

## Written evidence - Polly Mackenzie, CEO, Demos (LBC0305)

1. During the pandemic, Demos convened a national conversation, under the banner Renew Normal, to identify how the crisis had changed public experience and expectations, and build consensus on how we should rebuild the country. We involved 50,000 people in the debate. We called our final report Build Back Stronger, articulating our conviction that improving our collective resilience was the banner under which the nation could be united, and the lessons and consequences of the pandemic built into policy frameworks fit for the future.
2. This was followed by a series of linked papers, exploring elements of the pandemic and its consequences in detail; including the effects of home working; patterns of food consumption and the experience of those reliant on community food projects; the future of places affected by changes in economic geography; and the future reform agenda for public services struggling with backlogs and constrained funding.

### 3. Renew Normal

**3.1.** We identified five key lessons from the pandemic in this report; I gave evidence last autumn on the first - the extent to which minds have been changed, and on what. In short: there has not been a sea change, but far more people changed their minds about their own lives and how the country should be run than in any normal year.

3.2. Below is more detail on our four other key recommendations.

#### **3.3. Level up people, not just places**

3.3.1. There is a real opportunity after this crisis to shift the focus about what the government means by "levelling up". The agenda to narrow the gap between poorer, northern towns, and richer places in the South East remains important. But as we emerge from the crisis, it's clear we need a much more comprehensive approach, if we are to make Britain stronger and more resilient.

3.3.2. That comprehensive approach should include:

3.3.3. **Levelling up wellbeing** - through investment in green space, more flexible working.

3.3.4. **Levelling up social capital** - through a community development programme and support for volunteering.

3.3.5. **Levelling up health** - with a focus on poverty reduction, obesity, and healthcare access.

- 3.3.6. **Levelling up for left behind workers** - with a higher minimum wage, strengthened employment rights and a stronger welfare safety net.
  - 3.3.7. **Levelling up for left behind groups** - fulfilling commitments on racial equality and support for disabled people
  - 3.3.8. **Levelling up digital access** - with a combination of infrastructure and skills investment.
- 3.4. **Community makes us stronger, not just happier.**
- 3.4.1. The pandemic has proved beyond all doubt that community networks are a vital component of national resilience. National shielding support schemes, national test and trace, and national volunteering programmes were regularly out-performed by their local counterparts. And, as we explored in the previous section, hyper-local community organising delivered not just direct aid, but a national morale boost, too.
  - 3.4.2. Community business and charitable organisations have often formed the anchor points for mutual aid activities: where they do not exist, individuals have often struggled to pull together sufficient critical mass to meet needs. Areas that lacked infrastructure were unable to apply for funding, or when they did, were often unsuccessful.
  - 3.4.3. This is because community organisations contribute both social capital - often built up over years or decades - and organisational agility. Localised efforts are often the most receptive to the continuously changing nature of emergencies, because they remove the usual bureaucratic measures and can mobilise people to meet need incredibly quickly. What makes their work uniquely successful boils down to the connections and trust they have built up over the years.<sup>1</sup>
  - 3.4.4. And yet we have also seen that there remain substantial proportions of the population who know almost no-one in their neighbourhood, and that loneliness increased for millions. Gaps and disparities in social capital contribute to systemic fragility: increasing the demands on the state to support individuals where neighbours and communities had not organised to do so. There is therefore a benefit to all of us to start to fill these gaps in social capital, as part of the wider levelling up agenda.

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<sup>1</sup> Taylor and Wilson (2020)

### 3.5. **Remote working and online shopping are here to stay. We need to adapt**

3.5.1. Over the last year, we've seen an unprecedented shift of our lives online. And while it hasn't been perfect, and we can expect to see some bounce-back to offline working, socialising and shopping once restrictions are fully lifted, the simple reality is that we are not going back to how things were before.

3.5.2. People are broadly positive about the role technology has played in our lives. So there's not much point trying to put the genie back in the bottle and persuade or incentivise people back to their offices, high streets, or commute. The policy agenda needs urgently to move on focus on three things:

How to improve the quality of online experiences

How to adapt offline services so they can be affordably retained

How to adapt our physical spaces to the economic realities of the future - see below.

3.5.3. **We need an "everybody in" strategy for the digital world.** A significant portion of the population are limited in their internet use or do not use it at all. 9 million people in the UK can't use the internet without help; 7 million people have no access to the internet at home.<sup>2</sup> These figures are not merely significant in terms of who is able to get online, but intersects with other inequalities: research by the Good Things Foundation and NHSX Digital finds that digital exclusion is a co-determinant of health, and as such, the digitally excluded risk health inequalities to a greater degree.<sup>3</sup>

3.5.4. **Online spaces need more oversight as they become more important.** We can't assume that online is automatically good. The pandemic has also been a stark demonstration that online spaces, as they play a greater part in our lives, are even more in need of oversight and design in the public interest. Unregulated online spaces which are driven by commercial incentives are spaces where misinformation and abuse flourish: and this poses serious threats to both individual well-being and public health. While the platforms have been much more aggressive and

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/sites/default/files/research-publications/digital-nation-2020.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/sites/default/files/research-publications/digital\\_inclusion\\_in\\_health\\_and\\_care-\\_lessons\\_learned\\_from\\_the\\_nhs\\_widening\\_digital\\_participation\\_programme\\_2017-2020\\_\\_0.pdf](https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/sites/default/files/research-publications/digital_inclusion_in_health_and_care-_lessons_learned_from_the_nhs_widening_digital_participation_programme_2017-2020__0.pdf)

collaborative about misinformation, they have often been left playing catch-up. Forthcoming work on online harms needs to give regulators full access to data, and incentivise much greater investment in human moderation at scale.

3.5.5. **We need to adapt offline options so that they can be retained.** Our research showed real fear that offline options - to work, shop, or access public services - would disappear, and it would be the vulnerable, the poor, and the digitally excluded who would lose out. The public is clear that they would like offline options to be retained but - especially when it comes to shopping - this may be expensive or impossible. In public services, we argue that some of the savings from digital transformation should be recycled into face-to-face services for those who need them, as well as digital inclusion. There are real opportunities, given the changes we are likely to see in office and high street property use, to redesign workspaces and public service "front offices" to create hybrid spaces, where face to face support can be provided alongside digital infrastructure. Co-working spaces in towns, shared between multiple employers, for example, may offer a half-way house between a long commute and home working. Many high streets could benefit from digital hubs where citizens can get face to face support accessing a range of online public services.

3.5.6. **We need to reset the rules for remote working.** From health and safety assessments to the costs of heating and broadband connections; from privacy and workplace surveillance to management training: there are a host of policy issues triggered by this step change in the numbers of people working from home. Through the Workshift Commission Demos will explore these issues and make recommendations about how to ensure this catalyses improvements in our working lives.

### **3.6. Lesson 5: We need to redesign the places where we live and work.**

3.7. Our economic and social geography was under pressure long before the pandemic. Shopping was moving online and high streets were suffering. Cities were growing, pricing many people out, while towns were often dwindling, many with ageing populations. We had wide variations in access to green space and community buildings, which so often act as the foundations of community connection. Our public transport networks were overcrowded and in need of

- investment, and we needed major investment to create the infrastructure for moving towards electric vehicles.
- 3.8. Of course: the United Kingdom has an extraordinary range of public spaces, civic architecture and heritage assets, of which we are rightly proud. But increasingly it was clear that we needed to adapt the places where we live to increase civic space, to adapt to climate change and technology, and to accommodate the changing needs of an ageing population.
  - 3.9. The pandemic accelerated many of these long term trends. This raises huge questions for the physical infrastructure of the country: from the viability of public transport networks to the imperative of insulating homes; from how to repurpose vacant office or retail buildings to how to create high quality public space where communities can come together.
  - 3.10. Transition cannot mean that we wash our hands of the consequences of economic and social change: vacancies, derelict buildings, or impossibly expensive public transport. Of course, the market will support much of the switch from non-viable to viable uses of buildings. But the public is clear that they want the government to take a role in managing the consequences of change. In our research there was widespread support for government playing a role in driving the transformation of city centres, for example, to become primarily places for community, arts and leisure - rather than businesses.
  - 3.11. Now is the movement for urban and rural planners alike to innovate. To test and explore how to build more livable spaces, to support the connected communities the public is so keen to see emerge after this pandemic. This is an enormous opportunity for what Demos has called Everyday Democracy: mass participation in a consultation about what the future should look like for the spaces that matter most to each of us. We can mobilise discussion and debate, and help build a positive agenda for places that have - for too long - accepted the inevitability of decline
  - 3.12. And the plans we develop for those places can and must feed into the wider policy agenda for post-Covid renewal.
    - 3.12.1. More cycling and walking infrastructure could also be part of countering obesity and improving wellbeing.
    - 3.12.2. Insulating homes can be part of a plan to create new jobs, cut carbon emissions, and improve families' financial resilience.
    - 3.12.3. Creating new, local, office co-working hubs for public servants - on high streets - could help create jobs and civic pride in left behind towns, as part of the levelling up agenda
  - 3.13. At the top of the agenda for geographic change should be improved access to green space, in particular for those communities who

have the least. Reclaiming land and streetspace for community-run parks, in particular, could help build social capital and community connection, while increasing access to green space as part of a public health strategy.

#### **4. Changes in economic geography**

- 4.1.** Following on from Renew Normal we published [Post-Pandemic Places](#) and [Everyday Places](#); twin reports exploring people's attitudes to, and aspirations for, the places they live in, both during the pandemic and for the long term.
- 4.2.** This work found that areas with more remote working are likely to see higher levels of local spending, suggesting that hybrid working is key to the Government's plans for regeneration after the pandemic. The research found that 36% of people plan to spend more money locally than they did before the pandemic. Among people required to work from home, this rose to 47%. We called on Government to promote remote working as a regeneration tool. The Government should incentivise the establishment of more local offices and hybrid-working initiatives to give people the flexibility they want and also make progress on the 'levelling up' agenda, by spreading spending power across a wider geographic area.
- 4.3.** We also launched a new Place Satisfaction Index, which showed that access to good transport, nature, and high street shops were vital to people's sense of whether their place was thriving. A constituency-by-constituency breakdown is available at [places.demos.co.uk](https://places.demos.co.uk)
- 4.4.** This has been followed by our **Workshift Commission**, including [The Nowhere Office](#) and [Distanced Revolution](#), exploring changing working practices for formerly office based workers. We found that many home workers have had a generally positive experience. Working from home has been linked to better eating habits and improved stress levels during the pandemic, indicating flexible working policies could help tackle obesity and improve public health. Home workers have also been more likely than non-homeworkers to experience improved mental health and volunteer more.
- 4.5.** However, low income households have experienced the opposite, irrespective of whether they've worked from home. Low incomes have been linked to the deterioration of eating habits and stress levels, building on the arguments that more needs to be done to improve the living standards of low earners in the UK if we are to 'build back better'.

#### **5. The Social State**

- 5.1.** Demos is currently conducting a [research programme](#) into the role public services could play in strengthening the social fabric and community cohesion that was so vital to national resilience during the pandemic. We have found that, despite the positive impacts for communities, people are still struggling to form relationships locally and public services could be a vital catalyst for change.
- 5.2.** Looking forward, there is a huge risk that the gains we made in community relationships during the pandemic will be lost. In our work, a third (32%) said there were fewer opportunities to make new relationships with people now, than there was during the first lockdown, while four in ten (37%) said there was no difference and only a quarter (23%) said there was more. While the pandemic has brought people together under exceptional circumstances, it has also disconnected people from each other with ramifications for our social fabric. We found that six in ten (64%) have not made a new friend for six months or more, and four in ten (44%) have not made a new friend in over a year. Similarly, four in ten (37%) have not been hugged for six months or more, and a quarter (25%) have not been hugged for more than a year. That more than one in nine (13%) have not been asked how their day was, or talked to their neighbours in the past six months or more, reflects the disrepair in our social fabric, where too many are missing out on regular, basic social interactions.
- 5.3.** We argue that relational public services could help bridge the gap, boost resilience in communities to future shocks, and also offer a reform agenda focused on minimising social harms instead of simply pumping money into treating problems once they arise. The funding crisis for public services after the pandemic is serious and requires a new approach beyond the “inputism” that has overtaken our politics if we are to have a hope of meeting need.

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