

RED BOX | DIANA JOHNSON AND PAUL HOWELL

‘Left-behind’ communities need mending from the bottom up



Diana Johnson and Paul Howell

Delivering on the government’s promises will require a radical reimagining of the relationship between central government and Britain’s ‘left behind’ places. Often located on the periphery of towns and cities, these areas have missed out on funding and regeneration time and time again. Where funds have been forthcoming, the approach has been top-down rather than community-led.

The chancellor’s announcement of a £4 billion levelling up fund is a welcome starting point. A portion of the cross-departmental fund will target the places most in need – a “least first” approach which our colleagues in the all-party parliamentary group (APPG) for “left behind” neighbourhoods have long advocated – by prioritising areas facing particular challenges.

But these challenges run deeper than creaking physical infrastructure and poor digital connectivity. There is an urgent need to rebuild the social fabric of neighbourhoods which have seen the loss of vital community infrastructure in recent decades. We must support and empower local people to play an active role in reinvigorating the places they call home.

We lead a cross-party group of MPs who are calling on the prime minister to ensure that the 225 “left behind” neighbourhoods in England do not miss out on benefitting from the government’s ambition to level up the country. Specifically, we endorse the vision set out by the Conservative MP and APPG

member Danny Kruger in a recent report, which considered how we can best sustain and build upon the extraordinary levels of civic spirit and mutual aid that have been so vital in enabling communities to withstand the damage wrought by the pandemic.

Danny Kruger’s conclusions make compelling reading. Among his recommendations is a proposal to place the next wave of dormant assets in an independent endowment, tasked with investing over the long-term in rebuilding the foundations of local civic life in those deprived areas with the greatest levels of need and which face the biggest obstacles to a sustainable recovery. This new community wealth fund, worth £2 billion, would be underpinned by a series of fundamental principles.

First, it would provide long-term, patient funding over a ten-to-15-year period. There are no quick fixes for “left behind” neighbourhoods. Targeted investment would give local people the time and space to understand what their communities need, and develop ideas and projects that not only help them to respond to crises like Covid-19, but to thrive for decades to come.

Second, the fund would be resident-led with people empowered to decide what works best for where they live. That does not mean going it alone: communities would be actively supported in their efforts to build confidence, capacity and skills. A community wealth fund would be a collaborative endeavour focused on developing community resilience

and rooted squarely in the government’s commitment to levelling up.

Third, it would invest in the building blocks required to support people as well as places. Those living in deprived communities that lack places to meet and active local civic organisations experience significantly worse outcomes across education, health and employment than other equally deprived places, and England as a whole. This is an opportunity to improve lives and livelihoods.

It is worth pausing on that final point. While investment in housing and transport is critical, the ties that bind us are formed in local places to meet, where communities devise plans, develop ideas and deliver projects for the common good. “Left behind” neighbourhoods will fall even further behind if they are not given the tools to address weakened social infrastructure and lower levels of social capital.

As the chancellor himself admits, our approach to funding at the hyper-local level has been complex and ineffective for too long. A community wealth fund would shift the dial by trusting individuals and communities, and giving them the resources they need to achieve sustainable and lasting change. Now is the time to make a once-in-a-generation commitment to having pride in our places.

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