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What would it take to level up the UK's rural areas?

Many rural parts of the UK are being left behind. But in discussions of regional inequalities, such lower population areas get less attention than post-industrial towns and cities. Rural development requires investment and strategies tailored to specific circumstances, needs and priorities.

The UK government's 'levelling-up' agenda has been subject to extensive critique. But it does signal an acceptance of the need to address the country's regional inequalities, which are very high by international standards ([McCann, 2019](#)).

The patterns of spatial inequality across the UK are complex and evident across different scales. Places that seem to have been left behind include post-industrial towns and parts of the biggest city-regions outside London and the South East, as well as more rural and peripheral regions ([Davenport and Zaranko, 2020](#)).

Rural areas tend to receive less attention in discussions about reducing regional inequalities. So, what does research on regional and rural development tell us that might be relevant for any attempt to level up rural parts of the UK?

How are rural places different?

Not all rural areas are the same. There is a wide variety of places within what we might recognise as rural regions. These include urban or semi-urban towns, accessible rural areas in close proximity – or with good transport links – to cities, and more remote places, including islands.

Each of these places will have very different characteristics and needs. While we are used to seeing rural being defined in opposition to urban, the distinction is not necessarily clear cut. In fact, over time, the structure of rural economies has become increasingly similar to that of urban areas ([Lowe and Ward, 2007](#)).

While it is important to recognise this variation, a broad common set of characteristics and issues can be identified. These tend to be defined by low density of population, jobs and businesses, with few large employers and many very small firms ([Rural Economy and Land Use Programme, 2013](#)).

Rural areas do host a diverse set of activities – for example, there are around [90 rural creative industry micro-clusters across England](#). But they are also often characterised by the importance of natural assets – whether because of agriculture or forestry, tourism based on an attractive local environment or, increasingly, renewable energy generation.

Some rural places appear to be trapped in a low-skill or low-wage equilibrium due to the nature of local jobs and limited access to training ([Owen et al, 2012](#)). Levels of part-time and seasonal employment also tend to be relatively high, often as a result of ebbs and flows in tourism.

As a result, many rural places display what has been described as a paradox of high environmental value but low economic value ([Kitchin and Marsden, 2009](#)). They also face demographic challenges with disproportionately high numbers of older people for whom economic opportunities are less important ([Overman and Xu, 2022](#)). For example, in Cornwall, the number of people aged over 65 increased by 25% in the decade between 2011 and 2021, compared with a rise of just 1.7% among people aged 15-64 ([Office for National Statistics, ONS, 2022](#)).

Poverty is a significant issue in many rural areas, although this is sometimes overlooked ([Shucksmith et al, 2023](#)). One study indicates that half of the population in rural areas of the UK experienced poverty between 1991 and 2008 ([Vera-Toscano et al, 2020](#)).

Rural areas can also often be seen as peripheral. Physical distance from population centres, and limited internal and external connectivity, pose particular challenges to firms and individuals. Peripherality can also be seen more broadly as exclusion from political and economic power ([Kühn, 2013](#)).

Specifically, rural areas can find it difficult to be heard in national politics and policy, and control and ownership of economic assets often lies elsewhere. This can make them vulnerable to the effects of external decisions – for example, the town of Stranraer has been forced to [explore alternative economic](#) futures since the relocation of its ferry terminal over a decade ago. It can also mean that businesses, local authorities and community organisations in rural places can face challenges in accessing and mobilising resources for development.

What policies might be effective in levelling up rural regions?

Research based on the experiences of city-regions internationally has identified a number of elements in effective strategies to reduce regional disparities ([Taylor, 2022](#)). These include large-scale funding sustained over decades, clear vision and priorities based on local knowledge, and local and regional government with adequate powers and capacities to deliver the programmes.

These principles are likely to be applicable to rural development too, and they align with an emerging consensus on the importance of place-based approaches ([Barca et al, 2012](#)). Such approaches recognise that development is possible in all types of regions, but that different places will still need strategies that are tailored to local circumstances and which build on local assets and strengths.

Customised interventions are particularly important in rural settings with a diverse set of places where mainstream policies focused on business, growth and agglomeration may be less effective than in cities. While there may be a need for investments in infrastructure, skills development or business support in different places, these should be integrated into more holistic development strategies.

Effective place-based approaches need to draw on knowledge and resources at different levels. Local capacity is required to identify specific 'bottom-up' strengths, needs and opportunities. But this also needs to be supported from above by government. One example of it working well is in Wigtown in South West Scotland, where an evolving network of local volunteers and organisations has been able to access a variety of different funding streams over 25 years to support its reinvention as a [centre for book-based tourism](#).

This indicates that meaningful interventions are likely to require resources from government, but that local stakeholders should have a degree of autonomy over how and to what ends the resources are deployed. The European Union (EU) LEADER programme for rural areas – discontinued in the UK since Brexit – was an example of this approach that aimed to empower local organisations ([Bosworth et al, 2016](#)).

A more coherent national approach to rural development might also require policy-makers at the centre to consider how policies might have different effects in different places. Commitments to 'rural-proofing' policy are now common, although this can be implemented in a variety of ways ([Atterton, 2018](#)).

At its most basic level, it means recognising that apparently 'place-blind' policies may benefit some places more than others. For example, centrally-funded concessionary bus fares in Scotland were used eight times more often by people in cities than in rural areas ([Scottish Council for Development and Industry, SCDI, 2019](#)).

Potentially more seriously, the transition from the EU's Common Agricultural Policy to a new UK system of support could have uneven regional economic effects. For example, the South West of England is expected to lose a significant proportion of agricultural funding, with an uncertain impact on its local economies and environment ([Short et al, 2022](#)). This should be recognised and considered by national policy-makers.

What should rural levelling-up policy aim to do?

This all raises fundamental questions about what levelling-up policies should be aiming to achieve in different places, and what measures of success might be appropriate to evaluate them. These might go beyond the traditional goals of economic performance, employment and business growth.

In rural settings, there has long been a particularly keen understanding of potential tensions between growth and protection of environmental assets. National parks – like the Lake District, the Cairngorms and Exmoor – are an example of institutional arrangements through which these conflicts can be managed ([Scott, 2010](#)). There is also a well-established history of giving weight to other types of goals around social and community development, or the need to support vulnerable or marginal places. For example, this comes within the remit of enterprise agencies in the Highlands and Islands, and now in the South of Scotland.

Such broader conceptions of development have only recently begun to achieve broader recognition in policy agendas such as [inclusive growth](#) or [community wealth-building](#). These are now being [reframed and adapted](#) to rural contexts.

Research suggests that social needs – such as addressing homelessness, poverty and crime – tend to be seen as the most pressing issues for levelling up, but this is not reflected in how funding is allocated ([Davis and Clay, 2022](#)).

Similarly, polling research indicates that people living in left behind places ([Local Trust, 2020](#)) feel that they are disadvantaged in terms of the provision of community facilities, including a lack of sports and leisure venues, and other places for people to meet. Further, they believe that these should be a key priority. In the past, this type of social infrastructure was a responsibility of local government, but it has been eroded through years of austerity, which has hit some rural areas disproportionately hard ([May et al, 2020](#)).

Although the [Levelling Up White Paper](#) does set out targets across a range of indicators, the focus has largely been on the need for places lagging behind in terms of employment and productivity to perform better. But a place-based approach recognises the potential for different places to have different priorities and views of what matters and what they are trying to achieve.

Questions these areas may want to consider include: what types of jobs and businesses do they want to attract? Is quality of life more important than economic indicators? Should addressing inequalities be a priority?

The answers may vary by place. Some argue that the ‘difference’ of rural areas – with lower productivity, but strong environmental assets supporting wellbeing and lifestyles – means that they should be allowed to ‘shape their economic purpose to their own particular ends’ ([Curry and Webber, 2012](#)).

Some rural areas have benefited from the various government funding streams introduced since Brexit. Nevertheless, it could be argued that these are still largely driven by top-down rather than bottom-up priorities.

More generally, funding tends to be short-term, competitive and based on criteria that might not recognise the different circumstances in rural places. A report by the [Rural Services Network](#) argues that the selection of metrics used to identify places in need of levelling up are urban-focused and miss the underlying causes and needs of rural disadvantage ([Leckie et al, 2022](#)). This is a long-standing complaint across various policy areas, most notably the measurement of poverty.

To address questions about what type of development should be pursued, places will require a degree of local capacity and leadership. This varies widely between different places, depending on their internal resources and governance. Support to expand the capacities of people and groups at the community level to engage in development strategies will be an important element in any effective approach ([Atterton and Skerratt, 2017](#)).

Some places will also have greater capacity than others to attract external support and resources. There is evidence that England’s smaller and more rural areas struggle to win national funding compared with bigger cities ([Taylor, 2019](#)). This is a particular challenge if local priorities for rural development do not align with those promoted by mainstream national agendas. In a system like that of the UK, which remains largely centralised, with competition for top-down funding, there is a risk that some rural places could fall further behind as a result.

What does this mean for levelling up rural places

This all suggests that levelling up – if we understand this broadly as an attempt to reduce spatial inequalities – will require long-term local strategies for cultivating development in rural places. These should be tailored to the underlying strengths, needs and goals of rural areas, rather than seeking to fit with centrally determined priorities or measures, which may be predicated on urban-centric conceptions of development.

This means that rural places should have a degree of capacity and autonomy, as well as sustained support and resources to enact these strategies. It should also be recognised that the question of what type of development should be pursued in a particular place can be open to contestation and conflict.

On the other hand, if the aim of levelling up is to reduce disparities in economic performance, a more interventionist approach might be necessary. One study indicates that places' development opportunities are structured by their existing economic activity ([Mealy and Coyle, 2021](#)). Specifically, it can be very difficult for areas to move from economies based on low-value activities to high-value ones. This poses a challenge for many rural places with economies predominantly based on low-productivity jobs and sectors.

In such circumstances, an approach that seeks solely to build on local strengths may serve to disadvantage these places further and to exacerbate spatial inequalities. This suggests that any attempt to level up rural places could require a more actively redistributive approach and funding by national government.

Where can I find out more?

- [Rural governance in the UK: Towards a sustainable and equitable society](#): opening chapter by Sean Heron, Ruth McAreavey and Adrienne Attorp in a book of the same title.
- [Rural lives: understanding financial hardship and vulnerability in rural areas](#): event recordings and report by Mark Shucksmith, Polly Chapman, Jayne Glass and Jane Atterton.
- [The strategic case for equitable recognition of rural economies in Levelling Up policies](#): briefing paper from the National Innovation Centre Rural Enterprise.
- [Rural recognition, recovery, resilience and revitalisation](#): report for the Local Government Association.

Who are experts on this question?

- [Mark Shucksmith](#)
- [Jane Atterton](#)
- [Jeremy Phillipson](#)
- [Neil Ward](#)

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