

Levelling up

On Thursday the PM gave a speech setting out his vision of levelling up. It rightly concentrated on the differences in lives in different parts of our country, drawing attention to big variations in average life expectancy, in likelihood of getting a degree and obtaining a well paid job, and the differences in ability to buy a decent home. The speech both accepted that governments of all persuasions in the post 1945 world have tried to reduce these inequalities, and that the divergencies have remained.

The new ground in the speech was the understanding that successive governments have in practice reinforced the success of the richer areas, drawing ever more talent into places like central London . This has led to the need to invest heavily in public transport and other public services there to cater for all the extra numbers going to work and living in such places. In a vivid topical analogy he said investment has followed success creating a world where you “hang around the goalmouth rather than being the playmaker”. The draw of London has meant many people facing long, expensive and often vexatious commutes, and relentless pressure for more housing investment and development in the South East. As a result two thirds of the country’s graduates from the top 30 universities end up in London.

He was clear that a socialist egalitarian agenda which entails levelling down as well as levelling up is not the way to go. “We should not want to decapitate the tall poppies. We don’t think you make the poor parts of the country richer by making the rich parts poorer”. What you need is more of the potential playmakers to stay in or move to other cities that can as London does attract talent, investment and new jobs.

The big issue is how we help create these new success stories. The digitalisation of the UK is part of the answer, where the PM tells us 60% now enjoy the benefits of faster broadband, up from 7% two years ago. I will return to these issues and examine the government proposals to help level up. Central to it all, as this speech states, is to help many more people on their personal journeys to success, to home ownership, to business creation or to better skilled and better paid jobs.