

LEVELLING UP THE LEADING EDGE

Investing in our natural assets for collective wealth



June 2022

By Nicholas Woolgrove and Jane Wills

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



This work was supported by Research England's Policy Support Fund.



Special thanks to the wider research team, including:

Tess Ax – Senior Policy Officer, Cornwall Council

Dr Carl Warom – Senior Environment Officer, Cornwall Council

Jessie Hamshar – Head of Cornwall Partnerships, University of Exeter

Dr Joanie Willet – University of Exeter

This paper is published as part of a wider ongoing PhD project by lead researcher Nicholas Woolgrove, sponsored by Cornwall Council, and exploring regional development policy in the periphery of England. Specifically, this work seeks to better understand the potential solutions and policy mechanisms that could promote resilient and sustainable local economies through the better management of the natural environment.

The research team would also like to thank the members of the **Britain's Leading Edge** Network for their constructive thoughts and insights:

Steve Ford – Cornwall Council

Carl Warom – Cornwall Council

Philippa Hoskin – Cornwall Council

Rachel Whaley – Cumbria County Council

John Sellgren – Dorset Council

Matthew Millington – East Riding of Yorkshire Council

Julian Branscombe – CEO Isles of Scilly Wildlife Trust

John Metcalfe – Isle of Wight Council

Justin Brown – Lincolnshire County Council

Neil Irving – North Yorkshire County Council

Mark Andrews – Rutland County Council

Penny Sharp – Rutland County Council

Mark Barrow – Shropshire Council

Woolgrove, N. and Wills, J. (2022) *Levelling up the leading edge: investing in our natural assets for collective wealth. A policy report.* University of Exeter: Environment and Sustainability Institute. ISBN: 978-0-902746-69-5

Photographs taken by Nicholas Woolgrove.

4	Britain's Leading Edge
6	Executive summary
8	Recommendations
11	Introduction
13	Research methods
15	Emerging policy debate about nature recovery
23	Research findings
24	Challenges of levelling up
29	Opportunities from investing in nature
34	Conclusions
36	Bibliography



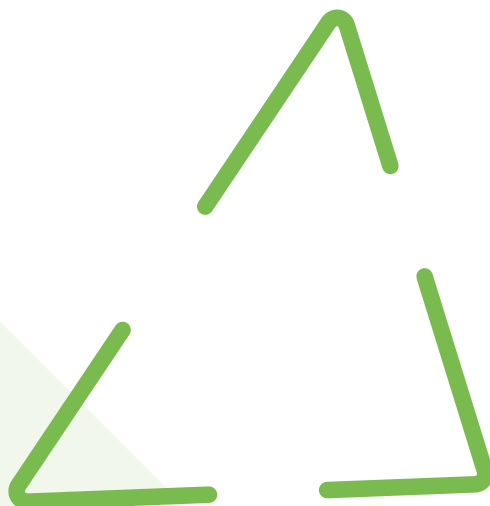
BRITAIN'S LEADING EDGE



Britain's Leading Edge is a network of predominantly rural regions on the periphery of England, seeking to challenge city-weighted funding decisions and provide a powerful new voice on regional policy and practice. The collaboration includes 12 upper tier local authorities representing a population of almost 6 million.

Taking a critical view of central government's narrow approach to place leadership and the emphasis on cities, **Britain's Leading Edge** seeks to highlight the impact of historic central government funding decisions which have tended to overlook the social and economic challenges facing many rural and coastal regions on the periphery of the UK. Economic shocks like COVID-19 risk deepening these regional inequalities and pushing back the much needed 'levelling-up' agenda for **Britain's Leading Edge**.

Due to their rural makeup, **Britain's Leading Edge** regions are rich in natural capital. They offer secure supplies of renewable energy which will provide an essential component of the national move towards a decarbonised society, along with playing a significant role in naturally sequestering and removing carbon. As home to almost 65% of England's Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, these regions already play an essential role in the ecotourism sector and host a major proportion of England's forestry, agriculture and fishing businesses, solidifying their importance in the nation's food security. **As such, Britain's Leading Edge regions are on the frontline of the transition to a more sustainable future.**



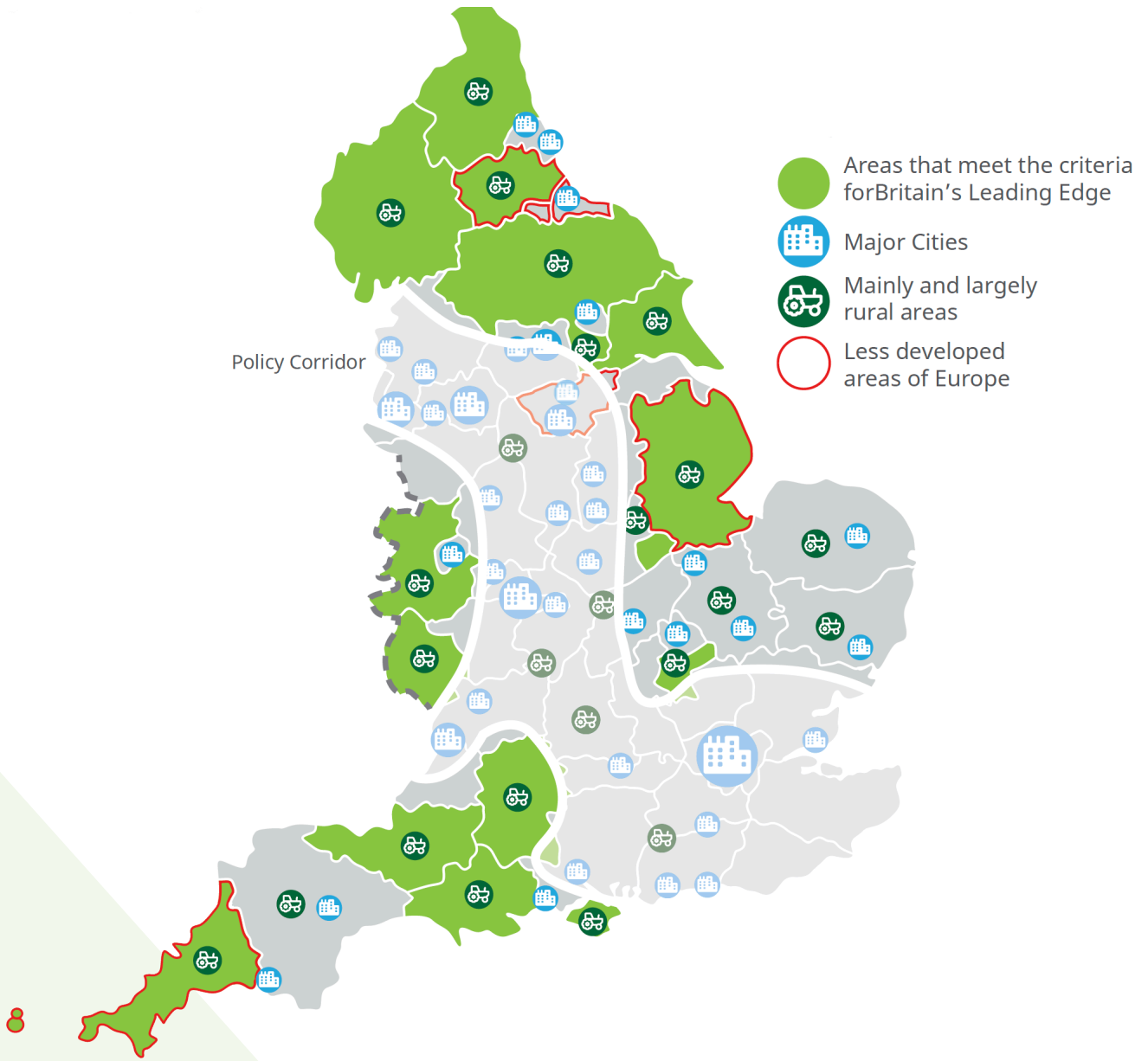


FIGURE 1

Map of England which highlights the current city-centric policy corridor running through the country. Source: Britain's Leading Edge Launch Document, available here: www.britainsleadingedge.org

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Central government in the UK is increasingly demonstrating a substantial commitment to restoring, maintaining, and enhancing the nation's wealth of natural assets. This commitment is evident in recent policy publications, associated strategies, and funding opportunities designed to reimagine historic approaches to agriculture, climate change, and conservation. This reconsideration of the role of government in the stewardship of our natural capital is developing alongside the levelling up agenda, arguably the most ambitious mission a modern government has ever taken to address longstanding regional inequalities in the UK. With a fund of £4.8 billion attached, the levelling up agenda offers historically 'left-behind' regions the opportunity to tackle their most pressing challenges and opportunities, providing new powers and funding to establish real change for their regions. Peripheral areas, like those represented by **Britain's Leading Edge**, sit at the intersection of these emerging policy agendas. As areas abundant in natural assets, peripheral areas will be a key focus of natural capital investment, and as some of the most economically ignored areas, peripheral regions can justifiably present themselves at the forefront of needing levelling up powers and funding. This report addresses these intersecting opportunities for peripheral regions in the UK, exploring the extent to which investing in natural capital could become a key component of levelling up.

With both policy agendas still in their early days, the time is right to consider the response of **Britain's Leading Edge** - the primary network representing peripheral regions in the UK. **This report summarises the findings from interviews conducted with representatives from members of the Britain's Leading Edge network.** These interviews assessed councils' ambitions for levelling up, their expectations of national government, and the extent to which nature recovery has featured in their thinking. The interviews were semi-structured, most lasting 45 minutes to an hour. The thoughtful responses given by each of the interviewees reflected the approaches being developed by organisations that care deeply for the prosperity and wellbeing of their regions and their people.



However, the results from the interviews revealed a network that is only at the beginning of critically engaging with the policy agenda promoting nature recovery. While there were some powerful responses from a minority of the interviewees who discussed how their councils were taking steps to capture the substantial opportunities provided by environmental growth and nature recovery, most were focused on other areas of policy such as digital infrastructure, employment, economic growth, and productivity.

In the main, these important challenges were not presented as being connected to investment in the local environment. However, of those who spoke about the emerging local opportunities associated with nature recovery, the focus was on new jobs, the impacts on local businesses, and increased resilience for the region. These ideas require more investigation to better understand the potential benefits they offer, as the specific geo-social-economic complexion of each **Britain's Leading Edge** region will harbour its own specific challenges and opportunities in regards to nature recovery.



1. Putting natural capital at the heart of levelling up

The levelling up White Paper highlights the role of the private sector in countering spatial inequalities, with new commitments being made to provide funding for Research and Development (R&D) and business support. The framework for delivery is currently based on supporting six cylinders of ‘capital’, aiming to strengthen the interconnections between physical, intangible, human, financial, social, and institutional forms of capital. It is somewhat surprising that natural ‘capital’ is missing from this approach. Given the multitude of emerging opportunities associated with investing in the environment, this omission from the levelling up framework and associated policy development must be urgently addressed. Moving forward, it is crucial that natural capital is considered to be at the heart of levelling up. There is scope for national government to provide additional support for local authorities as they develop nature recovery plans and associated economic development strategies, as being pioneered in **Britain’s Leading Edge**.

2. Increasing engagement in the policy debate about nature recovery

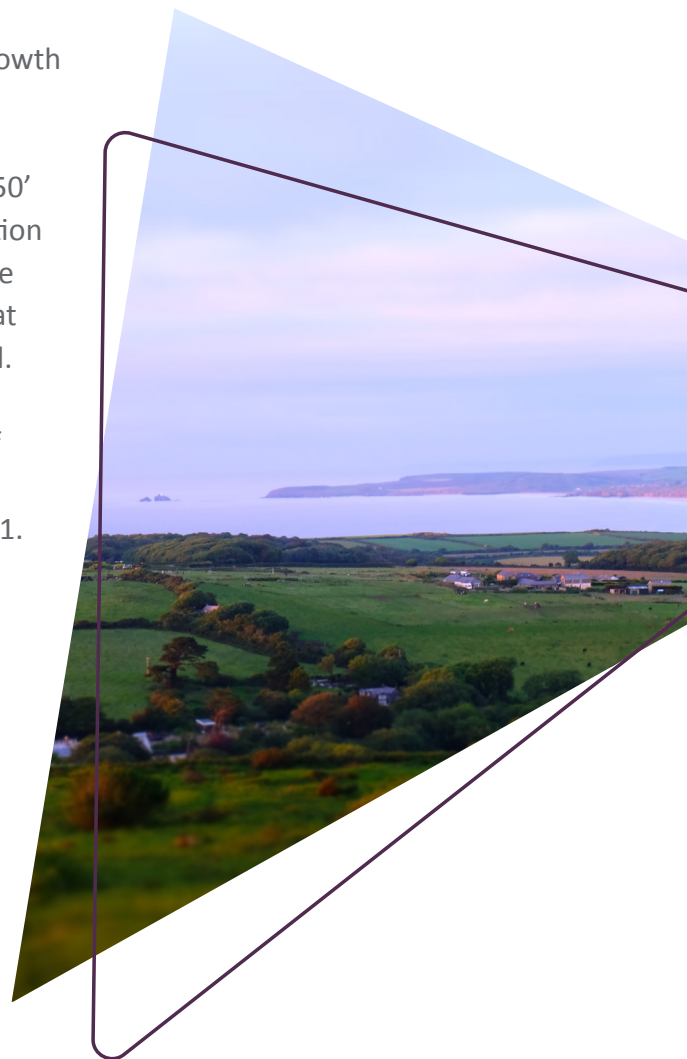
As a network, **Britain’s Leading Edge** needs to rapidly develop its understanding of the current policy debates surrounding nature recovery. As outlined in the policy review section of this report, there has been a dramatic shift in central government thinking on green investments aimed at environmental growth and nature investment in recent times. Especially in the context of the Environmental Land Management Schemes (ELMS) and Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) pilot schemes, this policy change appears to be a permanent and significant shift towards substantially investing in the environment. Equally, an extensive amount of academic and grey literature is currently being produced, outlining the case for significant change in the way we govern, invest, and interact with our local environments. Policy change is already in the pipeline, and it is regions on the Leading Edge which are going to be at the forefront of associated developments. Large scale investment in our natural assets is not going to be focused on metropolitan areas, but rather will take place in rural areas like those represented by **Britain’s Leading Edge**. While this change can be dictated by central government, it would be more successful if channelled through the development of place-based policy, allowing local authorities to become the architects of their own development. As a regional network, this means increasing the level of understanding and creating momentum in each member council of **Britain’s Leading Edge**, in order to capture what will be a growing number of opportunities in the coming months and years.

3. Developing Britain's Leading Edge as a hub of excellence

Although our understanding about nature's role in fostering vibrant, sustainable economies is relatively new, there is still time to build a substantial base of knowledge and experience in this area as applied to Leading Edge areas. It would then be possible to increase appropriate investment and provide a resource for shared learning across the network. Moreover, it is also important to acknowledge that nature recovery is not solely limited to Leading Edge and as such, there will be many other regions and local government organisations which could benefit from **Britain's Leading Edge's** leadership in the field. As a network, **Britain's Leading Edge** has the potential to become a hub of excellence on this approach, paving the way for other groups to reimagine how investments aimed at nature recovery could substantially benefit their regions as well.

4. Exploring Cornwall as a case study

Cornwall has consistently been at the forefront of new thinking around environmental growth and nature recovery. Cornwall Council's 2015 Environmental Growth Strategy was unprecedented at the time, outlining a long term plan for the sustainable stewardship of Cornwall's natural capital. 'The Cornwall Plan 2020-50' was adopted in December 2020, outlining the ambition to create resilient, zero-carbon economies with more space for nature, committing to increasing the rate at which nature on both the land and at sea is restored. Moreover, Cornwall was the first non-metropolitan area to declare a climate emergency and was one of only five areas involved in the Government's Local Nature Recovery Pilot Scheme which ran during 2021. As a member of the **Britain's Leading Edge** network, there is an opportunity for Cornwall to share its experience with other members of the network which have similar characteristics. Placing a greater emphasis on sharing lessons learned from Cornwall offers the potential to accelerate other members' thinking and their strategic responses to the opportunities provided by nature recovery.



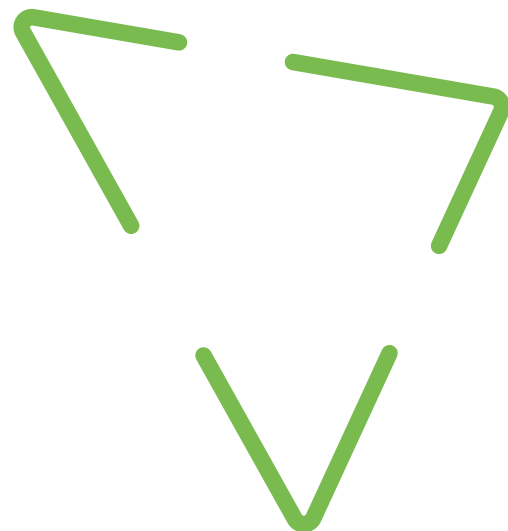
5. Raising the collective voice of Britain's Leading Edge

Leading Edge regions face critical challenges in relation to low rates of economic growth, limited local employment opportunities, and the need for more devolution. There is scope to connect these challenges to nature recovery, making a new pitch to central government about the value of environmental growth and nature recovery that benefits the nation at large. Nevertheless, collectively as a network, **Britain's Leading Edge** must be clear as to how it defines its goals moving forward. There are divergent ideas, ambitions, and associated definitions in regards to concepts such as peripherality, economic growth, and devolution across member authorities. **Britain's Leading Edge** has the potential to become a powerful collective voice for change in local governance practice and culture, yet work remains to be done to establish a clear message that unites all members around mutually agreed goals.



Regional development policy in the UK is now at a critical juncture. ‘Levelling up’ and ‘environmental growth’ are two major policy agendas for this government, promising grand changes with grand budgets attached. These agendas have also reinvigorated the academic debate on spatial inequality, encouraging a surge of innovative new research across multiple disciplines. There are many seemingly complimentary objectives in these two policy agendas; both emphasise local empowerment and both encourage the establishment of vibrant new economies. However, research into how these seemingly complementary agendas interact and overlap is still limited, and there is much to understand as to what levelling up through environmental growth could look like in practice.

The establishment of the new Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC), the recent publication of the long anticipated White Paper, and the £4.8 billion Levelling Up Fund indicates an ambitious commitment by the current government to address long-standing spatial disparities in the UK. The White Paper reconsiders the role of public policy in reshaping the UK’s social and economic geography, outlining the objectives of boosting productivity in left-behind regions, improving public services, restoring a sense of community, and empowering local agency and decision making. These regional growth objectives are located within a framework of ‘capitals’, namely: physical, human, financial, intangible, institutional, and social, cutting across private, public, and civil society sectors. The obvious ‘capital’ missing in this framework is natural capital, a core pillar underpinning environmental growth strategies. This omission warrants investigation, for levelling up provides a crucial opportunity to highlight the scope and impact of investing in natural environments for the benefit of the wider national community.



At the same time, government commitments to environmental growth and nature recovery demonstrate a drive to reimagine established approaches to conservation, agriculture, planning, climate change, health, and wellbeing. The 25 Year Environment Plan pledged a 'Green Brexit', promising a new environmental land management system which treats the environment as a public good, restoring and enhancing our natural capital assets. Policy objectives have been developed over the last four years, with the introduction of new Acts, Strategies, and Action Plans, including: the Agriculture Act, the National Food Strategy for England, the National Pollinator Strategy, the Clean Air Strategy, the Tree Resilience Strategy, the Ash Tree Research Strategy, England Trees Action Plan, England Peat Action Plan, and the Green Finance Strategy. These policy developments culminated in the new 2021 Environment Act which established a new body called the 'Office of Environmental Protection' and formalised the provision for biodiversity net gain, making it a prerequisite of planning permission moving forward in England.

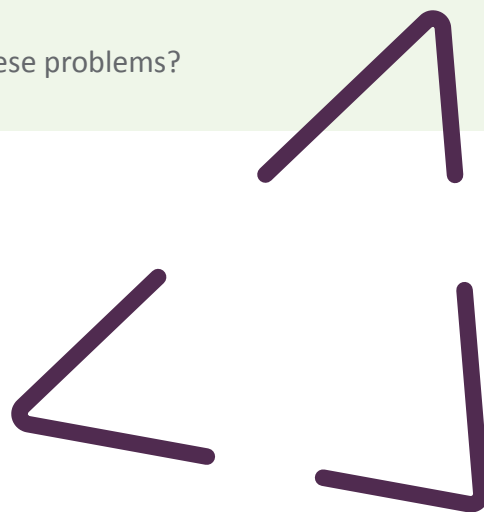
Peripheral regions sit at the crossroads of these two emerging policy agendas. While it is widely acknowledged that peripheral regions have much to offer their national economies, spatially-blind policy making has historically affected their development trajectories, privileging an urban-focused research and policy agenda. As a result, peripheral regions represent some of the places most in need of levelling up, often revealing a comparative lack of digital infrastructure, inadequate transport connections, outward migration of young people, poor access to external markets, and smaller-scale innovation networks. However, peripheral areas are also characterised by the richness of their natural assets, something so far undervalued in both policy agendas. A strategy which acknowledged the abundance of environmental assets in peripheral regions could not only reveal new development trajectories for wellbeing and prosperity, but also form a central role in underpinning the UK's transition to net zero and towards more sustainable forms of growth. A crucial element of regional development policy moving forward therefore lies in unlocking the indigenous potential of peripheral areas, adopting a more complete understanding of their unique requirements and presenting these areas with new opportunities to thrive and prosper. However, key questions remain about how to go about capturing this effectively, especially around issues of financing, local control, and public engagement.

Aims and objectives

The objective of this research paper was to identify the collective challenges and opportunities present for the **Britain's Leading Edge** network in light of the emerging levelling up and nature recovery agendas. The report builds on the ongoing relationship between Cornwall Council, **Britain's Leading Edge**, and the University of Exeter, seeking to strengthen ties within the network and establish common ground around the development of a robust policy response that accounts for the 'left behind' regions represented by **Britain's Leading Edge**. The goal is to use this report as a tool to influence decision makers, with a launch event to showcase the key findings and policy ideas.

The key questions for this research:

- What are the main ambitions in levelling up for Britain's Leading Edge?
- What does levelling up through nature recovery and environmental growth look like in practice?
- How can green investments aimed at nature recovery be used to benefit peripheral regions?
- What are the key challenges in facilitating nature recovery for regions on the 'edge'?
- What are the potential solutions to these problems?

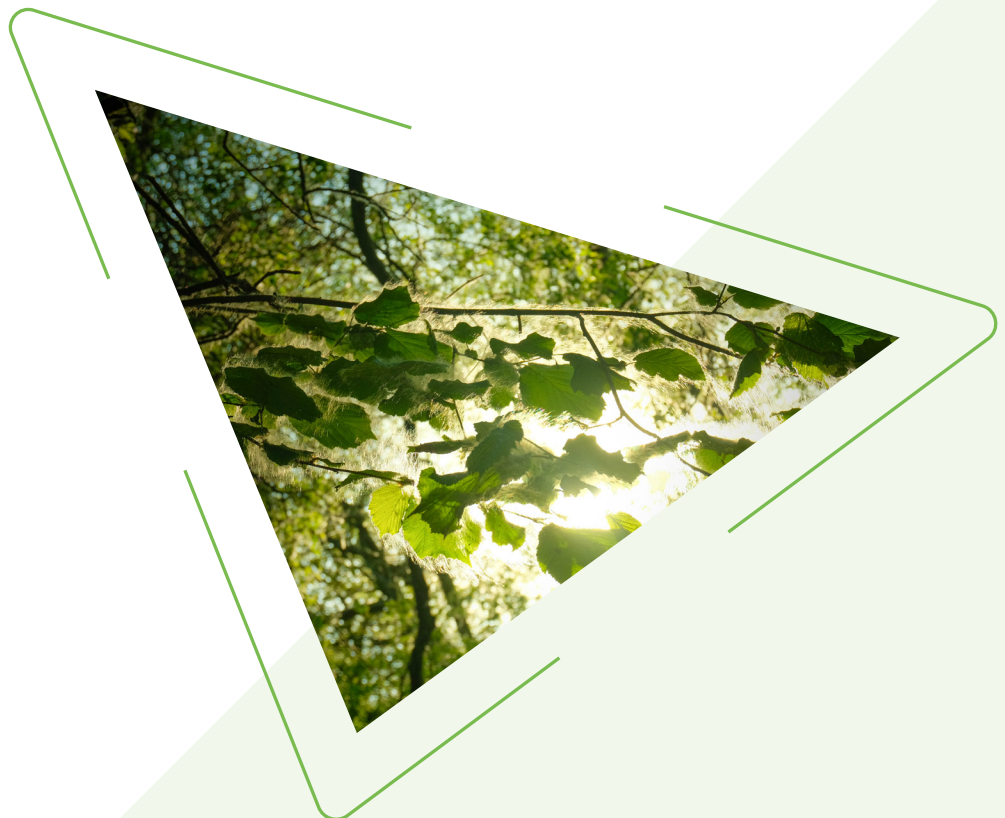


Methodology

A series of qualitative, semi-structured interviews were undertaken with members of the **Britain's Leading Edge** network, forming the core component of the data presented in this report. The aim of these interviews was to expand on the main themes from the literature, building a detailed picture of how **Britain's Leading Edge** is collectively responding to the levelling up agenda. This data was supported by a literature review which covered the main recent policy developments in relation to environmental growth and nature recovery. The paper forms part of a larger PhD project, sponsored by Cornwall Council, exploring the impact and opportunities of investing in the natural environment for **Britain's Leading Edge** regions.

Research ethics

All participants were contacted via email, and an information sheet outlining the goals of the research project and what their participation would involve was attached. After agreeing to interview, an ethical consent form in line with the university's policy was sent out to be signed and returned. All interviews were conducted online via mediums such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom. The interviews were fully transcribed and coded using NVivo. This material has been anonymised, and selected quotes are presented as part of the research findings below.



EMERGING POLICY DEBATE ABOUT NATURE RECOVERY



Introduction

A defining challenge of our times lies in finding tenable solutions to the climate and ecological crises. Recent years have seen an explosion of grey literature on the subject, and an unprecedented number of high-level government policy responses. These emerging government responses demonstrate a drive to reimagine established approaches to conservation, agriculture, planning, climate change, health, and wellbeing. The scope of this policy review outlines 'green' policies pertaining to farming, forestry, land-change use, and peatlands primarily. Charting proposed changes to the other forms of 'blue' natural capital including rivers, inland waterways, and marine environments is beyond the scope of this paper.

Green growth still remains the dominant vision at the national government level. Heralded as the ultimate win-win by neoclassical environmental economists, green growth aims to find positive synergies between economic development and environmental preservation (Sandberg *et al*, 2019). Moreover, green growth advocates argue that ecological degradation has been primarily caused by market failures, and technological development or investments will stimulate the new forms of economy, decoupling economic growth from further environmental degradation (Mastini *et al*, 2021). Monetising parts of the natural world and improving the resource efficiency of technologies (e.g. electric vehicles) are therefore key elements of national strategy, permitting the continuation of production and consumption while negating the harmful environmental impacts of the current financial system (Sandberg *et al*, 2019).

Nevertheless, with the introduction of Local Nature Recovery Strategy pilot schemes and outlined plans for the agricultural transition post Brexit, the government has begun to demonstrate ambitions to reimagine investing in nature beyond its impact on economic development. Moreover, these are ambitions with increasingly large pots of funding attached to them. Therefore, this policy review has been conducted to outline some of the key policy developments supporting environmental growth and nature recovery, highlighting the most important publications which demonstrate the trajectory of government thinking.

Green growth

After the OECD published its Green Growth Strategy *Towards Green Growth* in 2011, domestic policy responses began to snowball. The *Going Green for Growth* pamphlet produced by the EU in 2013 outlined the ambition to scale up decarbonisation and expand carbon trading. The paper argued for the untapped growth opportunities of climate action and the low carbon business boom, suggesting “in Europe in the last twenty years, economic growth has been decoupled from increasing carbon emissions” (Green Growth Group, 2013). The *UK Clean Growth Strategy* (2017) built on the *Industrial Strategy* (2016) and the *Climate Change Act* (2008), laying out the government roadmap to provide support to businesses for improving their energy productivity, demonstrating international leadership in carbon storage, accelerating the development of low carbon transport, and establishing a £14 million Energy Entrepreneurs Fund. The *UK Clean Growth Strategy* also sought to develop ‘world leading green finance capabilities’ by establishing a Green Finance Taskforce to maximise the UK’s share of the international green finance markets. This strategy anticipated the landmark *25 Year Environment Plan* published in 2018, which promised a ‘Green Brexit’ calling for an improved approach to land use including agriculture, forestry, and fishing. The Plan also included an ambitious new framework for nature recovery, encouraging the private sector to develop markets for and invest in nature recovery as a route to increased carbon sequestration and climate resilience.

The *State of the Environment 2020* report led by the Environment Agency outlined the economic benefits of maintaining a healthy environment, including the social and health costs to be saved due to reductions in factors like flooding, noise pollution, and antimicrobial resistance. For example, the paper outlines how the total social cost of noise pollution from road traffic is estimated to be over £9 billion annually, including health costs and productivity losses. Moreover, the NHS could save close to £2 billion annually in treatment costs, if England established more equitable, good quality green spaces. One of the latest papers *Regulating for People, the Environment and Growth 2020* (published in October 2021) references the effects of the coronavirus pandemic and how nature has been experienced as a coping and healing mechanism. It notes how COVID has ‘shed a light on the depth of environmental inequalities’ and the implications for the economy and wellbeing. It pledges to create a more resilient nation in the face of climate change, supporting economic growth and the levelling up agenda, and improving regulation so that communities and the environment are better protected.



Natural capital

A key component of the modern economic system is a heightened financial interest in and engagement with the natural world (Ouma *et al.*, 2018). This interest is part of a wider, ongoing financialisation of the economy, whereby economic activity is being moved away from primary production, manufacturing, and services, towards financial investments such as currency trading, insurance, and asset management (Mawdsley, 2018). The 21st Century has witnessed the introduction of a number of emerging fields linked to increasing financial engagement with nature, such as: mitigation schemes; payment for ecosystem services; and carbon markets. In brief, the concept of natural capital emerged in the 1970s and grew from Capital Theory in economics, achieving attention in the EU-project CRITINC (Brand, 2009). Natural Capital is used as a concept to join together economic and ecological thought and position the environment as a foundation underpinning economic development (Butcher, 2006). However, the term has emerged to predominately refer to the management and utility of the environment, focusing on the natural assets which produce ecosystem services, which in turn underpin our wellbeing. It is thus an ‘anthropocentric framing’, a concept which contextualises the natural world in respect to the value generated for society, considering the stocks of its assets and the flows of its services (Bateman and Mace, 2020).

The UK has been a pioneer in the development of natural capital accounting, starting with a 2011 ONS/ Defra funded programme which sought to compile a broad set of accounts and statistics for this field (Dasgupta, 2011). In 2012 the Natural Capital Committee (NCC) was formed to advise government and recommend policies which promoted the sustainable use of our natural assets. The NCC produced seven high-level reports between 2013 and 2021, highlighting the value of the nation’s natural assets. Thus, understanding the economic limits to environmental exploitation, emphasised by the natural capital framework, is equally important to its use in policy (Butcher, 2006). However, a central challenge remains in understanding the relationships between the stock of natural capital assets, and the often elusive and indirect wellbeing benefits to society which come from them. A further complication lies in accurately quantifying biodiversity and ecosystem values, where habitats often present a range of diverse services, like recreational facilities, carbon capture, flood protection, and air purification (Bright *et al.*, 2019). However, this has been further explored in the high-profile *Dasgupta Review* (2021). Commissioned by the Treasury, this review outlined how the global community has collectively mishandled our natural assets, and calls for a reconstruction of ecological-economic thinking, including a sharper focus on natural capital accounting.



Biodiversity

A report published by the Natural History Museum (NHM) in 2020 revealed that the UK has lost 50% of its natural biodiversity since the industrial revolution; the worst performing G7 nation, the third worst in Europe, and in the bottom 10% of countries globally (Davis, 2020). The NHM team who published the report developed a new Biodiversity Intactness Index, suggesting that the UK has 'led the world in degrading the natural environment' (Davis, 2020). Similarly, the 2019 *State of Nature* report by the National Biodiversity Network presented a detailed overview of biodiversity and abundance in the UK, reviewing pressures caused by invasive species, pollution, urbanisation, climate change, and agricultural management. The report found a 13% average species decline per year across 696 terrestrial and freshwater species (Hayhow *et al*, 2019).

Subsequently the UK government has introduced a number of high-level reports outlining the case for the change. The *25 Year Environment Plan* in 2018 was a seminal report, calling for an improved approach to land use including a focus on agriculture, forestry, and fishing, by delivering a 'Green Brexit'. The Plan also promised the development of a Nature Recovery Network. This network was introduced in 2020, aiming to contribute to three of society's biggest challenges: climate change, biodiversity loss, and wellbeing. Nature recovery aims to enhance sites already designated for nature conservation, improve the landscape's resilience to climate change, provide natural solutions to sequester carbon, sustain vital ecosystems, reinforce the natural and cultural diversity of landscapes, and enable us to enjoy and connect with nature. The policy is designed to restore 75% of protected sites on land, create or restore 500,000 hectares of additional wild areas, and increase woodland cover by 2042. At the same time the government released the *Building Partnerships for Nature's Recovery* document, which called for creating new spaces for nature to thrive, not simply recovering nature through special sites and reserves. The paper also called for new ways to assess the health of the natural environment. To achieve this it advocated for establishing greater collaborative action, whereby a wider range of people, organisations, communities, and partnerships come together for environmental benefit.

The *Dasgupta Review* 2021 highlighted that current human demands on the environment must be curbed and nature's supply increased, and made the case for replacing GDP as the main measure of economic wealth with something that incorporates the economic cost of nature depletion. Dasgupta also advocated for restructuring the global financial system so it is better able to invest in and enhance our nature assets, demanding that natural capital reporting should be developed to boost assessment frameworks. For Dasgupta, a combination of both legislative and market based approaches will be needed moving forward, with environmental education becoming a cornerstone of national policy. These recent papers culminated in the 2021 Environment Act¹, which introduced a new body called the 'Office for Environmental Protection'. It also formalised the provision for including biodiversity net gain as a new condition of planning permission in England. Furthermore, the 2021 Parliamentary Report *Biodiversity in the UK: bloom or bust?* advocated for the UK playing a leadership role in addressing biodiversity loss by demonstrating 'transformative action'. The report also recommends an increased level of investment in green jobs, specifically in the training and skills for ecologists and associated disciplines.



1. Available here: www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2021/30/contents/enacted

Farming

Brexit has forced a radical change in ideas about farming and its support, and the government is in the process of implementing the ‘biggest change in agricultural policy in half a century’ (George Eustice, Path to Sustainable Farming). The *25 Year Environment Plan* refers to building a new environmental land management system, treating the environment as a ‘public good’, designing incentives for land managers to restore and improve natural capital and rural heritage. The Plan outlines intentions to create an ambitious new framework for peat restoration, as well as a new policy framework for woodland expansion, concurrently strengthening domestic offset mechanisms which would encourage the private sector to invest and develop markets for carbon reduction.

Defra’s 2018 policy paper *Health and Harmony: the future for food, farming and the environment in a Green Brexit* reflects these ideas, referencing the ‘flawed’ nature of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and the ‘opportunity for fundamental reform’. The paper highlights how the CAP often worked to undermine incentives for productivity enhancement, was limited by bureaucracy, and provided poor value for the taxpayers. Most importantly, the CAP was weighed down by regulatory limits and failed to reward farmers for promoting the environment. As such, the paper lays out the case for fundamental reform of agricultural and land management policy, including incentivising farmers to create new habitats, reduce flooding, increase biodiversity, and mitigate climate change. It also proposes a plan for the phasing out the Direct Payments and introduces the central idea ‘public money for public goods’.



In 2020 Defra released a policy statement called *The future for food, farming and the environment: policy statement* which reflected consultations with land managers and farmers, acknowledging the vital role farmers play as stewards of land and the critical need to protect our natural assets. The statement provided specific details of the new ELMs and the agricultural transition period, outlining the ‘three tiers’ of the scheme. The tiers included environmentally sustainable farming and forestry, supporting local land managers to deliver targeted environmental outcomes, and delivering landscape land-use change projects. In July 2020, Defra released the *National Food Strategy for England*, which was framed in the context of the harmful nature of the current food system; how it contributes to deforestation, freshwater pollution, and biodiversity loss. The Strategy recommended around one third of the new ELMs budget should be spent on restoring nature and sequestering carbon, producing fundamental change to the way we use land. It recommended the creation of a ‘Rural Land Use Framework’, incorporating the three compartment model of semi-natural land, land sharing, and land sparing. This framework also requires the development of a new ‘National Rural Land Map’, supplying detailed assessments of how each given area of land would be best-suited moving forward.

The *Agricultural Transition Plan 2021-2024* was laid out by Defra in late 2020, outlining the plan to reduce and eventually stop Direct Payments to farmers, between 2021 and 2027, seeking a more flexible and co-designed approach to policy with farmers. The Plan states that between 2022 and 2023, Direct Payments to farmers will be reduced by 15%, with the core elements of ELM rolled out, more funding will be made available for the legacy Countryside Stewardship scheme, a slurry investment scheme will be offered, and new stand-alone programmes which support tree planting, peatland restoration, and nature recovery will be introduced. A new industry-led innovation and R&D scheme will be launched, as well as an exit and entry support scheme for farmers. Between 2024 and 2028, there will be a full roll out of the ELMs. By the end of 2024, the Basic Payment Schemes will have reduced by 50%, and any residual payments will also be phased out, with the last to be paid in 2027. Further to all this, the Agriculture Act was introduced in England in 2020, pledging to phase out Basic Payments in England by 2028 and to formally introduce the new Environmental Land Management System. It also committed to improving the productivity and technology on farms, and work towards meeting the UK targets to reduce emissions as laid out in the *25 Year Environment Plan*.



Woodland and peatland creation

The government has also taken strides to support the recovery of the UK's woodlands and peatlands, two major priorities identified in the Dasgupta report. In 2018 Defra produced the *Tree Health Resilience Strategy* which set out a plan to strengthen the UK's trees to withstand pests and diseases, reduce the impacts of other pressures like climate change, and limit the entrance of new biosecurity threats. The strategy proposes to achieve this through three desired outcomes: Resistance, Response and Recovery, and Adaption. In light of the Ash dieback problem, Defra, Forest Research, and the Forest Commission produced the *Ash Tree Research Strategy* in 2019, aimed at providing a roadmap for research to support Ash Tree policy priorities for the next five years.

In May 2021, Defra released two important policy papers: *England Trees Action Plan 2021-2024* and *England Peat Action Plan*. The former commits to 12% tree cover by the mid-century, facilitating the development of a new economy of woodland creation and management, backed by greater private investment. The *England Trees Action Plan 2021-2024* references 'levelling up' through a thriving forestry sector, where the UK reduces timber imports, encourages innovative green finance, and upskills the workforce. It also acknowledges the role that woodland plays in mental health and wellbeing, contributing to improved air quality, and fostering a sense of place. In terms of investment, the government has committed to allocate £500 million of the £640 million Nature for Climate Fund to trees and woodlands between 2020 and 2025, with the goal of 'at least treble woodland creation by the end of this parliament.'

The *England Trees Action Plan 2021-2024* also commits to establishing new Woodland Creation Partnerships to support local capacity and ambition. The *England Peat Action Plan* aims to prevent further peatland habitat loss and promote restoration by developing a detailed map of peatlands by 2024 and funding at least 35,000 ha by 2025. A new lowland Agricultural Peat Task Force was launched in January 2021, and will develop recommendations over the next 18 months. In terms of investment, £8 million was already invested in peatland restoration in 2020/2021. Moreover, the recently launched Nature for Climate Peatland Grant Scheme intends to invest £50 million into peatland restoration by 2025. Post 2025, the main delivery mechanism for peatland restoration will be the ELMS.



RESEARCH FINDINGS



Once the interviews were recorded and transcribed using Otter.ai, the text was processed using the data analysis software NVivo. NVivo facilitated the coding of the transcripts to identify the most relevant and frequently discussed points. The goal was to pull from the data a set of themes which captured **Britain's Leading Edge** thinking on nature recovery in relation to levelling up. However, nature recovery was only discussed in detail by six of the interviewees, and codes emerged around other challenges facing peripheral regions as outlined in Table 1. This section highlights the top five most discussed issues around levelling up, before issues related to nature recovery are explored in more depth.

Theme	Frequency
Digital connectivity issues	6
Upskilling opportunities	6
Tourism	5
Devolution	5
Social mobility	5
Farming / Agricultural transition	5
Reconsidering 'growth'/ capitalism	5
Funding challenges	4
Working more collaboratively	4
Housing shortage	4
Transport challenges	4
Peripheral framing	4
Good quality jobs	3
Stimulating a 'green economy'	3
Renewable opportunities	2
Increasing and measuring 'productivity'	2
Greater community engagement	1
Ageing populations	1

TABLE 1

The most commonly reported challenges faced by Britain's Leading Edge areas in relation to levelling up.

Challenges of levelling up

Framing the debate

Many council interviewees highlighted particular challenges in regards to the way that the concept of levelling up frames rural and peripheral regions; often being presented as 'behind' or 'marginal to' the centre. There was a perception that central government failed to recognise and value rural and peripheral areas, as well as complaints about the underestimation of the contribution they make to the national economy. For example, one interviewee described how *"the rural is often perceived as commuter villages or farms,"* while another suggested that peripheral areas are often treated as an afterthought in policy development, being seen predominately as *"the place where people go and live when they've left their city job."* As such, there was a general consensus that there was great value in collaborating to ensure that rural and peripheral local authorities had the opportunity to frame the debate themselves.

In so doing, however, interviewees were divided on how to move forward to maximise opportunities within the levelling up agenda. There was a general consensus that peripheral areas such as those represented by **Britain's Leading Edge** are difficult to define, and face challenges in terms of generating an effective narrative to sell nationally, with one respondent concluding, *"people understand what a city is, and people understand what a rural village is, and what you try and say is this is a bit of a mix of both, and they struggle to get that concept."* Using the word 'peripheral' as a descriptor for **Britain's Leading Edge** areas divided opinion, with some approving of the freshness of the term, while others remained sceptical. One interviewee commented, *"I am bored beyond belief about hearing people talk about coastal communities and how deprived they are"* adding, *"I genuinely believe peripherality is really, really important and something that we lose sight of."* However, not all agreed, with some interviewees commenting on the negative overtones associated with 'peripheral', arguing that the word suggests these areas are marginal to the core of the nation and therefore not significant. Another participant similarly suggested that, *"Peripheral does imply, sort of, we're not that important,"* with another agreeing, saying, *"I think that in itself, I mean, you say peripheral and it makes us feel unimportant. Well, that's probably where we are."* One interviewee described the importance of **Britain's Leading Edge** communications needing to avoid *"a self-fulfilling prophecy that we're at the bottom of the heap all the time."*

Digital connectivity

Many interviewees outlined the perpetual challenges associated with slow Wi-Fi and mobile connectivity speeds in their areas. There was a general consensus that the pandemic, along with an increase in people working from home, has escalated digital connectivity issues. One interviewee noted that while superfast broadband coverage was at around 97% in their area, *“it’s just the very remote, isolated, rural properties that are still left [and] we’ve got to crack.”* Another respondent highlighted the range of new products on the market which now require lightning fast speeds, suggesting that *“what most people don’t see at the minute is the benefit of having super, super, super fast (broadband) as opposed to just super, super fast.”*

This idea was developed by one interviewee who highlighted the need to upgrade the entire electrical system throughout the area to make it fit for the emerging green transition. They added that *“we’re going to have to have a big change in the way electricity is generated and distributed.”* This point was picked up by another respondent, who talked about the importance of connectivity for the operations of local, high value businesses with global reach. While lifestyle may have brought the business owners into the region, improved digital infrastructure is argued to be crucial for them to grow, *“they are struggling at the moment in terms of getting the right level of bandwidth that they require to really progress their business in terms of digital connectivity.”* Thus, upgrading the digital infrastructure was argued to be fundamentally important for **Britain’s Leading Edge** authorities.



Local employment

Maintaining high quality education was found to be a persistent challenge for peripheral regions. One interviewee noted how low performance in education across the region led to a critical imbalance in the labour market with *“too few people at level one in terms of skills and not enough people at level four in terms of NVQs.”* In terms of local employment opportunities, the seasonality and low quality jobs in rural and coastal regions was discussed by many respondents. People reported that too many jobs were predominately associated with *“cafés and tourism that might not be exciting enough or well paid enough.”* One interviewee also highlighted the challenges faced in trying to train staff for higher quality jobs in areas dominated by coastal seasonal employment, saying *“we cannot train our staff during the summer, because they’re so busy,”* adding that it also proved difficult to recruit more highly trained staff from outside. However, there were also seen to be positive sides to the ‘seasonality’ of the economy, and one respondent had conducted a survey recently revealing that *“something like 40% of the people we spoke to said they’re not bothered about seasonality,”* and many local people appeared happy with working hard in the summer, and spending *“the winter in Benidorm, being warm, and resting, and relaxing.”*

Social mobility and aspirations

The aspirations of young people in peripheral and rural areas was mentioned consistently by the interviewees as being in need of attention. One council respondent described the way that education currently lacks a focus on enabling young people to build bigger ambitions for themselves. In describing this problem, another interviewee said, *“there’s many people staying [here now] with low ambition, with a fairly insular outlook on life.”* Another respondent described how their area is split into two distinct groups: one cohort who are content with the status quo and *“quite happy to accept the way things are. So they can go walking, they can go cycling, they can go surfing, so what they’ll do is they’ll take a relatively low paid job, and kind of accept that.”* The second, much smaller group are those *“who want to move away and, then once they’ve gone away, they will not come back for a period of time.”* The objective for this interviewee was to develop the aspirations of the first group, to encourage them to try new things elsewhere, to *“see their life can be a little bit different, but they also find opportunities for them to come back. It’s the lack of opportunity to come back [that] I think is really difficult.”*

The lack of local opportunities to inspire young people was described as a challenge across the board, with the requirement to travel to access high value, high paying jobs being a significant influence on young people's decision to remain or leave. One interviewee described how their area has some of the *"best qualified 18 year olds, and some of the worst qualified 20 year olds,"* suggesting the retention of skilled young people in the area is a persistent challenge without sufficient high value jobs being available locally to incentivise them to remain. Many agreed with the supposition that the most important factor was not desperately holding on to young people, but cultivating a local work environment that provided young people with the choice to remain if they wished, with one interviewee quoting from a recent community project *"I'd hate my children to have to move away, when they wanted to stay."*

Devolution

The appetite for greater devolution was mentioned frequently amongst the interviewees, emerging as a key focus for local councils on the periphery. Many highlighted the problems associated with the highly centralised nature of our political system and the perceived 'controlling' nature of Westminster, with one respondent referencing a report which said *"next to Albania, we're the most centrally controlled country in Europe."* Some interviewees highlighted the limit to how much Government can understand about peripheral areas from their macro-scale and centralised agenda, unable to see, as one person put it, *"how it all hangs together, really, and then the knock on implications of one to the other, to the other, to the other."* Despite the general enthusiasm for the idea of devolution, however, there was still some confusion amongst council respondents as to the specific details associated with the different stages of devolution, with one interviewee reporting that it's *"still a bit opaque as to what these next tiers of devolution look like. I mean, nobody seems to know."*

Nevertheless, some also raised concerns, suggesting that devolution could potentially be used as a mechanism for national government to pin failing policies or unpopular economic decisions on local areas, with the potential for *"government to do a blame game and pass the buck."* One interviewee highlighted how different people and organisations address policies completely differently over time, whether they're regionally based or not, suggesting that while *"additional powers can be beneficial, they obviously can also be misused locally as much as they can nationally."* An important critique of devolution came from a respondent addressing the funding side of the agenda, suggesting that local areas expecting to pay for additional projects through council tax will only be able to do this in areas with an already high council tax base, adding *"those areas that are already rich, the rich will get richer, and the poor get poorer. So there has to be a degree of central control over that."*

Ambitions for economic growth

Opinions about the concept of economic growth varied amongst the interviewees. For some, economic growth was seen as a core pillar of levelling up, and increasing productivity in their region remained a fundamental objective. One respondent further described the emphasis on growth as being important in relation to the declining communities in their region, saying *“from our point of view we would see growth as twofold: one is about place, and one is business,”* adding, *“from a place perspective, we need growth.”* Other advocates of economic growth pointed towards productivity being a critical priority, saying *“from our perspective we see levelling up as being about raising productivity, and in doing so, raising opportunities for people, whether they’re out of the labour market, or unemployed.”* Nevertheless, even from pro-growth advocates there was scepticism about the notion of productivity gains being made across the entire region, with one interviewee suggesting *“it’s quite hard to it make it more productive when your main areas are the care market and also the utility sector.”* Likewise, Gross Value Added (GVA) as a measure for determining investment and levelling up was met with scepticism, with many interviewees being in favour of a more balanced accounting of regional potential. One interviewee summed this up, saying that *“you have to look at things more in the round. [GVA] is a bit of a hard metric.”*

Many of those interviewed were in favour of a broader definition of growth, which accounts for and includes a wider range of values. Most were in favour of growth that was compatible with the environment, focusing on green solutions to development challenges. As an example, one interviewee said that they understood growth to encompass many things, *“but it isn’t putting in big, filth belching factories in the countryside or anything like that. It’s, I suppose, sustainable growth.”* This view was reflected by another interviewee, who stated that growth is associated with a number of negative overtones for people in their county, *“because they immediately think it means lots more houses or industry, [and] some of that destroys the green environment.”* Some interviewees went further, reflecting a disdain for the word in general.

One respondent said, *“I don’t like the concept of growth, it’s a tainted word,”* adding, *“I think we need to roll back to language that people understand.”* This idea of developing the focus away from growth was highlighted by another interviewee, who said, *“I can’t stand the obsession with economic growth. I think it would be better to have, you know, a sustained, happy, healthy (approach).”* A point of wide agreement among the interviewees centred on emphasising people within plans, with one saying that, *“the first thing that we absolutely must consider is the impact on people who are already here.”* Many added to this point, agreeing that emphasis should be on creating common opportunities that are of benefit to the entire region and its people, as one interviewee put it, we want *“change, but change in a way that has benefits for everybody. At the moment we’ve got communities that are declining, becoming unsustainable, so there needs to be some measures but it’s not about GVA, it’s also about the natural environment, the quality of life.”*

Opportunities from investing in nature

The economic impacts of nature recovery

There are a number of ways in which investing in the natural world generates substantial economic opportunities for the surrounding region. Understanding the extent of these emerging connections between nature and the economy, and designing relevant policies which strengthen them, remains relatively new thinking in government, with nature appearing in relatively few national economic indicators. The consequences of nature's historic omission from government policy decision making means that *"resources are not being allocated efficiently within the economy and opportunities for significant gains in wellbeing and future growth are being lost"* (NCC1: 7). The development of effective policy begins with a basic recognition that most economic activity, and thus human wellbeing, is predicated upon a healthy and sustainable natural world. However, this premise was not brought up by many of the interviewees from **Britain's Leading Edge**, with only six mentioning investment in nature as a key objective for levelling up. Moreover, the development of local policy frameworks promoting nature recovery or environmental growth was limited.

Yet, among those who did talk about nature recovery and its links to their local economy, the level of understanding and ambition was high. For example, one interviewee noted how *"the starting point was [strong] in our area, because of how much the natural underpins activity,"* adding, *"I think this kind of recognition within the council is through a variety of things; there is an importance of the environment to the economy, so it's driving the agricultural economy or the tourism."* For this interviewee, the agriculture and tourism sectors prevalent in their area provided the starting point for future discussions about nature recovery in general as well as its effects on the economic prospects of the region.



One interviewee talked about the thriving new businesses, products, and services which have developed in their region because of the desire to see the natural environment enhanced, adding *“whether it’s using marine plastics recovered from the sea, or recycling biodegradable surfboards, there’s whole industries that have developed here.”* Among those who spoke of environmental protection, climate adaptation, and nature recovery, there was a strong desire to see it much better represented at the national planning level through the shared prosperity and levelling up agendas, with one interviewee describing it as an uphill battle for nature development to be recognised *“so that it’s not just all about spaceports.”* In this regard, some interviewees queried the potential links between nature and the economy, highlighting the challenges of making these connections. One interviewee brought up GVA, saying *“how much GVA are we talking about potentially being generated by Local Conservation action? I don’t know and we don’t have a clear estimate for that”* adding, *“other than saying, we think there’s a positive impact, we don’t have a particularly robust, formal way of estimating that presence locally. We have spoken recently about trying to get towards such models.”*

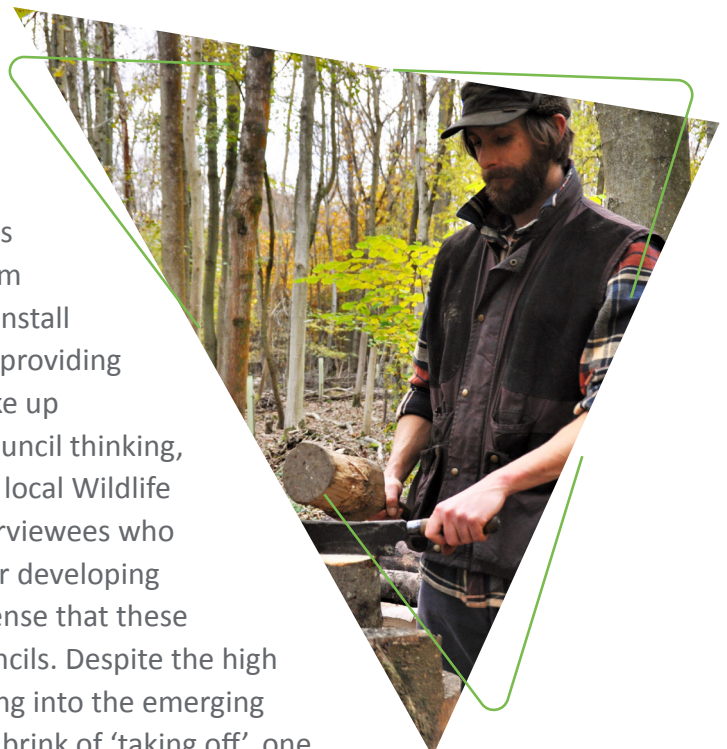
Nature-based jobs

Investing in nature comes with the increased opportunities for jobs and upskilling within the local area. Some interviewees referenced the dearth of skilled people who could be employed in the nature recovery and land management sectors, highlighting the critical need to invest in relevant training and education programmes. One interviewee described the *“chronic shortage”* of skilled ecologists and farm advisors in their area, and was keen to distinguish nature-based opportunities from other green growth employment, which often get tied together, noting, *“we’ve talked to death about insulation, renewable technologies and those nano-technologies, but actually, I think there’s this huge potential for nature-based skills, especially with the ELMS coming down the line.”*

While a number of sectors were highlighted by interviewees as potential areas for massive expansion, including work on peatlands, marine, and wetlands, the area discussed most frequently in terms of jobs was in the burgeoning forestry sector. Of all the environmental jobs that may be developed in the near future, one interviewee noted that *“the more tangible one is woodland creation. There are vast, vast numbers of jobs that will be created through the need and the desire and the push nationally to plant more trees.”*

Some agreed, highlighting how the demand to grow more trees and acquire more woodland nurseries doesn't yet equal the number of skilled people available locally to facilitate the growth. One interviewee noted, *"How do we get more people who know how to do these things? So straight off, you've got jobs and skills and business growth in the mix already, but they're not really being taught for this huge potential"*. Another interviewee emphasised how the desire to learn nature-based skills, especially in the forestry sector, was there locally, but that desire has not yet been matched by adequate educational provision. They knew about a locally run course on woodland creation, but noted how *"we're booked up for 18 months."* Others even saw opportunities for expanding nature-based jobs well beyond the environment sector. For example, one interviewee described how there are emerging jobs like software engineering for flood management, as well as more *"mainstream"* jobs like plumbing, decorating, and hairdressing that offer the opportunity to capitalise on nature investment, adding, *"there's market potential there, those people are already exploiting it for people that want eco-window cleaning."*

However, in general it was only still a minority of interviewees who saw potential in nature-based employment. One interviewee described how their council was very market led on all things related to the environment, having policies like 'green business toolkits' for the tourism sector, and courses teaching plumbers to install heat pumps instead of gas boilers. As yet, providing opportunities to upskill local people to take up nature-based roles was not top priority council thinking, instead being left to organisations like the local Wildlife Trusts and the RSPB. Even among the interviewees who spoke in depth about the opportunities for developing nature-based employment, there was a sense that these ideas were not yet a main priority for councils. Despite the high levels of support for working groups looking into the emerging green jobs and skills, sectors being on the brink of 'taking off', one interviewee concluded, *"It's almost a bit too peripheral currently to be anyone's jobs except mine. As soon as I kind of do it, people will probably embrace it and want to find a way to do it."* Two interviewees independently referenced the desire for their regions to become *"hubs of excellence"* or *"centres of excellence"* for nature based employment, imagining a growing sector that upskills local people to contribute towards a new, fast developing kind of development that supports employment alongside nature recovery.



Local land ownership

Some interviewees highlighted the potential for changing of land ownership alongside investing in nature, and the positive impacts this may have for local communities. One interviewee described the current understanding of communities as being very *“human centric,”* and they advocated a fundamental change in our local cultural norms by *“bringing in the natural world.”* For some, ‘bringing in the natural world’ through investment and employment opportunities offers the potential to fundamentally shift the way land is owned and utilised, presenting the case for more collective local ownership over the benefits and ecosystem services that nature provides. For example, one interviewee described potential changes in land ownership as *“an alternative option, where for instance, we use the opportunities of nature recovery to engage in, if not land purchases, then at least the devolution of various pockets of land to local communities for their ownership and control for natural outcomes, that would be incredible.”*

These ideas were referred to with caution by some, especially in the context of the commercial opportunities posed by local nature recovery that could mean ‘green-grabbing’ of land as its value increases. For example, one interviewee described how they are *“concerned that what it might lead to is swathes of land being acquired to support carbon offsetting or biodiversity net gain, and actually, there are examples out there where it’s already happening for commercial advantage.”* Another described a similar scenario in terms of a *“dystopia”*, due to pockets of land being bought and owned solely to offset the impact of big businesses elsewhere. While these reflections indicate how reimagining land ownership through nature investment is still in its early days, they also demonstrate how some local areas are already reimagining the possible opportunities of this agenda for levelling up.



Fostering resilience

Some of the interviewees recognised the beneficial impacts of growing nature for strengthening the resilience of their regions. For most, this took the form of understanding how a quality environment is intrinsically linked to more sustainable forms of economic growth. For example, one interviewee described how *“a stable environment, without massive flood risks, drought, dirty air etc. can lead to a more sustained and flourishing economy.”* Another discussed the potential impact that flooding and coastal erosion had on large companies in their area. They recognised that *“big businesses along the estuary [are] embracing climate change, creating offshore wind power and these sorts of things, but also [they] could be highly affected by it with supply chain disruption,”* adding that this is an *“opportune time to sort of say, well let’s look at these things together.”* In the context of regional resilience fostered through nature recovery, a point which remained unaddressed was the potential for environmental growth to lead to new development pathways for peripheral regions. For example, in the context of an evolutionary understanding of resilience, diversifying the economy to include more truly sustainable forms of employment, such as nature-based sectors, could offer the region increased opportunities to resist conventional external economic as well as climate shocks, on the basis of having a more diverse portfolio of activity.



For many interviewees, the levelling up debate requires reframing. There was a general consensus that peripheral areas are inherently misunderstood by central government, historically left behind, and considered in policy circles only as a 'bolt on'. There was general enthusiasm for the principle of levelling up, but scepticism that suitable policy or adequate funding will materialise for peripheral regions. This frustration at the historic lack of attention and investment in **Britain's Leading Edge** areas can be compounded by using the word 'peripheral' when describing such places. The interviews revealed that the framing and narrative used to describe **Britain's Leading Edge** areas is still in debate among the members themselves. It follows therefore that more work needs to be done to establish a consistent mutually-agreed definition, and associated language and narrative that outlines the specific characteristics of **Britain's Leading Edge** regions. Successful pitches to central government in the future will require an enhanced level of collective agreement and endorsement of the language used to describe **Britain's Leading Edge** areas.

A number of timely policy priorities were mentioned by the interviewees. Digital and mobile connectivity speeds ranked highly, with many highlighting the urgent need to upgrade the local digital infrastructure, especially in rural areas. With the pandemic having required more people to work from home (a trend which is set to continue into the future), the development of electrical products which demand faster speeds, and local businesses (especially those with global reach) which require improved digital infrastructure in order to grow, it is easy to see why this issue ranked so highly. Many interviewees also referenced the challenges around providing high quality education, with a vibrant local job market to match any improvement in skills. Some pointed towards the prevalence of seasonal employment and low value sectors being a particular challenge for their areas. These concerns were tied up with reflections about the general expectations of young people, and the importance of increasing their ambitions. However, in most cases, the need to provide high quality, sustainable jobs, and increase the social mobility and ambitions of the younger generation were not connected to establishing new employment prospects through investing in nature. The green jobs and upskilling opportunities associated with nature-based employment are potentially large, yet there was little recognition of this among interviewees.

A strong appetite for devolution was revealed, despite general concerns as to what devolution could actually look like in practice. However, the opportunity for devolution to potentially bring about stronger local control over ecosystem services and the local environment was not cited as a primary reason for supporting this change. Growth was a key concept mentioned by all interviewees, both as a primary regional objective, and a point of contention. Some saw economic growth and productivity as core pillars of regional development and prosperity, while others were in favour of including a much broader range of value systems in their measures of success. It would be highly beneficial for **Britain's Leading Edge** to develop a clearer collective position on the term 'growth' and future development paths. Moreover, amongst the advocates of economic growth for their region, there was little reflection about the potential for investing in and growing the local environment upon which local businesses, goods and services, infrastructure, and communities depend.

The most important area of potential identified by interviewees was the creation of new nature recovery jobs. This was especially true for the forestry sector, where some interviewees not only outlined the opportunities in new markets and job creation, but also highlighted the strong desire locally to upskill the sector. Although acknowledged by some, the guiding principle that sustainable economic activity is predicated upon a healthy natural environment was not widely recognised during the interviews. As such, there is scope for **Britain's Leading Edge** to further explore the substantial economic opportunities which are currently being lost or unexploited. Nevertheless, among those who spoke about the economic impacts of investing in nature, the level of understanding was high, and this provides a basis for building a new narrative around levelling up by investing in nature. In this regard, it will also be important to open up a conversation around who owns what, and to what purpose land is being used. Equally, despite recognition by some interviewees of how a sustainable resilient economy is intrinsically linked to a healthy environment, the connections between the two were not widely recognised by the interviewees.



Bateman, I., and Mace, GM. (2020). The natural capital framework for sustainably efficient and equitable decision making. *Nature Sustainability*, 3, 776-783

Brand, F. (2009) Critical natural capital revisited: Ecological resilience and sustainable development. *Ecological Economics*, 68(3), 605-612

Bright, G., Connors, E., and Grice, J. (2019). Measuring natural capital: Towards accounts for the UK and a basis for improved decision-making. *Oxford Review of Economic Policy*, 35 (1) 88-108

Butcher, J. (2006). Natural capital and the advocacy of ecotourism as sustainable development. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 14 (6) 629-644

Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly Leadership Board. (2020). The Cornwall Plan 2020-50. Available at: www.cornwall.gov.uk/media/xcdhwsmu/thecornwall-plan-2020-2050.pdf

Dasgupta, P. (2021), *The Economics of Biodiversity: The Dasgupta Review*. (London: HM Treasury)

Davis, J. (2020). UK has 'led the world' in destroying the natural environment. *Natural History Museum News*. Available at: <https://www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/news/2020/september/uk-has-led-the-world-in-destroying-the-natural-environment.html>

Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. (2016). *Industrial Strategy: building a Britain fit for the future*. Policy Paper. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/industrial-strategy-building-a-britain-fit-for-the-future>

Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. (2017). *Clean Growth Strategy*. Policy paper. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/clean-growth-strategy>

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. (2018). *25 Year Environment Plan*. Policy Paper. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/25-year-environment-plan>

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. (2018). *Health and Harmony: the future for food, farming and the environment in a Green Brexit*. Policy Paper. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-future-for-food-farming-and-the-environment-policy-statement-2018/health-and-harmony-the-future-for-food-farming-and-the-environment-in-a-green-brex-it-policy-statement>

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. (2018). *Tree Health Resilience Strategy*. Policy Paper. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/tree-health-resilience-strategy-2018>

Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs., Forest Research., and Forestry Commission. (2019). *Ash tree research strategy 2019*. Policy Paper. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ash-tree-research-strategy-2019>

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. (2020). *The future for food, farming and the environment: policy statement (2020)*. Policy Paper. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-future-for-food-farming-and-the-environment-policy-statement-2020>

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. (2020). *National Food Strategy for England*. Policy Paper. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-food-strategy-for-england>

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. (2020). *Agricultural Transition Plan 2021 to 2024*. Policy Paper. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/agricultural-transition-plan-2021-to-2024>

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. (2021). *England Trees Action Plan 2021 to 2024*. Policy Paper. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/england-trees-action-plan-2021-to-2024>

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. (2021). *England Peat Action Plan*. Policy Paper. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/england-peat-action-plan>

Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. (2022). Levelling up the United Kingdom. Policy Paper. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/levelling-up-the-united-kingdom>

Environment Agency. (2021). State of the environment: health, people and the environment. Research and Analysis. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/915134/State_of_the_environment_health_people_and_the_environment.pdf

Environment Agency. (2021). Regulating for people, the environment and growth, 2020. Research and Analysis. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/regulating-for-people-the-environment-and-growth-2020>

Going Green for Growth Group. (2013). Going for Green Growth: The case for ambitious and immediate EU low carbon action. Department of Energy and Climate Change. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/going-for-green-growth-the-case-for-ambitious-and-immediate-eu-low-carbon-action>

Hayhow DB, Eaton MA, Stanbury AJ, Burns F, Kirby WB, Bailey N, Beckmann B, Bedford J, Boersch-Supan PH, Coomber F, Dennis EB, Dolman SJ, Dunn E, Hall J, Harrower C, Hatfield JH, Hawley J, Haysom K, Hughes J, Johns DG, Mathews F, McQuatters-Gollop A, Noble DG, Outhwaite CL, Pearce-Higgins JW, Pescott OL, Powney GD and Symes N (2019) The State of Nature 2019. The State of Nature partnership. Available at: <https://nbn.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/State-of-Nature-2019-UK-full-report.pdf>

House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee. (2021). Biodiversity in the UK: Bloom Or Bust? First Report of Session 2021-22. Volume 1. Available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/6498/documents/70656/default/>

Mastini, R., Kallis, G., and Hickel, J. (2021). A Green New Deal without growth? Ecological Economics. 179. 1-9. Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0921800919319615>

Mawdsley, E. (2018). Development geography II: Financialisation. Progress in Human Geography. 42 (2). 264-274

Natural England. (2020). Building partnerships for Nature's recovery. Policy Paper. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/natural-england-building-partnerships-for-natures-recovery>

OECD. (2011) Towards Green Growth. OECD Green Growth Studies. OECD publishing: Paris. Available at: <https://www.oecd.org/greengrowth/towards-green-growth-9789264111318-en.htm>

Ouma, S., Johnson, L., and Bigger, P. (2018). Rethinking the financialisation of 'nature'. Environment and Planning. 50 (3). 500-511

Sandberg, M., Klockars, K., and Wilen, K. (2019). Green growth or degrowth? Assessing the normative justifications for environmental sustainability and economic growth through critical social theory. Journal of Cleaner Production. 206. 133-141. Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0959652618329044?via%3Dihub>

