



Liaison Committee

Corrected oral evidence: Regenerating seaside towns and communities—follow-up

Monday 20 March 2023

3.05 pm

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Liaison Committee—members present: Lord Gardiner of Kimble (Chair); Lord Bichard; Lord Haskel; Lord Taylor of Holbeach.

Regenerating Seaside Towns and Communities Committee—members present: Lord Bassam of Brighton; Lord McNally; Baroness Valentine; Baroness Wyld.

Evidence Session No. 1

Heard in Public

Questions 1 - 9

Witnesses

I: Rebecca MacDonald-Lofts, Lead Officer, Local Government Association Coastal Special Interest Group; Daniel Davies, Chief Executive and Founder, Rockpoint Leisure; Alan Cavill, Director of Communication and Regeneration, Blackpool Council.

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

1. This is a corrected transcript of evidence taken in public and webcast on www.parliamentlive.tv.

Examination of witnesses

Rebecca MacDonald-Lofts, Daniel Davies and Alan Cavill.

Q1 The Chair: I welcome you to today's meeting, which is to follow up the work of the Regenerating Seaside Towns and Communities Committee. Your evidence will help to inform our follow-up report on this vital subject. A list of members' interests relevant to the inquiry is available online. As this is the first evidence session of this inquiry, it is a requirement that members of the committee declare their relevant interests orally when speaking for the first time, so they are on the record.

The session is open to the public, is broadcast live and is subsequently accessible via the parliamentary website. A verbatim transcript will be taken of the evidence and put on the parliamentary website. A few days after this session, you will be sent a copy of the transcript to check for accuracy. It would be helpful if you could advise us of any corrections as quickly as possible. If, after this evidence session, you wish to clarify or amplify any points made during your evidence, or have any additional points to make, you are very welcome to submit supplementary evidence to us.

I think it would be appropriate if you would introduce yourselves to the committee, please.

Daniel Davies: I am the chief exec of Rockpoint Leisure, a regeneration company that, in 2018, embarked on the regeneration of New Brighton. I am also the chair of the Institute of Licensing, so I have been in front of Select Committees before, both this one and the one for the Licensing Act. I represent our members, which are local authorities, police in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, operators and things like that.

Rebecca MacDonald-Lofts: I am the lead officer for the Local Government Association coastal special interest group, also known as the LGA coastal SIG because it is a bit of a mouthful. We have a membership of 57 coastal councils all across England. Our role is to raise the issues that they have, but also to seek opportunities to make those communities thriving and resilient.

Alan Cavill: I am the director of regeneration and communications at Blackpool Council. I am also on the Pride of Place board, which is a joint board with BITC, and the community and businesses in Blackpool, to promote regeneration in the town.

The Chair: We are having only two sessions today, because the Minister is unfortunately unwell, so I just mention that in case you were thinking of waiting to hear that evidence. She has sent her sincere apologies. May I pass over to Lord Bassam, who chaired the committee, to open this with the first question?

Q2 Lord Bassam of Brighton: Welcome to our session. I have to first

declare my interest. I currently work in a job-share as co-director of place and levelling up for the national charity Business in the Community, with Baroness Valentine actually. Our work involves working in a number of locations nationally, including Blackpool, as I am sure Alan will know well.

I hope that you find the session as rewarding as no doubt we will. It has been four years, roughly speaking, since we produced our report. What have been the most significant developments for seaside towns and communities since the committee reported in 2019? Do the challenges faced and the opportunities posed by these communities remain broadly the same as those that were raised during the committee inquiry? Have they moved on or changed? How do you see the landscape now?

Alan Cavill: Obviously an awful lot has happened since 2019, not least Covid and Brexit. In Blackpool and many other seaside locations, we have benefited from some government funding in relation to regeneration. We have been very fortunate in the fact that we have worked very closely, as I have already said, with the local community, business and Pride of Place, through Business in the Community.

We have managed to get quite a lot of projects going on the ground, mainly capital projects. We have about £500 million worth of development projects on the ground in Blackpool, all of which have started since the committee, so I thank the committee for its part in that. That is a significant change for us. An awful lot is happening on the ground.

It is more difficult to address some of the social issues than it is to just address the physical issues. That is the same as it has always been. Many of the issues that exist for seaside towns about skills, transport, the remoteness and so on are all pretty much the same.

One thing that is slightly different is that a post-Covid world has highlighted hugely to us that the people are a long way from the labour market. Before, you could have thought that seaside towns did not have enough jobs for people and that is why people were out of work. Now the situation, certainly in Blackpool and in some other places, is that there is a real difficulty to fill posts, despite the fact that, in Blackpool for instance, over 10% of people are still claiming out of work benefits and about 6,200 people want to find work.

Many employers find it very difficult to employ people, because many of those 6,200 people either have health issues or are a long way from the labour market in respect of their experience or skills. It has really highlighted the issue, perhaps more so than it had before, that it is not just about jobs. It must also be about the access to those jobs for the people locally.

Rebecca MacDonald-Lofts: We have a bit of a different perspective, because we have 57 councils. We are very pleased that Blackpool is one of those. Some report, as Alan has said, that they have been able to find a lot of funding, they have had quite a boost to their local economies and

they are able to take forward quite a few projects. We have those, on the other hand, that are finding themselves in a worse state than they were in 2019. We have quite a chalk and cheese approach at the moment in how people are experiencing the current climate.

One thing that really seems to have changed since that point is that we are having more of an interaction between the human, the physical and the nature capital, which are coming together to play a bigger part in the regeneration of seaside communities. We have seen a really big shift in changes, in that the natural environment is changing a lot more quickly, for some of our councils, than was ever expected. That is massively impacting upon their ability to regenerate, because they are having to try to deal with the issue of transitioning and adapting coastal communities.

Also, we are seeing a huge shift in people's behaviour when they attend coastal communities. That change in behaviour is having quite a negative impact. Coastal communities are finding that, while they should be revelling in the increase in revenue that tourism is bringing, that revenue is unfortunately having to deal with problems with waste, but also antisocial behaviour, car parking, all these other issues that have been exacerbated since Covid happened.

They are trying to deal with those aspects. They are trying to deal with the changing environment. They are finding particular issues with funding pots that last for only three years when they need them to be long term, sustainable and increasing resilience. There has been quite a shift.

We are hearing now from our councils that they have these concerns that they could regenerate their town and their communities, but at the moment there are funding issues where they could have quite a significant impact, such as on coastal landfill. We have quite a few councils that are impacted. They have coastal landfill sites that are already having landfill coming out on to the foreshore and to the water. That is impacting people's experience of being at the seaside and could have quite a strong impact on tourism. There is not a funding pot to assist with that.

There are some other issues that seem to be coming together and becoming quite a web, if you like, that could either help or hinder.

Lord Bassam of Brighton: Daniel, perhaps you could give us a bit of a taste of how it is for the private sector and its input into regenerating communities.

Daniel Davies: I gave evidence at the last one. I was hoping by this time we would be further on. Putting to one side the pandemic, lockdowns and various other challenges that everyone has faced, there are still a number of issues that cause problems for coastal communities.

There is a slight difference between a coastal community and a seaside town. In New Brighton's case, we have what once was the third largest seaside town in the UK. We had the biggest ballroom in Europe that held

3,500 people. You could sit down for a meal and watch the Rolling Stones or Little Richard. The Beatles played there 27 times, which, apart from the Cavern, was the most times they had ever played anywhere. My mum and dad used to go dancing there.

On top of it was the biggest building in the UK, a tower bigger than Blackpool's. We had two piers, 11 theatres, the largest open air baths in the world, another large baths down the other end of the promenade. Lord Derby built that one, the Derby Pool. Lord Leverhulme funded that. We have had a huge history there.

Over the years, for a lot of the reasons that we have discussed before with seaside towns, they started to go into decline, with package holidays and various other things. I was born in 1973. When I grew up, we were on the tail end of this. The piers had gone; the ballroom had gone; the tower had gone. The baths were hanging in there. They hung in there until about 1990.

If you went to university, you never came back. We do not have a university, unless you go to Liverpool. We did not retain any talent and we did not attract talent. There are no big businesses. The biggest employer in New Brighton is Morrisons, which is sited on the site of what once was New Brighton Baths. When I grew up there, there was a feeling that it was all over and that was it. There were a huge number of boarded-up places.

There have been a couple of goes at doing a bit of regeneration. One thing I have been trying to do in the last few years is engage with education. I built up in New Brighton a company called CPL, which I started in 1991 and sold in 2018. I used the money to start regenerating my home town, because I was fed up of seeing it go the way it went.

One thing we wanted to do was attract and retain talent. We have done that by engaging with primary schools, secondary schools, colleges and the three universities in Liverpool. We have basically been having new start businesses there. One issue is that the council that represents us, Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council, did not even respond to the first Select Committee.

We have spent about £7.5 million. Everyone has got behind it, the local residents and local businesses. We have had from the council £3,000 and four new waste bins on the road, and that is it. We have spent huge amounts of money cleaning up the public realm, cleaning up fly tipping, getting the kids who are causing problems to get high-vis vests on.

David Cameron said something about the big society. There were a lot of things I did not agree with David Cameron on, but I bought into the big society idea and thought, "Actually, people should look out for where they are and try to do something". I am frustrated, this amount of time on, that we have not had the help. I know we will come on to this later, but some of the funding streams need to be looked at. They tend to go into either metro regions or the council, which decide where it will be spent.

Q3 **Baroness Valentine:** I should declare an interest before we start. I work for Business in the Community in a job-share with Lord Bassam. In that capacity, I sponsor business-led interventions in several places around the UK, of which the only coastal one is Blackpool. The interventions we seek to make as Business in the Community are to facilitate transformational, positive and long-lasting change in the places where we operate. The local funding for activity that we do as Business in the Community is sourced from local businesses and the relevant council.

For this particular session, I should also say that I worked in Blackpool from, I think, 2017 to 2019. I liaised with Lord McNally, who we will hear from later, on some of the Blackpool issues.

How would you assess the Government's current approach to addressing the needs of coastal areas, and making the most of the opportunities presented in those areas? Is the current levelling-up agenda sufficient to address the needs of coastal areas? Is a more dedicated, focused and co-ordinated policy response on coastal areas needed? If so, what form should this take? Those are quite a lot of questions, so feel free to pick and mix from those.

Daniel Davies: From my point of view, we have not seen anything, so there is a bit of an issue. Levelling up is hard. I have a Labour MP, three Labour councillors, a Labour leader of the council, a Labour deputy leader and a Labour metro mayor. You would think that this was a no-brainer for them to have private investors putting money in—not even investors, just residents who want to see the place get better and see it sustainable.

When you have been around for a while, you start seeing the cycles of them spending money on things where you think, "That's not going to be here in 10 years' time. It's not going to be here in 20 years' time", and yet they let things go that are sustainable with a bit of help and support. There could be a dedicated coastal seaside town fund that had to be spent there, or a certain percentage that had to be earmarked.

Again, so much is wasted. By the time it has been passed down through a metro system and then the local council, local councils might be firefighting other things, and everyone blames each other. Labour blames the Conservatives. Everything is blamed on the Government. The Government blame the other side.

In my area, all the focus goes on Birkenhead, regenerating that and some of the other areas, so not a penny goes anywhere else, maybe to Woodside or things like this. These are often passed down through the chamber of commerce. By the time they have been passed down and diluted, the focus is not there, so they never get to the end user, where you would get a lot more bang for your buck.

One issue is the number of consultants used. In my experience, most of these consultants are brought in from outside the area, and yet there is huge expertise in a local area. You have people who have vast amounts of experience and who live in the postcodes. There should be some more focused way of channelling that, rather than to consultants, who take an

off-the-shelf product and say, "Here's one we did earlier for a similar-sized town or city. Let's just change the name and give it over". When the council keeps putting it out to a consultant, it is like plausible deniability, just to pass the buck on. I do not know if that answered the question.

Lord McNally: We have heard it all before.

Rebecca MacDonald-Lofts: For us, it is about metrics. The granularity of the data does not provide enough detail for us to work out the true picture of what is going on. Recently, through a collaborative funding between quite a few organisations, we put together a report on levelling up and how the metrics have worked across coastal communities. We had quite a lot of trouble pulling that report together because of the metrics. The data does not go down to the level that is required for coastal communities to be highlighted.

Unfortunately, the way the metrics are happening at the moment, the data does not go down to that sub-geographical layer that we need it to. It needs to go down to district level; it needs to go down to ward level. Then you can truly see the picture. Otherwise, a lot of those deprived areas are being completely missed and more affluent areas are overshadowing them.

We need something to change there in terms of the metrics that are used. I hope you have all had a copy of that report; we sent one through. In it we highlighted which metrics might help bring that forwards. If you have not had a copy, we will certainly circulate one.

The funding formula at the moment does not work, unfortunately, on quite a few levels. It is too short term. Three years is not long enough for real change. Seven years is more realistic; nine years is even better. That funding formula should be taking a completely different approach, in terms of having an objective to be realised. To make that objective happen, you have several workstreams coming in. You do not just have the local council but you also have health, education and the private sector. You have everybody working together to make that objective deliverable and workable in the long term.

Without that, you have this disconnect between different areas, but also you are constrained. If you get a pot of money to deliver one thing and you know that, to deliver that one thing, actually you need to do something else, you cannot use that money; you cannot move it over. The criteria are so restrictive. That is really unhelpful, in a way.

Also, the local government funding formulas are really tricky. It would be good to see some change there in terms of looking at the issues of delivering things for the councils. There tends to be a higher cost, the more remote the coastal communities are. We have loads of issues with connectivity, transport but also digital connectivity. Delivering the basics for your coastal community is much more than it could be for another community, so that has to be taken into account, as do levels of

deprivation in those areas. For us at the moment, the funding formula is on the right lines, but there is quite a long way to go for it.

Alan Cavill: I agree with what Rebecca says, which is not to say I do not agree with what Daniel says, even though I am from a local authority. Sorry, Daniel.

Daniel Davies: They are not all bad.

Alan Cavill: We have had an interesting experience. Our belief is that you have to make it easy for government to support you. Over the last five or six years, we have developed a prospectus. I hope you have all seen and been bored with the various versions of Blackpool's prospectus. It is signed up to by everybody in the town, be that health, local authority, private sector, third sector. Everybody in the town is signed up to that document, which has a simple set of asks. One of those was that government should work with us, rather than against us or not with us, to deliver against those opportunities as we saw them.

Blackpool was one of three levelling-up pilots that started back in February of last year. We had a deep dive that dealt with some of the issues to do with the data. Lots of very high-foreheaded economists from DLUHC came to see us, went through the data in great detail and tried to figure out how they could measure what success would look like in Blackpool.

We had a department, in DLUHC, that had decided that its job was to try to make things come together for a location and that the whole of government should be pulling in the same direction. It is not about money, although money is great. It is not just about money at all. It is about recognising the needs of a place, or a set of places in the case of seaside towns, and owning them altogether between us, rather than individually.

Our specific problem is housing. The way housing policy works in this country is that we spend all our money on building new houses on either greenfield or brownfield sites, in order to produce as many new houses as possible. Many seaside towns suffer from really poor-quality housing that needs to be replaced or renewed. Building more houses does not solve that problem because you still have the ghetto, if you like, in the centre of those locations.

Making that case and trying to persuade government, through DLUHC in particular, to change the rules in relation to private sector landlords and how money is spent through Homes England has been a tough journey. The last 12 months have been amazing in terms of government really buying into a levelling-up agenda for a place, such as Blackpool. Us having our message right, being together, knowing what we want and having one voice all the time, the same voice and the same asks, has been the most important thing in making that happen. It is a point of view and I guess that it has not happened for everybody, but it has certainly worked in Blackpool.

Lord Bassam: Lord McNally, your question follows on well from that.

Q4 **Lord McNally:** It does indeed. My full title is Lord McNally of Blackpool, but I was born in Thornton-Cleveleys and keep an interest in the whole of the Fylde coast. Indeed, I have long been a believer in a city of the Fylde, between the Ribble and the Wyre. I am a chair of the Fleetwood Trust, which is trying to regenerate the old derelict Fleetwood Hospital into a community service hub. I am also on the national advisory board of Pride of Place for Blackpool.

We have touched on funding. There have been various funding streams available to seaside towns and communities. Have these been sufficient to support coastal areas and enable regeneration? Is targeted, dedicated funding required to better serve coastal communities, such as a successor to the coastal communities fund? Daniel has already said that he would support that.

The current funding landscape is complex, I think we would agree. Do you agree with the Government that the funding landscape needs to be changed? I certainly would. Would the UK shared prosperity fund and levelling up fund as the sole channels of funding be appropriate? I would like to know your opinion on that.

Rebecca MacDonald-Lofts: I would certainly agree that it needs to change. The way it is at the moment is not working. We were really concerned about the removal of the CCF. It suddenly disappeared into the shared prosperity fund and we did not know whether it had been ring-fenced. There is other documentation that says that it was reduced in the amount that actually went into the shared prosperity fund from the Crown Estate. That is a bit of a concern as well.

We are co-secretariat for the Coastal Communities APPG. Our chair, Sally-Ann Hart, put forward an ask to the Treasury to find out what had happened with the ring-fencing for that money. We are awaiting a response on that. We know that it has recently been said that the money should go back to coastal communities in some kind of fund, especially from the Crown Estate.

One other avenue that does not seem to get mentioned very often is that there is a lot of money in the private sector for energy. A lot of our communities are really on the forefront of climate change. They are being heavily impacted by increased changes, which will happen naturally, but are exacerbated at the moment. They are not seeing any funding coming back from the energy sector, which has a role to play in that, but also in the offshore wind sector, which is now booming and really starting to take off. There is this ask: "Could there be funding from those streams to help to support a new coastal communities fund to operate?" There are questions being asked at the moment about those funding streams and how they could work.

One thing that we find tricky is that there is no central Minister for the Coast who oversees the coast. There was until 2015 and then that role was merged into other roles. We feel that that role should come back.

That Minister could then oversee and have a cross-departmental working group from all those sectors, which could come together and talk about what the issues are around coast. We can start talking to education and levelling up.

All these different things can come forward and say, "These are the issues. This is how we propose going forward". At the moment, that does not exist; that route is not there. For us, that would be a really major step forward into changing that funding.

Lord McNally: In your earlier evidence, you referred to some funds being too short term and narrow in scope. Do you reiterate that?

Rebecca MacDonald-Lofts: Yes, most definitely. They are too short term. In terms of what we need to see for coastal communities, they do not want handouts all the time. They want something that allows them to deliver, raise themselves up, become more resilient and be future proofed. If that is only a three-year fund, it does not really do that. If it has that narrow focus and they know, "We need money over here and over here to reach that one thing we have actually been given money for, but we can't use that money for these different areas because of the criteria", they are set to fail. Even if they lift up whatever part of regeneration that is, unless they can change other elements, they cannot change it.

For example, if you put a huge amount of money into regenerating businesses in the town centre or along the coast, who is going to take those roles? Who are the staff going to be? We have large areas where people come from workless households and there is a culture of not working. We need money to go into the communities in order to support those families to change their attitude going forward.

We are not seeing that people do not have aspirations. They do, but when they get to secondary school they go, because they do not have the support behind them—the emotional and moral support of their friends and families to make those changes and go forwards. That is not for everywhere. Everywhere is different, but that is one of the things that we are seeing. If you have the objective of pushing forward a coastal community by regenerating the businesses, you need to look at that aspect.

You also need to look at education. We have a problem in that, at the moment, the education formula is not working. If you are a college or sixth form, you deliver your education from September to July. That is a problem because, in the coastal community, July is peak season. Everyone has gone to work. If you can provide education that runs over the winter months only and allows for people to take advantage of the seasonal employment, that works a lot better. This is what I mean when I say that we need different factions to come together to deliver one thing.

Q5 **Baroness Valentine:** There are two specific funds, community renewal fund and town deal funding. Do you have any observations on those two?

Rebecca MacDonald-Lofts: To be honest, our councils have not really come back with much on those. For the ones that they have gone for, out of all the different funding pots, they are finding a huge squeeze on them to deliver a funding bid. It is costing them thousands in officer time and sometimes having to bring consultants in in order to deliver something, which then adds cost. They are not guaranteed to receive that money back. They can put in a huge amount of officer resource, time, money and then they have no comeback and they have lost it. That is having quite an impact.

Alan Cavill: As they are currently written and being delivered, the UKSPF—the shared prosperity fund—and the levelling up fund probably do not meet the criteria that you are looking for in this question. The UKSPF, for instance, came to us in a very small amount of money in year 1, ramping up to year 3 and then a cliff edge. It is not even three years of funding actually; it is about two and a bit years of funding. It is very hard to make projects fit within that. It is very hard to use it for something that is long term.

Everything becomes short term. Effectively, everything is almost capital. Even your revenue projects are almost capital, because they are one and a half or two years, so it is something you know you are going to be able to do for a short period.

Yes, a lot of time and effort goes into the bidding. You are quite right about that. We have been fortunate that we have been reasonably successful in most of those bids, I think because we have a good story to tell. It is worth saying that, had somebody said to us at the beginning of all this, "Instead of fighting for each individual piece of money you get, here's £120 million over 10 years, £12 million a year, to use to deliver your vision", that would have been far more useful than the 120 million quid we actually got, if that makes sense.

That sounds incredibly ungrateful and I am not ungrateful, I really am not. I am very pleased that we have been able to win those bids, but thinking about things differently is really important. Being able to fund somebody's plan for a long period, over successive Parliaments, is a challenge. I understand that, but it is the only thing that is going to work for many of these communities, because there are embedded problems. Building an office block in the middle of Blackpool is not going to solve the problems for the people of Claremont, for instance, a particularly deprived area just outside the town centre.

Daniel Davies: I take your point. I have actually seen the guys from Blackpool and they all worked really well together. In New Brighton, we have the coastal community team. We have all the residents behind this. We have the local businesses, schools, colleges et cetera.

An observation I have is that a council will get money for certain projects, for example to renew the public furniture outside. It might be a bandstand, Victorian streetlights or something such as that. They get money, they put them in and they do not build anything in for

maintenance. We live on the coast, so things decline. They will spend an amount of money up front and then just walk away and say, "Okay, we've done that".

If they are just spending small amounts of money here and there in an area, by the time the maintenance comes on the first one, they are rotting away and they are not maintained. When we started, 60% of the streetlights were out. We could not even light the streets and the roads. Their boast was, "We are one of only two councils that is not legally obliged to light the streets". You are going, "Really?" I thought that light was a human right, virtually.

It is the knock-on effect. Some of this is measurable and some is a lot harder to measure. Our main high street goes back to 1830. They needed housing. Some of the businesses had been run down. These were beautiful five-storey buildings. They end up compulsory purchasing the lot, losing 33 businesses, only relocating two of them. This is in previous councils. They basically let 150-odd jobs go and did not relocate any of those businesses.

It meant that half of the street, which led right down to the promenade, ended up getting bulldozed and they put a Barratt estate there. If you walk along the promenade and look at what was Victoria Road—it is now Victoria Parade—it just looks like a Barratt estate. You do not realise that there are all the shops and everything there. They knocked down New Brighton Baths and everything, stuck a Morrisons there, a Home Bargains and a few other mid-tier businesses.

They absolutely wreck places. This decision-making is terrible. If you cannot be bothered lighting the streets, it increases crime and antisocial behaviour, but also people tripping up and stuff. It is a damn sight easier to pay for a lightbulb to be changed than to pay for somebody's hip that has been broken because they have fallen over. Then there is the stuff that you do not see: for example, somebody who is too scared to leave the house at night and go and get a pint of milk, because they cannot see where they are walking. You need to do the basic stuff first in a lot of these places and then build on it.

Lord Bassam of Brighton: That is very helpful. Thank you very much.

Q6 **Baroness Wyld:** I need to declare that I am a non-exec board member at Ofsted and a member of the court of the University of Newcastle upon Tyne.

I wanted to ask you about the devolution changes that are in the levelling-up White Paper and the levelling-up Bill. In your view, would they enable local authorities better to support seaside towns? You have all been really good at illustrating your points so far, so can we do some more of that as we go along?

Rebecca MacDonald-Lofts: At the moment, what is coming back to me about devolution is that they are really excited by the prospect. They are seeing it as something positive that could enable them to look at it from

their point of view. They can make the changes that they want to. They can have that autonomy that they need.

We have all these different coastal communities, seaside towns—however you want to split them. No two are the same. They all have different challenges; they all have different issues. It is really difficult, in terms of funding formulas and things, to work that out. Devolution gives them that opportunity to say, “This is our problem. These are the things we have as a challenge. These are the things we have as an opportunity. How can we go forward?” They are not trying to fit into someone else’s mould.

They see that as a real opportunity at the moment. They are quite interested, but at the same time there is that tentativeness: “We really want this to work, but what if it doesn’t work?” At the moment, they are seeing the opportunities in connectivity. They feel that it will really drive digital, infrastructure, transport and those different abilities for connectivity. Those are the main things that are coming back to me at the moment, but there is that concern: “We are really excited, but is it going to deliver for us?”

Baroness Wyld: That is helpful, thanks. Is everybody positive? With the various structures that have come through in the Bill, clearly there has been some pushback. What would your reflection be on that?

Rebecca MacDonald-Lofts: At the moment, it is coming back that overall they are positive, because they are seeing this ownership of it. They have not been given that opportunity before. At the moment, they are positive, but there are, as you say, certain elements where they are not quite sure, depending on how the different councils see things working. Overall, it is positive at the moment.

Q7 **Baroness Valentine:** One issue with coastal towns is that the boroughs do not naturally sit on the coast. As you were saying earlier about metrics, it is bits of boroughs. Does that not present problems for the devolution that you are talking about?

Rebecca MacDonald-Lofts: It potentially does, but they are seeing it as ownership of something, so they may have more of an input than they have at the minute.

Alan Cavill: Anything that brings more power to the local level is useful and important. We would absolutely 100% support that. The difficulties are that the areas that make up the administrative counties or whatever are not actually travel to work areas or anything else. They are fairly artificial boundaries.

If you take our county, which is Lancashire, the needs of Burnley, Blackburn and Ribble Valley are very different from those of the coast. Tom referred to the city of Fylde before, for which I thank you. A natural community with delegated powers would be very powerful. The ability to bring together that area from a transport and economic point of view is really important.

You can see how well some of the mayoral combined authorities work, Manchester and so on, where they have a central hub and a real understanding of their place. Some other areas just do not have that geography. God bless everybody in Blackburn and Burnley, but they are very different from the people on the coast, in a good way. It is therefore difficult to see how all their priorities can fit together in a combined authority, but I think we can do it. It is important that this policy is pursued, because there simply is not enough control at local level.

Baroness Wyld: You seem pretty optimistic.

Alan Cavill: I would say so, not necessarily for Lancashire.

Daniel Davies: In principle, I am in favour of an amount of devolution. With things like the northern powerhouse and levelling up, in principle it is a good idea. In practice, it depends who it goes through. If it goes to the right people on a forward-thinking, visionary sort of council, that is great. It is the process that it has to go through.

Lord Bassam of Brighton: That is a very good, short, sharp, succinct response. Thank you very much.

Q8

Lord Bichard: I have no technical interest to declare, although I have been the chief executive of two local authorities and I have a passion for place and devolution. I therefore read the report with huge interest. It was an excellent report and I have listened to you today with great interest. It has left me wondering why we have to learn these things time and time again before we do something about it.

None the less, I have been asked whether I would focus on transport and digital. The report pointed out the importance of transport connections and digital connections, for very good reasons. Do you feel—I think I know the answer that is coming—that we have made much progress on those two issues since the report was published? Take transport, for example. Since the report was published, we have had the first round of levelling up and £450 million, I think, on transport projects. Does that sufficiently prioritised the needs of coastal communities and coastal towns? We have had the national bus strategy in 2021. I could not find a reference to coastal areas or any real prioritisation of connectivity issues where buses were concerned. Have I missed something, or are you similarly disappointed? I do not want to put words in your mouth, obviously.

Might you have expected coastal towns and communities to have benefited a bit more from the new stations fund—I am trying to remember all these funds—or restoring your railway fund? Again, I could not see much reference to coastal towns. Do you feel that what the inquiry was saying has actually led to real action?

I will not go into the same amount of detail on digital, although it is desperately important. I noticed that the *Communities on the Edge* report that was published recently specifically pointed to a gap between coastal and non-coastal districts in the premises with gigabit-capable broadband

and 4G. Is that still your experience? Do you feel that that has been given enough priority?

Daniel Davies: From our point of view in New Brighton, we have very close proximity to Liverpool. We are literally just the other side of the Mersey. We are right in the top right-hand corner of the Wirral peninsula, so we are surrounded on three sides by water. I very much viewed the redevelopment of New Brighton as like Brooklyn to Manhattan, and that is the way you have to do it. A lot of coastal towns have the disadvantage of having 180 degree land and 180 degree water, whereas we had a 360 degree opportunity, I felt.

Connectivity is generally quite good. I got down here today in two hours 10 minutes from Liverpool Lime Street station. We have an airport. The Liverpool region is a good place transport-wise, generally. As far as things such as broadband go, they are all generally quite good where we are.

Where we have an issue is with local transport. We used to have piers that would deliver 5 million day trippers coming over from Liverpool. We do not have them in New Brighton now. We have then slightly up the coast in Woodside and Seacombe. There is the new Everton stadium getting built right opposite where we are. There is an opportunity for river taxis and things. The train system has been a bit hit and miss recently where we are. On a very localised level, in our main Victoria Quarter area we have bus stops that no buses stop at. You have a hike up the road to get a bus.

Going back to serving a community, if you have taken out all the banks, because banks generally do not have a high street presence any more, and you have taken out the bus service, an older member of the community cannot get up the road to the big Morrisons store. There is some localised stuff there that really needs to be looked at transport-wise. This is why we wanted to retain things on the street, such as the greengrocer, the opticians, the pharmacy, the post office, so that people can get to them. We wanted to protect that at all costs, because, when you take out some of the transport systems, it makes it a lot more difficult for the local community.

Lord Bichard: You are saying that you have not seen great evidence since the report was published of this issue being given new priority.

Daniel Davies: No, apart from cycle lanes.

Lord Bassam of Brighton: That is a good thing.

Rebecca MacDonald-Lofts: No, it has not, unfortunately. We have the odd few councils saying, "We've really benefited from this. We're going to see a lot more transport in our area", but generally they have not seen what they need to see and they cannot get that.

On digital connectivity, one thing that concerned us about the report and the levelling-up metrics was that the whole focus is on 4G. We have a lot

of coastal towns where you cannot even get a mobile phone signal. You cannot get 1G, never mind 4G. There is that ask of changing the metrics a bit there. There was also an ask on the metrics about transport to see how many people actually own a car and how that is impacting the area, because you cannot get around by bus or any other means at the moment.

Alan Cavill: Again, the answer is probably no. Most of the money is focused on the metropolitan areas when it comes to transport. It will continue to be, because that is where all the people are. Having said that, there are real opportunities here, especially with digital. Digital could be the answer for seaside locations, because it gives them the opportunity to be in business and to engage without necessarily having to build a £100 million motorway to wherever they are.

It is entirely driven by the commercial approach to delivering 4G, 5G and so on and so forth, so it simply gets put where there are more people. The government funding for this is very small compared to the actual cost of delivery, which is why it happens that way. Unless there is some intervention, that will continue.

Q9 **Lord Bassam of Brighton:** Rebecca, the Budget statement last week made certain announcements with regard to LEPs. We heard criticisms of LEPs during our last report. Do you think that the changes they are proposing will help or hinder regeneration?

Rebecca MacDonald-Lofts: It is not a straightforward answer for this one. I have some councils say that it is good for the LEP to be going into the council, and they can see a real strength and positivity from that. Others are concerned that some of the people in those LEPs will disappear within the councils and might not be at the forefront.

From another perspective, we are part of something called the OneCoast Coalition, which is made up of national coastal organisations. We have an advisory group, which we are delighted that the coastal LEP has re-joined us on. There is a little network of coastal LEPs that have all come back together after the recommendations that were put forward by you. We are going to lose that now, because they will all be integrated within. We are not quite sure how that is going to work, because we finally made this bridge and we are worried that we are going to lose it. I am sorry that it is not a straightforward answer, but that is where we are.

Lord Bassam of Brighton: I appreciate that it is complex. I can see the complexity. Perhaps it is something we will comment on.

The Chair: Thank you very much indeed to our witnesses. We are all extremely grateful for the wide-ranging responses you have given us.