


Editorial: Levelling up the United Kingdom? A useful mantra but too little substance or delivery?

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Introduction

At the time of writing (April 2022), globally, the effects of COVID 19 are still very real for the National Health Service, and other health services across the world; the Brexit aftermath continues to reverberate across Europe; and an energy crisis is looming in the wake of the ongoing Ukrainian War. Meanwhile the UK is experiencing economic slowdown and rising inflation, whilst the Johnson Conservative government is plunged into the midst of Partygate.¹ The culmination of these crises is severely impacting the UK economy and this cocktail of internal and external shocks does not bode well for reducing disparities or addressing social and economic difficulties. Many commentators argue that in the last 2 years, existing social and economic inequalities have been exacerbated, the north-south divide has worsened; with a severity incomparable across Europe.

In his first speech as Prime Minister, Boris Johnson spoke of a need to ‘level up across Britain’ and ‘answer the plea of the forgotten people and the left behind towns’, unleashing

the ‘the productive power’ of every corner of the country” ([Prime Minister’s Office, 2019](#)). The theme of levelling up was also addressed in the Conservative Party’s 2019 election manifesto – this pledged to ‘to use our post-Brexit freedoms to build prosperity and strengthen and level up every part of the country’, through specific measures such as Investing in towns, cities, and rural and coastal areas; giving those areas more control of how investment is made; Levelling up skills using apprenticeships and a £3bn National Skills Fund and creating up to 10 freeports to help deprived communities. Similarly, [The Queen’s Speech \(2021\)](#) stated the Government will ‘level up opportunities across all parts of the United Kingdom, supporting jobs, businesses and economic growth and addressing the

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impact of the pandemic on public services'. (Prime Minister's Office, 2021).

Levelling up is designed to address the longstanding problem of the UK's regional economic disparities. The 2020 Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) Green Budget included a chapter on levelling up, which identified the following characteristics of areas most in need of levelling up: A 'left behind' area, in need of 'levelling up', is characterised by broad economic underperformance, which manifests itself in low pay and employment, leading to lower living standards in that area. Behind these factors lie other considerations such as poor productivity, which in turn may be associated with a low skill base. The health of the population may also be poor: in some cases, this could be a legacy of deindustrialisation or long-term unemployment, as well as deep-rooted socio-economic issues (IFS, 2020).

Levelling up: The United Kingdom's ambitious medium-term missions

As part of the Government's focus on responding to the need for investment across all part of the United Kingdom, the Levelling Up White Paper was launched on 2 February 2022, announcing 12 strategic missions to be achieved by 2030. The missions cover Living Standards, Research and Development (R and D), Transport Infrastructure, Digital Connectivity, Education, Skills, Health, Well-Being, Pride in Place, Housing, Crime, Local leadership. There is a focus on employability, supporting people to gain high-quality skills and wider plans to improve well-being. The White Paper commits to tackling crime in the worst-affected areas and confirms an intention to offer every part of England an enhanced devolution deal and long-term funding settlement like existing Mayoral Combined Authorities (Shutt and Liddle, 2019, 91–93). The emphasis now is on County devolution Deals to match the urban city-region ones and the accompanying devolution process.

Tackling crime and neighbourhoods – One of the key strategic missions

Each of the strategic missions is a complex piece of the jigsaw and each has its own policy environment and specific aims. However, to illustrate this we have chosen Crime to tease out some of the complex issues to be addressed—other papers in the special issue examine *Research and Development, Pride in Place, Local leadership, Business Support, the replacement of European Structural Funds, and Youth Services*, but it is clear that a much greater level of integration is required to examine how the missions inter-relate at sub-regional and local scales.

The White Paper includes crime prevention, under the rubric of restoring 'a sense of community, local pride and well-being' (HM Government, 2022). However, in this area as in others, we get a sense of repeating things that were already happening, such as the much announced '20,000 more police officers on our streets by 2023', and the Home Office's Safer Streets Fund. The White Paper promised that the Fund will continue, whereby Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs), local government and police forces, and some 'civil society organisations' in England and Wales can bid for money, to tackle crime and anti-social behaviour. As for its 10-year Drugs Strategy, launched late last year, the Government says that it will collaborate intensively with the local authorities of 10 to 20 areas mostly affected by prolific neighbourhood crime; in order to deliver on Dame Carol Black's independent review of drugs (Home Office, 2021b).

Neighbourhood crime is at the heart of the policy, with Government promising to cut homicide, serious violence and more by 2030. Clause 3.4.3. proposes the government's plan to dismantle crime and criminal enterprises. The key to these endeavours lies most notably in tackling drugs and organised crime – as well as reforming the asylum system with a 'tough' new border regime. Highlighting that most of the issues arising from crime disproportionately

effect areas with higher ethnic minorities, it was noted that a quarter of all neighbourhood crime in 2018–19 was concentrated in just 5% of local areas (Open Government, 2022).

Further to this, the Levelling Up White Paper states: ‘Crime erodes social capital, deters investment and job creation, entrenches poverty and undermines prospects for young people’ (HM Government, 2022: p. 228). This can be translated as a means of looking at the social determinants that underpin or give rise to violence, crime and the prospects/futures of young people. Such sentiments are akin to those of a public health approach to crime and safety.

The primary objective of public health is to achieve maximum benefit for the greatest number of people (Schneider, 2020) and based on the public health approach, programmes are designed to prevent violence at a population level are designed to reach a broad segment and to reduce and prevent violence at a population level (WHO, 2021). Through primary prevention programmes, policy interventions and advocacy, public health principles provide an effective framework for investigating and understanding the causes and consequences of violence and to prevent violence from occurring. In addition, the police have an indelible and complex link to public health in its various forms and dimensions (Wood, 2020), such as problem-oriented policing (POP), which is not designed as a public health approach, however, in collaboration with partners and problem-solving techniques that focus on prevention within a broader public health framework, these are compatible (Shephard and Sumner, 2017). For instance, the public health model for violence prevention outlined by the World Health Organisation’s Violence Prevention Alliance is highly compatible with POP by seeking to understand problems, their causes and the impact of interventions designed to address them in the long term (Christmas and Srivastava, 2019).

Whilst these long-term objectives across crime (and other mission and policy areas) does

not sit easy with the Government time in office, it is acknowledged that action is needed now. These developments further coincide with the publishing of a major independent review of the future of policing in England and Wales (the Review) by the Police Foundation on 9 March 2022. The review argues that policing alone, and as currently configured, cannot tackle the range and complexity of modern crime and public safety challenges. As stated, ‘public safety depends by no means solely on the police and it would be much better, economically and socially, to prevent crime from happening in the first place than to deal with it after the event. Yet our system is designed to do the latter not the former’ (Police Foundation, 2022: p. 8).

To meet these challenges, the Review is recommending the need to redesign our public safety institutions, including the police who will require new capabilities and a reformed organisational platform to be more proactive and deal with issues for the long-term gain. Both the Levelling Up White Paper and the Strategic Review are setting out that change and reform is needed (or what it describes as a universal system approach to public safety, as set out by the former) but what these mean in practice is still open to interpretation and implementation on the ground. For the levelling up priorities in particular, the elephant in the room is how these priorities are to be resourced and funded beyond what has previously been pledged. The Levelling Up White Paper undoubtedly moves the topic of levelling up from what could previously be viewed as a nebulous slogan to now a White Paper that is full of ambition. However, it contains far less on how the various targets, objectives and 12 missions are to be achieved and policy coordinated and delivered at spatial levels.

Lastly, whilst the Levelling Up White Paper provides an indication that the Government’s views to tackling crime and its developments in both the short and long term, it may be a little short sighted in its focus. For instance, traditional crime (all crime except fraud and cybercrime) has fallen by 75% since 1995.

However, these traditional forms of crime (burglary, car theft, low-level assaults and so on) have been replaced by new forms of crime and harm. These have in turn been generated by three transformations (technology, environmental crisis and social change), as set out by the Review into Policing in England and Wales ([Police Foundation, 2022](#)).

Crime prevention and neighbourhood crime, as conceptualised in the White Paper, are key areas of priority setting and focus, they may also represent only the beginning in terms of the impacts of crime and its transformations impacting all areas of the UK. A better view is needed for the long-term changes that the White Paper aspires to provide for all.

The White Paper is an informative analysis, but the levelling up policy is unclear on its key priorities, overstretched and unclear in its spatial and regional and local objectives. Despite a renamed Department of Levelling Up Housing and Communities (DLUHC) which has been decentralised from London to Wolverhampton, urban and regional policy has been given less cash overall, incomplete and unclear devolution and a lack of policy coordination and integration between the four nations of the UK, and within England itself, where fragmentation rules. Commitment to Place is weak and policy for Health, Energy, Finance, Housing and Benefits are eroding the welfare state and increasing poverty and rapidly increasing inequalities in modern Britain. It is not just that the north-south divide is getting worse, so too the quality of urban and rural life and how larger internal and external forces are impacting at ground floor level requires a much sharper focus on local and regional change.

The new funds after the White paper April 2022

The government has now committed to four new funds which will be in place for most of this next decade, bearing in mind it takes

3 years at least to change policy directions after a general election.

- The UK Shared Prosperity Fund-to replace the EU Structural Funds
- The Levelling UP fund (Round one and now Round two in Autumn 2022)
- The Community Ownership Fund
- The UK Community Renewal Fund

These four investment programmes will aim to

‘Regenerate our town centres and high streets, support individuals with employment, improve local transport links and invest in local culture, while giving communities a stronger voice to take over cherished local assets that might otherwise be lost’.

The commitment to community economic development has in fact been superficial in terms of financial commitments and the UK Community Renewal Fund has been only a bridging gap between the end of the EU funding regime and the start of the new UKSPF regime post-Brexit – it remains to be seen how the commitment to community economic development maintains itself. We now know that UKSPF will provide only £1.5 billion per year by 2024/5. *It is allocated by formula and not competitive bidding* and was launched on 13 April 2022 to provide funding through to 31ST March 2025. England has been allocated £1,58 billion, Scotland £212 million, Wales £585 million and Northern Ireland £127million.

UKSPF – Local authorities in the driving seat?

UKSPF is set to match previous EU regional funding from the European Social Fund and European Regional Development Fund. It is said to be more flexible, locally led and with decisions made by elected leaders in local government. The new funds also include a new £559 million adult numeracy programme

MULTIPLY across the whole of the UK. This is to support people with no or low-level maths skills to get back to work. The scheme is to offer free personal training, digital training and adult courses in numeracy skills.

UKSPF is related to the government's 12 mission statements in the Levelling Up White Paper and local authorities are now to bring forward Investment plans for their allocations for the rest of 2022/3, to sit alongside the £4.8 billion in the Levelling up Fund and Round 2. With only £150 million committed to the Community Ownership Fund, compared with £3.6 billion in the Towns Fund, these are all still allocated by competitive bidding not by formula, so it is hard to track their impact—more so with successive rounds of funding.

Because UKSPF replicates the EU funding regime, its formula appears to have been noddled through on out of date, existing European data—thus, it still favours Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly and West Wales and the Valleys *but even then*, Cornwall gets less than half of the money which was expected to get from the EU after Brexit. It is further sad news for South Yorkshire and Lincolnshire, Tees Valley and Durham and the North East which might have expected to get better returns from UKSPF and its allocation policy if a sensible review had taken place using more up to date UK data. The IFS have been keen to point out that the funding mechanism is already outdated. (Emmerson et al., 2021).

National audit office interventions

In the absence of on-going evaluation of government programmes, the NAO is often the only national organisation reviewing ministerial spending plans and looking at the collective impact of different programmes. There have been hardly any full-scale evaluations of large government programmes since 2010, especially since the abolition of the Audit Commission. In February 2022, the National Audit Office produced their report (NAO, 2022) on 'supporting local economic growth' which

looked at policies for 2011–2020 and was particularly focused on the Levelling up fund, UK Community Renewal Fund and Freeports. The report recognises the government's intention to curtail funding for Local Enterprise Partnerships and the greater role and emphasis now being assumed once again by local authorities and the new central DLUHC. This emphasis on local authorities has been re-emphasised in recent UKSPF announcements and so to some extent is to be welcomed but wither the LEP's? – in the urban areas they are being absorbed into the new Combined Authorities.

NAO argue that the new DLUHC has a poor understanding of what has worked well in previous local growth programmes, because of the lack of consistent local and national evaluations and they argue that the way interventions currently work makes it hard for local authorities to plan the joined-up investment strategies which are needed at local level to promote economic (*and social*) growth.

'Multiple funding pots and overlapping timescales, combined with competitive funding, creates uncertainties for local leaders' (p. 9).

Conclusions

No one can doubt that a lot of effort is being expended into the levelling up policy processes and the new-found commitment to local authorities and the Mayoral Combined Authorities to deliver local economic growth policies is welcome. However, fragmentation and the lack of integration and coordination sits alongside the increasing inequalities generated outside of DHLUC, and the responsibilities of other departments for related government policies (such as crime and policing, or public health as noted earlier). There is a real danger in a lack of focus and delivery.

In this special issue of Local Economy authors bring together their responses to the levelling up debate which evolved over the last 2 years and in the context of the many delays

over new policy announcements, potential new programmes, the White Paper and then the UKSPF announcements. Sceptics of the levelling up process like Hudson, sit alongside other academics like Broadhurst and Gray who firmly believe in bringing in new Place-based Recovery models whilst others, like Marlow, argue for a more strategic mission focus on research and development and innovation models to better understand national innovation roles-policies which were emphasised in the White paper with its focus on new city-region models for research and innovation in Greater Glasgow, Greater Manchester and Greater Birmingham. Universities, more generally, are being encouraged to take a premier role in local and regional change under Levelling Up and expected to be significant anchor institutions in Place Leadership (UPP, November 2020)

Marlow's viewpoint paper questions whether or not the Levelling Up White Paper (LUWP) will drive reform of national innovation policy and practice as intended. He is unconvinced of the capacity to drive local economic growth and development in left-behind places. He suggests that without systemic behaviour and culture change in national innovation institutes and their funders, LUWP will produce few, if any results of game-changing significance. Highlighting the case of a Research Council and its core funded institutes, his paper explores some important practical changes needed for making LUWP place-based innovation ambitions a reality.

Copeland and Diamond's contribution is set within the replacement of EU Structural Funds, and they argue that at the time of writing that there is little evidence of current approaches to levelling up English regions creating an alternative model of economic and political development. With a continued logic of supply-side policies, and 'entrepreneurship' less pronounced, they believe that the current institutional framework at sub-regional level remains inadequate with ad-hoc, pragmatic and bespoke individual deal making between the centre and local areas, but with HM Treasury

maintaining financial control by introducing more centrally driven performance targets.

Hudson offers a more sceptical and long-term view of local and regional change, in the context of Levelling Up. He suggests that the 2019 general election enabled the Prime Minister to claim that he would 'get Brexit done' as leaving the EU would restore the UK to its rightful sovereign status and precipitate a reduction in inequalities in a post-EU UK. This, Johnson suggested would happen more especially in former solidly Labour voting constituencies in which a Conservative member for Parliament, often for the first time in history, was returned to Parliament (referred to as Red Wall seats). The on-going uncertainty of what exactly a comprehensive Levelling Up approach means, and lack of clarity on how to achieve or measure it, according to Hudson, creates problems for restoring growth in the national economy. He remains convinced that policies for LU have echoes of past (and failed) government attempts since 1930s to address regional imbalances and created a more challenging environment since the onset of COVID 19 and the transition to a zero-carbon green economy and society. His overriding conclusion is that current conditions are reinforcing deeper socio-spatial inequalities than were already in existence. Inequalities, in Hudson's view result from structural rather than contingent, characteristics of capitalist development, and eliminating inequalities through levelling up is an unattainable policy goal within a capitalist social formation.

Newman and Gilbert turn attention to learning lessons about the role of the private sector in subnational governance by analysing the UK's Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs). In offering a comprehensive and detailed account of the establishment of business-led LEPs with civic and business leaders brought together to seek answers to some of the persistent economic problems of places. In challenging the underpinning rationale for both justification and establishment, the authors propose a set of guiding principles for the role

of the private sector in the Levelling Up agenda; to include greater representation, transparency and accountability. In a wide-ranging analysis, Newman and Gilbert argue that LEPs were created to enable knowledge flows, but this knowledge was skewed by unrepresentativeness of LEP boards. They were also intended to catalyse networks, but such networks were built around individual interests, and lacked transparency, and though they were intended to mirror business structures, in reality they have undermined democratic accountability. Similar to Bridge's later analysis, Newman and Gilman's findings reveal that the creation of LEPs was an attempt to solve the wrong problem in the wrong way, and overall, they conclude that a business-led models of subnational governance had in-built institutional design challenges.

For these authors, to deliver the multifaceted aims implied by Levelling Up, subnational institutions will need alternative approaches to gathering local economic knowledge, building local partnerships and securing capable leadership. Rather than seeing businesses as the solution to economic challenges, they advocate separate solutions to problems, within an uncompromised framework of representative, transparent and accountable governance. To some extent the flaws with the LEP Model have already been recognised within the Levelling up process.

Broadhurst and Gray argue that when countries are impacted by a crisis, comparisons at the national level fail to explore how local measures are enacted alongside centralised responses. They address the gap by focussing on multi-level governance (MLG) and resilience theories to explore how different tiers of government responded to COVID 19 in areas hardest hit by the pandemic. As England starts to move towards rebuilding the economy through the Levelling Up agenda, they query how resilient the existing systems of governance can be, given that power is centrally retained in the hands of policymakers, with decisions made by neutral bureaucrats. If

Levelling Up is to address long-term economic and societal imbalances, Broadhurst and Gray believe that decisions should not be left to policy makers determining the paths to recovery, but instead, greater value placed on experience and knowledge embedded within heterogeneous communities. The authors offer a new place-based recovery model; one that reinforces the growing arguments for increased devolution by balancing top-down with local knowledge. They conclude that local areas should be entrusted to lead in the development of place-based institutional arrangements by drawing on local and regional resources of human and social capital. The findings reinforce the view that discrete economic development policy is more appropriately designed and delivered locally. Local institutions are at the heart of providing the services that underpin the broader determinants of well-being and growth and are key to efforts to address the long-term challenges, amplified by the crisis. A more detailed framework is needed for a systematic approach to subnational governance that facilitates improved collaboration, coordination and joint working between different geographical tiers of government and related agencies.

Bridge examines the launch of the LU Fund aimed at boosting business enterprise and economic prosperity of areas outside London and the South-East of England. For this author, neither the problem nor the identified cause has been made clear, so he adopts a medical analogy to demonstrate that a false theory can have a long-lasting legacy even after it has apparently been rejected. In his view, LU, as currently proposed, is unlikely to make real improvements in targeted economies and he argues for an entirely different approach that diagnoses the real cause of problems, and deeper consideration of the appropriateness of prescribed cures.

Conventional ways of diagnosing lack of business enterprise have included offering further support or introducing new institutional fixes, but such mechanism are unlikely to be

effective, but despite this, governments continue to pursue hitherto attractive policies for addressing this issue. Bridge advocates a different diagnosis by suggesting that the main constraint on enterprise is a legacy of the history of the area; one not easily overcome. Moreover, the social attitudes and culture within a locality might also go some way to explaining how the social and economic fortunes of some areas have been detrimentally affected in past, centrally directed policies. He concludes by suggesting that past governments have chosen the easier cures, despite the lack of evidence to indicate success.

Finally, Ord and Davies agree with earlier authors that Levelling Up is far from clear, and they firmly believe that in addressing the needs of disadvantaged and left behind communities, the importance of young people as valued members of those communities, together with youth work and youth services have been largely absent from policy discussions. Their key premise is that youth services are the best placed services for (re)investment, to enable a wide variety of outcomes for young lives. Arguing that huge austerity cuts to youth services in England disproportionately affected disadvantaged communities, they make the case for a distinctive role for youth services in the Levelling Up agenda, as a means for rebuilding left behind areas. Despite limited mandatory state infrastructures, youth work practitioners, they argue, are able to identify and meet individual and shared needs, interests, and concerns, as well as contributing to a wide range of outcomes to significantly level up the lives of young people and their communities.

The Levelling Up White Paper confirmed that regional disparities in the UK are longstanding, with complex roots and manifest in different ways, from (for example) local health outcomes, average pay or crime levels (Shearer, ILG, March 2022). The cross-cutting missions' approach is an attractive and welcome proposition but there are numerous anomalies to be clarified, details to be ironed out, and concrete proposals for fulfilling ambitious aims. As

things stand (in April 2022) most of the missions contained in the LUWP remain narrowly defined or lack clear objectives or detail; unrealistic; contain a confusing mix of overly ambitious or under-ambitious metrics, and there are still question marks over which level of governance will be the focal point for assessment and evaluation, never mind questionable data integrity. This all adds up to a recipe for further confusion between the different spatial levels. In this evolving policy landscape, central government has made a commitment to release further information on how 'success' will be measured, but in the siloed world of central government, where we might have expected some coordination of LU missions and policies, accountability and reporting on spending and programmes still seems to be fairly disparate and rudimentary, at best, given the scale of the tasks ahead. It is no wonder that civil servants and local government officials and their partners alike are struggling to understand how to implement such grandiose programmes, where in some cases, they still lack capacities and the resources to achieve them.

This special issue recognises that we need much more local evaluation of how levelling up processes are working on the ground in specific localities and at different spatial levels across city-regions to complement fairly limited national policy and programme evaluations. It also seeks to capture the complexities of the levelling up policy process which has been longwinded and drawn out and taken 3 years in development. The task now is to reinforce Place-based approaches and assess the complex realities in which policies are interconnected on the ground. Delivery matters and we will need to assess what has been achieved by this raft of new policies and programmes.

All the aforementioned need to be assessed within a four-nation state framework, because too often (as in the case of Levelling Up) policy is focused purely on England, and insufficient attention given to the UK as a whole. Without a deeper appreciation and examination, or at the

very least an acknowledgement of the many varied and inextricably embedded, interdependent, historically shaped connections and mutually reciprocal relationships across, and between, the four-nation states, fragmentation of state architectures and policy making processes will continue, central state and local relations will remain fraught, and long-awaited attempts, such as the Levelling Up policies examined in this special issue, will not only fail to redress the regional imbalances but, worse, may have the opposite effect from the good intentions underpinning the whole LU agenda. We may actually see a further increase in levels of social and economic inequality, and worryingly, a greater chasm opening up between the north-south, and between the four nations of the UK, regardless of the numerous upbeat Ministerial statements to the contrary.

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Note

1. The first time a serving Prime Minister and Chancellor of the Exchequer have been served with a penalty for contravening legal restrictions on movement during COVID 19 lockdown, due to their attendance at parties held in Number 10 Downing Street-further legal penalties are expected.

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