



PARALLEL LIVES

REGIONALLY REBALANCING
WEALTH, POWER AND
OPPORTUNITY

**Zoë Billingham, Stephen
Frost, Ryan Swift and
Jonathan Webb**

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IPPR North
Suite 4.07
Blackfriars House
Parsonage
Manchester
M3 2JA
E: north@ippr.org
www.ippr.org/north

IPPR
8 Storey's Gate
London
SW1P 3AY
E: info@ippr.org
www.ippr.org
Registered charity no: 800065 (England and Wales),
SC046557 (Scotland)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Zoë Billingham is director of IPPR North.

Stephen Frost is a principal research fellow and co-head of participative research at IPPR.

Ryan Swift is a research fellow at IPPR North.

Jonathan Webb was a senior research fellow at IPPR North at time of writing.

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SUMMARY

“I just think that the people who live in it should be the people who are given the opportunity to have a say on how to transform it, and how to better it. It’s all very well politicians from London having a say on our situation, but they haven’t walked in our shoes.”

Stoke-on-Trent citizen conversation participant

OVERVIEW

Our economy and democracy are not yet designed to help all places thrive.

Reducing regional inequality, or levelling up, remains imperative for both improving the fairness of society and the efficiency of our economy. If the UK was more regionally equal, life chances would be more fairly distributed across the country and the full economic potential of our regions would be realised (McCann 2016). There is the potential to build an economy where wealth, power and opportunity are shared more fairly. But to do this, we need to rethink the regional distribution of economic and democratic power.

Inequality between our regions reveals itself across many metrics. A long, healthy life is a convincing catch-all indicator for how well a society functions and there is wide regional discrepancy. Between those living in the south east and the north east of England there is on average a five-year healthy life expectancy gap (ONS 2022a). While the evidence also reveals gaping divides in productivity and incomes between regions, differences in incomes are also significant within regions (Agrawal and Philips 2020). But the evidence also shows significant inequality between regions, in access to higher-paid jobs, growing inequalities in wealth, and differences in educational outcomes (ibid). These inequalities, coupled with a sense of distance from political power and powerlessness, were reflected in many of our citizen conversations held across England for this research and points to how inequality is lived across the country.

There is political consensus that regional inequality is a problem, but so far there have been few suggestions to rewire the status quo. The government’s levelling up white paper¹ rightly advanced the development of mayoral combined authorities (MCAs) but otherwise did little to alter the trajectory for most places. The status quo keeps the UK at the bottom of the international league table for regional inequality as measured by the gap in productivity per hour between the best and worst performing regions (ONS 2022b).

Citizens and communities feel the ongoing impacts of regional inequality and are demanding more from politicians ahead of the next general election.

Over the past year we have held citizen conversations across the country – in Hastings, Stoke-on-Trent and Redcar – and heard the public’s concerns and ideas for how the country can be made fairer and more balanced, testing their views against the evidence. We heard how citizens want their places to thrive, to be able to be involved in decisions that affect them, to be empowered to take part in their communities and be able to hold politicians to account. We also heard their fears about shrinking access to public services; vacancies on high streets; an ongoing loss of public space and community assets and a lack of information and understanding about the decisions being made on their behalf.

¹ See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/levelling-up-the-united-kingdom>

The desire for change is clear, and the party that offers the necessary structural change will help determine the result of the next general election.

Our research highlights three key areas where citizens want to see change across the country: in the distribution of wealth, power and opportunity.

This report seeks to represent the views of the citizens we spoke to on what would make the most difference in their area of England. The ideas set out take inspiration from other nations in the UK and we take direct lessons from Scotland. But in other areas the lessons are as applicable to each nation as in England. As a result, we propose policy ideas to reenergise and refocus the agenda in the run-up to the next general election.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Safeguarding locally held, community wealth

Introduce the principle of ‘common good property’ to protect communities from the continued sell-off of publicly owned buildings at the local level.

In Scotland, common good property is local authority-owned land and buildings, and moveable items such as furniture and art (Scottish Government 2018). The duty includes being transparent about the existence of community good, publicly-held assets and community involvement in decisions regarding them, including how they are used and disposed of (ibid). To build on the work of others who have independently sought to map assets of community value (ACV) (for example the Plunkett Foundation, Power to Change and Locality) local authorities should build on existing data and information from community groups and the voluntary and community sector to map current assets and make this publicly available information. Local authorities are too often left with no choice but to sell local assets in order to help balance budgets in an increasingly precarious funding landscape.² According to new analysis of published DLUHC (2023) data combined with FOI responses from 154 principal local authorities, an estimated 75,000 council assets, including buildings and land, at an approximate asset value of £15 billion (cash prices) are estimated to have been sold since 2010. Any new government will need to work urgently with local government to help ensure its long-term financial viability.

Support communities in reclaiming community assets through capital and skills.

The options for supporting community ownership of assets have rightly been a key part of the political debate on levelling up. Action needs to be long term and meet the scale of the challenge. The recent proposal by Labour for a ‘community right to buy’ – giving communities the first option to buy up community assets – moves the emphasis in the right direction; but this needs to be paired with practical options for how communities can raise the capital as well as access the support and skills to acquire, maintain and run assets. The government’s Community Ownership Fund³ is welcome, but one-off funds are inevitably a short-term solution to the continued sell-off of assets that could either be safeguarded by the public sector or claimed by the community.

an estimated
75,000



local authority owned assets
have been sold off in the past
13 years in England alone, at an
asset value of

£15bn

2 This builds on previous findings by Locality 2018

3 See <https://www.find-government-grants.service.gov.uk/grants/the-community-ownership-fund-1>

Protecting public space

Introduce a minimum green space planning requirement.

As proposed by IPPR's Environmental Justice Commission (Murphy et al 2021) a renewed planning framework should introduce a local planning rule to ensure no new home is further than 300 metres from accessible green space. We also know that this is a matter of inequality and that the poorest areas have fewer protected green spaces (CPRE 2022) with also distinct benefit for health outcomes, both for wellbeing and clinical benefits including reducing rates of depression, anxiety and cortisol levels (Beyer et al 2014).

Connecting places

Inter-regional commitment to Northern Powerhouse Rail in full as a priority, and High Speed 2 (HS2).

Intra-regional catalytic transport investment in cities outside the South East. As a result of a mixed devolved funding landscape on transport investment, mayoral combined authorities (MCAs) and local authorities continue to rely on central government investment for major local transport infrastructure. Recent research has demonstrated the key role of scaling up local bus services as well as the extension of franchising in all MCAs (Frost et al 2023). Future ambitions should include a commitment from central government to support a mass transit system, such as a tram service, in Leeds and in Liverpool.

Intra-regional catalytic transport investment in cities outside the South East.

Until transport investment is fully devolved to the regional or local level, mayoral combined authorities (MCAs) and local authorities will continue to rely on central government investment in local transport infrastructure. Recent research has demonstrated the key role of scaling up local bus services as well as the extension of franchising in all MCAs (Frost et al 2023). Future ambitions should include committing to a tram service in Leeds and in Liverpool.

Integrate 20-minute neighbourhoods into local planning systems

The core goal of 20-minute neighbourhoods is to create places where most of people's daily needs can be met via short walking, wheeling, cycling or public transport journeys from home. While in places like Stoke-on-Trent the proximity to green parks was welcomed by local citizens, growing parking charges in parks was given as an example of decreasing access to some. This makes the requirement for accessible public space by active travel or public transport even more important.

Rebalancing government investment

Establish a new fair funding formula for major public sector investment projects across England's regions.

The government should commit to matching London's levels of investment spending across England distributed by a fair formula for major public sector investment projects (Dibb et al 2021). The government has made early attempts to adjust the Green Book – an evaluation tool used to allocate government investment – to propose investment should be regionally rebalanced; but more substantive change is needed to make regional rebalancing a prerequisite for public investment. We propose to replace and properly fund major projects with a fair formula that determines allocations to cities and regions in England, taking into account need and historic levels of investment and providing certainty for places in the medium term.

Establish green industrial clusters supported by long-term government investment.

We spoke to citizens in areas where there is a proud industrial heritage, and they felt that they were still waiting for a clear economic plan for their place. Green industrial clusters could bring together levelling up and industrial policy, drawing on plans local authorities have made previously through Local Industrial Strategies and clustering around universities to generate spatially well-distributed growth (Laybourn-Langton et al 2017). This spending would be committed based on an expectation of the crowding in of private sector investment, which needs long-term clear commitments from national government, beyond the low-level investment offered by investment zone policy (£80 million per cluster over five years) and proportionate to the scale seen through the US Inflation Reduction Act.

Improving citizen participation and empowerment through devolution

Increase citizen participation in local democracy through making community engagement a legislative requirement.

In political debate there is often a concern that empowering community groups challenges the status of elected political leaders, when in fact the engagement of the community can both improve democratic engagement – through voter turnout and participatory forums – and also support councils and mayoral combined authorities to create a vision for a place. We also heard that involvement in community activity can help create a pipeline of local talent for elected positions in places. To make sure this is done consistently, a legislative requirement to engage communities in decision-making could be designed.

While community engagement will rightly look different in each place and for the types of decision being made, there is a growing ‘playbook’ of tools that can be used to improve community engagement with the political process. Among the citizens we spoke to there were particular ideas that were well supported:

- standing citizens juries
- participatory budgeting
- paid-for community leaders.

Minimum of 1 per cent of local funding to be allocated through participatory budgeting.

As showcased in Scotland, local authorities could decide to allocate a percentage of their annual budget to participatory budgeting where community groups select how they want revenues to be spent (Murphy et al 2021).

Explore expansion of hyperlocal governance.

Hyperlocal governance – whether that is parish councils, neighbourhood forums, non-statutory bodies, or other more informal community bodies – can play an important role in improving local democratic engagement for communities, providing opportunities for representation and empowerment, and can help shape a positive sense of place. Hyperlocal governance in England is extremely patchy and there is a need to develop ideas to improve hyperlocal representation and ensure that it can better empower communities.

Advancing local information and political understanding

Develop a local news strategy to protect local independent news outlets.

Many local newspapers have either folded or have shifted to provide a much-reduced output in recent years, largely owing to the challenging nature of the news market. More than 300 local newspapers closed between 2009 and 2019. This runs counter to the ongoing deepening of devolution and the increasing need for local

accountability and scrutiny. We propose a local news strategy to assess the decline of local news in all formats.

Level up local government communications.

Many citizens we spoke to were either not aware of or could not engage with local authority communications fully. We propose that the Local Government Association actively shares best practice between places in order to level up the quality of local government communications.

Make teaching of political understanding a compulsory part of personal, social, health and economic (PHSE) curriculum.

Too many citizens reported that they had never been taught about how political systems work and how they can take part and influence them. In order to empower citizens and communities, the PHSE curriculum should consistently offer the opportunity to understand how to play an active part in our political system.

1. THE STATE OF PLAY

It remains an imperative to reduce the UK's regional inequalities. Despite lacklustre action by government, the public still want and expect the 'levelling up' agenda to happen (Kenny and Kelsey 2021). However, the public has decreasing confidence that it will.

Tackling regional inequality is critical for both improving the fairness of society and the efficiency of our economy. The goal to reduce regional inequality challenges the assumption that where you are born should determine your life chances. It also challenges the idea that it is efficient to endlessly increase investment in one part of the country at the expense of everywhere else. Creating a fairer system requires understanding and challenging the economic and democratic systems that have brought us to this point before setting out how things could be done differently.

The government's levelling up agenda has had a tumultuous few years (Johns and Hutt 2023) and recent attempts by the government to level up have been too unfocussed and too unambitious to tackle the root causes of regional inequality. The Levelling Up white paper (DLUHC 2022) and its focus on structures of government was welcome, but provided little sense of prioritisation or policy for an agenda which is being woefully undermined by wider government decisions, from local government funding to social security policy.

Levelling up is far from the first attempt to change the fortunes of England's regions. It is well known that our regional inequalities are long-standing, but recent attempts have done little to change the direction of regional prosperity. Both Labour and the Conservatives have attempted to address regional inequalities, through the New Deal for Communities and the creation of regional development agencies, and local enterprise partnerships and the Northern Powerhouse agenda respectively. The critique of the approaches tried so far remains that levelling up policy fails when conducted at insufficient scale, held centrally and with high policy churn (Martin et al 2021).

The continued narrative around 'boosterism', where places and projects are talked up as part of the wider levelling up agenda, jars with the reality of millions of people living in the UK who are increasingly finding it difficult to make ends meet. Regional rebalancing would help secure the wealth, power and opportunity to assist in reducing poverty in the long term. This does not alleviate the immediate need to support families across the UK through the social security system.

The evidence is clear that the UK is still the most regionally imbalanced country in the OECD (Raikes et al 2019). Gaping divides in healthy life expectancy, wealth, power and opportunity reveal the cost of pursuing a regionally imbalanced economic model.

The UK additionally suffers from significant within-region income inequalities (Agrawal and Philips 2020). This is driven by the existence of more high-paid jobs in overall better-off regions (ibid). But the discussion of within-region inequality by no means undermines the reality of between-region inequality. The evidence tells us that, in addition to productivity and income differences, there are significant types of inequality between regions, including access

to higher-paid jobs, growing inequalities in wealth, and differences in educational outcomes (ibid). These inequalities, coupled with a sense of distance from political power and powerlessness, were reflected in many of our citizen conversations held across England for this research.

Regional inequality is consistently polled as the most important form of inequality. YouGov research has found that inequalities between more and less deprived areas are seen by the public to be the most critical form of inequality (Duffy et al 2021). Concerns about place-based inequalities are felt keenly across all political groups and across different parts of the country (ibid). People living in different regions in England feel varying degrees of distance from the government's consideration. At the regional level, polling suggests that almost two in three people in the north of England agree with the statement "the government cares less about people in my area than people in other parts of the country" (McKay 2021). In contrast, only 23 per cent in the southern regions outside London agree with this statement.

As the majority of people in England now live within an area with a devolution deal (Henderson and Paun 2023), it is important to consider how devolution can deliver economic security and local democracy differently to what we have seen so far as a country. We are far from a system that works for most regions in England, or for the poorest people within the more prosperous regions.

This report and our recommendations are rooted in citizen conversations that IPPR North and IPPR researchers held across England, in Hastings, Stoke-on-Trent and Redcar over the past year. Far from attempting to cover all aspects of regional inequality, this report instead seeks to represent the views of the citizens we spoke to on what they thought would make the most difference in their places and expand them to other parts of the country. The ideas set out take inspiration from other nations in the UK and we take direct lessons from Scotland. But in other areas the lessons are as applicable to each nation as in England. This report aims to reenergise an agenda which has so far disappointed the public and local councillors from across the political spectrum (Ball 2023).

2. OUR APPROACH

The research conducted by IPPR North and IPPR researchers for this report is rooted in citizen conversations, held in Hastings, Redcar, and Stoke-on-Trent across 2022. Debate on levelling up has tended to swing between polling through to more abstract (as far as citizens are concerned) debate of the UK's productivity puzzle. While we have also drawn on existing literature and analysis on regional inequality, we believe that foregrounding the perspectives and voices of citizens is key to reenergising policy thinking on levelling up.

We ran two-day workshops in each of our three locations. The sessions involved up to 12 participants from a diverse range of backgrounds and of differing political persuasions. In each of the workshops we used participatory methods to seek rich insights into people's perceptions of the areas in which they lived, what they liked and disliked about it, and their aspirations for it. We also explored people's perceptions of their community and the extent to which they felt connected and engaged with it.

We chose our three research sites because each has a distinctive and proud history, but, according to many metrics, have increasingly fallen on hard times; hence, places where regional rebalancing is essential.

Hastings is a large seaside town in East Sussex on England's south coast. The town and its surrounds have a rich history. Hastings was an important port in the middle ages and in the modern era it was a fashionable and popular seaside resort. While the town still has much to offer, the decline in popularity of the English seaside holiday in recent decades has had a negative impact on Hastings; the empty site of the Old Bathing Pool, once regarded as one of the finest lidos in Europe, is symbolic of this decline.

Redcar is a proud industrial town nestled between the built-up industry around the Tees and the Cleveland countryside. It grew as the iron and steel industries did. Teesside proudly boasts "We built the world", and Redcar's steelworks were central to that story, building everything from the Sydney Harbour Bridge to Churchill's war rooms. In the 20th century, the petrochemical industry would also expand locally, creating good jobs with high wages. However, the closure of the last Redcar blast furnace in 2015 was a traumatic shock for the town; around 3,000 jobs were lost, whether directly or in the supply chain.

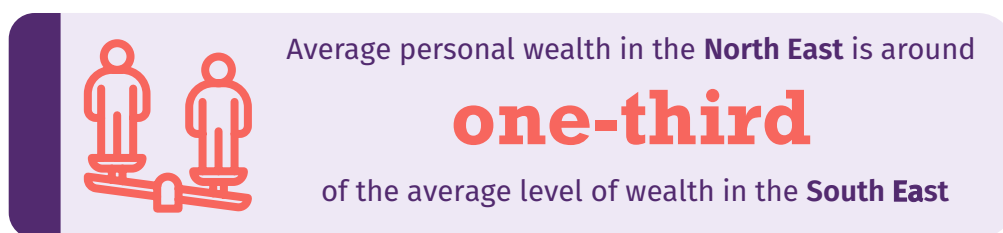
Stoke-on-Trent is a conurbation made up of six towns in the county of Staffordshire. It is on the main route between the cities of Manchester and Birmingham but is also within close proximity to the countryside of the Peak District. Stoke has a rich history as the centre of British pottery manufacturing, once home to illustrious brands like Wedgwood and Mintons. The potteries have defined Stoke's present-day culture and character, and people there felt the industry helped to put their city on the map. Yet, the decline in British pottery manufacturing has had an impact on employment and on local pride in the city. Today, the online gambling giant Bet365 is the most well-known company associated with Stoke.

While all unique in their own ways, the stories told in these three research sites – of former greatness and a proud history; of perceptions of contemporary decline, decay and abandonment; and of an attachment to place and a hopeful optimism for a better future – resonate in towns and cities elsewhere in the UK. The insights gleaned from these three workshops have therefore played a key role in shaping our thinking on what a transformative approach to levelling up – rooted in the everyday lives and aspirations of people in our communities – might look like.

3.

THE ECONOMIC MODEL THAT FAILS OUR REGIONS

The UK is one of the world's most regionally unequal advanced economies (Raikes et al 2019). At the root of this imbalance are inequalities in economic growth and productivity and who benefits from their distribution. There is a vast literature that seeks to explain these differences and what can be done that often points to interventions in research and development (R&D) and innovation policy among others (most recently Stansbury et al 2023). While these are worthy routes to pursue to lift the fortunes of our regions, in this report we instead investigate how inequality between regions is lived, by elevating the voice of citizens and focussing on the inequalities that they feel most keenly and are demonstrated by the evidence across wealth, power and opportunity. In doing so, we seek to address the gaps in the regional inequality debate.



We start with wealth inequality. Our current economic model systematically concentrates wealth in a few hands and places. Wealth is becoming increasingly unequally distributed across the country (ONS 2022c) and our current economic model systematically concentrates wealth in a few hands and places (CEJ 2018). How wealth is distributed matters because wealth helps create financial resilience including the ability to withstand income loss (ONS 2022d), which in turns shapes our living standards and ability to take risks and make choices. Average personal wealth (which includes property, physical goods, private pensions and savings) in the North East (£168,500) is around one-third of the average level of wealth in the South East.

While private wealth becomes increasingly unequally distributed across the country, community-held wealth and local public assets are in decline. The citizens we spoke to were clear that at the root of this decline is the sale of assets traditionally considered part of communities that are being sold off for private use (for example pubs and or post offices). But this was also reflected in the ongoing sale of public buildings. According to new analysis of published DLUHC (2023) data combined with FOI responses from 154 principal local authorities, an estimated 75,000 council assets, including buildings and land, at an approximate asset value of £15 billion (cash prices) are estimated to have been sold since 2010.⁴

The regionally imbalanced distribution of wealth is the cumulative effect of investment and opportunity concentrated in the South East. In addition, even when

⁴ This builds on previous findings by Locality 2018 that has suggested that an average of 4,131 sales of publicly owned buildings and spaces between 2012/13–2016/17, often to meet short-term budget gaps.

investments are made outside of the South East, too often the wealth then leaves those communities to companies headquartered elsewhere, including tax havens (in which the UK has some of the highest proportion of wealth stored in globally as a percentage of GDP see Alstadsæter et al 2017). Citizens know that the economy doesn't work fairly for all places. During our citizens conversations, when talking about the decline of the high street, for example, there was a clear sense that 'someone is still making money' from places in decline.

Our laws, regulations and tax system support the growth of wealth from assets over income from work. This is demonstrated by the lower rate of capital gains tax on income from wealth than income on work. These facts are central to appreciating why the UK economy systematically delivers regional inequality.

The concentration of wealth in a few places in the UK has a long history. The UK has pursued an economic model based around specialisation in its areas where it was comparatively better than elsewhere, in financial and professional services, since the 1980s. The assumption behind this shift was that specialisation would maximise efficiency and therefore grow the economy and its rewards for everyone through 'trickle down' economics (Dibb et al 2021). This shift was paired with the privatisation of the UK's key sectors, like utilities. But specialisation in financial and professional services has failed to deliver widespread prosperity and has instead contributed to sharply growing regional inequality (ibid).

A new narrative in the US of 'bottom up, middle out' (Hanauer and Beinbocker 2022) has helpfully emerged to describe the failure of trickle-down economics that the UK economy has relied upon to date. Instead, it suggests an alternative of an economy based on raising the lowest incomes and growing the number of people with middle incomes. The accumulation of wealth and its uneven regional distribution demonstrates how economic benefits are not fairly 'trickling down' to people or places. Instead, the 'bottom up, middle out' approach suggests that ultimately economic growth comes from expanding cooperation – more people with both the skills and economic wherewithal to innovate, make and buy things – and cooperation is built on foundations of fairness (ibid). These ideas were reflected in comments made to researchers during our citizen conversations.

“People that are on minimum wage, working really hard, with a family, deserve a decent standard of living – which they can't afford. That's what needs addressing. You've got to start levelling up with the people at the bottom.”

Stoke-on-Trent citizen conversation participant

The failure of our current 'trickle down' economic model to grow incomes for most people has been masked for some time by the growth of private debt, and, for some, growth in housing wealth. But this settlement is now being stretched to its limits, with home ownership now seeming out of reach for an entire generation. Now mortgage holders are being squeezed by rising interest rates, while the cost-of-living crisis is brewing a crisis of over-indebtedness. To change this demands a shift in who benefits from wealth, and a rebalancing between incomes from wealth and incomes from work.

The recent history of regional development shows that when we seek to replicate a model that concentrates wealth, power and opportunity in regional core cities, we risk replicating the same inequalities on a smaller scale that we see in the South East (Berry 2022) without important improvements to connectivity. This is now being recognised in places like Manchester, for example through their Greater Manchester Independent Inequalities Commission. While the government's Levelling Up white paper (DLUHC 2022)

implicitly recognised that our current economic model has failed, there have been scant proposals to alter the path ahead.

PROTECTING COMMUNITY AND PUBLIC SECTOR ASSETS CAN HELP SAFEGUARD COMMUNITY WEALTH

The sale of community assets and public buildings are two of the most visible ways communities see places being hollowed out. Against this context, citizens lose track of what ‘levelling up fund’ or other money is fair for their place.

“I know we’re getting £56 million but I don’t know if that’s fair.”

Stoke-on-Trent citizen conversation participant

Political attention has so far focussed on the loss of community assets, with the government responding through a £150 million Community Ownership Fund over four years, and Labour, in opposition, proposing a ‘community right to buy’ proposal, giving communities first refusal to buy or take on community assets ahead of private buyers. Local authorities, such as Wigan Council, also have their own Community Asset Transfer Policy (Wigan Council 2022).

Both sets of proposals to protect community assets are well intentioned. But the government’s one-off offer will fund a very short-term set of community assets while questions remain about the ability of communities to access sufficient access to capital to buy community assets, prohibitively high land and property prices in urban areas, and the ability of communities to engage with the planning system in the same way as commercially interested parties. As a result, some communities have taken action into their own hands – for instance in Sheffield where a local community has turned a site that had been derelict into the largest community-run park in England, Heeley People’s Park (Shaw et al 2022).

Insufficient attention is being placed on the additional loss of public sector assets. Local authorities are too often left with no choice but to sell local assets in order to help balance budgets in an increasingly precarious funding landscape. Any new government will need to work urgently with local government to help ensure its long-term financial viability

4.

DEMOCRACY DONE DIFFERENTLY

“People need to be brought together. There’s a lot of people with views, and they feel angry about things, but there’s no central place where they can get together.”

Redcar citizen conversation participant

The centralisation of power in Westminster has resulted in a dysfunctional economic and democratic model that reinforces regional inequality. To transform democracy, devolution must continue to be broadened and deepened. But devolution must also do democracy differently to better restore the link between people, place and politics. Devolved power must avoid the pitfalls of policymaking in Westminster which can be siloed, conducted far from the people it impacts, and with lack of consideration for how lives are lived differently across the country.

There is now a large degree of consensus from the UK’s two main political parties on the need for further devolution in England. The Levelling Up white paper outlined the UK government’s current levelling up agenda (DLUHC 2022) while the Gordon Brown Commission for the Labour Party ‘Renewing our Democracy and Rebuilding our Economy’ has set a new benchmark for a proposed approach for Labour to devolution and reform of democracy in the UK (Labour Party 2022). While devolution cannot guarantee fairer growth across the country, the evidence shows it can lead to the more efficient spending of public funds, as well as, crucially, bringing decisions closer to people.

While the idea of devolution appears to be having a rebirth, the process of devolution in England has been slow. Defined by its ‘patchwork nature’, there is currently a twin track approach with selected places accelerating ahead on devolution (Giovannini and Griggs 2022). More fundamentally, devolution has largely focussed on the design of new institutions and the creation of new elected metro mayors. So far, devolution has yet to provoke a radical rethink about how communities interact with elected officials on an ongoing basis.

Research is clear that it is both the material circumstance and a sense of powerlessness that is driving the disenchantment felt by so many. There is a pervasive sense of disempowerment, neglect, loss of identity and dignity, particularly in post-industrial areas (see Kenny and Kelsey 2021; McKay 2021; Silver et al 2020; Left Behind Neighbourhoods APPG 2020). The ‘take back control’ narrative of the Brexit campaign is arguably the root of the levelling up agenda itself (Swift 2022), and now it has been formally linked to the devolution of power by the Labour Party, using the phrase to describe its approach to devolution.

By enhancing the power of citizens, empowering the voices of different groups of citizens, and increasing citizen participation in policymaking, trust in politics can start to be restored. At the same time, devolution has the potential to change how decisions are made, bringing decision-making closer to the people it effects and allowing communities to better shape their own lives.

TRUST NEEDS TO BE NURTURED AT ALL TIERS OF GOVERNMENT, INCLUDING BETWEEN LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITIES

“Doing this, here, today, is the only way we can have an opinion. This is how we could influence decisions that are made, by speaking to people like you ... How else we could do it, I wouldn’t know.”

Stoke-on-Trent citizen conversation participant

Trust in democracy has been declining in recent decades, with people now distrustful of both politicians and their country’s political systems (Quilter-Pinner et al 2021). In the UK, trust has been undermined by two main sets of factors – the performance of government and the processes of government (ibid). Often, the performance and processes of government are interlinked, with the UK’s current democratic system of governance reinforcing poor performance of government (Raikes 2020).

“Anybody in politics, anybody with power, should be held to account. Accountability is a big thing for me.”

Redcar citizen conversation participant

Devolution is one of the ways in which we can enhance trust in democracy. Devolution can give people a voice, help ensure policymaking is in tune with local needs and ensure better representation. It is also vital for addressing economic inequalities, with devolution of economic powers being the precondition needed to rebuild a fairer and stronger economy (CEJ 2018). But devolution alone will not build a sense of trust at the local level. Greater devolution of economic powers must be combined with a maturing of the central and local government relationship which includes a shift towards greater financial autonomy (Johns and Hutt 2023) as well as ‘double devolution’ to communities.

CITIZENS WANT TO PARTICIPATE IN POLICY AND POLITICS, BUT DON’T KNOW HOW

Our citizen engagement work across Hastings, Redcar and Stoke-on-Trent suggests that people want credible mechanisms for engaging and participating in policymaking and, in many cases, in politics. Citizens recognise engagement can improve the quality of local policymaking and believe it would also restore trust in the policymaking process by making them feel better connected to their local representatives and included in local decisions.

Feedback from our citizen workshops was clear that participation is not the endgame. Instead, communities want to participate in more meaningful interventions, rather than temporary or tokenistic ones. Positive examples include permanent citizens’ assemblies that cover a range of topics that concern communities and which they can choose from (Murphy et al 2021). The current options for communities to participate in decisions that affect them fall short and are often complex to navigate.

“Why couldn’t we, once a month, have an event at the park where your children could go for free and do stuff, but then while you’re there, have people that go round and ask questions, and get the community involved.”

Stoke-on-Trent citizen conversation participant

The citizens we spoke with wanted greater involvement in local decision-making. This included in local budget setting and increased scrutiny, transparency and accountability. Ideas around citizens’ assemblies were popular, as were increasing direct say in local decisions through, for example, issue-specific referendums. People also felt it was important for there to

be greater transparency on decision-making including, for example, council meetings. Further ideas included more informal and dispersed mechanisms to influence local priorities and to encourage actors beyond government to participate. For example, local businesses and charities or citizens leading local projects with resources allocated through participatory budgeting at the hyperlocal level.

“I know you can attend some of these council meetings sometimes, like if there’s a planning application in, but I think you’re told to be quiet or you’ll be ejected.”

Stoke-on-Trent citizen conversation participant

There are positive examples of local and national commitments to participatory approaches. In partnership with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, the Scottish government set out a commitment to allocate one per cent of local government funding through participatory budgeting by the end of 2021 – something that could be matched across England (Murphy et al 2021). Elsewhere, participatory budgeting is now routine as we see in Paris. As early as 2014, 40,000 citizens voted on more than a dozen proposals put forward by Paris City Council, ranging from creating outdoor ‘kiosks’ of art in public spaces to new vertical gardens. Two years later, more than double the number of participants involved in 2014 were making spending decisions about issues that affect them (Cabannes 2017).

In the UK, in response to poverty and social isolation in their communities, Leeds, West Cheshire and Morecambe Bay have developed successful Poverty Truth Commissions in which one participant described how it was putting people with lived experience at the ‘front and centre’ (LGA 2021).

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to citizen participation and community empowerment, but there is a suite of tools available to local institutions to help make ‘double devolution’ to communities happen. Giving communities greater support to develop neighbourhood plans, transfer assets and access vacant or underutilised sites from which communities can begin to create ‘hubs’ and centres of citizen participation are all appropriate models to help build community power in places (see Dobson 2022).

CITIZENS FEEL ILL-INFORMED ABOUT LOCAL DEMOCRACY AND ARE CONCERNED THAT THEY HAVE MISSED OUT ON A POLITICAL EDUCATION

“Until the last few years, I didn’t have any knowledge of politics or anything ... If I was taught about it, then maybe I would know more about how to actually influence things. As a younger person, I wasn’t taught anything in school.”

Stoke-on-Trent citizen conversation participant

A recurring theme across all three workshops in Hastings, Stoke-on-Trent and Redcar was both a lack of clear local information about what was being decided and done locally by those in local and national government, as well a broader sense of having missed out on a political education.

“When we went to school, we got so many more subjects, which included politics, money management, home economics, everything like that. After the 1980s, the school curriculum completely changed. How are people supposed to know about things if they’re not taught about them from an early age?”

Redcar citizen conversation participant

Participants in our citizen conversations felt that providing people with more information and a better education on how to make change happen and how decisions were made was essential to building their willingness to get involved in community action and their ability to take up local opportunities. Many wanted information about the opportunities for involvement locally to be made more accessible. Stronger local media was consistently the preferred option to support better information sharing and also help hold decision-makers to account, as well as clearer council communications.

The Digital, Culture, Media and Sport select committee has been clear that the government needs to invest in local media in order to prevent them falling into decline, which risks undermining democracy and local identities (DCMS Committee 2023). And in Redcar, participants told us that young people had few opportunities to learn about their democratic rights and the importance of civic participation. There is a need to address these shortcomings to ensure that local communities are politically informed and are well equipped to make decisions about their local area.

5. OPPORTUNITY OF PLACE

“I think they want to make Stoke-on-Trent basically the Silicon Valley of the North, which would be good.”

Stoke-on-Trent citizen conversation participant

Citizens want to play their own role in the development and improvement of their place but are not convinced that ‘levelling up’ is working. The participants of IPPR and IPPR North citizen conversations consistently felt that levelling up remained a political slogan, not a policy programme for change – this came across in all workshops. This reflects the findings of several polls on public perceptions of levelling up; a previous poll found that over half the population (53 per cent) think it will either make no real difference or will result in less money for their local area (Kenny et al 2021). Broader economic arguments about the country do not easily land with residents unless they understand how it will improve their area.

Work by the Local Government Association and Neighbourly Lab (2022) has also found that what they term ‘Contentedness with Place’ is primarily determined by “how a place supports people to live well”. In particular, they identify four key criteria for satisfaction with place:

1. that core material needs such as housing and jobs are met
2. that the place has good local amenities including shops and tidy open-spaces
3. that citizens have sufficient social connections
4. that they feel able to have an “optimistic view of the place’s future” and see a role for themselves within it.

The regional inequality agenda seeks to support people where they choose to live and make opportunity available to them, and this is what we heard consistently throughout our citizen conversations.

CITIZENS WANT PUBLIC, NON-TRANSACTIONAL SPACES TO MEET AND SOCIALISE

“I think people are very community-spirited, and I think if people could all get together, there would be a strength.”

Redcar citizen conversation participant

A common theme between our citizen conversations was a sense of loss of spaces that were free to use to meet and socialise. This extended to increasingly high parking charges in car parks, where increases were seen as prohibitive for many accessing green spaces at all, particularly in places inaccessible by public transport. This finding is consistent with previous IPPR research to support communities across Yorkshire to build social capital and to promote social cohesion (Mort et al 2022).

“There are no parks in the whole country like Stoke-on-Trent has. There are so many. So much greenery. That’s what we appreciate the most.”

Stoke-on-Trent citizen conversation participant

The prioritisation of public space is well supported by wider research. In communities that feel they receive less than their fair share of resources, the

provisions of parks, places to meet and leisure have been found to be the highest priority, over and above health and transport (Shoben 2020). The importance of green spaces is highlighted in the findings from focus groups carried out in Yorkshire for UK in a Changing Europe (SurrIDGE and Wager 2022). Participants pointed to the positives of the “scenery and countryside around them” and some highlighted the positives of a “rural or village life”. For some a sense of connection to both the urban and rural was seen as important (ibid).

Polling also suggests that residents in so-called ‘left behind’ neighbourhoods care deeply about the preservation or revival of social amenities in their communities. In recent research, residents were asked what they feel their areas are missing out on, ‘places to meet’ and ‘leisure and sports facilities’ were the top two choices (with 57 per cent and 55 per cent respectively). ‘Parks’ came fourth (with 49 per cent), just behind jobs in third (Left Behind Neighbourhoods APPG, 2020). There is also significant support for initiatives such as ‘sprucing up parks and green spaces’, ‘regenerating the high street’, and ‘restoring a sense of purpose to declining communities’ (Tryl and Burns 2022).

“The community is holding this town together. Community is the most important thing in my opinion.”

Hastings citizen conversation participant

Similarly, recent polling which asked citizens “what builds civic pride and what has undermined it” found that it is about the quality of shared spaces and the public streetscape (Frayne 2021). In other focus group research, participants suggested that “when it comes to infrastructure, Britons have a clear preference for local projects over big national programmes, which are often seen to benefit outsiders rather than local communities themselves” (Tryl and Burns 2022).

CONNECTIVITY IS KEY – BUT IT WORKS IN BOTH WAYS

“If people can’t get here, no wonder the shops are failing.”

Redcar citizen conversation participant

“We need regular, reliable transport ... The buses should be every 15 minutes, like they are in cities.”

Redcar citizen conversation participant

Agglomeration has been the dominant model of regional growth in the UK. Agglomeration is the idea that there is a positive relationship between city size or density and productivity, and that by increasing the degree of urban concentration in the economy, we can increase productivity and overall economic growth.

Agglomeration can help deliver economic growth through the benefit of lots of educated and skilled labour being concentrated in one place, spillover of innovations and knowledge, larger markets, and links between complementary goods and services (Pike 2018). This in turn can help grow local economies. Amenities in urban areas and specialised labour markets make it easier for countries to attract multinational firms to locate in places that benefit from those effects.

Agglomeration, however, has unintended consequences for nearby smaller towns and cities, as well as for the people living in the agglomerations themselves. Without sufficient connectivity, nearby cities, towns and villages can be disconnected from economic activity. For people living in agglomerations, easy access to work may come at the price of inflated house prices, congestion and pollution. Agglomeration also assumes that concentrating a small number of high-

value jobs in an area will ‘trickle out’ or ‘trickle down’ to those in other nearby places; but recent evidence suggests this is not the case (Berry 2022).

The citizens we spoke with felt that living near another larger, urban area could be to the detriment to their locality. This was particularly true in Stoke-on-Trent where the frequent train service to Manchester was seen as a reason for young people to be drawn culturally and economically to their larger neighbour. Similarly in Hastings, people are seen to be drawn to job opportunities in London.

“Stoke is a depot, that’s it.”

Stoke-on-Trent citizen conversation participant

These insights point to developing multiple economic hubs of activity and improved connectivity – both transport and digital – to agglomerations, while also investing in the quality of place to protect places from being only a ‘depot’.

“A coherent regional policy should either explicitly address the impoverishment of local government and its ability to provide public services, or address how declining levels of public service provision will be resolved otherwise.”

CITIZENS HAVE LOST A SENSE OF WHAT THEY SHOULD BE ABLE TO EXPECT FROM LOCAL PUBLIC SERVICES

It is clear that public services – delivered either by local or national government, or as some citizens pointed out, by communities supporting each other – are a visible and tangible example to citizens as to the success, or not, of their places. In our citizen conversations, they are often cited alongside high streets as the litmus test of how well a place is doing.

So far public services are yet to be politically connected to the regional rebalancing agenda. A coherent regional policy should either explicitly address the impoverishment of local government and its ability to provide public services, or address how declining levels of public service provision will be resolved otherwise.

Wider research also supports the importance of local public services to citizens. The quality of local services and the extent to which those with power address local priorities has an important bearing on perceptions of place (Duffy and Lee Chan 2009). Key sources of concern related to place-based satisfaction include access to good-quality services, in particular schools and healthcare, and the existence of good local employment opportunities (Pereira et al 2021).

“We all know that the NHS is collapsing. It’s hard to even see a doctor now ... I think investment in public health services, healthcare services, in Hastings and surrounding environments, is critical.”

Hastings citizen conversation participant

Across each of our three citizen conversations there was strong appetite to invest in and improve basic public services that make it possible for people to live a good quality of life. These services were predominately explained to researchers as healthcare, public transport and childcare.

“We need adolescent facilities – somewhere for them to go, something for them to do. We need attention focussed on young people who, at the moment, are being prompted to be on the streets, either dealing or taking drugs, either carrying knives or getting stabbed by them.”

Hastings citizen conversation participant

BUILDING A SENSE OF BELONGING, COMMUNITY AND PRIDE IN PLACE

“We’ve got a uniqueness, and we want to protect it. That is our essence, almost. It’s what makes us who we are. We’re quite keen to defend that, I think.”

Hastings citizen conversation participant

Common across our three citizen conversations was the desire to see the heritage and community assets of each place properly recognised, including improved support for high streets. In Hastings, we heard residents in agreement that the high street “could be anywhere” while the historic old town was seen as the “best bit” of the town.⁵ When the site once occupied by the *Hastings Observer* newspaper was turned into community hands, for example, it was properly restored after decades of decay and is now a thriving space occupied by small businesses (Shaw et al 2022). Meanwhile in Redcar, the lack of a pier in such an historic seaside town was considered an oversight (in recent history Redcar has had two piers).

“Everybody wants a pier. People don’t feel right without it.”

Redcar citizen conversation participant

In Stoke-on-Trent, similarly, the physical appearance of each of its constituent towns regularly came up in citizen discussions. There was a desire for the public space, and the front that Stoke presents to the world, to be attractive – addressing litter, derelict buildings and vacant plots of land was popular. People are proud of the heritage of Stoke and enjoy seeing this reflected in the design of its spaces – keeping buildings, not knocking them down. Failure to invest in and renew high streets can have a damaging impact upon morale in particular areas, and in turn deplete the factors which are most conducive to both pride and economic growth (Shaw et al 2022).

For many, the decline of the high street invokes a sense of “profound loss” (Silver et al 2020). The loss of “key community-building institutions” such as pubs and youth clubs was also seen as “a death knell of social cohesion”. It appears that in both towns and cities, communities across the country share many similar concerns.

Preserving or repurposing historic buildings and heritage sites can bring community benefits including improving community cohesion, wellbeing and pride in place (Historic England 2020). Polling suggests that 66 per cent agree with the statement that “historic buildings are a source of pride in the local area where I live” (Historic England 2020). It is often argued that heritage evokes memories of place and recognition of cultural distinctiveness of places. Historic England suggests that in places with larger numbers of heritage assets, people have a stronger sense of place.

5 Hastings has a very active community development movement – its pier has a chequered history of private neglect, transfer into community ownership and then back into private hands: <https://www.powertochange.org.uk/news/hastings-pier-a-community-business-kick-start-to-regeneration/>

6.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO REBALANCE OUR REGIONS

It is clear from our citizen conversations across England that citizens still expect and want regions to be more equal in wealth, power and opportunity. Citizens want their places to thrive and to be able to be involved in decisions that affect them. Instead, citizens face shrinking access to public services; vacancies on high streets; an ongoing loss of public space and community assets and a lack of information and understanding about the decisions being made on their behalf. Based on the concerns and ideas put forward directly by citizens and testing these views against available evidence, we recommend a series of ideas to reboot the regional rebalancing agenda.

SAFEGUARDING LOCALLY HELD, COMMUNITY WEALTH

Wealth continues to leave communities in a number of ways. The citizens we spoke to were clear that at the heart of this is the sale of assets traditionally considered part of communities being sold off for private use (for example pubs and or post offices) or public building that are sold to fill short-term budget gaps in local government (such as town halls, libraries, leisure centres). We propose measures to both increase transparency over asset ownership and the choices local authorities are facing and to facilitate community ownership.

Introduce the principle of ‘common good property’ to protect communities from the continued sell-off of publicly owned buildings at the local level.

In Scotland, common good property is local authority-owned land and buildings, and moveable items such as furniture and art (Scottish Government 2018). This includes being transparent about the existence of publicly held assets and community involvement in decisions regarding them including how they are used and disposed of (ibid). To build on the work of others who have independently sought to map assets of community value (ACV) (for example the Plunkett Foundation, Power to Change and Locality) local authorities should build on existing data and information from community groups and the voluntary and community sector to map current assets and make this publicly available information. Local authorities are too often left with no choice but to sell local assets in order to help balance budgets in an increasingly precarious funding landscape. According to new analysis of published DLUHC (2023) data combined with FOI responses from 154 principal local authorities, an estimated 75,000 council assets, including buildings and land, at an approximate asset value of £15 billion (cash prices) are estimated to have been sold since 2010.⁶ Any new government will need to work urgently with local government to help ensure its long-term financial viability.

Support communities in reclaiming community assets through capital and skills.

The options for supporting community ownership of assets have rightly been a key part of the political debate on levelling up. Action needs to be long term and meet the scale of the challenge. The recent proposal by Labour for a ‘community right to

6 This builds on previous findings by Locality 2018.

buy’– giving communities the first option to buy up community assets – moves the emphasis in the right direction, but this needs to be paired with practical options for how communities can raise the capital as well as access the support and skills to acquire, maintain and run assets. The government’s Community Ownership Fund is welcome, but one-off funds are inevitably a short-term solution to the continued sell-off of assets that could either be safeguarded by the public sector or claimed by the community.

PROTECTING PUBLIC SPACE

Public space has a multitude of benefits, clearly reflected by citizens in our conversations. Public space has been shown to improve mental and physical health, facilitate socialising, learning and improve public health all without being obliged to spend money. Citizens keenly feel the lack of safe, public, non-transactional spaces. People want thriving high streets, places to be and gather, things to do and walkable streets. Improved public space can also allay fears of crime or anti-social behaviour (Design Council).

Introduce a minimum green space planning requirement.

As proposed by IPPR’s Environmental Justice Commission (Murphy et al 2021) a renewed planning framework should introduce a local planning rule to ensure no new home is further than 300 metres from accessible green space. We also know that this is a matter of inequality and that the poorest areas have fewer protected green spaces (CPRE 2022) with also distinct benefit for health outcomes, both for wellbeing and clinical benefits including reducing rates of depression, anxiety and cortisol levels (Beyer et al 2014).

CONNECTING PLACES

Connectivity both between regions and within regions is an undeniable part of regionally rebalancing and reducing regional inequality. Transport connectivity directly impacts how large a place effectively is and therefore the extent a place can capture agglomeration benefits (Forth 2018) and expands the boundaries of where people live, work and socialise. Digital connectivity is also critical.

Over the past decade, if the regions of the North had received the same per person transport spend they would have received £86 billion more (Johns and Giovannini 2021); the regional imbalance of transport spend in the UK is well evidenced. In order to correct these imbalances, large-scale, long-term transport projects need to be committed to, in order to demonstrate intent and commitment while building connectivity and helping the country meet its net zero goals.

Inter-regional commitment to Northern Powerhouse Rail in full as a priority, and High Speed 2 (HS2).

As Transport for the North and the Northern Powerhouse Partnership have previously set out, delivering Northern Powerhouse Rail and HS2 in full would improve journey times and reliability between our towns and cities, free up capacity on existing routes and reduce carbon emissions through electrification (Transport for the North 2022).

Intra-regional catalytic transport investment in cities outside the South East.

Intra-regional catalytic transport investment in cities outside the South East. As a result of a mixed devolved funding landscape on transport investment, mayoral combined authorities (MCAs) and local authorities continue to rely on central government investment for major local transport infrastructure. Recent research has demonstrated the key role of scaling up local bus services as well as the extension of franchising in all MCAs (Frost et al 2023). Future ambitions should

include a commitment from central government to support a mass transit system, such as a tram service, in Leeds and in Liverpool

Integrate 20-minute neighbourhoods into local planning systems.

The core goal of 20-minute neighbourhoods is to create places where most of people's daily needs can be met via short walking, wheeling, cycling or public transport journeys from home. While in places like Stoke-on-Trent the proximity to green parks was welcomed by local citizens, growing parking charges in parks are becoming prohibitive for access to some. This makes the requirement for accessible public space by active travel or public transport even more important.

REBALANCING GOVERNMENT INVESTMENT

There have been some early attempts to rebalance public investment between the South East and the rest of England, but to date they have been lacklustre. Citizens know that one-off sums invested in places are neither enough nor sufficiently put into context to be reassured that funding between places is fair.

Establish a new fair funding formula for major public sector investment projects across England's regions.

The government should commit to matching London's levels of investment spending across England distributed by a fair formula for major public sector investment projects (Dibb et al 2021). The government has made early attempts to adjust the Green Book – an evaluation tool used to allocate government investment – to propose investment should be regionally rebalanced, but more substantive change is needed to make regional rebalancing a prerequisite for public investment. We propose to replace and properly fund major projects with a fair formula to determine allocations to cities and regions in England, taking into account need and historic levels of investment and providing certainty for places in the medium term.

Establish green industrial clusters supported by long-term government investment.

We spoke to citizens in areas where there is a proud industrial heritage, and they felt that they were still waiting for a clear economic plan for their place. Green industrial clusters could bring together levelling up and industrial policy, drawing on plans local authorities have made previously through Local Industrial Strategies and clustering around universities to generate spatially well-distributed growth (Laybourn-Langton et al 2017). This spending would be committed based on an expectation of the crowding in of private sector investment, which needs long-term clear commitments from national government, beyond the low-level investment offered by investment zone policy (£80 million per cluster over five years) and proportionate to the scale seen through the US Inflation Reduction Act.

IMPROVING CITIZEN PARTICIPATION AND EMPOWERMENT THROUGH DEVOLUTION

Devolution enables decisions to be made closer to citizens and be more responsive to local needs. But this dynamic is not a given and local relationships need to continue to be built up over time with communities, and engagement needs to be participatory and representative. At the local and regional level, local councils and mayoral combined authorities should continue to innovate in deliberative methods – they are at small enough scale, encourage a local voice on local issues and can produce demonstrable outcomes for communities.

Our citizen engagement work across Hastings, Redcar and Stoke-on-Trent suggested that people want credible mechanisms for engaging and

participating in policymaking and politics. Citizens recognise engagement can improve the quality of local policymaking and believe it would also restore trust in the policymaking process by making them feel better connected to their local representatives and included in local decisions.

Increase citizen participation in local democracy through making community engagement a legislative requirement.

In political debate there is often a concern that empowering community groups challenges the status of elected political leaders, when in fact the engagement of the community can both improve democratic engagement – through voter turnout and participatory forums – and also support councils and mayoral combined authorities to create a vision for a place. We also heard that involvement in community activity can help create a pipeline of local talent for elected positions in places. To make sure this is done consistently between places a legislative requirement to engage communities in decision making could be designed.

While community engagement will rightly look different in each place and for the types of decision being made, there is a growing ‘playbook’ of tools that can be used to improve community engagement with the political process. Among the citizens we spoke to there were particular ideas that were well supported:

- standing citizens juries
- participatory budgeting
- paid-for community leaders.

Minimum of 1 per cent of local funding to be allocated through participatory budgeting.

As showcased in Scotland, local authorities could decide to allocate a percentage of their annual budget to participatory budgeting where community groups select how they want revenues to be spent (Murphy et al 2021).

Explore expansion of hyperlocal governance

Hyperlocal governance – whether that is parish councils, neighbourhood forums, non-statutory bodies, or other more informal community bodies – can play an important role in improving local democratic engagement for communities, providing opportunities for representation and empowerment, and can help shape a positive sense of place. Hyperlocal governance in England is extremely patchy and there is a need to develop ideas to improve hyperlocal representation and ensure that it can better empower communities.

ADVANCING LOCAL INFORMATION AND POLITICAL UNDERSTANDING

A recurring theme across all three citizen conversations in Hastings, Stoke-on-Trent and Redcar was both a lack of clear local information about what was being decided and done locally by both those in local and national government. Additionally, during these sessions, many participants reflected on their lack of political understanding and a desire to be better informed.

The decline of local media was highlighted in each place, with participants explaining that often where they had previously sought information was no longer an option (for example, free local newspapers), and they no longer knew where to consistently receive quality information.

As devolution continues apace and given the majority of people in England now live within an area with a devolution deal, it seems even more counterintuitive that local information and political understanding should be so limited. While each of the following policy areas merit additional exploration, the pertinence of these

issues to citizens we spoke to across Hastings, Redcar and Stoke-on-Trent cannot be underestimated.

Develop a local news strategy to protect local independent news outlets.

Many local newspapers have either folded or have shifted to provide a much-reduced output in recent years, largely owing to the challenging nature of the news market. More than 300 local newspapers closed between 2009 and 2019. This runs counter to the ongoing deepening of devolution and the increasing need for local accountability and scrutiny. We propose a local news strategy to assess the overall decline of local news in all formats.

Level up local government communications.

Many citizens we spoke to were either not aware of or could not engage with local authority communications fully. We propose that the Local Government Association actively shares best practice between places in order to level up the quality of local government communications.

Make teaching of political understanding a compulsory part of personal, social, health and economic (PHSE) curriculum.

Too many citizens reported that they had never been taught about how political systems work and how they can take part and influence them. In order to empower citizens and communities, the PHSE curriculum should consistently offer the opportunity to understand how to play an active part in our political system.

CONCLUSION

Regionally rebalancing the country remains a central challenge for the next government. From our citizen conversations across the country in Redcar, Stoke on Trent and Hastings it is clear that citizens are still too painfully aware that our economy and democracy are not yet designed to help all places thrive. Citizens want and expect change.

Devolution presents a powerful opportunity. The rise of mayoral combined authorities and their continued roll out across the country is a very welcome work in progress. But while we move towards deeper and broader devolution, central government must recognise where it undermines local and regional progress and instead positively support action being taken at all levels of government.

Against a backdrop of public services that are increasingly failing to deliver, struggling high streets, a growing number of local authorities in financial distress or close to effective bankruptcy, alongside inflation eroding living standards, local, regional and national leaders need to work in sync more than ever before. Too often we see local government undermined by the continued and impossible pressure on local budgets, or regional leaders undermined by large-scale promises made on the delivery of big infrastructure such as Northern Powerhouse Rail, just for plans to be rolled back.

The next government needs to commit and stick to the big ideas to help rebalance the country. Ideas in this report, rooted in citizen conversations across the country and a body of evidence behind what is needed to rebalance the country, seek to reinvigorate the debate that remains central to the country's success.

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