

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

FINAL REPORT  
October 2020

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# Executive Summary

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 inclusive growth, skills and the economy.

# 1. Background and introduction

# Background and introduction

This report from Collaborate CIC identifies [the system level learning for the WMCA area from the initial wave of the COVID-19 pandemic](#). It makes recommendations both for the WMCA and the wider system through the lens of the WMCA's public service reform ambitions.

In terms of timing, these insights are designed to feed into consideration of the ongoing response to the continued presence of COVID-19, as well as wider issues regarding the potential role of the WMCA.

This report includes:

- [recommendations about the short, medium- and long-term priorities](#) for the region and a clear steer on the system conditions that need to be invested in to deepen and strengthen collaboration.
- a description, set out as series of challenges, of what the [future of public service reform could look like in the West Midlands](#), drawing on learning from public service activity - both pre Covid-19 and during.
- [case studies](#) on the 'bright spots' of activity to learn from, and recommendations for work that the region could begin prototyping and learning from.

# 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

# Diagnostic: Interviews

We would like to thank the following 20 partners who participated in 30-minute interviews to share their reflections and learning

Matt Bowsher (Dudley DASS, WMCA shielding lead)

Ian Melvin (Walsall Housing and Welfare lead)

Gary Taylor (Assistant Chief Fire Officer)

Tom McNeil, Waheed Saleem, Alethea Fuller (PCC Office)

Jamie-Ann Edwards (HMPPS)

Hugh Disley (WMDCS)

Pete Jackson (ADASS)

Fred Rattley (Thrive Together Birmingham,  
Christian foodbank)

Jean Templeton (St Basils)

Lee Barron (Trades Union Congress)

Maureen Connolly (Birmingham & Solihull  
Women's Aid)

Peter Fahy (Coventry CC, WMCA PPE lead)

Rachel Egan (Solihull MBC, Places Directorate)

Lorna Fitzjohn (Ofsted)

Claire Bell (Chief Supt WM Police)

Tom Knibbs (Coventry and Solihull, Head of  
Resilience)

Karl Robinson (Sandwell MBC, Rough Sleeping)

Justin Varney (Birmingham CC, Director of Public  
Health)

Lucy Heath (Wolverhampton CCG)

# Diagnostic: Learning sessions

We would also like to thank the 12 participants at the 90 minute learning sessions:

Vicky Harris (Dudley and Walsall Mental Health Partnership)

Xris Middleton (Sandwell MBC, Resilience Manager)

Fran Hyde (Dudley MBC, Health Protection Officer)

Chipiliro Kalebe-Nyamongo (Healthwatch Birmingham, Policy and Research Manager)

Anthony Walker (Wolverhampton, Rough Sleeping/Housing)

Zachary Barker-Williams (Greater Birmingham & Solihull LEP, Policy Officer)

Amanda Hughes (Brinsford Prison, Governor)

Jane Kaur-Gill (Walsall Council, Employment and Skills)

Louise Richardson (Warwickshire CC, Resources Directorate)

Rachel O'Connor (NHS Birmingham and Solihull)

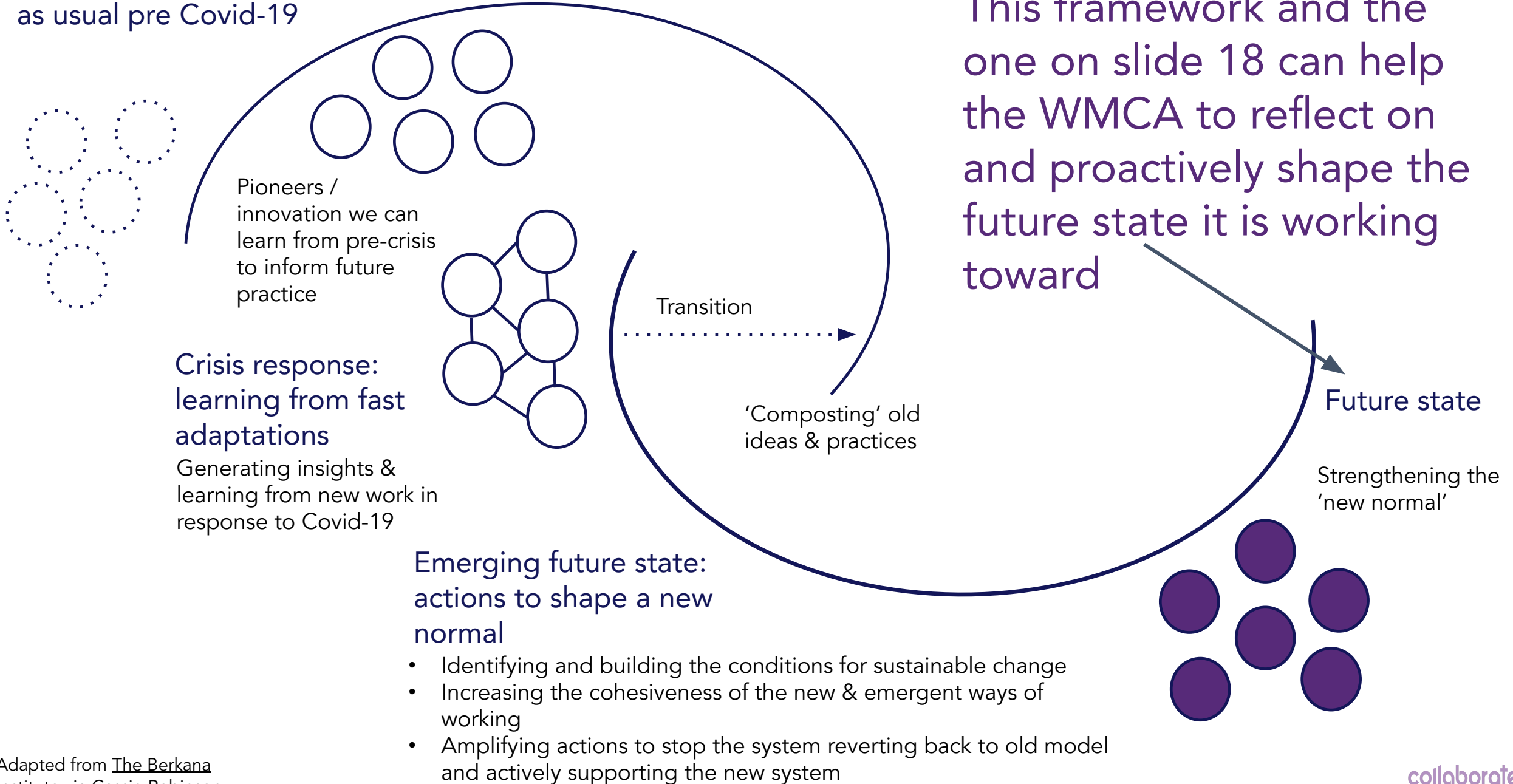
Abdullah Rehman (Bahu Trust)

Meena Bharadwa (Locality Birmingham)



## 2. Learning: overall insights

Dominant paradigm/business  
as usual pre Covid-19



# 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)

# 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.*

# Overall learning: areas for consideration

Despite a shared understanding of future regional challenges, there are some issues to consider in relation to what comes next:

- **System understanding:** system actors did not necessarily naturally view themselves as part of a wider system, and if they did there was no singular understanding of that system. They were able to clearly identify the learning for themselves and their organisations arising from the pandemic; however, many struggled to identify the learning and implications for the wider system or the region.
- **Geography:** in part, this is because the wider system meant different things to different people and for many the footprint of the WMCA did not have prime salience. As it moves forward it will be important for the WMCA to acknowledge and work within this 'messiness' of regional and sub-regional geography and consider its role as a 'shaper' of the local system.
- **Mixed views about the role of the WMCA:** Some people felt that the WMCA provided a credible and solid foundation which the region could mobilise quickly at the start of the pandemic than other places. The people with a clear view of the WMCA's role and a closer relationship with the WMCA felt it should continue to play a convening, coordinating, and facilitative role, bringing the system together to tackle complex issues, and presenting a coherent voice to central government (i.e. in relation to the issues on the previous slide). However, others were less clear that the WMCA had a role, or indeed were clear about its existing focus and value. The final section of this report sets out some thinking which may aid the future shape and focus of the combined authority.

# Overall learning: How would you describe the West Midlands' response to the pandemic?



Co-created in the two learning sessions

# 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.”*



# 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 coherent system in which system actors play a role.
- **Environment - an agenda/focus area?:** Whilst the environment and 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.

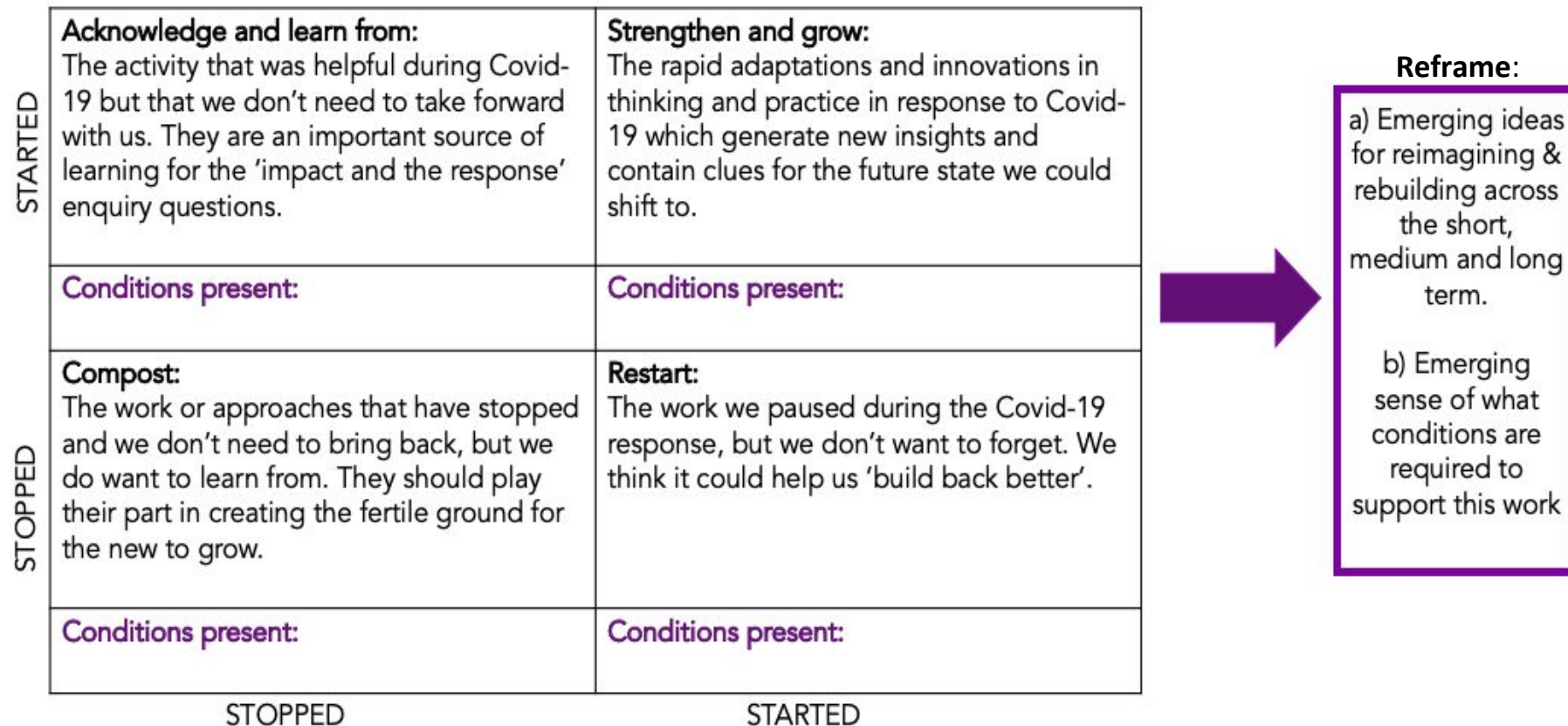
*"I still think there are more opportunities for us to work more closely with the health service and ambulance service."*



# 3. Learning against the Collaborate framework

# Our framework

We used the framework below to help explore and make sense of the themes arising from our fieldwork. The learning in this section is categorised under the four headings of the framework. This framing is not simply a retrospective tool - it should continue to be relevant and useful as the WMCA responds to the next iteration of the pandemic.



# 1. Acknowledge and Learn From, and; 2. Compost

*Helpful during COVID but we don't need to take forward, and;  
Things we have stopped and don't need to bring back.*

- **Traditional (pre-pandemic) bureaucracy, approach to risk and governance:** Traditional and slow decision making processes have been streamlined and there is no desire to go back to how things were (work on sourcing and distributing PPE and on the prisoner release scheme is a powerful example of this type of streamlined decision making).
- **Pre-pandemic paternalistic relationships with VCS and Communities:** Local Authorities have begun to step away from an often paternalistic way of working with other partners, particularly the VCS (although there is still more to do to develop an equal relationship)
- **Face to face working and delivery:** The traditional assumption that services and support are always better delivered in person has been challenged by COVID-19. We don't need to jettison all remote support – in fact some is better delivered this way. Many also acknowledged the largely positive impact of home working to enable a wider set of system actors to come together across the region
- **Emergency structures:** Some emergency structures and task forces are no longer required and are being stepped down

## 2. Compost

### *What people said*

*“What we need to keep an eye on is that the work at a regional level remains focused on coordination and communication, not on reporting and data gathering for some other body. We need to work on the basis that things have a shelf life, I don’t need to coordinate a regional vulnerable persons response cell any more, that need has passed.”*

*“The normal way of business has become too slow. Our collective challenge is to let go a little, trust our collective judgement, and continue to decide and act more quickly.”*

*“Lots of credibility to be gained by acknowledging the problems and recognising where assumptions haven’t worked.”*

# Things we should leave behind from the pre-pandemic world based on what you've learned...



### 3. Strengthen and grow

*Clues to our future state - these are the things people want to keep*

- **Approach to decision making:** The crisis has driven much more rapid decision making and people have enjoyed working in this way
- **Relationships:** There were good pre-existing relationships and they have been strengthened through the emergency response. Networks created during COVID-19 are felt to be credible platforms for future work. Some noted that the pandemic provided an opportunity to involve non-LA partners e.g. the Fire Authority and Probations services, and these relationships and seats at the table need to be maintained
- **Communications:** Better and more regular communications (e.g. weekly mayoral briefings) were seen to help build a common understanding and bust common myths
- **Sense of place:** There is a strong sense of connection to the local place among many that we spoke with. For some the WMCA provides an infrastructure which holds relationships around this.
- **Focus on practical work:** Part of the success of the pandemic response has been that it has focused on the practical, giving system actors a tangible sense of what can be achieved. We therefore think it will be important to balance any strategic/policy endeavours against the appetite to focus on the immediate and practical. Some felt the Resilience Forums going forward may be a sensible place for the strategic objectives of the WMCA to be operationally delivered

# Some practical recommendations - the ongoing COVID challenge

Recommendations	Examples of what this might mean in practice.
<p>Retain the best of the operational response to COVID:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People are tired but it will be important that the WMCA is prepared to energetically stand regional and systems back up in the face of a second wave.</li> <li>• Continue to work at pace, streamline all bureaucracy: Ensure that all WMCA organised groups are focussed on getting stuff done rather than signing papers off.</li> <li>• Keep open the doors that COVID has forced open - but be flexible and guided by stakeholders.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify clearly the CA-convened or organised mechanisms that will coordinate activity during a second wave and set out a clear procedure for re-initiating activity. Work with LRFs on this.</li> <li>• Focus clearly on the LA as the level of future delivery, and how CA activity can support this.</li> <li>• Retain a commitment to rapid decision making - clearly set out timescales as part of routine working.</li> </ul>
<p>Build time for shared reflection:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• System actors were keen to share their reflections and learning, it will be important to build these opportunities in going forward.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Build into future activity specific moments for shared learning and reflection. Can be done at meeting agenda level or on a wider but clear timescale - e.g. two weekly calls.</li> </ul>
<p>Sustain citizen focus:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Through the pandemic there are significant examples of the system being better able to focus on the needs of residents, and some examples of a shift to community power. It will be important that these are sustained.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explicitly commit to citizen representation on all WMCA-convened bodies.</li> <li>• Insert Citizens Panel into the WMCA decision making process</li> </ul>
<p>Keep communications regular and open:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not everyone is aware of the role of the WMCA but irrespective of this the mayor's weekly communications are well received. It will be important to consider how communications and relationships can be maintained outside the immediate emergency and regular meetings associated with the height of the pandemic.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify clearly and with other local stakeholders the areas where CA will take a lead.</li> <li>• Attempt to draw apart the messaging around COVID response and the medium term discussions that will feed into the next mayoral election in 2021</li> </ul>



### 3. Strengthen & grow

*What people said  
(1)*

*"Because we already had a rough sleeping taskforce we had a shared infrastructure, governance and strong relationships to draw on."*

*"Another success factor has been the clear governance structure, and shared culture. People aren't there for an organisational perspective, they are there to represent a particular element of the sector... And they are all there with the shared vision to design out homelessness."*

*"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."*

*"A lot of people said it has been a kind time, more give and take, reciprocity and a lot of connections have been made between neighbours and communities. Very few people said they felt more isolated as a consequence of Covid, which is actually extraordinary. People feel more connected than they did before."*



### 3. Strengthen & grow

*What people said  
(2)*

*"Our work in the past has been about building relationships with other agencies linked to our prevention messages. Covid-19 has allowed us to develop these relationships further. For me, these strengthened relationships are the legacy benefits of the pandemic."*

*"The weekly broadcasts by the mayor built a sense of being connected to the idea of the WM: clear messages, a useful way to share information and to deal with myths. The regular drumbeat was very helpful."*

*"The local level is where the information and intelligence is - but the reliability of data can vary."*

*"Stripping away governance revealed the previous over-governance of normal ways of working."*

Things we should strengthen and grow in our 'new normal'...



## 4. Restart: key themes

*Paused but not forgotten.*

- **Root causes, not just presenting needs:** Many acknowledged that the focus on the immediate emergency – getting food and prescriptions to people, and getting 'Everyone In' – meant that the system was not necessarily focused on the root causes and systemic inequality which led these issues to arise in the first place. *We suggest this is worth reflecting on when considering how to build on the pandemic response to tackle deep-rooted and complex challenges that existed pre-pandemic, and in some cases have been deepened by the pandemic*
- **Applying the pandemic model to other challenges:** It was felt that the strong local and regional response of the pandemic could tackle many other issues as well
- **Use of technology and ways of working:** New approaches to technology and other issues such as the use of buildings is something that was already being developed. This work should be re-initiated on the basis of learning from the pandemic. COVID response will most likely provide the driver (and focus) for much technology adoption work, but this can also provide a foundation for longer term work to address digital inclusion.

## 4. Restart

*What people said  
(1)*

*"The old barriers of who controlled the money and history were swept aside and everyone was focused on preservation of life and doing the best they could."*

*"Localities proved themselves to be more than capable of working out local solutions on PPE, risk, deliveries."*

*"We had to develop local systems, and in the main those local systems worked really well."*

*"Government designs systems in isolation. We've missed collaboration on the system piece because we have been focused on this immediate crisis."*

*"There has also been benefit in the regional approach. The WMCA and the vulnerable persons cell had a general overview and accurate picture of what was going on in the localities, this enabled organisations in the region to collaborate who hadn't worked together, and then that gave a credible platform for escalation. The regional role is about coordination and escalation."*

## 4. Restart

*What people said  
(2)*

*"Because of the scale and pace we didn't have the bureaucracy, the fuzz and interference was removed. Everyone wanted to work together."*

*"Working locally. My view is quite optimistic, as demand has reduced we are looking at a transition rather than exit. ... Those relationships are there, we've built those relationships on a one to one, at the right level in those organisations. The bureaucracy will need to be reconsidered – things like data sharing."*

*"Don't do to, do with."*

*"Conditions for innovation as well as coordination need to be set and this is a long term challenge."*

## 5. Reframe: key themes

*Issues that we see in new ways as a result of our experience during COVID.* We have added this section to the 4 themes set out in slide 18 as it became clear that the response to COVID had reframed some partners' understanding of the importance and interconnectedness of issues that were already under consideration.

There is a **new understanding of the major challenges and a sense that these need system-wide and collaborative solutions**. The implications are that the areas below are not simply areas where work needs to be restarted, but areas where work needs to be reframed, with a specific focus on the interconnectedness of these issues.

- Economy and inclusive growth, proactive workforce and skills agenda
- Housing
- Future of local care market
- Digital Inclusion
- Domestic abuse
- Child Poverty
- Demographic changes and how these create future vulnerability (e.g. COVID second wave) - both overall and in terms of specific communities.

**Our interviews also highlighted the value of taking a break and reflecting on the past months.** For some people we spoke with this was the first time they had time to do so - as partners deal with the ongoing and developing response to COVID, the resilience of people is likely to become more and more of a challenge.

## 5. Reframe

### *What people said*

*"We need [the WMCA] to lead national and regional studies that can't be brushed under the carpet. Without bringing the area intelligence together we can't start to solve the wider systemic issues. The role of WMCA is to petition government. There is more power in a shared voice. They need to provide that coordination to make sure we don't work against each other."*

*"Unemployment and poverty will drive everything. The rhetoric is build, build, build. But we need to think about the basics, about those families most at risk of unemployment and poverty to ensure the welfare benefits system is ready to respond."*

*"The big system challenges, they aren't just because of the pandemic."*

*"The sheer ability to properly reflect isn't something I have had. This is the first time I have had to stand still to reflect. We need to make space to do this in person."*

*"It is fresh in people's minds, we need to carry it forward straight away, if we don't there is a risk of backsliding and going back to how we used to be."*

*"Out of an emergency discussion has come a much wider discussion about food, how it's grown, what's good..."*

4. Four case studies that illustrate new ways of working adopted during the pandemic



# Case Study 1

## Rough Sleeping

This case study describes the pandemic emergency response, but also highlights the need for a regional focus on systemic prevention.

### What happened? How were services transformed?

The lockdown and closure of non-essential shops and services at the same time as the Government's 'Everyone In' policy created a number of system changes which fundamentally altered how the system was operating for around 1,000 rough sleepers across the WMCA area:

- LAs secured additional accommodation to make 'Everyone in' happen at pace.
- Many of the enablers for some rough sleepers were taken away (e.g. soup kitchens, overnight hostels, retail premises and high streets with high footfall which supported street begging) at the same time that there was a drive to get all rough sleepers into accommodation.
- This meant that rough sleeping and wider support services were much better able to engage and work with residents, who were easier to find.
- These conversations over the course of lockdown moved from considering immediate needs, to building relationships and starting to focus on root causes. Sandwell, for example, noted they had seen engagement with those being supported rise to 41% - a high in lockdown.
- Unique to the West Midlands was the WMCA Homelessness Task Force which took a convening and lobbying role - bringing together the LAs to collectively argue for a stronger systemic focus on designing out homelessness building on the success of Everyone In creating a hopeful and practical legacy.

### What are the implications?

There is an opportunity to review the current system to move away from treating symptoms and instead enable public services to work together with residents in a strengths-based way to tackle root causes. The WMCA Homelessness Task Force provides an exemplar of the practical role the WMCA can play (as described in more detail on slide 41)

*"In the old pre-pandemic world, single people with no vulnerabilities and people with No Recourse to Public Funds, they've got no chance. There has been a real opportunity to meaningfully engage with people because of Covid and because we have been able to relax the rules. Being able to accommodate them has meant we've been able to build relationships. When the shops were all closed we had high engagement. A lot are pulled away from long-term support because they continue to street beg. Let me give you an example: there's a lady, she could make £20 an hour [begging] at Aldi. There is no incentive for her to engage with the long-term support that would help her out of that situation. It wasn't until lockdown that people like her had to engage with us. The non-essential economy had shut down and a lot of community-based, emergency, face-to-face support also shut down. My reflection is that a lot of support services are enabling rough sleeping rather than preventing it. Because food kitchens, shelters were all closed and we knew where people were, we then saw an increase in engagement in longer term prevention. During the height of lockdown people had no choice but to accept our offer."*

# Case Study 2

## *Food provision*

This case study describes the practical way that a non-traditional partner was able to transfer core skills to an immediate need.

### What happened? How were services transformed?

- The lockdown meant that a huge number of people across the West Midlands, not just those who were advised to shield by the NHS, but others with precarious incomes found it difficult to get the food they needed for their families.
- In the West Midlands, different from other places, a whole system response was mobilised at pace which supported both those who were shielding and residents more broadly.
- The Fire service, as an organisation with significant skills in practical emergency response, logistics and getting boots on the ground quickly and with a coherent regional footprint played a key role, working with Local Authorities and VCS and faith organisations to ensure food went to those that needed it.
- Many other LAs in the country did not have such a comprehensive offer, or one which drew on as wide a system (some commissioned food delivery out to the VCS, others the LA led alone).
- This work has been mutually beneficial to all the system actors involved and has also served to further strengthen relationships.

### What are the implications?

Going forward, it will be important to consider the transferable skills that different partners bring to the system and how they can be used so that the whole system is working together in shared endeavour. The pandemic continues to shine a light on just how precarious many WM residents' lives are. The fact that so many in the region were in need of food support reflects the deep-rooted inequalities which exist. Ongoing work in this area provides the opportunity to understand and help address these root causes as well as meet acute demand.

*"We helped establish hyper-local community delivery – including food and medical deliveries. We established 6 hubs at fire stations to support each LA and the third sector partners that were operating. We used fire service staff from the service who volunteered to be redeployed. They used the strengths they had and were involved in making contact with people who were shielding that the council couldn't reach. We worked with 18 partners, including VCS and LAs. Our work in the past has been about building relationships with other agencies linked to our prevention messages. Covid-19 has allowed us to develop these relationships further. For me, these strengthened relationships are the legacy benefits of the pandemic."*

# Case Study 3

## *Shift to community power, devolution in action*

This case study describes examples which demonstrate the shift from top down to more decentralised ways of working and decision making

### What happened?

- Many Local authorities noted the shifts in the relationships they have with each other and with their hyper-local communities noting the strength of the spontaneous community response with neighbours helping each other and looking out for one another.
- Example - Prisoner Release Scheme: The enforced pace of the scheme transformed the delivery of this service. The collaborative work in this area matched a regional level response with detailed work at community level. The pace was rapid, decision making was decentralised by necessity. National stakeholders could not keep up in terms of delivery and the constraints on this service were in practice national not local.

### What are the implications?

- Many LAs reflected that there has been significant learning through the pandemic about the need for LAs to act as enablers, supporting and unblocking issues for both the formalised VCS and faith sectors, as well as informal street and neighbourhood-based groups.
- Many reflected that the work of the Facebook, WhatsApp mutual aid groups had been particularly important working alongside support to those who were shielding.
- It will be important for both LAs and the WMCA through its 6 priority areas to consider how the shifts to community action which were so prevalent through the pandemic can be nurtured to be part of a broader reframing of the role of citizen and state in the West Midlands.

*"The last 3-4 months have provided demonstrable evidence of how community outcomes can be improved if organisations get out of the way... The ability to sustain all that has been good in our response will rise and fall on leadership. It is clear this is the right way, but the question is can we rub out the barriers between organisations and between organisations and communities."*

*"Localities proved themselves to be more than capable of working out local solutions...The old barriers of who controlled the money and history were swept aside and everyone was focused on preservation of life and doing the best they could."*

# Case Study 4

## *New approaches to governance*

This case study describes practical examples of less bureaucratic and more agile decision-making

### What happened? Some examples of service transformation:

- Ofsted and the children's services and support to vulnerable people: Ofsted worked directly with 14 LAs across the West Midlands in a much more direct way during the initial response to the pandemic. This was balanced by regional work (eg REACT group) that pooled information and the interpretation of guidance from central Government to reduce pressure at LA level.
- Homelessness Task Force (see slide 33)
  - The different meetings of operational and strategic themed groups convened by the WMCA was seen by many as a real strength of the West Midlands pandemic response.
  - Practical, regular meetings where decisions were made, problems were resolved and there were clear paths for escalation without an overreliance on long reports or long timescales.
  - Through these regular, daily sometimes twice daily meetings relationships were built quickly often enabling system actors to make new connections and think differently.
  - The Homelessness Task Force for example then used this solid base of practical work to create a practical and regional ask of central government which focuses on designing out homelessness.

### What are the implications?

- It may be useful to reflect on and refresh the existing governance structures, terms of reference and even the sorts of items that are considered at a regional level to ensure the strengths that many saw in the pandemic response are maintained.
- For example, for each sector or piece of work there could be an explicitly defined set of emergency or crisis response governance arrangements, and a clear set of criteria for the adoption of these arrangements. For any second round of crisis response, this will enable a much more explicit and rapid transition to more appropriate - and responsive - governance arrangements.
- Longer term, partners can consider if the routine governance of activity can be moved closer toward the crisis response approach, to retain what have been considered very positive elements of a more curtailed system e.g. much speedier and distributed decision making.

*"We must transform to a new contemporary way of working, there was a desire to do that before, but now having gone through all that we have we can't go back to the way we were working – bureaucracy, siloes, it wasn't the right thing back then, but it definitely isn't an option any more."*

# 5. The role of the Combined Authority (and its partners)

# 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.

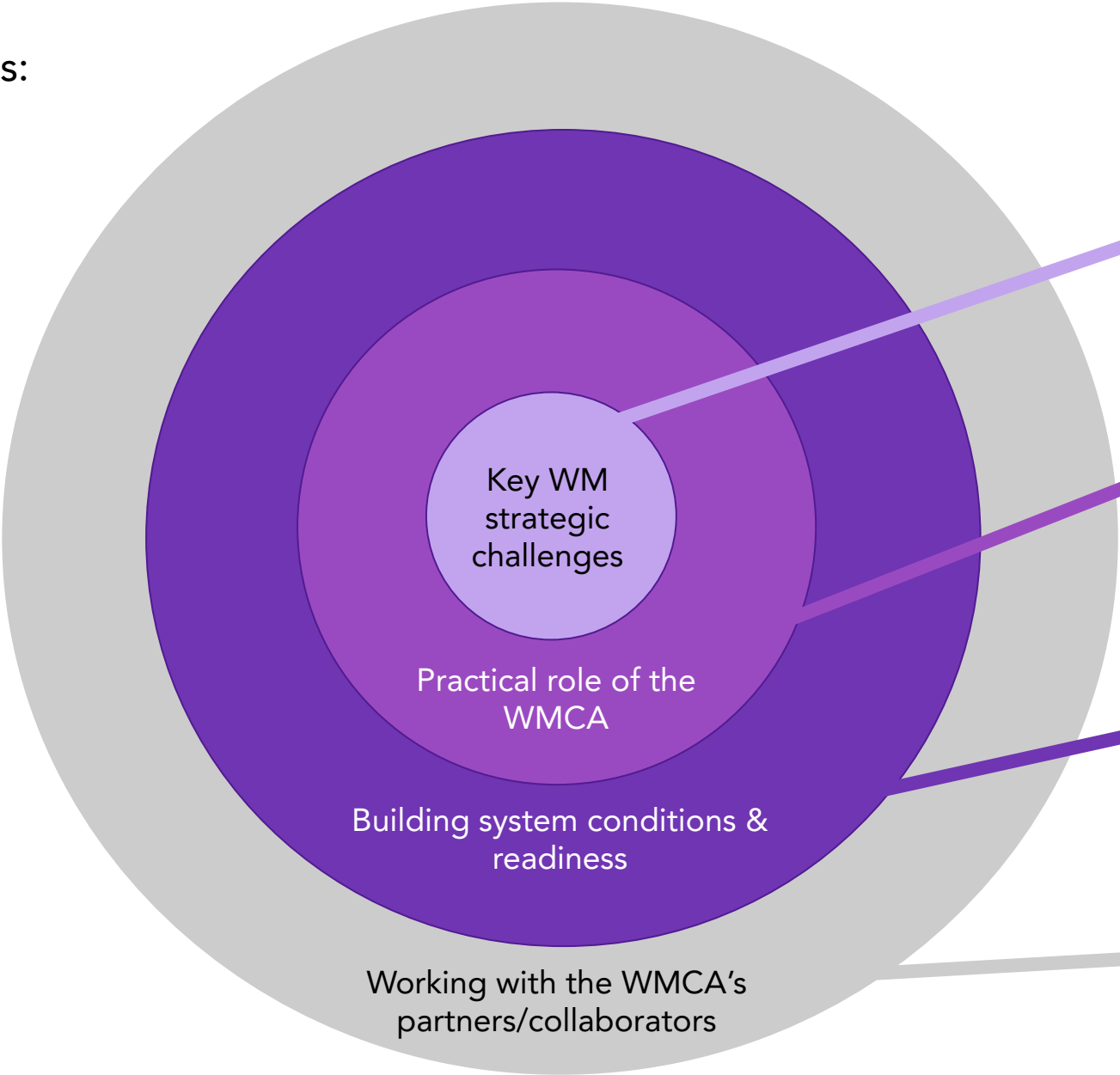
Our observation is that there are widely differing views across the system. Some people think the WMCA has an important role to play across the big strategic challenges facing the region, and ideas about what that role looks like. Some think the combined authority's role is primarily economic, and perceive 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.

This section also looks at the conditions present or required to enable effective system level collaboration. Slides 44 and 45 are based on Collaborate's learning from other projects and set out the conditions needed to help collaboration in practice. 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 the 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:

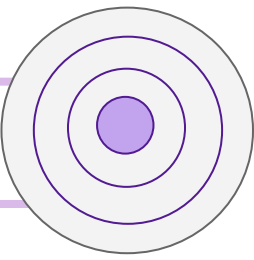


Challenges:

- 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



# 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:

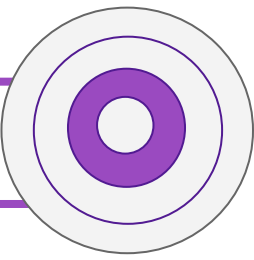
- 1) Living Safely with Coronavirus
- 2) Accessing healthcare and improving physical health
- 3) Mental Health Support and Awareness
- 4) Education and Young People
- 5) Jobs and Training
- 6) Local Businesses and High Streets

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



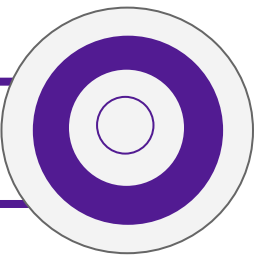
Key WMCA challenge: Building on pandemic learning and role to continue to demonstrate value and shape the regional agenda more

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.

# Building system conditions and readiness



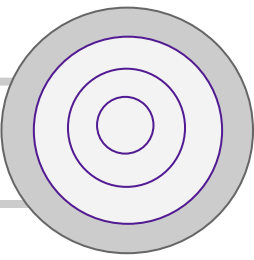
Key WMCA challenge: Building the conditions for systemic collaboration on both practical immediate challenges and complex long term challenges

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.

# 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 all 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 what 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)

# What have 'system conditions' been like in the WM during the initial COVID response? (1)

Collaborate CIC has conducted work with and across a range of different systems. Via this work we have observed a set of system conditions which, if present, enable effective collaboration. These conditions are described in the frameworks we have included in the appendix and specifically on slide 51.

## Relationships

- The response to the pandemic has strengthened relationships, providing a sound basis for both the ongoing pandemic response and work together on wider regional issues.
- There is also a strong understanding that the response to the pandemic has driven rapid learning about system level coordination.
- As our study was focussed mainly on public sector and institutional partners we can only take a partial view of this - but amongst respondents there was a strong feeling that they had reached out well to a wider range of partners (VCS in particular) as part of the COVID response. It is not clear this view is reciprocated - the related study on the local economy (Wolverhampton Uni) should be consulted here.

## Shared vision

- There is a common description of the challenges the region faces but we would not say there is as yet a common shared vision shared by system actors.
- There is a stronger connection with purpose and orientation towards citizens
- To what extent does the WMCA's vision need to be co-created with others?

# What have 'system conditions' been like in the WM during the initial COVID response? (2)

## Shared principles

- There is some recognition of the opportunity (and requirement?) that the pandemic response has created in terms of public sector reform.
- The response has highlighted the value of principles such as trust, collaboration & citizen-focus.
- There is also wide referencing of the need to address underlying issues such as existing health inequalities - a de facto expression of some shared principles or system working.

## Shared behaviours

- The pandemic has created a set of shared behaviours and actions where all parts of the system are pulling together (e.g. food provision, Everyone in)
- There is a strong and shared commitment to retain the positive elements of the response to COVID in terms of ways of working, and not to move back to previous ways of working

## Shared infrastructure

- From often (and understandably) ad hoc initial responses (outside existing resilience fora) there is evidence of good governance & decision-making, and clear system-wide communications. The mayor's updates have been specifically praised.
- There is a clear opportunity to review existing infrastructure in light of learning to streamline bureaucracy and create spaces for system actors to come together, in particular for shared learning.

# How can the WMCA help create the right system conditions?

Recommendations	Examples of what this might mean in practice
<p>Work with and accept the geographical messiness of the region:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The WMCA area might not be the most important regional geography for the system actors you are working with. Don't waste energy on trying to simplify this, work with and accept it</li> <li>• Continue to build – and emphasise though both comms and practical action – the extent to which the WM is seen as a coherent system in which system actors play a role</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify the different geographies relate to different issues and how they work in practice</li> </ul>
<p>Co-create your future focus:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If the WMCA has ambitions to convene and influence beyond the remit of the economy it will be important to prioritise where it focuses and to build legitimacy in these areas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Set out your stall</li> <li>• What are the CA areas of interest and action? What does it want to convene, lead or deliver?</li> </ul>
<p>Continue to build and invest in relationships:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus energy on bringing groups together so that they can focus on practical delivery</li> <li>• The role of the WMCA isn't seen to be in this practical delivery, but in the convening, creation of a shared narrative and evidence base, lobbying and providing the space for system actors to come together</li> <li>• Continue to invest in and protect the progress that has been made in the pandemic relating to ways of working, deeper and wider relationships with new system actors, a more mature approach to risk, governance and bureaucracy)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clearly establish named CA convened groups to look at specific issues - and to work with each other across the CA geography or remit</li> <li>• Be clear not just what you want to work on, but how you want to work. Apply collaborative principles to guide the practice</li> <li>• Good examples to follow – e.g. Bristol and the network of city boards</li> </ul>
<p>Continue to pursue a shared agenda:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Much of the success of the WM pandemic response has been due to a shared agenda with all partners pulling in the same direction. It will be critical to build on this sense of shared endeavour in relation to the WMCA's wider PSR ambitions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the next common endeavours around which people will gather? It probably needs to be a fairly short list - better to pick a low number of issues and be effective than list everything that could be done but make progress nowhere</li> </ul>

# Recommendations and their alignment with your principles

	Extra help to the most affected	Innovation and creativity	Environmental focus	Transparency and citizen voice
Retain the best of the operational response to COVID	X			X
Build time for shared reflection		X		
Sustain citizen focus	X			X
Keep communications regular and open				X
Work at pace, streamline bureaucracy		X		
Work with and accept the geographical messiness of the region:		X		
Co-create your future focus	X			X
Continue to build and invest in relationships		X		X
Continue to pursue a shared agenda:		X		

# The key challenge? How do you want to be and how do others want you to be? How to bring these together?

## You:

- Legitimised convening framework responding to citizens and communities of interest.
- Using the wider and flexible remit of the CA to promote and support wider prevention agenda and deal with health and other inequalities.

## Others:

- Be really clear about the CA agenda and how it relates to existing statutory mechanisms.
- 'Stay in your lane' e.g. WMCA not a health body – best contribution to wider health issues is to promote job creation and develop relevant skills.

There is a key tension running through this study - a gap, sometimes explicit and sometimes implied, between the CA view of itself, and the view of those with whom it works. This relates to the complex ways that perceived legitimacy as a system convenor and/or actor is or isn't developed and it directly affects the potential impact of the CA.

If the CA seeks to expand its scope and impact beyond the clear (and solid) ground of economic development, this is an issue that needs to be considered - and addressed.



For reference - some additional  
Collaborate frameworks to help  
WMCA and partners consider and  
strengthen the conditions for  
system collaboration

# 1: Start somewhere

- Shift mindset: think system not organisation
- Find allies: this is a collective endeavour
- Respect differences: seek understanding, not agreement
- Travel together: bring others with you

# 2: Make the system visible

- Get on the balcony: view the whole from multiple perspectives
- Think systemically: map allies, adversaries and persuadables; relationships and power; opportunities and obstacles; untapped resources; ripe issues
- You are part of the system: what role can you best play?



# 4: Act together

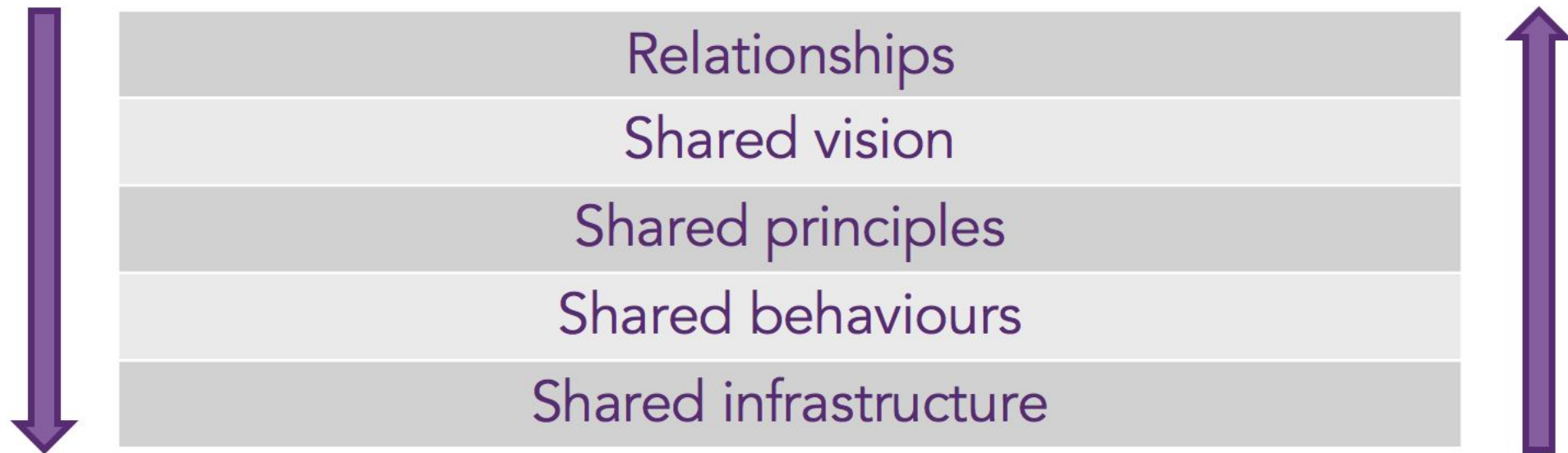
- Start with things you can change: build momentum and strengthen collective capabilities
- Be clear on ends, flexible on means: focus on purpose; learn by doing; adapt; experiment
- Increase capacity for future actions: distribute leadership; mobilise new resources; include new allies; build new coalitions
- Keep listening

# 3: Build collaborative capacity

- Set the ambition: for degree of joint working
- Identify the barriers and work on conditions: relationships, common purpose, ways of working
- Build system infrastructure
- Hold the tension: between common purpose and diverse approaches; listen
- Share the power: distribute leadership

# Foundations of Collaboration

The conditions that enable effective system level working (as applied to the WMCA on slides 44-5)



## A FRAMEWORK FOR A COLLABORATIVE SOCIETY

Collaborate's Manifesto for a Collaborative Society describes the need for a system shift to a more collaborative mindset. Through the framework it describes in more detail the five practical areas which we believe underpin that mindset shift.

It may be useful for the WMCA and its partners to assess the extent to which the shifts in the framework (relating to leadership, organisations, the economy, communities and public services) are underway and what further might be needed to continue the journey and enable deeper system collaboration.



Collaborate's 9 system conditions describe the behaviours and ambitions we believe act as pre-conditions which enable system change and collaboration.

Again, It may be useful for the WMCA and its partners to assess the extent to which the condition are areas in place and what further might be needed.

## INTRODUCING OUR PRE-CONDITIONS FOR SYSTEMS CHANGE: A FOCUS ON VISION AND BEHAVIOURS...

These preconditions are neither linear nor independent: they are adaptive and interdependent as people, relationships and priorities change.



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for social change

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