

Now is the time to get behind Levelling Up, and the identical twinning towns scheme is exactly what the government needed to get us on board

- Labour continues to scorn new initiative designed to improve civic pride
- Post on Sundays editors look at the trial schemes and agree – it's time we helped ourselves

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The Levelling Up policy has certainly had its faults and I won't claim to have been completely convinced the whole time, but last week in parliament I saw something different.

For some time now I have been waiting for the government to wise up to the need to unify this nation, and their own party, so that they can head into the next election with a strong sense of how to lead us into the future.

The identical twinned towns initiative is exactly what we need to reunite a country falling into factions, and finally puts it in terms that people on the street will understand. This is "love thy neighbour", but not as we've seen it before.



The industrial sector requires British investment in Britain's own manufacturers

The message is clear: that we can help each other and ourselves and do so by investing in Britain at a time when it so sorely needs to rebuild in a spirit of togetherness. This, more than any other phrasing of the Levelling Up plans, is something we can all get behind.

Imagine my surprise then on seeing that Labour were immediately trying to pick flaws in the scheme, with the Shadow Secretary for Levelling Up attempting to cast it as some kind of distraction tactic.

How many times must we see the MP for Wandsworth appear on breakfast TV trying to deflect from her own party's racism? Can you imagine the uproar if it had been a member of the Cabinet who had made the remark about Siamese towns? "Racist!" "Ableist!" The woke rage would have been unbridled.

As if this wasn't bad enough, we then have to endure one of *The Custodian's* rent-a-mouths actually going as far as to publicly criticise the creative work of ordinary people in our towns expressing their feelings about home.

No doubt the *Custodian* readers pouring scorn on the plans are the same people jumping for joy at the idea of the Oxford to Cambridge train line being reopened. So if those two cities can be linked, to the tune of £5bn, why can't Southampton and Southend form a partnership based on much more modest sums of funding?



The East West Rail project is expected to be completed by 2025

Whatever the MP for Wandsworth or a Sussex-based "author and gardener" think of it, this initiative will satisfy people's desire to feel connected in a society that is increasingly atomised. So rather than treating the trial schemes as something to mock or belittle, *Post on Sundays* decided to engage with them properly, and see what fresh ideas about community our forgotten towns had to share. We brought in our arts and literary editors to assess the work being produced.

Deborah Siddle on Darlo Matters: a community poem produced by residents of Darlington*

I loved this poem, it reminded me just what it felt like to be from a small town - Woking - and the combination of voices really made me feel like I was listening to a single community speaking. I could sense the pride they felt about their surroundings, both in the history of their town and in its present as they live it.

There's an optimism to it too, an eye on the future and how they will work together to make Darlington stand out. The lines "Don't blob us all together" and "How do we get the most out of things?" speak to a determination to be acknowledged as part of a nation, not overlooked within it. The final stanza feels to me like a critique of what has happened to the town over recent decades:

Shaped by attitudes – Let down by those in power
Focus on what we have now and the future
How will it look?
How can we make it together?

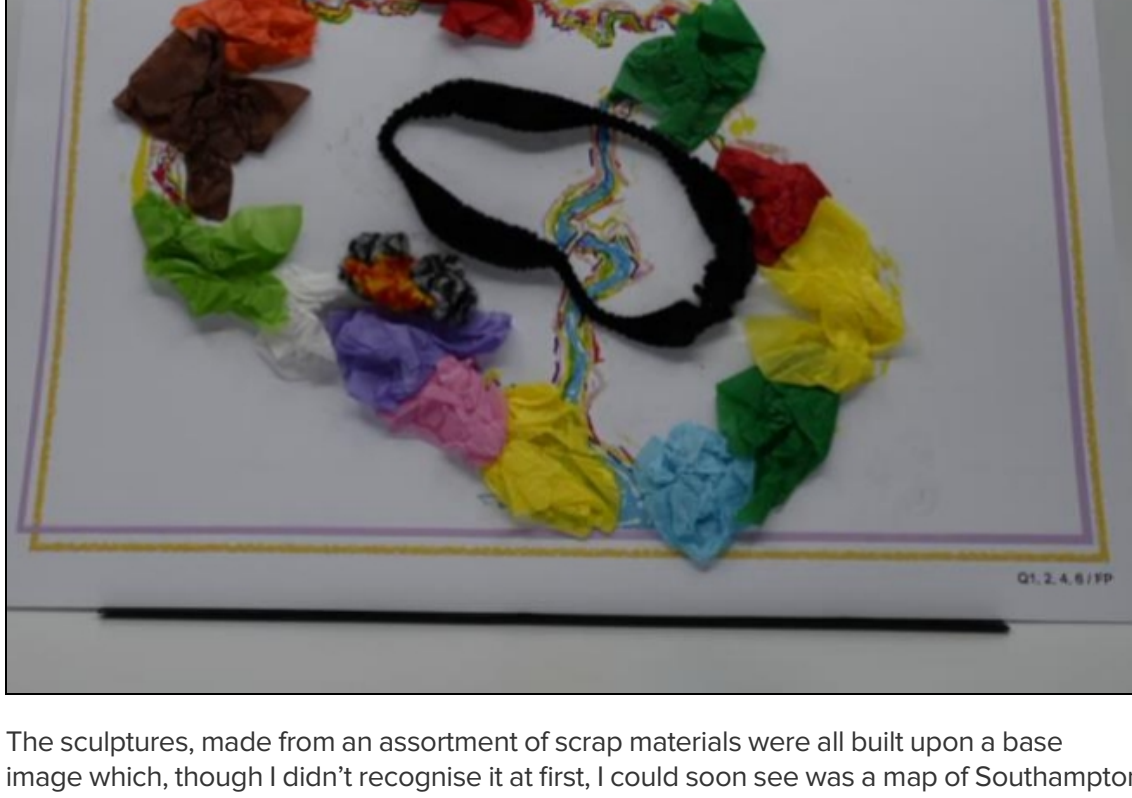
How will you engage us?

Darlington voted overwhelmingly in favour of leaving the EU, and I think we can see here how much of a "doing it for ourselves" attitude there is now. There's an uncertainty about the future yes, but also a powerful instinct for self-reliance post-Brexit. "How can we make it together?" and "Become more than the sum of their parts" almost call out to their new friends in identical twin town Dorchester, inviting them to help form a new union. I find myself hearing the lyrics of this poem to the tune of Jerusalem and nearly welling up!

Anthony Saunders on the Southampton Cultural Spaces Project

As the arts editor I had the opportunity to see some of the sculptures produced by Southampton children in workshops that will soon be displayed as part of a welcome party to school groups from Southend.

My first feeling when I walked in was "Wow, such colour!" There's something about artwork produced by youngsters that allows you to see how much easier they find it to be optimistic. But something I particularly liked about these were the way the starting point for each also expressed a colourful optimism.



The sculptures, made from an assortment of scrap materials were all built upon a base image which, though I didn't recognise it at first, I could soon see was a map of Southampton itself, but one made using the same kinds of colours that the children would be drawn to.

So there was an ethos of encouragement and partnership involved in every design, but you could also see that the artists had been given free rein - the workshop leaders hadn't told the children to stay in the lines, or use particular patterns or materials to represent what was on the map. This seemed to me to show a lot of trust in what beautiful things could happen if people were given the opportunity to build on their own rather than being lectured to or controlled from above.



There was also such a clear attitude of Make Do and Mend in the way these young artists had used the materials available to them, which gave me hope that the Blitz spirit that got us through some of the darkest days of our history still now lives on in the new generations, we just have to encourage them to connect with it. I would like to be here when the Southend group arrives because it would be a joy to see how readily they would identify with and appreciate the efforts of their creative countrymen, or rather, countryboys and girls!

We don't yet know how many of these twin pairings will be made, but what's already clear from the trial schemes is that the ingenuity of the ordinary British public has been an untapped resource in this country for too long. Once we unleash it, and find new ways to share it among ourselves, a massive uptick in national pride and unity is sure to follow.

That's a thumbs up from us.

* Poet Lisette Auton was invited to contribute to this article but was not available for comment