

Levelling Up White Paper: local public transport will reach for London's standards

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Michael Gove has announced his [Levelling Up White Paper](#), outlining how the government is aspiring to boost the UK's capabilities and success.

As part of this, Gove says there will be an aspiration that public transport outside London comes close to the same standard as the capital by 2030. The statement accompanying the paper said this would "connect people to opportunity, improving local skills provision, or being able to act more flexibly and innovatively to respond to local need." Transport will be helped by "improved services, simpler fares and integrated ticketing."

This aim is the third of 12 new missions to "level up" the UK. The paper also discusses the possibility of better devolved powers for regions. This includes what the paper calls "trailblazer deeper devolution deals" with the likes of the West Midlands and Greater Manchester.

Mention is given to schemes such as the Integrated Rail Plan as part of a drive for greater success.

Darren Caplan, chief executive of the Railway Industry Association, said: "The Levelling Up White Paper

published today is welcome, and it is particularly positive to see transport connectivity and rail services recognised within it.

“We know that rail is a vital catalyst for economic growth, generating £2.50 from every £1 of spend, and investment in our railway touches all corners of the country, supporting cities, towns and communities across the UK. We urge the government to continue investing in rail as passenger numbers return post-Coronavirus and to support the decarbonisation, digitalisation and expansion of the railway network, ultimately ensuring the rail industry is best able to support economic growth, investment and jobs for the future.”

Laura Shoaf, chair of the Urban Transport Group, and chief executive at West Midlands Combined Authority, said: “Devolving more powers over transport is the right approach as mayors, leaders and local transport authorities are far better placed to make the right calls than command and control from Whitehall. However, we need to see this translated into action, including on the devolution of more powers over local rail networks, over bus funding, as well as less micro-management of our capital investment programmes.

“We welcome the investment that the government is making in the future of bus services which will bring real benefits in some places. However, those same bus networks face a more immediate challenge which is the ending of additional COVID revenue support from 1st April. This is one reason why we are already seeing service cuts and inevitably there will be more to come without a sustainable, longer term revenue support package for the bus.”

Andy Street, the Mayor of the West Midlands and chair of the WMCA, said: “Today’s Levelling Up White Paper will help finally address the imbalance of opportunities across the UK.

“Whether it’s building more affordable homes, ensuring better access to qualifications to secure the high-quality well-paid jobs of the future, or the region receiving a greater share of critical research and development funding, the White Paper has set out a clear plan as to how it will build on the progress we have already made in the West Midlands to improve people’s chances in life.

“Prior to the pandemic we already had the fastest growing economy outside of London, with record homes being built, record numbers in work, and record investment in public transport. But with COVID knocking us for six we needed the white paper to help get us back on track, and that is exactly what it will do.

“From the West Midlands being named as one of the UK’s first innovation accelerators, to yet more cash coming our way through the devolved Shared Prosperity Fund to spend on improving education and training opportunities, the region has secured some great wins that will allow us to make a real difference to people’s lives.

“But the real prize is the commitment from government to negotiate a third, trailblazing, devolution deal with the West Midlands. This is something we lobbied extremely hard for as it now opens the door for us to be able to push for more powers and funding, ensuring devolution goes hand-in-hand with levelling up.”

Mayor of South Yorkshire Dan Jarvis said: “The government’s Levelling Up White Paper is a step in the right

direction – but without the means to achieve the positive ambition it sets out.

“We welcome moves to create London-style powers across England, devolve more control over skills, and to spread R&D and culture spending more evenly around the country, as well as the initial £13m allocation towards regeneration efforts in Sheffield. If government are ready to put real resources into a partnership driven from South Yorkshire and not SW1, it could be the start of something significant.

“However, a goal which takes eight years to get the rest of the country to the point London is already at is incremental rather than revolutionary, and there is no indication that more substantial powers, like greater control over revenue, will be granted. Mayors and local authorities will still largely be left to fight each other for funding pots ultimately controlled by Whitehall.

“Above all, the paper is missing the means to achieve the goals it sets out. Its 12 ‘missions’ are great aspirations – but their lion-like ambition is matched with mouse-like resources. The money is almost all recycled, and often less than the funds it replaces. In practice, cuts to local government funding since 2018 easily outweigh funding in that period from the main levelling up funds – by an average of £50m, across 144 out of 157 local authority areas.

“Without the funding needed for real change, the government’s promises of levelling up will remain hollow. This White Paper gets some things right, but two long years after the election the Conservatives fought on the promise that levelling up would be their ‘defining mission’, many people across the country will be left asking themselves – is this it?”

Richard Bonner, city executive for the North, Arcadis, said: “Overall, Arcadis welcomes the overarching ambitions of the Levelling Up White Paper and the direction and support towards our great Northern cities and towns.

“There is a golden thread through the Levelling Up White Paper addressing the issues of skills and educational attainment. In particular, we welcome the strengthening of local devolution powers and responsibilities to develop programmes that suit local needs. This is vitally important to accelerate the transformation of economies but also support the transition of skills to accelerate net-zero carbon reduction in our city regions. Here, systematic approaches are required to develop complex programmes across energy networks, transport systems, industry, housing and buildings, and the White Paper creates a strong platform for strengthening these.

“But, we also recognise that the well-being of UKPLC is underpinned by the overall economic performance of all regions of the UK, and we want to ensure that support and funding does not slow down economic growth in London and the South East for example. There are also areas where further detail is still needed. For example, it’s important that we now see smaller towns and urban areas being picked up by the newly proposed county deals and further detail on the powers and remit of the new Levelling Up Council. More broadly, while there is much to celebrate in the White Paper, we look forward to seeing greater clarity on funding and how that funding will be implemented to deliver what has been promised effectively and in line with the ambitious targets set.”