

Levelling up is about people more than about public spending

I reproduce below a piece I published recently on Conservative Home:

I'm all in favour of levelling up. Our country needs all the talent it can get. I want more people who have bought their own home, found a good job, built their own business, developed a passion for dance or sport or entertainment.

I want a society where snobbishness is a thing of the past and where the plumber is as valued as the accountant and a food delivery driver as much as a health worker. We need a reliable water supply and food in the shop every day. These are important tasks.

The recent battle to recruit a new army of truck drivers should be seen as a prime case where we need to level up. We have seen years of decline in the numbers of people wanting to be long distance and heavy lorry drivers. A lack of concern by some employers over facilities for breaks and overnight stops, coupled with relatively low pay and long periods away from home, has made it difficult to recruit younger people and women.

During lockdown the online retailers needed a massive expansion of van deliveries for their offers. They were able to attract drivers to smaller vehicles with more flexible hours and better pay. The closures and shortages across Europe reduced the numbers of migrants willing to work for less with poor conditions.

The UK needs to attract back the qualified HGV licence holders and early retired, those who have swapped jobs in pursuit of better pay, and train a new cohort of truck drivers. Large employers and government need to remedy the defects of the conditions with more lorry parks, with better facilities for breaks and overnight stops.

Pay needs to go up, as it did when tube drivers used their negotiating muscle to require the public sector to pay much higher rates for a job than an HGV driver gets. There should be a new respect for these drivers now people see how dependent their own lifestyle is on the timely delivery of everything from food to petrol.

Levelling up is about people as well as about place. Indeed, if enough people in a given town make a success of their business or company careers their extra spending power will bring the extra investment, new services and better shops people would like to see.

Conservatives should not try to define levelling up in Labour terms. They place all the emphasis on levels of public spending. Levelling up to them is more about place than people. Buy the town a new heavily subsidised tram system, put in more public sector community centres and provide new school

and surgery buildings and the place will be levelled up. If only it were that cheap and easy. They stress the amounts of money rather than what we get for it.

Of course it is right that improving the quality of the public estate and helping with communications and connectivity can help. Any MP knows they have to argue the case for the new school or the improved road for their patch.

That is not the same as thinking if we just double the public sector spend lives will be transformed. To have a self sustaining wealthier community requires government helping the many. They need to reap better rewards from work and to get access to the qualifications and opportunities it takes to own your own home, have some money in the bank for a rainy day and to have a working life that commands respect.

It all begins in the schools. Inspired teachers can help every pupil find that spark, that thing they love and wish to excel at, that drive to be positive about life and its numerous chances. It requires discipline, as you only get good when you practise a lot.

Aims need to be stretching but achievable, built up as a child progresses. It moves on to the choice of apprenticeship or degree. Some break from academic education because they are already sure of their ambition to be sports people or entrepreneurs or performers whose path in life after leaving school requires their full attention to the chosen course.

Government can of course help. It needs to redouble its efforts to make it easier for people to set up their own business, and to go on to recruit their first employees. It needs to make it easier and more affordable to buy your own home. The attack on the self employed through IR35 was unhelpful, The new tax on jobs is a bad idea. Getting a mortgage is not easy. Government contracts could be made available to more smaller companies to give them a chance of getting one through break down of quantities required through multiple suppliers.

Where place and people come together is in planning decisions. Places the Government wants to level up need more homes for people with good jobs and businesses of their own. Many have more freedom over where to live now we are moving into a hybrid world of working. More people with good qualifications and earnings help boost a community and provide more demand for others to meet.

A relatively affluent community like Wokingham is not affluent through more public spending. We are at the bottom of the tables for public spending per head in the main services. We are well placed in the relative prosperity and good place to live tables because they keep on sending so much investment in expensive homes for people to live in who have levelled themselves up through qualifications and good jobs.