

Event Summary Report

Levelling up together

Conference • Thursday 19 May 2022

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Gloucestershire's Levelling Up Our Communities Conference
Thursday 19th May 2022

Event Summary Report

Table of Contents

1. Background.....	3
2. Gloucestershire's Levelling Up Our Communities Conference.....	4
3. Summary of Discussions	5
4. Next Steps: Levelling Up Gloucestershire Together	10
<i>Appendix A – The Focus of the Event.....</i>	<i>12</i>
<i>Appendix B – Levelling Up Our Communities.....</i>	<i>13</i>
<i>Appendix C – Summary of the Government's Levelling Up White Paper.....</i>	<i>14</i>

1. Background

In Autumn 2021, a Council Motion was debated at Full Council that explored the County Council's approach to tackling poverty and deprivation in Gloucestershire. It was agreed that hosting a conference was a good way to begin the conversation with communities to better understand their needs. The purpose and focus of the event were shared with delegates in advance (**Appendix A**).

The Gloucestershire Council Strategy for 2022-26 'Building Back Better in Gloucestershire' (**Appendix B**) articulates the vision for how we will work to achieve the aims of the UK Government's Levelling Up Agenda. (**Appendix C**). It outlines an ambition to "work with communities across the county to: reduce inequalities, regenerate high streets, market towns and neighbourhoods; improve infrastructure, jobs, skills and education provision; and help residents to achieve their ambitions for the places they live".

The stated aims are to:

- Work with local partners to attract national Levelling Up Funding to regenerate Gloucestershire's high streets, market towns and neighbourhoods.
- Listen to local communities about what they want to achieve and how.
- Work alongside neighbourhoods to develop plans that build on their strengths, as well as attracting local and national investment to help deliver them.
- Supporting local residents to develop new skills, careers and job opportunities.
- Link local people to jobs by providing sustainable transport solutions and reducing barriers to employment.
- Shape local community services to make sure they can adapt to the needs and aspirations of local residents.
- Working with local schools and academies to improve the quality of local education provision.

The conference was an opportunity to launch this ambition and offer a forum to hear from our communities about what is working well and where Gloucestershire County Council can work better to reduce inequalities.

The Hotspots Network were invited to provide material and input to the conference. This network brings together some of Gloucestershire's leading urban and rural practitioners of social enterprise and community building, to share some of their thoughts, ideas, and experience to facilitate discussions. Each Hotspots Network partner has a proven entrepreneurial and community building track record and trusting local relationships between citizens and partners. The Hotspots Network comprises the following community groups:

- [GL11 Hub](#)
- [Gloucester Community Building Collective](#)
- [The Grace Network](#)
- [Fair Shares Gloucestershire](#)
- [Gloucestershire Gateway Trust](#)

2. Gloucestershire's Levelling Up Our Communities Conference

Gloucestershire's Levelling Up Our Communities Conference was held at Quayside House in Gloucester City Centre on Thursday 19th May 2022.

Hybrid in nature, it was attended by approximately 130 people in person and virtually. There were representatives from across a range of voluntary sector and community groups and local public sector leaders. Each community group listed above presented a film showcasing the following themes – building trust, capacity building, community development plans, community wealth and social enterprise. Most of the discussion took part in breakout groups, the content of which has been brought together and summarised in this report to help shape the next steps for Levelling Up our communities.

3. Summary of Discussions

At the conference, the Hotspots Network shared their five policy pillars which formed the basis for our discussions:

1. Increase transparency and formalise collective risk taking across public and VCSE sectors when it comes to Levelling Up Bids and other commissioning processes, specifically by inviting community groups to scrutinise and develop Levelling Up bids
2. Ensuring all Levelling Up bids should include 10% investment into new, upgraded, or protected community hubs, spaces, or assets (and associated green spaces) e.g., village halls, community centres that should be ring-fenced for investment into direct funding (to be spent as locally directed) of place-based community development capacity.
3. Commit to developing community-led Economic and Social Development plans that become the basis of Levelling Up bids and other public sector investment.
4. Open up local government to community led bids to run contracts and reinvent services collectively by inviting community groups to work with officers to redesign services from the outside.
5. Ensure all Levelling Up bids should commit to ring fence 10% of levelling up investment for social enterprise investment via CICs, COOPs and other social enterprise structures.

Each policy pillar was discussed in breakout sessions throughout the event and the feedback for each is discussed below.

1. Increase transparency and formalise collective risk taking across public and VCSE sectors when it comes to Levelling Up bids and other commissioning processes, specifically by inviting community groups to scrutinise and develop Levelling Up bids

Delegates highlighted that there can be many benefits to increased collaborative working and transparency between the public and VCSE sector. It was suggested that community groups could be involved in commissioning processes across the board and therefore more time should be allowed for this for this involvement to be viable and meaningful. These experiences can help to build trust between organisations. Some groups, however, raised concerns that this could lead to conflicts of interest.

The importance of ensuring those involved in these processes are diverse and representative was suggested as a learning point. VCSE organisations of all shapes and sizes should be consulted with to support them to understand, participate, and contribute. It should be recognised that VCSE sector organisations can be in competition with one another for funding, and this has the potential to impact upon relationships.

It was proposed by some that the VCSE sector should be considered an equal partner and treated as such. The VCSE sector would like to inform and influence the scoring systems currently employed within commissioning processes. Attendees raised some concerns over potential for problems in this regarding conflict of interest and competition. Even so, it was also noted that improved relationships and greater trust could also allow for a more flexible, creative, and proportionate approach to monitoring, which is better suited to evaluating complex work.

There were many local examples of successful partnership working including the Forest of Dean's recent Levelling Up bid.

- 2. Ensuring all Levelling Up bids should include 10% investment into new, upgraded, or protected community hubs, spaces, or assets (and associated green spaces) e.g., village halls, community centres that should be ring-fenced for investment into direct funding (to be spent as locally directed) of place-based community development capacity.**

Delegates generally recognised that this idea could be beneficial. There was an appreciation that in some areas, community spaces need refreshing as well as protecting. Discussions recognised that core funding allows community groups to do what matters to local people whilst maintaining momentum.

The diversity between and within Gloucestershire communities was noted by groups who also recognised that it is important to avoid being too prescriptive. Flexibility will encourage greater engagement from smaller organisations and hyperlocal work. What is needed in each area will depend on what an area already has, and a more holistic, longer-term approach will have more sustaining impacts. Some delegates advocated that greater consistency in funding streams would provide more stability to the VCSE sector and communities.

Parallels were drawn with Section 106 funding which operates on similar principles but can ultimately be unsuccessful if not supported by a strategic vision.

It was recognised that it is difficult to make informed decisions when investing in the VCSE sector and that community groups are in a good position to understand how funding could be effectively allocated to directly benefit communities. Capital investment could be supported by both engaged volunteers and/ or paid staff. Funding for the latter is hard to come by and therefore this funding option should factor that in. The benefits are widespread and includes the creation of local jobs.

- 3. Commit to developing community-led economic and social development plans that become the basis of Levelling Up bids and other public sector investment.**

Attendees discussed the benefits that that community-led economic and social development plans help to encourage strategic and joined up thinking and working in some areas so long as they are dynamic and forward-thinking.

Where plans could be of benefit to communities, decisions such as how big an area would need to be, and who was involved in each plan, would need to be decided locally. Planning groups should be truly representative of the communities they serve. This could include parish/town councils, communities, and experts. Some areas will be better equipped to do this, and some areas may require additional support. It was noted that not all areas in Gloucestershire require plans to achieve their Levelling Up ambitions.

Some attendees acknowledged that Community groups may not have the expertise to write funding bids, and so creating the mechanisms to capture what they need into larger funding applications could enable them to spend more time focusing on what is important to their communities and less time fundraising. This would also encourage collaborative working and learning across other communities within the same funded project.

A plan could also help county-wide organisations better understand how they can best adapt their services to suit local needs.

The Power of Three plan produced by Matson, Robinswood and White City communities was shared as an example of where a plan has been used locally.

4. Open up local government to community led bids to run contracts and reinvent services collectively by inviting community groups to work with officers to redesign services from the outside.

Some delegates suggested that community groups could be involved in the commissioning processes across the board, but there was mixed feedback on this approach in its totality.

Some felt this could encourage collaborative working and shift power dynamics in the right direction. It could encourage statutory services and other providers of commissioned services to be more responsive to feedback and flexible in how they shape and adapt their services. On the other hand, others discussed that this could lead to conflict of interest for community groups.

The public sector would need to nurture and prioritise an ethos that promotes hyperlocal working, to encourage local organisations who collectively have the relationships, trust, insight, and expertise to form collaboratives and take on larger contracts together. Many felt this would make better use of the skills within the community.

Delegates acknowledged that there needs to be the will to try a test and learn approach within the public sector. This approach would be more complex and resource-intensive but ultimately yield greater, more sustainable benefits. There may be conflicts of interest, and opportunities to get involved would need to be equitable.

5. Ensure all Levelling Up bids should commit to ring fence 10% of levelling up investment for social enterprise investment via CICs, COOPs and other social enterprise structures.

The feedback for this proposal was mixed. It is recognised that the VCSE sector contains within it many skills and that supporting social enterprise structures further demonstrates investment in local people e.g., through upskilling.

There were concerns about inaccessibility for other charities who may not have the appropriate governance. It was noted that social enterprise structures may be able to apply for any funding for which charities are eligible, so they already have opportunities.

There was a concern that this could hamper opportunities for charities and smaller community groups, and that it therefore may not be supportive of other work which aims to make things simpler and encourage all VCSE sector organisations to grow and flourish.

Positive examples of how this has worked elsewhere were shared.

4. Next Steps: Levelling Up Gloucestershire Together

This conference highlighted to all attendees that to properly Level Up Gloucestershire we must all work together with communities, VCSE partners, other public sector organisations and businesses.

At the conference, the Leader of Gloucestershire County Council Mark Hawthorne announced that we were investing £1.5 million into levelling up communities across Gloucestershire. To oversee the delivery of this money and our wider ambitions for Gloucestershire, he appointed Cllr Nick Housden to the new Public Health and Levelling Up cabinet portfolio.

To support the important work of the wide range of work being led by communities and VCSE partners, this funding will be used to create a Levelling Up Together grants scheme. This will be as broad as possible to allow communities to be creative in what they bid for and, in keeping with the stated aims of the conference, be focussed on the 12 most deprived Lower Layer Super Output Areas in the county. So long as the bid can demonstrate how they will achieve outcomes in these areas which relate to five of the missions in the Levelling Up White Paper, there will be no restrictions on types of applications allowed; whether that is funding to devise a community plan, invest or upgrade community hubs or deliver projects on the ground.

The five missions of the White Paper that we want to focus this fund towards achieving are:

- By 2030, the gap in Healthy Life Expectancy (HLE) between local areas where it is highest and lowest will have narrowed, and by 2035 HLE will rise by five years
- By 2030, well-being will have improved in every area of the UK, with the gap between top performing and other areas closing

- By 2030, the number of primary school children achieving the expected standard in reading, writing and maths will have significantly increased. In England, this will mean 90% of children will achieve the expected standard, and the percentage of children meeting the expected standard in the worst performing areas will have increased by over a third.
- By 2030, the number of people successfully completing high-quality skills training will have significantly increased in every area of the UK. In England, this will lead to 200,000 more people successfully completing high-quality skills training annually, driven by 80,000 more people completing courses in the lowest skilled areas.
- By 2030, pride in place, such as people's satisfaction with their town centre and engagement in local culture and community, will have risen in every area of the UK, with the gap between top performing and other areas closing percentage of children meeting the expected standard in the worst performing areas will have increased by over a third.

We want to ensure that hyperlocal ideas are supported and delivered by those with the knowledge and expertise to do so. We will encourage VCSE partners to work together where possible. Further details on this fund will be published imminently.

Gloucestershire County Council is committed to listening to its communities. This conference was the first step in the journey to Level Up Gloucestershire Together. The £1.5 million fund is the start of delivery of our shared ambitions.

Appendix A – The Focus of the Event

The Levelling Up Our Communities Conference is taking place following a Council Motion in December 2021 which committed to focussing on ‘levelling up’ the twelve LSOAs (Lower-layer Super Output Areas) in Gloucestershire that fall among the ten percent ‘most deprived’ in England (as identified by the Index of Multiple Deprivation 2019).

LSOAs (Lower-layer Super Output Areas) are small areas designed to be of a similar population size, with an average of approximately 1,500 residents or 650 households.

The twelve LSOAs which fall into the ten percent ‘most deprived’ in England (as identified by the Index of Multiple Deprivation 2019) are:

- ***Podsmead (Gloucester)***
- ***Matson & Robinswood (Gloucester)***
- ***Westgate (Gloucester)***
- ***Kingsholm & Wotton (Gloucester)***
- ***Westgate (Gloucester)***
- ***St. Mark's (Cheltenham)***
- ***Moreland (Gloucester)***
- ***St. Paul's (Cheltenham)***
- ***Cinderford West (Forest of Dean)***
- ***Tuffley (Gloucester)***
- ***Matson & Robinswood (Gloucester)***
- ***Barton & Tredworth (Gloucester)***

This event will be an opportunity to learn about what is already going on in and across these communities – what is working well and what is getting in the way – and to think about what our next steps ought to be and how we can work together to achieve them. We will also be considering our plans in the context of the Government’s Levelling Up White Paper (available [here](#)), and Gloucestershire’s County Council’s latest Strategy for 2022-2026 (available [here](#)).

Levelling up our Communities

Our ambition:

To work with communities across the county to: reduce inequalities, regenerate high streets, market towns and neighbourhoods; improve infrastructure, jobs, skills and education provision; and help residents to achieve their ambitions for the places they live.

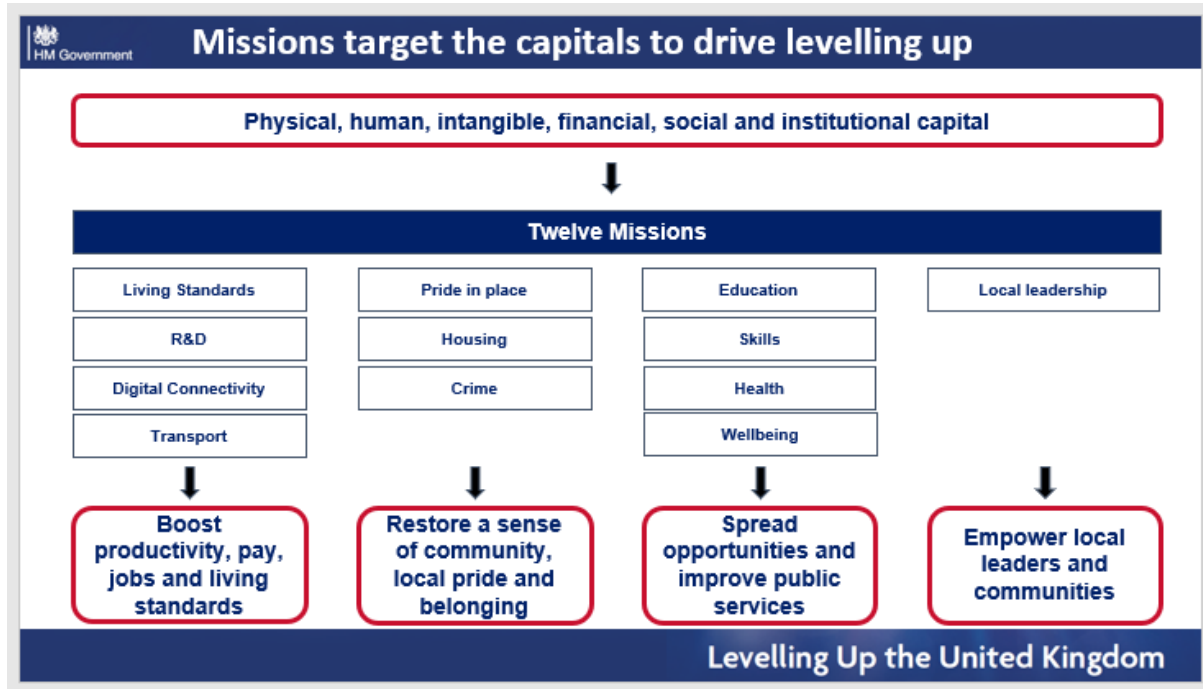
We will:

- ✓ **Work with local partners to attract national Levelling Up Funding to regenerate our high streets, market towns and neighbourhoods.**
- ✓ **Listen to local communities about what they want to achieve and how.**
- ✓ **Work alongside neighbourhoods to develop plans that build on their strengths, as well as attracting local and national investment to help deliver them.**
- ✓ **Supporting local residents to develop new skills, careers and job opportunities.**
- ✓ **Link local people to jobs by providing sustainable transport solutions and reducing barriers to employment.**
- ✓ **Shape local community services to make sure they can adapt to the needs and aspirations of local residents.**
- ✓ **Working with local schools and academies to improve the quality of local education provision.**

Appendix C – Summary of the Government’s Levelling Up White Paper

A summary of the Levelling Up White Paper can be found at [this link](#).

The twelve key missions can be summarised in the slide below.



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