

Levelling Up & Regeneration Bill Briefing

Commons Committee Day 1 (28.06.22): Levelling Up Missions

Summary

This briefing is on behalf the Better Planning Coalition, representing 27 organisations across the housing, planning, environmental, transport and heritage sectors. It covers clauses 1 to 6 of the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill, on levelling up missions.

The inclusion of levelling up missions is a welcome part of the Bill. A new legal duty on the Secretary of State to publish objectives to tackle geographic disparities has the potential to drive forward the levelling up agenda, and ensure more communities are given the tools they need to thrive. However, this part of the Bill requires strengthening to allow detailed scrutiny to improve the assessment and delivery of each levelling up mission. The potential of an overlooked levelling up tool, access to nature, also needs to be recognised through a specified mission.

Amendments we strongly support

Amendment 3: Independent scrutiny body

As drafted, Part 1 of the Bill allows ministers to mark their own levelling up homework. Ministers are tasked with assessing their own progress in meeting levelling up missions in annual reports to Parliament, with those reports directing the future direction of each mission. It is reasonable to suggest that this analysis, as is common with self-assessment, may veer towards the overly positive.

The independent scrutiny body proposed by the amendment would ensure a greater degree of objective analysis for each mission, with constructive, dis-interested feedback identifying omissions and challenges to be overcome, thereby contributing to the ultimate success of each mission. The Government has recently acknowledged the benefits that such independent scrutiny can bring, through the creation of the Office for Environmental Protection to assess ministers' progress towards Environment Act targets.¹ This principle can be usefully extended to levelling up missions.

Amendment 4: Action plans

This amendment would address an omission in statements of levelling-up missions, as defined by clause 1. The current definition includes levelling up objectives, and a methodology for measuring progress towards those objectives, but is silent on actions to be taken to deliver the mission itself. By requiring statements of levelling-up missions to be accompanied by action plans, the amendment would ensure that ministers publish delivery plans for each mission, to allow for parliamentary scrutiny and improvements arising from that scrutiny.

¹ <https://www.theoep.org.uk/what-we-do>

Comments on other amendments

Amendment 9: Changing mission progress methodology and metrics

We support the intention behind this amendment, which is intended to prevent ministers from switching to easier-to-achieve levelling up mission methodology and metrics when progress proves difficult. Whilst this safeguard is necessary, an ability to make mission methodology and metrics more rigorous should be retained, for circumstances when evidence shows that the original mission methodology and metrics are insufficiently robust. One option to allow for this discretionary approach would be empower the independent scrutiny body proposed by amendment 3 to accept or reject proposals from ministers to change the mission methodology and metrics.

Question to ask Minister at Committee – why is access to nature omitted from levelling up?

Access to nature helps determine quality of life. 70% of UK adults report that being close to nature improves their mood², with these wellbeing benefits feeding in improved health outcomes - current green space provision results in estimated savings for the NHS of at least £100 million a year from fewer GP visits.³ These benefits are however concentrated in the wealthier areas where access to nature is highest.⁴ For levelling up to be successful, these disparities in access to nature, and the health and wellbeing benefits that flow from this access, must be rectified.

Despite this significant levelling up potential, access to nature was not included as one the levelling up missions published in February's Levelling Up White Paper. To safeguard against further omissions and to ensure that the full potential of this powerful levelling up tool is realised, a levelling up mission to provide everyone with equitable access to high quality natural spaces should be established and delivered through the Bill. This specified mission would secure and maintain a ministerial focus on increasing nature on people's doorsteps, enriching lives and improving health outcomes. We would be grateful if Committee members could ask the Minister why access to nature has been omitted from levelling up to-date and what plans the Government has to address this omission. More information about the need for an access to nature mission can be found in the evidence provided to the committee by Wildlife and Countryside Link CEO Richard Benwell on 23.06.22.⁵

² <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/campaigns/nature/nature-research>

³ <https://www.fieldsintrust.org/revaluing>

⁴ <https://naturalengland.blog.gov.uk/2021/12/07/how-natural-englands-green-infrastructure-framework-can-help-create-better-places-to-live/>

⁵ <https://parliamentlive.tv/Event/Index/06c0e6bc-9a78-48b6-b9ee-8808c885dff0>

About the Better Planning Coalition

The Better Planning Coalition represents 27 organisations across the environment, housing, planning, heritage and transport sectors with one common goal: a planning system fit for people, nature and the climate. The broad range of organisations, including Shelter, Friends of the Earth, CPRE the countryside charity, National Trust, RSPB, Link and the Ramblers, formed the Better Planning Coalition to campaign for the biggest upgrade to planning rules for at least a generation.

For more information please contact:

Mark Robinson: MarkR@cpre.org.uk
