



Responding to COVID-19 in the Liverpool City Region

**After COVID-19: Is Liverpool Still Beyond or
Back On The Brink?**

Professor Michael Parkinson

Map of Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (LCRCA) boundary (in red) and constituent local authorities



Data sources: Westminster parliamentary constituencies (December 2018 - ONS), local authority districts (December 2018 - ONS), and combined authorities (December 2018 - ONS)

After COVID-19: Is Liverpool Still Beyond or Back on the Brink?

Key takeaways

1. The COVID-19 crisis has challenged the optimism many people felt after Liverpool's extraordinary renaissance during the last 20 years and raised questions about its future prospects. The position is very difficult economically and socially. But Liverpool is not back on the brink of disaster as it was in the 1980s. Its economy is more diverse, its people more resilient and its leadership stronger. Many partners have responded well to the crisis and its leaders have been bold and decisive.
2. The city and wider city region have paid a higher price than other UK large cities in health and economic terms, especially its poorer and BAME communities. And many sectors which drove Liverpool's renaissance – the visitor economy and city centre retail, residential and office development – have been and will remain very badly hit by the crisis. But some of its "harder" assets, especially but not only in the Knowledge Quarter, like health, green and digital sectors, could emerge even stronger in future.
3. Some of the city's challenges like social distancing are brand new. Many of them – like poverty and inequality; tensions between a public health system and a fragmented, privatised social care "system"; and a too powerful central and too weak and poor local government – have been exaggerated by the crisis. They must be top of the national and local policy agendas in future.
4. The next phase – after lockdown but before a vaccine is found – will be very difficult to manage economically, physically, psychologically. The city and its people must be prepared for a long haul of at least 2 years. But there is hope, especially if the city continues with the right policies locally and gets Government support.
5. The city needs an Economic Recovery Plan with a strategic, ambitious narrative which is authentic and based on Liverpool's past experience, current realities and captures some of the benefits of lockdown. The plan must persuade Government to invest in Liverpool so it can sustain its recent renaissance, avoid potential discontents caused by significant youth unemployment and remain a progressive, global city helping the country's recovery and renewal. There should now be a serious conversation between Liverpool's leaders and Government to make that happen.

1. Introduction

This policy briefing, and the longer piece that it accompanies, reflects on the Liverpool COVID-19 story so far. Its point of departure is *Liverpool Beyond the Brink: The Remaking of a Post-Imperial City*, which I published exactly a year ago telling the story of Liverpool's extraordinary renaissance during the last 20 years and painting an essentially optimistic portrait of the city's future (Parkinson 2019). However, the scale of the crisis challenged such optimism in

many people's minds, raising questions about Liverpool's future prospects.

This briefing answers questions including: is Liverpool back on the brink of disaster as in the 1980s; what damage has the crisis done to the key drivers of the economy; are there any benefits to be taken from the COVID-19 tragedy; how well did the city leaders respond to the crisis; will Government support our city's leaders in future; when will Liverpool's recovery begin and what will it look like; and who should do what to achieve

recovery? We are in the middle of the crisis, but after the lockdown the city should take stock of who did what; what worked well and did not; what are the implications for the city and Government. In this sense this briefing is an epilogue to a book that has been written and a prologue to something that is yet to come.

2. Observations on the crisis so far

Liverpool and its poorer people have paid a higher price

COVID-19 is a public health crisis but also a national economic crisis, the largest in living memory – something between Spanish flu in 1918, 9/11 and the 2008-9 financial crash. It has hit Liverpool and the wider Liverpool City Region (LCR) very hard, because more of its businesses are in vulnerable sectors of the economy and more of its people live in poverty with the underlying health problems that make them vulnerable to COVID-19 (Magrini 2020; LCRCA 2020; Whitehead et al. 2020). Its rise in unemployment has been greater than any other large city in the UK. Its death rate has also been greater than

any large city in the UK outside London. The city has paid a higher health and economic price than many other cities and its own poor and Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities have also paid a higher price. COVID-19 was a health tragedy waiting to happen in Liverpool.

The city centre, the driver of the city regional economy badly hit – but needles of hope

Liverpool had a wonderful renaissance but many of the sectors which drove it – the visitor and cultural economy, retail and residential and office development – because they are “softer” face-to-face activities, have been very badly hit by the crisis and by the continuing need for social distancing. Its hotels, shops, bars, restaurants, theatres, football, and festivals around the city centre could struggle for some time. But it has many “harder” assets which will flourish in future precisely because of the nature of this crisis – most notably in the knowledge industries, especially the health, green and digital sectors.



Giants come to Liverpool (Credit: Culture Liverpool)

Some new wine but some old wine in new bottles too

Some features of the crisis, like the need for social distancing, are new. But others are old wine in new bottles. The crisis has stress-tested our existing systems and underlined many flaws: the extensive poverty and inequality within our cities, which the Black Lives Matters (BLM) movement only too clearly demonstrates could lead to damaging social unrest; the disjunctions and tensions between a national public health system and a privatised, fragmented social care “system”; that central government is too powerful, local government too weak and too poor to address such crises in future; that we need a new social contract between them, a new focus on urban policy, more devolution and proper funding of local government.

Some benefits

It has been a terrible time for many people who have lost their lives and their livelihood – and fear they might yet still. Nevertheless, there have been some economic, social, community and political benefits of the change in work and lifestyle under lockdown which we should retain. They include: reduced use of cars with a contribution to the environment and climate emergency; a better work life balance for those who are digitally connected and can work from home; increased community mobilisation, volunteering, neighbourly activities and general kindness; more flexible and efficient working by many organisations; greater collaboration by partners across the city region; a recognition of some of the city's key global economic strengths.

Next stage harder – but there is hope and Government should help

The next phase after lockdown but before a vaccine is found, and when social distancing is required, will be very difficult

to manage economically, physically, psychologically. The city must plan for a long haul of at least 2 years – sadly with more health, economic and social casualties on the way. But the way the city, its leaders and people have responded so far to COVID-19 shows they have the assets, experience, resilience, commitment and ingenuity to triumph over adversity. Liverpool has a lot to build on, especially if it continues to pursue the right policies locally – as well as getting the right response from Government. However, every place will be looking for support. Liverpool must develop a powerful case to Government about the support it will need but also the contribution it will make to the nation's recovery. That is now being done by all the city region leaders with an Economic Recovery and Renewal Plan. This briefing discusses some potential messages for it.

3. Policy messages – what might a recovery plan look like?

Ambitious, strategic but authentic and realistic

A recovery and renewal plan would need a strategic, ambitious narrative but one which is authentic and based on Liverpool's past experience and current realities. It should build on the city's known strengths, address its known weaknesses and seize any new opportunities which emerged during the COVID-19 lockdown. And it should do this across three big themes – productivity, place and people. It must be right for the city of Liverpool but also align with wider Liverpool City Region ambitions and recovery plan. It should have public, private and community partners involved and onside. It should work for the Government and help it to deliver national recovery as well as its levelling-up agenda. To do this the plan should address the social equity as well the economic competitiveness and innovative

policy agendas, since extensive deprivation is one of the reasons the pandemic has hit the city so hard. It would be a mix of capital and social programmes. It should be well-evidenced, well-costed and deliverable.

Building on strengths

A plan should build on the city region's knowledge-based industries, in Knowledge Quarter Liverpool especially, particularly in health, which is a real constraint upon the local economy, but a real strength of its global higher education institutions. It should protect and preserve the visitor economy which has driven Liverpool's recovery in the past decade, but which is now at serious risk. In particular it must help the cultural sector's film, music, theatre and museum facilities, which have been a crucial part of that visitor economy attracting businesses, residents and students as well as visitors. The cultural sector is as much investment as consumption. It should address the challenges faced in the city centre, a jewel in Liverpool's crown in the past decade, which is significantly threatened by the continuing need for social distancing, and it should reimagine the role and nature of the city centre.

Dealing with weaknesses

Since Liverpool does not have enough businesses it must do all it can to save existing good businesses, including the self-employed. Also too many people and places missed out on the achievements of the city in the boom and have paid a heavy price during the crisis. So, a plan must address inequality and poverty within the city, including the extensive disadvantages experienced by BAME communities who have also been particularly vulnerable to COVID-19. Crucially it must confront directly and urgently the potential damage and risks of social discontent created by substantial



Science meets religion in Knowledge Quarter Liverpool (Credit: Knowledge Quarter Liverpool)

numbers of young people becoming unemployed. Given the city's history of social problems arising from sustained youth unemployment in the 1980s and the current BLM movement, this is a major concern. It will need significant, concerted and creative policy attention and immediate action to avoid similar problems in future. This would require a mix of skills, training, apprenticeships and community programmes to provide immediate short-term work for the unemployed and longer-term skills for more secure jobs for when the crisis subsides. A major programme to retrofit a lot of the city's worst housing stock would be an obvious contender to protect both people and places.

Seizing opportunities

The city must preserve as many of the benefits of the lockdown as possible. It must protect the environmental gains made by the reduced use of private transport (Nurse and Dunning 2020). It must do as much as possible to help good ethical firms. It should encourage going local in our economy. It should do more with the social economy and foundational economy. It should exploit digitalisation to address the challenges of social distancing. It should exploit further the sustainable, green, low carbon, renewable



'We Love this City' in the Baltic Triangle (Credit: Andrew McClelland)

energy agenda. It should capitalise upon the incredible community mobilisation and volunteering the crisis has called forth (North 2020).

Government should invest in Liverpool for a national recovery

After the crisis there will be a groundswell of opinion for Government to give the greatest support to those who paid the price and did the dirty work in this war – the NHS, the care sector, the key workers, the low paid. The Liverpool plan would make a large contribution to this health, social equity and welfare agenda. Given the state of the national economy and finances, Government will focus on economically competitive, innovative sectors. Again, a Liverpool plan has huge potential as well as the commitment, momentum and capacity to deliver in those sectors. The Liverpool story over 20 years demonstrates that public expenditure can create ambition, hope and confidence for key partners which leads to investment and national and local benefits (Parkinson and Lord 2017). The evidence from Europe confirms this

(Parkinson et al. 2012). There should now be a serious conversation between Liverpool City Region leaders and Government to help it sustain its recent achievements and make a real contribution to national renewal after COVID-19.

We are remaking the city

It must be right for the future. *Beyond the Brink* told Liverpool it must no longer be a willing victim for developers but must raise the quality of its development. COVID-19 makes this more important. The city must hold its nerve, develop mature relationships with higher quality developers and funders and use its land strategically for key projects, not do development at any cost. And leadership will matter. Just as they have in the crisis, the city's leaders should be good partners but bold and decisive. If Government responds to that as it should, Liverpool will be a progressive, global city helping the country's recovery and renewal. There should now be a serious conversation between the city's leaders and Government to make that happen.

4. Make No Little Plans!

The scale of the emergency response to the crisis has demonstrated the extent of change that can be achieved in a short time on even intractable issues with an active state response, political commitment and community mobilisation. It is crucial after the health, economic, social and psychological costs the crisis has imposed that such a spirit inspires any recovery plan. We are not going back to an old normal. It will be as much about reimagining and renewal as recovery. Any plan must be up to the scale of that challenge. My book about the extraordinary remaking of Liverpool city centre in the 2000s was entitled *Make No Little Plans* following the words of the architect of Chicago, Daniel Burnham. He wrote: “they have no magic to stir men’s blood and probably themselves will not be realised.” I agree with him. Liverpool leaders made no little plans in prosperity. Nor should they in adversity. Liverpool should now make big plans!

5. References

Liverpool City Region Combined Authority [LCRCA]. 2020. *COVID-19 LCR Information*. Unpublished slide deck. Liverpool, UK: LCRCA.

Magrini, Elena. 2020. “Where has Seen the Biggest Unemployment Since Lockdown Began.” Centre for Cities, May 19, 2020.
www.centreforcities.org/blog/where-has-seen-the-biggest-increase-in-unemployment-since-lockdown-began.

North, Peter. 2020. [*Building Back Better: What Role for the Liverpool City Region Economic Recovery Panel?*](#) Policy Briefing 009. Liverpool, UK: Heseltine Institute for Public Policy, Practice and Place, University of Liverpool.

Nurse, Alex, and Richard Dunning. 2020. [*Cycling and Walking: A Faster Route to a*](#)

[*Safer and Stronger Liverpool City Region*](#). Policy Briefing 010. Liverpool, UK: Heseltine Institute for Public Policy, Practice and Place, University of Liverpool.

Parkinson, Michael, Richard Meegan, Jay Karecha, Richard Evans. 2012. *Second Tier Cities: In An Age of Austerity Why Invest Outside the Capitals?* Liverpool, UK: ESPON and Liverpool John Moores University.

Parkinson, Michael. 2019. *Liverpool Beyond the Brink: The Remaking of a Post Imperial City*. Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press.

Parkinson, Michael and Alex Lord. 2017. [*Albert Dock: What Part in Liverpool's Continuing Renaissance?*](#) Liverpool, UK: Heseltine Institute for Public Policy, Practice and Place, University of Liverpool.

Whitehead, Margaret, Ben Barr, and David Taylor-Robinson. 2020. “Covid-19: We are not ‘all in it together’ – less privileged in society are suffering the brunt of the damage.” *The BMJ opinion*, May 22, 2020.
<https://blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2020/05/22/covid-19-we-are-not-all-in-it-together-less-privileged-in-society-are-suffering-the-brunt-of-the-damage>.

The Heseltine Institute is an interdisciplinary public policy research institute which brings together academic expertise from across the University of Liverpool with policy-makers and practitioners to support the development of sustainable and inclusive cities and city regions.

Heseltine Institute for Public Policy, Practice and Place
University of Liverpool, 1-7 Abercromby Square, Liverpool, L69 7ZH

 Follow us @livuniheseltine

About the author

Professor Michael Parkinson CBE

Michael is Associate Pro-Vice-Chancellor for civic engagement and Ambassador for the Heseltine Institute at the University of Liverpool. He has acted as adviser on urban affairs to the European Commission, the European Parliament, OECD, EUROCITIES, the Department of Communities and Local Government, the National Audit Office, the House of Commons Select Committees, the Core Cities and a range of cities in the UK and Europe. He is currently a member of the Mayor's Advisory Board on Liverpool's World Heritage Status and a Board Member of the Special Olympics Great Britain 2021. He was made Commander of the British Empire for services to urban regeneration in 2007. He was made Citizen of Honour of Liverpool in 2016. He wrote *Liverpool on the Brink* in 1985. His career has been partly devoted to showing how much the city has changed for the better since then! He published the sequel *Liverpool Beyond the Brink: The Remaking of a Post Imperial City* in 2019.

This Policy Briefing complements a wider paper also written by Professor Michael Parkinson which can be accessed here - www.liverpool.ac.uk/heseltine-institute/reports/

The information, practices and views in this Policy Brief are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Heseltine Institute.

COVID-19 Policy Briefs can be accessed at: www.liverpool.ac.uk/heseltine-institute