

LONDON DURING THE PANDEMIC

LOCAL DEMOCRACY AND INEQUALITY

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Key Findings:

The State of London Governance:

- London governance is complex and fragmented. London is governed by a broad range of different actors: individual councils, City Hall, central government, business and social organisations, international actors and local inhabitants. The system operates by means of cooperation, negotiation, convening and know-how.
- Governance actors in London usually follow rules of representative democracy and employ a variety of well-embedded tools of representation. Actors are interested in and experiment with involving citizens directly at different stages of policy processes.
- As a response to the Covid-19 pandemic, governance actors in London created cross-sectoral emergency meetings, moved access to services online, digitalised their engagement tools and created local lists of vulnerable inhabitants and inhabitants eager to volunteer. However, there was a separation between the official action and the community, bottom-up response (such as mutual aid).



Key Findings

Local Inequalities:

- London is socio-economically unequal. Londoners are unequal in terms of income, wealth, access to housing, employment, safety, clean air, green spaces, access to social and health services, availability of safety nets, power to influence the decisions that affect them and the influence that the pandemic has had on their lives. The Covid-19 pandemic has shaken the system and amplified the effect of pre-existing inequalities.
- Features of the governance system (in particular its complexity, fragmentation and lack of ability to raise local funding) makes it difficult for local actors to counter these inequalities.
- However, there is no agreement across London on the nature of existing inequalities, nor on how to address them.



Recommendations



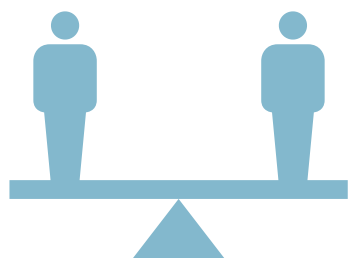
Learning from Covid-19

Covid-19 has shaken Londoners' lives, amplified existing inequalities and disrupted how London governance works. To guide recovery, London governance actors need to rebuild the trust of London communities and create tools that provide communities with meaningful opportunities for feeding into policy development, testing and implementation.



Countering fragmentation

Governance in London is dispersed among different actors. It is possible to address disconnection by acknowledging inhabitants' mobility, creating better data sharing practices across London and by creating a more positive narrative regarding local governance.



Addressing socio-economic inequalities

Action is needed to address the needs of the most vulnerable: accessible information, better care and a focus on mental health.

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Introduction




This report is based on the results of the project 'Coping with Complexity and Urban Inequality: Dilemmas of Democratic Mega-city Governance'. This project was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council UK (ES/V009346/1) and led by Dr Marta Wojciechowska, Lecturer in Politics at the Department of Political Economy, King's College London.

The report is a result of collaboration with representatives of London boroughs, the Greater London Authority, business organisations and non-governmental organisations. In this report, 'London governance system' refers to all the actors who effectively influence London at the local, national, international or community level. The report refers to participating stakeholders as 'participants'.



Why Investigate Democracy and Inequality in London Now?



London is the best-off region in the United Kingdom; it is a city with a rich, democratic past. Covid-19 disrupted how London governance works, challenging London's status and prosperity. This report analyses London governance at the time of the Covid-19 pandemic. It investigates how the system works and how individual governance actors responded to the pandemic. It analyses how the pandemic influenced Londoners' local socio-economic status. Finally, it asks how policy participants envision a future London and offers recommendations for how to reach the envisioned future.

The report is a result of semi-structured interviews with fifteen London governance participants (conducted between December 2020 and May 2021), six preliminary interviews with external participants (held between October 2020 and March 2021) and an interactive online workshop (synchronous and asynchronous, June and July 2021).

The key outcome of the project is an understanding of participants' perceptions of London governance and local inequalities, their understanding of the biggest challenges for London and their assessment of their own actions. The second outcome is a collaborative, cross-sectoral set of recommendations regarding piecemeal reform.

Participants reflected left, right and politically neutral alignments; however, there were more left-leaning than right-leaning participants.

The State of London Governance

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‘If you were starting with a blank piece of paper, you would not design the political governance model that we have in London. Because there are 33 boroughs, individual boroughs who have far more direct—rightly because of the need for local...—direct influence on a day-to-day basis than the mayor does.’ Council 4

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There was broad agreement among participants that London governance is complex, multi-layered and fragmented. London governance is based on strong, locally oriented councils which are responsible for service delivery to the inhabitants. The Mayor of London plays a convening and strategic role across the city. There are several pan-London units that realise specific functions and provide services across the whole city (e.g., the London Mayor Integration Unit, Transport for London, London Councils). Several participants mentioned fragmentation and lack of communication across different actors as a problem for London governance.

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‘I think one of the great advantages of the local government, London, of the UK is that it’s genuinely local and there’s a... it provides the ability for people to ensure their interests are considered in a way that’s specific to the local circumstances.’ Council 1

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The State of London Governance



Some participants considered London governance to be too weak. According to them, governance in London is an example of unfinished devolution in which individual actors do not have enough power to deliver public goals. Several participants mentioned limited local budgets and lack of ability to raise and keep revenue as an obstacle to realising their aims. According to the participants, the relationship between London actors and the central government is particularly poor, resulting in constrained budgets, lack of knowledge-sharing and duplication of services

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'I think the relationship between central local government in the UK is very unequal, across England. It's not a mature relationship where you can have a good balance of powers and a proper discussion.' Council 2

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According to the participants, the governance system in London operates thanks to the co-operation, negotiation, convening and know-how of rules and people. Historically and nowadays, business actors have an influence on the system. Business organisations and non-governmental organisations (charities) often realise public functions.



The State of London Governance

The London governance system is a representative democracy with a variety of well-embedded tools of representation. Representatives are democratically elected; public officials spend time and effort reaching out to their electorate. London is also a sphere of vivid community, charity and bottom-up organisation. Most participants made a broad representative claim—they consider themselves to represent and act on the interests of not only their electorate (or members and service-users), but of all Londoners: businesses, visitors and even tourists.

There was a clear appetite among participants for increasing inhabitants' influence at the different stages of policy processes. London governance actors have experience of diverse forms of engagement, which vary in terms of inhabitants' actual influence: open forums, public consultations, citizens' panels, citizens' assemblies, community led co-design, delegation of policy tasks to the inhabitants, co-production of local or council plans, listening and networking exercises and involvement of service users at the various stages of policy circles.

Some examples of these tools include Talk London (an online platform), Civic Futures (an internship to facilitate collective learning), online citizens' assemblies, Southwark Stands Together (co-production of a council plan and action), action groups bringing together inhabitants and people with specific lived experiences, a Critical Friend Programme (a shadowing programme), and many others.



The State of London Governance

However, participants also mentioned barriers to increasing inhabitants' influence. Several participants emphasised that it is often the same groups of inhabitants who engage repeatedly. Furthermore, the capacity of individual public actors is limited by legal national frameworks.

Participants identified several barriers to engagement, which often affect already marginalised communities: limited time, lack of knowledge of the processes and rules, the complex language used by public bodies, insecure legal status, precarity, lack of trust in official institutions and English language difficulties. To reach the most marginalised communities, a more targeted approach is necessary: working with community gatekeepers and allocating sets of funding with open priorities to be used by the group, but also an effort to provide information, payment and targeted support during the process. As one participant stated, the aim of engagement tools should be to change the power balance and empower individual inhabitants.



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‘We just need to make it really work for communities. You have to bring them in as early as possible, give them as much information as possible, pay them for their time and don't leave everything in that process to the very last minute. ‘Cause communities will feel short-changed, and they haven't had a proper go at whatever it is that you brought them.’ Pan-London Organisation 2

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The State of London Governance



Covid-19 disrupted how London governance worked, bringing to the fore previously existing problems: limited budgets, fragmentation, inadequate information sharing, absence of data records on the population across the whole of London and lack of visual representation at the level of executive leadership. London governance actors largely responded to Covid-19 separately from the national response: they created cross-sectoral emergency meetings, moved access to services online, digitalised their engagement tools and created local lists of vulnerable inhabitants and inhabitants eager to volunteer. For some actors, the use of modern technology during the pandemic led to engagement with previously disengaged groups: younger inhabitants and those from BAME backgrounds. Separate from the action of public actors, the community and bottom-up response (such as mutual aid groups) was particularly strong in London.

“*‘When we went into that emergency response structure, it lost all sense of diversity and just became this small group of people who look the same, thought the same and therefore kind of lack of challenge and creativity and innovation. I think we were poorer for that.’* Council 4

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Inequalities

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London is a very successful place on aggregate, but large amounts of people who are struggling to have minimum standard of living because of the cost of things.’ NGO 4

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Participants repeatedly referred to socio-economic inequalities among Londoners as a challenge. Based on participants’ experiences, Londoners are unequal in terms of income, wealth, access to housing, employment, safety, clean air, green spaces, access to social and health services, availability of safety nets, power to influence the decisions that affects them and the influence that the pandemic had on their lives. According to the participants, these inequalities are structural and interconnected. At the same time, participants disagreed on the precise nature of the inequalities that affect Londoners and their significance.

According to participants, there are several reasons why London is socio-economically unequal: lack of fiscal independence, lack of recognition of relative poverty by the central government, fragmentation, lack of cooperation between individual governance actors, different rules regarding the funding and help available in different councils, lack of popular support for tax increases and an inability to access help due to other barriers. Participants mentioned that some services are particularly difficult to access for those for whom English is not their first language or who not know how the systems work, and that institutions are effectively gatekeeping inhabitants from using their services.



Inequalities

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'So, I think moving from borough to borough is a really big issue and I think that yeah, there's no kind of ongoing support during that process. Which means that, people often fall out, fall through the cracks and then don't have the support that they were having before.' NGO 5.2

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As funding for public bodies is limited, businesses and charities take over public functions. This enables the effective realisation of some public functions, but the consequences for underprivileged inhabitants remain uncertain. Access to funding for such additional functions is often based on pre-established parameters. This effectively limits the groups of actors that are able to apply for the funding.

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'If I am a funder, you know [when I] write my [funding] form—you must meet x criteria for you to be eligible for these criteria. Just by virtue of me doing that, I have already decided what the priorities are. I decided that parameters in which citizens can engage in the future. That's distorted.' NGO 4

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Inequalities

The Covid-19 pandemic has shaken the system, but it has not affected all Londoners equally. Its impact intersects with other indicators of marginalization: lack of secure housing, precarity of employment, precarity of status, limited access to welfare support (no recourse to public funds), race and trust in official authorities. Participants predicted that the mental health crisis arising from Covid-19 will be particularly long-lasting and significant in terms of addressing inequalities in London.

“ ‘The impact, particularly during the pandemic, was huge if you weren't able to access the Internet at home. Or there might be a cost implication. In that people are having to pay for data to like get their child online to do it at schoolwork.’ NGO 5

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Visions of an Ideal London

Participants offered a vision of an ideal future London that would be broadly egalitarian. The ideal London should include a fairer future for residents and businesses so that they can not only survive but thrive. It should be a great place to live, work, invest and play; a place in which no young person is left behind and opportunities are available to everyone. Each Londoner should have a safe and suitable home.

Participants were not in agreement regarding how to reach this better future, however. They identified a wide range of desirable institutional and systemic changes which were often mutually contradictory. For example: strengthening the power of individual actors, changing the number of councils, increasing the role of city-wide commissions units and directly delegating more powers to London communities. Although many participants identified further devolution as single reform which would solve problems in London governance, not all of them did. Some participants argued against institutional change, saying that there is value in the stability offered by the current system.



Recommendations

We asked participants to choose a set of challenges and propose concrete recommendations to address them. The participants focused on three challenges:

- learning from Covid-19,
- addressing governance fragmentation,
- addressing inequality.



Recommendations

Learning from Covid-19

- Covid-19 has shaken the life of Londoners, amplified existing inequalities and disrupted the way that London governance works. However, the community response has been invaluable for supporting inhabitants. Communities have an irreplaceable value for London governance.
- To guide recovery, London governance actors need to rebuild trust with London communities and create tools that provide communities with meaningful opportunities for feeding into policy development. To reach the most marginalised communities, a more targeted approach is necessary: working with community gatekeepers and allocating sets of funding with open priorities to be used by the group, but also an effort at providing information, payment and targeted support during the process. Engagement with communities should involve power-sharing and shared ownership of the process and its results.

Recommendations

Learning from Covid-19

- Communities' input should be fundamental for identifying problems and solutions, design, testing and evaluation. To rebuild trust with communities, London leadership positions should be more diverse and replicate the diversity that exists among Londoners.
- The experiences of bottom-up communities and their knowledge needs to be incorporated into the strategic long-term response.
- To do so, London needs to introduce: direct collaboration between governance actors and community organisations, funding for communities to develop local regeneration plans, a taskforce forum that includes community representatives in the design of local recovery plans and shared ownership of such plans.



Recommendations

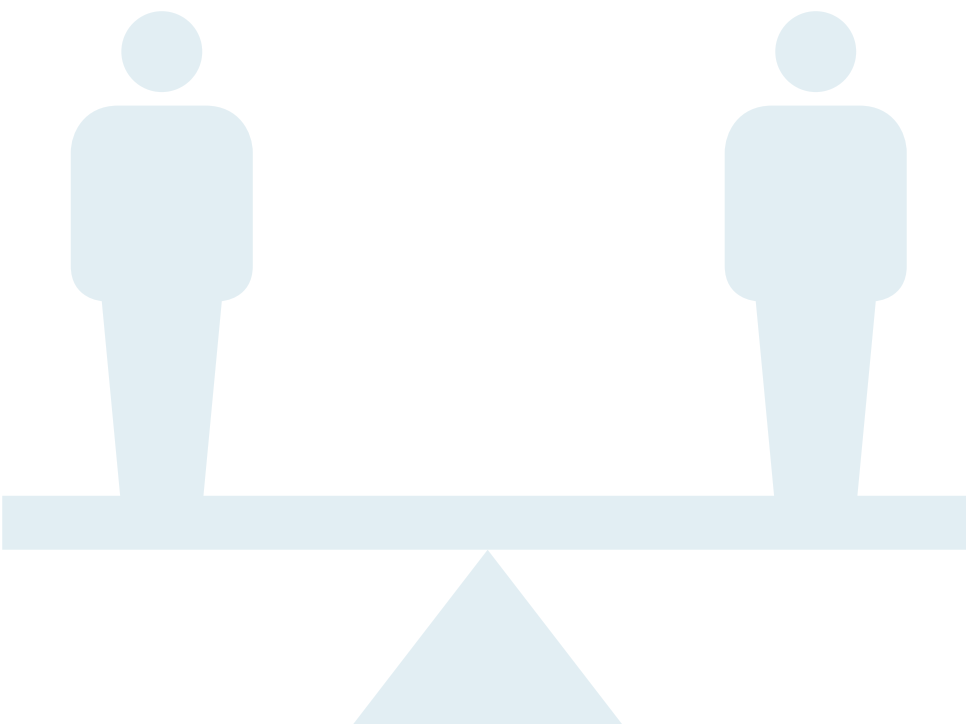
Countering fragmentation

- Covid-19 exposed fragmentation and disconnection among London governance actors. It is possible to address disconnection by acknowledging inhabitants' mobility, creating better data sharing practices across London and by creating a more positive narrative regarding local governance.
- Coordinated and shared data-services need to provide cross-London information on inhabitants' demographics and challenges. This information needs to be the foundation for addressing mobility within London and for bringing together communities of practice in evidence-based policy. The data sharing needs to be extended to private and community actors but also needs to be secure and safe to use.
- The creation of a positive narrative regarding local governance needs to be based on the provision of accessible information on how London governance works. It also requires the creation of opportunities for intermingling between central and local civil servants—during professional training, for example.

Recommendations

Addressing socio-economic inequalities

- Disagreement on the nature of inequality in London does not need to be a weakness. However, action is needed to address the needs of the most vulnerable: accessible information, better care and a focus on mental health.
- Socio-economic inequalities can be partially addressed by rebuilding trust and providing more meaningful involvement with London communities. Furthermore, London governance actors need to ensure that information on services is available online and for people not confident in English. The information should use straightforward language and offer clear step-by-step guidance. London governance actors need to provide better care to those who rely on them: wi-fi access in temporary accommodation, better quality temporary accommodation and a designated officer for each client. Governance actors need to focus on mental health by creating clear routes for accessing help, narrowing down the time between follow-up meetings and advertising additional services that can support those waiting.



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