



Exploring levelling up: an Edge Roundtable

Recommendations and Messages

On 10th December 2021 the Edge in collaboration with the Planning team at DLUHC held an Expert Roundtable to discuss the challenges and opportunities involved in delivering the levelling up agenda across the UK.

The Roundtable was held under the Chatham House Rule and all comments made are unattributed.

From the discussion at the Roundtable the Edge has distilled the following:

Edge recommendations

1. There needs to be a switch from short-term injections of capital aimed at discrete projects to long-term partnership funding
2. Local Authorities should be given the role of budget holders and planners for multiple different spending packages along with targets for delivery.
3. Collaborative and cross-institutional working should be encouraged and incentivised
4. Funding packages should be provided to local communities for them to decide on and invest in improvement projects
5. New oversight panels with strong community representation should be put in place to advise and make decisions on large scale projects
6. All projects (over a minimum size) should enhance biodiversity and incorporate natural systems and solutions
7. Retention of existing buildings and structures should be seen as the default, but greater leeway given over how these are developed
8. Plans for achieving net zero carbon emissions within ten years (& reducing) should be obligatory for all new and any substantial refurbishment projects
9. Public funds should be invested in a combined decent and net zero homes programme, delivered on a neighbourhood basis using a new participation and decentralised decision-taking approach
10. A training academy for placemaking skills should be urgently established

Messages

the Edge recommendations have been drawn from the many messages expressed in the Roundtable discussion:

Levelling up

Levelling up is particularly pressing in those areas and communities that have for many reasons been left behind. While the correlation may be not be perfect, this can be usefully measured by the OSCI Community Needs Index (CNI).

There is not a clear north-south divide for left behind communities as concentrations occur in pockets across the country and cities. Tyneside was cited as an example where there is a 10-year difference in healthy life expectancy between the most and least deprived parts of the city conurbation.

There is a strong link between poor living environments (including housing quality) and being left behind and it operates both ways - being both a consequence and driver of community need.

Q. Is there also a link between community need and vulnerability to climate change?



Challenges

Because of the long entrenched nature of many problems, including harmful environmental quality, de-industrialisation, weak access and connectivity, loss of capacity and skills and poor health and mental distress, the challenges facing some areas are multiple and interconnected, resulting in:

- Disincentivised (and stuck) populations
- Place (and self-) stigma
- Fragmentation
- Lack of local physical value
- Lack of human capacity
- Shortage of resources and investment
- Urgent and single opportunity need for successful turning round

Other challenges include:

- The current system of competitive bidding for levelling up resources and investments is not working well. The hard work involved in submitting a bid makes it difficult for impoverished communities to get involved and even when successful the system encourages fragmented and short term funding rather than the joined up and long-term responses that are required. Stop and start funding is a barrier to fluid accelerated delivery and misses wider benefits such as enabling apprenticeships.
- The shortage of good quality housing is a continuing problem and it is essential to bring up existing homes to a decent as well as net zero standard. It was stressed that housing numbers themselves wouldn't create a sustainable legacy and that in some instances it might even be necessary to demolish failing properties.
- Out of town sprawl combined with a lack of public transport access was leading to isolation and dead-end places.
- Local government finance has been the subject of a long-term squeeze and money has moved from universal to personal services. Universal service provision is under intense pressure
- Significant, longer-term public money is based on Land Value Uplift, a metric on which left behind places will fail almost by definition.
- Systems for compliance are stymying creativity and innovation

Many of these are long-term structural issues that require long-term solutions, but there are solutions available.

Potential ways forward

Agency

The importance of local, community-scale agency was stressed time and again along with the message that actions should be taken with and not done to communities.

Social capital needs to be built on and developed using existing assets, whether physical, heritage or human, ensuring that responsibility and stewardship is retained at a local level. This will involve getting private, voluntary and institutional sectors involved without them taking over control. There were examples from organisations e.g the Big Local on how this could be achieved. Alongside this there is a need to build local markets for goods and services and ensure the growth of community-based businesses



Small, but consistent, measures are of great importance: achieving short term improvement and small scale interventions to raise ambitions, e.g. cleaner streets and returning buildings to beneficial use to create aspiration

The key is changing how people feel about their place

Q. How to deal with the localised comparative challenge of levelling up and the sense that your neighbours are doing better than you are?

Scale

The importance of achieving change at scale was recognised, as was the potential contradiction with simultaneously giving local communities agency. Scale, in particular, was seen as being essential to attract private investment as well as balancing whole area economics and achieving meaningful carbon accounting.

One means of ameliorating the inherent divergence in these approaches was to make it clear and transparent how benefits to communities were being maximised with any surpluses reinvested back into the community using a credit system that drives further benefits

Higher quality partnerships were advocated focusing on fostering non-adversarial dialogue and achieving long-term action. Open and reliable long-term planning was seen as an essential basis for combined community and private sector engagement.

Existing Assets

Existing local assets were seen as key elements in delivering levelling up. These included open spaces, heritage buildings and sites as well as existing urban density and human capital such as civic and community ownership and strong leadership from local authorities.

The importance to sustainability and net-zero of re-using existing buildings was stressed but also the challenge to impoverished communities of maintaining existing buildings and environments in both resource and organisational terms.

It was noted that recent evidence shows how the heritage sector and historical places enhance wellbeing and quality of life

Partnership potential

Institutional joining up is seen as a major potential opportunity for local areas, one that was already well underway in many places. Working with faith organisations, the NHS and the voluntary and community sector as well as local businesses is seen as a key and productive role for local authorities.

In particular discussion focused on the role on universities and colleges working with local authorities to achieve a number of significant gains, including bringing life and activity to towns and cities, investment in facilities, enhancement of civic values, cultural events, biodiversity, local training and skills development and long-term retention of graduates in an area. Universities could also act as key anchor sites in communities. However it was noted that there was no requirement on HE institutions to support their local area and they came with no resources to do so. There was also the possibility that they might be allowed to fail. There was great potential and capacity but current governance arrangements came with 'high risk'.



Natural environments

The importance of nature and green and blue spaces in cities was stressed by many speakers – 'they are a necessity' - and offer huge opportunities for enhancing the lives of communities. Evidence shows investment in green/blue spaces delivers high value for money.

The example of the Future Parks initiative was cited as being 'a gamechanger', but its initial rollout was limited to only 10 projects. Community forests have acted as a catalyst with links to other schemes and encouraged innovative thinking about how to put in place new investment models that enable long-term maintenance solutions and innovations to overall planning, delivery and investment methodologies.

It was advised that existing housing and spaces would need to be retrofitted in order to bring in nature, biodiversity and nature-based solutions as part of the package for achieving net zero environments. Everything was going to have to work very hard together if net zero was going to be achieved.

Placemaking / neighbourhood-making

Placemaking was essential but it required working with and understanding the needs of local residents. Places were needed where people felt safe and had ownership. There is a knowledge base on how to achieve this, but it is not a cookbook – it is more about skills. Innovation needs to be place-based. LA 'Place Directorates' (e.g. as in Derby) were cited as a potentially strong model.

It was recommended that:

- Places should be planned for children and full lifespans – inequitable effects start in childhood
- Meaningful shared decision-making should be standard practice, with a focus on cleanliness and quality
- Existing social capital should be built on and strengthened – in part through making relational spaces
- Metrics for policy goals, e.g. wellbeing, should be put in place and monitored

A Placemaking Academy was proposed to develop skills for key actors in developing and improving places

A Decent Neighbourhood Standard was also recommended, but this maybe more about defining a successful process of engagement and investment decision-making than design or quality standards.

Connectivity and transport

Transport investment determines the quality of a place. Housing and development should be built alongside public transport schemes, e.g. tram and RT routes, resulting in a completely different kind of place and more sociable and vibrant communities.

Investment should be in public transport and not roads. How places connect is really important, including walking and cycling provision.

Civic institutions

The importance of civic institutions and of collaboration between institutions was stressed.

Transformation, energy and the passion of local people was seen as a key means of attracting finance into Local Authorities



Working practices

The following were suggested as key to successful working:

- Place should come first – by creating a distinct and engaging sense of place, worthwhile development will follow
- A focus on local people. New platforms are required to enable this
- Professionals and users must work together
- New models of buildings and financing are required. There is not enough choice. New approaches, new players are needed to change things, we can't rely on the past
- Maintenance (involving the local population) is essential
- Taking a positive attitude to the built and natural heritage and environment
- Balancing how buildings perform etc., possibly using heat networks rather than individual installations
- Adequate resourcing

Resourcing

The challenge of resourcing improvements and positive development underpinned the discussion.

Local control of budgets was seen as vital as was long-term funding agreements, enabling the linking together of funding streams to achieve beneficial synergies as well as the opportunity to leverage in other investments from different sectors.

Other potential sources of investment were discussed, including the Big Lottery Fund, the Accelerator programme etc. Targeted R&D spending in universities could also help rebalance the UK economy regionally

Local Authorities are essential in securing investment, developing capacity and enabling projects, but it was suggested they also needed to know when to get out of the way.

The current competitive bidding method needs to be replaced with more systematic, transparent and long-term arrangements.

Note

There is a separate set of detailed notes on the Roundtable discussion prepared by the DLUHC team. These are available on the Edge's website (www.edgedebate.com).

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