

Is there a strategy for the central South?

Briefing Note from the Southern Policy Centre



The challenge

This project was prompted by widely shared fears that central southern England is neither gaining the resources and power of other regions, nor promoting itself effectively to private investors. Two years ago, former Northern Powerhouse Minister Lord Jim O'Neill told us¹ the central South had failed to identify clear priorities and distinctive outcomes. Ministers are looking for a coherent strategy and vision with broad political, business and public sector buy-in.

LEPs, local authorities, statutory undertakings and business organisations do publish strategy documents. Our project asked whether, taken together, these can provide the basis for a clear strategy for the central South built on shared priorities and challenges.

Why take a regional perspective?

Few major challenges map neatly onto the statutory boundaries of local authorities or LEPs. Effective policies on innovation, skills, infrastructure, transport, energy, climate change and sustainability require concerted action over a wider area.

Successive governments have encouraged regional collaboration that brings together the public and private sectors as vehicles for economic and social regeneration and strengthening local communities. Regional partnerships including the Northern Powerhouse, the Midland Engine and the Oxford-Cambridge Corridor have attracted government resources to deliver new homes and improve infrastructure. They are developing a powerful voice on regional priorities including transport.

By articulating a clear and compelling vision for their future based on shared strengths and challenges they also make their regions more attractive to private investors.

It is clear that effective regional collaboration has been rewarded by government which has devolved power and resources to them. Local Enterprise Partnerships in areas where there is a statutory Combined Authority receive more funding per capita than do those in the central South.²

¹ "Devo South: Getting Back on Track" – SPC Conference, May 2017
(<http://southernpolicycentre.co.uk/2017/11/devolution-south-reboot-needed/>)

² SPC research (<http://southernpolicycentre.co.uk/2018/12/leps-and-the-central-south-a-summary-of-our-breakfast-seminar-in-conjunction-with-pwc/>)

What makes a region?

In looking for evidence of a regional strategy for the central South we were looking for the potential to provide:

- A compelling vision based on distinctive, shared strengths and common challenges;
- A robust partnership which brings together councils, LEPs and other key partners, building a shared ownership of the vision and a joint commitment to its delivery;
- A clear and coherent geography, reflecting a connectivity of landscape, place and infrastructure;
- Common public investment priorities and a shared plan for delivering infrastructure, economic and community regeneration;
- Strong levels of private sector investment, demonstrating confidence in the vision and partnership working;
- Strong business, higher education and third sector networks;
- A clear and strong message to promote the region;
- An authoritative voice to Government.

We were looking for evidence of a regional narrative: a clear and shared statement of regional priorities is of immediate value to any organisations seeking to champion the region but also provides the core content of any future discussions with Government to secure devolved powers and resources.

Any such region must reflect the realities on the ground: the nature of the economy, the physical and natural environment, its towns, cities and rural areas. It must make sense to the people who live there, and it will not necessarily reflect council, LEP or other boundaries.

We were looking for the potential for partners to develop a shared narrative for the central South that articulates shared ambitions and common priorities for investment in ways that add value to their existing activities and priorities.

We did not consider, and certainly do not propose, any reorganisation, boundary changes or new legal structures.

What did we find?

The SPC examined the strategies of councils and LEPs lying within the area covered by the Dorset, Enterprise M3 and Solent LEPs. We also looked at plans published by regional and national bodies such as Homes England, the Environment Agency, the National Infrastructure Commission and Transport for the South East.

These documents are the way in which the various parts of the central South promote themselves to government, local people and to potential investors.

The strategies we reviewed all focus narrowly on the area covered by the LEP or local authority. There is no attempt to promote a wider regional narrative. The documents we reviewed rarely make explicit reference to common priorities or aspirations that are shared with their neighbours.

It was particularly noticeable how few references were made to strategic infrastructure outside the organisations' boundaries, even where investment would have a significant impact on the area in question.

The future potential

However, we did find that there are many common themes which together offer the building blocks for a regional strategy.

There is a history of collaboration amongst councils and others in the central South. The strongest example of this is the Partnership for Urban South Hampshire (PUSH – now renamed Partnership for South Hampshire, PfSH, as it has grown to encompass the New Forest). For nearly sixteen years PUSH has provided a forum for local authorities in South Hampshire to discuss and agree a consistent approach on aspects of planning, sustainability and infrastructure. There are significant examples of collaboration between our local LEPs and with neighbouring LEPs.

In addition, there is clear evidence of:

- Economic synergies – with many organisations highlighting the same priority sectors: from defence and aerospace to the digital economy, health and med-tech;
- Shared challenges – ranging from the need to improve skills and provide space for business to grow through to the dire shortage of affordable housing;
- References to the idea of a Gateway region – with our ports and airports connecting the UK to the world, and strong links between our local economy and the rest of the UK
- Critical infrastructure – common concerns about improving strategic highways or rail access within the region and beyond to London and the Midlands;
- Regional assets – there is a shared pride in our distinctive natural environment and heritage, coupled with a desire to protect and enhance both; there is real strength in higher education
- Sustainability – a commitment to tackling the climate emergency, in particular through improving energy generation and usage.

Taken together, the strategies and plans we examined suggest ambitions to create a vibrant, attractive place which will encourage businesses and talented individuals to settle here.

Our coastal cities – Bournemouth, Christchurch & Poole, Southampton and Portsmouth – are important both as centres of economic activity and in the synergy between them and their suburban and rural hinterland. We also noted the influence of London across the study area, albeit manifested in different ways in the north and south.

Where is the central South?

Our 'region' could be as large as the 'South East' as once defined by government or as small as the city regions of Southampton or Portsmouth. To an extent, the most appropriate region depends on the policy issue being addressed.

However, it is important to identify a region that is of sufficient size but has a sufficient sense of identity to be the basis for a shared narrative, a common set of priorities and a joint approach to delivery. Our assessment of the different options suggests the 'best fit' is a central South 'region' which:

- Focuses on the three coastal cities;
- Reaches into Dorset and Hampshire;
- Has strong links with the South West, the Thames Valley, Surrey and London;
- Has 'fuzzy' rather than rigid, tightly drawn boundaries.

We suggest this offers a central South which:

- Includes three waterfront cities with complementary economies and ambitions;
- Is home to a population of around 2 million;
- Is the base for six universities, complemented by a strong FE offer;
- Offers a mix of high-quality cultural venues and activities;
- Sees its distinctive natural environment as central to its identity;

- Is a nationally important gateway to the world.

Developed effectively, the central South could provide the basis for a shared narrative, enhance existing aspirations, provide a coherent basis on which to engage with government, and be sufficiently cohesive to be built on voluntary cooperation between stakeholders.

What next?

SPC will present our findings to the conference on 20 September, and invite responses from representatives of councils, LEPs, universities and business. That debate and the discussion about a regional strategy for the central South will help determine what happens next. That could include:

- Articulating a shared narrative for the area;
- Determining shared strategic priorities for investment;
- Building on the existing co-operation on planning and transport;
- Strengthening regional networks across sectors.