
Time for change: How we can address deep, structural inequalities in our society through locally led economic development

Received (in revised form): 1st March, 2024

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Abstract This paper explores what needs to be done to better address the growing and substantial inequalities in the UK and how the 'Levelling Up' policy that seeks to address them could be improved. It argues that a much longer-term vision and a sharper, cross-government focus on fewer challenges is required to make a more tangible impact. Four key findings are identified: a focus on health and education is fundamental for our social and economic prosperity; there is a need for greater devolution of power, with transparent and robust accountability; an open, nationwide knowledge base to share what works and what does not, and the lessons learned from innovative pilots, is required; and a more holistic approach is needed to support businesses and provide them with better-quality support. This paper argues that without these issues being taken into consideration, the lives and well-being of our disadvantaged citizens, our children and our economy will continue to worsen. It concludes that making economic development a statutory function, putting it at the very heart of our public services, is needed to ensure that the levelling up outcome is achieved.

Keywords: *economic development, statutory function, levelling up, regional development, devolution, inequalities, left-behind communities, economic growth, regeneration, health, education, towns, cities, regions, local government, councils, public sector, business support, entrepreneurship, start-ups, scale-ups, procurement, social value, funding, mandatory dissemination, single pot, long-term, leadership, focus, citizen's debate*

INTRODUCTION

It is indisputable both that regional inequalities are common in many parts of the world, and that the UK is one of the world's most centralised and most unequal economies, with by far the worst social and spatial inequality of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. It is also a fact that these inequalities continue to increase, on almost any measure you care to look at, and that trickle-down economics and a focus on growth fails to lift all ships.

The UK government's 'Levelling Up' White Paper, and the activities that have followed it, have done nothing to create a compelling long-term vision or the necessary focus to turn the dial on the lived experience of inequality. Yet there is no more serious matter to address, for not only will the financial burden of dealing with those 'left behind' continue to accelerate, but it eats away at the very fabric of our society.

I am ashamed, as a UK citizen, that the Trussell Trust network distributed 3 million emergency food parcels in the last year.¹ That 4.2 million children are living in poverty.² That every year, around one in five students leave education without a basic qualification, and that there are 700,000 16–24-year-olds not in employment, education or training.³ That there is a 19-year gap in healthy life expectancy between our richest and poorest areas.⁴

These, and many other similar realities, contribute to the constant erosion of any lingering, fragile hope for real change, for a better future, for the citizen and for their children on the Grimsby omnibus — for all people on any bus in any of our most unequal communities, within country villages, within towns and cities and within regions.

My respected Institute of Economic Development (IED) board colleague Lawrence Conway in an article for the

IED⁵ said that 'the UK is not broken, it's just grumpy', and I agree with him that what we are crying out for is real leadership, with a clear, cohesive, inclusive vision, with well-defined, long-term policies and a sustained commitment and financing to execute them. It has taken decades for us to arrive here, and it will take generations to address these deep, structural inequalities in our society, not just a parliamentary lifetime or two.

We continue to face two crises therefore — a vacuum of leadership and worsening inequalities — and no answer to the question of how we can collectively develop and implement a focused strategy that will have to extend well beyond any government term of office if it has any hope of succeeding. There are no quick fixes. We need a 20–40-year time horizon.

If the country were run as a business, we would set out our mission and vision, a tangible goal, agree a strategy to achieve it, and develop a clear operational plan with key performance indicators (KPIs), constantly monitoring performance with a continual focus on what works best and what the market needs most. Strong, passionate leadership walking the walk, and honest, consistent communication up, down and across the organisation would maintain commitment and motivation. We would hire the best talent we could afford, empower the team with the tools and resources they need and let them get on with what they do best. We would share and collectively learn from failure and success alike and we would be open to innovation and creativity, and therefore risk. We would not keep moving the goalposts or make our team leaders regularly compete against each other for small bits of project funding every few months, and we would definitely enable those who do not perform, at all levels in the company, to find alternative employment.

The levelling up agenda is a jack of all trades and master of none, and with

a 2030 timescale, doomed to fail. As a country, we simply cannot afford to fix all the things that characterise and exacerbate economic underperformance and social inequality all at the same time. To spread any jam so thinly across so many initiatives will make no transformative impact.

There are so many interwoven factors in inequality, from poor skills levels, health and housing, through business start-up, survival and growth rates, the decline of heavy industry and high streets alike, to low levels of innovation and research and development and a creaking infrastructure. How these factors combine and manifest themselves, how this looks and feels to our citizens who make up and live in these communities, is different in each local place — and therefore, why local economic development is so crucial for success.

This paper discusses four key ways to help reduce inequality. First, there needs to be a cross-government focus on just the most pressing key inequalities, health and education, not the manifested symptoms, in order to break the self-perpetuating and increasingly generational cycle of deprivation and inequality. Secondly, there is a need to devolve power and to ensure that there is the freedom — and accountability — at local level to get on with achieving that goal. Thirdly, knowledge needs to be shared so that local economic development practitioners learn from what has been done elsewhere. Fourthly, business needs appropriate support to ensure that companies can create jobs and opportunities for people not just to move up the ladder, but to get on it in the first place.

FOCUS ON THE MOST PRESSING INEQUALITIES: HEALTH AND EDUCATION

At national level, as head of UK Plc, I would propose just two missions, health

and education, and get there faster. An unhealthy population is a massive financial and social burden on our economy. Health inequalities were brutally laid bare during the COVID-19 pandemic, when 30 per cent of COVID-19 hospitalisations were directly attributed to overweight and obesity.⁶ It is also estimated, pre-pandemic, that health inequalities cost the UK around £30bn each year in lost productivity and £20–30bn in lost tax revenue and higher benefit payments.⁷ Improving physical and mental health will enable more people to live longer, healthier and more productive lives, and enable those cost savings to be reaped and reinvested quicker.

Education should be a priority because ensuring that every child enters adulthood with both skills and hard knowledge that will equip them to live a productive and happy life is the foundation point for our future social and economic well-being as a country, not to mention our competitiveness and productivity. It is vital that businesses, the drivers of gross value-added (GVA) and job creation, have a skilled, enterprising workforce that is really fit for the future, so raising the standards of attainment and the numbers achieving them, and addressing the misalignment between educational output and business needs, is essential. We should also educate young people much, much better about the options and benefits of entrepreneurship, particularly those in danger of being ‘not in employment, education or training’ (NEETs) and thus likely to experience inequality in the future. I am proud to be a champion for the work of Inspire2Ignite⁸ as a great locally driven solution of how the right kind of engagement and support can solve this problem and generate significant benefits to individuals, employers and local communities.

We saw, both in the referendum leading up to Brexit and during COVID-19, an

unprecedented level of citizen engagement. Both topics consumed our news, our screens and our social dialogue across the nation for years. We vigorously debated the rights and wrongs, the pros and cons of leaving or remaining, we argued about whether we should shut down or open up, the penalties for dissenters against policy and were collectively grateful for the amazing fortitude of essential workers, especially in the NHS. Whether we were well informed about the facts of either is another matter, but my point is: we had the debate.

Why can we not have the same discussion, or at least try, about the future of our country — a citizen's debate at local level up and down the country, inspired and ignited by local leaders. Surely we, as citizens, businesses, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), residents, investors, academics and policy makers, must try to find some consensus on the most important two or three things we should focus on, and what outcome we want a generation or more down the road? Only then can we truly hold politicians of every hue to account in delivering it.

Is it more important to increase literacy and numeracy standards, educational attainment or reduce carbon emissions? To reduce violence and neighbourhood crime or reverse the decline in manufacturing? To improve the health of both children and adults, increase productivity or revive high streets, restore local community pride and support businesses to grow? To invest in innovation and skills or high-quality affordable housing? Do we want the convenience of a just-in-time (JIT) economy at the mercy of stretched and fragile supply chains or one based on fundamental resilience? What combination is going to deliver, over time, the most meaningful impact on those left behind in our society, their children and the economy?

DEVOLVE POWER

Returning to the second requirement for success, devolved power, freedom and robust accountability is then essential, and should not be at the gift of the centre, which has proved itself incapable of dealing with these issues for decades. As Robin Tuddenham, Chief Executive at Calderdale Council and lead spokesperson for Solace for Economic Prosperity, said:⁹

The current, nationally-led approach to economic growth has underperformed for years. It's time the Government released the handbrake on local places and give them the tools and resources to turbocharge economic growth across the country, and address social, regional and financial inequalities within and between places.

IED Executive Director Nigel Wilcock also expressed a similar view, commenting:¹⁰

It is a symbol of how centralised UK political thinking has become, that in order to stimulate a policy concerning delivery of improved local services and strengthened local communities, the first act of government is to create a central department.

As a SME business owner, employing over 100 people last year, I also have direct and very personal experience of this overweening scrutiny, which nearly collapsed my business.

The question then becomes: to what level do we devolve that power? Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) responsibilities have transferred to Mayoral Combined Authorities, devolved areas and upper-tier local authorities. Perhaps, because of the levels of integration already in place, we will not suffer the loss of regional knowledge that happened when the Regional Development Agencies (RDA) were axed. As an aside, will these mostly private

LEPs now compete for the delivery of services in their areas, and how will those manifest potential conflicts of interest be managed?

Many upper-tier and combined authorities are large and do not have the depth and breadth of knowledge as the district authorities about their constituent communities — but do all these second-tier authorities have the necessary capacity and expertise to be responsible for the effective disbursement of Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF) funds to achieve full benefit? The more the small SPF pot is devolved, the smaller the budgets and the more fragmented the outcome and impact and scale is vital to make a noticeable difference in both. What is the right scale will depend on each area, but deliver economies of scale we must.

Furthermore, the smaller the local area, the increased likelihood of policies and activities being influenced by powerful figures, local ‘old boys’ networks’ and vested interests, instead of data-driven evidence. The European Union (EU) model of basing distribution of resources on need as defined by the Indices of Multiple Deprivation has gone, and with it, the ‘regional’ commissioning of services which helped to mitigate local embedded relationships influencing decisions. As a provider of business support services in the public sector for more than two decades, we have seen a marked trend in conflicted procurement.

Only achieving true collaboration, partnership, trust, knowledge flow between all tiers and good governance will generate the optimum impact from whatever funding is available to ‘level up’.

I certainly believe that districts should be funded to procure small pilots for riskier, more innovative, radical and creative activities and new solutions on their patch, provided that they have the inherent ability to be replicated and scaled locally or elsewhere. This would

help solve the problem lack of innovation in approach, and it will help build confidence in our citizens that change is possible, sparking the opportunities and motivation at hyperlocal level to make a difference. It would empower those who really care about ‘their place’ and want to change things and create the mindset and determination that will overcome low self-esteem and negative perceptions — because people make things happen.

It would be an impactful use of levelling up funds if hundreds of exciting, entrepreneurial community projects, particularly those involving younger people, could be tested. This could build on the original Community Regeneration Fund (CRF) pilots, of which YTKO delivered three in different parts of the country, and the lessons learned from these projects, as summarised in the overall Wave Hill evaluation.¹¹ Such an initiative should be managed entirely locally, with long timeframes, local decision making, broad outcome options and mandatory publication of evaluations for the benefit of all.

It would also have the great benefit of incorporating the voices of those residents in our disadvantaged communities who often do not have a say, and largely have never had one. Including local opinions will help empower residents to co-create something for their place, by themselves, and not have it done for them, imposed from on high. It will give those in left-behind communities hope and belief.

SHARE KNOWLEDGE

This brings me to a topic that has long been a source of challenge, and one of the things that the IED continually strives to address: the sharing of knowledge. During my time as chair, the board and executive team worked hard to create a range of different mechanisms to disseminate knowledge, including webinars, case

studies, conferences, events, annual awards and much more, and this body of work is a key and established part of IED member benefits. We try to give insight on what has worked well to move the dial. What does 'really good' look like? Why did some things fail? What can we learn from that? We want to help local economic development practitioners learn what has been done elsewhere that might work in their local communities too. Knowledge sharing is essential to success.

The CRF was a pilot programme, designed to inform SPF allocations and activities. To benefit from this experience, however, the knowledge gained from the pilots needed to be shared. Why were not all the individual evaluations published transparently and openly? Why are not all European Social Fund (ESF) and European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) evaluations publicly available? How can I find out whether the £40m invested in 11 local authorities with the highest child obesity rates and deprivation levels worked or not? How can I see the results of the Wolverhampton pilot to incentivise healthier living? Not only do we keep ignoring the lessons of the past and reinventing the wheel, but great ideas and practices that happen in one geography are not widely disseminated, remaining unknown to others who could adopt, nuance and replicate. It is taxpayers' money funding support for people and businesses, and the fact that the results are not publicly available helps retain power and control at the centre.

There should be mandatory dissemination of all evaluations for initiatives funded by the public purse to help improve local knowledge, understanding and performance and resolve this knowledge deficit. The IED would be delighted to act as a central repository and data bank to help all economic development practitioners,

policy makers and change agents build on what has worked well in communities across the UK.

In addition to summary information on the context and aim of the intervention, outputs, outcomes, costs and so on, data on gender and ethnicity engagement (which in many cases is woefully and inexplicably way below 50 per cent of the people present in the local geography) should also be provided. It would be wonderful to have the information so that we can be inspired about how to do things differently, to make an impact, to learn lessons about innovative, creative approaches, risks taken and outcomes achieved. This would also help solve the problem of breaking the top-down, siloed and generic thinking that typifies much of the support available and foster the dissemination of new ways of doing and thinking that really work to make a difference.

SPF outputs and outcomes are pretty standard stuff, extending out from the ERDF and ESF that preceded them, but given the language of the White Paper, aim to focus more heavily on communities, services, well-being and pride. So how can we best measure these softer outcomes and, especially, their impact on individuals? For example, if people have received support to improve their life skills for things like increasing confidence, resilience, self-efficacy and self-esteem, how different do they feel afterwards, how much more optimistic are they about their life chances, the future of their children? If an individual has received support to help them gain employment, or achieve a qualification — did they get a job? A good or better job? Were they able to benefit from that employment or those other positive results as a longer-term, sustainable outcome? Are they less unequal?

It is a positive development to see the increasing requirement for social

value activities in tenders, but the same questions can equally be applied to these as well. Are we doing the right things? Measuring the right things? What actual difference did it make in the longer term? It is far better in my view to monitor and measure the right things imperfectly than the wrong things perfectly.

This question also speaks to the issue of assessing tenders mostly on value for money (VFM), which will always favour strong places with capacity. Of course, it is quite right that VFM is essential for the public purse, but if we just measure financial value, how can we encompass and score potential improvements to the deep societal issues that levelling up is meant to be about? Delivering a raft of outputs is straightforward; delivering sustainable long-term change and tangible impact is more difficult, but is surely the prize to strive for.

In most SPF procurement, tightly bounded by word or page count, there is little or no scope to present innovative solutions or even pilots; it is not embedded in the system. Local and national economic development thinking would benefit from a question in every tender that says: 'What would you like to do to improve any outcomes over the longer term, and why?' There is so much talk and lip service around innovation, but the reality is that almost always it carries a higher risk than doing what has always been done, and getting what we have always got, and is therefore ignored. This is a real opportunity missed.

APPROPRIATE SUPPORT FOR SUCCESSFUL BUSINESSES

David Fletcher, former Director of City Development and Growth, Derby City Council, said:¹²

Business support has been the Cinderella of economic development approaches in many

locations ... and in many cases, has been reduced to a signposting activity with ever reducing areas of support to be signposted towards.

He is absolutely right in this, and I will focus the rest of this paper on the Cinderella, because successful businesses drive our economy and creates the jobs and opportunities for people not just to move up the ladder, but to get on it in the first place. While fully supporting the continuation of Growth Hubs as 'the door' and source of knowledge for signposting, if there is a paucity of *appropriate* support services to send customers to, it might as well just be a website.

In fact (as a quick small aside and going back to the VFM argument), there *should* be one national website, searchable by postcode and need and displaying all pertinent results for the customer in a quick and user-friendly manner, with links to find out more detail. If a business is incapable of searching for, eg 'business support Bristol', one wonders what their chances of survival are. This would avoid a massive amount of purely repetitive information-giving by Growth Hub teams and save money, which could be redirected towards the provision or procurement of actual support.

My emphasis is strongly on the word *appropriate* support. We all know that our 5.6 million UK small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are the lifeblood of our economy and provide three-fifths of our employment.¹³ What is less commonly known is that approximately 75 per cent of them are sole traders, and of the remaining 25 per cent, only around 5 per cent of them grow beyond nine staff, with the vast majority employing up to four people.¹⁴ Of that 5 per cent, only about 1 per cent grow beyond 49 headcount.¹⁵ So, our SME profile is incredibly flat, and we also know that within a five-year period, nearly two-thirds of new businesses die.

The overall objective of the government under the levelling up agenda is to boost jobs, pay and productivity for smaller businesses (under 249 employees). It is self-evident from the above that both the accessibility and uptake, and the quality, of start-up support must improve, particularly for those in our left-behind communities. Many individuals in such geographies suffer from multiple disadvantages, particularly low or no skills, leaving them distant from the labour market. Previously, and still to some extent now, they were badged as ‘hard to reach’ and written off in terms of human, social and economic potential — and their voice was definitely not being heard, or their needs served.

But of course, they are not hard to reach at all — go where they go, and you will find them in spades. Business 101 in terms of awareness and demand generation, and ensuring your product or service addresses their needs. Our experience and outcomes since establishing YTKO’s Outset service over 15 years ago constantly demonstrates that these individuals *do* want to change their lives, *are* motivated and *do* succeed in transforming their living standards through giving themselves a job. Our three-year survival rates outstrip the national average, despite starting from very low bases in most cases, and we have made great efforts to share the knowledge widely on how other practitioners can best engage and support this target group.

Much start-up skill support is very generic, off the shelf, and does not focus anywhere near enough on the well-known causes of business failure, or the needs of a disadvantaged individual. Who cares when procuring support under SPF whether the content is high-quality or not? Are they capable of judging? Is that why it is rarely asked for?

Exactly the same questions should be asked for any levelling up interventions intended to increase business resilience

and survival during their first few years. Improving our business survival rate would have a key impact on the SPF’s overarching jobs goal and solve a long-standing issue. Ensuring quality and fitness for purpose is absolutely the responsibility of local economic development policy and procurement.

As stated earlier, growth at almost any cost does not lift all boats, but for those businesses which do have the ambition and desire to grow and create jobs, particularly those in the vast mass of micro-enterprises not within our 5.6 million, the appropriate high-quality skills support should be provided to tackle the (again, very well-known) challenges that are common across almost every sector. Through YTKO’s service delivery across the UK, including a lot of deprived areas, we have helped over 30,000 businesses in the last two decades, unlocking more than 14,000 new jobs *within the lifespans* of each project.

Personally, I think more of these small businesses would be encouraged to grow if the employment burden of National Insurance and workplace pensions was less onerous, and if the apprentice system worked better than it currently does. Tax incentives are an important government lever, so why do small employers have to pay the same tax to take on additional staff as multinationals? Reducing Business Asset Disposal Relief (BADR) for those entrepreneurial wealth creators who have worked so hard to build a business, take the risks, work the hours and create those jobs is a further disincentive to building a business.

And finally, we need appropriate support for the elusive 5 per cent of what are called high-growth or scale-up businesses (there is a difference, but no one seems to differentiate), because these are the ones who generate the most job growth. There are two distinct audiences here: those who are doing it already,

growing at 20 per cent headcount and/or turnover year on year, and those with ‘high growth potential’. Every local economic development team — and investor — would love to have a foolproof way of picking and selecting these potential winners, but growth is stochastic. It has a random probability distribution and may not be predicted precisely, and the post-COVID-19 world cannot be well modelled on pre-COVID-19 analysis. Much valuable research by the Enterprise Research Centre can perhaps be best summarised by the Data Science Campus:

Modelling high growth companies using traditional structured business data from the Interdepartmental Business Register (IDBR) results in poor results, with little improvement in classification over random choice. Our (ONS) analysis has confirmed existing research that it’s difficult to predict high growth firms.¹⁶

Yet this problem is also solvable. YTKO has recently concluded a Growth Works project across Cambridge and Peterborough, in which, as the deliverers of the ‘Growth Coaching’ element, we were responsible for identifying, engaging and supporting both existing and potential high-growth and scale-up companies. We utilised our own experience of managing rapid growth, our expertise in supporting such businesses in the private sector as well as in the public realm, and our equity and debt funding experience, having raised around £100m for clients to date. We know how to engage this audience, know the challenges they face from first-hand experience, and know the critical indicators of high growth. In a 30-month delivery window, nearly 900 such businesses were supported, leading to the creation and commitment of over 3,800 high-value jobs. Yet where will the evaluation and lessons learned be shared

with other local economic development practitioners wishing to replicate or learn more?

CONCLUSION

As we move forward, in 2024 the IED has launched a manifesto calling for economic development, regeneration and all aspects of economic policy to be at the very heart of our public services as a statutory function, with a single settlement funding pot and a multi-year approach based on local intelligence. It is our right to expect our local leaders, as well as our government, to not only have a long-term, inclusive and effective vision about how to improve and level up their local economies, but also to be capable of creating, funding and executing an evidence-based strategy to achieve the change that the levelling up agenda needs to deliver.

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