



# RECOVERY IN THE CENTRAL SOUTH: AN UPDATE

Online seminar: 26th February 2021

# Recovery in the central South: an update

## Report of SPC's seminar held on 26 February 2021

In June 2020, the Southern Policy Centre published [Recovery in the central South: collaboration for growth](#). That report summarised the conclusions of a series of online consultations with key players from business, economic development, local authorities, further and higher education and the voluntary sector. It focused on priorities for economic recovery for the central South in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Eight months on from then, as the region looks forward to following our Government's 'roadmap' for bringing businesses and communities out of the pandemic, we followed up some key themes from that discussion at a seminar held on-line on 26 February. Our five speakers examined what progress has been made since the publication of that report, explored how the COVID-19 crisis has impacted the central South and discussed how we can address some of the key economic, social, and environmental issues which have arisen from the pandemic.

This report summarises our February discussions.

## Skills and young people – Sarah Stannard, City College, Southampton

In many respects, young people have been hardest hit by the pandemic and the lockdown of our economy. Many have found learning hard, some because they don't have access to the technology required or space to work. Others have found it hard to engage with online learning. There will be a real challenge to allow learners to 'catch-up' and City College, along with other FE colleges across the region, are working hard to bring young people back into learning.

The key challenge is getting young people qualified and back onto the job market. That is a task made more difficult by the loss of jobs in hospitality, retail and tourism, which have traditionally offered opportunities for young people. Those on apprenticeships also face delays in completing their qualification, increasing competition from older apprentices and we are seeing fewer new opportunities.

The sector has responded to this, with Government supporting more opportunities for training young people – the Kickstart Scheme – and for re-training. The Lifetime Skills Guarantee which will guarantee equal access to four years of education post-18 is not scheduled to come into effect until 2025 but the need for adults to retrain and reskill is urgent and this should be brought forward. Colleges are also exploring opportunities that may come from ideas set out in January's Skills for Jobs White Paper. Employers need to be at the heart of the change, working with local FE providers to ensure they can train the skilled young people needed for the future of our local economy. Volunteers are being

recruited from local business organisations such as the Hampshire Chamber of Commerce to create a local creative skills improvement plan to meet these needs.

## Green recovery and sustainable growth – Alison Barnes, New Forest National Park Authority

It's clear that people's expectations about recovery have changed, with a desire to see an economic recovery which takes account of the importance of protecting our environment and our communities. The first SPC seminars in June 2020 emphasised how important a 'green recovery' was to businesses and communities alike.

Alongside local expectations of a different approach, national policy is also encouraging that fresh perspective: whether the Prime Minister's 10 point green industrial revolution or the changes to funding regime for farmers which encourage spending to protect and enhance nature, what Ministers have called "*public money for public good*".

*The Greenprint for South Hampshire* is our local response to this. Supported by the Partnership for South Hampshire and shaped by colleagues from across the region, the Greenprint sets out a framework which will encourage collaboration on shared priorities. Those priorities range from aiming for a zero-carbon economy and communities through to improved health and wellbeing and creating jobs in the green economy. They reflect what is distinctive about the local economy, our environment and South Hampshire's communities.

- **Net zero with nature** – providing the leadership necessary to reduce carbon emissions... and build zero carbon economy and communities
- **Natural health service** – improving physical and mental health and wellbeing and tackling health inequalities through greater access to our world class natural environments
- **World class blue/green environments** – protecting, restoring and improving our distinctive environments, enabling their ecosystem services to contribute to a strong economy and a healthy, inclusive society
- **Creating great places through quality in design and build** – encouraging an innovative approach to creating high quality, inclusive and sustainable places for people and nature
- **Centre for excellence in green skills and jobs** – tackle local skills gaps and economic inequalities by building a future workforce which can seize the opportunities offered by innovation in key sectors of our economy

### OUR GREENPRINT FRAMEWORK: FIVE PROPOSED PRIORITIES

The Greenprint is a pragmatic and practical approach to how best we can rebuild our economy in a more sensitive and environmentally aware way. It offers a basis for the public and private sectors working together to respond to the growing desire for positive change in how we live and work.

## Strengthening communities – Jonathan Cheshire

It has been a challenging year for voluntary organisations. Whilst some have remained able to contribute – to food banks, for example – many have struggled as funding has reduced, volunteers have been unavailable and users have been unable to use many services: lunch clubs, for example, have fallen away during lockdown.

Many have responded by changing their business model, going online for example. And new organisations have sprung up to support those forced to isolate. But there is no doubt that the sector has faced real difficulties just as there was a demand for their support.

Hampshire & Isle of Wight Community Foundation were able to offer some assistance, raising over £5m, including support from Hampshire County Council and Government funding. The furlough scheme has also helped keep organisations ticking over.

However, the sector will face some real challenges as this support ends. No doubt some funding and volunteer support will return, perhaps even with a more active appreciation of the sector's value. But many will have to re-shape their business model to survive.

## Future of our city centres – Daniel Curtis, Blake Morgan

The centres of the central South's cities have many roles: from being homes to businesses and retail centres to a focus for leisure and culture. All of these roles have been changing in recent years as our behaviours and day-to-day habits changed, and the covid-19 crisis has accelerated many of those trends. They are unlikely to be reversed.

As SPC's research on city centres, which Blake Morgan sponsored, has shown, cities need to re-invent themselves to remain attractive and relevant places. This may mean taking a fresh look at what can attract people to live, work or visit the city centre in future. New models for retail and working are evolving, and new challenges are emerging – for example significant changes to the planning system which could see retail or business premises lost to housing.

As we begin to build a recovery, city centres must recognise how people's expectations have changed, with a greater focus on nature, the environment and sustainability. Technology is central to many people's lives, and city centres need to embrace the digital world and explore how it can improve their offer.

To survive and continue to thrive we will have to develop fresh ideas for our city centres, and perhaps take risks in re-defining their purpose in daily life. There will still be a place for offices and shops, but they will look and function very differently. And leisure will be a central part of the post-lockdown city centre, after all, *“everyone needs a little hedonism!”*

## Collaboration – Mark E Smith, University of Southampton

Perhaps the most significant lesson from the last year is the importance of collaboration. We will only get the recovery we want if public and private sector organisations work together. The central South's Universities have an important role to play in shaping that recovery.

Southampton University has been working with NHS colleagues and business to help in the fight against coronavirus, with its world-leading research teams helping in the development of new testing regimes. But perhaps more surprisingly, they have been a key player in a County-wide initiative to explore how we can best create an exciting narrative for our place, an essential building block for economic and social recovery.

The Hampshire Place Story has brought together businesses, councils and others to develop that narrative. At its heart is a story of prosperity and opportunity, but also a recognition that we face economic, social, and environmental challenges. Getting that story right should help us drive recovery, bringing investment to the area.

## Some key messages from our discussions

The seminar's audience were keen to see a recovery which gave a better balance between economic, environmental, and social needs – *“ending the apartheid between the environment and the economy”* as one speaker put it. Equally, whilst many recognised that our region had many economic advantages, they did not want to see some of the pressing social needs our communities face glossed over.

There was particular concern about the plight of young people, who were losing opportunities for learning, training and working. Their future should be a priority for investment. One opportunity was for businesses, councils and the FE and HE sectors to collaborate in creating a detailed 'map' of the region's skills needs. The Skills White Paper offered an opportunity to pilot such an approach.

One participant spoke about the importance of using technology to build 'smart' cities and communities, using data to shape more responsive and tailored services. He gave as an example collaborative work across the Bristol City region which aimed to develop a fresh, collaborative approach to 'smart' place management.

In summary, SPC's John Denham drew four key messages from the seminar:

- There was a sense of 'change' running through our efforts to guide recovery, accepting that the future would be different, with a changing set of priorities. There seemed to be a consensus about the need for a fresh balance between the economy, environment and society, and a willingness to embrace new ways of doing things;

- The central South is seeing a slow return to a new version of ‘normal’, but some parts of our community, notably young people and the less well off, continue to face real challenges and should be a focus for our efforts;
- The central South has some strong institutions, and together they are well placed to create a clear and coherent shared narrative for our future;
- Collaboration is vital to a successful recovery. That needs to evolve, building on relationships which already exist across the region. Collaboration is not about structures or geographies, but conversations and shared visions – *“collaboration is more a matter of mind than of structures.”*

**Simon Eden**

**3rd March 2021**

**Postscript:** Solent LEP’s successful bid for freeport status was announced by the Chancellor in the 2<sup>nd</sup> March budget. Whilst the overall advantages of freeport status are not yet clear, the potential benefits to the central South could be sizeable. The policy may attract investment to the local area and be of particular value to ‘left behind’ communities whilst furthermore accelerating innovation, helping to de-carbonise the economy and contribute to the ‘greenprint’ discussed at the seminar. There will be a need to explore how the freeport can contribute to tackling the social ‘levelling up’ issues around skills, education and health in the area, which SPC will be examining in a report to be launched soon.