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ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

Robust Local Governance Responses in the Context of Turbulence: The Case of Collaborative and Co-Created COVID-19 Pandemic Responses in Two Local Authority Areas in England

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic required local and national governments to respond urgently and rapidly to new and unprecedented challenges. According to an influential strand of literature within public administration, public agencies must exhibit robust governance strategies to tackle the unpredictability, instability and complexity of a turbulent event such as the COVID-19. In the face of turbulence, robust governance is characterised by adaptability, agility and innovation and co-creating with partners and communities, while governance systems must evolve so that they perform more effectively in the future. This paper examines how two local authorities in England responded to the pandemic. We draw upon a novel qualitative dataset obtained through privileged access to senior council staff, elected members and council partners. Both 'Metaltown' (North West) and 'Milltown' (West Midlands) were poised, at the outset of the pandemic, to be badly hit by COVID-19 due to their population characteristics, relative deprivation and occupational structures, and the areas did experience some of the highest numbers of infection rates and coronavirus-related deaths. The two local responses both entailed multi-agency action with the local authority working alongside partners in the police, emergency services, health, education, transport and housing sectors, with private enterprise and with community groups to manage the challenges. Although we observed robust governance strategies, this occurred in the absence of any deliberate policy design at the national level. Instead, the responses were locally determined, fit for purpose and adaptive in response to challenges that emerged on the ground. The findings suggest a need to modify the robust governance framework to better account for contextually specific circumstances. This has implications for how local and national governments respond to current and future challenges, such as the ongoing cost-of-living and climate crises.

1 | Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic began as a global public health emergency but soon morphed into a multi-domain social, political and economic crisis that exacerbated pre-existing inequalities

and created new and unprecedented demands on public services. COVID-19 has been defined as a 'turbulent' event, one that required local and national governments around the world to respond urgently and rapidly, and that demanded 'adaptation, agile modification and pragmatic governance solutions'

James Rees is the co-author of this study.

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(Scognamiglio et al. 2023, 53). According to an influential strand of literature in public administration (PA), the problems facing society are becoming increasingly characterised by their turbulent nature, evolving in variable and unpredictable ways and presenting complex challenges that defy simplistic systemic solutions and instead require iterative adaptation (Ansell and Trondal 2018; Howlett, Capano, and Ramesh 2018).

If public agencies, local government foremost amongst them, are to maintain their functions and responsibilities in the face of a complex, cascading and multi-domain event, such as COVID-19, it is argued that they must exhibit robust governance, defined as a ‘complex system’s ability to remain functional in the face of shocks or disturbances’ (Capano and Woo 2017, 403). For Ansell et al. (2021, 952), robustness means that ‘creative and agile public organizations adapt to the emergence of new disruptive problems by building networks and partnerships with the private sector and civil society’. This was broadly true of the UK’s response to COVID-19, particularly at a sub-national level, as local public agencies and their partners worked together to meet basic human needs, tackle emergent problems and to ‘recover’ from the pandemic (Bennett et al. 2024). This included hitherto untested co-creation strategies such as public and third sector organisations collaborating with hyper-local community initiatives and mutual aid groups (Rees et al. 2022).

Yet, the empirical findings presented here challenge some of the normative underpinnings of this PA literature. First, these robust governance strategies seemingly emerged despite, rather than because of, any explicit adoption of a robust governance strategy for the UK. The national UK government response has been judged as flawed and chaotic (Hallett 2024), and local resilience took place in the context of strained, if not at times antagonistic, central-local relations. Second, the PA literature is perhaps better suited to those social-democratic states of continental Europe that exhibit high degrees of trust and cooperation rather than neoliberal states such as the UK. The resilience of the UK state and its capacity to act were weakened by a decade of austerity (Arrieta 2022), its focus on Brexit (Taylor 2023) and ongoing political instability (resulting in a ‘snap’ general election in December 2019). Third, theories of robust governance assume a top-down perspective that is not sufficiently grounded in the realities of everyday governance or governing during a turbulent event.

Drawing upon novel empirical research, we question whether this robust governance framework, which relies upon a picture of the (multi-scalar) state that is rational, competent and well-meaning and able to consciously co-construct robust governance, can fruitfully be applied to the UK. Did English local government and public agencies exhibit robust governance strategies despite the lack of a national enabling framework for robustness? If so, moving on from COVID-19 towards addressing subsequent and ongoing challenges such as the cost-of-living and climate crises, what can be learned from this?

We consider two local authority cases in England: Milltown (North West) and Metaltown (West Midlands)¹. In the UK, the national context of a lack of preparedness, poor leadership, policy U-turns and constantly-changing guidance created a disruptive context for local pandemic responses. Nevertheless,

the responses in both case study areas demonstrated creativity, agility and adaptability, as well as considerable ingenuity and place-based commitment to saving lives during an emergency situation. We conclude that although the local responses in the two areas did exhibit elements of robust governance, they did so in the absence of any conscious and deliberate policy design. Crucially, the relative success of these two responses—where success is judged as having averted even higher numbers of disease and deaths—was seen to have been that they were locally determined and owned, fit for purpose and adaptive in face of turbulent and contextually specific challenges that emerged on the ground. Furthermore, events since suggest a return to ‘business as usual’ which runs counter to the robust strategies recognised within the PA literature, such as the reduction of ‘red-tape’, developing high-trust and rapid communication environments, and collaboration across sectoral boundaries.

First, we review the robust governance literature. Second, we outline the methodological approach. Third, we consider the respective responses. Finally, we bring those responses into dialogue with the robust governance framework.

2 | Robust Governance in a Context of Turbulence

We consider first (i) turbulence and then, as a response, the need for (ii) robust governance, as well as (iii) co-creation as an emerging feature of robust government responses.

2.1 | The Context of Turbulence

A prominent body of work in PA views turbulence as the dominant feature of the landscape for governing, since the world is becoming increasingly unpredictable, complex and chaotic (Ansell and Trondal 2018; Howlett, Capano, and Ramesh 2018). For instance, Cristofoli et al. (2023) understand turbulence as the ‘new normal’, and consequently research in PA has focused upon how governance systems can adapt to continue to deliver their agenda and functions (Capano and Woo 2017; Sørensen and Ansell 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic was undoubtedly a turbulent event, exhibiting characteristics of complexity and unpredictability with a particular stress on extreme urgency and threats to life. It had dynamic cascading effects whereby an initial health issue spread to all social domains (Bambra et al. 2020; Scognamiglio et al. 2023). The rapid surge in humanitarian need, the necessity for immediate organisational, digital and communicative adaptation, and uncertainties about the future (for instance, whether a vaccine would be found) created major challenges for local government and civil society (Calò et al. 2023). A key insight of this literature is the implication that governance must adapt and adjust to a new equilibrium rather than simply restore the previous order.

2.2 | Robustness as Response to Turbulence

The implementation of systemic ‘robustness’ or the adoption of a repertoire of robust governance strategies has been posited as a key component of the response to turbulence by PA scholars (e.g., Howlett and Ramesh 2023; Sørensen and Ansell 2023).

At one level, robustness is displayed when a governance system is capable of maintaining its primary functions, but Ansell and colleagues go further to suggest that central to a robust governance system is the capability to respond creatively, adapting to challenges by partnering with a wide range of non-governmental actors (Ansell, Sørensen, and Torfing 2021). Indeed, this strand of co-productive and co-creative activity has long been a feature of UK local governance, outlasting contrasting ideological national policy regimes (Durose and Richardson 2015).

Thus, in our view, a governance system can be considered to be robust where it adopts a range of strategies of ‘flexible adaptation, agile modification, and pragmatic redirection of governance solutions’ (Ansell, Sørensen, and Torfing 2021, 952; see also Calò et al. 2023; Howlett, Capano, and Ramesh 2018; Scognamiglio et al. 2023). In contrast to the concept of resilience, which refers to how a system may return to a previous state of equilibrium in the face of disruption (Ansell, Sørensen, and Torfing 2023), robustness entails the potential transformation of the system so that it might perform more effectively under turbulent conditions into the future (Howlett and Ramesh 2023; Sørensen and Ansell 2023). This was visible during the pandemic in the face of a novel threat.

At this point, a number of key implications arise for our focus on local government. First, though robustness seems to have been essential to the global (but varied) response to the COVID-19 crisis (Scognamiglio et al. 2023), it does not guarantee that local responses are successful in the sense of mitigating the impacts of COVID-19; our aim here is to make a balanced assessment in the two case studies. Second, a potential drawback of the robust governance literature is the lack of explicit recognition of the multi-scalar nature of sub-national governance systems. This is pertinent not only because of England’s complex sub-national governance structure (Davies and Giovannini 2024) but also, as we shall demonstrate, due to the nature of multi-agency action within the two places, which relied upon different organisations—each with their own geographies and structures—working together. Third is our observation that robust governance could arguably be conceived as a recommendation for a more rational and ‘complete’ policy system, rather than one which is emergent, spontaneous and unpredictable.

2.3 | Co-Creation as Key to Robust Responses

As noted above, for some time, and particularly in a context of constrained resources, co-creation strategies have played a role in the functioning of English local government. They are also widely recognised as being central to the pandemic response given its cascading impacts, complexity and urgency (Bennett et al. 2024; Sancino, Rees, and Schindele 2019). Co-creation can be understood as ‘a process through which two or more public and private actors attempt to solve a shared problem, challenge, or task through a constructive exchange of different kinds of knowledge, resources, competences, and ideas’ (Torfing, Sørensen, and Røiseland 2019, 802) and involves decentralising governance through collaboration, partnerships and networks (Ansell and Miura 2020). Indeed, research shows how the pandemic presented local governance systems with the stark challenge of developing co-creation with diverse societal actors in

a context of ambiguity and uncertainty (Smoke, Tosun, and Yilmaz 2023; Steen and Brandsen 2020; Torfing et al. 2021).

While the benefits of cross-sectoral collaboration include the wider range of insights and experiences that can be shared, solutions found and resources drawn upon, co-creation also comes with considerable challenges to public sector organisations. First, UK public sector bodies are not noted for their dynamism, innovative capacity and adaptability, although research has highlighted that civil society organisations noted a profound shift in the openness of the public sector to implementing cross-sectoral solutions during the pandemic (Bennett et al. 2024). Second, the need for stability, relationship building and the development of trust have long been recognised as core challenges to successful cross-sectoral collaboration (Torfing, Sørensen, and Røiseland 2019), yet conversely the urgency of COVID-19 has been noted as driving rapid experimentation (Steen and Brandsen 2020). Ansell, Sørensen, and Torfing (2021) identify three concepts of robustness that are pertinent for co-creation: *prototyping* involves developing new methods through experimentation and rapid feedback; *modularization* refers to the ability to reassemble policies and programmes to respond to changing circumstances and *bounded autonomy* describes the flexibility that local actors enjoy to adjust national strategies according to conditions on the ground.

Thus, as Scognamiglio et al. (2023) note, turbulence may be viewed as a direct threat to successful co-creation strategies, yet the possibility remains that urgent and cascading threats can be a catalyst for rapid co-creative innovation; indeed, research has illustrated the value of effective place-based leadership and combined expertise during the pandemic (Aluisio et al. 2020; Yilmaz and Boex 2021). Like Scognamiglio et al. (2023), who sought to add empirical evidence to the robust governance framework in the context of COVID-19, we believe there is an urgent need to compile real-world evidence, and we here draw upon qualitative research that benefited from unique and unparalleled access to the strategic governance actors, co-creating partners and other stakeholders in two English local government case studies.

3 | Methods

Milltown is located in the north west of England and Metaltown in the West Midlands. The areas both comprise a large town that is culturally and ethnically diverse, surrounded by several other smaller towns and villages that make up the local authority area. In 2019, both authorities returned Conservative administrations, breaking historical patterns of alternating between Labour and no overall control. Milltown and Metaltown are formerly industrial places with contrasting pockets of deprivation and relative affluence, and both rank amongst the 20% most deprived local authorities in England. In both areas, national government austerity policies have eroded the capacity and resilience of the local state causing greater pressures on public services and a shrinkage of the community and voluntary sector, with real-terms budget cuts totalling over 20% since 2010.

Milltown and Metaltown share features that shaped their vulnerability to COVID-19. Namely, (i) local economies dependent upon large numbers of low-wage frontline workers employed

in services and logistics industries who were not able to work from home; (ii) significant numbers of people living in multi-generational homes, combined with a crowded and dilapidated housing stock, which prevented effective social distancing and (iii) a disproportionately clinically vulnerable population. The two places were therefore poised to be badly hit by COVID-19 and did indeed observe some of the highest infection rates and coronavirus-related deaths in England.

In late 2021, the authors were commissioned by Metaltown Council to undertake a qualitative review of the actions taken within Metaltown during the pandemic response. Metaltown Council felt there was a need to document the actions that were taken during this period and to capture learning that could be useful in future crises. The following questions were co-designed with executive staff of Metaltown Council:

- What happened during the response and why?
- What were the key factors that facilitated the response?
- To what extent was partnership-working a feature of the response?
- To what degree did the response rely on agile and resilient governance?
- What can be learned for responding to future crises?

Then, in early 2022, the authors were commissioned by Milltown Council to conduct a qualitative review exploring similar avenues of inquiry, albeit focused on a particular period of time covering April–June 2021, when, in response to rapidly escalating infection rates, Milltown Council had led a comprehensive community engagement plan for testing, tracing, isolation and vaccination.

We conducted 59 semi-structured interviews² online lasting around 1 hour each with senior staff across multiple council departments³, elected members representing the major political parties, and local, regional and national partners, identified with the support of each council. The partners we interviewed included the police, emergency services, anchor organisations in the health, housing, transport and education sectors (including schools, colleges and universities), community and voluntary groups, the private sector and national partners *Highways England* and the *UK Health Security Agency* (formerly *Public Health England*). The interviews provided a secure space for officials to reflect on what were at times highly challenging personal and professional experiences. We were mindful to carefully build trust, rapport and understanding whilst retaining rigour and scrutiny of their decision-making processes.

Alongside interview transcripts, we collected interview notes and private correspondence between interviewees and the authors. We cross-checked the interview data with secondary data in the form of internal documents and reports, minutes of meetings, surveys, local and national news media and demographic, health and COVID-19 data. The dataset was then subject to rigorous qualitative thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006), whereby codes were derived from the initial research aims combined with additional themes identified during the research.

The preliminary findings of the initial two studies were ‘sense-checked’ via workshops with research participants before presentation to several council committees and stakeholder groups. Following completion of those studies, we systematically reanalysed the data coding for themes pertaining to robustness (e.g., adaptability, innovation, co-creation), which enabled comparison of the two cases.

Contrary to the view that working closely with the local authority might erode rigour, our approach has enabled unparalleled access to senior staff and the generation of a novel dataset that captures as close as possible to contemporaneous decision-making. However, some caveats remain. First, a small number of partners are omitted from our analysis. Second, the inclusion of more elected members would have offered the opportunity for greater political scrutiny. Third, speaking with a wider range of stakeholders—such as residents, frontline workers, community organisations and businesses, particularly those not involved in the activities—would allow for a fuller picture of how the pandemic was experienced in both places. This is vital work to equip local government to better respond to ongoing and future crises but beyond the remit of this paper.

4 | Responding to COVID-19 in Metaltown

We first (i) outline the response, before turning to consider (ii) factors which facilitated the response and (iii) the extent to which robust governance was exhibited.

4.1 | The Response

The strategic response in Metaltown placed the local authority at the centre. The Chief Executive of Metaltown Council led an Incident Management Team (IMT) consisting of local and regional partners to deliver multi-agency leadership, to coordinate activities and to translate the (expected) national strategy and guidance into a tailored local approach. The humanitarian activities, delivered with partners, were organised through the council’s pre-existing social prescribing mechanisms. This included the provision of a telephone number, operated by the fire service and volunteers, to enable residents to seek community-based support. The council funded some community organisations to deliver a telephone-based befriending service, a shopping service, food parcels, mobile libraries and a prescription collection service. Meanwhile, the authority issued computers and mobile phones so that employees could work remotely to sustain frontline services. Some services, such as leisure centres and libraries, were reduced or adapted, with staff being diverted to work elsewhere, while council providers (such as private hire taxis and minibuses) were instructed to assist vulnerable residents with payments continued. Officers also set about to secure facilities for the potential mass storage of corpses.

4.2 | Factors That Facilitated the Response

The response was led by a strong charismatic leader combined with a tangible sense of collective endeavour. It was agreed that

there was an already existing spirit of cooperation and trust between partners; the role of the IMT was to harness this. One partner operating at the regional level noted that Metaltown felt 'noticeably different [compared to] the functional approach taken by other local authorities' due to the strength and credibility of the council's leadership. Meanwhile, a local partner remarked that 'the culture was very good; it genuinely felt like the partners were all pulling in the same direction'. Many senior officials spoke about being born-and-bred in Metaltown, and of being united by a shared commitment to this place. They found solace in the IMT, describing it as a cathartic space to share challenges, to feel supported and to hear other partners' experiences. One officer recalled:

We really did just work out what we needed to do. We didn't really think about boundaries [...] It was a really collaborative, no barrier approach

The response required council officers, elected members and partners to make enormous personal sacrifices, such as working extremely long hours under immense pressure. Yet the local authority leadership was able to transform these individual emotional responses into an effective operational response. An additional factor was that organisations now shared a common sense of purpose; the pandemic affected every partner, so there were obvious advantages to working together. This was compared to earlier attempts at collaboration under the previous council leadership, which were considered to have lacked a shared sense of enthusiasm, purpose, commitment and risk.

Meanwhile, time-limited changes to legislation by Central Government enabled all local authorities to reduce certain services and relaxed other statutory requirements (a point to which we shall later return). Early into the pandemic the council switched to a model of emergency decision-making power which enabled decisions to be made without undergoing full political scrutiny, further empowering the Chief Executive.

4.3 | Robust Governance?

In Metaltown, pre-existing partnership arrangements proved invaluable. For instance, the main housing association had recently worked with the local hospital to help unemployed tenants find employment within the NHS; during the pandemic, the housing association was able to help relieve pressure on the hospital by adapting private homes to allow patients to be more readily discharged. New relationships also emerged. *Highways England* and regional transport groups provided data to the IMT on passenger numbers and traffic flows, enabling vital information (such as advising of peak times and when and when not to travel) to be communicated back to local residents through community partners. Working with health groups and the main housing association, the council turned a redundant municipal-owned building into a temporary hospital ward within 1 week, reducing pressure on the hospital. The council provided the NHS with two sports centres, an empty shop and free car parking to support vaccination, while transport groups provided additional public transport to

vaccination sites. These factors enabled Metaltown to roll-out the vaccine faster than other places.

We know that robust governance requires adaptability, agility and innovation to find imaginative solutions to complex problems. This meant that the response needed to have the ability to mobilise people and resources quickly, but too often central government (in)action was seen to have actively hindered local action. The guidance was confusing, contradictory, untimely and often at odds with the convictions of senior officials. Many officers reported the exact same frustrations: 'you'd get a government announcement at 5 o'clock at night [and] you know then what's going to happen; you're going to be working all hours responding to it'. It was also felt that 'we were too believing of government in the early days; we thought they had their act together [and] they knew what they were doing' (council officer). For instance, early into the pandemic, Metaltown Council expected to receive a sizeable delivery of food for distribution within the community, yet what arrived was perceived to be wholly insufficient. In the subsequent weeks, the authority decided to take matters into its own hands:

We took a decision that we weren't going to wait [...] so we just sourced PPE. We just kept buying it wherever we could find it. We literally had a team of people that all day, every day...and we created a big stock of PPE. We repurposed one of our day centres [municipal building] as basically storage for PPE. So, if you had gone into it, there was literally just boxes piled up in every corridor and every room [...] No care provider ever had a problem because we made sure that we sourced it and supplied it directly (council officer).

Further instances of locally led innovation included that during the first 'lockdown' they digitally mapped and promoted green spaces to encourage residents to 'stay local' and to conduct socially distanced recreation. Following inaccurate information published by national government, the authority rapidly developed an online postcode checker enabling residents to check precisely where upcoming door-to-door testing would be taking place. The council's communications team was able to exploit a temporary relaxation of GDPR rules to gain access to email addresses from the Electoral Roll. This allowed for the circulation of a residents' newsletter that communicated local and national news to residents, combating the spread of disinformation.

Clearly, challenges remained. Door-to-door engagement with residents saw relatively widespread rejection of voluntary testing; some council staff were threatened by residents and refused to return to work the following day. According to a council survey conducted in October 2020, only around 50% of residents were willing to express confidence in how the pandemic had been handled by Metaltown Council (although this figure is higher than that reported of the national government). It was also noted how the top-down response relied heavily upon pre-existing structures and that while more established community

and voluntary sector partners were incorporated, other groups felt neglected. As one local charity partner reflected, '[the council] missed a real opportunity to capitalise on social action because we had hundreds of volunteers lined up who we were unable to place'. It was also thought that, despite relatively greater social need, there were fewer referrals through social prescribing in the more ethnically diverse neighbourhoods of Metaltown due in part to the presence of pre-existing mutual aid community networks. This suggests that the coordinated top-down response in Metaltown was less effective at recognising and working with the forms of community action that were already taking place, which would have indicated robust governance.

To conclude, the response in Metaltown was characterised by strong organisational consensus and collaboration amongst the senior leaders of predominantly public agencies led by a convincing and charismatic leader of the local authority. It represented multi-agency action formed by partnership between those senior leaders rather than co-creation with communities on the ground. The strong consensus delivered robust governance and enabled the council to 'ride out' criticisms from partners not involved in the activities, albeit the community engagement could have gone further.

5 | The Pandemic Response in Milltown

We first discuss (i) the response before (ii) the community engagement plan and then (iii) the extent of robust governance.

5.1 | The Response

In Milltown, the response was led by the council's Public Health team and co-created where possible with partners. There is an additional layer of (Labour-led) regional political governance for Milltown. The area experienced five 'waves' of COVID-19 compared to the three observed nationally. Consequently, Milltown faced more protracted and restrictive nationally imposed 'stay at home' measures than other local authorities. Libraries, museums and sports centres were closed and other municipal services were scaled back. There was a shift to remote working and telephone and virtual appointments and, like Metaltown, the authority relaxed its demands of commissioned-service providers as it quickly became apparent that the usual contractual obligations could not be fulfilled.

Within days of the first 'lockdown', Milltown's community and voluntary services had established an urgent response volunteer programme. Meanwhile, the council provided a dedicated telephone line for pandemic-related welfare enquiries, and staff were redeployed to support the humanitarian effort. Milltown's largest housing provider donated its own centres—which offer debt, housing and welfare support services—to be repurposed by partner agencies for the humanitarian response, whilst the council's 'one stop shop' was established as a hub providing food, medicines and other essential supplies, supporting vulnerable residents and even providing dog-walking services. The hub was run by council

workers, volunteers and staff redeployed by partner agencies such as the housing association and a food poverty charity. The authority worked with foodbanks and market stall holders to source food and to develop a food delivery service for vulnerable residents. These actions demonstrate a level of agility that is atypical of UK local authorities, and an openness to innovation that is driven by external agencies, a point to which we shall return to below.

5.2 | Community Engagement

In April 2021, a sudden spike in rates of two variants of concern (VOC) appeared. In response, a nationally-supported targeted programme of 'surge' activities consisting of four components—testing, contact tracing, enhanced isolation and vaccination—was established. Milltown was one of the first areas to conduct surge activities but soon became an exemplar for other locality-based responses due to its strategy to bring about genuine and meaningful community engagement that would tackle pre-existing and newly emerging health inequalities:

We thought this was a unique opportunity to engage with some of our communities in a way that we haven't been able to before [...] So we said 'well, we're going to do everything we can' because this will potentially help us reduce inequality within access to testing, it will reduce inequalities in variations in vaccination take-up, and it will hopefully then put us in a stronger position coming out of this so that we'll have a community with higher levels of immunity and higher levels of engagement in testing, higher levels of compliance with tracing and isolation, and other population behaviours. So we went into it with a really, really clear strategy (council officer, Public Health).

The intent was to conduct the activities in a way that would allow Milltown to build on these partnerships in the future working with communities. One officer explained that it entailed 'using every opportunity to collaborate at every single level'. Over 6 weeks, 300 volunteers and elected members worked together alongside the emergency services, health groups, the housing provider, schools, faith leaders, local businesses and the community and voluntary sector. British Army service personnel were also deployed, a response seen as an extreme measure in the UK, that can spark local opposition. Public Health founded a *Community Champions* programme that recruited some residents as volunteers for the surge response⁴. They provided hyper-local insight, cascaded messages through their own networks and reached diverse communities by using tailored and multilingual messaging. Through this, they were able to provide understanding as to why some residents were not complying with the restrictions and not engaging with surge activities.

It is broadly true that the surge activities were positively received. While engagement with testing was low when run solely by national teams, 'having the [later] blended approach of

national and local teams, the military and local communities really worked' (council officer). In one postcode area, engagement reached over 60%, the highest in the country, where innovative community engagement was seen to help overcome some structural barriers to access:

We actually had residents running and getting in the car and coming and driving back saying 'please, here, we've done our test!'. They were so happy, they were WhatsApping their neighbours and saying, 'I've got mine, make sure you get yours!' [...] So that highlighted that these diverse communities are not against it and there wasn't such a fear, it's just they didn't know how to access it or maybe didn't have the time, or didn't feel they could, but knowing somebody could explain to them in a language that they were familiar with and take the time to explain the procedure, it just made things easier (council officer).

Indeed, it is thought that up to 4000 cases may have been prevented throughout this period. Yet, council officers still sensed fear and mistrust towards the local authority, whereby non-compliance amongst racialised minority residents, including migrants and British ethnic minorities, was higher than that observed amongst White British residents. There was too 'a strong anti-vac movement in [Milltown] [and] we had anti-vaccination protests' remembered one council officer. There was thought to be widespread resentment concerning the duration of 'stay at home' restrictions that were imposed upon Milltown, which council officers agreed were not reflective of the everyday ways in which residents live and work in the area. Finally, public health officials acknowledged that the so-called 'community leaders', who were preferred as a 'go-to' partner, do not necessarily speak for diverse social groups. The corollary of this is that an overreliance on certain stakeholders perhaps closed down opportunities for engagement with some smaller grassroots organisations, a potential missed opportunity.

5.3 | Robust Governance?

The activities demonstrated agility, adaptability and innovation during an emergency and rapidly shifting situation. As in Metaltown, regular multi-agency meetings enabled the response to flex to what did and did not work. In Milltown, there was an emphasis on removing barriers to testing and vaccination, such as by providing female-only queues, walk-ins and a bespoke drive-through service for taxi drivers (two-thirds of drivers lived in a certain area with significant VOC). Milltown was one of the first areas to use a mobile vaccination bus to reach underserved residents, which was then brought to schools and local businesses. Public Health deployed community webinars supported by elected members, and health groups produced targeted social media content, both aimed at combatting misinformation and vaccine hesitancy. The response illustrates an iterative and rapid cycle of experimenting, learning and implementing, whilst innovating

in collaboration with other agencies. This collaboration occurred across multiple scales; for instance, the council liaised with private business to secure unused meals from the nearby airport that were then distributed via a local foodbank.

As in Metaltown, council officers reflected on the difficulties of working with central government. The authority was informed at very short notice that the Army would be soon arriving to support the surge activities, which created fear amongst the local community. The community engagement first led by national teams consequently generated little uptake, and the council had to work hard to allay fears and to ensure that the Army subsequently supported a community-led response. This was later achieved by integrating service personnel with community engagement teams with hyper-local knowledge. Meanwhile, the lack of timeliness and clarity of central government information created difficulties; like in Metaltown, senior officials were finding out about changing restrictions and guidance only whilst watching the evening news.

Public Health felt that national agencies were insufficiently aware of local circumstances and were not agile enough to flex to the rapidly changing situation. Council officers reported spending an inordinate amount of time relaying knowledge back to national agencies, who did not act upon this advice anyway. Then, officers were required to await both national and regional clearance, which inhibited their ability to respond in rapid and agile ways. After having identified a suitable site for vaccinations, an elected member recalled, 'we had to wait for them to say to us: "you can use that centre". If you're a councillor you've got local knowledge; you know your people, you know where they live, and you know what makes them tick [but] we were being dictated to constantly'. Another councillor concurred: 'when things were left to the local community, the local council, and the local NHS, they tended to work a lot better than when things were [directed] from London'. According to those we spoke with, the key aspect of the robust response was, therefore, that it was locally determined and owned and that it was adaptive in response to turbulent and contextually specific challenges that emerged on the ground.

6 | Discussion

To our knowledge, these two studies are unique, through our unparalleled access, in documenting what senior council staff, elected members and partners, actually did in the early stages of the pandemic. One overarching observation is that the robust responses happened largely despite, rather than because of, leadership and crisis management at the national level which was characterised by well-informed senior local stakeholders as chaotic and poorly communicated (see Hallett 2024). Nevertheless, our data suggest this had advantages in that the enormous scale and urgency of the crisis, coupled with a dysfunctional national response, created a governance vacuum that was filled by effective place-based leadership. Furthermore, this actually enabled the two responses to be tailored to local opportunities, challenges and circumstances. While the responses in Metaltown and Milltown played out differently, they each drew upon

hyper-local knowledge, pre-existing partnerships and/or new forms of collaboration and co-creation and innovation and problem-solving.

That said, the pandemic placed huge personal and professional toll on council staff: ‘there was no night and day, there was no weekend. [There were no] barriers or boundaries, we just had an end goal that we were going to reach and that’s how we worked’ (partner, Milltown), as a consequence suffering fatigue and emotional exhaustion. As time went on, staff felt burned-out and recalled that the goodwill and novelty that typified the outset of the pandemic had since worn off. This calls into question the extent to which local action alone can perform robust governance without a more functional, coherent and ‘pro-robust’ national approach that enables a devolved approach to pandemics and other crises. Yet, while this was evidently not the case under the then Conservative Government, we believe it is possible within the UK governance system, particularly if it were able to adopt a robust governance orientation.

The contrasts between our two cases are instructive. The response in Metaltown was led by a strong charismatic leader and a cohesive and harmonious senior leadership team that benefitted from partnership working with other (predominantly public) agencies and a culture of collaboration that preceded the pandemic. We saw a preference for operating through pre-existing structures because, quite simply, the local authority knew what they wanted to do and could work effectively across multiple agencies to achieve it. The calculation was that ‘deep’ community engagement was not needed and so, for instance, humanitarian support was provided through the existing social prescribing service. Turning to Milltown, initially the signs were not promising because of the tensions within the corporate response due to political instability (a newly elected minority Conservative administration meant that multiple parties were involved in leadership and delivery), friction between different council departments and the extra bureaucracy relating to the layer of regional governance. The pandemic was understood by the local authority as an issue of public health, rather than as an all-encompassing social, economic and humanitarian crisis (as it was in Metaltown). Yet, despite the lack of an all-council approach, public health led meaningful co-creation with communities thanks in part to the greater capacity and strength of Milltown’s community and voluntary sector which enabled it to source co-creative approaches and to drive collaboration. Unlike in Metaltown, where senior leaders mobilised existing mechanisms, Milltown was effective in building the collaborative structures almost from scratch.

Regarding co-creation, the response in Milltown demonstrated greater involvement of local people, including minority and faith communities, who were critical to the delivery of the surge response in the full glare of national media attention and political scrutiny (‘the army being called in’). Public Health utilised novel communication techniques through their community champions to mobilise sceptical communities and to cultivate a sense of collective endeavour, which created public consent for vaccination. Despite the chaotic national picture, local and regional stakeholders were able to innovate and leverage local trust with communities to achieve vital outcomes. Indeed, one of the challenges in Milltown was conducting multi-agency place-based

action within a multi-scalar state, as different local, regional and national agencies, each with their own particular geographies and governance remit, were required to work together in new ways under extreme pressure. In our view, these factors have not to date been properly accounted for within the robust governance literature.

There were additional factors that enabled the authorities to respond urgently, flexibly and creatively, such as simple necessity, the noted changes to national legislation and changes made to the political functioning of the authority which allowed both councils to set aside more typical bureaucratic risk-averse modalities. This suggests that robust local governance is enabled by some key regulatory changes even in the absence of a pro-robustness mindset or even proactive policymaking at the national level. In addition, an implication for the literature on leadership is that different leadership styles, ranging from more charismatic individual (Metaltown) through to dispersed and collective (Milltown), can be consistent with robustness (see Hambleton 2020). It is also essential to note that many of the examples of agility and innovation were more a product of the moment rather than emerging out of any conscious policy choice. Furthermore, in Milltown, we observed how the leadership was receptive to ideas coming from other public agencies and communities, which demonstrates how robust governance can be driven by a diverse range of actors.

While robustness is clearly a desirable characteristic for English local government, a clear lesson from a turbulent event like COVID-19 is that where it emerged at the local level, this was almost in spite of an unhelpful national context. One exception to this is where key regulatory changes (such as the ‘relaxing of red tape’) enabled robust responses to emerge, but we question whether this came from national agencies rather than the political (ministerial) level—a question that would repay further research. Overall, however, we are led to question the normative slant in the (predominantly continental European) public administration literature that depicts a rational, coherent, and comprehensive policymaking polity. Between these two poles, if there is a core transferable policy ‘blueprint’, it is that local government needs room to innovate and to seek local solutions, to be adaptable and flexible and to seek opportunities for co-creation. The literature must also better account for place and geography, including the role of local electoral-political dynamics, leadership, partnership histories and communities, each of which shape the potential for robustness.

7 | Conclusion

The central aim of this paper is to ask whether learning from local government responses to the COVID-19 pandemic might inform governance strategies that will equip the local authority to be more resilient in the face of complex crises such as the current cost-of-living crisis. We have drawn on a unique dataset enabled by obtaining privileged access to senior staff at two local authorities in England in the immediate aftermath of COVID-19. The concept of robust governance within public administration is helpful to understanding the scale and nature of contemporary ‘turbulent’ challenges facing local government, but we argue that, to date, it has underplayed the nuance of local

circumstances and that it is not grounded in the everyday realities of governing during a turbulent event. It also implies that robust governance strategies need to emanate from a rational central polity. The emergence of distinctive repertoires of robust governance in the two case studies, reflective of very different local circumstances, and despite the chaotic nature of the national response, strongly emphasises the need for alternative visions of robustness.

Were the two responses ‘successful’? To fully answer this question, we would require an alternative methodology and dataset that is beyond the remit of this paper. Our interpretation is that the areas were somewhat effective in having averted even higher numbers of disease and deaths in the face of national level ‘chaos’. The effectiveness of the two responses relates to them being locally determined and owned, fit for purpose and adaptive in face of turbulent and contextually specific challenges that emerged on the ground. Our data suggest that the authorities achieved what they could, despite the constraints, and with some limitations (such as the lack of universal community engagement). There was robust governance at the local level, but this was not rationally designed or driven by supportive central-local government relations. Instead, we propose that local responses would have been more effective in the context of a coherent, ‘robustness-informed’ and enabling national government. Moreover, in the UK, where local government capacity and resilience have been denuded by over a decade of austerity and attempted reform, a key lesson is the need to be adaptive and to work through co-creation approaches in the face of constant crisis. This is particularly pertinent given the prospect of further council ‘bankruptcies’ in the form of section 114 notices, which restrict councils’ ability to function without national oversight.

Data Availability Statement

The anonymised data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Endnotes

¹The local authorities have been provided with pseudonyms in order to preserve anonymity.

²Metaltown $n = 27$; Milltown $n = 32$.

³The precise department structures differ across councils. To preserve anonymity, we do not use exact department names but interviewees included senior staff (mostly at Director level) from public health, adult services, children’s services, business, governance, democratic services, neighbourhoods, place, resilience, and social inclusion amongst others.

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