Write Up from the DLUHC Levelling Up Roundtable in Collaboration with The Edge
10th December 2021

1.1 Introductions from DLUHC

- The event discusses how planning, climate change, health and wellbeing and quality of place are key components to the Levelling Up agenda. Across the course of the session, we consider some of the complicated realities the department is trying to tackle.
- We then look ahead to some of the solutions, and how we can join up these complex agendas.

1.2 Introductions from The Edge

- The Edge is a multidisciplinary thinktank for the built and natural environment, established 25 years ago to promote collaboration across the industry through debating the issues of the moment, together.
- The Edge's main target is the professional institutions. (Around 17 professional institutions now work with The Edge)
- The Edge has a particular focus on climate change and previously delivered the DLUHC Net-Zero Climate Change Round Table which many colleagues would have attended; high level notes can be redistributed upon request if required. This event explored how planning is key to the levelling up agenda, amid the climate and biodiversity emergency.
- Levelling up needs collaboration across both local authority and government departments, after scene setting, the Edge has invited 7 experts to make their case to be at the heart of a local authority's policy. The discussions in the session are technical, rather than political, as we examine the opportunities and barriers.
- The session aims to both understand and contribute to developing thinking on national, regional and local policies and in particular to explore current urban challenges based on case study examples to ensure discussion is grounded in reality. Secondly, the session aims to examine ways to use individual investment streams in association to achieve local synergies and create multiple long-term benefits. Thirdly the session aims to address local decision making and joined up control of normally separate budgets.

2.1 No Place Left Behind
www.createstreetsfoundation.org.uk/no-place-left-behind/

- No Place Left Behind: The Commission into Prosperity and Community Placemaking looked at transforming the local environment through community led regeneration, for example in places like Hull and Sunderland.

- The No Place Left Behind Commission was first and foremost about exploring the relationship between left behindness and place. How being left behind affects the built and natural environment of a place, and how the physical conditions of a place feed into and produce left behindness.

- As a definition of left behindness: the commission used the OSCI Community Needs Index (OSCI CNI).

- The CNI gives statistical definition to the somewhat nebulous idea of left behindness. It is not perfect, however, the index maps far more closely onto the Brexit vote than the Index of Multiple Deprivation score does. This suggests the feeling of alienation that has been discussed following the referendum, is about both household deprivation and deprivation of place. This underlines the crucial role of the planning system in overcoming alienation.

- Looking at the OSCI CNI across the country, there are concentrations of left behindness around the deindustrialised cities and towns of the northern midlands, as we may expect, as well as coastal towns (particularly in the east but also in the south west). We also see pockets of left behindness in the suburbs and wider peripheries of more prosperous towns and cities.

- Considering the places at the bottom of the OSCI CNI, the following challenges were identified:
  o Left behind places suffer **economic deprivation, a lack of social amenities, and poor connectivity**
  o People who live in left behind places **can feel ignored**, undervalued and marginalised
  o **A poor-quality physical environment** is both a consequence and a driver of the experience of being left behind and under valued
  o **Poor housing conditions,** particularly in a growing Private Rented Sector
  o **Poorly engaged communities** can mean what (scarce) resources are available can be spent badly
  o **The pandemic is intensifying these factors**, as well as longer term trends like high street decline, poor transport connections and housing market polarisation.

- However, the research also found significant opportunities:
  o **Left behind places often have significant assets** that can be deployed to improve places and lives: existing housing stock in traditional streets, under used heritage buildings, public, natural and green spaces, and a shared sense of community.
  o While macro-economic factors are important (employment, education, transport) **place-based factors are more readily amenable to relatively low cost, bottom-up interventions** in places where there is less financial value that can be realised by conventional models of (re)development.
  o Case study of Arches Local, Chatham: Big Local Funded Community Led Regeneration.

- To sum up the No Place Left Behind conclusions:
  - Left behind places need **trees, trams and tricycles** to create prosperous, child-friendly environments.
  - Left behind towns need the **tools and freedoms to turn declining high streets into thriving centres** of community, cultural and commercial life.
  - Left behind communities need **the powers and half the money to take control of their assets** and realise the economic value of community regeneration.

- Left behind neighbourhoods **need street-by-street investment to bring homes up to standard and meet the net zero carbon target**.
- Levelling up the country needs **patient, flexible funding,** and **a healthy ecosystem of civic institutions** to empower communities and ensure no place is left behind.

2.2 Exploring Levelling Up: The Stoke-on-Trent Story

- This presentation looks at a single case study. It's important to recognise the heterogeneity of different places. This case study of Stoke-on-Trent brings some of the themes to life.

- Stoke-on-Trent is a city of just over quarter of a million people, part of a broader North Staffordshire economic area and geography, which is also Stoke-on-Trent's essential health geography, in terms of the ways systems and institutions work.

- Stoke-on-Trent is built on an industrial past. It went through three distinct industrial waves: ceramics and pot-banks, coal, then steel. All three industries went into rapid decline in the 1970s-1980s, leaving a post-industrial landscape and increasing levels of deprivation within the community.

- Stoke-on-Trent is a polycentric city, formed of six towns but many more individual settlements. It is a creative population, and still has a significant manufacturing base within the city, which is now supplemented by logistics, distribution and service industries.

- During the deindustrialisation period there was something of a scatter gun approach to development, partly driven by economic necessity, which led to a lot of out-of-town development such as retail parks. This has impacted town and city centres.

- In the last seven to 10 years, the city has seen economic growth with almost all economic indicators going in the right direction albeit from a low base. Pre-pandemic it was one of the highest areas in the country for wage growth and growth of house prices.

- In the prosperity index, Stoke on-Trent is in the top third for economic development in the UK but the social indicators are lagging in the bottom 10%.

- Any levelling up story in Stoke-on-Trent is about how to connect the population to those opportunities of economic growth.

- Stoke-on-Trent is also left with a huge number of legacy landscapes that can be both assets and burdens, such as the former Spode ceramics factory, which is currently being regenerated. Many heritage assets like this are either back in use or need to be brought back into beneficial use over the coming years.

- Reclaiming spaces is at the heart of the city's levelling up bids. Stoke-on-Trent won three out of four levelling up bids, which demonstrate new ways of mixing uses. New retail/cultural centres are emerging.

- When repurposing assets, we have to be realistic and pragmatic that not every asset can be for community use. A number will be redeveloped as housing or business spaces, for example.

- Major interventions are also important. The levelling up bid is for a new civic quarter on a large derelict site. This will be a mixed use development comprising an arena, housing, retail, and leisure uses.

- Key planning issues in Stoke-on-Trent:
  - Interconnectivity is poor, particularly with respect to public transport. Taxis are prevalent - cheapest way to get around.
  - Lack of intrinsic value in terms of market value and the impact of site abnormals.
  - Shortage of skills in relation to land use planning, heritage, project management, regeneration, transport specialists etc.

2.3 Considering the Natural Environment in the context of Plymouth

- The presentation shared on the ground views on how we need to link planning and the natural environment using the context of Plymouth.

- Plymouth, like so many cities, has complex challenges: although located on the south west Coast, Plymouth's demographic is very similar to some of the northern cities in terms of deprivation, housing inequality, aspirations of young people and school attainment.

- The pandemic has shone a light on inequalities in Plymouth, particularly in access to green space and nature and their associated benefits.

- Communities that really need levelling up are going to be hit hardest by the impacts of climate change. These communities are already at increased risk of being affected by surface water flooding.

- Plymouth has tried to take a coordinated and joined up approach to how we plan for the natural environment alongside other factors around housing and employment. Taking a nature-based approach to some of the city's greatest challenges of transforming green and blue spaces.

- The local plan sets out very clearly the network of green and blue spaces, but there is still a lack of joining up in key policy areas. The council sometimes lacks the mechanisms, the powers and the funding to make sure these areas are all tied together.

- Natural infrastructure isn't classed as national infrastructure, therefore the funding is often inconsistent, which makes delivering long term change for communities difficult. There are no national targets on net gain in access to nature for people. National targets would help to level up this aspect

- Retrofitting the greyest neighbourhoods is also a priority, which will have a significant benefit in terms of economic uplift and increasing jobs. These neighbourhoods were designed in a

way that lacked green space from the outset. A problem for local authorities is that, even with the capital, how can the changes be maintained to a higher standard. A nature investment model could help ensure changes deliver increased health and wellbeing benefits, respond to flood risk and support the net-zero agenda over the long term.

2.4 Plan making

- Presentation by a design and research cooperative working towards making cities and towns fit for the 21st century by responding to the climate and ecological emergencies through a social justice lens.

- Working on retrofit, urban design, landscape, and strategic planning. Success in these areas requires holistic and systems-based approaches requiring expertise and the views of end users. In this way you combine local knowledge with professional expertise and end up having meaningful conversations that result in meaningful outcomes.

- Superficial interventions don't work well, they result in unintended consequences and abortive work, that, given the climate emergency, we don't have time for, and creates failure demand. Under-resourced local authorities end up trying to fix problems created by previous, poorly-conceived interventions.

- The current setup makes this difficult, especially within a pandemic. Huge amounts of time and money are spent on bidding for funds that don't always align with the long term needs or visions of local areas.

- Low property values limit investment, and grant funding is capped by speculative property values, not necessarily by what's needed.

- Public sector clients have low capacity and there are lots of disjointed programmes and thinking. For example, in retrofit, new gas boilers are installed one year, and ripped out the next as there is now funding available for heat pumps. This induces cynicism and wastes time and resources. Resourcing in planning departments is also an issue. All this leads to uncertainty in the development industry.

- Retrofit projects also reflecting lack of joined up thinking in relation to the public realm, transport connections and the actual experience of living in a particular neighbourhood. The desire for speed also makes these things difficult, as engaging with key stakeholders takes time.

2.5 Housing

- It could be argued that housing is the least consumer orientated part of the UK economy. Citizens and residents are the customers; however, they are often not treated as such. There is often more emphasis on housing programme technicalities and delivery than on what local people think.

- There are many positive examples of where things have changed due to minor interventions driven by local people, the big question is: how do you create platforms to encourage and create catalysts for that to happen?

- A big issue is the role of placemaking: what is it, how does one get more of it? Critical issues such as supply, regeneration, sustainability etc, are not going to be joined up unless there is a sense of good quality placemaking.

- Infrastructure should be considered at the early stages, and not as an afterthought. Harlow and Gilston Garden Town, Hertfordshire is a development of up to 10,000 homes being delivered across two counties and two district local authorities. The Garden Town will contribute to the regeneration of Harlow. The contribution of new settlements to support the regeneration of existing places is an important issue to consider as it is often overlooked.

- In order to deliver on retrofitting and sustainability priorities, we need a better understanding of the technology that we can expect to scale up to the level of response that is needed.

2.6 Development

- Addressing sustainable development is a priority, taking the lead from the findings of the latest IPCC report published in August 2021. This is particularly challenging in areas that need levelling up, such as parts of the North of England, where there is often rich built heritage, that can be seen as an asset or as a constraint.

- We should look at VAT, which currently favours new build over redevelopment/remodelling. We need to look at ways to encourage repurposing of built heritage.

  Each place has its own unique challenges; however; there are some good examples of best practise across the country.

2.7 Levelling up and Education (in particular, the role of higher education institutions)

- Universities are part of a healthy ecosystem of civic institutions. Education plays a critical role for the life long learning of citizens and must be a key consideration for the roles of central and local government in relation to place-based levelling up.

- We should recognise that responsibility for education at successive stages of our lives is divided between departments of state and diverse regulatory bodies, which by and large encourage competition between providers.

- Most departments of state and regulatory bodies operate "place blind" policies. Place is critical for local government, which has limited leverage over key stages of education.

- UK is fortunate to have universities across the country widely recognised as local anchor institutions with a huge impact including as larger employers. They also link to schools to encourage widening participation in education, in workplace learning with employers, and run continuing professional development programmes, and so provide continuity for life long learning.

- However, universities' activities aren't necessarily local. While dependent on public funding, there is no requirement from central government for universities to actively meet the lifelong learning and skills needs of their local communities.

- Universities compete for research excellence funding, which is distributed by the UKRI, finances for teaching come from student fees, and the market is regulated by the office for students, reporting to the DfE. In this higher education marketplace, some institutions could fail, including those anchor institutions in left behind places. There is a real opportunity for institutional failure in some key places.

- The regulators do not specify where research should be carried out and transferred to innovation. They also don't consider where students enter the labour market and how to deal with the geographical consequences of institutional failure, i.e. if an institution fails, whose responsibility is it to deal with it?

- The structures detailed were established in the 2017 Higher Education and Research Act, which has remained intact since that date. This is in spite of changes in the political climate that potentially point to more active interventions towards levelling up nationally.

- When you consider what the governance structure would imply in the context of Stoke council, how can higher education be mobilised to support levelling up? There are two universities in Stock-on-Trent. Both are competing institutions and have independently pledged to develop civic university agreements.

- Universities have no core funding stream to underpin the delivery of these aspirations. Additionally, the council is not part of a mayoral authority with the resources, expertise and clout to develop a joint partnership, as Manchester has done.

- Places that should be the focus of levelling up are different in terms of access to higher education and in local governance structures. However, the two systems need to be looked at together, nationally, if universities are to be mobilised to support levelling up. This requires an emphasis on building capacity for collaborative working between universities and local government so as to generate demand for university education and research services.

2.8 Health

- Population health: to reduce inequalities across an entire population. Only around 20% of health outcomes are down to access to care – 80% are wider social determinants. Policies need to be focused on these wider factors.

- According to the UN, by 2050 70% of the world's population will be living in urban areas – which can be complex and involve multiple disadvantages. But many studies focus on single contributors e.g., greenspace rather than complexity. These are important but do not provide solutions alone.

- Key challenge – place stigma. Challenges are structural, multiple, also unfair, and unjust – and can impact on residents (accept it, difficult to challenge, lack of agency). But can be avoided by efficient policy making.

- In areas that don't need levelling up, you see no connection between mental distress and the physical environment. In moderate deprivation, you start to see this, and these are tipping points. In "left behind" places with high deprivation you start to see severe issues.

- Recommendations: We should plan for children and plan for the whole lifespan. The effects of inequitable places begin in childhood, but there is minimal thought to them. The levelling up agenda in these places needs stewardship and shared decision making. It also needs linking to social capital and clear metrics.

2.9 Transport

- The choice of transport investment is key. We tend to build in places centred around roads, with small houses, no walking distance facilities, and small gardens. Residents must buy cars as a result. When building in this way, you build the housing and don't worry about the place.

- However, another style of building is to look at it from the other end: What do we need in the way of transport? How would we do it all together?

- We can start to think about building along new bus routes and tram routes, for example. It's important to not just talk about the number of homes but also to consider how they are connected.

- When you build with these considerations in mind you get a very different place, a much more human-scale place. Socialisation is increased, regeneration takes place, loneliness is reduced. All this contributes to a modern, vibrant community.

- This is possible if there is investment in local public transport and not investment in major roads and increasing the capacity of the road system.

Section 3, discussion: delivering levelling up, the implications for planning, and the potential for an integrated policy approach.

Questions raised on the issue of scale: How do we reconcile fast local initiatives with all the long term committed plans, how do we work on both those scales of interventions? Also, how do you balance the requirement to maintain an area with the long-term commitment to improve it in a way that makes sense to occupants.

A- The issue of the management of places is important. You can have the most well designed, well built, integrated fantastic places, but if no one is owning the management of them then they will fail over time. And by management we don't just mean sweeping the streets and all the rest, but the stewardship of it. The linkages to governance, the way in which local people have a role in how that place develops and changes. The Big P Planning ought to be in parallel with the small p planning about when it gets delivered, how is it going to be managed?

A- Joining the two aspects can create a positive experience for people. You create places people truly feel they own, where they feel safe and where they want to come, so that is a way of marrying the long term and the short term. Another point to make is about local government finance. There is an inexorable decade long squeeze on the discretionary resources that local

government uses to manage place. This is happening in part due to cuts on local government finance, but also because of the increase of demand for personal services. The 'basic services' such as tackling antisocial behaviour, managing greenspaces, keeping streets clean, are under intense pressure because of the overall resource envelope and the demand for personal services.

A- When bids are competitive, left behind places will not be able to effectively compete, as they don't have the resources. We need to bridge the gap between top down and bottom up. Any evidence of wellbeing improvement associated with top-down delivery of urban regeneration is abjectly missing. It doesn't appear to happen; wellbeing improvement only happens when there is meaningful involvement of the community.

- Point raised on heritage, natural environment, and maintenance: Heritage is a huge resource, it's also a significant challenge, sometimes it can become a burden. Maintenance has not been fully considered; there is a fundamental need to approach how we manage our environment, not only how we maintain our buildings but also how we maintain our streets, and we make sure local people are engaged in that. We forged links to the Future Parks accelerator programmes in Bristol and Plymouth. COVID meant we used our natural and historic spaces more than ever.

- Question raised on Permitted Development Rights (PDR): Where does PDR fit in with everything discussed across the session? It seems there is a need for more planning, a really careful approach to the mix between residential and other uses in places, how we build up density to sufficient levels to support public transport, active transport. It feels like PDR approach doesn't give the level of planning that we need to address these issues.

- Is there anything that would be helpful from those outside of the department to encourage productive conversations on the issues discussed?

- Point raised on Agency, how do we engage communities, local authorities, businesses etc. Whatever is done going forward, we need to find ways to create agency, especially for those who do not already have it.

  How do we build markets and businesses in this process? Detroit – good example where non-profits and businesses have been central in regenerating the waterfront, they are also now working on 20-minute neighbourhoods where densifying neighbourhoods creates competitive advantage.

- How does decarbonisation, and climate adaptation fit with levelling up. It would be really interesting to look at this through the place-based lens from a delivery perspective. The neighbourhood scale of retrofit is interesting. Another key consideration is how do we create incentives for business investment, so that there is investment beyond stop-start government grants? Government grants have a place, but business investment is also important and we need to consider how to encourage this.

How do we get private financing and utilise private investment models to create sustainability?

- We need local and neighbourhood level retrofit, but we also need to learn from failures of the past. Need to ensure it isn't poor quality, poor materials delivered by those without the necessary skills. We've seen poor examples that have had a detrimental impact on communities, and even potentially health. Need to balance local needs with ensuring good practise/specification.

Follow up question, are there examples of retrofit that have worked well and examples that haven't?

- There are several key issues/paradoxes to tackle levelling up. For example, what needs to be done nationally? And what needs to be done locally? We need to identify what the different roles are. The second paradox is how do you get the private/voluntary sectors, other institutions fully engaged and properly involved in these processes.

- Further to the above, the scale at which things take place is often neglected, one of the things that is quite helpful when discussing what's done nationally and what's done locally is- how do we conceptualize the work that's done? The idea of 'best practise' is something that might be handled nationally through guidelines, indicators etc. But when you move locally, you consider something you might want to call 'right practise' where different stakeholders can be involved in leading the process in a more context-based way.

- Challenges of poor quality housing homes still be built and granted permission. Recently in an area that received levelling up funding where new homes being built that repeated the mistakes we have made in the past – car dominated layout, poor access to open space and disconnected from local amenities.

Follow up question to this point: How can we, at a national level, bring some influence to encourage leadership at the local level to prioritise quality of neighbourhoods when there are pressures of viability at the forefront of Local Authorities concerns when they look at planning applications.

- The private sector will engage if it can see a return; that should be acknowledged and understood. We need to consider how we can facilitate return for the private sector, that might mean a new set of non-adversarial relationships between local government and the private sector. We need to learn how to be better partners. The returns don't need to be huge, if the risk is relatively low. The skills to engage private sector need to be established.

- A point on evidence and capacity: the Future Parks Accelerator built capacity and taught different ways to work with resources and different ways to look at investment. Regarding bringing in private investors, particularly in the context of natural environment, the scale will be important, but also when a new initiative comes out of government enabling new investment, we need to ensure the benefits are maximised, in terms of return. This means private investment can be drawn in. How do we resolve the maintenance issues we have with local authorities? Any surplus from these initiatives should go towards the levelling up agenda, but these aren't requirements currently. Left to the market alone, these new initiatives will be driven by how much profit can be created. When new financial instruments are set up, local government would find it helpful if the requirements could be around not just delivering the basics of a system but delivering a credit system that benefits other ongoing challenges.