

The holes in the UK levelling-up strategy: key omissions from the government's metrics

*The 2019 Conservative Party manifesto pledged to level up all parts of the UK and last February's White Paper set out the details of the Government's flagship programme for addressing inequalities by 2030. With a levelling-up bill now passing through Parliament, **Polly Vizard** takes a closer look at the suite of metrics that will be used to measure and assess the delivery of the Government's levelling up objectives.*

The Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill introduced into Parliament last month will put the government's levelling up programme on a legal footing. The bill includes legal requirements for the government to define its levelling-up objectives; to specify time-bound targets for delivery; and to set out the methodology and metrics it will use to report on progress. While this emphasis on accountability and metrics as part of an overall 'policy regime' for addressing inequalities in the 2020s is welcome, the Government's proposed levelling-up metrics have some key omissions. Our [new infographic](#) identifies eight key areas of stalling progress, several of which are not reflected in the government's levelling-up metrics.

Looking back to the second decade of the 21st century, the infographic shows that by the end of the 2010s, progress in tackling social disadvantage and inequalities had slowed down, stalled and / or gone into reverse against key indicators spanning different critical areas of life (or 'domains'). The adverse trends were not limited to living standards but also affected education, health and physical safety and security. Using the [SPDO indicator set](#), the infographic identifies eight key areas of stalling social progress that were already apparent in early 2020 – before the COVID-19 pandemic and the cost of living crisis struck:

- Child poverty;
- In-work poverty;
- Life expectancy inequalities;
- Unmet need for care;
- Educational inequalities;
- Inequalities in early childhood;
- Homicide inequalities;
- Homelessness.

Looking forward, a basic minimal requirement of any inequalities plan for the 2020s is the guarantee of a return to social progress in relation to each of these key outcomes. How confident can we be that the suite of metrics that the government will use to evaluate the delivery of its levelling-up objectives programme will include robust evidence on overall progress and inequalities in relation to each of these key social indicators?

On a positive note, the government's proposals on metrics – set out in the technical appendix to February's levelling-up white paper – are less narrow than was initially feared. Each of the twelve levelling-up missions has its own suite of metrics for evaluating success, including a headline indicator and multiple supporting indicators. These do not focus exclusively on growth, productivity, and infrastructure and include measures of educational attainment, healthy life expectancy, wellbeing, and homicide. This reflects the insight in the white paper that six interdependent types of capital (including human and social capital as well as physical capital and economic resources) are required to kickstart economic and social change in left-behind areas.

However, with the cost-of-living crisis escalating around us and threatening deprivation in essentials such as food and heating for millions, a credible suite of metrics designed to measure progress in levelling up during the 2020s must include progress in reducing income poverty – including child poverty – as a key indicator and yardstick of success. The first of the government's levelling-up objectives includes living standards, while the first deliverable sitting under this objective (Mission 1) is specified in terms of pay, employment, and productivity. Proposed metrics include gross value added (GVA) per hour, skilled employment, median and low pay, employment rates and gaps, gross disposable household income and children in 'workless households'. Specific indicators of household income poverty and child poverty are not proposed and measures of food poverty, fuel poverty, and homelessness are also absent.

On housing, the white paper provides recognition of the role of housing in building up human and social (as well as physical) capital and of the importance of housing disparities in relation to living standards, health and wellbeing. The 2019 Conservative Party manifesto pledged to build back better, including by delivering a million new homes over the next Parliament; and while there is slippage against this target, metrics on housing supply and new home ownership are taken forward under Levelling Up Mission 10. Metrics on housing decency are also specifically included. The role of social housing is highlighted in the analytical section of the white paper and plans for a social housing regulation bill are flagged up. Announcements on decency standards together with measures on tenancy security in the private rental sector (including no fault evictions) have been received positively by housing charities and taken forward in a separate white paper.

On education and skills, while the government's failure to fully fund education pandemic catch-up recommendations is a major concern, the new lifetime skills guarantee, set out in a separate white paper, is an important advance and apprenticeship new starts are included in the proposed levelling-up metrics. Additional measures will, however, be required to capture how well the needs of the substantial current cohorts who lack GCSE attainment in English and maths are being met. Recognition of early years as a form of human capital is an important advance but the associated metrics being proposed are overly restrictive.

The focus of Mission 7 on healthy life expectancy (including gaps) is welcome as is the inclusion of childhood obesity as a metric. On delivery, the white paper and levelling-up minister Michael Gove's statements have referred to a new strategy to tackle the root causes of health disparities as well as the recommendations of the Henry Dimbleby Food Review. However, the government's white paper on health disparities is still unpublished. Delays to buy-one-get-one-free and junk food advertising restrictions, the omission of key anti-obesity measures from the government's food strategy and increasing inadequacy of free school meal arrangements in the wake of the cost-of-living crisis, have also raised concerns about the direction of travel. Mental health (GHQ12) is omitted from the proposed metrics under Mission 7 – although a measure of anxiety is included along with life satisfaction metrics under wellbeing.

On social care, the absence of an indicator of disabled and older people's access to care is another key concern. The development of an indicator of inequalities in unmet need for care amongst the over 65s has been a focus of the SPDO research programme, and we recommend an expansion of the 'Levelling up' metrics to include this measure.

On physical safety and security, the inclusion of a homicide indicator within the suite of 'levelling up' metrics is important. However, the concept of safer neighbourhoods set out in the white paper should be broadened to address violence behind closed doors and the issue of domestic homicide should be made visible within levelling-up measures and metrics.

It is essential that metrics for measuring and tracking progress in the delivery of levelling-up objectives are made available at a range of different geographies including at the neighbourhood level with coverage throughout the country. The recent local and by election results have suggested that voters in the South may need some convincing that levelling up is relevant to their lives. However, the underpinning analytical framework set out in the white paper is explicit that geographical inequalities are not exclusively about the North-South divide or gaps with London. It emphasises that geographical inequalities occur within as well as between regions and local authorities including at a hyper-local level. These insights must be captured and reflected in the government's approach to metrics – with breakdowns by small area deprivation.

Subgroup disaggregation will also be key. While the white paper 'data availability' exercise was limited to region and local authority, a commitment to further breakdowns including by age, disability, ethnicity, and gender is flagged up.

Critically, the white paper proposals on metrics are described as preliminary and as being neither "exhaustive" nor "definitive". Plans to consult are flagged up. Addressing key omissions and shortcomings and embedding a more granular approach to metrics and building up levelling-up data infrastructure will be essential and the SPDO infographic and [indicator set](#) offer a starting point.



Notes:

- The [infographic](#) has been produced as part of the [Social Policies and Distributional Outcomes \(SPDO\) research programme](#) funded by the [Nuffield Foundation](#).
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