



# Responding to COVID-19 in the Liverpool City Region

## From Crisis to Recovery: A Review of the COVID-19 Policy Briefs

## Map of Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (LCRCA) boundary (in red) and constituent local authorities



Data sources: Westminster parliamentary constituencies (December 2018 - ONS), local authority districts (December 2018 - ONS), and combined authorities (December 2018 - ONS)

# From Crisis to Recovery: A Review of the COVID-19 Policy Briefs

## Key takeaways

1. The Heseltine Institute launched the COVID-19 policy brief series in April 2020, at a time of unprecedented uncertainty in public policy, with the aim of disseminating knowledge and research on the impacts of the pandemic across society.
2. Issues covered by the series have been diverse. Early papers addressed the immediate health and economic crisis, with later briefs exploring ways we might look to 'Build Back Better'.
3. The series also provided a platform for international comparative studies, including contributions from New Zealand and China, along with insights from experts on fields such as grassroots sport, museums and care homes.
4. The series aimed to play a role in disseminating cutting edge research and analysis to policy audiences in Liverpool City Region and beyond, producing a platform for rapid knowledge transfer and collaborative learning.
5. The Heseltine Institute will soon launch its revamped policy brief series, with a new focus on *Renewal and Recovery*, emphasising four key areas: economic futures; inequalities; climate change and resilience; and public service innovation.

## 1. Introduction

In April 2020, shortly after the UK joined much of the rest of Europe in a full national lockdown, the Heseltine Institute published its first COVID-19 policy brief. The series was launched in the midst of significant uncertainty about the future of public policy, and academics turned their thoughts towards the societal and economic impacts of the pandemic. Our aim was to publish research that could contribute to combating the immediate health crisis and its aftershocks, and address longer-term objectives to *Build Back Better* from the crisis. Our concern, shared by local leaders and policymakers, was that Liverpool City Region was particularly vulnerable to the likely effects of the pandemic. While significant progress had been made over several decades to improve health and economic outcomes in the region, we went into the pandemic with a higher percentage of

residents with comorbidity than the national average, and an economy especially exposed to the dramatic effects of lockdowns.

The pandemic has transformed the environment in which universities operate. Higher education institutions were already moving towards a more explicit focus on policy impact, but COVID-19 has challenged universities to intensify their efforts in addressing critical social, economic and environmental challenges. The University of Liverpool was quick to encourage academics and members of the research community to engage with local policymakers. As an urban policy institute, we are pleased to have played a role in this contribution over the last 18 months, by developing and promoting research that would aid understanding of the challenges facing Liverpool City Region, and how they could be addressed. We have since published over 40 briefs, written by academics,

researchers, public policy professionals, local government leaders and community practitioners.

The pandemic continues to cause devastation, and there have already been [more deaths worldwide from COVID-19 in 2021 than there were in 2020](#). The crisis is far from over, and the potential for new variants of the virus to circumvent vaccines is real. Nevertheless, in the UK at least, we appear to be emerging into a new stage, where vaccination of most of the population has broken the link between COVID-19 cases, hospitalisations and deaths. In July, the government withdrew almost all social distancing restrictions in England. 'Freedom Day', however, was welcomed tentatively by much of the population, as caseloads increased and public health messaging placed greater emphasis on individual responsibility, a timely reminder that recovery from the pandemic is unlikely to be a linear process.

We will soon be revamping and relaunching our policy brief series, with a new focus on what we hope is a post-pandemic era. This brief recaps some of the 40-plus papers published since April 2020, assesses the contribution of the series, and explores some of the lessons learnt from publishing these papers over the last 16 months. A final, concluding section includes further details on our upcoming new policy brief series and the kind of topics we are looking to cover.

## **2. What issues have the policy briefs addressed?**

Reviewing the papers published in this series, it is striking how the issues covered reflect the wax and wane of the pandemic in the UK. Many of the early policy briefs focused on the immediate public health crisis and how to address it.

[Our third policy brief](#), published in May 2020, was a collaboration between University of Liverpool health researchers and those involved in public health policy in Liverpool City Region. These included Matt Ashton, then the newly appointed Director of Public Health at Liverpool City Council and now a household name thanks to his regular media appearances and Liverpool's leading role as a laboratory for policies such as surge testing and pilot events. This paper was prescient in its prediction that mathematical modelling would be critical to tracking the spread of the virus, and would be increasingly influential in shaping policy on lockdowns and reopening. By this point, much of the UK population was gripped by the daily press conferences where scientists such as Chris Whitty and Jonathan Van-Tam would present stark-looking predictions of hospitalisations based on Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) modelling. In Merseyside, the Lancaster-Liverpool COVID-19 Demand Model predicted admissions to Intensive Care Units across the region as a result of the virus, in turn helping the NHS to manage local capacity issues.

It was clear from the early days of lockdown that COVID-19 represented the kind of social and economic shock that emerges perhaps once every generation, and researchers quickly sought to identify how we might *Build Back Better*. COVID-19 had, argued James Hickson, author of [Policy Brief No.5](#), shone "a spotlight on the systemic weaknesses of our economy and society, bringing into stark relief the deep-rooted, deeply-damaging challenges that have long been unsustainable". These challenges were explored further by [Professor Michael Parkinson](#), as he expressed cautious optimism about Liverpool's potential to bounce back from



lockdown. Meanwhile, the Liverpool City Region Metro Mayor Steve Rotheram responded quickly, forming the LCR Economic Recovery Panel, described by Professor Pete North in [Policy Brief No.9](#) as necessary to form “a more inclusive, clean and green LCR in which people can live well for the long term”. Papers on the potential of a [Universal Basic Income](#) and [Doughnut Economics](#) were also published during this febrile period, as academics grappled with the ideas and concepts that look likely to shape policy debates over the coming years. The health crisis of COVID-19, meanwhile, continued to hit the most vulnerable parts of our population the hardest, as highlighted by [Dr Asangaedem Akpan in his critique of the government’s approach to care homes](#).

The pandemic and subsequent lockdowns impacted every part of our economy and society. As the first wave eased in the UK through summer 2020, a number of papers highlighted the effect of COVID-19 on a variety of sectors. Daniel Parnell and colleagues at the University of Liverpool’s Management School discussed how the pause to grassroots sport during lockdown should be the catalyst for [a debate about](#)

[reforming football at the community level](#). Laura Pye, Director of National Museums Liverpool, [reported on the rapid shifts to digital delivery in the cultural sector](#), and emphasised the challenges that will be faced by museums and galleries over the coming years. Chris Murray, Director of the Core Cities group, considered [how the pandemic was likely to change how we design our cities](#), arguing for “pragmatic excellence in the everyday cityscape” rather than “window dressing for those that can afford it, or iconic buildings that can feel remote”. Perhaps the most significant shift in our everyday lives was the move to online delivery of many services, such as GP appointments. However, as [Professor Simeon Yates highlighted in his paper](#) on digital exclusion, around 600,000 LCR residents are thought to use the internet either in a limited way or not at all. Meanwhile, while lessons were being delivered virtually, 30,000 households in the region with school age children were offline entirely or had limited access to the internet.

Meanwhile, the UK’s already high death toll was being compared unfavourably to the experience of New Zealand. Academics from the University of

Auckland [wrote for us on the 'Go Hard, Go Early'](#) approach adopted by Jacinda Ardern's government that helped it become the first country to reach 100 days without community transmission of COVID-19, and suffer no deaths as a result of the virus since May 2020. The authors noted in particular the importance of public health messaging, highlighting the government's sporting references to its residents as a "team of five million", each with responsibility for beating the virus. The role of government in shaping public responses to the pandemic was also a key theme in the paper published by [our colleagues at Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University](#). The Chinese government's ability to impose strict, comprehensive lockdowns, and to closely monitor the movements of citizens, was identified as key contributor to its suppression of COVID-19 following the initial outbreak in early 2019. Meanwhile, as the UK entered its deadliest wave of the pandemic in early 2021, [researchers at the University of Liverpool](#) explored the role of place inequality in the geography of COVID-19, identifying high concentrations of infections in post-industrial communities, particularly in Northern England.

### 3. What has the policy brief series achieved?

A key element of the Heseltine Institute's work is promoting policy transfer: developing and disseminating knowledge about policies, institutions and ideas, and understanding how this knowledge can be applied in other settings. Policy briefs were short (1,500 – 2,000 words), with the aim of producing rapid responses to key policy issues arising from COVID-19 and its fallout. For this reason, we were very keen that the policy brief series was widely read, not just by academics and researchers, but by those *doing* policy and

service delivery on the ground. Each policy brief was distributed to the Heseltine Institute mailing list, including hundreds of policy professionals in Liverpool City Region, around the UK, and internationally. We also promoted the briefs through our social media feeds, contributing to a six-fold increase in engagement with the Heseltine Institute's Twitter feed from 2019 to 2020.

To understand the impact of the policy briefs, we regularly engaged with authors and readers, and through summer 2021 sought feedback on the first series. We were interested in understanding how the series contributed to the Heseltine Institute's four pillars of research impact: research and thought leadership; knowledge exchange; capacity building; and evidence-based public policy. In each of these pillars, there were notable examples of impact, including:

- Invitations from public bodies such as Public Health England to present research findings;
- Discussions with Liverpool City Region Combined Authority and other local partners on how research can shape local policy;
- Ongoing collaboration between policy brief authors on a variety of research projects, including international collaborations;
- Submissions to parliamentary inquiries, based on research published initially as policy briefs;
- A number of papers were expanded to full-length academic journal articles.

The series helped to build the profile of the wide range of researchers based within the University of Liverpool, and their collaborations with partners. The series also developed student engagement with

policy, leading to outcomes such as the [Emerging From COVID-19 Stronger](#) podcast series, hosted and produced by two doctoral researchers in partnership with the Heseltine Institute.

#### 4. What next?

The COVID-19 crisis has been an exceptional world historical event. We must not and cannot go back to our old normal – not least because that normal lacked resilience and made us vulnerable in the first instance. But there is no reason to assume that the 2020s will open up an Overton window. Whether or not COVID-19 becomes a threshold moment in ‘big history’ will depend upon what we make of it. The recent history of societal responses to systemic shocks and disturbances has been a history of ‘ignore and override’ – for all the talk of failing forward and building back better, when faced with shocks and emergencies, the tendency has been to double-down and endure the pain in the hope of picking up the same ideas, plans and projects once circumstances improve. Too often what actually emerges in the end is much the same as what came before. In spite of this powerful force of system redux we need to work hard to ensure that the 2020s do offer policy communities a moment to pioneer innovative and better ways to regenerate LCR.

The UK’s cities and city-regions will play a key role in ensuring society emerges stronger from the pandemic. Devolution, particularly the introduction in Liverpool City Region and other urban areas of metro mayors, has emphasised the role that could be played by local leadership in shaping economic and social outcomes. Within the urban policy community, there is an acceptance that the form and function of cities will change, presenting

new spatial and distributional challenges that were not anticipated two years ago. The central public policy question confronting LCR today is how we might best envision, articulate, debate, and action what ‘Building Back Better’ might mean locally. We will soon be launching our revamped policy brief series, with a new emphasis on issues of *Renewal* and *Recovery*. As Liverpool City Region, and the rest of the UK, emerges into a new period of public policy, we anticipate greater focus on what needs to change to ensure economies and societies can be more resilient to future shocks.

Our new series will play a central role in our quest to prompt, broker, and leverage a local conversation on what *building back better* might mean for LCR. It will also enrich this conversation by providing policy communities with rapid access (in real time) to intelligence, good practice and advice on how successful policy models built around different political, institutional and technical architectures might be engaged and applied locally. We are particularly interested in publishing papers addressing four key, long-term issues facing local and national policymakers:

##### *Economic futures*

The economic consequences of the pandemic will continue to be felt long after the immediate health emergency has passed, impacting the trajectory and stability of recovery at the local and urban level. Long-term trends created or accelerated by the pandemic will need to be understood and analysed as Liverpool City Region seeks to regain the positive momentum it was building prior to the pandemic. What, for example, will the shift to home working do for the spatial distribution of economic activity in our cities? How will it continue to change the

retail sector, and how will this impact our high streets? What new industries will emerge as a result of changing consumption habits, and which sectors will wither?

Rebuilding the City Region's economy cannot mean simply returning to the pre-pandemic 'normal'. For all its recent successes, the LCR economy has too often failed to deliver shared prosperity for all people and places. Embracing the opportunity to do things differently through devolution, what new models of local economic development, regeneration, and post-crisis renewal can be designed to proactively redress LCR's long-standing and deep-rooted challenges, support improved outcomes, and maximise its strengths?

### ***Inequalities***

The pandemic has exposed and exacerbated the inequalities that continue to unjustly impact people's lives. We have seen the extent to which our health and wellbeing is contingent on the quality of our homes, our neighbourhoods, and our economies. In LCR, where one in four people of working age has a limiting health condition, poor health has long acted as a barrier to opportunity. With the long-term physical and mental impacts of the pandemic adding to this challenge, it will be critical that the long-term renewal of Liverpool City Region proactively supports good health and wellbeing for all residents.

Meanwhile, the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on young people, those on low incomes, women, people with disabilities, and racial minorities has highlighted the depth of inequality that cuts across our society. The Black Lives Matter movement has further shone a spotlight on the stigma, discrimination,

and unequal access to opportunity that people continue to face because of their racial identity. And the challenges faced by some young people accessing food, education, and digital technology during the lockdown have emphasised the extent to which child poverty and deprivation continues to impact too many of our communities.

As we aim to build back better from the pandemic it will be vital that these social and economic inequalities are addressed systematically and at source. We therefore welcome papers that continue to expose issues of inequality and offer social, economic, and political solutions that will help to deliver a fairer and more equal city region.

### ***Climate change and resilience***

The UK hosts the COP26 conference in November, as the world grapples with increasingly alarming climate events such as the recent floods in Belgium and Germany, and extreme heatwaves in the usually temperate Pacific North West. Meanwhile, Liverpool City Region, as a birthplace of the industrial revolution and with communities now on the frontline of climate change, has a particular responsibility to show leadership in response to the global climate emergency. This will require significant innovation, adaptation, and the delivery of just transition to a Net Zero Carbon economy at speed and scale. We therefore welcome papers from a range of perspectives and disciplines that explore how cities and city regions can pioneer environmentally sustainable and resilient models for living, working, and getting around that will be fit for the future. These papers could focus on science and technological innovations, or governance and politics, on issues such as emission reduction and renewable energy,

sustainable housing and transport policy, or nature-based solutions to the climate crisis.

### ***Public service innovation***

The pandemic has placed significant strain on public services in the UK, most notably in healthcare and education, but also on a range of other institutions. However, the COVID-19 crisis has also revealed the extent to which the public sector is able to innovate and evolve, as well as revealing areas where reform is needed. For many UK residents, the importance of public institutions has been emphasised over the last 18 months, and there is a clear desire amongst the public to tackle long-term challenges in areas such as social care, educational divides, the criminal justice system and welfare. However, in each of these areas difficult political choices will need to be made, and

we are particularly interested in how these decisions can be navigated by politicians and policymakers at a local, regional and national level. We also welcome reflections on moves towards more democratic engagement in civic processes, service design and asset management, as evidenced by the growth of the Community Wealth Building movement, the recent report of the [Liverpool City Region Land Commission](#), and the development of collaborative and co-operative forms of governance in cities across the world.

Full details of the series and how authors can contribute will be announced soon, but in the meantime if you are interested in discussing how we might be able to help disseminate your research through policy briefs, please contact [hipolicy@liverpool.ac.uk](mailto:hipolicy@liverpool.ac.uk).

# COVID-19 Policy Briefings: Series One

There are 42 papers in series one of the Heseltine Institute COVID-19 policy briefings. These can all be accessed below.

[Policy Brief 001: Introducing the Heseltine Institute's COVID-19 Policy Briefs](#)

[Policy Brief 002: Towards a New Civic Agenda for Universities](#)

[Policy Brief 003: How Modelling is Contributing to the Merseyside Response](#)

[Policy Brief 004: Coordinating Public Procurement](#)

[Policy Brief 005: Principles for Uncertain Times](#)

[Policy Brief 006: Universal Basic Income](#)

[Policy Brief 007: Liverpool City Region Wealth and Wellbeing Programme](#)

[Policy Brief 008: Devolution in England after the Pandemic](#)

[Policy Brief 009: What Role for the LCR Economic Recovery Panel?](#)

[Policy Brief 010: A Faster Route to a Safer and Stronger Liverpool City Region](#)

[Policy Brief 011: Care Homes and COVID-19](#)

[Policy Brief 012: The Liverpool City Region Doughnut](#)

[Policy Brief 013: Pan-Northern Transport After COVID-19](#)

[Policy Brief 014: Is Liverpool Still Beyond or Back on the Brink?](#)

[Policy Brief 015: Overcoming Barriers to Food Access in the LCR](#)

[Policy Brief 016: Building a Fairer, Sustainable Food Economy in the LCR](#)

[Policy Brief 017: Transitioning Towards a Four Day Working Week](#)

[Policy Brief 018: Football After COVID-19](#)

[Policy Brief 019: Urban Psychology and Urban Design](#)

[Policy Brief 020: COVID-19 and the UK Cultural Sector](#)

[Policy Brief 021: Racial Inequalities and COVID-19](#)

[Policy Brief 022: Delivering Social Innovation](#)

[Policy Brief 023: Prioritising Health and Equity in Recovery from COVID-19](#)

[Policy Briefing 024: Going Hard and Going Early in New Zealand](#)

[Policy Brief 025: Communicating "Reopening" to the Public](#)

[Policy Brief 026: Tackling the "Housing Disease"](#)

[Policy Brief 027: Inequality in the Face of COVID-19](#)

[Policy Brief 028: Access to Legal Advice for All](#)

[Policy Brief 029: Intergovernmental Relations in England](#)

[Policy Brief 030: COVID-19 and Social Care](#)

[Policy Brief 031: COVID-19 and Digital Exclusion](#)

[Policy Brief 032: Securing the Future of Liverpool City Region's Live and Dance Music Sector](#)

[Policy Brief 033: Towards an "Asset-Based" Indicator Framework and Data Dashboard for Liverpool City Region](#)

[Policy Brief 034: The Geography of the COVID-19 Pandemic in England](#)

[Policy Brief 035: Public Service Leadership in a Digital Future](#)

[Policy Brief 036: Reopening After COVID-19 Lockdown: Insights From China](#)

[Policy Brief 037: Assessing the Potential of Liverpool City Region's Freeport](#)

[Policy Brief 038: Regional Inequality and the Restated Case For Devolution](#)

[Policy Brief 039: COVID-19 and Community-Based Participatory Research](#)

[Policy Brief 040: Arts and Mental Health](#)

[Policy Brief 041: Supporting Learning Recovery](#)

The Heseltine Institute is an interdisciplinary public policy research institute which brings together academic expertise from across the University of Liverpool with policy-makers and practitioners to support the development of sustainable and inclusive cities and city regions.

Heseltine Institute for Public Policy, Practice and Place  
University of Liverpool, 1-7 Abercromby Square, Liverpool, L69 7ZH

 Follow us @livuniheseltine

#### About the author

The Heseltine Institute Policy Brief series is part of a cross-faculty University of Liverpool strategic research programme on urban resilience and the response of cities to COVID-19. Working with colleagues from the UoL Management School, the Department of Epidemiology and Population Health, the Department of Public Health and Policy, the Institute of Ageing and Chronic Disease, and the Institute of Infection and Global Health, the programme is part of the university's response to COVID-19 and its aftershocks.

**The information, practices and views in this Policy Brief are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Heseltine Institute.**

COVID-19 Policy Briefs can be accessed at: [www.liverpool.ac.uk/heseltine-institute](http://www.liverpool.ac.uk/heseltine-institute)