

If the rest of the country is to catch up to London, we need a Great North Plan

By Democratic Audit UK

*Since the introduction of the London mayoralty, London has enjoyed a level of strategic planning which has allowed it to speak with one voice in putting the case for greater infrastructure and economic development. The rest of the country does not have this advantage, and IPPR North's **Bill Davies** argues that in order to bridge the gap we need to think about new ideas to help catch up, and to put together a "Great North Plan".*



Liverpool (Beverley Goodwin, Credit: CC BY 2.0)

On Wednesday, the Mayor of London welcomed the [London Infrastructure Plan](#). The collection of documents by consultants Arup outlined the future demands on London's infrastructure network, where the stresses were, and where they are coming down the line, as the capital's population continues to grow. The plan is an excellent visioning exercise, exploring issues that London will face in terms of housing capacity, transport capacity, and energy capacity.

Crucially, it is about ideas – the transport paper is brimming with ideas of how to evolve the transport network to cope with additional demand, and respond to future changes in behaviour. Among these are bigger, faster trains; better roads to make the lives of Londoners easier. These will improve the connections between people and places, between buyers and sellers, that speed up business activity, improve productivity, and drive economic growth.

Why stop at London? The other parts of the UK suffer major connectivity problems – in fact, on many measures, the poorer parts of the UK, such as the North East, North West, and Yorkshire and Humber suffer from creaking connections that would be unthinkable in London. For instance, [a recent paper](#) found that the speed of trains between Leeds and Manchester were as slow as they were 150 years ago. The Reading to London journey covers a similar distance, but takes around half the time. But it doesn't stop at transport -from sluggish East-West train links, slower broadband connections, and weaker mobile coverage.

Current policy is also leaving the other regions of the UK behind. The gap in infrastructure will widen further, as planned spending outlined by the Treasury shows 59% of regionally allocated, publicly supported investment, will go to the capital – an imbalance driven largely by major project investments. Crossrail, Thameslink, and Underground improvements on their own exceed publicly supported investment in the North of England. Widening the investment gap will not deliver the rebalanced economy the government; instead OECD research indicates that backing weaker regions with infrastructure investment could deliver higher returns.

The other regions cannot protest without viable alternatives; and a plan like Boris' is just the ticket. Getting there needs an understanding of where the gaps are (and they are myriad), and a collection of ideas that people can discuss, and get excited about.

That's why IPPR North have launched the Great North Plan ([#greatnorthplan](#)); a competition for professionals and armchair infrastructure enthusiasts to submit the big ideas that will manage population growth and transform the connections that will promote economic growth in the North of England. For the next month, we've set up a website for people to submit their ideas, and we will shortly begin to showcase them.

Some of the ideas we've seen build on existing networks – fully electrifying the trans-Pennine rail network, building High Speed 2 from North to South, and developing existing road, and rail capacity to realise the Chancellor's vision of a connected Northern 'powerhouse' of major cities competing with and complementing the strength of the capital.

There are other ideas that establish new networks, harness new technologies, or emphasise new ways of living. Some are possible now – cycle networks to transform city health and transport could happen tomorrow with the capital and commitment, as could free city-wide wi-fi. Others are further away – replacing tarmac with rolling-road pedestrian zones are unlikely, but still provide an answer to connectivity, sustainability and public health problems that hold cities back.

These ideas may, or may not work. What is clear is that the other regions of the UK need ideas that can compete for ministers attention against the clearly demonstrated and articulated propositions for the capital. The North needs a plan like the one Boris got this week. Go to greatnorthplan.com and tell us yours.

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