

# New Green Recovery: How can local renewal lead to fairer, more sustainable places?

Public Practice is a not-for-profit social enterprise with a mission to build the public sector's capacity to improve the quality and equality of everyday places.

COVID-19 hit local authorities just as they were escalating action on the climate crisis. How can authorities now respond to these twin emergencies to not only rebuild but remake local economies and neighbourhoods?

On 10 May Public Practice convened an expert panel to discuss how local government is taking a place-based and long-term approach to renewal. With contributions from across disciplines and places, panellists Mark Atherton, Director of Environment at Greater Manchester Combined Authority; Rafe Bertram, Sustainability Facilitator with Meridian Water in the London Borough of Enfield; Miatta Fahnbulleh, Chief Executive of the New Economics Foundation and Georgia Gould, Leader of Camden Council shared their thinking about how authorities can develop the capacity to build fairer, and more sustainable places through the recovery.

## UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGE

There is broad consensus now about the scale of the challenge ahead. The immediate and urgent task of recovery from the effects of the pandemic has also galvanised action to tackle the climate emergency, social inequality and other deep-seated challenges on a national scale and beyond. None of these are happening in isolation. As complex as the challenges are, a holistic pathway to a sustainable recovery can offer solutions that bring successes across multiple objectives. Local Authorities will have a key role to play in this.

## PLACE-BASED

The built environment industry often frames the challenge of responding to the climate crisis as an urban problem, with the discourse dominated by debates over high rise buildings, or low traffic neighbourhoods. To focus on just the urban misses the challenges of different places with different needs, and overlooks the diversity of solutions needed in different settings. Time and again, interventions that are place-based have proved successful; there are homes, offices, schools and infrastructure everywhere that need to be decarbonised. Institutions and communities need support to build capabilities and capacity to respond to local circumstances.

## DEVOLUTION

The immediate response to the pandemic over the last year has required large-scale nationally-led initiatives. But creating a sustainable recovery over the long-term will need locally-led interventions. Devolution across the UK has been slow, ad-hoc and fragmented, and limited an increasingly centralised system of governance and funding. Authorities and other stakeholders need to argue for a devolution of powers and resources to the appropriate level - not as in a way that is seen to be 'wresting power from the centre', but by making the case for the benefit to communities and cohesion at a national level. The more successful, more responsive and more effective locally-delivered work of Authorities and partners over the last year can be cited as clear evidence for further devolution.

## PROCUREMENT & DECISIONMAKING

Authorities have a powerful tool in how they procure services and contracts. Procurement for development, design, maintenance, retrofit, social care - anywhere that capital or services will be acquired - can use public spending to reshape local economies. Choosing suppliers that meet clearly stated objectives on the environmental and social outcomes of a fair and just recovery, sends a signal to the market and gives suppliers confidence to re-tool to meet these objectives. Within a complex set of actors, a transparent procurement policy and decisionmaking process can provide a framework to navigate conflicting priorities and tensions.

## SKILLS

There is huge potential to develop new skills across the range of greening and recovery disciplines. With the scale of work ahead there is scope for jobs for life across emerging industries such as decarbonisation and retrofit as well as the services that support them, including specialisation in planning for zero carbon, energy networks and engagement. Investment in skills for a green recovery across disciplines will reap benefits to local and national economies, build resilience and create virtuous connections between responding to the climate crisis and other policy areas.

## LEADERSHIP

The role of planners, public servants and Authority officers is important, as ever, to balance competing interests. To have strategies and plans based on evidence and local need, and to be able to advocate for those changes requires skills, capacity and leadership. Striking a fair, just and successful balance between competing interests requires skill. However technically sound and evidence-based these strategies are, strong leadership is a common factor for successful long term outcomes. Having a strong voice advocating for, and leading, change can of course also create undesired impacts if focusing on other priorities.

## ENGAGEMENT WITH COMMUNITIES

At the heart of everything is people. People living in places, working, living and affected to varying degrees by the choices and actions made on their behalf. Whether it is the leaders, the related professions, or citizens on the street, engaging people affected by change guides and improves decisions. Business as usual can be so powerful that it is hard to change ideas of what business as unusual could be like. Harnessing the lived experience of as wide a pool of people as available helps reimagine what is possible, as well as help disseminate the reasons for action being taken.

## COLLABORATION

Tackling such significant challenges at the scale and complexity of local places and our built environment can only be achieved through a collaborative effort. Government of different tiers and hues need to work together. Delivery partners across sectors and places learn and benefit from close collaboration. Authorities who coordinate across boundaries and share deliverables will see mutual success. Policy makers and practitioners who can share best practice and learn from common mistakes will find quicker shortcuts to effective solutions.



The summary of this event is authored by Ben Hockman.

A full recording of this event is available to watch online [here](#).

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