APPG inquiry into levelling up

Summary notes from Session 4: Levelling up investment and local leadership
Empowering local leaders and communities, especially in those places lacking local agency

Date: Tuesday 24th January 2023

Time: 3.00pm – 4.45pm

Venue: Jubilee Room, Westminster Hall

APPG members present: Paul Howell MP, Dame Diana Johnson DBE MP, Andy McDonald MP, Ian Levy MP, Lia Nici MP, Baroness Armstrong of Hill Top, Lord Glasman

Secretariat: Daniel Crowe, Tilly Steward and Sarah Stearne, 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'. In the fourth and final session of the inquiry, jointly chaired by Paul Howell MP and Dame Diana Johnson DBE MP, the APPG heard evidence from four expert witnesses across the White Paper's mission on devolution and funding settlements, with a specific focus on local leadership and communities.

Focus area	Mission
Empower local leaders and communities, especially in those places lacking local agency	
Local Leadership	By 2030, every part of England that wants one will have a devolution deal with powers at or approaching the highest level of devolution and a simplified, long-term funding settlement.

Local Trust

Expert witnesses

- Billy Dasein, Chair, East Marsh United
- Gavin Parker, Professor of Planning Studies, University of Reading
- Barbara Slasor, Community Development Lead, Gaunless Gateway Big Local
- Henry Kippin, Chief Executive, North of Tyne Combined Authority

Witnesses brought a wealth of expertise to the session, ranging from community-led housing, sub-regional government, neighbourhood planning and area regeneration, to community development and resident-led neighbourhood improvement activities.

Building local leadership

'Left behind' neighbourhoods face significant challenges caused by a lack of social infrastructure – even compared to other, similarly deprived areas that may benefit from the presence of community networks, assets, or activity. While the specific context of each area is unique, this makes it harder for communities to develop local leadership or mobilise around a shared project or common goal.

Parliamentarians heard evidence from East Marsh United, a resident-led group operating in the East Marsh of Grimsby, which was formed in response to ongoing problems with drugs and crime in the local area. In part inspired by 'broken windows' theory, the group identified the look and feel of their neighbourhood – characterised by fly tipping and poor-quality housing – as a key contributor to these broader issues. The group began their efforts with collective activities such as litter picking and have grown these to include initiatives supporting street tree planting, arts and culture, as well as community-led housing. Collectively – and only because of the initial spark of leadership from within the community – East Marsh United have been able to create a cycle of positive change.

Witnesses were asked about the broader enabling environment in which local leadership can be fostered. First, a sense of stewardship has to be encouraged, in which people feel they are responsible for or have the power and means to act to improve their communities. The second is based on relationships: connecting with and genuinely engaging local residents, so that they understand what efforts are being made, feel a part of these activities, and want to participate themselves. Another witness stressed the importance of viewing volunteers as 'professionals' with deep knowledge, skills and expertise and not as 'amateurs', lacking them.

Support for community groups

Access to flexible funding is often vital for resident-led groups to begin to take action and to ensure their efforts have the greatest impact within their communities. Traditional funding streams can be competitive – requiring a complicated application process – or come with restrictive conditions or timescales which do not allow for learning or the refinement of objectives over time. As previous research for the APPG has shown, traditional funding opportunities can exclude or disadvantage 'left behind' neighbourhoods which often have depleted levels of social capital or less access to the resources required to make a successful funding bid.

Witnesses also highlighted the need for more opportunities to secure revenue funding, as opposed to capital funding which has tended to dominate existing levelling up initiatives. Revenue streams that can contribute to a limited number of staff salaries is important for community groups, to ensure that any voluntary efforts are appropriately supported and to help counter volunteer 'burn out'.

Parliamentarians asked what the future would hold when initial funding for community activity was exhausted, particularly given the difficulty of securing grants. East Marsh United have employed a community share model and generated income through community-led housing, whereas Gaunless Gateway Big Local have thought creatively about how to build a legacy from the Big Local partnership in Bishop Auckland. This has included providing seed funding to bring a disused building back into use for a centre for social enterprise and employment, as well as investing in the capacity of other organisations that will continue to operate in the local area after their programme's completion.

Partnership working

The efforts of community groups, local government, and statutory agencies alike can be strengthened through effective partnership working. Local government can often appear opaque to residents and community groups, where a degree of knowledge or experience is needed to identify important decision makers and allies for their agendas and work through processes which can seem labyrinthine.

Witnesses provided examples of positive community engagement with different levels of local government and other statutory agencies, but it was also felt that the period of austerity and budget cuts had made engagement harder for both sides. Some identified the difficulty of building relationships with key staff members, only to have them move positions or for a programme to be discontinued. Nevertheless, resident groups can also perform an important convening power, whereby they bring together groups, agencies or organisations that have not traditionally worked together in the local area.

Devolution

Discussion turned towards the devolution of power and spending within England, and the role this shift could play in empowering communities at the local level. While traditionally devolution has been conceived of in economic terms, there is a growing recognition of the importance of social infrastructure and community wellbeing, and how these are vital foundations of economic growth that can be supported by various tiers of government. New models of devolution also allow for greater connections to be made between the fortunes of urban centres and peripheral areas such as 'left behind' neighbourhoods.

One member of the APPG expressed concern over whether combined authorities or other regional groupings were best placed to create positive local change – they tend to be advantageous for larger scale efforts like major planning projects or attracting inward investment. A witness outlined how it was important for combined authorities to understand where they add value, and the importance of maintaining appropriate funding for local authorities and the voluntary sector at the same time.

Neighbourhood planning

Related to the topic of devolution is neighbourhood planning. By creating a Neighbourhood Plan, residents can have more power over shaping local development, such as the building of new homes or shops. Communities opt-in to this process and the evidence so far is that, of the approximately 3,000 plans initiated, take up has been overwhelmingly in more affluent or rural areas. In part this is because the process is less straightforward in urban areas that do not have parish or town councils. Creating a Neighbourhood Plan can also be a complex procedure that in many cases requires the input of specialist consultants. The use of consultants is at times contentious: while they bring necessary technical skills, they can also make communities feel that ownership is being taken from them and that capacity of local residents is not being developed.

A further barrier to community engagement is that neighbourhood plans are limited in scope to the land use planning system (i.e., what should be built, where), and residents can become frustrated when they have broader issues that they want to see tackled through the same process. Parliamentarians asked how residents in 'left behind' neighbourhoods could be encouraged to engage more with neighbourhood planning. It was suggested that they needed to be given accessible information and provided with appropriate support to facilitate their creation.

Despite some of the challenges, neighbourhood forums, which are set up to lead on a neighbourhood plan, can also be a way for a community to come together and build advocacy or leadership on other issues. In this way neighbourhood planning can generate a positive outcome in and of itself, but it also can start to encourage potential leaders from within communities to get involved in a broader range of issues in their local area.

Enabling success

The session heard from a resident-led group in a 'left behind' neighbourhood regarding the challenges they face, and from other experts on the ways in which political devolution and policies aimed at empowering communities, like neighbourhood planning, had not always given enough thought to enabling 'left behind' neighbourhoods to succeed.

There were, however, also many examples of the positive things that communities could do for themselves, if they were given appropriate funding and support. While 'left behind' neighbourhoods do need engagement from local authorities and will often need targeted support to navigate certain processes or applications, ultimately local people are experts in their own lives, and no one knows the challenges facing these communities better than they do. As one witness put it, residents of 'left behind' neighbourhoods do not feel poor, they feel under-resourced.