



RETHINKING LEVELLING UP

CARING FOR PLACE, EMPOWERING
CONNECTORS, AND REDESIGNING
OUR CULTURE OF GOVERNANCE

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December 2022

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ABOUT THIS PAPER

This paper is part of IPPR and IPPR North's progressive levelling up research. It has been commissioned as an independent provocation paper, designed to stimulate new thinking on a major topic in relation to the levelling up agenda. This paper focuses specifically on the governance of levelling up and how reforms in democratic governance can help achieve the deep-rooted changes needed to create a more progressive, equal and levelled up country.

This paper is published by IPPR and IPPR North as part of its ongoing research. The findings, argument and conclusions of the authors do not represent IPPR and IPPR North positions and this paper is designed to promote new thinking on the topic of levelling up.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank Zoë Billingham and Jonathan Webb for their support throughout the writing of this paper. Their detailed comments on drafts triggered much reflection on our behalf and enabled us to refine our arguments.



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Citation

If you are using this document in your own writing, our preferred citation is:
Giovannini A and Griggs S (2022) *Rethinking levelling up: Caring for place, empowering connectors, and redesigning our culture of governance*, IPPR. <http://www.ippr.org/publications/rethinking-levelling-up>

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SUMMARY

The levelling up agenda has made little progress since its inception in 2019. Yet abandoning its programme of reform risks returning us to a status quo characterised by over-centralisation and top-down control, that served the country so poorly and paved the way to wide regional divides in the first place.

Against this background, this paper critically assesses the unfinished governance processes of levelling up, challenging the traditional orthodoxy of territorial government in the UK. It argues that the governance of levelling up, as it stands, is underpinned by a set of structural weaknesses, captured by a profound central-local disconnect which has produced an architecture of institutions without purpose and top-down modes of participation and collaboration. In response, it calls for further experimentation with different forms of participation and the bringing back in of local institutions and communities – putting them at the core of a new vision for levelling up. As such, we call for a culture of governance that rests on the logic of caring for place, that recognises that participation and a reinvigorated local government go hand in hand, and that supports the work of ‘connectors’ across places and the culture of problem-solving, both within communities and between all tiers of government.

1.

INTRODUCTION: LEVELLING UP IS DEAD, LONG LIVE LEVELLING UP

Levelling up is the latest in a long line of attempts to tackle the deeply entrenched regional inequalities that cut across our country. But, beyond rhetoric, since its inception in 2019, the agenda has made scant progress (Webb et al 2022). Socioeconomic divides between and within regions keep widening, even more so as the country unravels at the seams under the strains of the post-pandemic recovery, a cost-of-living-crisis, an imminent deep recession as well as domestic and international political turmoil. Indeed, the ‘polycrisis’ (Tooze 2022) looming over the British political system suggests that taxes as well as the cost of living will continue to rise, public spending will be curtailed, and public services will suffer from another round of austerity cuts that they can ill afford.

Of course, ultimately, the return to austerity or ‘austerity 2.0’ will be the result of political choices rather than economic necessities (Jung and Roberts 2022). But if followed through, such political choices will only hinder, in practice, any real attempt to rebalance the economy. And, in the midst of the current turbulence and quick turnover of prime ministers and chancellors at Westminster, they may well even sound the death knell for levelling up.

Yet, abandoning the levelling up agenda altogether would be misguided. First, with trust in politics already hitting very low levels (Quilter-Pinner et al 2021), demoting the salience of levelling up could strain even further the fragile social contract that binds citizens and political institutions in our country. The ‘intersection of crises’ that we are facing is arguably weakening the very foundations of the relationships between the state and citizens – from an economic, political and democratic perspective.

Second, the public cares about regional inequalities, and want to see them addressed (Menon and Stowers 2022, Raikes, Giovannini and Getzel 2019, Hall et al 2022). Reconnecting with the agenda is crucial for political parties both in government and opposition.

Finally, the ‘uneven reforms’ of the past decade, including the creation of a patchwork of devolution deals, presented as key to achieving levelling up, has left a set of unfinished governance processes in place – which run the risk of turning into ‘architectures without purpose’. Abandoning levelling up would lead us back full circle to a status quo characterised by over-centralisation and top-down control that served the country so poorly and paved the way to widening regional divides in the first place.

In this paper, we focus on the unfinished governance processes of levelling up developing a critical reflection on what needs to be done to reverse current trends and establish a locally focused, community-oriented and democratically accountable system of governance that can shift the dial on over-centralisation and regional inequalities and facilitate a sustainable approach to levelling up. We argue that the governance of levelling up, as it stands, is underpinned by a set of structural weaknesses, captured by a profound central-local disconnect. This is characterised by an ‘incoherent state’ (Richards et al 2022a) that seeks to retain rather than overhaul its power-hoarding nature, leading to a ‘disjointed experimentalism’ approach to reform (Kenny 2019) that fails to deliver on policy and tends to disregard democratic links with local communities.

To tackle this, we start off by mapping the flaws and inconsistencies of the governance of levelling up: assessing the structural weaknesses that underpin centre-local relations and reflecting on how these influence/shape the governance of levelling up and produce an architecture of institutions without purpose and top-down modes of participation and collaboration. Notably, we challenge the traditional orthodoxy of territorial government in the UK, challenging the binary oppositions between centre and local and the labels of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ governance often associated with such oppositions. Next, we call for further experimentation with different forms of participation, underlining nonetheless the need to be aware of the political exclusions of all forms of politics and guard against them. Finally, drawing on this initial analysis, we present our ideas on ‘how to turn the tide’, bringing local institutions and communities back in – putting them at the core of a new vision for levelling up. We call for a culture of governance that rests on the logic of caring for place, that recognises that participation and a reinvigorated local government go hand in hand, and that supports the work of ‘connectors’ across places and the culture of problem-solving, both within communities and between all tiers of government.

Now more than ever, there is a need to reclaim and reframe the agenda – and turn it into an enduring, long-term vision for a prosperous country underpinned by coherent institutional arrangements and a regional development framework that is connected with local communities, and that can take root and ‘stick’.

2.

THE GOVERNANCE OF LEVELLING UP – FLAWS AND INCONSISTENCIES

CHALLENGING THE TRADITIONAL ORTHODOXY IN POLICY CIRCLES

Back in the 1970s, Jim Bulpitt (1972, p248) argued that there was a ‘traditional orthodoxy’ framing our understandings and investments in devolved territorial government across the UK. This orthodoxy, he claimed, unproblematically lauded the contribution of community, participation and decentralisation, and elected local government, to the fundamental workings of the modern democratic state. In other words, more participation, more decentralisation, and more localism risked at the time becoming ingrained in the rhetoric of policymaking, repeatedly and uncritically voiced as the answer to the complex multiple pressures facing the British state.

Some 50 years on, it is not far-fetched to suggest that this ‘traditional orthodoxy’ continues to dominate current debates and ways of thinking about the British political system and the distribution of power and relationships within it. This is not to dismiss out-of-hand the promises of the ‘traditional orthodoxy’ and the benefits that a more decentralised localist approach to decision-making could add to the political vitality of the UK. There is a wealth of research that demonstrates the negative impacts on local decision-making of a top-down ‘Westminster model’ of parliamentary sovereignty that concentrates power at the centre and offers no constitutional protection for subnational government institutions (APSE Local Government Commission 2021, Richards et al 2022b, Barnett, Giovannini and Griggs 2021).

But, importantly, for levelling up, this continued reliance on such tried and tested orthodox positions and policy ‘solutions’ arguably risks getting in the way of the transformational political change necessary to address regional inequalities. The rhetoric of ‘empowering local government, mayors and communities’ (see DLHC 2022) continues to play out the politics of levelling up through binary ‘orthodox’ oppositions. Notably, we continually pit the ‘good’ of the stymied local against the ‘bad’ of the overbearing centre or we juxtapose the inclusivity of the co-produced against the exclusions of representative political leadership.

However, the governance of levelling up is not simply about the centre letting go nor can it be reduced to transferring responsibilities over to communities. Reproducing ‘orthodox’ binaries does little to unpack what needs to be done, in practice, to ‘connect the dots’ of the governance of levelling up. As Bulpitt (1972) rightly underlined, political relations between the centre and local are rarely ‘one-way’, while the location of decision-making

does not necessarily dictate its 'nature', and the politics of participation are not always inclusionary. In short, we have to make more room in our analyses for the reality of the 'grey' or 'messy' dynamics of effective territorial government and subnational relations. With that in mind, let us first turn to the uneven architecture of institutions that characterises the fragmented landscape of multiple spaces and arenas of decision-making that go to make up the realm of the local.

AN ARCHITECTURE OF INSTITUTIONS WITHOUT PURPOSE

Local governance in England is a famously complicated affair, giving rise to a largely incoherent institutional landscape (Giovannini 2021, Richards et al 2022b). Over the past decades we have seen new architectures being created, disbanded and/or repurposed at an astonishing pace, based on a fragmented and incremental approach to reform with no coherent, long-term plan (Barnett, Giovannini and Griggs 2021). This has generated uneven structures and policy delivery mechanisms – with overlapping boundaries, functions and roles, different powers and increasingly blurred lines of accountability (Giovannini 2021, Barnett, Giovannini and Griggs 2021).

The emerging governance of levelling up – understood as the networks, relations and institutions operating at different levels that should marshal and deliver the agenda – reflects this approach and is marked by similar characteristics. Crucially, this has left a set of patchwork and unfinished governance processes in place.

The devolution agenda that should be tightly connected with levelling up is a case in point. Since the incremental introduction of 'devolution deals' in 2014, new sub-regional structures (such as combined authorities, 'metro mayors', local enterprise partnerships, etc) have been set up and added to the already complex map of local governance in England. But these 'governance innovations' were implemented by the government to put a clear 'political stamp' on the agenda, rather than as part of a long-term strategy able to unlock structural change at the scale required. Devolution also remains competitive and a centre-led process: only some areas have been 'granted' devo deals by Whitehall, while others – often in 'left behind areas' – are still missing out (Webb et al 2022, Giovannini and Johns 2021, Williams and Foster 2022).

The result is an incoherent and uneven landscape, that sees some areas getting devo deals mapping onto local geographies and a sense of place, others that are designed around models of city-regions and travel to work areas or even completely artificial boundaries, while large swathes of the country are simply excluded. This, again, mirrors the flaws implicit in how the levelling up agenda has been designed and delivered – ie in a top-down, incremental, opaque, and short-term manner, with little regards to the concerns of local areas and their communities.

The levelling up white paper and bill acknowledges the importance of 'broadening and deepening devolution' to address inequalities (DLHC 2022). But, in practice, they have not changed the nature of the process: both levelling up and devolution remain top-down agendas, driven by political motifs and with little input from the public. Finally, recent changes at the helm of the government and key departments show that the link between the two strategies remains volatile, and subject to political events.

As noted by the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee (PACAC 2022, p24), “successive governments, far from putting in place careful reforms to nurture and develop decentralised and durable governance structures in England, have adopted a piecemeal and uncoordinated approach” – which has serious repercussions on policy and democratic outcomes. In addition, “the current balance of decisions is weighted too much to the centre and this leads to suboptimal decision-making and policies” (PACAC 2022, p42). Indeed, deeply engrained resistance within Whitehall to let go of powers, combined with the ‘silo culture’ of its departments, tends to deliver ‘one size fits all policies’ that are ‘place blind’. Once implemented at the local level, these often fail to connect – resulting in local areas and people having a range of different, disjointed experiences (ibid) – thus preventing any real levelling up. Collectively, these issues contribute to a low sense of political efficacy, whereby individuals feel “their voice is not being heard” (PACAC 2022, p4).

Within this context, it should come as little surprise that subnational governance institutions – and in particular local government – are left in a difficult position. First, they are disempowered and lack any form of constitutional protection. Second, they are at the interface of a complex set of vertical relationships. They have to take on what the centre imposes on them, with no official mechanisms to input directly on policy or funding decisions. But they also have to connect with local people and deliver on the ground: responding to the needs (and often frustrations) of local communities they are elected to serve – without having, however, the autonomy required to achieve this in full, which only risks adding to the mismatch, particularly in times of austerity, between the needs and expectations of the public and the reality of what constrained local authorities can actually do.

In sum, the governance of levelling up is problematic because it is underpinned by a profound central-local disconnect that affects all the levels involved: from an ‘incoherent state’ and central government apparatus (Richards et al 2022a) that stubbornly seeks to retain rather than overhaul its power-hoarding nature, with negative policy and democratic consequences; to a disempowered layer of subnational governance institutions – from local government to new devolved structures – which, despite their potential, remain under the thumb of the centre; to local communities, that find themselves at the receiving end of these processes, and bearing the brunt of their negative effects in terms of service delivery and democratic engagement.

The emerging scenario is undoubtedly problematic. Indeed, there is a real risk that the complex, patchwork devolved subnational structures that have emerged over recent years could turn into *architectures without purpose* – ie institutions that *could have* transformational potential, but are, in practice, volatile, disconnected, with limited powers and subject to the whims of the centre. What is needed, as we will go on to argue, is not just the centre letting go – but the development of collaborative forums or mediating arenas where meaningful dialogue, exchanges and negotiations can take place (Ansell 2011). Indeed, such collaboration is also at the heart of the institutionalisation of ‘meaningful participation’ and working with communities.

BUILDING MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION

One of the main criticisms moved against levelling up in general, and the governance architectures that underpin it in particular, is that it fails to reconcile the ‘economic development’ dimension with the democratic one. In principle, the narrative that sees levelling up and devolution going hand in hand should address this. But, in practice, the limited nature of the decentralised model on offer through ‘devo deals’, combined with the top-down nature of centre-local relations discussed above, thwarts such ambitions (Giovannini 2018, 2021).

From this angle, many have argued that ensuring local communities believe they have a voice and are directly engaged in policy decisions that can shape the future of their localities is key (eg see Sarling 2022, *Power to Change* 2022, *Local Trust* 2022). Of course, it is hard to disagree with this principle. Too often, local communities are indeed the ‘missing link’ in the networks that shape subnational governance and its decision making processes (see forthcoming research from IPPR North and IPPR). And yet, there is a risk that, in the context of the centre-local disconnect that characterises the governance of the country, focusing on ‘empowering communities’ could become a normative assertion – based on an uncontested value judgment that pitches participatory democracy tools as a panacea for the problems of English governance, but that does not necessarily commit the resources nor construct the forms of collaboration to work with communities on the ground in a ‘world’ in which roles and responsibilities remain fragmented and disconnected between different spheres of governance.

As previously noted, the current nature of central-local relations means that *all* the levels below the centre are disempowered and considered as ‘dependent’ on Whitehall’s decisions. This applies first and foremost to local government – but also the new devolved bodies created through ‘devo deals’ have strong limitations to their leverage. In this context, ‘empowering communities’ by advocating the use of participatory methods could ultimately end up simply off-loading onto them decisions on a host of ‘wicked issues’ that, however, are beyond the reach and prerogative of communities and subnational governance bodies alone.

Thinking about how ‘meaningful participation’ can be embedded in the governance of levelling up is essential to shift the dial and reframe the agenda. This, however, requires a form of institutional design and power distribution that overcomes the current centre-local disconnect. In other words, back to Bulpitt’s point, there is a risk that the ‘ghost’ of the traditional orthodoxy continues to mask over the complexities of ‘actually addressing’ levelling up. In such circumstances, the discourse of levelling up comes to operate most effectively as an ideological narrative that promises to deliver us from the interconnected economic, environmental, social and political crises that blight many of our communities, but masks at the same time how policies push responsibility (and blame) for recovery down to those very communities – but with little reflection on the type of structural reform and institutional design that are needed across all levels of government to connect in a meaningful way local people, subnational governance bodies, and the centre.

3.

EXPERIMENT, EXPERIMENT, EXPERIMENT...

In any discussion of how to enhance community participation in local decision-making, there is a danger of ‘teaching grandma to suck eggs’. ‘What works’ in community engagement has arguably been well-known for some time. Local authorities have experimented with new forms of decision-making, from participatory budgeting, citizen assemblies and conventions through to community bonds, digital platforms, neighbourhood councils and covenants, regional commissions, multi-agency collaborative planning, and devolution down to parishes and town councils. In fact, there is something of a smorgasbord of forms and modes of participation at our disposal. Such experimentation, we suggest, has to continue, with local authorities and communities capturing good practice and spreading the lessons of their engagement across the local government community. There is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ answer to participation. Participatory initiatives need to be adapted to respond to local political, economic, and social contexts.

Of course, such experimentation should not be undertaken without certain qualifications. A cursory glance at the many ‘how to’ guides at our disposal produces a lengthy checklist of challenges: the tensions between representative and participatory democracy; the fuzzy boundaries of so-called ‘natural communities’; the potential for unrepresentative community representatives; the need for time; the management of expectations and so on. In this sense, we have to constantly remind ourselves that all participatory mechanisms are political in that they reproduce particular exclusionary and inclusionary dynamics, privileging particular ‘voices’ over others, be it the ‘expert citizen’ or the ‘everyday maker’. Participation thus relies on a strategy that brings together a bundle or package of different mechanisms and tools, one that arguably mainstreams participation and ways of working across all departments of local authorities and anchor organisations.

Importantly, there is also a need to recognise where we are starting from. Years of austerity have created something of a contradictory embracing of participation across authorities. On the one hand, cuts to services and staff have arguably weakened the capacity of local authorities to engage with, and meet the demands of, communities (Hastings and Gannon 2022). But, on the other hand, austerity has led authorities to invest in the likes of co-production and community asset transfer as a means of producing efficiencies and service innovations. But this has often meant in practice that participatory initiatives understandably become tinged by the need to save money and make efficiencies, while putting officers and councillors in difficult positions as they go out to front up cuts to services as a result of austerity.

Such tensions surface the broader issues of governance that impact on local participation, for it is difficult to deliver such initiatives without returning to the need for a redesign of centre-local relations and the culture of governance that informs how such relations are played out in practice. For as we have said above, without a broader consideration of centre-local relations, but more importantly, the culture of centre-local relations, we risk simply transferring problems onto communities without giving them the ability to address the very problems that we are hoisting onto them. Indeed, devolution, as we have argued, does not necessarily deliver participation, for what we have seen is mostly forms of delegation¹ designed to bolster or assuage central departments, at the risk of emptying or by-passing local government (Studdert 2022).

This is hardly saying anything new. Such concerns have been recognised and voiced repeatedly. Indeed, there is a broad progressive consensus that there is a need for constitutional reform to protect the role of local government, alongside new powers for local government, as well as financial reform and an end to the policy churn and political clientelism that has characterised policymaking for far too long (Pike et al 2016, Fransham et al 2022, Martin et al 2021, APSE Local Government Commission 2021). Indeed, the levelling up agenda has been designed and delivered in a top-down, incremental, opaque, and short-term manner, with little regards to the concerns of local areas and their communities. In practice, devolution remains a disconnected project, based on a patchwork of ad hoc fixes in the form of ‘deals’, that offer varying degree of power and resources to different areas, leaves too much control in the hands of the centre, and priorities economic development outcomes over democratic ones (Giovannini 2018, 2021). This leads to a dysfunctional form of power dynamics between the centre and subnational governance institutions and networks, whereby local institutions and communities are often presented as the main beneficiaries of levelling up and devolution – but, in practice, are given no voice in shaping either of these agendas.

So, what needs to be done in practice, particularly if we know the diagnosis and have some level of agreement around what a progressive agenda might look like? We argue here that the challenge for a progressive agenda of levelling up lays less around what we might call the ‘institutional hardware’ of the rules, mechanisms and operating procedures. Rather, it is the challenge of ‘institutional software’, the discourses, cultures and everyday practices that support such a progressive agenda. In short, we argue here that the effectiveness of participation and levelling up requires a new culture of governance, which draws upon but goes beyond the embedded orthodoxy of territorial governance. Again, this is not the time for binary oppositions, ‘either/or’ policy solutions which overly invest in the local over the centre or the community over government. Any solutions may well have to recognise the ‘greyness’ of pragmatism that demands that we start from ‘where we are at’ (Barnett 2020, Barnett and Chandler, forthcoming). At the heart of any such renegotiation sits, we suggest, the embracing of a logic of caring for place across all tiers and spheres of governance.

¹ We are thankful to Andy Pike for this insight.

4.

BUILDING UP THE GOVERNANCE OF LEVELLING UP

EMBRACING A LOGIC OF CARING FOR PLACE

First, a revised governance for levelling up has to embed further a culture of caring for place (Sullivan 2011, Healey 2018, APSE Local Government Commission 2021). A culture of place reconnects the economic demands of levelling up with the political, social and environmental demands of communities. Equally, it transforms the timescales that inform policymaking by taking into account the impacts of policies on this generation and future generations (APSE Local Government Commission 2021). But importantly, it recognises the geography of policies. Each and every policy has its own specific spatial impacts on the local geography of place. Failing to recognise that geography has the potential to disempower local communities and the capacity to generate alternatives (Martin et al 2021, Studdert 2022).

Caring for place, or stewardship of place, starts from the recognition that places are multiple, pluralistic, and in many ways fragmented collections of different spaces, relations, infrastructures, emotional attachments, and memories (Healey, 2018). Places are brought into being in our everyday practices: people are brought together; challenges are discussed and memories shared; and identities reproduced and transformed. In other words, multiple vectors cut across communities or places, be it influential actors and organisations, or economic, environmental, social or ideological forces (what Humphreys (2016) calls 'normative vectors'). These vectors may well come up against one another, pushing in different directions with unexpected alliances, disruptions and imbalances across different localities. As such, we should recognise the fragility of places (Connolly 2013), how periods of stability can be followed by rapid changes and unexpected developments as communities are buffeted by crisis after crisis.

PARTICIPATION AND A REINVIGORATED LOCAL GOVERNMENT MUST GO HAND IN HAND

Second, the fragility of places means recognising that effective participation rests on having a reinvigorated local government. Strong local government and healthy democratic participation go together. We have to avoid models of new municipalism that risk reproducing a variant of localism infused with an anti-statism that pitches local government against local communities (Barnet et al 2022). Local government can, we acknowledge, be overly bureaucratic, trapped in silos and unresponsive to community demands. But equally, participation can in practice produce exclusion and misinformation,

privileging the voices of the ‘good citizen’ with the time and energy to devote to democratic renewal (Metze 2022).

With this in mind, caring for place rests, we suggest, on the reinvigoration of local government. Local government has to have the capacity and capability to be a ‘nodal actor’ across local communities, delivering on community demands and bringing into decision-making multiple groups and individuals in ways that offer voices to all. This is not simply about ensuring input legitimacy, that everyone has a voice, but it is also about output legitimacy, having the powers to deliver progressive change within communities. As such, we embrace the organising principle of ‘local by default’ which assumes that services and policies should be decided and delivered locally unless it can be argued otherwise (APSE Local Government Commission 2021). Such subsidiarity should be the mainstay of a renewed culture of governance.

GETTING CONNECTORS IN PLACE

Third, we advocate further support for the work of ‘connectors’, those individuals, community organisations, faith groups, businesses and institutional spaces that can join up places and initiatives. Indeed, we privilege the power of reach, the ability of actors to ‘reach into’ different arenas, to possess the capabilities to delve into the everyday practices of different spaces and how they come together (Cochrane, 2020). For only through recognising this agency of connectors can we build sustainable and inclusive governance institutions and avoid a ‘paralysis of participation’ that gives voice to communities but fails to put in place the connective practices that actually allow engagement to be meaningful and bring together alliances and coalitions to work on concrete problems. In other words, places need to be connected up, from individuals to neighbourhoods to towns and cities through to regions and to Whitehall and Westminster.

In *Mending Democracy*, Hendriks et al (2020) refer to the vitality of such connective practices. They view them as an essential pillar of the processes of repair that address the disconnect across democratic institutions. These processes of repair are, they suggest, often everyday, small-scale, bottom-up efforts such as the sitting and talking that bring communities together (2020, p3). Such efforts sit, we suggest, alongside the role of institutional connectors that associate actors with problems and solutions, channelling them together to bring together coalitions for change. They extend beyond narrow definitions of the local, spreading at times across multiple spheres of governance. They are, as we now go on to argue, entwined with the politics of problem-solving or what Ansell (2011, p184) calls ‘problem-solving democracy’.

FOREGROUNDING THE CULTURE OF PROBLEM-SOLVING AND PUZZLING

Fourth, problem-solving complements existing models of representative democracy with renewed ways of caring for place that start with the concrete everyday problems experienced by communities and construct consent for action through engagement and collaboration (Ansell 2011, p191). Progressive change also often comes through pragmatic mutation of services, through strategies that extend the life of past activities or deliver new combinations of existing assets (Barnett et al 2022). Such practices underscore the work of ‘innovative puzzlers’, who identify and target the inconsistencies between traditional ways of working, the council stated aims, and the service-delivery outcomes

within communities (see Barnett et al 2022, Spinosa, Flores and Dreyfus 1997, pp22-9). As such, new dialogues emerge with new voices, for as Ansell (2011, p191) rightly points out, ‘problem-solving democracy builds consent with smaller publics focused on specific problems.’ But such practices require room to experiment, as well as permission to fail cultures that open up the potential for innovation. In other words, puzzling about problems brings people together to challenge taken-for-granted ways of working, and to imagine new visions.

CENTRE-LOCAL RELATIONS THAT ARE ABOUT LEARNING

Fifth, caring for place and problem-solving rests on putting in place the capacity for learning and for communication across the whole system of government. But while the power-hoarding nature of Westminster is certainly part and parcel of the problem, the answer to the governance of levelling up is not simply the centre letting go. It is time to re-think how we might understand the default operations of Westminster towards centralised policy responses. Rather than being interpreted as a sign of the strength of local government, what if we saw such responses as a sign of the weakness of central government and an over-reliance on blunt top-down ‘instruments of control’? From a perspective, the ‘urge to control’ betrays a weakness, or indeed the centre’s inability, to act as a strategic ‘steward of place’ and coordinate the complex challenge of delivering a clear policy strategy that can address regional inequalities in a sustainable way. Its foregrounds the failings of a paternalistic approach, that tends to treat local governance bodies as ‘children’ (Barnett, Giovannini and Griggs 2021) while wrongly assuming that, in developing reforms, Whitehall officials are connected with and know the needs and assets of the local places they seek to impose policy decisions on – which, of course, is rarely the case (APSE Local Government Commission 2021).

In fact, re-interpreting default centralisation as a sign of the weakness of the centre demands a redesign of centre-local relations that recognises the patterns of independence that cut across multiple spheres of governance. Working hand-in-hand with the ethos of problem-solving, it invokes the need for a new form of hierarchy, one which frees up the centre from giving detailed operational control and re-orientates it towards communication and collaboration around concrete challenges. Such a reorientation around problem-solving and interdependence delivers a centre that engages in closer and more consistent engagement with the different tiers of government, not through the currency of lofty planning and blunt instruments but through that of dialogue and communication and shared responsibilities in ways that have the potential to overcome the disconnect across central government and between centre and local (Ansell 2011, p191). In other words, central government has to be seen as part of levelling up in localities, no longer sitting above or apart from localities (Allen and Cochrane 2007). Indeed, such readings would embed the strategic role of the centre, deliver ‘feedback loops’, and give new autonomy to local government and provide long-term commitment and stability over short-term politics and instability (Studdert 2022, Ansell 2011). As such, levelling up is not about decentralisation or centralisation, it is about both at the same time.

5.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have challenged the traditional orthodoxy of territorial government in the UK and indeed elsewhere. We have underlined the limits of the governance of levelling up, foregrounding the risk of delivering an institutional architecture without purpose and pushing down responsibilities onto communities. But while the diagnosis is clear, and the broad pillars of reform are shared, it remains difficult to define what a coherent programme of reform able to deliver change at the scale required should look like (Giovannini 2021, Tomaney and Pike 2020). Eschewing the binary oppositions associated with that the politics of the centre and the local, we hope to have contributed to a progressive agenda for a transformation of the predominant culture of governance that shapes local government. We call for further experimentation with participatory democracy in ways that seek to give meaning to a logic of caring for place and stewardship, emboldened with a re-invigorated local government that facilitates the work of connectors, addresses concrete problem-solving and delivers new forms of collaborative governance and communications between the central and local institutions.

Such proposals, as we have previously acknowledged, are arguably not new; they have been said before and will no doubt be said again. Our fear is that moving forward, the levelling up agenda continues to attract support but does so in part due to its lack of policy substance and ability to speak to multiple audiences. In many ways, it is this conundrum that is both simultaneously a strength and weakness of levelling up. It has become a 'saturated concept': a sort of catch-all phrase that seeks to address myriad concerns in which almost everyone agrees, but with no quick or easy 'fix' (Tomaney and Pike 2020). In fact, the 'fuzziness' of the concept has been deliberately deployed for political/electoral reasons (Giovannini 2021, 2022). As a result, levelling up has been presented – at least until recently – by the Conservative government as the only game in town: a panacea to a vast array of pressing 'wicked issues', and therefore the solution to none. Perhaps it is time to think through more carefully what we understand as levelling up, and what cultures of governance it demands. If not now, when?

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This paper was first published in December 2022. © IPPR 2022

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