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ARTICLE

The road to "local green recovery": Signposts from COVID-19 lockdown life in the UK

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Abstract

Responding to the conspicuous absence of reference to the local scale in national and global discourses of "green recovery" from COVID-19, this paper articulates a series of interlinked research agendas united by a focus on what a "green recovery" might involve at a local scale within the context of the United Kingdom. We argue that geography as a discipline is particularly well placed to contribute to theoretical and practical framings of "green recovery" as manifested at and through a range of scales, including the micro (individual), meso (household), and what we term "meso+" (neighbourhood). Specifically, we signpost what might be considered "green shoots" worthy of urgent empirical investigation – shifts in everyday life and practice catalysed by COVID-19 and with the potential to underpin longer-lasting transformations towards socially, economically, and environmentally sustainable localities.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19, green recovery, habits, household, local, resilience

1 | INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 has caused significant disruption around the world. It has thrown into sharp relief the limitations and vulnerabilities of many of the systems humanity has devised in support of (purported) economic progress, from precarious global supply chains of food and medical supplies (Hobbs, 2020) to employment economies that are equally precarious and grossly inequitable (Rushton et al., 2020). From a relatively early stage in the global pandemic, emergent policy discourses globally (WHO, 2020) and in the UK (Climate Assembly UK, 2020; Hanna et al., 2020) presented COVID-19 as an opportunity to kick-start a "green recovery" that puts environmental and economic sustainability in direct partnership. While this discourse has largely focused on the macro-level picture of national government policy, we argue that investigating responses to the pandemic at the local scale could usefully inform and enable local "green recoveries" (Burton, 2021; Searle et al., 2021).

We acknowledge that the term "recovery" could be problematic for those who would argue that a process which reverts too closely to what came before misses timely opportunities for more fundamental systemic change (Turhan, 2021). We might therefore consider whether framing the future in terms of "renewal, regeneration or re-organization" might more effectively catalyse change (Folke, 2006, p. 257). However, the term "recovery" used hereafter has been chosen to

align with the "national green recovery" discourse across UK public and private sectors. The term refers to the ways in which social-infrastructural collectives at various scales are responding to, adapting to, and minimising future vulnerability to the challenges driven by the COVID-19 pandemic, in ways which may be (un)intentionally "green" and thus of benefit to local, regional, and national environments.

In the UK, necessary limitations on everyday mobility, exercise, and consumption (UK Government, 2020a), as well as reports that the natural world has played a key role in how individuals have coped with "lockdown life" (CPRE, 2020), have induced greater attention towards our most proximate environments. This has prompted a mix of emotions, with pleasure, joy, and relief often tempered or even overwhelmed by sadness, anxiety, fear, or frustration (Li et al., 2020; Rajkumar, 2020). We therefore acknowledge the enormous practical and emotional challenges wrought by COVID-19 for people from a range of circumstances, and the role of material and natural environments in mediating these, whether for better or worse (Burton, 2021). Notwithstanding the significant – and problematic – racialised, classed, and gendered variations in lived experiences of lockdown (Turhan, 2021), there has been a common requirement to adapt to and cope with the pandemic-induced restrictions on everyday life.

The necessary concentration of everyday life within households – such as, for some, conducting both social and working life from home – has demanded significant practical and emotional adaptation. Patterns of working, learning, everyday provisioning, eating, exercising, and resting (to name a few) have all been upended. This enforced experiment sits against a backdrop of extant research which has previously framed households as crucibles of habit formation, particularly in the context of enculturating "green" practices (Reid et al., 2010). We therefore identify a timely opportunity to explore how *some* aspects of "lockdown life" might be engendering positive feedback loops between personal (micro), household (meso), and neighbourhood ("meso+") resilience, support for more localised economies, and environmental sustainability, whether intentionally or inadvertently (Hitchings et al., 2015). Goffman describes this as a "new kind of glocalisation, in which people live far more local lives than in recent decades but with greater global awareness through a connective world brain" (2020, p. 48). Specifically, we see both practical and intellectual value in identifying where *positive* outcomes (economically, environmentally, and/or socially) have been achieved at the local scale (individual/micro, household/meso, neighbourhood/meso+) in this challenging context. In doing so we by no means wish to downplay the negative impacts of COVID-19 nor deny that many people will likely revert to aspects of pre-pandemic life. Rather, we see an important role for geographical research in bringing critical attention to bear on those *positive* phenomena that have emerged through the cracks of this crisis, in order to feed into narratives and practices of "green recovery" that accommodate, enable – and perhaps learn from – recovery and resilience at the local scale. Here we articulate a research agenda by outlining four intersecting avenues for geographical investigation that we suggest might enhance understanding of the potential levers for local green recovery. Some of the intersecting cross-scalar manifestations of these four avenues are illustrated in Table 1; the examples selected are illustrative and by no means exhaustive.

2 | CONNECTING LOCAL GREEN RECOVERY

Research that has previously explored household-level responses to other types of large-scale crises, such as emergencies induced by natural hazards, has demonstrated a paradigm shift towards "bottom-up" approaches to building resilience (Cutter et al., 2008), with local-scale action emerging as a key strategy within risk management policies (Godschalk et al., 2003; Van Niekerk et al., 2018). Central to this is the visibility of others' actions, which contributes to the sense of belonging to a network of preparedness (Cox & Perry, 2011) and shared community resilience (Magis, 2010). From the start of lockdown in the UK (23 March 2020), self- and community-organised support networks proved crucial as a practical means of meeting vulnerable people's basic needs for food and medicines, tackling the social isolation that resulted from lockdown restrictions, and promoting a discourse of "all being in this together" (Pristerà et al., 2020; Public Health England, 2020), even while the reality proved substantially different. This has been most apparent in the UK by the formation of covidmutualaid.org, a national network of local groups focused on providing essential support for the most vulnerable. In response to variations in lockdown restrictions across the UK, the need for responsive support networks (both physical and digital) is likely to persist, particularly when the resumption of some aspects of 'normal' life re-obscures the needs of the still vulnerable.

Echoing a recent call from Jones et al. (2020) for geographers to proactively engage with those communities of practice which are seeking to deliver "resilience" (acknowledging the problematic near ubiquity of that term), we see opportunities to examine how locally oriented (meso+) neighbourhood initiatives become more than the sum of their parts as they fulfil multiple (social, emotional, practical) needs. This is particularly salient as local authorities, third-sector

TABLE 1 Matrix illustrating cross-scalar interconnections within four thematic areas of "local green recovery"

	Connecting	Navigating	Feeding	Nurturing
Micro (Individual)	Heightened sense of individual agency and personal resilience through connectedness with spatially proximate others	Intensified embodied experience of local area through spatial constraints on mobility; increase in walking, running, wheeling, cycling for exercise and fulfilment of basic needs (e.g., buying food)	Food supply concerns prompted: meal planning, batch cooking, food preserving. Increased interest in home-growing vegetables linked to food supply challenges and individual need for a 'project' to manage anxiety or boredom	Interaction with plant/animal nature, e.g., through time spent in garden; cultivation of care for nature through gratitude for access to it
Meso (Household)	Collective mobilisation/organisation within households to contribute to local networks by offering specific skills/capabilities	Shared leisure activities, e.g., family walks and bike rides	Undertaking of new multigenerational hobbies, e.g., gardening/growing vegetables/cooking/baking. Provisioning in new ways, e.g., subscribing to veg boxes, milk deliveries	Gardens as spaces for human–nature mutual care; gardens as spaces of paid employment (e.g., garden offices) and social life; access to hyper-local green space/nature (e.g., within the home, on doorstep, on street)
Meso+ (Neighbourhood)	Networked connection of mutual aid groups across local/regional areas; visibility and accessibility of local aid/action groups	Increased digital connection (e.g., through fitness apps) with local others; removal of commuting obligations allowed 're-acquaintance' with local people and services	Support for local food producers resulting from requirement to 'shop local'; mutual aid groups providing food for vulnerable households	Access to local green space (beyond garden/yard); networked connection of engagement with nature, e.g., engagement with plant/bird ID apps, citizen science projects

community support networks, and *ad hoc* "neighbour-to-neighbour" arrangements constituted the front-line response to many COVID-19 challenges. The efficiency and efficacy of the micro–meso–meso+networks forged through necessity suggest valuable opportunities to learn from their practical enablers and emotional drivers, ahead of future (public health/environmental) crises.

We might also consider in what contexts neighbourhood support networks might usefully be (re)framed as "encouragement" or "motivation" networks. For those local authorities which have declared a climate emergency (around 69% of them; LGA, 2020a), a joined-up response to COVID-19 and the climate emergency could encourage and enable the continuation of newly formed individual and household habits aligned with more environmentally sustainable living, such as shopping locally on foot or bike, by focusing explicitly on individual wellbeing or neighbourhood connection rather than the environmental benefit. This may bring easily embodied sustainability into the purview of those for whom environmental crises are marginal concerns (Myers et al., 2012).

The alignment of public health and environmental imperatives has perhaps never before been so timely, offering synergies and efficiencies of value to both societal impact and the public purse (Nurse & Dunning, 2020). Understanding the mechanisms that effectively connect micro-scale needs and capabilities with meso+civic structures will be essential to local green recovery in the context of an ever-retreating state.

3 | NAVIGATING LOCAL GREEN RECOVERY

Restrictions on mobility have been at the centre of life under lockdown. The requirement in the UK for those who could to work from home has illustrated the impact of commuting on worker productivity (Beck et al., 2020), personal wellbeing (Chatterjee et al., 2020), and the physical and natural environments that otherwise have to make space for human life (Child, 2020). Growing unemployment (especially among the young), furlough schemes, and economic contraction have all cast light on *who* moves (or is *required* to move) and how, as well as the extent to which any element of "choice" features in everyday mobility. Together, these shifts raise questions around how employment-sector norms both "lock in" travel-related carbon intensity and "lock out" opportunities – including opportunities to choose low/zero-carbon mobility options – for those in particular sectors, roles, or geographic locations.

The shift to localised living driven by spatially recast practices of work and leisure has collapsed the often distant spatial reach of these activities, instead re-scaling much everyday mobility to a half-hour walk around the neighbourhood to simulate the morning commute or a run to the next town in place of a fitness class at the gym. This has called into question some of the (il)logics of everyday mobility that previously were often difficult to contest, including travelling to fulfil needs capable of being met more locally. We therefore wonder to what extent "re-enchantment" (Bennett, 2001) with the local through limitations on mobility might enable a positive feedback loop, in which pandemic-induced requirements to "stay local" create a sense of willingness to remain local – *some* of the time and for *some* activities. We might ask, for instance, whether a continuation in home-working arrangements has any bearing on an individual's inclination to shop locally, on foot or bike. Here, the economic futures of meso+commuter settlements might form a key consideration in a multi-scalar green recovery that sees macro-level working cultures (such as more flexible working for some[1]) tied to micro-level re-enchantment with local neighbourhoods.

With private car use returning to pre-pandemic levels (UK Government, 2020b), a mixed picture of who can, will, or should continue to work from home (e.g., Centre for Cities, 2021; Lund et al., 2021), and a growing proportion of retail taking place online (UNCTAD, 2020), contributing to the economic challenges faced by local high streets (LGA, 2020b), we might interrogate how shifts in our self-conceptualisations – as workers, as consumers, as people who *get around* – are mediating how we (want to) *do* mobility. The significant growth in e-bike sales, for instance (Mintel, 2021), might indicate new material (socio-)cultures of mobility in which the status previously attached to a private car transfers to an e-bike. We might also ask what we want – or need – personal everyday mobility *for*. In other words, have changing requirements for how we *must* get around changed why, how, or indeed whether we opt to be mobile in pre-pandemic ways? We see the intersection of (re-)localised work, travel, and leisure practices, and the everyday life rhythms that both shape and emerge from them, as being a crucial avenue for exploration of how COVID-induced (im)mobilities might shape local green recoveries.

Additionally, social and emotional dimensions of everyday "getting about" were fundamentally challenged from the start of the pandemic. Limitations on individual range of movement, such as the requirement to "stay local" as well as the closure of many spaces of leisure and exercise, from gyms to parks, further concentrated social and emotional life at the scale of the household (or social "bubble"[2]) and/or neighbourhood. Neighbourhoods became sole sources of exercise,

fresh air, and social interaction (at the government-sanctioned "social distance"), all of which proved crucial for many people's ability to practically and emotionally cope with COVID-19. The early stages of UK lockdown drove a surge in walking and cycling as leisure activities, prompting individuals or household groups to fulfil important self-care needs on their doorsteps, heightening awareness of the previously overlooked possibilities of the local for physical and mental wellbeing, as well as the nurturing of intimate relationships (Nurse & Dunning, 2020; Payne, 2020). For some, this meant connecting these activities to a community of digital others through the use of apps with shared mapping functionalities such as Strava, or technologies such as Fitbits that offer intensified place knowledge (Farrelly, 2017). We are thus prompted to wonder to what extent the affordances of local environments for self-care and relationship-care during the pandemic might translate into a modest yet valuable feedback loop, where greater care is in turn revisited on those local environments through micro-acts such as litter avoidance.

4 | FEEDING LOCAL GREEN RECOVERY

The disruption to supermarket supply chains at the start of the UK's lockdown starkly illustrated the vulnerabilities inherent to globalised food production networks (Singh et al., 2020). For many consumers this was their first experience of scarcity of household essentials. The short-term benefits of this to some local businesses was significant. Subscriptions to vegetable box delivery schemes doubled, with the highest growth experienced by smaller companies with a local delivery radius (Wheeler, 2020). Yet anecdotal evidence from some smaller-scale food producers suggests that, as the first phase of UK lockdown eased, custom then declined (Millar, 2020) as shoppers reverted to national supermarkets. At the same time, the difficulties faced by small, local, independent businesses of all kinds as a result of shifting and short-notice government guidance on COVID-19 restrictions drew stark attention to the socio-economic value of consuming locally. This highlights some intriguing tensions in consumers' differential engagement with opportunities to support local businesses, as well as questions about the nature of the imaginations and emotions that shape household provisioning. How, for example, did temporary consumers of vegetable box deliveries conceive of that product, that service, and that producer before, during, and after they consumed it? To what extent were such decisions driven by, for example, altruism towards local suppliers versus anxiety about fulfilling household needs?

Like vegetable boxes, doorstep milk deliveries significantly increased in popularity during the early months of the pandemic, with younger consumers turning to this service for the first time (Farming UK, 2020). Although suppliers reported some fall-back in sales as pandemic restrictions eased, demand has remained significantly up compared with pre-pandemic levels. Teasing out the interplay of mundane but influential micro-level factors, such as convenience, a sense of novelty, and a reduction in household packaging waste, might offer helpful signposts for other local food and drink producers. Further, as vegetable box and milk delivery businesses now offer more than their "headline" groceries (both often sell other household staples including bread, fruit juices, and dry goods, such as rice and pulses (e.g., Earth, 2021)), we might ask to what extent local distributors embody increasingly important socio-economic roles within their local areas as "meso+connectors" of local producers, by reducing food miles, promoting support for local businesses, and reshaping relationships between producers and consumers at a range of scales.

Fresh food was not only sought from vegetable box schemes during lockdown in the UK. The uncharacteristically fine spring and summer weather encouraged some people to try "growing their own" at home in gardens or window boxes, or on allotments (Walljasper & Polansek, 2020). While home-grown produce is rarely scalable to full self-sufficiency, public engagement with the growing of food presents other opportunities of value to a green recovery, such as the impacts of "unveiling" the food production "fetish" (Cook, 2004) as the labour, skill, and temporalities of production are revealed. One important dimension of this revealed by WRAP (2020) demonstrated that consumers were managing their food better under lockdown, reducing waste of key foodstuffs (potatoes, bread, milk, and chicken) by 34% through activities such as meal planning and baking, freezing, and preserving to prolong the usability of items purchased. As lockdown lifted, food waste rose again. To what extent was the spectre of food waste the result of concerns about food scarcity, the affordability of food if household incomes had been reduced, or – for new "home-growers" – the result of their material engagement with the process of growing? As a patchy normalcy returns to domestic routines for some, and as evidence already points to a return to higher rates of food waste, we might enquire how lockdown-induced attentiveness to waste might be sustained as the social and temporal demands of post-lockdown life risk re-obscuring the everyday food (waste) fetish.

5 | NURTURING NATURE FOR LOCAL GREEN RECOVERY

With reference to the widely acknowledged role played by the natural world in many people's coping responses under lockdown (National Trust, 2020), there are intersections of personal self-care and care for nature that have been specifically emergent under lockdown that are ripe for exploration and build on recent research into the benefits of time spent in nature (Pretty et al., 2017; White et al., 2017). Household gardens and other forms of domestic green space (e.g., window boxes), as well as proximity to public green space (Slater et al., 2020), have proven important means of what we might term "mutual microcare" through simple acts of mindfulness and appreciation (Stuart-Smith, 2020). Here the multi-scalarity of "local green recovery" is perhaps at its most poignant and prescient, with individuals' interactions with local nature sometimes proving fundamental to their ability to engage with, and contribute to, forms of recovery beyond their own embodied lockdown experiences. Drawing on well-established cross-disciplinary literature concerned with the relationship between individual wellbeing, nature, and environmental care (e.g., Martin et al., 2020; White et al., 2020), questions pertaining to the significance of the local – and specifically the connections across micro, meso, and meso+scales – take on new urgency as the green shoots on the doorstep are, for some, both metaphor and practical reality. Geographical scholarship concerned with care provides some important theoretical and conceptual starting points, including recent work examining meanings and practices of care in the context of austerity (e.g., Hall, 2019; Power & Hall, 2018), itself an important point of intersection with notions of local (green) recovery, and theoretical developments that open up social (inter)actions as sites not just of care but embodied ethics (Middleton & Samanani, 2020), showing how acts of care can "ripple out into the world beyond immediate caring relationships and the immediate moment" (Hanrahan & Smith, 2020, p. 230). We suggest that this growing field has considerable scope to bring the nexus of self- and environmental care more explicitly into its purview.

Public interest in local nature also grew significantly during UK lockdown, with the Natural History Museum reporting that "the British Trust for Ornithology had twenty times as many people sign up for their Garden BirdWatch scheme as the previous five years" (2020, para. 24) and that wildlife spotting app iRecord recorded an increase of 54% in sightings compared with the same period in 2019. Emergent literature which has examined the impacts of the pandemic on a range of conservation projects suggests that citizen science approaches not only enable the continuation of important projects but engage local populations in care for local environments (e.g., Basile et al., 2021; Dwivedi, 2021). Some conservationists have actively urged their professional peers to seek to maintain the public interest in nature generated by the pandemic, with citizen science named as a key tool for doing so (Evans et al., 2020). Geographers might harness this enthusiasm to consider how wildlife encounters via citizen science apps play a part in deepening nature-watchers' stakes in care for the natural world. As we consider how to better understand changing orientations towards nature as the world adapts to live with COVID-19, the mutually reinforcing human–nature care relationship being played out through these micro-scale local recoveries has much to reveal.

6 | CONCLUSIONS

It would be a fallacy to celebrate any apparent environmental benefits of COVID-19 as anything other than circumstantial, partial, and – in many cases – temporary (Searle & Turnbull, 2020). However, here we have proposed that COVID-19 could act as a catalyst for positive local-scale change for some which, if sustained, could be beneficial for both humans and their environments. With a wide range of organisations seeing the efficiencies of tackling climate change and COVID-19 in parallel, the role of individuals, households, and neighbourhoods in visibly embodying a new, greener "normal" will be essential. Locally networked support structures can enable personal, social-psychological recoveries as well as economic and environmental recoveries – a synergy that will be needed for a green recovery to be both just and sustainable.

We contend that, over the longer term, "bottom-up" local-scale micro-resilience measures, though small and incremental, could have a much larger impact nationally if the opportunity to maintain them is harnessed and embraced within a "local green recovery" agenda. This paper constitutes a call for geographical scholarship to engage with these 'green shoots', to identify how shifts in everyday social relations, cultural practices, and environmental care have been driven by COVID-19, such that lasting templates for a multi-scalar 'green recovery' might be enabled.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this paper as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Given our focus on *local* green recovery, we concern ourselves with issues at the macro scale only insofar as they help explain or contextualise the examples we articulate. Here, our reference point is the ongoing work by CIPD into the future of flexible work, which began before COVID-19 but has been extended explicitly to consider pandemic impacts (CIPD 2021).

[2] In the UK, sole person households were permitted to form a "social bubble" with another household in order to address social isolation.

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