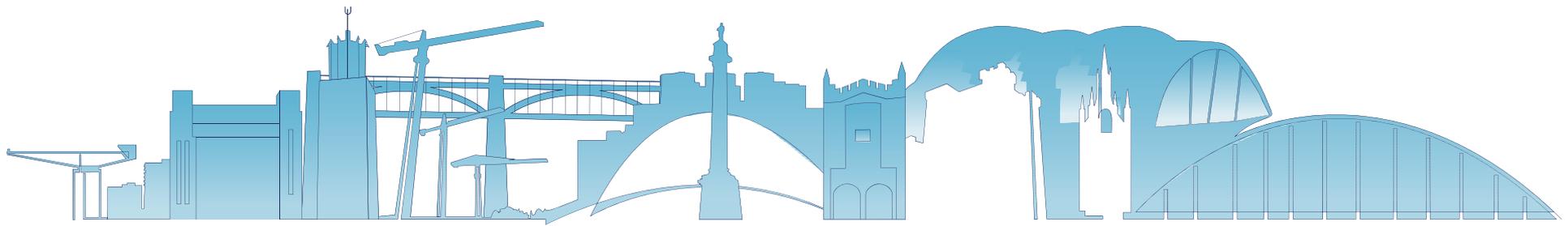


# Making sense of the Northern Powerhouse

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**RSA Winter Conference 2018: Holiday Inn Bloomsbury,  
London 15-16 November 2018**



# Introduction

- Established by George Osborne in 2014 as latest initiative for rebalancing the UK economy.
  - ... if we can bring our northern cities closer together – not physically, or in some artificial political construct – but by providing modern transport connections, supporting great science and our universities here, giving more power and control to civic government; then we can create a northern powerhouse with the size, the population, the political and economic clout, to be as strong as any global city. (Osborne 2014).



# Introduction

- City-regionalism at pan-regional scale, international competitiveness
  - Scale and agglomeration
- Nature, origins and evolution of NPh
  - Governance and management of uneven development
    - Spatial imaginary and narrative
    - Space of pan-regional promotion, collaboration, contestation
    - Interaction with existing spaces of governance
    - Distinctive trajectory: peak Powerhouse 2014-16, subsequently remained in place but lost political momentum

# Theoretical Dimensions of the Northern Powerhouse

- Strategic-relational state theory (Jessop 1990; 2016) and ‘new state spaces’ (Brenner 2004)
  - Spatial imaginary and narrative, privileging of North as economic space for investment.
  - ‘State spatial strategy’ (Brenner 2004) to strengthen economy of Northern England and close the growth gap.
    - An accumulation strategy designed to harness Northern economic assets.
    - A hegemonic project that aims to mobilise support behind this agenda and maintain the legitimacy of the state in the North.
    - Hegemonic bloc of leading political actors, local government leaders, business interests?
  - Devolution as ‘state spatial project’ (Brenner 2004) which brings together central and local government actors.

# Theoretical Dimensions of the Northern Powerhouse

- New 'soft spaces' of governance (Haughton and Allmendinger 2015).
- Renewed importance of place marketing and brand identity, NP as brand.
- Crucial interaction with formal spaces of governance.
  - City-regions and local government.

# Origins of the Powerhouse Concept

- Agenda of regional rebalancing from 2010.
- New economic geography / urban economics.
- Northern core cities.
- HS2, East-West links, Higgins Report 2014.
- RSA City Growth Commission 2014.

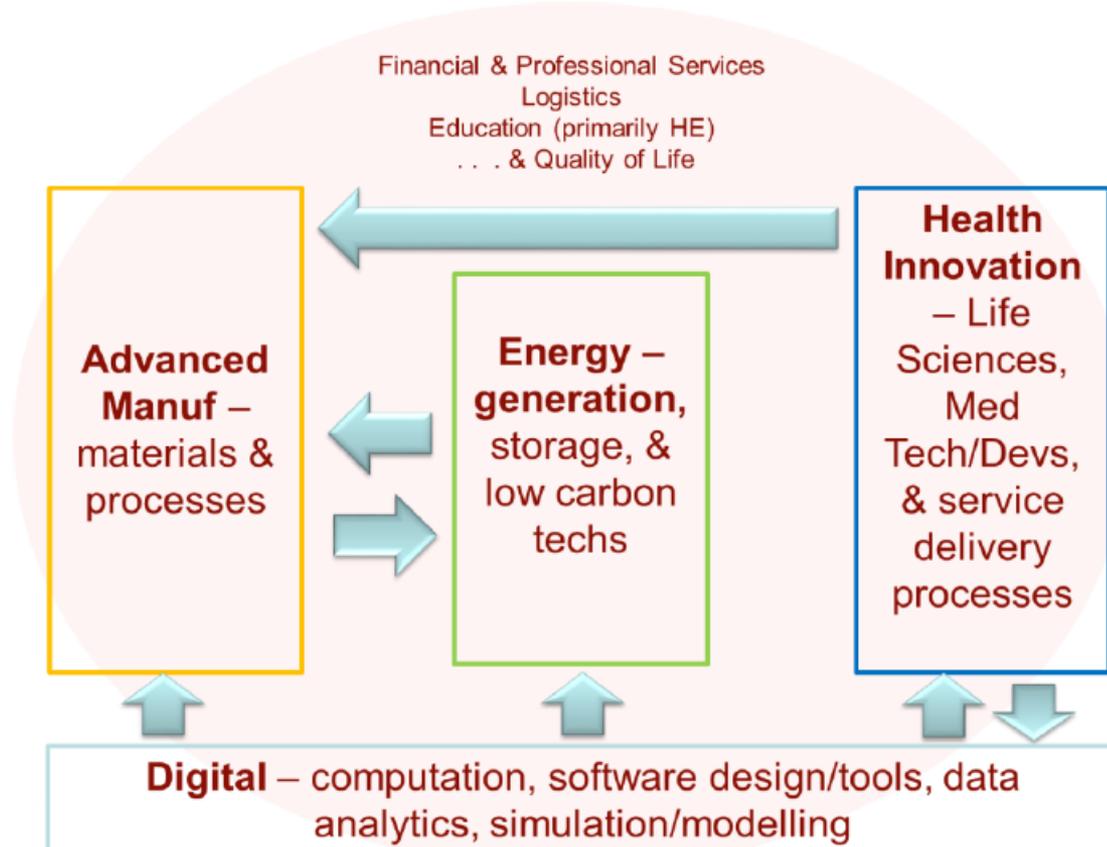
I think George's own motivation started when he got booed at the Olympics... And he because he had become so much the face of austerity, he was trying to find something else. And this appeals to him. (Senior policy maker, September 2017.)



# NPh as 'State Spatial Strategy'

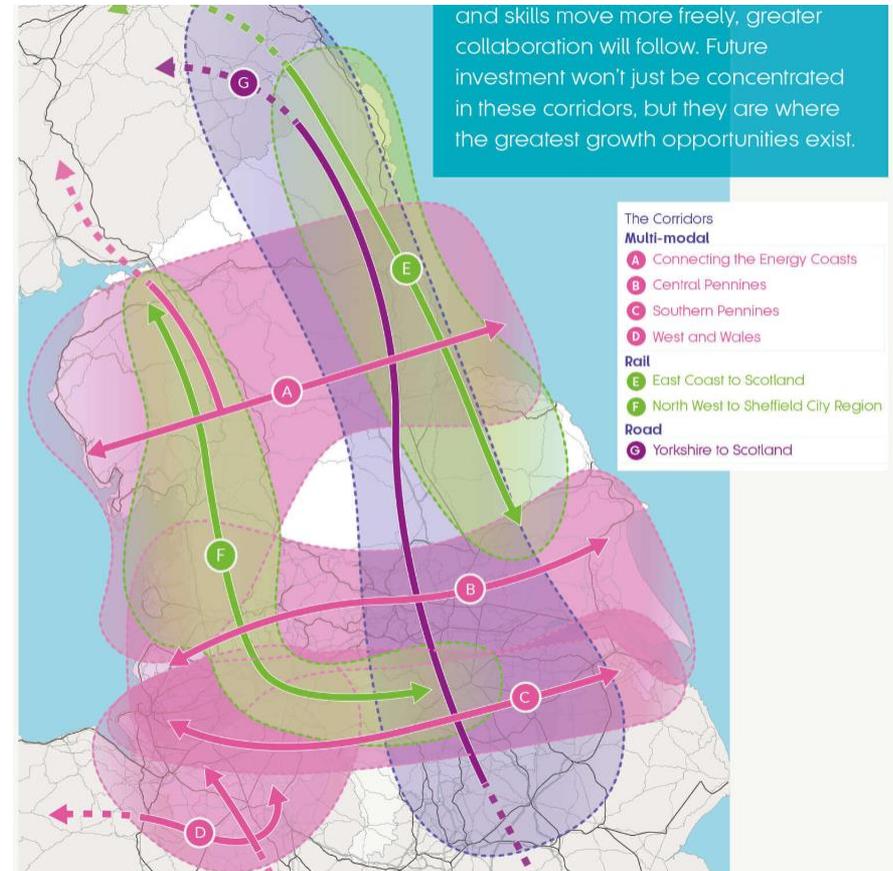
- Accumulation strategy
  - NPh Independent Economic Review

Figure 3-3: 'Prime' and 'Enabling' Capabilities and their inter-relationships



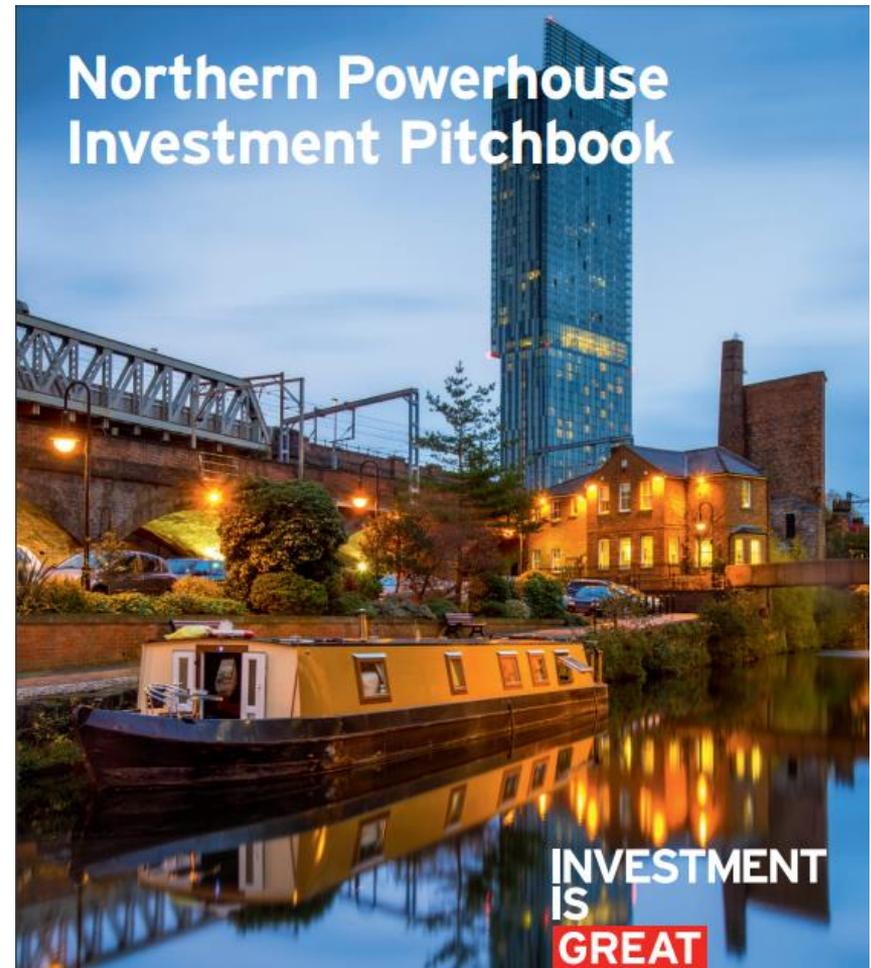
# NPh as 'State Spatial Strategy'

- Original vision of bringing the Northern cities closer together requires transport investment.
- Establishment of Transport for the North and Northern Transport Strategy.
- Northern Powerhouse Rail.
- Funding and decision-making?



# NPh as ‘State Spatial Strategy’

- Investment promotion.
  - Scale and international recognition
    - ‘even if the product is crap, the brand is brilliant’ (Government official, October 2017)
  - NP ‘pitchbook’
  - Dedicated team in DfIT, but some tensions with city-regional scales.



# NPh as ‘State Spatial Strategy’

- Hegemonic project
  - Framed by broader spatial rebalancing discourse, but disparities widening, e.g. transport investment
  - Prominence in 2015 election, key part of Conservative political strategy
  - Mobilisation of business interests and civic leaders
  - Osborne continued political agency beyond the state

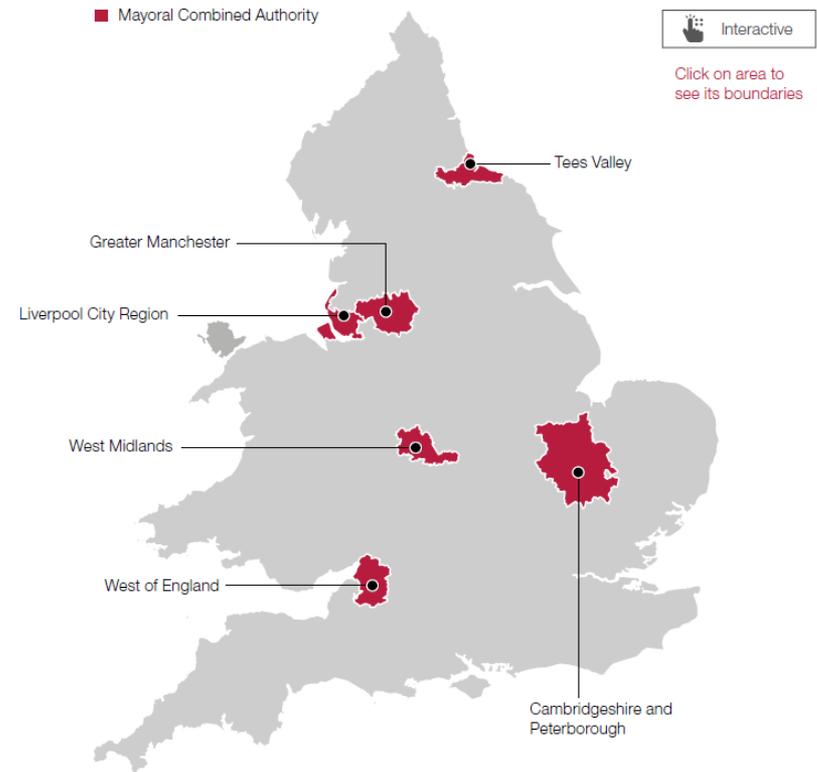


# NPh as ‘State Spatial Strategy’

- But city-centric business agenda unable to engage wider public.
  - Reflected in ‘Leave’ vote outside core cities
  - ‘People’s Powerhouse’ project.
  - Government response through local Industrial Strategy and NP11 as new Council for the North.

# Devolution as ‘State Spatial Project’

- Devolution folded into NPh
  - Spatially selective
  - Deal-based approach.
  - Emerging governance and financial gap between devolved and non-devolved areas.
- Mayors rallying behind devolution and NPh agenda .



Legislation establishing mayoral combined authorities only applies to England.

Source: National Audit Office 2017

# Conclusions

- View NP as spatial imaginary and strategy which privileges North as economic space for investment.
- Peak Powerhouse 2014-2016, but persistence.
- Unable to sustain effective hegemony, but Osborne continued to exercise political agency outside of government.
- Lack of strategic direction and investment from government post-Osborne.