

DEMOS

TEED UP FOR SUCCESS?

WHAT THE TEES VALLEY
TELLS US ABOUT
LEVELLING UP

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Courtney Stephenson and Dr Kate Harrison

January 2023

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Levelling up is an ambitious, long-term agenda. It was a crucial policy of the Johnson-era, and helped the Conservatives win a landslide victory in the 2019 general election. Much has changed since then. Unprecedented global challenges have wreaked havoc on the country, with the Covid-19 pandemic and a global energy crisis taking precedence over regional policy making in the government's priorities. National politics has been no stranger to chaos, either, with three prime ministers in seven months.

We wanted to look beyond the rhetoric and find out how the levelling up agenda is really doing, by talking to the people it was designed to help. Tees Valley is arguably the poster child for levelling up, with the mayor Ben Houchen its figurehead. We went to Tees Valley and spoke to people who live there to find out exactly what they think of levelling up, whether they think progress has been made and what they think of politics more broadly.

Our focus groups revealed a tension between long-term optimism and shorter-term worries. Among those familiar with the levelling up agenda, there was a good deal of hope for the prosperity it could bring in the future. However, most of the people we spoke to felt that they were yet to see the benefits. Instead, they were focused on the immediate challenges posed by the cost of living crisis.

Levelling up is a work in progress. This is inevitable: the changes it is intended to bring - local economic growth and greater equality between Britain's regions, to name a couple - are ambitious and will take time. A localised approach to this, driven by devolved powers, is the right one, as Demos argued in our previous levelling up report, *Movers and*

Stayers.¹

We found that, right now, two key barriers stand in the way of the success of levelling up in Tees Valley. First, relationships between local government and people in the area are fractured. A lack of trust in politicians and confusing layers of local government are at the heart of this problem. Engaging people in the policy making process is crucial to repairing these relationships and getting people invested in the long term, levelling up agenda in local areas.

Second, the cost of living crisis poses a threat to levelling up.² The success of the levelling up agenda in the long term is reliant upon these problems being effectively addressed in the short and medium term. If people have less money in their pockets, they cannot spend it in the local economy. Revitalised theatres, new bars and restaurants and multi-million pound shopping centres will fail if the local population cannot afford to support them. Public support for levelling up may also wane if the politicians tasked with delivering it are not doing enough to support people in the short term.

To address the tension between long-term goals and short-term challenges, we have two key recommendations:

- First, **central government must step up to address the cost of living crisis**. The success of the levelling up agenda in the long term depends upon how effectively people are supported through the cost of living crisis in the short term. **We recommend making the current cost of living support more accessible, significant and longer term**. This could include extending the scope of cost of living funding

¹ Stephenson, C and Harrison K, *Movers and Stayers*. Demos, 2022. Available at: [Movers and Stayers: Localising power to level up towns - Demos](#) [Accessed 1/10/22]

² Atherton, G. & Le Chevallier, M, *Mission Impossible: how the cost of living crisis will effect levelling up*. Centre for Inequality and Levelling Up, 2022. Available at: [Mission Impossible How the cost of living crisis will affect levelling up CEILUP.docx](#) (live.com) [Accessed 10/11/22]

beyond just those eligible for benefits, as called for by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.³ It is also important to protect local authority budgets and to more explicitly connect cost of living and levelling up policy.

- **To make a success of levelling up in the Tees Valley, local government and the combined authority need to find ways of building engagement into the policy making process.** Currently, consultation is absent from the combined authority's approach to levelling up policy. People we spoke to supported the idea of local people having more of a say. This could be addressed by **building consultation into levelling up policy making processes at the local level**, and communicating regularly across multiple channels. These are lessons that other combined authorities and local authorities can also build into their levelling up policy.

³ Earwaker, R, *Going under and without*, 2022. Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Available at: [Going under and without: JRF's cost of living tracker, winter 2022/23 | JRF](#) [Accessed 13/12/22]

INTRODUCTION

LEVELLING UP - IT'S TIME FOR A PROGRESS CHECK

The end of 2022 saw a chaotic few months for British politics. For those involved in the levelling up agenda, last year was a particularly turbulent time - fighting to keep the policy among the priorities of Conservative party candidates and prime ministers. Now that the dust has settled and one of its architects, Michael Gove, is back in his role as Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, it seems that levelling up is here to stay.

Levelling up contains big ambitions - boosting productivity, improving public services, spreading opportunity and restoring community pride.⁴ Fundamentally, it is about sharing opportunities more equally across the whole of the UK. In a country with substantial regional differences, including in economic performance and health outcomes, it is vital that it succeeds.^{5,6}

Three years since the Conservative party won a landslide victory, with levelling up a key manifesto pledge, and almost a year since the Levelling Up White Paper was published, it's time for a progress check. We wanted to understand how levelling up is going so far, not by analysing investment outcomes or tracking employment opportunities, but by speaking to the public. Tees Valley is a key testbed for levelling up - we wanted to know how the people who live there have experienced it. Have they seen any changes in their area over the last year or so? What did they know about levelling up and what did they think of it? These conversations provided the

core of our research - a progress check on levelling up, from the people's perspective.

WHY TEES VALLEY?

Levelling up is a national project, delivered predominantly at the local level. In our previous report *Movers and Stayers*, we argued that a localised approach was essential to the success of the policy.⁷ The Tees Valley Combined Authority (TVCA) has been said to epitomise this approach. It offers a locally led programme of levelling up projects, with a specific focus on industry and job creation that is borne out of the geography, context and history of the place. Its Conservative mayor, Ben Houchen, explicitly aligns himself with the government's approach to levelling up and has described Tees Valley as being evidence that levelling up "works in practice".⁸ Houchen has said that levelling up goes to "the very heart of a prosperous United Kingdom" and has been a vocal advocate for the agenda at the national level.⁹ There is arguably no better place to get an insight into levelling up than the Tees Valley.

OUR METHOD

To really understand how levelling up is going in the Tees Valley, it was important to speak to people who live there. We spent two days in the Tees Valley, speaking to the public and key local stakeholders from local government and academia. Methodologically, the research draws on the following sources:

4 Levelling Up Campaign, *Levelling up means opportunities wherever you are*. HM Government Available at: [Levelling Up – Levelling up means boosting living standards, investing in education and restoring local pride and opportunities where you are in the UK](#) [Accessed 1/10/22]

5 Lord Sainsbury, *Levelling up the UK's regional economies*. Centre For Cities, 2021. Available at: [The problem of regional inequality | Centre for Cities](#) [Accessed 15/10/22]

6 The Health Foundation, *Major study outlines wide health inequalities in England, 2022*. Available at: [Major study outlines wide health inequalities in England](#). [Accessed 11/10/22]

7 Stephenson, C & Harrison K, *Movers and Stayers*. Demos, 2022. Available at: [Movers and Stayers: Localising power to level up towns - Demos](#) [Accessed 1/10/22]

8 Houchen, B, *On Teesside, we have seen how 'levelling up' works in practice*. The Guardian, 2021. Available at: [On Teesside, we have seen how 'levelling up' works in practice | Ben Houchen | The Guardian](#) [Accessed 10/9/22]

9 Kirby, S, *Mayor Ben Houchen sets out 5-point 'Levelling Up Pledge' in call to Tory leadership candidates*. Teesside Live, 2022. Available at: <https://www.gazettelive.co.uk/news/teesside-news/mayor-ben-houchen-sets-out-24448904> [Accessed 10/9/22]

- A comprehensive evidence review focused on levelling up nationally and in the Tees Valley.
- Three focus groups in October 2022, with people from across the Tees Valley, where we spoke to a total of 20 people from across the area. We spoke to participants with a range of diversity in terms of age, gender, employment status and ethnicity. We conducted these focus groups in Middlesbrough, Darlington and online in order to have as broad a geographical spread within the area as possible. We also held focus groups at varying times of the day, to enable a wider variety of people to attend and share their views.
- Interviews with stakeholders in October and November 2022, including academics and local government officials, from across the area to understand their perspectives.

CHAPTER 1

LEVELLING UP IN THE TEES VALLEY AND HOUCHEENISM

TEES VALLEY: THE POSTER CHILD OF LEVELLING UP

Tees Valley is a unique place when it comes to levelling up. It has a metro mayor explicitly aligned with the government's approach to the policy; landslide election victories at the national and combined authority level; and a devolution deal already in place. Given all of this, Tees Valley could be seen as the 'poster child' for levelling up. These factors make it a uniquely interesting test case, both for place-based levelling up and the metro mayoral model.

The devolution arrangements in the area are relatively well established. A deal between the five local authorities - Redcar and Cleveland, Middlesbrough, Hartlepool, Darlington and Stockton on Tees - the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) and national government was signed in 2015.¹⁰ The local authorities that fall within the TVCA have a historic working relationship, having worked together for over 20 years prior to the establishment of the combined authority.¹¹ Ben Houchen was elected as the area's first metro mayor in May 2017.

Having already served one term as mayor, in 2021 Ben Houchen stood for re-election on a platform explicitly connected to the national levelling up agenda, with a focus on creating local jobs and prosperity.¹² With a "record of delivery" dating back to 2017, Ben Houchen's levelling up agenda is in full swing in the Tees Valley.¹³ In theory, if levelling up is to succeed anywhere it should be in the Tees Valley.

In 2022, the national picture has been one of economic and political turbulence, with three prime ministers and a recession.¹⁴ In the midst of these changes, the future of the levelling up agenda has been called into question, but Houchen has remained a prominent advocate for its importance.¹⁵ Now is a key moment to understand the experience those living in the Tees Valley have had of levelling up - a progress check that centres citizens' experiences. To do this, we must first set out the context in which levelling up is being delivered in the Tees Valley and the core objectives set out by the combined authority and Ben Houchen. In doing so, we will draw out what is going well, where the approach should be improved and what lessons there are for levelling up at a national level.

10 Tees Valley Combined Authority, *Devolution*. Available at: Devolution - [Tees Valley Combined Authority \(teesvalley-ca.gov.uk\)](https://teesvalley-ca.gov.uk) [Accessed 10/9/22]

11 Tees Valley Combined Authority, *Frequently Asked Questions*. Available at: [Frequently Asked Questions - Tees Valley Combined Authority \(teesvalley-ca.gov.uk\)](https://teesvalley-ca.gov.uk) [Accessed 10/9/22]

12 Houchen, B, *My plan for local jobs*. BenHouchen.com, 2022. Available at: [My plan for local jobs | Ben Houchen](https://benhouchen.com) [Accessed 9/9/22]

13 Houchen, B, *A record of delivery, a promise of more*. Speech, 2018. Available at: [FULL SPEECH: A record of delivery, a promise of more | Ben Houchen](https://benhouchen.com) [Accessed 10/10/22]

14 Isaac, A. *The British people 'just got a lot poorer', says IFS thinktank*. The Guardian, 2022. Available at: [The British people 'just got a lot poorer', says IFS thinktank | Economics | The Guardian](https://www.theguardian.com). [Accessed 10/11/22]

15 Kenyon, M, *Houchen urges Tory leadership hopefuls to fully commit to levelling up*. Local Government Chronicle, 2022. Available at: [Houchen urges Tory leadership hopefuls to fully commit to levelling up | Local Government Chronicle \(LGC\) \(lgcplus.com\)](https://www.localgovernmentchronicle.co.uk) [Accessed 10/11/22]

Levelling up the Tees Valley is a significant challenge

Tees Valley is no stranger to significant social and economic challenges. Policy makers face some profound hurdles on their way to restoring prosperity to the region in an equitable way. The North East in general has long been characterised by high levels of poverty, with the Trussell Trust reporting over 100,000 food bank referrals in the region in 2021/22.¹⁶ The loss of traditional industries, combined with particularly punishing public sector cuts during austerity in the 2010s, have made the need for levelling up all the more pronounced.¹⁷

HOUCHEN - THE LEVELLING UP METRO MAYOR

The election of a Conservative mayor in traditional Labour heartlands by a narrow margin of 2.2% was a significant political shock in 2017. By 2021, Ben Houchen had increased his vote share by 33% and was elected to serve a second term as Tees Valley Mayor, suggesting there was public support for his unique brand of Conservatism.¹⁸

His victories are viewed by many as an endorsement of the government's levelling up agenda and he has not shied away from utilising his position within the Conservative party to draw attention to the region and the levelling up agenda more broadly. Following Boris Johnson's resignation, he called upon leadership candidates to sign up to levelling up pledges. Houchen has also repeatedly hosted members of the government at various industrial development sites across the Tees Valley.^{19, 20}

What does Houchenism mean for levelling up?

Houchen has developed a reputation nationally as an advocate for levelling up, as well as for using a

'different' style of Conservative politics to achieve his policy ambitions for the Tees Valley. His policy platform has been described as a combination of 'economic nationalism and interventionism'.²¹ This approach is seen as a unique brand of Conservatism more closely associated with the Johnson era of government and has been termed 'Houchenism' by economist James Meadway and others.^{22, 23}

Levelling up policy in the Tees Valley is centred around drawing investment into the area in order to create more local jobs and revive local industries. Houchen's approach is viewed as distinct for a number of reasons.²⁴ His policies have sought to combine free market economics, more traditionally associated with Thatcherite Conservatism, with public ownership, a staple of left-wing ideology.²⁵ He has placed emphasis on green industrial investment as a source of economic growth in the area, which he has sought to create using a combination of government investment and deregulation.²⁶ His moves to bring Teesside Airport into public ownership in 2019 and create a freeport area exemplify the traditionally contradicting approaches to policy that Houchen has employed to deliver on his manifesto promises.

Some consider this approach to levelling up to be unique, while others say it falls within Johnson-era Conservatism. Either way, Houchen has honed in on the circumstances of Tees Valley, particularly the loss of traditional industry and the opportunities for green investment provided by its geography, to develop a place-based plan for levelling up in the area. The plan was popular with voters and creates an interesting test case for levelling up.

Devolution and the mayoral model

Having a directly elected 'metro mayor' at the helm of local government is no longer a new idea. Andy Burnham in Greater Manchester, Andy Street in the West Midlands and Tracy Brabin in West Yorkshire

16 The Trussell Trust, *End of Year Stats*. 2022. Available at: [End of Year Stats - The Trussell Trust](#) [Accessed 04/12/22]

17 Buchanan, M, *Autumn Statement: Who do spending cuts hit the most?* - BBC News, 2022. Available at: [Autumn Statement: Who do spending cuts hit the most? - BBC News](#) [Accessed 19/11/22]

18 Centre for Cities, *Metro Mayor Election Results 2022*. 2022. Available at: [Metro mayor election results 2021 | Centre for Cities](#) [Accessed 10/9/22]

19 Kenyon, M, *Houchen urges Tory leadership hopefuls to fully commit to levelling up*. Local Government Chronicle, 2022. Available at: [Houchen urges Tory leadership hopefuls to fully commit to levelling up | Local Government Chronicle \(LGC\) \(lgcplus.com\)](#) [Accessed 10/11/22]

20 Lewis, E. *Rishi Sunak visits Teesside during election race and pledges to support levelling up of region*. Teesside Live, 2022. Available at: [Rishi Sunak visits Teesside during leadership race and pledges to support levelling up of region - Teesside Live \(gazettelive.co.uk\)](#) [Accessed 10/10/22]

21 Ball, J, *The 'Houchenist' Manifesto*. The New Statesman, 2021. Available at: [What is Ben Houchen's manifesto? - New Statesman](#) [Accessed 10/9/22]

22 Ball, J, *The 'Houchenist' Manifesto*. The New Statesman, 2021. Available at: [What is Ben Houchen's manifesto? - New Statesman](#) [Accessed 10/9/22]

23 Hutton, W, *Houchenism - the brand of can-do Tory threatening the left and right old guard*. The Guardian, 2021. Available at: [Houchenism - the brand of can-do Tory threatening the left and right old guard | Will Hutton | The Guardian](#) [Accessed 10/9/22]

24 Hutton, W, *Houchenism - the brand of can-do Tory threatening the left and right old guard*. The Guardian, 2021. Available at: [Houchenism - the brand of can-do Tory threatening the left and right old guard | Will Hutton | The Guardian](#) [Accessed 10/9/22]

25 Fearn, G, *How public ownership helped the Tories in Tees Valley*. Tribune, 2021. Available at: [How Public Ownership Helped the Tories in Tees Valley \(tribunemag.co.uk\)](#) [Accessed 10/9/22]

26 Ball, J, *The 'Houchenist' Manifesto*. The New Statesman, 2021. Available at: [What is Ben Houchen's manifesto? - New Statesman](#) [Accessed 10/9/22]

are among the local leaders at the helm of their local levelling up agenda. The powers granted to each mayor vary depending on the extent of their respective devolution deals, but they are considered to be central to the 'devolution revolution' announced after the 2015 general election.²⁷ This was a plan, set out by then Chancellor George Osborne, to devolve more powers from Whitehall to local government, including the retention of local taxes.²⁸

41% of England's population now live in areas covered by some kind of metro-mayoral devolution deal, with nine of the ten combined authorities being overseen by an elected mayor.²⁹ Devolution deals are now in the process of being created for other areas across the country, including Nottinghamshire, Suffolk and Cornwall. Understanding how effective the mayoral and combined authority model has been for levelling up is therefore important not just for the Tees Valley, but also for the rest of the country.

Table 1 lists the existing metro mayors and summarises their policy priorities and approach to levelling up in their respective combined authorities. It also provides an insight into the election of metro mayors more generally and facilitates some high level comparison. Turnout for these elections has generally been quite low compared to general elections - between 21-37% - but is consistent with local election turnout.³⁰ However, in areas where there have been two elections, turnout has increased from the first to the second. This suggests that the profile of metro mayors is growing. Politically, the combined authorities are dominated by Labour mayors: only two areas are currently led by Conservatives. In the 2021 elections, two areas - Cambridgeshire and Peterborough and the West of England - changed hands from Conservative to Labour leadership.

Many of the mayors tailor policies specifically for their combined authority. Dan Norris talks about the importance of the tourism economy in the West of England, while many of the northern mayors stress the importance of improving public transport. Significant consensus can be found across their individual plans - housing, jobs and skills, and infrastructure are recurring priorities for most of the regions. This could speak to the fact that mayors have similar core areas of policy responsibility or the

prevailing importance of these areas to sub-national policy making. Their approaches to delivery differ, as do their politics. However, most are generally supportive of the principles of levelling up, albeit with some criticism of the government's progress in delivering it, predominantly from high-profile Labour mayors such as Andy Burnham and Tracy Brabin.

Houchen, however, stands out as the only mayor who has made levelling up such a central feature of both his election campaign and his policy priorities.³¹ Jobs, skills and infrastructure development are the foundation of his plans for Tees Valley and he has publicly advocated for the importance of levelling up. This makes Tees Valley an important and interesting levelling up case study. Not only is Houchen in the minority as a Conservative metro mayor, his policy priorities are arguably those most explicitly connected to that of the most recent Conservative manifesto. By understanding how levelling up is going in Tees Valley, we can begin to gauge whether this approach is one that other mayors may be inclined to lean into in the future.

27 Paun, A & others, *Metro Mayors*. The Institute for Government, 2022. Available at: [Metro mayors | The Institute for Government](#) [Accessed 10/9/22]

28 The Rt Honourable Osborne, G & HM Treasury, *Chancellor unveils 'devolution revolution'*. GOV.UK, 2015. Available at: [Chancellor unveils 'devolution revolution' - GOV.UK](#) (www.gov.uk) [Accessed 11/9/22]

29 Palese, M, *What is a combined authority and what is a metro mayor?* Electoral Reform Society, 2022. Available at: [What is a combined authority and what is a metro mayor? - Electoral Reform Society - ERS \(electoral-reform.org.uk\)](#) [Accessed 15/9/22]

30 The Electoral Commission, *Report on the May 2022 local elections in England*. 2022. Available at: [Report on the May 2022 local elections in England | Electoral Commission](#) [Accessed 04/01/23]

31 Tees Valley Combined Authority, *The Mayor's Priorities*. Available at: [The Mayor's Priorities - Tees Valley Combined Authority \(teesvalley-ca.gov.uk\)](#) [Accessed 10/9/22]

MAYOR	COMBINED AUTHORITY	ELECTION INSIGHTS		POLICY PRIORITIES	EXAMPLE POLICY	HOW DO THEY TALK ABOUT LEVELLING UP?
		FIRST ELECTION	SECOND ELECTION			
Andy Burnham - Labour <i>Driving change with transport</i>	Greater Manchester	2017 Vote share: 63.4% (first round) Turnout: 28.9% ³²	2021 Vote share: 67% (first round) Turnout: 34.7% ³³	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Jobs and skills Housing Transport 	Bring buses under public control by 2025 with a cap on daily public transport fares. ³⁴	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advocates for devolution Said levelling up has “unlocked a cry for regional fairness that isn’t going to go away” Critical of the progress so far³⁵
Andy Street - Conservative <i>Creating growth through innovation</i>	West Midlands	2017 Vote share: 50.4% (second round) Turnout: 26.7%	2021 Vote share: 54% (second round) Turnout: 31.2% ³⁶	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Jobs and skills Infrastructure and transport Housing Levelling up for local prosperity 	Commitment to “create 100,000 good quality jobs and skills opportunities”. ³⁷	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supportive of levelling up as ‘critical’ mission for his area Talks about it in relation to skills, transport and housebuilding³⁸

32 Centre for Cities, *Metro Mayor Election Results*. 2021. Available at: [Metro mayor election results 2021 | Centre for Cities](#) [Accessed 10/11/22]

33 Centre for Cities, *Metro Mayor Election Results*. 2021. Available at: [Metro mayor election results 2021 | Centre for Cities](#) [Accessed 10/11/22]

34 Burnham, A, *Our Place, Our Time*. 2021. Available at: [Andy-Burnham-Manifesto-v2.1-002.pdf \(andyformayor.co.uk\)](#) [Accessed 10/12/22]

35 Wood, P, Levelling up cash ‘being used to finance vital services’, mayors warn as they condemn funding formulas. *The Independent*, 2022. Available at: [Levelling up cash ‘being used to finance vital services’, mayors warn as they condemn funding formulas \(inews.co.uk\)](#) [Accessed 15/12/22]

36 Centre for Cities, *Metro Mayor Election Results*. 2021. Available at: [Metro mayor election results 2021 | Centre for Cities](#) [Accessed 10/11/22]

37 Street, A, *LET’S GET OUR REGION BACK ON TRACK*, 2021. Available at: [Andy Street-Manifesto 2021-Full_compressed_compressed \(1\).pdf](#) [Accessed 10/12/22]

38 Bourke, F, *Levelling up priorities for West Midlands unveiled by Mayor*. *Birmingham World*, 2022. Available at: [Levelling up priorities for West Midlands unveiled by Mayor | BirminghamWorld](#) [Accessed 11/10/22]

MAYOR	COMBINED AUTHORITY	ELECTION INSIGHTS		POLICY PRIORITIES	EXAMPLE POLICY	HOW DO THEY TALK ABOUT LEVELLING UP?
		FIRST ELECTION	SECOND ELECTION			
Ben Houchen - Conservative <i>Regenerating local industries to level up</i>	Tees Valley	2017 Vote share: 51.1% (second round) Turnout: 21.3% ³⁹	2021 Vote share: 72.8% (first round). Turnout: 34% ⁴⁰	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Jobs and skills Infrastructure Levelling Up 	Improving skills provision through creation of the 'Teesworks' skills academy and freeport as a source of local jobs. ⁴¹	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prominent advocate for levelling up Made it central to his policy priorities⁴²
Dan Norris - Labour <i>Giving a green light to green recovery</i>	West of England	2017 Preceded by Tim Bowles (Conservative) Turnout: 29.7% ⁴³	2021 Vote share: 59.5% (second round) Turnout: 36.6% ⁴⁴	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Jobs and skills Housing The environment Local prosperity Covid-19 recovery 	'Green recovery' scheme to upskill workers in green jobs and to retrofit homes. ⁴⁵	Has said that he needs more resources and levers of power to deliver levelling up style policies. ⁴⁶

39 Centre for Cities, *Metro Mayor Election Results*. 2021. Available at: [Metro mayor election results 2021 | Centre for Cities](#) [Accessed 10/11/22]

40 Centre for Cities, *Metro Mayor Election Results*. 2021. Available at: [Metro mayor election results 2021 | Centre for Cities](#) [Accessed 10/11/22]

41 Tees Valley Combined Authority, *The Mayor's Priorities*. Available at: [The Mayor's Priorities - Tees Valley Combined Authority \(teesvalley-ca.gov.uk\)](#) [Accessed 10/9/22]

42 Kirby, S, *Mayor Ben Houchen sets out 5-point 'Levelling Up Pledge' in call to Tory leadership candidates*. Teesside Live, 2022. Available at: [Mayor Ben Houchen sets out 5-point 'Levelling Up Pledge' in call to Tory leadership candidates - Teesside Live \(gazettelive.co.uk\)](#) [Accessed 10/10/22]

43 Centre for Cities, *Metro Mayor Election Results*. 2021. Available at: [Metro mayor election results 2021 | Centre for Cities](#) [Accessed 10/11/22]

44 Centre for Cities, *Metro Mayor Election Results*. 2021. Available at: [Metro mayor election results 2021 | Centre for Cities](#) [Accessed 10/11/22]

45 West of England Combined Authority, *Green Light for Green Recovery Fund*. 2021. Available at: [Green light for Green Recovery Fund - Combined Authority \(westofengland-ca.gov.uk\)](#) [Accessed 10/8/22]

46 Ball, J, *What do metro mayors think of levelling up?* New Statesman, 2022. Available at: [What do metro mayors think of levelling up? - New Statesman](#) [Accessed 01/12/22]

MAYOR	COMBINED AUTHORITY	ELECTION INSIGHTS		POLICY PRIORITIES	EXAMPLE POLICY	HOW DO THEY TALK ABOUT LEVELLING UP?
		FIRST ELECTION	SECOND ELECTION			
Jamie Driscoll - Labour <i>Good quality lives through good quality work</i>	North of Tyne	2019 Vote share: 56.1% (second round) Turnout: 32.3%	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Jobs and skills Housing Local prosperity 	Improving pathways to work for young people and ensuring that jobs in the 'foundational economy' are adequately paid. ⁴⁷	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Describes the levelling up missions as 'sound' Says that radical fiscal devolution and more funding is needed to make them a success.⁴⁸
Nik Johnson - Labour <i>Greener connectivity for rural communities</i>	Cambridgeshire and Peterborough	2017 Preceded by James Palmer (Conservative) Turnout: 33.6% ⁴⁹	2021 Vote share: 51.3% (second round) Turnout: 37% ⁵⁰	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Jobs and skills Housing Transport and infrastructure 	A 'fully integrated, greener county-wide transport system'. ⁵¹	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Says levelling up is not 'just for the north' and policies should also be suitable for rural communities. Sees widening inequality as a barrier to success⁵²

47 Driscoll, J, *Prosperity You Can Be Part Of*, 2019. Available at: [manifesto \(jd4mayor.com\)](https://www.manifesto.jd4mayor.com) [Accessed 10/12/22]

48 Ball, J, *What do metro mayors think of levelling up?* New Statesman, 2022. Available at: [What do metro mayors think of levelling up? - New Statesman](https://www.newstatesman.com/2022/01/what-do-metro-mayors-think-of-levelling-up/) [Accessed 01/12/22]

49 Centre for Cities, *Metro Mayor Election Results*. 2021. Available at: [Metro mayor election results 2021 | Centre for Cities](https://www.centreforcities.org/metro-mayor-election-results-2021/) [Accessed 10/11/22]

50 Centre for Cities, *Metro Mayor Election Results*. 2021. Available at: [Metro mayor election results 2021 | Centre for Cities](https://www.centreforcities.org/metro-mayor-election-results-2021/) [Accessed 10/11/22]

51 The Business Services Association, *Metro Manifesto Summaries*, 2021. Available at: [Metro-Manifesto-summaries-May-2021.pdf \(bsa-org.com\)](https://www.bsa-uk.org/manifesto-summaries/) [Accessed 05/12/22]

52 Ball, J, *What do metro mayors think of levelling up?* New Statesman, 2022. Available at: [What do metro mayors think of levelling up? - New Statesman](https://www.newstatesman.com/2022/01/what-do-metro-mayors-think-of-levelling-up/) [Accessed 01/12/22]

MAYOR	COMBINED AUTHORITY	ELECTION INSIGHTS		POLICY PRIORITIES	EXAMPLE POLICY	HOW DO THEY TALK ABOUT LEVELLING UP?
		FIRST ELECTION	SECOND ELECTION			
Oliver Coppard - Labour <i>Doing politics differently to empower communities</i>	South Yorkshire	2022 Preceded by Dan Jarvis (Labour) Vote share: 71.4% (second round) Turnout: 26.3% ⁵³	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Jobs and skills Local prosperity Infrastructure The environment 	Commitment to 'do politics differently' by engaging people in decision making processes. ⁵⁴	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Has said that levelling up is important for South Yorkshire Needs to address 'glaring imbalances' of power, support and opportunity across the country⁵⁵
Tracy Brabin - Labour <i>Putting culture at the core of economic growth</i>	West Yorkshire	2021 Vote share: 59.8% (second round) Turnout: 36.5% ⁵⁶	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Jobs and skills Culture Criminal Justice Transport Regional prosperity 	Wants to use culture to drive economic development, as well as pledging to buses under public control and recruit 750 more front line police officers. ^{57, 58}	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognises the ambition of the project and the potential of "transport led regeneration" Yet to see the results in her area⁵⁹

53 South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority, *Mayoral Election*, 2022. Available at: [Mayoral Election - South Yorkshire MCA \(southyorkshire-ca.gov.uk\)](https://www.southyorkshire-ca.gov.uk/mayoral-election) [Accessed 11/12/22]

54 Coppard, O, *My Plan for South Yorkshire*. 2022. Available at: [My plan — Oliver Coppard for South Yorkshire Mayor](#) [Accessed 10/12/22]

55 Coppard, O, *Why levelling up is so important to the region*. Yorkshire Post, 2022. Available at: [Why levelling up is so important to the region - Oliver Coppard, Mayor of South Yorkshire | Yorkshire Post](#) [Accessed 04/01/23]

56 Centre for Cities, *Metro Mayor Election Results*. 2021. Available at: [Metro mayor election results 2021 | Centre for Cities](#) [Accessed 10/11/22]

57 Haldane A & Brabin, T, *Culture should be at the core of West Yorkshire's economic plans*. Yorkshire Post, 2022. Available at: [Culture should be at the core of West Yorkshire's economic plans - Tracy Brabin and Andy Haldane | Yorkshire Post](#) [Accessed 10/1/22]

58 Brabin, T, *Pledges*, Tracy Brabin for West Yorkshire Mayor, 2021. Available at: [Pledges - Tracy Brabin for West Yorkshire Mayor \(laboursites.org\)](#) [Accessed 10/11/22]

59 Ball, J, *What do metro mayors think of levelling up?* New Statesman, 2022. Available at: [What do metro mayors think of levelling up? - New Statesman](#) [Accessed 01/12/22]

MAYOR	COMBINED AUTHORITY	ELECTION INSIGHTS		POLICY PRIORITIES	EXAMPLE POLICY	HOW DO THEY TALK ABOUT LEVELLING UP?
		FIRST ELECTION	SECOND ELECTION			
Steve Rotherham - Labour <i>Improving quality of life with a plan for prosperity</i>	Liverpool City Region	2017 Vote share: 59.3% (first round) Turnout: 26.1%	2021 Vote share: 58.3% (first round). Turnout: 29.7% ⁶⁰	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Jobs and skills Transport and Infrastructure The environment 	London-style transport system and a young person's guarantee for skills and jobs. ⁶¹	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Has been critical of the government's lack of progress delivering levelling up and the lack of consultation with local leaders⁶²

60 Centre for Cities, *Metro Mayor Election Results*. 2021. Available at: [Metro mayor election results 2021 | Centre for Cities](#) [Accessed 10/11/22]

61 Birkenhead News, *Steve Rotherham launches manifesto with pledges on jobs, transport, and climate change*. 2021. Available at: [Steve Rotherham launches manifesto with pledges on jobs, transport and climate change – Birkenhead News](#) [Accessed 10/12/22]

62 Ball, J, *What do metro mayors think of levelling up?* New Statesman, 2022. Available at: [What do metro mayors think of levelling up? - New Statesman](#) [Accessed 01/12/22]

CHAPTER 2

LEVELLING UP IN THE TEES VALLEY IS A WORK IN PROGRESS

THE STATE OF PLAY IN TEES VALLEY: THE PEOPLE'S PERSPECTIVE

In this chapter, we explore the perspectives of the people at the heart of the levelling up agenda in the Tees Valley - the people who live there. We asked them about the changes they had seen in the area over recent years, how they felt about politics and their views on the area more generally. Their responses paint a nuanced but clear picture. The long-term challenges that people face in Tees Valley, and the North East more broadly, remain - poverty, low employment rates and run-down town centres.⁶³
⁶⁴

In previous research with KPMG, we polled people's attitudes towards levelling up. The data showed that this is a familiar picture across the country - 87% people have not seen improvements to the areas they live in over the last 18 months.⁶⁵ In the North East, this was even higher, with 93% yet to see a change in their area.⁶⁶ This suggests that levelling up is yet to have a tangible impact on people's lives - something we therefore wanted to delve further into

in this research.

We heard some clear messages in the focus groups we ran. Recognition and opinions of the mayor were mixed, with many not understanding his role or what he was responsible for. Although people felt positive about the area and had seen some welcome changes in recent years, the cost of living crisis is at the forefront of their minds. Many people are also worried about the impact of national politics on local funding - including on the levelling up agenda. While there was support for improving employment and skills opportunities across the area, people worried that this could not solve the problems they faced in the short term. These immediate challenges are of most concern to people and they are sceptical about the impact that long-term investment projects can have on their lives, and the lives of the most vulnerable, in the short term.

⁶³ Breach, A, *Tees Valley Metro Mayor - Three Policy Priorities for 2021*. Centre For Cities, 2021. Available at: [Policy priority 1: Invest in local skills to boost productivity, employment and wages | Centre for Cities](#) [Accessed 10/10/22]

⁶⁴ Kennedy, P, *One in three Teesside children living below headline as one area has second highest poverty rate in Britain*. Teesside Live, 2022. Available at: [One in three Teesside children living below headline as one area has second highest poverty rate in Britain - Teesside Live \(gazettelive.co.uk\)](#) [Accessed 10/10/22]

⁶⁵ Stephenson, C, *Don't leave levelling up behind*. Demos, 2022. Available at: [Don't leave levelling up behind - Demos](#) [Accessed 10/11/22]

⁶⁶ Related polling can be found here: Stephenson, C, *Don't leave levelling up behind*. Demos, 2022. Available at: [Don't leave levelling up behind - Demos](#) [Accessed 7/11/22]

People saw the Tees Valley as a good place to live and some had seen positive changes in recent years

Close proximity to nature, beaches and nearby cities was commonly given as what people liked most about living in the Tees Valley. Other highlights were friendly people, the range of activities for families in the area and that it is relatively affordable to live there. Several people were very positive about living in the Tees Valley. One man told us, "I love Teesside."

What I love about the area is the fact that we've got everything on our doorstep. You've got the beach, you've got the countryside, you've got somewhere to go shopping.
(Female, Darlington focus group)

There was also acknowledgement that some positive changes had taken place in recent years. In particular, some people thought that investment in town centres to improve options for socialising had had a positive impact. One man commented that he was pleased to see a bigger range of bars and restaurants in the area and that the redevelopment of the Castlegate centre - a local shopping centre - was "a positive thing because... it was horrendous." Improving tourism and making the region more attractive to visitors was also seen as a motivation for local authorities' investment in the area's seaside towns. However, opinions on whether this was the right approach were mixed.

The focus on high streets and leisure facilities reflects the nature of the funding the area has received. The area has received funding via the Future High Streets Fund and Towns Fund, which target investment at improving 'culture' among other things.⁶⁷

However some people felt that where there had been short-term investment, it had missed the mark

Although people spoke positively about some of the investments that had been made in improving the high street or developing leisure facilities, this came with caveats. High street investment was seen by some as having the undesirable impact of drawing footfall away from other areas of the town.

Stockton, I think, is starting to improve slightly, where they've moved everything to Wellington Square area, one area. But it has left the rest of the town as a bit of a ghost

town. (Female, Darlington focus group)

While it was recognised that more options for places to eat, drink and socialise were important, participants questioned whether these businesses were likely to succeed in the current economic climate. One participant shared their worries: "the businesses, the restaurants, the bars, and stuff like that, where people can't afford to go as often, are going to end up closing again. Which then ends up with us with empty buildings and then you've got nowhere to go, when we finally do have some more money."

The government's Industrial Strategy for Tees Valley includes £2.7 million to accelerate house building - some people had noticed an increase in house building, and saw it as a positive change.⁶⁸ However, others questioned who would be able to afford to buy the houses. One man said, "there always seems to be new houses being built. People often say, 'Where do people get all their money from?' Because there's a lot of poverty across Teesside."

People also raised concerns about the lack of infrastructure to support the volume of people moving into the area and that house building was reducing the amount of green space to which they had access. This was particularly important because participants had been almost unanimous in referencing green space as their favourite thing about living in Tees Valley.

Both knowledge and opinions of levelling up were decidedly mixed

Having asked about changes to the area more broadly, next we wanted to find out what people thought about levelling up specifically. When asked if they were familiar with levelling up, there was a range of responses. A small number of people could give a general description of the aims of levelling up, some had heard of it but could not describe it in detail, while others had never heard of the policy at all. The most common understanding of levelling up among those we spoke to was that it was an attempt to "equalise" the north with the south, in terms of jobs and prosperity.

To bring job opportunities into the area equal to what we have in the south, to bring us in line with what they have in the south. (Female, Darlington focus group, on the aim of levelling up)

⁶⁷ Tees Valley Combined Authority, *Mayor Welcomes Funding for Multi Million-pound Town Deals*. Available at: [Mayor Welcomes Funding for Multimillion-pound Town Deals - Tees Valley Combined Authority \(teesvalley-ca.gov.uk\)](https://www.teesvalley-ca.gov.uk/news/mayor-welcomes-funding-for-multi-million-pound-town-deals) [Accessed 11/11/22]

⁶⁸ UK Government, *Tees Valley - Industrial Strategy: local summary*. Available at: [Tees Valley - Industrial Strategy: local summary \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/101111/tees-valley-industrial-strategy-local-summary.pdf) [Accessed 6/11/22]

Of those who had this understanding of levelling up, many were sceptical about its chances of success. One person told us the aim of levelling up was “just to make everyone equal, basically.” But she added, “I don’t think it will work out that way.” There was doubt around the viability of levelling up, particularly for the people that participants felt would benefit most - the most vulnerable and young people who needed skills training to take on better employment opportunities. Some participants questioned who levelling up was for. One woman told us, “I just feel like it is more of a levelling up of the aspiring middle classes”, pointing to the recent announcement of a local outpost of Eton College as an example.⁶⁹ The levels of inequality and poverty in the area were a common theme throughout our conversations, with many feeling that for levelling up to work it had to start “right at the bottom”.

Few people had a detailed understanding of what levelling up meant on a local level, or connected it with Houchen himself

Although many people had heard of levelling up, only a handful of participants could point to examples of levelling up projects or clearly understood what it meant on a local level. However, some knew it was connected with reviving local industries and increasing the employment opportunities available to local people. When asked about the role of the mayor in delivering levelling up, few people we spoke to associated levelling up with Houchen himself. Many felt it was not clear who was responsible for delivering the local levelling up agenda.

I think I have noticed things happening, like [I] noticed the airport open and different things, but I wouldn’t necessarily know that those would be accredited to [Houchen] or anything else, really. (Female, Middlesbrough focus group)

The jury is out on Teesside Airport, but it was the levelling up project most commonly associated with Houchen

Of the mayor’s stated priorities, the airport was the project that most people were familiar with and associated with him - even if they were unsure of his exact role in it.⁷⁰ A participant in Darlington told us she knew very little about what Houchen was doing as mayor. She said, “he seems to be heavily involved with the airport, and that seems to be it.”

I think I’ve heard a lot about Teesside Airport. Potentially, I think, did he open up new flights and new destinations? I couldn’t tell you specifics, but I know there was a lot about Teesside Airport, basically. (Male, online focus group)

The airport itself was a source of contention in our focus groups, as some people thought it was a “white elephant” - something that is expensive to maintain and difficult to dispose of. In contrast, others thought Houchen had made a success of a failing project. One man we spoke to in Middlesbrough spoke of how the Tees Valley had got behind the project, saying, “[Houchen] said, ‘All Teessiders, can you support us?’ So what have we done? We looked at that and said, ‘Oh, direct flight from Teesside to Bulgaria, sunny beach, put me down.’ And we do. We fly every year now, sunny beach in September.”

Despite a few participants expressing such strong opinions, the prevailing feeling towards the airport and Houchen was a distinct lack of clarity. Many were unsure what was happening with the project and were not clear what Houchen’s role had been in it

Some people felt they had seen the impact of levelling up investment locally...

A minority of the people we spoke to had seen the impact of levelling up in the Tees Valley, and could point to examples of large projects that had been implemented as part of the policy agenda. The examples they gave were generally the airport and the freeport - two of Ben Houchen’s large infrastructure projects and key priorities. One participant spoke in detail about the port and told us she had seen activity and recruitment. She thought that there had been some job creation that had resulted from the combined authority’s levelling up investment. It was clear she saw this as a positive change in the area, saying “I know we talked about how industry has changed, but it’s a different industry. It is not the lack of industry.”

Since Houchen has come in, I have got a warm fuzzy feeling that industry is coming back, the manufacturing industry, not the service industry, I mean where you can make something and get pleasure for building something and seeing it work, and I applaud him. (Male, Darlington focus group)

People were also aware of the relocation of Treasury jobs to the area. Again, though, there were mixed

⁶⁹ Allan, D *Eton coming to Middlesbrough – mayor hails ‘phenomenal result’*. Teesside Business, 2022. Available at: [Eton coming to Middlesbrough - mayor hails ‘phenomenal result’ - Tees Business](#) [Accessed 26/11/22]

⁷⁰ Tees Valley Combined Authority, *The Mayor’s Priorities*. Available at: [The Mayor’s Priorities - Tees Valley Combined Authority \(teesvalley-ca.gov.uk\)](#) [Accessed 10/9/22]

opinions on the impact this could have for local people. One participant was very enthusiastic about the prospect of jobs coming into the area, emphasising there were going to be 1,500 well-paid jobs coming into Darlington. However, others were concerned that these jobs would go to people moving into the area, rather than offering opportunities for local people.

There was some recognition that the levelling up agenda in Tees Valley was focused on job creation and the revival of industry. This suggests that Houchen has successfully communicated his priorities to some people in the area. There are, however, some caveats: several people thought that Houchen's role had become less clear in recent months. They commented that they used to see a lot of communication about what projects he was working on and local businesses he was visiting, but that this had dropped off more recently. Talking about the mayor's presence following some problems at a local airshow, one person explained, "he was all over social media, like you're seeing pictures outside the airport and stuff, and he seemed very heavily involved. And then, after that, you don't see or hear much of him."

...but most people in the Tees Valley are yet to feel the impact of levelling up on their lives

Those who could point to examples of levelling up projects in the Tees Valley were in the minority, while those who had seen an impact on their lives were even fewer. Most people we spoke to were yet to see any direct impact of levelling up, with one woman saying that "levelling up seems to have ground to a halt". In fact, there was a prevailing sense of confusion as to whether levelling up was still happening. Some associated it with the Johnson premiership, and therefore assumed it was no longer an active government policy.

I thought levelling up was something in the previous government, but then I thought it was scrapped in the current government, so I wasn't even sure if it's still going ahead as a concept. I guess, maybe, we've not seen the actual practical... What that actually will be, as far as I'm aware. It's just an abstract concept at the moment. (Non-Binary Person, online focus group)

Most people felt that the promises of job creation and revived local industry had not been delivered upon yet. Despite a stated "record of delivery" by the mayor - including investment of hundreds of millions - many felt that the local levelling up agenda was yet to deliver on its promise of increased employment opportunities.⁷¹ This was a concern for many participants, either personally or for the area more generally. One person told us their husband was looking for work and that they had struggled to find jobs. Another said, "They've said that there would be a lot of jobs available, in Darlington especially, but I've not seen anything."

Some could point to examples of jobs that had been advertised but had failed to materialise. One man told us, "I mean my son-in-law was supposed to be the manager of this wonderful turbine blade, a manufacturing site down by the docks. Well, that didn't - they pulled out. Why did they pull out? I don't know."

Short-term challenges stand in the way of long-term levelling up success

Despite a general feeling that levelling up industry and skills made sense for Tees Valley in the long term, many people spoke of more immediate, short term concerns. These worries included the cost of living crisis, skills gaps and the implications of national political turbulence for local levelling up.⁷² ⁷³ Many people either felt that these issues should take priority over levelling up or stood in the way of it succeeding.

At a tumultuous time in national politics, thoughts turned to how this could impact the chances of levelling up succeeding in Tees Valley. Specifically, people expressed concern that if there was not enough money nationally, local projects would be the first to go. One woman asked, "How long will this levelling up funding keep coming? Will that be put on hold?" A clear concern about how the national and local dynamic would interact in the context of the cost of living crisis was a recurring topic throughout our conversations.

71 Houchen, B, *A record of delivery and a promise of more*. BenHouchen.com. Available at: [A record of delivery, a promise of more | Ben Houchen](#). [Accessed: 11/11/22]

72 Belam, M, *UK crisis: a beginner's guide to the political turmoil as Liz Truss quits*. The Guardian, 2022. Available at: [UK crisis: a beginner's guide to the political turmoil as Liz Truss quits | Liz Truss | The Guardian](#) [Accessed 25/11/22]

73 Downes, S, *Cost-of-living crisis 'immediate threat to levelling up'*. Local Government Chronicle, 2022. Available at: [Cost-of-living crisis 'immediate threat to levelling up' | Local Government Chronicle \(LGC\) \(lgcplus.com\)](#) [Accessed 20/11/22]

A skills gap creates a barrier for local people looking for work

We've got a lot of great workers here to do the mid-level work, but we don't have people who live here, who can do the hard jobs. Because the jobs haven't been here. Which is what they need to do, is put the training in, to get the people in the area up to the management levels... The people in the area who wanted to go into those industries and do those jobs have moved out. (Female, Darlington focus group)

Several people we spoke to expressed concerns around the impact new jobs in Tees Valley would actually have for local people. People felt that there was a skills gap between the "hard jobs" that required specific skills and the people in the area who could do them. This in turn meant that people were concerned that these roles would instead be taken up by people from outside of the area, reducing the potential for local people to share in the prosperity that employment opportunities could bring.

Others worried that if young people were not trained up now, they would not have the skills to take on the roles the local levelling up agenda was seeking to create. One woman called on the government to focus on teenagers' prospects: "They're going to be the 20 to 30-year-olds in ten years' time, who need to be having these jobs that the levelling up is working towards."

CONCLUSION

Tees Valley residents care about their local area. They feel it is a good place to live and want to see it thrive. The challenge they, and local government, face is that a lot more work is needed for it to meet those aspirations. We heard clear concern about decline in the area. People were particularly worried about towns, where they felt the high streets were struggling and investment was sometimes misplaced. However, there was also real pride in local beaches and green spaces, which almost every resident we spoke to mentioned as something they liked about living in the area.

Many people felt that levelling up held a lot of potential to boost the Tees Valley. Some felt they could already see the impact, citing the airport, Teesworks and Treasury North as opportunities for growth and new jobs in the area. However, many more could not identify any improvements. According to the people who live there, levelling up in Tees Valley is a work in progress - a long-term project that the majority of people think has got

the right idea, but are sceptical about its success in reality. The long-term hopes were tempered by short-term worries, with many people expressing concern about the impact these short term problems would have on the long term prosperity of the area. There are many reasons for this, which we will explore in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3

LEVELLING UP IN THE TEES VALLEY - OPPORTUNITIES AND BARRIERS

Levelling up in the Tees Valley is a work in progress. The combined authority has made steps towards implementing a place-based agenda that will create prosperity for the region in the long term. However, local residents' feelings about what has been done so far are mixed, as is their knowledge. There are opportunities that the combined authority and the mayor can capitalise on to make levelling up a success, but there are also barriers. In this chapter we will consider those opportunities and barriers, before setting out our recommendations in the final chapter.

OPPORTUNITIES

The place-based approach to levelling up in Tees Valley is the right one. Revitalising local industries with a focus on green jobs and skills development, and using assets the area already has, clearly has potential to create long-term prosperity for the people in Tees Valley. Among people we spoke to, there was a sense that the area was aiming for the right things, though people's knowledge of the specifics was limited. Several people spoke about things heading in the right direction or said they were hopeful for the future.

As mayor, Ben Houchen has undoubtedly raised the profile of the Tees Valley on a national level. He has carved out a reputation for the area as being at the forefront of the levelling up agenda, holding the attention of senior politicians and has successfully

bid for funding.

He has significant electoral support, having won the 2021 mayoral election with over 70% of the vote, which gives him significant power to shape local politics, including the levelling up agenda. His commitment to levelling up has also gained him a positive reputation among some of the people we spoke to, with one man telling us, "He is the only politician I know, because he has actually delivered on his manifesto". Another felt he was "very passionate about this area" and that he wanted to "regenerate the area for the benefit of the people who live here". This is a foundation upon which Ben Houchen and the combined authority can build: growing support locally and nationally will be important to continue to deliver their levelling up agenda.

The devolution arrangements in Tees Valley are relatively well established: the combined authority has existed since 2015, with a metro mayor now in place for five years. We heard from local stakeholders that the local authorities had a strong working relationship prior to the creation of the combined authority, which stood them in good stead to work well under the new devolution arrangements. While the devolution arrangements in Tees Valley are not perfect, a long-standing arrangement with minimal conflict locally provides a valuable opportunity for Houchen. It provides a strong case, for example,

to call for more devolved powers - such as further powers overskills policy - in the future.

BARRIERS

Our discussions highlighted that, while local levelling up in the Tees Valley is the right approach, there are barriers that need to be addressed in order for it to have the best chance of success.

i) Mistrust and scepticism of politics

A common theme throughout our conversations was the mistrust and scepticism people have for politicians and politics, both generally and specifically in their local area. This has led to some people feeling like politics and politicians were disconnected from the realities of life in the Tees Valley. While for some this manifested in frustration, others were left feeling apathetic and disengaged. Talking about the government, one woman told us, "My faith in them is out of the window." Another said they had "total mistrust of the government; I just don't trust anyone now." This mistrust among our participants is reflected nationally - recent polling found that two in three voters now say that politicians are "out for themselves" rather than serving "the interests of the country".⁷⁴

Some of the problems are rooted in a mistrust of politics generally...

I don't think it matters what they promise really, I just think I'll wait and see if it happens, but I don't trust them. (Female, Darlington focus group)

There was a feeling among many of the people we spoke to that politicians did not understand the real-world problems that they were tasked with addressing, which meant people didn't trust that they would be able to deliver. For example, one participant said, "They're just totally disconnected from it, aren't they? It's a different world."

Central to these concerns was the fact politicians were not well connected to the places they served, either because they did not come from there or their life experiences were very different to those of many local people. Some people commented that when politicians from elsewhere, such as government ministers, came to visit people would "put their best face on". This means that politicians don't get to "really see the problem".

100%, they should be at least within the Tees Valley or close area, because if you're not in the area and you come up here once in a blue moon, then you're

not going to have a true picture of what the area is like. (Male, online focus group)

They felt strongly that MPs and other local politicians should be rooted in the area or have relevant expertise for the role they were carrying out, in order to have a better understanding of what the Tees Valley needed. One person told us, "They don't live in those areas themselves, so they're not having to walk along those streets every day and see the state they're in. They just don't get it."

Other problems are closer to home...

The scepticism among our participants was not solely reserved for national politics. Several people provided anecdotes about corruption and conflict in local councils. One man told us, "Middlesbrough [Council] is just falling apart with infighting." Some people thought that their local government was doing a good job, but there was cynicism that they publicised what they were doing more frequently around key points in the election cycle. This, as well as incidents of councillors arguing on social media, were given as examples of why people also mistrusted politics on a local level. People felt that local representatives were focused on these issues of personality and reputation, rather than the community.

There was also scepticism as to whether local government could really deliver for people, with one participant telling us: "All these things that people are talking about that they are promising. Are they actually going to happen, because they've got no money anyway?" Another thought that the local government was working "for their own ends". People listed concerns about internal conflicts or financial problems as reasons why they thought their local councils were not functioning as effectively as they could be.

Uncertainty has left people disengaged and apathetic

Whether we're talking about Hartlepool, or Stockton, or Middlesbrough, Redcar, you see a lot of change, but, as just an ordinary member of the public, you're often sceptical as to whether or what this actually lead to? And whether people like the councillors who are making these decisions are actually the best people to be making them. (Male, online focus group)

There were several factors contributing to a shared feeling of uncertainty and apathy among many of our participants. While people were worried about the impact of national politics on local projects, they also felt fairly uninformed about these projects in the first place. For example, some felt that local government

74 Quilter-Pinner, H, *Freefall: how a year of chaos has undermined trust in politics*. IPPR, 2022. Available at: [Freefall: how a year of chaos has undermined trust in politics | IPPR](#) [Accessed 01/12/22]

had shied away from sharing the outcomes of large investments. This meant that local people could not make an informed decision about whether the projects had been a success or not. Some people then found it difficult to give an opinion on levelling up, as they did not know enough about what had happened or what was planned for the future.

Why is this a problem for levelling up?

Levelling up is - and should be - a long-term project. Nationally and in the Tees Valley, the levelling up agenda is tied to a political mandate. Nationally and locally, the Conservative party and Ben Houchen respectively won significant electoral majorities with manifestos that had levelling up at their centre.

In the Tees Valley, the majority of Houchen's stated priorities as mayor are connected to delivering local growth and new employment to help level up the area.⁷⁵ Arguably, the successful delivery of levelling up requires political stability. Whether Houchen remains as mayor in future elections or the area elects new leadership, it is key that the area keeps levelling up as a political priority. Retaining the trust and support of all residents - not just the minority who already vote - is important for this to be possible.

Houchen has a considerable mandate for his levelling up agenda, which comes with considerable pressure to deliver on it. At present, scepticism towards politics both locally and nationally presents a significant barrier for Houchen and other politicians in the area. Retaining the trust of those who voted for him, and improving engagement with residents across the area, is of paramount importance to deliver levelling up.

ii) Confusing layers of local government

Devolution has been effective at conveying more power - both political and fiscal - to the Tees Valley. However, we found people find the multiple layers of governance confusing. The Tees Valley has a metro mayor, city mayors (political and ceremonial), MPs and local councillors. This creates ambiguity as to who is responsible for delivering what across the area.

The creation of the Tees Valley Combined Authority was part of this confusion - it was not clear to everyone we spoke to which areas it did and did not include, for example. Some people were unsure about which politicians were responsible for delivery on a practical level, while others worried that the area risked losing a clear local identity. One focus group participant explained how confusing it was

that parts of the area had been known as Cleveland County, Tees Valley and Teesside at different times, commenting that "I don't even know what's quite what." This in turn led to ambiguity about where responsibilities lie in local government.

Then, and obviously, because we're all in these different councils, there's then you don't have the benefit of the economies of scale. You have, I think, a lot of fragmented thinking. Then, often, different councils will outbid each other, or they won't go for bids together. Like, I see a lot of things that happen south of the Tees that are good, that you never see north of the Tees. (Male, online focus group)

This confusion extended to the role of the mayor. A large number of people were confused as to what his role was in the area and how it differed from other politicians they were more familiar with. One person asked, "So is he in charge of all the other mayors then? Like the mayor of the mayors?"

Having a mayor does not seem to have had a significant impact on people's political engagement

In 2021, Houchen won the mayoral election by a considerable margin and increased his vote share by 33%.⁷⁶ Despite this 'landslide' victory, it does not appear that having a mayor has had a significant impact on the political engagement of people in Tees Valley. Turnout for this election was 34%, around the average for mayoral elections across the country but still only representing a minority of the electorate. This reflects conversations we had with Tees Valley residents, many of whom had not voted in the mayoral elections, either because they did not know they were happening or did not feel informed enough to cast a vote. Those who did vote told us they generally vote in other elections anyway - having a dedicated representative for the area had not inspired any of them to get out and vote if they would not ordinarily do so.

Why is this a problem for levelling up?

The confusion created by multiple layers of local government makes it more difficult for politicians to be held accountable for delivering on levelling up and discourages people from engaging. Devolution can be a positive force for change: local authorities are better placed to understand the needs of local people. Local councils and combined authorities should be at the forefront of levelling up with adequate powers to deliver it. However, our conversations showed that people in Tees Valley are far from clear as to who is responsible for what in

⁷⁵ Tees Valley Combined Authority, *The Mayor's Priorities*. Available at: [The Mayor's Priorities - Tees Valley Combined Authority \(teesvalley-ca.gov.uk\)](https://teesvalley-ca.gov.uk) [Accessed 10/9/22]

⁷⁶ Centre for Cities, *Metro Mayor Election Results 2022*. 2022. Available at: [Metro mayor election results 2021 | Centre for Cities](https://www.centreforcities.org/metro-mayor-election-results-2022/) [Accessed 10/9/22]

their local area.

Local government roles need to be more clearly communicated so that people can better engage with the levelling up agenda. This is important for democratic accountability and for the success of levelling up projects; people are more likely to engage with and support projects if they understand them. This came through in our focus groups: people wanted more clarity as to the objectives of levelling up initiatives and to be informed about their outcomes. They felt this would enable them to make more informed choices about how local government was doing, and who to vote for.

iii) Lack of clear communication and absence of consultation

Communication from local government is hit and miss

Communication underpins the problems we have already identified with trust and confusion around layers of government. In our conversations, we found that people did not think there was clear communication about the objectives and progress of levelling up.

Where people did receive regular communication from a local representative, this came from a local councillor. The regularity, tone and utility of these communications seem to be something of a lottery, depending on the area in which people live.

Residents felt that communication from the combined authority was absent, other than the mayor's presence on social media, with which some were familiar. Although they thought social media was a useful source of information, some did not use it at all and others questioned whether it was the best forum for effective communication between constituents and politicians. People referred to discussions on social media as "white noise" and a place where only the strongest opinions were concentrated, with one participant saying they thought social media was a "dangerous" place for local debate. In its current form, they felt it encouraged disagreement rather than facilitating constructive conversations.

Consultation is almost totally absent

Very few of the people we spoke to could recall being involved in any form of consultation about projects or policy making locally. Where they could point to examples, these related to very specific local services, such as filling in questionnaires about GP waiting times or being asked to contribute to a consultation about the local swimming pool. No one we spoke to had been consulted or engaged about a specific levelling up project.

Most participants supported the idea of consulting local people as part of the policy making process. One man told us, "I think this entire country would be a better place if people had more power, if people had more strength, if you know what I mean, more leverage." Others agreed: when asked who best understands the needs of the local area, one participant told us without hesitation, "the people that live there". This is supported by recent Demos polling, which found that 71% of people think it is important for local people to have a say in decision making about their local area.⁷⁷

The people we spoke to were also clear that they did not want consultation or participation for the sake of it. They thought it should be utilised for projects where it would actually be valuable and relevant to people's lives. They felt it would be beneficial for people to be more informed about what was happening locally - what investments were being made, what the limitations were and what local government was hoping to achieve.

I was just going to say, if someone asked me to go to a meeting, I feel like I'd come out more educated on what they were able to do, rather than me just going, "Well I've got an opinion," they could tell me why that would work or wouldn't work. You know what I mean? (Female, Darlington focus group)

Past experiences engaging with local government had left some sceptical as to how successful participative policy making could be. Participants told us they had been blocked by local councillors on social media or that politicians had been unresponsive or unhelpful. A participant in Darlington explained that a lot of people don't see the point in trying to participate in local decision making, saying, "They won't listen to me anyway, they'll just do what they want to do."

Why is this a problem for levelling up?

Communication underpins several of the concerns people raised in our focus groups, from not having faith in levelling up projects because they did not know the outcomes, to a lack of trust in politicians as a result of seeing them arguing on social media. If communication was improved, residents in Tees Valley would have a better understanding of the objectives of the levelling up agenda and what was being done to achieve them. If communication was supplemented with consultation and participation where appropriate, there would be even greater benefits. Chapter 4: Conclusions and recommendations

77 Stephenson, C., *Don't leave levelling up behind*. Demos, 2022. Available at: [Don't leave levelling up behind - Demos](#) [Accessed 10/11/22]

As the poster child of the levelling up agenda, Tees Valley has many of the preconditions to make a success of levelling up. It has an elected mayor closely aligned with the policy, an established devolution deal and a plan for levelling up rooted in the opportunities and needs of the local area.

Rooted in local people's experiences, this research set out to conduct a 'progress check' on local levelling up. There were several lessons for the agenda more broadly. First, a localised approach is the right one. Cutting and pasting one area's model of levelling up onto another is sub-optimal. It ignores the unique challenges and opportunities of each area - what works for Manchester is unlikely to work in Cornwall, for example. Understanding the challenges and opportunities of each place is the best way to make a success of levelling up.

Our conversations with people from across the Tees Valley painted a complex picture of the state of play. Some people were disappointed with the progress levelling up had made in recent months, others supported the mayor's agenda wholeheartedly, while many had not heard of the policy at all. However, some common themes came through loud and clear. People were concerned about the cost of living crisis and how it would impact local businesses and the most vulnerable. There was also a desire to see their area thrive but a shared scepticism as to whether those desires were realistic.

Another key theme was a profound mistrust of politics - and politicians - on a local and national level. This scepticism was partly rooted in a lack of faith that their concerns were listened to by politicians. Engaging people in the policy making process is one way to address this, but is currently missing from the levelling up agenda in Tees Valley. Policy makers should seek to effectively communicate with people, keeping them informed about the progress of levelling up projects and, more fundamentally, utilising their ideas. This will create levelling up policies that reflect people's priorities and develop a better culture of democratic accountability at the local level.

We have drawn two key conclusions from this research. First, improving the relationship between local government and the public is essential for levelling up's success in Tees Valley. At present, it is a work in progress. Second, problems caused and exacerbated by the cost of living crisis present a barrier to success. In order to enable levelling up to address the challenges the country faces in the long term, more must be done to effectively support people through this period of intense difficulty. More needs to be done to address these challenges in

the short term, to give levelling up the best chance of success in the long term. We set out these recommendations in more detail below.

LEVELLING UP IN THE TEES VALLEY IS A WORK IN PROGRESS - IMPROVING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE PUBLIC AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT IS ESSENTIAL FOR ITS SUCCESS

Houchen's approach to levelling up in the Tees Valley is, largely, the right one. It roots the delivery of levelling up firmly in place, for example by aiming to revive local industries for the 21st century with a focus on green tech. People we spoke to were positive about this approach. They wanted to see local industries thrive and be a source of prosperity in the area, as well as offer more highly skilled jobs for local people.

In our previous report on levelling up, *Movers and Stayers*, we advocated for precisely this approach on a smaller scale for towns.⁷⁸ A place-by-place approach that draws on the existing strengths of a town, combined authority or region has the best chance of success. Crucially, we also emphasised the importance of putting local people at the heart of levelling up. People are more likely to engage with local projects and investments if plans reflect local priorities - something that people in Tees Valley felt was often missing.

For levelling up to be a success in Tees Valley, the relationship between the public and local government needs to be strengthened. To achieve this, the following problems need to be addressed.

People are not clear on levelling up

Many people have a limited understanding of what levelling up means, both nationally and at the local level. Similarly, lots of people are not familiar with the big levelling up projects happening in Tees Valley. They are unlikely to be invested in the success of a project if they are unfamiliar with it in general or how it could impact them.

For the levelling up agenda in Tees Valley to work in the long term, people need to be invested in it now. For example, residents need to be made more aware of the existing skills programmes, so that their children can participate and take up the highly skilled jobs that the levelling up agenda promises. Currently, this is not happening as well as it could be - lots of people we spoke to still felt that there were not enough jobs in the area. Very few could point to examples of jobs directly connected to the levelling up agenda that they knew about.

78 Stephenson, C & Harrison K, *Movers and Stayers*. Demos, 2022. Available at: [Movers and Stayers: Localising power to level up towns - Demos](#) [Accessed 1/10/22]

Residents need greater clarity on local government roles and responsibilities. Limited recognition of the mayor was part of a wider sense of confusion over what different layers of local government were responsible for delivering, including the mayor. Poor communication was part of this issue. No one we spoke to could recall receiving information from the combined authority about levelling up projects, outside of posts on social media. The effectiveness of using social media as a communication tool was also questioned by many people.

For many people we spoke to, levelling up is a confusing, ambiguous concept. This lack of clarity is problematic for both the success of the project and for democracy more broadly. At the heart of this problem is communication: communication of the objectives of levelling up, of its progress and of who is responsible for delivering it.

Lessons for levelling up: communication is key

To make a success of levelling up in the Tees Valley, local government and the combined authority need to find ways of building engagement into the policy making process. This will not only enable people to be more informed and invested, but will also help to disambiguate who is accountable for its delivery.

Recommendation 1: Communicate regularly, across multiple channels

- The mayor and the combined authority should work to strengthen and increase the frequency of their communications across the area, specifically regarding levelling up projects. While social media is a useful tool for reaching people, it is not a perfect one. Improving the range of communication tools would increase the accessibility of information, be that through newsletters and leaflets through people's doors, stalls in town centres or local media engagement.
- Keeping people up to date on the progress of projects should be part of this strengthened communication. Accountability was something several people told us was important to them.

Recommendation 2: Introduce consultation into the local levelling up agenda

- Ben Houchen himself has said that, "The people best placed to make decisions about an area are those who live in it."⁷⁹ To truly engage local people in the levelling up agenda, the Tees Valley Combined Authority should introduce

consultation into their work. Understanding people's priorities and shaping projects to reflect them, where possible, will improve their chances of success. Improving the extent to which people can see their priorities represented in politics and policy making will also improve trust in these processes.

- Those we spoke to wanted to see their area thrive, to be somewhere their children could live and earn a decent living. Local people are a valuable resource and people want a say in how decisions are made locally. Recent Demos polling found that those in the North East are among the most likely to say that this is important to them, at 76%.⁸⁰ The combined authority should engage people in the policy making process, whether that is in setting priorities, co-design of local development programmes or participatory budgeting. By harnessing this resource, they can develop the levelling up agenda to better reflect the priorities of local people.

MORE NEEDS TO BE DONE TO ADDRESS THE SHORT-TERM PROBLEMS THAT ARE IMPEDING THE LONG-TERM SUCCESS OF LEVELLING UP

Levelling up is a long-term agenda, designed to address long-term problems. However, the cost of living crisis has exacerbated the poverty and inequality that already existed in many places across the country. These problems are not only having a profound impact on people's quality of life, ability to pay their bills or find work, but are also hampering the success of the levelling up agenda.

People we spoke to felt frustrated that they saw some significant investment in their town centres, but that they didn't have the money to spend in new shops and restaurants. Rising prices weighed heavily on our participants' minds, making it harder to see long-term investment as a priority. These short-term financial worries are likely to hamper the success of levelling up investment as people will be reluctant, or even unable, to make use of new retail and hospitality venues.

Lesson for levelling up: stepping up to address the cost of living crisis is key to the levelling up agenda

Levelling up should not be abandoned to address the cost of living crisis. It is important that levelling up succeeds to increase prosperity and create more resilience in future crises. Nor should the cost of

⁷⁹ Tees Valley Combined Authority, *Mayor Welcomes Funding for Multi Million-pound Town Deals*. Available at: [Mayor Welcomes Funding for Multimillion-pound Town Deals - Tees Valley Combined Authority \(teesvalley-ca.gov.uk\)](https://www.teesvalley-ca.gov.uk/news/mayor-welcomes-funding-for-multi-million-pound-town-deals) [Accessed 11/11/22]

⁸⁰ Related polling can be found here: Stephenson, C, *Don't leave levelling up behind*. Demos, 2022. Available at: [Don't leave levelling up behind - Demos](https://www.demos.co.uk/dont-leave-levelling-up-behind) [Accessed 10/11/22]

living crisis be ignored so that policy makers can plough ahead with levelling up. The two are not mutually exclusive, but rather they are intrinsically linked. In order to level up effectively in the long term, the government must step up in the short term. To achieve this, we recommend the following:

Recommendation 3: Make cost of living support more accessible, significant and longer term

- Effective support is support that people can easily access and benefit from. Currently, cost of living assistance is made up of multiple short-term funds and packages of support for different groups and purposes. More effectively advertising the access point for this support would make assistance more easily accessible and will help to avoid people missing out on what is currently available to them.
- One way of doing this is to improve and more actively publicise the ‘Help for Households’ campaign and website.⁸¹ The site currently signposts people to the cost of living support available. This site should be more specifically focussed on support people can access and accompanied by a media campaign to advertise this service - as the Scottish government has done.⁸² The government has a wealth of experience in public information campaigns after the pandemic. It should deploy those lessons to better communicate the help that is available. Central government should work with local authorities to ensure that there is provision to support those who do not have access to the internet or have low digital literacy.
- Even with existing support, people are still struggling: many are waiting for support, while others are ineligible. The government should bring forward and extend existing cost of living measures, such as expanding the eligibility of households able to claim cost of living payments after April 2023.⁸³ They should also consider extending measures beyond their current scope, so that people are not left vulnerable in the medium term. We support the calls from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) to extend

cost of living support to cover those on low incomes, not just those eligible for benefits. JRF have also called for a campaign to encourage those eligible for in-work benefits to take them up, as they are a significant gateway to the existing cost of living support.⁸⁴ We agree that there should be an additional round of support for the most vulnerable (those on the lowest 20% of incomes) this year, who currently face an average gap between cost increases and income rises of around £450 this financial year, even after accounting for existing cost of living support.⁸⁵

Recommendation 4: Protect local and combined authority budgets

- The success of levelling up in the long term depends on an effective response to the cost of living crisis in the short term, and a population who are adequately protected and supported. In the Autumn Statement, the Chancellor announced £30bn of spending cuts to be implemented from 2025/26.⁸⁶ Local government is often on the frontline of service delivery. Analysis by the Institute for Fiscal Studies shows that under current plans, local authority funding is set to increase in real terms over the next two years.⁸⁷ Protecting this commitment and their resources during the cost of living crisis and beyond is imperative. A second wave of austerity measures is not the answer.
- Local authorities are at the forefront of both supporting people during the cost of living crisis and delivering levelling up. It is crucial that councils are given adequate resources such that fulfilling each of these roles is not at the expense of the other. National government should guarantee the protection of local government budgets for the duration of the cost of living crisis and ring fence them in the long term as part of the levelling up agenda.

Recommendation 5: Connect cost of living and levelling up policy in a meaningful way

- Levelling up and cost of living policy are not currently connected in a meaningful way. Doing

81 GOV.UK, *Help for Households*. 2022. Available at: [Help for Households - Get government cost of living support](#) [Accessed 5/1/23]

82 Scottish Government, *Accessing help for cost of living*, 2022. Available at: [Accessing help for cost of living - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](#) [Accessed 14/12/22]

83 Brignall, M. *Is the energy bills support in the autumn statement generous enough?* 2022. The Guardian. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/money/2022/nov/17/energy-bills-autumn-statement-jeremy-hunt-price-cap> [accessed 02/12/22]

84 Earwaker, R, *Going under and without*, 2022. Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Available at: [Going under and without: JRF's cost of living tracker, winter 2022/23 | JRF](#) [Accessed 13/12/22]

85 Earwaker, R, *Going under and without*, 2022. Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Available at: [Going under and without: JRF's cost of living tracker, winter 2022/23 | JRF](#) [Accessed 13/12/22]

86 Hunt, J. *The Autumn Statement 2022 speech*. GOV.UK. 2022. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-autumn-statement-2022-speech> [Accessed 02/12/22]

87 Ogden, K, *English councils' core spending power is set to grow by up to 11% in real-terms over the next two years*. Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2022. Available at: [English councils' core spending power is set to grow by up to 11% in real-terms over the next two years | Institute for Fiscal Studies \(ifs.org.uk\)](#) [Accessed 18/1/22]

so is important to the success of the levelling up agenda in the long term. Tackling the rising cost of living should not be done at the expense of levelling up and it should be communicated to policy makers, local authorities and the public that this is the case.

- As part of this, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities should work to bring cost of living policies into the levelling up context. This includes assessing the impact that cost of living support will have on local government funding in the long term and accelerating levelling up initiatives which could address cost of living.
- Growing local businesses and improving town centres are a significant part of the levelling up agenda, including in the Tees Valley. People should be supported to live, not just survive. Ensuring that people have money to spend in their local community and to live a fulfilling life should be a consideration when the government is planning its medium-term cost of living support and connecting it to the levelling up agenda at the local level.

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