Written Evidence –

The Association for Public Service Excellence (PTC0007)

About APSE

APSE is the Association for Public Service Excellence, a not-for-profit local government association owned by its member local councils across the UK. APSE operates one of the largest local government research programmes, supports local council frontline services, and operates a range of services such as data benchmarking, learning networks, and advisory briefings on public policy and sector specific issues. Throughout the pandemic APSE has supported its member councils with bespoke advice, sector WhatsApp groups for rapid information sharing, a dedicated web-hub, sector specific advisory papers, networks and remobilisation reports. It has also liaised across Government departments and agencies supporting the pandemic effort with surveys and information gathering. This submission is therefore informed by the ongoing work in support of local government frontline services.

1. Housing and green spaces

1.1. The link between housing and health is well established. Research by APSE and the TCPA 'At a crossroads - Building foundation of healthy communities' explored this albeit in a pre-pandemic context. The pandemic has further highlighted housing inequalities and intensified the need for healthy homes and communities; areas of high-density poor housing reported much larger numbers of COVID-19 deaths. For example, in Newham, it is reported that such deaths were near to seven times higher than in better-off areas, with 144.3 deaths per 100,000 compared with 25.3 per 100,000 elsewhere. The importance of private outdoor space and access to green spaces was also amplified; as well as huge increases in footfall in parks and urban green-spaces, estate agents have reported an increase in people seeking homes with more space and outdoor areas.

1.2. Coupled with this desire for better and more functional homes the past year has witnessed the collapse of retailers, leaving unoccupied units in prime locations, alongside some larger employers looking to reduce office space. These properties present the opportunity for developers to purchase buildings at prices previously unthinkable, and convert them into housing under Permitted Development Rights (PDR) which have been further extended under the new legislation coming into force in August 2021 in England. This allows for commercial buildings to be converted into residential properties. Although dwellings converted will have to meet minimum space standards, there are no requirements to provide private outdoor space, meet green building standards to minimise the carbon footprint or meet usual planning standards, such as the provision of affordable homes. This type of development greatly impacts upon local authorities' ability to regenerate and repurpose town and city centres to ensure that they remain vibrant and economically prosperous in the future.

1.3. The introduction of PDR in England, coupled with the impact of the pandemic on retail, risks increasing inequalities. Over 75% of officers and elected members responding to an APSE/TCPA survey believed that the homes created through PDR could damage health and wellbeing; over 67% felt that

developments created through PDR had a disproportionately negative impact on the vulnerable. Due to the viability and lack of land available for development in city centres, PDR has the greatest impact on larger cities such as London, Birmingham, and Manchester.

APSE has called for the following measures and repeats these calls to the Select Committee:

- Local authorities must be central in developing the forthcoming reforms to the planning system, and build consensus on an approach to delivery.
- Government must consider how it can effectively ensure strategic planning and public health funding and policy powers are used to best support the coordination and communication between public health and planning.
- Government must make the promotion of health and wellbeing central to the regulation of the built environment, and outlaw the construction of homes and neighbourhoods which undermine the health and wellbeing of residents.
- Government must mandate net-zero targets in PDR and other developments.

1.4 Town/city leaders should:

- Focus on setting up processes that enable planners to work with public health colleagues and create evidence-based local policy.

1.5 Turning specifically to green spaces, and given in many areas the lack of access to private gardens or outdoor space, it was noticeable that during lockdown periods the only spaces open to the public were greenspaces which provided both physical and mental wellbeing bolt-holes for millions across the UK.

1.6 Evidence suggests that areas of high-density populations, where access to greenspace is at its lowest, also had the highest rates of COVID-19 infections; a seeming consequence of the inevitable close contact situations between families and neighbours, which provided the perfect conditions for virus transmissions.

1.7 Government has now recognised the need for better green spaces, committing to building back greener, investing in tree planting, peatland restoration, clean air zones, improved water quality and a general promotion and protection of natural assets. This realisation of the value of parks and greenspaces, as critical to a sustainable society, the environment and the physical and mental wellbeing of citizens is welcomed by APSE.

1.9 However, vision and words need now to be turned into actions. The UK Government has begun to provide funding to improve natural assets and has brought in requirements, such as 'Biodiversity Net Gain' to ensure developers improve the quality and opportunities for increased biodiversity on all schemes they are involved in, now including major national infrastructure programmes. However, whilst these recent post-COVID promises are welcome, the continued impact of austerity on local councils has hampered its ability to manage parks and greenspaces, and continues to put a severe strain on parks maintenance. This financial strain is coupled by an increase in user numbers.

1.10 Lockdown has had the positive impact of reconnecting communities with their local greenspaces and parks but this positive outcome must not be lost through managed decline. Addressing the capital and revenue funding issues for greenspaces and parks should be considered a priority; this approach would help councils manage the increases in user numbers, repair the wear and tear of increased usage and plan for long-term maintenance programmes and, in some areas, allow for expansion of greenspace, particularly in areas of housing development.

1.12 Investing in greenspace and parks provides a significant return on investment in public health and mental wellbeing. As well as starting to address some of the equalities' issues exposed by the pandemic, such as poorer health outcomes, this investment offers improved access to leisure opportunities such as outdoor exercise which have grown exponentially during the pandemic. These are likely to remain an important part of healthy lifestyles moving forward. Additionally, environmental benefits include tree planting, peatland restoration, and flood alleviation projects alongside supporting pollinators, as well as promoting improved environmental behaviours such as avoiding littering and fly-tipping, and promoting positive actions on climate change.

1.15 It is APSE's view that we have a brief opportunity to improve and protect our greenspace; in doing so we positively assist both a green recovery and address the health and wellbeing inequalities exposed by the pandemic. Improving access to green spaces can be achieved by upgrading existing parks and greenspaces, greening urban neighbourhoods, and creating large scale regional parks and forests in the urban fringe. Approaches to these types of interventions are outlined in recent APSE research ' Post Pandemic: Green Urban Spaces'.

2. The changing nature of employment

2.1 The pandemic created a seismic shift in work patterns, disrupted traditional employment roles, and left millions of workers reliant upon furlough payments, and facing long-term reliance on universal credit for in-work payments or support whilst seeking new work. For local authorities this in turn has drawn on scarce resources with a call on additional support such as free school meals, council tax, housing support and social care.

2.2 The changing nature of employment cannot therefore be separated from the wider impact on local government, and 'neighbourhood' level services, during and post-pandemic. APSE would therefore like the Committee to consider three strands to our response. First of all, the challenges of different ways of working; secondly the impact of unemployment and underemployment on council services; thirdly the role of local authorities in repurposing its assets, high streets and town centres to respond to employment and social changes.

2.3 Challenges of different ways of working

2.3.1 Whilst much has been reported about the 'new normal' encompassing home-working as a long-term outcome, there is scant data to support the long-

term viability of home-working for millions of workers. The UK is facing a crisis in housing need, not just the numbers of new units but the quality of housing stock, and the prevalence of poor housing quality, particularly amongst the burgeoning private renters. Therefore, the option of home working for many workers remains unviable. APSE's networks have identified this as a particular problem amongst younger workers who are increasingly reliant upon Houses in Multiple Occupation, where dedicated workspace is simply not available. See also APSE report for UNISON 'A decent place to live: Homes fit for key workers' published July 2021.

2.3.2 There are also concerns on the health and wellbeing of homeworkers. Using the local government workforce as a proxy measure APSE conducted a survey, with over 300 respondents, in Autumn 2020. Results were reported in December 2020 and can be accessed here. Contrary to common perceptions, 53% of respondents had worked during the pandemic at their office or depot, to support council service delivery; this suggests that rather than home working being 'normal' there in fact exists a more blended model, highly dependent on the nature of the work. Moreover 70% of respondents reported working much longer hours, including excessive hours, and this was attributed to a lack of separation between 'home' and 'work', and being available 'all hours'. A cause for alarm, is that near to 85% of respondents reported concerns about the mental wellbeing of their directly managed workforce or colleagues.

2.3.3 Whilst this survey was carried out amongst local government workers the results can be reasonably triangulated by other similar surveys across different sectors of the economy. The inability to homework is well documented in sectors like retail, logistics, construction, health and care.

2.3.4 APSE is also mindful that the future of work should be informed by facts rather than suppositions. ONS data found that of the employed population, 35.9% did some work at home in 2020 but this was notably reported as an increase of just 9.4 percentage points compared with 2019; this also includes a change in the type of people who worked from home in 2020. The ONS data includes differences in pay rates for traditional homeworkers, amongst professionals or higher earners, and employees who mainly worked from home, were around 38% less likely on average to have received a bonus (compared with those who never worked from home between 2013 and 2020).

2.3.5 This data suggests that whilst home-working appeared to be the 'normal' not all workers were able to work from home and clock-off in time to 'bake banana bread', as social media would have us believe. The local government frontline workforce adopted to different ways of working with the bulk of frontline workers in areas like refuse collection, street-cleaning, parks and cemetery and crematoria workers reporting to their usual places of work such as depots. This is important for a number of reasons:-

- There needs to be visible and available support for workers continuing to report to physical offices or depots as their workplace
- The viability of public transport links to workplaces has to be considered for those workers unable to work from home, where rapid shifts to homeworking decreases commuter numbers on public transport
- Homeworkers will need different kinds of support and consideration needs to be given to the conditions in which people are working where homes

are palpable inadequate to double-up as workspaces; this directly links to the issue of housing need and spatial quality of homes.

2.4 Impact of unemployment/underemployment on council services

2.4.1 Looking to the COVID-19 recovery, whilst there are already emerging banks of data on the impact on health and care services, the changing face of employment also has some serious considerations for local authorities. This impacts in two ways; Firstly, increased demand on services; Secondly, the place-shaping role of local councils as stewards of the local economy.

2.4.2 To look at service demand issues it is clear that underemployment and unemployment will increase demand on housing services, including homelessness services, financial support for housing need and council tax support. Universal credit claimants have increased surging from 3 million in March 2020, to reach 5.8 million by November 2020. This means other services have and will continue to see demand rise; these services include support to children and families, older people, free school meals, and local businesses, who may face closure, with further job losses. Whilst these pressures may reduce as the economy reopens it is unlikely to decrease to pre-pandemic levels as rapidly as the pressures have increased. This leaves local authorities with both an immediate increase in demand and that demand remaining in future years; such needs are unlikely to be met by the current financial resources available to councils, even with the much-needed additional support provided by Government. The demand will not fall evenly and the poorest areas will see the biggest deficit in available support.

2.5 The role of local authorities in repurposing its assets, high streets and town centres to respond to employment and social change.

2.5.1 As the UK emerges from the pandemic the acceleration of changes to consumer patterns of behaviour are unlikely to revert back to pre-pandemic modes. High streets and town centres were already reflecting the decline in retail and the shift to online purchases. Researchers from the Institute of Place Management (IPM) at Manchester Metropolitan University, using Spring-Board data, found patterns on successful maintenance and recovery of local high streets and town centres is highly dependent upon local factors. It is the knowledge of these local factors which supports the role of local authorities in reshaping and repurposing local high streets.

2.5.2 Whilst on the one hand a local authority providing support to the local high street may of itself be a notable endeavour, given the direct way in which this can support local jobs and local businesses, a less direct approach is where some of the traditional retail space, left empty in town centres, could be innovatively repurposed to provide work-hubs or ad-hoc use office spaces near to where people live. For those with unsuitable home environments but otherwise required to 'homework' such hubs could provide a viable option, saving a commute to distant offices but equally generating local footfall on high streets. This also provides more walkable or cyclable routes to support environmental outcomes. For underemployed/unemployed residents, such spaces could also be utilised as satellite hubs for job-seekers and skills. Public assets could also be part of the

new way of utilising local spaces, for example with touch-down points in local libraries.

2.5.3 Therefore, whilst the changing nature of employment produces many challenges, emerging examples of local authority innovation in places like Barking and Dagenham, Swansea and St Helens to name just a few, suggest that local councils are a key delivery partner in managing the transition to new ways of working and supporting residents who face these changes now and in the future.

3. Transport

3.1 The latest DfT statistics shows the number of local bus passenger journeys in England was 1.55 billion in the year ending March 2021, a 62% decrease when compared with a year earlier as a result of the nationwide movement restrictions due to COVID-19. Whilst many employees have now returned to work, many transport timetables have yet to respond and significant numbers are reliant upon cars. 84% of journeys pre-pandemic were made by car, van or taxi, 4% by bus, 1% by cycle and 9% by train.

3.2. The various lockdowns and 'work from home, where you can' guidance has dramatically reduced the number of staff working within centralised office accommodation. In spite of the challenges identified in 2.3.1 to 2.3.5 above the enforced use of IT and online meetings has called into question the volume of traditional office blocks as places of work. Should this state of affairs continue, then significant reductions in commuting, either by car or public transport might become the norm.

3.3. Those smaller towns and villages that have served as predominantly dormitory locations will see more people reliant on local retail services and short distance travel. Unfortunately, most are the same towns and villages who have seen their public bus services diminish drastically since bus deregulation and the parallel rise in car ownership. Whilst some journeys may transfer to bicycle, and this should be actively encouraged, short distance (and the most polluting) car usage will also rise. This creates a long-term impact whereby significant change in the profile of demand for public transport, favouring local journeys over traditional commuter routes, could result in bus operators responding to these changes by further reducing unprofitable routes.

3.4 Whilst working from home saves time and money on commuting, it is not the same for those undertaking manual labour or whose job involves working from a specific location. The effect will not be evenly distributed with some professionals like hospital doctors and teachers forced to commute, while others like administration and accounting professionals remain homeworking. Inequalities are therefore likely to be less obvious with increases based on type of employment rather than income and the viability of public transport in some areas being called into question.

3.5. The ONS found considerable difficulty in using the concept of towns to compare inequality. Some towns were regarded as low, some high deprivation residential (e.g. Heswall and Deal), some high deprivation working towns (e.g Walsall), and some low deprivation working towns (e.g. Solihull). Inequalities are therefore likely to be more distinctive between the low deprivation working

towns and the high deprivation residential, the latter being more reliant on commuting and a higher proportion of the workforce in manual employment.

3.6. There appears to be no criteria which fits geography well; therefore, interventions would need to be based on income and requirement to travel for work. Quick solutions may include reduced fare packages for low income/under 30s for a defined period. Longer term, mapping of transport usage within what is likely a be a changed commuting pattern will allow services to be redesigned to satisfy demand where it exists. However, the existence of a service will also stimulate demand so the two are linked.

3.7 If Government and local authorities are serious about removing barriers to opportunity, then affordable public transport to facilitate commuting has to be the goal. The decision to drive is balanced against the cost and speed of the public transport alternative, and demand will inevitably increase if that transport is fast, cheap and frequent. However, alternatives to the car will inevitably require initial and significant public funding.

Conclusion

In all of the areas for the Committee's consideration, housing and green spaces, the changing nature of employment and transport, the role of the local authority in supporting recovery and renewal from the pandemic, will be critical. This support however cannot be assured from a starting position of dire financial uncertainty and hollowed out local public services, which took the brunt of public sector funding cuts during the era of austerity. To support the recovery local government must be entrusted with the powers and resources to deliver on the economic and social challenges to 'build back better' and to 'build back greener'.

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