

CONNECTIONS SERIES, EP 1 • 18 JUN 2020 CITY BITES PODCAST



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#LearningFromCrisis: Connections Part 1: How can UK government tiers interact most usefully for economic recovery?

- Barbara Brownlee, Executive Director of Growth, Planning & Housing, Westminster City Council
- Professor Tony Travers, London School of Economics
- Host: Lisa Taylor, Executive Director, Future of London / Director, Coherent Cities

Take-aways:

- ⇒ Treasury needs councils to avoid financial crisis, partly for economic recovery but also because local authorities are best placed for testing and managing all aspects of Covid response and relationships on the ground. Further, as Brownlee pointed out, being forced into a Section 114 budget-balancing exercise by these extraordinary Covid-19 costs would mean harsh cuts and no room for flexibility or collaboration. Despite increasing bluster, Travers says we can expect MHCLG to do its best to help keep boroughs afloat.
- ⇒ Watch for councils, property companies and partners to start referring to all that vacant office space as “new” commercial or mixed-use space (Travers credits Arup’s [Alex Jan](#) with this reframing). Where landlords are amenable and planning authorities can flex, this could be a great way to bring fresh energy to town and city centres as smaller/newer/consortium organisations start to afford cheaper floor space.
- ⇒ Brownlee does represent a central London authority, but both make the case for not abandoning central cities (in the UK or elsewhere) in favour of sprawl. They also point out that large, historic landlords in city centres, like London’s [Great Estates](#), have the patience – and patient capital – to make sound decisions, “viewing this as a 200-year thing, rather than a 20-month thing”.
- ⇒ In economic terms, both are particularly worried about the huge hole in TfL and commuter revenues and the impact of that on investment, and about the terrible losses in the cultural sector, for livelihoods, businesses, footfall and export value.
- ⇒ Local authorities have limited powers to take direct action like policing risky queues or offering business rates relief, but they do have unique leveraging powers; watch for – or seek – more of this from them.
- ⇒ Both are convinced we will never go back to business as usual in terms of how we work, with Brownlee citing much more direct working on rough sleeping issues, and “100%” certainty that council staff and committees will stay at least partly remote and be as or more efficient than in the past.

Transcript:

This episode kicks off our Learning from Crisis "Connections" series, where we explore how the pandemic is changing our relationship to shared space, community engagement, negotiation, connectivity and culture. We start with a fascinating – and sometimes surprising – conversation on government’s role in the economic recovery.

There's an assumption that the UK's economic recovery, like the crisis itself, will be largely supported by government, at least as we get back underway. Central government has been paying out billions for direct income and business support, while councils have been doing huge amounts of frontline work – and frontline spending.

As we tiptoe through the economic wreckage toward recovery, there are fears that the financial burden may break some councils... there are concerns that central government's timing is off restarting various sectors... and there are suggestions that we may see a more 'co-operative' or less market-driven approach to things like housing and town centre recovery.

Relations between central and local government have been relatively positive through the crisis, but the cracks are starting to show. What might this governance and economics picture look like as we move into the next, pre-vaccine stage? What should it look like to give us the best chance of a healthy economic recovery?

To sense-check some of those ideas and find out which parts of government may be best suited to help dig out, we're talking with London School of Economics Professor **Tony Travers** and **Barbara Brownlee**, Westminster City Council's Executive Director of Growth, Planning and Housing. Welcome!

LT: In your opinion & your experience, which levels of government are best suited to help us get through these next phases of economic recovery?

TT – Well there's no question that this is a very clear example of a massive challenge which requires each of the three levels of govt to work on the things they do but also to work cooperatively and that does make it difficult. Let's just unpack that.

First, national government —it was them who ordered the lockdown, who produced the furlough system, who will withdraw it, who are giving government support to firms and to local authorities and so on, so there's a very, very important macroeconomic role that has a micro, local impact.

In London and other big city-regions where there are mayors or even where there aren't, city transport and policing systems are in the hands of city-wide govt, that's also important, and clearly getting a rational policy for the future of public transport is essential to the entire functioning of big cities, particularly London. Last but not most important, the boroughs are the primary local authorities who have to deal with streets, street use, roads in most cases – 95% of roads in London are run by boroughs, not by the Mayor – so the question of how planning adapts temporarily, how roads are adapted temporarily, how pavements are used temporarily, how people are made confident permanently, that's mostly for the boroughs with a bit of help from City Hall in London. So, it's undoubtedly a three-sphere-of-government solution required to what is a massive problem.

LT - Barbara, how has that been playing out for you at Westminster City Council?

BB - I agree there is an interplay between all three levels of government in London, and it's clear they're all required, there's no doubt about that, but I think Tony said an incredibly important word, which is "confidence". I think whatever we do to bring recovery to central London, one of the key issues is confidence... We are, as local government, responsible for movement strategies and half of pavement widening – TfL does some, we do some – the cleaning and a lot of the public health initiatives, but I think the operational side is not the absolutely key issue, I think it is confidence. I think London is an economy based on mass gatherings and huge social connectivity, international travel and international immigration. For all those things to come back, you need confidence, and that is, I think, about the boroughs, massively. A particular role for central boroughs is stepping forward and reinventing themselves as safe, public, healthy, sustainable places to be and live and work and spend money. I think that's local government, a lot of that.

LT – What tools do local authorities have to drive that?

BB - We own assets in retail and office space, and we can flex that. We are having conversations about flexing space for more community-based businesses, for start-up businesses... One of the issues in London is start-ups not being able to grow into that medium size, and we have this huge disparity in London between teeny-weeny and huge headquarters, and we are having conversations about using some of our buildings for that. Fiscally, we are operating central government schemes regarding business rate relief, but we don't have rates as a local government tool. We have a hole in our finances because of what's happened, rather than much to play with.

TT –There's no doubt that local government as a whole faces the problem that every single authority's income has gone down and every single authority's spending will have to go up. Central London boroughs get a substantial amount of money from street-side car parking, and also from leisure centres and other things they operate, and all of that's gone for months, possibly for a long time.

Separately, they're having to spend more on social care, PPE and other things for social care, so income down, spending up. Unhelpfully, this number is different for every single authority in the country, so the government has been giving extra grants to councils, but nobody thinks so far that the amount given is going to be near enough. So London Councils, representing Westminster and other boroughs, the Mayor, the County Councils Network for authorities outside London– they're all making the case for the money they need.

The truth is government is going to have to bail out councils. If they don't, councils are required by law to balance their books for day-to-day spending within year, or the senior finance officer at the council has to issue a so-called [Section 114 notice](#). This is not a good thing, because that means councillors then have to balance the books in that year come what may, and that means immediate cuts if there isn't enough income to fund spending. I don't think the government wants that. I think [MHCLG](#) will want to try to get the right amount of money to each council, but it's actually quite hard to do that, because the whole thing's dynamic and this means councils are having to be given, potentially at least, the freedom to borrow in the short term, or manage their cashflow, or eat into their reserves, each of which are things you can't do more than once.

LT - What happens if government gets the number wrong, or councils cannot handle the spend and are forced to make cuts or to stop projects that could have gone ahead and fuelled economic recovery?

BB - In a nutshell, Tony has described what happens: we get served with a Section 114 notice, we are officially declared bankrupt, unless within months that council balances the books. I've lived through that experience in Hackney many years ago. It's a blunt tool and you get very, very blunt outcomes from it: fire sales of land and property, swathes of people made redundant and as Tony indicated, services simply cut. What that does not allow is local authorities to do I think what they do best, which is to reinvent and reimagine and repurpose their services. Local authorities have been doing this for as long as I've been at work: making savings, responding to changes, responding to growing demand.

At the minute for example, one of the things the Covid crisis brought on for local authorities was an immediate need to get all the rough sleepers off the street. That's quite a big issue for Westminster, so one at the top of my agenda. What the crisis has done is allow us to completely re-examine all our services for rough sleepers. We have become much closer to that problem, it's a problem that's traditionally dealt with always across London as commissioned services, provided by charitable organisations in the main. We have worked with them and people are off the streets, but jointly with our services providers. We are now very involved in direct provision of services to rough sleeping, both with service providers and with MHCLG, and we are reinventing solutions for that group. And that service will never be delivered in the same way again.

I think that is what local government can do if it is allowed a little bit of time and a little bit of flex to do it. In Westminster, we've created volunteering banks as have others across the country, we've created Westminster Connects; every authority has them. If we run out of money, all ability to imaginatively work with our residents, work with colleagues across the piece in other boroughs, work as a collective, is cut from us, and we are simply in a horrible fiscal position of chopping services. I'm sure Tony is right, I'm sure central government wants to avoid that.

LT – Tony, are you seeing anything interesting in terms of potential evolution, where this has sparked some change that could potentially take hold and benefit us in the future?

TT - I think so great is the event that's just affected British government, politics and society – there's been nothing quite like it since 1945 – that we'll be thinking through some of these consequences for years, and one of those is the potential opportunity – I put it no stronger than that – for a sort of constitutional re-set.

I think one of the things that thoughtful folk in central government are going to realise is that their very highly centralised way of doing some things frankly just doesn't work. I honestly believe if the London boroughs and other councils had been sourcing PPE, they'd have done it faster than a centralised mechanism. They've got more logistical capacity in all sorts of ways and are more inventive in some ways.

So I think at the centre of government, there will be further soul-searching about whether a significantly more devolved version of England, with more powers at sub-national level, would be better not only for a public health emergency but in terms of proximity too— so people will feel that government is closer to them.

If I can bring in Brexit for a moment, Brexit has happened and will continue to happen. I doubt people who voted for Brexit really wanted government to be centralised in Westminster or Whitehall in the way that it had been in their view in Brussels. I think they want it nearer to them and sub-national government, local government, offers that. We do need to press that case.

However grudgingly, the government has realised if it's going to do test-and-trace or test-and-track or track-and-trace – whichever of those we're now with – only councils can do that really. They're present everywhere, they have officials, they've got logistical capacity, and they're the only people who'll be able to do it if it's to work at all, so they will have a role in that. The government's coming around to that and has got [Tom Riordan](#), Chief Executive of Leeds City Council, helping them on that; that's a signal, I'm pretty sure.

LT - Barbara, you talked earlier about confidence. In terms of what's happening on the ground, with shops opening and lots of crowds, what can the council do to provide the perception of safety and safety itself, and what are you alert to over the next few months?

BB - What we have to do is be a connector, enable, bring things together. As a council, we simply don't have the resources needed to police shopping in central London. What we can do is things like bring [Veolia](#) with [NWECC](#) and one of our Business Improvement Districts, [HOLBA](#), together to provide social distancing ambassadors at stands with free sanitiser, wearing [PPE](#) on the stall and reminding people: "Wash your hands all the time, you can do it here; look, stay a little bit apart." We can do things like that and we can provide a lot of those. That is about us being an enabler and I think that's the point: we're on the ground. We're on the ground and we are fortunate in having a huge bank of residents who want to volunteer. I should think most councils have that; I don't suppose we're different to anybody else.

We are more fortunate than some in having large corporations who want to be seen to be helping at this time. So, another huge role we can and should play is to bring those together with some of our unemployed residents. Youth unemployment in non-food retail and the hospitality sector is just crippling and is going to affect central London boroughs terribly. What we are working with now is trying to reconnect some of our residents with those businesses. For example, the social distancing ambassadors have employed some of our unemployed residents and we need to be making those connections.

We can't police queues at Tube stations; I don't think that's our role. We can work very, very closely with TfL around times and we can message, we can ensure we don't add to problems by ensuring our own workforce is completely staggered and enabled to work from home. We can do all that; we can message, we can connect, we can enable. We're not really out there to patrol.

As Tony said, the one operational difference is our public health function. Our environmental health function has always been in place for food safety standards. We have always had teams of officers who police health standards in restaurants and shops. And when test-trace-track whatever we're up to is ready, they are absolutely the team that will deliver that. They're there, they're ready, they know what they're doing, they know their patch, and every other borough has a team that knows its patch, and they will be able to carry out that work locally very well.

LT - We work with people from UK councils, some of whom have been surprised themselves at how fast and efficient things have been; it's due to that emergency response role councils have, but it's lent itself to this longer crisis really well, and I'm seeing an appetite with these next-generation leaders for not going back to the old ways. Barbara, can councils be more efficient?

BB - I think the answer to that is absolutely a yes, there is NO going back. You know, we had 85% of Westminster officers working from home within a couple of days, totally efficiently, and that's phenomenal. That's after years of trying to move people into agile working, persuade people slowly, talk to people... Suddenly overnight, all of our back office and administration and call centres – an enormous amount of service is being delivered absolutely brilliantly successfully, through Teams from home, so why would we suddenly unpick that?

We have virtual committees that allow public to speak, to participate; virtual planning, licensing, cabinet, scrutiny and council committees have all taken place. Why would we ever go back to dragging people into rooms in the evening to sit in central London so they can hear and listen engage in local democracy? We should never do that.

So things around delivery in that way have changed enormously. Although it's been a most terrible thing to happen, [the crisis] has put a stop to just trundling along the same old tracks, and I don't think anything will ever go back. We will definitely be more efficient. 100%, there's no doubt about that in my mind.

LT - Tony, I was going to ask you about higher education & universities; would you go back to business as usual?

I doubt universities will go back to usual. This will apply to further education, colleges and to schools. We're having a lot of debate about schools in the press. I mean, the good news of course is the younger people are, the more they adapt, given the chance, to things online. It's in some ways more difficult for me to adapt than for a student to adapt.

Having said that, there are big challenges for universities, central London, Westminster and Camden are home to a massive concentration of higher education and research. And that is going to present problems: you can't [usually] do laboratory-based research other than in a laboratory, for a start, and separately, students want the experience of meeting people. Universities and colleges and schools indeed are partly about socialising people, and they enjoy that part of it, so there is a big struggle here for educational institutions including universities, which is how to provide a good enough or better education – because as Barbara's just said, doing things online can be better if it's done properly.

As I've said to my colleagues, having done a bit of this already now, we'll all be TV producers soon, because you're using a mixture of conventional lectures with PowerPoint and some video added and perhaps some interaction and all sorts of other things, which is good, but it takes a bit of effort to get it going.

So, there are challenges, but education will adapt probably as easily as any sector, it's just going to be a bit crunchy as the gears change. Going back to something Barbara said, what this means for city centres is profound, because city centres were the places, and still are to some degree, that people liked to gather. They might have preferred to have their council meetings or their university courses remotely, but the truth is, fewer people going into city centres, just staying in their home neighbourhoods, will have profound implications potentially for central business districts not only in London and other cities, but in New York and Paris as well. That is going to be the big challenge.

LT - There's a supposition that now that people are only perhaps working two days in an office, you can work from not just a Milton Keynes along the train line but much further out, and have a longer commute or not commute at all. If that happens, there are people saying "Great, this means we'll be levelling up the economy, people will spend in their local village or town and they'll also work in London," countered against fears of loss of the creative agglomeration value.

TT - This is a massive, interesting and, to me, still unanswerable question. If we flip around one of the remarks made earlier about working from home, we have discovered you can do amazing things from home, or at least from not being at work. Of course, looked at another way, that constitutes the biggest growth in office space in central London – and London more generally – ever, at a step. So, we've suddenly created massive amounts of additional office space. Now that means it's going to be cheaper, and that means more businesses that previously couldn't have afforded inner and central London rents will be able to afford them, and indeed they won't actually need to leave London to go to cheaper

locations, so I'm not absolutely sure it will end up levelling up, because there'll be lots of office space in London at a lower price than hitherto.

I think this is going to be a dynamic, complex process, but for the boroughs – this is my personal view, I'd be interested to hear what Barbara thinks about this – I think there'll be an immediate need to try to find temporary shops to fill the ones that are empty, and there are start-ups that will work to help on that, and then to encourage new businesses and start-ups to move into empty office space that they couldn't have got into before. Done well, where some people work at home 2-3 days a week, but other people fill all that space – actually, the central business district wouldn't be emptier, it would just have different and probably newer people, probably – almost certainly – younger people

LT - That's a very positive view of what might happen. Barbara, what's your thinking on it? Do you agree?

BB - I agree with a lot of that and I certainly really agree that it's as yet unanswered. I think we will see waves of experiment going forward. I think Tony is right. It's a wonderful way of thinking of it, that we've created more office space, I had not thought of it like that. I think that's absolutely brilliant. What we also know is that we have huge swathes of it standing empty, so it will be cheaper and, yes, we need to refill it and we do not want to turn it into residential, that is for sure.

We are talking in Westminster about start-ups, pop-ups and some of those small uses that led regeneration years ago when Hackney was not as Hackney is now; the artists move in and then the cafés move in and then a few more businesses move in and Hackney became trendy and then you get a bit of growth going.

This won't happen exactly like that, but I do think there is a range of pop-ups, experimental businesses we'll try and some will fail and some will not, and I think that is where we do have a lever to use in making sure all of our economic development encourages and allows that, and adapts space and use for people and encourages that freedom of use, from our own space through planning, permissions being allowed, scrapping uses of buildings – I think all of those things are on the cards structurally to allow what Tony's described.

I also think there's a huge workstream around clean air, sustainability, safety and public health. It's possibly taking it too far to say we should grass Oxford Street and graze sheep, but to be frank, foreign tourists are not coming back quickly, I doubt before, I don't know, 2022 unless there's a vaccine – why would they in the numbers we need?

At the same time, it's not surprising that out of 14 John Lewises opening, there's only one in greater London and it's in Kingston. People are staying local, we need to get them back centrally, so what we have to do with those areas is make them days out for UK families. That's what we have to make some of central London: family friendly, healthy, accessible, really, really sustainable, with really good clean air – all those issues come to the fore in trying to regenerate some of the centre of London.

LT - Some really interesting ideas there; I'm doing a webinar with RE Women on that intersectional space outside commercial premises, including there being more car-free areas during shopping hours. Barbara, what about parking revenue if we go more pedestrian; can you give it up?

BB – I think we'll have to, won't we? It's not like we haven't been seeing this happen for years. Councils plan, they look ahead, we have been planning for a reduction in parking income for some time. I've worked in councils for too long, but I have never seen a time when they weren't being asked to deliver more for less. It is essentially what local authorities are good at. And they're quite good at it because they're close to the need in their borough, whatever that need is, to the income in the borough; and they have very good relationships locally, and that's from small boroughs to very centrally based like Westminster that are in a more fortunate position. I worked in Thurrock before coming to Westminster; you couldn't get more different, but it survived on the same principles. It understood the need in the borough, it understood the strengths in the borough, it stood up and took its role in the middle of that, and used the levers and resources it had, even though they were so much smaller. It utilised a lot of community or business strength to amplify what it could do, and I think that's the sign of a good local authority wherever you are, so yes, I think we'll survive a reduction in parking income – just don't ask me to exactly describe what we'll get to!

LT - A related question for you, Tony: You've been studying levels of government for a long time. Are you seeing potential here for a possibly healthier relationship between different levels of government?

TT - At any time, in London in particular, the relationship between different spheres of government can be good or it can be scratchy, and it's not always about party politics. You get different kinds of Conservatives from borough to borough, different kinds of Labour from borough to borough or in City Hall. Having started off this conversation saying this is a challenge which undoubtedly all three parts of the London government system will have to work on together, there have been some awkward moments. The awkwardest so far was between the government, particularly the Transport Department and the Mayor over the [funding of TfL](#). That was, in my view, all political. There's no evidence at all that TfL is less well run than the national railway, indeed personally I would say the opposite is likely to be the case. TfL, for all its faults is a remarkable institution. I've had my arguments with it over the years, but it's a remarkable place and it's got a [new commissioner](#) coming from New York, and from TfL in the past.

In the end, the government is going to need both the Mayor and the boroughs for a whole range of things, but the boroughs to kickstart capital projects and all the confidence-building we've just been discussing. The boroughs I think will see this as an opportunity to get some freedoms from government and from the Mayor, and they'll lobby for that, they always do.

They Mayor needs to protect the financing of particularly TfL. The scale of this cannot be [over]stated: both TfL's tube and bus services and the commuter rail system into London are losing cash between them at the rate of nearly a billion pounds a month, certainly £800-900m minimum. These are huge sums of money, and are indicative of people not travelling, and all the issues we've just talked about in relation to central London.

[On a related note], the theatre and cultural sector is in terrible trouble unless people can be tempted back and made confident again. So, Oxford Street will still be there, Tottenham Court Road will still be there, but there is a real threat to theatres, orchestras, and a whole range of cultural institutions which I think is currently understated, and again it won't be true only in London, it'll be true in other big cities besides and across the country. It's a massive export earner, the theatre industry, invisibly but truly so.

I think we are going to have to get government broadly pointed in the same direction to overcome these political hurdles, because in the end it's what the Treasury needs as well. It needs the economy to function as well as it did in January 2020, perhaps better. There's an opportunity to do better, but that does require all three parts of London government to get it right.

LT – Could you both expand on the culture-sector crisis? And Barbara, what can Westminster do to support the sector?

TT - Although we've always had complaints that the arts and the theatre in particular are London-centric – because they are – there's a massive agglomeration of theatres in the West End. It's one of the biggest, if not the biggest in the world, and then there's the off-West-End stuff in all the outer boroughs as well, and they're all working together. A lot of the money for that comes from overseas tourists; about a third of the West End comes from overseas tourist and a third from outside London. Against that backdrop, the West End in turn is a significant proportion of all UK theatre takings, so if it fails, one of Britain's greatest exports – and a cultural aspect, a part of us – risks being seriously damaged. And I don't think this an exaggeration.

BB - Tony's just brought up everything that makes me the saddest about this actually. Whilst I can be optimistic about a lot of things, the theatre and live music are something London is hugely famous for. I live in Islington, so it's not the West End, but it's packed full of pub theatre and live music venues, and it's one of the things that make Islington wonderful.

I read something the other day that really got to me about this, about returning to museums. Obviously they're slightly easier to open in many ways than a theatre or a live music venue because they're very controllable, they can ticket, time entrances, direct people around the building in a certain way, and people don't all have pints in their hands or jump up and down with glasses of white wine, so it's easier. But the line in this article said, "Forget ever again popping into a museum because you walk past and

you have a free hour; those days are gone.” Even though they’ll remain free, you’ll always have to have a ticket because entrance will always be timed, you will always have to have booked, and I thought that’s so sad.

BB – To your question, what can we do in Westminster? We can widen pavements, we can make sure people can queue safely, but we can’t redesign West End theatres, we don’t have that sort of funding and that’s going to be a huge centrally funded programme if it happens.

There are incredible ventures going on, for example there’s a huge thing for artists called [\[artist support pledge\]](#) with a range of artists from household names downward who put their work online for £200, that’s it. If anyone’s made £1,000, they pledge to buy another artist’s work, so they keep themselves going. That was started by [Matthew Burrows] on 16th March, and that idea is international now, so there are some fantastic things that have happened, but I don’t know what the answer is for theatre, and I think it’s extremely difficult and very sad that it will be damaged so much.

LT – Finally, organisations like Power to Change are calling for new approaches to town centres, with different funding models, more local, more community focused. Is that feasible, and what would it take?

TT - There’s no question that shopping centres and local shops outside central London, at least food shops, will have done relatively well out of the lockdown. I certainly have visited intriguing local shops I didn’t normally visit and bought intriguing fruits and pulses and other things and very nice they have been – an opportunity to do some therapeutic cooking which is good – but in the end, there is a tension here in public policy between central London as a massive generator of jobs for people who live in outer London and beyond into the home counties. It’s possible if all or part of that economic activity spreads out, it would temporarily be better for centres in outer London, but it’s hard to think it would be as productive as the spectacularly successful area that central London has been, and this applies to other big cities as well.

There are opportunities in this for the outer boroughs in all sorts of cities to improve their high streets, but having said that, [the Covid crisis] is speeding up an already extant retail change, which I doubt will do outer centres much more good than central London, and the great thing about central London – and Barbara hinted at this – is that there are some big, long-term landlords, the great estates and others, which is a profound advantage because they’re always clever at adapting, and I think many of them will adapt thinking about this as a 200-year thing rather than a 20-month thing. Central London has survived plagues, cholera epidemics, the Blitz... It will survive this; the only question is how long before it gets back to what it was? But are there advantages potentially for outer centres? Yes of course there are

BB - We have already relaxed Westminster’s new city plan to allow restaurants on the ground floor in shops in Oxford Street, we’ll allow licensed premises, we’ll allow people to show movies – things that would have been unheard of five years ago. Where central London was “This is retail and woe betide anyone who comes to us with a planning application to move it an inch from that!”, that’s all been swept away and I think that will just grow, it will snowball; those buildings will be used more imaginatively.

But I am completely foursquare with Tony: while I think there is some real opportunity for some changes in areas, if the centre of London doesn’t come back and doesn’t work, more than the centre of London suffers. The amount of jobs and the percentage of the economy it provides cannot be ignored. We need that back, and the question is how long it will take and what it will look like, because it won’t just be office space and retail. It’ll be a little bit varied, but it will be I think major players in there, it won’t all be collectives of artists.

LT – As Tony knows, I’ve championed a tourist tax for London or nationally: one argument now is “Leave it alone, because we’re already hurting and no one will come” and the other is, “We’re going to be more local now, more UK and London-based; perhaps this is the time to put a pound on a hotel room.” First, Barbara, what do you think about that?

BB - I wonder if I’m stepping into a political realm... Personally, at least, I think it’s the time to do it.

TT - It’s a zero point for the hotel and lots of the leisure industry. They would not be over-pleased, they would say it’s another burden on their attempt at recovery. But the truth is there will be a very rapid

recovery – maybe not to the same level for some time for tourism and travel, but it will recover and grow, and people would perhaps notice it less if it were introduced as the whole thing came back.

But in a sense, whether that's done now or in the future, I think we have to keep in mind the need for London as place and other cities in England as places to have greater autonomy in order to make their own decisions, and that real need hasn't gone away.

LT – Any final thoughts?

TT - This is a big moment for cities. Overseas cities like London, and in the UK, Manchester, Birmingham, Leeds, Edinburgh and Glasgow as examples: their central areas have all been improving in recent years, and there has been a return to cities, and my slight fear is some of the changes that have got going during the crisis, if they were not constrained by government, by policy, you just get lots of sprawl.

That's the real risk in all of this, that people might move further out from cities, but they won't go a long, long way, they'll just go in the areas around them, so they can still travel back every now and again. That just looks like sprawl, and none of us really thought sprawl was a good idea. So we have to use the power of government to some degree to direct what happens, not just sit around hoping and looking and then responding to what happens. In a sense, government's got powers and it needs to use them.

From the "Green Room":

Tony Travers credits Arup's Alex Jan for the 'expanded office space' idea, which Barbara calls "such a powerful idea" and I would guarantee will be appearing in property and inward investment promotions for months at least.

Tony also suggested another way of levelling up and populating spaces, by offering central London shop spaces to businesses [perhaps social enterprises?] from across the UK, citing a Welsh-owned business whose London shop is now its only one. Other cities could do this too...