

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

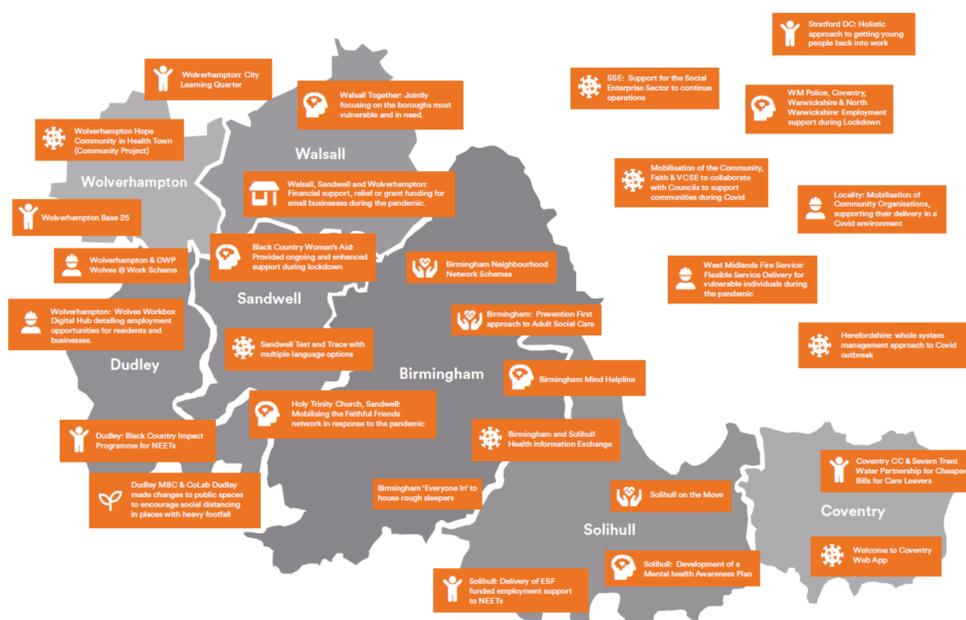
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## PROBLEM

- **Recovery** from a societal 'shock' should **not** mean **returning to a pre-existing state**. Whilst shocks 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, such as increased active travel and reduced carbon emissions, air and noise pollution.
- Like many other regional authorities in the UK, the West Midlands Combined Authority (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 summer 2020, the West Midlands Recovery Coordination Group convened a **Citizens Panel**, comprised of people from across the region, to ensure that recovery was aligned to their fears, hopes and experiences.

The local response to the COVID-19 pandemic in the West Midlands region<sup>1</sup>



The **six community recovery priorities** identified by local communities through a citizens panel process<sup>1</sup>

- Living safely with coronavirus
- Accessing healthcare and improving physical health
- Mental health support and awareness
- Education and young people
- Jobs and training
- Local businesses and high streets

## EVIDENCE

- Taking a **place-based and participatory approach to recovery** has the potential for progress beyond what existed before.
- Based on the WMCA experience, we identify **three key principles** that can foster **successful approaches to recovery and resilience**<sup>2</sup>

### AMBIDEXTERITY

A twofold process that involves:

- 1) looking backwards to understand regional evolution in terms of existing structures, assets, resources and connectivity;
- 2) looking forward to identifying possible disruptions and opportunities

### SOCIAL ASSET BUILDING

Enhancing connectivity within and between places by directly engaging communities in active consultation processes to identify a wide range of resources and assets that can be mobilised in community recovery efforts and contribute to broader priorities

### WHOLE-SYSTEM THINKING

Recognising the interconnectedness of socio-technical systems that enable the functioning of a region and enhance connections across scales, systems and sub-systems to develop responses

## SOLUTIONS

- Taking a more sophisticated view of **resilience as a shared property**, not belonging to any individual system or party and 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.
- As the West Midlands has shown, there is scope and appetite for **place-based connections** that provide the necessary **agility and flexibility to improve responses** both to acute shocks and to long-term transitions, not least by empowering residents as active participants.
- The medical science of neuroplasticity can provide lessons for **establishing resilient urban systems**. Understanding "**urban plasticity**" can be recovered through interventions at different scales may offer insights as to how a city can **prepare and recover from chronic and acute shocks**.

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### References

- <sup>1</sup> West Midlands Combined Authority, 2020, "Levelling-Up the West Midlands: Our Roadmap to Community Recovery and Prospectus for Government", West Midlands Combined Authority
- <sup>2</sup> Radcliffe, J., Bryson, J., Cox, E., Leach, J., Luiu, C., & Reardon, L. (2022), "A regional approach to COVID-19 recovery: lessons from the West Midlands". *Town Planning Review*, 93(1), pp. 7–14, DOI:10.3828/tp.2021.40

