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Governing ‘levelling-up’ in the UK: challenges and prospects

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ABSTRACT
Following the Conservative Party’s victory in the 2019 UK General Election, and its success in achieving significant electoral gains across traditional Labour Party ‘red’ areas in the north of England, Prime Minister Boris Johnson vowed not to let down the new Conservative voters and pledged that his government would address longstanding regional inequalities in the UK. Consequently, ‘levelling up’ became part of the public policy lexicon, and, in March 2021, the government published its Levelling Up Fund prospectus. The concept of levelling up enjoys widespread political support, has featured in important policy initiatives beyond the UK, and has been the subject of considerable theorising. This article considers how social scientists might evaluate the success or otherwise of the UK government’s levelling-up agenda. The article suggests that any evaluation of this agenda requires the need to take into account aspects of network complexity, the resource allocation arrangements attached to the policy, and what the policy signifies in terms of governance leadership in the context of delivering public value. The article concludes that the UK government’s plans risk falling short of delivering a sustained reform programme to reduce area-based inequalities.

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Introduction

The UK is Europe’s most regionally unequal major economy (Forth, 2021); therefore, the general idea of addressing inequalities enjoys widespread support. The basic idea of levelling up and addressing territorial inequalities is not new. Research shows that the UK has seen numerous regeneration initiatives which can be traced back decades (Tomaney & Pike, 2020) – in short, recognition of the problem of levelling-up and a focus on forgotten places, towns, and cities is far from new and remains a ‘daunting task’ to address (Davenport & Zaranko, 2020). The UK government’s levelling up agenda under Prime Minister Boris Johnson has to be seen in the context of the fact that community development initiatives have continually tried, and often failed, to address social disadvantage (Loney, 1983; Scott, 2017; Institute for Community Studies, 2021). The 2019 UK General Election was a critical juncture in political terms because the result revealed a strain in the relationship between working-class voters and the Labour Party (Wager, Bale, Cowley, & Menon, 2021, p. 6). The Conservatives benefited from a favourable vote...
swing in those areas of Britain which had voted ‘leave’ in the 2016 Brexit referendum. Labour saw dramatic losses in the North of England and the Midlands, with many areas being represented by a Conservative MP for their first time in history (examples include Ashfield, Bishop Auckland, and Workington) (Curtice, 2019). The victory by the Conservative Party led to the replacement of the pre-Brexit ‘red wall’ by a post-Brexit ‘blue wall’. The Levelling Up Fund (LUF) was created by the UK government as a way to build on the electoral gains in the north of England (i.e. the ‘red wall’) and this was considered to be the Shared Prosperity Fund (also billed as the replacement for EU structural funds) (Brien, 2020). The phrase ‘levelling up’ became part of the Conservative government’s policy language and, as has been the case with other phrases associated with populist politics, has resonance to other well-known political sound bites such as ‘take back control’ (Baldini, Bressanelli, & Gianfreda, 2020).

The main focus of the fund is to invest in infrastructure projects to reduce inequalities across areas in the UK. The LUF is not just one pot but comprises a number of schemes as part of a multi-faceted approach to investment in ‘left behind’ places. The schemes include the UK Community Renewal Fund, the UK Community Ownership Fund, the Plan for Jobs, the Freeports programme, the UK Infrastructure Bank and the Towns Fund (HM Treasury, 2021). The Levelling Up Prospectus provided details of the funding (HM Treasury, 2021). This article considers the importance of the levelling up agenda for the social sciences and examines the implications of the levelling-up fund prospectus and its implications for the wider post-Brexit political agenda. The article considers the complex governance arrangements of the levelling-up policy, the degree of politicisation surrounding the funding, and the wider public policy issues concerning the need for robust evaluation in the context of public value leadership.

The levelling up agenda and the importance of the social sciences

Will Hutton, appointed President of the UK Academy of Social Sciences in April 2021, made the case that social science research is crucial for understanding how to recover from the Covid-19 pandemic. He argued that:

geographers, social epidemiologists and economists have expertise to examine why Covid-19 is proving more stubborn to eradicate in some parts of the country. Those areas within towns that are poorer, with multi-occupied housing, with lower levels of educational attainment, patchy access to broadband and whose members have to travel to work on … public transport have emerged as Covid hotspots (Hutton, 2021).

There is clearly a need for social scientists and the learned societies which represent them to cultivate and coordinate social researchers from across disciplines to make meaningful contributions to understanding how recovery from Covid-19 can complement (or otherwise) attempt to ‘level-up’ the country. The policy space around levelling up and post-pandemic recovery are vast and, consequently, it is possible that government can manoeuvre, obfuscate and avoid blame due to ambiguities and lack of clarity. Jennings, McKay, and Stoker (2021, pp. 6–8) highlighted five ambiguities and contradictions, which should influence the direction of social science research:

- Equalising regional imbalances may address aspects of geographical inequalities, but there are significant differences within regions and between areas.
• Is the primary objective of levelling up to focus on lagging places with centres of growth, or to make local economies more self-sufficient and resilient?
• Does levelling-up relate to investment in physical capital (via the LUF), or is it about human capital (such as skills and education)?
• The idea of levelling up links to the devolution of political power relating to constitutional concerns to protect the union, yet the levelling up has been managed centrally.
• Levelling up implies a redistributive programme based on expanded public spending with the state becoming more interventionist, yet the impacts of this could be challenged, or even off-set, by the long shadow of austerity over the past decade which has cut funding for public services.

The contractions and challenges highlighted by Jennings et al. (2021) provide avenues for social science research in terms of unpacking the issues. Yet, there are further areas that need to be considered by social scientists, including the extent to which the UK government’s levelling up agenda interplays with visions of levelling up and inclusivity across the UK. The Scottish Government’s approach is based on social justice, inclusive growth and wellbeing (Scottish Government, 2021). Its vision resonates with the Welsh Government’s commitments to the ‘wellbeing of future generations’ and the foundational economy (Welsh Government, 2021), and the most recent Northern Ireland Programme for Government (Northern Ireland Executive, 2021). These different approaches raise questions about inter-governmental narratives of shared prosperity and the relationship between policy elites (governing actors and interest groups) and citizens (individual voters and civil society).

Considering the wider role of social sciences in relation to the levelling up agenda, it is also valuable to look across borders. If we view levelling up as the reduction of territorial disparities, then almost every country faces such challenges. The terminology used is variable. The EU employs the concept of territorial cohesion. France refers to La France périphérique (peripheral France), in the Netherlands Krimpgebieden (Shrinking regions), abgehängte Regionen (suspended regions) in Germany, Area Interne (inner areas) in Italy, and the rustbelt in the US (MacKinnon, Tomaney, & Pike, 2021). These terms all refer to ‘left behind’ regions that require targeted policy interventions. However, they differ in terms of the territorial scope, which in some cases is quite clearly defined, like the Netherlands and Germany, using a statistical index, whereas, in others like the UK and US, the territorial scope is more malleable and can apply to a variety of territories that can differ quite considerably in terms of their characteristics. The key issue is that the experiences from these countries offer valuable benchmarks in terms of implementation, governance and evaluation. They can point towards a variety of coordination mechanisms and different trends in terms of centralisation and decentralisation (Ferry, 2021).

Given the priorities, concerns and foci within the social sciences, and the variations in international approaches to the challenges of levelling up, what are the key issues and debates in the UK context, in view of the government’s 2021 initiatives in this sphere? We begin by examining the basic framework for the new policy.

The policy framework for levelling up in the UK

In simple terms, the UK government’s LUP involved the creation of a financial pot by the Treasury, which would be accessible by several government departments, the Ministry of
Housing, Communities and Local Government, the Scotland Office and the Wales Office, to support successful funding bids tabled by local public policy actors, primarily local authorities (HM Treasury, 2021). This new strategy for engendering a shared commitment to addressing deep-rooted territorial inequalities that have disadvantaged many of the northern constituencies involved a number of funding packages and was consequential upon the announcement by the Chancellor, Rishi Sunak, of a £100 billion capital spending programme in 2021-2. This included the aim to improve broadband, to upgrade local transport and flood defences as well as a commitment to the delivery of HS2 and other transport connectivity across the country (HM Treasury, 2021). The levelling-up dimensions of this funding, with six streams overseen by three UK government departments, is institutionally complex.

Ostensibly, the funding arrangements appear to follow a decentralisation logic. Eddie Hughes, the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government stated that ‘we want to devolve and decentralise to give more power to local communities, providing an opportunity for all places to level up’ (HC Deb Col 180, 16 March 2021). However, in practice the devolution of power to local areas is only the case insofar as local areas need to bid for centralised funding, and the gulf between the rhetoric of devolution and decentralisation and the reality of enhanced centralisation is significant, as discussed. Moreover, recent rescaling processes have provided increased decision-making powers for urban areas (Mendez, van der Zwet, & Borowska-Waszak, 2021). So although the application process may allow for direct local inputs, all the cards are held by the UK government in terms of funding decisions. The funding application process itself is highly politicised in that MPs will be regarded by the government as local champions for prioritising bids. The funding prospectus notes that ‘when considering the weighting given to bids, the expectation is that an MP will back one bid which they see as a priority’ (HM Treasury, 2021, p. 7). This raises questions about which MPs will be able to access the government to state their case and be listened to. An analysis by the Financial Times found that in England 14 places that were wealthier than average were ranked in category 1 and all had at least one Conservative MP (Bounds, 2021). Areas are categorised as 1, 2 or 3, with category 1 representing places with the highest levels of identified need. Areas that fall outside of category 1 can, in theory, still receive funding but will be assessed based on deliverability, value for money, and strategic fit – all of which do not have robust indicators for them to be assessed. Against this background, one main criticism of the government has been that the funding will be used as a political tool for maximising Conservative Party interests (Bounds, 2021). There is also the question of the capacities of local actors to fully engage in the bidding process. Such capacities are needed for areas to be able to apply for government funding in the first place. The levelling-up fund makes several assumptions about the social capital capacities available in order to complete funding applications. One of the levelling-up funding streams is the UK Community Ownership Fund, which aims to ‘empower communities to protect vital community assets in their area by providing funding to take ownership over them, in support of the social wellbeing of local communities’ (HM Treasury, 2021). Research into a very similar initiative in Scotland – the Community Empowerment Act 2015 – has shown that community ownership initiatives are hampered by the fact that local community groups lack the resources, skills
and abilities to be able to demonstrate and report on value for money (Tabner, 2018) (which is one of the criteria for the UK funding).

In terms of delivery arrangements, the UK government confirmed the following arrangements:

- The UK will use the new financial assistance powers in the UK Internal Market Act 2020 to make the Fund available to the whole of the UK. Other vires such as the Industrial Development Act (1982) can also be used where relevant.
- For the LUP, where appropriate, the UK Government will ‘seek advice’ from the devolved administrations at the shortlisting stage on projects that will be delivered in their geographical areas, including on deliverability and alignment with existing provision.
- Final decisions will be made by HM Treasury, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, and the Department for Transport.

(UK Government, 2021)

The government indicated that summer 2021 would see the publication of some monitoring and evaluation guidance and this would provide more insights into how post-award management would take place (UK Government, 2021). However, the evaluation criteria are not built into the policy design, and this undermines the ‘evaluability’ of the funding awards, as we argue below. This is significant because analyses of policy interventions have often concluded that one determinant of policy failure is the lack of evaluation in the formulation process (Connolly, 2016; McConnell, 2016).

Strategic fuzziness and network complexity

In some respects, the ‘levelling up’ concept is fuzzy in that it means everything and nothing at the same time (Menon & Bevington, 2020). This opaqueness is mirrored in the arrangements for governance applied to the UK government’s levelling up initiative. Prime Minister Boris Johnson deployed the term using broad language, referring to levels of wages, productivity, investment and opportunity and a response to ‘the plea of the forgotten people and the left behind towns’ (Menon & Bevington, 2020). Scholars have argued that fuzzy governance arrangements, involving a lack of clarity in lines of accountability due to a plurality of agencies being engaged in overlapping policy activities, are convenient for policy actors who might seek to avoid being held to account (Howlett, 2012; Massey, 2021).

Opaque policy processes stimulate opportunities for manoeuvring and culpability avoidance when policies fall short of their ambitions (Bache, Bartle, Flinders, & Marsden, 2015; Hood, 2020). When presenting the new Levelling-Up Prospectus in the House of Commons in March 2021 the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government noted that the ‘cross-departmental fund represents a new approach to local investment and will end silos in Whitehall that make it difficult to take a holistic approach to the infrastructure needs in local areas’ (HC Deb Col, 16 March 2021, Col 180). The problem with making such a claim is that, following serious engagement in the pre-2010 period, for some time thereafter UK governance has been marked by a lack of attention to modernisation or a ‘re-inventing
government’ agenda with the associated tools and techniques which would assist with the design and implementation of a complex and crosscutting policy initiative of the type epitomised by the LUF (see Connolly & Van der Zwet, 2021a). Using levelling-up as a form of experimental governance to avoid silo working, with no broader modernisation or governance reform agenda, and without there being clear overseers of the policy across the three aforementioned government departments, is problematic. Indeed, the public policy literature, particularly over the past decade, has warned that the routes to policy failure are largely signposted by governance leadership deficits when it comes to the processes of decision-making and implementation of complex public policy interventions (Marsh & McConnell, 2010). It has been argued that complexity can produce fuzzy governance arrangements (i.e. when lines of accountability are unclear due to a plurality of agencies being engaged in overlapping policy activities) that are convenient for those who might seek to avoid being held to account, given that opaque policy processes stimulate opportunities for manoeuvring and culpability avoidance when policies fall short of their ambitions (Bache et al., 2015; Hood, 2020). Public policy analysts would view the LUF as a complex policy network, with associated challenges around overlapping roles and responsibilities and diffused accountabilities relating both to the policy creation and design and the delivery and implementation scenarios (Connolly & Van Der Zwet, 2021b).

The key public management, governance and public policy paradigms (see, for example, discussions in Jordan, 1990; Rhodes, 1990; Marsh & Rhodes, 1992; Rhodes,1994, 1997), have invited consideration of the implications of policy making and implementation involving complex interdependencies within different parts of the public sector, and across to private and third sector bodies and organisations. The watchwords here include policy complexity, diffusion, fragmentation and disaggregation. The LUF can be located in this context, as it involves, inter alia, at the central government level, the Treasury, the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, the Scotland Office and the Wales Office, and at the local government level multiple bidding local authorities (and associated third sector bodies), resulting in an array of ministerial and official competencies and responsibilities, a lack of clarity regarding overall ‘ownership’, potential for buck-passing, and significant challenges around performance management, audit and delivery. Given that some of the funding is for infrastructure-related projects and that there are notoriously extended planning and delivery spans for these, the dangers of accountability gaps and vacuums would appear to be significant (Massey, 2021). The lack of clarity in relation to primary responsibility for the scheme leaves the agents of accountability (at least four Commons select committees, then audit bodies, and the local authority committees) potentially struggling to identify the political and official actors whose work needs to be scrutinised.

The politics of UK-devolved relations has brought a further complex dimension to this policy issue based on the fact that the Scottish and Welsh governments have reportedly considered themselves to be ‘aggressively undermined’ by the Westminster-controlled LUF (Batchelor, 2021). This is because the devolved administrations (DAs), despite local authorities in their regions being candidates for the funding, have expressed a preference to make the LUF part of the devolution funding settlement and, symbolically, the LUF is seen by the DAs as a blunt and misguided mechanism for promoting the Union (Batchelor, 2021). However, while it is difficult to deny that the Conservative government is
seeking policy success from levelling up, and even if intra-UK territorial politics are put to the side, it is reasonable to argue that the organisation of the policy including, as we note below, the lack of in-built evaluation of design and implementation, leaves opportunities for a degree of selectivity when it comes to claiming policy success without an evidential base. Indeed, Jonathan Holmes, a policy adviser for The Kings Fund, even suggested that the ‘levelling up’ language has a fluid definition and ‘its meaning is in the eye of the beholder’ (Holmes, 2021, p. 1). This can facilitate claims of political success, despite public policy limitations, caused in part at least by a failure to engage with the challenges associated with policy complexity, and, as we now argue, the political agenda is evident in the context of the underpinning methodology for the UK government’s LUF.

**Underpinning ‘methodology’: part of a political strategy?**

Early critiques of the UK government’s approach to levelling up have focused, in part, on the politicisation issue, with special emphasis on the methodology selected for categorising areas by need (see Jennings et al., 2021; Newman, 2021). The government has chosen to determine eligibility based on relatively simplistic indicators grouped as need for economic recovery and growth, which include productivity, unemployment and skills, as well as transport connectivity. These are not without merit in their own terms but, critically, the levels of deprivation in areas have not been included by the government (UK Government, 2021). This is problematic because the LUF methodology does not take account of deprivation within and between areas and social inequalities. The work of Holmes (2021, p. 1) illustrates this point:

Improving infrastructure is a vital part of addressing inequalities, but it is not sufficient to do so entirely ... There is a systemic relationship between health and deprivation, which sees people from more deprived communities experiencing worse health and shorter life expectancy on average. Over the past decade the gap in life expectancy between the most deprived and most affluent communities grew, and the healthy life expectancy gap between these communities is now 18.9 years for men and 19.4 years for women. Covid-19 has followed these existing fault lines in health equity, the mortality rate from the virus in the most deprived areas has been double that in the most affluent. What is more, if we overlay a map showing communities with the worst healthy life expectancies, with one highlighting the borders of the ‘red wall’, they aligned closely.

Community studies research in England has, moreover, raised concerns about the fact that the ‘funding allocated to level up is not sufficient to counteract the decade long impact of public sector cuts which have reduced the capacity of many places to capitalise on economic intervention; nor is it enough to counteract the financial impact of Covid-19 and Brexit for the most deprived places’ (Institute for Community Studies, 2021, p. 5). Beyond community research within one country, Bambra (2021, p. 4), who examined historical examples of macro-political and economic reforms in Brazil, England, Nordic countries, Germany and the USA, concluded, convincingly, that attempts to level up society cannot be divorced from the need for welfare expansion, social security safety nets, democratization processes and political incorporation, and access to healthcare (particularly for the poorest groups in society). For the UK, the attempts to level up the country have been based on an inadequate focus on health and social policy. Studies into social and health inequalities have repeatedly shown that addressing disadvantages
between areas requires sustained upstream deprivation-focused policy interventions – anything else will have limited impact and become no more than an exercise in pursuing ‘fantasy policy paradigms’ (Scott-Samuel & Smith, 2016). The economic vulnerabilities felt by areas cannot be divorced from the accumulation of the impact of longstanding de-industrialisation on areas, which have increased deprivation and widened social and health inequalities – essentially leaving communities behind (Mackenzie, Collins, Connolly, Doyle, & McCartney, 2017). Following the 2008 global financial crisis and the sweeping reforms to welfare in Britain post-2010, a ‘decade of deprivation’ has manifested itself in terms of precarious employment, increases in child poverty, and lack of affordable and social housing (Anderson, 2021). Incomes were falling even before the Covid-19 crisis; therefore those already trapped in poverty were more exposed to the economic consequences of the pandemic. Deprivation, therefore, is relevant for geographic inequalities and the levelling-up agenda, given that there is a positive correlation between income inequality, which is geographically disparate, and relative income poverty in the UK (McKnight, Duque, M, & Rucci, 2017). Compounded with this is the argument that the trade and competitiveness implications of Brexit will widen UK inter-regional inequalities but this will also be the case at the intra-regional level, because the weaker areas within broad regions generally face more severe competitiveness impacts than the more prosperous core areas within those same regions (Thissen, van Oort, McCann, Ortega-Argilés, & Husby, 2020).

Despite the importance of addressing deprivation in order to reduce inequalities the government has confirmed that they ‘will not be rethinking the data or the methodology that they apply to distributing their funding’ (HC Deb Col 181, 16 March 2021). The Housing, Communities and Local Government minister, confirmed in his reply to the Shadow Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, when questioned in Parliament about the lack of inclusion of deprivation levels in the funding formula that ‘I say that we decided to leave the criteria to civil servants. We set out the expectation – what we hoped to achieve – and left it to civil servants to decide the criteria’ (HC Deb Col 182, 16 March 2021). This stance by the government (i.e. being clear that that formulating the methodology was the business of civil servants) provides a degree of political mileage to ministers in that they could attempt to avoid blame in the event that the LUF is found to fail in meeting its objectives. As has been noted, ‘learning to avoid blame occurs not just in a technical programme sense of greater efficiency or cost savings or congruence with prevailing policy paradigms, but also in terms of being able successfully to negotiate policy and political decision-making processes’ (Howlett, 2012, p. 541). Interestingly, civil servants raised concerns about the funding methodology and were ‘unhappy that they have been made to look very political’ (Hill, 2021). Dr Nicola Headlam, former Head of Northern Powerhouse at the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, who worked on the levelling-up policy, is reported to have argued that the methodology underpinning the fund was flawed given the absence of the use of Social Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) saying that ‘the Index of Multiple Deprivation and its statistical geography were built for the task’ (Bounds, 2021). The validity of the data used to profile areas has also been weakened by the fact that unemployment rates have been used as part of the decision-making processes around categorising areas in need of funding, yet pre-pandemic unemployment data is being used for the levelling-up funding allocations. The Office for Budget Responsibility has indicated that approximately
2.2 million people, or 6.5% of all workers, could be unemployed at the end of the 2021 after the end of the government’s furlough scheme (the unemployment rate was 5% before the pandemic in February 2020) (Bounds, 2021).

**Evaluation vagueness**

Evaluation is crucial for establishing the success or failure of policy (and even the grey areas in-between). It is good governance to be able to demonstrate the social and economic value to be accrued from public investment. More broadly, the relationship between evidence and policy-making will be troubled if there is a lack of opportunities for ongoing policy learning. Yet, the government has weakened the evaluability of the LUF by taking a hands-off approach to establishing the outcomes of the funding. Studies of policy failure have shown that public value (see below for a full discussion) will not be demonstrated unless there is a reasonably high level of analytical capacity to perform the tasks associated with managing the policy process in order to implement evidence-based policy-making (Howlett, 2009; McConnell, 2018). When asked about indicators of success for the LUF, the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State confirmed that success will be for the people to decide and that there are no plans for ongoing local or national evaluations:

> It will be up to local people there to determine whether that money has been spent wisely … The criteria for allocations of the funding, or applying for the funding, include need for economic recovery and growth, need for improved transport connectivity and need for regeneration I know that this is not quite what he asked, but I suggest to him that if we are going to determine the success of these projects, the British electorate will probably do that at the next general election. I look forward to seeing how that turns out. (HC Deb Col 182, 16 March 2021)

This, to an extent, and linked to the argument about the fuzziness of the government’s strategy, contradicts the content of the government’s levelling-up policy prospectus document, which states that ‘monitoring and evaluation … will involve a combination of national-level evaluation activity with project-level monitoring and evaluation … Local authorities should set out a proportionate plan for project-level monitoring and evaluation’ (HM Treasury, 2021, p. 26). Yet, the details on this are unclear, including which departments will lead or commission evaluations and if there will be extra funding for evaluation studies.

**A centralised model masquerading as localism**

It could be argued that the levelling-up funding initiative represented an opportunity for government to ‘level-up’ decision-making by giving local council leaders, leaders of mayoral combined authorities and city leaders the powers and responsibilities for making funding allocations. Local leaders would be in a better position to understand the sensitivities of their local areas and perhaps help to foster policy forums to address the ever-present inequalities of voice in communities. Inequalities are often discussed using policy language with regards to ‘measures’ and ‘profiles’, yet being subject to inequalities is an experience. Those ‘left behind’ may not see themselves as candidates for co-producing policy solutions (Mackenzie, Conway, Hastings, Munro, & O’Donnell, 2013). This is even more problematic when decision-making is centralised or top-down,
given that the circumstances of local areas will be out of the reach of policy-makers in Whitehall. The alterative strategy would have been for the government to work with local leaders to involve citizens and stakeholder groups to discuss existing local plans for economic regeneration and what the gaps would be in terms of short, medium and long-term funding, and then embed evaluation as part of that design process.

National leadership would be more meaningful, compared to current arrangements, in terms of working with local areas to understand the feasibility and impacts of their planned projects and oversee a process rebalancing between areas (where required). This, in practice, could mean a more place-based approach with targeted funding to areas where gaps exist after having a better understanding of local needs and conditions. Instead, based upon the early indications, the most likely outcome is that the management of the LUF will remain highly centralised and will see areas compete with each other, with the very real risk that geographical inequalities will widen and tensions between areas will increase.

**Missed opportunity for public value-based thinking**

It could be argued that the levelling-up policy has also missed opportunities to learn the lessons of previous reviews into the performance of government in understanding the public value to be accrued (or otherwise) from Treasury-backed national policy interventions. One of the most significant drivers to promote public value across the British Government emerged in 2017 via Sir Michael Barber’s report – *Delivering better outcomes for citizens: Practical steps for unlocking public value* (Barber, 2017). The report was commissioned by the UK Treasury to understand how the Treasury (and wider government departments) can organise themselves to deliver public value. The report introduces a ‘Public Value Framework’ (PVF) to encourage public managers to manage resources in order to produce better outcomes. The PVF, according to the report, promotes two main agendas. First, the goal was for the PVF to ‘form the basis for the ongoing dialogue across the public sector on public value, thereby creating a common language on how to improve it’ (Barber, 2017). This is based on the idea of disseminating best practice, sharing learning and producing ‘new dialogues’ across government departments and with the beneficiaries of policies. The second intention of the PVF was for it to stimulate ‘the agenda for periodic Public Value Reviews through which the Treasury, works in collaboration with departments’ (Barber, 2017, pp. 25–26). Two years after the publication of the Barber review, a 2019 report by the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee (PAC) investigated the work of the Treasury in light of Barber’s review. The PAC report noted that short-termism and a lack of joined-up approaches had remained the norm:

Unless action is taken to correct these issues, the government’s longstanding problems of short-term thinking, sticking plaster funding and cost-shunting will persist, resulting in poorer quality, less sustainable and joined-up services. Ultimately, this means that the needs of the public, who rely on and fund these vital services, can fall through the cracks. (Public Accounts Committee, 2019, p. 1)

In early 2021 Sir Michael Barber returned at the request of Prime Minister Boris Johnson to conduct a rapid review of Whitehall effectiveness. This was on the basis of making departments outcome-focused and more joined-up. There was even the view that perhaps Boris
Johnson sought to inject some Blairite thinking into government by getting the modernisation agenda back on the policy table, given that the Covid-19 pandemic exposed the entrenched problems of silo-working across government (Diamond, 2021). The outcome of Sir Michael Barber’s work has been the development of inter-departmental outcome delivery plans (Johnstone, 2021), essentially replacements for individual departmental plans, underpinned by the use of the PVF – the same approach that he sought to convince, unsuccessfully, the Treasury to adopt in the recent past. This could have been a fruitful approach in the context of the UK government’s levelling up policy, in relation to issues surrounding policy design, methodological underpinning, engagement with local leaders, and incorporation of appropriate evaluation and ongoing monitoring arrangements. However, it is clear that public value-based thinking did not feature at all in this case. In order to ensure that important policy initiatives of this type benefit from a holistic public value perspective, a wider government-wide Whitehall reform agenda is required that places public value at the heart of government decision-making (Connolly & Van der Zwet, 2021a).

Discussion and conclusions

The LUF has been welcomed by many as a way to kick-start the recovery of the UK from the twin challenges of Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic. As Menon and Bevington (2020) noted when the levelling-up policy was at a formative stage ‘levelling-up as a political project may not necessarily be doomed to failure. For one thing, we should not underestimate the importance of political attention’. Unfortunately, the approach taken by the UK government leaves a considerable lack of clarity regarding the evidencing of reduced geographical inequalities. It might stand to reason that investing in growth, skills, transport, research and development, culture, and institutions could decrease regional inequality in the UK. Yet addressing social and health inequalities within and between areas is acutely important to level up the country.

Moreover, post-Covid-19 recovery, of which the levelling up agenda is a part, is fertile ground for social science research to have an impact. There are several potential research questions/areas for social scientists. To what extent do the values of policy actors and citizens in relation to levelling up differ across the UK? Do the values of citizens in different parts of the UK align with those of governing elites? In many senses, there is a role for building on the literature in the field of collaborative governance by integrating theories on public value theory (PVT) to frame the linkages between public values and the governance of levelling up across UK territories. Rooted in public administration scholarship, PVT underlines the importance of legitimacy and organisational capacity for achieving public values without offering normative prescriptions about the need to follow specific governance models or new public management principles. Public value assumes that citizens create and contribute to the public sphere, for example, through the co-production of public policy. This requires public managers to open up policy processes and rebalance power relationships to give citizens a greater role in shaping policy decision-making (which is also a form of levelling up within policy spaces through citizen involvement and co-creation processes). Social scientists also have a major role to play when it comes to investigating the extent to which policy performance, including among citizens affected by the policy, can provide what Moore (1995) refers to as legitimacy and support for policy solutions. Indeed, public value depends critically upon governance capacity.
Understanding the governance of territorial policy requires an examination of the values of actors at different levels and how these shape their approach to the administration of levelling up policies across and within territories at macro (policy-making), meso (local leadership), and micro (citizen) levels. There is an opportunity for the UK government to invest in social science research to evaluate the impact of levelling-up. If this is not forthcoming, then this will be yet another indicator of policy failure in what is currently a poorly evidence-based redistributive policy in the UK.

The major weakness of the UK government’s approach to levelling up has been categorised as strategic policy ‘fuzziness’ and a lack of appreciation of the challenges of network complexity; significant limitations within the LUF’s methodological underpinning, which prioritise a political rather than a public policy agenda; vagueness on evaluation; a policy of centralisation masquerading as localism; and a missed opportunity to incorporate and embed the policy in a public value approach. In the context of the latter point, we discussed the missed opportunities that could have been addressed with more public value-based leadership and thinking in government. These largely group around the lack of trust to devolve powers to local leaders, the need to embed outcomes-based evaluation at the outset, and the fact that the methodology for funding allocations is flawed due to the lack of account taken of deprivation within and between areas. Judge (2021) has written about how the government, under Boris Johnson’s leadership, has ‘walked on the dark side’ of scrutiny. Perhaps the LUF is a continuation of this trend in that it has been designed in such a way to allow for blame shifting, given the absence of national policy indicators for measuring success and failure. To this end, this potentially successful political project risks overshadowing what is predictably a public policy failure when it comes to reducing inequalities between areas in the UK. However, there is a major opportunity for social scientists to evaluate the LUF, and the wider agenda, on an ongoing basis in the hope that the government will listen to the evidence and adapt accordingly.

Notes
1. The Treasury, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, and the Department for Transport.
2. The King’s Fund is an English health charity that shapes health and social care policy and practice.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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