

A regional approach to COVID-19 recovery

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DOI:

[10.3828/tpr.2021.40](https://doi.org/10.3828/tpr.2021.40)

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Document Version

Peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (Harvard):

Radcliffe, J, Bryson, JR, Cox, E, Leach, J, Luiu, C & Reardon, L 2022, 'A regional approach to COVID-19 recovery: lessons from the West Midlands', *Town Planning Review*, vol. 93, no. 1, pp. 7-14.
<https://doi.org/10.3828/tpr.2021.40>

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A regional approach to COVID-19 recovery: lessons from the West Midlands

Journal:	<i>Town Planning Review</i>
Manuscript ID	TPR-01-21-VP-0002.R1
Manuscript Type:	Viewpoints
Keywords:	Planning, COVID-19, Recovery, Resilience, Ambidexterity, Social asset, System approach, City-Region
Abstract:	<p>Policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic must plan for recovery to an improved state and prepare for inevitable future shocks. Sub-national processes are critical to achieving these aims. The West Midlands region in the UK has developed a 'Community Recovery Roadmap', led by the priorities and principles identified from a Citizens' Panel, and through the collaboration of local governments and organisations. The place-based and deliberative approach has had three key attributes that are discussed: (1) ambidexterity, balancing alignment of current processes and adaptability to future changes; (2) social asset building, with more permissive and open methods of priority-setting; and (3) whole-systems thinking, embedding networks across sub-systems and scales within normal policy processes.</p>

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A regional approach to COVID-19 recovery: lessons from the West Midlands

Abstract

Policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic must plan for recovery to an improved state and prepare for inevitable future shocks. Sub-national processes are critical to achieving these aims. The West Midlands region (UK) has developed a ‘Community Recovery Roadmap’, based on a place-based, citizen-led and deliberative strategy. The paper outlines three key principles/attributes that we believe can foster successful approaches to recovery, based on the West Midlands experience: (1) ambidexterity, balancing alignment of current processes and adaptability to future changes; (2) social asset building, with more permissive and open methods of priority-setting; and (3) whole-systems thinking, embedding networks across sub-systems and scales within normal policy processes.

Keywords

Planning; COVID-19; Recovery; Resilience; Ambidexterity; Social Asset; System Approach; City Region

Recovery from a societal ‘shock’ should not mean returning to a pre-existing state. Whilst shocks – which range from acute and unexpected, to chronic and anticipated - are disruptive, they also provide opportunities to create better societies, places and economies. The COVID-19 pandemic has cut through entrenched ways of living and working, resulting in some positive outcomes, including reduced air and noise pollution, increased active travel and falling carbon emissions (Leach et al., 2020). Many organisations have had to rethink how they operate, with expensive business premises downsized, **creating** new possibilities for how cities and towns are organised. At the same time, established ways of thinking about places are having to change. For example, car-free cities are predicated upon **extensive use of** public transport and dense, vibrant streetscapes – neither of which **are feasible** during a pandemic.

Taking a place-based and participatory approach to recovery has the potential **for** progress beyond what existed before. Societies involve unique combinations of social, technical and institutional elements that work together in particular ways to create socio-technical systems. The systems evolve in response to endogenous drivers (such as the adoption of new technologies), new thinking emerging and through behaviours changing. The systems are also affected by exogenous factors, such as COVID-19, that accelerate change: technological developments are incentivised, behaviour change is mandated. As such, all places are engaged in a continual process of recovering from different levels of shock (Deverteuil, 2016). Some changes may be temporary in their full embodiment, but even so, they cause ripples that persist across the system, making it impossible to recover to ‘what was’, or to ‘bounce back’ (Matyas and Pelling, 2014).

Elected representatives and policymakers have promoted the concept of a post-pandemic ‘recovery’ (HMG, 2020). The nuance, however, is in recognising the transient state of our societies. If there is talk of recovery it should not be in relation to a static point. Rather, **‘recovery’** should aim for an improved state that also provides better preparedness and a greater ability to respond to shocks. As such, a key **focus of** recovery should be on developing the tools needed to respond to future shocks.

Learning from the West Midlands Combined Authority’s Community Recovery Roadmap

The West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) region **constitutes** a conurbation of four million residents, comprising a young and diverse population. **This region sits within central England, within a relatively centralised system of governance (Copus, Roberts and Wall 2017).** Pre-COVID-19, the region was experiencing growth in **the** business and professional services sectors, though had underlying issues, including inequality, poverty and poor health (WMCA, 2020). Like many other regional authorities in the UK, the WMCA **embarked on** a process to develop a plan for ‘Community Recovery’ to address the social and community issues arising from the COVID-19 pandemic **and beyond.** A central

tenet of the plan’s development was to enable residents to shape and drive the process; designed to be created with communities, not imposed upon them. In June 2020, a randomly-selected, deliberative Citizens’ Panel was convened to ensure the recovery process was aligned with: 1) residents’ experiences during the first lockdown and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on their lives; 2) their views on the issues they thought should be the focus of the region’s recovery and 3) how the Recovery Plan should be implemented and delivered (West Midlands Recovery Co-ordination Group, 2020). The panel consisted of 36 individuals, chosen to reflect and represent the regional population in terms of demographic characteristics (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity, social class, residential location and health), attitudes (e.g. political affiliation) and COVID-19 experience (e.g. of shielding and furlough). The Citizens’ Panel process produced a set of six priorities and four principles to drive the approach to community recovery (Table 1).

Table 1. Priorities and principles for community recovery (West Midlands Recovery Co-ordination Group, 2020)

Priorities for community recovery	Cross-cutting principles for community recovery
Living safely with coronavirus	Extra help to the most affected
Assessing healthcare and improving physical health	Environmental focus
Mental health and awareness support	Innovation and creativity
Education and young people	Transparency and citizen's voice
Jobs and training	
Local business and high streets	

A mapping process was undertaken to understand the response to the COVID-19 pandemic from the region’s Local Authorities and a range of other public agencies. A survey and strategy documents identified how the seven metropolitan boroughs; the non-constituent authorities; and the voluntary, community and social enterprise and public sector organizations were approaching pandemic recovery and how such approaches related to the priorities and principles from the Citizens’ Panel. The findings have been collected in a ‘Community Recovery Roadmap’ which also acts as a prospectus for government investment (West Midland Recovery Co-ordination Group, 2020). The Roadmap establishes the foundations for building a system-wide response to the pandemic and identifies key issues for recovery, good practice, opportunities for future collaborations among the Local Authorities and asks of central government to support recovery. The value of this regional approach over more local recovery efforts was recognised, and as the process unfolded, the significant added value in sharing local expertise, and identifying collaborative opportunities became clear.

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3 Although the recovery is a work in progress, the initial stages have revealed three key attributes that
4 can facilitate regional responses to shocks, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. These are: (1)
5 ambidexterity, (2) social asset building and (3) whole systems thinking.
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8 9 *Ambidexterity*

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11 COVID-19 challenges existing approaches to the development and implementation of regional risk
12 strategies. A region is in a continual state of 'becoming' that reflects an ongoing process of adaptation.
13 On the one hand, this is a process that involves looking backwards to understand regional evolution
14 as a process based on smart specialisation or existing structures, assets, resources, and connectivity
15 (Bryson et al., 2018). On the other hand, it looks forward to identifying possible disruptions and
16 opportunities, and to develop mitigation and adaptation strategies. In the organisational literature,
17 ambidextrous organisations balance two diametrically opposing pressures: alignment of current
18 processes, and adaptability to future changes (O'Reilly and Tushman, 2004). Regional planning must
19 adopt a similar approach and develop strategies for building ambidextrous regions.
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23 Reflexivity is crucial to achieving ambidexterity, as it fosters a form of policy process which is iterative,
24 builds regular evaluation into its strategic development and delivery and is open to deliberation
25 (Loorbach and Rotmans, 2010). It enables a dynamic and agile form of policymaking and policy
26 response. Such a process requires capacity, spaces for contestation, a need to work across (and
27 remove) silos, but also a culture open to experimentation and risk. It moves the policymaking process
28 away from a static and reactionary process, to one which is dynamic and proactive and, in turn, better
29 prepared.
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33 In the West Midlands, this process has involved close-working between the Combined Authority and
34 Local Authority officials. The mapping exercise, for example, had to provide evidence to the partners
35 that their existing activities were being carefully considered and valued as the building blocks for
36 future development. The Roadmap, although reflecting current activity, was deliberately written
37 around a set of ambitions for future recovery but without specifying specific action, leaving it open
38 and permissive.
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42 Successful regional resilience planning is a process which reflects the artful balance of existing
43 structures with improvisation. The ambidextrous region would have the processes, structures, and
44 relational networks in place to deal with any sudden shock. Such regions would also appreciate the
45 need to engage in a continual process of gradual adaptation.
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Social asset building

'Build back better' was developed by the United Nations as a strategy intended to reduce the risks to people and communities of future shocks and disasters (United Nations, 2015, 2017). It focusses on 'integrating disaster risk reduction measures into the restoration of physical infrastructure and societal systems' (United Nations, 2017: 6), emphasising recovery, rehabilitation, and reconstruction. For COVID-19, this has meant a shift in focus away from national-level disaster recovery frameworks and towards local ones.

It is at the local level that the 'the unavoidable challenge of negotiating a here-and-now' comes to the fore (Massey, 2005: 140). That which 'happens every day and recurs every day: the banal, the quotidian, the obvious, the common, the ordinary, the infraordinary, the background noise, the habitual' (Perec, 1999: 210). It requires an inclusive approach to the on-going process of place-based reconfiguration led by residents rather than disaster-recovery experts (Ihnji, 2020). Success is contingent upon three considerations: diversity, improvisation and developing local solutions (Andres et al., 2019).

The first consideration, of diversity, includes enhancing connectivity within and between places. This is to acknowledge that place-making is a process founded upon relationships between people. Residents must be given the opportunity to engage in a continual process of place-shaping and place-building. The danger is that current policy-making processes decentre residents, emphasising instead contributions made by policymakers and the third sector. In the West Midlands, the decision to place residents at the heart of the Community Recovery process by forming a Citizens' Panel was key.

Second, COVID-19 has forced residents and communities to improvise in a process of place-shaping (Law et al., 2020). Policymaking must learn from this process, enabling active bottom-up approaches to place-making. Consultation processes must be transformed from passive commentaries on pre-agendas to an active process that encourages residents and communities to identify opportunities to directly engage in place-making as an exercise in continual improvisation.

Working in lockdown the West Midlands process had a strong element of improvisation. Facilitators gave Citizens' Panel participants technical support to participate in online deliberation, with expert witnesses to the panel producing short video contributions to animate discussions. The pandemic empowered officers and politicians to 'let go' of normal patterns of project management. Furthermore, as the pandemic crisis persisted, the pressure to 'deliver a final product' was lifted, giving time and space for reflection and development.

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Third, the application of policy to place brings to the fore policy drivers such as accountability, value for money and policy impacts. These drivers can displace residents, emphasising a productivity and efficiency approach to policymaking with optimisation as the outcome. Optimised processes and systems should still contain within them alternative pathways to deliver similar outcomes (the ‘multiple realisability’ described by Huneman (2018)), which, in turn, provides place-based resilience. This allows alternatives to be enacted without the need for systems failure and, as such, provide opportunities for improvised resident- and community-led recovery and place-building.

In the West Midlands, the development of a Community Recovery Roadmap – as opposed to a typical strategy or action plan – enabled multiple stakeholders to contribute to broader priorities. The Roadmap provides a platform for stakeholders to identify a wide range of resources and assets that can be mobilised in community recovery efforts. It remains to be seen whether this more permissive and open approach is successful in galvanising activity - and whether certain elements of the Roadmap prove more realisable than others.

Whole-systems thinking

A whole-systems approach to recovery recognises the interconnectedness of socio-technical systems that enable the functioning of a region (Meerow et al., 2016). The responses of systems to disturbances are differential, dynamic and can occur over multiple timescales – as the disturbances, or shocks, can be themselves. By understanding systems to be in non-equilibrium, the natural state should be one in which networks across sub-systems and scales are embedded within normal policy processes, drawing on evidence and analyses that are credible, salient and legitimate (Sarkki et al., 2014; Cash et al., 2003). Long-term planning, incorporating evidence from horizon-scanning and scenario analysis, and identification of symbiotic opportunities will reveal otherwise missed benefits (Rogers et al., 2014). This architecture is best-placed at the local level in order to develop responses to the continual disturbances that impact across a region but requires light-touch co-ordination to allow for good communication and the value of collaboration to be identified and released.

The WMCA’s Community Recovery Roadmap shows the value of building connections across scales, systems and sub-systems to develop responses. Alongside citizen engagement, the process for bringing together a wide range of system stakeholders across the West Midlands has been rigorous. The Recovery Co-ordination Group involves not only senior officers from Local Authorities but also representatives from public health, the police and fire services, schools, colleges and universities, as well as voluntary and community sector partners. All of these were involved in regular meetings, providing information, data and examples of good practice. For a complex system such as a region to continue to deliver desired (and improved) functions and outcomes – such as providing education and

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health services to the population – there must be processes that allow for the ongoing sharing of knowledge between actors and institutions, within and across scales. A restricted view in terms of scope or time-scales can lead to perverse outcomes at a system level. Isolating responses to acute shocks (like a pandemic) or from longer-term transitions (such as decarbonisation) when they are inter-dependent may lead to interventions on one time-scale that locks-in undesirable pathways on another time-scale. Similarly, optimising a response within the boundaries of a particular sub-system misses opportunities for complementary approaches. A substantial investment in one approach can constrain future options, locking-in ways of living and working (Lombardi et al., 2012).

Resilience, recovery and ambidexterity

Cities and regions are in a continual process of adjustment and adaptation to shocks that occur at varying degrees of severity. The acute shock of COVID-19 has had an immediate and considerable impact and we are yet to fully appreciate its effects. Further shocks with the same severity and scale are inevitable – think of those related to climate change mitigation and impacts. Therefore, a more sophisticated view of resilience as a shared property, not belonging to any individual system or party and that is not based upon ‘returning to normal’, needs to underpin recovery planning.

A truly ambidextrous and whole-systems approach to policymaking that incorporates social assets must be embedded at scales where the decisions made affect the constituent population and are underpinned by evidence that considers longer timescales and wider impacts. The formation of networks and connections to enable this approach implies a focus on activity which engages citizens and brings together multiple stakeholders, which may have a cost but should lead to a better alignment of activity and resource that is more likely to achieve positive outcomes.

The steady centralisation of decision-making has led to an erosion of capacity and capability in local and regional government to facilitate multi-agency working between different sub-national scales (Hambleton 2017; Jones 2018). However, as the West Midlands has shown, there is still scope and appetite for place-based connections that provide the necessary agility and flexibility to improve responses both to acute shocks and long-term transitions, not least by empowering residents as active participants.

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Ref: TPR-01-21-VP-0002

Title: A regional approach to COVID-19 recovery: lessons from the West Midlands

Journal: Town Planning Review

28/05/2021

Dear Dr Sykes,

Thank you for your recent email. We are delighted that the paper has been deemed acceptable for publication subject to satisfactory amendments. We thank the reviewer for taking the time to provide such valuable comments and believe now that it is much stronger for having gone through the review process. Below we show “point-by-point” how these comments have been addressed (red font).

REVIEW 1

This is an interesting and timely piece that provides insights derived from the regional approach to recovery planning adopted in the West Midlands region of England. The case study is well-related to literature on resilience and disaster recovery.

We thank the reviewer for this most welcome praise.

#1 The approaches adopted in the region with the Community Recovery Roadmap informed by priorities and principles developed from a Citizen's Panel are interesting. Perhaps a little more could have been said about the organisation of the latter - e.g. how many people took part? How was the Panel organised in the context of the ongoing pandemic?

Thank you for this suggestion. We have now added more information on the citizens panel on page 3, including the date it was held, the amount of participants involved, and how they were selected and how the panel was organised.

#2 The final paragraph makes an interesting reference to the impacts of ongoing centralisation perhaps some examples of this could be cited here - or perhaps earlier in the article - to provide a little more context on the English setting for the Journal's international readers.

Thank you for this suggestion. Reference has now been made on page 3, to England being a centralised system of governance – making reference to the work of Copus, Richards and Wall 2017. References to Hambleton 2017 and Jones 2018 are also added to the point made about centralisation in the final paragraph.

#3 The article is generally well-written, but there are some minor typos (e.g. agreements and plurals) and very minor issues with expression in places. A thorough proofread would be useful prior to resubmission.

The paper has now been given a close proofread and we hope that any typos and/or issues with expression have now been identified and addressed.