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Learning from the system level COVID-19 response across the West Midlands Combined Authority

Executive Summary
October 2020

Headlines

Collaborate CIC was asked to work with system actors in the West Midlands to distill the system learning and implications arising from the pandemic. Our assessment is that:

- The WMCA area has been able to achieve much through the difficult challenges of the pandemic because of the existing infrastructure and relationships.
- This existing infrastructure meant the region was able to motor quickly and was able to put a rapid response in place.
- There are some brilliant and inspiring examples of system collaboration from work on street homelessness to food provision.
- Many people we spoke with are tired, but also feel reconnected with their purpose and are adamant that they do not want to go back to pre-pandemic ways of working.
- The WMCA can play a useful role in convening, facilitating and presenting a coherent voice to central government, particularly in relation to inclusive growth, skills and the economy (the area where it is seen to have greatest legitimacy).
- Whilst all system actors can identify complex and deep rooted issues facing the region which require systemic solutions, not all are clear about the added value the WMCA brings, and work will be needed if the combined authority wishes to move into other priority areas outside of the inclusive growth, skills and the economy.

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Methodology

This report brings together:

- Content and insight from interviews
- Two learning sessions
- Co-design session with the WMCA team:
- Feedback from our weekly calls with the University of Wolverhampton
- Learning from other Collaborate work

The work was conducted by a team from Collaborate CIC:

- Sophie-Ann Freund, Research Consultant.
- Rebecca Eligon, Senior Associate.
- David Relph, Senior Associate.
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And the WMCA:

- Claire Dhami, Head of public Service Reform and Prevention.
- Claire Spencer, Senior Policy Adviser (Public Services and Inclusive Growth)
- Adam Hawksbee, Head of Policy and Programme Development

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Overall learning: positives from the pandemic response

Whilst many acknowledged the difficulty and personal exhaustion they were feeling; on balance everyone felt there were huge benefits and positives arising from the pandemic in terms of:

- Ways of working including better use of technology and home working
- Deeper relationships with existing contacts and the establishment of a set of wider relationships with new system actors
- A more mature approach to risk, with people saying they felt trusted to take more autonomous decisions
- Streamlined and slimmed down governance and bureaucracy which was aided by frequent (sometimes multiple times a day) meetings to resolve issues and make decisions quickly
- Tangible examples of making a difference to local people at pace (esp. relating to 'Everyone In', food delivery and PPE)
- Many noted that on a personal level they felt reconnected with their 'purpose' and the reason they came in to public service (regardless of the part of the system they represented)

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Overall learning: shared understanding of system challenges

- Everyone we spoke with was able to identify complex issues that require a systemic, regional and collaborative response. For many, these were causing deep concern which predated but has been exacerbated through the ongoing pandemic. There is also concern about a second wave of COVID-19 and the effect this will have on the capability to deal with these wider issues.
- These issues were all rooted in systemic inequality (although none of the participants in this work used the language of Black Lives Matter).
- Many noted that the practical successes of the pandemic response meant there was more appetite to collaborate in relation to these 'wicked issues' which included:
  - child poverty
  - digital inclusion
  - inclusive growth (skills, economy)
  - the future care market
  - affordable and accessible housing
  - demographic change
  - domestic abuse

"We are now at a point in time where we are translating to a latent challenge from an emergency one. If you think about it in terms of a tsunami, we are now dealing with the long term effects after the initial wave."

NB: It is interesting that although environmental focus is one of the overarching principles of the WMCA it did not feature as one of the named system challenges for the region through our research.

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Broader reflections from Collaborate CIC (1)

Through this research we have been energised and inspired by the work of West Midlands partners through the pandemic. There are many practical examples of organisations and individuals coming together, rolling up their sleeves and really making a difference at a time of crisis, from Everyone In, to food delivery and the regional approach to PPE. This is seen to typify the culture and sense of community in the West Midlands. Although there are inevitable challenges and complexities (see next slide), there is much to build upon.

"Culture and history have driven the response in the West Midlands. We have a history of collaborating at scale. That's why the West Midlands' response has been different to other parts of the country in terms of our regional work – it is because we already had infrastructure and relationships and we are a culturally identifiable, compact area….It made it easier for government to engage with us. I've worked in the south west and south east and I am not sure they are 'a thing' in the same way as the West Midlands – the relationships pre-existed, which meant that when all of a sudden we were working alongside energy suppliers, water, council, police, fire in a way we had never worked before, we were able to form a sense of coherence."

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Broader reflections from Collaborate CIC (2)

There are also some important broader reflections which the WMCA and partners may wish to consider and respond to:

- **System:** People had a tendency to reflect on their personal and organisation learning from the pandemic – this isn't entirely surprising or unusual; however, it will be important to be realistic about the extent to which the WM is seen as a primary system for others.
- **Environment - an agenda/focus area:** Whilst the environment and physical infrastructure feature strongly in the WMCA's ambitions for Public Service Reform they did not emerge from our research as being areas identified by system actors as requiring a collaborative systemic response
- **Black Lives Matter:** Through the co-design session held midway through our fieldwork we were asked to probe to understand the extent to which BLM was a key consideration or future area of system focus. People largely framed the system challenges facing the region as part of a broader inequality and social justice paradigm rather than explicitly naming BLM.
- **NHS partners:** We struggled in this project to engage with NHS partners. While this could reflect the impact of the ongoing pandemic, it seems reasonable to ask whether this is also a possible indicator of the extent to which NHS partners think and act as part of the local and regional system.

"I still think there are more opportunities for us to work more closely with the health service and ambulance service."

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The role of the WMCA and its partners

During the project we have heard many views on the role of the WMCA in relation to what's worked during the pandemic and what needs to happen next.
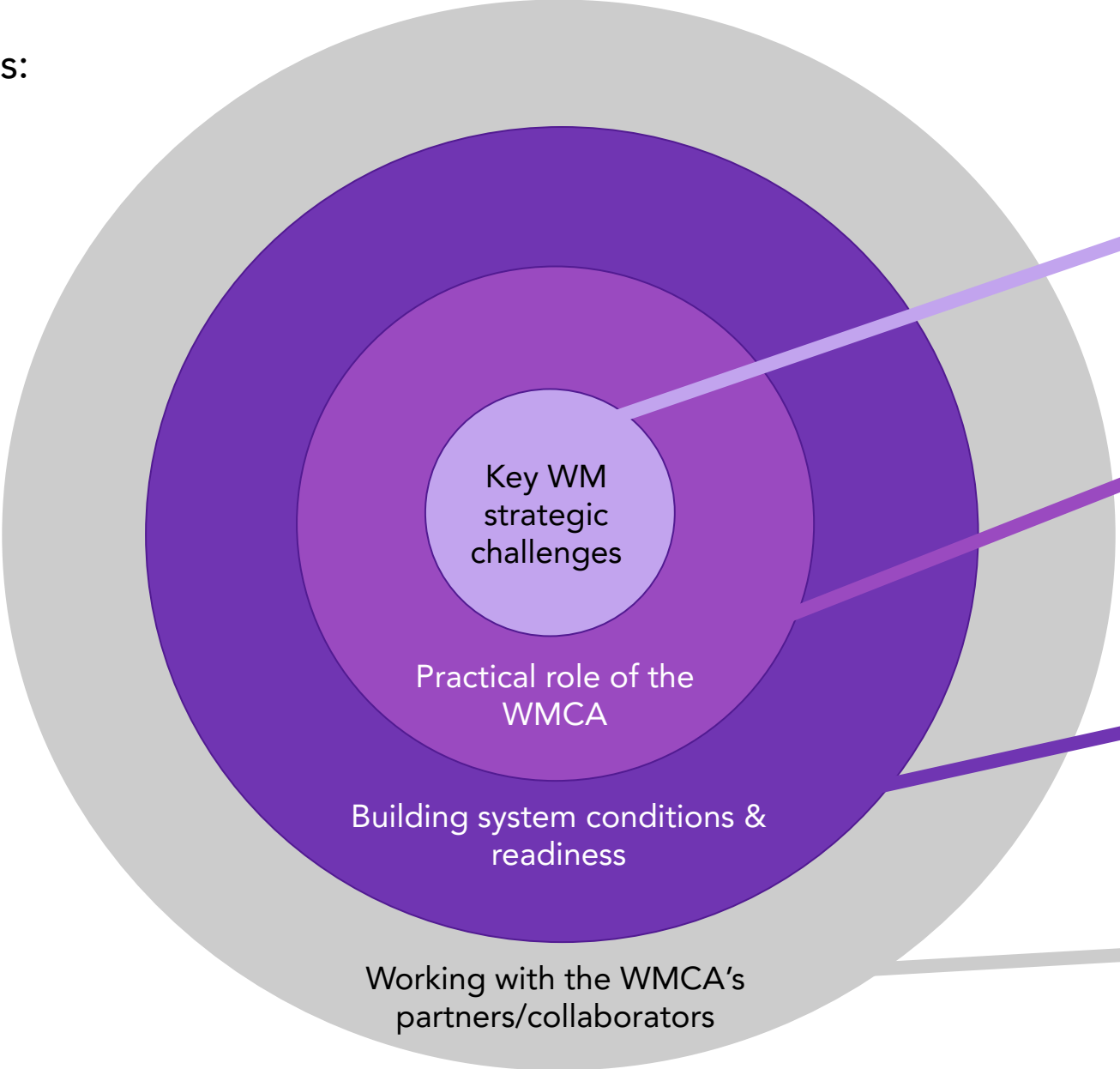
Our observation is that there are widely differing views across the system. Some people think the WMCA has an important role to play across the big strategic challenges facing the region, and ideas about what that role looks like. Some think the combined authority's role is primarily economic, and perceive limited legitimacy to act beyond that space. Others have no clear view.

In our analysis, we have identified three key roles for the WMCA, and one challenge relating to each of those roles. These are roles that need to be brokered with partners, and so we have said something about the implications of the CAs system partners too.

It is important to consider the conditions present or required to enable effective system level collaboration. There are important implications for the WMCA and its partners in this area, particularly in terms of the role that the CA can play in helping create these conditions for effective system working across the whole region, and not simply within the auspices of the CA in its formal and structural sense.

Four roles and challenges for the WMCA

Roles:

Key WM strategic challenges

Practical role of the WMCA

Building system conditions & readiness

Working with the WMCA's partners/collaborators

Challenges:

Building legitimacy to have a role in the range of system challenges

Learning from and building on the role the WMCA played in the pandemic/lockdown to continue to demonstrate value and shape the regional agenda

Building the system conditions for collaboration on both practical immediate challenges and complex long term challenges

Working with the WMCA's partners and collaborators to demonstrate and promote positive system behaviour

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Key West Midlands strategic challenges
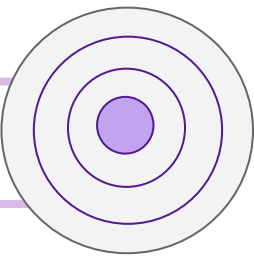
Key WMCA challenge: Building its legitimacy in relation to a broader agenda that extends beyond the economic - currently system actors do not necessarily see the role of the WMCA as relating to regional delivery or outside the remit of growth and skills.

These are the six priority areas of the WMCA:

1) Living Safely with Coronavirus
2) Accessing healthcare and improving physical health
3) Mental Health Support and Awareness
4) Education and Young People
5) Jobs and Training
6) Local Businesses and High Streets

These two are currently seen as the remit of the WMCA by external partners

However, through this project a number of system actors have identified other complex and system issues where the WMCA could play a role, and these broadly map onto priorities 1-4. For example,there is a big opportunity for the CA to engage with local (and emerging) Integrated Care Systems on the wider determinants of health, with a specific focus on use of a joint evidence base and a coherent public health and economic development outcomes framework.

Practical role of the WMCA
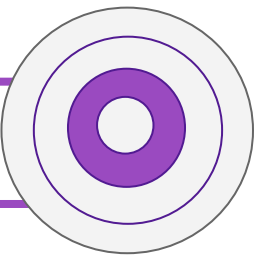
Key WMCA challenge: Building on pandemic learning and role to continue to demonstrate value and shape the regional agenda more

Partners that have worked closely with the WMCA can see the value it brings. In particular this is seen as:

- bringing the region together around a shared evidence base
- ensuring a coherent voice
- lobbying central government
- negotiating system conflicts (where one part/s of the region may be pursuing agendas/policies which may have an impact on others)
- facilitating joint working across the region or parts of it
- particularly undertaking these functions in relation to: the economy, inclusive growth, skills and employment

In some ways, this role is similar to the role a backbone organisation plays in a collective impact context.

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Building system conditions and readiness
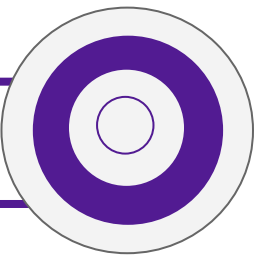
Key WMCA challenge: Building the conditions for systemic collaboration on both practical immediate challenges and complex long term challenges

The YMCA is in a unique position with its wider view of the region. Many of the conversations we had pointed to the need for the deliberate building of the conditions for greater collaboration across the system, not just in emergency response but also to tackle complex longer term challenges (such as economic, health and racial inequalities). The CA has a potentially very positive role here in terms of:

- Promoting and demonstrating positive and effective system level work.
- Building the capacity - and leadership - to do this well not just within the CA area but across the wider region.

The health of the system is essential to address these complex challenges, and is arguably a concern for the combined authority given its regional scope. We therefore suggest that in addition to the key strategic challenges and the practical actions the WMCA can take, the combined authority also focuses on building the wider system conditions.

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Working with the WMCA's partners/collaborators
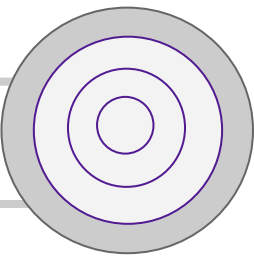
The effectiveness of the WMCA in each of these regards is fundamentally dependent on its partners. If the relationship between the WMCA and its partners/collaborators isn't right, the CA cannot succeed in the way that it seeks to.

The joint challenge (for all seeking to collaborate across the WMCA and region) is to build on pandemic learning and better use the various collaborative networks present across the WM to both continue to respond to COVID and address wider regional challenges.

Achieving this will need positive system focussed behaviour, for example:
- All partners being genuinely present in joint fora, not just turning up. Activism not commentary is the basis of effective system working.
- Describing - and challenging each other to deliver - positive system behaviours that everyone can adopt.
- Putting in right resources and capacity for regional discussions - and taking a joint view about how this capacity can be mobilised and shared. And using the existing networks that al connect to as platforms for joint work rather than exclusive forums.
- Bringing the region together around a shared evidence base and related outcomes frameworks- a genuinely shared view of issues and whats is to be achieved is an important enabler of a better system.
- Seeing sovereignty as a shared place-based issue not necessarily something organisations need to 'own' or 'win'. Think - and act - system first. Once a regional objective is set, don't compete with each other.
- Openly identifying and negotiating system conflicts (where one part/s of the region may be pursuing agendas/policies which may have an impact on others)

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Rebecca Eligon | David Relph
ann-sophie@collaboratecic.com | 020 7815 8297
collaboratecic.com