

Plymouth White Papers

Issue 3: Recovery
April 2021

An initiative by Luke Pollard MP



DESIGNED TO CHALLENGE, PROVOKE AND INSPIRE.

The Plymouth White Paper are an initiative by Luke Pollard MP. The hope is that each set of white papers will contribute to the energy, direction and passion around Plymouth, our economy and campaigning.

These white paper submissions have been written by people across Plymouth. They have been free to voice their own opinions and these are their own words. The white papers are designed to be political and challenge established thinking, but they're not designed to be party political.



Cover image: Ian Capper

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Luke Pollard - MP for Plymouth Sutton and Devonport

"There can be no return to business as usual. The consequences of Brexit, the pressing climate and ecological emergency and the pandemic means the old way of doing things is simply not an option for us."

Of course, we want to return to seeing friends and family, to cheering Argyle on at Home Park, to meals out and holidays abroad, but the fundamentals of our economy have changed. The sooner we understand those changes and adapt to them the greater our chance of riding out the economic storm will be.

During the pandemic you may have heard the phrase we are not all in the same boat, but we are all in the same storm, and that was true. As restrictions slowly and cautiously lift attention is turning to how we recover from the pandemic and what looks like being the deepest recession in hundreds of years. Ten years of austerity has hollowed out many of our communities and underfunding of services and our economy in the region meant we were not as strong as many of us would have liked going into the pandemic. What happens next matters. How we respond matters.

This third edition of the Plymouth White Papers looks at the recovery from a number of different angles, all with a strong focus on our city and the amazing work that happens here every day. We have grown accustomed to challenging Ministers for our fair share of funding, but we must not overlook the inspirational people, incredible talent and extraordinary resolve of our city.

From celebrating our arts and cultural sectors, to ensuring young people have a strong voice in the recovery, these white papers look at the challenges facing different groups across Plymouth and propose solutions. This is not a party political publication: rather, it is an attempt by me to use the platform and privilege I have as a Member of Parliament to amplify the voices of people who are not always heard. By elevating ideas and experiences to new audiences I hope that people will learn, be challenged and think about how recovery looks different for different communities within Plymouth. I hope these papers will also prompt us to look at our own work and say in whose name are we arguing for recovery? How can recovery best be shared by more people? Who are the ones losing out in the recovery?

Of course, before we get to recovery we must wade through the recession. I am under no illusions about how deep and cruel this coming recession will be. All those in public life from city councillors to Members of Parliament have a role in advocating for better decisions and bigger impacts.

As these white papers are put together, I am reminded about the experiences of Plymouth's war time generation. I chair the *Plymouth Blitz 80* commemorations work and have seen the stories of destruction and of loss that the bombing of Plymouth 80 years ago produced- but I also saw the resolve and the determination that we remember in the *Resurgam* spirit. The City Council is using that same spirit for its *Resurgam* recovery work. The experiences are obviously not the same, but the spirit of recovery and the hope that better days will come after the horrors of war and the cruelties of the pandemic remains consistent.

"Plymouth is an incredible place to live, visit, work and play. Our challenge is to ensure that as we emerge from the pandemic, from austerity and from the recession we are a better, fairer and greener city. It can be done. And it must be done."

Luke Pollard
Labour and Co-operative MP for Plymouth Sutton and Devonport
April 2021

Saving the high street

What does the future hold for our high streets? Are they in irreversible decline, with boarded up shops and deserted streets an inevitable consequence of changing customer behaviour and the COVID pandemic? Or, can our high streets re-invent themselves as thriving centres of retail, commerce, leisure and culture?

STEVE HUGHES, chief executive of the Plymouth City Centre Company, says that while there are big challenges ahead there are reasons for optimism, especially for Plymouth.



When Debenhams finally collapsed into administration last December, it came as little surprise. Outdated and outmanoeuvred by more nimble competitors, it had been on life support for years and in the end no-one jumped in to save its high street stores. Combined with the collapse of Arcadia, parent company of Topshop, Burtons and Miss Selfridge, it seemed to many as if the screaming “Death of the High Street” headlines were about to become an alarming reality.

How would our town and city centres recover with such big holes appearing in the high street, adding to already high levels of boarded up shops? A report by accountants PWC did little to calm the nerves, revealing that in 2020 more than 17,500 UK chain stores and other venues had closed. With 7,600 openings, this equated to a net loss of almost 10,000 stores.

In Plymouth city centre, retail vacancy rates have risen from 15 per cent in February 2020 to more than 20 per cent in March 2021 with more than 100 units now permanently closed. Several hundred of the city centre’s 13,000 retail and leisure employees have lost their jobs. Against this backdrop, it would be easy to think the high street in general and Plymouth City Centre in particular will never be the same again.

And that’s true. We will never again fill all those empty shops with similar retail offers. Nor should we. But that doesn’t mean the death of the high street. It means we have to adapt. COVID-19 has simply accelerated the pace of that change.

"What successful high streets need now is a new approach. Strong high streets need to be places people want to go to, not just for shopping, but for everything that they have been missing during these toughest of times."

What successful high streets need now is a new approach. Strong high streets need to be places people want to go to, not just for shopping, but for everything that they have been missing during these toughest of times. They will want to go to places where they can meet friends, family and colleagues in pleasant surroundings. Somewhere, they can sit outside, eat and drink, and take in some street theatre or public entertainment.

The spaces between the buildings should be every bit as important as the spaces inside. Clean, green, clutter free, contemporary, well-lit, safe and a pleasure to walk or cycle through. Successful high streets will have a year-round events programme, a strong evening economy and variety of things to do and see. Culture and public art will become increasingly important. And so will the customer experience. If it’s not good enough, the customer will simply go elsewhere.

In many ways, thanks to a forward thinking city council and its strong ethos of partnership working, Plymouth has been ahead of the game and much of this is happening or on the way. We have a new cultural strategy and visitor plan. We recognised years ago that the city centre retail footprint was too large and that we needed a much more vibrant and diverse offer, encompassing leisure, commerce and culture, giving people more reasons to visit.

That work started to bear fruit last year with the opening of The Barcode, a £53 million new leisure and restaurant complex, including CineWorld multiplex cinema and giant IMAX screen. This was quickly followed by the opening of The Box, Plymouth's new £50 million museum and art gallery – the biggest cultural attraction to open in the UK in 2020. The benefit of both those schemes to the city centre economy will be huge but has been delayed by the COVID lockdowns.

However, with the easing of COVID restrictions, and a huge city centre renaissance programme underway, we are doing the right things in Plymouth to create a city centre that we can be proud of and will, once again, be a focal point for residents and a popular destination for new visitors. With the conversion of the Civic Centre into a conference centre and apartments now confirmed, along with huge improvements at the railway station, new health hub for Colin Campbell Court and major improvement works to its streets and public spaces, Plymouth has much to look forward to.

Investors are interested in Plymouth's plan for the future as shown by the recent opening of Hugo Boss in Drake Circus and the soon-to-be open craft ale bar BrewDog at The Barcode. Add to this, the move by B & M and two restaurants into the former BHS building, the planned Premier Inn at Derrys Cross and the new 95-bed Hotel Oyo above the former Woolworths store and there is strong evidence that there is huge potential for our city centre to emerge from this crisis in good spirits.

"Plymouth, Britain's 'Ocean City', will rise again and our high street - the city centre – will be at the forefront of that recovery."

There is another success story emerging too in the West End of the city – the rise of the independents. With Plymouth Market at its heart and own sense of identity, the West End is forging a growing reputation as an independent quarter and destination in its own right, attracting new entrepreneurs with fresh ideas. Our new family friendly public space in Frankfort Gate has also been winning admirers and will attract more visitors as we see a return to outdoor events. The planned health hub will create jobs, drive footfall, and bring new services to the city centre.

I mentioned earlier the strength of Plymouth's partnership working. Nowhere is that more evident than in the city's action plan for recovery. Spearheaded by Plymouth City Council, RESURGAM (Latin for 'I will Rise Again') is the city's answer to the unprecedented challenges we now face.

Set up to save businesses, protect jobs and provide a road map out of lockdown it is a collaborative delivery plan across multiple sectors including health, defence, marine and retail. For retail and hospitality there are many challenges ahead, not least the cost of bricks and mortar stores in competition with online players operating with much lower overheads.

Landlords will have to be more realistic on rents and we will continue to call on the government for a reform of the business rates system which is crippling the retail and hospitality sector and stifling investment.

Brave decisions will be needed on the future of some major buildings such as Debenhams, House of Fraser, and development sites such as Mayflower House.

But Plymouth, Britain's 'Ocean City', will rise again and our high street - the city centre – will be at the forefront of that recovery.

Steve Hughes is chief executive of the Plymouth City Centre Company, a not-for-profit Business Improvement District, responsible for looking after the interests of more than 500 businesses. His main role is working with partner organisations to regenerate the city centre, nurture a thriving business environment and attract investment. Prior to getting involved in city centre management, he enjoyed a career in the print media industry in a variety of roles, including journalist, editor and managing director.

COVID recovery in the tourism and visitor economy

AMANDA LUMLEY from Destination Plymouth explains what effect COVID-19 has had on the city's tourism industry - and how it can look to recover.



2020 was supposed to be an amazing year here in Plymouth. Cautious estimates of up to 500,000 extra visitors over the year had been predicted on the back of the Mayflower 400 commemorations. Six years of hard work and pre-planning looked as if it was truly going to pay off, and then COVID-19 struck...

The tourism, hospitality and retail sector, alongside life as we knew it, became locked down overnight. We started the new normal of Zoom, Teams and Google meetings online and everything changed. It has been a tough 12 months in tourism, and nobody can deny that.

It is estimated that tourism businesses in the sector in Plymouth have lost 70% of their annual visitor spend, around £230 million over the past year. Normally Plymouth receives around 5.2 million visitors annually, spending over £334 million. Worse than that, many tourism businesses take 50% of their business in the months of June, July and August and given many of them were operating at below 40% capacity last year they have not made any profit since summer 2019. Plymouth has over 1,500 businesses in the visitor, hospitality and retail sector and this has had a huge impact on them all.

"In the very early days of the pandemic, it became clear that what was needed was an immediate plan to ensure that we didn't lose ten years of growth and development in the sector..."

In the very early days of the pandemic, it became clear that what was needed was an immediate plan to ensure that we didn't lose ten years of growth and development in the sector and some of the many attractions, restaurants, bars, galleries, theatres and on-water activities that we all know and love.

In early May, a plan was produced outlining three key stages to recovery - React, Recover, Return. Through the 'React' phase, the focus of activity has been to try to support businesses on the ground to ensure we retain as many of them as possible through to re-opening. Working closely with Plymouth City Council and our colleagues in the City Centre Company and Waterfront Partnership we have tried to ensure that as many businesses as possible have had the grants which they are eligible for.

Communication has been a key feature - pivoting away from the usual role of promoting the city to visitors and actively encouraging people to stay at home along with messaging about guidance on lock down, before repositioning in the summer to reassuring visitors that the businesses still open were COVID safe. Through the past 12 months we have rollercoasted between telling people to stay at home and #comebacklater, to #EatOutToHelpOut and #Escape - it has been a test responding to the rapidly changing environment.

Alongside this, the 'React' phase has also included actively lobbying the government for reductions in VAT and business rates, as well as gathering data and intelligence on what was actually happening on the ground. Bi-weekly COVID tracker surveys, monthly COVID data surveys and two major regional business data surveys provided us with the information we needed to successfully demonstrate to the government that more needed to happen to stop our businesses failing.

As we thought we were going into the 'Recovery' phase in the summer of 2020, businesses started to become more optimistic and visitors started to travel again. 'Eat out to help out' saw lots of people re-engaging with our local businesses over August and businesses became more confident even though many of them were operating at 50% less capacity due to social distancing. Thank goodness, many of them were able to make at least some income before heading into a third lockdown over the winter. The much talked about 'three winters' scenario became a reality and the sector closed down again.

"...there are gentle signs of recovery on the horizon."

So far, we have not quite made it into the 'Recover' phase of the plan. However, there are gentle signs of recovery on the horizon. During the past 12 months the team continued our work in the international and cruise markets. Communicating with travel agents, tour operators and media online has become the new way of working. The online webinar, zoom meetings and rapidly conceived 'virtual familiarisation visit' has evolved at pace from simple presentations to full-blown production pieces. The 'virtual conference' has meant an audience reach we could only have dreamed of a year ago. The feedback has been impressive, with lots of interest in Plymouth. Everyone still wants to come: it is a matter of when they can come, not why anymore. In particular the American market still really want to travel. Four years of developing that market has not been in vain, it has provided firm foundations on which we can now bounce back, and the same is true of the cruise sector.

So as we head into the first stages of re-opening and recovery we have much to be thankful for. We still have many of our businesses, who are battered and bruised but have demonstrated a resilience and determination to keep going.

The South West was ranked in Visit England's COVID tracker surveys as the number one destination for UK visitors this summer and forward accommodation bookings are looking very strong. The visitors who normally go overseas and party in the sun have found new 'cool' places to hang out and just maybe, they will want to keep coming back to them.

Our waterfront has attracted kayakers, paddle boarders and swimmers in numbers like never before, highlighting the broad appeal of 'Britain's Ocean City' and our waterfront assets. Our digital appeal has reached new audiences online whom we can entice to visit in person when the time comes. All we need now is to make sure we are ready for them and give them a great time so they want to keep coming back.

Amanda Lumley has been Executive Director of Destination Plymouth since 2013, and is President of the Tourism Management Institute.

How the pandemic has affected students in Plymouth, and how we can recover

HARRIET MOORE is a recent graduate from Plymouth College of Art. She offers an insight into how the pandemic has affected Plymouth's student population.

It goes without saying that this has been a difficult year for us all, with individual struggles either created or amplified by the pandemic. Students across the UK have struggled with mental, financial and academic hardships whilst navigating the strange world of online learning. Students at Plymouth College of Art, and other art and practice-based students, have had to find their feet with limited access to resources and facilities. Whilst things are now looking brighter and students on many practical courses are returning to campuses, other students remain online for what is most likely the rest of the academic year. But how can students, and Plymouth, recover?



For many students, including those at Plymouth College of Art, the academic year began in person on COVID-secure campuses. Those who were new had to not only navigate university life for the first time, many after a prolonged absence from their schools and colleges, they also had a number of one-way systems and new regulations to learn about. Not all students were as lucky. Some universities decided that it wasn't safe enough for them to study in the campus that they'd toured the previous year, while some couldn't attend for health reasons. These students didn't get to enjoy bonding with their new housemates, coursemates and getting to know their new cities, they joined in through video calls from their childhood bedrooms instead, as if nothing had changed at all.

"I have so much admiration for the students at Plymouth College of Art, for their resilience and adaptability..."

Isolation is something that resonates with us all this year. It has been a huge challenge for students in Plymouth and across the country. Student life is ordinarily a social experience, whether you want to go out drinking every night or prefer to stay in watching films. Meeting new people with different ideas and perspectives helps to expand our minds and challenge our beliefs; this is a huge part of university life, which many students are missing out on at the moment. As a student you learn from your peers, whether it's about whatever it is you're studying or something entirely unrelated. This learning happens in the hallways, in breaks or at lunchtime, at the start or end of a lecture, and it can easily be lost in video calls where there is no time to interact with your cohort unless within the taught sessions and breakout rooms.

Despite this, the students at Plymouth College of Art haven't given up trying to reach their community. They have created spaces for engagement with their cohorts and peers from across the institution. It's certainly not over yet, but I think that we've come a long way from discussions I had last year with students who were feeling isolated and disconnected from their peers. This collective experience has given students something to bond over. It has brought many students closer together and strengthened their connections both within and outside their cohorts. Through the creation of everything from Facebook support groups to online socials with crazy themes, students have created ways to keep their community alive. We should all take a leaf from their book.

In my opinion, community is the most important way for us to recover from the pandemic and for many, myself included, it has made us all realise just how important community is. I think the pandemic has brought the community of staff and students at Plymouth College of Art closer together and I think it has improved our connections to other institutions in the city. Myself and other Student Union staff have been working together to share best practice and ideas to support students across the city and beyond, which has been absolutely key to creating positive change both for local students and within the wider HE sector.

I graduated in the midst of the first lockdown, which brought wide-ranging changes to the final year of my degree, so I can empathise with the position that university students find themselves in this year. However, unless you experience it yourself, I'm not sure that any of us truly know what it must be like to work through three consecutive national lockdowns to date. I have so much admiration for the students at Plymouth College of Art, for their resilience and adaptability, as I scroll through my Instagram looking at pictures of their make-shift home studio spaces. I believe that's one of the reasons that graduates from creative degree qualifications are so valued by employers - because when you have a creative mindset, you'll always find a way to adapt, to make do with what you have and find ways to make your ideas work.

One night during the autumn term, I went on a walk around the city centre after work. I was frustrated and feeling a little helpless. Although I knew that my work was making positive changes for students and improving the community at Plymouth College of Art, I wanted to find ways to help people in the wider Plymouth community too. Walking past an area that had been heavily graffitied, I thought about the ways that art can brighten up these forgotten spaces. Then I discovered Plymouth Artists Together, a community group created by Mike Vosper for that exact purpose. From there, I went on to find a wealth of groups, charities and businesses helping to improve our city through restoration and artwork.

These groups not only help to brighten up the spaces we live in, but provide art students and artists in general with amazing opportunities to showcase their work to the local community. They give art students and local artists a chance to interact with and inspire each other. It is no secret that there can sometimes seem to be a divide between students who come to Plymouth to study and people who grew up here, but these groups dissolve those labels, bring people together for their love of art, and allow collaboration and networking that might not happen otherwise.

Public art has been a controversial topic in Plymouth lately, with some people arguing that money spent on cultural hubs like The Box, or pieces of public artwork like Sir Antony Gormley's Look II Statue on West Hoe Pier, are a waste of money. Artwork is beneficial for your mental health and can also challenge you in unexpected ways. Creativity allows for innovation and, in my opinion, it is crucial that we invest in culture and the arts. I believe that Plymouth has the potential of being known nationally as a vital place-to-be for culture and the arts.

"Artwork is beneficial for your mental health and can also challenge you in unexpected ways. Creativity allows for innovation and, in my opinion, it is crucial that we invest in culture and the arts."

The benefits of investment in these areas could create amazing opportunities for local artists, for national and international art and design students coming to Plymouth, and for Plymouth College of Art itself. Most importantly, investing in arts and culture could attract people from all over the world, helping the city recover from the effects of the pandemic.

Harriet Moore is a 2020 BA (Hons) Photography graduate from Plymouth College of Art, and is the current Student Union President and Governor at the institution. She has been a part of the Student Union team for nearly 4 years, having just been re-elected Student Union President for her second term to continue representing the student body. She advocates for more mental health support, the end of period poverty, wider student representation, equal opportunity for all and more; her overall goal is creating positive change at Plymouth College of Art and within the local community.

"Best foot forward..."

Taking a walk out in the open and reconnecting with nature has helped so many people in Plymouth get through the past year. On behalf of Environment Plymouth, ANTHONY MILLER describes a hike through the Efford Marsh nature reserve.

"Hi, Kev do you want a walk in the morning, I can give you a guided tour round the Efford Marsh nature reserve and show you a little of the work done before lockdown."

"OK Dad, see you around 10."



I am fortunate to have a local nature reserve nestled right up to my back fence often watching the birds come to my feeders - jays, woodpeckers, songbirds, buzzards soaring in the sun and the squirrels merrily destroying squirrel-proof feeders. I had been helping out as a volunteer with the friends of Efford Marsh before the lockdowns and looking ahead to better days back with the group maintaining the reserve.

Preparations early Saturday morning included packing my survival kit of tea bags, coffee, two enamel cups, hobnobs, thermos, first aid kit, mask, sanitizer, angina spray, torch and emergency whistle. Just as well my son was coming over to carry the rucksack.

Kev turned up right on time. "Hi Dad, you need to be really careful out there with the ice on the pavements, we can't have you slipping up back to the Stone Age again." Hefting the pack onto his back our trek began. Gingerly I trod along the pavement, white with a hoar frosting like sleet set for the day lying in the full shadow from the houses.

Crossing onto the field near the top bus stop it became a trip down memory lane for my son, over 30 years ago this was the go-to field for football games, the scaffold pole five aside goals had long gone, removed because of too many concussions when heading the crossbar instead of the ball probably.

The grass crunched crisply underfoot, our boots gaining white speckled toe caps as we pressed on towards the cinder path entering the woods, a slight detour was deemed appropriate as our boots sank in the boggy mire fed by the spring from Military road. I've only lived here for 38 years so should have remembered what happens after heavy rain. Anyway I digress, so back to the expedition, we took our bearings at the information board near the entrance, it's well worn and weather beaten now, a few marks of deliberate damage. It's been there so long that I can read "YOU WERE HERE" against the arrow pointing out our position in the nature reserve. Moving forward we pass the boundary marker engraved with a large 'W.D' and broad arrow that acknowledges the history of the area with Military Road running along the top edge of the park to Efford fort. Descending now the frost has gone from amongst the trees, it's still very cold. I'm almost tripping on the frozen mud ridges of tyre tread impressions churned up by the mountain bikers, past ash, hornbeam, holly, beech and mighty oak. Except for the holly, all standing skeletal on the skyline devoid of leaf. There is a stark beauty to it, you see far more features in the landscape on a winter's day with the sleeping woodland plants on their starting blocks ready to burst forth and flower before the canopy returns in late spring.

Veering left at the iron bridge we cross a meadow pockmarked with mole mounds and rabbit scrapes sprinkled with their droppings like a spilt bags of currants, our route is bracken-free for the moment, with a 30 degree slope to traverse a well-worn path cutting a shallow furrow through the ground. The way marker now points to the gorge as we climb the steps cut into the escarpment, they are made with wooden plank risers to hold the earth back but every step now has an eroded bowl in front of each riser, so stepping up with my short legs had my muscles aching and heart pounding. "Are you alright dad?" I'm asked as my son looks back, I reply "There's a bench at the top, we'll stop there for a drink and rest."

Now I have my breath back we survey the vista, supping drinks then looking up to our house, now across to the Ski Slope and Forder Valley. "It's amazing dad," my son remarks, "how the trees have all grown away since I played here, we never came this far down." I thought, "Wait til you see the gorge".

Refreshed, we move on again along a narrow path winding its way along the steep slope rising from the road and the Beefeater Restaurant, not the easiest to negotiate with fallen trees to step over and under. Where the trees fall their roots uncover traces of the bank and ditch protecting the approach to Efford Fort, one of the Palmerston Forts ringing Plymouth. Turning sharp right around the high bank our path opens out into the hidden gem of the nature reserve, it's described as 'the gorge' on the information boards but I call it Plymouth's Grand Canyon.



On the right side stands the high bank but the left ("Wow!!," my son's words not mine) has a sheer rock face reaching up 20 metres plus topped by trees, some precariously hanging on over the edge. I wonder if this was a quarry for the forts. It really is amazing with all the contorted rock strata to puzzle budding geologists and yet more fallen trees. Halfway we turn about to look back down the gorge and across the embankment to Saltram. "Why don't more people come this way?" my son asked. "Well during lockdown it's just as well no one's around" I replied. The day moved on as we also moved away from the gorge and on down to the marsh via a dog-legged, switchback path.

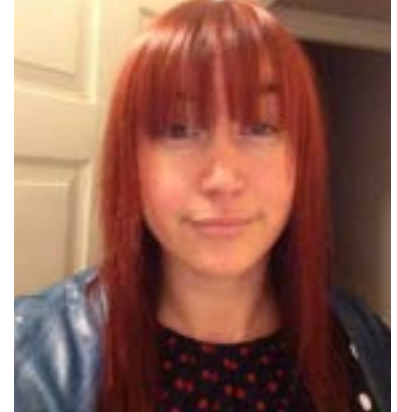
A large splash breaks the silence as a labrador launches into the water like a depth charge, followed by a couple of manic spaniels, we are back down in dog walker territory, welly booted doggy mums and dads standing on the small weir ready for their shakedown showers. I just hope they are well behaved when the ducks start nesting.

As the day drew to a close it is a gentle stroll along the flat disabled access path siding the marsh, finally coming out at the bottom of Deer Park Drive. It's a steep hill all the way to my close but I'm needing to get home for a pee, so it's best foot forward and having a hot cuppa with a bacon buttie followed by a hot radox bath. Bliss!

Anthony Miller, usually called Tony, is a 69 year old wildlife enthusiast living on the Deer Park estate within the Efford area.

Catching up: the recovery of young people's education after COVID

NINA ELLIOTT is a teacher in a Plymouth secondary school. She takes a look at the impact lockdown has had on our young people, and how 'bold asks' can help schools bounce back.



It is often said that school days are the best days of our lives - the freedoms, the learning, the friendships, the laughs, the hopes, the opportunities, and endless possibilities. However, school days over the last year have been challenging for all involved. The pandemic has stripped away many of these learning and social experiences at what is such a formative time for young people.

The headlines have screamed that we will have a lost generation, suffering from the combined effects of lost learning, mental health crises, safeguarding concerns and significantly reduced future earnings and all that entails.

There is no denying that many young people have suffered - and will continue to suffer greatly - from the after effects of the Coronavirus pandemic, but what we need to do now is give them back hope, give them back opportunities, teach them with passion, prioritise their wellbeing and stop the catastrophising.

As a teacher in a large secondary school in Plymouth, I have seen first-hand the impact that the Coronavirus pandemic has had on our whole school community.

About turn: The raft of changes have been relentless. In March 2020, schools were told to close indefinitely and - with just two days' notice - to move teaching and learning online. Except, of course, they weren't really closed as they remained open to vulnerable children and those of key workers, plus they were providing and distributing free school meals and vouchers to disadvantaged students and all the while negotiating ever-changing guidance about how to award grades as exams were cancelled, twice.

In the Summer Term there were face-to face sessions with Year 10 and Year 12 students, Summer Schools and rewriting policies and risk assessments and re-purposing school sites for reopening in September 2020. The Autumn Term saw schools become track and trace specialists as bubbles burst and children were sent home to self-isolate, and teachers developed new ways to blend in-class and online learning.

The Christmas holidays were spent preparing to convert school sites to mass testing centres, then another last-minute switch as schools were closed again and we reverted to online learning - though this time with a requirement for there to be a minimum of five hours a day of recorded or live lessons. Most recently, we have returned to teaching in the classroom though now with masks worn at all times, twice weekly testing and with exams cancelled, again.

Though sometimes it is in the details that we see these effects in sharp relief. The anxious new Year 7 student trying to negotiate the jump to 'big school' without any of the usual transition activities, the family with students in three different year groups trying to juggle online learning with just one device and limited mobile data, the colleague unable to come in to work due to being extremely clinically vulnerable, the student whose mental health support had just begun in early 2020 then ended too suddenly, the Y11 student who had worked two part time jobs so they could attend the Prom with 'that dress' and those bling shoes, the school leaver whose apprenticeship was withdrawn as the company faces the economic reality of successive lockdowns, the student whose home situation had fallen apart as their parents struggled with the effects of losing their job.

But Plymouth schools have stepped up, found solutions, worked around the clock - and, yes, through the holidays - to make sure our students have the best possible support academically and pastorally whilst remaining COVID safe and secure.

We have seen transition activities move online with virtual tours now streaming from most Plymouth school websites, local Plymouth businesses have generously helped to fill the digital divide providing laptops and school supplies, school minibuses have been converted into mobile stationery hubs delivering equipment free of charge around the neighbourhood, shielding colleagues have continued to teach their lessons via Zoom, or Teams or GoogleMeet so students haven't missed out on specialist instruction, pastoral teams have continued to call students at home and develop links with support agencies and sixth forms and colleges have ensured students were offered a place on a programme of study with flexible entry criteria.

*True recovery = **bold asks**.*

So, to truly recover we need to acknowledge the negative and the positive impact of the past year and be bold about asking for what we need to support all those in our school communities. But first of all, we also need to acknowledge the context of the recovery in Plymouth schools.

Even before the pandemic hit, Plymouth schools were facing considerable challenges. In fact, local schools had been targeted for a programme of support under the Plymouth Challenge initiative aimed at tackling relative underperformance across our city. Although funding for Plymouth Challenge was minimal, many schools were beginning to see real improvements in students' academic performance, this was in part achieved through greater collaboration and cooperation between schools, subject specialism hubs and training of school staff to develop leadership capacity. Then the pandemic hit, and exams were cancelled and partnerships were put on the back burner as schools responded to the ever evolving urgent demand of the pandemic.

To allow schools to truly recover we need to rethink how we judge school performance and not base it solely on high stakes accountability measures and one-off judgments. Of course, qualifications are important, they give our students the best route to increase social mobility, but the pandemic has also shown us that students need to be happy and healthy and resilient and flexible and kind and positive and many other things besides. There also needs to be greater parity between academic and vocational qualifications so all our students' achievements are valued. So, Bold Ask Number One - A renewed and properly funded Plymouth Challenge.

*So, **Bold Ask Number One** - A renewed and properly funded Plymouth Challenge.*

Funding cuts to Plymouth schools and recent changes to the eligibility requirements of pupil premium funding mean there are significant financial challenges too. Historically, Plymouth has one of the lowest education spends per head in the United Kingdom and whilst there have been increases promised in the 2020-2021 funding there have also been significant and pressing changes in schools' needs. To truly build our schools back better, we need significant investment in our school infrastructure and an acknowledgement that schools will know best how to spend money allocated for the 'catch up' provision. The £1bn already allocated for the National Tutoring Programme is welcome, but this needs to be used in the most effective way possible, grounded in the evidence and directly linked to the needs of Plymouth's young people.

***Bold Ask Number Two** - Fair Funding of Plymouth Schools.*

The mental health of young people has been tested to the extreme over the course of this pandemic. Most young people thrive on their social interactions with their peers and being told to stay inside while a deadly pandemic is sweeping the nation and with much uncertainty around exams and their futures has taken its toll. The vast majority have coped; indeed, some have even flourished without the anxieties of in-school learning, but many have suffered from poor mental health. Pre-COVID 19 the situation was dire with funding cuts meaning limited access for services and increasingly high thresholds. Those who were already accessing support found it cut off, at least in the short term, and those who were just about getting by were pushed into new and confusing headspaces without their support networks in place to keep them from the brink. Schools are now trying to deal with a backlog of students needing support and new and evolving needs as anxiety around being in school has been heightened after such a prolonged period of absence and increased screen time and reliance on social media has exacerbated students' poor mental health. This is no easy fix, and it is perhaps the boldest of all the Bold Asks. But we need to act now and invest in providing early intervention and ongoing support or we risk pushing many young people into life-limiting mental health conditions.

***Bold Ask Number Three** - A dedicated Mental Health Support Worker in every school.*

One of the starkest impacts of the Coronavirus pandemic on young people has been their loss of social experiences, many of which we would ordinarily consider rites of passage. At least two cohorts will have missed the opportunity to complete Work Experience, thousands of Plymouth students will have missed opportunities for school trips, at home and abroad, cancelled nativities, music concerts, sporting events and yes, the legendary School Prom. This will also have knock-on effects for the local economy with many businesses relying on these events to generate income. We have previously seen schemes offering vouchers and discounts to boost sectors of the economy hit hardest by successive lockdowns. Could Plymouth be bold and find a way to combine these common goals? Instead of Summer Schools, could every school child be given a voucher to spend on an outdoor activity or cultural experience?

To learn a new language or a musical instrument? A free concert to give them back some of the joy they have lost?

Bold Ask Number Four - Subsidised (free!) summer activities for all school children.

Recovery needs to be built on an acceptance that teachers and support staff will know how best to support students in their school, in their context, and that students' voices need to be heard too so they can claim back some agency about their futures.

Recovery for Plymouth schools can't just be about trying to recapture what we had pre-COVID - we have to recognise that that was broken too. We need to be bold and embrace this opportunity build back better and to create schools that our students, our teachers, our support staff, and our communities can be proud of.

Nina Elliott is a teacher at a large secondary school in Plymouth. She has taught in Plymouth for over 15 years and is currently Curriculum Leader for Modern Languages and Aspire Theme Leader at Tor Bridge High.

G7 summit in Cornwall - distraction or catalyst?

Thirteen of the world's leaders will descend upon Carbis Bay in Cornwall this June for the annual G7 Summit. JAYNE KIRKHAM examines how much of a real difference this could make to the local area.



The Government has announced that the G7 conference is coming to Cornwall in June. The leaders of the world's seven richest democracies are descending on Cornwall to discuss recovery from coronavirus and, as Boris Johnson said, "uniting to make the future fairer, greener and more prosperous." He also said, "Two hundred years ago Cornwall's tin and copper mines were at the heart of the UK's industrial revolution and this summer Cornwall will again be the nucleus of great global change and advancement."

So, what will Cornwall get out of the international attention on Carbis Bay and the world's press in Falmouth? Will it be COVID-safe for thousands to descend from across the globe when Falmouth's world famous Sea Shanty Festival, due to happen at the same time, has been made a virtual event again? Will the requirement for security cost the Cornish taxpayers, or put them at risk?

We have been told that the security and policing for the event will be managed by Devon and Cornwall Police, paid for by central government and that extra resources will be available from other forces across the country. The officers coming from metropolitan areas will be expected to abide by Cornish standards of community policing. The G7 has historically come with protests and it seems unlikely that this time will be any different.

Whatever the COVID restrictions that are in place in June, they are promised to apply to all international visitors. The G7 is due to happen before the full opening up in June, so at least some restrictions will still be in place.

Cornwall was always likely to be very busy this summer, regardless of the G7. With lockdown easing, people will head to the Duchy. It was very busy in the second half of last summer when restrictions were lifted, to the point where beaches and roads had to be closed as they were too congested. Visit Cornwall has estimated a £50 million boost to tourism from G7 countries as a result of the summit. It is difficult to see how this was calculated, but it will doubtless bring more visitors who may not have been aware of what Cornwall has to offer until their national leader was filmed walking across Carbis Bay. Whether this will be sustainable rather than carbon-hungry tourism is questionable. The drive towards eco and sustainable tourism is undoubtedly going to be a big part of the future of Cornwall's economy.

"We need to show the world's press how great wealth sits alongside deprivation in Cornwall. Our estates like Pengegon, Old Hill and Treneere are just a stone's throw from superyachts and multi million pound waterside properties."

St Ives has had large numbers of tourists for years and some great wealth. However, it still has great inequality. There are high levels of insecure, low paid jobs, eye-watering housing costs and surprisingly high levels of child poverty. Tourism alone won't make us prosperous and neither will the G7.

We need to show the world's press how great wealth sits alongside deprivation in Cornwall. Our estates like Pengegon, Old Hill and Treneere are just a stone's throw from superyachts and multi million pound waterside properties.

Post COVID, we are also one of the most sought after residential destinations in the country as people realise they no longer have to live near the city to work in the city. This is a double edged sword, as although it will bring money and spending power to the region and people will be able to live permanently in their previously second homes, it will also put a great deal of pressure on an already overburdened, wildly inflated and creaking housing market. The cost of housing is already often tenfold the local wage in these parts.

De-industrialisation hit Cornwall decades before the north of England and we are a case study in what happens when regeneration doesn't occur. Cornwall is ripe for 'levelling up' and more in need of it than ever. Particularly now we no longer have access to the projected £100 million per year of EU funding, and the 'Shared Prosperity Fund' that is meant to be replacing it does not appear to be stepping up to the mark.

The direct financial input to Cornwall as a result of the G7 that has been announced so far is £7.8 million to upgrade Newquay Airport to enable it to host the kind of aeroplanes that world leaders use. These improvements will also make the airport fit to be a satellite launch site if the Newquay Spaceport plan is brought to fruition. However, what Cornwall needs more than a direct link to space, are more traditional transport links to the rest of the country. Our one rail route in and out is unreliable and our internal links within Cornwall are woeful. The kind of infrastructure required seems unlikely to come out of the G7.

The other G7 offer is to be part of a new £5 billion gigabit fund which will bring 'the fastest internet on Earth' to Cornwall. This should help to boost our already burgeoning high tech industries and start-ups. We also have great creative, food and health technology sectors, amongst many others. Falmouth is my home town. It is vibrant, innovative and creative. Packet ships are a symbol of our history and the spirit of adventure still thrives here. It is a great place in which to maximise this opportunity to showcase the investment opportunities and products we have to offer in Cornwall to the one thousand plus members of the world's media.



Part of the promise to Cornwall from the Cabinet Office is that this summit will be carbon neutral. To counter the helicopter transfers from Newquay Airport to Carbis Bay, there will be funding for Cornish biodiversity and nature recovery projects. There will also be a cultural and schools project. Cornwall's Climate Change agenda leads other parts of the country after a Labour council amendment in January 2019 declaring a Climate Emergency and a 2030 target for carbon neutrality. The Cabinet Office said that Cornwall was chosen to host this G7 because of our green energy potential and environmental sustainability, which they hope will inspire the leaders of the G7 countries.

Those world leaders will see first-hand how we are surrounded by all the natural ingredients required to kickstart a Cornish Green Industrial Revolution. Wind, waves, sun, granite as a geothermal source, and minerals like lithium. I hope they can be tempted away from St Ives to see how Cornwall is starting to take tentative steps to use those resources to achieve our ambition of carbon neutrality by 2030: the 4km deep geothermal borehole at United Downs; the Jubilee Pool at Penzance; or the first new wind turbine in the southwest for 4 years at Ventonteague. To realise our ambition, we need investment. Investment in the infrastructure required to produce the electricity and to store it. We also need an upgrade to the national grid so we can export all the electricity we potentially could produce here for use in the rest of the country.

Our emerging Green Industrial Revolution is a real example to the G7. And hosting the G7 could be an opportunity to try to highlight and harvest some of the investment needed to make sure Cornwall gets the well-paid, full-time, secure jobs that we need in the greener industries of the future. It will give us a chance to show the world the real Cornwall of today, but also the huge potential of Cornwall tomorrow. Whether it will actually bring any lasting legacy and investment for Cornwall, or just fade once the razzmatazz, glitz and disruption of a world summit has passed on, remains to be seen.

Jayne Kirkham is a Labour Cornwall Councillor for Falmouth Smithick. She is up for election again on 6th May for the amended division of Falmouth Penwerris. Jayne is the deputy leader of the Labour Group on Cornwall Council and stood for Labour in the Parliamentary constituency of Truro and Falmouth in 2017 and the Euro elections in 2019.

Jayne worked as a teaching assistant in a local secondary school for 7 years until she became a councillor, which she now does full-time..

"A recovery which reaches everyone:" addressing food poverty in Plymouth

LIZ NICOLLS is a volunteer for Plymouth Labour Community Action. She describes the levels of food poverty that she has witnessed in Plymouth, and how important it is that our recovery does not leave anyone out.



During the Plymouth Blitz of 1941, the 80th anniversary of which we commemorate this year, St Andrew's Church was reduced to a charred shell. But before the blazing ruins had even cooled, a young teacher, Margaret Smith, had hung a sign saying "Resurgam", or "I will rise again," above what was left of the church door.

I have always loved this story. Plymouth has been my family's city for hundreds of years. During World War Two, my dad was a young boilermaker in Devonport Dockyard. His own parents were twice bombed out of their home, and ended up in one of the many prefabs constructed after the War, at Crownhill. Although I have lived and worked in other countries, and spent much of my working life as a civil servant in Whitehall, with Ministers and Prime Ministers, I feel a love and loyalty for Plymouth which I will never have for anywhere else.

"In the aftermath of the COVID pandemic, we will need to recapture something of that Resurgam spirit, and create a recovery that works for everyone"

It can seem today that we are a long way from the hopeful spirit embodied in Margaret's "Resurgam" sign, which embodied the enthusiasm with which the shining new city centre of Plymouth was built in the post war years. As a small child I remember how modern and bustling it seemed, how exciting it was to go to the plush Odeon cinema in Union Street, or for lunch in the Dingles canteen, and afterwards shopping for a new party dress. I would spend a lot of time with my grandma, in St Mary Street, Stonehouse. We would go shopping, and see women pouring out of the Jaegar factory near her flats.

In the aftermath of the COVID pandemic, we will need to recapture something of that Resurgam spirit, and create an economic – and social – recovery that works for everyone. Both Keir Starmer and Dame Louise Casey, government adviser on homelessness, have spoken of the need to use this time to tackle and eradicate deprivation. Since my childhood days, when I saw thousands of workers pouring out of the Dockyard gates at going home time, Plymouth's fortunes have been mixed.

Unemployment has doubled to 11,000 during the COVID pandemic. One in three children are living in poverty, despite at least one parent working. The Clarence Place area of Stonehouse is in the top 1% of most deprived areas in the country. And today, there is a 10 year gap in life expectancy from deprived areas of Devonport in the west of the city, to Chaddlewood in the east. These statistics are daunting, but there is also much cause for hope in this city which has risen from the ashes before.

My working and volunteering life in Plymouth is spent helping some of the poorest and most vulnerable people in the city.

When I returned to Plymouth in late 2016, I was determined that my skills and my passion for social justice, which I had developed throughout my working life, would not go to waste. I was successful in an application to join the Board of Plymouth Community Homes. I'm proud to be an advocate for 17,000 social housing residents in our city, and now as Chair of the Audit and Risk Committee, to ensure that our business is well governed and financially viable. Working for present and future residents is a privilege.

I also started work at Shekinah Mission, an important local charity working to support homeless and vulnerable people. Having helped many staff in my teams at work over the years to progress their careers, I work with Plymouth people who have been out of work for some time for a range of reasons – mental health or addiction issues, possibly an offending background, and support them with training, advice and job applications. Some are homeless and rough sleeping, many others are precariously housed, and at risk of losing their home. In this work, I thought I knew about the extent of vulnerability in the city, as I also helped people deal with debt, rent arrears, or the complexities of the Benefits system. However, my understanding wasn't fully developed.

It was during the first phase of the COVID pandemic from March 2020, that I felt I learned the true extent of need in the city, and how I could use my talents to serve others with respect. I also learned about the wonderful, vibrant, voluntary sector in Plymouth, and the many inspirational people working in it. Friends in the Labour Party came together to form Plymouth Labour Community Action, to help everyone in need. Starting with befriending phone calls, and help with food, a major part of our work then focused on collecting and delivering prescription medicines to the most vulnerable.

"What is the most important thing I have learned? How easy it could be for any of us to fall into homelessness, or food poverty..."

At the time, PPE was in short supply, and many people simply could not afford £2 for a mask. A friend had the idea of launching an appeal for people who could sew, to make cloth masks, washbags, headbands and mask mates, which we would then distribute free to the voluntary sector across the city. Launched with a wonderful poster (with me as the Rosie the Riveter poster girl), and entitled "Calling all Janners! Come and sew for Plymouth", we soon had a small army of women churning out the PPE, from donated and purchased material.

My next job was to make contact with the diverse voluntary sector in Plymouth, and ask them if they would like to have donations of PPE. We had a wonderful response and gave out thousands of items, to organisations ranging from the Memory Matters café, the Highbury Trust, the Stonehouse Food Bank, the Plymouth Soup Run, and many, many more.

These contacts have developed into something much more long term for my friends and I. I now organise a team of Plymouth Labour volunteers every month, to help out on the Soup Run. This can be either preparing food in the kitchen at Hope Baptist Church, or going out on the van between about 08:30 and 10:30 in the evening, and serving the people who are waiting for us at each of the 4 stops across the city.

This is a humbling experience. The Soup Run, staffed by wonderful volunteers, goes out every night of the year. On a busy night, we can serve up to 80 people, who have often been queuing for ages in the cold and wet. They thank us with such warmth and friendliness, meeting them is an absolute pleasure. We also have the chance to talk to them at length, and refer them to services who can help them, such as PATH (Plymouth Access to Housing). In addition to food, we also give out warm clothes, and sleeping bags. Recently, I cooked pasta bolognese for 60 people, which was very well received! What is the most important thing I have learned? How easy it could be for any of us to fall into homelessness, or food poverty – a lost job, illness, relationship breakdown, addiction – all life events which could strike us all.

I have also been volunteering in recent months with the Soup Run Plus, a special project targeted on some of the most vulnerable women and men in Stonehouse. This is on the street twice a week, all year round, on a Tuesday and Thursday. We are there for help and support, food, hot chocolate, clothes and toiletries. We know our clients, and they trust us. The streets can be a scary place at night, but we can offer support.

I am proud to be part of both of these projects, which never turn anyone away, are run by inspirational women, and keep going throughout the pandemic, because desperate need is always there.

The kind of recovery I want to see after COVID is one which reaches the most vulnerable. Anything less will not do if we are to honour the courage and defiance of Margaret Smith, and the spirit of Resurgam. This time round, a rising tide must lift all boats, such that they cannot fall back.

Liz Nicolls comes from a Plymouth family going back generations. She was previously a Whitehall civil servant working on housing, regeneration and housing and support policies. Liz moved back to Plymouth in 2016, and works in housing and support for the most vulnerable. Liz is a Board member at the biggest Housing Association in the city, and works hard as a volunteer on the Plymouth Soup Run. Liz is standing as a candidate for election to Plymouth City Council in 2021.

All Together Now? Reshaping our city centre

TUDOR EVANS is the Labour leader of Plymouth City Council. Here, he examines what the future might look like for our city centre in the wake of the pandemic.

Plymouth is ready to play its part, to 'build back' even better than it has been doing to date and to take its place on the world stage for economic and social development. This is no exaggeration. A huge amount has been done by the Labour Council in the past few years to bring the city to this powerful position. They are now straining in the wings to get out there and put their already detailed plan to the service of the national approach - but right now, that's the problem.



What is the national economic recovery plan?

The Council has succeeded in softening the terrible blows of COVID by stepping up to keep people safe, especially in care homes, with supplies of PPE. This was not the brief from the government but it was needed and so it was done.

It is also, many will be surprised to learn, not the brief from anywhere that councils should play a role in their area's economic development. They are mandated to deal with potholes in the streets but not in any way to make a plan to improve the lot of the city and its people. Happily, the Labour Council has been exceeding their brief here magnificently.

While COVID was doing its worst so far, just after Christmas, the UK was cut adrift from Europe to go it alone in the world. It's true that we might have become too comfortable, always waiting for Brussels to write the script with us and make the stage directions clear, but at the moment it's absolutely unclear as to whether we should be rehearsing for a musical or a full blown tragedy.

The national framework of governance and accountability has become totally fractured. Our democracy now comprises a patchwork of unitary authorities, mayor led cities and areas and local councils creating a rough mixture of regional variations. With each new direction for change, it feels more like a series of tinkering tactics, rather than an overall strategy for development and democracy. It is always useful to know where the stage might be lit and the music that will open and close the curtains, but strong direction depends upon a full script, with each player knowing their lines. They must also be clear about when and where to come on and to leave the stage - with or without a bear in hot pursuit!

With or without a clear mandate, local councils underpin a country's economic future and Plymouth over the past few years has proudly taken that role to its heart. Working in partnership with businesses and inward investors, roads, factories and planning grants have been orchestrated to drive economic and social growth, construction, culture and creativity to earn Plymouth's proud place on the world's stage.

In the past, as recently as a decade ago, there was a declared economic plan and each player knew their part. Now there is no idea from one year to the next and rumours of what might be are in danger of defeating or even corrupting the role of wise decision making.

When Labour took over in Plymouth in 2003, we stopped the Tories' plan to sell the city centre for £20 million to one company. Now, Plymouth works in partnership with investors, has a long-standing city centre Business Improvement District, a masterplan for the city and a strong partnership that has a £500m investment plan, with £300m underway now.

After a decade, our City Deal area is now a Marine Enterprise Zone, Ocean's Gate, home to leading edge marine technology and an Institute of Technology. This is opening the way for marine science technology and attracting foreign investment for leading-edge thinking. Plymouth is now ready to host a unique freeport that will not rely upon gigantic (but not that controllable) container ships but instead on powerful partnerships, which have already built the international credibility needed to succeed.

We've assembled a £47m funding package to build The Box, a huge museum, gallery and archive in the city centre. We've huge plans for the creative sector, the visitor economy and construction. Those plans too, are already being delivered. We have just issued the first prospectus for the UK's first National Marine Park, in Plymouth Sound.

All this needed the vision of the local authority, and commitment from councillors to set the course and stick with it. Yet during this relatively short time, the government has abandoned the Osborne slogan "long term economic plan" (there was no plan), demanded a set of regional productivity plans, then demanded a set of local economic strategies, and dropped both before they were even considered by the government.



At a time of scarce resources, we can ill-afford this flitting, fleeting attempt at strategic policy making. At the same time, the local government financing model needs to change away from being a burden for council tax payers and small business and worse still, a grace and favour cash distribution system in support of political allies.

Public understanding and support are what is needed to drive economic planning to further develop a city to be proud of and to feel safe in. Many years ago Plymouth invented community policing, taking the law into the places where people worked and played, to perform a supporting role and add to our safety. With the draconian cuts enforced by the government, police numbers have been reduced to 2010 levels and the local stations have been closed. The city council has introduced mobile and fixed CCTV to replace the eyes on the ground and it has been a great boost to safety. It's wonderful when a fast thinking council can adapt at speed and fill the yawning gaps in government thinking but how much better it would be if they could be working to a plan, to be reading the same script as their neighbours nationally and singing in harmony with the world.

Tudor Evans OBE has been leader of Plymouth City Council since May 2018. He was named Council Leader of the Year in 2015.

"We've all learned that we are stronger than we ever thought possible."

LISA CLARK is the owner of Moo Music, a play café for babies, toddlers and parents in Mutley Plain, Plymouth. Here, she explores the strain that COVID-19 has placed upon families and parents of young children.

As I write this, we're in the third national lockdown. We're on our knees and, with the full and brutal weight of the pandemic bearing down on us, recovery feels like a fantasy.

We look back. Back to better times, when we took our freedom, our daily habits and physical contact with the people we love entirely for granted.

And we look to the here and now. The unrelenting monotony of each day, the fear and uncertainty, the addictive doomscrolling of 24-hour news blaring out from our phones and TVs. The best tools we have connecting us with the outside world are, in a cruel twist of irony, keeping us trapped in our own heads.

But we daren't look forward. We've had too many hopes dashed in the past 12 months. Too many false dawns. And it's taken a toll. Our mental health has been battered. At a time when we most need to surround ourselves with family and friends, we can't.

I worry about the young families we are used to seeing in our play café on Mutley Plain. I worry about the women who I know had unhappy - often unsafe - domestic situations. I worry about women with a history of postnatal depression who were due to have their second baby. I worry about the parents we haven't even had the chance to meet yet, who've had babies in the past year but haven't been able to make 'mummy mates' and share advice on everything from teething and bedtime routines to sex and relationships after a baby. And I worry about the grandparents whose most joyous time of the week was to sing and dance and play with their little love at our classes. How are they all? How will they even begin to recover from this?

We have tried to support families as much as possible from afar, teaming up with the wonderful mental health charity Devon MIND to link families up with one-to-one support. We've also sent out practical tips from experts, like a pharmacist who gave advice on natural remedies to calm stress and anxiety, a perinatal teacher who spoke about relaxation techniques and acupressure points and an Early Years specialist who gave insight on how to support children's mental health. We also uploaded our fun sessions to YouTube to offer our families some familiarity and hopefully give them half an hour of escapism.

Throughout the past year, there have been some great triumphs by and for humankind. We did the planet a favour by cutting emissions, we discovered Zoom and we proved we really are 'Great' Britain by leading the charge on COVID armed with the vaccine.



"At a time when we most need to surround ourselves with family and friends, we can't."

But there have been some heartbreaking errors. To open pubs and restaurants before baby classes, breastfeeding support groups and even baby weigh-in clinics after the first lockdown was shameful. I guess breastmilk doesn't boost the economy the way beer does. But looking after the people who are raising the next generation of doctors, scientists, entrepreneurs and politicians should have been more sharply in focus, sooner. This time around, as we come out of lockdown, baby groups have been prioritised better, so it seems the powers that be have, at last, recognised their importance.

For me, that terrible decision highlighted how we view postnatal mental health – with flagrant disregard.

Becoming a parent is one of the most life-altering, stress inducing experiences a person can go through in their life. Yet, from what I have learned, it seems that you have to be on the brink of a tragedy before you will get mental health support.

Several of our families have told me firsthand about their experience of needing mental health support for the first time in their lives and being shocked that it isn't immediately available. New parents who describe themselves as well balanced, positive people who've never struggled with their mental health before who aren't in 'crisis' by definition, but certainly feel that way.

One lady explained to me recently how she'd asked for help and had to fill out an online questionnaire, only to find that she didn't qualify for support because she wasn't low enough. As if she'd failed some sort of depression test. Another new mum described to me how she'd told an under-pressure health professional that she was struggling. The woman says she was asked if she'd had suicidal thoughts. When she said she hadn't she was told there was no point referring her because she'd only go on a waiting list for months. By which time, life would likely be more 'normal'.

This doesn't make sense to me. Surely, it's easier to pull someone back from the metaphoric cliff edge before they fall, rather than stand below with your arms out blindly trying to catch them as they freefall towards rock bottom?

*"...a disaster
is brewing."*

Even now, many new parents in Plymouth are struggling to get in front of a midwife or health visitor, which must frustrate those professionals enormously. While technology is great, these highly skilled healthcare workers can't observe their patients to spot early signs of postnatal depression the way they are trained to. You can't see things like chewed fingernails or a shaking leg through a head-and-shoulders Zoom call.

In 'normal' times, it's estimated that 1 in 7 new mums and 1 in 10 new dads will suffer from depression within the first year of having a baby. But Andrea Leadsom MP, who is heading up a government review designed to give babies the best start in life, has expressed fears that lockdown is fuelling an epidemic of postnatal depression. I totally agree – a disaster is brewing.

Huge investment in mental health services – particularly postnatal mental health - must be at the forefront of the Government's recovery plans and prioritised the same way education and the economy is. MIND have set out five key tests for the Government's mental health recovery strategy and I'm glad to see 'supporting children and young people' on the list.

While recovery still feels like a fantasy, I have no doubt that it will become reality. We might not believe it yet, while we're still in it, but we've all learned that we are stronger than we ever thought possible. If someone told us a year ago, when the pandemic was first declared, that we'd still be banned from embracing our loved ones we'd have collectively declared "I can't cope with that". Well, guess what? We have!

Our fundamental need for physical connection has been amplified (the novelty of Zoom quizzes wore off pretty quickly) and is something we'll never take for granted again.

While our lives have been paused we've had the chance to reassess or reaffirm what is important to us. When lockdown eases and we begin our recovery, family will be at the very heart of it.

And what better city to recover from our ordeal than Plymouth? To eat ice cream on Wembury beach, have a cold beer on the Barbican, cycle on Dartmoor, have a picnic at Saltram, swim in the Sound ... and entertain children at Moo Music. How lovely that day will be.

Lisa Clark is the owner of Moo Music Plymouth. Moo Music delivers music, movement and multi-sensory sessions for babies & toddlers from its Mutley Plain play cafe and various other venues, nurseries and preschools across the city. Lisa and her staff see hundreds of young families each week. She prides herself on creating a fun, safe and non-judgemental environment for parents and caregivers to come and socialise with their young children.

Building Plymouth's own cultural voice

LAURA KRIEFMAN is CEO of Plymouth's Barbican Theatre. She gives us an insight into the health of the city's cultural scene in the wake of COVID, and explains how places like the Barbican help to give Plymouth a platform.



My tenure as CEO for Barbican Theatre, Plymouth started 4 days before the first national lockdown was announced. My team and I faced the year head-on, and have done a huge amount of organisation change work to allow Barbican to not only thrive, but redefine its work and its journey forward. That's involved a new business model, new approach to talent development work and embedding this in organisational role in the city and nationally. Our reflections and learnings throughout 2020 have necessarily been spurred on by closure, drastic financial remodelling and inequalities made more apparent by the fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic, Black Lives Matter movement and the ever-increasing impact of Brexit.

Looking forward now, this year we have sought to prepare and position Barbican and its staff to enable more inclusive futures as we practically re-engage our communities and rebuild the culture sector.

- We want to shape multiple light touch opportunities for you to explore your own creativity and gain confidence in the value of your voice, your stories and your place.
- We want to champion you, support you, be your critical friends and make spaces that are yours.
- We want our example to influence others to share knowledge and systems lightly.
- We want Barbican to be a safe space to come to reset after meeting challenging attitudes and environments.

"Barbican has a grip on the best explorative new work going on in dance and theatre in the UK...which is accessible, experimental and defies categorisation."

Tim Smithies, Arts Council England

Barbican occupies a key role in the cultural life of the city, investing in the Plymouth ecology. We work extensively with our partners across the city and throughout 2020 we've shared resources and knowledge as part of Plymouth's desire to work collaboratively and build shared production models that increase reach and mitigate COVID-related production risks.

Barbican is excited to see the focus of the Plymouth "Resurgam" plans and the new Plymouth Cultural Strategy which both recognise the role the creative and cultural industries can play in reimagining and recreating a better, fairer, greener, more sustainable and equitable world.

We're proud to see our instinctive development of our Playground events feed perfectly into the Plymouth Culture Strategy around making use of 'grey, green and blue' spaces and PCC work around 'Meanwhile' use of empty spaces in the city. Additionally, our work aligns very closely with the Resurgam Creative Industries strategy to use alternative spaces to revitalise cultural provision in the city. Barbican is active in stakeholder conversations about how we establish an ambitious cultural vision for Plymouth - one that builds on our strong cultural foundations and creates a framework for future decision-making.

"We believe that the Barbican's role is to create platforms for others to be seen, heard, believed and valued. "

Barbican will focus on making work that is AGILE, and MODULAR.

- Agile:
 - so that we can still reach our audiences and communities, even if they aren't comfortable, or able to enter our building.
 - So that we can present work in different locations at suitable scales for changing levels of social distancing.
 - So that we can be fleet of foot and moveable.
 - So that our ReBel talent development work can respond to the needs of our community and the upskilling potential.
 - So we can pivot and support under-heard subcultures and cultural voices.
- Modules:
 - are designed and budgeted within our existing capacity or are identified as additional fundraising objectives.
 - are designed to work in a variety of different combinations, that allow us to keep ReBels and Barbican's presence going no matter what 2021-22 presents Plymouth with.
 - will allow us to rapidly develop ReBel activity so it is fit for purpose not fit for our presumptions.
 - will be reconfigurable for different locations
 - will respond to the need for different types of creative content.
 - Will give Barbican a creative process that makes us agile and changes what we can deliver without feeling like change is a failure.

What does this actually mean for us?

Barbican is a vital part of the Plymouth arts ecology. Barbican will invest in Plymouth and our own talent development and freelance ecology. Barbican will become:

- a space that fuels
- that enables the next generation of creatives - telling stories for the 21st Century.
- Help these new creative voices extend beyond the city.

All Barbican Talent Development work was rebranded in 2020 under the brand name "ReBels" to reflect the key principles listed above, and to encourage cross pollination between cultural strands. ReBels are SuBversive and CollaBorative. They're standing tall and have the world in front of them.

Imagine an entire new dance style growing out of Plymouth (like KRUMP coming out of LA), the next music genre (like grime from London or Drum and Bass in Bristol). What's the new 'Margate' school of visual art? What's the new Ontroerend Goed youth theatre company that tells stories no one realised they needed to hear? Who's the next Kate Tempest?

“Progressive organisations, like Barbican Theatre, lead the way with their innovative approach and dedication to diversifying the creative sector.” Matt Griffiths, Youth Music CEO

We are revolutionising our approach to talent development- focusing on facilitating young people discovering and building confidence in their own culture and voices. By running a modular talent development system we are able to support and showcase different creative content, mentors and peers. We’ve gone from running 5 classes a week to 18, all of which can move between in person, socially distanced, blended and online so that we can continue to support creative growth. Each class combines 2 practitioners from different creative backgrounds, who are trained in collaborative co-creative techniques. Our ReBels Practitioners (including ReBels Music) are currently 66% female, 16% from LGBTQI+ community, 24% from diaspora backgrounds, 16% with disability. We have a diversity representation higher than Plymouth’s in our commissioned artists and freelance practitioners.



“There are more and more opportunities which I find thrilling and very positive.” Julius Taresch, ReBels member

Creating cross art form work enables more unique voices, and future employment opportunities because ReBels are given permission to flex their muscles and discover what their voices could be, and what they want them to be. There are regular opportunities to explore these discoveries in a public setting through our playgrounds. ReBels have the ability to move classes every 10 weeks, and choose and take risks through co-created project based learning.

“I’ve had amazing opportunities & met some really cool people who have helped support me.” Aya El Morshdy, ReBels member.

This is creating a rapid and ambitious development of our ReBels creative voices. They feel heard, seen and represented and consulted and as a consequence are feeling increasingly confident to move between different types of creative explorations.

Thanks to our ongoing support from Esmée Fairbairn Foundation we are able to offer a range of free/pay-what-you-decide masterclasses ranging from guest lectures to 4 day skills intensives. This provides Barbican with an opportunity to present the Plymouth creative community with a wide range of role models: from Rising Arts, expert sound designers, international events producers, activists and award winning filmmakers. This is about both widening the peninsula pool of creatives we work with and who identifies as creative in the city - challenging creative curiosity and encouraging an appetite for lifelong learning.



"AMAZING ... that was literally life-saving and game-changing to me ... so many incredible bits of wisdom that are going to fill in some gaping holes that I stumble over constantly."

Masterclass participant feedback after Jon Aitkin's "What am I worth? Finances for freelance creatives" masterclass

"If people can't come to us: we will come to them."

According to the TGI survey, adults in Plymouth are less likely than those elsewhere in England to attend almost all areas of arts and culture – most notably opera, museums, jazz, classical music, ballet, and theatre. [Source: Plymouth Cultural Strategy].

Across our Playgrounds and Productions Barbican wants to represent unique, and sometimes underrepresented voices - the subversive, underground, quietly rebellious subcultures of Plymouth:

1. Building the voices in our city
2. Bringing in experts from subcultures that are not currently highly represented in Plymouth ("you can't be what you can't see")
3. Upskilling and enabling across the city.

The pandemic national lockdowns and our theatre being closed allowed us to rewrite our position in the city, building a reputation: "We're coming to you."



Playground events are hyperlocal events that are specific and relevant to their locations. These offer an agile presentation of Plymouth's identity across cultural forms and scales, building and rewarding risk taking in audiences and non-siloed creativity across artforms. Identified playgrounds include nightclubs, barbershops, fish & chip shops, ferries, pubs, skateparks and amphitheatres. The programming of these events reflects the locality. Old theatre rules are broken, siloes removed and new voices coming through. It's about new combinations of arts forms in new places. A refreshing change of scene and a new way to engage.

"I danced in the rain to the sound of drums and it was the best I've felt in a while during Covid-19." Christina Fasoro, ReBels Performer for one of our Playground Events.



"My first paid gig... I was honestly just so happy to be there and take part. The work that you guys do really does make a positive difference in the community and to people's lives, and mine." Caitlin Brawn, live performer & ReBel member.

We are finding that engagement at this level is bringing in new young people into our ReBels programmes and creating collaborative partnerships across the city, monthly commissions for Plymouth and Peninsular artists and creating opportunities for creative forms that are often isolated to work together. Facilitating cross-pollination.

Barbican values the cultural changemaking possible by bringing pro, and semi-pro creatives together. We're creating permission for multiple venues, locations, scales and rapidly deployable performance formats that will enable us to weather future contractions and changes in public creative appetite.

Barbican productions and spectacles are programmed to live in the gaps of traditional programming, bringing something unique to the Plymouth ecology. They actively and repeatedly, with our Playground events, build new audiences. Each Production will change how Barbican is viewed in the city- creating repeated, proven scope, in new spaces, for strategic city partnerships.

"One to watch" - The Guardian

Our main ReBel Production for 2021 is Petrol Headz.

Engines roar, as the chequered flag drops – are you ready for a spectacular night that will leave your car windows shaking, make you want to paint your car and jump on its roof to dance your socks off?



Barbican Theatre and Plymouth Gladiators Speedway are collaborating on new spectacle about the modified car scene and the surrounding street culture. Using the Speedway Arena, we're creating a show for Plymouth full of roaring sound systems, drift cars, showcars, speedway bikes, skateboard tricks, parkour stunts, street dancers, DJs and MC battles. *Who said cars were just for driving?*

Petrol Headz will help redefine attitudes towards the car modifier 'boy racer' scene, prompting the creativity, cohesion and skill within the scene. *"We want more safe places to go. People that hate us and think we are boy racers tearing it up around the street should think about how they could help us provide places to go and do this in a safe way. We could all pay £5 entry for somewhere locally in Plymouth and it would take more people off the road."* (George Chester Masters - Plymouth Herald 2020)

On average between 4,000 and 7,000 people from the car modifier scene attend car meets and specific events in the peninsula. They are engaged as a community and look for events to showcase, network and develop their art - but are all part of the elusive under 35s who wouldn't traditionally go to a theatre or art gallery.

Our responsibility beyond all this:

I mentioned at the beginning that 2020 highlighted viciously the dramatic inequalities facing people across the UK, from increasing social economic deprivation, systemic racism, sexism, unacceptable attitudes to disability and the LGBTQI+ community.

We see the impact of each of these amongst our community and we will neither stand by and let these inequalities and injustices continue, nor support them unconsciously by not interrogating the systems that we have inherited and built over 40 years as an organisation.

Barbican is committed to moving beyond tokenism. Zahra Ash Harper is working with us as our Creative Director for Inclusion with her wider team including Adibah Iqbal and Grace Quantock. We are working over 12 months with Zahra, as a team, to explore what inclusion means for us as an organisation and what proportional representation is for Plymouth. We are conducting a stakeholder and historic analysis and board development. We will use the new awareness to shape our board recruitment process, and all our future recruitment processes, and refine the language and approaches we use across the organisation.

Alongside new standards of safe-guarding and collaborative process training, 12 of our staff are now fully qualified Mental Health First Aiders, and we're about to undertake a course of training exploring conflict and conflict resolution so we are able to hold a safe space for hard to hear conversations.

We hope we can help support and mitigate some of the increasingly destructive effects of COVID-19, the economic downturn, mental health crisis, digital poverty, and uncertainty facing us all nationally, and create a safe space, and community where people can come to reset after meeting challenging attitudes and environments.

"The corner of Plymouth that is changing the world" - Hannah Harris, CEO
Plymouth Culture.

That economic downturn: In the UK there are 5.1 million people currently registered as unemployed, 6 million furloughed [ONS] and 35,000 people who were unemployed or at risk of losing their jobs, which is 15% of the Plymouth Population. [Source: *Plymouth Resurgam*.]

Accessing culture can be prohibitively expensive: Barbican is also actively tackling economic and social deprivation as an access barrier to culture. We have 5 sponsored ReBels annual memberships for young people who self-identify as being in need in the St. Peter and the Waterfront ward which falls within the most deprived 1% in England (Barbican Theatre is in this ward). All ReBels can also request a staggered payment plan. Access to an unlimited number of classes is £60 per year.

During the pandemic lockdowns, Barbican actively tackled digital poverty - providing 5G dongles pre-loaded with data and tablets for any young people in need.

So how do we change our understanding and our approach to value, tickets and pricing?

Barbican is running 6-12 months of events as a pilot pay-what-you-decide trial. We want to change the rules and the current status quo around ticketing. We fundamentally believe that removing financial barriers is essential for wider access, risk-taking and encouraging new demographic audiences - especially in our current economic climate. We want to explore pay-what-you-decide ticket models and new ways of developing our sustainability.

- Can we run a pay-what-you-decide format to encourage risk taking for audiences in Plymouth and create a new business model for affordability and access to the arts?
- Can we create sustainable and resilient strategies/ways to fund/finance access to Barbican's arts and events in the city - exploring new business models, partnerships, sponsorships, cross-sector funding?

This is about changing the financial narrative, and value proposition for the Barbican's events market in Plymouth. We believe that 120 people paying an average of £5 a ticket is better than 30 people paying £15. It is an active decision in response to the levels of social and economic deprivation in Plymouth.

Will any of this work?

I don't know - but I do know that the foundations built throughout 2020 for Barbican's work- how we're working, where we're working, why we're focusing on that work, and our openness to change and improvement are the only way we can survive. We need to give ourselves permission to be unknowing. We need to give ourselves permission to try things and not get them right, to reiterate and learn, and try again. We need to give ourselves permission to be agile and comfortable with rapidly adapting for the continuously changing landscape we're riding. We need new modular building blocks - for different spaces and scales, and online and in real life. We need to step out of our own way- if we truly want to shape multiple light touch opportunities for you to explore your own creativity and gain confidence in the value of your voice, your stories and your place.



Laura Kriefman is an award winning Choreographer and Artist with over 15 years' experience as a creative, a producer and commissioner across theatre, dance, and interactive tech. She joins Barbican Theatre after 10 years spent delivering interdisciplinary projects worldwide that fuse the performing arts and creative technology, created through her company Hellion Trace Ltd (formerly Guerilla Dance Project) and three years as Creative Producer at Tristan Bates Theatre (London). Laura specialises in fusing movement and technology together. Recent work includes winning the Smart Oxford Playable City Commission (2017), Kicking The Mic (toured 2017-2020) and Crane Dance Bristol (2015).

She is a Quest Lab Artist in Residence at Studio Wayne McGregor, Mozilla XR Studio Fellow 2018, UK Innovator in Music 2017 (Keychange.eu), a 2016 INK Fellow, 2015 WIRED Magazine/The Space Creative Fellow and a 2011-2012 Fellow of the Clore Cultural Leadership Programme.

Laura has been a guest speaker at INK, WIRED, ReMIX, SxSW Interactive, World Science Fair (New York), IRCAM Paris, the Southbank Centre, and TEDxRoma, TEDxDanubia and TEDxLondon, and has experience of advocating for organisations, and showcasing leadership beyond the arts sector. She is also a sought-after facilitator in the field of digital and dance – and was recently brought in as an expert facilitator with Candoco, and with Y-Cam in Japan at the Kyoto Experiment.

Plymouth White Papers

Thanks for reading this year's
Plymouth White Papers.

Our thanks go to everyone who
contributed an essay. Luke and his
team wish everyone a safe year ahead
as our city looks to rebuild and
recover.

If you would like to contribute to the
next edition of the Plymouth White
Papers, get in touch:

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Image: Penny Cross

