

**BRITAIN'S  
LEADINGEDGE**



**MANIFESTO  
2023**

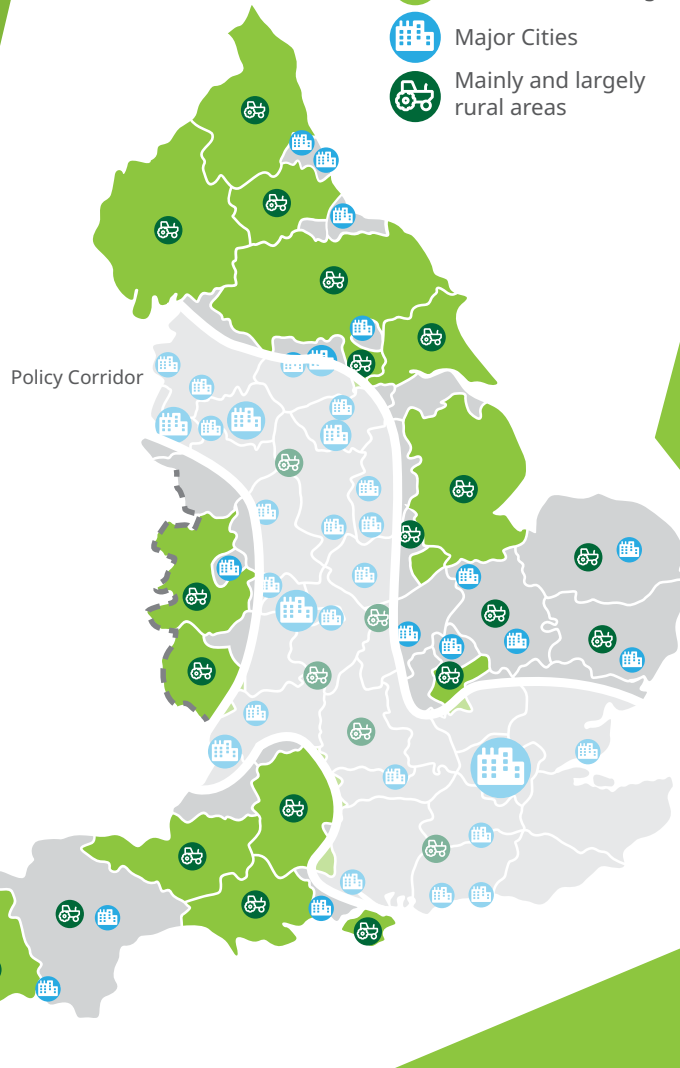


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## A policy corridor

### Key

- Areas that meet the criteria for Britain's Leading Edge
- 🏙 Major Cities
- 🚜 Mainly and largely rural areas



# BRITAIN'S LEADING EDGE

**Since its launch in 2019, Britain's Leading Edge has been a collaboration and advocacy network for predominantly rural upper tier local authority regions without the economic pull of a major city.<sup>1</sup>**

Central policy and investment has historically been focused on metropolitan areas and their immediate surroundings – the “policy corridor” – despite the challenges and opportunities for regions on the geographical periphery of the UK.

## Manifesto commitments

**Britain's Leading Edge** wants to work with partners to improve the quality of life for the 6 million people living in peripheral regions<sup>2</sup>, and contribute to powering economic growth for the whole of the UK. Together, we commit to:

- **Continuing to advocate for moving focus and investment beyond the policy corridor**, which still affects so much of central Government policy.
- **Press for all parts of the UK to be truly levelled up**, so that rural areas perform as well as metropolitan areas do with reference to the 12 Levelling Up Missions.
- **Helping Government deliver on its promise that the UK will be net carbon zero by 2050**. Britain's Leading Edge regions contain the clean energy capacity which will power this commitment.
- **Building UK energy and food resilience**, particularly in the light of ongoing geo-political developments.
- **Advocating for fairer Government investment in research, development and the vital connectivity infrastructure** that peripheral areas need to unlock our potential for growth, particularly in food production, clean energy, sustainable transport and digital.
- **Championing Government recognition for the extra costs involved in providing reliable, high-quality public services in peripheral areas**, and pressing for fair funding to drive innovation in service delivery.

# WE HAVE **SO** **MUCH TO OFFER...**

**The seismic global events that have taken place over the past three years show that peripheral parts of the country have a new and important relevance to the Government and UK PLC.**

## **We can power the UK**

Peripheral regions of the UK are the energy powerhouses of tomorrow, with our rich natural capital capable of generating clean, reliable, renewable energy for the whole country. In 2020, **Britain's Leading Edge** generated over 99,000 MWh of renewable energy, compared to just under 23,000 MWh from the rest of England.<sup>3</sup> Providing the devolved powers and funding to fully capitalise on this energy wealth will help the UK's future electricity resilience. This is crucial at a time when imports of energy are becoming increasingly unreliable, with catastrophic cost of living rises, devastating impacts on businesses, and inflation driven significantly by energy costs.<sup>4</sup> Significant long-term investments in green energy – and the environmental technology skills the industry requires – in **Britain's Leading Edge** regions will be wealth-creating, helping with our low-wage economy.

## **We are the lungs of the UK**

Residents of rural parts of the UK are custodians of the green public spaces that proved so vital to physical and mental health and wellbeing during lockdowns – and which will continue to generate mental health benefits going forwards.<sup>5</sup> We generate eight times fewer carbon emissions than the rest of England,<sup>6</sup> and look after almost 65% of England's areas of outstanding natural beauty,<sup>7</sup> which drive much of the UK's national and international tourism. Pre-pandemic, holidays in the English countryside drew spending of over £2bn (18.5% of all spending on holidays in England).<sup>8</sup> Holidaymakers say overwhelmingly that the outdoors is highly important to them: 57% of those answering a recent survey said that good views were a vital part of determining their holiday destination, with 53% saying the same for outdoor space.<sup>9</sup> Moving forward, we hope to see tourism in **Britain's Leading Edge** becoming greener and more sustainable, providing well-paid, year-round jobs for our residents.

Rural green spaces also have an essential role to play in managing the impact of climate change, as they are the “lungs” of the country – playing a major role in taking carbon out of the air and safely storing it.<sup>10</sup> It is critical that major policy proposals include, where relevant, nature recovery and environmental considerations that are particularly important to **Britain’s Leading Edge**.

## We can feed the UK

In recent years, global supply chains have been badly affected by the pandemic and the ongoing geopolitical instability resulting from the war in Ukraine. Food supply chains are particularly vulnerable to this kind of disruption, which is only likely to be exacerbated further by the effects of climate change. As the UK imported 46% of its food in 2020, developing better domestic resilience is essential and **Britain’s Leading Edge** areas can provide this.<sup>11</sup> A major proportion of the UK’s agriculture, fishing and forestry businesses are in **Britain’s Leading Edge** regions.<sup>12</sup> This means we have a significant role to play in securing the domestic food supply and helping the economy by increasing food exports. Investment in research, automation and a focus on resource efficiency will help us reach our full potential in this sector. If more of the UK’s food is produced domestically, food prices may be reduced as costly imports decline – addressing the cost of living crisis. As is so often the case, the crisis affects rural areas more severely: rural households spend 2% more than those in urban areas each week on food and non-alcoholic drinks.<sup>13</sup>

Supporting national food resilience must not come at the cost of environmental quality. Every effort should be made to balance the land- and energy- use requirements of a growing agri-food sector with the needs of the environment, particularly biodiversity. Local authorities in **Britain’s Leading Edge** can help find this balance by creating smart local plans, ensuring high-quality agricultural land and solar power generation both have sufficient land, alongside nature recovery projects.

*We have a significant role to play in securing the domestic food supply and helping the economy by increasing food exports*

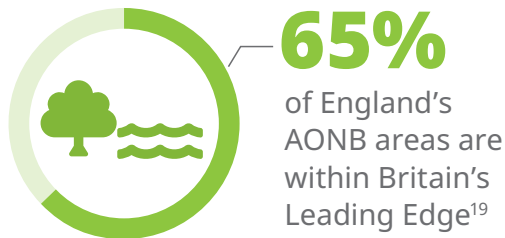
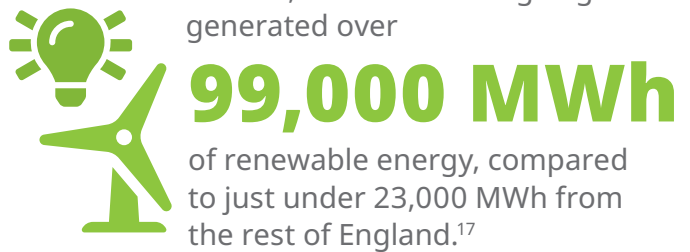
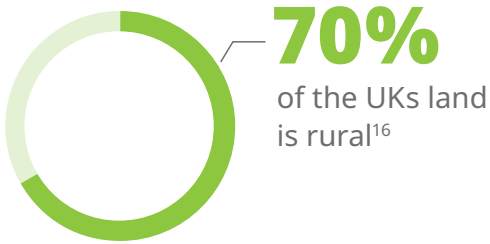


## Levelling Up the UK

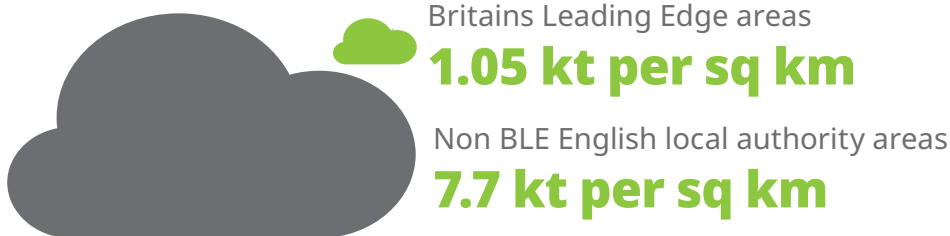
The Government's ambitious Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill sets out 12 Missions to tackle pervasive social and economic inequalities, aiming to address unequal regional productivity, pay, investment, health, infrastructure, education and skills.<sup>14</sup> **Britain's Leading Edge** members have long been advocating for greater funding and devolution of powers to tackle these issues, and have a plethora of examples of best practice in this field. We will be key partners with central Government helping to fulfil these missions for the benefit of our residents and the wider UK.

**Britain's Leading Edge** is home to the businesses which are the building blocks of a modern, low-carbon economy – and advances in technology are helping to show that high-quality, well-paying jobs are not just for cities. Continuing to improve digital infrastructure and skills will allow peripheral regions to provide better employment, retaining our most talented residents and generating a virtuous circle of wealth and investment. Accelerated by the pandemic, the boom in home and hybrid working will greatly benefit **Britain's Leading Edge**, reversing the narrative that the best jobs are concentrated in cities. The ONS reports that 84% of those working from home during the pandemic aim to mix working from home and offices, with the proportion of people working from home rising 12 percentage points between 2021 and 2022.<sup>15</sup>





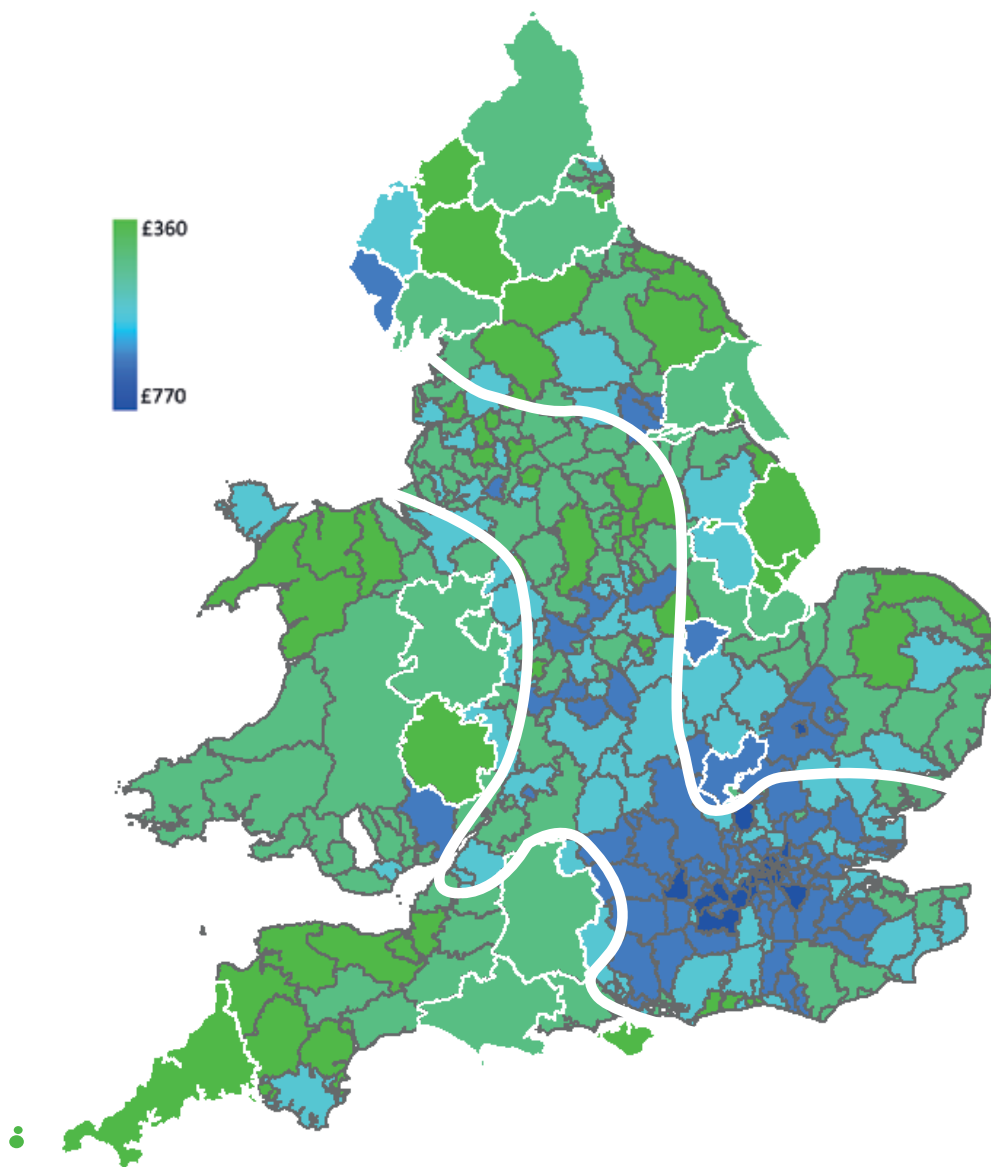
Annual carbon dioxide emissions (2019)<sup>20</sup>



*Britain's Leading Edge is home to the businesses which are the building blocks of a modern, low-carbon economy*

# EMPOWERMENT TO ADDRESS WORSENING INEQUALITIES

Despite their many opportunities, rural regions have also experienced a history of under-investment, and have a legacy of poverty, ill-health, inadequate infrastructure and pervasive economic under-achievement which must urgently be addressed.



Gross median weekly pay is consistently lower in **Britain's Leading Edge** regions, at £446 in 2021, compared to £493 in external authorities. Although pay has risen since 2019 (£417 and £465 respectively), the gap is very similar.<sup>21</sup>



## A health time bomb

Peripheral regions contain a demographic and health time bomb – our population is 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.<sup>22</sup> In 2020, the average age in **Britain’s Leading Edge** authorities was 47.5, compared to 41.7 for other English authorities.<sup>23</sup> This has implications for productivity, affordability of adult social care and healthcare costs. The dispersed nature of rural communities and healthcare provision can impede equitable access to treatment. To take one example, research by the University of Lincoln found that cancer survivors in rural areas reported a lack of bespoke support and spoke of how problematic it was to travel long distances to access urban facilities.<sup>24</sup> Just 55% of rural households are within 8 km of a hospital, compared to 97% of households in urban areas, and only 80% of people in rural areas live within 4 km of a GP, compared to 98% of those in urban areas.<sup>25</sup> These access problems are worsened by the poorer access to public transport that people in rural areas experience.

Hospital waiting times have lengthened more in rural areas than in urban ones, while emergency admissions and referrals for talking therapies fell more sharply in rural areas than in cities and larger towns.<sup>26</sup> Peripheral healthcare trusts now spend more on temporary staff than those in urban areas, and overall staffing levels have grown more slowly in rural areas than in other parts of the country.<sup>27</sup> Rural areas often have unavoidably smaller hospitals due to their remoteness, with higher service delivery costs, sometimes with disproportionate financial deficits.<sup>28</sup> Some analysis suggests that the NHS is “place blind” to the concept of rural need, and is unwilling to take the innovative steps required to address specifically rural healthcare challenges.<sup>29</sup>

*The dispersed nature of rural communities and healthcare provision can impede equitable access to treatment*

## Settlement in rural areas

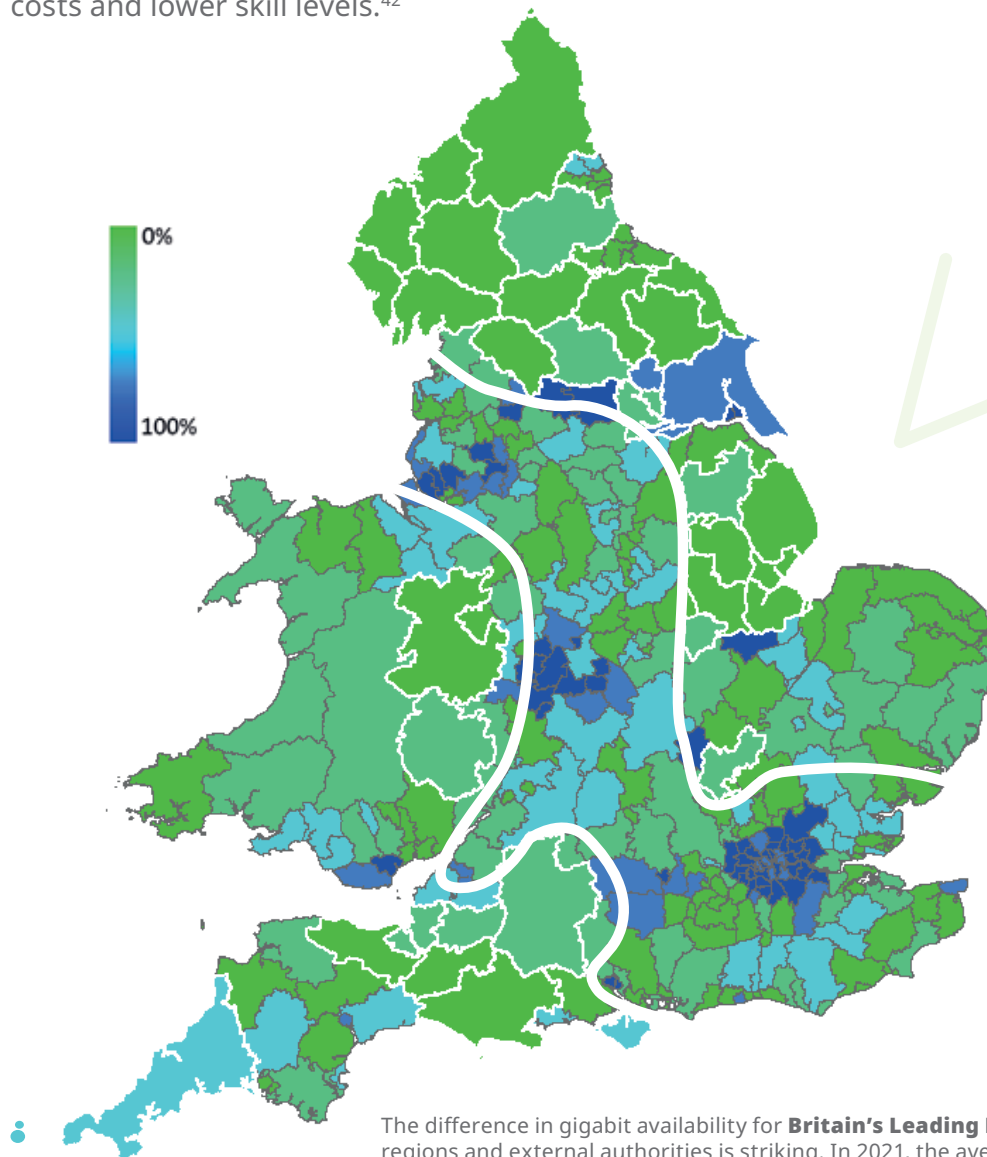
The geography of settlement in rural areas tends to worsen existing inequalities: poverty is typically more dispersed in rural areas than in urban ones,<sup>30</sup> which may make it harder to address, as resources are further away – and harder to get to – for those who need them. The All-Party Parliamentary Group for Rural Business and the Rural Powerhouse has found that it is more problematic for people in rural areas to get the upskilling they need, contributing to the rural economy being 18% lower in productivity than the national average.<sup>31</sup> It is harder for students in rural areas to access higher education and improve social mobility. Only 14% of disadvantaged young people in remote rural or coastal areas go to university, contrasted with 27% in urban “social mobility hotspots”.<sup>32</sup> These disparities have a real effect on the lives of people in rural areas – gross median weekly pay is consistently lower in **Britain’s Leading Edge** regions, at £446 in 2021, compared to £493 in external authorities.<sup>33</sup> If the rural/urban productivity gap could be closed, £43bn could be added to the English economy.<sup>34</sup>

Researchers at the University of Sheffield have argued that the UK’s level of regional inequality is worse than any other large, prosperous country, with the UK’s regional inequality worse than in 28 other advanced OECD countries.<sup>35</sup> This may be partially a product of the very different business environment in rural and urban areas. 71% of all those employed by registered rural companies work in small and medium-sized businesses, compared to 42% of people employed by registered urban businesses.<sup>36</sup> Small and medium enterprises typically generate wealth below levels seen in larger organisations.

## Improving infrastructure

Particularly internet access and digital skills – in rural areas could be a key way of addressing productivity differences. Gigabit internet access to premises is considerably lower in **Britain’s Leading Edge** regions, at an average of 13% compared to over 32% in external authorities.<sup>37</sup> 80% of rural business respondents to a Countryside Alliance survey said that “better quality connectivity would be the single largest improvement” to their business.<sup>38</sup> Campaigning groups such as the National Farmers’ Union have raised the concern that the Government’s pledge of gigabit coverage being lowered from 100% of the UK to 85% will “hit rural communities hardest”.<sup>39</sup> Benefits to greater rural connectivity include revitalising the economy in peripheral areas, drawing in new businesses (while making it viable for existing organisations to remain) and attracting new residents. This last point is particularly important in the context of the demographic imbalance faced by peripheral regions.

Historically, younger professionals have chosen to live in cities to be nearer to places of work, as well as cultural and social opportunities.<sup>40</sup> However, if digital infrastructure in peripheral areas is good enough to support working from home, there may be a reduced need for working-age professionals to leave rural areas, contributing to limiting the rural-urban brain drain.<sup>41</sup> Having the physical infrastructure in place for fast, reliable internet access is only one half of the productivity battle – it is also essential that residents in **Britain's Leading Edge** have the digital skills they need to access services online and make the most of opportunities for remote working. Currently, people in rural areas are less likely to be digitally included, due to a combination of poorer access, higher costs and lower skill levels.<sup>42</sup>



## Poor transport infrastructure

Poor transport infrastructure in rural areas hampers business growth and residents' access to services. The National Innovation Centre for Rural Enterprise (NICRE) surveyed 4,000 farm and non-farm businesses (with urban businesses for comparison) across the South West, North East and West Midlands in summer 2021. 36% of businesses in rural areas said transport infrastructure was poor or very poor, compared to 19% in urban areas, and public transport was given the same low rating by 57% of rural businesses compared to 21% of urban ones.<sup>44</sup> Analysis from the Campaign for Better Transport suggests that rural local authorities are more likely to miss out on Government funding allocations to improve public transport.<sup>45</sup> Limited public transport compounds reduced access to services such as banks and post offices, which adds to rural companies' difficulties employing and retaining workers.<sup>46</sup>

Finding and keeping staff is problematic for around a third of small rural firms in England, again contributing to the productivity gap.<sup>47</sup> People in **Britain's Leading Edge** areas are (on average) a 27 minute walk away from a large employment centre (a town or city with over 500 jobs), compared to a 15 minute walk for those in external authorities.<sup>48</sup> By using public transport and walking, this falls to an average of 17 minutes for **Britain's Leading Edge**, compared to 12 minutes for external authorities.<sup>49</sup>

*Finding and keeping staff is problematic for around a third of small rural firms, again contributing to the productivity gap*



A lack of reliable public transport in Britain's periphery harms the environment and reduces opportunities for active travel, as dispersed populations have to travel more to reach school, jobs and services. People in the most isolated rural areas make an average of 17% more journeys in cars or vans than those in urban areas, and have a 54% higher average mileage when they travel in cars or vans.<sup>50</sup> Making the switch to electric vehicles, reducing the environmental impact of this higher use of cars and vans, is likely to be harder for people in rural areas due to the relative paucity of electric vehicle (EV) charging points.<sup>51</sup> Policy Exchange found that availability of charging points is a key factor in people switching to EVs, and that the risk of under-provision of charging points in rural or deprived areas was one of the top five concerns from UK EV industrial stakeholders.<sup>52</sup>

Travel is also more costly for people in peripheral areas: research for the Rural Services Network found that people in rural households pay nearly 50% more than those in urban areas to travel, spending an average of £113.90 and £76.20 a week on transport, respectively.<sup>53</sup> Transport costs are a higher proportion of rural residents' disposable income, at 12.3% compared to 9.9% for people in urban places.<sup>54</sup>



## The housing challenge

Rural businesses also frequently cite a lack of local housing as being a barrier to employment and business growth. The NICRE survey found that 49% of rural companies said nearby affordable housing availability was 'poor' or 'very poor', contrasted with 30% of urban businesses.<sup>55</sup> Poor housing affordability, availability and quality has a significant impact on productivity in the periphery, with the LEP Network citing it as a "key additional constraint" on economic growth in rural places.<sup>56</sup> When people are not able to live where they work, money is less likely to be kept in the local area: and this is particularly challenging for peripheral regions. Newcastle University found that "England is the only OECD country where it is more expensive to live in a rural setting than an urban one".<sup>57</sup> Indeed, although average house prices outside London are seven times England's average wage,<sup>58</sup> this is far higher in some rural areas: in Cornwall in 2021, house prices were 10.6 times higher than the average local wage, compared to house prices in England being 8.7 times higher than the average national wage.<sup>59</sup>

The picture is perhaps even bleaker for the rental market. The availability of rental properties in rural areas has fallen by 61% since the pandemic, accompanied by an astonishing 224% rise in demand, compared to a growth in demand of 82% in cities.<sup>60</sup> The rural rental market is increasingly squeezed by holiday lets and second homes as properties outside city centres became more desirable.<sup>61</sup> Rents in rural areas have risen by 11% (compared to 2% in cities) since the start of the pandemic, with lower-earning rural residents spending 47% of their income on rent in 2021, compared to 43% for low-income urban households.<sup>62</sup>



## Fuel poverty

**Fuel poverty in rural areas is typically worse in rural than in urban parts of the UK**, with households in rural areas having a far bigger fuel poverty gap than those in urban areas.<sup>63</sup> Rural households would need fuel bills to fall by £501 to get them out of fuel poverty, compared to £223 in urban areas.<sup>64</sup> Overall, the average estimated energy cost of homes in rural areas is 10% higher than in mainly urban areas – and this is before the 2022 price increases.<sup>65</sup> Fuel costs are more uncertain for the 15% of domestic properties in Great Britain (as of 2021) who are not connected to the gas network, usually due to infrastructure constraints.<sup>66</sup> The majority of these households are on Britain's periphery,<sup>67</sup> and most use heating oil, the price of which fluctuates considerably – more than doubling in price between January 2021 and September 2022.<sup>68</sup> Heating oil is not subject to a unit price cap, unlike gas and electricity. Businesses in peripheral areas are typically micro-, small- and medium-sized, and often do not have the financial reserves to cope with the sharp rises in energy prices.

*Overall, the average estimated energy cost of homes in rural areas is 10% higher than in mainly urban areas*

**County Deals** (the transfer of specific powers held by central government to non-metropolitan local authorities)<sup>69</sup> and their fore-runners, Devolution Deals, have not typically gone to peripheral areas, despite their transformative potential. In the first tranche of Deals in 2014-17, Cornwall was the only **Britain's Leading Edge** member to secure a Deal. The new County Deals remain focused on regions with major cities – North Yorkshire, East Riding, County Durham and Cornwall are the only **Britain's Leading Edge** members negotiating a County Deal at time of writing.

Some commentators view the current Governmental focus on County Deals to be simply a matter of decentralisation of economic policy, rather than devolution of powers providing (limited) autonomy for local authorities.<sup>70</sup> At this early stage in the second tranche of County Deals, it remains to be seen whether decentralised control of allocated funds will be matched with devolved powers. Yet meaningful devolution and prioritising local growth are the keys to unlocking the potential of **Britain's Leading Edge**. Local authorities know their residents, businesses and geographies.

We know what works and what doesn't when developing and supporting our neighbourhoods. We are used to delivering capital expenditure projects at a large and small scale, driving growth and working with communities to create thriving places. These skills were honed further during the pandemic, when local authorities worked with Government at pace to assess and deliver targeted economic support that kept so many SMEs afloat.

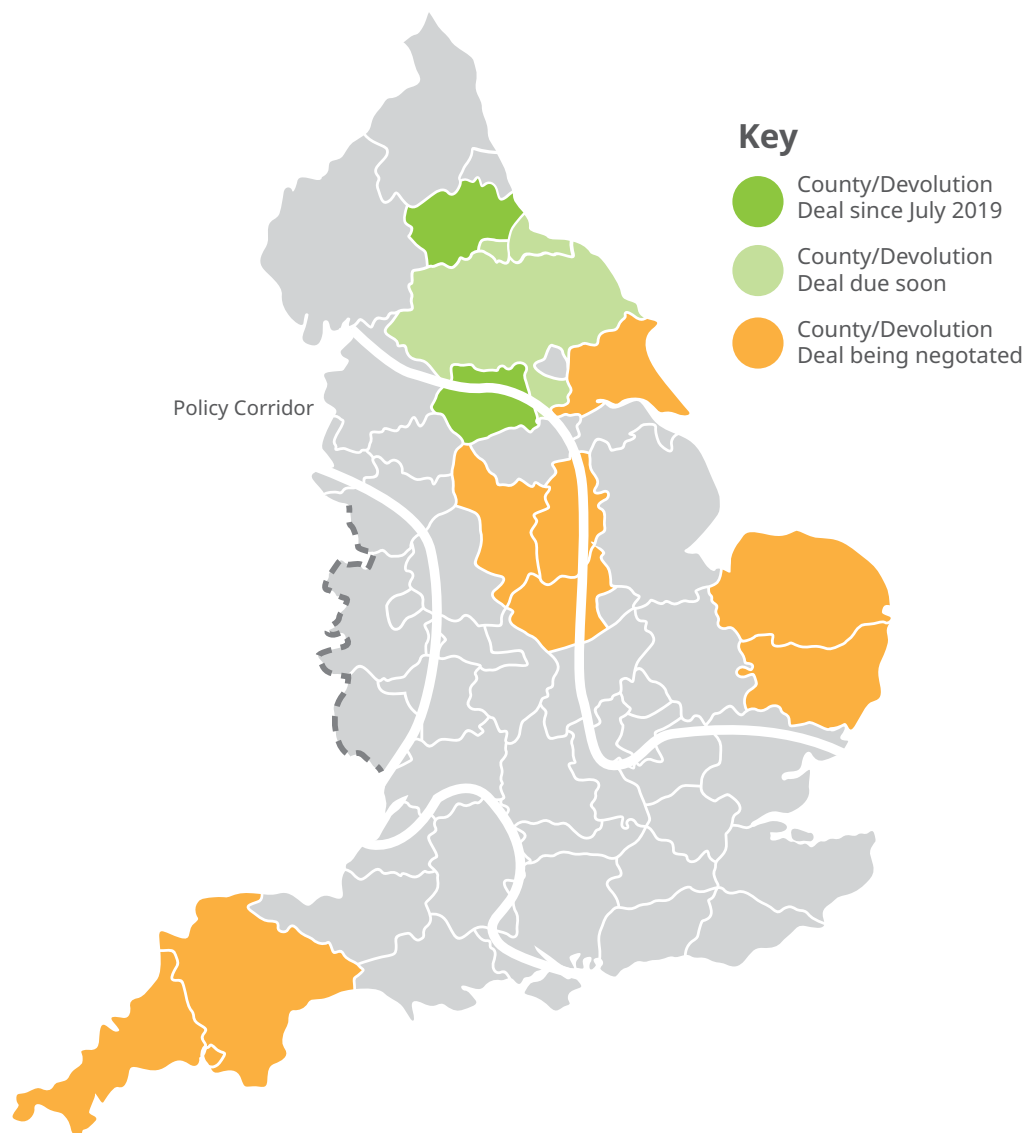
Local authorities are ready to take on more responsibility for economic growth, ensuring that smaller communities are not overlooked. If Government stands by – indeed, accelerates – its existing commitments to devolution and levelling up, local leadership will be empowered to deliver economic growth for the benefit of the whole country. The County Councils Network assesses that devolution of full public spending to county areas could create

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an additional £26bn for the United Kingdom’s economy and save £11.7bn over the next five years.<sup>71</sup> Making these economic strides can come with tangible social and health benefits – a recent study of the effects of devolution in Greater Manchester found that people had better life expectancy after devolution, with residents of the most deprived areas showing the greatest improvement.<sup>72</sup> Progress of this kind will require passing the relevant legislation such as the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill; ensuring powers are matched with single-pot long-term funding; and providing sufficient Government focus on agreeing devolution deals. **Britain’s Leading Edge** stands ready to work with Government for the benefit of our residents and the wider country.




# WHY DOES **BRITAIN'S LEADING EDGE** MATTER?

Put simply, **Britain's Leading Edge** matters because the socio-economic condition of people on the periphery of the UK is not on a par with many of those in urban areas. Advocacy for people and businesses in rural areas is required to address a narrow policy focus and historic under-investment, which continues to this day. Researchers have identified a “policy corridor” stretching between major cities in central England, where a significant amount of infrastructure and investment money is targeted.<sup>73</sup> Central Government per capita funding averages £182 for each resident in county local authorities, but £351 for urban authorities.<sup>74</sup>

When Government assumes that large metropolitan areas – with big organisations, catchment areas and budgets – are the typical recipients of policies and funding, smaller rural areas can be disqualified by definition. The All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Rural Business and the Rural Powerhouse highlights the “failure to recognise rural areas” as being responsible for policies which do not work for the periphery.<sup>75</sup> The APPG cites the example of a £500,000 minimum threshold for the recent Community Renewal Fund as being out of reach of smaller rural groups which could not practically use such a large amount of money – meaning they had unequal access to funding.<sup>76</sup>

**Britain's Leading Edge** is a vital voice for publicising the effects of potentially discriminatory policy decisions, particularly as they worsen existing structural inequalities faced by peripheral regions, contributing to slower growth, worse health outcomes, poorer transport infrastructure and a lower quality of life. By offering constructive feedback on an overly narrow focus on cities, **Britain's Leading Edge** can make a positive contribution to the implementation of the Levelling Up agenda.

The interconnectedness of issues affecting rural areas creates tangled problems, which will only be resolved by advocacy for joined up action.<sup>77</sup> Demographic imbalances and underinvestment cause a drag on the rural economy. Yet young people are unlikely to remain in – or migrate to – parts of the country where they cannot afford to live, with poor transport links and low-quality jobs. With fewer entrepreneurs and a working-age client base, businesses are less likely to invest in rural regions: and the cycle continues.



Peripheral regions are strikingly lacking in homogeneity, with diverse needs, places, types of economy challenges and opportunities. However, our common, pressing requirements mean we must speak together to be heard by central government. While the cultural heritage of Cornwall may differ from that of Rutland, we can agree that a lack of digital infrastructure and skills provision hurts our opportunity for greater productivity. Research has identified that fragmented rural calls to action hamper effective formulation of policy, and that we must step outside a focus on narrow communities of interest in order to prosper.<sup>78</sup> By effectively collaborating, we can magnify our voices to ensure the needs of rural people and places are heard.

## Over the last three years, Britain's Leading Edge has:

- **With the University of Exeter**, jointly sponsored the research of a PhD student into sustainable regional development in peripheral regions.
- **Hosted an academic conference on the UK's regional development**, focusing on the unique advantages and disadvantages of peripheral regions.
- **Worked with the Treasury** to ensure Green Book guidance on project appraisal and monitoring takes account of the rural perspective.
- **With the University of Exeter and UKRI**, developed a policy paper on the strategic role of peripheral regions in nature recovery which is important in levelling up.
- **Submitted detailed evidence to several Parliamentary Select Committees**, which you can read [here](#).



# WHAT'S NEXT FOR BRITAIN'S LEADING EDGE?

In our first manifesto, we were ambitious in our expansion plans. However, the criticality of local authorities to the national pandemic response has meant that these aspirations had to be paused. As local government's focus has now switched to recovery and renewal, we are keen to widen our collaborative network to include appropriate rural authorities in Wales and Scotland. Several Welsh and Scottish local authorities – particularly those on the coast of Wales and in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland – are also outside the policy corridor and lack the agglomerative effect of a major city. As we look to the future, it would be wonderful to make this advocacy network truly **Britain's Leading Edge**.

We have benefited tremendously from collaborations with universities and think-tanks, drawing on the burgeoning research on regional disparities, levelling up and issues facing the periphery. The PhD thesis of the student that **Britain's Leading Edge** co-sponsors will be published in 2023. While solidifying our existing partnerships, we are also keen to gain new perspectives – and would welcome contact from organisations working in this area. We are particularly keen to work with national MPs of every political hue to build a network of Parliamentary advocates for peripheral regions without major cities, powered by our research.

**Please contact us at**  
**[britainsleadingedge@cornwall.gov.uk](mailto:britainsleadingedge@cornwall.gov.uk)**  
with any feedback, questions or partnership suggestions. We look forward to working with you.

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