



Combined authority governance during COVID-19: lessons learnt

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Introduction

Audience

This report will be of specific interest for:

- Combined authority officers;
- Members sitting on a combined authority;
- Officers and members of combined constituent authorities;
- Partner organisations working closely with combined authorities;
- National partners.

We think that this report will also be of relevance for those with an interest in local governance and the devolution agenda. Furthermore, we hope that this will help officers, members and stakeholders understand the governance challenges arising from COVID-19 to better engage in efficient and accountable decision-making in future.

Background

All parts of the public sector have been subject to stresses and pressures during the COVID-19 pandemic. This 'lessons learnt' style debrief highlights the governance changes that took place within combined authorities (CAs) as they responded to the crisis and considers the governance risks as we enter the recovery phase.

The challenges posed by the pandemic have highlighted the value of rapid action, active learning loops in decision-making and the importance of upholding transparency and accountability throughout. The ongoing task of recovery and building resilience will drive the activity of CAs over the immediate to medium-term, and will shape future priorities. The way in which CAs are able to support and lead this change will be vital, especially in ensuring governance systems are equipped to cope with future emergencies.

We have gathered evidence from several sources:

- discussions with the Combined Authority Governance Network (CAGN), a bi-monthly informal network meeting of governance professionals working in CAs;
- a short survey in July 2020 that captured the views of local government practitioners on their authorities' scrutiny and governance response to the pandemic;
- a desktop review of CA Board and various committee documentation.

CAs are at various different stages in their development – some have the advantage of slightly more organisational experience but given the long-term, strategic nature of CA activity many were still in their institutional infancy when the pandemic struck. CAs, like all organisations, need strong governance to work well and the COVID-19 response has certainly put these relatively new governance systems to the test.

CAs provide a forum and a framework for joint decision-making, and as such their systems and processes need to be designed and maintained with care. We have previously emphasised that CA governance frameworks will need to be more flexible than that of local

authorities – the bespoke nature of CAs' deals with Government, and the developing nature of those deals, means that scrutiny and governance needs to be managed to meet specific regional needs¹. CAs' growing responsibilities are reliant upon maintaining robust governance arrangements to manage risk to ensure the effective delivery of their programmes and to lead the recovery.

The local, Mayoral and Police and Crime Commissioner elections in May 2021 will also lead to changes of governance, approach to recovery strategy and new or renewed delivery commitments. Potential changes in political dynamics and the direction of leadership could throw up additional challenges for CA governance and area-wide recovery planning.

Executive summary

Combined authorities are relatively young organisations, often with lean and streamlined staff structures. They hold a range of bespoke responsibilities relating to their respective devolution deals, responsibilities which will be critical in crafting a sustainable recovery for the pandemic.

An overarching need for sustainable governance systems which can deal with future unexpected shocks is resilience. A strong and well-understood governance framework can provide the architecture within which officers and members can operate flexibly – this framework is necessary because in its absence, the result is fuzziness and looseness around roles, responsibilities and accountability.

In learning lessons to support good governance from the experience of the pandemic, our research has identified some key themes:

- **Clarity of focus**. Consistency in the responsibilities shared between the CA and constituent councils is critical in a fast-moving local policy environment – part of this involves the CA itself having a clear sense of what it is trying to achieve (derived from the Mayor's own priorities), to provide a framework within which some flexibility can be found;
- **Resilience in governance systems**. One of the challenges of effective pandemic response has been the presence of emergency arrangements which can persist in the medium to long term. Systems for emergency planning and response (including those at sub-regional and regional level) have historically been designed for emergencies which were inherently short-term in nature;
- **Flexibility and adaptation**. As CAs begin to adjust from the impacts of the pandemic, they will need to consciously decide which new systems to adopt, which to adapt and continue, and which to stop doing. CAs will, individually, have developed operational workarounds to deal with many governance-related challenges over the past fifteen months – it will be necessary to conduct a meaningful local debrief because the specific experiences of individual CAs, and their strategic and operational response, have been so varied.

¹ CfGS, Overview and scrutiny in combined authorities 2nd edition, 2021 - <https://www.cfgs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/CfGS-CA-Scrutiny-Guidance-2nd-Edition-SINGLE-PAGES.pdf>

- **Transparency and accountability**. With clarity of focus comes the need for clarity of roles and responsibilities. Fast moving decision-making requires transparency over who makes decisions, how and why. Proportionate systems need to be in place to allow those decisions to be held to account. The experience of CA scrutiny arrangements in doing this is mixed;
- **Public involvement**. It has generally been a challenge for CAs to “engage” directly with the public over this period, with success hinging on individual CAs’ responsibilities and their overall visibility to the public;
- **Partnership and collaboration**. CAs sit at the heart of a complex network of partnerships, and during the pandemic many found it easier to “pull together” because partners were collaborating on a set of urgent and shared priorities;
- **Strategic and operational differences**. Having the capacity and capability to deal with both operational and strategic issues at the same time will require specific skillsets, and indeed mindsets. CAs will have to identify gaps in capacity and capability, and bridge those in order to build organisational resilience;
- **Risk**. An acute understanding of risk (including risks to governance) has been an important part of managing the unpredictable nature of the pandemic. As areas emerge from the pandemic’s immediate impacts, understanding how the risk landscape has shifted (especially for long term projects) will be important for future planning.

Key themes

Clarity of focus

Summary of learning:

- Set out a clear strategy for how the CA and local authorities will work together, informed by a good understanding of capacity and pressures;
- Be clear about what the CA is trying to achieve and put measures in place to monitor progress against these aims.

The impacts of the pandemic have varied across different CA areas, and indeed within these areas there have also been considerable variations. Factors such as demographics and the labour market will all present certain challenges for recovery and inclusive growth. Whilst inequalities have been exacerbated by the pandemic, there are also significant underlying issues that will need to be addressed – prevailing strengths and weaknesses in the local community which the pandemic may have thrown into sharp relief.

Whilst there is debate about how Government will drive economic growth, there is an expectation that CAs will lead the economic recovery in their areas, due to their specific responsibilities around economic growth. But the extent to which CAs understand the scale of this challenge locally, and how reverting back to ‘business as usual’ is unlikely to yield the results needed, will differ between authorities. There is undoubtedly an opportunity for CAs to reset longer term strategy and shape how they ‘build back better’, but without funding and other levers there is a risk that they will be unable to deliver on expectations.

CAs’ capacity to lead the economic recovery and make the most of strategic opportunities will be dependent upon the wider structural shifts brought about by the pandemic. This includes not only their particular ‘deal’ conditions, but also their specific institutional resources together with the intricacies of local coalitions and territoriality.

One key point is how CAs are able to define the issues that require immediate action within their direct purview, and the matters that they are able to influence in partnership with others. Meeting key legal requirements will have to be the first priority for all CAs, so there will be a tension between statutory duties and voluntary aspirations for CAs. Governance systems need to work to support those in leadership positions to identify the priority areas.

Socio-economic circumstances cannot be solved by a single organisation. Partners will have to play their part, but this can only be accomplished by CAs providing the overarching strategic leadership. Defining a shared narrative that captures the full range of perspectives and spatial footprints within a CA area will be a huge challenge. There is a risk that recovery will focus only on the short-term, or that dealing with multiple and shifting priorities will be too complex without the right arrangements in place.

The strength of CAs as an organisation lies in convening agreement across an area and working with others to develop a collectively owned vision. It will be a case of CAs creating

a forum to test previous assumptions, to question how well local stakeholders understand emerging issues and then using this strategic insight to pair ambition with capacity, where available.

We are in a period of unprecedented strategic uncertainty and governance systems (and strategic plans) will need to account for the need to continually reflect on whether priorities and plans are fit for purpose. This needs to happen in a way that does not look like an ongoing process of navel-gazing. Different priorities will contain the same goals, but it will be important to understand which ambitions take precedence and a long-term strategy will be necessary to consolidate priorities into a set of missions.

It is worth remembering that a clean alignment of priorities across structures and partners should not necessarily be a consistent aim. It is right that different organisations' priorities should vary and part of the relationships within CAs, and CAs and partners, is about recognising these differences and dealing with them; it is about balance.

Where there is a clear vision, CAs will have to communicate this effectively. There will be a core group of big partners with a clear stake in recovery, but messaging needs to be conveyed down to street-level, right across small businesses, organisations and communities.

Taking a joined-up and place-based approach throughout the pandemic has been a success of the response. It is not the case that CAs have "led" on the response, but many have played a critical role. Much of this has rested on the character and personality of the mayors involved and, equally, the personalities of others in leadership positions. Areas where relationships were already productive were, inevitably, better at taking direct and concerted action. Following the pandemic, a collaborative approach to dealing with multiple areas of focus and priority setting will be even more important. Developing recovery plans will need to be shaped by local knowledge and expertise, using every bit of local capacity in the system. Wide stakeholder engagement and buy-in across sectors and agencies will help to account for uncertain impacts, reflect shifting priorities and review if plans are fit for purpose.

The task ahead with recovery will need to be considered within the challenging factors impacting on CAs as organisations too, such as securing the appropriate revenue for their core operations. CA revenue comes through income generation, some specific government grants, and levies paid by constituent local authorities. With local authorities facing a difficult funding position themselves CAs will need to be mindful of minimising operational costs and demonstrating value for money.

Before the pandemic, CA priorities in their strategic plans tended to be grouped into policy areas (e.g. within transport, housing or skills) and reflected the main challenges, areas of market failure and opportunities for the area. Importantly, these priorities mapped onto the areas where CAs had agreed additional powers, responsibilities and funding through their devolution deal. Now that these strategic plans are being reviewed and potentially rewritten and the challenges for each CA may be significantly greater, there may be a further shift towards expressing cross-cutting priorities in strategic plans like 'resilience' and 'wellbeing' – which was already present in many pre-pandemic CA strategy documents. By building this understanding of the complexities of the local situation through the inclusion of partners in strategic plans, CAs will be able to better design and target the support that is needed.

The relationship between priorities and responsibilities will have to be navigated carefully, which poses a challenge for good governance. There is no doubt about the intention to act on improving outcomes, but whether CAs have the capacity to carry out these actions without the commitment and resources of partners is unlikely.

Resilience in governance systems

Summary of learning:

- Flexible governance arrangements are important for an effective rapid-response in an emergency situation;
- Enabling frameworks ensure actors in CA areas are able to do what is needed in the delivery of public services during emergencies;
- Demonstrating clear lines of accountability and resourcing responsibilities should be part of emergency planning;
- Governance systems such as the Gold-Silver-Bronze Command structure are critical for emergency response but not designed for long-term use.

The pandemic presented significant challenges to the resilience and continuity of CA governance frameworks – not least in ensuring appropriate and transparent decision-making and operations were maintained in a time of disruption and enforced social distancing.

CAs have been able to mobilise at pace, by adapting their existing plans, setting new priorities, tailoring programme delivery and amending governance arrangements.

We now need to reflect on the arrangements adopted during the pandemic period – those that we will keep (because they worked well) and those that we must now discard (because they were time-limited stopgap measures).

It is also important to emphasise that the emergency changes to governance arrangements were designed to support, and not replace, 'business-as-usual' systems. Arrangements should not drift into a state where emergency ways of operation become "standard operating procedure" purely through inertia. Returning to normal activity in CAs will need to strike the appropriate balance between efficiency and accountability versus the longer-term need for resilience and capability for dealing with emergencies.

The recognition by CAs of the need to take drastic action on COVID-19 developed over the course of early March 2020. The pandemic required a disaster response system, underpinned by the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 (given particular additional context by the Coronavirus Act 2020), through which emergency structures were implemented and linked into established governance and decision-making arrangements.

The governance changes implemented have had to account for uncertainty and the need for speed and flexibility in decision-making. A lack of certainty and precedent is disorientating in any governance setting, with the risk that it either breeds inaction, or kneejerk reactions under the pressure 'to do something'. The rapid response capacity

depended on having sufficient flexibility to make and enact decisions that helped mitigate or prevent further crisis-induced damage. It also meant temporarily reducing the bureaucracy surrounding decision-making procedures, making it easier for CAs to act.

Whilst ensuring governance continuity has been a top concern, one of the most prominent and disruptive changes in governance was the cessation of in-person public meetings following the national lockdown. In the immediate aftermath of the public health guidelines and social distancing requirements CAs were forced to cancel their scheduled public meetings.

In advance of being granted the power to hold remote meetings on 4th April 2020 under the new Regulations² there was a hiatus of several weeks during which it was impossible for formal CA meetings to be convened. During this period, authorities were left with a number of options to make decisions and manage their business in the face of the crisis:

- Postpone meetings and decisions. Some matters which were less business-critical were simply postponed. In some CAs only statutory, business-critical meetings took place throughout the late Spring and Summer of 2020;
- Working informally. Not all business needed to be transacted in formal meetings. Members were made aware of, and consulted on, developments remotely;
- Use of standard delegated powers. In CAs there are differences concerning executive decision-making powers; powers also exist for senior officers to make certain decisions. Some decisions which could not be postponed were made under delegated powers – although the way that this happened may need to be rethought and reframed to exclude any components where delegation might otherwise pose difficulties;
- Use of emergency delegated powers or urgency provisions. Many CAs have a “backstop” emergency delegated power which allows for the chief executive (Head of Paid Service) to take executive action.

In addition to the above actions, CAs also implemented a wide variety of changes to governance structures and human resources (redeployment, recruitment, ICT training, staff wellbeing, etc.) to increase the capability of the organisation to deal with and sustain its functioning during the crisis.

² Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020

Flexibility and adaptation

Summary of learning:

- Ensure that existing governance systems can respond effectively and flexibly to emergencies;
- Consider which governance changes are likely to be put on a permanent footing and what the long-term impacts of this will be.

A common theme in the resilience of CA governance systems during the pandemic has been the flexibility shown by adjusting existing institutional structures to effectively support new emergency governance arrangements.

The effectiveness of emergency and remote governance arrangements has largely depended on the administrative capacity and organisational resilience of CAs.

There is significant evidence in support of the logistical and democratic benefits of being able to convene remote meetings, and remote arrangements have in many cases better facilitated the 2/3rds quoracy for CA meetings (which had previously been difficult to achieve in scrutiny committee, for example).

However, it has also been noted that remote and hybrid meetings have required increased officer support. When the corporate and democratic core across CAs are under pressure to make savings, sustaining this level of support with diminishing resources may become difficult.

CAs initially responded to the crisis and lockdown by implementing business continuity plans and adjusting certain operating procedures to enable working from home for those who could. [TVCA](#) ensured continuity by immediately re-arranging all non-statutory meetings to take place by video conferencing and preparing for statutory meetings to take place by video conferencing in advance of this power being granted to authorities.

As CA Mayors have a general power of competence to do anything the CA can do (with certain exceptions), Mayors used that power in consultation with Board members, to decide items on the agenda in accordance with the law. In [CPCA](#), decisions the Mayor was not empowered to make were deferred until the next official Board meeting, when the required legal changes for remote meetings had been enacted. This short-term action was typical of steps taken both by CAs and councils, although few have systematically reviewed those actions so far.

Constitutional documents (Standing Orders, Schemes of Delegation, Key Decisions etc.) have been amended to deal with the type of governance emergencies posed by this pandemic. Carrying out remote meetings only required a modification of CAs existing standing orders in the constitution. This did of course necessitate new protocols for remote meetings, setting out the rules and expectations for an online environment.

Provisions in CA constitutions have allowed decision-making to go forwards through the initial response phase of the pandemic, but arrangements must be reviewed to ensure they are fit for purpose in the light of the altered circumstances. The constitutional amendments

adopted by CAs during the pandemic do not only have relevance to this crisis - other complex future emergencies may also lead to similar arrangements taking hold.

To enable speed of action, CAs relaxed controls and streamlined spending approvals. With regard to CA decision making during the initial response phase, all CAs took some urgent and key decisions under delegated powers to ensure business continuity, with additional oversight/sign-off at Head of Paid Service and/or Board level. These decisions have been published in accordance with usual practice. Where spending decisions were streamlined, the officers responsible still took decisions underpinned by the basis of ensuring that public funds were used in the public interest.

Certain decisions required approval, whether by Committees or the CA Board – in some cases this posed obvious difficulties in achieving quorum. Hence authorities had to utilise any urgency provisions in their constitution to take decisions between meetings. Or adopt a new delegated decision-making process allowing officers to take decisions in consultation with relevant elected members (no doubt only on a temporary basis during the pandemic).

Prior to the pandemic all CA constitutions contained a form of delegation to the Head of Paid Service (and sometimes the Monitoring Officer, or Chief Finance Officer) to act in circumstances of urgency in consultation, where practicable, with the Chair of the CA Board.

Inevitably some decisions were simply postponed during the response phase, however in some cases reliance was placed on the Head of Paid Service's delegated power to take urgent action in the interests of the authority.

Many changes made to constitutions allowed for other senior officers to take decisions in the absence of the Head of Paid Service. Other delegations specifically carried out by individual statutory officer were also changed to become shared responsibilities amongst all the statutory officers (the Head of Paid Service, the Chief Finance Officer and the Monitoring Officer). There were also changes made to provisions applying to key decisions, such as a time-limited increase for key decision thresholds.

Additional temporary delegation powers to allocate funding received from central government were granted to the Head of Paid Service in [LCR](#) until the next Annual Meeting in 2021. These changes were a consequence of the Covid-related funds received from central Government being in excess of the key decision criteria. Hence, amendments to officer delegated decisions were required to enable CAs to respond and allocate these funds at pace.

In [LCR](#) constitutional changes were made to enhance delegations for officers in order to facilitate strengthened organisational resilience and ongoing, flexible decision-making. The CA Board unanimously agreed to change the key decision threshold for 6 months to £2 million revenue and £3 million capital with effect from 1 April 2020 – the previous figure for both was £150,000. Whilst this might appear to be a significant increase, these figures are in line with other CA's key decision thresholds.

In [NTCA](#) Cabinet approved a revised scheme of officer delegations to allow for more powers to make a wider range of decisions, as well as authorising the Monitoring Officer to make any consequential changes to other parts of the constitution to ensure consistency.

In [SCR](#) previously the CA's statutory officers were authorised to make decisions with value up to a £100,000 threshold. Whilst it was noted that the relatively low threshold afforded the CA Board with oversight and control over operational matters, it had led to trivial matters – such as the award of cleaning contracts – being brought before the Board. In mitigation of this, the threshold for delegations to officers was increased to £200,000.

Amended schemes of delegation enable operational decisions to be made by officers in accordance with the policy and strategy set by the Board without placing an additional burden on Boards for approval and distracting from genuine priorities. Changes to the key decision thresholds and schemes of delegation such as these are likely to continue as CA activity grows in scope and scale; it will be important for CAs to consider the justification for these changes given the scale of the challenge ahead.

Throughout the pandemic there are examples of CAs proactively sharing governance changes with the CA Board, either for noting or for approval.

[LCR](#) had regular governance updates detailing constitutional changes decisions presented as an item to the Board from the Monitoring Officer. In the case of [WMCA](#), a mechanism was put in place to ensure that any urgent key decisions taken by the Head of Paid Service had the informal approval of Board members.

Considering the wider remit in CAs schemes of delegation it is now important to ask if there is a sufficient level of accountability built into this decision-making.

In [WMCA](#) statutory officers instituted an additional process of assurance to be completed before any new contracts or legal agreements over £250,000 are entered. This involved certification that the implications of Covid-19 on costs and deliverability had been fully taken into account.

Some CAs are carrying out reviews of constitutional documents with a view to making further changes based on arrangements that have facilitated the most effective emergency decision-making. LCR has instituted a rapid review into governance arrangements, namely into the Scheme of Delegations to identify changes that would be beneficial to the smooth running of the CA.

Transparency and accountability

Summary of learning:

- Clarify responsibilities for decision-making and governance, especially where chains of accountability are complex and involve multiple individuals;
- Consistent oversight of key decisions and providing clear documentation to support decision-making is important, the transfer of powers needs corresponding checks and balances;
- Evaluate the CAs response to the pandemic through scrutiny and take account of the findings to inform future planning.

For some CAs the pandemic has provided an opportunity to engage more directly with the public on the response activity. It has also been a reminder of the importance of democratic governance - transparency and accountability have been a challenge to maintain consistently during the pandemic.

Balancing the need to act quickly alongside upholding democratic decision-making means that emergency arrangements may conflict with providing the expected level of public consultation and scrutiny. It may be necessary now (given shifting organisational priorities) to reflect on the expectations around transparency and accountability, and to reset arrangements.

It is also important to ensure that if and when emergency governance arrangements are enacted in future that they are transparent, accountable and subject to regular review, and that the public interest is protected at all times. These are difficult processes to implement within the context of a crisis but there should be a way to monitor emergency arrangements, communicate trade-offs, and ensure that they are necessary, proportional and temporary.

CAs relied on delegated decision making in the early stages of the pandemic but soon moved to remote meetings or a hybrid set-up. After the April 2020 Regulations came into effect CAs were able to conduct remote meetings. Some took immediate steps to reconvene a full suite of member meetings, but the most common approach was to act in a way that reflected "business need".

Remote meetings enabled CA decision-making and scrutiny business to resume and signalled a move away from relying on emergency powers. A move back to in-person meetings without legislation to enable flexibility around remote meetings will inevitably divert decision-making back to delegated individuals in future times of emergency. To safeguard local democracy and accountability, major decisions and those of a controversial nature should continue to be made by elected members, rather than reliance on delegated powers of officers.

As CAs cover a wider geographical area than their local authority counterparts, remote meetings were particularly effective at supporting member attendance. It has been indicated by most CAs that public participation and member attendance at meetings have generally increased since remote meetings came into effect.

In [WECA](#) the constitution allowed the Head of Paid Service to take urgent and emergency decisions in consultation the Mayor and it also made a provision for the Chair of scrutiny to be kept fully informed of any such decisions whenever this was practical.

In [NTCA](#) a series of reports updated the scrutiny committee on the role that the CA was playing in supporting COVID-19 response and the governance changes this entailed.

Throughout the pandemic the scrutiny committee in [LCR](#) has received an update from the Mayor at each meeting. This committee has also sought to institute a public question time at scrutiny to provide broader engagement for residents and to contribute to the committees work planning process.

Providing a clear audit trail demonstrating the driving rationale and information that key decisions were based on is vital in ensuring accountability, especially when CAs are acting at pace.

CAs will inevitably have slightly different approaches to scrutiny, and there have been varying degrees of involvement of scrutiny in oversight of the response phase. Ultimately scrutiny is carried out on behalf of the public and therefore requires transparency.

Discussion with the Mayor about scrutiny's role will be important, especially in providing assistance to the recovery planning process. Executive-scrutiny engagement differs in CAs, in some cases Mayoral accountability happens through regular 'set-piece' scrutiny of the mayor, relating to their core role and responsibilities, in other cases mayoral attendance at scrutiny is more infrequent. In some CAs, such as GMCA and NTCA, mayoral accountability is also achieved through a public mayoral question time as well.

Public involvement

Summary of learning:

- Develop greater public awareness of and engagement in the work of the CA;
- Involve and empower the public through formal participation mechanisms;
- Governance systems need to be responsive to citizen needs and changing realities.

The pandemic has acted as a catalyst for the modernisation of government administration across all levels, with public services being digitalised, more responsive, and easily accessible. Many of these measures, such as remote meetings and arrangements aimed at increasing public participation, will no doubt have a durable legacy as CA governance returns to normality.

Effective communication and governance arrangements that seek the input of the public can help CAs convey their objectives for, and impacts on, communities. Furthermore, in future crisis scenarios, this supports robust accountability by allowing residents to check that emergency resources are distributed equitably and used optimally.

In [WMCA](#) new collaborative governance structures were set up to guide the response (Recovery Forum, Economic Impact Group, Regional Economic Implementation Group amongst others). There has been an additional innovative example of CA public participation in [WMCA](#) through the West Midlands Recovery Coordination Group, set up to involve residents in plans for community recovery of Covid-19 through the establishment of a Citizens' Panel (supported by an independent organisation). [NTCA](#) also announced a Citizens' assembly on Climate Change to take place in 2021, facilitated by an independent organisation.

Prior to the pandemic there were already some interesting examples of public participation arrangements in CAs, but there is arguably a lack of standard and formal approaches to ongoing public participation that feeds into the policy process (outside of CAs statutory responsibilities around public engagement in strategic planning for example).

Some CAs do have provisions for co-optees in the membership of scrutiny committees, which is a step in the right direction for increasing public participation and representation in the scrutiny of CA business. But there is an absence of arrangements written down in CA constitutions to outline public participation, aside from provisions in place for public questions at scrutiny meetings or Board meetings.

[GMCA](#) and [WMCA](#) have a 'Youth Combined Authority' in place set-up to advise the work of the Mayors, and in WMCA two representatives from the Young Combined Authority have joined the Overview & Scrutiny Committee and Transport Scrutiny Sub-Committee. Feedback so far suggests this is working well, the young representatives are engaged with the committee and its members on a formal and informal basis, they provide an alternative perspective on a number of areas and challenge the Mayor and or Portfolio Leads at Q&A sessions.

There are also examples of Business Engagement Forums, as in TVCA, made up of local businesses who receive regular information from the CA and are consulted on and invited to participate in strategy and policy development. However, examples of community engagement with CA strategic planning and decision-making is very limited.

As the situation changes, CAs will continue to face challenging decisions, balancing the health, economic and societal needs of their areas. Seeking public input and communicating the tough choices and trade-offs involved will be crucial in building trust.

Partnership and collaboration

Summary of learning:

- Gather and disseminate information from organisations and communities across the CA area;
- Enhance integration between local partners and stakeholders;
- Ensure that there is effective coordination and communication between the CA, central and local government, and private and public sector bodies.

A core aim of CAs is to work through consensus, and most have been built on a strong history of collaboration between local authorities and the private sector.

CAs sit at the heart of a complex network of partnerships, and during the pandemic many found it easier to "pull together" because partners were collaborating on a set of urgent and shared priorities. Difficulties arising from co-ordinating the emergency response across different levels of government in and around the CA area were made somewhat easier by uniting around common goals.

Throughout the pandemic response CAs have had to strike a balance between the effective provision of a cohesive and unified strategic direction at the regional level, whilst also supporting local decision-makers to manage the situation in their areas with context-specific strategies.

CA areas – via their Local Resilience Forums and a range of additional partners – continue to collaborate strongly in response (overseen by Strategic Coordination Groups) and recovery (through a Recovery Coordination Groups). But as we move into the post-pandemic space those alliances and common goals may become weaker and more diffuse. It is important to understand how to sustain, and where necessary rebuild, partnerships to operate in “normal” times but in a different strategic environment.

During the early stages of the pandemic CAs facilitated local leaders in coming together to identify priorities that would guide the collective response. Constituent authorities have actively collaborated at both a political and officer level throughout the pandemic, and CAs have played an ongoing role in leading elements of regional recovery planning.

The pandemic has highlighted the need for producing and sharing high-quality data, in GMCA the [Situation Reporting System](#) allowed all 10 GM councils to share data in one place. This dashboard of information monitored PPE levels, fatalities, infection rates and outbreaks to provide a coherent picture of operational pressures.

Responding to crises requires different parts of the public, private and voluntary sectors to work together. Some bodies, such as local authorities, NHS trusts, police forces, transport companies and utilities have legal responsibilities under the Civil Contingencies Act. While others such as charities and mutual aid groups provided critical services and much of this work is coordinated through Local Resilience Forums.

From the emergency response delivered to date, there has been wide recognition that the neighbourhood and locality led responses, often in the form of mutual aid groups, have led to some of the most effective interventions. Partnering with civil society groups and private sector organisations strengthened the CA response to the pandemic – but there is a balance to strike between supporting and coordinating civic activity, and adopting a prescriptive approach to micromanaging civic activity in aligning it with CA plans and strategy. Working with others on the response at a regional level has been challenging – but somewhat easier where a CA has responsibility for a specific operational service like transport.

There have also been examples of collaboration in PPE procurement across regions during the pandemic. Some of the quick constitutional changes CAs made regarding delegated decisions would have previously taken place over a much longer timeframe requiring member approval stages. But during the crisis, response amendments were made in a matter of weeks to allow quicker purchasing of vital resources by pooling resources together with partners.

Further work should continue to ensure recovery interventions are designed and delivered at the appropriate geographical level, with CA activity leading and providing a consistent approach where required. Ongoing recovery action planning will have to ensure representation from across the system, involving public, private and voluntary sectors, seeking to draw on local evidence and learning to inform future responses. Introducing effective measures for continued cooperation and monitoring the effectiveness of working between these sectors will be important. For many CAs this will involve working with the grain of existing relationships – but the May 2021 elections and the recession of the pandemic leading to the dissipation of the sense that “we are all in this together” presents a risk.

Individual CAs will need to shape the type of partnership working that is appropriate for their locality, and we expect that the nature of the personal and political dynamics in every area will continue to look different, with those differences probably increasing over time. Going forwards, there needs to be a clear agreement to the purpose of collaboration between partners within in the CA area and an understanding of how they complement, rather than detract from or duplicate the work of each other.

A systems approach accounting for the role of CAs, LEPs, local authorities and other public bodies on a regional and local level will be important. The nature of the LEPs relationship to the CA varies from area to area – whether the LEP remains an entirely separate body, whether it is legally separate with its own governance and decision-making arrangements within the CA, or whether it is an advisory body or sub-committee of the LEP. Where LEPs have merged with a CA it can facilitate closer working between the key elements and oversight and influence in the different areas (e.g. housing, transport infrastructure, business growth) that were interdependent in terms of area improvement.

There has generally been an acceptance that there still needs to be a place within the CA for business to have a “voice”, and Business Boards (and similarly named committees) have proven a convenient way to establish such bodies in an advisory capacity. The question will be whether these arrangements are sustainable if Government chooses to change the governing framework for economic development, and whether the CA/LEP geography continues to be the one at which Government will take action. Structural changes have the potential to fracture even strong relationships.

The diversity of needs across a wide geographical area make deciding on priorities for growth and economic development a particular challenge for CAs. Added to this is the complication when LEP geography does not match the geography of CAs.

CAs recognise the importance that strategic procurement and collaborating with the wider public sector can play in delivering efficiencies, transforming service delivery as well as ensuring value for money and positively influencing the impact on the local and regional economy.

The institutional structures underpinning collaboration will work differently in different places, especially in CAs without co-terminosity with other public sector bodies. This will pose a challenge for the interdependence and complexity of certain policy areas within CA footprints but outside of the CA's responsibility.

Strategic and operational differences

Summary of learning:

- Eliminate institutional overlaps by differentiating functions – provide clarity on who is doing what, who controls the funds and who makes key decisions;
- Assess the strategic and operation tasks of the recovery phase and match this with CA and local capacity.

The different spatial scales and layers of governance in CA areas creates operational complexity, and at times organisational confusion. Local operational responsibilities in the delivery of area-wide strategic plans need to be clearly defined.

There will need to be a recognition of the differing demands of operational and strategic post-pandemic action. Operational business support in the coming months will be different from planning with a thirty-year horizon – both are necessary for CAs, but both require a fundamentally different approach.

The impacts of the pandemic and phases of recovery will not be discrete from one another, and there will be significant 'blurring' between timescales. This raises challenges for project management, and for the operation and oversights of "gateways" that might have been set for external or senior review of major projects. Some major projects are having to be reprofiled as a result, which raises challenges around both operational and strategic oversight.

It is also important to distinguish between plans for the area at large (which will include constituent authorities and partners) from the CAs own organisational plans - i.e., how it will deliver the plans for the area. Both are essential, but defining the roles in delivering the recovery, and where strategic and implementation responsibilities will lie has important ramifications for how CAs act and accountability for these actions. Having an overview of recovery planning will be critical, from which a local breakdown can be provided to each constituent authority to enable partnership working in formulating a local recovery plan.

As part of the recovery planning process in [LCR](#) a distinction has been made concerning the COVID-19 Economic Recovery Plan "as a City Region plan rather than a Combined Authority plan or public sector plan. It will support the City Region's engagement with government on recovery planning/funding as well as provide a local framework for delivering the recovery". The engagement undertaken by the CA in this exercise revolved around consensus with various groups on priorities to focus discussions with Government, namely on what the local area needs and how it could contribute to the recovery.

An interesting aspect in the above example is the area-wide ownership of the plan, and it being presented as the best path for recovery across the City Region. A regional recovery which works in partnership across multiple levels of governance designed and led by CAs, but developed with public and private sector partners, will stimulate the economy in a way that best responds to locally identified challenges and opportunities. This is testament to the convening power and strategic direction of CAs and how they can galvanize collective approaches to problem solving.

Having the capacity and capability to deal with both operational and strategic issues at the same time will require specific skillsets, and indeed mindsets. This may be very different to the skillset which the CA possesses amongst its officer/member corps, and especially CAs with a lean organisational footprint. CAs will have to identify gaps in capacity and capability, and bridge those in order to build organisational resilience. Changes in committee membership, political control and senior officer leadership within constituent authorities and the CA itself will all have implications for organisational capacity and capability.

The definition of operational priorities is also a challenge. Detailed directorate level business plans for 2021/22 will need to highlight the assumptions on which they have been based, whilst allowing for some flexibility to enable iteration as strategic factors become clearer.

It is important to note that activity at the CA level is influenced, enabled and, at times, restricted by national policy and funding. A lack of access to financial resources and the uncertainty of future funding makes strategic planning difficult at the best of times. All business plans have been developed against the backdrop of considerable uncertainty, so there will need to be in-built mechanisms within the strategic planning process to allow for evolution and creativity.

Undoubtedly, there will be a challenge in providing strategic coherence and giving a voice to all the communities and businesses within a region without becoming unwieldy – a delicate balance to strike between representation and executive leadership.

Risk

Summary of learning:

- Encourage future preparedness for risk and contingency planning for major emergencies;
- Cultivate the relationships that future response activity will depend upon;
- Put in place effective monitoring to track the longer-term impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable groups;
- Test assumptions, evaluate progress and identify needs for the successful delivery of CA projects.

Shifting priorities mean that certain areas are now subject to greater, and unexpected risks. The tempo of decision-making and other activity during the pandemic has meant that risk has been handled in an ad-hoc and dynamic way. This has been largely effective, but a different approach may need to be applied to managing longer-term risks.

Encouraging an appropriate level of preparedness to enable an effective multi-partner response to future pandemics, with lessons learnt from COVID-19, will need to be embedded into emergency and business continuity plans.

Local approaches to the COVID-19 crisis have been responsive and adaptable in meeting the needs of residents and businesses, and it is important that the relationships and partnerships emerging from the response phase are cultivated in the recovery phase. A key positive takeaway from CA experience of the pandemic will be reinforcing and maintaining the local networks that can add value and provide support.

Due to the speed of the response required, it was impossible for CAs to fully consider the implication of decisions upon different groups of individuals. In future, there will be opportunities for CAs, and their constituent authorities, to reflect on how actions may have affected inequalities, and how these consequences will be tackled.

The pandemic will have impacted the progress of projects or disrupted priorities leading to slippage. But the full effect may only be seen in the future where behavioural conditions (for example the use of public transport) may affect intended outcomes of bus or rail projects. Most of the models and evaluation plans will present pre-COVID assumptions and will need to be revisited when the full extent of the pandemic has been understood.

Factoring in longer-term risk into plans for investment and business support, and wider plans for economic recovery may mean a need to shift, or unpick, previous decisions. This could bring with it political risk where certain commitments have been made. This may also involve the need to revisit devolution deals and other agreements with funders.

Resourcing is critical because for many CAs the economic recovery strategies in development will, at least in part, also serve as requests for funding support from Government. Building an appropriate level of capacity, alleviating workforce pressures and considering the long-term impact of pandemic-related spending commitments will have to be woven into these future plans.

Producing evidence-based regional strategic documents and recovery plans is an incredibly resource and expertise intensive task. For CAs that are relatively lean organisations, a lack of resource may be linked to an inability to act and think strategically coming out of the pandemic – resulting in future vulnerability. Setting up good governance structures requires significant resources, this could be further impacted by the challenges facing constituent authorities, as in many cases they are a vital source of support to CA corporate operations.

Any future CA governance redesign would also ideally take into account the potential of any streamlining and further efficiencies in decision making processes and structures. In some areas CA governance arrangements have been overlaid on legacy systems from previous iterations of the organisation (usually pertaining to transport functions). There is potentially risks of tension between the operational responsibilities and the strategic duties of the CA, and this may influence members' activities, priorities and focus.