
IS THERE A STRATEGY FOR THE CENTRAL SOUTH?

Briefing Note from the Southern Policy Centre

What next for devolution in central southern England

With a new devolution White Paper likely to be published soon, it seems Ministers will make devolution to our larger cities and regions part of their planning for economic recovery. In 2019 the Southern Policy Centre explored whether the central South can be seen as a coherent region, analysing the published plans and strategies of LEPs and local authorities, and asking whether when taken together they articulate a clear strategy for our area.

One hundred representatives from the business and public sectors, and from further and higher education joined an SPC seminar at the Careys Manor Hotel, Brockenhurst, in September 2019. We presented analysis of those plans and strategies, when taken together, set out articulated a clear strategy for the central South. A summary of our research is in a briefing note, which can be found [here](#).

Our findings

We found that communities across the central South – from BCP to Portsmouth and towards the north of Hampshire – face many common opportunities and challenges. There are shared economic priorities, demands for investment in critical infrastructure, and common social and environmental challenges. The ‘region’ has at

its heart our three waterfront cities and a potentially well-connected population of over 1.5 million individuals. It reaches across Hampshire, providing good connections to the economies of Surrey and the Thames Valley, London, the rest of the UK, Europe and the world. There are six complementary universities, a lively diverse cultural offer, strong heritage and tourist attractions and all is set with a world-class environment, including two national parks and a superb coastline.

But our 'region' is unlike others, it doesn't fit easily onto council or LEP boundaries. Its geography varies slightly according to the challenge: transport connectivity, encouraging innovation, supporting priority economic sectors or investing in affordable housing – our boundaries are 'fuzzy'.

Attendees at the Brockenhurst conference shared the view that there was a strong coherence to the central South that should be used to promote the region to the government and potential investors. There was also consensus that our focus should be on promoting the region and building cooperation rather than attempting to reorganise existing organisations or their boundaries.

Activity since September

Following the conference, the SPC was encouraged by business and public sector organisations to take forward the idea of the central South. The suggestion we benefit from seeing the central South as a coherent whole is already being adopted by some:

- it was the subject of a promotional video by Regenerate South;
- the regional brand was used by the public-private consortium that had planned to attend the MIPIM conference;
- it is used in strategy documents being prepared by some local authorities and universities.

As we had expected, the concept has proved flexible and adaptable to the needs of different organisations whilst still conveying a coherent and consistent message.

We also believe there is a greater willingness to collaborate amongst strategic organisations across the region. The events we hosted recently to discuss how the central South can stimulate a post-Covid economic recovery demonstrated the value many place on strong intra-regional collaboration to shape that recovery.

The general election at the end of 2019 and the coronavirus lock down mid-March both disrupted SPC's plans to follow up the Brockenhurst conference through extensive discussion with regional stakeholders. Nonetheless, valuable meetings and discussions were held with a number of local authority leaders, LEPs, universities and strategic planners. We will build on these in the months ahead.

Current drivers for a regional response

The new government moved swiftly to confirm plans to publish new devolution proposals for England. The release of a White Paper on devolution was disrupted by the country's lockdown, but that is now expected in the near future. It is likely that they will want to encourage effective regional collaboration which will help guarantee delivery of other economic and social policy priorities, so whatever emerges from the White Paper will set a framework for practical cooperation across the central South.

We can expect that the White Paper proposals will be designed to help achieve the government's ambition to 'level-up' the national economy, emphasising support for growth in the Midlands and the North. SPC has already shown that significant parts of our region do not share the prosperity and high productivity of much of the wider South East. However, we will need to make that argument very strongly to Ministers if the region is not to lose out in post-Covid investment.

In summary

SPC's research suggests there is a strong argument for a clear regional identity and effective collaboration if we are to succeed in arguing for investment in the central South. The conversations we have had with organisations across sectors since then suggest there is an appetite for closer collaboration, and now is an opportune moment to discuss how the idea of the central South is developing.

Our July seminar will help us understand how we can ensure the region is not left behind as the devolution debate seems about to gather fresh momentum. We will hear from Mark Sandford of the House of Commons, who will give us an overview of the devolution story to date and Nick King from the Centre for Policy Studies, whose work is helping shape the government's thinking on devolution. Cllr Vikki Slade from BCP Council will consider the response from the central South.