

PACE

The Policy Think Tank



Turning up the volume – A blueprint for Levelling Up?

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Turning the volume - A blueprint for Levelling Up?

Since the general election of late 2019, levelling up has permeated the language of politics and the media, with particular focus on the post-industrial regions and the so-called Red Wall seats. It is no accident that as part of this process Teesside and the wider Tees Valley has moved firmly into the political spotlight. As the UK 2070 Commission publishes findings from its [Teesside Taskforce](#), which called for a reframing of the Tees Valley narrative, it seems timely to reflect not on what levelling up *is assumed to be*, but what it *needs to be*.

The Taskforce's report could not be more well-timed. The long-term socio-economic challenges of the Tees Valley (low levels of employment, low skilled labour markets, low productivity, poor educational outcomes, high levels of deprivation and poor access to opportunities alongside poor health) have been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic and, as suggested in an earlier report from the regional observatory [PACE](#), necessitates "careful analysis and locally designed policy"¹. Representing a culmination of work undertaken over the past year with the Mayoral Authority, Teesside University and industrial partners, the Taskforce report highlights that the scale of work to close gaps in economic, social and environmental improvement is vast: put more simply, the need to level up is urgent. The report points to increasing productivity and employment by 10%, doubling the rate of innovation and 'lifting an estimated 35,000 people to Degree or Level 4 qualifications just to match the UK average'. On a more emotional level, the need to boost civic pride is a key priority.

Precisely what the government means by levelling up continues to be debated. Looking beyond the rhetoric and high-level statements, it may be distilled into a fundamental point – levelling up is first and foremost about maximising the potential of a region. With this in mind, it seems reasonable to suggest that levelling up will mean something different to each region; there is no one size fits all. What is universal is the understanding that, to succeed, levelling up must be grounded in the region, building on the potential and ambition of an area to develop evidence-based solutions capable of addressing specific social and economic challenges.

¹ [Post-Covid recovery – what now for regional growth](#)

To support the UK 2070 Commission, Teesside University conducted focus groups with young people and education professionals, gathering in-depth qualitative information on their lived experiences in the Tees Valley. As expected, the professionals placed education at the heart of levelling up, emphasising the importance of change being transformative and sustainable, whilst highlighting the inadequacy of quick fix policies that fail to hold the interest of communities and policy makers alike. The young people's group was more surprising and ultimately enlightening. For them, education is clearly at the heart of raising ambitions and aspirations. Further, investing in people and communities is key to encouraging them in turn to invest and take pride in their area. Improving the environment in which young people live and creating sustainable opportunities are vital. These findings foregrounded the importance of gathering insights from younger generations, an issue immediately recognised by the Taskforce and consequently included in the recommendations.

The Taskforce makes a number of recommendations based on evidence collected over the past year. As an anchor institution embedded in the Tees Valley, Teesside University is committed to transforming lives and economies. We act as a catalyst for change through impactful research, high quality partnerships and delivery of outstanding learning opportunities. Teesside University's Corporate Strategy positions us favourably to deliver actions and ambitions identified by the taskforce, for example:

- Accelerating the Tees Valley as a Global Centre of Excellence
- Developing the Future Skills of the Workforce
- Engaging with Communities

We cannot and will not achieve this in isolation. Rather, we will work closely with industry, education and government partners across the region to accelerate the ambitions of our strategy and curate a shared narrative for the Tees Valley.

Creating a sense of shared vision and collaboration is perhaps the most important recommendation to come out of the Taskforce. Levelling up is so difficult to define for the very reason that it cuts across so many policy areas (infrastructure, skills, research, innovation, new ways of thinking and more). Focusing on one area in isolation will not deliver the outcomes required. In the same way that regional stakeholders need to work together, government departments need to work together to realise this bold and complex ambition.

The Tees Valley has a rich heritage of collaborative working with communities and organisations renowned for their tenacity and ambition. There is a growing feeling that, through commitment and collaboration, the Tees Valley can, as the Taskforce says, 'shift the dial'. We strongly concur that it is time to turn up the volume and drown out the cynics.

At the moment, there is a real energy in the region, energy that comes from a feeling that Teesside is on the cusp of something big, a once in a lifetime opportunity. The Tees Valley is a true powerhouse with huge potential - not only to rebuild itself, but to help the UK build back better.

The Taskforce's report is aptly titled *Setting the Foundations* and gives the region a strong blueprint for levelling up the Tees Valley. With the Levelling Up White Paper imminent, speculation continues as to what the priorities of central government will be. Reflecting on the work of the Taskforce, partnerships and sustainability must be at the heart of levelling up alongside transformative change. Building on the foundations set by the Taskforce we can level up our communities, create jobs and opportunities and ultimately transform Teesside for people in the Tees Valley now and in the future.