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Telford, Luke (2023) '*Levelling Up? That's never going to happen*':perceptions on *Levelling Up* in a 'Red Wall' locality. *Contemporary Social Science*.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/21582041.2023.2207555>

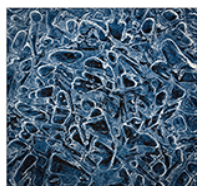
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Contemporary Social Science

Journal of the Academy of Social Sciences

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rsoc21>

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Luke Telford

To cite this article: Luke Telford (2023): 'Levelling Up? That's never going to happen': perceptions on Levelling Up in a 'Red Wall' locality, Contemporary Social Science, DOI: [10.1080/21582041.2023.2207555](https://doi.org/10.1080/21582041.2023.2207555)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21582041.2023.2207555>



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Published online: 02 May 2023.



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'Levelling Up? That's never going to happen': perceptions on Levelling Up in a 'Red Wall' locality

Luke Telford

School for Business and Society, University of York, York, UK

ABSTRACT

Emerging as the flagship policy of the Conservative Government in 2019, the Levelling Up agenda identified the need to ameliorate the United Kingdom's (UK) spatial inequalities with a particular focus on so-called left behind places. However, there is a dearth of qualitative research in these locales that explores what Levelling Up means to residents and how they believe it can be a success. Drawing upon 25 interviews with residents of left behind Redcar & Cleveland – a unitary authority that was central to the 2019 collapse of the Red Wall – this article explores their nuanced sentiments on the Levelling Up agenda. After presenting a brief history of Redcar & Cleveland, the study's qualitative methodology is presented. The findings sections are then structured into three themes: (a) the ambiguity of Levelling Up, (b) Redcar & Cleveland's freeport, and (c) cynicism of Levelling Up. It explicates how locals believe improved public infrastructure and well-remunerated employment, particularly through the unitary authority's recently opened freeport, should be central to Levelling Up the area. Next, the paper exposes the cynicism towards the agenda. It closes by suggesting failures to Level Up will serve to entrench peoples' discontent in places like Redcar & Cleveland.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 23 January 2023

Accepted 21 April 2023

KEYWORDS

Levelling Up; spatial inequalities; Redcar & Cleveland

Introduction

The UK's spatial imbalances are amongst the worst in the developed world, existing not only within regions and subregions but particularly within local authorities (Fransham et al., 2023; Hudson, 2022; Jones, 2019; McCann, 2020). Attempts to alleviate these inequalities have long been a focus of various Governments, dating back to at least the beginning of the twentieth century (Fransham et al., 2023; Jones, 2019). The latest core policy initiative – Levelling Up – emerged as the 'key political mantra' (Martin, 2021, p. 147) of the Conservative Government in 2019. The Levelling Up White Paper explored the policy in more detail, particularly the aims, objectives and 12 missions to be achieved by 2030 (HM, 2022). Such missions are broad and encompass improving the availability of well-paid jobs, bringing public transport in line with London's standards, increasing

CONTACT Luke Telford  Luke.telford@york.ac.uk

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access to high-quality skills training, reducing criminality, and restoring pride in place where it has diminished in recent decades (HM, 2022). This particularly includes in left behind localities, many of whom voted for the Conservative Party for the first time in modern electoral history at the 2019 general election (MacKinnon, 2020; Mattison, 2020). The catch-all nature of Levelling Up has clouded peoples' understanding of the policy, with a Centre for Cities (2021) poll outlining how 53% of respondents from Red Wall constituencies did not understand what Levelling Up means. Questions also remain over what the Government is attempting to specifically achieve (Martin et al., 2022), further convoluted by two changes in Prime Ministers since the policy was announced. This includes the election of Rishi Sunak in October 2022, with many Red Wall voters highly cynical of Sunak and often suggesting he is out of touch with working class people (Adu, 2022; Crerar, 2022). However, as Martin et al. (2022, p. 803) outline, 'Levelling Up these so-called 'Red Wall' constituencies in Northern England and the Midlands is undoubtedly now critical to retain their political support'.

Responding to calls for further qualitative research in left behind places (Etherington et al., 2022; Leyshon, 2021; MacKinnon et al., 2022; Martin et al., 2021; Pike et al., 2023; Telford & Wistow, 2022), this article utilises data from 25 semi-structured interviews with Redcar & Cleveland's residents. It is structured as follows. It begins by outlining a brief history of Redcar & Cleveland in Teesside in the Northeast of England. It documents how the unitary authority was central to British industrial capitalism's expansion throughout large parts of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Beynon et al., 1994; Warren, 2018); but is now considered a key left behind place for Levelling Up particularly in light of the 2019 collapse of the Red Wall (HM, 2022; Telford, 2022). The paper then presents the Levelling Up study that the qualitative data is derived from. Next, the data sections are structured into (a) the ambiguity of Levelling Up, (b) Redcar & Cleveland's freeport and, (c) cynicism of Levelling Up. The paper closes by suggesting failures to Level Up will entrench residents' political dissatisfaction.

Redcar & Cleveland & Levelling Up

Whilst the local authority was created in 1974 and originally known as Langbaugh and then Langbaugh-on-Tees, in 1996 it was awarded unitary authority status and renamed to Redcar & Cleveland. Straddling the Northeast coastline, it is populated by both towns and villages and possesses a population of 137,200 (ONS, 2022). The area's historical development has been shaped by the rise and fall of the Teesside subregion as an industrial economy in the previous two centuries (Lloyd, 2018; Shildrick et al., 2012; Telford & Wistow, 2022). Forming a core part of the UK's industrial revolution in the mid-nineteenth century, Teesside's local economy became dominated by steelmaking, mining, petrochemicals, heavy engineering, and shipbuilding (Beynon et al., 1994; Warren, 2018). The formation of Imperial Chemicals Industry (ICI) in the 1920s impacted significantly upon the area's economic development, founding products such as Perspex and innovating in the production of fertilisers that were exported globally (Warren, 2018). As a result, the locale was at the centre of British industrial capitalism's capital accumulation and market expansion (Beynon et al., 1994). By the middle of the twentieth century tens of thousands of people were employed in industrial work, meaning the area's identity became synonymous with industry's flame and smoke

(Telford, 2022). Teesside's industrial might was further enhanced in the immediate decades after World War Two, namely as ICI opened a plant in what was to become part of Redcar & Cleveland. This provided further social and economic stability to many residents, involving parallel biographies as primarily sons followed in their fathers' footsteps and acquired what they believed to be a job for life (Beynon et al., 1994; Lloyd, 2018).

The political economic transition to neoliberalism and a post-industrial economy, though, 'transformed some industrial heartlands into wastelands' (Jones, 2019, p. 23). By the turn of the millennium Teesside was one of the most deindustrialised places in the Western world (Shildrick et al., 2012). The loss of ICI in particular has left a deep structural wound in both the subregion and unitary authority (Telford & Wistow, 2022). Austerity also cuts deep into the locality's decline, with Redcar & Cleveland council witnessing cuts of around 30% to their budget from 2010/20. Accordingly, the unitary authority now stands second out of 74 most left behind local authorities in terms of the differential growth of both employment and output (Martin et al., 2021). Given this intense economic restructuring, political allegiances in Redcar & Cleveland have changed in recent years. Throughout most of its history the area possessed representatives from the Labour Party as its two constituency MPs. However, it voted to leave the European Union (EU) in 2016 by 66.2%–33.8% and supported the Conservative Ben Houchen as the 'Tees Valley' combined authority Mayor in 2017 and 2021. At the 2017 general election, a Conservative candidate also won one of Redcar & Cleveland's constituencies, while in 2019 the other seat turned blue for the first time in its history (Telford, 2022).

Evidently, the unitary authority formed a key part of the replacement of a Red Wall with a Blue Wall at the 2019 general election. Many places in Wales, the Midlands and Northern England that had historically voted Labour voted Conservative often for the first time in history (Beynon & Hudson, 2021; Connolly et al., 2021; Jennings et al., 2021; MacKinnon, 2020; MacKinnon et al., 2022; Mattison, 2020; Winlow & Hall, 2022). These localities are generally situated within what Jennings et al. (2021, p. 307) cast as 'the heart of Brexitland', with such a geography of discontent (McCann & Ortega-Argiles, 2021) illuminating what Hudson (2021, p. 17) casts as the UK's 'complex map of divisions'. It is worth highlighting, though, that place-based similarities exist across the world. This is especially the case for locales across Europe and the Americas that have endured deindustrialisation, economic decline, and an associated rise in political dissatisfaction (Dijkstra et al., 2020; Pike et al., 2023; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; Winlow et al., 2017). Nonetheless, the structural changes above form the political economic context into which promises to Level Up places like Redcar & Cleveland emerged in 2019, attempting to ameliorate some of the worst socio-spatial imbalances in the developed world (Etherington et al., 2022; Hudson, 2022; Martin et al., 2022; McCann & Ortega-Argiles, 2021).

Whilst space precludes an explication of the Levelling Up White Paper (see: Fransham et al., 2023; Martin et al., 2022), a key part of it are 12 missions to be achieved by 2030. Such missions hinge upon key aspects of economic prosperity (Arnold & Hickson, 2022) including raising pay, employment, and productivity, achieving closer to London standards nationwide in public transport, a significant increase in high-skills training, a narrowing in the healthy life expectancy and an increase in the number of first-time home

buyers across the nation (HM, 2022). This is complemented by a reorientation of central government decision-making to empower local actors to address issues in their communities (HM, 2022). Critiques of Levelling Up include it is a catchall phraseology (Jennings et al., 2021); it ignores the political economy's role in shaping spatial inequalities (Telford & Wistow, 2022); it glosses over how Brexit will impact detrimentally upon the UK's poorest regions (McCann & Ortega-Argiles, 2021); it has been constructed through mere electoral calculation (Hudson, 2022; Tomaney & Pike, 2020); some of the missions are either vague or bound to happen regardless of Levelling Up (Fransham et al., 2023); it is heavily centralised undermining a place-based approach (Connolly et al., 2021); it suffers from a lack of alignment with other relevant policies (Sunley et al., 2022); and the allocated funding is inadequate for the scale of the Levelling Up task (Arnold & Hickson, 2022; Martin et al., 2021, 2022).

The primary source of funding is the £4.8bn Levelling Up fund. Running across 2020/24 it is based upon a competitive funding model as councils must submit bids for pots of money, with English councils so far spending £27m alone on producing the bids largely for the services of external consultants (Whitehead, 2023). Whilst Redcar & Cleveland was unsuccessful in round 1 of the Levelling Up fund, in January 2023 for round 2 it was announced that the Teesside subregion was successful with several bids and would receive £54m (HM, 2023a). For Redcar & Cleveland this includes £20m largely for infrastructural improvements including pedestrian and cycle tracks particularly in one rural locale, enhancing its connections to other parts of the subregion (HM, 2023a).

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up – Michael Gove – suggested 'if you want to see what Levelling Up looks like, come to Teesside' (Cited in Houchen, 2021). This is partially because Teesworks – one of the UK's eight freeports – opened in Redcar & Cleveland in 2021. These special economic zones are prominent across the globe, involving a deregulatory market environment where taxes, tariffs and regulations are diminished to incentivise private capital investment (Hall et al., 2023; Schwarzkopf & Backsell, 2021). However, freeports are not a new UK policy as the Thatcher Government (1979-1990) previously introduced them in the 1980s (Etherington et al., 2022; Hudson, 2022), while Schwarzkopf and Backsell (2021, p. 328) acclaim they have also been associated with multiple problems including forming a policy tool for 'neoliberal wealth management' (also see: Hall et al., 2023). One problem associated with Redcar & Cleveland's freeport from October 2021 is the periodic mass death of thousands of marine life, including lobsters and crabs across parts of the nearby coastline (Russell, 2023). This has been linked to how dredging disturbed poisonous chemicals in the ocean sediment that seeped into the waters from the area's previous manufacturing base (Russell, 2023). However, the independent Crustacean Mortality Expert Panel investigation in December 2022, convened through the Government's Chief Scientific Advisor of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, ascertained that it is *exceptionally unlikely* that dredging caused these mass mortalities (HM, 2023b). Despite this ongoing environmental issue, Tees Valley Mayor Ben Houchen (2021) claimed thousands of well-remunerated jobs will be created in the coming years at Teesworks including at a wind-turbine manufacturing plant. Having outlined a brief history of Redcar & Cleveland and Levelling Up, the article now turns to the qualitative methodology. It then explicates residents' ambiguous attitudes towards the Levelling Up agenda, which often includes both hopefulness and cynicism.

Methodology

This paper draws upon data from 25 semi-structured interviews conducted with residents of Redcar & Cleveland across May–August 2022. Forming part of a research project on Levelling Up left behind localities, the research explored the left behind places problem and how it is tethered to the shift from post-war social democratic capitalism to neoliberalism (see: Telford & Wistow, 2022). Focussing on Redcar & Cleveland as a case study enabled an analysis of the unitary authority's structural problems, documenting how they present systemic obstacles for Levelling Up to address (see: Telford & Wistow, 2022). The interview questions were generally based upon the locality and included: What are your thoughts on Redcar & Cleveland? How has Redcar & Cleveland changed? What are the core problems in the area? And what does Levelling Up Redcar & Cleveland mean to you?

Except for three telephone interviews, the interviews were carried out face to face. As the author lives in the unitary authority, their biography was utilised to start data collection with participants initially accessed through various gatekeepers across Redcar & Cleveland. As Crowhurst (2013, p. 464, 468) claimed, gatekeepers can facilitate research as they possess a 'relationship of trust and respect' with potential respondents, enabling the researcher to 'step through the gate' and access data. Whilst the sampling frame was primarily purposive, snowball sampling was used to recruit more participants. Although this limits the respondents to the gatekeepers' personal networks, snowball sampling can be particularly useful when researching social groups who are often difficult to recruit such as people living in marginalised communities (Geddes et al., 2018; Noy, 2007). This proved to be the case when recruiting participants who lived in the unitary authority's more deprived neighbourhoods, since it was made more straightforward by the gatekeepers endorsing the study and vouching for the researcher.

Four participants are aged between 20–29, three between 40–49, four between 50–59, seven between 60–69, six between 70–79 and one in their 80s. Nine individuals are retired. Although the author interviewed people from a variety of age groups to elicit a range of perspectives about Levelling Up Redcar & Cleveland, they especially spoke to residents aged above 40 who had lived there for most of their lives. This is because they were able to outline more complex historicised sentiments on structural change in the unitary authority and the implications for Levelling Up. Whilst the class system has become more fragmented and complex partially due to deindustrialisation under neoliberalism (Beynon & Hudson, 2021; Winlow et al., 2017), most of the respondents are working class. They possessed experience of labouring in various jobs including a warehouse operative, hairdresser, school lunch lady and cleaner. Key demographic information of the participants – pseudonyms, ages, genders, and employment statuses – is summarised in Table 1 (see: Appendix 1). Five respondents lived in relatively affluent estates and were either employed in (or previously employed, but now retired) in jobs such as a Director of an Education Trust, Manager of a company, nurse and a senior petrochemical worker in what remained of Teesside's industrial base. Interviewing residents from both relatively deprived and affluent neighbourhoods evoked diverse opinions on the area and Levelling Up. All the project's participants are White British, generally reflecting local demographics since 97.6% of Redcar & Cleveland's population is white.

As the project contains a moderately sized sample, the findings are not generalisable. However, as Telford and Lloyd (2020) outline moderate qualitative samples can offer analytical generalisability. This is where the findings are either mystified or corroborated through further research. Given the lack of qualitative data derived from left behind Red Wall places (Etherington et al., 2022; MacKinnon et al., 2022; Martin et al., 2021; Pike et al., 2023), this small-scale study is empirically timely. Especially as Boswell et al. (2022, p. 188) highlight: ‘understanding the new place-based politics of the U.K will require further and deeper investigation across different contexts of deprivation’, meaning the research qualitatively builds upon the emerging literature on Levelling Up Red Wall locales (for instance: Etherington et al., 2022; Jennings et al., 2021; MacKinnon et al., 2022; Martin et al., 2021, 2022; Telford & Wistow, 2022). This aligns with Tracy’s (2010, p. 840) notion that ‘good qualitative research is relevant, timely, significant, interesting, or evocative’.

The data was transcribed and analysed through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Core codes and themes were identified, colour coded and organised into Microsoft Word documents. Transcripts were read several times to ensure robustness. The project received institutional ethical clearance and the research was conducted in accordance with the Economic and Social Research Council’s (ESRC, 2022) Research Ethics Framework. Therefore, the project adhered to core ethical principles including the anonymisation of specific places in Redcar & Cleveland, pseudonymisation of the research participants and ensuring the confidentiality of the data. Respondents were given full information through a participant information sheet and consent form/verbal consent prior to the interviews. This outlined the aims of the study, respondents’ rights, intended data usage and the risk of harm which was considered minimal. The paper now turns to the qualitative data, documenting how Levelling Up Redcar & Cleveland is being interpreted by residents.

The ambiguity of Levelling Up

All participants offered ambiguous sentiments of what it would mean to Level Up the unitary authority. Such perceptions included cheaper housing, communal regeneration, tackling crime, improving public transport, and raising living standards and investment to levels seen in Southeast England. However, a reoccurring finding was the importance of well-remunerated employment, equipping many residents with the economic means to forge a stable and secure livelihood. Illuminating this is Simon, 22, a mechanic:

The council have gone on about it [Levelling Up]. There certainly needs to be more opportunities for younger people to get into trades and stuff. Good jobs aren’t necessarily in this area. People often have to move away. Opportunities to do jobs here and not too far; help to get where people need to be. More advanced jobs.

Employment trajectories for young people in Redcar & Cleveland today are fundamentally different to many of their parents’ and grandparents’ working biographies, who often left school knowing they possessed a good chance of obtaining industrial work (Warren, 2018; Winlow et al., 2017). Acquiring these forms of employment in the area’s post-industrial landscape, however, is far more difficult. As such, Simon emphasises the importance of economically lucrative work in Levelling Up; not merely the creation of jobs that are demeaning, non-unionised and pay so little that employees struggle to get by (Lloyd, 2018). Anne, 73, retired, offered similar views by suggesting Levelling Up Redcar &

Cleveland is partially about: ‘Good paid jobs. People have to go out of town to go and get one.’ Participants’ sentiments on the prevalence of low-paid work in the area is tethered to how the average gross weekly pay for full-time employees working in the unitary authority is well below the national average, standing at £572.90 and £642 respectively (ONS, 2022). When asked about Levelling Up, Sophie, 29, a healthcare assistant, said:

We need more businesses, more jobs. Give people something to get up for on a morning. It is common on certain estates in this town, a lot of people unemployed and hanging around with people in the same situation, often leading to drugs, alcohol, and crime.

The transition to neoliberalism has meant places across the fallen Red Wall like Redcar & Cleveland have tended to possess higher rates of unemployment than the national average, since a service-based economy has not been a sufficient substitute for the industrial era (MacKinnon et al., 2022; Martin et al., 2021; Winlow et al., 2017). ONS (2022) data from December 2022 indicates that 4.1% of people aged 16+ were claiming out-of-work benefits in the area compared to the 3.7% national average, while figures for those aged 18–21 stood at 8.4% and 4.8% respectively. Moreover, Sophie suggests new employment opportunities are essential to furnish unemployed people with a sense of social purpose and an identity. As Sophie also highlights illicit drug use and criminality tend to be prevalent in these places, forming *structural scars* partially brought by acute economic restructuring (Telford, 2022). Particularly young people find it difficult navigating this post-industrial labour market, since the well-remunerated industrial jobs are generally out of reach. Accordingly, for respondents like Jonny, 55, a joiner, Levelling Up is crucial: ‘For the sake of younger people. The main thing is apprenticeships.’ Charlotte, in her 60s, a cleaner, highlighted the ambiguity of Levelling Up:

I’ve not heard of it before. But it means more places for people to work. Nicer shops and more of a community feel to the place. Cater for the kids and get them off the streets. Bringing things up to a decent standard for everybody. More housing, why not more council housing? I was brought up in one. I know a girl who has been waiting ages for one.

Employment, community regeneration and togetherness, youth services, increased living standards and more housing are cast as essential in addressing Redcar & Cleveland’s problems, highlighting the ‘ambiguous banner of levelling up’ (Sunley et al., 2022, p. 409). All participants suggested these issues had been deteriorating for some time. Occasionally the austerity era across 2010/20 was highlighted as a contributory factor to these problems. As Hudson (2021, p. 17) asserted, austerity ‘did not simply intensify regional immiseration there but also had a more generalised effect, disproportionately affecting the poor’ especially as it involved reductions in public expenditure, cuts to the welfare state and the further liberalisation of working conditions (Bailey et al., 2022). A lack of housing is also mentioned above. This has been shaped by the Thatcher Government’s 1980 Housing Act, which enabled council house tenants to buy their homes (Boughton, 2019). Aiding the mass privatisation of council houses, 1.8 million council homes had been sold by 1997 while council house building levels have been significantly lower throughout the neoliberal era in comparison to post-war Britain (Boughton, 2019). Although there is geographical variation in house prices, profound housing demand and inadequate supply means UK house prices reached a record high in 2022 (BBC, 2022). Relatedly, Anne spoke about how Levelling Up:

Is about trying to make us as economically good as down South. But we need to get rid of the drugs around here, improve transport and put the buses back on, stop opening pubs and charity shops in the high streets.

Similarly, Gareth, 56, a mental health support worker, framed Levelling Up as:

Improved infrastructure, transport system, high-speed rail. It goes as far as Manchester, why not bring it up here? But well-paid jobs are an absolute must. Levelling Up – we shall see.

Known as HS2, the high-speed rail infrastructure project seeks to connect London with the Midlands, North and parts of Scotland (Coffey et al., 2022). As Coffey et al. (2022) outlined, though, the project is likely to largely benefit London while the original plan to connect the Midlands to Leeds – 75 miles south of Redcar & Cleveland – has been replaced with investment in alternative local train programmes. Indeed, the participants' varying perceptions of what Levelling Up the unitary authority should address highlights the ambiguity of Levelling Up; the dissatisfaction with current structural conditions in post-industrial places like Redcar & Cleveland (MacLeavy & Jones, 2021); and the need for transformative change rather than tinkering at the edges (Martin et al., 2022; Telford & Wistow, 2022; Winlow & Hall, 2022). Many respondents were somewhat hopeful that the area's recently opened freeport could help to achieve this.

Redcar & Cleveland's freeport

Opening in 2021 the unitary authority's freeport is one of the UK's eight freeports as part of Levelling Up. Whilst it has been associated with environmental problems, most participants highlighted the freeport in relation to its perceived significance in Levelling Up the area. David, 79, retired, spent his working life as a postman. He said:

The Labour Party has done nothing for the Northeast, neither has the Conservative Party. But at the moment, even though I was totally against creating a mayor for this invisible 'Tees Valley', ironically, I think what they are doing at Teesport and bringing jobs in, they are doing a marvellous thing. The Northeast might flourish again.

Craig, 21, a petrochemical worker, offered similar sentiments regarding potential job creation:

It is a good development. It is bringing in thousands of jobs to the area; anything that brings jobs to the area is good. It seems quite sustainable as well. They [politicians] are talking about tens of thousands of jobs, which seems quite a lot. The area seems to be getting more industry. Hopefully it brings good employment opportunities: electricians, fitters, skilled jobs. Even if it is non-skilled work, it gets peoples' foot in the door for experience.

David and Craig offer relatively hopeful and optimistic views on the freeport, emphasising the importance of well-remunerated work in improving Redcar & Cleveland's labour market. Such local economic development is branded as a welcome boost, helping to revitalise the locality. Offering views that were more reserved, though, is Danny, 21, undertaking an engineering apprenticeship: 'I don't listen to them [politicians]; they promise one thing and do another. They twist words and promises.' As localised expectations of politicians and progressive structural change have diminished, the freeport is cast as a positive development since the logic is that *at least something* is being done to try and ameliorate problems with the labour market.

However, it is worth highlighting how six freeports were previously brought about by the Thatcher government; but they generally failed to aid the regeneration of the coastal localities they resided in and were shut down in 2012 (Hudson, 2022). Nonetheless, many of the older respondents like David claimed the freeport could help to resurrect the area and enable it to prosper again. Relics of the previous industrialised capitalist phase, though, continue to make way for the new. Bryony, 69, retired, outlined how:

They are clearing the old steelworks site. I have heard they are bringing a hydrogen plant. Teesside could be up and coming again for decent jobs. They [politicians/businesses] need to invest.

Spanning 4500 acres Teesside's freeport partially sits upon the unitary authority's old steelworks site, which closed in 2015 with the loss of between 2000–3000 jobs (Telford & Lloyd, 2020). Sizable levels of private investment in renewable industries on the site have occurred. This includes plans for a large-scale green hydrogen production plant starting in 2025 termed HyGreen Teesside, accompanied by plans for Europe's largest lithium hydroxide processing plant to fuel electric vehicle batteries at the subregion's nearby chemicals manufacturing base (BP, 2022). Jamie, 48, a petrochemical worker, pointed out how: 'I know they are on about doing stuff at the old British Steel site. But you are talking years and years to get that restored, and an absolute fortune. It is a massive site – a big clearing up site.' As Bailey and Tomlinson (2021) and Martin (2021) assert, the ongoing energy transition from fossil fuels to renewables provides opportunities to revitalise struggling localities and Level Up. Bailey and Tomlinson (2021) suggest jobs in green industries are forecast to rise from around 185,000–694,000 by 2030, with over half of these employment opportunities set to be in the North and other left behind locales across the UK.

It is worth highlighting how this transition to a green economy is fraught with uncertainties, particularly as uneven geographical development is central to capitalism (Hudson, 2022; Martin et al., 2021). Some places will benefit from investment, expansion, and growth while others will fall behind. As such, there are obstacles in ensuring that 'the transition is a social and spatially just one' (Martin, 2021, p. 150). The recent collapse of the Britishvolt project in Blyth, 60 miles North of Redcar & Cleveland, is a useful case in point. Alongside the planned Envision AESC plant in Sunderland, 40 miles North of Redcar & Cleveland, the Britishvolt plant was planned to be one of the UK's first gigafactories – plants that produce batteries for electric vehicles – which would have potentially generated thousands of skilled and well-paid jobs. Bailey and Tomlinson (2023), though, outline how the firm was hampered by financial difficulties, while it is questionable whether the Government offered sufficient financial support for the project. Although the company entered administration in January 2023, there are hopes that the project in Blyth could still be saved. Nonetheless, such uncertainty also illustrates how the UK is currently well behind other EU nations in attaining investment in the race to manufacture batteries for electric vehicles (Bailey & Tomlinson, 2023; Campbell et al., 2023).

Notwithstanding these instabilities, ongoing economic development in Redcar & Cleveland brought a feeling of optimism amongst some respondents like Richard, 65, retired, previously worked for the local council. He suggested the freeport is:

A massive thing for the area. A lot of it is in renewable energy; it is a fabulous opportunity for the local area. We have lost those skills over these past 40–50 years.

Clearly the freeport is regarded as a welcome policy initiative, especially as some of the respondents believe it might help to provide the economically rewarding forms of work that have diminished in post-industrial locales throughout neoliberalism. Richard's point regarding the hollowing out of industrialised working skills also illuminates how Redcar & Cleveland's problems have been coalescing for a considerable period and are socio-spatially entrenched. However, the well-paid and highly skilled job projections of freeports have been cast as overly optimistic (Tomaney & Pike, 2020), involving 'questionable effects' (Sunley et al., 2022, p. 414) on the areas they reside in. The potential for well-remunerated job creation in the unitary authority, however, is cast positively by participants such as Gareth:

Ben Houchen seems to have done a good job. He is pushing the Levelling Up agenda and is trying to bring as much investment as he can. The freeport, airport, renewable energy which is the future. He is talking about these being good, well-paid jobs. But until we see it, it is just what he is saying.

All respondents emphasised the importance of sustained investment in Levelling Up Redcar & Cleveland. Occasionally some suggested the area had not been sufficiently invested in for several decades. Whilst many participants like Gareth pinpointed the ongoing projects at the freeport as potential Levelling Up, he expresses a degree of reservation since until the jobs are available it is largely political rhetoric. Similarly, Danny claimed: 'Apart from the freeport, I haven't noticed anything that you might call Levelling Up. I just hope we get some good jobs and investment.' Whilst many participants offered relatively hopeful sentiments on the freeport, others were far more sceptical regarding the Levelling Up agenda's utility in remedying localised problems.

Cynicism of Levelling Up

Within the sample there was reoccurring cynicism of the Levelling Up agenda. Occasionally it was framed as another empty political slogan to try and appease left behind Red Wall constituencies, forming part of a long list of political promises that were not implemented in recent decades. Given the UK's profound spatial unevenness (Arnold & Hickson, 2022; McCann, 2020), many claimed markedly remedying these discrepancies including in job opportunities, public infrastructure and living standards between the UK's prosperous places and deprived localities was an impossible task. This is partly because the UK's myriad uneven economic and geographical development is long-running and spatially ingrained (McCann, 2020), particularly aggravated over the past half century as places like Redcar & Cleveland fell behind and others especially in the Southeast stormed ahead (Jones, 2019). Such geographical unevenness and the implications for Levelling Up were captured by Bryony:

I don't think they [politicians] will ever Level it Up. The jobs that earn the money are down South. They are on about bringing some Treasury stuff up to Darlington. That's not a bad thing; get them out of London. There are other towns and cities other than London, some people down South don't realise that. To bring more investment would be good. But we will never catch up.

The Levelling Up agenda contains plans to relocate 22,000 civil servants from London to several places like Darlington in Teesside by 2030, 25 miles from Redcar & Cleveland, spreading well-paid jobs more evenly across the UK. This discrepancy in the availability of relatively highly paid employment in parts of the South compared to places like Redcar & Cleveland was regarded by the sample as a key driver of place-based inequalities. Cast by Martin et al. (2022, p. 812) as ‘the UK’s centre of political, economic, and financial power’, London possesses a disproportionate share of high-skilled and lucratively paid jobs particularly in financial services. Whilst it is a profoundly unequal city and contains the highest concentrated poverty rate in Britain, the Centre for Cities (2019) outlined how it also possesses the UK’s highest average weekly wage at £751,71. Although the capital has high levels of labour productivity, excessive house and rental prices especially in its centre make the city unaffordable to many (Coffey et al., 2022). The London-centric nature of the UK’s economic geography in the neoliberal era has meant the capital has *overheated*, making the political mission of significantly Levelling Up socio-spatial inequalities a rather difficult task. Elucidating this is Gareth:

It means bringing the same investment down South up to the North. Are we seeing anything yet? Probably not. Generally speaking, I think it would take a lot of years to Level Up; you wouldn’t see proper signs of it until five-ten years at least.

The Levelling Up White Paper’s 2030 missions indicate an acknowledgement that it will take time to alleviate the UK’s geographical unevenness (HM, 2022), with Gareth believing it may take a decade to see the first significant improvements. Others, however, dismissed the Levelling Up agenda. Tim, 64, works for a local council. He was born and lived in London for several decades before settling in Redcar & Cleveland in the 1990s. He said: ‘Levelling Up is a load of cobblers. How are they going to Level Up?’ Such a perception speaks to the nature of both the UK’s deeply imbalanced economic geography and embedded place-based problems, which will take far more than the current allocated levels of governmental funding to markedly address (Arnold & Hickson, 2022; Fransham et al., 2023). Respectively, Jamie and Jonny provided sentiments on Levelling Up that were laced with cynicism and scepticism:

I’ve heard of it [Levelling Up]. Nothing has really happened. I’m not optimistic really. A few people from the BBC have gone to Manchester; but apart from that not much has happened.

I haven’t heard of Levelling Up. I hope so though. I don’t think it will ever be properly Levelled up. It might get to Leeds. But then it skips us up to Newcastle – they get a bit of money.

Since the policy’s inception over three years ago, Jamie claims there has been little progress on Levelling Up the unitary authority. Other participants including Jonny were politically disengaged and had not heard of the policy initiative, though he believed the scale of the UK’s socio-spatial divides particularly between the North and South was too large to adequately address. His perception was that some Northern cities receive some investment, whereas the needs of Redcar & Cleveland’s residents in Teesside are omitted. Such sentiments illuminate the localised ‘feeling that there is no future and no hope’ (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018, p. 196) in places like Redcar & Cleveland, highlighting the significant levels of political mistrust and sense of economic abandonment across the collapsed Red Wall (Etherington et al., 2022; MacKinnon, 2020; MacLeavy & Jones, 2021; Winlow & Hall, 2022). Jodi, 48, a hairdresser, further illuminates this sentiment: ‘They [Conservative MPs]

have been coming up here a lot. One of my friends had their photo taken with Rishi. They are all the same though, aren't they?' Distrust and cynicism were also displayed by Mary, 80, retired:

Levelling Up? That's never going to happen. There has been a North South divide for as long as I can remember. To stand any chance, wages would have to go up a lot up here.

While governmental controls were previously placed on finance capital in London to prevent it and the Southeast from steaming ahead of the UK in the post-war era (Jones, 2019), the abandonment of these controls and political economic primacy to London's interests under neoliberalism means it has become 'almost a city-region apart' (Martin et al., 2022, p. 796). This deeply unequal economic geography shaped some residents' perceptions of Levelling Up Redcar & Cleveland, suggesting the size of the task is too big to meaningfully remedy. A localised sense of scepticism towards Levelling Up was also demonstrated by Anne: 'They aren't doing much at the moment, are they! What are they levelling? The regeneration of the area is supposed to be bringing good jobs, but when, when?' The perceptions above indicate that while some residents were hopeful about Levelling Up the unitary authority, others were rather cynical towards the agenda's utility in addressing localised structural problems.

Conclusion

Levelling Up emerged as a core political slogan in 2019, indicating a willingness to address entrenched spatial inequalities within the UK's economic geography. This particularly included tackling place-based problems in left behind localities, many of whom supported the Conservative Party often for the first time in modern electoral history at the 2019 general election (MacKinnon, 2020; MacKinnon et al., 2022). Building upon a lack of qualitative research in left behind Red Wall constituencies (MacKinnon et al., 2022; Pike et al., 2023; Telford & Wistow, 2022), this paper documented Redcar & Cleveland's residents' perceptions of Levelling Up. The interviews exposed an array of issues for Levelling Up to address: improved public services, increased and sustained investment, well-remunerated job creation, more affordable housing, and communal regeneration to improve residents' opportunities and livelihoods. Despite an array of problems associated with freeports (Hall et al., 2023), including overly optimistic job creation projections (Hudson, 2022; Sunley et al., 2022; Tomaney & Pike, 2020), hopes were placed upon Redcar & Cleveland's freeport in helping to create high-skilled employment and Level Up the locality. The sentiments documented in this article also demonstrated the prevalence of structural problems in the unitary authority and discontent with the neoliberal present. In addition, they elucidated how new employment alone is not enough to revitalise struggling localities like Redcar & Cleveland (Arnold & Hickson, 2022), as well as the need for fundamental structural change rather than tinkering at the edges (Martin et al., 2021, 2022).

The UK economy, though, is currently afflicted by high levels of inflation as well as the fastest fall in real wages for around 20 years (Giles, 2022). Within a political economic juncture of ongoing crises, it is reasonable to suggest that residents' hopes regarding the Levelling Up agenda for Redcar & Cleveland are unlikely to be achieved. Although the green energy transition provides opportunities for well-remunerated job growth in

many left behind places (Bailey & Tomlinson, 2021; Martin, 2021), this is fraught with uncertainties as evidenced by the collapse of the Britishvolt project further North of Redcar & Cleveland in Blyth (Bailey & Tomlinson, 2023). Indeed, Boris Johnson's Conservative Government's relatively short-lived primacy to alleviating spatial inequalities has largely been replaced by Rishi Sunak's emphasis upon tightening the economic belt, which heralds the return of austerity (Martin et al., 2022). This is diametrically opposed to the unprecedented and sustained levels of investment areas such as Redcar & Cleveland require to tackle structural problems (Fransham et al., 2023; Martin et al., 2021). The political consequences of not only failing to Level Up Red Wall places but indeed exacerbating localised problems will aggravate peoples' cynicism and lack of belief in positive change. For the foreseeable future it is likely that the UK economy will endure the widening of socio-spatial imbalances rather than Levelling Up, heightening the discontent of residents in places such as Redcar & Cleveland.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Dr Luke Telford is a Lecturer in Criminal Justice & Social Policy at the University of York. Luke is an interdisciplinary researcher and his main interests include left behind places, political economy, political discontent, uneven geographical development, working-class culture, and the COVID-19 pandemic. He is the author/co-author of four books. This includes *Levelling Up the UK economy: The need for transformative change* with Dr Jonathan Wistow (Palgrave Pivot, 2022) and the monograph *English Nationalism and its Ghost Towns* (Routledge, 2022). Luke is currently working on the problems of left behind places and what can be done to resurrect them in relation to social policy and the political economy.

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Appendix 1

Table A1. Respondents’ basic demographics (ordered by age).

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Employment
Craig	Male	21	FT Petrochemical worker
Danny	Male	21	FT Engineering apprenticeship
Simon	Male	22	FT Mechanic
Sophie	Female	29	FT Healthcare assistant
Stuart	Male	44	FT Warehouse operative
Jamie	Male	48	FT Petrochemical worker
Jodi	Female	48	FT Hairdresser
Jo	Female	50s	PT School lunch lady
Lynne	Female	53	FT Nurse
Jonny	Male	55	FT Joiner
Gareth	Male	56	FT Mental health support worker
Joanne	Female	60s	FT School receptionist
Greg	Male	60s	PT Construction worker
Charlotte	Female	60s	PT Cleaner
Laura	Female	63	PT Cleaner
Richard	Male	65	Retired
Tim	Male	64	FT Council employee
Bryony	Female	69	Retired
Alan	Male	70s	Retired
Anne	Female	73	Retired
Emma	Female	73	Retired
Margaret	Female	75	Retired
Mark	Male	75	Retired
David	Male	79	Retired
Mary	Female	80	Retired

FT = Full-time; PT = Part-time.