

levelling up, transport, and capabilities



I am not sure who first had the idea of writing government White Papers in the vacuous style of the *Daily Mail*, but the latest does this magnificently well. Now that the much-anticipated Levelling Up White Paper has appeared,¹ you should take a look, if you haven't already. The condescending London-centric tone and Brexit boosterism are extremely tedious, and the heavy rhetoric is rooted in little evidence whatsoever. The inspiration for 'levelling up' seems to be Renaissance Florence, as if this gives the secret ingredients for high urban quality and plenty amid social equity. There really should be more contemporary and relevant examples used, but perhaps they would not be so politically palatable—from Germany, France or the Netherlands, for example, where regional planning is much more consistently developed.

The cover of the White Paper uses the Union Jack as background, and the first line starts as you might expect: *'The United Kingdom is an unparalleled success story...'* There is a little more realism in suggesting that *'there has been no shortage of attempts to tackle geographical disparities in the UK over the past century. These have been insufficient to close the widening gaps.'* This, of course, is the difficulty, and there is little in this White Paper to suggest that levelling up is to be seen any time soon. There is much postulation and grandstanding, but little substance in the way of funding or projects. There seems to be little understanding of how difficult it is to change levels of social equity within and across different cities and regions—including how transport might be used.

The general framing of the argument is that the 'underperforming' North should aspire to be as 'successful' and 'productive' as London and the South East—with transport viewed as an important facilitator. Social equity is not defined, but is usually viewed as fair access to opportunities, livelihood, education, and resources. Hence transport should be

an important element within a levelling-up strategy. We have known that transport is important to social equity for decades, at least since the 2003 *Making the Connections* report from the Social Exclusion Unit.² But there are many empirical difficulties with this topic, including what level of equity is appropriate in different contexts (it is a relational term); and how transport can be supportive in the process is also not a straightforward question.

The White Paper states that *'levelling up requires a focused, long-term plan of action and a clear framework'*—with which we can all agree. But national and regional spatial strategies or transport strategies are not mentioned, and without them it is difficult to pursue a systematic and consistent approach. The White Paper oddly focuses on six 'capitals' as important to social equity, derived from *'evidence from a range of disciplines'* (unspecified) and experience in Renaissance Florence. These are physical capital, human capital, intangible capital (innovation), financial capital, social capital, and institutional capital. It is suggested that:

'Places with rich endowments of all six capitals benefit from a virtuous circle of agglomeration.

They are home to skilled people with high quality jobs and have access to outstanding schools and globally-competitive universities. They have good roads, trains and fast internet. Residents live in fine housing. Funding is available for local businesses to invest and innovate, and communities are bound together by good relationships and a strong sense of belonging.'

Well, there is much to discuss here, including the odd dichotomy presented of London and the South East doing well and providing the model for the poor-performing rest of the country. This conveniently overlooks the varied distribution of income, wealth and transport provision in London and the South East. Not all that live in London, or perhaps even in Florence, live in fine housing, some schools are not outstanding, many businesses may struggle for funding, and communities within these cities are not all necessarily well bound together. Good roads may not be the basis of success.

The White Paper gives a very simplistic presentation, and is cynical in its motivation—offering the marginal voters in northern constituencies a few projects to



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The tramway arrives in Droylsden—an initial step towards changing deep-seated social equity across neighbourhoods in Greater Manchester. Can this level of public transport provision be replicated in low-income communities across the UK?

suggest that they are getting more priority in public policy. Renaissance Florence, from my cursory understanding, allowed an extraordinary accumulation of wealth by merchants and bankers, with political power residing with a few families, and limited wider democracy—very few even had a vote. Perhaps this is the ideal governance framework that is admired by our current national administration?

In terms of transport, the White Paper gives us, as the third in a number of ‘missions’: ‘by 2030, local public transport connectivity across the country will be significantly closer to the standards of London, with improved services, simpler fares and integrated ticketing’. Looking beyond the tired space race ‘mission’ metaphor, this is a very lofty aim and, of course, left unspecified for measurement purposes. A public transport system akin to London’s will be very difficult to achieve in Blackpool, Doncaster, Hastings, Manchester and Plymouth, and many other places, without huge investments in very depleted urban, regional and rural transport networks.

Meanwhile, the White Paper offers little in terms of transport funding. The very short list of transport projects includes the £96 billion Integrated Rail Plan (the widely derided partial funding of the wider Northern Way proposals), £24 billion on motorways and strategic highways (oh dear!), £5.7 billion in City Region Sustainable Transport Settlements, and £5 billion for buses, cycling and walking networks. These, as we all know, are projects released previously, which represent only a marginal proportion of the funding required to improve transport systems. The Road Investment Strategy will only lead to great environmental problems (through increased traffic and carbon dioxide emissions) and social

equity problems (people will be ‘forced’ to use cars, as there are few alternatives in place, and spend high levels of household budgets on this form of travel). Add in some token funding for buses and cycling—and we really have little of substance.

In reality, very extensive investment in high-quality public transport systems (regional and suburban rail, tramways, and buses) and walking and cycling is needed across multiple urban areas and regions, representing radically upgraded transport systems. This is a fundamental task that will take consistent investment over decades and over a much wider spatial scale, far beyond the oddly chosen rhetoric and the handful of projects given.

The government needs some help here—to carefully think about what social equity might mean in different cities and regions and about what transport strategies might be useful. Social equity is multi-dimensional and the solutions are likely to be fairly complex—much more than suggested in the White Paper. A much more interesting conceptualisation would be to think about transport investment and how this might relate to activity participation, including issues of appropriation; i.e. some people take up the new accessibility on offer, and others don’t, for many reasons. Recent research on transport and social equity has drawn upon the ‘capabilities approach’³ to distinguish between the following concepts:

- **Capabilities:** The alternative combinations of doings and beings that can feasibly be achieved, i.e. the real opportunities for people to do and to be.
- **Functionings:** The various things a person may value doing and being, with the realised functionings representing what a person actually achieves and how.

In transport, this helps us to differentiate between the theoretical opportunities available to individuals (perhaps related to new infrastructure provision, and relative to what a person may value and wish to do), and what they actually do. Hence, travel and activity participation are directly related to infrastructure provision, including the availability of public transport, but are also reliant on and modified by other 'conversion factors'. These include the governance and cost of public transport, the shape of the built environment, the cultural context and social norms, individual characteristics, and wider factors. All of these will influence how well new public transport, walking and cycling facilities are used.

Let's look at just two of these issues, with particular illustrations from Greater Manchester. Bus provision is deregulated across England, Scotland and Wales, with the exception of London, as a 36-year-old experiment and paean to the supposed efficiency of the private sector. It was promised that this framework would give a much more efficient delivery of bus services. But we can all see that it leads to private operators shaping their delivery to extract maximum income relative to limited investment. It leads to a focus on profitable routes and schedules and the use of old, polluting buses, ignoring everything else that might be possible. Single operators concentrating on specific routes have actually led to higher fares.

'There is some heavy rhetoric, but few projects to actually improve public transport within and across multiple urban areas'

Greater Manchester is seeking to move away from this model and use a bus franchise system, akin to that remaining in London, to gain control of the bus system in the region. Let's hope that this is successful, as services can then be more effectively planned, using integrated schedules, and low fares can be maintained and vehicle standards improved. This framework can then be replicated across wider urban areas and regions, to help shape much more extensive, affordable and cleaner bus systems. The governance framework for public transport delivery is not mentioned in the White Paper, but it is very important for better public transport provision.

The cost of travel is also critical to individuals wishing to use new public transport projects. Let's

imagine that we live in Droylsden, to the east of Manchester, and wish to work in Manchester city centre. The cost of a single Metrolink ticket for zones 1-3 is £3.80, a day travelcard is £6.10, and an annual travelcard is £967.00. Let's say that we wish to work in Leeds—an annual Manchester–Leeds travelcard ticket is £2,744.00. All of these prices, particularly for the rail tickets, are very prohibitive and mean that even a Metrolink route, or a new rail service, are unaffordable for many. The wages on offer will not be enough to cover the travel costs.

So, instead, we may have to rely on non-existent cycle routes, or walk, or work locally in Droylsden, or not at all. Again, there is no discussion of this component of transport-related social inclusion in the White Paper, but cost is one of the important wider conversion factors that can help people to use the public transport infrastructure that might be provided.

The Levelling Up White Paper is hence unlikely to make much difference—it is another government initiative to be forgotten within a year. There is some heavy rhetoric, but few projects to actually improve public transport within and across multiple urban areas. There is little understanding of the deep-seated inequities in many areas; the role that extensive investment in public transport, walking and cycling, across multiple urban areas, can play; and the wider conversion factors that are required to improve the level of realised functioning. Let's look to cities in Germany, France or the Netherlands for better practice in transport planning—this is where the serious efforts are being made to use transport investment to improve social equity.

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The views expressed are personal.

Notes

- 1 *Levelling Up the United Kingdom*. Levelling Up White Paper. CP604. HM Government, Feb. 2022. www.gov.uk/government/publications/levelling-up-the-united-kingdom
- 2 *Making the Connections: Final Report on Transport and Social Exclusion*. Social Exclusion Unit, Feb. 2003. Available at www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/---emp_policy/---invest/documents/publication/wcms_asist_8210.pdf
- 3 See A Sen: *Development as Freedom*. Oxford University Press, 1999; and R Hickman, M Cao, B Mella Lira, A Fillone, J Biona and N Lopez: 'Understanding capabilities, functionalities and travel in high and low income neighbourhoods in Manila'. *Social Inclusion*, 2017, Vol. 5(4), 161–74. www.cogitatiopress.com/socialinclusion/article/view/1083/1083