

NAVCA's submission to Neil O'Brien MP



Levelling Up, the view from local infrastructure

We see levelling up as a place-based set of policies and actions ensuring everyone has the opportunity to thrive, to live a fulfilling life and contribute to wider society. We welcome an approach which recognises the need to invest in place, to develop the resources, tools and systems needed for places to flourish, alongside national programmes which address people's individual circumstances. People and communities should be at the heart of decisions, as the repository of intelligence about their place. We know that some places face significant challenges: poverty (including in-work poverty), health inequalities, poor connectivity make it difficult for people to thrive.

Levelling up is the core activity of many place-focussed voluntary and community organisations. It's what they do every day: creating the conditions where people can take action on the things that matter most to them, for example creating social contact and networks for isolated people; drawing people into physical activity where they have been inactive; making connections and building relationships, so people feel a sense of belonging; connecting children and adults digitally to support education or combat isolation; providing support for parents with young children; connecting volunteers who want to pick up litter in the local park and clean graffiti from the bus shelters so the environment is safe and welcoming; working with young people to help them develop positive self-esteem and divert them away from risky behaviour. The list is endless and the expertise is wide.

NAVCA is the membership body for local infrastructure, or local voluntary and community sector support organisations (see Appendix). We have sought views and insight from our members, local infrastructure organisations rooted in place. This note draws on their intelligence, connections and relationships, developed over time as they bring together people, communities, voluntary and community groups, and work closely with both public sector (especially in relation to health and wellbeing, employment and skills) and private sector.

This intelligence and experience tells us that levelling up should be based in and led by places, and it must be sustained over time, over a 10-15 year period. Local decisions need to be supported by national programmes to change systems. Short term fixes will not resolve entrenched issues. History tells us that economic investment alone will not consistently create strong, resilient, healthy and thriving communities. We need to include measures to tackle social barriers so communities flourish. One of our member CEOs told us their experience of short term and intermittent investment resulting in communities making some progress then drifting back, in a cycle.¹ Investment needs to be long term, with decisions made at place level, building wealth in communities. It needs to fund intangible social assets as well as tangible, physical assets.

Plans for levelling up announced so far are ambitious, exciting and demonstrate a significant commitment to real change in our communities, not by imposing from the top but by involving the people who live and work there.

¹ NAVCA Member CEO, Workshop on levelling up, 27 May 2021.

In the sections which follow we cover:

1. Our vision for what successful levelling up would look like
2. Specific issue areas for consideration
 - a. Housing
 - b. Transport connectivity
 - c. Digital connectivity
 - d. Public spaces and high streets
 - e. Health and wellbeing
 - f. Economy, employment and skills
 - g. Young people
 - h. Social connectivity
3. Enablers
4. A concern
5. Recommendations
6. Conclusions

1. Our vision

“To make every place somewhere anyone would want to live, work or visit”²

Our vision is that every community (at ‘place’ or local authority level) is clean, safe and cared for, and that the community has the spaces and resources to come together and make it a place where the residents feel valued, are proud of where they live, feeling connected to and responsible for it. To achieve that, each place needs:

- a range of places and spaces where residents can meet for play, relaxation, leisure, community activities, learning and development of skills;
- effective and affordable transport links within its area and to neighbouring communities, to enable people to travel to education, employment, health services, justice services, leisure facilities, commerce;
- reliable and affordable digital connectivity alongside readily available devices and training/support in using digital services for those who need help; and
- a thriving and resilient VCS supporting community ambition, need, aspiration and interests (facilitated by a well-resourced, high quality local infrastructure organisation).

² NAVCA member CEO, Workshop on Levelling Up, 27 May 2021

We are conscious that this will not be achieved quickly. It requires long term vision and investment, working differently and taking decisions for the long term which involve the communities affected. In the past we have seen investment to drive regeneration and community development with a short-term focus, rather than driving lasting change. Levelling up offers the opportunity to avoid repeating this cycle.

We want to see a significant shift in the delegation and decision making to local level. People in communities are the experts on their own place, and so best placed to understand what will make a difference for them, how to prioritise, and to build on existing assets. They know the gaps and have creative, resourceful ideas for how to best meet those gaps. One way to recognise this would be to involve local authorities and/or place-based VCS organisations in peer review of funding decisions.

2. Specific issues for consideration

We have set out themes below, which go to the heart of levelling up. These would need to be adapted and developed, according to local need, so that action is owned and driven by local people.

Housing

Well maintained, safe housing meets people's physiological and safety needs – for warmth, shelter and security – at the most basic level. Unmet needs have a negative impact on people's motivation, affecting their ability and capacity to contribute to their community. Availability of dry, warm housing must be the baseline for everyone, with facilities for cooking, affordable energy and no overcrowding. To achieve this, each place should have:

- a sufficient stock of affordable homes, with mixed sizes and types of housing to support intergenerational communities;
- a programme working with private landlords as well as housing associations to make sure poor standards and bad practice are eliminated, standards are enforced and good practice is celebrated.
- support to strengthen tenancy success rates; and
- action in place to eradicate street homelessness (everyone in), and overcrowding.

Transport connectivity

People need to be able to move easily within and between communities, by foot, bike or public transport. That is essential to accessing services and jobs, as well as for mental wellbeing. To achieve that each place should have:

- public transport which is reliable, safe, clean, and affordable, which goes where people want to travel to/from, including later at night and early in the morning to support different working patterns. In rural areas this is likely to include dial-a-ride services;
- infrastructure which enables people, including children, to walk and cycle, moving away from the assumption that cars take priority;
- a requirement to be carbon zero, measuring transport emissions; and
- clean air, with action in place to tackle poor air quality arising from traffic.

Digital connectivity

Covid has shown the positive benefits of enabling people to reach public and commercial services digitally, as well as remaining socially connected. To achieve this, each place should have:

- universally available, affordable high speed broadband/4G/5G;
- a programme of measures to support people to access digital devices, and connect to the digital infrastructure; and
- support for people who need to develop their understanding and skills so they can make best use of digital connections.

Public spaces and high streets

People thrive where they can come together, to share ideas and creativity, to solve problems, to take action. We need safe, well-maintained spaces in which to be active as well as to relax, and vibrant spaces where people feel part of a bigger whole. These connections support a sense of place and belonging, and make communities that people want to live in. To achieve this, each place should:

- have a high street which is welcoming and thriving. We need to re-think our use of high streets, including as spaces for socialising, living, to meet others, for education. High streets need formal and informal space to facilitate this range of interactions;
- have parks and open spaces which are safe and welcoming, which people want to use (a brew, a loo, something to do);
- affordable or no cost fitness facilities to engage both young people and adults to increase mental health, self-esteem, educational attainment, diversion away from risky behaviour, reduction in ASB/crime and active aging;
- readily accessible cultural spaces where people from all parts of the community feel welcome; and
- be safe, tackling the fear of crime or anti-social behaviour as well as its reality.

Health and wellbeing

Life expectancy and healthy life expectancy vary significantly within as well as between places. Measuring healthy life expectancy adds a 'quality of life' dimension to estimates of life expectancy by dividing it into time spent in different states of health (assessed as very good, good or poor health). The proportion of life spent in poor health, alongside the number of years in poor health, are also important as both relate closely to the demand for health and social care and the associated costs.

"In our city, there is a huge variance between life expectancy and healthy life expectancy just a couple of miles apart. People from the wealthiest areas of the city enjoy on average over 70 years of healthy life compared to people from the more deprived areas who move into poor health, on average,

around age 50. Overall average life expectancy is 10 years higher in the wealthier parts of our city than in its most deprived areas.”³

We want to see a levelling up agenda which focusses on building places of wellness rather than illness, on people-focussed solutions alongside medical ones. To achieve this, each place should:

- ensure that everyone has ready access to health services. This will require services to be available where people need them, and offered innovatively and flexibly;
- have practical and social support for people living with physical and/or learning disability or long term conditions;
- have sufficient support for people affected by substance misuse (alcohol, drugs);
- invest in young people’s mental health, building their self-esteem and confidence as they move into adulthood; and
- focus on tackling problems upstream rather than once they have become established, to break cycles and generations of dependency.

Economy/employment and skills

Financial independence for individuals, families and communities comes through ensuring full take-up of existing benefits and support, as well as support to find and keep meaningful jobs. We see in-work poverty is a critical factor in poor places, with the opportunity to address it through the benefit system alongside work. Putting in place mechanisms to ensure people have secure incomes enables them to grow and develop, to feel safe, to have the capacity to engage with their community more widely. The VCS helps people develop a sense of purpose, build social capital, and make transitions to employment. It is also a significant source of direct employment.⁴ Many people living in households with intergenerational unemployment or who are far from the labour market will need significant and sustained support to enter and remain in the labour market, including intermediate employment. To achieve this, each place should: .Underplays vcs as employer and trainer of young ppl and for ppl needing support to get into the labour mkt (intermediary employment) and as a route to good employment.

- ensure people locally access all the benefits available to them, and review benefit claims to make sure they are dealt with accurately and promptly;
- recognise and value volunteering, which develops employment skills, education, sense of purpose, wellbeing, social capital, belonging, and encourage people volunteer. This is particularly true for those furthest from the labour market;
- ensure that skills training is aligned to long term employment opportunities which can be accessed within the community or timely and affordable public transport;
- foster a sense of ambition and possibility; and

³ NAVCA Member Chair, online discussion on levelling up, May 2021; also *Reducing Inequalities in Communities: closing the health gap in central Bradford* (<https://www.bradfordcravenccg.nhs.uk/ccg-information/strategy-and-plans/ric/>)

⁴ According to NCVO, the voluntary sector contributed £18.2bn to the economy in 2017/18, representing about 0.9% of total GDP. In 2019, the sector employed approximately 910,000 people. (<https://data.ncvo.org.uk/impact/>)

- ensure support systems are in place to enable people to work – transport, childcare, support with other caring responsibilities, equipment.

Young people

Young people need aspiration, self-belief, a sense of what they might become, and they need the support, tools and opportunities to become that person. Too many communities have young people without that sense of the possible. We want to make sure all young people have the opportunities they need to fulfil their potential; they should be able to find good quality employment, apprenticeships and further education locally as valid and equally valued alternatives to higher education. To do that, each place should:

- ensure young people have opportunities and support to re-build their networks after Covid;
- ensure safe spaces are available for young people to hang out and develop;
- ensure young people have access to the resources and input they need at school/college, including through a review of the pupil premium;⁵
- through the VCS provide support for young people without qualifications or skills to find and keep employment;
- support pre-school children and their families so they start school with positive self-esteem, confidence and appropriate levels of social development.

Social connectivity

Above all, people need to feel connected to their place, to feel that they belong. This is difficult to point to and touch, but we know when it is there. We need to support communities to build intangible but vital social capital – something which will be achieved by the themes above – but also consciously invest in it. To do this, each place should:

- develop leadership in communities, identify and nurturing emerging leaders, giving space and support as they develop;
- tackle loneliness and isolation in all generations, through physical connections, as well as through social connections.

3. Enablers

Enablers need to be in place for these actions to take hold and have maximum impact. Some are included in the themes above, but are also worth pulling out in their own right:

⁵ “Publicly funded schools in England get extra Pupil Premium funding from the Government to help them improve the attainment of their disadvantaged pupils. It amounts to £1,345 a year for every eligible primary age pupil, or £955 for every eligible secondary age pupil. However, for the 2021/22 financial year this funding will be based on the October 2020 census of pupils instead of the January 2021 census. As a result, schools with children who have become eligible for this funding – which pays for free school meals and academic support - during the pandemic will not receive any additional funding for another whole year.” (<https://www.fenews.co.uk/press-releases/68988-lga-survey-118m-for-disadvantaged-pupils-could-be-lost-from-school-budgets-this-year>)

- procurement needs to focus on investing funds in local organisations, to keep employment and investment local, recognising and maximising the wider value which can be leveraged in from public funding. This will support the economy and skills, give hope to young people of the opportunities available, promote health and well-being;
- leadership, as a root to bring communities together, identify a direction and focus energy and enthusiasm behind it. Effective leadership from within communities is the strongest catalyst for development, and developing future leaders helps ensure change is sustained;
- understanding need, as communities are experts in themselves. This means investing time in finding and harnessing that local intelligence. The VCS is a core component of a community and can provide expertise and insight, but can be messy and difficult to access from the outside.

The VCS contribution to social and economic recovery and levelling up cannot be overestimated. Place-based community organisations are adept at balancing precarious resources and rising needs; they are skilled at developing partnerships and driving collaboration. They are experts in their own communities. The challenges set out above cannot be solved by one sector alone. They demand a system-wide approach based on trust, mutual respect and understanding, shared vision and goals, taking and using the assets and skills of each part of the system.

4. A concern

While levelling up is more positive in tone, which is welcome, we are concerned that some of the existing systems around levelling up funding can create additional barriers to funding being secured for areas most in need.

Evidence shows that the impact of the pandemic has been felt more keenly in places with significant levels of deprivation and low levels of connectivity and social capital.⁶ By creating competitive bidding processes for levelling up funds, the Government is asking local authorities which have been under the most pressure, and communities which have historically low levels of social capital, to direct their energy and resources away from providing immediate support to their local area and into developing plans and bids which may not succeed. The Levelling Up White Paper is an ideal opportunity to set out how communities with the greatest need will be supported to participate in the programme, to prevent them being excluded from schemes which are intended to address those needs.

“There are big parts of one of our major towns which are in the bottom 10% of wards in England, when you look at the Indices of Multiple Deprivation and other indicators. But our local authority is in Priority 3 banding for levelling up and we have been told they have no intention of submitting a bid as they feel there is so little chance of securing funding.”⁷

⁶ ‘The pandemic is having an unequal impact on our already unequal society’, The Health Foundation (<https://www.health.org.uk/news-and-comment/news/the-pandemic-is-having-an-unequal-impact-on-our-already-unequal-society>)

⁷ NAVCA member CEO, Workshop on Levelling Up, 27 May 2021.

5. Recommendations

1. That the Levelling Up White Paper recognises that meeting housing need is central to helping communities to improve. Effective regeneration of public space, improved digital and transport connectivity and building stronger social connections, civic pride, responsibility and sense of belonging are dependent on meeting people's basic needs for safe, well-maintained and suitable housing.
2. That the involvement of the local voluntary and community sector as a strategic partner is required for levelling up to succeed. This draws on the specialist expertise and rich local knowledge which the VCS holds, brings different parts of the community together and provides understanding around need, aspiration and ambition. It includes the VCS as provider, employer and convenor.
3. That voluntary and community organisations should be able to submit bids for funding (ie that not only Local Authorities can be the conduit), subject to endorsement by the relevant local authority, and meeting other criteria.
4. That the criteria for funding awards should include an assessment of whether the bids being assessed provide a positive impact for each of:
 - a. People – the residents in the area where the project will be delivered
 - b. Place – the specific area where the project will; be delivered
 - c. Planet – the environmental impact of the project, in relation to both the development and long term phases, including materials used for construction, traffic impact and safer travel, air quality, carbon load.
5. That peer review by local authorities and strategic VCS organisations be included as part of the assessment process for any funding.
6. That the assessment criteria for funding awards should include an additional weighting for community wealth building, where procurement of the goods and services used during the development and delivery of the project is leveraged towards contractors whose primary business is based in the area covered by the projects, or whose workers live in the area.
7. That communities with the greatest need be supported to participate in the programme, to prevent them being excluded from schemes which are intended to address those needs.

Conclusions

We welcome the Government's focus on place-based levelling up. Communities are experts in what they need, where the gaps are and what how to close those gaps. We hope that the White Paper will strengthen the role of individual communities to make decisions and develop plans. We would welcome the opportunity for a further conversation about thinking as the levelling up agenda develops over the coming weeks and months.

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Appendix

NAVCA (the National Association for Voluntary and Community Action) is the only national membership body specifically for local sector support and development organisations (also known as local infrastructure) in England. We have almost 200 members covering the country. Our members are known as councils for voluntary service, community action, volunteer centres and a host of other names – there is no single model for local infrastructure, which reflects the diversity of needs and aspirations in different places.

NAVCA's members support around 200,000 local charities and voluntary groups across the country, helping them to thrive and deliver essential services within their communities. We believe that our members are uniquely positioned to play a strategic role in longer term levelling up ambitions to be set out in the White Paper. During the Covid pandemic, through our role as co-chair (alongside the British Red Cross) of the VCS Emergencies Partnership, we and our members have worked together to form the Local Information Network (LIN), funded through DCMS. Our members have used their local relationships, connections and insight as a highly effective means of identifying unmet need on a range of issues including food, digital connectivity, isolation and so on. The LIN has been an effective early warning system for the Government as well as being a mechanism for reporting unmet need and triggering reallocation of resources to respond to those needs. This demonstrates the reach and impact of our members and the value we can offer in connecting diverse communities to government policy.

By listening to our members, we understand the concerns and issues that they are facing locally and we create opportunities for their views, opinions and concerns to be heard at a national level. We speak about the value and contribution of local infrastructure to policy makers and decision takers, emphasising impact of our members and their vital role in building and maintaining strong, resilient and thriving communities. As a movement we are about supporting and encouraging people to take more responsibility for their communities.