



Left
Behind
Neighbourhoods

SPEECH
Check against delivery

COMMUNITY WEALTH FUND: TEN MINUTE RULE MOTION

Speech to the House of Commons, 8 December 2021

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Mr Speaker, I beg to move that leave be given to bring in a Bill to transfer monies from the Dormant Assets Scheme into a new national endowment called the Community Wealth Fund, to be invested for the purposes of improving the local environments and quality of life of deprived communities, including through building social capital and social infrastructure; and for connected purposes.

I am the first Conservative MP for Sedgefield since 1931 and, like so many of my colleagues on this side of the House, I was elected in 2019 with a mandate to level up every community across the UK. Over our first two years in office, we have worked tirelessly to level up opportunity throughout the UK.

The Prime Minister announced the Towns Fund, now worth in excess of £4.6 billion, to regenerate high streets, town centres and communities, and in his first Spending Review the Chancellor set out the landmark £4 billion Levelling Up Fund, to invest in the infrastructure of everyday life, alongside the UK Shared Prosperity Fund to support communities after Brexit. And we now have a Department focused on delivering our Levelling Up mission so that every community across the country can benefit from the policies of this government.

Most of the proposals announced so far will help to improve economic fortunes across the UK, as we build back better from Covid, and meet the challenges of net zero.

As the MP for an area that has suffered greatly as a result of the Beeching rail cuts, an issue explored in detail by the All-Party Parliamentary Group for 'left behind' neighbourhoods, and having worked with colleagues from the benches opposite to re-open such rail lines and stations, I know how important investment in physical infrastructure is, as it can be a significant injection of belief in an area.

But as I said earlier this week in my contribution to the Second Reading of the Dormant Assets Bill, levelling up needs to be more than just that - it is now time to tackle the next frontier of levelling up, and rebuild the essential social infrastructure that our communities rely upon.

This is because both places and people are important. Research and evidence strongly suggest that places need investment in their social fabric as well as in their physical infrastructure, and people need support and resources to nurture and develop the type of relationships that underpin the health and wellbeing of our communities and of the country as a whole.

Strong, thriving communities need places to meet and a vibrant civil society to build the networks and strengthen the ties that bind us together – and which contribute to that shared sense of pride we feel about where we live.

We have seen the benefits of such strong social connections over the past year as local residents stepped up during the pandemic to protect their communities from the virus, forming mutual aid groups to ensure that vulnerable residents were looked after.

As we move beyond COVID-19, meet the challenges of climate change, and look to the future, this sense of community spirit is something we must seek to harness and build on if levelling up is to be a reality.

This Bill seeks to do just that: helping to restore local pride in place, through investing in people and in developing their confidence and capacity and building the relationships needed to support people to take action locally in their community.

For our levelling up ambitions to reach every part of the country, it must begin in those places where the social fabric is frayed the most.

We need a 'least first' approach to levelling up: with investment targeted first at those areas that have the least. It is for this reason that I am bringing forward this Bill in my role as co-chair of the APPG for 'left behind' neighbourhoods, a group supported by 76 members from across both Houses.

The 'left behind' neighbourhoods that we represent and advocate for are facing severe economic deprivation as well as significantly lacking in the social infrastructure that is so important to our way of life, but which so many of us sometimes take for granted.

Those essential community places and spaces for people to meet in a local area. The local activity and engagement with civic life that supports a sense of local ownership and fosters belonging and civic pride, and the physical and digital connectivity that is so vital in connecting residents with amenities, services and opportunities

These neighbourhoods, including Trimdon and Thornley, and Ferryhill in my constituency, as research for our APPG has found, face significantly worse outcomes when compared to all other areas, including those that are equally economically deprived but which benefit from a foundation of social infrastructure.

The work of our APPG over the past eighteen months has made it clear that these neighbourhoods require investment in the politics of belonging: we must make these neighbourhoods better places to live and grow up in, investing in local talent and opportunities, and providing them with the support, resources and tools they need to flourish.

Every community needs access to places where residents can come together, meet new people, discuss ideas and take part in civic life, and become involved in projects and plans to improve their local area.

Communities thrive when they enjoy a vibrant local civic life, whether that's built around a shared local history, heritage and experiences, or important local assets and institutions like a pub or library, football club or community centre.

As an MP in the Land of the Prince Bishops I know the value of a shared culture and heritage, and am proud to back County Durham's bid to become UK City of Culture 2025.

These local assets add enormous value to our quality of life. They help create the bonds of trust, cement the relationships and strengthen those ties that bind us – to each other, and to the places we call home. They underpin our unwritten social covenant - generating trust

between people in the places where they live: trust that can be relied upon in times of difficulty.

These are things local residents understand too. Recent polling from Survation found that two-thirds of residents in 'left behind' neighbourhoods felt their neighbourhood was missing out on community facilities, with over half saying their area had less resources such as parks, leisure and sports facilities, and places to meet. As importantly, almost 60 per cent of residents said that they wanted to have more of a say over how future funding in their local area was spent.

When it comes to levelling up a local area, we know that the community is best placed to know what needs to be done. That is why we need not only to listen to local people, but to trust them to take the lead.

This means we need to level up by devolving down – to giving communities the confidence and capacity to take action on the issues that matter most to them, as well as the support and access to resources they need to enable them to improve local outcomes. This is the purpose of the Community Wealth Fund that I set out in this Bill today.

Let me be clear, this is not another call for more funding from the Chancellor. Instead, this Bill sets out the mechanisms to create a permanent endowment to level up the social fabric of these communities, at no extra cost to the public purse.

As we heard in the chamber on Monday, the expanded dormant assets scheme (funding from dormant bonds, stocks, shares, insurance and pension funds) could be used to provide almost £900m initially to this Fund. I welcome the aims of the Government, as set out in the Dormant Assets Bill, to broaden the scope of Dormant Assets. The money is committed for spending on "good causes". It must therefore be separate from day-to-day government spending

My Bill will ensure that this is a reality, setting up an endowment akin to a sovereign wealth fund that supports those places most 'left behind' to design their own futures, achieve greater control over the own destinies, and build long term prosperity.

To ensure that this Community Wealth Fund is impactful in transforming 'left behind' neighbourhoods where previous schemes have not, it must be invested in such a way as to build the social capital of residents whilst delivering visible and tangible benefits to their neighbourhoods.

Research by the University of Cambridge looking at the last 40 years of place-based regeneration schemes found that the key determinants for driving lasting change included local decision-making, targeted funding at the neighbourhood level and ensuring funding is provided over a long-term period.

Recent research for Onward reflects these findings: that whilst the involvement of communities is essential, many communities require upfront investment in order to participate fully. As co-chair of our APPG, I know just what is possible when communities receive this type of investment, and are supported and trusted to get on with things.

The Community Wealth Fund would build upon the learning from previous regeneration programmes and support residents to take the lead on making decisions about how it's spent, in order to achieve lasting change.

This would turbocharge the levels of community confidence and capacity in an area, increasing the stock of social capital and boosting civic pride and the local quality of life. Over the long term, we would expect this investment to pay dividends, through residents' ability to develop longer-term strategies for how they can deliver change and tap into the opportunities on offer across their wider region.

With the arrival of the Dormant Assets Bill and its second reading here on Monday, I am of course aware of the contention around the cross-party amendment in the Other Place that succeeded in writing a pilot Community Wealth Fund or community wealth funds into the Bill. I welcome the fact that the government is not opposed to considering community wealth funds, and that the idea is actively being considered as part of the Levelling Up White Paper discussions.

I also welcome the warm words of my noble friend Lord Parkinson, who acknowledged that the core features of a Community Wealth Fund — community decision-making at a hyperlocal level and investment in social infrastructure — have an important role to play in improving access to opportunities for everybody, particularly those in the more deprived communities. And I welcome my noble Lord's gratitude that the amended bill has genuine cross-party support and arrived in this House with a fair wind behind it.

I also recognise that the government is minded to remove the cross-party amendment seeking to pilot community wealth funds – and that, unlike the first dormant assets legislation, it prefers to leave the purposes to which dormant assets are put to a consultation currently planned for next year.

However, I remain hopeful that the government might change its mind before the Dormant Assets Bill reaches Committee - not least because I believe that the reasonable challenges posed by my noble friend Lord Parkinson when the matter was raised in the Other Place have been fully met.

So whilst I would fully support the objectives of a consultation, and indeed hope that the result will be a Community Wealth Fund - I urge government to listen to the many organisations that have backed the call for a Community Wealth Fund, and to colleagues from across the political parties. At the very least, I would hope that government ensures that the Community Wealth Fund is included in the consultation that is proposed.

A Community Wealth Fund would make a significant contribution to delivering the Government's levelling up objectives in many of our most left behind communities. It is what is needed if we are to realise our ambitions of a new social covenant: a national endowment vesting greater control directly in the hands of local communities.

My Bill thereby sets in motion the mechanisms by which we can build trust and achieve genuine and transformational change in 'left behind' neighbourhoods by giving communities the opportunities to take the steps and identify the measures they need to thrive.

I would welcome the opportunity to talk to ministers about the design and implementation of the Community Wealth Fund, together with members of the APPG for 'left behind' neighbourhoods.

I commend this Bill to the House.

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