

## Levelling Up

### Purpose of report

For direction.

### Summary

The Government's announcement of a Levelling Up White Paper in place of the previous Devolution (and Local Recovery) White Paper has implications for our policy and lobbying activity. This paper asks members' views on a change of emphasis.

Is this report confidential? Yes  No

#### Recommendation/s

Members are asked to agree the change of approach and comment on any area of focus.

#### Action/s

Officers to develop a work programme leading up to the publication of the White Paper in the autumn.

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## Levelling Up

### Background

1. For some time local government has been expecting a Devolution, or more recently, Devolution and Local Recovery White Paper. This was expected to set out Government's devolution agenda and next steps on localising powers and responsibilities. The People and Places and City Regions Board have led the LGA's preparations for influencing the development of the White Paper.
2. Recently, the Prime Minister announced his intention to publish a "Levelling Up" White Paper to deliver on manifesto commitments to address differences in productivity and opportunity across the United Kingdom.
3. It has now been confirmed by MHCLG that the Levelling Up White Paper supersedes the planned devolution White Paper(s). This change of focus suggests an opportunity to review the Board's work and how it might most effectively influence this new agenda on behalf of councils.

### Issues

4. As set out in the [Queen's Speech](#):
  - 4.1. The Government will bring forward a Levelling Up White Paper later this year, building on actions the Government is already taking to level up across the UK.
  - 4.2. This will set out "bold new policy interventions to improve livelihoods and opportunities in all parts of the UK." It looks to improve living standards, grow the private sector, improve health, education and policing, strengthen communities and local leadership and restoring pride in place.
  - 4.3. It defines levelling up in terms of creating good jobs, skills and productivity in places that have seen economic decline and enabling more people to grasp the opportunities of Brexit and get on in life without feeling they have to leave their local area.
5. Delivery of the wider Levelling Up agenda will be led by Neil O'Brien MP, who will head up a unit in the Cabinet Office answering to Number 10. Tom Walker, currently at Defra but previously a lead MHCLG civil servant in the development of Growth Deals and the early Devolution Deals, will be leading the team. This is a change of leadership away from MHCLG, with the unit having a much wider remit and the ability to drive interventions across Whitehall. Senior LGA officers have had some early engagement with the unit and conversations have thus far been positive.
6. The scope of the Levelling Up agenda extends across most, if not all, of the LGA's policy boards. However, some of the key features – skills and employment and growth funding – are led by this Board and the People and Places Board. Devolution, which has also

been a key area of work for the Board, does not explicitly feature in the Government's vision as it has been set out to date.

7. It is probable that Government's work will focus on concrete areas of delivery, as set out in paragraph 4.2. The Board has a strong track record of policy development in these areas. However, in order to better influence the upcoming White Paper and work programme, officers suggest a change in approach for our lobbying work. This would showcase local government's ability to deliver effectively and at pace and to make a real difference in people's lives, building on councils' remarkable efforts during the pandemic.
8. We might, for example, seek to use new research and media work to demonstrate even more clearly councils' successes in helping people into work or retraining into new sectors, with less of a public focus on joining up the wiring of the skills and employment system. This very necessary policy work will of course continue, and local government's ability to align disparate national initiatives is in itself a selling point.
9. This is likely to mean less media and lobbying activity presenting devolution as desirable in and of itself and a greater focus on the better outcomes that might be secured through stronger local control. By weaving devolution through policy areas that are priorities for Government, we hope to promote a shift towards acceptance of devolution as a means to improved delivery.
10. We have upcoming opportunities within the LGA annual conference report and plenary session, support from the LGA campaigns team to develop public-facing work, and forthcoming publications as set out elsewhere in this agenda. We would particularly draw on the urban recovery report discussed at this meeting. Taken together this should give us a strong platform for taking forward our messages.
11. We will however need to balance this with the need to continue to lobby on devolution as a priority area of interest for our membership. One way to do this is by continuing to work closely with the Devolution APPG who will be engaging with Government following the success of their recent report.
12. This Board will also be mindful of those Mayors, combined authorities and their constituent members that benefitted earliest from devolution and will want to ensure that the changing narrative around devolution does not hold them back from further progress. The principle of differential devolution is an established LGA line and should underpin our upcoming lobbying work.
13. Officers are also mindful of Government's strong focus on the Union and possibility that a Scottish independence referendum might bring a fresh focus on devolution in England. The Board's previous work on devolution stands it in good stead to respond quickly should this be the case.

14. **Are Board members happy with this change of emphasis? Are there any policy areas that would particularly benefit from this approach?**

### **Implications for Wales**

15. Wales is on its own devolution journey. Officers liaise with the WLGA on areas of shared interest.

### **Financial Implications**

16. Proposed work can be undertaken from within the Board's budget.

### **Next steps**

17. Officers to develop a work programme leading up to the publication of the White Paper with public affairs, campaigns and media colleagues.