



Centre for the New Midlands

Finally, the moment has arrived that we have 'all' been waiting for – the Government's 'Levelling Up and Regeneration' White Paper has been published.

The notion of 'levelling up' the United Kingdom by providing opportunities to each and every citizen regardless of where they live; improving the quality of life for people wherever they may reside, is to be applauded. However, with all of these grand announcements, the devil is more often than not, very much in the detail. Incredulity

- Devolution and the transfer of power and resource from Whitehall to different parts of the country is clearly here to stay – and will only increase, not decrease. This is the direction of travel for Government, but how much appetite the country has to create new tiers of governance is questionable. If Government manages to work with political leaders across the country to create new regional authorities/introduce new Mayors (or their equivalent), what is the future for local authorities and locally elected politicians? Where do they fit into this new maze of regional governance? What is the future for parts of the country who do not get on board with the new 'show in town'; will they be penalised for not embracing change?
- However, it is good to see Government regard the West Midlands and Greater Manchester as the trailblazers for greater devolution. The pandemic has very clearly identified areas of public policy that Whitehall does extremely well, and some areas that it does not. The Government and the CAs need to be even more ambitious in their next round of Devolution Deals to set out to the country the great things that regional authority and leadership can deliver.
- The introduction of 'real' metrics into the White Paper and a focus on how the Government's performance will be reported annually is a step forward. The Government have been accused of speaking in the abstract with regard to the notion of Levelling Up, so tangible and timebound metrics, overseen by both a soon to be created 'Levelling Up Advisory Council' is welcome, alongside a new independent body to improve transparency of local government performance.
- We are also pleased to see such a clear focus on the quality and quantity of housing across the country. The introduction of the Decent Homes Standard should be good news for private renters, as is a landlords register. The emphasis on transforming brownfield sites in the Midlands (and by assumption, further protecting the greenbelt) will be very welcome in The Mayor of the West Midlands inbox, as the focus on building more 'genuinely affordable social housing' will be too.

- The new National Youth Guarantee scheme will provide opportunities for millions of young people, but cynics may argue that the current Government is merely only making amends for the cuts it imposed on the youth service sector during the austerity years.
- Wolverhampton will understandably be keen on it being cited as one of 20 sites for major regeneration, and the changing role of Homes England into one of regeneration alongside Housing is interesting. The Government have been fairly big on infrastructure spend and the notion of improving High Streets, but this new announcement which speaks of “undertaking ambitious, King’s Cross-style regeneration projects, transforming derelict urban sites into beautiful communities” could bring new life into areas that have felt left behind. It will be interesting to see how the 18 other destinations will be selected and if the Government intend on bringing in another competitive bidding process for cities and towns to fight it out amongst themselves for additional resource.
- However, we have concern that the sums to deliver this Levelling Up agenda are nowhere near at the level required. We are hardly a lone voice with this perspective. One only needs to compare the sums of money Government spent during the pandemic or even to look at the estimated costs to ‘fix’ the Cladding scandal (estimated to be £16 billion) to know that the resource allocated to ‘Levelling Up’ barely provides a cherry, let alone the whole cake.
- The Innovation Accelerators sound interesting, but £100 million of ‘new’ Government funding, divided up into 3 regional authorities, over an 8 year period doesn’t sound like it will support too much innovation to accelerate. Particularly in a post Coventry City of Culture environment, the announcement of Arts Council funding being directed to areas outside of London is good to hear, but this is only the 100% of the funding uplift agreed at the last Spending Review.
- Some of the proposals within the Levelling Up agenda, whilst important, should surely be classified as ‘business as usual’ for Government? As an example, if we look at the White Paper’s specific 12 missions, which Government in history wouldn’t wish to close the gap between the region’s in terms of their productivity; healthy life expectancy or violent crime? The Government may argue that closing the gap between such regional inequalities haven’t been addressed in this way before, but this does feel more business as usual than truly transformational.
- We would also express some concern as to why there would appear to be so little focus on the Digital Skills agenda? Providing the country with widespread 5G and better connectivity is important but why hasn’t the Government articulated what it intends to do about closing the digital divide – a key part of the ‘Opportunities’ agenda surely?

To conclude from a Centre for the New Midlands perspective, the White Paper is welcome and the direction of greater devolution is the right one for the country if we are to reverse decades of regional inequality. However, the Government will need to find its magic money tree pretty sharpish or at least start planting some seeds now, if it is to inspire confidence in the country that the Levelling Up agenda really is at the heart of its ambitions for Global Britain.

Chris Smith, February 2022

