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The Network Newsletter: tackling social exclusion in libraries, museums, archives and galleries

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The Network's Website is at www.seapn.org.uk and includes information on courses, good practice, specific socially excluded groups, as well as the newsletter archive.

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Tackling social and digital exclusion – Government, Government Agencies and Local Government

Levelling up the United Kingdom

The 'Levelling Up' White Paper¹ was published in Feb 2022 (and weighs in at some 305 pages). For the purposes of this assessment, we will use the executive summary².

There is something triumphalist about all this! The White Paper opens with:

“The United Kingdom is an unparalleled success story – a multi-cultural, multi-national, multi-ethnic state with the world’s best broadcaster; a vibrantly creative arts sector; a National Health Service which guarantees care for every citizen; charities and voluntary groups which perform a million acts of kindness daily; globally renowned scientists extending the boundaries of knowledge every year; entrepreneurs developing the products and services which bring joy and jobs to so many; and millions of citizens whose kindness and compassion has been so powerfully displayed during the COVID-19 pandemic.” [p1]

and continues with a list of progress made since 2019, eg:

- “£23.3bn extra for the NHS in England over the 2021 Spending Review (SR21) period, a commitment to build 40 new hospitals by 2030 and an ambition to deliver 50,000 more nurses;
- a lower Universal Credit taper rate – down from 63% to 55% – and a higher National Living Wage, making work pay for millions of people, and letting them keep more of what they earn;
- 20,000 more police officers on our streets by 2023 and a £70m Safer Streets Fund to improve the environment and cut offending in high-crime areas;
- control of our immigration system by ending free movement and introducing a new points-based immigration system, giving the UK the freedom to decide who comes to our country based on the skills people have to offer;” [p2]

The White Paper then goes on to lay out the next stages in the process of 'levelling up' (suggesting that this would be a “contemporary Medici model” [p3]). It starts by outlining the UK’s “geographical disparities”, and argues that, to begin to overcome these, the ‘drivers’ of disparity need to be identified and acted upon, and the Paper summarises these as six “capitals” – these are:

- “Physical capital – infrastructure, machines and housing.
- Human capital – the skills, health and experience of the workforce.

¹ *Levelling up the United Kingdom*. [CP 604]. HMSO, 2022, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1052708/Levelling_up_the_UK_white_paper.pdf.

² *Levelling up the United Kingdom: executive summary*. HMSO, 2022, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1052046/Executive_Summary.pdf.

- Intangible capital – innovation, ideas and patents.
- Financial capital – resources supporting the financing of companies.
- Social capital – the strength of communities, relationships and trust
- Institutional capital – local leadership, capacity and capability.” [pp4-5]

It is where these capitals are weak or depleted, the Paper argues, that communities are in decline:

“Levelling up is about aspiring for every place in the UK to have a rich endowment of all six capitals, so that people do not have to leave their community to live a good life.” [p5]

To get there, we need a new policy regime: “[...] root and branch reform of government and governance of the UK. It is about putting power in local hands, armed with the right information and embedded in strong civic institutions.” [p5]

This new regime is “[...] based on five mutually reinforcing pillars.” [p6] These are:

- “First, the UK Government is setting clear and ambitious medium-term missions to provide consistency and clarity over levelling up policy objectives [...] The missions are rolling decade-long endeavours and will be reviewed periodically by the UK Government.” [p6]

The missions include:

- “Boost productivity, pay, jobs and living standards by growing the private sector, especially in those places where they are lagging” [p6]
 - “Spread opportunities and improve public services, especially in those places where they are weakest” [p7] This focuses on education; skills; health; and wellbeing.
 - “Restore a sense of community, local pride and belonging, especially in those places where they have been lost” [p7]. This includes pride in place; housing; crime
 - “Empower local leaders and communities, especially in those places lacking local agency” [p7] – includes local leadership.
- “Second, central government decision-making will be fundamentally reoriented to align policies with the levelling up agenda and hardwire spatial considerations across Whitehall. This will require greater transparency around the geographic allocation of funding and simplification of local growth funding. It will mean running levelling up through central government decision-making as a golden thread for which departments are held accountable. And it will mean extra resources being deployed to local areas, including moving 22,000 civil servants out of London by 2030.” [p8]
 - “Third, the UK Government will empower decision-makers in local areas by providing leaders and businesses with the tools they need. A new framework will extend, deepen and simplify local devolution in England [...] The UK Government will support existing and embryonic private

sector clusters of economic activity, which exist in all parts of the UK and are the wellspring of new innovation and job creation.” [p8]

- “Fourth, the UK Government will transform its approach to data and evaluation to improve local decision-making.” [p8] This is primarily to give greater access to reviews of funding and how it is being spent.
- “Fifth, the UK Government will create a new regime to oversee its levelling up missions, establishing a statutory duty to publish an annual report analysing progress and a new external Levelling Up Advisory Council. The Council will support Ministers by advising on the design, delivery and impact of levelling up policy. The annual report will update the public on progress against the missions so that levelling up is subject to rigorous external scrutiny, including by Parliament.” [p8]

To ensure that this all happens, the Government is also introducing a number of policy initiatives. These are:

- Boosting productivity, pay, jobs and living standards by growing the private sector. This will include: new R&D investments; “[...] three new Innovation Accelerators, private-public-academic partnerships which will aim to replicate the Stanford-Silicon Valley and MIT-Greater Boston models of clustering research excellence and its direct adoption by allied industries. These pilots will be centred on Greater Manchester, the West Midlands and Glasgow City-Region.” [p10]; establishing new regional investment funds; enhancing digital connectivity.
- Spreading opportunities and improving public services. This includes: setting up 55 new Education Investment Areas; creating a UK National Academy (“[...] this new digital education service will support pupils from all backgrounds and areas of the UK to succeed at the very highest levels.” [p11]); developing Local Skills Improvement Plans; introducing the In-Work Progression Offer (“[...] to provide employment support for disabled people and people with health conditions.” [p12]).
- Restoring a sense of community, local pride and belonging. “The £2.6bn UK Shared Prosperity Fund will be used to restore local pride across the UK by focusing investment on three main areas for investment: improving communities and place, people and skills, and supporting local business.” [p13]. This includes: regenerating 20 towns and cities; increasing the number of football pitches; increasing cultural spending outside London³; “[...] launching a new National Youth Guarantee so that by 2025 every young person in England will have access to regular out of school activities, adventures away from home and opportunities to volunteer.” [p14]; and initiatives around tackling crime.
- Empowering local leaders and communities. This includes: “We will extend, deepen and simplify devolution across England so that by 2030,

³ “[...] with support for theatre, museums and galleries, libraries and dance in towns which have been deprived of investment in the past.” [Full Paper, p xxv]. Will also fund the redevelopment of the British Library Boston Spa site.

every part of England that wants one will have a devolution deal with powers at or approaching the highest level of devolution with a simplified, long-term funding settlement [...]” [p16]

So, how has the White Paper been received?

The Museums Association comment that:

“All of the funding uplift received by Arts Council England (ACE) in the 2021 comprehensive spending review will be distributed outside London, under the UK Government’s Levelling Up agenda to address regional inequality [...]

But sector bodies have warned that the white paper's ambitions will be difficult to achieve under the government's spending plans.

Alistair Brown, Museums Association policy manager, said: ‘While we welcome the recognition of culture in the Levelling Up white paper, we also note that the current government has presided over a decade of austerity that has hugely weakened museums and cultural institutions across the UK.

‘The MA’s recent research into local authority investment in museums showed a real terms decline in spending of 27% between 2010-20. The government’s new plan is completely insufficient to meet its Levelling Up ambitions – instead, we need a serious, funded commitment that helps local authorities invest directly in their cultural institutions.’

Paul Johnson, director of the Institute for Fiscal Studies thinktank, said, ‘The targets are largely in the right areas, but many look extremely ambitious – that is to say highly unlikely to be met, even with the best policies and much resource.

‘There is little detail on how most of them will be met, and less detail on available funding. There is something for everyone, and hence little sense of prioritisation: ambition and resource will be spread very thin.’ [...]

A recent study by the Progressive Policy Thinktank found that regional divides are continuing to grow, with almost three jobs created in London and the greater south east for every job created in the north of England. The study showed that allocations in 2021 from the Levelling Up Fund added up to £32 per person in the north of England, compared to a £413 per person drop in council spending on services during the decade of austerity.”⁴

⁴ Geraldine Kendall Adams “100% of ACE uplift to be spent outside London under Levelling Up agenda”, MA News, 4 Feb 2022, https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2022/02/100-of-ace-uplift-to-be-spent-outside-london-under-levelling-up-agenda/?utm_campaign=2087876_04022022&utm_medium=email&utm_source=Museums%20Association&dm_i=2VBX,18R0K,27LU0M,4TU7Q,1.

Jonathan Douglas, CE National Literacy Trust, commented:

“At the National Literacy Trust we know that the lack of vital literacy skills can hold you back at every stage of your life. As a nation, we will only be able to truly level up if literacy is embedded at the heart of the government’s strategy. I am pleased to see that the government has committed to ensuring that 90% of children leave primary school reaching the expected standard in reading, writing and maths by 2030.

However, we must not underestimate the scale of this challenge. The pandemic means we are facing an unprecedented national literacy challenge, exacerbating the challenge of levelling up, that can only be addressed by a holistic approach involving charities, businesses and communities working hand in hand with schools and teachers.”⁵

For a long time, the term “levelling up” hasn’t really meant anything – now we have some concrete information about what it could involve and need to ensure that the cultural sector is deeply involved in these developments.

As more responses appear and actions start to develop, we will return to the White Paper.

Tackling social and digital exclusion – Other Agencies

UK poverty 2022: the essential guide to understanding poverty in the UK

JRF have just issued the first in their new-style assessments⁶ which looks at the major impacts of poverty. It is available to download as a full report or as a briefer “Findings”.

What is the overall picture? As the executive summary states:

“But many sources make it clear that while some groups have been well supported and face better prospects as we enter 2022, others face deep and persistent poverty. In a way this is much better than might be expected given the economic and social shock the country has been through.” [Full report, p5]

The report notes that there have been some positive moves, particularly those brought in to support people during Covid.

⁵ Jonathan Douglas “Our Chief Executive Jonathan Douglas reflects on the Levelling Up White Paper”, NLT News, 2 Feb 2022, https://literacytrust.org.uk/news/our-chief-executive-jonathan-douglas-reflects-on-the-levelling-up-white-paper/?mc_cid=55934d328b&mc_eid=a2d98ab814.

⁶ *UK poverty 2022: the essential guide to understanding poverty in the UK*. JRF, 2022, https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/uk-poverty-2022?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=JRF%20Newsletter%2021%20January%202022&utm_content=JRF%20Newsletter%2021%20January%202022+CID_c53a2a4fb4087b0d36a1112428db940f&utm_source=Email%20marketing%20software&utm_term=Read%20the%20report.

However:

“But looking at who has been left behind, some patterns stick out.

- The £20 uplift to Universal Credit has now been withdrawn, offering no additional support to those who are not able to work or are looking for work.
- Those on ‘legacy’ benefits (excluding Working Tax Credit) pre-dating Universal Credit received no increased support at all.

Families receiving these benefits have very high levels of poverty, with more than half of individuals in families in receipt of Universal Credit and its predecessor legacy benefits being in poverty, with 43% of households in receipt of Universal Credit being food insecure. This has meant the basic rate of out-of-work benefits is at its lowest for 30 years after adjusting for inflation, while earnings have risen by more than a quarter over the same period.” [Full report, p6]

In addition:

“There are also some elements of the benefits system that increase poverty, including:

- the two-child limit in income-related benefits
- the benefit cap
- the five-week wait for the first Universal Credit payment
- unaffordable debt deductions from benefits
- Local Housing Allowance rates (frozen since April 2020) again breaking the link between housing costs and benefits.” [Full report, p6]

In terms of the near future, the report notes the likely impacts of inflation:

“In terms of how all this plays out for future poverty levels, it seems clear that out-of-work families will fare worse than low-income families in work [...]

It is worth stating that many of the out-of-work families at risk of being left behind are not expected to work due to their disability or caring responsibilities, factors in themselves increasing the likelihood of poverty, with a gap of around 12 percentage points in poverty rates between disabled and non-disabled people [...]

Broadly speaking, there seems little prospect of reversing the trends since around 2012/13 of rising child poverty (which rose by four percentage points to almost a third of children by 2019/20) and rising pensioner poverty (which has risen by five percentage points to almost a fifth of pensioners by 2019/20). Larger families and single-parent families have particularly high poverty rates at almost half for both single-parent families and for families containing three or more children. We are likely to see individuals in Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Black families continuing

to have higher poverty rates (over 40% for individuals in households headed by someone of each of these ethnicities) and worse outcomes across many areas. Most worryingly, our latest data showed a big rise in destitution with more than a million households (containing 2.4 million people, including 550,000 children) experiencing destitution in 2019, a rise of 35% since 2017, with modelling suggesting further increases during the pandemic [...]

Another worrying element of the pandemic is how it is likely to have increased existing educational inequalities. We also know that the Covid-19 pandemic has widened the attainment gap between most and least disadvantaged pupils in the UK. This is due to a range of factors including the digital divide, home learning environments and potentially deepening poverty over the pandemic.” [Full report, p7]

Lastly:

“One final element of the pandemic response has been variations in responses between the countries of the United Kingdom, with a far greater visibility of leaders in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The benefit systems in Scotland and Northern Ireland are increasingly different from each other and from the rest of the UK, with mitigations against some of the most poverty-increasing welfare reforms of the last decade and, for Scotland, a new Scottish Child Payment which will be doubled from April 2022 and will help make progress towards its Child Poverty Act target [...]” [Full report p8]

Recommended.⁷

Abbreviations and acronyms

ACE = Arts Council England
JRF = Joseph Rowntree Foundation
MA = Museums Association
NLT = National Literacy Trust
R&D = research and development

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⁷ Source: JRF *Round-up*, 21 Jan 2022.