



# Response to the Levelling Up White Paper

From The Young Foundation and  
Institute for Community Studies

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## Shaping a fairer future We are the UK's home for community research and social innovation

The Young Foundation is the UK's home for community research and social innovation. As a not-for-profit, The Young Foundation brings communities, organisations and policymakers together, driving positive change to shape a fairer future.

Working to understand the issues people care about, The Young Foundation supports collective action to improve lives, involving communities in locally-led research and delivering distinctive initiatives and programmes to build a stronger society. The Young Foundation also powers the Institute for Community Studies.

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## About this report

On 2 February 2022, the government published its Levelling Up White Paper.

As the UK's home for community research and social innovation, The Young Foundation and its Institute for Community Studies are well-placed to build on the stated aims and 'missions' of this paper.

We work in collaboration and partnership with communities, businesses and policy-influencers, to positively and proactively shape a fairer future through deeply challenging and uncertain times.

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## Foreword

**"Levelling up' is only possible when local people and communities have a profound sense of ownership over their own story for change."**

There is nothing not to like about the 'levelling up' central premise; vast parts of our population and places are consistently being 'left behind', and a multi-faceted, systemic, long-term approach is fundamental to shifting that entrenched inequality.

But 'levelling up' is only possible when the 'part economic, part social, part moral' rhetoric of the white paper is embedded in every dimension of delivery. That means ensuring local people and communities have a profound sense of ownership over their own story for change. It means investment, R&D, innovation, and implementation of all the government's stated 'missions' are infused with that social and moral dimension.

It means we must work at every level to support a just transition through our green industrial revolution. We must acknowledge the significant impact of extreme weather events and climate adaptation. Flood is mentioned once in the white paper – in reference to a flood-lit football pitch.

It means equality, diversity and inclusion must be the core DNA for 'levelling up'. There seems to be a belief, alive in our society today, that a commitment to these things is a political ideology. Nothing could be more damaging to the health of our society and democracy. There is no 'levelling up' unless we face down and focus on each and every dimension of inequality, addressing the barriers that impede so many people across the UK.

Despite the statement of interplay and interconnectedness of the different 'missions' across the white paper, there is a deep sense that the economy, productivity and innovation reside in one corner, and public services, social purpose, wellbeing and belonging reside in another. Yet the key question of our time is: how can we bring these worlds together?

At The Young Foundation, our evidence (both theory and practice) shows that without involving people and communities more closely – without working



'The ambition to close the gap between people and the institutions who so powerfully influence their life chances and wellbeing is the golden thread that should weave the 'levelling up' missions together.'

radically differently across sectors, disciplines and boundaries – 'levelling up' is not possible in any meaningful sense.

History is too often ignored when formulating strategies for navigating or imagining our futures. It is easy to scoff at forays into Renaissance Italy or the First Industrial Revolution, but they are not un-useful devices when exploring ingredients for future success. Particularly when they emphasise the critical importance of creativity. Such is the richness and depth of our history, we can also be selective about which examples feel most useful to underpinning our general arguments and philosophies.

A more recent historical perspective was revealed through research undertaken by the Institute for Community Studies (ICS) in 2021. This work showed very clearly that approaches to regeneration and economic transformation do not work for the majority of local communities and their economies. Two decades of interventions have consistently failed to address the most deprived communities, contributing to a 0% average change in the relative spatial deprivation of the most deprived local authority areas across the country.

While the Levelling Up White Paper acknowledges these past failures, it is not evident that the proposed set of pre-existing funding streams will do any more than was achieved by the Labour government when Blair announced in 2002 that the "goal is a Britain in which nobody is left behind; in which people can go as far as they have the talent to go; in which we achieve true equality - equal status and equal opportunity, rather than equality of outcome."

Back to the 2021 ICS report, which also found the majority of macro funds and economic interventions over the last two decades have not involved communities in a meaningful or sustainable way. Where funds and interventions did have higher levels of community involvement, these were disconnected from the structures where decisions are taken, undermining their aim of building community power into local economic solutions.

This ambition to close gap between people and the range of institutions who so powerfully influence their life chances and wellbeing is the golden thread that should weave the 'levelling up' mission together. Feelings of disconnection from each other - loss of agency, confidence, influence and trust in our



politics, institutions and democracy - is a fault line that must be addressed in our mission to Level Up.

It is incredibly encouraging to see the announcement of a Strategy for Community Spaces and Relationships, promises of increased community ownership, more attention given to community priorities, piloting of Community Covenants, community improvement districts, support for critical social infrastructure, a Community Wealth Fund, community-led regeneration. Many of these announcements have long been championed and advocated by key leaders in civil society. And it's with no small thanks to Danny Kruger MP that they find their way into the Levelling Up White Paper.

Community strength, capacity and leadership are the foundational underpinning of a strong, healthy and safe society. If the UK is to avoid repeating the failed patterns of the past, we must continue to build a culture and an expectation of deeper involvement of people and communities in the work of 'levelling up', and in our institutions, governance and structures.



'There is no 'levelling up' unless we face down and focus on each and every dimension of inequality, addressing the barriers to that impede so many people across the UK.'





# Reflections

An eight-point plan for delivery

As the UK's home for community research and social innovation, The Young Foundation proposes eight areas of focus through which the implementation of 'levelling up' can have greatest impact and success:

1. **The Levelling Up Advisory Council must be representative and inclusive** of the people it seeks to support, and embed the values of equality, diversity and inclusion in all aspects of implementation of 'levelling up'
2. **The devolution of power from Whitehall should build sustained, meaningful partnerships with communities** that have measurable, material significance and impact on local outcomes
3. **'Innovation accelerators' must aim to boost the economic outcomes of local people**, driving greater, demonstrable impact
4. **Investment in research and development should directly benefit local people** in the places they are operational; widening the gate for new employment opportunities
5. **The 'levelling up' agenda must empower our citizens** (particularly young citizens). Those shaping the agenda must, intellectually and materially, better connect civic activities with efforts to tackle inequality in 'left behind' areas.
6. **The UK National Academy should be expanded to democratise access to education and training for all**, regardless of age, ability or geography
7. **The 'levelling up' agenda must commit to a just transition to a green, net zero economy**, addressing the fact that disruption will most affect the poorest households and those currently working in carbon-intensive industries.
8. **Pride will come from people having ownership** of the accomplishments and improvements in the place they live



## Eight points, explained

**Aim 1: The Levelling Up Advisory Council must be representative and inclusive of the people it seeks to support, and embed the value of equality, diversity and inclusion in all aspects of implementation of 'levelling up'**

*"I think the people in this country have had enough of experts from organisations with acronyms saying that they know what is best and getting it consistently wrong"*

*Michael Gove, 2016*

The white paper promises a Levelling up Advisory Council with membership from 'academia, industry and the public sector', but does not include membership from representatives of the people and places it will seek to transform. It adopts an aged and outmoded approach to governance; one that assumes a clutch of 'clever chaps' are wise enough to advise on how to tackle an entire country's complex, systemic challenges - many of which have been unerringly and stubbornly resistant to any prior intervention.

Yet our plural, networked society is well able to innovate and accommodate expansive models of governance, co-design and guidance at every level. There are many ways to meaningfully involve a much larger and more diverse group of people in any Advisory Council. Let's try something that is genuinely representative of diverse forms of knowledge and experience; something that is also porous and accessible to the general public, which would be to its - and the public's - benefit.

**Aim 2: The devolution of power from Whitehall should build sustained, meaningful partnerships with communities that have measurable, material significance and impact on local outcomes**

*'We want to usher in a devolution revolution, introducing a new model for counties with mayors or "governors".'*

*Executive Summary of the Levelling Up White Paper*

Further devolution is welcome, and yet without devolution of fiscal powers, we see more evolution than revolution in government plans. The art and act of implementing 'levelling up' must be devolved too. We might have a national 'recipe', but that does not make us great cooks. In seeking to tackle a challenge that has not budged for 70 years, let's resist the idea that 'one size fits all' - particularly in community-led regeneration and other kinds of decision-making and community involvement at a hyper-local level.

Community Covenants and Community Improvement Districts should manifest in ways that are mostly likely to embody sustained, meaningful partnerships with communities. For some, this might be the reinvention of a Business Improvement District, for others merging with an Integrated Care System. For some it may be the creation of an entirely new structure or body. For others, innovations such as Luton's Fairness Task Force (which seeks to place community power at the

centre of multi-sector systemic change) may be the most appropriate vehicle.

Our best learning will be through practice, and learning to work with the 'levelling up' recipe. And while a clear view of the measurement of progress towards 'levelling up' is critical, there should be as much if not more attention given to facilitating lateral learning and exchange across different localities.

We should also pay attention to the nature of power, and power dynamics. Decision-making close to the point of impact is necessary and desirable, yet the dynamics that exist between local government and Whitehall can sometimes be replicated between combined authorities and local councils, or between councils and neighbourhoods. The quality, depth and trust within relationships, at different tiers of government, matters as much as devolved powers.

The exclusion of a rural dimension to the Levelling Up White Paper (a 'rural proofing' second report is due in the spring) should not go unmentioned; its absence not only downgrades its importance, but also shows a disconnect from the experiences of people living in rural and semi-rural areas.

At The Young Foundation, we have spoken to hundreds of young people from across the country, and their voices support the mass of evidence that opportunities available to those living in cities are vastly greater than they are to those living in rural and semi-rural areas. Access to digital education, training and remote working will do much to support levelling up in these places. However, despite the 'mission' statement, it is not at all likely that people

living outside major urban areas will see 'local public transport significantly closer to the standards of London'. Worse, the lack of this will continue to limit people's access to a wide range of cultural, educational and professional opportunities.

We suggest this is an area ripe for innovation: how do we ensure that everyone in the country is able to the access services and opportunities they want on an equitable basis? And how can this be achieved in the context of 'net zero'?

**Aim 3. 'Innovation accelerators' must drive greater equality and have demonstrable impact on the economic outcomes of local people**

*'The government will target £100m of investment in three new Innovation Accelerators, which will aim to replicate the Stanford-Silicon Alley and MIT-Greater Boston models'*

*Executive Summary of the Levelling Up White Paper*

Silicon Valley's inequality has grown twice as quickly as the rest of the state of California over the past 10 years [1]. Boston ranks among the top ten unequal cities in the United States [2]. If these regions, with their vast wealth, cannot tackle - indeed seem to exacerbate - inequalities and poverty in the places they are operating, then we cannot assume that those self-same models will spread equality of opportunity to those experiencing most disadvantage within regions across the UK. We need a much more expansive idea of what innovation means, in the context of 'levelling up'.

Without taking away the immense value of scientific and technological innovation and the aspiration for

the UK to be a global centre of excellence, there is tremendous scope to support a more sophisticated model of innovation here in the UK. One that embodies the 'part economic, part social, part moral' intent set out by the Secretary of State. Leaning into global private sector investors, who are increasingly focused on valuing and measuring social as much as financial return on investment, is an opportunity for the taking.

**Aim 4: Investment in research and development should directly benefit local people in the places they are operational; widening the gate for new employment opportunities**

*By 2030, domestic public investment in R&D outside the Greater South East will increase by at least 40%.' Levelling Up White Paper, pp120*

Again, the intent and need for investment in R&D is evident and desirable. And again, some of the same principles apply: investment should be evidentially benefiting the people and places where work is being undertaken. Ambitions in this regard might be codified and measured, perhaps akin to the embryonic 'civic university' movement. While scouting the world to draw exceptional talent into the UK, we should also be dramatically widening the gate for local people to begin careers in research and innovation in the places where new investment is made. Traditional notions and practices of 'public



engagement' to raise awareness and understanding of innovation need to change (as they are in some quarters) towards building agency and capacity to become actively involved in R&D processes, not simply standing at the 'end of the pipe' to be sprayed with whatever emerges.

As another, short history lesson: when the telegraph, the telephone, the radio were invented, all were championed as being a democratising force for good; open by default. Over time, they all became closed, proprietary monopolies. This is a pattern that has been repeated in the evolution of the internet. While the potential of AI seems to have had a sobering effect on our technological deterministic streak, we are still marching into another pattern of advancement that (if we survive the rise of the robots) is likely to consolidate economic power and exacerbate the gap between the richest and the poorest. We *must* have an expressed view on the kind of innovation that is likely to level up our country, and which does not drive greater levels of economic inequality, whether across regions or demographics.

If the Medici model combined innovation in finance with technological breakthroughs, where is the similarly innovative use of finance in our 21st-century model to support research and innovation? The homeopathically small references to social enterprise and mission-driven enterprise feels like a large oversight within the white paper. The UK has a strong and growing social enterprise sector, three times larger than the agricultural sector, employing as many people as the creative industries [3]. Combining impact investment, industry ESG agendas, and mission-driven businesses that are ripe for scale – particularly those who are highly technologically focused – would signal that the UK is not just a great place to do business, but a place to do ground-breaking and responsible business.

**Aim 5: 'Levelling up' must empower our citizens (particularly young citizens). Those shaping the agenda must intellectually and materially better connect civic activities with efforts to tackle inequality in 'left behind' areas**

*'By 2025, every young person in England will have access to regular out of school activities, adventures away from home and opportunities to volunteer'*  
*Levelling Up White Paper, pp.213*

Empowering young people to become engaged, active citizens is a key ambition for any democratic society. The Institute for Community Studies is fortunate to be leading a major youth-led programme, seeking to create a new blueprint for beginning and sustaining a life of civic engagement and social action.

From disengagement with the terminology of 'volunteering' to taking an incredibly expansive view of what civic and social action means across all aspects of their lives, young people must be at the heart of designing new opportunities, and we invite the government to learn from and participate in the National Citizen Service-funded Civic Journey project.

There is also a clear need to shift in the way citizenship is taught in schools, supporting more engaged, project-based learning, where citizenship is a lived experience. Young people should experience their civic spirit being activated in their local community and learn by experience that they can influence the world around them in positive ways that work towards a local common good.

As with other commentary within this paper, we should not confine civic engagement to working in our communities. Our expansive view of





'volunteering' should mirror the views of young people: it is not only about increasing a sense of belonging, involvement and pride in a place, but also about fuelling our civic responsibility in other areas of our lives and work. As with the recently launched Year of Service, there are clear ways of rethinking work placements and employment, incentivising mission-driven, purposeful businesses to value and channel social commitment into their core business strategies.

Our collective ambition should be that civic participation is endemic across the whole system. Whether working in the private, public or civic realm, an evolved meritocratic narrative would ensure that there is demonstrable value ascribed to working in the service of the common good.

**Aim 6: The UK National Academy should be expanded to democratise access to education and training, regardless of age, ability or geography**

*The UK National Academy will be free and made available online to support the work of schools up and down the country. It will allow students to acquire additional advanced knowledge and skills, offering even more opportunities for every child to thrive.'*

*Executive Summary of the Levelling Up White Paper*

This is exactly the right sense of scale and ambition for fully democratising access to education through digital technology; and a great example of what a globally recognised Public Service Platform might contain. The Open University, which has its roots in The Young Foundation, opened access to higher education to those unable to participate in full-time, day-time education, and similarly transformative access could be achieved through the UK National Academy. We should be charged by the well-evidenced potential for increasing support, access and opportunity to skills and education – whatever our age, whatever our educational needs and priorities.

*"The species that survives is the one that is able best to adapt and adjust to the changing environment " - Darwin*

The evolution of our society has fundamentally deskilled our basic needs for numeracy and literacy. There is no need to count change given in a shop, no need to know how to spell in a text, for example. Without taking away from the critical need to ensure higher levels literacy and numeracy in our young people, we cannot continue to shy away from the 21st-century competency requirements, which stretch across a broader canvas of what constitutes a

meaningful education. The UK National Academy should emphasise and teach those competencies where possible and give equal merit and value to skills that afford a fighting chance of adapting to coming change.

**Aim 7: The 'levelling up' agenda and those shaping it must espouse and enact a commitment to a just transition to a green, 'net zero' economy**

'£26bn of public capital investment for the green industrial revolution and transition to 'net zero"  
Executive Summary of the Levelling Up White Paper

The White Paper states 'the 'net zero' transition could create huge opportunities for many of the UK's left-behind places, but also poses risks for them which, if unmanaged, could be damaging.' And yet despite the monumental shift in our economy and society, there is little substance in the articulation of what constitutes a 'just' transition; how that disruption is likely to affect the poorest households and those currently working in carbon-intensive industries. The answers are not evident to anyone. However, the need for an urgent, cross-sector understanding of what 'management' of this necessary and high-stakes disruption means *is* self-evident.

The disconnection with community and climate is also revealed through a lack of attention to the need for climate adaptation, a term which features not once across 332 pages - and yet the Committee on Climate Change says that five million UK homes are already at risk of flooding. The word 'flood' has one mention – in the context of a flood-lit grass football 'pitch.

It is necessary to charge forward urgently with a green industrial revolution; the focus on re-skilling,

employment and the potential for economic gains in 'levelling up' areas is right. But this change will be undertaken in a (literally) turbulent environment. People from more deprived areas disproportionately face more flood risk than those living in less deprived areas.

**Aim 8: Pride will come from people having ownership of the accomplishments and improvements in the place they live**

'We must 'restore a sense of community, local pride and belonging, especially in those places where they have been lost'

Executive Summary of the Levelling Up White Paper

Whether collective or individual, pride derives from feelings of achievement and accomplishment. Pride is inherently social. It is experienced when we are accomplishing actions which are deemed to be socially praiseworthy [5]. The Levelling Up White Paper's commitment to fostering Pride in Place is therefore entirely dependent on people and communities having a sense of ownership, influence and accomplishment of improvements in the place they live.

The challenge facing the government cannot be underestimated here. Its own data reveals that two in five people living in the 20% most deprived parts of the country are dissatisfied with their local area as a place to live, compared with just one in 10 living in the least deprived areas. [6] The north-south divide is similarly stark and persistent. Those living in the South West are ten percentage points more satisfied than those in the North East. [7]

That feeling of accomplishment and ownership

cannot be confined to the civic realm of community life. And pride will not arise as a result of things being 'done to them' or that are deemed to be in their best interests. Community and local people's sense of pride and ownership of 'levelling up' will come from them owning their own story for change.

In the run up to last week's White Paper, Michael Gove wrote that the UK 'is like a jet firing on only one engine'.<sup>[8]</sup> Unless and until the government accepts the critical importance of reconnecting people to the power and institutions that shape their lives, that jet will continue to fly slowly and in the wrong direction.



Community, and local people's sense of pride and ownership of 'levelling up', will come from them owning their own story for change

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[1] Silicon Valley Pain Index, 2021

<https://www.sjsu.edu/hri/docs/2021%20SV%20PAIN%20INDEX.pdf>

[2] Bloomberg CityLab, 2019

[3] The Hidden Revolution, Social Enterprise UK, The Size & Scale of Social Enterprise in 2018

[4] Social deprivation and the likelihood of flooding, [https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwjtv\\_KR7vT1AhX2QEEAHZ5UBVUQFnoECAYQAw&url=https%3A%2F%2Fassets.publishing.service.gov.uk%2Fgovernment%2Fuploads%2Fsystem%2Fuploads%2Fattachment\\_data%2Ffile%2F953492%2FSocial-deprivation\\_and-flooding-report-v2.pdf&usq=AOvVaw2Dvk9Vr4phowt-RQtQ57Nv](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwjtv_KR7vT1AhX2QEEAHZ5UBVUQFnoECAYQAw&url=https%3A%2F%2Fassets.publishing.service.gov.uk%2Fgovernment%2Fuploads%2Fsystem%2Fuploads%2Fattachment_data%2Ffile%2F953492%2FSocial-deprivation_and-flooding-report-v2.pdf&usq=AOvVaw2Dvk9Vr4phowt-RQtQ57Nv)

[5] Jeanne Nakamura (2013) Pride and the experience of meaning in daily life, *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 8:6, 555-567, DOI: 10.1080/17439760.2013.830765

[6] Community Life Survey 2020/21 Reference Table B8, average satisfaction between 2016/17 and 2020/21 by IMD decile [available online]

[7] Community Life Survey 2020/21 Reference Table B8, average difference in satisfaction between the South West and North East between 2013/14 and 2020/21 [available online]

[8] Michael Gove (2 February 2022) 'Government unveils levelling up plan that will transform UK', gov.uk media release ([www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk))



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