



Liaison Committee

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

Tuesday 28 March 2023

10 am

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Members present: Lord Gardiner of Kimble (Chair); Lord Bach; Lord Bichard; Lord Haskel; Lord Taylor of Holbeach.

Select Committee on Regenerating Seaside Towns and Communities Members present: Lord Bassam of Brighton; Lord Lucas; Lord McNally; Baroness Valentine.

Evidence Session No. 3

Heard in Public

Questions 22 - 35

Witnesses

I: Dehenna Davison MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Levelling Up), Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities; Will Garton, Director-General for Levelling Up, DLUHC; John McManus, Deputy Director, Regeneration Delivery Unit, DLUHC.

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

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

Examination of witnesses

Dehenna Davison MP, Will Garton and John McManus.

Q22 **The Chair:** Minister, a very warm welcome to you and your team to today's meeting, which is the follow-up on the work of the Select Committee on Regenerating Seaside Towns and Communities. Your evidence will help us greatly to inform our follow-up report on this vital subject.

A list of the interests of Members relevant to the inquiry is available online. The session is open to the public. It is broadcast live and is subsequently accessible via the parliamentary website. A verbatim transcript will be taken of the evidence and will be put on the parliamentary website. A few days after this session, you will be sent a copy of the transcript to check it for accuracy, and 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 you have any additional points to make, you will, of course, be very welcome to submit supplementary evidence.

I will ask the Minister and officials to introduce themselves, and then I will hand over to Lord Bassam to ask the first question.

Dehenna Davison: Lord Gardiner, thank you. I am Dehenna Davison, the Minister for Levelling Up. I have been in post since September. Before we begin, I just want to say thank you for being so understanding that I had to move the session a couple of weeks ago.

Will Garton: Good morning. I am the Director General for Levelling Up at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

John McManus: Good morning. I am the Deputy Director of the Regeneration Delivery Unit at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

Q23 **Lord Bassam of Brighton:** Minister, we want to focus on effectiveness and delivery. To start with, how effectively do you think the levelling-up agenda is serving coastal towns and communities? Is a dedicated seaside towns and communities policy or strategy required as a stand-alone to do better in targeting these areas? Perhaps as a supplementary to get you thinking about it longer term, how do the Government envisage that devolution changes proposed by the *Levelling Up* White Paper and the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill aid the better support of seaside towns and communities?

Dehenna Davison: The first thing to say about the levelling-up agenda is that it is broad. If we are to level up parts of the country that need it, we need to take a holistic approach. That is why we set out our 12 priorities and missions in the *Levelling Up* White Paper just over a year ago. While the *Levelling Up* White Paper does not focus specifically on coastal communities, the focus on those 12 missions will hit a large number of coastal communities. While coastal communities share some

challenges, I do not think that they are entirely homogenous. Some places will have issues around second home ownership, whereas for others it will be pay, productivity and housing standards. It is important that we take a holistic, top-down approach in government.

Broadly, I think that we are making good progress towards levelling up. It is an almighty mission; there is still a long way to go. For coastal communities in particular, to pick out a few areas, on broadband—which I know has been noted by the committee as a bit of a challenge for many coastal communities—good progress is being made on the gigabit broadband rollout. We are not quite there yet, but that area is very much on track in government at the moment.

On regeneration, it is clearly not all about funding, but funding is a vital part of this. When you look across many funds, be it the towns fund, the shared prosperity fund or the levelling up fund, a large number of coastal communities benefit from that funding.

Specifically on the devolution aspects of the question, it is vital. Will and I are spending an awful lot of time on making sure that the devolution deals that we are rolling out are the right deals and are benefiting local communities. A number of those have coastal communities within them: Tees Valley, Liverpool, the new deals we have announced in Cornwall, Norfolk and Suffolk, and the expanded north-east deal that will come into play. Each deal is bespoke. There are specific elements that are negotiated between the local area and government. I will run through a few examples of the specific coastal points that are in some of these deals.

In the north-east deal, local leaders have asked for a strategic infrastructure plan specifically to see how we can protect our coastline within their remits. Cornwall's new devolution deal will specifically have reference to floating offshore wind and a demonstration programme as part of that, seeing how Cornish innovation can help in this, supporting local economies, people and businesses. In Norfolk and Suffolk, we have a dedicated section in there that says that DCMS will work with the accredited local visitor economy partnership for the region to help promote visitor economies, which we know are crucial for coastal communities. In York and North Yorkshire we are looking at new proposals on net zero, looking at the coastal geographies there and how they can benefit from that.

We are trying to be deliberately bespoke in our devolution deals. We are not coming in as government and imposing what we think is right. We are working with local areas to make sure that those deals are reflective of local priorities. I think that is what the devolution agenda is all about. It is getting power out of our hands here in Westminster and Whitehall and giving it back to local areas so that they can focus on their local priorities. Ultimately, if an area is predominantly coastal, those local priorities will be at the forefront of those deals. Will, do you have anything to add?

Will Garton: No, I think that is exactly right. Overall, the answer to the macro part of your question is that the challenge is, as the Minister said, incredibly difficult at the outset. The inflationary environment and the long tail of Covid makes levelling up more difficult still, but more important still. As the Secretary of State and the Minister have said on a number of previous occasions, we are not waiting for the economic winds to change and be more positive; we are changing stuff on the ground now in our partnerships with places and thinking about place in a way that I have never seen in my career in government. It is much more focused, much more targeted and much more of a partnership with local government. It feels like we have a real agenda and momentum in the department.

Lord Bassam of Brighton: Okay. You mentioned Covid, economic winds and inflation. What about Brexit as an impact on seaside communities and towns?

Will Garton: The OBR has given you its own views of the impact of Brexit on UK GDP. That is clear for everyone to see. I think there are opportunities from Brexit as well that will present throughout the UK. I do not know how bespoke they are to UK seaside towns and coastal communities, but those opportunities are UK-wide and will apply equally to those places.

Lord Bassam of Brighton: The fishing industry was supposed to benefit from it and it obviously has an impact on our inshore fishing in particular. I wonder whether those communities have begun to reap any benefit from that.

Dehenna Davison: We know that fishing-dependent communities have faced some particular challenges, and at this point it is probably worth talking about our levelling-up partnerships programme. Our first was in Blackpool; we also did Grimsby and Blyth. In Grimsby in particular, there is an incredibly relevant example. I will hand over to John on this. As part of our place-based intervention, we send in our crack team of experts to figure out what the key challenges are locally. They can vary depending on where we are. There was a particular point raised in Grimsby about whitefish and Russian sanctions, so we made sure that we had intervened in the right way there.

Will Garton: I will do Grimsby; John does Blackpool. The Minister is right. We have set up these things called levelling-up partnerships. We announced 20 of them at the Budget. We had done three previously in Blyth, Grimsby and Blackpool. They are an example of our place-based working, having greater granularity, specificity and political oomph than it has ever had before. In Grimsby, we worked with the local authority there. We worked with local businesses, the FE college and a number of local actors. The Secretary of State held a number of meetings there. A team was despatched to stay there, but we also had area teams based in the regions supporting the effort.

What did we find? At the time there were a number of issues, as the Minister says, with sanctions on Russia and whitefish and the potential impact of that on the economy in Grimsby. We resolved those issues with colleagues from the Cabinet but gave it much more emphasis and political momentum than perhaps would have otherwise been the case. In Grimsby we found that the key issue on transport was that the local authority was worried about three bridges connecting the port to the town centre. We funded the restoration of those bridges. I do not know whether that would ever have reached the top of the Department for Transport's list, but perhaps not. We have spent £20 million regenerating the shopping centre, which is key to the town centre, and we are getting Homes England to spend time there to do proper master planning of the town.

We have a specific, detailed programme in Grimsby that is bespoke and specific to that locality. North-east Lincolnshire is very clear that it now has an ongoing relationship with us, and I do not think it is just saying that; it thinks it has benefited from that detailed interaction.

Lord Bassam of Brighton: Yes, having visited Grimsby, I am sure it is making progress. Baroness Valentine, I sense that you have a question.

Q24 **Baroness Valentine:** It is, I guess, a two-tier governance question. There used to be a Cabinet sub-committee on levelling up. I do not know whether that is currently in existence, so I would like to know whether that has been refreshed since it existed. That is relevant to the problem that your department has, which is that a lot of the issues you are trying to tackle exist in other departments, so I guess the broader question is how you have purchase on other departments if you are to be holistic about how you address things.

That was governance at that level, and then at Blackpool level, which I should disclose an interest in because I worked there for two years recently, some of the new levelling-up partnerships you have just announced are in coastal towns, I believe. What did you learn from what you saw of the governance structures in Blackpool and the business leadership you have from the woman who is now chair of Severn Trent, the senior partner of Eversheds, et cetera? Did the dynamic that you have in Blackpool work for the other two levelling-up partnerships? Do you know how it will work for your future coastal levelling-up partnerships?

Dehenna Davison: I will take the first part and then I will hand over to John to talk more specifically about Blackpool. On the Cabinet sub-committee, Will, I am not sure whether that is continuing.

Will Garton: It is now a levelling-up interministerial group but it still meets, chaired by the Secretary of State. An interministerial group is slightly different to a Cabinet sub-committee.

Baroness Valentine: That is effective?

Will Garton: Yes. That is operational.

Dehenna Davison: Yes. We have had, I think, three or four meetings and we have another meeting tomorrow. At each a theme is chosen. We have had anti-social behaviour prior to our announcement of the new anti-social behaviour action plan. We get Ministers from every department, who are all forced to feed in what it is that their department is doing around the specific theme. I have found that they have been incredibly effective in my short time in office to galvanise movement in particular policy areas.

John McManus: In Blackpool, as the committee has recognised before, we have realised that it is a multifaceted, deep-seated issue. In March 2022, Cabinet convened in Blackpool to put together a plan for Blackpool, looking at not just the built environment but a holistic regeneration strategy for Blackpool. That was followed up in the summer by a Permanent Secretary-convened group from across Whitehall to support local leaders to start to implement that plan.

That plan stretches across a number of policy areas and government departments. Blackpool Council was very keen initially to focus on the regeneration of the built environment. It highlighted to us that the magistrates' court in the town centre was a magnet for anti-social behaviour and that, as Will alluded to, it was not getting the bandwidth within traditional funding programmes. We worked with Blackpool Council and the Ministry of Justice to move the Blackpool court and in its place will come world-class leisure facilities, bringing £300 million of investment into the town.

Blackpool has the wrong housing stock for the community. We see a proliferation of HMOs, so we are funding the local enforcement team to enforce those standards to make sure that HMO landlords have much better behaviours. Alongside that, we are laying longer-term plans for the built environment to provide a better housing offer for Blackpool. There are many things I can touch upon if it is useful for the committee, but the key point to get across is that when we arrived in Blackpool, Blackpool already had a number of governance structures. As the Minister has spoken to, it was not about Whitehall turning up and saying, "This is how we do business" but rather understanding what was already working well locally and then trying to amplify that and provide national government support.

Q25 **Lord McNally:** On one point you made there, 10 years ago I was a Minister in the Ministry of Justice, and the question of the siting of the court came up. My Blackpool interests are there and I was very eager to help. I was told by the powers that be in the Ministry of Justice that its key responsibility was to maximise the profit for the Ministry of Justice in any disposal of that court. It has taken 10 years to get that decision. Is that not still a problem—that individual departments have these separate priorities, instructions or legal responsibilities that cut across the developments that you have been talking about?

John McManus: I think that is the root and branch review of the *Levelling Up* White Paper, saying that places need that holistic support

from the whole of government in order to deliver the change that we want to see.

In Blackpool, the courts would never have been a priority through an asset management strategy, so the Department for Levelling Up has used its capital to remove that facility and provide it elsewhere, to update the stock and to open up for private sector investment to build world-class leisure facilities. Without the levelling-up agenda, I think you are right: that would have continued to be overlooked for another 10 years at least.

Dehenna Davison: More broadly, going to your question, it is always a challenge in government to make sure that the right hand knows what the left hand is doing and draw together those strands. That is why the *Levelling Up* White Paper, those 12 missions, are crucial through the levelling-up interministerial group, through our levelling-up partnerships where we work holistically with other departments, and through our devolution deals. You will, I hope, have seen that we have just announced our trail-blazer devolution deals, where we have worked right across government with every department to make sure that it is a whole package of powers that are being devolved and funds that are being devolved to local areas. There has been some strong cross-government working on this.

Lord Bassam of Brighton: Thank you very much. I am conscious that several of us want to get our questions in, so can we move swiftly on to Lord Lucas?

Q26 **Lord Lucas:** Minister, have the various funding pots available to achieve levelling up been successful in reaching the seaside towns and communities that need it most? Please can you provide details of the investment received by coastal areas across the funding pots available? We do not expect that answer instantly. What progress has been made in addressing the complexities of the levelling-up funding landscape as recognised in the *Levelling Up* White Paper? The committee has heard calls for longer-term investment. Are the Government considering this in their assessment of the funding available? What consideration have the Government given to reintroducing a dedicated fund for coastal areas?

If I can just add to that, following on from what you said about levelling-up partnerships we in our committee very much recognise the need for long-term effective planning and partnership stimulation, and others have put the same emphasis on achieving an objective and enabling a number of work streams, in other words coherence. We also picked up on the need for outside ideas and experience, as coastal communities get quite cut off from the mainstream, and for support.

In Eastbourne, where I live and am active, we were successful in round 1, but since then not only have ideas developed as we have fleshed out the plans but we have had a substantial level of inflation. I have not seen anything happening for us or more widely that is anything like the place-based intervention you described for Grimsby. I would have thought that there was room for at least a scaled-down model of that to help with

getting the long-term implementation working right in communities that do not have, because of where they are, all the resources and experience necessary to make the best decisions.

Dehenna Davison: I will try to address each strand, but if I miss anything I will follow up in writing.

On the funding pots themselves, we have a few funding pots there. From the levelling up fund, around £1 billion in total will go to support 50 projects in coastal communities. Through town deals, 22 of the towns selected are coastal, receiving just over £520 million as part of that programme. In the levelling-up partnerships that we have already touched upon, there are a number of coastal areas, such as Redcar and Cleveland, South Tyneside, Hull, Torridge, Torbay, Tendring and Hastings—not Eastbourne yet. I would not say that our team is struggling with resource at the minute, but it is a small team. It is a fantastic team, but we have to be realistic for now about the number of places in which we carry out these levelling-up partnerships. We want to make sure that they are true deep dives and can get into the nitty-gritty of detail. If we were to, let us say, double the number but without the appropriate resource, our fear is that we would not be able to go into as much depth as we might like to tackle some of those changes. That is not to say that the programme may not continue following those initial 20; it is just that we want to make sure there is that right level of detail and dedication to those areas. I have heard your pitch for Eastbourne to be on our next list, and I will definitely make a note from our end.

You are right; Eastbourne was successful in round 1 of the levelling up fund. I have worked quite closely with the local MP on that, and I know she has addressed concerns around the inflationary aspects and the completion of the projects. We know that councils across the country vary dramatically in how they are resourced with regards to management of capital projects and the staff there. Some will have huge teams that are fantastic at writing these bids and carrying through the projects. Other smaller councils, such as Eastbourne, are not so well resourced by nature of the fact that they are smaller councils.

One of the things we have done as a department to try to help with delivery of projects is to put in place a package of revenue funding, which is available for local councils to draw upon through either buying in expertise and consultants, beefing up their own staff or additional training. Our own area teams have been paramount in supporting local councils with carrying out projects, cost analysis and completion to timescales. We are working in a difficult environment, given the vast inflationary pressures that we have been facing, but from our department's perspective I think we have done stellar work in making sure that that support is there for local councils to draw upon to ensure that those projects can be completed on time and, where possible, on budget.

I fear I may have missed some strands, but I will go on to the funding landscape more broadly. You are right—it is complex and has been, in my

view, a little daft that we have had so many different funding pots that overlap and, frankly, have largely done the same things. That is why we committed, as part of the *Levelling Up* White Paper but also more recently, to publishing a full funding simplification plan, which will be coming soon. I do not have a set date for you yet, I am afraid, but it is certainly imminent. We have been working hard on that.

Part of that is about drawing funds together and reducing where possible the need for competitive funds. We recognise that they are time consuming and costly for local authorities. We want to try to move away from that where possible and move to more allocation to allow the longer-term planning that you spoke of. We have deliberately modelled the new UK shared prosperity fund on an allocative model to provide that ability for longer-term strategic thinking by local authorities. The devolution agenda is an important part of this, too, for areas that have elements of devolution but particularly looking towards those trail-blazer areas, for now in Greater Manchester and the West Midlands. We hope that the deals that we have recently signed there will provide a bit of a blueprint for future devolution in other areas. I hope you will have seen that as part of that we are working towards that single financial settlement, which would provide for those devolved bodies to think about their own local priorities and to have that longer-term certainty about what cash is coming in so that they can plan and put forth projects that perhaps cannot be completed in 12 months but over five years might be.

We are doing a great deal of work on this because we have recognised the criticism, the feedback and the challenges that local authorities have been facing with these competitive pots. There is a lot of work going on and I am excited to finally publish our simplification plan when we are able to. Will, is there anything to add?

Will Garton: I agree with you. We want our levelling-up partnerships to be deep dives, not shallow dives, as the Minister said, so we have to do them properly and resource intensively. That said, one of the most difficult things is how you then learn lessons from those place-based partnerships and apply them across the country. We can do that; we are doing that. Some of the experience that John and the team had in Blackpool undoubtedly informs advice to Ministers and officials on what we are doing in the private rented sector in terms of legislation. It is a good, practical example of spending time in a place, learning some lessons and designing legislation accordingly, but we want sufficient depth with places, which we will not be able to do everywhere. As the Minister says, a devolution deal is open to everywhere. That is another way in, if you like, to focus coastal communities.

Lord Bassam of Brighton: Baroness Valentine, do you want to follow on with your questions?

Q27 **Baroness Valentine:** Yes. I have a couple of observations before diving into this one. The community renewal fund was an example of very bad practice. It is just a warning. The words that came out at the front end of that were rather good. All those Ministers you were talking about had put

the outcomes they wanted, and then the local authorities were left with six months to deliver outcomes that were, frankly, mad in that timescale. I know you have learned the lessons from that, but the words started off being good. That is just an observation.

The other observation is the town deal money. Again, it is the question I asked earlier about lessons. I see that in the 100-ish town deals you have. Where there is strong, genuinely independent business leadership, they are working. Where you have people centrally too close to the council or not genuinely trying to lead what is needed for the town, they do not seem to be working. It seems to me that there are some lessons around leadership on the town deal activity, which also applies to all the statutory.

Anyway, let me ask my question. How will government assess the policies and funds in place in terms of their impact in coastal areas? Will sufficiently detailed data be collected in the mission assessments to determine the impact in coastal areas? Sorry, there are a lot of these. Do the Government intend to consider how data can be collected from coastal communities regarding the challenges they face, including population transience and the high numbers of people claiming sickness and disability benefits? Finally, how will best practice be shared among coastal areas when deploying funds to tackle local challenges?

Dehenna Davison: On this I will largely hand over to my data guru, Will, but broadly I think that the metrics around each mission and how they will be assessed were set out in the annexe to the White Paper, which Will has a copy of here, as if by magic. We have established the spatial data unit, which is working alongside the ONS to pull together data at the right granular level that can then be applied in a whole range of scenarios. If we wanted to pull data specifically about coastal communities from that, that would be possible. This is a little bit above my head, so I will hand over to my experts.

Will Garton: I will do my best. Thank you for setting out the questions in advance. It makes it very helpful.

How will we assess the policies and funds in terms of their impact on coastal areas? For all the historic funds to date, the levelling up fund, freeports, the towns fund and the UKSPF, we have published evaluation strategies. All those evaluations will be able to be viewed from a coastal perspective, and the same is true of freeports. The impact will be assessed through a proper, thorough evaluation, as you would expect.

We did indeed learn lessons from the community renewal fund and have tried to make the UK shared prosperity fund a much lighter-touch, more mature way of doing business with our partners in places; thank you for recognising that change.

Will sufficiently detailed data be collected in the mission assessments to determine the impact on coastal areas? Yes, absolutely. This is the missions and metrics technical annexe. It tells you the geographical area

at which we are collecting data on both the lead indicators behind each mission and the supporting indicators. There are a number of them. We are working currently to make that even more detailed and granular.

For example, when the White Paper was published a year ago, we had GVA per hour worked by country and region, which frankly is too big a geographical scale to be of much use for coastal communities, or indeed for any community. Now, as a result of our work with the ONS, we can do that on what the statisticians call a lower super output area—what you and I call neighbourhoods. It gives you a sense of granularity that we have never had before. Very soon, the ONS will publish data on R&D spend at a regional level, where previously we had it only at a national level. We are looking at doing well-being by local authority. The ONS is doing work on transport, again by community.

We have very good understanding of all the mission metrics, both lead metrics and supporting indicators, how progress can be measured and what the other challenges are, because no doubt they do exist.

Baroness Valentine: This is not my specialist area either, but whereas Blackpool is pretty much along the coast, other local authorities are a mix of coastal and non-coastal. I guess implicit in this question is whether you can take your ward or neighbourhood data and sum it along the coast, as it were, as a subset of a local authority.

Will Garton: We can for some; it is GVA. We cannot for them all, not because we do not want to or do not recognise the value; the problem is whether it is technically possible to do it with any degree of accuracy. We are making great strides, and if you had told me a year ago that we would be doing GVA per hour via neighbourhood I would have been impressed. We keep going at this and we recognise just how important it is. Not all the statistics, of course, have to be of ONS standards, but rightly that is the standard that the ONS will want to uphold.

You asked about population transience. The ONS now does annual data on internal migration, which is better than the 10-year census data. That is an improvement. In our levelling-up partnerships to date, we then work with the local authority to try to get under the skin of what it thinks is happening in terms of population transience at a much more micro level. These are not national statistics. They are not data that we would publish as such because there is a risk that they are not 100% accurate, but that does not mean that we let the best be the enemy of the good. We try to use the local authority's knowledge and our own understanding as well as our own data scientists to get a grip of what is happening in a particular locality.

Lord Bassam of Brighton: I am conscious that we have 25 minutes left and four question areas to work through, so let us try to keep it crisp.

Q28 **Lord McNally:** I take the hidden message in that, Chair. The thing that worries us, of which the law centre was one example, is the silo mentality in addressing these problems. Have the Government continued to hold

meetings with cross-Whitehall official-level groups to discuss coastal communities? If not, do the Government intend to reinstate these to ensure joined-up working across government departments? I have been listening and you have referred to a Permanent Secretary's group and an interministerial group, but are these specific to the problems of coastal towns or is one needed?

Dehenna Davison: The interministerial group is not specific to coastal communities. It is covering levelling up more broadly. As I have said, we have different themes at different meetings. We have had anti-social behaviour, which we know is a challenge faced in many coastal communities. Very deliberately, we are taking the view that focusing this interministerial group around the levelling-up agenda more broadly is the right approach for reasons I outlined at the beginning, in the sense that while there are shared challenges across coastal communities, they are not completely homogenous. Some coastal communities are very successful; others used to be successful and are now facing the challenges of losing their visitor trade or what have you. We are focusing it around our 12 levelling-up missions because we know there are challenges faced that vary, but broadly we believe that those 12 missions are the right ones.

At the moment, there is not a plan to reinstate a coastal communities officials group meeting. That does not mean it is completely off the table at any point, and it certainly does not mean that we could not use the IMG specifically to have a session that focuses on coastal communities should we choose to, whereby we get every department in to talk about some of the core challenges. I think that could be a very good use for the IMG that brings about that cross-government effort, which we know is so vital. If I recall correctly—it was a little before my time in the department—the coastal communities group met pre-Covid. Unfortunately, Covid hit, at which point it was put on hold. Then we published our White Paper and decided that the focus should be more broadly around those levelling-up missions.

There are still areas where we are working incredibly well cross-departmentally. Going back to the levelling-up partnerships, we have already discussed where we are knocking heads together across government and making sure that all the cogs are moving in the right direction.

Q29 **Lord McNally:** You said that the number of funding pots is a little daft, and your colleague said that what was needed for regeneration was multifaceted, deep-seated and holistic policies. Would that not be best dealt with by a Minister for the coastal communities?

Dehenna Davison: It is a fair question and certainly one that I have been asked by some MPs from coastal communities. The challenge that we would have in doing so is that it is very possible and very plausible that there could then be a call for a Minister specifically for non-coastal rural communities or inner city communities. We do not want to end up with lots of people who are doing very important work focused on their

specific communities but where there may be a lot of crossover on the particular challenges.

That is why I think that the 12 missions framework is the right one. You may disagree, but I think it is the right approach, rather than having lots of people doing fantastic work for their communities but not recognising that crossover. For example, if we were talking about productivity, there are certainly non-coastal rural areas that see that as a challenge, as there are coastal areas that see that as a challenge. If we had two Ministers working on that separately, I am not sure that would necessarily be the best use of their time, officials' time or, frankly, taxpayers' money. I would rather see us focus in a much more holistic way, and that is why I think the approach we are taking is the right one. That does not mean there is not more work that we can do, of course, on the coastal communities agenda.

Lord Bassam of Brighton: It is worth just reflecting, is it not? I was once the Minister for football hooligans; it was part of my portfolio. There might be a case for having a Minister for coastal communities as part of the portfolio so that they could be the focus of activity. I make that as a comment; you do not have to necessarily respond, particularly on the hooligan bit.

Dehenna Davison: I am guessing it took you to my home town of Sheffield. We had a bit of a problem with football hooliganism at one point, great city though it is.

Lord McNally: On or off the pitch?

Dehenna Davison: A bit of both.

Q30 **Lord McNally:** One last thought: a lot of your direction of travel is towards devolution, but that has to be a two-way street. You have to devolve to a credible body to take the power, to take the money, to take the decisions. As a declaration of interest, I am a member of Blackpool Pride of Place's national advisory board, which quite naturally we think works very well. How do you encourage good practice at local level that makes them fit for purpose for the power that you want to devolve?

Dehenna Davison: It is a good question. There are so many different styles of local governance. That is why very deliberately we have tried not to take a top-down approach drawing lines on maps. With our devolution agenda, if there is not local buy-in and areas that have good working practices internally and good local relationships, the agenda will never work. That is why we are making sure that it is local area led. They come to us wanting a deal, at which point we work with them to try to make that happen.

As I said, there are a whole range of different styles, different governance structures and different relationships with the private sector. Each of those are assessed as part of our programme. There is one devolution deal we are exploring at the moment at very early exploratory stages, where we have spoken to the authorities in question and said, "As

part of this, if we go ahead, what we would like to do is review the cross-authority governance structures because at the moment they do not seem to be working as effectively as they can”.

Each deal is different and bespoke, but certainly there is the potential to improve those structures and make sure they are working in the right way, frankly, to get the best results for the local area. Will, do you have anything to add?

Will Garton: As the Minister says, it is very bespoke and that is not supposed to sound like a cop-out answer. We know that maturity of relationships, capacity and capability, and vision for locality differ greatly. If you are getting a devolution deal, level 3 in our framework—powers, money and responsibility—we want to make absolutely sure that you have good governance. Last week, alongside the trail-blazer devolution deals—which went further than ever before in terms of the devolution agenda—we published an accountability framework to sharpen accountability at one end of the spectrum. Of course, the strongest single form of accountability is a single figurehead. It is a single directly elected mayor who voters know and can hold accountable for the things they do with the powers and resources that we then agree with that locality.

Q31 **Lord Haskel:** The report made very strong recommendations about transport. The levelling-up toolkit spoke of strategic transport spending, and earlier we heard about bridges in Grimsby. Have the Government considered how effective current transport strategies are in tackling the challenges faced by coastal areas as far as transport is concerned?

Dehenna Davison: I hope you will recognise that, not being a DfT Minister, I am a little limited in my granular knowledge of transport policy. This is precisely the reason why transport is a core part of our levelling-up missions. It is one of those areas that do not tend to be at the top of one’s mind when one thinks about levelling up. One thinks about health, education, jobs, et cetera, but if you cannot access those jobs or health appointments or you cannot visit your loved ones and what have you, levelling up is always doomed to fail. Naturally, we need to make sure that transport is at the forefront there.

There is a lot of work going on from DfT. I could read out the list but I will not insult you by doing so today. That is why our levelling-up partnerships are crucial for addressing the issue. We talked about the bridges in Grimsby. As Will highlighted, without that levelling-up partnership that is probably an area that would never necessarily have made it up the top of government’s agenda quickly enough to have the impact it needs in the timescale it needs. I think the levelling-up partnerships will be crucial.

Similarly, on devolution again—I am sorry that I am beating the same drum here with a lot of the messaging I am using—we have specific transport strands in there. The trail-blazer deals, as that blueprint to future transport devolution, go incredibly far on things such as the bus

service operators grant. They go further on integrated rail. It is a comprehensive transport offer that we are putting forward.

There is good movement on this. There is still a long way to go and we have recognised that there are challenges. I spoke to the East of England APPG not long ago, and it was talking about some of the particular challenges around its coastal transport issues. There is further to go, but good progress is certainly being made.

Will Garton: The only other thing I add is that in coastal communities buses are, if we were to pick one thing, the single most important thing. There is a problem nationally that the usage of buses has not recovered to pre-Covid levels, but funding to ensure that the bus recovery grant is extended until June and the £2 fare is extended to June makes a difference. We recognise the importance.

In Grimsby, as we said, it was central. Three bridges were critical. When we were in Blyth, and I am sure the people of Blyth and Northumberland more widely would welcome better transport, it was not the number one thing. That is because the Ashington to Newcastle line was reopening anyway, so it was not a huge focus of our partnership. That is not because we underestimate the impact of it but because it was being dealt with elsewhere and it made sense to focus our resources in Blyth on town centre regeneration.

Place by place, it can depend. Where places tell us it is the number one thing, we are always up for seeing what we can do to bring about improvements.

Dehenna Davison: It is briefly worth highlighting as well that some of our capital funds have transport projects right at their heart. That is something that was deliberately a part of that working in conjunction with DfT, because we recognise that in some areas those local transport projects, be it a new bypass, changes to a rail line or something, can be crucial in getting that area running in the way that it wants to be.

John McManus: I will echo what the Minister was saying; there are probably three echoes for me. Increasingly, when the Department for Transport makes decisions around the strategic road and rail networks, it takes into account the wider benefits. How do we tackle social inequality and promote productivity? We have talked about the myriad programmes. Within a lot of those programmes is support for local transport schemes to make sure that once we have people into communities we can more easily move them around those communities. The Minister has talked to the partnerships approach to help us to identify those priority transport projects that are particularly holding back growth and equality in areas. There is a triangle of interventions there from a national agenda all the way through to a local agenda.

Lord Bassam of Brighton: Why is it, then, that over the last three years we have had, I think, a 14% reduction in bus routes? I thought that the Government were heading in the right direction with their

approach to bringing back the Beeching lines, but we have had only very limited progress in Blyth. I am not sure that the route has reopened entirely. Some of our areas and coastal communities are left stranded at the end of a non-existent railway line.

John McManus: We have the Restoring Your Railway programme, which is looking at the Beeching lines closing. We are in the process of reviewing which of those are prioritised, and you have mentioned the Northumberland line that is close to being commissioned. There are a wave of other schemes that will come forward, and a number of those will touch coastal communities.

Dehenna Davison: I agree that it is more difficult when you are in a community that is the end of the line in the sense that there is not that through travel and the need for that additional spur-style transport system.

Will Garton: I think the straight answer to your question is that fewer people are travelling on buses, and they are private companies in the main. We acknowledge that this is a problem, which is why bus recovery funding and the £2 fare have been extended until June. Numbers are down. The sector was in some senses fragile pre-Covid and that is definitely a problem that we are very cognisant of, especially for coastal communities. That is why money has gone in, but overall usage being down presents a macro problem for us all in thinking about this.

Lord Bassam of Brighton: Yes, but usage will not recover if you are taking the routes out. Let us just park it there.

Q32 **Lord Bichard:** One of the conclusions of the Select Committee in its report was that coastal towns needed a particular priority to be given to digital connectivity, partly because they are often quite isolated and partly because digital connection is so important to grow the economy and to grow businesses. The first part of my question is: do you agree with that? The second part is: have we seen any improvement since the publication of the report? I assume you have data on this because it is fairly easy data to get. Thirdly, what plans do you have to ensure that things change going forward? The *Communities on the Edge* report showed that coastal towns did not have the same level of connectivity as non-coastal towns. What will you do to address that and what milestones do you have to do that in the run-up to the 2030 Project Gigabit target?

Dehenna Davison: I think you are exactly right. You guys were at the forefront on the digital connectivity side. Your report was published in 2019, if I remember correctly, and since then the pandemic, if nothing else, showed just how much reliance on good, strong digital connectivity is crucial. With so many people working from home or moving to hybrid working, we recognise that this is even more of a priority than ever before.

You will know about Project Gigabit and the Government's schemes to roll out that gigabit broadband. That is alongside the shared rural network as

well, which we hope will massively improve mobile connectivity. There has been pretty good progress thus far on the 4G coverage. That has now reached over 90% of the UK more broadly. The ambition is to reach 95% of UK land, which is a huge stride forward compared with where we were before.

From last January to this March was the most up-to-date information we could get on gigabit broadband. Last January we were on 65.8% of premises with gigabit-capable broadband.

Lord Bichard: Is that nationally, Minister?

Dehenna Davison: That is nationally.

Lord Bichard: What about coastal towns?

Dehenna Davison: I do not specifically have the information, but I will ask DCMS for that information and share it with you. To show signs of progress more broadly, it has gone from 65% to 74.6% in just over a year, so good progress is being made. There is certainly further to go, but I know that DCMS is taking its responsibilities on this incredibly seriously. As I said, our priority on this area has been galvanised by the impact of the pandemic on the way we operate and our reliance on digital connectivity.

Lord Bichard: You will understand, Minister, that what we are talking about here is coastal towns. If we do not have any data on coastal towns and whether connectivity is improving and at what pace, it is very difficult to draw a conclusion as to whether it is being given priority, which is what the committee asked for.

Will Garton: This is a mission that is going well, and good progress is being made. Ofcom publishes the percentage of premises with gigabit-capable broadband and the percentage of 4G and 5G coverage provided by at least one mobile network operator at UK local authority level.

Lord Bichard: If that is available at an authority level, you should be able to draw some conclusions on whether coastal towns are getting priority.

Will Garton: My understanding is that that information is in the public domain.

Lord Bichard: That does not quite answer my question. I wonder whether, to save time, you could let the committee have that data specific to coastal towns with a trend graph on how it is moving.

Dehenna Davison: Yes.

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

Q33 **Lord Taylor of Holbeach:** I apologise for being late. I had a long-standing dental appointment and this meeting was very spontaneous.

I would like to ask a question slightly related to DCMS. You will see from my interests that I have been a leader of a group on the visitor economy, and within that responsibility DCMS commissioned a report by Nick de Bois on the visitor economy and, in particular, the role of destination management organisations. Given your responsibility in the same area, I wonder how this ties in with the changes to LEPs, which are in a way parallel organisations. One is a funding organisation and the other is a publicity organisation. How do the recent changes to LEPs make a difference and how do you see them making a difference to your task?

Dehenna Davison: You will know that we are consulting around future funding for LEPs and looking at rolling those into mayoral combined authorities or local authorities. That consultation has just launched.

Will Garton: Yes, or it is about to imminently.

Dehenna Davison: That consultation will be live very shortly. It goes back to the point I made about many people doing similar work. Looking at devolved areas where there is already a lot of strategic thinking going on, in many ways it makes sense to co-ordinate more strongly the work of LEPs and those mayoral combined authorities by rolling them into one body, as it were. We have certainly heard from mayors that this is something they think would be incredibly beneficial for their strategic planning.

You have caught me out a little on your visitor groups question so I may need to refer back to you on that one in writing, if that is all right.

Q34 **Lord Taylor of Holbeach:** Yes. Destination management organisations and tourist authorities are found more or less across the country and they apply just as much to Stratford-upon-Avon as they do to Skegness. From our inquiry's point of view, Skegness is where we are looking, but they have similar characteristics. There are lessons to be learned from all places that depend on the visitor economy and, in particular, on tourism. For example, the High Peak and Skegness have similar problems. I just wondered about the extent to which you had considered this, because it has been somewhere else. It has been in DCMS and now it is with—I forget what you call your department now.

Dehenna Davison: DLUHC these days.

Lord Taylor of Holbeach: There are so many initials. Local government and communities are important catalysts for making these effective organisations and they can make a difference, particularly to coastal towns.

Dehenna Davison: In that sense, it is probably best for me to refer back to the committee in writing with a little more information.

Lord Taylor of Holbeach: Thank you, yes.

Lord Bassam of Brighton: I think that would be helpful. The whole LEPs realignment with local government is clearly quite complicated. We have

38 LEPs at the minute. I am not quite sure how you can work those into the framework of local government. I can see that as a very difficult jigsaw puzzle to complete, but the accountability and the ability to link them into business networks is pretty critical to regeneration. It would be interesting if you could give us a bit more detail on that. I appreciate that it is an announcement that is catching up with itself.

Dehenna Davison: We will certainly follow up in writing.

Lord Bassam of Brighton: Does anybody have any more questions for the Minister today?

Q35 **Baroness Valentine:** I have one if I have time. You mentioned the ASB conversation you had with other Ministers and I have been reflecting on that. At ground level, getting the different services to work together is a nightmare, I guess. What do you do as a result of meeting? I am conscious of work being done in wards where a huge amount of effort needs to go in by charities to try to force the government departments to work together to a combined aim and, therefore, address ASB. What comes out of a meeting like the one you have just had?

Dehenna Davison: We are very keen not to have meetings for the sake of them being a talking shop. We always have specific actions for departments to report in with what specific measures and actions they are taking on a particular thing. We will often follow up with a plan. The anti-social behaviour action plan largely came out of the meeting of our interministerial group, whereby each department was asked to provide information about the steps it was already taking and what more it could do, and then it was all drawn together following an extensive write-round in government. We are not a fan of talking shops; we are a fan of doing things. We are very keen to make sure that our interministerial groups have set outcomes.

The Chair: Minister, Mr Garton and Mr McManus, it has been a fascinating hour and it confirms why it is so important to have meetings in person, particularly with Ministers. I am very grateful not only to the Minister but to the committee for this rearrangement. I think that the discussion will be extremely helpful in the consideration of the follow-up. We would also very much welcome as much information as you have on some of these specific details of seaside towns in particular. I thank you all. We have had a very interesting hour.