Megatrends and the West Midlands 2021:
Just City

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FOR THE WEST MIDLANDS COMBINED AUTHORITY

"The government says all the right things, but there's a lack of commitment"[1]:

how can 'build back better' mean something concrete?

Summary

There is a constant stream of reports on urban and economic development from Whitehall. A review of policy papers over the past two decades reveals that the same issues predominate, regardless of the colour of the government. So-called 'left-behind' post-industrial places are not sharing in the country's growth. There are specific deprivation problems affecting coastal communities and post-war new towns. The UK's infrastructure is outdated, and its housing market is failing to deliver affordable accommodation. Yet despite the attention given to these issues, performance on metrics such as homelessness, hunger and inequality continues to worsen. It might seem as though the challenges are too great, but solutions exist. After all, inequality is a product of policy choices. Orientating decisions towards justice can therefore create real change.

'Build back better' and 'levelling up' are the latest in a series of slogans heralding a mission to tackle regional disparities. In the wake of Covid-19 there have been unprecedented interventions by the government in the economy. The pandemic could be an opportunity to reflect on structural issues in our society and make some fundamental changes. Looking ahead, we must ask: by what mechanisms can inclusive growth be achieved? What are the barriers to achieving just development? What might the future look like? This think-piece explores these issues. It contends that building a fairer future necessitates learning from national and international success while adapting to local conditions, articulating shared visions between the public and its institutions, and setting ambitious strategies on social and spatial justice.

Key policy messages

1. The segregation of disadvantaged people across the WMCA area is increasing, making the city-region a microcosm of national trends. Civic engagement, affordable housing, skills training and improved connectivity can mitigate this.

2. Investment predicated on HS2 is transforming central Birmingham but is not benefitting communities on the margins. Mechanisms to achieve inclusive growth need to be implemented.

3. The Preston Model of community wealth building has proven to be more effective than deregulation and trickle-down economics in building an inclusive economy.

4. Reduced demand for office space after the pandemic could depress city centre property markets. This suggests a need for more flexible spaces.

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[1] Quote from an interview with an urban planner for the 'Democratic Foundations of the Just City' project

5. Visions for the future should be developed by citizens, rather than local authorities seeking to anticipate the needs of investors.

We can 'read' cities to understand the values of their societies (Pixabay/CCO/kirkandmimi)

Introduction

From growth and innovation to culture and diversity, cities are the engines of the modern world. They are where the values of societies are given form. Consider how the architecture of ancient Athens is synonymous with democracy, or how the skyscraper born in American boomtowns embodies global capitalism. However, while cities represent the aspirations of their societies, they are also where social problems are concentrated. Uneven distribution of wealth and opportunities is starkly visible in cities. The challenge for policymakers is how to harness the transformative power of development to help address social injustice. This idea is known in the literature as the 'just city'.

There has been great progress already. In the past century, problems such as access to sanitation and education have been overcome in the UK. Birmingham plays an important role in the story of local governments achieving social justice aims. It was here that Chamberlain formulated initiatives that went on to influence the world, such as tackling slum housing, establishing municipal utility

companies, and improving the public realm with parks, swimming pools, and libraries. The Bournville development is a truly excellent example of a business with a social conscience improving its area and employees' lives (O'Farrell, 2020a). The city should draw inspiration from this pioneering history of radical social reform as it looks to the future.

A problem in our cities is a lack of affordable housing. In the past three decades, the ratio of median house prices to median earnings has trebled[2]. Whereas a low-income couple could save a mortgage deposit in three years in the early 1990s, by 2017 this would take 24 years (DCLG, 2017). Decades of failing to build homes in line with demand has inflated house prices and stoked a colossal price bubble (Stephens et al., 2014). Alongside rocketing property prices, rents have also increased rapidly. Tenants in the private rented sector regularly spend over half of their income on accommodation (DCLG, 2017). This reduces discretionary spending elsewhere in the economy.

Just development means building a society with greater equality of opportunity for all, regardless of the circumstances into which a person is born. Scholars contend that injustice has an inherently spatial dimension, reflecting the uneven distribution of investment, services and opportunities across cities, countries, and the world (Soja, 2010). As such, development is not an exclusively economic matter; it is also a tool for tackling injustice. The following sections explore the idea of the just city, considering relevant issues and reflecting on potential scenarios.

Key issues

A just city is one in which ghettoisation, or the segregation of marginalised people, and gentrification, or the displacement of poorer people, are mitigated (Dlabac et al., 2019). This requires ensuring access to affordable housing of a decent quality. For decades, the UK has built fewer new units than required, driving up prices and forcing many to rent expensive, frequently poor-quality accommodation (Stephens et al., 2014). Historically, a key mechanism for regulating housing affordability and facilitating social mixing was social housing. However, the role of British local authorities in providing housing has been undermined since the introduction of Right to Buy. This enabled many to own property for the first time, but dramatically reduced the availability of affordable housing, while also setting in motion trends towards greater segregation (Scanlon, 2017). A segregated society is one with less mixing of different groups, leading to polarisation and social fragmentation (Morales et al., 2019). In Birmingham, ethnic minorities and white working-class residents are increasingly segregated in the

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[2] Median is preferable to use in a context of high inequality as it represents the central tendency, rather than the mean which is skewed by extreme values.

inner-city and the urban periphery respectively (O'Farrell, 2020a). These areas have higher rates of benefit claimants and lower educational attainment. The city is marked by clear patterns of spatial injustice (Dlabac et al., 2019). Building a just city means developing strategies attuned to the needs of these communities, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach. Top-down, technocratic measures often misunderstand the behaviours and needs of target groups (Møller and Harrits, 2013). Participatory, bottom-up methods have proven themselves to be more effective in designing holistic responses (O'Farrell, 2020b).

The UK combines high income inequality with low social mobility, as measured by intergenerational earnings and educational attainment (OECD, 2018) The country's scores on these measures are among the worst in the developed world. In the West Midlands, inequality has been growing. Even between 2001-2008, the longest period of growth in post-war history, real wages among the lowest paid in Birmingham fell between 3.5-4.5% (Fenton et al., 2010). In 2020, 44% of neighbourhoods (or LSOAs) in the Black Country belonged to the fifth most deprived in the country, and Birmingham had the greatest concentration of deprived neighbourhoods in the country by a considerable margin (MHCLG, 2020). These challenges have been sharpened by austerity. Rough sleeping has increased by 141% in the past decade (Zakra, 2020). Homelessness in Birmingham is above the national average (O'Farrell, 2020c). Food bank dependency has increased over thirty-fold, from 61,468 emergency food parcels distributed in 2010/11 to 1,900,122 in 2019/20 (Trussell Trust, 2020). Moreover, research by scientists from a consortium of the UK's top universities linked public spending cuts with 120,000 excess deaths over 2010-2014 (Watkins et al., 2017). These figures underscore the lethal effects of inequality.

Creating a just city requires strengthening democratic culture, building mutual trust between the public and institutions, and empowering citizens. While this point is not universally accepted (Fainstein, 2010), a common feature of states that perform best on measures of social mobility, such as Iceland, Finland, Ireland, and Belgium (OECD, 2018), is having sophisticated strategies of civic engagement. Participatory initiatives combine the technical knowledge of subject-matter experts with the lived experience of citizens, helping to root solutions in the social reality of the problem they seek to address (Negev and Teschner, 2013). One possibility for the West Midlands is scaling up the USE-IT! community research model, which has proven its value in the Ladywood district. The model involved the University of Birmingham recruiting citizens and training them in research methods so they could subsequently work on policy research projects commissioned by organisations across the city. USE-IT! upskilled residents, helped anchor institutions better fulfil their civic role, and facilitated greater inclusion of local knowledge in decision-making processes (O'Farrell and Dlabac, 2020; Scheffler, 2020).

Future scenarios – implications for the West Midlands

'Do nothing'	'Singapore-on-Thames'	'Just cities'

Baseline: 'Do nothing'

In this scenario, the UK remains one of the most unequal countries in the developed world, and social mobility declines further (Andrews and Leigh, 2009; OECD, 2018). Inequality will sustain high levels of political frustration and volatility (Uslaner and Brown, 2005). Brexit depresses GDP growth in the short- to medium-term. Work by the Institute for Government identifies automobile manufacturing, business and professional services, and chemicals and pharmaceuticals as the sectors worst served by the Brexit deal, suggesting economic challenges ahead for the West Midlands (Tetlow and Pope, 2020).

Regeneration of Birmingham's core will continue. HS2 may not be built in full, but the Birmingham-to-London link will be completed, encouraging inward investment. However, this could detach the city centre from its hinterland, creating an enclave of dynamism amidst a sea of stagnation (Barber and Hall, 2008). International evidence on high-speed rail shows that these projects are far from being a silver bullet; there have been cases where such networks have exacerbated productivity problems in weaker cities that are connected to more prosperous ones (O'Farrell, 2019).

Peripheral housing estates will remain poorly integrated, their populations marginalised (Dlabac et al., 2019). On current trends, ethnic segregation in Birmingham will intensify (O'Farrell, 2020a). Completion of new houses will remain below the level of 200,000 units per year that the Joseph Rowntree Foundation estimates is required to maintain poverty at existing levels (Stephens et al., 2014). In demographic terms, migration from the EU continues to decline, having fallen from 200,000 per annum in 2015/16 to 58,000 in 2019/20. However, this is counterbalanced by international migration from beyond the EU, which has been steadily increasing since 2013 and reached 316,000 per annum in 2019/20 (Pullen-Stanley, 2020).

More office jobs will be at least partially remote, accelerating trends towards flexible working for white-collar workers (Lopez-Lyon et al., 2020). This could help some have a better work-life balance but could lead to resentment from those whose jobs cannot be done online. The switch to home

working also has risks, including feelings of isolation and loneliness and higher rates of obesity (Khan and Moverley Smith, 2020). Demand for city centre office space falls as firms seek smaller spaces (WSP, 2020). This could reduce rental prices and attract start-ups and smaller firms into the centre. Reduced demand suggests more flexible spaces are required than traditional mono-functional office blocks. The trend of professionals moving to suburbs and rural areas accelerates, but young people continue to favour urban living, albeit with greater access to green space (Byron Carlock Jr., 2020).

Worst case: 'Singapore-on-Thames'

'Singapore-on-Thames' is shorthand for the UK making use of its new regulatory freedom to cut regulations on business. Advocates believe this will encourage international investment (Parker and Thomas, 2021). Britain is already one of the world's most deregulated economies, and since the early 1980s this has led to relatively strong growth by the standards of developed economies (World Bank, 2020). However, as detailed above, this growth has been accompanied by growing inequality and stalling social mobility. Further deregulation and cuts to what remains of the welfare state will compound this problem (Piketty, 2013).

One example of this vision is the proposed network of freeports, an idea championed by the Chancellor (Sunak, 2015). This idea is anathema to the idea of just urban development and inclusive growth. Freeports seek to entice businesses through weaker labour protections, tax benefits, and state subsidies, for example on import duties or National Insurance contributions. This is a net cost to the taxpayer, with negative impacts on local authorities which may lose income from business rates. The EU is clamping down on freeports owing to evidence of their role in money laundering and tax evasion (Korver, 2018). The government claims freeports will 'increase trade and investment, kickstart regeneration through job creation and boost innovation' (HM Government, 2020). There is no empirical evidence to support this. Independent research has not established a positive spill-over effect from freeports. Rather than creating new economic activity, it appears freeports divert existing business activity and planned investment (Serwicka and Holmes, 2019; Stojanovic, 2020). Redirecting development into these zones would undermine local authority budgets and distort urban and economic development, with no reliable evidence showing that they create net new jobs. As such, deregulation in the form of freeports would make it more difficult to achieve a just city.

Deregulation could lead to further deterioration of housing affordability, exacerbated by the decision to extend Right to Buy to housing associations. International experience shows that an active state is most effective in reducing pressure on housing affordability and counteracting ghettoisation (Zwicky, 2020). "Red tape" is much maligned, but the bonfire of health and safety regulation in recent years is implicated in the Grenfell Tower tragedy (Nadj, 2019). Further rolling back of regulation could have

similar unintended consequences. Already, deregulation of housing standards means that the UK has the smallest new-build properties in Europe, negatively impacting residents' quality of life (Morgan and Cruickshank, 2014). As seen during the pandemic, working from home is difficult for those living in tiny apartments or renting bedrooms from private landlords.

Ideal case: 'Just cities'

The twin shocks of Brexit and Covid-19 can be used to pivot towards the just city. Commentators refer to the Brexit vote as a 'cry of pain' from 'left-behind' people (Liberini et al., 2017). Despite this, there has been no meaningful attempt by the government to heal the rift in British society, and there has been no mission to listen to those who feel their voices are unheard. Local civic engagement can be the first step to building a more participatory culture in the UK.

The 'crowdsourced constitution' project in Iceland demonstrates the potential of a positive participatory culture, where citizens improve the outcomes of decision-making processes (Hudson, 2018). Other examples of best practice, such as the world-leading Vienna Model, can serve as inspiration for developing a dense ecosystem of participation and deliberation (O'Farrell, 2020b). The shock of the pandemic could likewise be leveraged to realise the concept of a "15-minute city", where shops, services and employment opportunities are distributed throughout neighbourhoods, rather than being concentrated in centres (Moreno, 2020). This spatial dimension is in line with the idea of the just city.

Achieving just urban development starts by orientating away from the pursuit of growth at any cost towards thinking about the social impact of investment. The Preston Model demonstrates how anchor institutions can successfully work together on community wealth building (Jackson and McInroy, 2017). Coordinated procurement from local suppliers by councils, universities and colleges, housing associations and the police increased spend in Preston's economy by £74 million over four years. Other aspects of the model include encouraging more employers to pay the real living wage, public pension fund investment, and new models of community finance (Hanna et al., 2018). This initiative has supported significant local job growth, improved social mobility rates, and decreased relative deprivation in the area (CLES and Preston City Council, 2019).

Social enterprises are another mechanism for creating a more inclusive economy. These are businesses with an explicitly social mission that reinvest profits into their cause. They also have an important role in offering employment to groups who often struggle to find traditional employment, such as the disabled (Barraket, 2008; Teasdale, 2010). British social enterprises employ 2 million people and generate £60 billion per year (Gregory and Wigglesworth, 2018). The UK has one of Europe's best developed support ecosystems for the sector (Borzaga et al., 2020) to build on. Further

business support for setting up and connecting social enterprises – particularly those from working-class or ethnic minority backgrounds – can generate inclusive growth through the medium of businesses with social justice objectives.

Targeting areas of deprivation with skills training, social services and better transport integration could help neutralise the damaging trends towards segregation seen in recent decades (Gibb et al., 2020; O'Farrell and Dlabac, 2020). Holding developers to the affordable housing target, which Birmingham has not been performing well on, is another practical step (O'Farrell, 2020a). Collectively, such changes would mean proactively tackling inequality and its associated political frustration. For Birmingham and the wider West Midlands, overcoming segregation could mean realising the potential social and economic 'diversity dividend' in one of Europe's superdiverse areas (Vertovec, 2007; Syrett and Sepulveda, 2011).

Birmingham's current diversity is Europe's future. Lessons in building an inclusive society here will be informative for cities across the continent in coming decades (CCO/Roman Zwicky)

Conclusion

This piece sought to provoke discussions on how to make urban and economic development serve social justice goals, such as overcoming inequality and distrust of politicians and institutions. On both the national and local levels, data show that segregation, poverty, and inequality are increasing in the UK. Birmingham is likely to receive significant inward investment in coming decades owing to HS2. However, without taking steps to make this investment work towards justice goals, there is a risk it could exacerbate the damaging trends laid out in this article.

The idea of the just city can seem abstract. However, there are practical steps to achieve it, from the Preston Model and supporting social enterprise to simply building more affordable housing and investing in public transport. It cannot be denied that the city is facing tremendous challenges. However, Birmingham has faced such challenges before. From its rise in the industrial age to rising from the ashes after the Blitz, the city has repeatedly shown the determination to overcome its problems. It is time to face injustice head on and start building the kind of society we want. *Forward!*

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