



The Levelling Up The UK White Paper: what's the problem?

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The Liverpool City Region

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Key takeaways

1. *Nothing new under the sun:* We have been here before with other White Papers about cities, regions and spatial inequality. Getting a White Paper right is a difficult balancing act, but this one is short on clarity, commitment, and cash.
2. *If wishes were horses, beggars would ride:* There are big questions about whether this paper proposes enough large-scale government interventions or offers the necessary powers or resources to local partners to deliver all its ambitious targets on an unrealistically tight timetable.
3. *An eloquent silence on the big cities:* There is a surprising silence about big cities generally and specifically on exactly how the UK's Core Cities - which contribute over half of the UK's productivity, but which underperform many European cities - are supposed to become 'globally competitive' in 8 years.
4. *Raising expectation but reducing trust?:* The gap between the often-impressive analysis – done by researchers - and the actions promised by policy makers is simply too great. By promising more than it can deliver it runs the risk of increasing cynicism about and reducing public trust in politics and politicians.
5. *Next steps – if everything matters, nothing matters:* Government must move quickly and decisively to sort out the wheat from the chaff, the interesting from the important and draw up a clear, costed programme to be delivered by and with local partners that will make progress on these critical issues.

Writing a good White Paper - a delicate challenge

This long awaited and delayed Levelling Up White Paper (HM Gov 2022) is arguably the third major attempt to tackle structural, spatial inequality in the UK. The other two were the 1976 The Inner Cities (HM Gov 1976) produced by a Labour government and the 2000 Our Towns and Cities: The Future (DETR 2000) again produced by New Labour.

Having been involved in preparing such documents for the UK Government and the European Commission (1997), I can sympathise with the authors. The issues themselves are 'wicked'. There are huge pressures involved in reconciling the competing demands of ministers, government departments, local authorities, advisers, think tanks, lobby groups in addition to extracting from the Treasury the scale of resources needed to meet the challenges demonstrated by extensive research and analysis.

This heady political cocktail means versions constantly chop and change and policy proposals come and go without any apparent justification. And the final versions rarely would win the Nobel Prize for literature.

When is a White Paper not a White Paper? When it is a jumble

But after reading this one I am left uncertain about the answers to two obvious questions: What is levelling up? And what is a White Paper? The dictionary defines it is 'a report or guide that informs readers about a complex issue and presents the issuing body's philosophy on the matter. It is meant to help readers understand an issue, solve a problem or make a decision.' Having read its over 300 pages it is hard to claim this document does that. It is a very hard read and you can barely see the wood for the trees. Less does not always mean more, but more often means less. It simply promises to do too much, on too many issues to convey the Government's real priorities or perhaps more importantly its real motives. It is short on clarity, commitment, and cash.

1976: The Inner Cities

By contrast, one of the best white papers ever written, this was a model of lucidity. It was just 20 pages long giving an elegant statement of the problems faced, the principles that should govern the response and a clear set of actions to meet them. It created Inner City Partnerships in the six biggest cities in the UK to tackle their social and economic problems which Michael Heseltine continued when the Conservative took over government in 1979, as he personally chaired the Liverpool Partnership itself. It formed the basis of urban policy for the next decade. The paper's most obvious problems were that it focused only on the inner cities; its partnership only involved the public and voluntary not the private sector; and it was introduced when the Callaghan Government had run out of money and the party was declared over. Nevertheless, it was the basis of something good.

2000: Our Towns and Cities - Delivering an Urban Renaissance

This was an improvement upon the 1976 paper. At the time I called it 'halfway to paradise' (Parkinson 2001). It had a clear vision of what it wanted cities to achieve - urban renaissance. It focused on the wider city boundaries, involved the private sector, identified economic opportunities as well as social need. It was based on a robust evidence base. It recognised the need to have economic, physical, and social approaches to the problem. It emphasised the importance of mainstream programmes rather than special regeneration initiatives and pots of money. It set up an Urban Policy Unit, a Cabinet Committee on Urban Affairs and convened a major Urban Summit.

Despite those virtues, it still did suffer some of the problems of the current White Paper. It included too much discussion and defence of existing government policies, many of which were not particularly urban in intent or effect.

It was not clear it was willing the means as well as the ends. There was much rebranding of existing initiatives. It also trailed many initiatives that remained to be determined in practice. But as I wrote at the time, 'halfway to paradise' beat the realistic alternatives. And as my State of the English Cities (Parkinson et al 2006) report showed, it helped to improve the economic and social performance of many UK cities – despite the big gaps that remained between and within them. However, much of that progress has been undermined by the austerity policies of the subsequent decade.

2022: So what's the problem with the Levelling Up White Paper?

Apart from its length and scattergun approach, there are a series of key dilemmas at the heart of it which threaten to limit its potential impact.

A fatal gap between analysis and action

There is a huge gap throughout this paper between analysis and action. Almost a third of it is a review – albeit a good one – of prevailing academic theories about cities and regions showing how the UK underperforms its more successful European competitors with large gaps between and within places. There is little you will not know about the New Economic Geography and the drivers of change at the end of this analytical section. It is valuable and interesting. But really it should have been much shorter and sharper, setting the stage for action.

Previous policy failures corrected?

This analytic section also identifies a series of previous policy failures: the lack of a long-term approach; failures in policy coordination; a lack of local empowerment; a shortage of evidence monitoring and evaluation; a lack of accountability and transparency. The problem is that current government policy does little to suggest that the lessons have been learned and will be built into future policy.

Future principles

The paper adopts a so-called mission-led approach, arguing that government policy must: improve transparency about place-based spending; hardwire spatial considerations into decision making and evaluation; improve coordination of national policies at local level; have a greater focus on local places, with central government officials understanding the needs of places much better. I would not demur from any of this. But again, it would be a stretch to claim this corresponds in any way with current government policy.

If wishes were horses, beggars would ride!

The policy programme consists of a set of very ambitious proposals across a wide range of fields where significant progress is supposed to be made and the gap between the best and worst performing places reduced in the next 8 years. It promises to: boost productivity, pay, jobs and living standards; increase by 40% and shift the focus of R&D spending away from the south-east; make local public transport across the UK as integrated as that in London; improve digital connectivity; ensure 90% of primary school children meet the expected standards in reading, writing and maths; increase the number of people who have completed high skills training; reduce the gap in health life expectancy between better off and deprived areas; improve the well-being of all people and reduce the gap between the best and worst performing places; improve pride of place and satisfaction with town centres and close the gap between the top performers and the rest; increase home ownership for renters and reduce the number of non-decent homes by 50%; reduce homicide, serious violence and neighbourhood crime in all areas; improve local leadership so all places have the choice of a devolution deal with increased powers and simplified funding.

Many of these targets are not well quantified and might just allow the Government to argue it has met its targets by 2030. But the absence of concrete, costed proposals combined with the decline in the capacity, resources, and powers of local authorities which would necessarily be heavily involved in delivering those targets, suggests this timetable is at the very least heroic. Wishing for things is different from making them happen.

Too many policy hints with not enough detail

There are in such a long document a whole range of interesting proposals about transport, research and development, culture, digital and net zero. Many of them are very welcome and must be explored. But too often they are just mentioned and left on the table. The remarks about regional leaders for levelling up or private sector-led partnerships are two such examples. The former cannot replace the Government Offices for the Regions. The latter may or may not replace LEPs but this a complex area where there have been many different approaches in the past. In both cases their remit, role, resources, and responsibilities are left totally vague. This is symptomatic of the whole document.

Follow the money!

The paper does not give serious enough attention to the resources that would be needed to address - let alone solve - the problems it identifies. The amounts of new money promised though, for example, the Towns Fund, the Levelling Up Fund, the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, the Brownfield Housing Fund and Community Ownership Fund are relatively modest and are seriously outweighed by the cuts in resources to cities, towns and their local governments in the past decade of austerity. The financial base of many cities has been and continues to be eroded.

Nevertheless, the paper specifically states that local leaders will be given the resources they need to level up their communities. Since government policy has been going in the opposite direction in the past decade it is hard to see how this will happen.

Local powers really matter

Much is rightly currently made of the German experience in levelling up east and west Germany and the difference in scale between the Federal government's actual and the UK's government's proposed levelling up resources. Much less attention has been paid to the decentralised nature of decision making in Germany – the legacy from the Allied powers occupation after the war – which means that German cities are the most powerful, best resourced and most successful in Europe. As my Second Tier Cities (Parkinson et al 2012) report for the European Commission showed, countries which are more decentralised with more powerful cities tend to have higher performing and better balanced national economies.

The Government was moving slowly in that direction until the fall from grace of Osborne, Heseltine, Clark, and O'Neill when the decentralising and empowering movement got becalmed. There is not enough in this document to suggest that central government is really going to reverse the trend and shift the balance of power significantly from national to local level. Much of the document discusses how central government will change its behaviour but much less about how it will enable and empower local places to change theirs.

An eloquent silence about the big cities

There is again a lack of clarity about the best spatial focus for policy. The thrust of policy in recent years has been - rightly in my view - towards city regions. By contrast this document plays far more to an agenda about the left behind towns. It talks of delivering physical regeneration to 20 such towns.

It promises to work with 20 places where there is ambition and leadership to maximise the impact of government expenditure to deliver transformational programmes. But apart from Sheffield and Wolverhampton it does not say which they will be, how they will be selected, and it does not seem they will get additional powers or resources.

In fact, apart from interesting invitations to Manchester and Birmingham to be devolution Trailblazers and Innovation Accelerators the paper is rather silent about the big cities. The recovery can't rest on two big places. And why these two and not others? The Government can't ignore Manchester because of the progress it has made, despite being a Labour stronghold. Presumably Birmingham was chosen because it is the only large city region controlled by the Conservative party. Despite this silence on the Core Cities which currently underperform their European competitors, it wants every region to have a globally competitive city inside 8 years. It says nothing in detail after a decade of austerity and cuts to money going into many of those cities how that will be achieved. This is wholly unrealistic.

Raising expectations - but reducing trust?

Throughout the document there is a large gap between the evidence about the scale of the challenge and the actual commitments to do anything substantial or new about them. I fear the pressure to say something about the country's most significant challenges may prove rather stronger than the pressure to do something about them. A deadline of 2030 to resolve such intractable problems - when it has taken two years to produce a document - is frankly ludicrous. Equally important, by raising expectations and promising more than it can deliver it runs the risk of increasing cynicism about and reducing public trust in politics and politicians when both these risks are currently very high.

Will the promised next steps really be taken?

The White Paper promises a lot will now happen to deliver the agenda including: the creation of an independent Levelling Up Advisory Committee; Ministerial visits to discuss plans and monitor progress; local delivery panels which will give advice to regional levelling up leaders; annual local progress reports which will feed into the Levelling Up committee; local online spaces to encourage engagement and creativity. But there are real concerns whether too much has been left to consultation, bargaining and political whims at the next stage. Will the resources really be made available? Will there be enough political support at the heart of government to drive the agenda through? Is this Government serious about delivering as well as discussing?

If everything matters, nothing matters!

This lack of priorities - the prizes for everyone syndrome - must be addressed if there is to be any meaningful and effective action by 2030. Government must move quickly and decisively to separate the wheat from the chaff, the interesting from the important and draw up a clear, costed programme to be delivered by and with local partners. It may be that this paper will simply gather dust since it is not clear how long the current Government will last. But even if the Government does change, it is crucial to continue this work. The challenges and opportunities it has outlined are hugely important. I wish this White Paper well - not ill. Perhaps a coherent programme can be rescued from it. But I trust this does not turn out to be the triumph of hope over experience!

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