

on levelling up



On 2 February 2022 the recently appointed Secretary of State at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (formerly known as the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government), the Rt Hon. Michael Gove, published the 297-page White Paper *Levelling Up the United Kingdom*.¹ Readers will know that White Papers are meant to lead to legislation quite soon. This column is not a substitute for reading this excellent White Paper, but just an opinionated taster. Unlike the dramatic planning reform White Paper of August 2020,² this is one to be taken seriously.

There is a typically hyperbolic foreword by Prime Minister Johnson in the manner of an exciting short conference speech at first read; an obviously exaggerated and overblown statement at second. 'From day one,' says Johnson, 'the defining mission of this government has been to level up this country.' By 'this government' he means his latest one of December 2019, when the 'red wall' of safe Labour constituencies in 'the North' turned Conservative blue and earned him a majority of 80. This White Paper, he says, is 'the crucial first step [...] The most comprehensive, ambitious plan of its kind that this country has ever seen.' Only if the country had never seen the Labour manifesto that led to Clem Attlee's government of 1945!

Then there is a foreword written jointly by Secretary of State Michael Gove and the fresh-thinking economist Andrew Haldane,³ who is the new Head of a Levelling Up Taskforce. They are surprisingly revolutionary (even Maoist) in tone, although the word 'mission' is over-used. It would take many decades and radical change to achieve the happy, healthy, rich, enterprising, productive, innovative, creative, outward-looking, world-leading, multicultural modern version of Renaissance Florence (which time and place is their lodestone). It is really exciting—reading like a first outline of a manifesto for a new social democratic party—but we

have been made undeliverable promises so often that the drag of cynicism is the elephant in the room.

Understanding what we've got

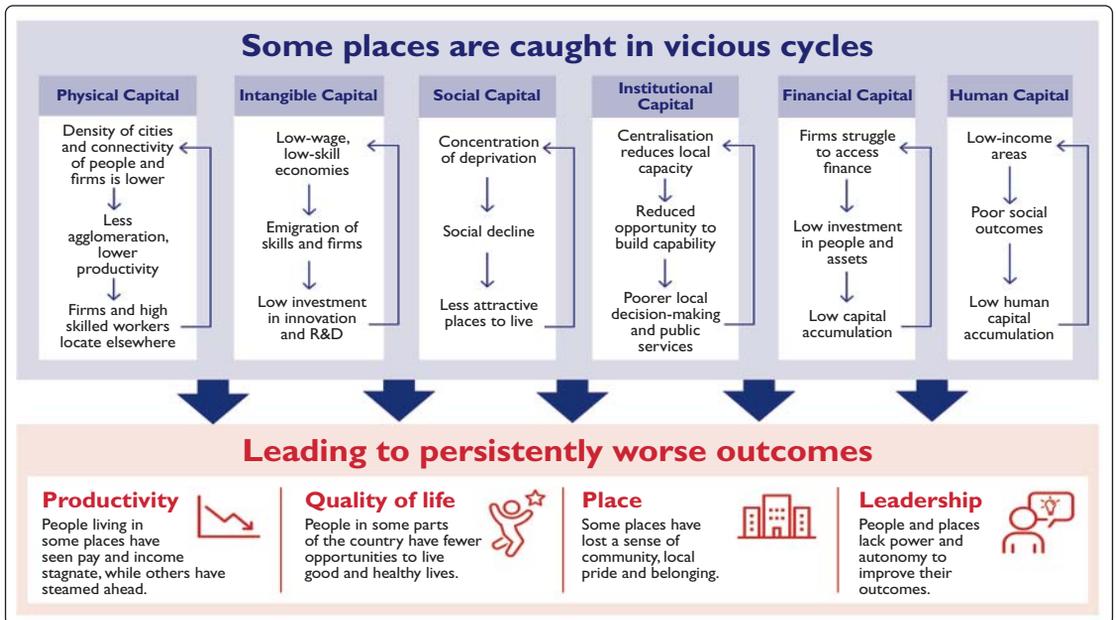
The first 103 pages of the White Paper are an illustrated lecture on the geography of disparities, including riveting sections on economic growth theory, new economic geography, social geography, and infrastructure. The hand of Haldane here no doubt, but too many footnotes refer to American academic texts to which readers may not have ready access.

'Future structural factors' driving the UK's economy are identified. We are then introduced to the 'six capitals' to be used as the framework for evaluating geographical disparities (and therefore the progress being made in bringing about change): physical, intangible, social, institutional, financial, and human capital. There are many maps and charts to show broad patterns of subject matter, but none are easy to interrogate. The UK is too big usefully to be mapped at A4 size, and the charts here are as vague as ever they were in national Covid briefings from Professor 'next slide please' Chris Whitty, the Chief Medical Officer.

Having educated us into new ways of seeing what we've got, there is a hectoring tone about how far we must now travel to 'level up'. One problem seems to be that the authors so often use 'world cities' as a measuring stick. That is too coarse to be much use—their radically different history, geography and political systems mostly explain how ours differ. Within the UK, the frequent use of London—a world city and national capital—as comparator, from which resources must now be redeployed to 'level up' the North, is a cheap and ugly political game. Nowhere else in the UK can be 'like' London in so many respects; and how horrid that would be. Better to cultivate and celebrate the distinctiveness of regions—a vision only occasionally glimpsed in the White Paper and one that should be deployed more strongly, save the fundamentals of health and happiness.

Systems reform

The 53 pages of the 'Systems reform' chapter of the White Paper include nine covering the history of policy approaches in the UK and lessons to be drawn. Disproportionate wordage is given to years



'Levelling Up Capitals Framework', taken from the Levelling up White Paper¹

starting with the Thatcher government in 1979. The truly revolutionary achievements of Clem Attlee's government of 1945 (second mention, for his government should be our yardstick) are aggressively and airily (pun intended⁴) dismissed in a sentence: 'Post war, there were further interventions [to reduce spatial disparities]'. From this biased fly-through, followed by a nevertheless candid and welcome summary of lessons to be drawn from past and other policy regimes, the White Paper constructs 'principles for a successful policy regime':

- longevity and sufficiency;
- co-ordination;
- local empowerment;
- data, monitoring and evaluation; and
- transparency and accountability.

No fresh ambition is set by the text under these familiar headings. It is action on each for which we yearn. The self-congratulatory acclaim for creating metro mayors in 2017 is controversial (not all parts of metro territories are happy to be minor princes in a medieval-style 'city state', and many of us are free from that anyway), and 'local leaders' imposed upon areas chosen by Whitehall form a layer of governance that has yet to be properly evaluated. We live in a small island, and more layers of 'leadership' mean more hiding places in consultation and decision-making processes.

From the principles are drawn 'a new policy regime' for levelling up, which has five pillars (oh

dear, the dreaded pillars of 1980s management speak still haunt us!):

- medium-term missions (referencing JFK's brief to NASA to achieve a moon landing—be clear on the objective and put black boxes on the flow chart marking unsolved links, and then work your way through them);
- re-shaping central government decision-making ('hardwiring spatial considerations into decision-making and evaluation' and requiring 'public bodies to have an objective of reducing geographical variations in the outcomes relevant to their business area');
- empowering local decision-making (a 'single institution or County Council' features heavily here, with or without a directly elected mayor, according to the 'level of devolution'; and maybe the 'single institution'—which could be a private sector initiative—is the answer where counties have quaint boundaries no longer relevant to the real geography of which the White Paper wants us to be aware);
- data, monitoring and evaluation (better ways of assembling and presenting data to aid decision-making); and
- transparency and accountability (a 'statutory obligation' is proposed for government 'to report annually on progress towards meeting the Levelling Up missions'—but for all the promise of improved democratic accountability that runs through the White Paper, the political landscape it

draws will be very hard for people to follow, and no comfort is given that we shall be properly consulted on anything much, or protected from manipulation by digital techniques).

A VIP Levelling Up Advisory Council is announced. Like the National Infrastructure Commission, it will give ‘independent expert advice on matters relating to the design and delivery of levelling up’, yet membership is in the gift of the Secretary of State for Levelling Up.⁵

The policy programme

Pages 159–243 recite the wonderful things this government is already doing, and sets out incredibly ambitious new targets under several headings (the writer’s pick from each cornucopia):

- ‘Boost productivity, pay, jobs, and living standards by growing the private sector’ (for example, ‘We will enhance digital connectivity through Project Gigabit and the Shared Rural Network so that by 2030, the UK Government and private sector will deliver nationwide gigabit-capable broadband and 4G coverage, with 5G for the majority of the population’, and ‘[we] will continue to increase the National Living Wage’...);
- ‘Spread opportunities and improve public services’ (for example through initiatives such as ‘Education Investment Areas (EIAs)’; a ‘UK National Academy’; ‘Local Skills Improvement Plans’; and a White Paper ‘designed to tackle the core drivers of disparities in health outcomes’...);
- ‘Restore a sense of community, local pride and belonging’ (for example by regenerating ‘20 of our towns and cities’; improving—not expanding as misreported—the Green Belt; increasing ‘culture spending outside the capital’; relocating civil servants out of London; establishing a National Landlord Register to flag the bad ones; and ‘investing £50m from the Safer Streets Fund every year of the [Spending Review 21] period [...] to tackle crime and anti-social behaviour’...);
- ‘Empower local leaders and communities’ (for example through ‘trailblazer deeper devolution deals with the West Midlands and Greater Manchester’; further mayoral combined authorities; ‘new County Deals’; and a ‘new independent body’ that will somehow ‘strengthen transparency for local people and publish rigorous, compatible data on performance’...).

The vast list is incredible, because each of the huge mountains of issues are to show change by 2030. True, there are few measurable performance targets (‘by 2030, public transport connectivity

across the country will be *significantly closer* to the standards of London’—emphasis added). It really is great stuff, but this government is making rods for its own back—will the Conservative Party, the Houses of Parliament, and the people embark on this Long March with Michael Gove, and at this speed; and what if the ‘red wall’ turns red or some other colour than blue? The whiff of a new social democratic political alignment gets stronger.

For those whose lives are stuck in a bad way, and for whom the only way is up, this White Paper is full of wonderful prospects. Although it is so very long and will be read by few of us, it is stimulating and uplifting.

For everyone else it will depend whether this sounds like rocking the boat too much, too fast. The evidence, as presented, is burning bright: we need to get rocking.

● **David Lock CBE** is Strategic Planning Adviser at David Lock Associates. He is a Vice-President and former Chair of the TCPA. The views expressed are personal.

Notes

- 1 *Levelling Up the United Kingdom*. Levelling Up White Paper. Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, Feb. 2022. www.gov.uk/government/publications/levelling-up-the-united-kingdom
- 2 *Planning for the Future*. Planning White Paper. Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Aug. 2020. www.gov.uk/government/consultations/planning-for-the-future — and see D Lock: ‘Unnecessary trouble’. *Town & Country Planning*, 2020, Vol. 89, Sept./Oct., 292–96
- 3 Andrew Haldane was the Chief Economist at the Bank of England, for whom he worked from 1989 to 2021, and is the Chief Executive of the Royal Society of Arts, on secondment for six months to the newly named Department. Wikipedia, for which thanks, suggests this man from Guisely in Leeds is very special — see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andy_Haldane
- 4 See footnote 2 in ‘Unnecessary trouble’ (see note 2) and D Lock: ‘Radical reform at last?’. *Town & Country Planning*, 2020, Vol. 89, Feb./Mar., 51–54
- 5 The 11 eminent members are listed on page 157 of the White Paper. Mostly economists, about 50% are academics. Notable in the list is David Skelton, Director of Renewal, which is a campaign group aiming to widen the working class and ethnic minority base of the Conservatives. He argued clearly how the working class vote was for up for grabs as far back as 2013, and is yet another former heavyweight from Policy Exchange. Catch the current zeitgeist with his book *Little Platoons: How a Revived One Nation Can Empower England’s Forgotten Towns and Redraw the Political Map* (Biteback Publishing, 2019), and *The New Snobbery: Taking on Modern Elitism and Empowering the Working Class* (Biteback Publishing, 2021). Political tectonic plates are shifting fast, although the consequences are not necessarily as Skelton may wish