

Levelling up

The government is launching a £4.8bn Levelling up Fund. Councils and Transport Authorities can bid for money to help pay for projects that can boost jobs, investment and the local economy in their areas.

When I was Local Government Minister I was asked by the Secretary of State to run a City Challenge Fund. This was similar to features of this wider Levelling up fund, seeking as it did to stimulate investment, jobs, prosperity and improved environments in urban areas that needed a boost. I was keen to ensure that any public money spent was geared to attracting substantial private sector investment in new facilities, jobs and people. I thought the plans could often be most useful where they concentrated on doing those things that the state had to do. Very often it helped bring derelict or disused public sector land back into better use. It could provide better roads into areas that could then be good destinations for new businesses or homes. It helped train local people to be able to take on new jobs that the investors were providing. It could improve the quality and appearance of the public realm in the local area to make it a more desirable place for the private sector and new residents to flourish in. The idea was to use government money to help and harness local efforts and private enterprise. You can only help create a great city or a flourishing town if you have a vibrant private commercial sector, and a range of voluntary and community groups and institutions alongside Council and government services.

I assume these features will be built into the Levelling up Fund. It will be more capital grant than revenue costs, so bidders will need to choose schemes which provide that backdrop to a successful lift off in private and community activity, drawing on a wide range of investors and companies. I suggest this fund could assist with the task of increasing the UK's capacity to make things for ourselves. Local and national government could bring better roads and rail links, cleaned up land, permissions and potential public sector orders for items the new and expanding businesses can make. Requiring substantial local and private sector involvement and effort is essential to continuing success. It is no good doing a place up with public ownership and money without allowing a much wider range of activities and investors to enrich the local area and provide a broader base and more stability for future jobs and incomes.