APPG inquiry into levelling up

Summary notes from Session 1: Levelling up social outcomes
Onwards and upwards: building neighbourhoods of opportunity

Date: Tuesday 26th April, 2022

Time: 3pm – 5pm

Venue: Jubilee Room, Westminster Hall

APPG members present: Paul Howell MP (co-chair), Dame Diana Johnson DBE MP (co-chair), Ian Levy MP (Officer), Emma Hardy MP, Dr Kieran Mullan MP (Officer), Jo Gideon MP, Mick Whitley MP, Andrew Lewer MP, Baroness Armstrong of Hill Top

Secretariat: Daniel Crowe and Tilly Steward, Local Trust

The APPG's inquiry seeks to assess the extent to which the Levelling Up White Paper's policy programme aligns with the needs and aspirations of people who live in those communities identified as 'left behind'.

Across two panels of expert witnesses, inquiry session 1 examined the White Paper's four medium-term missions relating to education, skills, health and wellbeing.

Focus area	Mission
Spread opportunities and improve public services, especially in those places where they are weakest	
Education	Mission 5: By 2030, the number of primary school children achieving the expected standard in reading, writing and maths will have significantly increased. In England, this will mean 90% of children will achieve the expected standard, and the percentage of children meeting the expected standard in the worst performing areas will have increased by over a third.
Skills	Mission 6: By 2030, the number of people successfully completing high-quality skills training will have significantly increased in every area of the UK. In England, this will lead to 200,000 more people successfully completing high-quality skills training annually, driven by 80,000 more people completing courses in the lowest skilled areas.
Health	Mission 7: By 2030, the gap in Healthy Life Expectancy (HLE) between local areas where it is highest and lowest will have narrowed, and by 2035 HLE will rise by five years.
Wellbeing	Mission 8: By 2030, wellbeing will have improved in every area of the UK, with the gap between top performing and other areas closing.

Local Trust

Panel 1: Levelling up education, skills, and 'beyond the school gates' to improve opportunities and social mobility

- Graeme Duncan, Chief Executive, Right to Succeed
- Simon Parkinson, Chief Executive, WEA
- Rebecca Woods, Reece Pocklington and Billy Robinson, Award-winning young community activists and co-founders of WE WILL

This panel was comprised of leaders at education charities working with young people and adult learners across deprived and 'left behind' neighbourhoods, as well as a group of young mental health activists. Witnesses expressed in-principle support for the aims of the Levelling Up White Paper, however stressed the need to pay attention to the unique challenges faced by individuals in 'left behind' neighbourhoods and the importance of giving communities the power, tools, and resources to create their own 'bottom-up' solutions.

Broader context of education

A key takeaway from this panel was that education does not exist in a vacuum, as educational participation, performance, and outcomes are influenced by broader external factors. On average, children from low-income backgrounds start their schooling behind in terms of literacy and numeracy – and often fall further behind peers over the course of their education. Following questioning from MPs present, members heard evidence of the external pressures facing parents and families: factors such as the cost of living and difficulties providing basic necessities can mean that education is pushed down the list of priorities in the home. In situations where parents need to work long or unsocial hours, children may be left unsupervised with less support available for homework. Additionally, the educational aspirations of young people can also be limited if they feel pressure to commence full-time employment and earn an income.

The impact of community involvement in solutions

Witnesses underscored the importance of considering local needs when designing potential policy solutions, working directly with 'left behind' communities to understand what measures would benefit them, as well as empowering residents to lead this change. Proposed initiatives included providing adult learning opportunities directly within a trusted community space – rather than expecting people to travel to another location, which may present additional barriers to learning due to poor public transport provision in 'left behind' neighbourhoods and residents lacking cars. Promoting shared interests and activities like sport (e.g., local football clubs), music, and arts can also be used as tools for individuals to develop new capabilities and skills. However, this requires community spaces and local community groups (i.e., social infrastructure) in place to provide these opportunities.

When asked what draws people into becoming active in the local community, witnesses explained it could be an interest or concern for a single issue or area that develops into more holistic volunteering or activism. The WE WILL campaign developed out of previous participation in an effort to protect local hospital beds, which provided young people with the confidence to set up their own initiative on youth mental health. Witnesses stressed that volunteering provides a double benefit: not only for the community, but also for their individual skills and confidence, which can be applied to other areas such as university applications or searching for employment.

Understanding the different barriers to education

A broad range of factors can combine and interact to negatively impact an individual's experience of education, particularly in 'left behind' areas. This can include a lack of local amenities, services, or poor transport, while a perceived absence of opportunity in an area can also contribute to low motivation and poor mental health. Learning and continuing education can also be held back by other, less overt barriers such as the language used to describe these activities. Witnesses raised the importance of how adult education is framed: offering adults numeracy skills at a 'primary school level' or referring to skills 'bootcamps' can be unhelpful and exclusionary. At the same time, demographic characteristics can also play a role and should be considered in educational outreach efforts. From the experience of expert witnesses, working class men face specific barriers to engaging with adult learning, which stereotypically is seen as for retired professionals. Digital exclusion (i.e., not having adequate access or ability to use digital platforms) was also raised as a potential barrier, given that the government envisages much of the Lifetime Skills Guarantee to be delivered through online learning.

Building on success and 'what works'

Parliamentarians queried what could be done to improve the performance of schools in 'left behind' neighbourhoods, employing the example of the London Challenge (2003-2011) school improvement programme that saw a positive impact across participating schools. More recent examples were given of specific schools in Blackpool and Birkenhead which have seen significant gains in literacy, even during the Covid-19 pandemic. Literacy was described as the 'master skill' – being the best predictor of GSCE results for pupils as well as opening up further education and employment opportunities – which should be the first priority for improving performance. It was also seen as a key platform to develop numeracy skills. Efforts to improve literacy have positive impacts on pupil engagement, behaviour, and even teacher morale, with these positive impacts extending to the experience of adult learners.

Targeting and celebrating breadth of achievement

In line with comments recognising the challenging context for adult and young learners in 'left behind' neighbourhoods, witnesses questioned the focus in the White Paper on Level 3 qualifications. One expert witness expressed concern about a lack of funding for lower skills levels, which are necessary to progress to more advanced qualifications. For some learners, simply building confidence and resilience is a significant achievement worth celebrating – outside the level of qualification gained – particularly for those facing mental health challenges.

Long-term, resident-led funding

Discussion turned to the principles that should guide efforts to help improve the life chances of young people in 'left behind' neighbourhoods: there was consensus among expert witnesses that centrally allocated and administered funds often do not recognise the specific needs and challenges faced in these communities. Witnesses expressed support for the Big Local programme due to its focus on resident-led decision-making and power over financial resources, as well as the proposal for a Community Wealth Fund which would provide long-term funding and help build capacity within local areas to generate lasting change.

Panel 2: Improving health and wellbeing outcomes

• Professor Mark Gamsu, School of Health and Community Studies, Leeds Beckett University

• Jim Burt, Executive Director of Programmes, National Academy for Social Prescribing

• Trisha Bennett, Community Development Co-ordinator, Whitley Big Local partnership, Reading

This panel was comprised of experts and practitioners across local health systems, social prescribing, and community development. As was the case for Panel 1, witnesses welcomed the White Paper's diagnosis of existing inequality and its ambitious targets, yet questioned whether these could be achieved in the stated timeframes and queried the scope for appropriate levels of community involvement in their delivery which was viewed as key to successful levelling up.

Health inequalities

The extent of health disparities between 'left behind' and other neighbourhoods is well-established, and witnesses supported the goal of raising healthy life expectancy in areas where it is currently lowest. However, they also stressed that the causes of health inequalities are multifaceted and are unlikely to be solved through increased health service provision alone. Rather, external factors such as financial insecurity can exacerbate health problems, requiring a holistic approach that considers the broader determinants of health.

A member of the APPG asked about the role of GPs in addressing health inequalities, yet a witness questioned the ability of the current funding system to help tackle this problem. As deprivation can occur in 'pockets' at the hyper-local level, this means that patients with additional needs may represent a minority in areas lacking primary care time or resources for targeted health initiatives. In addition, GPs operating in 'left behind' neighbourhoods do not receive extra funding to adjust for inequalities and the higher levels of care required.

Benefits and welfare system

Levels of financial insecurity in 'left behind' neighbourhoods contribute to people needing to draw on the welfare system in the event of serious or chronic illness, particularly if this prevents them from remaining in employment. One witness stated that accessing benefits can be difficult for people affected by severe illness. For example, charities, such as MacMillan Cancer Support, have had to step in to help cancer sufferers get benefits to which they are entitled, as this is not a service provided by the NHS. When it comes to disability benefits, while some GPs are helpful in assisting patients to complete the necessary paperwork for Personal Independence Payments, this is not uniform.

Social prescribing

Members heard how approximately 20 per cent of GP appointments are because of broader social determinants of health such as loneliness, social isolation, or financial problems. The NHS is currently halfway through its programme of recruiting 4,500 social prescribing link workers who act as a bridge between clinicians and patients, with an aim to reduce the need for medical or therapeutic interventions and pressure on the primary health system. Other witnesses expressed general support for the aims of social prescribing, however many raised concerns about sufficient funding and the lack of availability of activities to be prescribed within a local area. 'Left behind' neighbourhoods often lack the kinds of community spaces and groups that are vital for supporting social prescribing activities.

Food and nutrition

Access to healthy and affordable food can be a problem for the residents of 'left behind' neighbourhoods, with direct consequences for nutrition and healthy eating. However, the issue is not exclusively, as sometimes is suggested, that people in these areas lack knowledge about nutrition and healthy food options, or indeed how to cook. Rather, individuals may lack basic cooking facilities or face barriers because of the prohibitive cost of energy to prepare food. In some cases, families with children with complex needs may have additional dietary requirements, which can add extra expense and limit the options available. Another limiting factor identified by witnesses was a lack of shops with fresh fruit and vegetables in the local area, meaning that residents without cars or access to public transport face additional barriers to obtaining healthy food.

Importance of local, community-led action

As with Panel 1, witnesses highlighted the importance of supporting communities to improve health and wellbeing outcomes in their local area. Local residents are not only best-placed to understand the specific context and challenges of the community that they live in, but additional perceptions of 'do-gooders' from outside the area and top-down interventions can negatively impact take-up of projects and services. Witnesses stressed the importance of local community spaces: having a hub for residents to meet and get a coffee while accessing advice and services provides a welcoming and judgement-free environment. Further, any opportunities for potential funding should be designed to meet the needs of a community, without requiring multiple applications to access different funding streams, as this form of funding can present a barrier even for individuals with significant knowledge and experience of the sector.

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