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wider windows on wolverhampton

Peter Jones considers the role of brownfield development within the focus on levelling up regional economic inequalities

As the train from Stafford approaches Wolverhampton, two signs catch the observant traveller's eye. Out of the left-hand windows a sign heralds the National Brownfield Institute, while out of the opposite windows the sign on the new offices of the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, billed as the first new government headquarters outside London, is clearly visible. In some ways, this bilateral juxtaposition of signs evokes a seemingly new political spirit of economic and social regeneration—the National Brownfield Institute is under development, and the long-awaited Levelling Up White Paper was published in February 2022. This short article outlines, and reflects on, brownfield development and the concept of levelling up.

Brownfield land and the National Brownfield Institute

The National Planning Policy Framework refers to brownfield land as 'previously developed land', and defines it as 'land which is or was occupied by a permanent structure, including the curtilage of the developed land [...] and any associated fixed surface infrastructure'.¹ This definition excludes land that is, or was last, occupied by agricultural or forestry buildings, land that has been developed for mineral extraction or waste disposal, residential gardens, parks, recreation grounds and allotments in built-up areas, and land that was previously developed but where the remains of a permanent structure or fixed surface structure have blended into the landscape.

While all local authorities are required to publish an updated list of brownfield land under their jurisdiction annually, the occurrence, accuracy and frequency of publication varies considerably, and there is no definitive measure of the amount of brownfield land in England. Recent estimates of the extent of brownfield land vary. The National Housing

Federation, for example, has reported that in 2018 there were some 18,000 brownfield sites across England covering 25,000 hectares of land,² while Sustainable Build has suggested that there are currently some 66,000 hectares of brownfield sites in England.³ Geographically, brownfield land is found throughout England, but the main concentrations are in London and in the South East, North West, West Midlands and Yorkshire and Humberside regions, and the vast majority of brownfield sites are in urban, rather than rural areas.

The National Brownfield Institute is to be housed at the University of Wolverhampton's new Springfield Campus. Its vision is to 'create a world-class brownfield regeneration industry cluster through multi-sector partnership'.⁴ More specifically, the Institute's goal is to 'realise the city's vision of becoming an International Centre of Excellence in brownfield regeneration, sustainable construction and circular economy', by 'securing the city's position at the forefront of construction and brownfield development nationally and internationally', by 'bringing new skills, innovative technologies and new policies for remediation and regeneration of brownfield sites', and by 'contributing to the 'levelling up' and green growth agendas'.⁴

Levelling up

The ambition to 'level up'—i.e. to address and remediate significant local and regional inequalities without a consequent detriment to outcomes in prosperous places—was one of the pledges in the Conservative Party's manifesto for the 2019 general election. Since then, the term seems to have passed into popular usage and has been taken up enthusiastically by the Prime Minister, but the ideas behind it are not new. Newman,⁵ for example, has suggested that reference to levelling up has appeared intermittently in parliamentary records since the 19th century, particularly about the relative

positions of the Anglican and Catholic churches in Ireland, and that in the 20th century the term was used in relation to equality in government funding—and that, under the so-called New Labour government, levelling up was primarily used to refer to social policy, and more particularly to school funding.

After the current Conservative government was elected in 2019, levelling up became a more central political commitment to tackle regional inequalities in regional productivity, with a focus on transport, broadband, and research and development investment.

However, there is little detailed consensus about what levelling up means, and McCann and Ortega-Argiles⁶ claim that 'levelling up narratives are inherently mutually contradictory'. Tomaney and Pike,⁷ arguing that the current debate about levelling up primarily concerns how the Conservative government might consolidate its electoral gains in Wales, the Midlands and the North of England, go so far as to claim that nobody really knows what is meant by the term.

Jennings *et al.*⁸ argue that levelling up 'is not primarily concerned with redistribution between social classes, or even between regions, but rather targets communities that feel they have lost their centrality and standing'. Newman⁹ claims that 'levelling up is a vision of a post-Brexit Britain in which there will be greater state investment, educational opportunity, regional equality, and regional independence'. King and Ives,¹⁰ writing out of the Centre for Policy Studies, suggest that levelling up puts 'the emphasis on the devolution of power, so that local government can play a more active role in the local economy, and on a private sector which is incentivised to invest and operate in those areas which need it most'.

At a more practical level, for some commentators levelling up implies investment in education, training

and apprenticeships, and support for small businesses and enterprise; for others it involves more local decision-making and giving areas more control over investment; for others it involves a wide-ranging approach to harnessing both the public and private sectors to create sustained progress for communities; and yet others have described it in terms of the old chestnut of providing a level playing field for the UK's regions.

Despite this apparent uncertainty, in September 2021 the government announced that the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government was to become the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities 'as the government delivers on its central mission to level up every part of the UK'.¹¹ At the same time the government announced the establishment of a Levelling Up Taskforce, 'to deliver a programme of tangible improvements in every part of the UK'. In the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities' second headquarters in Wolverhampton, there will, for the first time, be a regular Ministerial presence outside London.¹² The *Levelling Up the United Kingdom White Paper*, published in February 2022, says that levelling up 'means giving everyone the opportunity to flourish. It means people everywhere living longer and more fulfilling lives, and benefitting from sustained rises in living standards and well-being'.¹³

Reflections

The extent to which brownfield land will continue to contribute to social and economic regeneration, and how levelling-up policies will be played out, remain very much to be seen, but a number of issues merit attention.

For some commentators, brownfield land should have an important role in the levelling-up process.



Carl Beech on Unsplash

While brownfield land is widely seen as having a major role to play in regeneration and levelling up, much of the nation's remaining brownfield sites require significant levels of remediation and decontamination

In arguing that ‘brownfield development is vital to levelling up’, the Environmental Industries Commission,¹⁴ for example, has argued that ‘increasing brownfield development holds the key to levelling up. It will unlock the land needed to meet the housing crisis, make regional economies more productive, boost local construction firms, and help create more attractive environments for communities to enjoy and businesses to locate in.’

It also claimed that brownfield development can provide the land needed for increased housebuilding, for closing regional productivity gaps, for boosting the regional construction sector, and for enabling place-making. On the latter, for example, the Environmental Industries Commission suggested that increasing the proportion of brownfield development can increase community wellbeing, protect the Green Belt, and reduce air pollution.

In a similar vein, the CPRE—The Countryside Charity¹⁵ has suggested that ‘our plentiful supply of brownfield land [...] is an opportunity to develop the homes we need, where we need them, without destroying green fields. Harnessing this resource for housing development means that our precious countryside and green spaces can continue to provide crucial services for nature and the climate, as well as for people’s health and wellbeing.’

However, Fothergill and Gore¹⁶ have argued that in the North of England ‘developing brownfield land [...] is rarely commercially viable’, and McGuinness *et al.*¹⁷ have suggested that, following the development of many of the brownfield sites first identified as suitable for development between 1997 and 2007 (‘the lowest hanging fruit’), the ‘remaining brownfield sites often have more intractable problems, such as contamination, that require de-risking or are not of a scale to be attractive to volume housebuilders’.

In a similar vein, Fothergill and Gore¹⁶ suggested that ‘the problem is negative land values—the cost of cleaning up and site preparation exceeds the value of the completed development-ready site. In these circumstances the private sector fails to bring the site to market.’ They note that public sector funding was required to make it worthwhile for the private sector to invest in brownfield sites. In November 2021, under the levelling-up banner, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities¹⁸ reported the allocation of some £60 million from the Brownfield Land Release Fund to support new housing development and new roads and infrastructure across over 60 local authority areas.

However, CPRE—The Countryside Charity¹⁵ argued that despite the government funding available for brownfield redevelopment, particularly in terms of contributing to levelling up, planning policy lacked a ‘truly ‘brownfield first’ approach’, which effectively meant that ‘much of our green spaces and countryside are built on before brownfield land is considered’.

More specifically, while it welcomed the new government brownfield development funding, it emphasised the importance of ensuring that the funding is properly directed to make a genuine contribution to levelling up, arguing that ‘the crucial next steps for the effective levelling up of housing on brownfield land in the midlands and north will require the translation of this political will into actions and national planning policies [...] This will mean overcoming the challenges and barriers which have restricted the development of brownfield land in the past, allowing for a comprehensive brownfield first policy which harnesses this regenerating resource and can be relied on as an aid in levelling-up.’

Concerns have also been expressed about how the relationship between levelling up and planning will develop. A report by an independent group of planning researchers, practitioners and academics¹⁹ has suggested that ‘given that the Levelling Up agenda is now enthroned in the core rhetoric, if not the practice, of almost all government departments, it is both tactically and strategically important that the relationship between planning and Levelling Up is understood’. The authors argue that while ‘good planning is important for the Levelling Up agenda (if taken seriously), because good planning is needed everywhere in England, at all levels’, planning also matters in two additional ways in those places and areas most in need of improvement:

- first, because of planning’s capacity ‘to integrate across key agenda fields: well-being via incomes and good housing, addressing environmental issues, linking diagonally so that improvement works up and down from neighbourhoods through to regions’; and
- secondly, because of the need for ‘the capacity for planning to operate democratically, returning control to councils working with communities’.

Finally, there is the wider question of levelling up and sustainable development. One of the most consistent messages in all the government’s statements about levelling up is that it does not imply the ‘levelling down’ of some areas—rather, it is most enthusiastically expressed in terms of driving growth throughout the country, epitomised, for example, in the Government’s *Planning for Sustainable Growth in the Oxford-Cambridge Arc* policy paper.²⁰

Setting aside concerns that promoting growth in what many might regard as one of the more prosperous and economically successful parts of the country might only serve to exacerbate regional inequalities, there are arguments not only that continuing economic growth is incompatible with sustainable development, and more specifically with lasting environmental improvement, but also that the need to move towards more genuinely sustainable consumption is becoming increasingly pressing. Such arguments emphasise that economic

growth, dependent as it is on the continuing depletion of the Earth's natural and social capital, is the antithesis of sustainable development, and runs counter to sustainable consumption, and that, as such, while political commitment to levelling up might have popular appeal, it is essentially unsustainable.

That said, there is little popular, commercial or political enthusiasm for an economic system that does not promote growth or that espouses zero growth.

At the same time, it is important to recognise that brownfield sites can also provide a range of ecosystem benefits and can be an important driver for sustainable development.²¹

Conclusion

The government's levelling-up agenda, and perhaps to a lesser the continuing development of brownfield land, seem likely to be important policy elements in future social and economic regeneration. As such, planners in the private sector may play an active role in helping to drive the levelling-up agenda. While their counterparts within local authority planning departments may be looking to ensure that the agenda is consistent with strategic and Local Plans, it remains to be seen whether they will have the resources or political support to fulfil that role as they might wish.

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Notes

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