

Covid-19 recovery planning, partnership working and the role of universities in city-regions

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Covid-19 recovery planning, partnership working and the role of universities in city-regions



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Executive Summary

This report presents findings from research **examining how partnership working has developed during the pandemic and the role of universities in recovery planning**. The objectives are to:

- Investigate what has worked well in Covid-19 recovery planning in recovery groups operating in the **West Midlands Combined Authority** area and the **North East LA7¹** area
- **Identify aspects of recovery partnership working** in these regions, **which have worked less well**
- Analyse the **role of universities** in city-regional recovery planning
- **Investigate what can be learned** from Covid-19 regional recovery planning **for informing the format and focus of existing and future partnerships focused on economic and social recovery** from the pandemic.

It is based on 30 **interviews conducted in summer and autumn 2021 with stakeholders in the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) area and the North East LA7 area** with a high-level of engagement in Covid-19 recovery planning and broader local and regional policy and governance activities. These regions were chosen due to their complex contrasting governance structures. The West Midlands has one Combined Authority (CA) and three Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) areas whilst the North East LA7 area includes two Combined Authorities.

FINDINGS

What has worked well?

- In both the WMCA area and the NE LA7 area, a variety of partnerships have supported economic and social recovery from the pandemic. These partnerships consist of groups which pre-date the pandemic and groups established as a direct response to the pandemic.
- Covid-19 has been “*catalytic*” for increased partnership working, facilitating collaborative working both across different spatial levels and sectoral boundaries in both the West Midlands and the North East.
- Partnerships in both regions have become more “*inclusive*” as the nature of the pandemic required great inter- and intra-organisational collaboration. In particular, partners from public health are now recognised as key members of regional strategy partnerships, enabling more holistic work within place.
- The urgent and practical nature of the immediate crisis and the design of emergency funding schemes at the local level helped galvanise partners around a shared goal and common sense of purpose to build on existing collaborations. Partnerships have responded quickly and agilely during the pandemic.
- Responding to the pandemic has encouraged more openness and willingness to share data and intelligence. Established partnerships have been widened to include new members.

What has worked less well?

- The way political geographies in both regions do not reflect economic geographies was suggested to have made collaboration more difficult in some instances.
- While relationships strengthened between those who participated in recovery groups, some interviewees pointed to “*frustration*” among those who were not included.
- Some recovery partnerships have encountered challenges balancing and moving between short-term emergency response and medium- to long-term recovery planning, in the context of earlier reductions in local government capacity. Both funding constraints and human resource capacity constraints have played a role here.
- Some aspects of Covid-19 response partnership working (particularly at the start of the pandemic) were hindered by challenges relating to sharing data between partner organisations.

¹ The ‘North East LA7 area’ refers to the local authority areas of Durham, Gateshead, South Tyneside, Sunderland, Newcastle Upon Tyne, North Tyneside, and Northumberland. It corresponds to the North East Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) area.

- It was suggested some aspects of partnership working may not 'stick' as recovery from the pandemic intensifies.

What is the role of universities in city-regional recovery planning?

- Universities were considered an important intellectual resource in both areas. Interviewees identified a key role for universities in providing independent research and analysis and assisting partners to understand policy and develop the policy responses required. Stakeholders described a desire for academic analysis to be complemented by live real data from partners and survey data regarding current trends.
- There is a role for universities in supporting recovery strategy development through creating a safe space for debate. This emphasises the importance of universities employing individuals with a strong understanding of local government and extensive connections outside of the university in coordinating university's immediate and ongoing response to the pandemic.
- Universities also have a key role to play in supporting regional strategy and policy development through working with local and regional partners to support the development of priority sectors identified in Local Industrial Strategies and, moving forward, Recovery Plans.
- Engagement can be hindered by a lack of understanding among partners of the benefits universities can bring.
- However, the role and reputation of universities in relation to regional strategy and policy development has improved during the Covid-19 pandemic through stronger partnership working. Moving forward, there is need for universities to focus and identify key activities which will be mutually beneficial to universities and partners. Exemplar key activities relate to supporting future sustainable and inclusive economic growth through connecting research and innovation and creating the highly skilled workforce to support this innovation. Developing new delivery models and recognising the role universities can play in addressing skills and labour market issues in partnership is important here. More broadly, universities have a vital role to play in supporting innovation across the business base, especially amongst those businesses that have limited history of innovation. With consumer behaviour and global markets changing, in part because of the pandemic, innovating - at least in some form - will be essential for many businesses if they are to be competitive longer-term. Hence the role of universities in facilitating innovation is becoming more important.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the rising deficit and wide-ranging challenges and opportunities that businesses and the economy will face, partnership working appears more important than ever if a sustained and accelerated economic recovery is to be delivered in the West Midlands and the North East LA7 area.

Six key priorities for the shape of future partnership working

1. **Maintain the partnership groups established during the crisis to provide regular forums** to enable partners to listen to each other's views and needs and discuss opportunities to collaborate to ensure a sustained economic recovery.
2. As stakeholders seek to move on from thinking day-to-day to preparing longer-term opportunities, **clarity on roles and remits of different groups and member organisations should be prioritised.**
3. **It is important that partnerships continue to be open and inclusive.** Universities, combined and local authorities, blue light services, public health, the third sector and business representative organisations should continue to be included in, and to take an active role in, future partnership working to support economic development, health, and wellbeing. In the light of partnerships needing to be dynamic, acting on new and live intelligence on economic and social needs and opportunities is also vital.
4. **Partners, including regional mayors, need to press government and national funding bodies to develop a funding system that better recognises and rewards universities' contributions to place.**
5. **Organisations should be encouraged to focus on how to embed partnerships into their structures** to ensure partnership working continues when key individuals move on to new roles.
6. **Support members of partnership groups to feedback both internally within their organisations and externally to other partner organisations** (who are not part of the group) to promote cross-learning.

Five key priorities for the focus of future partnership working

1. **A holistic approach**, bringing together economic development, housing, social care, public health, education and skills, environment and employers **is vital** for dealing with the big challenges (such as tackling health inequalities and promoting inclusive, sustainable growth) **as cities and regions continue to emerge from the pandemic** and address future crises. Such partnerships are especially key to responding to current challenges facing the economy around labour shortages and the need to accelerate green innovation.
2. Nonetheless, **if recovery is defined too broadly there could be a lack of focus**. This emphasises the need for coherent strategies. An important next step could be for recovery groups to conduct a review of what types of interventions are best delivered at which level that partners can sign up to.
3. Understanding new funding streams and **working together to draw down funds from central government could help regions to respond to challenges quicker and more effectively**.
4. **Continuing efforts are needed to support regional data and intelligence gathering and analysis, and to influence effective policy design at the national, regional, and local level**. A particular focus should be on policy domains and geographical areas where there is potential for significant gain at a regional level (e.g., continued development and establishment of regional partnerships between universities and regional partners to provide insight into key regional trends; joint bids for funding to support levelling up and promote innovation). Continuing to improve data sharing between relevant organisations is vital.
5. **Engaging with government to champion greater devolution is important whilst at the same time also aiming to improve existing structures and to develop a strong regional narrative** that will drive partnership working.

Introduction

“... let's not kind of wait for another crisis to look at better opportunities to work together.”

This report summarises the findings from a research project examining the extent to which partnership working has changed as a result of the pandemic and the role of universities in recovery planning. Drawing lessons from the regional response to Covid-19 in the West Midlands and the North East regions of England, the project also investigated what can be learned from Covid-19 regional recovery planning for informing the format and focus of existing and future partnerships focused on economic and social recovery from the pandemic. This included capturing the views of regional stakeholders on what is needed to drive recovery in city-regions going forward.

The findings are based on 30 interviews carried out between June and October 2021 with stakeholders in the West Midlands Combined Authority area and the North East LA7 area (corresponding to the North East Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) area) with a high-level of engagement in Covid-19 recovery planning and broader local and regional policy and governance activities.

Policy Context

English devolution, levelling-up & Covid-19

Since 2010, the UK has seen a new devolution agenda for England premised on transferring powers and resources from central government to subnational institutions. This led to the creation of 39 business-led Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) set-up between 2010-12, supported by the roll out of City and Growth Deals to drive economic growth across functional areas and support local strategies on employment, skills, investment, and business support (HM Government, 2011). LEPs were then followed by the introduction in some areas of ten Combined Authorities (CAs) since 2014, alongside directly elected metro mayors that could negotiate Devolution Deals with central government. So far, Devolution Deals have devolved a variable range of powers, including transport, skills, employment and health, land and housing, public services, and finance to nine CAs across England. The Deals have also established a 30-year core Investment Fund for each of the nine CAs.

Alongside devolution, the promise to ‘level up’ the country has been at the centre of the current UK government’s political agenda since their election in late 2019. The idea of levelling up is to reduce the rising economic and social inequalities between and within regions, without compromising growth in already successful places (Newman, 2021). The recent Covid-19 pandemic has intensified these inequalities, with agile responses to its place-based health and economic impacts seen partly to depend on targeted interventions and local knowledge at the subnational level. Metro Mayors, LEPs, local authorities, businesses and civil society across England have therefore been responsible for leading and coordinating local and regional recovery groups in response. However, the crisis has revealed several weaknesses in existing sub-national governance structures, including inefficient processes driven by competitive and short-term funding, a complex institutional architecture, and a lack of accountability (Seaford et al., 2020.) Research examining the architecture of economic development policy and strategy across the Midlands Engine² indicates that *“the geographically uneven and complex nature of layers of local and sub-regional governance with a mix of statutory and non-statutory organisations and responsibilities”* across the Midlands which has developed in a relatively *“ad-hoc”* manner inhibits the joining up of sub-national and national policies (Green et al, 2021).

² The Midlands Engine partnership brings together public sector partners and businesses to complement the activity of local and combined authorities, LEPs, universities, businesses and others across the West Midlands and the East Midlands. The partnership is about additionality, complementing the work of its partners to generate added value, at scale.

City-regions and partnership working

There has been a shift towards city-regionalism in recent decades in response to the globalisation of the economy (Scott, 2001) and state rescaling in search of a form of metropolitan governance that best serves competitiveness, functionality, and innovation (Brenner, 2009; Davoudi and Brooks, 2020). In addition to the resources, autonomy, and functional scope available at this level, the success of these new scalar arrangements is also partly dependent on the capacity of subnational institutions and actors to deliver effective economic development policy and contribute to multi-level policymaking. City-regional governance capacity represents the ability of city-regional actors to collaborate and coordinate by bringing together relevant stakeholders, to acknowledge shared challenges and opportunities, and to negotiate and agree on solutions and collective action. Therefore, the stronger the partnerships for promoting consensus and stability, the more effective strategies and interventions are likely to be (Nelles, 2012).

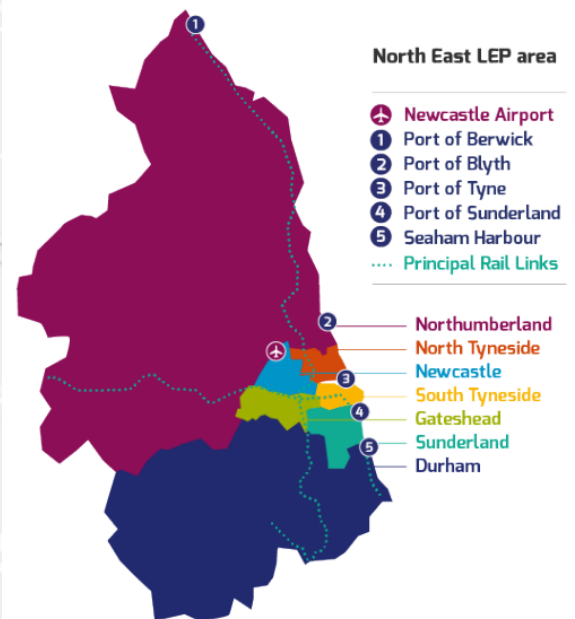
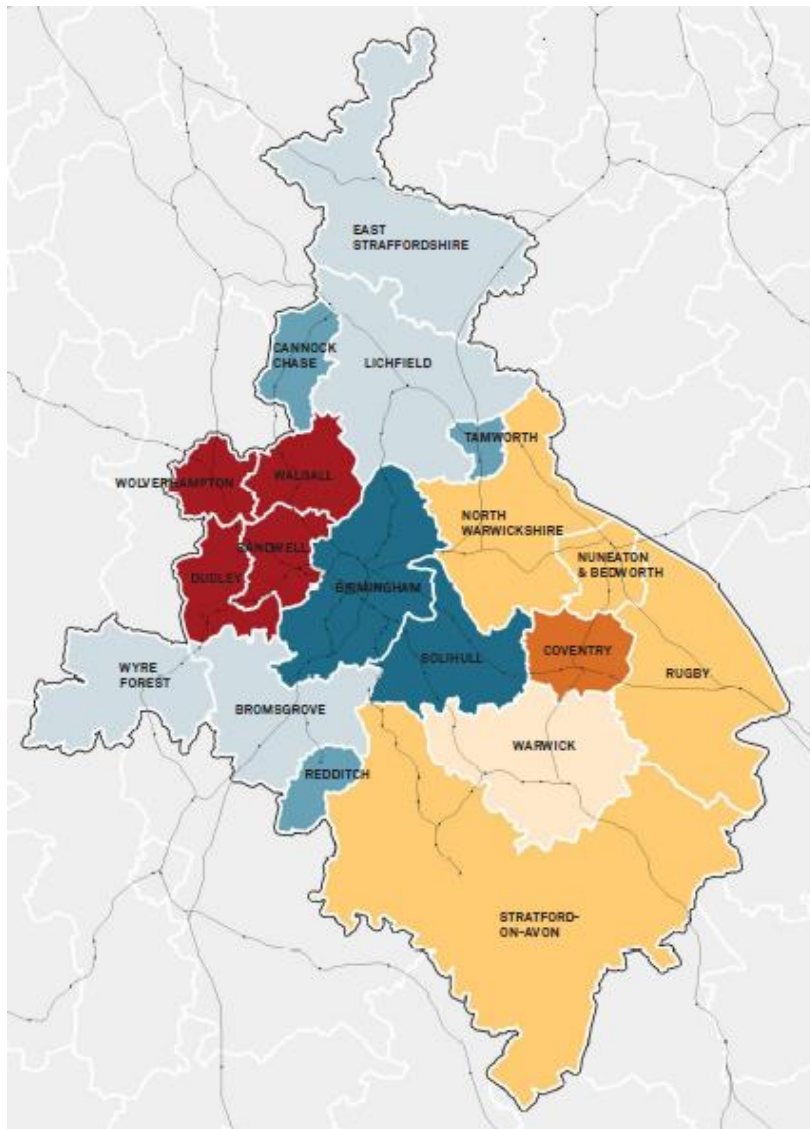
Regional Context

Overview of governance structures in WM and NE

Both the West Midlands and the North East have complex governance structures, which in some ways are mirror opposites. The **West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA)** was formally established in June 2016 as England's second largest functional area outside of London with a population of almost 3 million. It is one of 10 CAs set up in England as legal entities to enable groups of local councils to collaborate and collectively make decisions across council boundaries. The WMCA covers three private sector led LEPs, these being Black Country LEP (BCLEP), Coventry and Warwickshire LEP (CWLEP) and Greater Birmingham and Solihull LEP (GBSLEP). These have been in operation since 2011 following the publication of the Local Growth White Paper in late 2010 inviting local authorities and businesses to form LEPs to facilitate financial planning, regeneration, transport, and labour market interventions in the region. Alongside the three LEPs, membership of the WMCA also includes seven constituent local authorities (LAs), ten non-constituent local authorities (LAs) and four observer organisations.

The **North East LA7 area corresponds to the North East Local Enterprise Partnership (NE LEP)** area which was established in 2011. As a polycentric area with a tight urban core, a large rural area, smaller towns and a coastline, the area is distinctive. It covers the local authority areas of County Durham, Gateshead, Newcastle, North Tyneside, Northumberland, South Tyneside, and Sunderland. The NE LA7 area includes two combined authorities, the **North East Combined Authority (NECA)** and the **North of Tyne Combined Authority (NTCA)**:

- **NECA** was created in 2014. Originally, it included seven local authorities namely County Durham, Gateshead, Newcastle, North Tyneside, Northumberland, South Tyneside, and Sunderland. NECA's boundaries were changed in 2018 following the Newcastle upon Tyne, North Tyneside, and Northumberland Combined Authority (Establishment and Functions) Order 2018. NECA now covers the Local Authorities of Durham, Gateshead, South Tyneside, and Sunderland. It does not have a directly elected Mayor. NECA aims to "*create the conditions for economic growth and new investment*" through delivering on three portfolios: Transport, Employability and Inclusion, and Economic Development and Regeneration (NECA, undated).
- **NTCA** was established in 2018 and is a Mayoral Combined Authority comprised of the local authorities of Newcastle, North Tyneside, and Northumberland. Key powers relate to housing and planning, education, skills, and employment, economic growth, and inclusive growth. NTCA and NECA jointly exercise their transport functions/powers through a Joint Transport Committee which has a statutory basis. NTCA has a devolved investment fund in line with the other M10 Mayoral Combined Authorities.



Overview of recovery groups in the West Midlands and North East

City-regional responses to the pandemic were guided by new and existing collaborative governance structures.

The regional recovery groups operating at the time of writing (in late summer 2021) in the **West Midlands** are:

- **Economic Impact Group** – chaired by the WMCA Mayor, this group brings together approximately 40 leaders from local authorities, the WMCA, business leaders, central government, banks, universities, and trade unions. Meetings cover items on regional *response* and *recovery*. A standing item on the agenda was a presentation by the Director of West Midlands Regional Economic Development Institute (WMREDI) of the weekly (now bi-weekly) Economic Impact Monitors produced by the WMREDI partnership to help regional partners to shape responses and interventions to ensure the region continues to thrive.
- **Regional Economic Implementation Group** – this group brings together Local Authority Regeneration Directors, plus significant partners from the LEPs, Commonwealth Games, BEIS and universities.
- **Strategic Coordination Group** – monitoring of the pandemic by Senior Public Sector Leadership.
- **Tactical Coordination Group (Brexit)** – Local Authority officers and partners involved in resilience planning.
- **Recovery Forum** – top-level political steering body working alongside LEPs, bringing together Council Leaders and Portfolio-Holders, the Mayor, Police and WM Crime Commissioner and WM Fire and Rescue Service.

- **SteerCo** – steering economic recovery, this group brings together the Mayor, WMCA Portfolio Holder for Economy, SED Board Chair, and LEP lead, LEP Senior Leadership, WMCA Chief Executive and Economy Team.
- **LEP and Local Authority Covid Recovery Taskforces**. These groups include university representation.
- **Jobs and Skills Delivery Board**.

The regional recovery groups operating at the time of writing in the **North East** are:

The North East COVID-19 Response Group – made up of the NE LEP, NECA and NTCA, the CBI on behalf of business organisations, the TUC, Transport North East, the North East Joint Transport Committee and regional universities, this group was established to “*provide a platform for regional leaders to work together and ensure we have a shared understanding and respond together to the economic impact of Covid-19 on the North East economy*” (North East Covid-19 Economic Response Group, 2020a). The four universities in the North East are represented by a representative from Newcastle University. The group spearheaded the development of the North East Recovery and Renewal Deal, published in September 2020. This asked central government for £2.8 billion investment to “*directly unlock half of required 100,000 additional jobs quickly*” (North East Covid-19 Economic Response Group, 2020b).

- **The LA7 Recovery Coordination Group (RCG)** – this group brought senior representative from the local authorities, blue light services, public health, business, government, universities, NTCA and NECA. The RCG had four workstreams designed to examine the health, economic and social impact of the crisis. Not a governance forum, but it has overseen the development of the regional economic recovery submissions and the development of a regional Covid-19 recovery roadmap. One member described it as: “*Not necessarily a final decision-making board on certain areas, but an information board that would help look at strategic view and more longer-term view than some of the resilience forums that were already in place*”.
- **Local Resilience Forums** – their primary focus is to respond to emergencies. They have a broad membership. For example, County Durham and Darlington Local Resilience Forum included Durham County Council, Darlington Borough Council, the military, Police and Crime Commissioner, and Business Durham (one arm of the economic development team at Durham County Council), Durham University and community and volunteer groups.
- **City Futures Board for Newcastle City Council** – previously a Well-being for Life Board focusing on bringing health partners together, this group was re-purposed in response to the crisis. New partners, including two universities and private sector representative bodies, were brought on board. The group aims to facilitate collaboration, particularly between anchor institutions in Newcastle to respond to immediate and recovery needs. It is developing a partnership recovery plan for Newcastle.
- **Inclusive Economy Board** – launched in March 2020, this board advises the NTCA Cabinet on inclusive economy interventions, championing the NTCA Vision and supporting the area to become a national exemplar in inclusive growth. It is made up of experts from the skills, economic development, housing, and education sectors. Independently chaired, the Board is accountable to the NTCA Cabinet and operates in an advisory capacity, monitoring and reporting progress, and making recommendations. During the pandemic, focus changed to addressing inclusive growth challenges created by the crisis.
- **Local Authority (LA) Recovery Planning Groups**. This included regular meetings of the LA7 Economic Directors and the LA7 Leaders and Chief Executives. The meetings already took place before the pandemic, but the Covid-19 crisis changed the focus and increased the frequency of the meetings. The groups played an important role in information sharing, developing a common approach and public messaging across the seven LAs and developing a common message to take to central government.
- **North East EU Exit Implementation Group** - previously known as the North East Brexit Group, this group brings together regional partners such as the LA7, business representatives including the North East England

Chamber of Commerce, CBI, FSB, and regional universities, etc. to monitor and support on EU transition activities.

Universities in each region and how they are represented on recovery groups

Interviews conducted emphasise how the universities in each region have distinctive strengths.

The **WMCA area** includes eight universities:

- **Greater Birmingham and Solihull LEP** is home to five universities which vary in terms of history, specialism, research-intensity, international focus, and links to local communities: Aston University, Birmingham City University, Newman University, University College Birmingham, and the University of Birmingham. FE colleges include Bournville College, Birmingham Metropolitan College (BMET), the National College for High-Speed Rail, and South and City College. The [Greater Birmingham & Solihull Institute of Technology](#) is led by Solihull College & University Centre, Aston University and Birmingham City University, working alongside South and City College Birmingham as a Core partner and supported by BMET College, University College Birmingham and the University of Birmingham, as well as a range of employers. Opened in September 2020, it specialises in Engineering and Manufacturing courses.
- **The Black Country LEP** has one highly localised university (University of Wolverhampton) and several FE colleges (including City of Wolverhampton College, Dudley College of Technology, Sandwell College and Walsall College). The [Black Country & Marches Institute of Technology](#) is a collaboration between Dudley College of Technology, the University of Wolverhampton, the University of Worcester, Avensys and In-Comm Training. Specialising in providing training in the advanced manufacturing & engineering, modern methods of construction & offsite and medical engineering and healthcare sectors, it is due to open in Autumn 2021.
- **Coventry and Warwickshire LEP** area includes two universities - Coventry and Warwick and five FE colleges. The colleges include one of the largest further and higher education colleges in the UK (Warwickshire College Group) (WCG) as well as Coventry College, Hereward College, Solihull College and North Warwickshire and South Leicester College. Both universities have relatively large numbers of international students, although the former is traditionally more localised in orientation than the latter – albeit local engagement of the latter has become a greater priority in recent years. Both universities have strong links with local priority sectors.

Birmingham City University, Coventry University and the University of Wolverhampton have established a formal partnership agreement to support the WMCA.

In addition, regional data and intelligence gathering is facilitated through the West Midlands Regional Economic Development Institute (WMREDI). Funded through UKRI's Research England and matching funds from the University of Birmingham, the partnership also involves funding from the leading regional stakeholders, including the West Midlands Combined Authority, involved in planning, and delivering growth policies. Key university partners include Aston University, Birmingham City University, Coventry University, and the University of Wolverhampton.

The NE LA7 area includes four universities: Durham University, Newcastle University, Northumbria University, and the University of Sunderland. Durham and Newcastle Universities are members of the research-intensive Russell Group universities network. Northumbria and Sunderland are post-1992 universities with polytechnic routes. There are nine Further Education colleges within the North East LA7 area.

There is progress being made on the **civic role of Durham University**, with a [memorandum of understanding](#) (MoU) signed alongside **Durham County Council**. The MoU **aligns the priorities** of Durham University with those of Durham County Council. The four aspects of the MoU are: economic development; research; culture and heritage; and place.

Newcastle and Northumbria Universities have recently signed the **Collaborative Newcastle Universities Agreement**, designed to build on collaboration during the pandemic to support the economic and social recovery of the region as the North East emerges from the pandemic.

Key Findings

This section presents key findings from the interviews conducted regarding how partnership working has changed as a result of regional recovery planning. It responds to four key questions:

1. What has worked well in city-regions?
2. What worked less well in city-regions?
3. What is the role of universities in city-regional recovery planning?
4. What lessons can be taken forward for the future of city-regional partnership working?

The findings are illustrated with key quotes from interviewees. After each quote, the geographical location and regional position of the relevant interviewee is indicated. 'NE' relates to interviewees in the 'North East' whilst 'WM' refers to interviewees in the 'West Midlands'. Three types of interviewees are distinguished: those working in Higher Education (referred to as 'HE'), those working in a Local Authority/Combined Authority (referred to as 'LA/CA') and those working in other organisations (e.g., LEPs, business representative organisations, development agencies) who are involved in recovery planning (referred to as 'other').

How has partnership working changed as a result of regional recovery planning?

What has worked well in city-regions?

Covid-19 has been “*catalytic*” for increased partnership working, facilitating collaborative working across different spatial levels and sectoral boundaries in both the West Midlands and the North East LA7 area. In the areas of business and economy, many of the challenges which organisations have been dealing with, have been too great for single organisations to be tackling them alone/in isolation. This has been key to the further development of common strategy across partners and strong messaging across partners both for the public and to central government. It has reinforced the importance of partnership working and strengthened existing partnership arrangements and relationships. Existing coordination groups increased the frequency of their meetings (for example, meetings between LA Chief Executives in the North East increased from once a month before the pandemic to two to three times a week at the start of the pandemic and are now occurring fortnightly). In addition, new recovery groups were established in both the West Midlands and the North East to support aspects of resilience and recovery.

“... it feels less competitive, it feels more collaborated with the wider stakeholders.” WM (Other)

“if the North East were to put a recovery deal together, before the pandemic, my gut feel is it would have taken an awful lot longer. So, this global crisis, pulled us together quickly and got us on the right track. Very, very quickly, actually. I mean, okay, the pandemic's been 18, 19 months now, but the actual North East Recovery & Renewal Deal, probably, most certainly didn't take that long to develop. [...] It was a matter of months to pull together and get agreement on, which is pretty unusual for a document of its type.” NE (LA/CA)

Partnerships in both regions have become more “*inclusive*” and supported new collaborations as the nature of the pandemic required great inter and intra organisational collaboration. Established partnerships have been widened to include new members. In particular, partners from public health are now recognised as key members of regional strategy partnerships, enabling more holistic work within place. The move to more holistic partnership working was linked to a shift from regional economic development strategies that prioritised high-growth, high-productivity sectors to “*broader and deeper*” recovery plans in terms of the communities, industry sectors and jobs they seek to support.

Within organisations, Covid-19 has also brought a need to work more horizontally and organisationally wide (i.e., emphasising the need for cross-organisational collaboration to support common outcomes across organisations.) This contrasts with organisational models, which are heavily hierarchical and inward looking.

“... it's certainly pressing the need that we need to work much more horizontally and less vertically in the organisation [and] that outcomes are much more organisationally wide... [for example] it's made me work a lot closer with the Director of Public Health, Director of Adult Services and Director of Children's Services.” WM (LA/CA)

“It was very early on, noted by leaders and chief execs, that the pandemic doesn't adhere to local government boundaries. So, the aspects in terms of looking at the opportunities to work in a coordinated and consistent way across the region were particularly important in terms of public health, and transport related issues were there” NE (LA/CA)

The urgent, practical nature of the immediate crisis and the design of emergency funding schemes at the local level helped galvanise partners around a shared goal and common sense of purpose. In a sense, Covid-19 provided a “platform” around which different stakeholders could build on existing collaborations. This helped to repair political, transactional, and financial tensions between partners at senior levels, particularly in the North East where tensions emanated following the establishment of two CAs in recent years. Strengthened collaboration between politicians is also encouraging greater collaboration at executive and officer levels. The pandemic was also reported to have somewhat strengthened the need for universities in the North East to come together and develop stronger relationships in order to input into discussions collectively.

“... you saw politicians who previously had perhaps not been that keen to support each other because of, you know, imminent political issues, actually working really well together to strive for the best solution for the area to address the issues. A lot of political tensions were put to one side. And I guess that sort of trickled down the layers so that the working relationships at the working level became much better as well, because they knew their political masters were more at ease if you like.” WM (Other)

“... immediate Covid response is, is a very, very fast way of binding together people around a shared goal, which often is a very practical one.” NE (LA/CA)

“I think certainly the emergency response to Covid-19 and now that we start to engage in recovery planning has presented an opportunity to reunify the region and perhaps repair what has been a fragmented governance landscape [...]. And I think again, you know, born out of necessity, but it's a renewed impetus to us identifying common priorities and thinking about how those are addressed collectively.” NE (LA/CA)

Partnerships have shown more agility to act and respond quickly during the pandemic. In the North East, this can be considered to have accelerated and reinforced the work of the NTCA, a relatively new organisation at the start of the pandemic and emphasised the value of the NECA in terms of playing a coordinating role for its constituent local authorities to develop consistent approaches to key issues.

“Covid-19 has had quite profound effects I would say. In some areas, it's accelerated the work of the Combined Authority... COVID-19 definitely accelerated, getting to market and into delivery, some of the (planned) work [...]. So, I think, investment in key sectors that are important to [the North East's] recovery, investment in some of the infrastructure and housing components [...], and for sure, around skills and human capital, and job and skill matching. It's been an accelerant... if that's a word.” NE (LA/CA)

Covid-19 “confirmed the need for the combined authority to keep close networks and communications and engagement with the constituent authorities [...] so that when there's an opportunity for advocacy, or a combined view, whether it be ranging from discussions with DFT, or Treasury, with MHCLG or even if it's a combined view on climate change plans, some of the community forest work that's been going on.” NE (LA/CA)

Partnership working during the pandemic has benefited from a virtual working environment that has provided more opportunities for engagement from a broad range of partners across regions.

“It is quite a big region. [...] more online work etc. It's just made it easier. But it's also always something that traditionally we've done, it's just been made slightly easier as a result of the pandemic and the new ways of working.” NE (HE)

"I think the region knows each other better, individuals know each other, they see each other more. There are more opportunities to influence and shape stuff." WM (LA/CA)

Responding to the pandemic has encouraged more openness and willingness to share data and intelligence

"I think that the data sharing has been a real positive of Covid." WM (Other)

What has worked less well in city-regions?

Some challenges remain in relation to how political geographies in both regions do not reflect economic geographies. This was suggested to have made collaboration more difficult at times.

"... reaching a sense of priority in that... that's not always easy... because everyone still wants their fair share. You know, do we see regional priorities? Or do we still want our own priorities?" WM (LA/CA)

"... for the local authorities, politically... it's not a clean geography at all. And when you overlay the LEP... which covers the seven local authorities, the governance, and political geographies... they're just not coherent in terms of economic, spatial geography... It's definitely sub-optimal in terms of governance at the moment." NE (HE)

While relationships strengthened between those who participated in recovery groups, some interviewees suggested there was some "frustration" among those who were not included. One interviewee involved in recovery groups suggested there were sometimes issues related to the transparency of how recovery partnerships operate.

"I think some relationships will have been strengthened by those who develop a common goal and a common purpose and an ability to influence it. But there will be others who won't have that same perspective, because they weren't in the room." NE (Other)

"It's not always clear who's leading the agenda setting and who can contribute and how those decisions are communicated." NE (LA/CA)

There have been challenges in relation to the ability to balance and move between short-term emergency response and medium to long-term recovery planning in the context of earlier reductions in local government capacity. Both funding constraints and human resource capacity constraints have played a role here. One interviewee noted that, for example, business support staff have needed to direct lots of time supporting businesses that have experienced the biggest challenges due to the pandemic, which has reduced available capacity to support those businesses recovering most quickly who want to invest in growth and innovation. From a funding angle, one example is EU Exit where the duration of support and levels of funding made available by government were suggested to have been insufficient to address the needs of small businesses in particular in adapting to new trading regulations with the EU and associated administrative requirements.

"... we've seen quite understandably, a massive focus on that immediate emergency response, and much less on how do we understand and respond to those medium to longer term challenges." NE (HE)

"... we haven't reacted in my mind quickly enough to the fact that we're not in lockdown anymore... I think we've probably got stuck in a bit of a Covid rut, rather than kind of addressing the new challenges that we're now facing." WM (Other)

The need to support new collaborations across sectors could have been recognised sooner.

"I think we should have brought in organisations like in public health much earlier with the broader economic thinkers around the table." WM (Other)

Data sharing sometimes remains an issue and was challenging, particularly, at the start of the pandemic. Interviewees emphasised how national data does not always present an accurate picture of how regions may be facing different issues due to the time lag and lack of granularity of such data. They stressed the importance of investing in capacity in local/regional intelligence gathering.

“There's still reluctance in some parties because of GDPR to share data. [...] at one point last summer, [...] the lack of real data coming to the Public Health Director was just getting in the way and then national to local data sharing. And then, between organisations data sharing took ages to work out. Towards the end of the summer, I seem to remember it getting a lot better.” NE (LA/CA)

What is the role of universities in city-regional recovery planning?

Universities were considered an **important intellectual resource** in both the West Midlands and the North East. In both regions, interviewees identified a key role for universities in **providing independent research and analysis** and **assisting partners to understand policy and develop the policy responses required**.

Universities have contributed regional intelligence gathering to support policy development. In the West Midlands WMREDI was tasked with providing an up-to-date monitor of the current Covid-19 economic impacts, on a weekly basis to help regional partners to shape responses and interventions to boost the region's resilience. A key feature of the weekly (now bi-weekly) monitor is how it brings together data and intelligence from across the WMREDI partnership into one single source which can be shared and utilised in planning and responding to the challenge of the virus.

In the North East, the universities have provided insight on different policy aspects to inform the work of the Regional Coordination Group. The Urban Observatory at Newcastle University and the National Innovation Centre for Data were important in providing local stakeholders with analysis of real-time data relating to footfall and traffic levels. Local Authorities in the North East have commissioned a resident and business survey into the impact of the pandemic. The survey - which is currently being analysed by Durham University - investigated people's health and wellbeing during different periods of lockdown as well as the impact of the crisis on people's employment and household finances and community cohesion, attitudes to social distancing and the vaccination programmes. One Local Authority explained that they chose a university to analyse the survey results for multiple reasons including the *“impartiality”* of universities in analysing results across multiple local authority areas, their knowledge of research methods and ability to analyse limitations in the data, and their capacity to disseminate research findings to a wider audience than local authorities may be able to reach alone.

The role of universities in providing real-time data and related analysis to support economic recovery was stressed to a greater extent in the West Midlands than the North East, perhaps reflecting the existence of local and regional partnerships between universities and regional policymakers designed to develop an integrated, regional data hub and tools for analysis and monitoring in the West Midlands. Plans for a similar consortium in the North East are at an earlier stage of development but support was expressed for a data and analysis hub led by universities that would support policymakers across the region.

Another key difference between university structures in the two regions is the lack of a pan-university body representing universities in the North East. By contrast, as noted in the introduction, several such groups exist in the Midlands pan-region and the West Midlands. The lack of a group representing universities across the region was suggested by one university interviewee to limit understanding of how universities can work in partnership to support labour market recovery.

Whilst acknowledging how academic work regarding the crisis will be *“insightful”*, other interviewees emphasised how this must be complemented by live real data from partners (e.g., Public Health) and survey data regarding current trends (e.g., in partnership with the CBI).

“I think universities have got a really important role in terms of helping the partners understand the data.”
WM (Other)

“it's absolutely ensuring that academic expertise is fed into policymaking, so we have to be evidence lead, and [...] I would want to see, real strengthened connections and opportunities for co-produced work and just understanding where that expertise can inform our work. So, I think it's just in strengthening those relationships that we already have in the region, and then being able to take that to the next level, which might be bidding

into a funding pot together to actually really develop the regional evidence base. And having all the universities around the table and the Combined Authorities together to agree that. That will be an amazing opportunity for us” NE (Other)

There is also a role for universities in supporting recovery strategy development through creating a safe space for debate. This emphasises the importance of universities employing individuals with a strong understanding of local government and extensive connections outside of the university in coordinating universities’ immediate and ongoing responses to the pandemic.

“The universities have played or certainly we’re trying to play a bit of an honest broker in that regard, in that we don’t have the same administrative boundaries or political restrictions that the other Local Authorities have. And, so, we’ve been able to, I guess, in part linked to my role because of political connections that I that I’ve had historically, it’s been possible to have some of those conversations about how, how we can come together as a region and how I guess the universities can support some of those wider agendas.” NE (HE)

Another way in which universities have a key role to play in supporting regional strategy and policy development is through working with local and regional partners to support the development of priority sectors.

“I think they (universities) probably need to look at the region’s priority sectors in the Strategic Economic Plan, and agree how they will support the skills agenda for those sectors, and how they are either collectively or individually going to engage with those sectors? Again, I’m sure a number of them are. And obviously, that will ensure that the needs of employers are fed into curriculum development.” NE (LA/CA)

“I do think like having all the universities and having that unified voice, speaking on behalf of that sector, where they have that kind of agreed agenda and agreed priorities in order to support local economic development, I think is really important.” NE (Other)

Interviewees indicated that there can be a lack of understanding among regional partners of the benefits universities can bring. Universities also need to go further in outlining specific policy initiatives in response to the data and expertise they provide.

“... at the regional level... I think there is deep misunderstandings about the way universities work and the benefits that they can bring to society” WM (Other)

“I sometimes felt that the inputs were at a level where you could do almost anything, and it would be good to get universities to put their money where their mouth was sort of thing and say, this is what you really ought to be doing, and making hard recommendations to politicians in terms of what policies would be ideal and what difference they would make.” WM (Other)

The role and reputation of universities in relation to regional strategy and policy development has improved during the Covid-19 pandemic. The interviews conducted emphasise how the pandemic has enabled universities and their partners in both the West Midlands and the North East to better recognise the wider role universities have to play beyond the emergency phase of response (e.g., around distributing PPE) in developing and delivering recovery strategies. Important roles for universities in supporting recovery from the pandemic stressed in the interviews include: the role of universities in relation to operational questions regarding the return of students to cities given how “*hugely important*” students are to “*the footprint of the economy*” and working alongside FE colleges and other skills and training providers in operating retraining programmes to support individuals to retrain as the furlough scheme ends. It was suggested that current systems are sub-optimal in terms of recognising and rewarding universities contributions to place.

“... the importance of science has been underpinned in a way that nobody would believe and because of the expert commentary, and all the kind of, you know, that feeds into SAGE, and because of the vaccine development, so universities have to do something with that, I think they have to exploit that.” WM (Other)

“it’s been a very useful experience, both for partners like ourselves, also for the universities, really important, probably, you know, underlined, new and additional areas of work in which they can have an involvement. And

I think it's probably just sort of reinforced and reminded people of the critical role that universities do play both in the in the planning stage, but now as we move into delivery, as well." NE (LA/CA)

Universities have a role in providing support for local businesses. Universities were described as a crucial provider of innovation support to businesses, both through their expertise and leading-edge facilities/equipment. Sharing of such equipment and knowledge was reported to be crucial given the urgent need for businesses of all types to innovate as the economy recovers and responds to changing consumer behaviour and global markets.

However, local businesses often do not recognise universities as places to engage with for support. One key way in which universities can support local firms is through ensuring that course content is flexible enough to rapidly respond to the needs of local employers in key priority sectors.

"I still don't think that businesses really fully see universities as a place to engage and innovate, as opposed to it's just a place that produces local students. I'm not sure that the full totality of what universities do to a local place is fully realised. And I think to be able to do that, we've perhaps got to change the language, the approach." WM (Other)

"The challenge is for universities is to get out into the private sector to help the skills development of businesses, they need to be perhaps a bit more responsive to businesses' needs. They need to perhaps enhance their business engagement activities, which is never easy. [...] to meet the [...] the changing skills needs of employers within the North East." NE (LA/CA)

Moving forward, across the interviews an important finding was the need for universities to have a focused role in supporting future sustainable and inclusive economic growth through connecting research and innovation and creating the highly skilled workforce to support this innovation. Interviewees suggested it is crucial that universities are "mindful" of the "massive change" that partners have gone through and that they listen to and understand the pressures they are facing whilst also considering the needs of university staff and students and developing a targeted sense of public good. This reinforces the need for universities to be focused and identify select activities, which will be mutually beneficial to the university and partners. One example, of how focused university engagement is being developed to support recovery needs is the partnership agreement Collaborative Newcastle Universities Agreement between Northumbria and Newcastle Universities. Designed to support the economic and social recovery of the North East post-Covid, the collaboration will be focus on three key areas: People, Planet and Prosperity. Plans include establishing a new IntoUniversity Centre to support disadvantaged young people into higher education.

"We can't do everything and actually as universities, nor should we, you know, so the question is around kind of where we can add most value." NE (HE)

"There's the more thematic approach that we're taking. Whether some of these major policy drivers intersect with things that the university is really strong on ... developing mutually beneficial projects that would speak to [the LEP's] agendas, but also support our researchers." NE (HE)

What lessons can be taken forward for the future of city-regional partnership working?

Interviewees argued that the difference between 'response' and 'recovery' needs to be recognised. Linking to this, they suggested partnerships need to become more forward-looking, strategic, and far-sighted to seek opportunities and build resilience to future challenges.

"There's a big difference between response and recovery. Recovery is kind of lumpy, it's nonlinear." NE (LA/CA)

"I think it's more important that the culture moves on. So, the focus moves more from the day to day... to slightly longer term to make sure we are gearing up for longer term opportunities." WM (Other)

Future partnership working should address the key challenges that lie ahead, such as health inequalities and reaching net zero that Covid-19 has “*shone a light on*”. Regions should not aim “*to go back to normal*” but to “*start investing in something different*”. Covid-19 provides a “*different lens*” to view future challenges and responding to these will require continued collaboration across the economy, public services, and wellbeing.

“... one of the things that's probably really moved on as a result of Covid has been a reaction that we couldn't continue the way we were with regard to environmental sustainability... Covid just brought home to people that these big events that we don't expect in our lifetime can actually happen.” WM (Other)

“So, for me, it just really shone a light on something that we've not really paid sufficient attention to previously, when we've been talking about economic development, is the relationship with health and wellbeing more generally.” NE (HE)

It is useful to reflect on learning from previous crises, but it is essential to consider and adapt learning in relation to the present context. It is important that lessons are captured and made accessible to partners to promote better preparedness for future challenges. Institutional change hinders learning from previous experience. This can benefit from the local knowledge that retaining staff and organisations over the long-term can bring.

“I think people have taken their experiences and what's worked and what hasn't in the past and brought them to bear here.” NE (LA/CA)

“I'm not sure there is a good institutional organisational memory of what happened before and what worked and what didn't. And of course, your bodies weren't around so Combined Authorities and LEPs weren't around for either of those (foot and mouth disease and the 2008/9 Financial Crisis) two events.” WM (Other)

Previous connections and already established relationships strengthened the impact of recovery groups. For example, stakeholders in the North East had prior experience of working together in relation to transport and infrastructure.

“We have benefited from a good track record of working in partnership with the key players in the county. So, you've already got those relationships and structures in place. So [working with those partners] felt like a natural thing to do ... My feeling is it meant we were better placed to cope with the emergency situation that we found ourselves in ... in some ways Covid crisis kind of gave you something tangible to work on together.” NE (LA/CA)

“It's a relatively small region. And, so, relationships are often strong and easy to kind of develop.” NE (HE)

There may be challenges ahead for ensuring the sustainability and continued effectiveness of the kind of partnership working seen during the pandemic as focus moves from emergency response to recovery and implementation. These include, for example, managing to keep the momentum of partnerships going (and, in particular, the co-production of regional plans) when the immediate challenge becomes less clear, and the urgency is diminished. Challenges were also described in relation to improved partnership working being built on personal relationships rather than institutional relationships.

“... improved working relationships between partners... a lot of that does work through individuals and personal relationships and I do have a concern about the sustainability of that if some key individuals, were to relocate... So, if I would say right, I'm leaving [LOCATION OF EMPLOYER], I'm going to work somewhere else. How would I ensure that my successor is embedded into those relationships and partnerships?” NE (LA/CA)

“I would hope that the momentum is not lost, moving forward with this. And that the plans that were collaboratively brought together, that that drum keeps getting banged... I hope that that collegiate, same message continues, even if the actors change. And so, the groups not just the people.” NE (Other)

The frequency, intensity and scale of interactions were described as being key to keeping up momentum and creating strong partnerships. It appears that future partnership working will benefit from a hybrid working arrangement (face-to-face and online).

“The whole virtual arrangement for the region works really, really well and enables greater engagement.” WM (LA/CA)

“Going forward, it is important for pan-regional players that meetings don’t just go back to face-to-face but rather engage with partners in a hybrid fashion.” WM

The research stressed the vital role of strong leadership during times of crisis to support practical action. Individual leaders who bring partners together and set clear directions can be key.

“I do think there were some people who stepped up and showed great leadership through the crisis, and cool heads and calm thought, that set the direction and set the tone for others around them, which meant that it was practical.” NE (Other)

“[One] of the challenges that I found was that, because of the good intent from so many people, sometimes some of the messages got confused. [...] So, it was almost regardless of the best intentions, it also needed someone to help push and someone with the authority and accountability to be able to, to do that.” NE (LA/CA)

It is essential that partners continue to share data and look for improved ways of sharing real-time data more efficiently and effectively and that the relevant organisations mobilise themselves expediently to address the challenges or opportunities being raised through the data (or lobby government on the need for further investment in the respective areas).

“I do think we’ll stick with the data sharing; I think we’ve all kind of recognised the importance of that... [and] how we better share data... about innovation... [or] whatever it be in different areas of economic growth.” WM (Other)

“... when we went into this, our data and evidence was very siloed and out of date, so we rely on a lot of national data sources that... didn’t allow us to have any kind of local or regional picture. So, data and evidence is a massive issue.” NE (HE)

Universities must continue to play a central role in regional policy and strategy.

“I would expect the universities to have a much more central seat at the table for the discussions about how those sorts of economic plans are developed. I think it’s a missing part of the moment.” WM (Other)

“[NAME OF UNIVERSITY] has in the last few years become more focused on what is their regional impact ... and I think we’ve seen a real change coming from the top and the university around what do they bring to the regional economy? And how can the expertise and the research excellence really benefit the region’s economy?” NE (LA/CA)

New relationships can be created quickly, even remotely, but soft skills are vital to building them.

“I think the human element and the willingness to trust, roll sleeves up, get involved, put egos to a side. I think that’s that was the reason that it worked because there wasn’t any ego, yes it didn’t feel like there was an ego.” NE (Other)

“[Building relationships] depends on personalities and motivations. Some [people] are quite happy to think of [collaboration] almost as a consultancy type of arrangement ... and it’s a bit more kind of transactional. Whereas we’ve got others who are much more about ‘how do we work together to find these mutual areas of interest?’ ‘How do we potentially think about how we might influence the agenda?’” NE (HE)

Summary:

“... it would be lovely for the pandemic to leave the legacy of you know, we’re stronger working together.” WM (Other)

Figure 1 below summarises the key changes in partnership working identified over the course of the pandemic identified in this study. It identifies various challenges in terms of the development of sustainable partnership structures for the future.

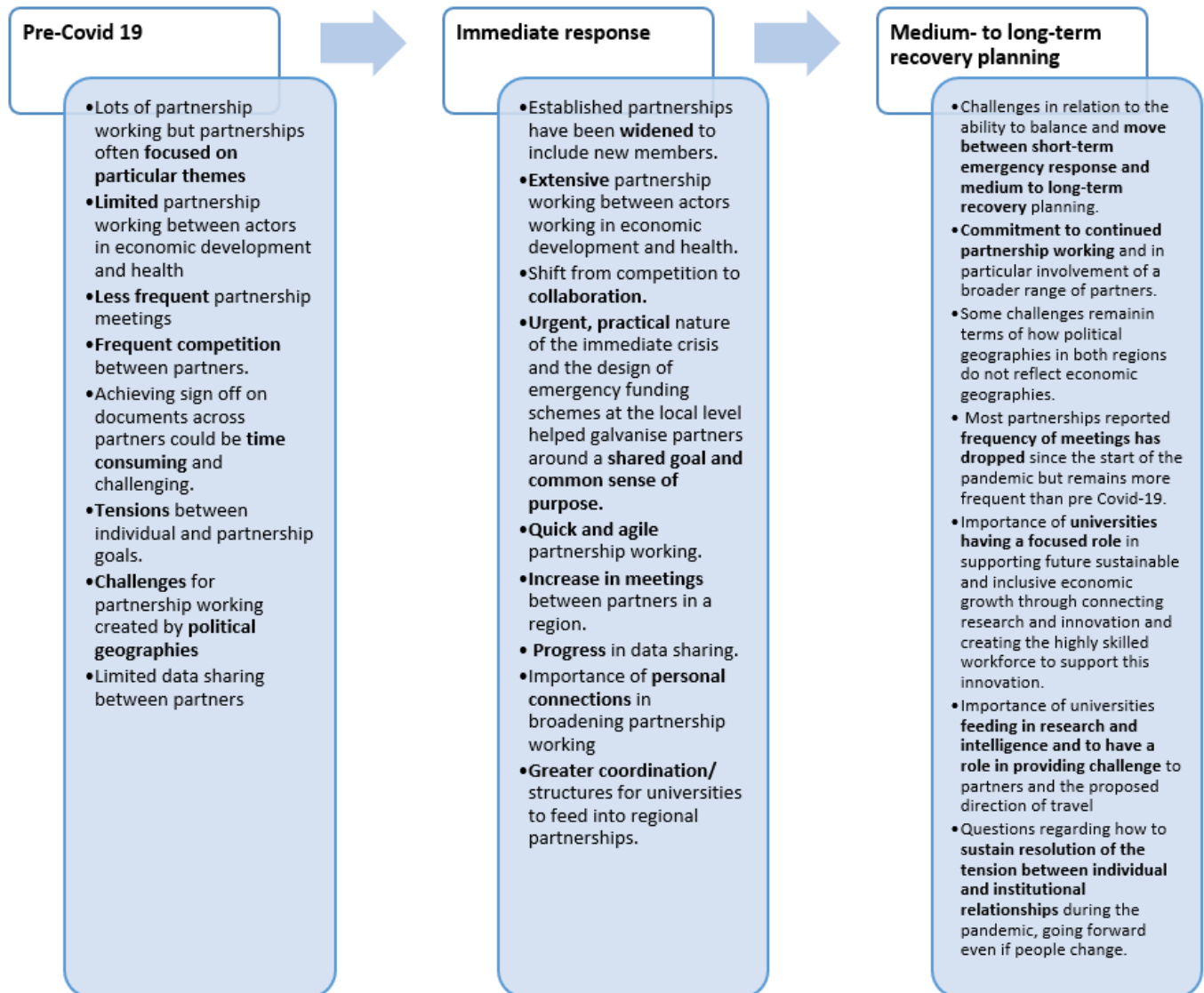


Figure 1: Key changes in partnership working Pre-Covid 19, during the immediate response phase and as stakeholders have moved into medium to long-term recovery planning

Policy Recommendations

This report has examined Covid-19 recovery planning, partnership working and the role of universities in the West Midlands Combined Authority and the North East LA7 area. Although both regions have LEAs and at least one CA, their governance structures are not the same. Hence, it is useful to look at the two areas to see similarities and contrasts in experience.

Partnership working has clearly improved since the start of the pandemic, but it must be recognised that recovery partnerships built on previous collaborations.

The research identifies several priorities for future partnership working in terms of how partnership working is facilitated and the focus of partnership working to support recovery from the Covid-19 crisis over future years.

Key challenges for future partnership working to continue economic and social recovery

- The complex governance structures in both the West Midlands and the North East LA7 area.
- How to move from partnership working focused on short-term emergency responses to partnership working designed to support medium to long-term strategic development, particularly in the context of extensive cuts to local government capacity and uncertainty around university funding.
- How to ensure that the relationships between organisations developed through recovery planning become more established at an institutional level.
- Tensions, which organisations may encounter between organisational goals and wider partnership goals, as recovery from the pandemic intensifies.
- How to best share data and analysis at a regional scale, particularly real-time data.

Six key priorities for the shape of future partnership working

These priorities relate to **the shape of partnerships, wider funding structures and how organisations prioritise and embed partnership working.**

1. **There is a need to maintain the partnership groups established during the crisis to provide regular forums for participation and debate.** Such forums will be crucial to enabling partners to listen to the views and needs of each other and discuss opportunities to collaborate. To maximise attendance at partnership boards, organisers should consider how to best promote hybrid partnership working, where individuals can attend both in person and online.
2. For partnership working to be most effective as stakeholders seek to move on from thinking day-to-day to preparing longer-term opportunities, **clarity on roles and remits of different groups and member organisations is vital.**
3. To optimise collaboration across partners, **it is important that partnerships continue to be open and inclusive.** Building on the contribution of universities to emergency and recovery groups, during the pandemic, **universities should continue to be included in and to take an active role in future partnership working (alongside other partners such as combined and local authorities, blue light services, public health, the third sector and business representative organisations) to support economic development, health, and wellbeing.** Universities have a crucial role to play both as institutions that are an active player in the region, as well as having a reach that transcends regional boundaries. Key areas of focus could be empowering other partners to lead and promoting facilitative rather than control leadership, encouraging innovation in conjunction with business, especially using public sector buying power, and supporting higher-level skills development.

4. **Partners, including regional mayors, need to press government and national funding bodies to develop a funding system that better recognises and rewards universities' contributions to place.**
5. **Organisations should be encouraged to focus on how to embed partnerships into their structures. Rather than just relying on personal relationships** (which can be lost as individuals in key roles move on), **there may be merit in organisations formalising commitments to partnership working within their organisations.** A clear commitment to partnership working from organisational leaders and clear structures to support partnership working (at executive and office level) are necessary to maintain the dynamism and ambition of partnership working generated in the pandemic.
6. **Developing routes to enable members of partnerships to feedback both internally within their organisations and externally to other partner organisations** (who are not part of the group) to ensure lessons are transferred across. Improving communication between universities and wider stakeholders such as businesses and regional and local policymakers can be facilitated through universities employing policy engagement managers to act as a bridge between academics and wider stakeholders.

Five key priorities for the focus of future partnership working

1. **Responding to crises going forward requires a holistic approach**, bringing together economic development, housing, social care, public health, education, environment, and employers. Working together is essential to dealing with the big challenges as cities and regions emerge from the pandemic such as addressing health inequalities and promoting inclusive, sustainable growth. The research identified some concern that progress made regarding developing policy in response to actual need rather than political/institutional goals could be lost as the immediate need for emergency response is lessened.
2. Nonetheless, **there is a danger that if recovery is defined too broadly there will be a lack of focus.** Coherent strategies are required. An important next step could be for recovery groups to conduct a review of what types of interventions are best delivered at which level that partners can sign up to.
3. Understanding new funding streams and **working together to draw down funds from central government could help regions to respond to challenges quicker and more effectively.**
4. **Continue efforts to support regional data and intelligence gathering and analysis and to influence effective policy design at the national, regional, and local level.** Given that partnerships effectively gathered and fed intelligence into central government to influence policy design, but equally contributed to policy design at local level, going forward partnerships could continue to address policy domains and geographical areas where there is potential for significant gain at a regional level (e.g. continued development and establishment of regional partnerships between universities and regional partners to provide insight into key regional trends; joint bids for funding to support levelling up, ensure HE provision responds effectively to employer demand and promote innovation). Continuing to improve data sharing between partners relevant organisations is important here.
5. **Engage with government to champion greater devolution but at the same time, seeking to overcome barriers in existing structures to develop a strong regional narrative**, which partners can get on board with. There is a need to balance developing long-term strategy and seeking to change systems to make them perfect.

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