

'Levelling Up is falling short in Suffolk'

ED HALFORD

A student from Lowestoft

As Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Levelling Up, is expected to release the White Paper on 'Levelling Up' this month, Lowestoft awaits in anticipation of the reforming agenda.

So far, the government's promise to 'Level Up' the country has resulted in a narrow focus on improving infrastructure and investment in the North, and particularly in the constituencies coined as the 'Red Wall' seats.

The Department for Levelling Up summarises its focus as "spreading opportunity, boosting living standards and improving public services."

For the people of Lowestoft, this rosy picture of life under a Conservative government has not come to fruition.

If the slogan "Levelling-Up" is intended to serve as more than a slick soundbite, then you would expect the government to deliver on cutting crime, improving educational standards, and investing in local infrastructure. On all these accounts, the government has failed to 'level-up' in Lowestoft.

Despite the Conservatives' promise to take "tough decisions to cut crime" and "make our streets safer", anti-social behaviour in Lowestoft was recorded as 25 per cent above Suffolk's average in 2021 and bicycle theft specifically was 51pc above the county's average.

In addition to the rate of crime increasing, what is extremely worrying is the declining successful prosecutions, as from December 2020 to November 2021 the police were "unable to prosecute 34.3pc of suspects." It is without a doubt that crime will become more widespread and young people will become entangled in networks of organised crime unless the government



A central tenet of the 'Levelling Up' programme is to improve the life chances and aspirations of young people.

Picture: DOMINIC LIPINSKI/PA WIRE

addresses the harmful absence of 'bobbies on the beat' and the now long-gone youth centres.

With the high-profile Sarah Everard murder drawing nationwide attention to women's safety, residents in Lowestoft will be concerned to learn that the most common criminal offence in the year to June 2021 was 'violence and sexual offences', with the offence accounting for 40.2pc of the town's total crimes.

The Levelling Up agenda is promoted as encouraging growth in local communities through investment and working with local

institutions which know their areas' needs best. The recent data for crime in Lowestoft implicates the government's continued neglect of coastal communities, as future investment and growth will elude Lowestoft until there is hope of halting the intensifying anti-social behaviour and violent crime.

A central tenet of the 'Levelling Up' programme is to improve the life chances and aspirations of young people, although Lowestoft has experienced no drastic changes to the quality of education on offer.

Schools which become academies receive direct funding from the government and have more autonomy over how their budgets are used, but there is little evidence that their students' academic fortunes fare better than those pupils attending schools led by local authorities.

There is no worthy substitute for ramping up investment in education and pupils in coastal communities, like Lowestoft, statistically bear the brunt of under-investment more severely than those pupils living in metropolitan suburbs.

The Sutton Trust's 2018 report, entitled 'Access to Advantage', provides convincing evidence in support of the argument that pupils in coastal towns suffer from educational inequalities in our education system more profoundly than those in cities.

A stark example of this is only 18pc of all state school applicants in Suffolk receiving a place at a Russell Group university, as opposed to 26pc of all state school applicants receiving a place at one of these prestigious institutions in Manchester.

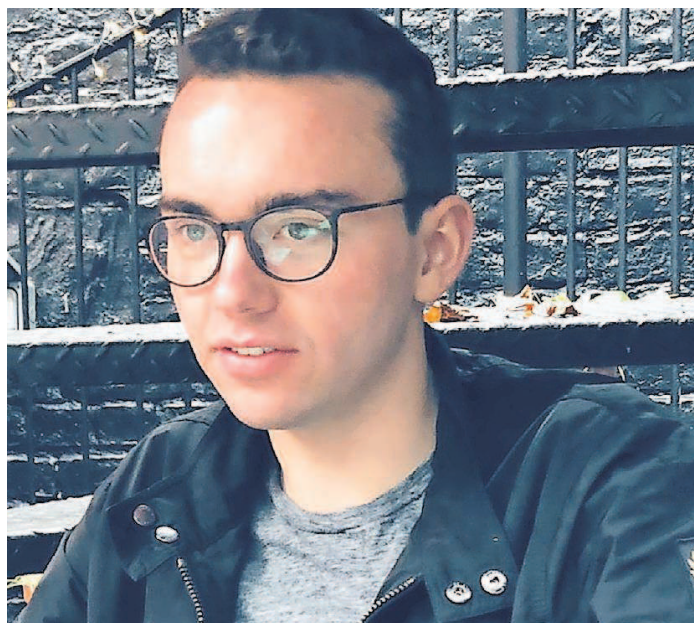
If the government is serious about transforming pupils' outcomes, then improving living standards in the North cannot come at the expense of also introducing educational reforms in seaside towns across England.

More recently, the clearest indication has been given to the people of Lowestoft that the 'Levelling Up' programme's main priorities will not encompass improving their local infrastructure.

Despite the government showing a strong determination to connect London with the

Midlands and North through HS2, the Department of Transport's decision to strike a new agreement with Greater Anglia which omits the company's previous promise to operate a service between Lowestoft and Liverpool Street demonstrates a scarce commitment to Levelling-Up the East of England.

Waveney MP Peter Aldous has applied pressure on government ministers, although with the government's priorities elsewhere, the Levelling Up of Lowestoft remains in doubt.



Ed Halford has given his views on Levelling Up in Lowestoft



Michael Gove was appointed Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities in September 2021.

Picture: PA WIRE/PA IMAGES