions.

4. Distilling the lessons for a successful post COVID, green recovery

From regulation to action

Chapter one set out the importance of local authorities in shaping our response to the challenges that emerge from the pandemic and the opportunity of the subsequent green recovery. While private and third sectors will play a vital role in this process, local Government is uniquely placed to provide a guiding hand and the strategic oversight to drive the scale of the change required. In the final analysis it is also the only body that is clearly accountable to the public. The question is, how can local authorities seize this opportunity given the severe challenges they face around resources and capacity?

The survey and policy analysis conducted for this report set out the major barriers which stand between local authorities and their positive potential to be drivers for physical change. Particularly in England, they are confronted with a powerful mixture of declining resources and the loss of regulatory powers. The APSE Local Government Commission 2030 Report, 'Local by default', powerfully sets out the wider context of the declining financial position of local Government and how this has diminished the sector's capacity to play a positive role in place making. Local authorities adapted to this reality by placing a greater reliance on local regulatory powers to effect change. These powers had limitations but, as in the case of the delivery of affordable homes through section 106 contributions, effective outcomes could be secured through the planning process.

As regulation has either been removed or centralised, particularly in England, local Government has been stripped of this influence and left with the challenge of reinventing direct delivery, but with a fraction of the resource availability. There are real and systemic barriers preventing the sector from fully seizing the opportunity of securing healthier places in the context of Covid recovery. These barriers have been stated and restated in this report and a number of others on the function of local Government.

That, in essence, is why new forms of direct delivery models by local Government, along with wider partnerships to support a green recovery, are so key. They represent one of the primary pathways to secure the outcomes which communities need to thrive. Only by taking an active stake in sectors like housing delivery can local authorities secure the key actions communities need on health, wellbeing and climate change. The case studies examined in Chapter 3 highlighted some of these innovative solutions which range from the direct delivery of specific housing projects to much wider ambitions to reshape the local economy. All depend on local authorities developing bold and holistic visions for their local area.

Indeed, to be transformational the ambition of local councils to be positive agents for change must go beyond individual examples. Instead, it implies a significant realignment of local Governments' role reflected in the ideas, championed by APSE, around 'municipal entrepreneurship'. This is an ambitious model of local Government as a guiding hand, coordinating action to ensure key public interest outcomes. But while local authorities need to innovate to secure the green recovery, the survey responses confirmed that only a limited number of authorities were actively considering options associated with 'new municipalism'. The question remains as to how positive examples can be scaled up into general practices and enabled by central Government support.

This chapter distils the learning of the case studies and sets out the key and transferable components of these successful approaches. The chapter then deals with questions about how these approaches can be enabled more widely, through increased support from national Governments and a more active offer from local anchor institutions.

Each of the case studies provided important lessons on how to deliver successful solutions to the complex challenges facing our communities.

It is possible to distil these lessons into six key components. While priorities and approaches will vary from locality to locality, we believe each one of these components is an important foundation of a successful approach. For example, the public can become rightly cynical about being involved in establishing visions for their communities which lack defined

delivery mechanisms to make them real. At the same time, individual policy actions, while welcome, are unlikely to be effective in dealing with the multiple challenges of a post-COVID world unless they are embedded within a coherent strategic narrative. We also are aware that these components will play out differently across the nations of the UK, and particularly in Wales and Scotland, which have more supportive and enabling national policy contexts than England, though similarly serious challenges regarding resourcing.

Visions

Corporate ambition and strategic vision

Nothing can be achieved without a recognition of the scale of the challenges facing local communities and the desire on both the part of political leadership and corporate senior management to explore new approaches. Success relies on key players, like finance directors, buying into the long-term benefits of the direct delivery of homes or energy. This inevitably requires a culture of trust, energy and creativity, as well as acknowledgment that if new approaches come with risks, then so does the status quo. Some degree of cross-party consensus about the value of a local vison is also vital if long term change is to be achieved.

A local vision for green recovery requires a coherent and holistic framework of principles if it is to be a credible basis for transformation. These ideas, like the 'kindness economy' in North Ayrshire, are tried and tested approaches which offer a coherent narrative and are therefore more effective in driving wider organisational innovation. Simplistic commitments to economic growth are no longer enough if the objectives of local authorities on health, wellbeing and climate are to be addressed. A credible strategy which speaks to these wider concerns is vital and that credibility can come from drawing down existing frameworks such as Cornwall council's commitment to 'donut economics'.

First Steps

Knowledge and skills partnerships

Local authorities have a fraction of policy and research capacity they enjoyed two decades ago. Networks such as APSE and the TCPA provide the opportunity for sharing information, innovation and knowledge in the absence of this capacity. In addition to such networks Securing a knowledge partnership which improves access to policy and analytical support can therefore be a vital to success. They provide a key way of securing resources and building the credibility of strong local strategic visions.

In some cases, these partnerships will be based on educational institutions that already play an anchor role in the local economy, as was the case between Cornwall Council and Exeter University. These partnerships have mutual benefits and fit within wider debates on the corporate social responsibility of the higher education sector. They also offer the opportunity for joint funding bids for research resources and can provide a degree of institutional memory and long-term analysis.

Not all local authorities benefit from such anchor institutions, and in these cases reaching out to major Charitable Trusts and other research organisations can provide a similar benefit. Carnegie UK brought insight and credibility to development of 'kindness' as the basis for corporate strategy in North Ayrshire. And, while there is less evidence of current practice there is no reason why private sector bodies could not play a leading role in such knowledge partnerships.

Partnerships between local authorities sharing evidence and approaches can be an equally powerful of building and sharing capacity and in securing new funding. There is clearly a need to promote better knowledge exchange networks, as our survey results showing a mismatch between a) the number of local authorities self-reporting the use of innovative approaches to local development and b) awareness of other local authorities taking innovative approaches, also suggests.

It is, however, important to note that external partnerships of whatever kind don't remove the need for internal skills and capacity. Sustaining this capacity is vital in interrogating research and delivery options.

Community dialogue

The green recovery depends on the active support of communities. Public trust in Government of all kinds need to be rebuilt if a consensus for lasting change is to be achieved. Building a new vision for places requires an ongoing conversation with defined opportunities for dialogue, a genuine commitment to shift power and clear ways of working through disputed and differences.

The intense and sometimes successful lobbying against 'low traffic neighbourhoods',[87] introduced during the pandemic to benefits pedestrians, confirmed the need to explain the benefits of change and to ensure powerful voices, often dominant on social media, are not mistaken for majority views.

There are a range of well-established approaches to community participation and deliberative democracy which can help build public trust. New technology can also be a useful way of engaging the community. But building public trust takes time and serious commitment. It goes beyond communication strategies and requires a genuine commitment to listen to the community and act upon what they say. All of that requires the commitment of other resources.

Pathways

Defining priority actions in a delivery plan

Knowledge partnerships should produce a clear understanding of the priority issues which need to be addressed locally to secure progress on issues such as health and wellbeing and the climate emergency.

These priorities will vary depending on local circumstances. For some authorities, retrofit to address fuel poverty will be key. For other areas with major growth pressures, it may be focused on shaping new development.

Defined delivery mechanisms and delivery partnerships

Over the last 6 years our research has highlighted the wide variety of delivery tools available to local authorities, from procurement to establishing new enterprises, which can contribute to the delivery a strategic vision. It is vital that these elements fit into an effective delivery strategy which can guide project management. Such a strategy is a vital way of ensuring internal corporate join-up of what can be a complex set of delivery mechanisms from housing to energy.

In considering the mix of delivery elements it is important to maximise existing regulatory powers like planning, public health and housing enforcement. These need to be closely aligned with the delivery strategy which require clear lines of internal communication so that, for example, public health expertise is applied to support ambitions around housing and local planning policy.

Measuring success and evolving the approach

Measuring the impact of the delivery strategy is a vital, and often neglected, part of ensuring the vision is being delivered. It enables lesson to be learned and approaches to be adjusted. Knowledge partnerships provide a key way of finding the resources to do this work and can provide access to range of emerging policy assessment tools on issues such as quality of life or social value.

How central Government can enable local success

Local Government has a difficult choice about its role in a post COVID recovery. It is a choice defined by inherent risks and taking a more ambitious approach to place making. But central Governments have an equally important choice as to whether they wish to enable and support such actions. The success or failure of the national economy depends on decisions made in villages, towns, and cities across the country, and central Government need to produce an environment that enables the right decisions.

While the position of local Government in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland is not easy in relation to resources, they enjoy more supportive national legal and policy frameworks upon which to base local innovation. This confidence and continuity is in sharp contrast to England, where the structure, powers and finance of local Government are subject to

ongoing change. The result is some major and negative contradictions between, for example, rounds of competitive funding for town centre regeneration and at the same time the removal of planning powers necessary to make this investment effective. In short, English local Government is trying to deliver *despite* national policy rather than because of it.

There is also a clear distinction between the nations and regions on the extent and coherence of national pandemic recovery strategies. While the Scottish Government has made very clear the importance of planning, housing and place making in the green recovery there is no equivalent document which can frame the actions of local Government in England. Wales has a mixture of green recovery projects and the powerful Wellbeing of Future of Generations Act (though, not necessarily the resourcing to support its full implementation). Northern Ireland entirely lacks any form of green recovery strategy at all.

Previous reports in this research series as well as the comprehensive APSE Commission on the future of local Government have repeatedly stressed the need to bring clarity to the powers and financing of local Government. Little can be achieved without lasting solutions to these problems and this report endorses the recommendations of the APSE Local Government Commission 2030 in its final report 'Local by default'. There are, however, a series of defined actions which could be taken centrally to enable local action. These actions mirror the key components of success in local place making.

Recommendation 1: An enabling national strategy

A clear national strategy and vision on the objectives of post-pandemic recovery and the role to be played by local Government is a vital foundation for local action. This strategy must recognise the importance of the quality of place to the green recovery and to acknowledge that local Government is best placed to drive change on the delivery a wider of recovery measures from climate to housing to mobility.

Scotland and Wales have begun this process, but England is falling behind. And acknowledgment of the leading role of local Government has to be supported by the necessary powers and funding to secure positive progress.

Recommendation 2: Support for innovation

National Governments have an extremely important role to play in supporting information sharing and technical support amongst local authorities. They can do this by funding existing networks and be endorsing innovation which helps build the confidence of the sector.

Recommendation 3: Support for skills and innovation

While the general issue of local authority funding is a major problem, the specific problem a lack of capacity and skills is holding back innovation. While knowledge and delivery partnerships are key, local authorities need the resources to think strategically and the detailed delivery skill to get on with the job. If local authorities are key to the post-pandemic recovery, then national Governments must see funding skills and capacity building as equal to 'hard' infrastructure investment.

Recommendation 4: A moratorium on centralising local powers in England

Despite strong concerns from local Government in England, a range of place making powers continue to be centralised – something most evident in the expansion of permitted development rights. This national shift to the centre has significantly weakened the capacity of local authorities to deliver the positive innovation highlighted in this report. Government should restore the powers it has removed or at least signal a moratorium on further power being removed.

Recommendation 5: Encouraging the corporate social responsibility of anchor institutions

Some aspects of enabling local action sit with local anchor institutions like the NHS or Universities. At present, their engagement in local transformation is patchy despite their power to support transformation. Since many of these institutions are underpinned by public money Governments can encourage a more comprehensive approach to partnership working and make clear the expectation that such bodies should engage and support local authorities in securing the green recovery.

Councils: Place making bystanders or agents for change?

As the APSE Local Government Commission 2030 report 'Local by default' makes clear, local Government is facing a period of unprecedented change framed by increasing service demand, rapid socio-economic change, declining resources and reducing regulatory powers.

The survey conducted for this research highlighted those pressures which, taken together, can only be described as an existential challenge for local authorities. The choices facing local Government are extremely difficult but for those wishing to be an active enabler in supporting positive change and better post-pandemic world. But there is important learning to be gathered and built upon from a range of pioneering councils. The key components of these approaches provide important transferable lessons.

This report has highlighted some of those positive components which can help build successful approaches. However, if these positive ideas are be scaled up and deployed more widely the national Governments' relationships with local Government, particularly in England, require fundamental change. If local authorities are to play a positive and pivotal role in improving the health and wellbeing of communities, they need the powers and resources to do so. Both of these factors are crucial, as our case study of Wales and the Wellbeing of Future Generations act shows. A clear and lasting settlement is required which recognises the key role of local authorities as positive agents for change and best placed to understand the needs of local communities.

As we reported last year, there is no doubt that local place making in England in particular is at a crossroads. This report makes clear what the choices for local authorities are. One is to simply discharge their minimum regulatory functions, in which case they will be more or less bystanders to a range of structural challenges, from the death of town centres to the world-changing impacts of the climate crisis. The other choice is to adopt an innovator role creating a positive and interventionist approach in shaping the future, framed by creative innovation, new partnerships and direct delivery.

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