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# Policy in an Age of Uncertainty

## The Heseltine Institute Policy Briefings

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# Policy in an Age of Uncertainty

## Key takeaways

1. UK policymakers are operating in a challenging period characterised by a high degree of uncertainty. Public services are under significant pressure, economic growth remains low, inflation is at its highest for 30 years, technological change is rapidly changing the way we live and work, life expectancy is flatlining, instability in geopolitics provides an ever-present threat and climate and ecological change present urgent and existential threats.
2. In the midst of this ‘polycrisis’ – a term recently popularised by economist Adam Tooze – universities have a role to play not only in producing innovative and impactful research, but by connecting it to policy development and practice.
3. It is in this context the Heseltine Institute launches its third series of policy briefings, titled *Policy in an Age of Uncertainty*. Over the coming months we will publish briefings that speak to this theme across four areas: Cities and city-regions; Public services; Inequalities; and Power, politics and place.
4. Since launching the Heseltine Institute policy briefings in 2020, we have published more than 60 papers from a range of academic disciplines, practitioner perspectives and policy viewpoints, from Liverpool City Region, across the UK, and internationally.
5. The policy briefings aim to contribute creative and innovative thinking about how UK cities and city-regions can address the most pressing policy challenges of the 2020s and 2030s, to encourage learning between researchers, policymakers and practitioners, and to foster collaboration.

## 1. Introduction

In his 1999 book [Homeland Earth: A Manifesto for the New Millennium](#), French sociologist Edgar Morin coined the term ‘polycrisis’ to describe the complex web of interwoven and overlapping crises facing the natural world. Twenty years later, the phrase re-entered the policy landscape when [European Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker used it](#) to summarise the multiple challenges facing the European Union – the hangover from the sovereign debt crisis, the fallout from wars and famine in the Middle East, and the future of the UK outside the union.

However, it was not until 2022 that the term reached mass consciousness. Economist Adam Tooze, largely responsible for popularising the term over recent months, suggests that the degree

of uncertainty and complexity facing politicians and policymakers is of a different order from those dealing with crises of the past. Economic and social instability is intertwined with growing anxiety about the prospect of crossing various ecological rubicons, leaving politicians grappling for appropriate policy frameworks that effectively cut across multiple challenges.

When the Heseltine Institute launched its policy briefings in April 2020, the UK was of course in the midst of perhaps its most significant single crisis since the Second World War. Virtually the entire machinery of central government was channelled towards two goals – restricting the spread of the COVID-19 virus and developing a vaccine that would ultimately allow life to return to some semblance of pre-pandemic normality. As became clear in



the following months, and detailed in our policy briefings published through 2020 and 2021, the end of the acute phase of the pandemic shone a light on a range of complex policy dilemmas facing the UK.

Initial optimism that we would quickly ‘build back better’ now seems somewhat misplaced. While, for many of us, daily life has returned to something equating to normal, the political and policy environment appears increasingly uncertain. Meanwhile, local and regional leaders are at the vanguard not only of tackling the nation’s most significant policy challenges, but developing innovative approaches to addressing mounting problems in areas such as social care, housing and transport.

The overarching framework in which local leaders are operating is one of uncertainty – about how public services can adapt to an ageing society, how cities and city-regions (and their economies) can adapt to technological and industrial change, and how climate change and the way we tackle it will affect our homes, businesses and lifestyles. Devolution to English city-regions is providing local policymakers with increased opportunities and responsibilities to develop tailored solutions to local problems and, in some areas, to diverge from national government responses. Communities also have a crucial role to play in addressing crises and navigating uncertainty, as demonstrated by the activity of community and voluntary sector organisations during the pandemic.

For researchers interested in addressing society’s trickiest problems, it is perhaps at the regional and local level where the most interesting opportunities to impact policy now arise. Researchers are also required, perhaps more than ever, to help policymakers understand and navigate a dynamic, unstable and increasingly complex landscape.

## 2. Policy in an age of uncertainty

The uncertain context can have the effect of making local and regional policymakers, researchers and practitioners feel helpless in the face of global and national challenges over which they may have little influence. However, uncertainty provides opportunities to shape policy as well as challenges in responding to it. A growing body of academic research is developing to support the future-proofing of policy, with notable examples including [Mariana Mazzucato's work on mission-orientated policymaking](#), and interest in concepts such as [anticipatory governance](#) from organisations including the [United Nations](#). Similarly, policy-focused researchers are building support for a state which [emphasises prevention](#) as much, if not more, than reaction.

It is in this context we launch the Heseltine Institute’s third series of policy briefings, with the theme of *Policy in an Age of Uncertainty*. While policy has always been hostage to ‘events’, we are arguably in a period of particular fragility. A [recent report by the United Nations Development Programme](#) suggests uncertainty is taking “ominous new forms” today, a situation produced by the intersection of ecological and environmental instability, sweeping societal transformations and intensifying political polarisation. An environment characterised by uncertainty presents particular challenges for policymakers and the communities they represent, making developing long-term responses to policy problems and building the institutional capacity and resilience more difficult. Political environments dominated by uncertainty can, [as argued by Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck](#), become risk-averse – withdrawing from the types of grand projects which for example improved sanitation in UK cities in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, or built the National Health Service after 1945. Today in the

UK, uncertainty presents itself in different ways:

- Political uncertainty, reflected in the unusually high degree of churn in national leadership and subsequent shifts in policy priorities.
- Economic uncertainty, as the fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic was swiftly followed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, upturning energy markets and contributing to generational highs in inflation.
- Social uncertainty, as technological change precipitates changes in the workplace, our lives at home and our interactions with friends, family and neighbours.
- Environmental uncertainty, as climate change contributes to increasingly common extreme weather events here in the UK, and the risk of future pandemics remains alarmingly high.

Dealing with uncertainty is particularly critical for policymakers at the local and regional level. As we have seen over recent years in the rapid flux of local economic development policy, exemplified over the last 12 months by the proposal for new investment zones in several English cities, local policymakers are often at the frontline of policy churn and the uncertainty that this brings. City-regions are particularly prone to the impacts of uncertainty as urban communities are arguably most exposed to crisis – as witnessed during the COVID-19 pandemic where cities faced the worst of its health impacts.

As a central part of our offer to publish, promote and disseminate policy-focused research with a particular focus on UK cities and city-regions, our policy briefings aim to:

- Contribute creative and innovative thinking about how city-regions in the UK can navigate and address the demographic, societal, economic,

environmental and political challenges of the 2020s and 2030s, and benefit from the opportunities provided by new technologies, economic thinking and social change.

- Encourage knowledge transfer and learning between researchers, policymakers and practitioners.
- Connect researchers with policy professionals to foster collaboration and promote the policy impact of research.

Since launching our policy briefings in 2020, we have published over 60 papers from researchers, policymakers and practitioners, addressing a wide range of economic, health and societal policy issues. During the early days of the pandemic, the briefings provided an outlet for rapid dissemination of research into [modelling the spread of the virus](#), the controversial [care homes policy](#) and the impact of lockdowns on sectors such as [sport](#) and [culture](#). Our second series, *Recovery and Renewal*, provided opportunities for proposals on how to rebuild public services and civic society after the pandemic. Most recently, our [Eurovision](#) special series highlight the opportunities for Liverpool City Region to develop a sustainable legacy for an event which attracted hundreds of thousands of extra visitors, and the attention of 160 million TV viewers. Building on this back catalogue, our new series will focus on helping policymakers deal with our age of uncertainty.

### **3. Dealing with uncertainty: future-proofing policy**

For this new series of policy briefings, we have identified four areas which we are particularly interested in covering topics addressing how policymakers are dealing with uncertainty:

*Cities and city-regions.* As a result of devolution, UK cities and city-regions are tasked with dealing with an increasing

array of policy challenges. Mayors, combined authorities, local councils and other local bodies are adopting innovative approaches to tackling climate change, the transition to net zero, demographic change and economic policy.

*Public services.* Public services in the UK are under increasing strain, particularly following the economic and social aftershocks of the COVID-19 pandemic, and over a decade of local government austerity. We are keen to publish briefings exploring challenges in areas such as education, health, transport, research and development, and culture. We also want to hear from researchers and practitioners developing understanding of how technological and environmental change will impact on how we deliver public services, and those involved in their delivery can make them more accessible to a diverse group of users.

*Inequalities.* Our cities and city-regions are increasingly defined by inequalities – between places and people, by health, wealth and opportunity. UK city-regions are home to some of the most nation’s wealthiest and most deprived neighbourhoods. We are interested in policy briefings which identify ways to reduce inequalities between places, and within places, and help develop understanding of how uncertainty shapes economic, social and environmental choices within communities.

*Power, politics and place.* As we look towards a likely General Election in the UK in 2024, along with several important elections for local authorities and ‘metro’ mayors, the dynamics of our local and regional politics are likely to be of significant interest. We are keen to publish briefings which discuss the strengths, limitations and trajectories of regional devolution, and related national, regional and local policy areas such as planning and housing. We would also welcome interventions on elections and voting,

particularly in the run-up to key electoral events.

#### **4. Conclusion**

At this critical time for UK policymakers, our policy briefings will offer timely interventions which we hope will inspire, provoke and prompt action on a host of pressing policy challenges. Our previous policy briefings have fostered collaboration between researchers and policy partners, been cited in academic research and referenced in parliamentary inquiries, and been used by local leaders to shape a range of policy interventions. For further details on our policy briefings and information on how to contribute, visit [our website](#) and keep up to date on Twitter at @livuniheseltine.

The Heseltine Institute for Public Policy, Practice and Place 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.

Our policy briefings aim to promote and disseminate creative and innovative contributions from academics, policymakers and practitioners on a range of challenges facing the UK, particularly those which affect our cities and city regions.

### **About the author**

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