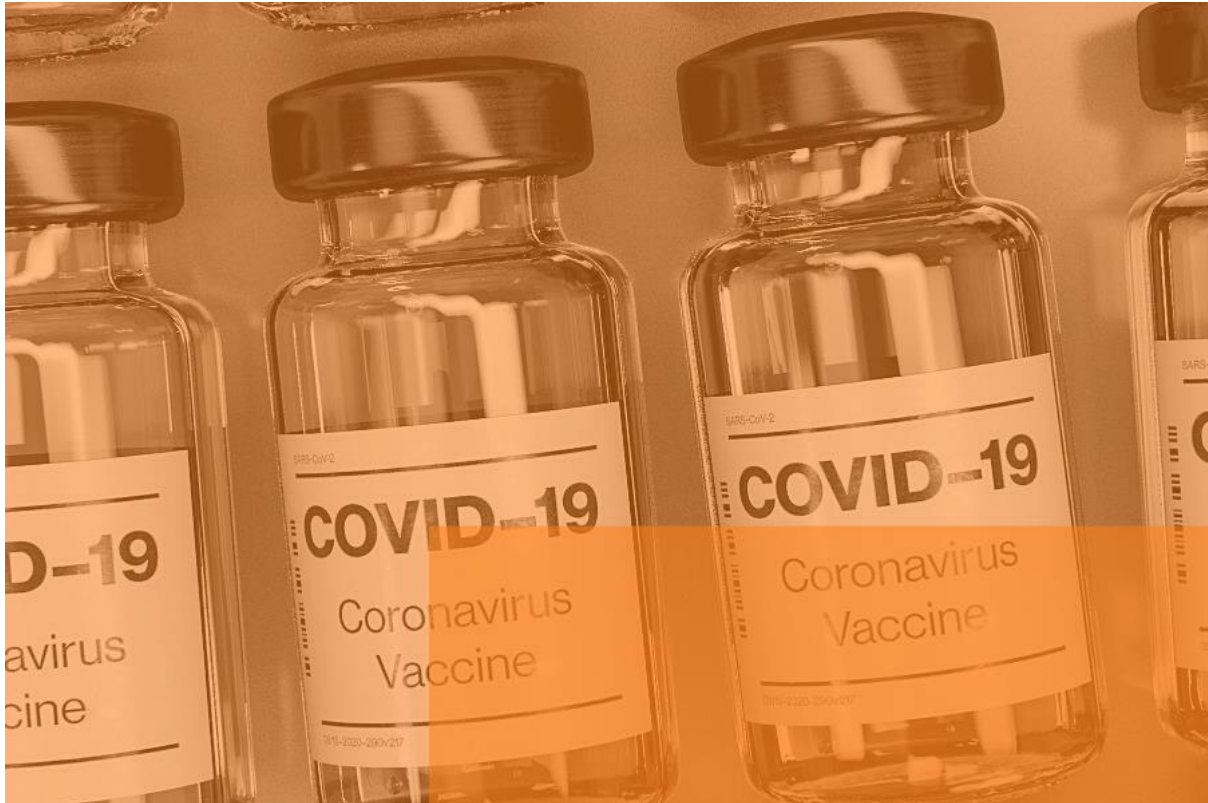


Megatrends and the West Midlands 2021:

Urban responses to pandemics and economic shocks in historical perspective



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Summary

Political debates could be enriched through greater input from historians. We can learn from history to understand how economic crashes and pandemics transform the societies they affect. This article draws from a range of case studies to explore how cities have responded to and been shaped by shocks. Looking at the Black Death (1346-53), Spanish Flu (1918-20), and AIDS (1981-present), it charts effects of pandemics. Turning to focus on the city scale, the effect of economic collapse on post-2008 Athens demonstrates how crisis and inequality can boil over into dangerous 'us-versus-them' polarisation and radical movements also seen in the interwar period. Finally, the case of Aberdeen, an oil city hit by a rapid downturn since 2014, suggests responses to sudden economic challenges.

This piece contends that observing historical experiences can help inform responses to the shock of Covid-19. It also considers the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on accelerating trends towards remote working and digital retail. The piece argues for developing mechanisms for economic and political justice to ensure that no groups are "left behind" in the post-pandemic world.

Key policy messages

1. Maintaining a safety net for the most vulnerable communities can avoid contributing to social polarisation in the aftermath of Covid-19.
2. The Covid-19 pandemic can be harnessed to reset the economy, counter inequality, and mitigate environmental unsustainability. Community wealth building is one alternative approach that could be considered.
3. History shows that pandemics erode trust in institutions and leaders. Given the already low levels of trust in British society, this could lead to even greater political volatility. Measures to rebuild civic trust are urgently needed.
4. The pandemic strengthens the case for further devolution, given the need to apply knowledge from "on the ground" to diversify local economies and develop citizen-centred services.
5. The pandemic has accelerated trends towards home working and ecommerce. City centre development needs to be more flexible, with accessible green spaces and public squares, and consideration of minimum space standards for housing.

Introduction

Attention to history can help avoid the tendency of politicians and commentators to see all events as ‘unprecedented’. It can also contextualise economic models that pay insufficient attention to history and geography (Garretsen and Martin, 2010). In our current circumstances, it is worth noting that we have always lived with pandemics. We also have accrued sufficient experience to observe the effects of economic crashes, the risks they pose, and how negative consequences might be avoided.

Rather than considering the key issues and their implications, this piece takes as its starting point the Covid-19 pandemic that has rocked the world. Writing in February 2021, we hope that an end to the pandemic is in sight with the rollout of multiple vaccines. However, this also means that decisions will soon have to be made about how governments will pay for their responses to Covid-19. Businesses may also be permanently altered by the mass experiment in home working.

How do pandemics affect society? This piece opens by considering the impacts of diseases, starting with the Black Death of the fourteenth century, which is credited with breaking down feudalism (Castor, 2001). It considers the erosion of trust as a long-term impact of the 1918-20 Spanish flu pandemic (Aassve et al., 2020). It then introduces the AIDS pandemic since the early 1980s that has disproportionately affected marginalised communities and developing countries (Bonuck, 1993; Stover and Bollinger, 1999; Barnett et al., 2001). These case studies put Covid-19 in context and show typical effects of pandemics. For brevity’s sake, other pandemics such as SARS, avian flu, swine flu and smallpox are not considered here, but they also demonstrate the importance of preparedness, international collaboration, and evidence-led responses.

The impacts of economic crisis and sudden spikes in inequality are presented with reference to post-2008 Athens, drawing parallels with interwar Berlin and Vienna. Rapid growth in inequality, combined with low trust in institutions, can lead to political instability and existential threats to democracy. The article then presents Aberdeen, a city that has been hit hard by the collapse in demand for oil since 2014. This example demonstrates the importance of diversifying local economies, developing long-term strategy, and investment in social and physical infrastructure for greater resilience. The piece closes by reflecting on lessons for the future.

Case studies

Past pandemics

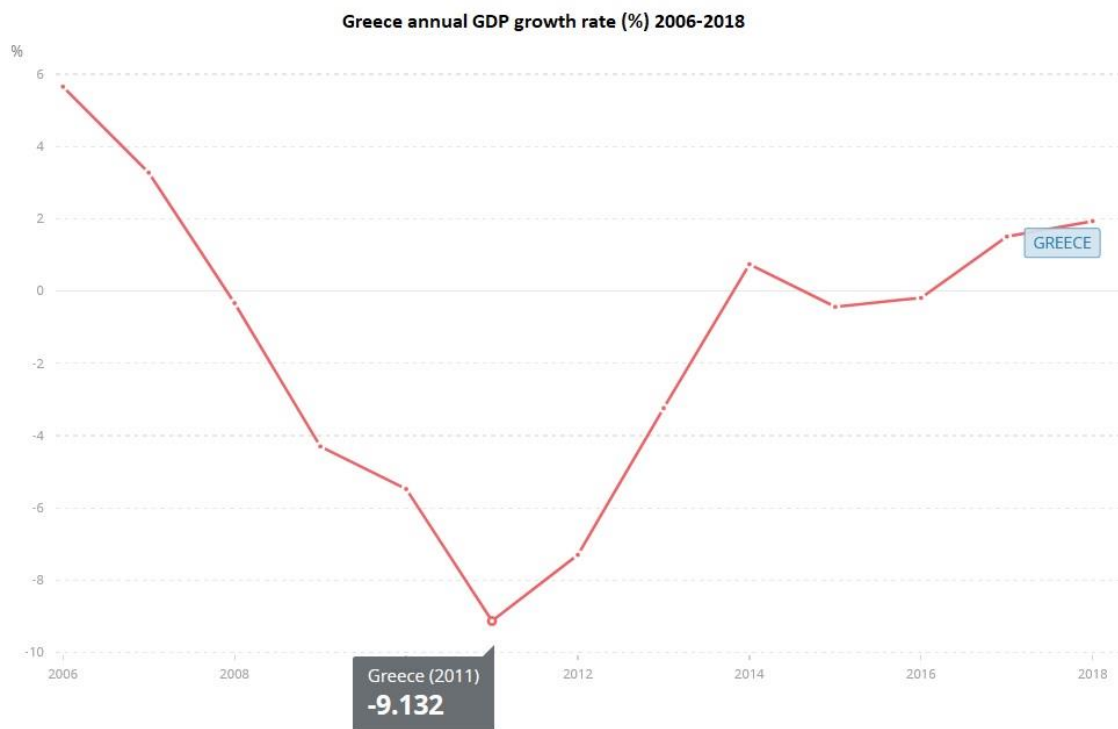
The Black Death was one of the defining events of medieval Europe. Causing between 75-200 million deaths, it rocked the continent and this ‘population shock’ left a new world in its wake (Jedwab et al. 2020). There were long-term impacts on urban development and population growth, structural

changes in national economies owing to major labour shortages, and the growth of hostility towards ‘outsiders’, particularly Jews (Cantor, 2001). Covid-19 is not on the same scale as the Black Death, and medical science has progressed far since then. However, this experience alerts us to the possibility that the fear unleashed by pandemics can trigger underlying authoritarian predispositions among segments of the population, leading to the scapegoating of minorities (Haidt, 2012). We see the potential for this already with tropes about “bat soup” and anti-Chinese racism in the context of Covid-19 (Fernando and Mumphrey, 2020; Taylor, 2020).

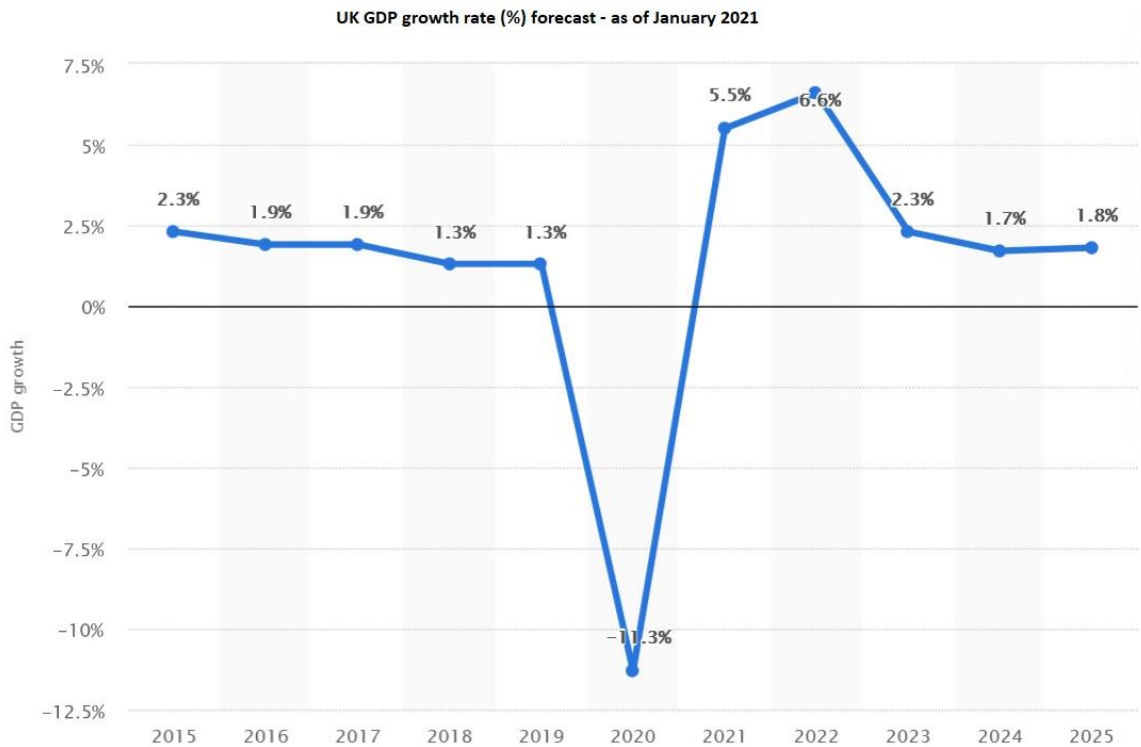
The pandemic that has been most referenced in relation to Covid-19 is the Spanish Flu of 1918-20, which originated in Kansas (Ott et al., 2007). As now, mandatory closures of schools, bars and restaurants were introduced, with libertarian protestors decrying public health orders to wear face masks as “big government” overreach (Hauser, 2020). This pandemic claimed the lives of 50-100 million people. Research shows that areas which took swift action to enforce social distancing and other non-clinical interventions saw lower overall excess mortality (Ott et al., 2007; Lilley et al., 2020). Premature relaxation of measures also led to second waves which far outstripped the first in their intensity (Wheelock, 2020). Crucially, the social disruption of the pandemic undermined trust and constrained future economic growth, with damaging implications for society in the following decades (Aassve et al., 2020). This calls for greater emphasis on measures to rebuild trust in institutions after the Covid-19 pandemic, especially given that trust has already been much eroded in Britain over the past decade (More in Common, 2020).

There is another ongoing pandemic that has claimed the lives of 33 million people since the early 1980s (UNAIDS, 2020). AIDS disproportionately affects marginalised populations – gay men, trans people, drug addicts, sex workers and black people in Western countries, and up to one-quarter of the entire population in sub-Saharan African countries such as Eswatini, Lesotho and Botswana. The efforts to research a vaccine for Covid-19 is a reminder that humanity can achieve remarkable results quickly and gives hope that such efforts can be applied to other diseases. AIDS demonstrates how pandemics disproportionately affect vulnerable groups and operate on a global scale. In parts of some African countries, the impact of AIDS is so severe that it undermines the potential for local economic development (Stover and Bollinger, 1999; Olakunde et al., 2020). As such, responses to pandemics ought to be global in nature, for ethical reasons, to help end aid dependency, and to ensure that Covid-19 is eradicated before it can mutate and increase in lethality.

Protracted crisis



Greece recorded six consecutive years of GDP contraction, falling by 9.1% in 2011 (source: World Bank, 2021).



The UK's GDP is estimated to have fallen by 11.3% in 2020, one of the sharpest falls in the world (source: Clark, 2021).

At the time of writing in February 2021, the UK has recorded one of the world's highest death rates from Covid-19 (Johns Hopkins, 2021) and experienced the deepest economic contraction of any Western nation (Walker, 2020). While there are optimistic hopes for a return to growth in 2021, these are contingent on the successful rollout of vaccines and ending the lockdown. There is potential for further contraction ahead, especially with the effects of Brexit beginning to be felt. In January 2021, British exports to the EU fell by 68%, with exporters naming increased bureaucracy as a major barrier to trade (Reuters, 2021). Given that the EU accounts for 43% of the value of UK exports (Ward, 2020), there will be significant negative pressure on GDP if trade disruption continues, with the potential for a more long-term recession.

Prolonged economic contraction often leads to growth in poverty, distrust in institutions, and increases in frustration. This was demonstrated in the Greek economic crisis of 2009-2018, which was triggered by the Global Financial Crisis that dramatically increased the country's budget deficit and public debt. Owing to rules governing membership of the Eurozone, Greece was unable to take the classic response of devaluing its currency. A series of harsh austerity policies implemented by the "troika" of the European Commission, ECB and IMF further weakened the country's economy and precipitated the growth of both SYRIZA, the Coalition of the Radical Left, and the far-right Golden Dawn party, which was recently outlawed for murdering an anti-fascist campaigner. Athens itself is degraded by the crisis, and there has been a rise in the number of buildings occupied by radical groups

in the city (Arampatzi and Nicholls, 2012; Dalakoglou, 2012; Raimondi, 2019). For those who believe the UK is immune to such possibilities, the rise of left-wing populism in the form of Corbynism, support for the right-wing populism of UKIP and its reincarnations, and the murder of Jo Cox MP by a fanatical Brexiter serve as a cautionary warning.

Squatting as a form of resistance to austerity has been seen in cities throughout the world in times of crisis (van der Steen et al., 2014). Berlin in both the Weimar and post-war eras was marked by the inequality, government paralysis, and the rise of squatting, anarchism, and fascist movements (Kitchen, 2005; Holm and Kuhn, 2010; Mitchell, 2015). Another example is interwar Vienna, whose left-wing city council undertook one of the most far-reaching projects of social housing construction in history in the face of poverty and housing market failure (Gruber, 1991; Blau, 1999; Marten-Finnis and Uecker, 2001). In a context of growing economic inequality and anger towards politicians, Vienna became the target for right-wing populists who attacked it as a bastion of “liberal elites” out of touch with “ordinary” Austrians (Lewis, 1991; Melinz, 1999), fuelling the growth of Austrofascism. This highlights the danger of normalising violent political rhetoric and encouraging ‘us-versus-them’ narratives to take root. Moreover, if Covid-19 is paid for with further austerity, we could see the return of squatting and occupation movements, similar to Occupy London in 2011-12, as well as renewed radical politics of the left and right.

Sudden economic shock

Cities without a diversified economic base are vulnerable to sudden economic shocks. Birmingham has already been through such a shock from the late 1970s as its industrial base collapsed, particularly in automobile production. Between 1981 and 2013, the city lost 300,000 manufacturing jobs (Swinney and Thomas, 2015). Over this period, the West Midlands fell from being one of the UK’s wealthiest regions to its second poorest (O’Farrell, 2020).

Aberdeen is a city whose fortunes have been founded on the North Sea oil boom since the 1970s. The collapse in oil demand since 2014 hit the city hard, with prices falling by more than 70 per cent in a short space of time (Thøgersen, 2016). While Stavanger, the other oil capital of the North Sea, had the world’s largest sovereign wealth fund to fall back on (Price, 2013), the British government has not saved its oil windfall, using it instead to fund tax cuts (Hawksworth, 2008). The experience of Aberdeen points to the importance of diversifying local economies and taking a more long-term approach towards economic policy.

The collapse in demand for oil significantly depressed Aberdeen’s property market (Smith, 2019). A quarter of all jobs in the area are linked to oil and gas; a 35% contraction in the number of jobs supported by the industry between 2014-18 thus undermined Aberdeen’s economic stability

(Aberdeen City Council, 2018). The city responded by seeking to diversify its economic base towards life sciences, digital, energy, and food and drink, along with investment in infrastructure and redeveloping the city centre (Cockburn et al., 2013; Aberdeen City Council, 2015). While the pace of change has been slow, these interventions had begun to bear some fruit before the onset of Covid-19. After a contraction of 11.8% of GDP between 2014 and 2016, economic decline stabilised with a fall of 0.9% in 2017 (Aberdeen City Council, 2019). This is a long-term challenge to wean Aberdeen off its dependence on oil, especially given the negative environmental impacts of fossil fuels. The lack of establishment of a sovereign wealth fund, contrary to the case of Norway, is indicative of the failures of strategic planning.

Aberdeen did not have had a coordinated industrial strategy for the development of its oil industry and has far less collaboration between institutions across the city than Stavanger. Interestingly, a comparative study of the innovation systems in the two found similar levels of international economic competitiveness. Based on this, researchers suggest that differences in local innovation systems may be associated with similar long-term outcomes (Hatakenaka et al., 2011). This conclusion challenges contemporary policy narratives in favour of local industrial strategies and university-industry collaborations. However, much other research finds that strategies are effective in enhancing economic output, particularly in “left behind” regions, through applying local knowledge and adapting to specific strengths and weaknesses on the ground (Berry, 2018). This suggests that government-led industrial strategies are one potential solution, but that in other cases the private sector can also be effective at developing a local specialisation cluster without government intervention.

Lessons for the West Midlands

Turning now to the present, what are the impacts of Covid-19, and how do they feed into longer-term trends? Furthermore, what lessons we can draw from history to mitigate negative impacts?

- In the professional services sector, one of Birmingham’s major employers, four out of five employees are working from home during the pandemic (PwC, 2020). Given that services account for 80% of UK GDP, this experiment in mass home working could influence the future of work in Britain.
- In the month of April 2020, 47% of all British workers did some of their work at home (Cameron, 2020). This is an acceleration of a long-term trend towards greater home working (Reuschke and Felstead, 2020).

- High earners are 3.3 times more likely to be able to work from home than low earners, suggesting the pandemic is exacerbating social inequalities (Rodríguez and Ifan, 2020).

Britain has an extremely unequal economy by the standards of its peers (OECD, 2018). History indicates that the prospects for societies with high rates of inequality are poor. We have already seen how the impact of the 2008 financial crisis has destabilised politics in the UK over the past decade. Frustration with austerity was the decisive factor in the victory of Leave in the 2016 Brexit referendum (Fetzer, 2019). Moreover, public trust in the UK is now the second lowest in the world (just above Russia), with only 42% of Britons saying they trust institutions (Williams, 2020). The signs that this distrust and frustration is being channelled towards populism is a cause for concern, given how this threatens democracy. Worryingly, new data shows that 70% of Britons doubt the effectiveness of democracy as a form of government, far higher than any other G7 nation (Williams, 2020).

As such, measures should be introduced to help tackle inequality and ease public frustration. For the West Midlands, one approach could be to learn from the best practice of community wealth building (Jones, 2020; Leibowitz, 2020), in which anchor institutions keep money in their areas through procurement from locally owned businesses. The case study of Preston showed how this model increased spend in the local economy by £74 million over four years, supporting local job growth, facilitating social mobility, and decreasing deprivation (CLES and Preston City Council, 2019). Resetting local economies in favour of environmental sustainability and reducing inequality could also help the region play its part in tackling the great challenges of the age.

- While many enjoy remote working, those without workspaces at home have felt under pressure during lockdown. Two-thirds of participants in a study by the University of Birmingham were unhappy that home working had blurred the boundaries between their professional and personal lives, especially among women (Chung et al., 2020).
- Men under 25 and migrants who speak a language other than English at home are significantly more likely to believe conspiracy theories about Covid-19 and vaccines (McCaffery et al., 2020; Pickles et al. 2020).
- There are fears that long-term mass home working could reduce UK GDP by £15.3bn per year through reduced consumption and clustering effects (PwC, 2020). Economic activity could remain at 70% of pre-pandemic levels, threatening up to 7.6 million jobs, principally in low-wage jobs such as hospitality and food service (Allas et al., 2020).
- However, concerns that home working is less productive may be misplaced; seven in ten say they are just as or more productive when working at home (Felstead and Reuschke, 2020).

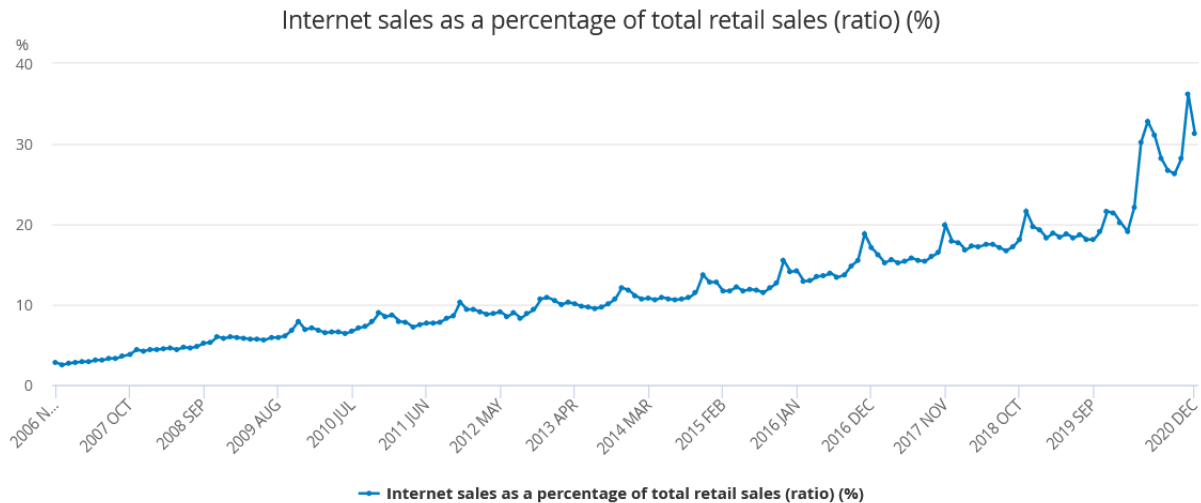
We know that the impacts of pandemics are not felt equally. Much like AIDS, poorer and more marginalised communities are being hit harder. The overlap between low skill levels, belonging to either the white working class or an ethnic minority, and being employed in sectors most affected by the pandemic means there is a social justice dimension to life under Covid-19 (McNeil et al., 2020). Moreover, while great progress has been made on women's rights, the fact that women are feeling most stressed from balancing home working, childcare and housework shows that gender equality remains an unfulfilled aspiration.

There is an additional imbalance in who trusts politicians and institutions in the time of Covid-19, with an 18-point gap between trust levels in institutions between the most educated Britons (57%) and the wider population (39%) (Williams, 2019). Evidence shows that young men and ethnic minorities are particularly susceptible to conspiracy theories about Covid-19. Given that the West Midlands has a high concentration of both, this points to an immediate need to engage with schools and faith and community leaders to assuage the fears of these groups. In the long-term, conspiracy theories and distrust thrive in contexts of low agency and high inequality, meaning that effective civic engagement strategies and further devolution to reduce the gap between citizens and decision-makers are a desirable goal.

- High street footfall has been significantly reduced by the pandemic and store closures have increased by 25% since 2019 (Jahshan, 2020). However, spending in local independent retailers has increased by 31% (Savills, 2020).
- Contraction in the West Midlands economy is the greatest of all UK regions, with a drop of 21% of GDP in Q2 2020. Seven in ten businesses expect to make redundancies between February and April 2021 (Riley et al., 2021).
- The pandemic has turbocharged the growth of ecommerce, enhancing a pre-existing long-term trend (ONS, 2021).

Sudden economic shocks can morph into long-term economic malaise, as the case studies of Athens and Aberdeen demonstrate. While in recent years central Birmingham has witnessed major redevelopment predicated on the HS2 rail link, reduced demand for office space and city centre apartments put a question mark over this strategy (Arup, 2020). If large firms downsize, smaller firms and start-ups may move into city centre to benefit from the greater connectivity and clustering effects that such locations offer (Serwicka and Swinney, 2016). Nevertheless, given that there is a pre-existing trend towards home working and ecommerce, cities should encourage the construction of more flexible spaces in the urban core. Before the pandemic, it was estimated that ecommerce would

account for half of all retail by 2028 (Retail Economics, 2019). The latest ONS data shows that online shopping rates have almost doubled under Covid-19, rapidly accelerating this trend.



Ecommerce figures have seen a sharp increase during the Covid-19 pandemic (ONS, 2021).

The combined authority has a facilitative role and can encourage organisations and businesses to collaborate on a range of strategic interventions, such as work placements (Walker and Diamond, 2020). The West Midlands Combined Authority might consider developing a West Midlands graduate scheme to help talented young people build careers in the area, rather than feeling they have to move to London: 70% of young people in Birmingham say they want to build a future in the city (Brum Youth Trends, 2019).

When it comes to more flexible spaces, the Social Market Foundation recommends repurposing city and town centres through converting vacant retail space into residential property. They estimate this could create 800,000 new homes, helping tackle both the housing crisis and the oversupply of retail units (Corfe, 2020). Of course, there is a major risk of substandard accommodation being produced through the conversion of unsuitable spaces that could create the slums of tomorrow, housing the lowest earners in poor quality housing on sites such as retail parks and industrial estates without access to services. This means that local authorities have an important role to play in enforcing quality standards of any such conversions.

Given the pandemic has shown the importance of space (both green and personal) which could undermine demand for city centre apartment blocks, the construction of urban parks and squares ought to be prioritised in new developments (Grimsey et al., 2020). Given that the UK has the smallest new-build properties in Europe (Morgan and Cruickshank, 2014), minimum space standards for accommodation ought to be introduced. There is also a need for long-term strategic thinking and

setting bold targets. For instance, a policy briefing from the University of Liverpool recently called on the city's combined authority to pilot a four-day working week to increase wellbeing and facilitate a better work-life balance (Swift, 2020). This is just one example of thinking beyond day-to-day matters to reflect on the kind of society we want in the future. Ultimately, while it is important to learn from the past, more than ever we require visionary leaders who can inspire change and help us collectively transition to a more just society.

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