Climate Resilience, Social Justice & COVID-19 Recovery in Preston

Final Report: Executive Summary

Main authors:
Dr Ioan Charnley-Parry
Dr Alan Farrier
Prof Mark Dooris

With contributions from:
Dr Julian Manley
Prof John Whitton
Marjorie Drake
Maria Turda

May 2022

University of Central Lancashire UCLan

PCAN PLACE-BASED CLIMATE ACTION NETWORK

UKRI Economic and Social Research Council

CONTENTS

PROJECT WEB PAGE

To access outputs from this project, including the Full Report, the Rapid Literature Review and Community Researcher Training Materials, see **Project Web Page**.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

FOREWORD

There was, and still is, much talk of 'building back better' from the pandemic with a focus on transforming society and the economy in a greener, low carbon and climate resilient manner to respond and adapt to the interlinked and worsening climate and ecological/biodiversity crises. Part of this conversation involves learning some of the lessons from the pandemic to inform societal responses to the planetary crisis. Some of these lessons include an acknowledgement of the central role and necessary agency of the state in responding to threats to lives and livelihoods, and how the pandemic itself has been caused by the same unsustainable and unjust economic model/system that is the root driver of the planetary crisis.

This report makes a valuable place-based contribution to this on-going debate, demonstrating the need to link, inter alia, public health (including mental health), sustainability, energy transitions, climate resilience to socio-economic equality and social justice outcomes. It does so by offering an innovative synthesising of three approaches, models or areas of concern – Community Wealth

Building, Doughnut Economics and Place-Based Climate Action – and applying them in a case study of Preston. All three models can be characterised as pioneering, novel and challenges to the political, policy and economic status quo, not least to the dominant (and inadequate) orthodox political responses to the crises mentioned above, which can be viewed as forms of 'greening business as usual'. It is precisely the application and testing of new ways of thinking, acting, governing that we will need in the years and decades ahead in the face of the planetary crisis and the need to respond and transform to that crisis in a manner which is not only effective, timely and at scale, but also just and with wide democratic support. Synthesising and applying them, as this report has done, adds yet another layer of novelty and innovation.

I would like to highlight two important dimensions of the report. Firstly, it demonstrates the effectiveness and support for localised and resolutely place-based pathways beyond both the unsustainable and unjust economic status quo, and I would also suggest, beyond 'greening business as usual'. Community Wealth Building, itself first practiced within the UK in Preston, with its stress on the central role of public sector 'anchor institutions', as this report points out, can be harnessed towards achieving local climate, ecological outcomes and is compatible with moving beyond a narrow focus on 'economic growth' as the main or only policy objective. Secondly, the report offers to my mind a hopeful set of findings and lessons that can be applied and adapted to other localities. One of the consequences of the planetary and pandemic crises has been an increase in anxiety and mental illness amongst sections of the population. Particularly in relation to the global and existential threat of the climate catastrophe, it is sadly all too easy to move from awareness to despair, both in terms of the enormity and scale of the threat and challenge, and the demonstrable lack of global and national climate action by states. So perhaps here, as the report stresses, it is at the local level that we can see innovation, the necessity of 'doing things differently', and providing real, tangible and effective forms of climate action that benefit people, place and planet.

Beveridge talked about the 'five giants' that the post-war British welfare state was created to tackle – namely, want (caused by poverty), ignorance (caused by a lack of education), squalor (caused by poor housing), idleness (caused by a lack of jobs, or the ability to gain employment), and disease (caused by inadequate health care provision). While sadly all of these are still present (and need, as this report suggests, to be integrated within localised plans and models to combat climate change), this report can be viewed as 'notes from the new front line' in the battle against new 'giants' our generation faces. These new giants could be summarised as the planetary crisis; deepening and dangerous socio-economic inequality; prioritising growth rather than jobs; health and wellbeing; hopelessness and fear; and related to the latter, a lack of belief and imagination for constructing viable and significant transformations to the policy and economic status quo. As local notes from this new front line, this report offers valuable insights gained from people 'in the trenches' as it were, those dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, social injustice and the climate and ecological crisis.

The report is testament to how, when faced with the multiple crises we face, we can witness the resilience of communities, speedy and collaborative responses by local anchor institutions (the local state), and the real possibility of transformative change at the local level. Moreover, perhaps above all else, the report shows how explicitly linking these crises, and showing their causal connections, can co-create novel and effective societal, policy and institutional responses (such as citizens' assemblies and City-level Climate Commissions for example), based on local knowledge and place-specific considerations. The report also points to the importance of seeking out local climate and economic actions that maximise co-benefits, and in that way help generate the necessary democratic support for the required transformative solutions that climate science has indicated will be necessary.

John Barry
Professor of Green Political Economy, Queen's University Belfast

1. INTRODUCTION

This summary document reports on the 'Climate Resilience, Social Justice & COVID-19 Recovery in Preston' project. Funded by the Place-Based Climate Action Network (PCAN) with additional support from the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan)'s Institute of Citizenship, Society & Change and Centre for Sustainable Transitions, this comprised a rapid literature review and a qualitative research project, and sought to explore how recovery from COVID-19 could translate into practice the rhetoric of 'build back better' and create innovative opportunities for climate action and social justice.

2. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The COVID-19 pandemic has been highly disruptive – with social, economic and environmental impacts for nations, municipalities, communities, families and citizens. Highlighting the inextricable connections between human health and planetary, economic and societal wellbeing, it has been strongly argued that the COVID-19 crisis should not be viewed as separate to the climate and ecological crises.

Recent reports from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), alongside the COP26 Climate Change Conference, have concluded that without urgent action to cut emissions there will be irreversible changes to the global climate system and ecosystems. The Place-Based Climate Action Network (PCAN) is a five-year Economic and Social Research Council funded project that aims to transform climate policy into action 'on the ground' to bring about transformative place-based change.

Community wealth building, pioneered through the 'Preston Model', offers a democratic place-based approach to building more sustainable, resilient, equitable and relocalised economies. It encourages institutions to procure in ways that benefit localities, and works to ensure that wealth created locally is more equally owned and equitably distributed through community-based, co-operative and public ownership.

Doughnut Economics aims to meet the needs of all people within the means of the living planet. The framework presents two concentric rings: a social foundation, to protect human wellbeing with no-one falling short on life's essentials; and an ecological ceiling, to ensure that we do not collectively overshoot the Earth's planetary boundaries. Between these boundaries lies a doughnut-shaped space that is ecologically safe and socially just: a space in which humanity can thrive.

Place-based climate action, community wealth building and Doughnut Economics have all responded to and considered the implications of COVID-19, with the consequence that engagement with the three approaches has been accelerated by the pandemic. The context for this interest is an appreciation that, alongside the pain, suffering, injustice and predicted long-term damage, COVID-19 has offered glimpses of what a new and different world might look like. In many places, lockdowns have been associated with new patterns of working and learning, and with plummeting air travel, reduced motor traffic, increased uptake of cycling and walking, improved air quality, decreased carbon emissions and a new-found connectivity with nature All of this points to the potential for the disruptive crisis to catalyse the truly transformative recovery necessary to 'build back better'.

3.   THE EVALUATION: AIMS, CONTEXT AND METHODS

The project aimed to explore, both conceptually and with stakeholders from Preston's anchor institutions and communities, how disruption from one threat might galvanise momentum to address another – examining how recovery from COVID-19 could be a springboard to accelerate action for a future that respects and prioritises wellbeing of people, places and the planet. The project focused on: experiences and impacts of COVID-19; glimpses of a different future; perceived opportunities to address climate change and related ecological and social challenges during Preston's recovery from COVID-19; and the intersection of place-based climate action, community wealth building and Doughnut Economics.

Preston, situated in Lancashire in North West England, received city status in 2002 and has a population of 144,147. It is the 46th most deprived area in England with more than 15% of households in fuel poverty, a lower employment rate than the national average and an overall deprivation score of 27.4 compared to 21.8 for England. While its population is predominantly white, around 20% (28,000) are Black or minority ethnic. Life expectancy and other health indices are lower than national averages. Economically, as noted in Section 2.3, Preston has pioneered community wealth building through the 'Preston Model'. In November 2018, it was named as most improved and most rapidly improving city in UK); and in 2021, the best city to live and work in the North West of England. Alongside this, in 2019, Preston City Council declared a climate emergency and committed to a target of net-zero by 2030 (Preston City Council, 2019).

The project was led by a core team of three UCLan researchers, supported by a Project Oversight Group (comprising members from UCLan, Preston City Council, Community Gateway Association and Climate Action Preston.

Methodologically, there were two main strands within the project:

- The first was a rapid literature review, supported by a webinar and workshop, looking at the inter-connections between three concepts - Place-Based Climate Action, Community Wealth Building and Doughnut Economics – and examining how they could collectively help frame and shape future thinking and strategic planning.
- The second was a research study using interviews and focus groups to capture perspectives from a total of 68 stakeholders – including staff and students from UCLan; officers and councillors from Preston City Council; staff, tenants and Board members from Community Gateway Association; and individuals from Preston's voluntary, community and faith sectors and its diverse communities. Additionally, to support a co-productive approach, five volunteer community researchers were recruited and trained to work with the UCLan researchers on the data collection and analysis.

4.   FINDINGS

Four interconnected overarching themes, with sub-themes, emerged from the data analysis.

4.1 Impacts of COVID-19

The first overarching theme focused on the diverse impacts of the pandemic on individuals, communities, workplaces and organisations. Common characteristics were widespread uncertainty and fear relating to COVID-19, combined with restrictions on movement and inter-personal contact arising from lockdowns and other regulatory or advisory

containment measures. Linked to these, several cross-cutting sub-themes emerged from the findings: mobility and travel; working practices; mental health and wellbeing; and nature engagement and connectivity.

Restrictions on mobility and interaction resulted in rapid changes to frequency, patterns and modes of travel. Alongside the challenges for mental health and participation in both work and recreation, participants generally welcomed the reduction in car use, the increase in cycling and the changed ambience this created. Noting the remarkable adaptability demonstrated by communities and organisations, participants were deeply affected by this glimpse of a different way of living, prompting them to consider how such changes could be embedded to reap longer-term environmental, health and social benefits. Alongside this, there was concern that fear of COVID-19 transmission had discouraged people from using public transport and that overcoming this might prove challenging.

Significant changes to working environments, practices, patterns and expectations resulted from COVID-19 containment measures, creating substantial challenges and negative impacts for some, while presenting opportunities and positive effects for others. How people experienced the changes reflected inequalities within society – and participants identified key influences such as role and ability to practise this remotely; personal circumstances, type and size of home environment, and ability to accommodate an 'impromptu' workplace; and familiarity and confidence with virtual technology. While many people felt disconnected and isolated, others were able to adjust to remote communication and celebrated reduced commuting time, increased productivity and improved work-life balance.

Alongside its debilitating physical impacts, COVID-19 has both triggered and exacerbated mental health problems, as reflected in the increased demand for, and severity of cases seen by, counselling and support services. Participants talked about the stress, anxiety and depression resulting not only from the fear and uncertainty associated with the virus and its transmission, but also from changed working environments, and from loneliness linked to isolation from friends, family and work colleagues. They also highlighted how anti-social behaviour and other issues relating to community cohesion are closely interwoven with people's experiences of lockdowns and COVID-related mental health challenges. Looking beyond the pandemic, many felt anxious about a return to normal.

The creation of new work patterns and a stronger 'rooting' in place due to travel-related restrictions resulted in increased connectivity with and appreciation of nature. While acknowledging that experiences had differed, mirroring societal inequalities, participants reflected on how the pandemic had changed their and other people's relationships with the outdoors and natural environments – and expressed enthusiasm to consolidate these positive wellbeing and sustainability impacts. Going forward, they wanted to avoid a return to the 'old' normal and highlighted implications for travel- and work-related policy, as well as for the maintenance of parks and green space.

4.2 Institutional Responses to COVID-19

The challenges of the pandemic have been experienced by organisations in addition to individuals and communities. The second overarching theme concerned responses of anchor institutions participating in the study, which have, unsurprisingly, varied – reflecting differences in size, remit and structures. However, key sub-themes emerging from the data

related to adaptability, resilience, and safety and support – primarily relating to how organisations have responded, while also reflecting community-based experiences.

The restrictions introduced by government to control COVID-19 transmission required organisations, as well as individuals and communities, to demonstrate agility. Participants applauded the adaptability shown by their organisations, with particular mention of the key role played by Information and Communications Technology departments in facilitating the shift to remote working – and the opportunities to harness the benefits into the future. Participants also reflected on the resilience demonstrated in the face of the pandemic, closely related to the agility of Preston's anchor institutions. For many, this revealed the 'human face' of organisations, with staff taking a solution-focused approach and acting collectively to respond to unprecedented challenges. Despite questioning the long-term viability of increased workloads and redeployment responsibilities, participants were optimistic for the future – citing how people had put aside differences and worked together co-operatively rather than competitively, both within and between organisations.

A core focus of institutional responses to the pandemic was safety – of staff, students, customers and the public. The importance of reducing COVID-19 and maintaining healthy, safe and supportive spaces strongly influenced the strategies, behaviour and actions of organisations. Participants highlighted how costly this had been for their organisations and also drew attention to the challenges posed to particular services.

4.3 Anchor Institutions' Strategic Priorities and Plans

A third overarching theme to emerge from the data - closely linked with the focus on 'building back better' and its future implications for Preston (see Section 4.4) – was a focus on anchor institutions' strategic priorities and plans. Within this, the sub-themes were: wellbeing; sustainability and climate action; community wealth building; partnership working; and a focus on the long-term.

Wellbeing was understood to have been embedded in anchor institutions' strategies over many years, closely entwined with commitments to fairness, equality and social justice. The importance of an holistic approach was noted, with housing, green space, employment and food security all being identified as key determinants of wellbeing, alongside concern to connect the wellbeing of people with sustainability and climate action.

Sustainability was understood to be a key strategic priority guiding the future direction of the three anchor institutions involved in the research study. Participants suggested that action on the climate and ecological emergencies – with appropriate accountability and reporting mechanisms – were now fundamental to their future plans and would need to be built in to all their policies. Alongside this, there was an appreciation of the enormous amount of work remaining and the challenges of effectively prioritizing and funding action.

Community wealth building, as encapsulated in the 'Preston Model', is a key strategic driver for Preston City Council. Although the challenge of working within severe financial constraints was acknowledged, participants thought it significant that commitments to climate action, sustainability and wellbeing are all embedded within the refreshed strategy 'Community Wealth Building 2.0'. Other anchor institutions also commented on the approach and their involvement in its pursuit. Although COVID-19 has delayed work in many areas, the 'Preston Model' was seen to offer potential to play a key role in framing and

helping address COVID-19 recovery and galvanise climate action. Several participants highlighted Doughnut Economics, suggesting that its adoption would offer an important opportunity to strengthen the Preston Model into the future, amplifying its focus on the wellbeing of people, communities and the planet.

The resilient response to the pandemic has shown how success has often relied on or been strengthened by partnerships with other organisations, some already in existence, some newly forged. Anchor institutions viewed this collaborative approach developed in response to the COVID-19 crisis as essential in pursuing common strategic priorities such as climate action, sustainability and wellbeing. Participants also celebrated the breaking down of traditional silos and a shift from competition to co-operation.

The data suggested that the experience of COVID-19 has encouraged anchor institutions increasingly to think long-term and embed this perspective into their strategic planning. For some, the experience of the pandemic combined with the imperative of looking ahead to the challenge of climate change had prompted a review of organisational strategy to ensure this was 'fit of purpose' into the future.

4.4 'Building Back Better' and its Future Implications for Preston

A key focus of the research study was an exploration of how COVID-19 might serve as a springboard and accelerator for building a better future. While this thinking did not resonate with all participants, the fourth overarching theme was 'Building Back Better' and Future Implications for Preston. Key sub-themes to emerge were: tackling inequalities; the built environment; shifting mindsets; rhetoric versus reality – the tendency to return to 'normal'; and embedding enduring changes in working practices.

Reflecting on how COVID-19 could serve as a catalyst to build a better future, participants emphasised the importance of tackling societal inequalities, which have been both spotlighted and exacerbated by the pandemic. Significantly, the crisis had catalysed a collaborative approach at the grassroots level. Widely understood to provide insight into what is possible when resources are made available, this looked set to continue and evolve to the benefit of disadvantaged communities.

When asked about the rhetoric of 'building back better', some participants talked about buildings and the physical environment. At the macro level, there was a focus on UCLan's new Student Centre and Square alongside future City development that ensures equity, viability, connectivity and vitality. In relation to local housing, the concern was to promote wellbeing and sustainability. Energy efficiency and insulation for new build and retrofit were highlighted as essential in tackling both the climate emergency and fuel poverty. While cost was a key concern, there was also optimism about the opportunity to prioritise skills development and invest in worker-owned companies.

Participants highlighted the unique opportunity presented by the pandemic to build a different and better future. They also pointed to the urgent need for organisations to harness their learning from responding to the COVID-19 crisis so as to be better equipped to respond to the longer-term climate and ecological emergencies. While some were not convinced that the pandemic would be significant in mobilising climate action, others felt strongly that the glimpses of what might be possible could and should help embed a lasting shift in mindsets and help accelerate urgent transformative systemic change.

Counter to the focus on positively embedding a radical shift in mindset that prioritises climate action, some participants expressed scepticism and disappointment about the gap between Government rhetoric and reality. Alongside this, there were fears that organisations and individuals were already showing a tendency to return to the 'old normal', failing to seize the opportunities offered by COVID-19 as a catalyst for change.

In talking about 'building back better', participants identified changes to working practices as a key area offering potential to re-orient priorities and integrate a commitment to climate action and carbon reduction. Reflecting on possibilities going forward, a key focus was how the continued and expanded use of technology to enable remote and blended working where appropriate and viable, and potentially also enable organisations' estates to be reduced in size (and therefore emissions). Additionally, participants highlighted how glimpses of a possible new future – characterised by a reduction in traffic and noise, reduced emissions and increased nature connectivity – could be a springboard for embedding changes to working practices long-term.

5. CONCLUSION

This report has reflected on the 'Climate Resilience, Social Justice & COVID-19 Recovery in Preston' project, which sought to explore how recovery from COVID-19 could translate into practice the rhetoric of 'build back better' and create innovative opportunities for climate action and social justice.

A qualitative research study was conducted, comprising ten semi-structured interviews and twelve focus groups with a total of 68 stakeholders from both anchor institutions and communities within Preston. As detailed in Section 4, analysis of the data revealed four interwoven overarching themes:

- Impacts of the pandemic on individuals, communities, workplaces and organisations – with sub-themes related to mobility and travel; working practices; mental health and wellbeing; and nature engagement and connectivity.
- Responses to the pandemic and its impacts (primarily relating to how organisations have responded, although also reflecting community-based experiences) – with sub-themes related to adaptability, resilience, and safety and support.
- Anchor institutions' strategic priorities and plans – with sub-themes related to wellbeing; sustainability and climate action; community wealth building; partnership working; and a focus on the long-term.
- 'Building back better' and its future implications for Preston – with sub-themes related to tackling inequalities; the built environment; shifting mindsets; rhetoric versus reality; and embedding enduring changes in working practices.

Alongside the interviews and focus groups, a rapid review was undertaken to examine the intersection of place-based climate action, community wealth building and Doughnut Economics – supported by a webinar and workshop facilitating further conceptual thinking. This concluded that to effectively tackle the inter-related challenges posed by the climate and ecological emergencies and growing societal inequalities, we need a disruptive approach that 'bounces us forward' into new ways of thinking and doing. 'Doughnut-Shaped Community Wealth Building' offers a way forward for place-based action to tackle these crises and reap benefits for people, places and the planet, fostering synergy to achieve co-benefits.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Introduction

Regarding 'next steps', it is important to appreciate the 'real-world' context. Characterised by an absence of supportive national policy and severe resource constraints, this evidently limits what anchor institutions, voluntary, community and faith sector organisations, and communities can do. Acknowledging this 'reality', the following inter-connected recommendations are not the 'endorsed views' of either partner organisations or individual research participants', but ideas that flow from the research study and rapid literature review – presented in the spirit of stimulating an engaged and productive discussion and debate about: what type of future we want; what needs to happen to enable this future; and what is possible within the contextual constraints.

6.2 Recommendations for Discussion and Debate

6.2.1 City Level

- Seize the opportunity to use COVID-19 as a springboard to accelerate transformative change in Preston, by:
  o combining insights from Community Wealth Building 2.0 and Doughnut Economics to pursue the vision of our city as a thriving, equitable, regenerative and inclusive city, and guide its transition to a greener, fairer, post-carbon future
  o harnessing the experience of responding to an emergency to prioritise and implement a comprehensive place-based response to the climate and ecological emergencies.

- Consolidate the co-operative approach developed during the pandemic, building on existing partnerships, by:
  o creating a cross-sector Climate Commission or similar governance structure able to lead the City's work going forward – guided by a post-carbon 'roadmap' and informed by a citizen-based Climate Assembly
  o identifying tangible opportunities to collaborate across sectors to progress decarbonisation, increase carbon literacy and test innovative solutions.

- Continue to prioritise action on inequalities, by:
  o reflecting on the implications of the pandemic, which has spotlighted and exacerbated these
  o critically engaging with and implementing the Lancashire & Cumbria Health Equity Commission's recommendations within the context of Preston.

- Build on the positives glimpsed during the pandemic to prioritise development across the city, to deliver:
  o a green and active transport system and infrastructure
  o safe and attractive natural environments.

6.2.2 Organisational Level

- Review organisational responses to the pandemic to capture learning and ensure preparedness and resilience into the future.

- Promote wellbeing through nature-based and other social prescribing.

- Take a nuanced but radical approach to future work policies and practices, which:
  - harnesses the positives of virtual technology for carbon reduction and wellbeing, and its wider potential for reducing travel, space utilisation and energy use
  - implements 'win-win' blended solutions that prioritise decarbonisation while meeting the needs employers, clients and employees – but also acknowledges that there may be difficult trade-offs.

- Implement 'whole system' and 'whole life cycle costing' approaches in institutional plans to ensure sustainable operations and address the climate and ecological emergencies.

- Review opportunities within further and higher education and vocational training to invest in research, innovation and learning opportunities, which:
  - develops the knowledge, skills and competencies necessary to enable and support Preston's just transition to a greener, fairer, post-carbon future
  - offers solutions to problems generated and/or spotlighted by the pandemic (e.g. use of plastic-based personal protective and testing equipment)
  - provides insight into the relative wellbeing and carbon reduction benefits of face-to-face and remote working and learning.

- Build on the vision set out in Community Wealth Building 2.0, and the net zero ambitions of Community Gateway, UCLan and other institutions, to encourage anchor, local business and community partners to work together to meet growing demand for renewable energy, retrofit and other green technologies, including through community energy initiatives to create community wealth and address fuel poverty.

- As a group of anchor institutions, advocate collectively for supportive national-level policy that facilitates place-based action to tackle the climate and ecological emergencies, calling on Government to provide increased financial support and remove unhelpful regulatory barriers.

6.2.3 Community Level

- Advocate for citizens to have a voice in future planning, decision-making and action relating to the climate and ecological emergencies, through the establishment of a citizen-based Climate Assembly.

- Celebrate and nurture the collaborative culture mobilised at a grassroots level by voluntary, community and faith sector organisations, strengthening their capacity to address inequalities, tackle disadvantage and strengthen resilience.

- Build on the practical projects already underway and explore opportunities to forge wider partnerships and extend impact.