

IED Webinar 28 April

Resilience in crisis: How are economic development and regeneration professionals responding to coronavirus?

Q&As

Below we have highlighted some of the panelists' thoughts on a selection of questions asked by attendees but were unable to be answered during the session. A reminder that our panellists were:

- Alexander Jan, Chief Economist at Arup
- Ciaran Gunne-Jones, Head of Economics at Lichfields
- Suzanne Malcolm, IED Board member and Acting Deputy Chief Executive – Place at South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils
- David Fletcher, Assistant Director - Economic Development, Hampshire County Council

Q Do you think that the enforcement of lockdown (and subsequent potential change in preferences for residents and citizens) will impact upon the trend towards privatised public space (e.g. More London)?

It is certainly a possibility. The reality is that privatised public space is more often than not open to the public but with some proper oversight to prevent anti-social behaviour for example. Clearly actively managed space (and public service areas such as stations) is on the up right now to allow for social distancing. I can also see the pressure might well be for more individual properties to have their own "private space" - that is a garden or balcony. Although how long this all lasts for will be a function of the impact of the pandemic on people's lifestyle choices...(Alexander Yan)

Q Isn't one of the most critical unknowns is the potential for a significant shift in consumer behaviours? and this is made more complex when this is viewed against different demographics?

There are for sure lots of unknowns – and we will only gain a better understanding of them as people reveal their preferences and choices over time. We will then be able to see if behaviours are associated with age or other related factors. I can see cities (London) becoming younger over time as older people choose to move out for example and this in turn will have impacts on consumer choices. (Alexander Jan)

Q To David and Suzanne: How do your councils approach local economy recovery programmes and what are your thoughts on short term public realm interventions to help restaurants/shops continue to trade?

From my perspective local economy recovery programmes need to be a combination of bottom up and top down approaches. We know that government will be disseminating funding through regional/LEP structures and therefore at a local level we need to work within these frameworks and there is value in this joined-up approach. However what we can do at a local level is feed in the local understanding and knowledge from local level to make sure that it addresses in any regional recovery programme. There has been a lot of discussion in recent days on public realm interventions, particularly around cycling and walking in towns. There are opportunities to look at using wider public realm for restaurants and shops, however this is not going to be easy for all towns/businesses and may work easier in larger cities where there is more open space and opportunity to manage the social distancing of customers in this way. (Suzanne Malcolm)

I think in terms of public realm design generally, we need to caution against reacting too directly to the current crisis – I'm sure that over time social distancing will not be the norm. However, clearly some short term measures are required – one of the LEPs covering Hampshire has already announced a Town Centre Fund to assist local authorities in getting their urban centres into a state which is more conducive to pedestrians and cyclists to encourage footfall. Of course, from a bigger picture perspective, the way to make town centres and high streets sustainable is to both make the offer attractive but also to ensure that locally people have buying power, which is of course through having a sound economy with quality employment opportunities. (David Fletcher)

Q What role do districts/boroughs - rather than LEPs - have in terms of financial recovery/normalisation interventions, given their proximity to and understanding of the specific needs of local/town economies?

As I mentioned above, the added value that districts/boroughs have is the local knowledge and understanding. That intel is not widely available at LEP level, therefore it is important that districts/boroughs play a key role in helping LEPs shape recovery and the delivery of that recovery on the ground. (Suzanne Malcolm)

Definitely agree that generally direct business relationships have been with local authorities, so they are well placed to get a real sense locally of challenges being faced by businesses, both large and small. However, there are often common themes across larger geographies and the LEPs have a key role to play in ensuring that such themes can be translated into coherent asks of Government. (David Fletcher)

Q In response to Suzanne; the government had already committed to future high street fund and town deals - do you think these pre covid commitments will be renegued/reshaped?

I think it is possible that they could be reshaped - government will be keen to continue but I think they will need to review whether the commitment is really value for money given the significant changes that Covid-19 has brought to towns/high streets. (Suzanne Malcolm)

I don't think it will change the critical need for this support but it may be influence the focus and of course the high street visions the local authorities wish to pursue. (David Fletcher)

Q How do you think sectoral variation might affect the labour market and our strategies to support economic recovery at a local authority level?

Yes I think this is a significant issue. For example, in Hampshire we have a large visitor economy and hospitality sector (around 11% of employment) and this sector is one of the most impacted. Some jobs in sectors such as this may never return in their original form and individuals may have to reskill – of course another key challenge is how swiftly the education and skills providers can respond to the changing needs of the economy. I do think though that the longer term, the fundamentals of prioritising our tradable sectors which bring net income into our economies will remain a sound approach. (David Fletcher)

Q Will business have a much great role through Corporate Social Responsibility both during and after the current Crisis, could businesses that survive play a much greater role at a local authority level then they do at the moment?

I believe so, the crisis has seen a much closer relationship form between local authorities and their local businesses and it is likely that this will continue post crisis. (Suzanne Malcolm)

I would certainly hope so. Despite many efforts to proactively establish good engagement with local businesses, we still have a task in convincing some business leaders of the value we can add to their operations. But there are two sides to this – we as local authorities also have to genuinely exhibit pro-business behaviour, and make sure that support we offer really does add value. (David Fletcher)

Q Should local authorities be scoping programmes to support individuals who are vulnerable in the labour market or focusing on business resilience in the hope that positive benefit will flow out to our unemployed residents?

It's maybe a predictable answer but if we can genuinely get more employers playing an active role in assisting colleges and other institutions to develop education and training programmes which the employers need, this would benefit both companies and individuals. In Hampshire we have been bringing together Farnborough College of Technology and key aerospace employers to better align local provision with employer need. Sounds like a cliché but if you get it to work everyone wins. (David Fletcher)