

# PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT  
GENERAL COMMITTEES

## Public Bill Committee

### LEVELLING-UP AND REGENERATION BILL

*Second Sitting*

*Tuesday 21 June 2022*

*(Afternoon)*

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#### CONTENTS

Examination of witnesses.

Written evidence reported to the House.

Adjourned till Thursday 23 June at half-past Eleven o'clock.

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**Saturday 25 June 2022**

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**The Committee consisted of the following Members:**

*Chairs:* MR PETER BONE, † SIR MARK HENDRICK, MRS SHERYLL MURRAY, † IAN PAISLEY

† Andrew, Stuart ( <i>Minister for Housing</i> )	† Norris, Alex ( <i>Nottingham North</i> ) (Lab/Co-op)
† Atherton, Sarah ( <i>Wrexham</i> ) (Con)	† O'Brien, Neil ( <i>Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities</i> )
† Dines, Miss Sarah ( <i>Derbyshire Dales</i> ) (Con)	† Pennycook, Matthew ( <i>Greenwich and Woolwich</i> ) (Lab)
† Farron, Tim ( <i>Westmorland and Lonsdale</i> ) (LD)	† Smith, Greg ( <i>Buckingham</i> ) (Con)
† Fletcher, Colleen ( <i>Coventry North East</i> ) (Lab)	Vickers, Matt ( <i>Stockton South</i> ) (Con)
† Gibson, Patricia ( <i>North Ayrshire and Arran</i> ) (SNP)	Bethan Harding, Adam Mellows-Facer, <i>Committee Clerks</i>
† Henry, Darren ( <i>Broxtowe</i> ) (Con)	
† Kruger, Danny ( <i>Devizes</i> ) (Con)	
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma ( <i>South Shields</i> ) (Lab)	
† Maskell, Rachael ( <i>York Central</i> ) (Lab/Co-op)	
† Moore, Robbie ( <i>Keighley</i> ) (Con)	
† Mortimer, Jill ( <i>Hartlepool</i> ) (Con)	† <b>attended the Committee</b>

**Witnesses**

Professor Graeme Atherton, Head of the Centre for Inequality and Levelling Up, University of West London

Eamonn Boylan, Chief Executive, Greater Manchester Combined Authority

Sacha Bedding, Campaign Community Leader, We're Right Here

Rich Bell, Campaign Manager, We're Right Here

Councillor Sam Chapman-Allen, Chair, District Councils Network

Councillor James Jamieson, Chair, Local Government Association

Councillor Tim Oliver, Chair, County Councils Network

Dr Parth Patel, Research Fellow, Institute for Public Policy Research

Joanne Roney OBE, President, SOLACE, members' network for local government and public sector professionals, and Chief Executive, Manchester City Council

Laura Shoaf, Chief Executive, West Midlands Combined Authority

## Public Bill Committee

Tuesday 21 June 2022

(Afternoon)

[IAN PAISLEY *in the Chair*]

### Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill

#### Examination of Witnesses

*Eamonn Boylan, Laura Shoaf and Joanne Roney gave evidence.*

2 pm

**The Chair:** Welcome back. We are in public session and the proceedings are being broadcast. I encourage you to switch any mobile or electronic devices to silent. I welcome the fourth panel of witnesses. We will now hear oral evidence from Eamonn Boylan, chief executive of Greater Manchester Combined Authority; Laura Shoaf, chief executive of West Midlands Combined Authority; and Joanne Roney OBE, president of SOLACE and also chief executive of Manchester City Council. They are all joining us via Zoom.

Before calling the first Members to ask questions, I remind you all that questions should be limited to matters that are in scope of the Bill and that we must stick to the timings in the programme motion that the Committee agreed this morning. This session will last until 2.40 pm. I find that with larger panels we should try to direct our questions to a specific member of the panel, otherwise one questioner could end up taking all of the session. I also encourage our panellists to be pithy in their answers, but if one of your colleagues has had a question directed to them and you think there is something really important that you need to say, please do indicate and say it because it will add to the evidential value.

I have already introduced the panel. For the sake of time, I will call our first questioner, Tim Farron.

**Q43 Tim Farron** (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): First, it is great to see you all here. I am not sure who to put the first question to. The levelling-up Bill has provisions for communities that go through devolution settlements and local government reorganisation to have a Mayor, but for that to be called something else and for the title to be amended. Do you think that that is sufficient in terms of respecting the desires of a local community? Is it possible for a community that has not yet got a devolution settlement to construct their own governance arrangements without having a Mayor or anything like it, yet still be able to access the full devolution deal that the Government might offer? I will pick Laura.

**Laura Shoaf:** I can probably speak only from our perspective as an area that has a Mayor. I will reflect on what we have seen so far in the first and second term. The elected Mayor model has worked really well in our area and has been a success for accountability, which is critical. As devolution continues and more powers are devolved, the mechanisms need to be in place to ensure accountability. In our experience, that works quite well by having an elected Mayor.

**Q44 Tim Farron:** Looking close to home in my neck of the woods, we have just gone through a local government reorganisation and we have two unitary authorities. Cumbria's six districts are being abolished. The county council will be abolished and there will be two new authorities from next April: Westmoreland and Furness, and Cumberland. In both cases, those councils are now run by majority by parties that opposed the notion of a Mayor. Do you think it would be respecting the will of the people of those two parts of Cumbria to impose on them a Mayor, or to tell them that they could not have a devolution deal if they did not accept a Mayor?

**Laura Shoaf:** I think one of the principles of devolution is that they should be unique to each place. I would not necessarily suggest that one model would work absolutely everywhere. If devolution is to work, in our experience it must be meaningful to the place, and it must be something that reflects democracy and accountability in that place. I do not think there is a one size fits all answer to that, but I would reiterate that in our experience, with our Mayor, that has been a very powerful role to rally around and it has yielded great results.

**The Chair:** I call the Minister.

#### **Q45 The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Neil O'Brien):**

This question is for Eamonn and Laura. One of the missions the Bill will put on a statutory footing will increase public domestic research and development spending outside the greater south-east area of England by a third over the spending review period, and in both of your combined authorities there is an innovation accelerator on top of that. How can we best ensure that that mission is a success? How can we best ensure that the innovation accelerator does what it is supposed to do and catalyses significant amounts of further public and private investment into those two city regions? I will ask Eamonn to start.

**Eamonn Boylan:** Thank you. We were very pleased to be identified as one of the three innovation accelerator areas in the White Paper. We have been working very hard on developing a broader approach to innovation through an organisation imaginatively called "Innovation Greater Manchester". We see the innovation accelerator as being effectively the fuel in the tank that can drive that forward.

It is fair to say that there needs to be a clear concentration on those areas where individual city regions can be globally significant and competitive, rather than having a broader approach. They need to be very clear that the purpose of the innovation accelerator is to improve not only the performance of business and employment in a particular location, but to drive prosperity for the UK as a whole.

There is a need for longevity in terms of the commitment, to make certain that the innovation agenda can be rolled out, developed and properly evolved over a period of time, but also concentration on those areas where, quite clearly, particular places have a significant, if not unique contribution, to make.

**Laura Shoaf:** I will do my best not to repeat the exact same answer, but we have another organisation, the aptly titled "Innovation West Midlands". I reiterate all the points that Eamonn has just made and a point I made slightly earlier, which is that places have different areas of expertise. We want not to spread the jam so

thin that it doesn't make a difference in any one area, but to really invest and be very precise in each area, especially where there is a comparative advantage.

**Q46 Neil O'Brien:** Thank you both. The Bill makes it easier and quicker to establish new combined authorities, either with or without a Mayor, in new parts of the country. How important has the role of the Mayor been in terms of being a figurehead and attracting inward investment to your two city regions, and catalysing wider conversations with Whitehall and other stakeholders? What difference has having a Mayor made in Greater Manchester and the West Midlands? I will ask Laura to start answering this question.

**Laura Shoaf:** It has really been transformational. As an officer, I was working in the region before there was a Mayor, then in a Mayor's first term and now in a Mayor's second term. I would reflect on the fact that the role, with its accountability and ability to galvanise and be a figurehead, has grown over time. It definitely evolves alongside a region.

For us, with our Mayor, we have seen the ability to come together as a region, to make cohesive arguments, to attract a lot more inward investment and to be able to work at scale, if you take something like brownfield land, where we have been able to operate at regional level, so we can have a regional impact, then being very careful not to do what is already done very well locally. I often describe it as two plus two plus make five, instead of four. That is exactly what we have seen through the model to date.

As you can tell, my background is not from this country, but this model is well understood and recognised in other countries when trying to attract inward investment from abroad. It is a model that is understood, works well and helps make it easier, if that makes sense, to drive some of those big conversations.

**Neil O'Brien:** Thank you. Eamonn, would you add anything to that?

**Eamonn Boylan:** I would certainly echo Laura's final comment about the international potency of the mayoral model, which is proving to be a real strength. We led the field with the creation of the first combined authority, which has been in operation since 2010. The first mayoral election was in 2017, so they had a lot of experience of working prior to having a Mayor, with strong local leadership provided—particularly by the city of Manchester.

I think the Mayor has had the transformative effect that Laura has described, not only in respect of areas where there is a very clear power vested in the Mayor, but also where the Mayor's influence and use of soft power can be quite useful in helping to galvanise change and support and amplify activity. The example I would use in the Greater Manchester case is the work we have done collectively on street homelessness and rough sleeping, which has been very successful. A huge amount of work has been done by individual local authorities, but it has also been galvanised by collaboration through the office of the Mayor. It is a very powerful office and tool for us to use both locally and internationally.

**Q47 Neil O'Brien:** The Bill strengthens and streamlines compulsory purchase order powers and creates the opportunity for local authorities to run high street

rental auctions as part of a wider shift toward increasing places' ability to do brownfield regeneration through the brownfield fund, with the new role of Homes England and so on. Are the strengthened CPO powers and the high street rental auctions and so on things you would welcome and which you could see your authorities and your constituent authorities using? I will aim that again at Eamonn and Laura mainly, but if anyone else wants to come in, please do.

**Eamonn Boylan:** It would be difficult to make CPO slower. Aiming to accelerate it is very welcome. The flexibility around the application of CPO to support a wider range of purposes is also welcome. I think we need to recognise that initiating a CPO is quite a high-risk activity for a local authority. Therefore, we would need to be certain about the legislative framework within which we were working, but certainly the principle of acceleration of CPO and its broader application is something we would generally welcome and would certainly seek to make use of.

**Laura Shoaf:** I will just pick up on the point about pride in place. Pride in place is a key goal that is outlined as part of the levelling-up agenda. I think that being able to speed up the delivery of projects where a compulsory purchase order is needed will bring clarity and help us to deliver pride in place. That is just one other aspect that I think is important.

[SIR MARK HENDRICK *in the Chair*]

**Joanne Roney:** I will come in with three quick points to support Laura and Eamonn. Among the wider society of chief executives—who represent the views from up and down the country, including places that do not currently have combined authority or mayoral models—there is a welcome for these additional powers. The first point is that whatever replaces the existing CPO system needs to be simple and inexpensive. The current process is very costly.

Secondly, there is a bit of a concern around capacity in local authorities to take advantage of these new powers. Talking with my Manchester hat on, one of the things we do in Greater Manchester is shared capacity between the 10 local authorities through the combined authority, but that capacity point to take effective new powers is important. Thirdly, we would like to see the revoking of permitted development rights to go alongside CPO powers to make the maximum impact in some of our communities.

**Q48 Neil O'Brien:** I have one last question to Laura. The Bill, among other things, makes it simpler for Mayors to take on the powers of the police and crime commissioner, effectively streamlining governance and creating a single point of accountability, which enables the join-up of different priorities between crime and transport and so on. If that were to happen and there were to be a decision in Westminster to do that, could you see that there would be some synergies from combining those two roles? You could join up transport and criminal justice policies.

**Laura Shoaf:** We have certainly seen it work well elsewhere, including in Greater Manchester. Initially, the combined authority did not have full support to transfer those functions in 2019. What I would suggest that we need to do now is look at the timing of the deal

and of Royal Assent, and how we could align governance around that. We would need to look at the issues around co-termination and there would probably be quite a bit of work to make sure that it was something that the entirety of the region would get behind.

**Neil O'Brien:** Thank you, Laura. Unless Eamonn wants to add anything on that point, I am probably finished.

**The Chair:** I will move over to the Opposition. I call Alex Norris.

**Q49 Alex Norris** (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Sir Mark. I am grateful to the witnesses for being with us this afternoon. I will start with a basic question that is probably best answered by the chief executives of the combined authorities, but Joanne, please do contribute if you want to.

Your two combined authorities are seen as very much at the forefront of devolution to combined authorities and Mayors. Much of what we talk about in the context of the Bill is about how to push the rest of the country up to having similar levels of responsibility. What more do you want yourselves? What more do you want to build on your current settlement? Where might devolution go in the future for you?

**Eamonn Boylan:** We have significant ambition for further devolution and we are working to develop propositions that we will be discussing with officials over the coming weeks in response to the Government's call for us to step forward with a trailblazer devolution deal, which was contained in the White Paper. The asks would be for greater power and influence in areas such as housing, transport, skills—you will be unsurprised to hear that—because we believe that there is a need for us to be able to shape local skills offers and opportunities to the local jobs market more effectively than currently happens.

The other major ask we have, consistent with a number of other places and some recent think-tank reports, would be for a greater degree of certainty over the funding framework and the outcomes framework that we agree with the Government over a period of time, whether that is a spending review period or some other period. At the moment, we are hampered by the number of separate and completely bespoke competitive processes that we go through to resource an awful lot of our activity. Having greater certainty over funding—not necessarily more funding, although that would be welcome—and greater flexibility over its deployment, for which we would be very willing to be held directly accountable to yourselves in Parliament, would be the real goal for us and a real step forward in terms of the current devolution journey.

**Q50 Alex Norris:** Laura, what is your response from the West Midlands perspective?

**Laura Shoaf:** In a lot of ways, our position is very similar. Again, there is a big focus on skills and a want to go further and faster to have more control over budgets and particularly to look more at employment support and careers. It is similar for transport and housing, but for us, it is very specifically housing retrofit, as we have some of the worst levels of fuel poverty in

the country. Another area that is slightly more bespoke to the West Midlands is around digital inclusion, where we have some quite unique circumstances.

We are also interested in flexibility. I would reiterate all the points about funding simplification, funding certainty and funding flexibility and the willingness to be held accountable, and how important it will be through this process to have transparent and accessible local and regional data so that we know whether we are levelling up. That is something we are really keen to work with the Department on. In general, more certainty around funding, which is simplified, and, please, more accountability. Like Greater Manchester, our Mayor is keen to be accountable and held accountable for delivering.

**Joanne Roney:** The point I would make is that the devolution settlement needs to be alongside the multi-year local authority funding settlement and sustainable funding for the wider social infrastructure issues that we are trying to tackle, which Laura mentioned.

To pick up that point about fragmented funding, in 2020 the Local Government Association recognised that 448 different grants were paid to councils, with different initiatives and different timescales on them. When at a combined authority level we are trying to tackle delivery of some of those big, wider ambitions, as outlined in the 12 missions, I think that stability and flexibility of funding for local authorities and the wider public sector plays into the mix to make the effect of the devolution changes that we want. So, core funding for public services, alongside the devolution asks, is important.

**Q51 Alex Norris:** Thank you, Joanne. That leads me nicely into my next question, which is to you, perhaps with your Solace hat on, but obviously in your day-to-day leadership role in a local authority as well. How do your members feel about their current capacity to deliver what they need to as a council? How would they react to being asked to do more things?

**Joanne Roney:** Capacity is a huge challenge for local government and for my members, up and down the country. That is capacity in terms of not only workforce and expertise but stable funding. As Eamonn said, it is not necessarily more money, but an understanding of the long-term planning that we need, and multi-year settlements so that we can start to work collectively.

To answer the question about how my members feel about doing more, as Eamonn said, in Greater Manchester we have been at the forefront of working together, as 10 local authorities, with these wider ambitions, for a considerable amount of time. One of the key features of Greater Manchester's original devolution deal was public sector reform. We were very mindful of the fact that we think we can do more collectively, in particular in that space around prevention, to start to make best use of public sector resources.

My members would say, "More power to devolution to Greater Manchester;" and that, importantly, the resources, reform agendas and public sector expenditure should be dealt with at the lowest possible level to get the changes we need to make the difference to coincide with the 12 missions. That is what they would say.

**Q52 Alex Norris:** I have one more brief question, if I may—a final point on compulsory purchase orders, to ensure that I understood what was said in the previous

answer. Notwithstanding issues of cost and capacity, which link to what Joanne just said, given what is on the face of the Bill on CPO, would you like to see anything further in the Bill, or do you think anything needs to be added or subtracted? Eamonn, you mentioned permitted development. That question is to any or all of the panellists.

**Eamonn Boylan:** The measures contained in the Bill in respect of CPO are eminently sensible and supportable. There will always be issues—this goes back to Joanne’s point about certainty of funding—with the availability of funding and the ability to manage what is still a complex legal framework, but the reforms set out in the Bill are an essential prerequisite for making CPO more applicable and useful in delivering place-based regeneration.

**Q53 Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op):** To start, I have a question for Ms Roney. There are proposals to move from section 106 funding to a new infrastructure funding model. How will that be helpful in releasing funding to generate affordable and social housing? Where do you see the risks in that funding proposal?

**Joanne Roney:** We have gone around the loop on a number of these different measures for a considerable time. If the outcome is to deliver more affordable housing, I think the challenge is still the variances between different parts of the country and the ability to deliver affordable housing because of the value of the land and the cost of build. So I am not sure that that will necessarily fix it, but then I am not sure that section 106 fixed it either. I think we should be having a different conversation—about how we provide affordable housing in different areas.

I will call on my colleague Eamonn to help me here, because one of the successes of the combined authority has been the revolving housing investment fund that we have used and the different models we have created to try to get better value out of all our developments and translate that into affordable housing numbers. We have had a range of success, but some of that has come from the ability to use flexible funding that we already have to support some schemes.

Overall, I think we would support the proposal in the Bill, but we need to do more to look at affordable housing provision in different parts of the country, and different innovative and flexible ways to drive value in order to provide truly affordable homes.

**Eamonn Boylan:** I echo Joanne’s comments, but I will just make the point—I know a number of Committee members will be well aware of this—that section 106 is far less potent in northern parts of the country than in others because of the issues around viability, particularly where we are dealing with brownfield land. Most of my brownfield land has the periodic table underneath it, and therefore the costs of remediation are significant.

We really welcome the Government’s initiative on the brownfield land fund, which has really helped us to unlock development, but section 106 or a replacement levy will not provide us in the north with sufficient resource to deal with the challenge of affordable housing. We need to go beyond that. That is part of the devolution ask that we will be making around how we might work more effectively with Homes England in delivering programmes—particularly on affordable housing, and particularly on affordable low-carbon or zero-carbon housing, which is a very significant challenge.

**Laura Shoaf:** I mentioned earlier that one of the things we wanted to do in a trailblazer devolution deal was to look at how we can use the housing and brownfield funding that we have more flexibly, to address some of the wider regeneration challenges but also to help us to increase levels of affordable housing. The brownfield funding, as Eamonn said, has demonstrably made a difference in our ability to assemble sites, to remediate sites, to bridge the viability gap and then, ultimately, to do what we all want to do, which is to deliver more housing, affordable included.

**Q54 Rachael Maskell:** Thank you. May I move on to the issue of viability appraisal, stacking up and being able to deliver projects? Clearly, there are multiple challenges with being able to deliver viable economic/residential projects, particularly in the north. What changes do you want to see to the Bill to make sure that such projects, which really do regenerate local communities, can be delivered?

**Eamonn Boylan:** At the risk of repeating myself, one of the keys to unlocking significant urban regeneration is certainty of funding and confidence in the longevity of any funding source. I will use the example of Ancoats, which used to be a no-go area in Manchester but is now regarded by some as the coolest urban neighbourhood in western Europe. The platform for delivering that was laid by investing public money through derelict land grant 15 years before the major acceleration in housing development took place; the market took that time to recover post-recession and to move forward. It is not only the availability of resource; it is our ability to invest at the right time in order to trigger affordable and sustainable growth and leverage very significant private sector investment.

In answer to your question about whether we think there are places where the Bill could go further, we think the review of Green Book evaluation methodology needs to be pushed forward in order to take more account of some of the affordability and viability challenges we face. I have a long catalogue of projects in both housing and other areas where we have failed the Green Book benefit-cost ratio test at individual project level but not been allowed to apply it at the programme level, where overall we could have made it stack up. I think flexibility around the application of some of those rules would be really helpful in enabling us to move forward.

**Joanne Roney:** May I can come in on the back of that to give an example? Ancoats, as Eamonn said, is one of the successes in Manchester. I am currently dealing with the north and the east of the city. The north of the city has 15,000 homes to be built across a range of sites involving a range of different Government Departments.

I completely support the idea that the Bill could go further in helping us with land assembly and doing more to encourage, through grants, brownfield land to be acquired and remediated, but there is also something about simplifying the process through a partnership with Homes England so that I do not have to produce a business case for Homes England, for the Treasury and to access individual grants. There has to be a more efficient way to do large-scale regeneration of swathes of land that needs to be brought back into use and put to greater purpose. That is key for the devolution asks for Greater Manchester, particularly in respect of that partnership with Homes England.

**The Chair:** Rachael, do you have any more questions?

**Q55 Rachael Maskell:** I have a couple more, if I may. On the planning changes proposed in the Bill, there is a sequencing around national infrastructure projects and local development plans. What do you consider to be the implications of the interruption of local development plans as a result of national infrastructure projects? What does that mean for your ability to pursue your housing and economic aspirations locally? I am talking about the Secretary of State's powers.

**Eamonn Boylan:** We have had to deal with sequential challenges in terms of development, control and planning for a number of years. It is fair to say that we would need to be reassured that there was sufficient cognisance of the timing of the planning of projects at a major or national level so that they can be properly accommodated in local plans and so that local plan considerations can inform the way in which those plans are brought together.

One thing in the Bill that is of slight concern to us is the reference to it being possible to have only one local plan at any one time. We have done a lot of work over the past six years to develop a spatial framework for all of Greater Manchester, incorporating nine of the 10 boroughs. That was supported by the development of local plans that were entirely consistent with it but overarchingly governed by that strategic framework. We just want to make certain that there is a transitional arrangement that will enable us to protect that position as we move ahead, because it has held us in good stead as we have moved forward over recent years.

**Laura Shoaf:** I do not know that I have much to add. We do not have a regional spatial framework in the West Midlands and we are not a planning authority, so this might not be the best place for me to make a useful comment. Joanne might have a view.

**Joanne Roney:** I am not sure that I disagree with anything Eamonn said. Broadly, we welcome the introduction of additional tools and powers that help us to deal with compliance and anything that can help existing sites to be built out. I think Eamonn has mainly covered the other points that I would have made about seeking the approach to continue to get the complexity out of the system, particularly in respect of the production of local plans.

**Rachael Maskell:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Are there any further questions before we move on to the next panel?

**Q56 Matthew Pennycook** (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): I have a question about the infrastructure levy that touches on the issues that my colleague just raised. Does the panel have any thoughts on the ways in which, if it is at all, the proposed infrastructure levy is more beneficial than the current arrangement? I appreciate that lots of detail needs to be filled in, but how would you—I suppose this is directed to Eamonn and Laura—see the infrastructure levy operating, particularly on complex brownfield sites?

**Eamonn Boylan:** One thing in the Bill that we very much welcome the principle of is the notion that the infrastructure levy is effectively extracted once value has been created. That will make it much easier to calculate an appropriate levy, particularly on a complex, multifaceted scheme.

The issue for us would be, if the income from the levy is delayed until after development has been completed, what are the arrangements that enable me to fund the infrastructure up front? That is needed to enable the development to take place in the first instance. It would need to be linked to the availability of things like the brownfield land release fund or, potentially, borrowing powers to enable us to invest in the infrastructure on the basis of a levy replenishing the borrowing at a later date. The principle is a good one, and I am sure it will be welcomed in the development community, but we need to find a way of making certain that it does not work in a way that prevents us delivering infrastructure in a timely way to enable schemes to come forward.

**Laura Shoaf:** I reiterate that there is still a lot to unpack and still a lot to understand about what it will mean in practice. We keep coming back to certainty and simplicity being the two things that really help enable us to get big, new-generation projects off the ground. I reiterate Eamonn's point: anything that can be leveraged into some sort of pump priming to help to give both certainty and consistency would be genuinely very welcome.

**Joanne Roney:** I would just add that generally, across the UK, we are supportive of the infrastructure levy being non-negotiable, which is a strong statement to make, and of it being determined at a local level, which will take in those regional differences that Eamonn and I mentioned earlier—the viability in different places. There is a lot to welcome in this, but the detail needs to be worked through.

**Q57 Matthew Pennycook:** I have a brief follow-up question for Eamonn. You said one of the potential advantages is that the levy is extracted at the point that the value has been created. Do you foresee any disputes arising between local planning authorities or combined authorities and developers as to valuation appraisals at that point in time? Will we get conflict at that point in time between the two sides over what the precise value is and therefore what the levy should be?

**Eamonn Boylan:** I will not pretend to you, sir, that I can have absolute confidence that we will avoid disputes over valuation. We have it at the start of projects now and we have had it at different stages. It will be essential to have established prior to the signing of formal agreement with the developer or developers that we have an agreement on the valuation methodology to be used at the point at which the levy is to be calculated—to try to remove some of that risk. That is certainly what we would hope.

**Joanne Roney:** I think the move to viability assessments increasingly being made public to planning committees helps to bring transparency and clarity to value early on in the discussions, as part of the planning process. We would want to build on that, so that we try to avoid those arguments. I am sure they will be there, but it is how they get resolved.

**Matthew Pennycook:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** As there are no further questions, I thank the witnesses for their evidence. We will move to the next panel: we have two witnesses virtually and two present in the room. If Members wish to remove their jackets, please feel free to do so.



### Examination of Witnesses

*Professor Graeme Atherton, Rich Bell, Sacha Bedding and Dr Parth Patel gave evidence.*

2.39 pm

**The Chair:** We will now take oral evidence from Professor Graeme Atherton, head of the Centre for Inequality and Levelling Up at the University of West London; Rich Bell and Sacha Bedding from the We're Right Here campaign; and Dr Parth Patel from the Institute for Public Policy Research. We have until 3.20 pm. Will the witnesses please introduce themselves for the record?

**Dr Patel:** I am Parth Patel. I am a fellow at the Institute for Public Policy Research, where I lead the programme of work on democracy and justice. I am also a doctor in the NHS.

**Rich Bell:** I am Rich Bell. I am the campaign manager for We're Right Here, a campaign for a community power Act. Our campaign is supported by a number of national policy organisations, including Power to Change, New Local and Locality, but it is driven by community leaders who are pursuing a range of social missions in their community, all of whom believe that their work would be easier if public institutions were designed for them to do things with, rather than designed to do things for them. Sacha is one of our six leaders.

**Sacha Bedding:** Hi, I'm Sacha Bedding. I work for a small, estate-based charity in the Dyke House area of Hartlepool. The charity is called the Wharton Trust, but we are better known locally as the Annexe. We are a community anchor organisation; I think that would be the best description of us. I am here on behalf of my colleagues in the We're Right Here campaign.

**Professor Atherton:** My name is Graeme Atherton. I am based in the University of West London, and I head the Centre for Inequality and Levelling Up, which is a research centre at the university focused on developing policy-relevant research on geographical and broader forms of inequality. The centre was launched just over a year ago.

**The Chair:** I understand that Government Members started the questioning last time, so I ask Alex or Matthew to start.

**Q58 Alex Norris:** I will, if that is all right, Sir Mark. Good afternoon, panellists. I am really grateful for your time. I will direct my first question to Rich and Sacha. Your campaign is about community power. What do you think about what is in the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill?

**Rich Bell:** Our basic sense is that there are positive individual measures in the Bill to strengthen the agency of local authorities and communities, but we have some worries about the way that local leadership is conceived of in the Bill. Andy Haldane, who led the Government's levelling-up taskforce, said that if we are to make a reality of levelling up, local governance has to be a team sport involving local government, local finance, community organisations and local people, yet local leadership seems to be conceived of, both in the levelling-up White Paper and in the Bill, as being restricted to elected metro Mayors, potentially county mayors and governors. We do not think that that fulfils the need for meaningful

control at community level. Giving people control of the services, spaces and spending decisions that shape our places will be absolutely pivotal to fulfilling levelling-up missions related to pride in place—as will local leadership, obviously.

**Q59 Alex Norris:** Sacha, did you want to expand on that?

**Sacha Bedding:** Teesside is well known for what our metro Mayor, Ben Houchen, is doing. If you were to ask people in my community what that means to them—the purchase of an airport; the decarbonisation of industry; carbon capture and storage—they would say that they are good things, and the macroeconomic circumstances arising out of them could be a positive, but it feels as though they are a million miles away from having an impact on their life. When we talk about local leadership, I would like us to move beyond the sub-regional. From a Westminster perspective, that is more local, but from a community perspective, to really feel for those people in left-behind neighbourhoods, of which ours is one, it needs to be most local leadership. Giving people agency and control over more decisions, more often, would be beneficial.

The Bill is a start, and a step in the right direction. As Rich says, there are elements that you can get behind, but probably more needs to be done, so that people can feel that they benefit from some of the levelling-up opportunities in the paper.

**Q60 Alex Norris:** This might be a good moment to go to you, Parth. In your research, you have looked at democracy and decision making. What does that tell you about who people are confident in, where they want to make decisions, and what involvement people in general want in decision making?

**Dr Patel:** At their simplest, questions of constitutional reform and devolution are questions about whose voice is heard, which we should not detach from the question of who has a voice in the first place. There is minimal engagement in Bill with local politicians at certain scales, or with community and civil society organisations and citizens. There are some allusions to public consultation, but without much detail about what it involves. That is a problem, because when you are implementing a tier of local governance without having come bottom up, there is a risk that the link between the citizenry and this new tier of state will be weak. Then you get low political engagement, of all sorts, and local opposition to certain new tiers of government, and it feels like a wasted opportunity.

At the same time, clauses 43 and 45 grant the Secretary of State new powers to impose a combined county authority, change the constitution in a CCA or impose a mayoralty unilaterally—with a public consultation, although that is not quite defined. That purely top-down approach to constitutional reform risks being at best a little bit of a waste and at worst democratically not very legitimate.

**Q61 Alex Norris:** Thank you. Graeme, we spoke a little in this morning's sitting about the missions. As you know, whether the missions should be set out in the Bill, or whether the Bill should say instead that there should be some missions, is something of a politically contested

[Alex Norris]

space. We also talked a little about how we will understand progress. From your research in your unit at the university, how best can we as decision makers and legislators monitor levelling up and understand the impact of the various levelling-up missions and programmes?

**Professor Atherton:** One of the first things is that the missions differ significantly in precisely how they can be measured. For some missions, you see targets that one could see progress against in a quantitative way; for others, that is less so. Consistency across the missions would seem a good starting point. Then, if we are indeed to look for progress, there need to be quantitative and possibly other measures alongside each mission.

Inevitably, one of the challenges with levelling up is that the White Paper is so broad and encompasses so many different policy areas. We found over 120 different policy targets or policies mentioned in the White Paper, alongside £250 billion-worth of spend. Refining that down to a number of missions will be difficult. First, you need to make the missions consistent, and there needs to be a rationale for why certain things are included as missions and others are not. For instance, we consistently have things on skills, but not on other aspects of education—we have things for younger groups, at primary level, but not for those at a level between the two.

The important point is: what is and is not the mission? In defining it and looking for progress, we need to be as precise as we can be for each mission. We should possibly go beyond the time scale in the White Paper, and look at what happened prior to that, because although the medium term is good, you need to consider the short, medium and long-term progress you are looking to make on the missions.

**Q62 Tim Farron:** Thank you to all the panellists; it is brilliant to see you here. My first question is to Dr Patel. Rural communities face inequality in accessing health services, given the geographical distances that people need to travel to receive healthcare. Thinking about cancer treatment, A&E and GP access, what evidence can you call on to indicate whether those large geographical distances have an impact on health outcomes?

**Dr Patel:** It is an excellent question. I cannot call on a precise study that will give me an exact scientific answer to what you are asking. The thing about health outcomes is that they are a point of convergence for a whole array of economic, social, cultural and political factors, including access to public services of all kinds, not just health services. That is why health outcomes are quite a good thing to look at. Within the 12 missions, it is sort of the mission of the missions. The other 11 all basically feed into whether or not we achieve the health mission, so it is a good thing to look at. There are no two ways about it: public services are a key determinant of health distributions and health patterns, and they make a massive difference to cancer outcomes, for example. At the same time, they are not the be-all and end-all. The local economy matters, and things like pride in place and social relations also matter.

Zooming out a little bit, do I think this Bill and the proposed funding pots around it will achieve the health mission? The evidence tells me I should be sceptical. A really good example is if we look at east and west

Germany in 1990, when there was a four-year life expectancy difference between east and west Germany. Two decades later, that had closed to three months. In those two decades, we saw radical constitutional reform, sweeping political change, €2 trillion of investment and a massive upgrade in public services and access to the services you described. In relation to that, what this Bill proposes is certainly more symbolic than substantial, and that is where my scepticism originates.

**Q63 Tim Farron:** On using this Bill to provide rights to access, or giving local communities the powers of definition and delivery, so that GP practices are protected in rural communities or cancer treatment is brought closer to where people live, what provisions could be put into the Bill to make sure those things are delivered?

**Dr Patel:** That is another brilliant question. There is a huge cut-across here with what has been going on with NHS reforms over the past two or three decades. It is almost as though we have had some of the issues again—the problem with top-down structural reform and how, ultimately, it does not really make a difference. Structures are important, but people really care about outcomes.

I would encourage people to compare what has been going on with the integrated care system reforms, and to think about the priorities, legislative and non-legislative, between those new institutions; the ICS boards operate at the same sort of size as a mayoral combined authority. I for one have definitely encouraged the ICSs to have a much stronger conversation with combined authorities about how they can work together to ensure that services can be delivered to the hardest-to-reach populations. There are certainly places that are doing that quite well. Often, it comes back not just to governance, but to resourcing. By that, I do not just mean money; I mean personnel. The public sector is anaemic in a lot of places, and that is a huge barrier beyond a legislative one.

**Q64 Tim Farron:** Thank you. I have a quick one for Rich and/or Sacha about planning. How much do you think the campaign to increase communities' power over their destiny depends on the level of planning control and the kinds of powers communities have?

**Rich Bell:** I think the destiny of communities is significantly shaped by their level of control over planning decisions. One thing we are at once encouraged by and slightly disappointed by in this Bill is the proposal regarding the neighbourhood share. This is the idea that 25% of the infrastructure levy could be controlled by either a parish council or a neighbourhood planning forum. That currently applies in the case of the community infrastructure levy, but not in the case of section 106. I think it is a very positive step on the Government's part to extend that neighbourhood-level control over the investment of developer-generated public money—to devolve that directly to neighbourhoods. Unfortunately, parish councils are predominantly found in wealthy and rural areas. A report produced for the Department then known as the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government by academics at the University of Reading concluded something very similar on neighbourhood planning forums just a few years ago.

We would suggest that members of the Committee should consider whether the Bill could be amended to expand the definition of a "qualifying body" on page 264.

We would ask Members to introduce a clause amending the Localism Act 2011 that expands the range of organisations to whom that neighbourhood share could be passed. It should be possible for local authorities to designate community anchor organisations, such as the Wharton Trust in Hartlepool, as local trusted partners who could work with that local authority to spend that not insignificant amount of public money.

**Q65 Neil O'Brien:** This question is mainly for Sacha and Rich. It is about high street rental auctions, which the Bill introduces. As well as being an opportunity to improve our high streets and regenerate the local economy, do you think they are an opportunity for voluntary groups, small businesses and social enterprises to get themselves a place on the high street? How would you like to see community involvement in that high street rental auction process work?

**Rich Bell:** We were very encouraged by the detail of this proposal. We were very pleased to see that the Bill defines high street use in a way that recognises the use of high street premises as a communal meeting space. It is incredibly important that the legislation recognises that high streets are not just drivers of local economies; they are the sites of the bumping spaces and the meeting places that stitch together our social fabric. It is similarly positive that the Bill's local benefit condition recognises the social and environmental benefits of high street premises as well as their economic benefits.

We encourage the Government to consider how they can shape accompanying regulations to ensure that local authorities feel that they have permission to work with social enterprises and local community organisations, and to shape their own criteria for high street auctions, so that those community organisations can gain access to high street sites. As I say, we were encouraged by the detail.

**Sacha Bedding:** High streets are absolutely about pride. There is nothing worse than seeing boarded-up places. The opportunity for local ownership and activity will help. People are full of ideas on how to do that. I will not go on too long; we absolutely agree with what Rich said, and there will be any amount of ideas, not just focused around retail, on how people can help make their high streets thriving places again.

**Q66 Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP):** I noted your comments, Mr Bell, about the importance of team spirit in levelling up communities. Do you have any thoughts or comments about the fact that the Scottish Government will not be involved at the decision-making stage in the allocation of levelling-up funding? That suggests that there will be implications for duplication, the inefficient use of resources, and lack of strategic overview.

**Rich Bell:** My only comment would be to say that it seems incredibly important, when taking what is a pretty radical step in promoting sub-regional devolution across England, to do so in a joined-up way which involves dialogue with all the national Governments across the UK. That said, I would say that the problem in the Bill is not the lack of emphasis on sub-regional and national devolution; the problem is the lack of emphasis on devolution at the most local level, as Sacha said, and the complete absence of genuine community leadership.

**Q67 Patricia Gibson:** The Institute of Economic Affairs has described the missions in the Bill as being of “dubious quality”. Do you have any concerns about whether there are sufficient or robust ways of objectively measuring the progress and impact of levelling up, given that many say that there appears to be a lack of accountability or even ownership for each of the missions? If you do have such concerns, how do you think that the Bill could, or should, be altered to address them?

**Rich Bell:** I suspect that this is a question that Graeme and Parth will be able to answer slightly better. As a campaign, we certainly see a case for some sort of independent body that would be charged with assessing the suitability of the levelling-up missions and, crucially, the metrics against which they are measured.

Something we are calling for, as part of our proposal for a community power Act, is the creation of a community power commissioner to assess the Government's performance in upholding the rights of communities. We would say that there is something unique about the Bill in its emphasis on local leadership and on issues of social infrastructure and social capital, and we would like to see particular attention paid to those elements of this agenda when it comes to shaping the metrics and assessing the suitability of the missions.

**Dr Patel:** On the first part of that question, the mission quality, I think that some of the missions are excellent and some are not. Not every mission is equal. That is the top line. Despite the domains being about right as a package, some of the missions are quite narrow—education and skills, for example. Some of them are quite vague, the living standards one in particular, and some of them are probably just a bit too easy to achieve—even with a do-nothing approach, you would probably end up hitting that mission. Having said that, some of the missions are excellent, like the health one. We could dwell on that a little more.

The second half of your question was about accountability. I strongly welcome the reporting to Parliament. Particularly given recent trends in the use of secondary legislation and in the bypassing of Parliament in the Brexit negotiations and the covid legislation, it is nice to see the parliamentary scrutiny mechanism used. It is great that the Government will be doing that. Having said that, I do not think that that in itself is adequate, or at least it is on the low end of ambition, when accountability frameworks might have been useful.

In addition to the political accountability that Parliament will give by something being brought before Parliament each year, a further step would be independent scrutiny. There is the council here, but it is still at the behest of the Government and it will not have analytical power, capability or policy expertise, or the quantitative expertise, to be able to provide this really rigorous scrutiny that you would want around the missions, akin to what we have for climate progress—we have the Climate Change Committee, and the Office for Budget Responsibility or even the National Infrastructure Commission. If we had an institution like that, if the council—which has no statutory footing for levelling up—were turned into an independent institution with a statutory footing, with that coming some resource to hire the policy experts that you need, that would be excellent.

You would then have the political accountability mechanism, as well as the technocratic accountability mechanism. One might be better placed to do an annual

progress report and the other to do an annual delivery plan, but those two mechanisms together would be the gold standard to ensure accountability and progress on the missions.

**Q68 Patricia Gibson:** Does Professor Atherton want to add anything?

**Professor Atherton:** Yes. I agree, particularly on the issue of independence and scrutiny. Transparency is important as well, if we are going to construct what is most desirable, which is some form of independent scrutiny. If you look at the Bill, it is weak in that area, with regards to how the missions are scrutinised. That has to be done in a transparent way, whatever approach is taken. We have already seen in the distribution and levelling-up funds some issues regarding transparency and clarity in those areas. I would also say that we would have to consider how the ability is set in the Bill to change the missions. There is something of a contradiction to consider there in that the missions are meant to be long-term challenges.

In the White Paper, there is significant attention placed on the nature of missions—why we have missions and how they will make a significant difference to how we deliver on this agenda. However, in the long-term element, there is at the same time the ability set in the Bill to change the missions, and I think how that is done needs to be transparent. If we consider the time limits, from my understanding of the Bill, they can be changed quite frequently, possibly after only a small period of implementation, which would suggest that we could have a scenario where we move from mission to mission.

That kind of devalues the concept of the missions altogether. We have to consider what the missions are adding to the mix. Overall, they have a possible powerful role to play. The way the policy is constructed is to have lots of other different policies moving towards levelling up. Having a mission is a way of tying that together in some way, so I think that is quite welcome, but for them to work, they have to generally be constructed as different from a policy target—i.e. a mission. Therefore, it implies longevity, scrutiny, transparency as well as clear metrics around progress and, as I said before, consistency across the nature of what the missions are.

**Patricia Gibson:** Chair, perhaps we could let Sacha come in on that if he wants.

**The Chair:** Quickly, because we have a number of people who still want to speak, and we are running a bit short on time. Sacha, do you want to come in on that?

**Sacha Bedding:** No, it's fine.

**The Chair:** Okay, Minister?

**Q69 Stuart Andrew:** I just want to return to the issue you raised on neighbourhood planning. There is an interesting concept there about the neighbourhood share, particularly in areas where there is not a parish council or town council. What potential issues might you see in terms of any conflict between the interests of that group and what they are wanting to deliver for that community and the wider community? What governance arrangements might be needed to ensure that there is transparency around the needs of that community and how they develop?

We have a significant number of neighbourhood planning groups and neighbourhood plans around the country. However, there are areas—particularly more deprived areas—that have not developed those. The Bill provides for the neighbourhood priority statements to introduce a simpler way for communities to think about how they want to improve their place. Do you see any issues around that area in the Bill that need to be looked at again? Is this a real opportunity for such groups to formulate how the needs of their communities are delivered on the ground for those towns and areas?

**Rich Bell:** The creation of neighbourhood priority statements, which allow people at the local level to very clearly set out their priorities, and having those accounted for in local plans, is definitely a positive step forward, and we really welcome that. The point we would make is that community anchor organisations work in a way so as to unlock the capacity that is already present in communities. We would suggest that drafting them into this work could actually be key to addressing the geographic disparity in current levels of neighbourhood planning, particularly as research by the Communities in Charge campaign has demonstrated that the sorts of organisations we are talking about—community anchor organisations that seek to address local challenges in holistic ways that are truly reaching the community—are actually more likely to be found in areas that we would describe as deprived.

Clearly, there are challenges around how you ensure those organisations are acting with legitimacy. We think that the Government's pledge to bring forward community covenants in their White Paper is potentially a game changer in that respect. We see that as a means of working through the challenges of a public body investing a degree of authority in a community organisation that is not on a statutory status. We would suggest that as long as you are working through the intermediary organisation in the form of the local authority, and as long as the Government provide guidance and regulations to ensure that that local authority is ensuring the community organisation has the trust of the whole community before it invests that power, it is a neat and relatively easy quick fix to what might otherwise be a problem by which the Bill would wind up deepening inequalities in control and power rather than resolving them.

**The Chair:** I call Matthew Pennycook.

**Q70 Matthew Pennycook:** I have a follow-up question for Rich and Sacha on neighbourhood planning. Given the campaign's interest in neighbourhood planning forums as a model for community covenants, as well as for neighbourhood planning in the suggested power of those covenants, can you expand on how you see the potential use and/or misuse of some of the measures in the Bill, especially national development management policies on the status and functioning of local planning and, in particular—because it is an important aspect—on participation and trust in that process at a local level?

**Rich Bell:** I think we certainly agree with the comments that were made by many Members on Second Reading about the seeming primacy of the national management policy and the way in which the Bill seems to grant the Secretary of State the power effectively to overrule local communities. That does not seem to be in the spirit of the levelling-up agenda as we understand it.

**Q71 Matthew Pennycook:** Sacha, do you want to add anything to that?

**Sacha Bedding:** Only to say that the consequence of that would be more disillusionment, and it needs rectifying. If people are really to have a sense of agency and ownership of their own place and feel that it has been levelled up, they need to feel that they have the power to stop that happening. That needs teasing out in a thoughtful way, so that those powers that we hope will pass down to communities are enshrined and do not depend on the largesse of other people in more significant positions of power.

**The Chair:** I call Darren Henry.

**Q72 Darren Henry (Broxtowe) (Con):** I was just observing that one of the missions is on transport infrastructure, for example, which will move closer to the model in London by 2030. When Parth gave the example of the health and life expectancy case study in East and West Germany, the question struck me of whether the Government are being ambitious enough. We have an opportunity of a blank sheet of paper for a deprived area. Could we look at best practice in transport for example? Seoul and Tokyo are good examples that we could aim for.

**Professor Atherton:** Definitely, when it comes to transport linkages, localism is really important. If we are to take this blank sheet, ambitious approach, we need to ask what model works for particular communities and areas. The modes of transport that we are looking to implement may differ in different areas, and that is really important. This is an area that fits with our previous discussions about where we put decision making at a local level with regards to what sort of innovative transport solutions we could achieve.

We need to be mindful also of being cognisant of the net zero agenda. If we are talking about transport innovation with regard to missions, we have the opportunity to do that in a way that is consistent with the societal commitment to reducing our carbon footprint. Those things are really important.

On the international comparison, there is a need for greater work across the missions on understanding where we see things that work in a comparable nature. It is one thing to look at other countries and say, “Well, X has worked here, but is area X fully comparable to some of the areas that we know face the greatest socioeconomic challenges?” We cannot just pick and choose the things that we want to implement. When we look at evidence of innovation and success, it has to be comparable. Localism is also really important in forming innovative solutions, especially where transport is concerned.

**Q73 Darren Henry:** Okay. I will go to one more witness. Out of Sacha and Rich, who would like to answer that question?

**Rich Bell:** I was going to suggest Sacha. I do not know whether he has anything to add.

**Sacha Bedding:** Of course, when the buses stop running at 6 pm in Hartlepool, it would be good to look at how we can enable transport infrastructure to improve. I am sure that if Mayor Houchen could have a Tees Valley metro system across the area, there would be opportunities for the connectivity between, say, Hartlepool and Redcar, which is an hour trip rather than 15 minutes across the

bay. The scale of what is required to get us anywhere near the standards in London is huge, but we should broadly welcome the idea.

I was interested to see in the paper that the amount of public transport used by people in the north-east was significantly higher than in other parts of country, probably because car ownership is so low. It is about what lies behind those statistics. We need to make it as easy as possible for people to use public transport. At the moment, our solution appears to be electric scooters, but I am not convinced that that is necessarily the right way to level up.

**Q74 Darren Henry:** Parth, do you have anything to add?

**Dr Patel:** I have two quick points. Talking about London-style transport has been causing quite a lot of confusion—I do not quite see what that means. Is it ambitious enough? The London Mayor has more power than other devolved leaders around this country, but from an international perspective it is hard to think of a mayor of a major city who has fewer powers than the London Mayor. Only 8% of revenue is controlled by the London Mayor, and Whitehall still dominates about 70% of revenue streams in London. That is the first question: there is an inherent tension between devolving the power to run public services but not devolving the power to generate revenue to fund those public services. That is a tension that we will see again and again until the question of fiscal firepower is taken seriously.

On the second point, about what a fair comparison is, it is unfair to compare Glasgow to London or Newcastle to London, because London is this mega-city—it is one of a few cities in the world—so Tokyo is a fair comparison. Comparing Newcastle to London is an unfair comparison because they are fundamentally different in population size, economy and all sorts of things. Newcastle should be compared with Leipzig or Lyon—small or medium-sized towns with good, strong public transport that is organised in a way very different from the London transport system. Those are my two points.

**Darren Henry:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Final question from Sarah Atherton. We are running close to time, so can your question be quick, Sarah?

**Q75 Sarah Atherton (Wrexham) (Con):** Can I pick up on community involvement again and the need for ownership and the sense that a community belongs to a project? Perhaps Sacha and Rich could give their opinions on the street votes.

**Rich Bell:** We welcome the spirit of street votes. They seem like a very sensible step forward to allow people to exercise a bit of agency at the neighbourhood level. We do not think they are anything near equal to the challenge that is before us. To emphasise the scale of the challenge we face, last year Demos asked people whether they would prefer to have more of a say over how money is spent in their area or rather have more money: people were twice as likely to say that they would prefer more say and less money than that they would prefer less say and more money. That speaks to how stark the situation has become.

There are various measures that we think could be taken to strengthen the ability of communities to exercise control over planning in their local areas. One that we would strongly recommend that the Committee considers is building into the Bill a community right to buy like that which is currently in law in Scotland. We would see that as a very sensible progression of the current measures.

**Sarah Atherton:** Sacha, do you have any comments?

**Sacha Bedding:** No, that's fine.

**Q76 Sarah Atherton:** Do you have any suggestions, like the community right to buy?

**Sacha Bedding:** The strengthening of the Localism Act would be hugely helpful, as would longer timeframes for us to get our act together—if you give us six months and a developer comes in and already has money in the bank, the developer is always going to win. It is about levelling up the opportunity to take control of assets, because if you control the assets, you are halfway there. There are other things that can be done. For instance, give us 12 months rather than six months—that type of simple approach. Level the field between local communities—certainly in our left-behind places—to give them longer to get together, because it will take longer. Be patient with them and help them build their capacity to do this, because there is an overwhelming desire for it. When you talk about taking back control and levelling up, that resonates, because they have so little control.

**The Chair:** Order. I am sorry, but we have run out of time for questions to this panel. On behalf of the Committee, I thank the witnesses for their evidence.

#### Examination of Witnesses

*Councillor James Jamieson, Councillor Tom Oliver and Councillor Sam Chapman-Allen gave evidence.*

3.20 pm

**The Chair:** I think we have some technical problems with some of the witnesses, but we have Sam Chapman-Allen, chair of the District Councils Network. Would you like to introduce yourself, Sam?

**Cllr Chapman-Allen:** Sorry if there is a bit of a lag; I am down in Australia at the moment, at a local government conference. I am Councillor Sam Chapman-Allen, the leader of Breckland Council in Norfolk. I am also chairman of the District Councils Network for England. I represent 184 district councils across the country, and we serve 22 million people, which is 40% of the population, covering 68% of the country's area. In turn, we provide support to 40% of businesses across the whole of England. I do not know how brief you want me to be, Chair.

**The Chair:** Thank you—that is fine. We are just a bit anxious about the other two members of the panel not being able to connect yet. I will throw the questions open to the Government side first.

**Q77 Neil O'Brien:** Thank you, Sam, and thank you for making the time this afternoon. One of the goals of the Bill is to amend the law in order to make it easier for

us to extend the devolution of powers to more areas outside our cities, particularly areas with two-tier governance, and to respect that two-tier governance. It both makes the process of setting up a combined authority quicker, and also creates combined county authorities. The Government's intention through combined county authorities is to leave the option of having a mayoral combined authority in place, but to create a model in which the consent of every single district in the area is not needed for the creation of the combined authority.

However, it is the Government's intention to have a strong role for lower-tier authorities once those combined authorities are created. I wonder if I could pick your brains on what sorts of things your members might want to combine powers on as voting members of those new CCAs or through joint committees, for instance as a single local authority devolution deal. What sorts of powers would your members potentially want to combine powers on, and to what end?

**Cllr Chapman-Allen:** Thank you for the question. Initially, I think we need to talk about the scale of ambition that local authorities and leaders are trying to achieve. The levelling-up framework sets out the clear positions of levels 1, 2 and 3 for what can be devolved within those nine vanguard areas. For me particularly, those six are in those two-tier areas.

Neil, you spoke about the county councils and unitary councils being enablers for the CCA and what districts would be willing to support moving forward. I think it is important to say that district councils in some areas where these deals are being suggested are being more ambitious than those counties and unitaries. Therefore, whoever is willing to be most ambitious should ensure that they have a seat around the table, but in turn ensuring that no sovereign body has those powers and/or responsibilities removed. There should be opportunities for districts, with those key enablers around business support and planning and growth.

Having spoken to colleagues across the country, but particularly in my area of Norfolk, which is one of those areas, I think we would be willing to have conversations with those that want to share strategic opportunities in the wider planning piece, be they in local planning, master planning, the duty to co-operate—although that is a blight, it is being diluted as we move forward, which is important—our housing challenges and how we support each other to ensure that our housing policies support residents in our localities and, in turn, how we deal with inward investment, to ensure that, regardless of where you want to land in a county locality, you have the same opportunities and support on business rates, business rate exemption and that planning process.

However, it is important that those individuals and sovereign councils buy into being a part of that CCA. In turn, they have to be a constituent part. We are talking about combined authorities, so district councils need to be combined in the decision-making process. There should absolutely not be a veto. I do not think that any individual in that combined authority should have the opportunity to veto, but if they are relinquishing some of that sovereignty through partnership and collaboration, they should have an equal say in how policies, strategy, spend and projects come forward.

**Q78 Neil O'Brien:** That is helpful. Can I press you a little further on that? Obviously, the Government completely agree that no sovereign body should lose power without consent, and that lower-tier councils should have a vote where they are pooling powers. In the light of what districts and boroughs do at present—culture, waste, democracy, tourism, leisure, inward investment, planning, homelessness and so on—how can we best use the new models of combined authority in two-tier areas? How can we best set things up to make it as easy as possible for districts to come together in the ambitious way that you have described?

**Cllr Chapman-Allen:** The frameworks and structures around MCAs already exist. Some individuals in Whitehall cite failures of governance in some of those MCA structures. We do not necessarily need to throw the baby out with the bathwater as we try to recreate a CCA. We can actually use the existing framework and governance structure, and tweak them to ensure that we are delivering for residents and businesses across our localities and communities.

It comes down to the bottom-up position. Localities and sovereign councils absolutely see the opportunities presented in the levelling-up framework and the Bill, but we have to make sure that we are able to help in shaping those opportunities moving forward. District councils across the country collaborate with each other through partnerships every single day. In my locality in Norfolk, we have a shared waste partnership across three councils—it is one of the biggest waste partnerships in the country—and, of course, as the collection authority across the whole of the county of Norfolk, all the district councils provide a set framework for how we collect that waste.

That district collaboration in some statutory service provision—be it waste, planning, housing, or homelessness—occurs not just in Norfolk, but across the whole of the country. We just have to make sure that we lift that to the new body—whether it is an existing MCA or the new CCA—which will be able to help shape the agenda as we move forward and ensure that there is equal say at the table on policy and spend.

**The Chair:** I call Matthew Pennycook.

**Matthew Pennycook:** To clarify, Chair, will we not be able to get the other witnesses in?

**The Chair:** It is looking iffy at the moment. If they do not appear, we can have a brief discussion about how to address it at the end of the sitting.

**Q79 Matthew Pennycook:** Great—I will tailor my questions accordingly. Sam, thank you for attending. Do you foresee any issues with the requirements in clauses 75 to 81 relating to planning data and digitisation? Local planning officers will go to their IT departments and ask them to help facilitate that digitisation. Are district councils sufficiently well resourced, in terms of their IT capabilities, to manage the introduction of and ongoing compliance with those sorts of standards?

**Cllr Chapman-Allen:** There are two parts to that question. One is that, across the whole of the country, regardless of which tier of government deals with planning, we have a shortage of planning officers. That, sadly, is the nature of the beast, with their desire to work in the private sector, where incomes will be greater.

For us in district councils, for those who have not got a rural locality basis—that ability for residents to interact with their council—through poor broadband provision, I think the proposals for digitalisation for planning is the real positive. As for how district councils will operate that, we are already in the vanguard of that AI—artificial intelligence—and how we interact with our residents on digitalisation.

The trial that has already taken place across the country has been really successful. Both we and the Department have learnt a great deal from it. As long as the outlay, with some capital support, is forthcoming in the Bill, to ensure that we are able to uplift our software and our hardware, I think it should be a seamless transition. However, we have to ensure that we build that into our capital programmes and into the activity of our staff, so that we can deliver it and, in turn, train up how our council officers operate and, more importantly, ensure that the public understand how they begin to interact and use that new digital service.

**Q80 Matthew Pennycook:** That is really helpful; thank you. Some specific software requirements are proposed in clause 78. Do you think that there is a risk that they might undermine public investment in software tools that have already been purchased and are in use, if the Government are in a sense dictating the types of software that need to be used across the country?

**Cllr Chapman-Allen:** There will be legacy licences for some existing software. They will have a lag time to run out or, depending on the Government's position on this, if there is a hard reset date, there will be a revenue cost to the authority. That needs to be picked up as it moves forward. However, I do not think that it will be a challenge, because the uniformity for residents on planning—in particular for developers and individuals applying with planning applications—will allow the smooth understanding of how to interact with their local planning service.

**Q81 Matthew Pennycook:** On the national management development policies, clauses 83 and 84, the LGA has published concerns. Does the DCN share those to any extent? In particular, will you comment on how you see the impact of national management development policies on the ability of district councils to tailor plans to their local circumstances, to innovate and to embed higher standards that the Government might want to see in particular areas?

**Cllr Chapman-Allen:** I am not completely sighted on that clause, but in the wider sense of the LGA and DCN's position on the proposed rules moving forward, this must be a bottom-up approach. As we have said time and again, in order for growth to take place, communities have to see the benefit realisation, whatever that is, whether for infrastructure, design or the specification of units we are building. As long as residents see the benefit to their communities, the policies that are forthcoming to date are in line with what we were expecting; with what we asked for back in the planning consultation in August 2020. That said, there will be nuances in every location across the country that will sit outside the NPPF, in which local planning policies from local plans must have that flexibility to support local needs and desires, and therefore those sorts of outputs.

**Q82 Matthew Pennycook:** Great. I have two more questions, Chair—I will try to rattle through them. Sam, earlier you touched on planning officers and the profession. Do you think that this Bill is missing an opportunity to address some of the issues around morale, capability, resourcing and status of planning officers within authorities?

**Cllr Chapman-Allen:** I do not necessarily think this is a position around culture and morale. Being a planning officer is one of those specialist trades in a district council, no different from an environmental health officer or a health and safety officer. It takes years to get to the standard required to undertake that duty and that requirement.

The challenge we face is that framework and that position, and the fact that we are competing with the private sector. So, particularly for those districts that surround the M25, it is immensely easy for those planning officers to transit in between and to commute into London. For those districts that are in rural locations, some of those challenges on connectivity, and on access to health and education, make it a career choice sometimes for people as to whether they want to reside in those locations.

Of course, the new agile lifestyle post covid presents some further opportunities, but it once again comes down to pounds, shillings and pence. We are stuck between a rock and a hard place. We can always pay more for planning officers, but sadly we are not able to get 100% cost recovery on planning applications. So, in response to your question, we could go further to ensure that district councils and others that deal with planning matters could get 100% cost recovery and therefore pay a higher value for those planning officers to deliver that service.

**Q83 Matthew Pennycook:** Brilliant. Just finally, nowhere in legislation is the purpose of our planning system set down. Do you think there is any value in more clearly defining the aims of the planning system? Is this Bill an opportunity to do that?

**Cllr Chapman-Allen:** Yes, there is, but I will put back on the health warning that with planning the clue is in the name—we need to make sure that we are planning for our communities for the next 10, 15, 20 or 30 years, and not being reactive. Also, this cannot be a top-down exercise for what we are trying to achieve. Every one of our locations, in our communities and in your constituencies, has its unique beauty, its unique opportunities and its unique challenges. Therefore, those local plans must be derived locally. As much as the national planning policy framework sits at a national level as the umbrella, I do not think it should necessarily dictate completely how we deliver planning locally for us.

**The Chair:** I call the Minister, Stuart Andrew.

**Q84 Stuart Andrew:** Thank you very much, Sir Mark. I am half-tempted to say, “G’day, Sam.” Thank you for your time today.

Just touching on the local plans, obviously at the moment we have about 39% of England covered by local plans, which means that there is a significant area not covered by them. Clearly, the Bill is trying to simplify the process of developing local plans. What has been the reaction your members of to the measures in the Bill to try to achieve that, and are there any other

suggestions they have made that they think would be helpful, so that we can get more local plans in place within a much shorter timescale than we are currently experiencing?

**The Chair:** Just before you answer that question, Sam, can I just bring it to the Committee’s attention that we have now been joined by Councillor James Jamieson, chair of the Local Government Association, and Councillor Tim Oliver, chair of the County Councils Network. Welcome to the sitting. I am sorry that you have had those technical problems, but we are glad to see you here. We are just partway through a question from the Minister, Stuart Andrew, at the moment. I will bring you both in and we will obviously tailor some of the questions towards you both as the sitting progresses.

**Cllr Chapman-Allen:** Thank you, Chair. Stuart, the answer is twofold. Local planning is an immensely complicated process—that to-ing and fro-ing with the planning inspector makes it immensely challenging. I think it comes back to the previous questions: “Is this a top-down exercise? Do we need a very clear framework for what planning is?” But planning derives from that local position.

If we are being really clear and setting clear parameters for what local communities need to deliver through that formula of housing growth, challenge if it cannot be delivered, and allow those local communities to move forward and deliver upon that in a set timeframe, then we will expediate that. In my local authority in Breckland, we delivered a local plan, confirmed in December 2019. We are already out for review again, at vast cost, vast expense and vast frustration for our communities, when actually we should probably only be tweaking some of those local policies.

The sad fact is that some of those locations that you mentioned, which do not have a developed local plan, are now in the challenge around nutrient neutrality and an inability to deliver those plans, and of course the duty to co-operate places a further burden on those councils to provide that local plan.

In answer to your question, really briefly—sorry to waffle—make the timeframe shorter; allow that local drive to come from the bottom up; ensure that the national planning inspector supports those local policies, not a top-down approach; and I think you would see expediated local plans and adopted local plans across the country.

**Q85 Stuart Andrew:** Thank you. I will try to give you a bit of a breather now, and involve our other two witnesses.

I want to turn to the infrastructure levy. The intention behind this is that it is non-negotiable, to try and reduce all the time that planning officers seem to spend on negotiation. Are the measures welcome? On the development of the infrastructure statements that local planning authorities have, do you see the opportunity for greater working between county and district councils in agreeing, as part of a local plan, the sort of infrastructure that is needed within those communities ahead of development being granted?

**Cllr Jamieson:** Thank you and apologies for my technical problems. On the infrastructure levy, I do think that is a helpful move. All too often, developers use viability as an excuse to increase their profits, or landowners to increase the value of their land. Really, where there is a



significant uplift in the value of land as a result of receiving planning permission, it is only right and fair that that bonus of increase in value should go towards providing the essential infrastructure that is needed to support that development, whether that is roads, schools or soft infrastructure, such as health and community support. We welcome the community infrastructure levy as a simpler mechanism and one that will be applied to more developments, both commercial and housing.

One of the issues we have raised many times is the fact that developments of fewer than 10 houses do not pay anything. Quite clearly, that is all very positive. Of course, there are parts of the country where the land value uplift is not sufficient to provide the infrastructure, and that needs to be addressed and will have to be addressed by funding from Government. However, in areas where it is—yes, we welcome the fact that it is simplified. Of course, Sam just mentioned some of the other issues, such as nutrient neutrality, which is yet another imposition on development, so we need to be cognisant when we look at the infrastructure levy of the other levies and costs that are put on the land.

**Q86 Stuart Andrew:** Tim, do you have anything to add from a county council's perspective?

**Cllr Oliver:** Many thanks, and my apologies too for the technical issues. We absolutely welcome a simplified community infrastructure levy and section 106 arrangement. At the moment, CIL is administered by the district and borough council, and the county council, in normal circumstances, would make an application for a part of that funding. It would be helpful for the Bill to provide clarification on how that infrastructure levy should be used. It is a levy to enable infrastructure support to facilitate housing and development. I know that part of the suggestion in the Bill is that 25% of that infrastructure levy would be set aside for parish councils, but, to your point, I would hope that there would be early conversations between all three tiers of local government, where they exist, as to how that levy should be spent for the benefit of the community.

**The Chair:** Thanks Stuart. Just before I bring in Tim Farron, I will give both Neil and Matthew the opportunity to ask a question to the other two panellists, who unfortunately were not present earlier. Neil, have you got any brief questions? I will then bring in Matthew.

**Q87 Neil O'Brien:** Thank you, Sir Mark. James and Tim, the Bill contains measures both to simplify and accelerate the process of creating new combined authorities, be they mayoral or non-mayoral, and to create a new type of combined authority, which is more regularly usable in two-tier areas and respects the division of powers in those areas. I do not know what your views are on how much interest there is among your members in forming further combined authorities and doing further devolution deals. What is your view of the powers to accelerate and create new models to enable us to move forward with devolution in two-tier areas and avoid the unintended consequence of the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009, which gave each district in an area a veto over its neighbours and led to us not moving forward with deals in Lincolnshire and in Norfolk, Suffolk and Cambridgeshire previously? I suggest James answers first.

**Cllr Jamieson:** First, in broad terms, we welcome the move to enable every part of the country to have devolution. Previously it has been very much city focused and, of course, most of the country is not in cities, so we welcome that fact and the ambition that everywhere should have a devolution deal.

Obviously, simplifying the process is always welcome, provided that there is a fair and reasonable consultation, and involvement of all relevant parties. Clearly, we should not ride roughshod over various parties. However, as ever with devolution, we think devolution should be led by devolving and not by restructuring. That is one of the issues that has happened in the past, and we need to ensure it does not happen this time. There needs to be genuine devolution from Whitehall down to the local level, at which point we will find much greater acquiescence at the local level when it comes to how to come up with a structure that works.

When we first start talking about restructuring and then about devolution, I am always concerned that we should devolve the powers down and then look at what is the best way, on a local basis, which will be different across the country, to deliver the outcomes from that devolution. I would emphasise—Neil, I really appreciate the work that you are doing—that we certainly believe that far more can be done on a place basis than on a Whitehall basis in local devolution, simply because if I am in the north of England or Northumbria that is very different from Cornwall or central Bedfordshire. We have different priorities and issues, and that can only be done at the local place level, so the more that is devolved, that is clearly better. I emphasise devolution first, and then restructuring to match the powers that are devolved to us.

**Q88 Neil O'Brien:** Thank you. Tim?

**Cllr Oliver:** Thank you very much. The County Councils Network and my members are hugely supportive of the intentions set out in the Bill. We see this very much as an opportunity for the two thirds of the country that are not currently able to benefit from any devolution deal.

We see this as the devolution of powers from Parliament down to local government. The complications that exist at the moment will be taken away by the Bill. I think we will see members embracing the opportunity to have a devolution deal. In terms of the CCA, only 50% of my members would need that, where they have an adjoining county authority or unitary authority. The other 50% could benefit from a simple devolution deal.

My understanding is that this is not about the organisation of local government, either overtly or through the back door. This is about the flow down of powers from central Government to local leaders, where those leaders are clearly identified, and then the county level engaging with all our partners. This is as much about delivering the health system, and the integration of health and social care, as it is about any tier of local government. It is important that the process is simple, straightforward and quick. If at all possible, we want to get on with this. Then it is for the county authority to engage with the other two tiers of local government, if those exist, and to work out how best to deliver that.

I am very supportive, as is the CCA. I am grateful to the Minister for clarification on some confusion around clause 16. That seems perfectly workable and reasonable, so I very much support the direction of travel.

**Neil O'Brien:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Matthew, do you have any questions for the two panellists?

**Q89 Matthew Pennycook:** You will be relieved to hear I am not going to go over all my questions, Sir Mark, but I will ask James and Tim the specific question that I asked Sam about clauses 75 to 81 on planning data and digitisation. Can you foresee any issues with how authorities can implement those measures, specifically in terms of how well resourced IT departments are to do so? In his response, Sam from the District Councils Network said that yes, it will all work fine, presuming that the correct amount of capital support, and so on, comes with it. What needs to come with the Bill for you to properly implement those measures around data and digitisation?

**Cllr Jamieson:** The key thing is that we are all immensely supportive of digitisation; it is the way to go. We do not want paper. In fact, one of the things that we saw during covid was that a number of local authorities moved to remote working and digitisation anyway, which made the process so much easier.

This is something that we are supportive of. I think Sam is right that we need clear guidelines, the relevant capital support and clear technical things, such as, “How will the system work?” and “What are the data protocols?”, because we want a very clear system that works for everyone. As ever, I think we are all slightly nervous about big IT projects, but this should work, with proper engagement with local government to ensure that we do it in the right way.

**Q90 Matthew Pennycook:** Great. Tim, anything to add?

**Cllr Oliver:** Yes, I agree with both James and Sam. Obviously, planning is largely in the remit of the district and borough councils. In an ideal world, I would hope to see some sort of spatial development strategy, or the ability to create that. The duty to co-operate has not worked particularly well, and, where we are creating CCAs and county deals, it would be very helpful for there to be some input, at least, from a county-wide perspective. In terms of the digitalisation, I would leave that to the other two and I agree with what they said.

**Q91 Tim Farron:** Hello to all three of you; it is really nice to see you. Thank you very much for your time. My question is on housing and planning, so it is probably for Sam, but with a little bit of James, and we would be perfectly interested to hear what Tim has to say as well.

If we take it as a given that, particularly in the rural communities that many district councils serve, there is a collapse of the private rented sector into the Airbnb sector and a massive growth in second home ownership at the expense of permanent occupied dwellings, do you think that this Bill gives you any additional powers that help you to push back against that? What additional powers would you like?

**Cllr Chapman-Allen:** The relaxation for local authorities to tax second homes for council tax purposes had a really positive impact. We are seeing that across those communities in which second home ownership is immensely high. For communities such as yours, Tim, that Airbnb

community is a challenge. First, it removes those rental properties from the market for long-term tenants. Secondly, it creates a really fluid community, and sometimes there are risks of antisocial behaviour related to that. There could be more strengthening for those local authorities to place conditions on new builds and new properties to ensure that the type of mix and tenure, and/or usage around holiday homes and/or Airbnbs, could be strengthened.

That said, we have the existing legacy problems for coastal communities, market towns and cathedral cities already. I would not necessarily want to suggest that we change that through this Bill now. We need to ensure that we are working with those landlords positively, as with housing providers and housing legislators, to ensure that they understand the challenges they face, but more importantly, the challenges that the communities face.

We have a long way to go. Over the last 12 months, there has been a lot of change for landlords. Sadly some of those have now vacated the market because of the changes in regulations, and policies required of them. We must ensure that we have a suitable housing mix across the country, and those who want to and do rent have an important part to play. Therefore, landlords have an important part to play in that process. I would not necessarily want to over-regulate so that landlords no longer want to operate in that market. However, there is a challenge around Airbnb and there is further work we can do to support the Government in implementing some legislation on that.

**Tim Farron:** Thanks. James?

**Cllr Jamieson:** I agree with Sam on the issue of second home owners—I think that is a helpful move. Airbnb is a slightly separate issue that needs to be thought through because there is a whole range of issues associated with it. It is not just about taking it out of the market. As Sam alluded to, it is a potentially antisocial issue; it is a transient nature; and it potentially puts more pressure on local authorities. It is more about how we manage that type of property, which is something we are very keen to have a conversation about—on enforcement, on ensuring that the accommodation is suitable, and on things like a potential tourist tax. I am not quite sure the solution to Airbnb is part of the levelling-up White Paper. It is potentially a separate issue that we need to look into quite carefully.

However, you were right when you alluded to the fact that housing just costs far too much in far too many parts of the community. In your area, Tim, and in the south-west and coastal communities, housing is being soaked up by holidaymakers and second home owners, with not enough homes available for people who want to work there. There are manifest stories of people wanting to go on holiday—to, say, Cornwall—but the pub has to shut because it cannot get any staff, because they cannot afford to live there.

**Q92 Tim Farron:** Yes. I have one totally separate question—hopefully it will be of interest to all of you. The Government state that having an elected Mayor is essential to providing strong leadership. Do you agree? Are there exceptions?

**The Chair:** Could you answer quickly? We have one more question—possibly two—and we are running very short on time.

**Cllr Jamieson:** Our view is that we have excellent local government leaders. There is a role for Mayors, but it should not be essential to have a Mayor everywhere. There are plenty of powers that could be devolved to the existing structure without the need for a Mayor. As I said, there is nothing against Mayors; they are absolutely appropriate in certain places. We think it should be the choice of the local area as to the best governance arrangement for them.

**Q93 Tim Farron:** I think Tim might want to come in.

**Cllr Oliver:** I support that. I understand and agree with the Government's desire to have a single accountable leader. However, I think that in the case of a county council leader, that person already exists. I know that my residents know exactly who to write to if they have any issues, particularly on potholes. We do not necessarily need to have a directly elected Mayor or leader to deliver the devolved aspects and benefits that will come with the Bill. We respect the Government's position, but we do not see that as an absolute prerequisite.

**The Chair:** Okay. A couple of words, Sam?

**Cllr Chapman-Allen:** Thank you. In response to Tim's question, I would say that, once again, it comes back to the bottom-up position. We are sovereign bodies in our own right. We work in partnership across our localities, whether through public sector leaders' boards or leaders' forums, and we can already operate in that structure. The past two years, with the pandemic, have proven that collaboration.

In direct response to Tim's question, the risk is that, as we move forward, there are powers being devolved, and actions and functions—particularly around local enterprise partnerships—that are moving away to a single person who is not elected for that role directly. We should be using existing structures, arrangements and

collaboration to deliver on behalf of Government. Coming back to James's point, we do not actually quite know what is being devolved from Government yet.

**The Chair:** Greg Smith, you have half a minute for a question and half a minute for an answer.

**Q94 Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con):** Thank you, Sir Mark. A big theme we are talking about today is localism in the Bill. Many a council over recent decades has been elected on a promise to stop overdevelopment, only to then preside over massive development. The common excuse is Government targets. Should there be a nationally set house building number, or should it be left entirely to local areas to decide what is needed?

**The Chair:** Who do you want to answer that?

**Greg Smith:** Let's go to Councillor Jamieson, who is chairman of the Local Government Association.

**Cllr Jamieson:** I represent localism, and I think it is all about localism. The Government need to be very clear about their objectives. Setting national targets and then blaming councils when houses are built and forced through on appeal by the Planning Inspectorate is slightly disingenuous.

**The Chair:** Order. I am afraid that that brings us to the end of the time allotted for the Committee to ask questions in this afternoon's sitting. On behalf of the Committee, I thank our witnesses for their evidence. The Committee will meet again at 11.30 am on Thursday in this room to hear further oral evidence. Thank you all for attending.

4 pm

*The Chair adjourned the Committee without Question put (Standing Order No. 88).*

*Adjourned till Thursday 23 June at half-past Eleven o'clock.*

**Written evidence reported to the House**

LRB 01 Community Rights Action