

From the local to the global...

Green Party Councillors use their experience of Covid19 to explain the importance of local democracy to a green recovery.

Recently the Parliamentary Group on the Green New Deal called for evidence on how to reset UK society after the Covid-19 crisis so that it is greener and fairer.

Based on experiences of working in our communities and our councils, we have put forward a series of ideas to RESET. This summary focuses on the local story that needs to be at the heart of a green recovery, from people led voluntary efforts to the potential for local democracy.

Taking part, working together

Spontaneously, with no government plan, people have stepped up to help each other out. 'Mutual Aid' groups have sprung into life across the country. Whilst there has been a perception that these are often in better off areas, Cllr. Jamie Osborn from Norwich says, "mutual aid was not lacking in poorer areas, it was just less visible and tended to be based around friends and family." Volunteering has involved little bureaucracy and people have jumped in to do specific tasks based on what they can manage. Funds have been found to support this work when too often in the past the process of making funding bids created a barrier. Groups are now thinking about what role they might play in the future. Cllr. James Kennedy from Kenilworth reports a local group has now registered as a charity. Elsewhere social media groups are discussing their future.

Informal, task-based volunteering can be a model for actions to improve communities. People who are not 'joiners' might still be 'doers'.

Partnerships

Volunteer groups, existing charities and council staff have worked together in rapidly established new partnerships. These have then made a real difference to the lives of many, providing practical help and addressing isolation and loneliness. Could such partnerships come together again, to address new issues? In the words of Cllr. Zoe Nicholson from Lewes, "these sort of working parties between local govt. third sector and voluntary groups, which could also extend to trade unions and businesses groups, could have different focuses: community wealth creation and precarity in work for example"

Local partnerships between councils, volunteers and community organisations have sprung into existence. Let's be creative about building on this experience.

Neighbourhoods

Neighbourhood scale support has come to the fore. Local shops have played a huge role. As London Assembly Member Caroline Russell explains "lockdown has shown us that many of our local areas still provide us with most of our essentials, albeit supplemented by online shopping". This is something to build on. By being able to work, shop and play locally more of the time we can reduce stress, reduce traffic pollution, and make streets safer. Locally owned or run stores and services means incomes are spent and re-spent usefully, rather than money disappearing for dividends and

bank balances far away. More home working means reduced commuting, which frees peoples time to be with friends and neighbours. Further travel then becomes a joy, not a chore. This is the model of the '15 minute neighbourhood'. In many places making this real is a major economic opportunity which could be supported with the right mix of incentives. Supporting living neighbourhoods means tackling traffic and roads. The policies for doing this are well known; creating neighbourhood streets that filter out through-traffic; introducing 20mph limits; providing connected, segregated walking and cycling networks beyond the neighbourhood...

Practical steps to support neighbourhood living are good for people and for the environment. Clear packages of measures are needed to create the '15 minute neighbourhood'.

Local democracy can deliver where the centralised corporate approach fails.

Council staff have shown imagination, energy and resilience. They have been key to bringing together volunteers and community organisations. Councils found refuge for the homeless. Councils managed parks and play spaces to keep them safe. Many councils quickly rolled out additional space for walking and cycling – often in response to campaigning councillors and evidence from local organisations as exemplified by Cllr. Nicola Day in Peterborough, who worked “with Sustrans and The Peterborough Cycle Forum, to put forward ideas for the reallocation of roadscape”. All of this has been done at the same time as adapting to home working and social distancing.

But councils could have done so much more. Track-and-trace is failing to be ‘world beating’ in the hands of corporations: councils have the skills and understanding to deliver if given the information and resources. The government is now talking the talk on cycling infrastructure; but it is councils that will design and build.

People have shown themselves more than willing to do the right thing when the case is clear (to the evident surprise of the entitled elite). This is strengthened by participation in decisions making. As Cllr. Eva Ward from Gloucestershire puts it, local decision making “empowers local people and encourages compliance”.

Councils have proved themselves to be capable of flexibility, responsiveness and creativity in the face of adversity.

RESET needs stronger local democracy

But we need a handbrake turn to enable the local solutions to flourish. Right now, planning laws are threatened that weaken democratic control. A reorganisation of local government is looming, with no guarantee that local accountability and decision making will not be further weakened. Control of ‘shovel ready’ investment often remains in the hand of unaccountable ‘Local Enterprise Partnerships’ with unsustainable strategies. As Cllr. Jamie Osborn points out ‘LEPs are dominated by private sector interests with no public involvement.’ The government remains committed to a £27bn road building programme and a £100bn+ HS2, neither of which address the climate or social justice case for strengthening local connectivity. Meanwhile the small change that local government is allocated is often tied up in bidding wars benefitting the well-organised council rather than the people most in need.

A reset for the UK needs a handbrake turn away from centralised, corporate failure towards democratic, people led success.