



# ‘Soft planning spaces’ for growth

How effective are so-called ‘soft planning spaces’ in delivering growth? This briefing, based on research conducted for the RTPI by Oxford Brookes University and UCL, focuses on three such spaces – the Partnership for Urban South Hampshire (PUSH), the Gatwick-Diamond Initiative (GDI), and South-central Oxfordshire/Science Vale UK (SVUK) – and evaluates the effectiveness of their governance arrangements for delivering growth in the South East of England. Despite their particular settlement patterns, administrative arrangements and political complexions, there are likely to be implications from this research for sub-regional planning and growth management across the UK.

## Who should read this?

Local and regional policymakers and decision-makers, local planners, and central government policymakers with an involvement in planning for economic growth and related issues such as housing and transport.

## Key messages for policy and practice

These soft spaces – alternative administrative geographies to existing ‘hard’ planning areas – are in part intended to ensure a greater role for business in planning for growth. However, based on the areas examined in this research, the overall strength of governance arrangements for delivering growth may rest primarily on the strength of commitment and resourcing from the *public sector*, especially local government.

This reflects the role of local government in devoting resources to spatial planning, the generation of an effective evidence base to underpin policymaking, and the need to agree spatial commitments regarding housing and employment land allocations.

This research presents a framework against which good economic governance can be judged as seen by stakeholders, including: the identity and image of an area; the clarity and detail of development strategy; the ability to prioritise development and investment; patterns of ownership and stakeholder engagement; clarity of the business agenda; wider political influence; resourcing; and monitoring and evaluation processes.

To date, in each of the three case study areas there has been a notable commitment to the housing and employment land allocations established under the previous era of regional planning.

However, the process of introducing the localism agenda has created considerable uncertainty. In particular, the risk is that localism licenses popular concerns over housing and population numbers, and in some cases prompts a return to an earlier reluctance to plan positively for population and economic growth. In time, this may weaken the coherence of such ‘soft spaces’ and so their ability to promote growth and development.

In this research, the area with the strongest business voice and the strongest ‘spatial metaphor’ and identity – Gatwick Diamond – emerges as the sub-region that may be least well positioned to deliver on its agenda for growth, despite strong private sector initiative and backing. PUSH emerges as the strongest area in terms of its governance arrangements, against expectations given its lack of image and identity, and level of business input. SVUK is somewhere in between in terms of its capacity and potential to deliver growth.



## Main findings

### Evaluating governance arrangements for economic growth

This research presents a framework against which 'good economic governance' can be judged. This framework has been applied to the three case study areas which are the focus here.

The framework focuses on indicators of good governance specifically tailored to delivering economic growth, that is, the efficient design of institutions for delivering economic growth (such as the ability to prioritise goals). Other indicators, such as clarity of agendas and priorities, could be thought as applying whether the objective is economic growth or other social or environmental agendas.

This framework includes:

- identity and image of an area;
- clarity and detail of development strategy;
- ability to effectively prioritise development and investment;
- patterns of 'ownership' and stakeholder engagement;
- clarity of the business agenda;
- wider political influence and leverage;
- resourcing; and
- monitoring and evaluation processes.

### Effectiveness of the case study areas in delivering growth

Somewhat counter-intuitively, the area with the strongest business voice and the strongest 'spatial metaphor' and identity – Gatwick Diamond – emerges as the sub-region that may be least well positioned to deliver on its agenda for growth, despite strong private sector initiative and backing.

PUSH emerges as the strongest area in terms of its governance arrangements, somewhat against expectations given its lack of image and identity, the level of business input, and given the history of local government stances across the South East as a whole and in South Hampshire historically.

SVUK emerges as a sub-regional strategy that is somewhere in between in terms of its

capacity and potential to deliver growth. Its growth plans are relatively well-established, however the capacity of the governance arrangement here to deliver on these growth plans relies substantially on other organisational interests.

There are a number of reasons for these conclusions, including: the scale of resources that have been devoted to spatial planning and the allied generation of an evidence base which in no short measure has derived from local government contributions; the extent to which partners in these initiatives have been able to agree to specific spatial commitments to issues such as housing and employment land allocations; and the near coterminosity between the PUSH and LEP areas and a strong measure of interlocking directorships which appear likely to ensure a high degree of coordination between public and private sectors.

### About the case study areas

The case study areas range from a population of around 1 million covered by the PUSH area, to 60,000 in the case of SVUK.

PUSH represents the largest and most complex of these spatial planning agendas, comprising 11 local authorities but also involving significant variety in the complexion of these authorities.

SVUK is the smallest and seemingly the least complex of the areas in terms of the planning and LEP authorities involved. It is located within a single county and incorporates parts of just two district councils. However, it is challenged by the specificity, isolation and separation of the three key sites that drive its economic growth, as well as the complex political realities in Oxfordshire.

GDI is the sole case which cuts across county council boundaries, incorporating parts of West Sussex County Council and Surrey County Council. It has perhaps the greatest growth pressures resulting from London-related spill overs, given its excellent road and rail access into London and internationally via Gatwick Airport. Its situation is something akin to the



pressures apparent in the M4 and M11 corridors emanating from London.

PUSH and GDI emerged earliest, in 2003-4, partly in response to the regional planning agenda under the previous Government, while SVUK is a more recent initiative, from 2008.

### PUSH

To begin with, PUSH was a local government initiative, with no significant business involvement. Despite the pressures unleashed by the emergence of localism since 2010, the sub-regional strategy developed by PUSH as part of the South East Plan has remained largely intact. While some of the detailed targets have changed, the thrust of the overall vision – including a focus on regenerating two cities – has remained the same. Housing figures have been adjusted in an updated plan to take account of housing units already built and to reflect the downturn in development activity since 2008.

### Gatwick Diamond Initiative

The Gatwick Diamond Initiative (GDI) was established in 2003 as a business-led joint venture by the Surrey and West Sussex Economic Partnerships to stimulate and maintain strong economic growth. However, the private sector initiative here gradually merged with on-going local authority planning efforts under the RSS process to create the public-private partnership that is GDI, and a Local Strategic Statement was produced for the area only recently in 2012.

Under the previous regional arrangements and the South East Plan, detailed housing targets and employment objectives were specified for sub-regional growth areas. As a result of recent reforms, the previous specific growth commitments for the area have been called into question.

### SVUK

‘Science Vale UK’ is a relatively recent innovation (introduced in 2008) encompassing the towns of Didcot, Wantage and Grove, and the employment centres of Harwell Oxford

(previously Harwell Science and Innovation Campus), Milton Park and Culham Science Centre (CSC). The SVUK concept (known initially as the ‘Quadrant’) emerged at the tail end of the era of regional economic and spatial strategies and the parallel enabling of cross-boundary agreements across local government districts (so called ‘multi-area agreements’) designed to promote new planning spaces at the sub-regional scale.

Since its introduction the SVUK concept has become well established as a planning entity and is referenced widely in formal planning documentation, for example, Oxfordshire County Council transportation policies, the local development frameworks and core strategies of relevant district councils. However, localism has given rise to policy divergence between SODC and the Vale of the White Horse District Council (VOWH), as the two neighbouring authorities have responded differently to the new planning context.

### The changing landscape for sub-national economic development

Since 2010, the UK Government has almost completely removed previous programmes for local growth and replaced them with a new set of structures and funding mechanisms, alongside new local freedoms and responsibilities. The implications for sub-national governance arrangements have been considerable.

Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) were introduced in 2011 to replace Regional Development Agencies (RDAs). At the same time, the Government’s localism agenda has introduced significant changes to the planning system as well as the institutional and policy landscape for economic growth. In planning, major reforms have taken place with the introduction of the Localism Act 2011 and the National Planning Policy Framework, effective from April 2012, as well as the Growth and Infrastructure Act 2013.

In terms of institutional change, new experiments in urban governance have been introduced through City Deals, and new – or rediscovered – mechanisms have been established including Enterprise Zones, the



## Regional Growth Fund and the Growing Places Fund.

As might be expected, the Government's plans for local growth have continued to develop as new initiatives and funds have been added and changes have been made to address apparent weaknesses, including additional funds to build LEPs' capacity, and improved central scheme management for the Regional Growth Fund.

These reforms have been in contrast to the increasing attention paid over the previous decade or so to cross-boundary and cross-sectoral strategic planning, especially in relation to housing, population change and economic growth. Within the overall context of regional planning under the previous Labour Government, so-called 'soft' sub-regional planning spaces were introduced as a means of delivering growth targets, overcoming local political differences and responding to historic shortfalls in housing and infrastructure.

One outcome of this restructuring has been a question over the status of soft planning spaces introduced alongside the regional arrangements cultivated by the previous Labour Government. Some of these planning spaces – including the three case studies examined here – emerged as sub-regional components of the Regional Spatial Strategy preparation process. In some instances these dovetailed with the enabling and financing of multi-area agreements which were taken-up by the most active of sub-regional planning groupings. Elsewhere, broader cross regional cooperation saw the emergence of meta- or supra-regional spatial planning initiatives, such as 'The Northern Way'.

Arguably, a measure of continuity exists with such sentiments having remained in the emphasis placed on the Duty to Cooperate by the current Government alongside its localism agenda. However, it is also the case that the revocation of the Regional Spatial Strategies and regional tier bodies such as the RDAs, and the expectations set in train with the initial introduction of the localism agenda, have left these soft spaces and their fledgling patterns of governance somewhat exposed.

## The implications of localism

Planning and politics across the South East region as a whole has long embodied an approach that has sought to allocate land as accretions to the existing settlement patterns rather than to embrace the comprehensive planning of new settlements. Across the case study areas there is an emerging recognition of the limits of this approach.

In each of the case study areas there has been a remarkable commitment to housing and employment land allocations established under the Regional Spatial Strategies process, with little draw back under the localism era. This reflects underlying concerns in each area about economic growth – especially in relation to the rest of the South East and in some instances to other international benchmarks.

Nevertheless, politicians and planners alike now appear keen to relay popular concerns into the detailed planning and housing numbers associated with particular land allocations in ways which resemble a past reluctance to plan positively for population and economic growth.

## About the research

This briefing is based on research conducted for the RTPI by Dave Valler from Oxford Brookes University and Nick Phelps from University College London, funded through the RTPI's Small Projects Impact Research (SPIRe) scheme. The full report is available on the RTPI website at: [www.rtpi.org.uk/spire](http://www.rtpi.org.uk/spire)

## About the RTPI

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