Investing in the Borderlands

In his monthly column, **Professor Frank Peck**, of the University of Cumbria's Centre for Regional Economic Development, looks at why the £345 million Borderlands Growth Deal provides a timely opportunity to address common issues across the Anglo-Scottish Border

In the midst of Brexit chaos through March, a good news story comes as welcome relief. On March 14, a joint announcement was made by UK and Scottish governments to provide £345 million to fund delivery of the Borderlands Growth Deal.

For those involved in the development of the proposals for Growth Deal funding and for the communities than make up the Borderlands, this is good news as it provides resource to implement plans that are intended to stimulate business activity, raise productivity and improve the socio-economic wellbeing of inhabitants of the Borderlands.

But what exactly are the Borderlands?

The Borderlands are obviously defined in relation to the Anglo-Scottish Border. In the first instance, this may be viewed as the near Border territory involving communities that face one another either side of the line.

'In terms of economic activity, the local authorities have much in common'

However, when viewed through the lens of public funding for services and infrastructure investment, there is also a far Border territory that embraces the five local authorities that touch the Border – Carlisle City Council, Cumbria County Council, Dumfries & Galloway Council, Northumberland County Council and Scottish Borders Council. It is this larger territory that constitutes the Borderlands

The view from arable farmland off Brisco Road over the roof-tops of Upperby to the city sky-line of Carlisle Cathedral and the Scottish hills beyond

POPULATION ACROSS THE BORDERLANDS, 2011 CENSUS

COUNTY	RESIDENT POPULATION 2011	AREA (HA)	POP DENSITY (P. PER HA)
Cumbria	499,858	676,656	0.7
Northumberland	316,028	501,302	0.6
Dumfries & Galloway	151,300	642,596	0.2
Scottish Borders	113,900	473,174	0.2
Borderlands	**1,081,086**	**2,293,728**	**0.5**

Inclusive Growth Deal.

In what sense, then, does this territory have coherence and significance?

One unifying feature is the absence of a major city-region.

This territory that combines the far north of England with the south of Scotland lies between the major city-regions along the M62 corridor, the conurbations in North East England and the cities of the central belt in Scotland: it is non-metropolitan in character.

That is not to say that urban centres are unimportant; rather that settlements are freestanding and function as a system spread across a very large area.

These include, prominently, the city of Carlisle (population 78,470 – built-up area, 2011 census), industrial towns and ports in West Cumbria (Whitehaven, population 24,900; Workington, 27,100 and Maryport, 10,000) and south east Northumberland (Blyth, 37,300; Cramlington, 33,200; Ashington, 27,700) as well as many historic market towns that provide significant local employment and other service centres spread across predominantly rural areas (eg Kendal, 29,100; Dumfries, 39,500; Morpeth, 14,400 and Galashiels, 15,000).

The Borderlands is large, however, and despite the absence of a major city-region, the resident population of the whole area totals over one million though with an average population density of only 0.5 persons per hectare across territory that is mainly "rural" in character.

The Borderlands face obvious common challenges, some which are associated with disadvantages created by peripherality and sparse population. The Borderlands as a whole displays the following statistical averages:

• Productivity is below average: Gross value-added per hour worked is relatively low (in the range £26-£29 compared to the national average of £32.6 in 2016);

• Wages and salaries are below average: Workplaces in the Borderlands are below the GB average (£552 gross per week), particularly in Dumfries & Galloway (£466) and Scottish Borders (£467);

• The population is ageing: 23-24 per cent of residents are aged over 65 compared to the national average of only 18 per cent.

In terms of economic activity, the local authorities that comprise the Borderlands have much in common.

Reflecting the importance of the visitor economy, there is significant local employment in accommodation and food services (10 per cent of total).

However, there is also above average representation of employment in manufacturing (14 per cent) and significant numbers in health services (17 per cent) as well as over 24,000 working in agriculture (five per cent).

There are clearly many positive aspects shared across the Borderlands – not least the beauty of landscapes, quality of natural environment, resilience in communities and, in some sectors, signs of recent growth in employment opportunity (visitor economy, healthcare, professional services).

It is perhaps appropriate, however, to reflect on the findings of a consultation carried out by the South West Rural Productivity Commission in 2017. This report noted a widespread view that the trickle-down effect of investment in larger cities rarely operates to spread economic development unless supported by targeted investment and interventions in the periphery.

Arguably, the Borderlands Growth Deal shows recognition of this reality.

Major challenges remain in these "rural" or perhaps "non-metropolitan" areas of the UK, including the lack of available skills, fewer opportunities to train locally, poor transport provision, lack of broadband and mobile network connectivity and, of course, dealing with any negative consequences of Brexit.

In these regards, a Growth Deal aimed specifically at the Borderlands provides a timely opportunity to address common issues across the Anglo-Scottish Border.

Right: Borderlands Initiative champion and Conservative MP for Carlisle John Stevenson, on the Scotland/England border in Gretna