

# Welcoming Britain's Leading Edge

Three years on from its birth **Cllr Linda Taylor** says Britain's Leading Edge's work is only just begun. The group has vowed to stand up for places on the periphery in the levelling up agenda

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Mevagissey harbour and town, Cornwall: the latest census data shows populations are declining as a share of the UK's total, while the average age in rural areas is rising faster than in cities

It has been three years since Britain's Leading Edge was established by a collaboration of like-minded councils to strengthen the voice of peripheral and largely rural areas that don't contain major cities. While the initial focus of our collaboration has been on English regions, we have invited Pembrokeshire to join our collaboration – due to a shared vision of a national policy which harnesses the distinctive strengths of all regions, not just cities.

Since then, Britain's Leading Edge has developed into an organised advocacy network to broaden the Government's approach to place leadership and governance.

The Government's Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill shows the voice of Britain's Leading Edge has been heard.

In fact, the seismic global events of the last two years points to peripheral parts of the country having a new and important relevance to the Government and UK PLC. Our green spaces provide natural carbon capture and storage: we are the lungs of the UK.

Peripheral areas are not without challenges – the latest census data shows our populations are declining as a share of the UK's total, while the average age in rural areas is rising faster than in cities and their surroundings. In many ways the pandemic affected peripheral areas more severely than larger cities and towns.

At the start of the pandemic, Centre for Towns research showed the most badly economically-impacted 5% of towns were located on the periphery of the UK – often the places already at a disadvantage. As we have recovered, the growing popularity of our places to live has put an already overstretched housing market into crisis.

The pandemic and the war in Ukraine also showed how

reliant the UK is on global supply chains for its energy and food.

Britain's Leading Edge is in a strong position to help the UK meet these challenges. Our areas contain many businesses which are the building blocks of a modern, low-carbon economy, able to do more to feed and power the country.

## Two areas in Britain's Leading Edge – Cornwall and Durham – were given a prominent position in the Levelling Up White Paper

Government's new levelling up agenda acknowledges the disparity between what can be achieved and what currently happens in practice. It seeks to rectify the fact that although 'there are world-leading and enterprising businesses and innovators right across the UK, economic growth and the higher productivity which drives it has been over-concentrated in the South East of England'.

And while this new policy direction touches on many of the main themes on which Britain's Leading Edge has been campaigning, levelling up metrics show the desperate need to level up our regions, so they are equal to the best performing areas in the country.

Our gross median weekly pay sits well below the average of authorities outside of Britain's Leading Edge.

Two areas in Britain's Leading Edge – Cornwall

and Durham – were given a prominent position in the Levelling Up White Paper by being invited to bid for 'an ambitious and early' county deal. Although both councils have ambitious plans to address the stark place disparities that have widened as a result of the pandemic, through county deals – together with North Yorkshire – they remain the only areas on the periphery with a potential devolution deal that gives them the powers and funding to level up between and within regions.

Research by Britain's Leading Edge PhD, Nick Woolgrove, shows the current levelling up agenda focuses on six cylinders of 'capital' – physical, intangible, human, financial, social, and institutional – therefore omitting the key strength of peripheral areas: natural capital.

Think-tank Localis's latest essay collection reflected that levelling up has focused more on decentralisation than devolution and the Rural Services Network argues that the metrics sets out by the Government do not account for the pressures currently facing rural areas.

Despite generational changes at global, national and regional levels – as well as an ambitious new policy agenda to address the disparity in opportunity across the UK – our work has only just begun.

As we recommitted ourselves to the collaboration at our conference in the margins of the Local Government Association annual conference 29 June, Britain's Leading Edge will continue to provide a vital voice from the edge until our potential is fully seen and maximised. ▀

*Cllr Linda Taylor is the leader of Cornwall Council*

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