

COUNTY SPOTLIGHT

CCN
COUNTY COUNCILS NETWORK

Leading the Economic Recovery



COUNTIES
LEADING RECOVERY
DELIVERING RENEWAL

About COUNTY SPOTLIGHT

At the County Councils Network (CCN) one of our core objectives as a national representative body is to share the innovative work our councils are doing on a daily basis to provide vital frontline services, support local economies, and create thriving communities.

This new, regular, publication seeks to shine the spotlight on the most recent best practice and innovative solutions being put forward by our member councils across a range of different policy areas. Alongside this, it provides an update on the national policy landscape and commentary from our lead members and strategic partners.

To find out more about future themes, or to recommend a case study, please contact ian.burbidge@local.gov.uk.

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THE VIEW FROM CCN



Despite still dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, the country is also focussing its attention on helping the economy to recover.

Make no mistake, the last 24 months have had a significant impact on our economies: unemployment doubled across many County Councils Network (CCN) areas at the height of the pandemic; people's livelihoods have been turned upside down; and some sectors are still reeling from the impact.

The government's flagship levelling-up policy is now intertwined with economic recovery; and the Levelling-Up White Paper is imminent. CCN has played a prime role in arguing that levelling-up cannot bypass shire counties, and the government responded by promising greater access to devolution deals for counties. If these deals have the right powers and resources, they could be transformative to our economic recovery and levelling-up efforts.

Whilst the policy direction of travel and funding will be determined nationally, CCN member councils have wasted no time in grasping the nettle locally and have begun to set out how their local areas can bounce back from the last two years and transition to the economies and industries of the future.

Counties have the size to influence, convene, and negotiate with local and national partners in devising ambitious visions for their areas in economic growth strategies, and many have already put substantive strategies to the public, with climate considerations firmly embedded in these.

These efforts not only concentrate on the bigger picture, but they are people-focussed too: with county councils and unitary authorities having the capacity and intimate knowledge of their areas to target support to those most in need, particularly in skills and in business support.

Despite grappling with Covid pressures - with social care authorities at the sharp end of this - this document shows the imaginative and innovative work CCN's member councils are doing to support business, transform economies, and ensure that local residents have the best possible local opportunities. Whilst the pandemic is not over yet, counties are already leading recovery and delivering renewal.

Cllr Matthew Hicks

CCN Economic Growth Spokesperson

STRATEGIC PARTNER VIEW



Like many, we have been giving considerable thought to Levelling Up: what it will mean on the ground for different places; how will it be measured and how will Government know if it has been a success; and how could it be developed so that it genuinely delivers change.

Our over-arching conclusion – while we wait for the detail of the white paper – is that if levelling up is to be a success then it has to enable local government to deliver.

Centrally imposed solutions have never worked and will not work in an agenda that must be intrinsically localist in nature. County deals are an exciting opportunity but will only really enable levelling up if county authorities are allowed to lead them to meet their own very specific and tailored needs.

Our work over a number of years with you has underlined the vital role that county authorities have played in the successful implementation of place-based growth and change. County authorities are both the places in which much of the UK's future growth or 'levelling up' will need to occur as well as a vital instrument for driving change through their investment, influence and action. It is clear through analysis we have done, the reports we have worked on for CCN and the rich case studies contained within this Spotlight that levelling up will only happen in a meaningful way if local government is given the resources and levers it needs to make things happen in their places.

We are very aware that county authorities face complex and multi-faceted challenges across the business environment, living standards and enabling infrastructure. Challenges where the 'gap' to the national average is often significant. It is a challenge that in some places is exacerbated by the variability in performance that exists within county authority areas. Taken together, these differences underline the danger of a 'one size fits all' approach to Levelling Up policy or programmes across county areas. Rather, they clearly point to a requirement for policy and action that combines an intimate knowledge of place, with a joined-up approach to delivery, shared outcomes across stakeholders and a suite of freedoms and powers to make decisions across a broader spatial scale.

Alongside this, government needs to simplify its funding programmes and help to create a critical mass in the private sector funding markets that will help secure investment into key local projects and priorities.

We regularly see first-hand the place-leadership role played by county authorities. This creativity, innovation and best practice needs to be shared and this is why this Spotlight is so timely.

Paul Dossett

Partner, Public Services, Grant Thornton

THE LATEST POLICY LANDSCAPE

The levelling-up agenda pre-dates the pandemic but has become intertwined with the country's economic recovery effort as England looks to move on from the impact of the last 24 months.

When the levelling-up agenda was first announced in the Conservative Manifesto in late 2019, the government pledged that investment would be made across the country, including rural and coastal areas, and stated that this wouldn't just be about investment 'but giving them far more control of how that investment is made'.

Since that manifesto pledge, £4.8 billion was announced at the 2020 Spending Review for a Levelling-Up Fund for capital investment in local infrastructure. Two other funds were also announced – the £220m Community Renewal Fund, which pilots a new approach to replace European Structural Investment Funds through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund – and the £3.6bn Towns Fund for investment in town centres.

Importantly, the government has gone further, intrinsically linking levelling up to devolution and empowering strong local leadership. To deliver this, it was announced in May 2021 that the Devolution White Paper would be replaced by a Levelling-Up White Paper.

From the outset, CCN has argued that county areas have deep-seated socio-economic challenges and cannot be overlooked in the levelling-up and devolution agendas. As demonstrated below, counties are home to some of our most prosperous and successful areas, but we must not forget that many left behind areas are located within counties; from deprived towns, rural and coastal communities in the north, south and east, to former manufacturing hotbeds in the midlands, to places where young people leave to go to university and never return.

The government responded positively to this advocacy, and in July 2021 the Prime Minister announced his intention to ensure levelling up had a specific focus on county areas. He outlined the intention to devolve major new powers and funding through new 'county deals', with a commitment to offer similar powers and flexibilities to the devolution deals that have been on offer to city regions.

CCN said that this announcement could be a 'game changer' for levelling-up in county areas. The government has since entered negotiations with a cohort of county authorities, building on a set of new principles underpinning the approach to county devolution, which CCN have strongly welcomed. As expanded on below, CCN has positively engaged with this new approach to devolution, with new research outlining the options for governance, powers and funding to be considered by both national and local government.

The long-awaited Levelling-Up White Paper, due early February, is set to outline the government's blueprint to level-up the country, including further details on county deals. CCN will be analysing the white paper's detail, making the case that policies and resource must be fairly focused on county areas across the four corners of the country. Crucially, CCN will argue for no let-up in the county devolution drive, and for ministers to begin negotiating the next tranche of deals once the first areas are signed.

CCN Research: Why counties need levelling up

CCN has long called for a programme that will 'level-up' local economies, with supporting research from Localis about how to support 'stuck' communities, and working with the County APPG on a report about how social mobility and economic opportunities in county areas can be brought more in line with those that exist in London and other big cities.

Most recently, CCN commissioned Grant Thornton to undertake two extensive studies exploring placed-based growth and the role of county authorities in supporting the economic recovery.

The first study, completed shortly before the Covid-19 lockdown, showed that county areas are the backbone of the UK economy, delivering 39% of GVA, 48% of all businesses, and 42% of all employees. At the same time these areas have witnessed slower growth rates over the past five years. Business growth of 7.9%, for instance, has lagged behind the England average of 11.6% and 15.1% for non-county areas.

The research also identified that county areas also suffer from structural weaknesses such as poor productivity and business growth, lower than median wages and significant skills gaps. Some 31 of the 36 county authorities have productivity levels below the national average, driven by low levels of business formation rates and structural challenges such as low median incomes: 23 of the 36 county areas have mean income levels below the England average and only 13 above. Evidence also shows that the gap in incomes for county areas is widening, with a 13% increase in the gap over the past 5 years.

[Read more on our research on economic growth here](#)

CCN Research: County deals

In November 2021, CCN and Grant Thornton published the first major analysis of county deals since the announcement of the policy in July 2021. The study independently assessed the most suited devolution models and local leadership to spearhead new arrangements, alongside the devolved powers and funding that could make the most difference to the levelling up agenda. The report concluded:

- Mayoral combined authorities are not the most suitable model for county deals in most cases and the government should maintain its commitment to explore alternative governance options. When independently assessed, devolving directly to leaders of county and unitary authorities is scored the most readily deliverable model to devolve and funding powers on the scale of existing city devolution deals.
- The government should begin a rolling programme of county deals and not stop at an initial phase of first cohort of deals, so areas are not left behind in supporting the economic recovery.
- There should be parity with existing devolution deals agreed with the major cities, as a starting point, in both powers devolved and funding available.
- But the government should also go even further than it has done with the cities, and grant counties even more ambitious deals. Proposals could include new powers for councils in county deals, such as a net-zero investment fund to help to decarbonise areas, devolution of the Shared Prosperity Fund to local areas, powers to levy council tax on unimplemented housing developments and the capability to propose a tourism tax.

[Download the full report here](#)

HELPING KEEPING BUSINESSES AFLOAT: SHORT TERM ASSISTANCE

It has been an extremely tough last 24 months for local businesses, with successive lockdowns seeing the widespread closure of hospitality and retail for extended periods.

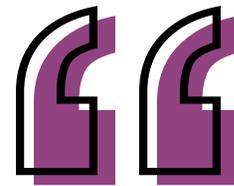
For the country's economic recovery is to be a success, it was imperative that as many viable and emerging businesses are able to stay afloat, and councils were tasked with helping ensuring this happens.

The government has made available a substantive funding package for businesses adversely impacted for the duration of the pandemic, and local authorities were tasked with distributing these funds. CCN's unitary authorities worked hard to passport millions in government support grants quickly to local businesses, helping to ensure they were able to weather the storm of the pandemic.

But the support of county and unitary authorities runs much deeper than this - targeting their interventions on communities, businesses, and high streets to try and shield their areas from the economic downturn and put them on the path to recovery.

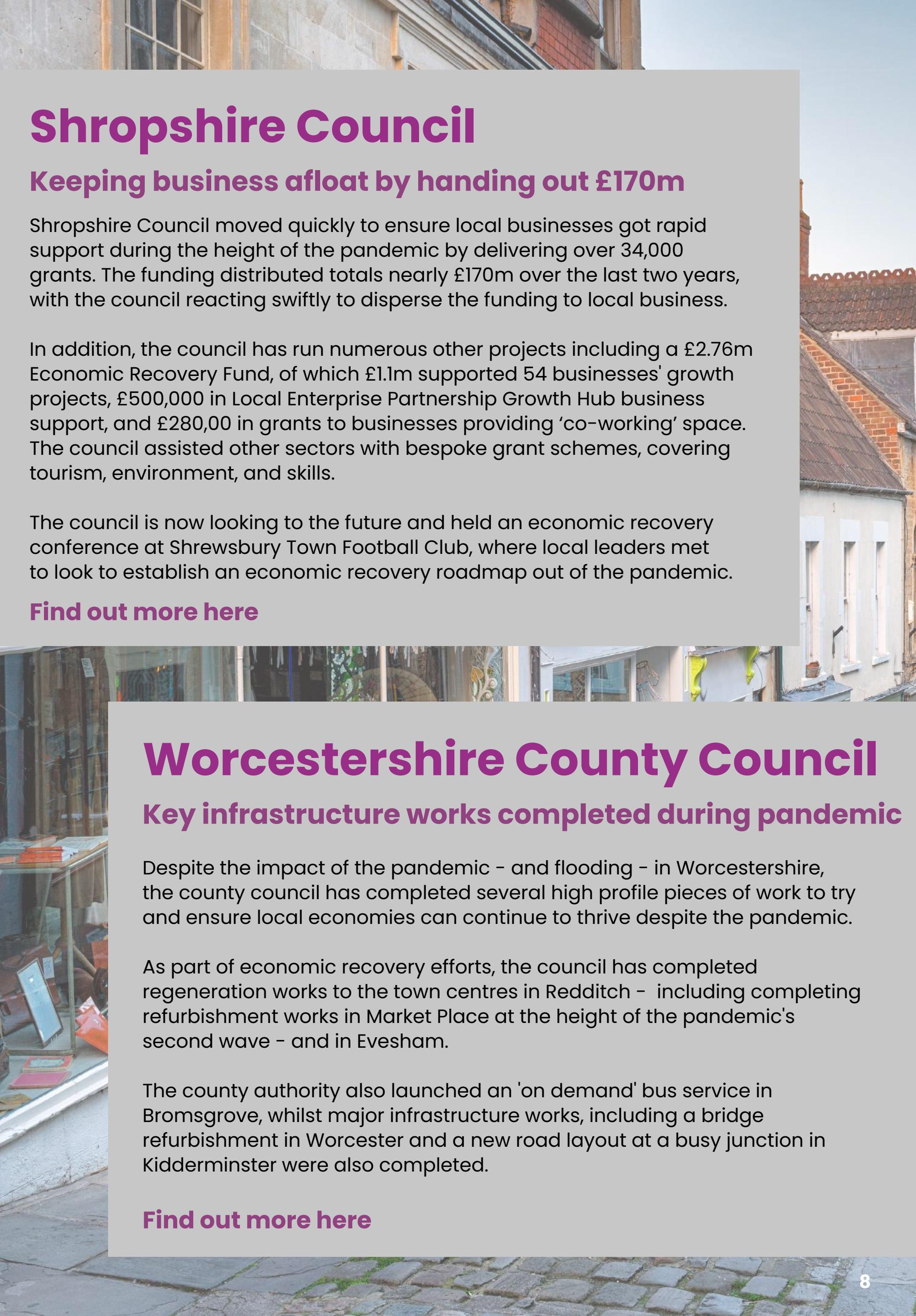
The first theme of this document showcases the short-term inventions from CCN member councils in supporting their local businesses and economies.

Examples include revamping their town's high streets, by completing infrastructure works to improve footfall, and organising high-profile events and summits so the voice of local business can be heard on how best to lead recovery in their areas.



Ensuring that government support reached the frontline quickly was only part of the story





Shropshire Council

Keeping business afloat by handing out £170m

Shropshire Council moved quickly to ensure local businesses got rapid support during the height of the pandemic by delivering over 34,000 grants. The funding distributed totals nearly £170m over the last two years, with the council reacting swiftly to disperse the funding to local business.

In addition, the council has run numerous other projects including a £2.76m Economic Recovery Fund, of which £1.1m supported 54 businesses' growth projects, £500,000 in Local Enterprise Partnership Growth Hub business support, and £280,00 in grants to businesses providing 'co-working' space. The council assisted other sectors with bespoke grant schemes, covering tourism, environment, and skills.

The council is now looking to the future and held an economic recovery conference at Shrewsbury Town Football Club, where local leaders met to look to establish an economic recovery roadmap out of the pandemic.

[Find out more here](#)



Worcestershire County Council

Key infrastructure works completed during pandemic

Despite the impact of the pandemic - and flooding - in Worcestershire, the county council has completed several high profile pieces of work to try and ensure local economies can continue to thrive despite the pandemic.

As part of economic recovery efforts, the council has completed regeneration works to the town centres in Redditch - including completing refurbishment works in Market Place at the height of the pandemic's second wave - and in Evesham.

The county authority also launched an 'on demand' bus service in Bromsgrove, whilst major infrastructure works, including a bridge refurbishment in Worcester and a new road layout at a busy junction in Kidderminster were also completed.

[Find out more here](#)



Herefordshire Council

Business summit to get traders' input for recovery

More than 50 business leaders in Herefordshire, alongside local MPs and the council's leadership, took part in a business summit in the autumn to discuss ideas on the future of business in the county.

Organised by the council, the summit brought business and local leaders together to discuss the economic recovery and post-pandemic growth, including industries of the future which could transform Herefordshire's economy.

The event is part of Herefordshire's 2050 Big Plan, devised by the council. This strategy sets out how the county can drive change, building new relationships with businesses to deliver growth, and the role of government and its supporting policies. Delegates were given a tour of a new build cyber research and development centre - a public-private partnership.

[Find out more here](#)



North Northamptonshire Council

Major works aim to revitalise town centre

Major works for Kettering's town centre are underway in 2022, aimed at revitalising the high street to improve footfall and as part of wider regeneration.

The Kettering High Street Heritage Action Zone project, a £4 million partnership between North Northamptonshire Council and Historic England, is working to reinvigorate parts of Kettering town centre to improve the look of its street scene, showcasing the town's heritage. Aimed at kickstarting wider regeneration and attracting new business, the works include replacement roads and pathways, tree planting, and improvements to the street scene.

As part of the partnership, funded in part by the council, grants will be made available for shop owners to spruce up their storefronts, whilst funding is also available for conversion and repairs of historic buildings.

[Find out more here](#)



SETTING OUT A VISION: LONG-TERM GROWTH STRATEGIES

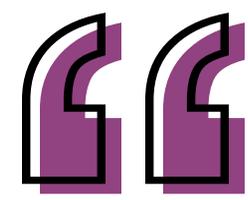
The nature of the pandemic – which has accelerated the decline of some sectors – means that local economies have changed irrevocably since March 2020.

Councils are currently grappling with changing workforce patterns, higher unemployment rates, and declining high street footfall, to name but a few issues in their areas. It is how councils can lead the charge in adapting to these challenges and transform their areas into post-pandemic economies that will go a long way to determining how successfully places will recover in the coming years.

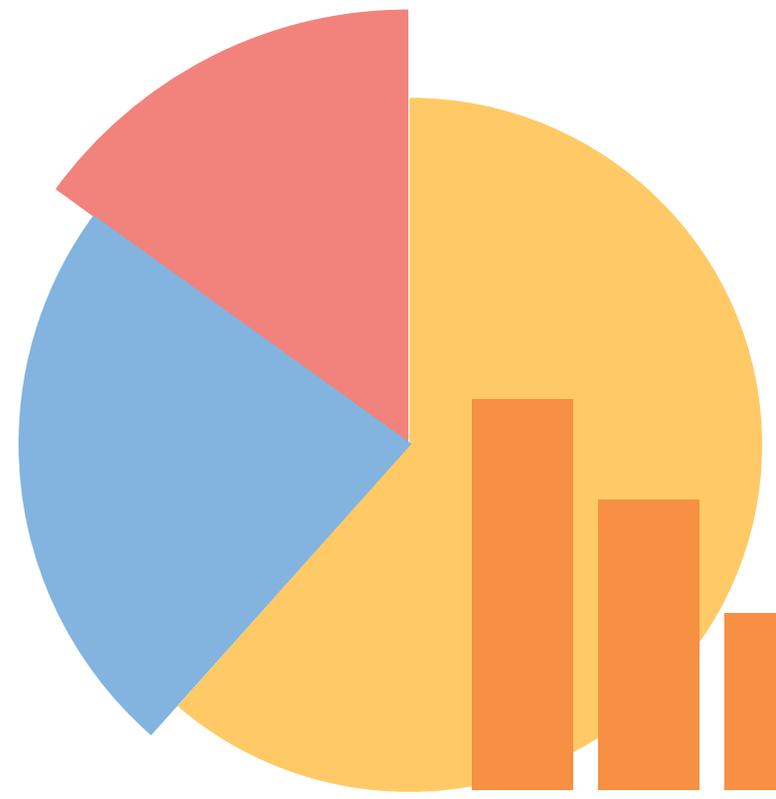
Whilst national policy will have a big influence, county and unitary councils can use their influence and expertise to bring together partners to set out ambitious visions for their areas, building long-term strategies for what is needed for their businesses and their communities, while setting out a framework for targeting investment.

This theme shows how several county authorities are thinking big and imaginatively in their strategic plans for the future, encompassing infrastructure, levelling-up, inward investment, and skills considerations.

Other long-term work is well underway, such as creating the foundations to attract new industries, or agree growth deals: showing counties' ability to influence and convene high profile local partners.



County councils and unitary councils can use their influence and expertise to bring together partners to set out ambitious visions for their areas



Northumberland Council

Bringing partners together to deliver 5,000 jobs

Northumberland Council played a major role in securing £450m of investment in a ground-breaking deal.

The council worked with local partners, including Cumbria County Council – and two different governments – to sign the Borderlands Growth Deal in March 2021. The first-ever cross-border growth deal of its kind, it is estimated to deliver £1.1bn in additional GVA and create 5,500 jobs.

Investment will include funding for green energy, infrastructure, and skills – as well as funds to improve culture and tourism. This includes high-speed internet vouchers, the redevelopment of a train station, and investment in tourism, such as the Berwick Theatre.

[Find out more here](#)

Nottinghamshire County Council

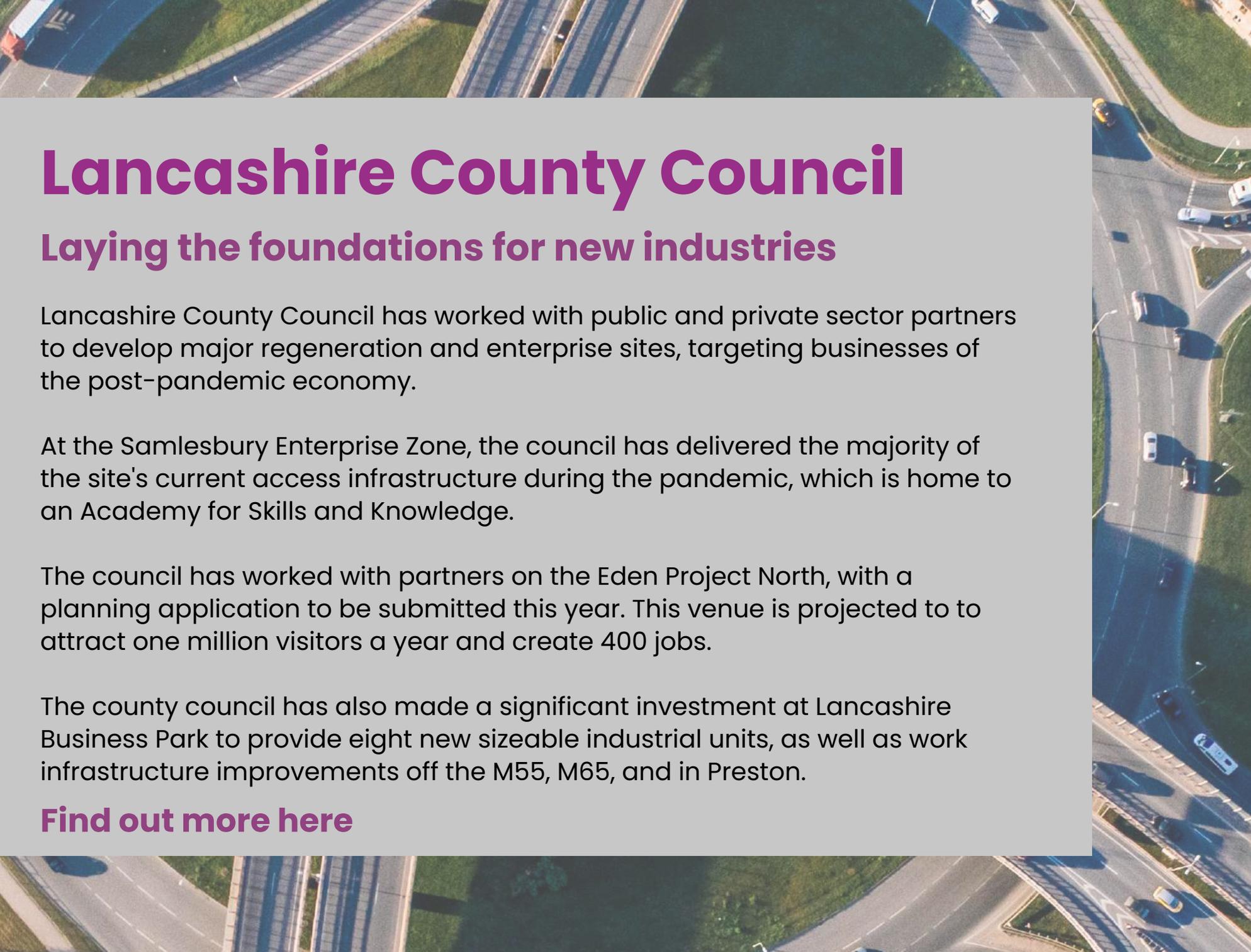
An ambitious ten-year vision for the county

Levelling-up life opportunities for Nottinghamshire's residents is at the heart of a new ten-year blueprint approved by the county council.

Nottinghamshire County Council's ten-year vision, approved in November, sets out how greater investment and powers for the county would support the delivery of major infrastructure projects, such as HS2, as well as a commitment to invest in priority communities and local roads and pavements.

Shaped by 12,000 residents, the plan includes working with local partners to pilot Family Hubs which give access to all family support services under one roof, a target of going carbon neutral by 2030, and creating the world's first 5G 'Connected Forest' at Sherwood Forest.

[Find out more here](#)



Lancashire County Council

Laying the foundations for new industries

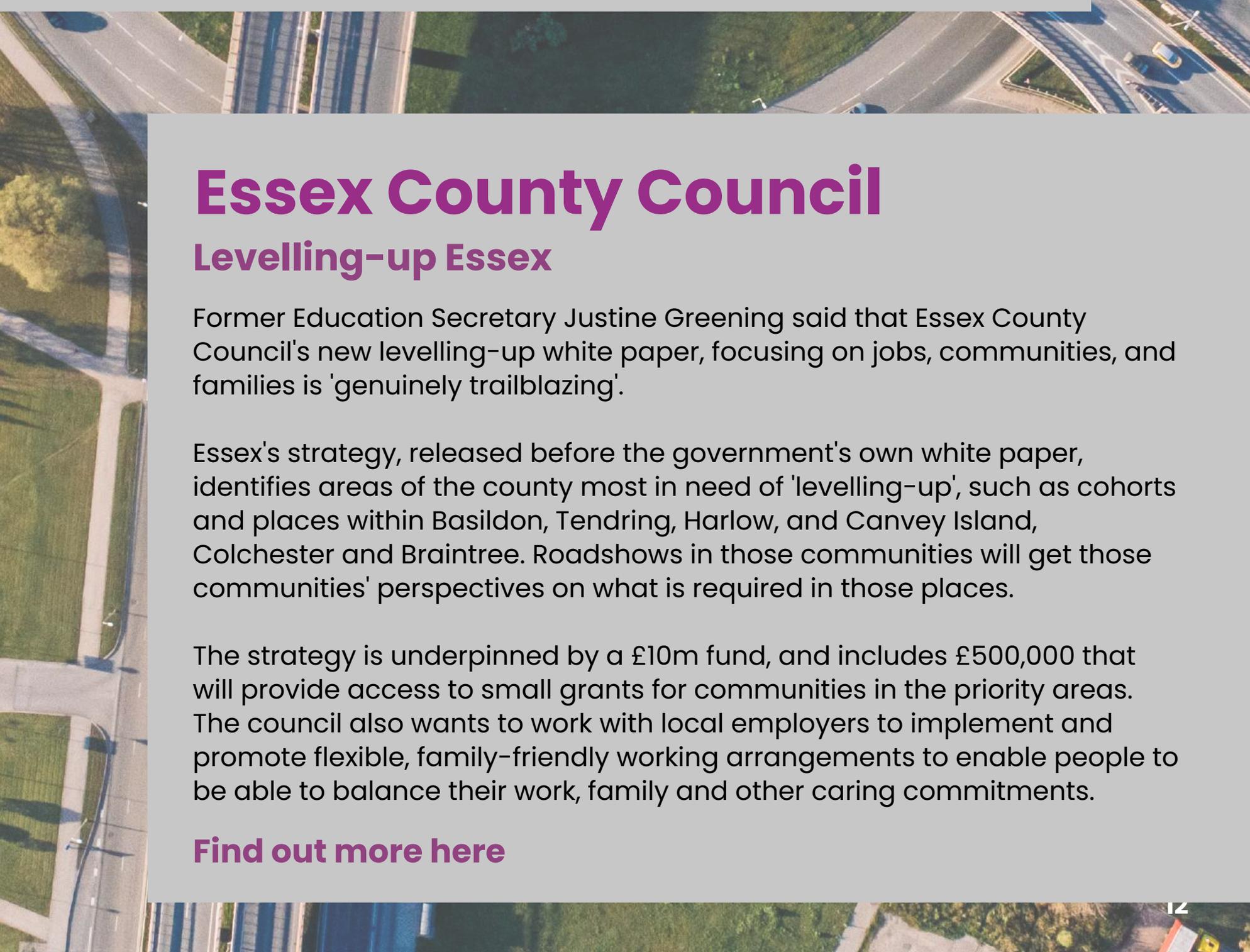
Lancashire County Council has worked with public and private sector partners to develop major regeneration and enterprise sites, targeting businesses of the post-pandemic economy.

At the Samlesbury Enterprise Zone, the council has delivered the majority of the site's current access infrastructure during the pandemic, which is home to an Academy for Skills and Knowledge.

The council has worked with partners on the Eden Project North, with a planning application to be submitted this year. This venue is projected to attract one million visitors a year and create 400 jobs.

The county council has also made a significant investment at Lancashire Business Park to provide eight new sizeable industrial units, as well as work infrastructure improvements off the M55, M65, and in Preston.

[Find out more here](#)



Essex County Council

Levelling-up Essex

Former Education Secretary Justine Greening said that Essex County Council's new levelling-up white paper, focusing on jobs, communities, and families is 'genuinely trailblazing'.

Essex's strategy, released before the government's own white paper, identifies areas of the county most in need of 'levelling-up', such as cohorts and places within Basildon, Tendring, Harlow, and Canvey Island, Colchester and Braintree. Roadshows in those communities will get those communities' perspectives on what is required in those places.

The strategy is underpinned by a £10m fund, and includes £500,000 that will provide access to small grants for communities in the priority areas. The council also wants to work with local employers to implement and promote flexible, family-friendly working arrangements to enable people to be able to balance their work, family and other caring commitments.

[Find out more here](#)

COMMUNITY RECOVERY: HELPING PEOPLE BACK TO THEIR FEET

Much of the focus of the economic impact of the pandemic in England has been on businesses and rising unemployment rates. But behind every statistic there is an individual's life that has been turned upside down from having their business close or losing their employment.

As the previous section showed, whilst county councils and unitary authorities are working on major long-term strategies to address the challenges of the pandemic, they are able to have a real influence on individual people's lives - as the last two years has shown.

Successful recovery efforts from the pandemic will take place over many years and through detailed strategies, but the recovery will also take place at a very local level: in adult education colleges, in libraries, and in community hubs. Here, county authorities will be looking to re-skill and up-skill residents, based on local need and priorities.

With unemployment levels higher in every county since the beginning of the pandemic, efforts to help re-skill and up-skill local people to help them adapt to emerging industries and a new economy will be vital.

This section showcases how county authorities are using their size and scale to influence the fortunes of residents at a very local level - whether from setting up bespoke training and education for young adults with special educational needs, or through adult education hubs to help to re-skill people, or more targeted measures such as providing free Wi-Fi to boost town centre footfall.



The recovery will also take place at a very local level: in adult education colleges, in libraries, and in community hubs... as county authorities look to re-skill residents



Devon County Council

Free courses to re-skill Devon residents

Three 'Wellbeing Hubs' have been set up across Devon which offer free learning for adults.

The hubs, set up as part of Devon County Council's economic recovery strategy, will see the council working with local schools and colleges. These facilities aim to up-skill or re-skill local residents, taking into account the adverse effects of the pandemic on some individuals.

These centres will allow people to learn new skills and gain qualifications, and there be a range of free courses on offer, including English and maths, digital skills, art and craft, but will also focus on mental health.

The first hub opened in Holsworthy in October, with facilities in Tavistock and Okehampton set to open their doors in Spring 2022.

[Find out more here](#)

North Yorkshire County Council

Free Wi-Fi key to economic recovery in county's towns

North Yorkshire County Council has worked with partners to begin rolling out free public access Wi-Fi in 18 market towns in the area - aimed at increasing town centre footfall as part of economic recovery efforts.

With people being encouraged to work from home more, the scheme aims to support the economic recovery in places such as Whitby, Ripon, and Knaresborough. With footfall down in many high streets across the county, the council believes that offering free internet services could encourage people to visit.

In addition, this free Wi-Fi offers opportunities for people with limited or no broadband to access vital local council, government and health services.

[Find out more here](#)

Hampshire County Council

New hubs to support individuals with SEND

Hampshire's first 'Independence Hub' - which offers post-16 education to young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) opened last year, with more to follow in 2022.

The hub, based in a college in Alton, was funded by the county council. The facility offers a dedicated learning environment for individuals with SEND, and also focuses on helping prepare them for adulthood, providing the essential skills needed for independent living, employment and good health.

With 13,000 people in Hampshire on Education, Health, and Education Plans currently in post-16 education, council leaders say this facility's dedicated support could give these individuals the best chance to make the most of their talents, helping them to achieve their goals.

[Find out more here](#)

East Sussex County Council

Offering work and job opportunities to rough sleepers

Following a successful pilot, East Sussex County Council is rolling out a scheme where former rough sleepers are given work and training opportunities.

Plumpton College in the county recently welcomed a group from the Rough Sleepers Initiative for an eight-week training programme in local parks which included a mixture of activities to support wellbeing, a qualification in Horticulture Studies, and work experience. Some of those on the course had slept in parks they were now helping to improve.

Heading into 2022, a further 50 people who can benefit from scheme will be invited to take part at three new locations over the next six months, to try and ensure those individuals do not fall into homelessness again. The scheme is funded by the Covid Outbreak Management Fund.

[Find out more here](#)

A GREEN RECOVERY: CLIMATE ACTION AND REGENERATION

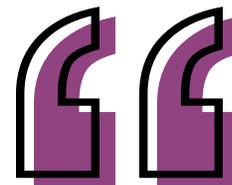
The threat of climate change continues to be one of the most pressing issues we, as a society, face and all eyes were on the UK last Autumn at COP26.

A green and sustainable recovery are now key features of economic growth and recovery strategies, with county authorities recognising that there is a significant economic and societal value on decarbonisation and that a large part of the industry of the future will be climate-related.

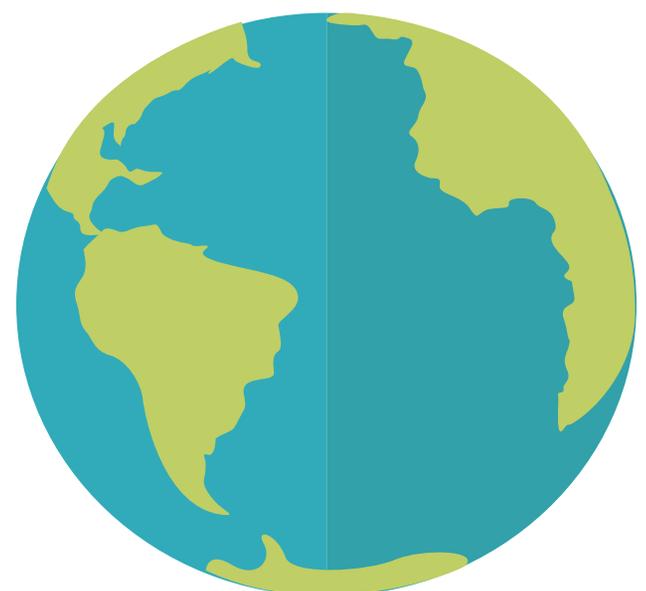
At a local level, every county council and unitary council in the CCN membership has a climate action plan in place and they have worked hard to embed this work across the whole of the council. Despite the onset of the pandemic, CCN member councils have all set ambitious carbon neutral targets, and have begun to set out strategies on how they can achieve these.

One area of particular importance is upgrading existing housing stock. With homes needing to be retrofitted and new green standards coming to the fore, housing and regeneration is intertwined with reaching net-zero: CCN's members have begun putting together proposals on how they can decarbonise existing housing stock and influence the development of greener homes.

This section showcases the innovative work from CCN councils, including using an old coal mine's water to heat 1,500 homes in a new development, ambitious plans to cut one in three car journeys by 2040, and a county's first-ever electric vehicle strategy, aimed at ensuring the right infrastructure is in place for residents.



Despite the onset of the pandemic, CCN members have all set ambitious carbon neutral targets



Durham County Council

Major development heated by natural resources

A 1,500 home development will see heating and hot water for its houses pumped with natural resources from an old coal mine nearby – a UK first.

Durham County Council has worked with local partners, including the Coal Authority, to ensure that the Seaham Garden Village will benefit from sustainable energy sources in an example of the local authority using a place-based regeneration and sustainable energy approach.

The mine water from a nearby coal mine is extracted and then heated using pumps, and will be used to power the development. This type of energy will be affordable for residents and will have a stable price.

The council has played a lead role in developing proposals, which include 750 affordable homes and a new school, and the first residents are expected to move in by the middle of 2023.

[Find out more here](#)

Oxfordshire County Council

Twenty year transport plan sets out green strategy

Oxfordshire County Council has targeted a net-zero transport network by 2040 – including replacing one in three current car trips.

The county's Local Transport and Connectivity Plan sets out to achieve this by reducing the need to travel and discouraging unnecessary individual private vehicle use through making walking, cycling, public and shared transport the natural first choice for residents.

The strategy includes rolling out more electric vehicle infrastructure and an ambition to increase the number of annual cycling trips to one million by 2031. It also sets out an aim to improve multi-modal travel, including the development of mobility hubs where people can easily change between different forms of transport, so that not all of a longer trip is made by car.

[Find out more here](#)

Wiltshire Council

Ten year plan to make 5,000 properties greener

Wiltshire Council last year began a major piece of work – updating all 5,000 homes in the authority's housing stock that are rated under B in the government's Energy Performance Certificate (EPC).

The ten-year plan, Wiltshire's Housing Energy Efficiency Programme, looks to tackle both climate change and fuel poverty, and aims to reduce carbon emissions from those thousands of homes, reducing energy costs, and mitigating the impact from future energy price rises.

The council will retrofit around 500 properties a year, which are located in towns, villages, and rural areas in Wiltshire. The council secured £546,000 in funding from the government's Green Homes Grant, and begun work on the county's 100 least energy efficient properties last year.

[Find out more here](#)

Norfolk County Council

County's first electric vehicle strategy

Norfolk County Council has identified gaps in the county where there are a lack of electric vehicle charging points – and its first ever electric vehicle infrastructure strategy looks to plug the gaps.

With petrol and diesel cars being phased out across the UK, the council assessed the take up of electric vehicles in the county – with 22% of registrations in South Norfolk but only 5% in Great Yarmouth. The council aims to be carbon neutral by 2030.

The authority's strategy sets out ways to improve electric vehicle infrastructure, including creating more charging points on streets, near village halls and community hubs, and in every new parking space. The council also proposes placing a requirement on developers to ensure every new home with a parking space has access to a charge point.

[Find out more here](#)

CCN

COUNTY COUNCILS NETWORK

Founded in 1997, the County Councils Network is a network of 23 county councils and 13 unitary authorities that serve county areas. The network is a cross party organisation, expressing the views of member councils to the Local Government Association and to the government.

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County Councils Network



County Councils Network

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COUNTIES

LEADING RECOVERY

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