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Please note: The views expressed in this evidence are the authors' own and do not reflect those of their affiliated organisations.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 This written submission focusses on a specific area outlined in the Committee's call for evidence: *What effective cross government looks like and how it might be achieved*. More specifically, it argues that effective cross government working requires both *horizontal* co-ordination across government departments and jurisdictions and *vertical* co-ordination between Whitehall and sub-national governance structures. In the academic literature, many argue that the best place to achieve joined up working, or a systems approach, is at the local level (Ayres et al, 2023). However, this requires cross-government working nationally to provide the right structures and incentives to enable local actors to join up their activities. We, therefore, advocate for effective cross-government working nationally to promote systems thinking across the whole governance system and set out four areas below that might assist.

1.2 The views expressed here are drawn from a major United Kingdom Research and Innovation (UKRI) project - 'Tackling the root causes upstream of unhealthy urban development' ([TRUUD](#), 2019-2024, £6.7m), which is examining how Whitehall and England's devolved structures can co-create healthy urban development by taking a systems approach to policy design and implementation. A systems approach describes 'a group of interacting, interrelated, or independent elements forming a holistic functional whole' (Crawford et al, 2005, 93). Crucially, it is not simply its multi-actor nature that defines a policy system, but that each part affects and is affected by other parts (Hawe et al, 2009).

1.3 There is growing recognition that tackling complex social problems, like climate change and health inequalities, can only happen by building strong interconnections across policy jurisdictions and sectors (Bates et al., 2023). The Government's recent *Levelling Up White Paper* (2022) indicates that the local level is the best spatial scale to join up and engage affected communities in the co-design of place-based initiatives. It advocates a systems approach by drawing attention to the interconnections between policy areas. There has been much debate about what needs to happen at a local level to level up (Connolly et al, 2021), but comparatively less attention on the cross government working required in Whitehall to deliver success. This evidence explores this dimension and makes four central claims:

1.4 First, Whitehall needs to develop and articulate a joined-up and long-term vision for English devolution. This would provide the stability to develop robust institutional structures, cross-governmental relations and joined up funding streams to support local initiatives.

1.5 Second, we advocate for continued collaboration between Whitehall and the scientific research community to develop innovative evidence and data to support a systems approach to policy development at all levels of governance.

1.6 Third, consideration of cross-cutting objectives, linked to the Levelling Up agenda, currently fall between the cracks of Whitehall structures and accountabilities. Cross-departmental schemes that are currently small in scale could be extended to offer transformative change in overcoming siloed working.

1.7 Fourth, pursuing long-term, preventative policies at a local level requires funding models that will grant greater local autonomy. Local leaders need more control over target setting and spending and Whitehall must be able to accommodate this through effective cross government working. Each of these claims is discussed in turn.

## **2. Creating a long-term vision for English devolution**

2.1 The past few decades have been characterised by numerous reforms aimed at decentralising powers and responsibilities to the subnational tier. Since 2010, several ‘mayoral combined authorities’ have been created, principally in the larger urban areas in England. They are led by directly elected ‘metro-mayors’, with local authorities in the area as ‘members’, and they have negotiated bespoke ‘devolution deals’ with the UK Government (Ayres, 2022). These deals transfer powers and budgets from central government bodies to the localities. The most advanced deals feature annual budgets for the metro-mayors of several hundred million pounds (DLUHC, 2023).

2.2 The next phase of English devolution will take place within the context of an unprecedented global economic, social and health crisis. Hambleton (2020) argues that cities and localities face four key challenges: a health emergency, an economic downturn, a climate change emergency and a worrying growth in social, economic and racial inequality. He contends that these challenges will require joined up, local solutions if the UK is to ‘build back better’. The need for a radical step change is clear. However, Wills (2016) notes that the inherent propensity for top-down elite control in British politics undermines our ability to imagine other ways of organising the state. One way of addressing this is to develop new and bold ‘imaginaries’ about political decision-making to tackle complex social problems (Healey, 2018).

2.3 Published in February 2022, the *Levelling up White Paper* (HM Government, 2022) is the Government’s flagship project to reduce regional inequality and enhance opportunities for all. It is intended to be bold and imaginary and to remedy the plight of left behind places by addressing the propensity for centralised and siloed control in British politics. The White Paper acknowledges that past attempts at regional rebalancing have failed due to a top-down, siloed approach to target setting and implementation. Instead, the 12 missions are intended to play a coordinating role by promoting a ‘whole system’ approach that acknowledges the links between different domains and parts of government. Overall, the ‘concept of levelling up enjoys widespread support’ in policy and academic domains (Connolly et al, 2021, 523). There are, however, concerns about whether levelling up will survive a potential change in government at the next election. We argue that Whitehall needs to articulate a clear and long-term vision for the next phase of English devolution - one that avoids the institutional churn characteristic of previous constitutional settlements so that cross government commitments and initiatives can bed in.

## **3. Collaboration between Whitehall and the scientific community**

3.1. Evidence and metrics are central to decisions about areas that require a systems or joined-up approach, what can be devolved and how local leaders can be held to account for performance (Sandford, 2022a). However, ‘developing an evidence-led approach is a long-term project; demand for evidence needs to be created; local partners need to be involved; external challenge should be encouraged; negative findings need to be acknowledged and addressed; compelling narratives need

to be created built upon the evidence; evidence needs to be utilised and acted upon; and the development of evidence needs to focus upon long-term drivers of economic growth' (Martin et al, 2021, 127).

3.5 Evidence undeniably has a role in informing Whitehall capacity for cross government working and devolution. A new 'spatial data unit' has been established within DLUHC to publish data for sub-national geographies and undertake evaluations of place-based policies (Sandford, 2022b). However, this accountability framework and reporting is likely to focus on those areas that can be easily identified, quantified and evaluated and may find it hard to accommodate an evidence base appropriate for cross-cutting issues, such as healthy urban development. We argue for the development of new and original sources of evidence that can assist Whitehall in pursuing a systems approach to devolved policy. For example, TRUUD has developed an economic valuation model that shows the health outcomes related to urban design (Eaton et al, 2023). The Health Appraisal for Urban Systems (HAUS) model identifies who gets ill and with what disease, as well as the economic cost of ill health and where these costs are incurred across the system. It is often assumed that the cost of ill health falls on the health system. However, the model shows the cost impact of poor health to the household, private sector, criminal justice and education systems, for example. This allows decision makers from all Whitehall departments and governance tiers to think about the problem from a systems perspective - thus facilitating cross government working.

#### **4. Enabling cross departmental initiatives**

4.1 The White Paper recognises that devolved areas need to be empowered to set a coordinated, holistic agenda so that 'decisions in one domain, such as transport, take proper account of decisions in another, such as education, health or business' (HM Government, 2022, 111). A persistent obstacle to this empowerment across past iterations of English devolution has been the siloed nature of much UK policy-setting, where individual Whitehall departments define outcome measures and funding criteria centrally, sometimes in ways that are at odds with the goals of others (Coyle and Muhtar 2023; Institute for Government, 2021). This has two consequences: first, that areas have only limited scope within which to enact place-based agendas, needing in part to defer to Whitehall's diagnosis of policy problems, its proposed solutions and its identification of success measures. Second, the hazard that conflicting central objectives persist at local level and thus undermine the holism of the local approach.

4.2 It follows that for Government to successfully deliver its programme of devolution, it must find ways to incentivise inter-departmental working across Whitehall and establish shared accountability for strategic objectives. Martin et al (2021) make several bold suggestions to this end, some of which have been met, including the establishment of a Ministerial lead and a department with a specific remit for Levelling Up. Another was adopted in the White Paper itself with 'a statutory obligation to report annually on progress towards meeting the Levelling Up missions. The report will draw on the metrics set out in this White Paper and provide rigorous analysis and monitoring of progress in reducing regional disparities' (HM Government, 2022, 156). If review of these annual reports is conducted by officials from multiple departments, then the new mechanism has the potential to drive greater collaboration in joint policy and programme design and reduce the contradictory policy signals received by leaders in devolved areas.

4.3 Progress is also being made through the Shared Outcomes Fund, which has allocated £386m to cross-departmental initiatives to response to complex policy challenges like supporting people with multiple complex needs, prison resettlement and drugs treatment through to 2023/24. The fund commits to robust evaluation and learning to inform development of future programmes (HM Treasury 2020). However, what is needed for truly transformational change is for this same

collaborative approach to be extended to many departments' core business. For example, DLUHC is accountable for levelling up housing and infrastructure but the responsibility for levelling up public health lies with the Department for Health and Social Care - yet housing quality and infrastructure are significant determinants of population-level health. As such, we contend that holistic consideration of cross-cutting levelling up objectives currently falls between the cracks of Whitehall administrative structures and accountabilities for levelling up (Ayres et al, 2023).

## **5. Promoting systems thinking in Whitehall**

5.1 Tackling complex societal problems such as non-communicable diseases and widespread health inequalities requires long-term and upstream preventative policies and systems approaches that bring together disparate stakeholder groups for cross-sectoral and innovative action. In many policy areas, the best scale for achieving this collaborative action is frequently at the local level where interventions can be co-created by policymakers, stakeholders and communities who have the greatest understanding of the characteristics and needs of their local areas.

5.2 The recent trailblazer deals for Greater Manchester and West Midlands Combined Authorities (DLUHC, 2023) provide an excellent example of how the government can devolve power and resources. Specifically, the deals provide a model for 'single pot' funding that is required to provide greater power and autonomy over how resources are spent locally. Our research indicates that the funding model established in the trailblazer deals should provide a template for future national funding pots for the Combined Authorities (Ayres et al, 2023).

5.3 We argue that supporting systems approaches at the local level and enabling long-term and upstream preventative policymaking requires funding models that will give greater autonomy to local actors over target setting and greater flexibility on spending. Local actors currently lack the power and resources to effectively respond to their priorities and targets (Houlden et al, 2022). One key reason for this is the reliance on fragmented bid-based pots of national funding, which have centrally driven conditions and targets (Martin et al, 2021). These central government targets do not always reflect the variation of needs within and across the regions (Sandford, 2022b) and therefore limits the potential for pro-active place-making to reflect local preferences and agendas. For example, our research highlights how national house building targets drive local decision-making over the needs of local communities and restrict autonomy (Ayres et al, 2023).

5.4 Single pot funding settlements across government departments that are secured over long-term periods will provide the local autonomy and security needed for preventative policies that are needed to address complex issues, like health inequality (Henderson et al, 2023). This will give local actors more control over how to use funding and enhance their ability to invest in preventative approaches with long-term outcomes to better reflect local placemaking needs.

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