

National Planning Forum – The Role of Planning Making Levelling Up a Reality and the Likely Challenges – Sam Spencer

As the first speaker, it may be remiss of me to dive in without first addressing some of the themes of levelling up. In the Prime Minister's July Speech on Levelling up, the theme was very much focused on growth and growing together laying out a desire to bridge the gap at the regional and intra-regional level. Improving the productivity of *ALL* cities, not just London was mentioned as something that may likely re-appear as a bench mark to gauge success in the future. The fact that life expectancies may vary significantly across the country and that access to healthcare or exercise facilities may be limited for some areas was also mentioned to underscore that the levelling up agenda seeks to cover a lot of ground. Of course, we'll see something more concrete in the coming months when the White Paper is released, but for now, there is value in discussing the potential and limits for the role of planning in this agenda. No, we can't claim that planning will directly solve every single malady or that it will single handily address major social and economic inequalities, but it is a perfect place to start, especially when the Prime Minister's speech mentions so many ambitions for infrastructure and increased opportunities for sub-national governments to have greater influence.

I'd like to mention a piece of work that RTPI published back in 2019 as something of a prelude to this discussion as it came out in the early days of the levelling up conversation. *Ambitions for the North*—as the title may suggest—sets out a series of ambitions that seek to establish a spatial framework for a pan-Northern economic transformation. I will just quickly point out that while this report does seek to address inequalities between the North and the rest of England, it also recognizes the need to address an urban rural divide within the North. The principles guiding this spatial framework highlight the role of planning and can be summarized in a few key statements which I'll highlight here. First, "Spatial planning should

be aligned with strategic investment in infrastructure and economic development” Second, “The planning system should create the conditions which we can create better, more attractive places”. And finally, “The planning system should support and enhance the North’s cultural identity, protect and enhance its environment, and increase its ability to confidently adapt to change”. While the research paper engaged with Northern stakeholders, these guiding principles remain relevant to the greater discussion of what planning can potentially accomplish for the levelling up agenda.

Now that we’ve introduced the Role of planning in the context of levelling up, I’ll go deeper into some of these themes. The first of which I’ll discuss is Transportation and Travel.

Referring back to the Prime Minister’s July speech, he suggests that the public transport systems in major city regions are holding them back before mentioning the 4.2 billion pounds in additional funding for the 8 English city regions to improve local transport networks.

While the idea of a London-style transport network for any major city is exciting and goes a long way, but access to jobs and amenities must not be limited to major urban areas. There is already some enthusiasm to promote transport access to the most car-dependant areas, but perhaps levelling up will provide a boost to these efforts. In any case, planning has the potential to have a great amount of influence on transport linkages to promote equitable access.

Now, the levelling up conversation hasn’t been all that heavy on the role of decarbonization, but if we are looking at changing existing transport infrastructure to meet Net Zero goals it is essential that planners consider the potential outcomes and work proactively. In Transport for the North’s Draft Decarbonisation Strategy they address the ambiguities of the future by coming up with 4 different models for behaviour. Two of these imagine a future where the urban morphology of the North is denser, the cities see the lions share of new development and growth and this of course has a very significant impact on the demand for transport,

enabling TfN to meet its ambitious goals. The impact of the pandemic might be influencing trends in the other direction, with greater demand for space drawing people to rural communities and increasing our dependence on private vehicles (petrol or electric). This presents a challenge to ensure that rural communities (Northern or Southern) aren't left behind by a propensity to invest where CO2 reductions can be most easily attained. This could mean planning for electric charging stations in remote areas or greater regional coordination in expanding public transport. Achieving Net Zero should be an opportunity for the planning system to ensure that the benefits are shared equitably.

Related to transport and Travel there is a need to focus on how we can improve the quality of existing places. A lot of this comes a very local level, through neighbourhood planning and regeneration efforts. The RTPI also sees a greater role for national and local design codes which we believe can improve the quality and sustainability of new developments. I mention that with the caveat that these shouldn't be too prescriptive. For new development we're pleased to see an interest in 15 minute cities or 20 minute neighbourhoods where the aim to keep neighbourhoods walkable and have most amenities nearby. Now, this may not be possible for all areas, but its worth mentioning as we see some migration from urban areas to smaller communities. In our 2020 paper Invest and Prosper, we outline a business case for why we should invest in planning. One aspect of that is examining the value that improved access to greenspace has for long-term health outcomes which we note can yield significant savings for the NHS in the long run. And finally, I'll note the importance of climate justice in spatial planning. The idea of climate justice revolves around the idea that there are inherent inequalities in the responsibilities and impacts of climate change. Addressing the impacts of climate change in the plan making process will be essential in ensuring that climate risks are mitigated equitably.

On the economic front, one focal point for the economic vitality of local places is the state of the local high street. Covid-19 hasn't helped, but there has been a growing trend towards online retail or out of town developments. There is absolutely the potential for regeneration in some areas, especially if we focus on what makes a high-streets unique, though the RTPI is cautious about the use of permitted development rights to convert high streets to residential. In our location of development research we explore the relationship between new development and amenities and job clusters which will become increasingly important for planning, especially as the government looks to have 300,000 new homes per year. Planning has role of ensuring that we get the location of new development right for both the benefit of local services and wider employment opportunities. Planning can also play a proactive role as an attractor to engage with certain industries by creating or identifying the social and physical infrastructure or increasing connectivity to generate new investment. The distributor approach looks at this growth can be balanced fairly across a local economy rather than aggregating the best employment opportunities within one city. Planning can play a significant role in outlining and harnessing economic potential while levelling up.

Now, for the last few slides I probably could have come up with a few different ways of grouping these outcomes, but that just reiterates the point that planning reaches many aspects of our lives. Making these connections and outlining a plan to achieve them is a key first step in achieving the levelling up agenda. And yes, I'm probably preaching to the choir a bit in discussing what the planning system can yield, so I'll turn your attention now to looking towards a few additional opportunities to tie together some of what I've discussed and what else might help make levelling up a reality.

In the RTPI's response to the Government's planning white paper last Autumn, we proposed the concept of 'Green Growth Boards'. The idea of Green Growth Boards is that they would contain members from each council and sit across local authority boundaries, steer the Local

Plan, and ensure alignment with other key strategies like economic growth, transport, climate and health. This could also serve to provide the housing figures required for each local authority in a fair and transparent way. However, one key challenge in making Green Growth Boards successful is the need for some sort of incentive for all relevant stakeholders to participate which could for example come in the way of access to infrastructure funding. Finally, and leading into the next proposal, we believe that GGBs could be chaired by a 'Chief Place maker/ or Chief Planning Officer.

The idea of having a chief planning officer is something we have dedicated not one, but two reports on. The first of which notes that only 23% of local authorities surveyed in the UK and Ireland had a head of planning service and the second report lays out the case for why we need greater corporate presence of planners. Corporate management teams provide leadership, vision, and priority setting for places by shaping the strategic operational direction and investment decisions of local authorities. Additionally, at this level of decision making, planning can help deliver major cost savings for local authorities by understanding the spatial implications of decisions made in other departments and through upstream preventative interventions associated with place-making. Local authority decision making is inherently political and by engaging with this we can ensure that a fair case for planning is made.

The final opportunity that I'd like to discuss doesn't sound all that novel, but it is essential in determining the reality of what has been delivered. Currently it can be difficult to measure the success of planning because much of the existing metrics surrounding planning outcomes are focused on decision times and the volume of applications. While these are important, it can be difficult to gauge the success of levelling up initiatives by these alone. Our Measuring Planning Outcomes report from 2020, provides a toolkit and framework for monitoring progress towards broader objectives which in the case of the Irish, Welsh and Scottish pilot studies were based off of United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. The idea is to

move from looking at short-term outputs (including current planning metrics), to outcomes (for example the conversion of planning consents to development), and finally to impact (how those new developments have conformed to the best practices in urban design and how does this impact the goals outlined?). The benefits of this include improved tracking of progress, improved decision making, and raising the aspiration towards delivering better planning outcomes against strategies, plans, or other policy goals.

Taken together, we believe that these proposals and what planning already has to offer in its ability to make levelling up a reality shows a lot of promise. In going through these points, I've tried to pre-empt some potential challenges that we're likely to face, but I'll conclude by discussing some of the big ones that I've yet to discuss directly.

Perhaps one of the biggest challenges that planning faces is simply that of resourcing. This is not a new issue by any means, but it is one that very much needs addressing, especially if we are going to be asking planning to take a more proactive role. From the 2009/2010 fiscal year local authorities net spending on planning was 686 million pounds while in 2019-20 net spending was only 455 million. Adjusted for inflation the subsidy for development management has fallen by 255 million and the subsidy for planning policy by 72 million pounds in the same timeframe. This has changed the dynamics of planning departments and led to a significant decrease in the proportion of resources allocated to policy which has an impact on plan making. The government's planning reform as outlined in the whitepaper places a large focus on plan making and it not unreasonable to expand the planning capacity of local authorities to support increased demands in the levelling up agenda. In the RTPI's comprehensive spending review submission we're asking for £500 million which we believe will help local authorities be in a substantially better position to help make levelling up a reality. A final note on the challenge of resourcing is that this problem is felt more in some regions than others. If we examine the per-capita amount spent by region we see some

significant disparities. Hopefully I've outlined enough of an argument to support the idea that planning has the potential to make a very profound impact towards this agenda and as a starting point it would go a long way if the gap in resourcing between regions could be adequately bridged.

Finally, if levelling up is going to have the scope and scale that it has been touted with it is worth examining the role of good governance in bringing together so many stakeholders.

Devolution brings the promise of local leaders who are directly accountable to a population and the ability to make direct deals with the government opens many doors. However, one area we will be watching is where the boundaries fall. Should it be up to Whitehall define a devolved geography? And will some areas be left out of the process? The current deal-based system introduces some complexity and uncertainty, but this is certainly an area to watch carefully.

Lastly, the themes of levelling up suggest the need for long-term strategic planning across functional geographies and sectoral boundaries, with early and proactive engagement from a range of stakeholders. Current arrangements for strategic planning are delivering positive results within a flawed and complex system, which excludes parts of the country. In many areas (whether statutory or non-statutory strategic planning is being managed), the support from county councils is being provided for free and where they have the expertise. This unfortunately again comes back to a resourcing problem.

I probably should have re-arranged my slides to avoid ending on the challenges that planning faces to make levelling up a reality, but there will always be obstacles to overcome. A lot remains to be seen about the levelling up agenda, but regardless of the form it takes, I do remain very optimistic about what planning can accomplish.