

Personal responses to draft East Sussex Economic Recovery Plan

GENERAL POINTS

The report presents a very conventional and narrow approach to a situation that requires new and more holistic thinking. It has no local differentiation, or acknowledgement of the need to do so. The section on 'adapt and improve place-making' is heavily dominated by developer desire to extract returns from land, ignoring the far wider activities that actually shape places.

We don't want to go backwards to systems that have been recognised across the political spectrum as 'broken'. That 'normality' was full of acute challenges and suffering. The challenges haven't gone away; new ones have been added; under the strain we need to 'bounce forwards' with new approaches, not creep back to a damaged version of the *status quo ante*. Our job is to shape the *status quo emergo*.

[Diverse economies](#) are embedded in our lives and have become more obvious during the crisis. Reciprocity, mutual aid, neighbourliness, solidarity. Sharing, swapping, peer-trading, local loyalty, caring. [While confidence levels in 'the economy' have dropped significantly, community cohesion and trust have never been higher:](#)

The economy does not sit outside of the whole of social reproduction and the largely unpaid 'core economy'¹ that includes maternity, child-rearing, education, lifelong learning, care, culture, health, caring for the inheritance and handing on the legacy. And it must exist within the 'doughnut'² where it contributes to the goal of human flourishing without going beyond one-planet constraints. We need a 'circular economy' where the money flows locally for longer, waste is reduced, and institutions are tethered to place. We need an inclusive economy – an asset-based approach that sees all people as creative, resourceful and whole, rather than problems to be fixed or passive recipients segregated by the services they use.

Value is created and integrated into every system and decision for the good of all through placing the focus on wellbeing – be it in the creation of places that encourage a sense of belonging, environments that enable active, lifelong learning and innovation, or behaviours and actions that promote and sustain positive health.

The blanket, county-wide approach fails to acknowledge the contextual factors, specific needs, geographical variations and opportunities of each place. While this can emerge through locally-driven processes, its absence (even as a future objective) reveals a level of over-simplification and one-size-fits-all approach at county level which is unlikely to be matched by sufficient resources to make the difference that is needed.

"As we look to the recovery period, we have an opportunity to rethink *how* we invest in places and, more importantly, *who* should benefit from this investment. If we are to see this as an opportunity to build back better, we cannot revert to business as usual. Instead, we need to truly invest in people and the places where they live by building a social economy that enhances welfare, improves living standards, and creates fairer communities". – Social Investment Business

¹ Cahn, E., No More Throwaway People, 2000

² Raworth, K., Donut Economics, 2017

A NOTE ON TIMING

Some things need to happen really soon. For example, outdoor eating, drinking and entertainment needs immediate support to clear planning hurdles out of the way, provide encouragement and advice, invest in the public realm. Some authorities are providing kit (seating etc) to help establish an outdoor culture. This would be particularly welcome in the Trinity Triangle for example.

Some need to start soon but take longer, like changes to road use and patterns to accommodate more cycling and walking. Or the development of out-of-school education opportunities. [Exciting ideas are emerging in this field](#); we need to be paying attention and experimenting. The Observer Building provides a perfect trial ground for 'big wide world' learning.

Other concerns and opportunities need to be placed as markers for ongoing development. The Green New Deal is essential now and every level of government should commit to it.

ACTION PLAN AMBITIONS (AS STATED IN THE DRAFT)

1. Digital
2. Inward investment
3. Visitor economy (this subsumes leisure and culture)
4. Low carbon
5. Business adapt, recover and grow
6. Retain skills infrastructure, support employment, build workforce resilience
7. Local procurement
8. Adapt and improve place-making

MY CONCERNS WITH THE STATED AMBITIONS

Digital

These actions are all about improving speeds, apart from A1:4 which focuses on digital exclusion for young, disadvantaged people in areas of deprivation and A1:8 which supports home-working.

It misses the opportunities that have been revealed by the lockdown for new digital formats and the imperative of the transition for blended digital/physical approaches.

Inward Investment

This is all about marketing to compete for an unspecified kind of incomer. What about some internal investment products – like the Investors Collective and emerging Neighbourhood Bond? How about a County Bank? This is a very rich region and we should be providing opportunities for people to invest locally.

Leisure, hospitality, culture and tourism economy

I'm concerned about the "pan-Sussex PR and social media presence to coordinate the restart of the visitor economy, support the health of the population and grow a pan-Sussex shared evidence base to support future funding bids". Hastings has more in common with

the South East coast than with a Sussex identity. There is an elision between a PR/tourism drive to place Sussex on a par with Yorkshire, and a wider change that might somehow 'support the health of the population' by sublimating it all into 'Sussex'. Not evidenced.

Low carbon

Welcome the focus on local transport (rather than inward travel). But this section misses the opportunity for wider action on climate and biodiversity. Needs input from Transition Town Hastings etc.

Business adaptation

Focused on support from above and continuing as usual. No differentiation between types and sizes of business. Or recognition that the majority of businesses in the county (or at least in Hastings) have never even heard of the Business Growth Hub. No gender analysis despite the [clear benefits of investing in female entrepreneurs](#) (£100bn across the UK).

Retain skills infrastructure

This is a very low-flying ambition. In my experience the 'skills infrastructure' hasn't been much use so far. It has been busy merging, reviewing, responding to austerity, surviving. This is an opportunity for change not for 'retaining'.

A6:9 – 'new programmes to develop the skills of young people when there is little opportunity for employment'. Needs to be so much more ambitious than this – or we'll be back with the hated YTS approach of the 1980s.

Local supplier/procurement

A7:1 strengthen public sector procurement to increase local procurement (Preston model) Local e-markets – we're testing this with Independents Day (4th July, Isolation Station).

Beyond commissioning - "Commissioning is dead - the deliverers in Council, NHS & communities work better together & build trust when they can just build a model together then just do it instead of spending months or years writing commissioning intentions & contracts" – Prof Donna Hall (initiator of the Wigan Deal)

Place-making

The text of this section is almost all about property development and 'reigniting the house-building industry', which will never solve the housing crisis and is part of the problem [see Bob Colenutt *The Property Lobby* (2020)]. The action plan shows some wider thinking around diversifying town centre uses (including A8:4 – rapid delivery of outside trading permits), 'allowing' empty retail to be repurposed (A8:5) and repurposing spaces for work and learning (A8:8) which are all welcome but will need significant capital finance.

MY VERSION OF THE AMBITIONS:

1. Digital
2. Diverse/doughnut economy
3. Support for surviving, new and re-start businesses
4. Real, useful work for people without jobs or with spare time
5. Action on climate and biodiversity
6. Space & Place
7. Data, evidence, information, knowledge, wisdom, trust
8. Leadership, engagement, decision-making

COMMENTS ON MY AMBITIONS:

1. Digital

Opportunity for blended digital/physical approaches to: live entertainment; education and culture; health & wellbeing; community engagement; the future of work. Isolation Station Hastings (ISH), and its plans for a transition to a blended digital/physical approach, is an example of innovation in this field. It is essential that content providers and stream coordinators are supported to sustain and monetise this rapidly-changing aspect of the economy (recognising that most digital businesses need patient investment before they reach self-sufficiency).

As well as being revealed by the crisis as underpinning infrastructure for the whole spectrum of economic, social and cultural activity, a utility as important as water or electricity, 'digital' is also a whole field of the economy in its own right, and one that does not (necessarily) depend on location or transport links.

ACTIONS:

- (all the actions from the plan relating to improving coverage, speeds, and reach plus...)
- support the development of existing and new tech businesses, especially those that are locally-rooted and/or socially minded
- support digital innovations like ISH and the proposed streaming studio in the Observer Building
- provide a year of digital training to every citizen (much of it delivered peer-to-peer, potentially through the Recovery Corps – see 4 below).

2. Diverse/doughnut economy

Widen and deepen the understanding of the economy to include social reproduction (care, health, education and culture), diverse and prosocial economies (reciprocity, mutual aid, cooperation, collaboration), inclusive economics (valuing people as creative, resourceful and whole, supporting them to have economic agency), circular economies (increasing local multipliers, reducing waste and the extraction of value).

ACTIONS:

- Review the care economy across the county with an explicit aim to increase the value and quality of care work (for the carers and those needing care)
- Lobby government for a bonus year in which all those in education repeat a year in which they can a) revisit and revise the learning from that year and b) undertake other learning and training. That way the generation whose education has been impacted will actually see a bonus benefit rather than suffering long-term scars.
- Understand that health is an economic factor. Not only is poor health heavily associated with poverty, and good health with productivity, but we are likely to see many workers whose physical and mental health has been battered. With so many small employers, occupational health regimes are unlikely to be in place; there is a role for Public Health in supporting the workforce.
- Recognise the economic importance of culture, creativity and leisure, and the role of imagination in driving innovation.
- Seek to valorise, support and promote prosocial economic activity such as mutual aid, community businesses and cooperatives
- Change the language around disadvantage, deprivation and need, from a deficit model to one that recognises people as assets
- Develop proposals to invest and divest as appropriate to shape an economy that works within planetary constraints and contributes directly to reducing environmental harm
- Reconsider the role of housing in the economy and vice versa. Engage in the debate between the use-value and the exchange-value of housing, homes for living in or units as commodities.
- Increase local multipliers through local-friendly procurement by anchor institutions (housing providers, universities, hospital), and by encouraging buy local/ invest local schemes
- Reform commissioning to prioritise partnership and co-production
"Commissioning is dead - the deliverers in Council, NHS & communities work better together & build trust when they can just build a model together then just do it instead of spending months or years writing commissioning intentions & contracts" – Prof Donna Hall

3. Support for surviving, new and re-start businesses

Businesses need some measure of certainty or at least some limits to uncertainty.

"We need organisations to think creatively, responsibly and ambitiously about operating differently, but economic evidence shows that uncertainty is itself an inhibitor of investment and consumption. It inhibits not just consumption but innovation and investment in transitional solutions." (RSA)

The RSA has suggested a 'year of stabilisation' in which transitional arrangements would be maintained for a year unless the virus was effectively conquered, or the R rate went over 1. This would allow for urgent and transitional measures to be put in place or sustained, and for a longer term economic plan to be developed at an appropriate pace.

Small businesspeople, the majority of employers, may prove more resilient in the medium and longer term if they can access rescue finance now and be properly supported through transition into a new future. We need some more nuanced understanding of business development. [Deloitte estimate £100bn extra](#) to UK if female entrepreneurs are supported.

ACTIONS:

- Lobby government for a year of stabilisation and in any case introduce one across the county.
- Provide support to increase certainty – eg an expert group that is aware of the latest evidence and can advise businesses on their transition plans.
- Prioritise business support that focuses on social goods and market innovations
- Focus on SMEs since they are by far the majority. Consider their assets (agility, easy start/easy fail/easy start again, passionate/hard-working directors), build their resilience (cashflow lending, pay-on-time contracts and pay-in-advance grants), provide loan financing mechanisms for the long term not just the crisis (a county bank?)
- Recognise that many businesses will fail but the entrepreneurs behind them will be driven to start new ones. Bespoke support for re-starts which have different need from start-ups.
- With very high unemployment and novel challenges, new business ideas are likely to flow. Many will be unusual, innovative, unprecedented – it will take imaginative business coaches to support them to dare to fail quickly and learn on the go.
- Encourage local networks, directories, and shared spaces (physical and digital) – business-to-business, business-to-community, and business-to-customer.
- Support mixed-use diversified workspace with integrated enterprise development programmes
- Gender map of county/SELEP businesses to provide a proper understanding of the potential gap, and ideas of how to fill it.

“Currently, fewer than 6% of working-age women are engaged in early stage entrepreneurial activity, compared to more than 10% of men. Increasing female participation in the sector to 10% would take the overall economic contribution of women-led SMEs to more than £180bn by 2025. Targeted help for early stage women entrepreneurs could provide a £100bn boost to the UK economy over the next ten years.” [Deloitte](#)

4. Real, useful work

Recognise there will be ongoing furloughing and huge unemployment, especially for young people. For those in work is very likely that more part-time work will emerge (eg everyone working 3 different days per week). We need to think at scale about public and community works that could absorb this human resource into the care and ongoing improvement of the physical, social and cultural fabric of our places. In Hastings we have the historic example of Sidney Little, known as the Concrete King but in fact as much a social innovator as an engineering one; several of his major works in Hastings involved large numbers of unemployed and/or schoolchildren.

ACTIONS:

- Lobby government for the Community Allowance to enable people on benefit to be paid for work they do that is good for the neighbourhood [see CREATE, 2012]
- Establish a Recovery Corps (inspired by Roosevelt's Civilian Conservation Corps) and identify large-scale public/community works that can be achieved (a combination of the RSA's proposals for a 'Good Work Fund' and a Training & Work Guarantee). The average age of US corps is 28 – a strong focus on young people but also a spread of people of all ages.
- Harness the volunteer surge by working with the local mutual aid networks to understand motivations and direct volunteers to appropriate opportunities, including active citizenship and place-making as well as helping people in need. Recognise that this is an economic activity – if it was not being done for free it would be a real cost of doing business.
- Support school leavers and graduates through a dedicated scheme run by an organisation like i-Rock, in liaison with local employers and organisations with volunteer opportunities.

5. Action on climate and biodiversity

The omni-crisis is upon us and will unfold over the next three decades. Covid-19 has been a warning and the people of future generations will judge us for whether we listen or not.

ACTIONS:

- Lobby government for a Green New Deal (now is definitely the time)
- Divest all public sector holdings in planet-harming corporations and funds, press private funds to do the same
- Establish a single, simple grant/loan scheme for insulation, solar PV, and other pro-environment measures
- Public and school educational programmes around biodiversity and climate action
- Be aware of the prohibitive cost of electric vehicles – these are not available to everyone. However, free parking for electric vehicles and EV charging stations in all car parks, would help to encourage take-up, then we need reconditioning and selling on of electric vehicles, battery rebuilding as a skill, ways of recycling the benefit, including perhaps working with commercial sponsors to stage EV competitions and celebrations – a new event in the Hastings calendar?!
- Investigate the feasibility of the Hastings Bus Grid
- Restore the full funding to the Hastings Greenway and keep to the original off-road route
- Invest 1% of the ESCC pension fund in local green bonds to fund local energy projects. Renewables are a good investment and the pension fund has the ability to invest up to 5% of holdings in local. Use public-commons partnership as the ownership model so local people co-own these assets into the future.
- 'Level up' by targeting investment in the retrofitting and digital capacity initially to large social housing estates

6. Space & Place

We need space for living, working, leisure, learning and community action, space to be together, space to engage with the future and to make it.

Increased importance of the public realm. We are going to have to live outside much more so it will need improved quality, amenity and facilities.

Focus on place – not as competitive positioning to fight over inward investment but as a quality of life issue, the source of distinctiveness, civic pride and solidarity.

ACTIONS:

- Provide patient loan funding to enable mixed-use developments like the Hastings Commons (particularly the Observer Building which is ‘oven-ready’ for recovery)
- Encourage local teams to identify the spaces at risk in their place (eg Debenhams in Hastings) and to partner with Orbis to research ownership and develop proposals for transitional and future use
- Reprioritise the public realm to create the kind of quality spaces and facilities we generally expect inside buildings
- Tackle the issue of smoking and other antisocial behaviour in public spaces
- Develop a model for ‘flourish and thrive’ centres, utilising empty commercial property with a focus on positive public health and wellbeing
- Support local work in each town and district in the county to develop Local Plans that genuinely engage with local people. Explicitly connect Local Plans (land use) to Investment Plans (capital funding) to Climate Action Plans to Anti-Poverty Plans to masterplans for specific opportunity areas, and to Neighbourhood Plans where local people wish to develop them.
- Partner with social purpose developers to unlock difficult sites
- Hold a county-wide #LoveLocal festival similar to Heritage Open Days, where people would go out locally and also visit each other’s towns to experience the best of the distinctive local.
- Explore ‘showrooming’ not just as a retail survival strategy but as a strategy for sustaining and improving the quality of streetscape
- Use relatively low land values in Hastings to undertake European-style development where the council in partnership with the community defines parameters of quality and social value, sets the land price and takes bids, prioritising those that will deliver additional social value and local economic benefit (eg by keeping surpluses local).
- Provide an easily accessible fund for small pots of money for individual streets of shops to try out street improvements like road closures and street markets.

7. Data, evidence, information, knowledge, wisdom, trust

To survive and thrive in the coming period we will need to gather and share the best available data and evidence. We will need to share information and need platforms and conduits for that. Because none of this is clear and all of it is evolving, we need space and facilitation for debate. We need to draw on all kinds of knowledge, including lived

experience and local intelligence. We will need both the wisdom of years and the energy of youth. And we need to trust each other more.

ACTIONS:

- Revolutionise data-sharing for the public good, with clear and appropriate guidelines (that are different from those governing commercial data-sharing).
- Support local media and information-sharing networks
- Continue and evolve the work of the Hastings Hub which has demonstrated a highly effective collaborative approach that has built trust across sectors and fields
- Seek out diverse perspectives to grow our collective knowledge base and continually challenge our own thinking
- Initiate and support cross-generational engagement projects bringing energy and wisdom into the same room to develop solutions together
- Use the ease of digital communications to spend more time together having conversations about the future.

8. Leadership, engagement, decision-making

Finally, and most importantly of all, we need to innovate around governance.

“Alongside stabilisation policies, profound changes to how government engages with expertise, representative interests such as business and the trade unions, with other levels of administration and the public are required. These cannot wait as they lie behind multiple failings in the Covid-19 response which, in the UK and many other contexts, has been fundamentally a failure of governance.” (RSA)

People of all ages and from every background have already made enormous sacrifices. Now they are facing the worst recession for 300 years. The looming omni-crisis kills any sense that we just need to somehow ‘get through this’ and everything will return to ‘normal’.

Normal was deadly for too many people and degrading for so many more. The stark choice we face now is to take active steps towards a more prosocial economy or to allow the worst of the old world (low-pay, zero-hours, casino capitalism, environmental damage, populist nationalism, extractive speculation, etc), to dominate the new one.

People deserve and will demand the right to be heard, to be agents of their own future not subjects of someone else’s masterplan.

In any case it is now widely accepted that local government will not be able to achieve even its statutory objectives alone unless resourcing is transformed. If we are to involve wider society in the delivery of social objectives, which we must, then representation and engagement will have to change.

ACTIONS:

- Review options for the future of local government, services and decision-making, including possibly a division between:

- **Public/Social Authorities** who provide the safety net at the most appropriate scale. Note that blanket territorial authorities are not necessarily required if you have proper market-like coverage in a context of adequate state investment (there will always be someone who will fill a gap as long as it is properly funded)
- **Town Boards** (part elected, part nominated) that set the agenda for the town. A Town Board should be local, visible, available and accountable – eg part elected councillors (usually by party) and part ‘alderpeople’ (nominated by councillors or by petition, and elected by popular vote).
- Seek to encourage, assist and model distributed leadership, listening leadership, leaders focused on growing new leaders
- Establish decision-making structures and processes that are fit for purpose, transparent, engaging, accountable and effective. Make use of existing structures where they show promise and are willing to adapt.

WHAT IF.. (thanks to Richard Watson, OBE)

This is the perfect time for a Ministry of Imagination, for the WHAT IF questions...

What if free green spaces in parks and schools were farmed?

What if income inequality was the first priority?

What if there was a debt re-purchasing fund that redeemed, for example, water debts?

What if £100 mil was spent on e-cycle ways, both coastal and into the hinterland, to create a healthy eco-tourism nirvana?

What if there was an alternative food voucher currency?

What if every building that was suitable had solar panels funded by a municipal green bond? What if councils and communities came together to commission an offshore wind farm off Dungeness?

“In this crisis”, Mark Carney says, “we know we need to act as an interdependent community not independent individuals, so the values of economic dynamism and efficiency have been joined by those of solidarity, fairness, responsibility and compassion” (Carney 2020). These are key features of inclusive economy institutions, including many organisations for example that operate under the banner of community energy:

- One organisation is working on a project to supply electricity to fuel poor households at 1/3rd of the retail price
- Another reports a Social Return on Investment of 24 to 1 for fuel poverty work they undertake (6 to 1 directly accruing to fuel poor households)
- Four organisations alone mobilised a combined £100k which stems from surplus generated from community renewable electricity generation for Corona Crisis Funds to support community-organised aid networks
- Across 30 groups in the Southeast, £74,252 were saved on energy bills of fuel poor households through outreach activities between March 2019 and March 2020
- In total, it has been estimated that £2.3m of funding up to 2018 leveraged £40m in community energy investment

USEFUL INPUTS

<https://www.thersa.org/discover/publications-and-articles/rsa-blogs/2020/05/stabilisation-transition-bridges>

<https://cbmutualaid.co.uk/>

<https://cles.org.uk/news/community-wealth-building-should-be-at-the-heart-of-recovery-plans-as-local-economies-try-to-rebuild-after-the-pandemic/>

But also twitter and facebook and instagram and the places where people are.