



## **Context**

Britain's Leading Edge (BLE) is a collaboration of rural upper-tier local authorities without major cities. We are reframing the story of the contribution that rural regions can make to a sustainable national economy.

We can power the UK! Peripheral regions of the UK are the energy powerhouses of tomorrow, with our rich natural capital capable of producing clean, reliable, renewable energy for the entire country.

We can feed the UK! Increasing Britain's food supply chain resilience will be even more critical in years to come. Much of the UK's food and drink sector is based within Britain's Leading Edge areas.

We are the lungs of the UK! Residents of rural parts of the country are custodians of natural public spaces. We play a vital role in taking carbon out of the air and safely storing it.

We are coastal, too. Many BLE authorities are coastal economies where fishing, ports, tourism, defence and blue-green industries intersect. Since the closure of dedicated Coastal Communities funding, coastal places have often fallen between urban and rural policy models; devolution must explicitly recognise coastal needs in design, funding and delivery.

We are excited to realise the government's devolution ambitions. Some members are in the vanguard, already capitalising on the efficiencies and opportunities for growth presented to Strategic Authorities. We want to fast-track the advantages of devolution to all of our member areas to maximise our contribution to the national economy.

Britain's Leading Edge believes that the success of devolution in rural and coastal areas will depend on whether governance arrangements, funding mechanisms and accountability frameworks are consciously designed to better reflect the realities of non-metropolitan places.

Rural regions have the capacity, assets and ambition to drive national growth, but this potential can only be realised if devolution settlements provide the long-term funding and place appropriate powers needed to deliver fair outcomes. Ensuring that rural needs are visible, valued and fully integrated into future devolution policy is essential, both to unlock growth locally and to secure the balanced national prosperity that government seeks to achieve across all communities.



## **1. Rural economic growth**

BLE regions are strategic national assets, underpinning national ambitions in clean energy, food security, defence resilience, and climate/nature recovery. BLE members generated nearly 17,000 GWh of renewable energy in 2024, hold substantial clean energy potential limited only by grid constraints, host major agricultural and fishing sectors essential to domestic food supply, and contain key defence infrastructure and supply-chain clusters.

However, there is a long history of underinvestment and “policy corridor” bias that privileges metropolitan centres and can exclude rural needs from programme design and thresholds (e.g., large minimum bid sizes), which, by implication, has limited the reach of earlier local growth regimes such as LEPs. We consider that past devolution and local growth mechanisms were not structurally rural-proofed, i.e. rural impact assessments were not carried out; effectiveness for rural businesses was therefore patchy and often suboptimal.

BLE also notes that current productivity gaps reflect structural constraints, including rural deprivation, dispersed poverty, workforce shortages and an ageing demographic. Rural areas experience higher costs of living, lower median pay and reduced service access, which collectively suppress economic performance.

BLE welcomes the move to a statutory devolution framework. Some BLE regions already benefit from the opportunities available to Strategic Authorities, particularly in the Mayoral Strategic Authorities (MSAs) in the North East. However, BLE regions are underrepresented in the early phases of the Devolution Priority Programme despite readiness. This has implications for access for BLE members to local growth funding, particularly following the end of the Shared Prosperity Fund in March 2026 and the ending of pan-regional partnerships as regional advocates for growth.

The government’s tiered devolution framework gives MSAs the broadest set of levers with which to unlock the potential in local areas. There remains a lack of clarity around the Foundation Strategic Authority (FSA) offer and whether this is a sufficient alternative to BLE members. To avoid entrenching existing disadvantages for rural and coastal areas, BLE believes that successful rural FSAs should have parity with MSAs/established MSAs.

Our ask for Devolution Priority Programme – Government should:



1. Prioritise BLE areas for early Foundation Strategic Authority (FSA) pathways where Mayoral Strategic Authorities (MSAs) are not immediately deliverable or desirable;
2. Confirm that settled geographies (e.g., Wessex) not undergoing LGR are eligible for early FSA status;
3. Provide meaningful capacity funding to FSAs (multi-year) so they act as genuine stepping stones, not holding patterns;
4. Reduce the distinction between FSAs and MSAs/established MSAs in the Devolution Framework with regards to access to funding, powers, and functions, including the “right to request”.

We consider that new powers in the Bill can best support rural businesses by using the following place-based levers:

1. **Local Growth Plans with rural market failure analysis**- target digital/energy/transport connectivity and rural SME innovation, including defence supply chain access for rural SMEs.
2. **Ensuring that Spatial Development Strategies (SDS) align with the principles of land, energy and nature**- for example, reserving/enabling land for agrifood innovation, renewable generation and grid upgrades that unlock stalled private projects.
3. **Anchor institutions** using devolved convening powers to grow local supply chains and apprenticeships around colleges, hospitals, military bases, ports, SMEs, and utilities in rural and coastal areas.
4. **Rural Enterprise Zones** for agri-tech, defence, aerospace and green manufacturing corridors that will offer bespoke planning flexibilities, innovation incentives and grid/digital fast-track.

Despite the above, we consider there are still gaps in the legislation/devolution offer, including:

- The lack of a rural proofing duty or rural impacts assessment requirement across outcomes frameworks, metrics and funding rules (to avoid urban thresholds that exclude small rural bidders).



- A mandatory rural and coastal consideration within Spatial Development Strategies (SDS), evidenced through a rural impact assessment and delivery plan.
- The lack of long-term, single-pot funding for Strategic Authorities that explicitly recognises higher rural delivery costs and support revenue as well as capital (business support, transport operations).
- Enabling grid capacity improvements and connectivity commitments are integral to devolution settlements. Every devolution settlement should include a funded Grid Acceleration Plan (connections, reinforcements, strategic substations) and a Digital Inclusion Plan (gigabit rollout plus community digital skills), with named delivery partners and milestones.

## 2. Skills

We consider that the Bill and wider devolution offer are currently missing the following enablers for effective skills across the BLE area:

- A rural access plan requirement (travel support, satellite provision, digital delivery) so residents in dispersed settlements can reach training;
- Stable commissioning budgets to build specialist skills for the energy grid, environmental tech, defence, and health/care workforce, where BLE faces acute needs;
- An explicit social mobility focus. Currently, there is lower HE participation and productivity gaps across the BLE geography, and BLE members need effective mechanisms and funding to address these issues and support young people.

BLE also notes a significant digital skills and inclusion gap, with connectivity below the England average in most BLE areas. This limits participation in training, remote work and modern labour markets. Addressing this should be a core component of devolved skills powers.

## 3. Transport

Current transport provision across the BLE area includes weak rural transport links, particularly public transport. Residents of BLE areas live further from major



employment centres and rely on cars with higher travel costs, less availability of fuel stations, and poorer EV charging access.

Devolution of powers can help enhance and improve transport provision for both residents and businesses across the BLE area if it is matched with revenue support, EV infrastructure and appropriate, aligned investment in housing and skills. Without this, the current disadvantages experienced by BLE members will persist.

We also consider that the Bill is missing:

- A rural minimum connectivity standard tied to access to jobs, health and training;
- Ringfenced rural transport revenue;
- Statutory alignment between SDS housing allocations and funded transport plans for villages/market towns.
- Coastal connectivity plans (ports, last-mile freight, coastal bus/rail links) with revenue funding for seasonal patterns.

Devolution should provide investment certainty for rural strategic corridors (e.g., A350, A303, A31 and associated rail), aligned with growth sites and skills hubs. Rural decarbonisation requires tailored measures:

- Rural EV schemes with hub-and-spoke charging at market towns, village hubs and tourism destinations;
- Safe, low-density active travel: multi-use trails and rural school/work links where conventional cycle-lane models are unviable;
- Demand-responsive transport (DRT) integrated with health, FE and employment timetables.

#### **4. Housing and planning**

Currently, BLE members experience acute housing pressures, including affordability, private rent scarcity, and second homes/holiday lets. Rental availability in rural areas has fallen 61% since the pandemic, while demand has risen 224%, with affordability ratios far above the national average. These pressures can be addressed via devolved, multi-year funds to deliver rural appropriate housing and retrofit/energy measures, which acknowledge higher rural delivery costs.



As it stands, however, the Bill and the government's policy approach do not allow for the equitable treatment of rural regions with respect to housing powers and funding, the result of the mixed picture of BLE members' access to devolution. There is a potential for the current housing reforms to smooth the delivery of housing in rural areas at the regional level, but this approach will run the risk of delay or duplication if BLE regions without devolution do not have rapid access to devolved settlements and funding. It is therefore critical that all local leaders have equal access to those powers and funding.

A current example of this is the Government's Warm Homes initiative, where funding that would benefit rural housing, e.g. housing retrofit, is likely to be funnelled to Strategic Authorities. These risks disadvantage rural areas without devolution, despite their strong track record and capability to deliver. An additional factor is that of aging rural housing stock, significant proportion of which is poorly heated and/or off the grid, adding to cost of living and fuel availability concerns for households.

#### **5. Land use and nature recovery**

As rural and coastal regions are central to net zero and nature recovery, we consider that environmental renewal should be part of devolved powers available rather than being treated as a purely national remit. BLE regions hold a significant proportion of England's national landscapes, critical water catchments and major biodiversity assets, and are essential to climate resilience, carbon storage and the UK's nature recovery ambitions. To fulfil these responsibilities, devolved powers must be matched by targeted investment funding in nature recovery, flood and coastal resilience, water and soil quality and skills.

Environmental policy should also enable BLE regions to integrate land for clean energy, sustainable agriculture, rural housing and nature recovery, so that rural areas can fully contribute to national food and energy security.

#### **6. Governance**

We consider that devolution needs to be in the context of a balanced model, with strategic decisions taking place at the Strategic Authority level, whilst retaining a space for local place shaping and delivery in councils, all rural-proofed or impacts assessed, and supported by sustainable and fair funding.



Lessons from previous devolution suggest it is imperative that the government seeks to avoid urban thresholds, short-term or inequitable access to funding, and metrics that mask rural deprivation.

We would support the following governance recommendations to enable effective leadership at the devolved level that takes into account rural needs and perspectives:

- The establishment of Rural Business & Communities Panels feeding formally into Spatial Delivery Strategies and growth plans.
- The publication of rural KPIs dashboards, e.g. transport access, digital gigabit availability, affordable homes, skills participation, nature recovery hectares delivered;
- The creation of cross-Whitehall sponsor boards (energy, digital, defence, food) for BLE SAs to accelerate enabling infrastructure and market access.
- SDS should publish rural/coastal impact statements with associated KPI dashboards to demonstrate delivery.