

By email

The Rt Hon Michael Gove MP
Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing
& Communities
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Paula Hewitt
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13th October 2021

Dear Mr Gove

Re: Levelling up locally

I write on behalf of the members of ADEPT, the professional body that represents 'directors of place' from county, combined and unitary councils across England along with directors of LEPs, corporate partners drawn from the private sector, and our sister associations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

We were delighted to see that levelling up was at the heart of the speeches that you and the Prime Minister gave at the Conservative Party Conference this month and look forward to the forthcoming white paper. As executive officers within local councils, we are committed to the four objectives that you have set out. Levelling up is all about place; it is not about north vs south or urban vs rural. To achieve levelling up at a place level requires a whole range of interdependent economic, social and environmental services to work together. Our role as place directors is to help our places to 'self-level', to join things up and to support our council leaders in making things happen and improving opportunities for our local communities and businesses.

Councils have demonstrated throughout the Covid pandemic that when they are trusted by government, they deliver. We know that senior civil servants across those Whitehall departments we regularly work with, think this too. Perhaps as a consequence I think there is a real buzz around local leadership. People are inspired by the opportunities to take a bottom-up approach to tackling the ingrained problems and new challenges facing the UK. Place directors have varied professional backgrounds, which brings diversity of thought and approach to the debate.

As place directors, we can help our local leaders and you to achieve some quick wins whilst other, longer-term objectives are put in place. We can have those practical conversations with you and your civil servants as we know what the issues are locally and we join up the infrastructure, housing, economic, environmental strategies, programmes and funds that create sustainable places. Some initial ideas are set out in the briefing note attached. The breadth of the ADEPT portfolio means that

we can help join up across Whitehall as we have good relationships with the key spending departments (Defra, DfT, BEIS, DCMS as well as DULHC). In addition, we have good relations with our sister associations representing public health, adult social services and children's services and the Local Government Association.

With the right support from government, councils can mobilise communities and businesses to help deliver levelling up. I would welcome the opportunity to meet with you, and your officials, to discuss what we are already doing across our local places, what more we can achieve, and how we can support you and our local council leaders in achieving the levelling up agenda across the country.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Paula R. Hewitt".

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Association of Directors of
Environment, Economy, Planning & Transport

Levelling Up Locally – what ADEPT can offer

October 2021

"For too many people geography turns out to be destiny."
(Prime Minister's speech in Coventry, 15th July 2021)

Levelling up is an ambitious programme of government action to tackle complex and deep-seated problems – an unbalanced economy, unequal opportunities, wasted talent, insecurity and falling living standards for many, heightened health and social inequalities due to the pandemic, growing loss of biodiversity and the impacts of climate change. These imbalances are experienced in the places where people live, they are found within our regions as well as between them, and increasingly between generations as well. We need now to work harder to tackle these inequalities so that everyone everywhere feels the benefits of recovery – with the biggest gains for the poorest groups and places – and that we build back better across the whole of the UK.

As the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities said at the Conservative Party Conference recently:

"We want to strengthen local leadership to drive real change. We will raise living standards especially where they are lower. We will improve public services especially where they are weaker. And we will give people the resources necessary to enhance the pride they feel in the place they live."
(Michael Gove speech, Manchester, 4th October 2021)

1. Strengthening local leadership – empowering leaders and communities

As with the government's ambitions on climate change and improving the environment, local government has an essential role to play in delivering the levelling up agenda. Levelling up will be done on the ground in real places – it needs to be locally led and bottom up.

"Local leaders now need to be given the tools to make things happen for their communities and to do that we must now take a more flexible approach to devolution in England."
(Prime Minister's speech in Coventry, 15th July 2021)

It is our job as place directors to work with local political leaders and help them to implement their visions for the places they represent. Our members have experience of working with Leaders in unitary and county councils, and with elected Mayors in combined authorities. Levelling up doesn't happen automatically, places don't 'self-level', there are local challenges that need to be managed, and place directors are uniquely placed to support elected local leaders to do this.

2. Raising living standards – particularly in poorer places

As we look towards the UK Shared Prosperity Fund next year, government has recognised the need for a new approach to supporting local economic growth and to review the future role of Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) to ensure that businesses are represented. Recovering from the pandemic and building back better means investing in place – skills and training, supporting people into work, and business support. We are committed to improving local and regional infrastructure to help regenerate our town centres and high streets, upgrade local transport and digital infrastructure, and improve natural, heritage and cultural assets.

ADEPT established an Economic Recovery and Renewal Task Force last year with members drawn from local authorities, LEPs, central government and our commercial partners. This work showed that the pandemic had affected local economies differently, reflecting their sector, business and workforce composition. We have the evidence base to support local recovery and renewal strategies that reflect the reality of places. We must build back clean, green and inclusive, creating skills and jobs to build resilience against future shocks whilst delivering benefits for the environment, health and wellbeing. Investment must be consistent and sustained to encourage markets and supply chains to develop sustainably.

3. Improving public services and spreading opportunity

As place directors, we are in a unique position to help improve and level up public services. Our place-based services are universal – roads, parking, waste & recycling, litter, planning – and important to communities, businesses and voters. We also design and deliver the long-term strategies, policies and programmes that ensure vibrant, sustainable places.

Place directors provide services and shape places in ways that support people and communities and reduce the demand for people services. Examples include waste collection staff in Somerset being trained to recognise and help residents with dementia; innovative adaptation of a typical house by the South Gloucestershire housing team and local housing association to demonstrate how disability, frailty and age is no barrier to independent living; and Nottinghamshire's Independent Travel Training Scheme for students with learning difficulties.

4. Restoring local pride – regenerating urban centres and local environments

Throughout the pandemic councils have been busy reshaping their local places to keep people safe and to enable them to feel confident about going to work, school and shopping in their local areas. People have spent more time locally and had a greater focus on neighbourhoods and community networks. All of this provides a firm base for renewing local businesses and restoring local pride.

For ADEPT, levelling up is three dimensional – economic, social and environmental – and these play out in a place-based context. Levelling up means raising outcomes across all three dimensions, particularly for those currently most disadvantaged, to give greater equality within and between places. It's not just about more and better jobs, improved educational attainment, less crime, reduced health inequalities – vital though these are – but also access to green space and countryside, protecting and improving nature, working towards net zero, and adapting to the existing local impacts of climate change.

“The growing loss of biodiversity and the threat of climate change also reinforce how existing inequalities and vulnerabilities risk becoming more pronounced.”
(Michael Gove speech, Ditchley, 27th June 2020)

Environmental improvements have co-benefits for better economic and social outcomes – improving access to green space and nature in those places lacking in them improves people's physical and mental health; investing in nature-based solutions supports training and jobs.

Asks....

This requires effective collaboration between central and local government, and other local partners. Place directors are expert collaborators, locally and nationally. As the National Infrastructure Commission stated when launching its new report [Infrastructure, towns and regeneration](#) “Levelling up cannot be done from Whitehall. Every English town faces a different set of challenges and opportunities and local leaders are best placed to develop strategies to address these.”

Devolution must be matched with greater funding freedoms and flexibility. It requires integrated, long-term funding streams: **the multiple funding streams that exist today tend to be short term, ringfenced and often require rounds of competitive bidding. Government needs to simplify these funding streams and provide strategic local authorities with devolved multi-year budgets for local transport and other local infrastructure.**

“Competitive bidding can increase the magnetic attraction of the “have” over the “have-not” places, the opposite of levelling up. These centrally-allocated pots often also fail to provide the long-term committed finance necessary to deliver long-lasting social infrastructure projects.”
(Andy Haldane speech, Local Trust, 6th July 2021)

....and offers

To start a conversation that will bring place directors, LEPs and our corporate partners, who are drawn from the private sector, to the table. That will include our partner associations in the devolved administrations enabling us to offer a UK-wide approach.

To work with Whitehall officials to design a basket of metrics to measure the success of levelling up. For ADEPT, there must be a balanced set of measures covering all three dimensions of levelling up - economic, social and environmental. These would include rising incomes, higher skills, raised educational outcomes, better transport and digital connectivity, and visible improvements in local places.

To work with our colleagues in adults, children's and public health services to get levelling up embedded in everything that a local authority does in providing services, collaborating with local partners (including businesses and communities), and providing local leadership. The preventative role of place has a critical role in enabling levelling up across many policy areas/many diverse government agendas.

To join it up locally – councils will do levelling up as part of a package with climate actions, recovery from the pandemic, delivering the forthcoming Environment Act, and in due course managing the reformed planning system.