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Original
Negotiated strategic regional planning: emerging practice in the London–Cambridge corridor / Mace, A., Mossa, A.. - In: TOWN PLANNING REVIEW. - ISSN 0041-0020. - 95:6(2024), pp. 665-683. [10.3828/tpr.2024.37]

Availability:
This version is available at: 11583/2996687 since: 2025-01-19T15:37:00Z

Publisher:
Liverpool University Press

Published
DOI:10.3828/tpr.2024.37

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(Article begins on next page)

14 October 2026

https://doi.org/10.3828/tpr.2024.37

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Negotiated strategic regional planning: emerging practice in the London–Cambridge corridor

Formal regional planning structures were abolished in England in 2011. One response has been to call for their restitution, another has been to argue instead for negotiated strategic regional planning. The latter envisages the formation of partnerships in lieu of formal structures, with two key benefits being it is less vulnerable to government tinkering and is more attuned to economic and political actors. We employ a proxy – the UK Innovation Corridor – to look at the possibilities for negotiated strategic planning. This leads us to conclude that a hybrid model of formal and negotiated regional planning would offer a more robust model.

Keywords: corridor regions, London, planning narratives, regional imaginaries

Introduction

How best to plan, or to attempt to plan at all, city-regions and mega city-regions is an ongoing challenge internationally (Aguilar and Lopez, 2018, Kantor et al., 2012), which is inevitably complex (Storper, 2014). This is reflected through the governance turn, which recognises the increasing range of actors who have an interest in managing metropolitan areas (Haughton et al., 2010). Furthermore, the geography of regions is no longer seen as 'natural' or fixed, rather, regions are territories of practice that emerge in relation to global flows and networks (Agnew, 2013, Fricke and Gualini, 2018). In this context, planners have sometimes been described as left seeking to resolve the structural incompatibility of statutory planning for legally bounded spaces and strategic planning across less determined spaces (in the case of Mexico see Aguilar and Lopez (2018), and of Finland, see Granqvist et al. (2021)).

In England the challenge has its own specificity, as in 2011 formal regional structures were dismantled by government, reflecting a longstanding political scepticism towards regional planning (Wray, 2016). Governments have since legislated for a 'joined-up' localism, which has been criticised for being an inadequate replacement (see for example McGuiness and Mawson, 2017). In response to the limitations of the post-2011 arrangements, Gordon and Champion (2021) offer an alternative to calls

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for a wholesale return to former regional planning structures and practices. They seek to work with the grain of recent government's less formally structured approach to regional planning, arguing that actors should seek proactively to develop negotiated strategic regional planning rather than simply waiting for and/or responding to partial legislative substitutes from government.

Their argument for this approach can be categorised under two broad headings: resilience and competence. Resilience reflects their argument that formal regional planning structures initiated by central government will only be as stable as the commitment of that and any future government. While the rise of the city-region in particular has sometimes been linked to the post-Fordist hollowing out of the central state, Galland (2012) notes the reality is more a reconfiguration than a withdrawal of the state: 'the state holds an inherent capacity to decide which specific actors or institutional arrangements it is to favour in terms of handing-over powers and allocating resources' (Galland, 2012, 539, drawing on Jessop 1990; see also Harrison, 2010). From a pragmatist rather than an ideological perspective, Storper (2014) argues that top-down changes to metropolitan governance are an inevitable response to inherent complexity. Formal regional structures are only fit for purpose at the time of their creation (Wannop, 1995), leading inevitably to central government 'tinkering' (Storper, 2014). In other words, there is a certain uncertainty in the structuring of regional governance by the centre.

The competence case encompasses two arguments that we develop. First, Gordon and Champion (2021) argue that in the past, regional planning has not taken sufficient account of the economic context, noting that 'ignored market responses can lead to quite perverse effects from key policies' (6). And second, that as planners have a relatively weak professional status to draw on as leverage, it is better to seek delivery through strong partnerships. In arguing for partnerships whose negotiations are informed by interests at a regional scale, Gordon and Champion (2021) recognise the need for an effective spatial imaginary. As conceptualisations of regions have moved from being bounded and simple to more flexible and complex, so regional identity has come to be seen not in terms of 'inherent qualities [but] as a social construct that is produced and reproduced in discourse' (Paasi, 2013, 1208). A body of writing takes as its focus the role of spatial imaginaries as the means to defining and constructing regions (Davoudi, 2018, Davoudi and Brooks, 2021, Harrison and Gu, 2021, Harvey et al., 2011, Luukkonen and Sirvio, 2019). An effective imaginary is, therefore, a prerequisite for the perception of regional interests that can bring actors together to negotiate with one another.

The UK Innovation Corridor

The UK Innovation Corridor (UKIC), which started as the London Stansted Cambridge Consortium (LSCC) in 2013 is an example of a partnership with sub-regional ambitions that sits outside government sanctioned, top-down (sub) regional projects.[1] As a voluntary association of willing partners from the private and public sectors it represents a proxy to start to test the arguments of Gordon and Champion (2021). While the UKIC is not primarily structured around or related to formal planning processes, our interest is in the possibility for local plans to contribute to the regional imaginary of the UKIC and therefore, to support negotiations that are informed by a regional dimension. Before turning to the corridor, we briefly provide more detail of the context in which it the UKIC has formed and sustained itself.

Since 2011 central government has facilitated (but not always required) a range of joint working at the more-than-local level. These include:

- *local strategic partnerships* (LSPs) which are voluntary arrangements with the private sector to plan for economic development at a more-than-local level, (see Pike et al., 2015)
- *multi area agreements*, where a group of authorities can agree to joint working, with the government agreeing to some devolution of power in return (see Baker and Wong, 2013)
- *combined authorities*, where a 'super authority' can operate alongside the existing local authorities (see Townsend, 2019).

Alongside these arrangements, central government has also identified 'regional' projects (in all but name) including by signalling the expansion of a corridor-region approach. For example, a report by the Local Plans Expert Group (LPEG), which identified corridors as one tool for addressing the need to plan at a more-than-local level where there are particular pressures for development, states:

> Government should consider the extent to which it is necessary to create the circumstances to enable the establishment of growth points to complement the capacity of local plans to meet national needs. Options include: […] facilitating the preparation of locally produced spatial plans based on transport corridors. (LPEG, 2016, Appendix A:10)

A further example is the government's *industrial strategy* (BEIS, 2017, 225) which referenced existing 'regional corridors in the Northern Powerhouse and Midlands Engine'.

The case of the Oxford–Cambridge Arc, as a government-sponsored corridor, is an informative contrast to our case. Although with longer narrative roots, the Arc started to gain traction in the early 2000s (Valler et al., 2023, see also Valler et al., 2021

1 Hereafter, for consistency we refer to UKIC regardless of the timeframe.

for an evaluative framework). The Cambridge–Milton Keynes–Oxford Arc/corridor became the focus of government support not least through the work of the National Infrastructure Commission which championed rail and road improvements along the Arc with related negotiations for increased housing delivery. Valler et al. (2023) provide a detailed account of the fall of the Arc, which was notable for the rapidity of its final demise between the latter part of 2021 and 2022 following a pivot by the government to its 'levelling up' agenda. It is a specific case, and its demise may be due in part to, '[it being] inchoate and somewhat amorphous, lacking in discursive and material coherence' (Valler et al., 2023, 618). But beyond any specific reasons for its fall, it lends support to the general point, made by Gordon and Champion (2021), that formal regions (or in this case a government-sponsored corridor region), will be subject to the changing priorities and related organisational responses of government.

In contrast, the UKIC sits outside government sanctioned, top-down corridor-regional projects. Funded voluntarily by public and private bodies in the London–Cambridge corridor, it covers three counties and four LEPs, and its members include 14 local authorities, which also act as local planning authorities (the subject of our research). Independent of planning, the UKIC has sought to narrate its importance to the UK economy in order to have government 'notice it' and to commit funding for necessary new infrastructure along the corridor. Its change of name to the 'UK Innovation Corridor' was to represent better its economic importance to the UK. Reflecting the broader observation of Almond et al. (2017), the corridor represents, '[a] sub-national regional space as an important level of institutional adaptation [where] regions organise themselves to compete for inward investment' (115). In this case, the emphasis is on seeking government funding and broader commitment to ensure that the corridor sub-region can continue to attract inward investment, especially into the high-tech centres to the north in Cambridge and to the south in central London, and where London Stansted Airport plays an important role.

The UKIC has not set itself the task of producing a strategic plan for the corridor not least because it does not want to exceed its authority in the eyes of its members, especially the local planning authorities. However, when it describes its objectives, these are strongly suggestive of a strategic planning role:

- Promote the corridor: which covers supporting Members with the development of the narrative for the corridor, promotion and positioning with government, Whitehall, and the investor community.
- Make the case for infrastructure: prioritising and focussing on the key infrastructure requirements which are needed to support growth. This includes London Stansted Airport as one of the key infrastructure components, as well as rail, road, digital and utilities.
- Supporting our key sectors: identifying growth spaces for expansion, supporting labour mobility, and encouraging skills development.

(GLA 2017, 2)

In seeking to achieve its objectives, an ongoing task for the UKIC is to successfully create and sustain a spatial imaginary that makes it significant to government (i.e. the contribution of the corridor to the national economy) and which spatially frames/aligns actor's interests to bring parties to the negotiation table. In this context, our interest was in the extent to which local plans and related infrastructure delivery plans are being and might be employed in support of building an imaginary of the corridor, providing the weight of statutory local plans to help frame a shared basis for negotiating strategic decisions in the corridor.

Our research drew on a literature that understands the region as a spatial imaginary and on a related literature that understands planning practice as including the formation and transmission of narratives or of storytelling (Bulkens et al., 2014; Forester, 1993; Van Hulst, 2012). Narratives and storytelling are techniques for making sense of complicated situations (Jensen, 2007) and managing uncertainty (Gonzáles, 2006). Narratives can guide politicians, planners and residents to future actions shaping the way they imagine the future of a place (Mandelbaum, 2000; Throgmorton, 1996; van Hulst, 2012), '[they] do not have to be original, but they must be authoritative (that is, provide reliable evidence marshalled into a convincing argument). The best are both original and authoritative' (Sandercock, 2003, 19).

The process of producing narratives is closely linked to spatial imaginaries. Planners use narratives to imagine neighbourhoods and other spatial sub-divisions of their jurisdiction. But narratives are equally employed to bring into being spatial imaginaries that transcend their jurisdiction, including of sub-regions and regions. In England, post-2011, planners are required to narrate their relationship to neighbouring authorities through their plans, but might narratives support an even wider spatial imaginary such as the corridor? Put another way we are interested in the extent to which locally generated narratives, developed in fixed or hard spaces, can be expanded in support of softer spaces of negotiated strategic planning.

Methods

We offer a conjunctural reading of the UKIC, drawing on the approach of Valler et al. (2023) and their analysis of the Oxford–Cambridge arc. This provides for a reading that takes the general (theory) and the particular to be mutually constitutive. It allows for a reading that recognises structure, but which includes influences that at any given time have a bearing on events. Of particular relevance to our interest is that the approach can also be spatialised so that,

> [conjunctural analysis not only goes] backwards in time, but also outwards in space (identifying how local events are shaped by distant processes), and upwards and downwards in terms of geographical scale (whereby events at a particular scale may be shaped by both higher and lower scale processes). (Leitner and Sheppard, 2020, 495)

While focused on a rigorous analysis of the local and infrastructure plans, with our methods described below, we are also informed by several years involvement with the working of the UKIC. We have been part of various formal meetings and presentations and have had numerous conversations with UKIC staff and partners as well as with a wide range of planners, politicians and other actors in the corridor. These relationships and our familiarity with UKIC and wider planning policy over an extended period inform our reading of the UKIC as a case study against which to consider the possibilities for negotiated strategic regional planning and the possible role of local planning in this. As the conversations and contacts were not formally part of this research, we have not sought to employ them directly here. We therefore give greater weight to our analysis of the local plans and their role in supporting a spatial imaginary of the corridor in support of strategic negotiations.

Following our framing of planning as narratological, and taking a constructivist approach to the sub-region, we employed a discourse analysis of the statutory local plans in the corridor, to assess the extent to which statutory plans are being employed in support of creating an imaginary of the corridor. We supplemented this with a review of the infrastructure delivery plans which support local plans. Each local authority (LA) is required to produce a local plan which has legal status within the planning system. Alongside this an LA will produce a range of other planning documents which complement the local plan. The local plan must include a strategic vision for the LA as part of fulfilling its statutory planning purpose (i.e. setting out a legal document that guides development decisions within an authority's area). Alphabetically, the authorities are Broxbourne, Cambridge City, East Hertfordshire, Enfield, Epping Forest, Harlow, Redbridge, South Cambridgeshire, Uttlesford and Waltham Forest (see Figure 1).

We used the latest available iteration of the local plan, referring to consultation versions of draft plans where available as these give the most up-to-date picture of the LA's thinking. While the exact wording may change in later versions of the document this is offset by the advantage of having a more contemporary picture than provided in existing 'adopted' local plans. As noted, cooperation is not only recorded or achieved through the local plan, but we used this as the best single point to look at how authorities described themselves and their relationship to the corridor. Moreover, the local plan is a document that covers an extended period (around 15 years), and which contains policies and supporting text that have legal weight.

There is a varied structure of local government in England and, consequently, the local planning authorities encompass a range of types with differing statutory duties. This produces some variations in the scope and context of the plans, but this is not significant for our purpose of researching how each LA narrates itself and the corridor. Broadly, Cambridge City and Harlow are two 'city' authorities (although Harlow is not officially a city). Enfield, Redbridge and Waltham Forest are London boroughs where the London Plan acts as a higher tier plan, with the local plan having

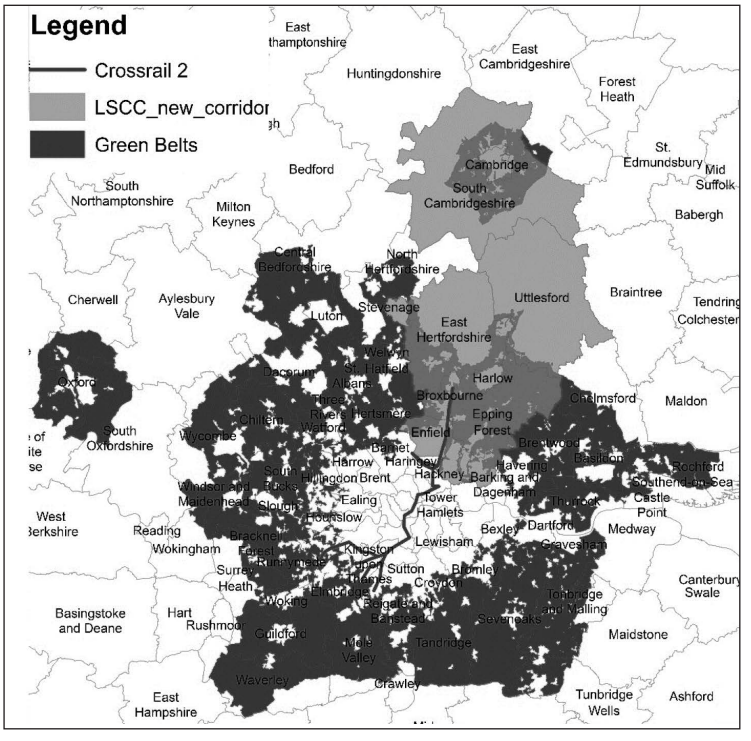

Figure 1 UKIC (LSCC) case study authorities (light grey) with green belt overlaid (dark grey)

to be in general conformity with the London Plan. The remaining LAs represent more expansive rural areas that include towns. Districts are part of counties but for the purposes of this work are not subject to a higher tier plan in the same way as are the London boroughs.

We did not want simply to look for formal references to cooperation. Rather following Forester (1993, 30) our purpose was to look at how the local authorities in the corridor, 'reconstruct selectively what the problems at hand really are [and then] characterize themselves (and others) as willing to act in certain ways or not'. To do this, we analysed narratives by extracting relevant pieces of text in the context of larger sections of text to provide and maintain context. We then wrote an observation about the selected text and coded it; this allowed each researcher to review the other's decisions with the longer extract providing important context for the key text. Our main categories were adapted from Gee (2005, cited in Greckhamer and Cilesiz, 2014): identity building (defining characteristics); significance building (drivers of change); relationship building (the LA in relation to others); connection building (how the LA links to the plans of others); knowledge building (use of rational scientific and other evidence); political building (who is the LA aligning with and against), and finally, activity building (how does the LA plan to respond).

Narrating the UKIC

Our analysis of the plans showed primarily an inward focus (as we might expect of a local statutory plan) with some 'strategic' attention, primarily to neighbouring authorities, which is required of statutory local plans. This produced three clusters along the corridor, to the south, London, and specifically several north London boroughs, as well as neighbouring districts bordering the north of London. A middle section comprises more rural authorities such as East Hertfordshire and Uttlesford, and to the north, Cambridge and South Cambridgeshire.

In the middle section of the corridor local district plans recognised and narrated their areas as lower density locations, in terms of both population and work, where people travelled into and out of the authority. In effect these authorities narrated themselves as 'deep' suburbs of both Cambridge to the north and London to the south as well as having internal centres of employment – notably Stansted Airport in Uttlesford.

> Beyond the District the nearest towns are Bishop's Stortford and Braintree which both lie close to the District's southern boundaries, whilst Cambridge and Chelmsford are also accessible and provide a greater range of services. Further afield is London with good transport links to the District by both road and rail. (Uttlesford District Council, 2018, 2.6)

In the middle section of the corridor the narrative of growth pressures (significance building), was more often linked to internal and external commuting flows with an attendant housing market area impacting demand: 'The location of East Herts on the periphery of London means that the affordability of housing is a key issue across the District' (East Herts District Council, 2018, 14.4.1).

A clearer articulation of the local in relation to the corridor is found in the shared idea of the 'Core Area'. Epping Forest and East Herts's local plans reproduce the same text,

> The Core Area will build on its key strengths including its skilled workforce in sectors such as health, life sciences and pharmaceuticals, advanced engineering and aerospace, its high-quality environment and education opportunities. Together with London Stansted Airport, the local authorities will deliver sustainable growth which supports the economic ambition of the LSCC [UKIC] and the UK. (Epping Forest District Council, 2023, 15)

We might interpret the use of tropes such as 'core' and 'heart' as a wish to lay claim to significance within a corridor where the economic powerhouses are to the north and south. However, it might also be suggestive of the degree of commitment to the corridor insofar as the authorities wish to be seen as serious actors within it.

In these authorities in particular, the presence of the UKIC provides useful leverage, a 'big picture' claim in negotiations for infrastructure, taking the LA's claim beyond the local to leverage its role in supporting regional/economic development. For example, Epping Forest's plan references joint working on housing need between partnering authorities in March 2017 explaining, '[that] this forms part of the mechanism for delivering the [UKIC] Vision' (Epping Forest District Council, 2023, 2.17). This is a strong reference to the UKIC not least for directly stating that the work on housing need informing the local plan is also there to support the vision for the sub-region. Usefully, Uttlesford's plan makes similar reference to the jointly produced assessment of housing need linking it to the work of UKIC in the same way. This powerfully provides local housing negotiations with the weight of a wider joint vision, while also reinforcing the corridor by connecting it to housing delivery. There are significant references to UKIC across the plans in the 'Core Area', setting out in some detail how the local plan and UKIC relate to one another. This represented a 'best practice' for the use of statutory plans in supporting an imaginary of the corridor.

To the south is the behemoth of London. Here things are more complex, as in London there is a series of local plans each written by the respective London boroughs, but the London Plan (GLA, 2021)2 – produced by the Mayor of London – forms part of each borough's local plan. The London Plan makes several references to Cambridge, but only twice in relation to a London–Cambridge corridor (at 2.1.29 and 2.1.32). It also narrates Oxford, Cambridge and London as a 'golden triangle' (2.2.5, 6.8.3). At 2.3.8 the Plan lends support to the UKIC's claim for improved transport infrastructure, referencing as strategic priorities, '[improvements to] West Anglia Mainline, [the development of] Crossrail 2 North (London – Stansted – Cambridge – Peterborough) and [improvements to the] M11'. While the support from the London Plan for new and improved transport infrastructure in the corridor is useful overall, the London Plan does not make great play of the corridor. This likely reflects political sensitivities on the part of the GLA, not wanting to be seen as imposing itself on neighbouring authorities. However, it does hold open a position for future negotiations with partners along the corridor. The three London borough plans we included – Redbridge, Waltham Forest and Enfield – all reference the UKIC positively several times in their respective plans. However, none add the level of detail given in the Core Area plans, and no space is given to a description of what the UKIC is nor to its vision.

Finally, to the north, Cambridge and South Cambridgeshire. The city plan narrative was of a city-region that was primarily having to manage its success. Economic growth was depicted as the greatest driver of change, leading to overcrowded transport networks (road and rail), and a shortage of housing, often linked to the unaffordability of housing. For Cambridge, the demand was depicted largely in terms of the city as an international attraction and a regional centre with commuting and service demands

2 The version of the Plan current at the time of the research.

spilling over from a sub-region surrounding the city: 'Cambridge City Centre is a thriving regional centre and international tourist destination, in addition to providing for the needs of those living, working and studying in the city' (Cambridge City Council, 2018, 3.3).

Neither the Cambridge nor the South Cambridgeshire plan nor the infrastructure delivery plan make any mention of the UKIC. The infrastructure delivery plan describes the proposed transport corridors and desired effect they should bring, focusing on residential growth and connecting employment centres in the city fringes. Housing targets, thus, are sought to be reached through implementing development at the city-region level, with Cambridge as the hub of this growth; the corridors that are mentioned do not include the UKIC.

This absence is clearly a missed opportunity, given the centrality of Cambridge to the imaginary of a high-tech 'innovation' corridor. In terms of identity, relationship and connection building, Cambridge has narrated a uniquely local-centric narrative among the UKIC authorities. This emphasises the potential for the statutory local plan process to lead to a fragmentation or undermining of a strategic imaginary. As one of the 'bigger' partners, *being* Cambridge *is* the strategic imaginary. This is reflected in the local plan making 11 references to world leader, world class and world heritage (Cambridge City Council, 2018) with five references in the South Cambridgeshire plan (South Cambridgeshire District Council, 2018). These two local plans 'talk to' central government; of Cambridge's needs as a city-region but offer little in the way of a supportive narrative for negotiated strategic planning along the rest of the corridor.

In summary, statutory local plans along the corridor vary in the extent to which they narrate their respective authorities as part of the corridor, and this variation is particularly marked regarding 'relationship' and 'connection' building. In the most positive cases, clear links are made showing the potential for the use of statutory plans in support of negotiated strategic planning for the corridor which could bring together multiple public and private actors. The corridor imaginary is strongest in relation to claims on central government for further infrastructure investment, where 'political building' or establishing a sense of common purpose is relatively easy, as investment in linear infrastructure such as roads and rail can have a clear benefit along the corridor. However, the UKIC has avoided contentious strategic issues more likely to divide its partners. We next turn to two related examples which, we argue, illustrate the limits of negotiated strategic regional planning, at least as viewed through the proxy of the UKIC.

Contentious corridor issues

We briefly look at the related matters of housing development and land constraint (specifically green belt policy) which are likely to be more divisive than unifying but which would make an important contribution to narrating into existence a strong

spatial imaginary of the corridor, and so improving connection and relationship building to refine activity building.

Housing supply and land constraint (arising partly but not exclusively from an extensive green belt at either end of the corridor) are closely related. These are divisive issues for the local authorities in the corridor, as the perception is that local voters will likely strongly resist new housing development and equally oppose any loss of green belt/relaxation of land constraint. The majority of residents are unlikely to accept a strategic negotiation which, for example, traded more local housing for less elsewhere in the corridor or some loss of local green belt locally for provision elsewhere. For LAs in the north and centre of the corridor, claims that the authority is going to play its part in hosting development in the corridor are strongly caveated by conservationist growth limits. Green space (of all types) is described as a defining characteristic of most of the authorities. Cambridge City is the most direct in linking conservation (including of open space) to past and future economic success, 'The Green Belt is one of the key elements that contribute to the symbiotic relationship between high quality of life, place and economic success of Cambridge' (Cambridge City Council, 2018, 2.51). Cambridge City's plan speaks directly to government in defending this approach. It narrates a past willingness to remove parts of its green belt as justification for taking a more restrictive approach to green belt release in the new plan. There is a similarity here in the case of Stansted Airport, one of London's airports and a major source of economic activity and employment to the mid-south of the corridor. Although the host LA recognises the airport's economic significance, it gives great weight to the case for constraints, 'The Green Belt will be firmly safeguarded to retain a belt of countryside between Harlow, Bishop's Stortford, Stansted Mountfitchet and London Stansted Airport' (Uttlesford District Council, 2018, 3.24).

However, there are examples of neighbouring local authorities cooperating on housing development/green belt in the corridor, a good example being Epping Forest (over 90 per cent green belt), which is working closely with neighbouring Harlow to meet the former's housing need through cooperation with and development in the latter. This is a clear instance of a synergy of interests between neighbouring authorities, '[with] a recognised need for significant regeneration of Harlow, including through the delivery of Harlow and Gilston Garden Town' (Epping Forest District Council, 2023, 1.45). But noteworthy is that while, as previously mentioned, Epping Forest linked delivering housing to the future growth of the corridor, the out-borough solution is with a neighbour and does not talk to potential corridor-wide allocation of development land. To the south, in or near London, LAs also identified green space as a defining asset of their areas, but nuanced this with the expressed wish to attract new employment and to balance green space including green belt with the need to increase land supply for development.

Were the partners in the corridor able to address contentious matters more effectively, including through the local plan process, they would be able to produce a significantly more comprehensive imaginary of the corridor as an entity, as more than the sum of its parts and in so doing, greatly strengthen their negotiating position with central government. The issues include where to concentrate growth and where to defend and amend conservation in the corridor. For example, land outside the investment hotspots of Cambridge and central London, and importantly too, outside the green belt (Figure 1), could be identified for employment uses, releasing land for housing in Cambridge and London. Alternatively, these areas might take up more of the housing demand to allow for the development of employment space at either end of the corridor. Even more contentiously, the green belt could be addressed at a regional rather than a local scale (Herington, 1990), with selected strategic release providing sites for employment and housing.

The possibility would be to set demands for investment in linear infrastructure alongside the promise of a significant uplift in the delivery of new housing in support of economic growth in the corridor, in effect, the promise that won government backing for the Oxford–Cambridge Arc, but in the case of the UKIC, with bottom-up support. But so far, the UKIC has separated itself from such contentious strategic negotiations. In summary, maintaining the partnership rests partly on avoiding negotiations over difficult strategic matters within the corridor. This may be necessary for the UKIC, to hold itself together in order to be able to negotiate with central government. Yet, at the same time it weakens its position in these negotiations as this model appears no more able to internally negotiate and deliver a strategic uplift in housing delivery than the Oxford–Cambridge Arc.

Discussion

We have looked at the experience of the UKIC as a proxy for a type of practice we might expect to emerge in response to the call of Gordon and Champion (2021) for negotiated strategic regional planning, in the absence of (and in preference to) formal regional planning. Following Leitner and Sheppard (2020), our conjunctural reading of the UKIC draws attention to the importance of the scalar alongside the temporal. The UKIC seeks to operate in an environment influenced by international investment, national government and its partners' local interests. The abolition of the regions in 2011 left a vacuum that the UKIC has sought to address. In several respects the UKIC should find a ready audience from the government it was formed under. It is a partnership that has strong representation from the private sector, and it provides part of an alternative to formal regions. Nevertheless, the wider national context has been ambiguous. After the Brexit referendum in 2016, the bandwidth of government has been occupied with the politics of withdrawal. Yet the UKIC claim of importance

to the UK economy, including high levels of international investment, should make it an attractive imaginary in Britian post-Brexit. The 2019 election then shifted the geographical attention of the main parties, with the Conservatives winning a majority including by gaining northern seats, which has made overt endorsement of major infrastructure investment in the south of the country more difficult.[3]

Moreover, there have been regular changes to the planning system, with national planning guidance having been revised in 2018, 2019, 2021 and twice in 2023. This and other messaging from central government is likely to have drawn attention inward as local authorities seek to manage these changes. Meanwhile, at a regional scale, the green belt remains an 'institution', which at least at the time of writing faces no effective challenge and which, consequently, shapes the behaviours of actors within the corridor, as does the backdrop of strong NIMBY resistance to development (although variable across the corridor).

Within this context, we briefly discuss our observations of the UKIC using what Gordon and Champion argue are the four basic foundations for, 'realistically sustainable strategic practice, [in summary], building collective understanding […] reducing incentives to non-cooperation […] enabling leadership from sources with a capacity to commit resources [and] establishing the grounds for negotiating acceptable deals' (2021, 9). Our analysis shows that local statutory plans already go some way to narrating a collective understanding supportive of a regional imaginary. In addition, the UKIC in most cases is also used to strengthen local planning narratives. While planners are the producers of spatial narratives, they are not their sole owners. Spatial stories are 'read' as well as 'written' where the act of interpretation may lead to stories being either effective or dismissed (Zitcer, 2017). The UKIC at least suggests that negotiated strategic planning could support planners in producing more authoritative local narratives by better recognising the economic and political forces beyond their jurisdiction, but which have an influence on it.

Next, reducing incentives to non-cooperation: we found a focus on issues where cooperation is more readily achieved and a distancing from those issues that are likely to be divisive. The strategic basis for negotiation is strongest where claims on funding for linear infrastructure are being made by the partners to central government. The basis is weaker where issues are more 'internally' contentious. The allocation of land for housing and the presence of green belt at either end of the corridor are potentially divisive issues that disincentivise cooperation. The UKIC approach in its own documents, and the approach of local planning authorities in their plans, is to treat these as matters for the individual authority and their immediate neighbouring authorities, as is required by

3 Since the time of writing, a general election on 4 July 2024 returned a Labour Government with a significant majority. In its early weeks, the new government placed planning reform, including a new approach to green belt, at the forefront of its agenda with the aim of securing greater economic growth. These changes might be significant for the UKIC but it is too early to determine this.

planning law, and not to extend beyond this. This is perfectly logical in terms of nurturing the UKIC network but illustrates the limitations of seeking to deliver a strategic vision without formal planning tools (including hierarchies) that can overcome a reversion to local interests where contentious matters are involved.

The UKIC brings into conversation organisations who have and/or control resources and can exercise some leadership. Cambridge University, for example, has considerable resources, including as a landowner, and attracts significant international investment to the city. Stansted Airport is also an important actor in the corridor. But their attraction and deployment of resources is relatively geographically constrained within the corridor and will not make a majority contribution to necessary linear infrastructure such as road and rail. Therefore, while the UKIC includes actors with the ability to commit resources at a local level, this is of a different scale to that of government, which remains as the key allocator of resources across the corridor. Here the UKIC remains susceptible to shifts in government priorities.

Finally, establishing the grounds for negotiating acceptable deals: here we argue, the inclusion of local plans is a positive first step to providing grounds for negotiation as these are documents with a legal status which can help focus the attention of actors and shape relevant negotiations. In (mostly) recognising the corridor, the local plans help narrate into existence a space – the corridor – that draws the attention of actors. From a local planner's perspective, the UKIC again suggests the possibility of being strengthened in negotiations with private and public sector actors by the ability to leverage a strategic imaginary, addressing the relative professional weakness of planners (Campbell and Marshall, 2005).

Conclusion

The complexity of metropolitan and regional governance poses a challenge internationally. England provides a particular case since formal regional structures were abolished in 2011. Assessments of the post-abolition arrangements have not broadly been positive and have led some to argue for a return to some type of formal regional planning structure (Bafarasat et al., 2023). Mindful of the fact that regional arrangements are dependent on what is politically possible in the present, calls for formal structures are necessarily future focused. In the present, Gordon and Champion (2021) offer the model of negotiated strategic regional planning, but this is not offered simply because it resonates with the present architecture of more-than-local planning in England. Their proposal is founded on the observed need to have a way of working that is more resilient to changing government interests and arrangements, which the Oxford–Cambridge Arc became a victim of. They also critique earlier forms of regional planning which were often unsuccessful because of a failure to recognise sufficiently the broader economic and political context in which these were seeking to act and to influence.

We have offered the experience of the UKIC as a proxy for the proposed practice of negotiated strategic regional planning. In providing a narratological framing of the corridor through local plans, our focus has been on how, in the post-2011 English context, the hard spaces of local planning might be softened and soft spaces hardened (Zimmerbauer and Paasi, 2020). The UKIC has maintained itself through a turbulent period of national politics, which is a considerable achievement strongly supporting part of Gordon and Champion's case for negotiated strategic regional planning. However, the benefits are not so clear in other respects. Elsewhere, scalar tensions exist where there are formal planning mechanisms at the regional and local level (Granqvist et al., 2021); indeed, such tensions formed part of the justification for the abolition of regional structures in England. In our proxy case, it is hard to find evidence that negotiated strategic planning can significantly reduce scalar tensions; rather it has avoided them. Negotiated strategic planning works where there are willing partners, but it still comes up against the limits of differing spatial identities and interests. This includes persuading all the necessary actors in the corridor to accept the logic of planning at the more-than-local scale (Gherhes et al., 2023).

There have been some successes in using the weight of statutory local plans to narrate the corridor and so to bring together some actors. However, in the terms of Davoudi (2018, 101), to date, this may have provided a stronger imagination of the corridor (imaging what is not yet there) than it has an imaginary: '[that is,] deeply held, collective understandings of socio-spatial relations that are performed by, give sense to, make possible and change collective socio-spatial practices'. At least as evidenced through local plans, the UKIC has successfully brought willing partners together to act around a limited imaginary but shared to a differing extent, the case of Cambridge being a pertinent example, having absented the UKIC from its local plans. It has not yet to find the means to build a stronger imaginary that would allow for active negotiations and agreements over more contentious issues, even though the UKIC has an interest in these.

Given the apparent limits of negotiated strategic planning, at least as suggested by our proxy, it is difficult to dismiss calls for some form of statutory regional planning mechanisms able to preside over necessarily contentious decisions. However, a return to old systems would be open to old problems, to tinkering and possibly to being insufficiently attuned to economic and political contexts. Therefore, if or when new formal structures are developed by government, the UKIC experience suggests that there are good reasons to seek a hybridised version of regional planning that requires effective horizontal negotiated partner-based planning alongside sufficient vertical authority (including the promise of resources) to bring people to negotiate the more contentious issues.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the anonymous reviewers whose feedback has made a significant contribution to improving the article. We also want to thank John McGill of the UKIC for who has included us over a long period in the activities of the UKIC. We also acknowledge the contribution of Fanny Blanc, Davide Zorloni and Sarah Slate who assisted with aspects of the research. Finally, thanks to our colleague Nancy Holman for her encouragement and advice.

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