

TOWARDS A GREAT NORTH PLAN

A SUMMARY OF RESPONSES TO THE CALL FOR EVIDENCE

General observations

Although the range of organisations and individuals who submitted evidence reflected broad interest and diverse expertise, responses to the call for evidence¹ were remarkable primarily for their unanimity. There was substantial agreement on the main issues which should be included in a GNP, with more differences in emphasis rather than substance.

What should be the nature and scope of a strategic spatial planning framework for the north of England?

Key components

Perhaps problematically, given the range of issues proposed for inclusion, there was also a fairly common view that a Great North Plan (GNP) needs a ‘very tight agenda’ if it is to be effective.

Promoting and facilitating proposals to support economic development and rebalancing was the main priority of a GNP for almost all respondents. Some also stressed the opportunity to build a kind of growth which is different from that experienced in a London-dominated UK. This is broadly characterised as more sustainable than established models and also more redistributive, both between people and between different places. ‘Vibrant local economies’ and support for local businesses were a part of this, and resilience to future economic shocks was also mentioned.

Sustainability was also important to many respondents. This involves tackling climate change and its social and economic challenges; respondents noted the importance of balancing growth with long-term environmental factors. Quality of life and quality of place were also recurring themes. These are seen as existing assets of the North which can contribute to its economy, but also as aims for a GNP which will contribute to the preservation of existing ‘great places’ and improvements to living environments and quality of life for all.

The following issues were discussed as contributors to these outcomes.

- **Connectivity** was discussed in almost every response, with a focus on approaches to transport which are firmly grounded in its role of bringing together people, businesses, trade and communities. Transport planning which is integrated with economic development and other ‘human’ and economic factors is seen as the ideal, and priorities for transport included appropriate capacity and performance. Connectivity both within and beyond the North (including international links) is essential. It should be planned in relation to key hubs and also to information about current *and future* social developments in the way the North lives and works. The use of ‘Transport for London’ as a model framework and brand was proposed more than once. Several detailed discussions of specific challenges and particular ‘problem areas’ for the current northern transport system were received.

¹ <http://www.ippr.org/publications/do-we-need-a-great-north-plan-call-for-evidence>

- **Transport investment:** some respondents discussed the need to win investment at levels equivalent to those in London, and to demonstrate how these can support northern growth.
- **Digital connectivity** and wider technological issues.
- **Energy** use and energy generation; the latter is a particular strength for the region. There was some interest in local generation of energy, particularly green energy. A small number of responses noted the need for clear approaches to fracking.
- **Infrastructure** and infrastructure investment, again guided by principles of ‘place making’.
- **Utilities:** waste management and water were prioritised in particular. The opportunity to plan for sustainable, low-carbon and low-impact infrastructure and utilities was noted as a contributor to growth, sustainability and quality of life.
- **Different kinds of business**, and ensuring that small businesses do not lose out to large investors; SMEs and social enterprises are particularly important. The opportunity to revitalised manufacturing in the North was a strong theme in several responses.
- **Flooding** and the management of flood risks.
- **Logistics** and assessments of logistics requirements.
- **Natural environment, culture and heritage** as resources for quality of life and economic contributors.

Population factors were discussed by several respondents, taking various approaches. There was consensus on the need to anticipate and plan for population trends, and in particular to ensure that regional populations can travel easily within a region and have sufficient suitable living space. Land use was mentioned by a few respondents, who felt that this should be included as it relates to economic development, growth and investment. However the issue was relatively rarely raised.

Skills were mentioned by only a few respondents, but those who did raise this issue felt strongly that it *should* be considered in a Plan. For some this involved the inclusion of actual initiatives for skills development, while for others skills should be considered as an element of population information and economic planning. The former group stressed the usefulness of broad regional planning for skills, for example in relation to the complementary roles of cities and hinterlands, and strategic connectivity.

The only major area of disagreement was over whether housing should be included in a GNP. Some respondents warned that it would ‘slow down’ a plan and lead to its becoming mired in detail which in reality is best let to local authorities. Others argued that a GNP for economic growth must take account of housing as a component of population, and also in relation to quality of life. Some preferred a ‘high level’ approach to housing, as it supports economic developments through the provision of a skilled workforce. Others made very specific proposals such as a ‘region-wide duty to co-operate’. This latter group felt that co-ordinated housing delivery could overcome barriers and mitigate limitations to infrastructure or transport investment. The opportunity to plan for social housing on a large scale was also noted.

Boundaries

Not surprisingly, the northern, western and eastern ‘boundaries’ of a GNP area were universally agreed as being the two coasts and the Scottish border. Those who addressed the issue of a southern boundary felt that this should *not* be ‘hard and fast’. More generally, respondents felt that a GNP should take the opportunity to situate the North in the context of the national economy and infrastructure, stressing its potential contribution and necessary rebranding ‘northern’ projects as nationally significant. It should have ‘resonance’ particularly for close neighbours including Scotland and the northern midlands.

Scope and inclusiveness

Cities are seen as crucial, but respondents were clear that they could not be ‘the whole story’. A GNP should present a narrative which takes account of how cities and their ‘hinterlands’ play complementary roles. The contribution of rural and polycentric areas as growth drivers must also be supported. One respondent noted drily that ‘trickle down’ from cities to other places does not actually work. Among the functions of a GNP is the opportunity to encourage cities, towns and rural areas to work together for mutual benefit: it should reflect diversity and complementarities. The distinctive potential, strengths and needs of different places should be carefully considered and accommodated, and the benefits of co-operation stressed. A GNP should also take account of places across the full geographical range of the northern region.

Relationship to statutory plans

The relationship to existing statutory plans is crucial, and respondents broadly agreed that the GNP would function best by ‘bringing together’ local plans and strategic economic plans (SEPs), transport plans and other established documents. One suggested that it could ‘define a baseline and articulate a vision’, while another felt that it could mitigate the ‘fragmentation’ of mechanisms for spatial planning and economic development. It could also be used to guide the authors of local plans and related documents, for example by guiding the use of resources, encouraging more strategic and collaborative thinking, or ‘sense checking’ overambitious or impractical aspirations. A GNP could offer additional direction and consistency by providing a strategic level ‘between’ local plans and national frameworks, and bringing together what one respondent called ‘all the good intentions’ of other documents. It could also draw on the very substantial bodies of research and evidence which supports these.

There was no enthusiasm for a statutory GNP. However, it could be integrated more formally with statutory plans, possibly as guidance and an element of ‘material consideration’ for their preparation, or by being ‘embraced’ within national planning policy statements as the first spatially based sub-national planning policy statement. This would give it greater weight within the government’s national planning framework, and provide additional traction for its implementation.

Relationship to the northern powerhouse

A GNP can provide focus and substance to the northern powerhouse project. One respondent suggested that it could be a ‘spatial expression of the northern powerhouse’ to address key implications and consequences of the Government’s wider growth initiatives. Another stated that if the northern powerhouse is to be ‘more than political rhetoric’ it needs an associated Plan. Many places are already engaged in relevant projects, which the GNP can help to co-ordinate. It can also be a marketing document and delivery vehicle for implementing aspirations of existing plans and strategies.

What might be the process and timetable for the development of such a framework?

Timetable

A small number of respondents proposed a timescale for preparation and drafting, which would last between 18 and 24 months. This should include evidence gathering and analysis, consultation and multiple drafting. A GNP should be a ‘live’ document, regularly revisited and if necessary revised in the light of developments and progress. Respondents advocated regular monitoring and periodic more comprehensive reviews, which might take place once a decade.

There was unanimity on the need for a long-term horizon. Dates up to 2050 were proposed, mostly at the later end of this scale. Respondents felt that it must be informed by a ‘long term’ perspective, and by proposals and commitments which

extend beyond the regular electoral cycle. Alongside this there should be clear and regular 'interim' milestones, whose progress can be observed and monitored. These actions should shape the full lifespan of the GNP. One respondent suggested that a GNP should only be implemented *after* the end-date of current local plans, but this was a very isolated view.

First steps

There was almost unanimous agreement that the GNP should be a brief document, bringing together strategic vision with 'concrete' content. A strategic approach which leaves detail as far as possible to local authorities and 'lower level' documents is the preferred way forwards. Models such as the Scottish plan and some European documents were noted. Some respondents suggested that a GNP might be accompanied by additional initiatives to complement its 'tight' focus and strategic viewpoint; one proposal was for a Commission on Land Reform.

Good quality, well-analysed evidence should inform the GNP, and different kinds of evidence have a role to play. This should include independent economic reviews, but also social data and insights. Proposals should be costed and tested for economic viability. Specific methods of professional and academic spatial planning could prove useful in developing a GNP and ensure that it is effective. Its implementation would also require expertise, possibly in the form of a small dedicated delivery team. Those implementing a GNP can also learn from effective established combined authorities. Professional experts could be 'seconded' to write the plan, which would avoid partisanship.

Key partners

Numerous partners were proposed, including:

- Academic and professional experts in spatial planning and economic development
- Businesses, including established operators and those who can attract investment
- Public sector professionals, including representatives of central and local government, relevant agencies (such as transport authorities, the HCA, the AGMA, and so on)
- Universities
- Community groups, the third sector and VCOs; people working with hard to reach groups
- Infrastructure and utility providers
- Professional and membership bodies
- Young people, the workers and leaders of 2050.

Involvement and consultation

Democratic engagement was a high priority for most respondents. A GNP must be 'of the North', produced in the region by people who understand its potential and needs, and its implementation must be democratically accountable to the region's communities. This might involve working with elected mayors or combined authority leaders, but could also require new approaches for a new kind of plan. One respondent proposed the establishment of 'a strong civil society Coalition for the North' which could influence and hold to account those implementing the GNP and also organisations such as Transport for the North and the combined authorities. Many noted the opportunity presented by a GNP to implement genuine localism and work alongside emerging devolution.

Possible funding

Funding through contributions from central and local government was the most popular option. This would offer a GNP greater leverage and 'clout'. Some respondents suggested that direct sponsorship could be sought, or that multiple funders could be engaged; this latter option would avoid the undue influence of

major funders. Other proposals include an INTERREG framework, and in-kind support through donations of time and expertise from the private sector.

Branding

Branding and presentation were seen as key: a GNP should be 'short and punchy', eye-catching and easily grasped as a 'confidence builder' by private and public sector investors. It should be visually compelling, using maps and spatial diagrams effectively. Short- and long-term aims should be clearly articulated, with a sense of 'vision', while evidence and background information should *not* form part of the main document but be easily available through a web link. Promotion should be managed through a partnership selected to build wider ownership.