

LGA Special Interest Group Annual Report to LGA Board

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Membership

The Key Cities Group is a diverse cross-party partnership of councils for urban cities and places, acting as a united voice for Urban Britain. Our membership currently consists of 25 local authorities. These are: Bath & NES, Blackpool, Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole, Bradford, Carlisle, Coventry, Doncaster, Exeter, Gloucester, Hull, Kirklees, Lancaster, Lincoln, Medway, Newport, Norwich, Plymouth, Portsmouth, Preston, Salford, Southampton, Southend on Sea, Sunderland, Wolverhampton and Wrexham.

Eligibility to Key Cities is primarily extended to mid-sized cities and places included in the Centre for Cities 'Cities Index' as well as other areas which do not fit into this population band but are significant to the wider area in their local economy and to the UK as a whole and have similar challenges and ambitions to the group.

Aim

The Key Cities Group aims to provide focus, collaboration of learning and a unified voice to ensure that those cities and places within the group are more visible and are consistently represented in policy-making at a national level. We are working to lobby Government and engage with critical Government Ministers based on a clear and consistent set of key asks and messages which are unique to our group – in order to exert sufficient influence over the national agenda.

What is the groups purpose?

- To provide a united voice for urban cities
- To make the case for greater investment in our cities
- To share expertise and promote collaboration between cities, sectors and industries to seize post-Brexit opportunities
- Develop policy to strengthen resilience, and improve economic performance and social cohesion in our places

What makes Key Cities unique?

- Uniquely positioned to form the 'engine room' for the UK's economic post-Covid recovery.
- Nimble size and governance are ideal for scalable innovation.
- Available land with room to expand
- Diversifying economies
- Reduced dependence on single industries
- Targeted and sophisticated strategies to support economic development
- Major strengths in manufacturing and exports

What do Key Cities offer?

- Strong returns on public investment to boost productivity
- 'Test beds' for innovative government policies
- Agility to respond quickly to new opportunities
- A strong partnership with central Government

Key Activities / Outcomes of work undertaken

Group governance

Key Cities is governed by three main bodies:

- **Key Cities Full Group**: comprised of all Leaders or Deputies, Elected Mayors and Chief Executives. Meetings take place quarterly.
- **Key Cities Executive Group**: comprised of an agreed number of member Leaders, currently standing at 12, who lead on different thematic portfolios for the group. Meetings take place on average every 6 weeks.
- **Key Cities APPG**: open to all MPs and peers. The APPG is chaired by John Stevenson MP (Carlisle) and Julie Elliott MP (Sunderland Central) who were elected together in July 2020. Meetings take place quarterly.

Conferences and Events

- **Key Cities Manifesto launch event** – On 29th September 2020, Key Cities marked the launch of the Key Cities Manifesto with a live webinar to discuss its recommendations and the future programme of Key Cities.
- **'Levelling-up' Roundtable** – On 26th January 2021, in collaboration with Core Cities and the think tank Onward, this roundtable brought together local leader representatives and MPs from the 'Levelling-up' Taskforce to discuss how to support stronger growth in lagging places.
- **The Future of Urban Centres post-COVID launch event** – On 21st May 2021, Key Cities and Core Cities marked the launch of their joint report on the Future of Urban Centres post-COVID. Hosted by MIPIM, the webinar discussed the recommendations from the report and how Cities can prosper and grow after COVID
- **Key Cities Webinar: How are the UK's Key Cities deploying Future High Streets funding and High Streets Task Force?** – On June 8th 2021, this webinar, chaired by 3Fox, discussed how Key Cities are deploying both recent Government funds and what opportunities for development are being unlocked post-COVID.

Key projects/workstreams during the year

- **Key Cities Manifesto** – In September 2020, Key Cities launched their manifesto which outlines the significant opportunities for cities and places across the UK to drive our economic and social future, and places Key Cities and its members as the natural partners for the Government's levelling up agenda. A virtual launch event was held with Chair of Key Cities Cllr John Merry, Key Cities APPG Co-

Chair Julie Elliott MP, Director of *Onward* Will Tanner, and Deputy Director of the National Infrastructure Commission Greg McClymont.

- **Future of Urban Centres report** – In February 2021, Key Cities and Core Cities commissioned from Metro Dynamics an ambitious piece of work on the Future of Urban Centres post-COVID, to cross-analyse the effects of the pandemic across Key and Core Cities and put forward a policy framework for both local and national government. It encompassed the following work:
 - Numerous workshops with officers and leaders from across the 36 Key and Core Cities to discuss their local challenges and opportunities from the pandemic.
 - The development of an online evidence-based dashboard which presents information for each Key City and Core City to help local leaders apply the insights and recommendations of the Future of Urban Centres report to their city's specific conditions.
 - Engagement with MPs and Peers at the Key Cities APPG to discuss the findings from the initial workshops.
 - Deep-dive sessions with Key Cities member BCP Council and Core Cities member Leeds to analyse the effects of the report's policy framework if applied to their city.
 - A webinar launch event hosted by MIPIM, chaired by Stephanie Flanders and were joined by Sadie Morgan OBE, Cllr John Merry and Cllr Nick Forbes to discuss the recommendations of the report and what support/freedoms are required for Cities to prosper and grow after COVID.
- **A futuristic reimagining of the urban economy and built environment** – In June 2021, Key Cities commissioned a complimentary think-piece to the Future of Urban Centres report which reimagines the urban economy and built environment if led by health and wellbeing. We will be advancing this piece with the economic consultancy *WPI Economics* who have leading expertise in the relationship between urban planning and health inequalities. In addition, we will be partnering with Neuroscientist Araceli Carmargo, who will help to shape this piece through a cognitive lens, focusing on the mental and physical impact of the built environment, particularly within the context of COVID-19. This piece is expected to be published in August 2021.
- **Key Cities workshops** – In March 2021, Key Cities launched a series of thematic workshops across the year, designed as an opportunity to delve into the broad and detailed collective knowledge of the network. Each session covers one of six key themes, selected due to their relevance to the current national policy agenda, including: Housing, Culture, Ports, Climate, Devolution and Levelling up.

APPG

We are supported by an All-Party Parliamentary Group in Westminster co-chaired by Julie Elliot MP and John Stevenson MP. The APPG developed as an active mechanism to grow the influence of Key Cities and its members. As the only APPG that is directly concerned with urban issues, this group has real potential to directly engage and influence Government on policies concerning urban Britain. Recent work includes:

- The Key Cities APPG report on *Cities Driving Recovery*, which outlines the discussion of our last APPG meeting on the Future of Urban Centres and puts forward recommendations to support urban-led economic recovery
- *The Cities Commission* – the Key Cities APPG is in the process of developing a proposal to create a dedicated research arm titled *The Cities Commission* which will commission research through our associate membership to develop an

innovation partnership across the Key Cities network, help drive policy and deliver better outcomes for urban living in the UK.

Collaborative partnerships

- Key Cities have been collaborating closely with Core Cities in both the 'Levelling-up' roundtable and our jointly commissioned 'Future of Urban Centres' research, and working together to jointly lobby our shared interests
- Key Cities have been engaging with the Levelling-up taskforce on how we can strengthen partnership between local and national government and help support their efforts in levelling up the country.
- Key Cities contributed to the Cultural Cities Recovery and engaged with DCMS and the Minister for Digital and Culture to push forward its recommendations.

Media activity

- Key Cities has developed a full PR coverage strategy across a range of relevant topics such as the future of town and city centres, the outlook for urban places post-COVID and the new Key Cities leadership group – coverage has appeared regularly in publications such as LocalGov, the MJ and key regional titles.