

Government unveils new twinning initiative to promote UK unity

Levelling Up Secretary's plan for the domestic pairing of towns receives mixed responses in parliament



The latest policy initiative is aimed at regenerating forgotten towns through building domestic cultural bonds rather than links to places abroad

Jeremy Baxter 5 May 2022

Boris Johnson’s government today announced a new culture and tourism initiative as part of the wider Levelling Up policy that would “encourage growth, pride and sustainability across our communities”.

Dubbed the “Tale of Two Towns” initiative, the government’s Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities announced plans to adapt the “twin town” framework – historically used to pair UK towns with localities in other nations – by transitioning it into a domestic model, where two UK towns would be twinned together. This would, he said, create “intra-national routes of commerce, tourism and friendship.”

“In this time where the tourism and hospitality sectors are still dealing with the effects of the pandemic, it is more important than ever to encourage movement within the nation to help rebuild businesses and communities in a sustainable way that responds to a changing world. By facilitating local partnership in this way we will level up areas too often overlooked by foreign guests and address significant knowledge gaps generated by educational trends that privilege other nations’ history and geography over our own. During my time as Education Secretary I was shown statistics suggesting that most secondary school pupils could name more US states than English counties. This initiative will address that problem by giving young people the opportunity to get to know their close neighbours better, raising civic pride throughout all regions of our society.”

Though the formal title of the initiative borrowed from Dickens, it became clear that the intention was for the scheme itself to be known as “identical-twin towns” after the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Levelling Up stood to clarify details of the proposal, noting that,

“While bonds of friendship can of course cross borders, and indeed *must*, for the continued security and stability of all nations, ‘twin town’ has perhaps historically been a misnomer, as twins do not usually have such distinct cultural backgrounds. My constituency has the honour of being twinned with a city in Germany, but comparing the two places I would not claim to see any obvious family resemblance. Our aim will be to pair regions in this country which have more identifiable connections, so that the relationships can go deeper than merely occasional international ceremony. And in recognition of this government’s commitment to reduce economic imbalance between areas we will be creating pairings that are based on an assessment of places requiring equal levels of funding. When a fond mother has identical twins she likes to dress them the same to show that there is no favouritism and neither is prioritised. This same caring instinct will guide the policy.”

He explained that the project would be rolled out gradually, with trial schemes currently being organised twinning Southampton with Southend-on-Sea, and Darlington with Dorchester. The initial stage of the pairings would focus on “cultural introductions” where young people creatively respond to their local areas in ways that are then shared with the equivalent groups in their identical-twinned town as a way of introducing others to their communities before meeting them directly. These creative introductions were so far said to include poetry, video art, stylised local maps, sculpture and photography.



Southampton and Southend, two coastal towns earmarked for the regeneration scheme

The announcement of the scheme was met with much criticism from Labour, with the Leader of the Opposition querying whether it was merely window dressing to cover for the poor implementation of the government’s Levelling Up reforms. In response to the statistic about geographical knowledge among school pupils, the Shadow Levelling Up Secretary challenged the former Education Secretary on cuts to schools’ budgets during his tenure, before she went on to argue that this period of austerity, rather than outward-looking curricula, would account for the apparent lack of knowledge about other regions in the UK among the young.

As discussion turned to education, one Labour backbencher offered a personal reflection that was met with equal derision and support.

“If you will indulge me a youthful reminiscence Mr Speaker, I find myself reminded of the time when, attending my local comprehensive school, I was taken aside with another pupil at the end of a lesson and we found ourselves tasked with the responsibility of keeping another of our friends in check. The lad in question had difficulty staying focused on lessons and would occasionally act up. The two of us agreed we would try to keep him focused in future classes, but, a week later when he was judged to have been mucking about in an English lesson, we, his nominated guardians, were reprimanded for not being able to control him. I remember feeling outraged that I was in trouble for something it was clearly someone else’s job to deal with and lead on, and after that I found it difficult to respect my teachers for outsourcing their responsibilities to those they were employed to support and guide. I hope that you will forgive this digression, but I find myself reflecting upon it today when thinking about the same dereliction of duty displayed by this government in its permanently failing Levelling Up policy.”

When asked to clarify the connotations of his remarks he went on, “At the heart of this new direction there seems to be an idea that areas in need of investment and regeneration can merely pair up to help each other, rather than receiving the kind of attention and support they need from their elected government.”

The mood turned ugly at one point when another Labour backbencher drew significant jeers after standing to declare, “the Honourable Member mused that identical twins share a fond mother who likes to dress both the same. Well I would contend that two twinned towns which are so closely connected as to already share a nation, and are struggling as they battle for the same limited resources are not *identical* so much as they are Siamese.” This remark, which generated significant debate on Twitter and prompted the hashtags #ConjoinedNotSiamese and #HooperResignNow, led to the Speaker needing to call the House to order.

While it looks to be the latest of a series of divisive initiatives set forth by a government with an election in sight, the MPs for Southampton Itchen and Rochford and Southend East both welcomed the plans, the former telling the chamber that it showed great leadership and invention in providing a new model for national unity, and the latter explaining that many community leaders and educators in his constituency were very excited at the prospect of sharing their local heritage with others and couldn’t wait to get started.