



## **GW4 Green Recovery Workshop Report**

### **A Green and Just Recovery across Bath, Bristol, Exeter, and Cardiff?**

Engineers' House, Bristol. 16<sup>th</sup> September 2021

Galvanized by the COVID-19 pandemic and commitments to net zero, a focus on 'green recovery' has emerged across many cities. Yet the precise policies and practices associated with this rhetoric are still emerging. How are different people and groups mobilising ideas of green recovery? To what extent do they provide an opportunity to rethink ways of organising urban life, and accelerate the profound changes that are needed to achieve net zero?

To explore these issues, this workshop brought together activists, NGOs, and local policy-makers from Bath, Bristol, Cardiff, and Exeter to discuss plans and aspirations for a green post-Covid recovery. The event was discussion-based, and aimed to explore questions such as: which different visions of green recovery are being promoted? How are visions translating into action? How are priorities and plans driving innovation and tackling inequalities?

The event was part of a GW4-funded Green Recovery project which investigates the rhetoric and practices of green recovery in cities in the South West of Britain. Our key research themes are:

- Pledges and policies to achieve net zero, and how the politics of knowledge production interacts with policy at the city-scale;
- Interactions between activist groups and formal governance structures;
- The role of rhetoric and narrative in perceptions of climate change and environmental policy;
- How different actors are mobilising rhetorics of green recovery.

### **Key findings**

- Green recovery debates provide an opportunity to bring diverse groups and individuals together, and offer a new route to connecting concerns regarding climate, inequalities, and prosperity.
- Spaces to bring together local government, community leaders, and activists on this key agenda are lacking. The range and richness of community leadership and activism provides a significant resource. However, existing framings of green recovery do not engage with this.
- Engaging diverse voices is essential to ensure debates of green recovery go beyond economic recovery, and incorporate perspectives of care and justice.
- The framing of 'just transitions' could provide a useful lens through which to explore processes of change, and alternative futures related to recovery from Covid.
- The absence of a regional voice to engage with or link to national green recovery debates limits scope for long-term, ambitious action in cities.



## GW4 Green Recovery Workshop: How it Worked

Following an introduction to the project, the research team presented early findings from their ongoing review of green recovery rhetorics and plans in the four cities. This has consisted of an online search using a range of terms including 'green recovery', 'post-covid recovery', 'green stimulus', and 'build back better' for each of the four GW4 cities: Bath, Bristol, Exeter, and Cardiff. This has resulted in a database of 142 documents which were qualitatively reviewed for key themes and the framing of green recovery. These early findings emphasised that the most frequently occurring themes were: climate emergency and COP26, inequality and poverty, net zero, sustainable travel, nature emergency, and economic recovery.

Participants then split into groups and took part in a [World Café style](#) format based on small group conversations focussed on specific questions related to green recovery. Following two rounds of conversation, there was a harvest session in which participants shared insights with the rest of the group. Participants were invited to record their thoughts on posters and post-it notes, and a member of the research team took detailed notes in each of the four groups.



### Key themes and priorities

#### Conversation 1: What words or stories describe these moments and the potential for a Green Recovery? What is missing?

- *The importance of stories:* narratives of green recovery can shape perceptions of what is possible. However, the extent to which existing visions of green recovery reflect the diversity of voices in the four cities is unclear.
- *Missing voices and creating open conversations:* the voices of some communities, particularly those most affected by the pandemic and climate change, are seldom heard. Local consultation and conversations about green recovery needs to be meaningful and inclusive. This is an exciting time with many opportunities for change, but many people feel disengaged from power. Some decision-making processes, such as consultant-led reports and visioning, can feel exclusionary. It is necessary to ensure that people feel they are part of decision-making.
- *Dominance of growth narratives:* instead of building a narrative of hope and inclusion, the green recovery agenda is too focussed on economic growth. There is a risk that private profit and industry take over the agenda, despite the early focus on care and fairness. We need to interrogate the term 'growth': what is growth, and what purpose does it serve?
- *Reframing from being technology focussed to people focussed:* Technology, particularly Informations and Communications Technology (ICT), played a key role during the pandemic, and could be central to addressing the climate emergency. However, ICT can play a dual role in both supporting change

and maintaining the status quo. Cities need to frame their approach to ICT and smart technologies around their ability to increase wellbeing and reduce inequality, considering issues of accessibility.

- *Urgency*: The pandemic exposed the need for rapid and radical change to address the climate emergency and social inequalities, but we have a shrinking window of opportunity in which to act. The rhetoric of green recovery needs to translate into action with bottom-up, community action holding great potential for rapid change.
- *Emotions and mental health*: Covid is a period of loss and anxiety with long-term effects, but many experience the same feelings regarding climate change. Access to nature has particular potential for supporting mental health and engagement in wider climate issues.
- *Green skills and education*: We need to learn from previous transitions about the importance of fairness and equity in social and economic change (e.g. past economic/industrial transitions). Workforce planning should mobilise around green transition at a city and regional scale.
- *Lack of empowerment to act*: In all four cities, there has been considerable positive action on climate. Localities know what they want to achieve, but lack the power to act. Local priorities are often forced to align with the national vision, and are dependent on centrally-allocated policy and funding, which is often short-term and project based.
- *Bottom up change as an enabler of system change*: The local level could play an important role in creating the enabling conditions for ambitious action at the national level. Cities have the potential to create a sense of momentum towards change, and mobilise collective purpose rather than relying only on individual action.

‘The rhetoric is all about growth, rather than upskilling people into new jobs.’

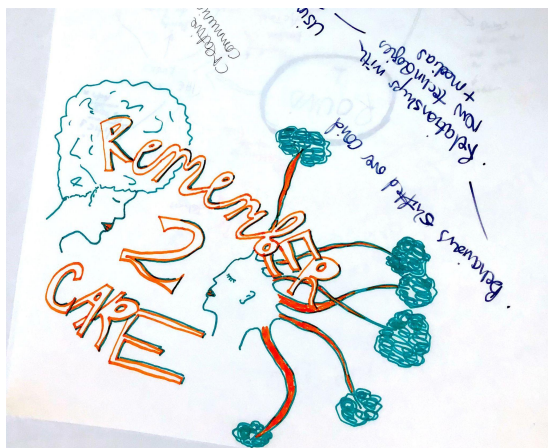
‘Covid has created an opportunity to reimagine how our communities could be...but the window is closing’.



## Conversation 2: As a community of activists, change-makers, and policy makers, what do you need in the context of green recovery? Where can you see an opportunity to connect beyond what doesn't feel possible? Which practices are working to make a Green Recovery possible?

- *Trust*: Widespread trust in processes and methods of engagement is key to creating an approach to green recovery where people feel confident they are represented even if they're not engaged. Trust, inclusion, and communication are bound up together.
- *Dialogue and communicating change*: Tackling the climate and ecological emergency will require radical action. It is essential to involve people in dialogue on how places might change, the role of policy, costs, benefits, and impacts on different communities. Effective engagement requires the creation of time and space for community development, mapping existing engagement opportunities and identifying those that need to be created.
- *Foster a sense of community*: Many people connected deeply with the idea of helping and supporting their local community during the pandemic (e.g. through mutual aid groups). Covid resulted in many examples of community leadership, often where formal agencies couldn't or wouldn't intervene. This leadership needs to be acknowledged, understood, and nurtured.

- *Recognising different needs and wants of communities:* Not everyone wants a say in decision-making or is able to engage, but working with key community members/representatives could help to ensure everyone feels effectively represented.
- *Technology and social media:* The pandemic demonstrated the ability of social media to connect communities and create rapid momentum around local action, such as through new ways to swap and barter, or rewilding projects. However, there are challenges with issues of digital poverty, and the tendency of social media to amplify biases.
- *Bringing local government, activists, and communities together:* Work to bring together policymakers, activists, and community leaders could provide new opportunities to understand the potential of green recovery. Training on how to engage with local government can be very valuable for activists, and particularly for young activists.
- *Communicating the diversity of activism:* people often have entrenched views of what an ‘activist’ is, and can be concerned that becoming an activist means losing your existing community. There’s a need to break down barriers between ‘activist’ groups and the general public, and communicate different ways of taking action and participating in your community. These ways might not always be described as ‘climate action’.
- *Just transition:* Communities with high-carbon industries are concerned about future jobs, and about ‘being left behind’. Focussing on the idea of a ‘just transition’ could help redress inequalities, although ‘just transition’ needs to be carefully defined.
- *Devolution of funding to localities:* There is a need to fund place-specific initiatives to respond to local needs and wants.
- *The missing middle:* There is a wealth of knowledge and capability at the local level, but this is enmeshed in, and often limited by, the national level. There is an absence of a regional voice to link the local to the national.



‘Those not involved in the conversations are most affected’.

‘Voluntary and community sector organisations...were very much the first line of response during Covid...it’s seeing communities, community hub organisations as real leaders in the climate action in cities’.

## Summary

The event revealed that there is considerable existing action from local governments, NGOs, and activists to bring climate and inequality concerns together under the umbrella of a green post-Covid recovery in cities. Despite this wealth of knowledge and capability at the local level, the event demonstrated the wide range of conflicting narratives attached to the idea of green recovery. It suggested that broader conceptions of a care-based and just recovery are under-represented in formal discourses. Developing new ways to engage community leaders and activists in this agenda could be a valuable way of ensuring that a range of views of what green recovery is and could be are incorporated into future plans. Additionally, the event indicated that national responses to net zero and corporate visions of green recovery are inadequate.

There is an absence of spaces in which activists, community leaders, trade unions, and local government can get together, share approaches, and co-ordinate plans on a regional scale.

- Green recovery debates have the potential to bring diverse groups together in cities. They could connect concerns regarding climate, inequalities, and employment around the idea of rethinking needs and priorities.
- The range and richness of community action and activism provides a significant resource that is under-used in the existing framing of green recovery.
- Engaging diverse voices is essential to ensure debate of green recovery goes beyond economic concerns to incorporate perspectives of care and justice.
- The framing of just transitions could provide a useful lens through which to explore processes of change and future visions.
- The absence of a regional voice to engage with or link to national green recovery debates limits scope for long-term, ambitious action in cities.

'It's having an opportunity to talk and to listen in a room of such diversity. There was a multiplicity of voices that don't often get to hear each other'.

'Young people have been worst hit by layoffs and unemployment during Covid,...there could be huge economic scarring as a result, [but] we could get green skills training, vocational course for retro-fitting buildings or improving public transport.'

## Podcast

Celia Robbins created a podcast which explores the perceptions and priorities of the workshop participants: <https://m.soundcloud.com/celia-robbins/a-green-and-just-recovery-across-bath-bristol-cardiff-and-exeter>

## Contact

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For more information, please see the GW4 Green Recovery website: <https://green-recovery-cities.com>.

## Project team

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This event was funded by the [GW4 Alliance](#) and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).



**Appendix: List of Organisations Represented at the GW4 Green Recovery Workshop**

<b>Bath</b>
Bath and NES Council
Bath and NES 3rd Sector Group
Families Action for Climate Change / Schools Climate Network
Bath & West Community Energy
University of Bath
<b>Bristol</b>
Bristol City Council
Green Capital Partnership
Friends of the Earth
Bristol Community Climate Action / Bristol Eastside Trust
The Lucas Plan
University of Bristol
<b>Cardiff</b>
Wales Centre for Public Policy
Cardiff Green New Deal
Trades Union Congress Wales
Uprising Cardiff
Cardiff University
<b>Exeter</b>
Exeter City Council
Liveable Exeter
Fridays For Future Exeter
Exeter Community Energy
Devon County Council
University of Exeter