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The South East can deliver just when the UK needs it most

The South East of England is crucial to the success of the UK economy. It's been that way for many hundreds of years of course, not because governments, monarchs or commissions have had in their power to dictate where trade goes, but because the South East has inherent strengths including location. The problem is complacency can set in; it is assumed that the South East can take care of itself and the money it contributes to the economy will continue to flow.

As well as avoiding complacency, the UK must play to its strengths. At any time over the last decade Apple could have cut back investment in the iPhone on the basis that sales are already pretty good, accepting the risk that its overseas competitors might take advantage. Of course Apple didn't do that, but continued to invest and find new ways to generate income from its strongest asset.

The South East is one of the UK's strongest assets but research commissioned by South East England Councils shows that the economy has underperformed during the last decade – its certainly not been in crisis but it should be a concern to everyone that growth has been sluggish compared to many other areas. Productivity in the is the same as it was a decade ago. It's a trend that needs to be reversed. A summary of the analysis can be found at <http://www.secouncils.gov.uk/2019/07/powerful-new-data-on-the-south-east-economy>

South East England Councils is very supportive of the investment that is being made in different types of infrastructure across the Country, but it needs to be matched here. The South East exports over £85bn of goods and services each year and is home to over 8,800 foreign owned businesses. Companies that stop buying from the South East may well trade with places in Germany, China or the US instead. Despite being a gateway to global markets and home to major ports (air and sea), public investment in transport is relatively low in the South East which is harming us all.

To give a practical example, Crossrail demonstrates visionary thinking about how to enable the flow of people and goods across London in a way which promotes economic growth, supports housing delivery and has less impact on the environment. It's just a pity that the it doesn't extend far into the South East - indeed it stops a few miles short Kent.

We must up our game in the way we articulate the strengths and the potential of the South East, and the benefit that increased Government spending and greater autonomy will have for taxpayers across the UK. Also make sure that people realise that London and the South East are not one and the same – they are two distinct areas with different funding and governance.

There are a lot of organisations doing a lot of good work in the South East, but the individual voices are at risk of being drowned out by the massed choirs of new partnerships elsewhere grabbing the national media spotlight and clearly having an impact with the Treasury. The South East is already an economic powerhouse, but our challenge is to find a way of becoming equally influential for success to be sustained which will benefit the whole of the UK.

One thing we can learn from partnerships elsewhere is the immense pride they show in their regions. We mustn't be complacent that people realise that the South East is a great place for residents, businesses and visitors. It has fantastic cities, towns and villages, and breathtaking countryside and coastline. Our job is to make it even better with a sustainable economy and environment.