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PLACE

THINKING OF NATIONAL STRATEGY FROM THE GROUND UP

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About the Fellowship

The Heywood Fellowship was created by the Heywood Foundation in memory of Jeremy Heywood, Cabinet Secretary 2012–18. This visiting fellowship gives a senior UK civil servant the opportunity to explore public service and policy issues outside their immediate government duties. The Fellowship is based at the Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford, with support from the Cabinet Office. The fellow is associated with Hertford College, Lord Heywood's former college.

This year's Heywood Fellowship sets out to examine how governments come to a national view of what really matters over longer time horizons, the ways governments can best confront and tackle future problems, and how the configuration, mechanisms and capabilities of the state can best enable the pursuit and delivery of long-term outcomes for citizens.

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THINKING OF NATIONAL STRATEGY FROM THE GROUND UP

Executive summary

This project starts from the belief that the UK — and countries like it — are at a generational turning point. We believe this moment calls for a more outward-looking, future-focused, and nationally grounded approach to setting ambition and direction. Doing so requires a more strategic practice — one that is agile, aligned, and capable of responding to fast-moving pressures, while staying focused on long-term national goals.

To be effective, this national strategy practice must be open and make sense not just in Whitehall but have meaning in towns, cities, regions, and nations across the UK. It must be able to set an overarching sense of long-term direction and mobilise governments and partners operating at different spatial levels. It must draw on place-specific opportunities and strengths to understand the UK's overall comparative advantages, to assess trade-offs and make bold future-oriented decisions. Achieving this is not easy. A national strategy practice will need to operate across overlapping electoral cycles; political leaderships; mandates and priorities.

To understand how to achieve these aims, we have had conversations with experts across the UK and carried out two detailed case studies looking at long-term strategy through the lens of industrial transformation in Port Talbot and the development of the semiconductor sector in Cambridge.

What is clear from our case studies is that the status quo presents a significant challenge to delivering long-term transformational change with, and for, places. Places, which we define broadly as sub national areas in this work, clearly matter in policymaking, and national, devolved or local levels of government can have individual ambitious long-term approaches to delivery. However, to our interviewees this is not plugged into long-term strategy thinking that consistently aligns all levels of government and wider partners around a common diagnosis of challenges; a collective vision for an area's long-term future and the bold decisions needed to achieve it.

Our interviewees note several reasons for this. Some are structural. Devolution arrangements across the UK are asymmetric and different powers sit with different levels of government with weak incentives for all government levers to act in sync for a credible period. This level of uncertainty in turn makes it harder to mobilise private and third sector action. Other reasons relate to the maturity of current approaches to engage places in strategy development. Our interviewees feel strongly that the tone and timing of engagement is still dictated by central priorities

and schedules. The design of these approaches also often sets up places in the UK to compete against each other for limited resources rather than helping them identify and thread place-based activity and assets across the UK to create "strategic connectivity" that would help them compete internationally.

Despite the challenges with the status quo, we heard a sense of optimism about what could be achieved through a national strategy practice that genuinely embraces place. While it is unrealistic to expect perfect alignment of goals, having such a practice with a common set of operating assumptions can help position the UK's complex multi-level governance system as a strength, harnessing the diversity of local strengths and opportunities to deliver long-term outcomes. To do this, our interviewees felt it important that such a practice should:

- Draw on comprehensive and place-sensitive **evidence** to diagnose challenges and opportunities. There should be a clear ability to see how any trade-offs and big bets play out and are amplified and absorbed at local and national levels.
- **Deliver a shared planning horizon,** in a way that enables long-term delivery across distinct electoral, funding, policy cycles that operate at place levels.
- Create conditions to **incentivise alignment** of activity across levels of government, sending clear and stable signals that enable confident private and third sector action. In the absence of structural reform, bold **convening leadership** is important to 'lock in' a shared purpose and demonstrate a collective stake in long-term outcomes. This should be done in a way that:
    - **Dials down 'central chauvinism',** seeing places as a source and sometimes leaders of strategies that deliver nationally critical outcomes.
    - Enables **mature shared conversations** about trade-offs with more realistic dialogue on how to prioritise resources; spot untapped synergies and respond to uneven place impacts.
    - **Empowers interventions** based on real, complex social and economic contexts — not just administrative boundaries.
    - **Ends 'closed system fallacy'** and focus on synergies between places to capture maximum global value rather than foster artificial competition between places for a narrow set of resources.
    - **Sustains** this shared approach through continuous, respectful engagement.
    - Builds **public awareness and support for decisions** by linking national ambition to local identities and sense of place.

Introduction

This year's Heywood Fellowship has set out to examine how governments come to a national view of what really matters over longer time horizons, the ways governments can best confront and tackle future problems, and how the configuration, mechanisms and capabilities of the state can best enable the pursuit and delivery of long-term outcomes for citizens.

Our starting position is that the countries who will succeed in an increasingly complex world are those who understand themselves, who understand the context in which they are operating, and both the challenges they face and their areas of comparative advantage.

In this briefing paper we look at how countries can achieve this by having a better understanding of challenges and strategic priorities of places *within* a state when deciding what long-term outcomes to pursue. It sets out our views on how a national strategy process can effectively account for *place* specific strengths and opportunities, and support and enable strategic action at different spatial levels. We have based our views on three things:

1. Engaging with experts from across the UK including in roundtable discussions.
2. Turning the lens and looking at national strategy from the perspective of industrial transformation in Port Talbot, Wales and semi-conductor sector in Cambridge, England. The interviewees underpinning these case studies — with central, devolved, and local government officials, businesses and academics — were carried out between March and May and so do not capture events after this period. In these case studies our aim has not been to assess the specific interventions mentioned by interviewees, but to understand what their reflections reveal about the role of place in shaping an effective national strategy.
3. Comparing and contrasting approaches in other countries.

We have kept our definition of place deliberately broad in our approach. Rather than confining it to fixed geographic or administrative boundaries, we approached place as any sub-national area of strategic significance — a lens through which we could think about how place shapes, and is shaped by, the practice of national strategy.

The rest of this paper sets out what we discovered about the current state of long-term strategy and our recommendations on how this can be improved. Although the focus of our recommendations is on long-term strategy making, we believe the ideas and principles can also be useful for individual public policy and delivery processes.

Current state of long-term strategy: a place view

Across our case studies, we find that *place* matters: residents care about the history and future of where they live; businesses care about the quality of life it offers to the talent they seek; and all levels of government care about addressing an area's most immediate and pressing challenges. Policymakers seem to understand this instinctively. There is a strong presence of government action: a multitude of national, devolved or local strategies operating in a place; action plans linked to specific pots of funding and multiple conversations in different stakeholder configurations to deliver specific strands of activity. Some of these individual plans and strategies may well take a long-term view.

And yet, despite the presence of this high-level of activity we found an absence of cohesive long-term strategic thinking that brings together all levels of government and wider partners around a common diagnosis of the challenges, a collective vision for the area's long-term future and appetite for the bold decisions needed to deliver this vision. It is as one interviewee described it, that the pieces of long-term strategy-making in a place are in constant motion, a "swirling jigsaw" that never quite resolves into a coherent picture of long-term transformational change. Our interviewees note several reasons for this:

The UK multi-level governance landscape is complex with weak incentives for strong levels of collaboration needed for long-term delivery.

There is a long history of devolution within the UK - with the first phase of devolution in Northern Ireland beginning in 1921 - set within a constitutional framework in which the UK Parliament remains formally sovereign and with a strong central government that retains control over most major fiscal powers. The current system of devolution in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, was established in 1999, when the UK Parliament transferred responsibility for certain policy areas to devolved governments and legislatures. In contrast, the UK Government continues to act as the executive authority for England. Devolution in England began in London, with the creation of a mayor and assembly and, since 2015, has gradually expanded to other regions[1] with the recent English Devolution White Paper outlining the UK Government's proposals to widen and deepen devolution in England.[2] Each of these waves of transferring power away from central government has been distinct and brokered through negotiation between central and local actors.

As a result, devolution settlements in the UK are asymmetric and continuously evolving. This creates a complex governance landscape. Long-term strategic action is only possible when policy, legislative, and delivery levers — spread across different levels of government — operate in sync for a sustained period of time, creating a stable and predictable policy environment that enables the private and third sectors to act with confidence. This governance framework requires intense collaboration and negotiation to work, which can be complicated by the multiplicity of election cycles and differences in political instincts and views between elected officials at different levels of government.

The "fuzziness," as one interviewee described it, in the devolution framework creates weak incentives within and across different levels of government to work together toward shared goals. The lack of clarity in the devolution framework obscures accountability, sometimes allowing each level of government to transfer responsibility to explain or excuse a lack of strategic action. For example, with most major fiscal levers held centrally by the UK Government, interviewees noted that there can be a tendency by other levels of government to attribute all inaction to 'lack of funding'. This easily shifts responsibility around levels of government avoiding a real collective conversation on how to best use resources available. The reward of collective action is also poorly understood. There is little explicit evidence and understanding of the value places can create not only for their own residents but for wider geographies.

Individual levels of government may be ambitious about long-term action, but interdependencies makes this challenging to deliver.

Individual levels of government can and do demonstrate ambition in designing and delivering long-term strategies, and there are numerous examples of such initiatives at the local level. However, these strategies are inherently constrained by the scope of authority and policy levers available to that specific tier of government. As a result, they often rely on assumptions about the actions and commitments of other levels of government, which may not always align or materialise, limiting the overall effectiveness and coherence of long-term delivery.

In our Cambridge case study, we found that some teams, such as local planners, work with 20–25-year horizons. Yet they must base these on broad assumptions about national and regional policies, which often shift, creating a mismatch between planned expectations and emerging realities.The difficulty of any one level of government being able to independently lead long-term thinking was further reflected in our interviews regarding the Welsh legal framework promoting intergenerational well-being — □□[3]□outcomes in the area.

'Central chauvinism' dominates existing approaches to bring places into strategy development.

Interviewees acknowledged recent progress has been made in bringing place-based input into policy and strategic thinking. However, they had strong views about the current approaches. They identified a strong current of 'central chauvinism' permeating how places are brought into central strategy development. This chauvinism is reflected in the behaviour of every 'higher' level of government toward the one below it, creating a hierarchical dynamic that they felt limited genuine collaboration.

Interviewees felt that policymakers often adopt a 'policy first' mindset, developing options before considering how these might apply to nations, regions, or localities. Consequently, places and local strategies are rarely treated as sources of innovative ideas or transformative interventions capable of shaping policy options. It is even

rarer for centrally-led processes to recognise and lend meaningful support to strategies initiated at more local levels.

Where and how input from places is sought can feel superficial and transactional. Interviewees in our Port Talbot case study described instances where different teams within the same tier of government approached the area through conflicting policy lenses. Timing also matters. There were examples given of draft strategies frequently withheld from officials at other levels of government early on and rarely shared beyond governmental circles. In official documents and strategies, place can often appear as a separate chapter rather than being woven throughout the analysis. This separation underscores a tendency to regard place as an add-on rather than a foundational element of strategic thinking.

In some cases, this is not deliberate. A significant amount of time and energy can be consumed by internal negotiations, particularly when there are strong disagreements over policy direction. In such cases, processes can get timed out from engaging with other levels of government and even less externally with wider groups of place representatives. In such cases, policies can commit to engagement later in the process, but this tends to reinforce a negotiated, transactional relationship, treating place content as something to be bargained over rather than a fundamental input driving policy development. This in turn encourages different levels of government to shape their input according to their individual interests, rather than overall national outcomes.

Current approaches set up places in competition with each other rather than to work together to realise shared opportunities.

There were two aspects to this. Effective intervention, interviewees strongly felt, needs to be defined by the nature of the opportunity or challenge rather than administrative boundaries. In our Port Talbot case study, many interviewees argued that meaningful transformation could not be achieved by focusing solely on the town. Instead, it would require coordinated investment across the broader South West Wales region or a re-thinking of the spatial policy framework within Wales.

Interviewees, particularly those from our Cambridge case study, criticised what they described as "insular" place-based thinking in the UK. They argued that place-based approaches too often encourage areas to measure their success relative to neighbouring regions, rather than assessing their position in a global context. International benchmarking can often happen at the national level in the UK, whereas regions and nations need to more precisely identify and compete against the specific global clusters that mirror their strengths.

This, they felt, compounded a false assumption; that doing research and innovation in the UK will automatically translate into domestic industrial success. In contrast, interviewees noted that other countries like Ireland recognise their openness and vulnerability as small economies and pay "painful attention" to ensuring that innovation efforts have clear, plausible pathways to capture economic value through jobs and local growth. Other interviewees brought up examples of how

other countries in the semiconductor sector, through tactical targeting, are gradually "nibbling away" at the high-value elements of a sector, extracting and retaining economic value elsewhere. To counter this, rather than focusing on local competition, interviewees advocated for place-based strategies that help places understand where they can lead internationally, and where collaboration with other regions might create greater collective value. These observations were shared before the publication of the UK Industrial Strategy.[4]

This uncertain public policy environment makes it difficult to mobilise and channel private action.

Several interviewees highlighted the risk that disjointed or delayed public decision-making poses to mobilising action from other stakeholders including businesses, third sector organisations and community groups. Timely, clear, and coordinated action from government was considered essential not just for effective planning, but for building the confidence needed to unlock private action.

Interviewees also highlighted the cost of uncertainty, particularly in relation to attracting and retaining private investment. They observed that a lack of coordination and slow responses across different levels of government often create delays and ambiguity, conditions that can prompt international investors to withdraw or redirect funding elsewhere. In fast-moving sectors and global markets, missed windows of opportunity can have lasting consequences for local economies. Crucially, improving this coordination could allow the UK to better capture the value of its strong startup and spin-out culture, value that is currently lost when promising firms are sold internationally before they have a chance to scale.

We are collectively better at reacting to crises and emergencies than anticipatory action.

There was a recognition that all levels of government and partners are more effective at mobilising joined-up action when place-specific impacts reach crisis point, often in response to demands from local actors, but not at anticipating and responding to these impacts before they materialise.

This was evident in our conversations about Port Talbot, where interviewees pointed to the lack of foresight over decades in preparing the area for the consequences of national decisions about the steel industry, but saw a coordinated response to the recent decision by Tata Steel to close its blast furnace. A similar story emerged in Cambridge, where interviewees felt that the current infrastructure constraints, especially water supply, were a result of insufficient early investment but saw the Water Scarcity Working Group as a positive example of national and local government, regulators, and private sector actors coming together to tackle the persistent issue of water shortages in Cambridge.

Contributors noted that this tendency to act in crises meant that places could sometimes end up being defined more by their crises than by their opportunities — shaping the psyche of the area in lasting ways. There was also a recognition that

this experience meant long-term aligned action was possible. In the next sections, we explore how this might be achieved through a national strategic practice.

The case for national strategy from a place-based perspective

While we began with the aim of exploring how place could be better incorporated into the practice of national strategy, our findings point to something more fundamental: the case for a national strategy itself - a long-term national strategy that brings together a shared diagnosis of contextual challenges, a common view of strategic priorities, and clarity on what actions need to be taken and by whom can help address some of the challenges to place-based long-term strategy identified in the last section.

We take a strong view that achieving long-term national goals requires collective action and partnership across the whole of government, and beyond. We are realistic about the challenges to this, not least the difference in instincts and views in political leadership that can exist across the UK. However, we believe that a national strategy approach can help orient all levels of government, businesses, universities and beyond around an overall sense of direction. This does not mean there will be 100% agreement or alignment in goals and objectives. However, such an approach can help:

- **Mobilise the totality of UK's capacity and capability** in one direction, anchoring coordinated action, ensuring that every actor or 'steward of place' is incentivised to work towards shared goals.
- **Maximise opportunities for growth**: helping to align activity across sectors and places achieving a degree of strategic connectivity that strengthens the ability for places to compete internationally and capture maximum global value.
- **Position the multi-governance context in the UK as a strength**: effectively drawing on the diversity of strength and opportunities that exist across the UK. A national strategy practice would not aim to centralise but mobilise the distinct capabilities and opportunities present across the UK's nations and regions to achieve better national outcomes.

How a practice of national strategy can meaningfully account for place

There was a strong sense of optimism among our interviewees about what could be achieved through a national strategy that genuinely embraces place. Our interviewees, drawing on case study examples and their prior career experience, identified place-based inputs essential to effective national strategy practice and the delivery of long-term outcomes. For a national strategy to meaningfully incorporate place, not as an afterthought but as a central pillar, interviewees felt it must address four dimensions. National strategy must:

- Draw on comprehensive and place-sensitive **evidence** to diagnose challenges and opportunities. There should be a clear ability to see how any trade-offs and big bets play out and are amplified and absorbed at local, regional, and national levels.
- **Provide a shared planning horizon** in a way that enables long-term delivery across distinct electoral, funding, policy cycles.
- Create conditions to **incentivise alignment** of activity across levels of government, sending clear and stable signals that enable confident private sector engagement. Timing matters, and if consensus can be locked in at the right moment, through bold, convening leadership and clearly defined accountabilities, it can become self-sustaining. This should be done in a way that:
    - **Dials down central chauvinism,** seeing places as sources of strategy, not just recipients of central wisdom. At its best, the practice should be able to identify where places can lead, and where central government needs to enable, support, and follow.
    - Facilitates **mature shared conversations** about trade-offs with more realistic dialogue on how to prioritise resource, spot untapped synergies and smooth uneven impacts across places. At its best, this means all actors thinking beyond their own boundaries to contribute to a coherent, whole-system approach.
    - **Empowers interventions** based on real, complex social and economic contexts — not just administrative boundaries.
    - **Ends 'closed system fallacy'** and enables places to identify synergies that help them compete globally and capture maximum global value rather than foster artificial competition between places for a narrow set of resources.
    - **Sustains** this shared approach through continuous, respectful formal and informal engagement between different levels of governments and partners giving depth and meaning to existing structures.
- Deliver **public-facing dialogue** that links national ambition to local identities and sense of place.

We discuss each of these in more detail below.

Draw from a comprehensive and place-sensitive evidence base

Interviewees across all our case studies consistently emphasised that the analytical spine of national strategy practice must be comprehensive and place sensitive, drawn from all parts of the UK and capable of showing how national trends play out differently across different spatial levels. An evidence base that is spatially broad and deep is important to an effective diagnosis of challenges; understanding of

where national and local assets lie, especially in relation to global value chains, and lead to a more effective judgements on trade-offs and what resources to prioritise.

Our case studies also underlined the importance of a more comprehensive data set to support a nation's understanding of the benefits of strategic action. Interviewees felt that better spatial data could be used to quantify the value place-based investments create not only locally but also regionally and nationally. A common evidence base, they argued, could serve as a tool to systematically capture and attribute the benefits of public investment across different tiers of government, incentivising more coordinated action across levels of government.

While interviewees emphasised the importance of place-sensitive data, they also recognised the challenges involved in assembling it. The 2024 independent review of the UK Statistical Authority (UKSA) has highlighted both progress and persistent gaps in the UK's statistical infrastructure, notably, the lack of consistent, comparable data across all parts of the UK.[5] For interviewees, it was important to address past underinvestment in "foundational systems" like data and any "blind spots" in the spatial and sectoral coverage of data, so that a national strategy practice was not dominated by particular geographical scales or specific domains for which data happened to be available. Equally important to interviewees, was the need to share data that is available openly and transparently.

While improving data coverage and sharing systems is a complex and ongoing discussion beyond the scope of this paper, the need for robust data and evidence to support an ongoing national strategy practice is clear. In the near term, a national strategic practice should draw on the widest possible spatial data. This could draw on existing guidance and advice for examples recommendations published in this 2024 guidance for government analysts on how to access and use comparable datasets.[6]

Provide a shared planning horizon

Interviewees were realistic about the challenges of a national strategy practice that operated across multiple electoral, funding and planning cycles that can exist within and across governments. A well-designed national strategy process wouldn't be able to reconcile these cycles — and nor should it attempt to do so — but should aim to provide a shared planning horizon.

Establishing a high-level, common framework, where assumptions about national priorities are transparently and openly understood, can provide a stable reference point for the development of other strategies and plans. This approach would also help to reduce the repetitive coordination and significant transaction costs currently borne by individual policy initiatives in trying to reconcile conflicting cycles and coordinate strategically across systems.

Create conditions to align incentives

Our case studies make clear that a national strategy practice should create conditions to incentivise alignment of activity across levels of government, sending clear and stable signals that enable confident private sector engagement. As discussed throughout this paper, this is far from straightforward. Significant headwinds, ranging from fragmented responsibilities to misaligned incentives, make strategic coordination challenging.

For some interviewees, the complexity, or "messiness", of current governance structures means that structural reform is essential to create the conditions for better alignment of government activity to deliver long-term outcomes. In Cambridge, for example, interviewees noted that despite significant responsibilities for managing growth and services, local actors had limited fiscal powers compared to international peers. With stronger fiscal levers, they argued, there would be a clearer link between responsibility and control, reducing upward accountability to the UK government and enabling more locally-ailored, forward-looking investment. Crucially, they suggested this could help shift public spending away from a reactive, crisis-driven model toward one rooted in long-term prevention and growth. Interviewees acknowledged that these changes involve trade-offs and require careful pacing. Some suggested starting with incremental steps, such as introducing a tourism levy in England. Outside of England, contributors highlighted the need for deeper local devolution within Scotland and Wales, arguing that empowering the local tier was equally critical for delivering long-term strategic goals.

Interviewees were pragmatic about the time and political will required for meaningful structural reform. Recognising that such changes will take time, they focused on what could be done now. The sections that follow draw on their reflections about how a national strategy practice can improve alignment within existing constitutional structures to ensure that all actors are both motivated and enabled to contribute to long-term strategic goals.

Bold, convening leadership

Interviewees emphasised the critical role strong leadership can play in aligning stakeholders, building shared commitment, and unlocking progress, even within a fragmented governance landscape. Effective leadership, they argued, can successfully "shift the dial" away from the status quo and unite actors around a common strategic vision.

Several interviewees pointed to real-world examples where strong leadership had successfully cut through institutional ambiguity, creating the conditions to align strategies and deliver outcomes, even with different political objectives at play. This kind of convening around a shared vision, they suggested, could take different forms depending on the context. In some cases, it might involve aligning local actors behind broad national missions that provide a unifying direction. In others, it could mean rallying stakeholders around targeted interventions to tackle a specific crisis or opportunity.

Some interviewees proposed strong governance frameworks could be used to formalise "terms and conditions" of collaboration between government, business, and communities. These frameworks, they thought, could help ensure each party has a clear stake in both the potential rewards and risks of a strategy and serve as commitment devices, clarifying each stakeholder's role in delivery and establishing accountability.

Once responsibilities and financial contributions are clearly defined and governance structures formalised, interviewees noted the risk of major shifts in strategic direction decreases significantly. Early buy-in from outside government - business, and other local partners - helps build momentum and insulates delivery from political volatility. As one interviewee put it, once the critical phase of stakeholder alignment is complete, political energy shifts from debating the strategy to focusing on getting it done, a turning point that enables more stable and continuous implementation.

This view was grounded in their experience: they had seen greater consistency in maintaining long-term strategies at the local level, across different political parties and election cycles, compared to national levels, where changes in leadership often led to more rapid and dramatic shifts in direction.

Dial down central chauvinism

Interviewees emphasised that engagement aimed at building a strategic coalition around a national strategy must be carefully constructed. It should recognise the important role of each actor and place, without reducing anyone to a narrow "representative" of a single geography or point of view. Instead, engagement should be framed around the goal of coalescing around a shared vision and purpose — one in which all participants can see the collective value of action and feel a genuine sense of ownership and accountability. Respect for the contributions of different actors, across levels of government, businesses, civic institutions, and

communities, was consistently underlined as essential to building this kind of strategic coalition.

While 'respect' can seem abstract, interviewees were clear that it is often small, practical actions, not grand gestures, that send the clearest signals. The structure of engagement, whose knowledge is valued, and how input is reflected in outcomes all act as subtle, but powerful, cues that either build or erode trust. The practices that seem to matter most include:

- **Doing the groundwork**: grounding engagement in a realistic understanding of how responsibilities and accountabilities are distributed. This includes clarity about who holds which levers and what forms of collaboration are needed to achieve long-term outcomes. All representatives should be prepared to bring their own views and ideas on the strategic or policy issue being discussed.
- **Planning engagement well**: scheduling meetings with sufficient notice and aligned to timelines that work for all participants. The right people, not just the most senior, should be in the room, with each actor deciding for themselves who is best placed to contribute. Poorly planned meetings can have an outsized negative impact on the quality of dialogue.
- **Understanding each actor's priorities**: taking the time to understand partners' existing strategies, plans, and targets can help uncover areas of shared interest and common ground.
- **Using shared language**: using politically neutral, purpose-driven terminology, rather than branding associated with any one level of government or actor, can be powerful in creating a sense of unity and mutual understanding.

At its best, the practice should be able to clearly identify some place-based strategies which are not just locally important but central to achieving national outcomes, whether in economic growth, net zero, or social cohesion, and should be treated with corresponding strategic weight. In this case, it is places that may well be best positioned to lead, drawing on local knowledge, innovation, and legitimacy, and where central government would need to enable, support, or follow.

Facilitate mature conversations around trade-offs

It is our project's strong view that an effective national strategy must enable proper choices, and not be everything to everyone. This means making realistic, often difficult, decisions about resource allocation. Our initial instinct was that adding a place-based lens to resource allocation discussion might risk being 'additive', complicating trade-offs rather than clarifying them. But interviewees were more ambitious about what a national strategy practice should set out to achieve. They described the necessity of and growing ambition for more open and honest conversations, ones that involve all actors in facing shared trade-offs, rather than defaulting to fragmented lobbying for individual interests. What frustrates places most, they said, is not being told 'no', but being given no clear rationale for

(in)action, especially when they feel that they can help deliver strategic opportunities for the UK that are being missed.

For this to happen, in addition to getting the basics (set out in the preceding section) right, they felt that the practice must facilitate the sharing of clear and transparent information about the realities and constraints of resource choices. This openness is essential to build trust and enable all levels of government to engage meaningfully in the trade-off discussions. In turn, place leaders need to actively participate, not just advocating for their own interests, but engaging constructively to weigh options, recognise broader priorities, and contribute to shared outcomes. Only through this mutual willingness — to share candid information from the centre and to engage openly from the local level — can trade-offs be realistically assessed and priorities effectively aligned across the system.

We therefore recommend that a national strategy is built on structured, hard-edged dialogue involving all levels of government and key actors. We recognise this approach would be both novel and challenging, but it is only through such mature dialogue that strategic priorities and major big bets can be crystallised, alongside an understanding of how they will play out differently across the country, where impacts may be amplified, risks concentrated, or opportunities unlocked. Our Port Talbot case study illustrates how local perspectives can shed light on the real-world consequences of trade-offs, and where early action is needed to manage risk or unlock new opportunities. In Cambridge, interviewees emphasised the role of a place-based view in shaping smarter public investment decisions. This can then enable anticipatory action, whether that means diversifying local economies to manage concentrated risks, strengthening targeted interventions to maximise benefits, or adapting delivery to local conditions.

Empower input across all areas of strategy and end "closed system fallacy"

Building this kind of strategic coalition also requires avoiding what several interviewees described as the "closed system fallacy" — the assumption that the UK's regions are locked in competition with each other for limited resources, rather than part of a broader, globally competitive system. National strategy practice should encourage an open-system perspective, where places understand and articulate their unique strengths in relation to global opportunities, not just to other UK regions. This shift in mindset supports more collaborative growth, helping to identify areas of complementarity rather than conflict.

Places should be empowered to contribute based on real, complex, social and economic contexts, not just administrative boundaries. This, to us, supported the need for a national strategy process that empowers policymakers to identify and act on strategic opportunities at different spatial levels, rather than relying on a patchwork of local strategies built around often arbitrary definitions of place, that are themselves subject to change.

Places should also be empowered to input across all areas of strategy, not only those traditionally associated with place. Our case studies of Port Talbot and

Cambridge demonstrate that place-based perspectives on trade, defence, and industrial strategy can be just as valuable as insights into public service delivery.

By recognising and planning for these place-based perspectives in the selection of strategic priorities and big bets, national strategies can maximise return on investment and foster resilience across the system, shifting the focus from managing isolated investments to actively shaping whole systems of growth and opportunity, with a clear, interconnected vision.

Sustain respectful engagement

It is crucial that national strategy practice should not facilitate one-off engagement between levels of government but sustained formal and informal dialogue across the whole cycle of design and delivery. It is our strong view that the practice should facilitate open, and not just internal dialogue; and any engagement with place should not be limited to dialogue between levels of government alone but actively involved businesses, civil society, communities at place level. Such engagement can also facilitate learning and sharing of lessons during delivery.

While the national strategy practice will need to have institutions and governance arrangements of its own, sustained engagement at place-level should make best use of existing structures of engagement, giving them meaning and common sense of purpose. For example, the UK already has intergovernmental bodies that facilitate collaboration between the UK Government and devolved administrations. The Council of Nations and Regions, established in 2024 and chaired by the Prime Minister, brings together the First Ministers of Scotland and Wales; the First Minister and Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland; and English mayors. These existing structures could be leveraged more deliberately to support the co-design and delivery of long-term national goals.

Effective community buy-in

Our case studies gave some important place-based insights into how a national strategy practice should engage the public. Our interviewees stressed that public engagement rooted in a place-sensitive approach can help land national narratives more effectively. National ambitions expressed in ways that resonate with community identity and local priorities are more likely to be embraced as shared goals rather than imposed technical frameworks. Interviewees identified five key principles to achieve this:

- **Narrative alignment**: national strategies should be framed in ways that connect with local identities, histories, and ambitions. This alignment helps communities see their place within the broader national story.
- **Build on previous engagement**: our Cambridge case study highlights the frustration communities feel when each new initiative restarts engagement from scratch. Instead, effective strategies should acknowledge and build on

previous conversations, demonstrating that communities have been heard and that their contributions inform future action.

- **Empower local actors with information**: genuine empowerment goes beyond consultation. It requires giving local partners the tools, data, and autonomy they need to shape decisions and tailor interventions to local needs.
- **Early wins**: our Port Talbot case study showed how long-standing scepticism can take hold in communities when promised change fails to materialise. Delivering visible, tangible outcomes early on was seen as essential for building momentum and demonstrating that engagement leads to real action.
- **Ongoing dialogue**: engagement must be sustained over time. Two-way communication enables strategy to evolve in response to changing local circumstances and strengthens long-term relationships between communities and government.

Above all, this kind of sustained, place-based dialogue allows different levels of government to speak not just for themselves, but for a shared national mission. When rooted in real places and real lives, public engagement can become a powerful enabler of long-term change.

Conclusions

In this paper, we set out to examine how an adaptive, forward-focused national strategy practice should account for place. Our work so far has found strong appetite for such a practice, one that can help set a sense of common national direction while empowering bottom-up action, and practical suggestions on how this can be achieved. We will continue our activity and engagement on this workstream which will help the work we are doing to develop a practical playbook and toolkits on how a national strategy practice can work.

Lastly, we should note three place-related big bets for the UK that have been identified in our case studies. First is the reform currently underway in local government in England, both local government reorganisation and the wider and more defined approach to devolution. Most of our interviewees felt that this held promise if it could be sustained over time and would improve on the governance status quo. Second, the demand for loosening of central government's hold on fiscal levers, allowing local places to own more of the risk and reward. Lastly on betting on some places over others, our findings note that this need not be a zero-sum game. We find that taking a holistic, long-term view can help identify how investment in particular parts of local economies can benefit others and, in that way, unlock their full potential as part of a dynamic, adaptive system that can better compete internationally.

The case studies

Next, read our case studies:

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