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**Professor Dan Osborn, Chair CPRE Sussex, responds to the Government's Levelling Up the United Kingdom Policy Paper (published 2 February 2022)**  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/levelling-up-the-united-kingdom>

## **Government Demotes Nature – Leaves a gaping hole in the levelling up agenda**

The Government says it supports the natural world. So why, in its latest pronouncements on making life better has it levelled down nature? Bad choice or serious mistake?

Last week Michael Gove's department for Levelling Up issued its blueprint for making life in Britain better. But it has a gaping hole at its heart that means it won't deliver what it could have. The initiative might even be doomed to failure.

All out health and wealth comes from the resources that are found in the natural world. These resources are scarce because they all come from just one planet, Earth. So why is this natural capital omitted from the foundation list of what needs to be accounted for when Levelling Up?

If we continue to omit nature from the way we make plans and decisions, and just base those plans and decisions on the old-fashioned economics that have got us into the mess we are in at present -with climate change and water supplies etc - then we will continue to take bites out of nature and nature will bite back harder and harder. So, a Levelling Up course correction is needed, and fast.

There is a belated mention of our natural capital after 158 pages of other material and a statement about what Defra are doing on the topic. Some will say "See, that means nature is there as part of levelling-up." Unfortunately, that minor mention is accompanied with a very bold restatement of the foundation list that omits natural capital. So, demoting nature looks like a choice and not a mistake. This is no way to deal with climate change or water issues and no way to plan for the future.

Natural capital and the services like food and water we get from ecosystems is supposed to be part of the thinking of all government departments. Why? Because it will help make more sustainable decisions as part of the government commitment to the 25 year Environment Plan. The trouble is that all too often old-style economic factors dominate. Social matters – like supplying truly affordable homes for local people – and environmental matters – such as ensuring there is enough water for nature, people, farming and business – often seem not to feature in decision-making at all. Nature's capital must be just as much part of decisions as other kinds of capital drawn on to investment in the future.

Does any of this matter to Sussex? Well yes it does, because the Government Department that is setting the Levelling Up agenda is the same one that determines housing numbers, will have oversight of what seem like the increasingly odd plans to expand Gatwick and that has the last word on planning applications and how much money developers pay towards our social and environmental infrastructure such as schools and enhanced biodiversity.

And all of this downgrading of the natural world comes a time when the new Environment Bill's provisions to protect and enhance the environment face delays in being enacted and when hard

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pressed local authorities seem to have no resources to implement them. As Mr Gove said when he launched the 25 year Environment Plan: “So, protecting and enhancing the environment .... is about more than respecting nature. It is critical if the next generation is to flourish, with abundant natural resources to draw on, that we look after our and their inheritance wisely.” Maybe, that same Mr Gove can correct the serious omission of nature from the foundations of in his Levelling-Up Plan that his current Department have just issued? We cannot on any basis have our environment deteriorate any further.

Professor Dan Osborn

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5 February 2022