Written evidence submitted by the City Region Economic Development Institute [FFL 027]

Funding for Levelling Up Inquiry

This response is provided by the City Region Economic Development Institute (City REDI) and is based on a range of studies (including the Research England Funded West Midlands Regional Economic Development Institute, research carried out through secondment to the West Midlands Combined Authority, Greater Birmingham Local Enterprise Partnership, Cabinet Office, Industrial Strategy Council and the Smart Specialisation Hub. It is also based on work carried out advising Treasury on the Green Book Guidance and Magenta Book. Our work is both academic and applied as we work closely across a range of partners delivering levelling up.

Findings below are based on research to date conducted as part of the LIPSIT project (Newman et al., 2021), undertaken by the Universities of Birmingham (City REDI), Cardiff, Surrey and Warwick and the think tank Demos, and funded by the ESRC, Grant ES/T002468/1. The aim of the LIPSIT project (Local Institutions, Productivity, Sustainability and Inclusivity Trade-offs) is to identify institutional and organisational arrangements at the regional level that tend to lead to the 'good' management of policy trade-offs associated with increasing productivity, and to make recommendations based on this.

The following findings are also taken from work carried out by staff at City-REDI whilst on secondment to The Industrial Strategy Council ('the Council') which was an independent non-statutory advisory group established from November 2018 to March 2021. It provided impartial and expert evaluation of the government's progress in delivering the aims of the Industrial Strategy. Its membership comprised of leading men and women from business, academia, and civil society. The Council undertook substantial primary research (Regan et al, 2021; Romaniuk et al, 2021) into devolution and governance structures across the UK. The aim was to draw lessons from how local institutions work together to drive policy implementation, which structures seem to work best, and gauge appetite for greater devolution.

1. **How can the Government ensure that all areas that need funding for Levelling up receive adequate support with the bidding process and subsequently receive adequate funding?**

    - Budgetary certainty over the longer-term is one of the central issues for the implementation of levelling up. This is because levelling up requires interventions aimed at alleviating the long-standing economic challenges of left-behind local areas and regions. These challenges can only be addressed with a long-term strategy, and a long-term strategy is only possible with budgetary certainty. These budgets should be based on need and requirements of place. (Newman et al 2021)

    - Winding down funding competitions which create complexity and waste resources, and initiating a process of setting shared objectives between local authorities, combined authorities and organising single pot funding would be helpful in ensuring that resources are targeted more appropriately at local needs (Newman et al 2021).

- Multi-year settlements are needed to create more certainty and enable longer-term strategic planning and implementation. In addition to multi-year settlements, there is a need for a more streamlined and less bespoke bidding process for central pots of money (from Regan et al, 2021)

2. **What are the challenges of competitive bidding and will this impact areas with limited resources and capabilities for bidding?**

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- Transformational change requires long-term budgetary certainty – competitive bidding does not align well with this objective, especially when it involves short-term funding that is exposed to the daily turbulence of national and local politics (Newman et al., 2021)
- The funding system is highly inefficient and unable to deliver the transformational, cross-sector change necessary for levelling up (Newman et al., 2021). For example, an estimation of bids submitted for one round of the Community Renewal Fund in the West Midlands came to £3.3million of resources committed across 110 bids, of which only 8 were successful. (Brittain et al 2021)
- Existing funding rounds, funding competitions, and budgetary regulations mean that local authorities and regional bodies tend to focus on a one-year horizon, which is insufficient for the delivery of transformative change and significantly limits the capacity for partnership working. There is insufficient institutional certainty to plan into the future, with local and regional policymakers knowing that when a funding period ends, there could be a funding cliff edge and/or top-down institutional reform (Newman et al., 2021).
- Competitive processes often rely on piloting small scale projects and programmes which do not have the scale for transformative change and impact. Larger-scale interventions and investments (especially with capital costs) take longer to develop. Good business cases require time to develop the strategic case, examine options and propose sound operational and commercial cases. The turnaround times on competitive bid processes can mean bids need to be written within weeks, which means that only ideas which already exist can be submitted. They therefore may not be the best or appropriate bid for the funding call or the needs of the place.
- Many local authorities do not have the expertise to conduct a robust economic case and usually have to seek consultancy support for this. This can be costly when there is no

guarantee that the bid will be successful. This also creates an opportunity cost for the local authority as money spent on developing a bid is money that is not being spent elsewhere.

- Short-term funding undermines partnership working with the private and third sectors as timescales for development are often too short, and the lack of long-term security of the funding makes it difficult for other partners to justify dedicating time and effort (Newman et al., 2021)
- Due to over-specified funding pots, it can be the case that regions do not bid for what they think is needed but for what they think the UK government will approve. Spending is confined to a strict central framework of project appraisal and evaluation as set out in the Treasury's Green Book (Seaford et al., 2020).
- However, the Green Book provides guidance, and the responsible funding department does have considerable flexibility including a 'light touch' approach on smaller funding pots. There are also issues that the central business case for the programme is rarely shared, so there is limited transparency on the business case behind a programme places are bidding into.
- Many important projects for places fail to attract funding because they do not meet the specific requirements of centrally designed funding pots (Newman et al., 2021).
- The current inefficiencies in the competitive funding system mean that the more money that is spent, the more money that is wasted (more competitive processes, results in more time spent on bidding). Local and regional institutions waste time and resources on the bidding process, and their long-term strategies are in part a product of their bidding capabilities rather than the needs of the local economy. The danger is that the inefficiencies and failures of the competitive process will multiply if levelling up is delivered in this way (Newman et al., 2021).
- Subnational institutions are in direct competition for funding which undermines regional cooperation and hinders partnership-working across geographical boundaries (this is particularly problematic in some policy areas such as transport, R&D, sector supply chains, housing supply, educational and health provision) (Newman et al., 2021)
- Strategy and long-term planning is difficult in this context because funding is short-term and fragmented. It also can lead to disjointed funding i.e. programmes which rely on complex funding from different pots may fail as funding is not won for all parts of the programme. Possible examples include - innovation districts without business support, transport infrastructure without housing, educational infrastructure without work-based placements or careers education.
- Fragmented funding streams provide an unstable foundation for long-term and coherent strategy, and prevents the cross-sector holistic interventions that are necessary for transformative change (Newman et al., 2021)

How the funding system prevents levelling up	
Levelling up is place-based	Local and regional institutions have limited control over how funding is spent, meaning that they are often unable to address place-specific challenges. As a result, they also struggle to develop and nurture their economic and cultural specialisms.
Levelling up is multi-level	Short-term funding undermines collaboration between organisations at the local and regional levels. Partnerships between tiers of government are weakened by competitive funding.
Levelling up is cross-sector	With various pots of funding coming from different departments, cross-sector policymaking is very challenging. Fragmented funding pots have to be stitched together into cross-sector agendas. These challenges are compounded by underfunded organisations and small teams.
Levelling up is strategic	The fragmentation of the funding system means that place-based strategies are based not on local challenges and opportunities but on the projects that they can win funding for. These projects are significantly influenced by the particularities of central funding pots.
Levelling up is long-term	Existing funding rounds mean that short-termism is built into local and regional policy. This is partly because funding is for particular short-term projects, but also because local and regional authorities are too exposed to the turbulence of national politics.

Source: Newman et al. (2021)

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- Competition for central pots of money is too resource intensive, can drive poor behaviours (free riding) and lacks transparency (asymmetric information). This issue is compounded by the fact that there are variances in capacity across institutions.
- Funding uncertainty creates over-reliance on consultants, who are often more costly and have a limited positive impact on building institutional knowledge or delivery capability.
- Internal capacity, particularly in analytical functions, has been considered insufficient and has held institutions back in terms of developing coherent evidence-based, long-term strategies and securing funds from central pots. Insufficient skills and capacity also limit their ability to conduct evaluation and learning.

International cross-comparative analysis conducted by City-REDI, emphasises the importance of **investing for the long-term** if countries and city-regions want to reduce inter- and intra-regional inequalities. A commitment to scale and longevity in funding was imperative in how all the places we studied have overcome significant social and economic inequalities in recent years.

Germany spent almost €2 trillion between 1990 and 2014 on addressing regional on policies to address regional inequalities. The Ruhr region alone received €4 billion in EU structural funding between 1989 and 2011. While in Cleveland the city's flagship project is based on a 20-to-30-year horizon. The Leipzig case study reveals it is not just high levels of funding that are important, but policy designed and funded over the long-term. As I showed on the graph a few minutes ago, reducing unemployment in Leipzig was not achieved quickly. Instead, it took sustained high levels of funding, over 30 thirty years, in particular through the Innovation and Structural Change Fund, to achieve this reduction. Our research suggests that to achieve the missions set out in the White Paper, there needs to be a focus on sustained longer-term funding (Taylor et al., 2022 from evidence presented at APPG on Left Behind Neighbourhoods).

- Research for the Industrial Strategy Council shows that political and funding uncertainty negatively impacted on the process of developing Local Industrial Strategies (LISs). Securing stakeholder engagement was at times challenging due to a lack of clear vision of how the LIS would translate into funding. (Romaniuk et al, 2021) The report also notes large differences in the number of employees in LEPs and the consequences of this in terms of LEPs securing funding for local programmes and interventions. Moreover, a degree of consultation fatigue is emerging. Interviewees suggested that businesses in particular may be reticent to take part in future consultations until clarity is provided on future funding opportunities. (Romaniuk et al, 2021). Funding uncertainty impacts on local willingness to engage in discussions regarding evaluation plans (Romaniuk et al, 2021).
- In relation to LIS development, regional disparities are not only visible in gross value added (GVA) figures, but also in Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) capacity. Larger LEPs have more capacity to secure new funding, whereas small, rural LEPs struggle the most (Romaniuk et al, 2021).
- The LEPs which have performed strongly in terms of total allocations for central government funding including the Regional Growth Fund, the Growing Places Fund, and the Single Growth Deal are Greater Manchester, London and Leeds City Region. Small, rural LEPS struggle the most to obtain funding. Whilst Greater Manchester stands out outside of London, combined funding for the West Midlands LEPs (i.e. Greater Birmingham and Solihull, Coventry & Warwickshire, and the Black Country) is very similar with a similar population. (LEP funding report).
- All LEPs considered that cross-LEP projects are challenging to implement. Many suggested that competitive funding pots actively discouraged cross-LEP working (Taylor 2018).
- LEPs have experienced challenges with regard to aligning funding from different pots to support key projects. In particular, interviewees emphasised the difficulty combining capital and revenue funding in European Structural Investment Funds projects (Taylor 2018).

3. How does levelling up funding integrate with other funding streams such as the Towns Fund, the High St Fund, the Sustainable Transport Fund etc?

- There is a lack of evidence about how funding is integrated at a local level across funding pots. The limited availability and transparency of business cases for funding contributes to this lack of evidence. There is also a lack of evidence on what does not get funded and why certain bids do not get funded whilst others do. City-REDI at the University of Birmingham found that historically, there have been concerns surrounding bids such as the Towns Fund, around bias and lack of transparency in the selection process for awarding bids. The rationale for the selection of some bids and not others was to be unconvincing, with justifications for selections being vague and based on sweeping assumptions. Moving forward, it would be helpful if the government was clearer on its process for ranking interventions and its reasoning for the success or failure of submitted bids. (Pugh, 2022).

- Combined levelling up funding has not been aligned to population levels so alignment to other population-based funding has been difficult (i.e. local authority budgets)

Top 10 allocations of 'levelling up funding per capita

Funds Covered: Coastal Community Fund; Coastal recovery Fund; Community Ownership Fund; Future High Streets Fund; Towns Fund; Levelling Up fund; Community Renewal fund; Shared Prosperity Fund; Getting Building Fund; Local Growth Fund; Transforming Cities Fund

Allocated To	total	population	Price per capita
Isles of Scilly	£49,086,826	2226	£22,052
Copeland	£50,969,787	68041	£749
Barrow-in-Furness	£45,679,064	66726	£685
Ashfield	£72,072,006	128337	£562
Boston	£33,937,331	70837	£479
South Derbyshire	£51,754,346	109516	£473
Lewes	£47,847,713	103525	£462
Norwich	£65,093,709	142177	£458
Chesterfield	£47,875,285	104930	£456
Scarborough	£49,530,938	108737	£456

Source: City REDI analysis 2022 based on data released via select committee

Allocation to areas with highest populations and amount per capita

Allocated To	total	population	Price per capita
Greater London Authority	£319,888,212	9002500	£36
South East	£573,300,000	4283100	£134
West Midlands MCA	£771,667,496	2939900	£262
Greater Manchester	£587,500,000	2848300	£206
Greater Manchester MCA	£316,860,100	2848300	£111
Leeds City Region	£680,100,000	2345200	£290
West Yorkshire Combined Aut	£321,267,933	2345200	£137
D2N2	£240,600,000	2234500	£108
North East (includes North Eas	£376,900,000	2003600	£188
South Yorkshire MCA	£361,600,000	1800000	£201

Source: City REDI analysis 2022 based on data released via select committee

- It is also difficult to integrate competitive pots due to conflicting outcomes, outputs, timescales, geographies, and boundaries of different pots. Geography is an issue as pots can be allocated at both political and administrative boundaries (and the two are not always the same). For instance, Local Authority, Combined Authority and region are used for different pots, for example the adult education budgets and levelling up budgets.
- There have also been large scale budgetary cuts in local authorities which means services which would normally support competitive pots aren't there. Such as match funding, discretionary services (such as mental health support, youth work and employability programmes). For instance, in Birmingham non-schools education saw net spending decrease of 56.6% between 2010/11 and 2019/20[1]. If Birmingham was then to run a skills, programme it may no longer have the supporting services it would have once had to help develop a strong bid or implement interventions effectively.
- As funding pots are often small, local authorities use the different funding pots to support each other to generate larger outcomes. For instance, if the Towns Fund was used to build a community hub, then levelling up funding may be used to fund a computer room within the hub with IT skills training available. Essentially, because the funding on offer is usually small, local authorities have to combine different funds to create one larger programme, which is able to make effective change, against target outputs and outcomes. The different funding pots alone rarely offer substantial levels of funding for local authorities to implement interventions which would have an effective change against solving real challenges within local authorities (Pugh, 2022).

4. How can the Government achieve its aim of streamlining funding for Levelling Up?

[1] NAO. (2021). Financial sustainability of local authorities visualisation: update. Available at: https://www.nao.org.uk/reports/financial-sustainability-of-local-authorities-visualisation-update/

- Transformational change cannot be delivered through fragmented funding because it requires a cross-sector holistic approach (Newman et al., 2021)
- To deliver the long-term transformational change inherent in the levelling up agenda, local authorities and regional bodies need to receive as much of their funding as possible via a single block grant. This is because they need the ability to plan their own budgets in line with long-term economic strategy. If fragmented funding streams come from the centre, place-based policy interventions will also be fragmented, and thus significantly less effective (Newman et al., 2021)

5. How can funding focus on both wider regions, as well as individual towns?

- City-REDI research with the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy into how international city-regions have sought to address regional inequalities, identified how Germany and France have systems that enable funds to be redistributed across regions and cities to address regional and urban inequalities. They show how tax powers can be designed to compensate areas with low tax revenues (Taylor et al., 2022), as the examples below demonstrate.
- In Germany, the national government raises approximately €700bn in tax revenues per year, which it distributes between national, federal and local governments. Germany's fiscal equalisation policy is designed to support a more equal redistribution of tax income across the country between states and to ensure a diversified revenue stream across jurisdictions. This ensures that no jurisdiction is reliant upon a single source of revenue.

- The French state redistributes funds between local authorities through the *Dotation globale de fonctionnement* (DGF), the main state allocation to regional and local authorities in France. It aims to provide authorities with stable and predictable resourcing and to implement vertical equalising by supporting authorities confronted by costs they are unable to cover. It is made up of a block grant and an equalisation component responding to the challenges faced by different types of *communes* (i.e. rural, urban). The equalisation component takes account of the potential fiscal revenue[2] of *Métropoles*. The way in which state equalisation policies incorporate potential fiscal revenue at the local level is an example of how devolving tax powers to sub-regional authorities can seek to prevent entrenching inequalities in low tax areas. The increase in horizontal redistribution mechanisms was identified as important in limiting fiscal capacity gaps and increasing local autonomy. (Taylor.A, publication date awaited)
- City-REDI analysis of international experiences of city-regions which have made progress with levelling up conducted in partnership with the Industrial Strategy Council (Taylor et al., 2021) found that that levelling up of regions does not necessarily mean levelling up within regions. Socio-economic inequalities between residents in each place were more difficult to

[2] Desjardins, Xavier and Estèbe, Philippe (2018) La décentralisation : comment faire revivre le projet émancipateur ? *Revue d'économie financière,* 132(4), pp.21-37.

address than attracting new businesses and high-skilled workers. This highlights the importance of affordable housing and targeted investment in disadvantaged communities. City-REDI research with CIPFA (Taylor et al., 2022) also shows how attempts to level up can create new challenges, for example through increased tourism, for communities. The number of overnight stays in Nantes almost doubled from between 2010 and 2019. Whilst this has brought important economic benefits - indeed visitors brought an estimated direct economic benefit to the combined metropolitan area of €43m in 2014, but this has created challenges in terms of pressure on infrastructure, particularly transport services, housing, childcare and schools.

6. **How can Government ensure that spending across all departmental budgets can be adjusted accordingly to ensure all of government is focused on achieving levelling up and that resources are directed to the areas most in need?**

   Alignment of budgets into one pot and alignment of outputs and outcomes to delivery of that pot would be beneficial. Allocation according to a needs-based formula would help, rather than just be on a straight formula based on population but on level of population which is disadvantaged, because of access to jobs, poor health, poor educational attainment, poor connectivity or poverty.

7. **How are Levelling Up projects being measured in terms of value for money and for their contribution to Levelling Up?**

   - Value for money assessments are often calculated via uplifts in GVA at a place-based level. Then calculating the benefit cost ratio and net present value, the higher the values for both, the greater the value for money. In order to generate a higher GVA and therefore generate a greater value for money, outputs for projects are usually heavily based around employment, apprenticeships, product development and transport infrastructure. This means interventions with low economic value for money are often sidelined, even though they may have the potential to generate effective progression towards levelling up goals, such as qualification levels or improved wellbeing. However this is not how the Green Book should be implemented (HMT 2020).
   - For many projects it can be difficult to assess the value for money, as for instance net zero projects often have a negative value for money. This is because it is expensive to implement interventions such as retrofitting homes, and the expense can often outweigh the economic rewards. Therefore, economic value for money assessment is not always the best way to measure the benefits of a project.
   - Levelling Up contributions are being measured by either comparing key economic indicators (such as GVA, employment, NVQ level) for the local authority over time to see whether they have improved, or by comparing their current economic indicators to the national average. However, City-REDI research found that the lack of available data at a local authority level can often make it difficult for local authorities to understand the true impact of interventions (Swan, 2022).

8. **Is the UKSPF a sufficient replacement of the European Structural Investment Funds?**

   Research conducted in partnership with Midlands Engine shows that there has been an estimated 40% cut in funding compared to pre-Brexit, by 2024/25 (Hopkirk, 2022). Therefore, for many LAs in at least the West Midlands will mostly receive less money from UKSPF than they would have through EU funding.

9. **What is your assessment of the Levelling Up Fund, and what improvements could be made, with reference to:**

   a. **The bidding process** – this should be streamlined under the guidance of the HMT Treasury Green book Team and review by the Green Book User Network (HMT 2020), with specific focus on the applicability and detail required, with reference to the appropriate financial controls and levels. The process should also be streamlined through allocated single pots to local levels to deliver certain outputs (and the related outcomes). Allocations could then be made through negotiated development of strong business cases, by the relevant fund holder identifying the appropriate priorities in consultation with partners, identifying the appropriate delivery mechanisms locally and developing collaborative business cases that reduce duplication and waste (awaiting publication)

   b. Feedback on unsuccessful and successful applications – there is very little feedback on applications, partly due to the volume of applications that central government are faced with. There is also very little public scrutiny of bids as a result.

   c. **Transparency** – all business cases should be made available and the impact analysis of funding on place made transparent (as required by the latest Green Book Guidance). City-REDI analysis demonstrated only 1 in 8 successful business cases across 4 of the place based programmes could be accessed openly online (awaiting publication) This creates issues of transparency on spend, but also reduces the capability to share best practice, understand other funding which has been won or could be built on and concentrates knowledge in a small number of organisations and individuals.

   d. The impact of inflation

   Inflation is often included within business cases, within the financial and economic cases. However, business cases over the last couple of years will not have calculated for the exponential rise in costs, and with no further funding available to help with the increased costs, intervention schemes may have to be rolled back – this is especially the case for capital interventions which will be impacted not only by inflation, but goods shortages in construction materials, for example. Additional, funds or guidance support should be available to help projects that face costs outside of the control of local authorities, otherwise it may be difficult for successful bidders to fully deliver on the priorities outlined in their business case. (Pugh 2022)

10. **How should the success of Levelling Up funding be measured against the Government's desired outcomes for Levelling Up?**

- A key challenge in England over recent years has been the existence of numerous different funding pots and a lack of opportunity to evaluate these seriously over recent years. Indeed, the National Audit Office report published in February 2022 which was critical of how previous local economic growth policies have been evaluated. It found that the Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities "*has a poor understanding of what has worked well in its previous local growth programmes because it has not consistently evaluated them*". The government has since established a new Levelling Up Advisory Council. The extent to which the Levelling Up Advisory Council benefits from high levels of funding, quality management and clarity over its role and remit is likely to be key to its success.
- There is an issue with the levelling up outcomes not being in sync with the department outcomes (as published as part of the Budget 2021). Therefore, there is a misalignment between the Levelling Up White Paper and what departments may spend their budgets on. This misalignment needs to be corrected.

11. How will the proposed Investment Zones contribute towards the key objectives of Levelling Up? And is this different approach the right approach?

- Until there is clarity on the funding and funding mechanisms this is difficult to judge. At the time of writing there is confusion in places as to what an Investment Zone is and should be delivering or if there will be any funding flows through them.

12. Will the Government's approach to funding for levelling up achieve its objective of levelling up the country?

- The White Paper sets out welcome clear goals and represents a step in the right direction in terms of enabling greater devolution of powers and strengthening relationships between central, regional and local government, particularly the potentially important role to be played by the proposed regional directors, however these have yet to be appointed. But City-REDI's international research with the Industrial Strategy Council and the Chartered Institute for Public Finance and Accountancy suggests levelling up policy in the UK remains shorter term and less well-funded than in the cases we studied (Taylor et al., 2021, 2022). There is a clear need for a greater focus on sustained longer-term funding. Our research also suggests that the White Paper could have sought to establish new systems to enable funds to be redistributed across regions and cities to address regional and urban inequalities and provided greater direction in terms of promoting the role of anchor institutions in supporting levelling up.

Links

Brittain. B et al. (2021) REDI Updates – Levelling Up – the challenges of implementing, understanding and measuring levelling up https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/city-redi/wm-redi/redi-updates-3rd-edition.aspx

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Taylor, A., Sampson, S. and Romaniuk, A. (2021). *What does it take to "level-up" places? Evidence from international experience.* Industrial Strategy Council. https://industrialstrategycouncil.org/what-does-it-take-level-places

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