

**The Secrets of Getting British Plans Done:
A Discussion Paper**

Ian Wray

**Heseltine Institute for Public Policy, Practice and Place
University of Liverpool**

**School of Planning, Property and Environmental Management
University of Manchester**

April 2026

Debate on Britain's economic direction has returned to familiar concerns: weak productivity, sluggish growth and a fragile industrial base. The Government's Modern Industrial Strategy, a ten-year plan published in 2025 to boost investment, resilience and regional growth, has signalled a more interventionist stance, backing key sectors while trying to provide long-term policy stability for business.

At the same time, the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill sets out the most far-reaching shift of powers to local leaders in half a century, widening and deepening devolution as the foundation for place-based growth. Together these developments reflect a growing recognition that centralisation has impeded progress, and that any credible economic strategy must marry national priorities with empowered local institutions driving long-term change on the ground.

How can we best achieve this? An obvious approach is to identify places with known broader economic potential and support their growth through infrastructure, housing, deregulation and public investment and support.

The Oxford Cambridge Arc falls into this category. Since the present government took office, the Chancellor has made it clear that public investment here and in London has very strong support¹. But it is a 'single shot' policy which puts all resources into one already prosperous and highly resource constrained place². It is almost as though, in places familiar to Treasury officials, regional commitments which would be unacceptable elsewhere in Britain are simply waved through.

It was the late Professor Sir Peter Hall (with Ian Wray and David Thrower)³ who came up with the similar idea for High-Speed North as the backbone of a Trans Pennine Mega City. Hall et al advocated an upgrade and renewal of existing rail infrastructure (not unlike London's Overground) tying together the labour markets across 'the south of the north'. When the idea was picked up by former Chancellor George Osborne it morphed into Osborne's highly ambitious Northern Powerhouse Rail project, with long tunnels under the Pennines. Osborne's concept was so expensive and complex that nothing has been achieved in over a decade.

The unsung success of the Trans Pennine Rail Upgrade

Whilst the ambitious 'official' plan has made no progress, the regional engineers at Network Rail have been unknowingly pursuing Hall's modest vision in their Trans Pennine Rail Upgrade project (TRU). Their objective is to secure faster speeds by reinstating quadruple track (east of Huddersfield), with new stations, faster junctions, electrification and new trains.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/chancellor-vows-to-go-further-and-faster-to-kickstart-economic-growth>

² <https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/heseltine-institute/blog/therealityofthenorthernarc/>

³ Peter Hall, Ian Wray and David Thrower High Speed North – Building a Trans Pennine Mega City, TCP, April 2014

Manchester Liverpool is now electrified (with track speed limits raised from 70 to 90 mph) as is Manchester Stalybridge. Electrification of the route between Leeds towards York is underway. We are waiting for commitment to electrification over the steeply graded Pennine route section from Stalybridge to Huddersfield.

We await a final component. The heavily congested Manchester rail hub is a super critical problem constraining rail capacity across the north and may require a short east west city centre tunnel giving direct access to the heart of the city centre. Greater Manchester has already reached population and employment forecasts for 2040 and Manchester's central road network is overloaded with bus and Metrolink trams.

The seven characteristics of highly effective plans

The TRUs modest devolved and modular initiative is typical of how Britain gets plans done. My own research into big successful British plans⁴ identified what I refer to as the seven characteristics of highly effective plans:

- Not dependent on the central state
- A clear and realistic vision
- Modest objectives, conventional (or modest new) technology
- Devolved, sometimes informal, institutional platforms (beyond the central state)
- Stable long-term leadership
- Modular implementation
- Cost control within known budgets

TRU passes the tests with flying colours, just as HS2, one of Britain's greatest planning disasters, arguably failed all seven⁵.

My research showed that almost invariably Britain's successful big plans did not rely on government for direction from the centre. There has been little positive planning in Britain for social and economic outcomes of the sort which underpinned the post war Japanese economic miracle⁶ and the emergence of dynamic industrial competitors in Asia⁷. There was little long term central strategy and correspondingly little continuity within the central government machine, and various attempts to address the issue have foundered.

A different model has prevailed in Britain, where initiative has characteristically come from below. Passionate and well-informed individuals, often with a high degree of determination, invariably drive change. They sometimes went to extraordinary lengths to have their visions adopted and their plans implemented, using a wide range of autonomous institutions as platforms for their campaigns and objectives: private companies, landed estates, charitable

⁴ Ian Wray Great British Plans, Routledge, 2016

⁵ Ian Wray, Britain's High Speed Rail Crash, lecture given at Manchester University, May 2024

⁶ Chalmers Johnson, MITI and the Japanese Miracle, Stanford UP, 1982

⁷ Joe Studwell, How Asia Works, Profile Books, 2013

trusts, professional institutes, campaigning societies; universities; and most of all local government. Local government often proved an essential support, and sometimes a driver, for initiatives launched elsewhere, just as central government often proved to be indifferent or even hostile to change.

Making progress in an uncertain world

What can we learn from this experience? I suggest there may be four key principles.

First, stability is vital and that emerges from devolved institutions with drive, less at risk from Westminster's political cycles and the comings and goings of individual Ministers and Prime Ministers. The central explanation for Manchester's remarkable turnaround has been its high level of political stability - and in turn its inspired leadership. The Urban Development Corporations and former Regional Development Agencies provided similar executive and policy stability (Manchester had two UDCs and huge support from the former RDA, in compulsory purchase and land assembly)

Second, in developing an industrial or economic strategy one should go with the grain and decentralise as much as possible in terms of policy development and execution. This should increase flexibility, knowledge and response and may require institutional strengthening of government beyond Whitehall to restore 'doing' powers, capabilities and partnership abilities. Most of all it will instil 'hands on' drive, commitment and enthusiasm.

Third, focusing on places makes sense and relates well to the first principle. There can be no conceptual objection to the 'Ox Cam Arc', but it is not enough⁸. A 'Northern Arc' counterbalance makes good sense⁹. Community and political support are more likely, much basic infrastructure, especially housing, is already in place and can be built on Peter Hall's original idea for a northern mega city connected by High-Speed North¹⁰. The latter has been more than half completed, to Hall's concept specifications, not Osborne's, with over £11 billion spent/committed, and without anyone particularly noticing¹¹.

Fourth, whether we pursue a sectoral or place-based strategy, we need to know much more about Britain's new economic geography, looking below the headline figures for growth and productivity. Where are the places with the strongest economic potential? What are the emerging trends which might upend our comfortable assumptions and stereotypes? In particular, what are the key locations giving access to energy and water, now and in the coming decades?

We seem to live in times of extraordinary uncertainty and risk, as exemplified by the American President's recent threat to obliterate an entire civilisation, and the closing off of more than 20% of the world's oil supplies. What implications does such turbulence have for

⁸ It appears that this is a primary reason for appointing Tom Riordan as Government Envoy for the North in December 2025

⁹ <https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/heseltine-institute/blog/therealityofthenorthernarc/>

¹⁰ Peter Hall et al, op. cit.

¹¹ Hall sometimes referred to this as a low-speed high-speed railway

planning styles? Should we be looking to an even stronger centre, with a strong man or woman in charge?

Perhaps not, for the characteristics of Britain's planning style - improvisation, flexibility, and informality – seem to sit well with uncertainty. The dispersed and often organic nature of planning activity has made it a fertile breeding ground for innovation¹². Centralised planning works best in a relatively stable environment, when trend-based forecasts are inherently reliable. In conditions of greater uncertainty a different model might be more effective: something that is reliant on trial and error, encourages dispersed and decentralised initiative and is inherently flexible.

Ian Wray is an Honorary Professor in Liverpool University's Heseltine Institute, Honorary Professorial Fellow at Manchester University's School of Planning and former Chief Planner, Northwest Development Agency.

The author is grateful for helpful comments from Sue Jarvis, David Thrower and Jim Steer

¹² Wray, 2016, op. cit.