

RESEARCH NETWORK GRANT SCHEME (RN) Event Report Form

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Events and research network reports for Regions eZine- <https://regions.regionalstudies.org/>
In order to publish your report in Regions eZine, we would request that your report outlines the key discussions occurring during the event and how these discussions contribute to the scholarship and readership of the regional studies community. We would value linkages being made between the take-away messages of the event and the current literature, for instance from open access articles published in one or more [publications of the Regional Studies Association](#).

Alternatively, more general description of the event can be submitted for publication on our website.

PLEASE INDICATE IF YOU ARE SUBMITTING THIS REPORT TO REGIONS OR FOR OUR WEBSITE: This report is for the RSA Website

RESEARCH NETWORK TITLE: **Regional Studies Association Research Network on Infrastructural Regionalism (NOIR)**

EVENT TITLE: **Regional Rail and Infrastructural Regionalisms**

DATE AND PLACE OF EVENT: 7-8 November 2024, London, UK – 2024 Regional Studies Association Winter Conference

ORGANISER(S)' NAME(S): Jen Nelles and Michael Glass

PLEASE PROVIDE US WITH DETAILS OF YOUR EVENT

- **What was the aim of this event?**

This NOIR special session aimed to stimulate discussion engaging academics and practitioners around the policy and planning challenges of high-speed rail (e.g., HS2), regional networked mobility (Manchester's Bee Network), and the differing capacities of epistemic communities to 'see' regional space through such projects. The session also served to officially launch the second phase of NOIR and provided a timely moment for reflection for network members while looking to mobilize NOIR's conceptual foundations for practical issues and practitioners.

- **How many people attended (speakers and delegates) the event? Please add an approximate number of countries.**

The NOIR special session was attended by approximately 25 people in-person across the sessions (speakers and session attendees) with presenters from universities in the United Kingdom and France.

- **Please list the speakers of the event and title of their presentations (please give a description of how and why these papers were selected).**

SS04: Regional Rail and Infrastructural Regionalisms

- **Thomas Arnold**, *University of Liverpool, UK*, "Regional Rail Imaginaries in Northern England: From the Pennines to Powerhouse and Beyond"
- **Chia-Lin Chen**, *University of Liverpool, UK*, "Stuck on Infrastructure? Planning for the Transformative Effects of Transport Infrastructure"
- **Dan Durrant**, *UCL, UK*, "High speed rail and national imaginaries"
- **David Valler & Jen Nelles**, *Oxford Brookes University, UK*, "EWR: Infrastructure and Regional Planning in the Supercluster"
- **Nasima Baron-Yelles**, *University Gustave Eiffel, France*, "Transit Thermal Re-infrastructuration don't Refresh Hubs but Reactivate Node Planning"
- **Adam Brown**, *Cambridge Econometrics, UK*, Discussant

The papers were selected from a pool of submissions to the open call given their focus on, and engagement with, questions of regional infrastructure and infrastructural regionalism. We paid particular attention to issues of disciplinary and topic diversity, as well as looking to include presentations from early career researchers.

- **Please send us the program and outline of your event.**

See the RSA 2024 Winter Conference program.

- **Please describe any social activities organised as part of the event.**

Informal drinks and discussion followed the session.

- **Please provide us with conclusions of the event (how it contributed to the overall aim of the network and an outline of the key discussions occurring during the event).**

The session challenged presenters to explore and draw out how regional rail infrastructure shapes regional imaginaries and governance and/or is shaped by it. Presentations focused predominantly on regional rail in the UK, touching on Northern Powerhouse Rail (Tom Arnold) and South Fylde (Chia-Lin Chen) lines in the North; HS2 (Dan Durrant), which was originally pitched as a high speed connection linking northern and southern parts of the country; and East West Rail (Dave Valler and Jen Nelles) - a line that will ultimately link Oxford and Cambridge and provide a strategic connection between eastern and western main lines. A case study of regional rail in the Cote D'Azur (Nacima Baron) offered a European perspective. Adam Brown concluded the session with some remarks reflecting on shared themes across presentations.

While presentations spanned various geographies they also spoke to each other, underlining how regional imaginaries and infrastructural regionalisms are mutually constituted. For example, Tom Arnold identified four periods of Northern regional imaginaries within which projects associated with Northern Powerhouse Rail have evolved. In each period, infrastructure priorities shifted to serve shifting logics from pan-regional connectivity of city center to linking left-behind places (and beyond). Here, regional imaginaries are in part constituted by perceptions of infrastructural deficiencies and rail planning occupies a central role in regional regeneration narratives even though no consensus yet exists as to the appropriate infrastructural remedy. Dave Valler and Jen Nelles contended that aspirational imaginaries that underpin the Oxford-Cambridge region rest on shaky foundations - the idea that linking infrastructure between two innovation poles will yield regional (or even national) benefits makes intuitive sense but lacks empirical evidence. However, the vision of a unified

innovation region has played an important role in moving the East West Rail (EWR) project forward. Adam Brown added that the real logic behind EWR was to (re-)establish an important strategic connection between main lines and that the innovation region narrative was a politically expedient cloak for a project that was essentially about solving infrastructure and planning issues. This demonstrates how a multiplex of interests can adopt and use imaginaries that are aspirational or convenient, depending on perspective.

These examples suggest there may be a three-stage interdependency cycle of transport infrastructure, economic geographic reality, and administrative and perceptual boundaries: where evolution of transport infrastructure shapes economic geography, economic geography shapes the boundaries of a regional imaginary, and boundaries shapes the planning of infrastructure. While we have them listed here in one order, the cycle can start with any one of these. Similarly, there are questions about whether we do this “consciously” enough at each stage.

Imaginaries encompass but also exclude. Chia-Lin Chen's analysis of the South Fylde line, conceived as a connection between Blackpool and Preston in Lancashire, shows that projects that have not secured clear roles in regional narratives struggle to penetrate planning cycles. Earlier infrastructural interpretations of regional rail in the North were highly city centric and focused on linking city centers, paying less attention to the left behind places that anchored subsequent plans. In each period, as focus shifted, different places were deprioritized or excluded.

There has been an interesting evolution of thinking away from the simplistic urban-centric view to one where all components of a city region are understood as of equal importance and the key to growth is integration and coherence not favoring one type of area over another. Perhaps burnt over HS2, the infrastructural turn has evolved from advocating for between city-region connectivity like HS2 to within city-region connectivity like the Leeds Tram and (arguably) the Manchester-Liverpool railway, perhaps partly because this aligns better with political administration.

Time matters. Processes of regional imagination and infrastructure development unfold over time, and rarely in lockstep. Developments in one can drive, reshape, or disrupt progress on others. This is a major theme in NOIR's most recent edited collection, *Infrastructural Times: Temporality and the Making of Global Urban Worlds*. Crucially, in the case of Northern Powerhouse Rail, regional imaginaries have transmuted more quickly than planning process have been able to concretize infrastructure plans. In the Oxford-Cambridge case, various parts of the EWR line have been upgraded, connected, or completed over nearly a decade and so most attention is now focused on local dramas where remaining alignments have yet to be finalized. This fragmentation and a certain amount of parochialism undermines the regional logic as local actors emphasize the line's potential to relieve growth pressures and serve a broader commutershed.

The promise of regional infrastructure can also erode over time, dampening underlying logics and forcing narrative adjustments and political reckonings. Dan Durrant's paper offered a critical perspective on the logics underpinning the HS2 project citing, particularly related to economic growth potential and progress towards sustainability goals. As legs of the project were gradually cancelled these claims have become even more difficult to defend. However, one of the participants wondered if the current political tension over HS2 would have been as acute if it had been built decisively within expected timeframes.

- **Please outline any future actions (planned events, outputs, follow-up of the event, publications).**

This group of presentations stimulated a rich discussion and set up the potential for lots of future dialogue around different themes of rail and infrastructural regionalism. We will continue the conversation with a series of sessions on *Infrastructuring Regions* at the AAG Annual Meeting in March 2025. And at the next RSA conference in Porto in May 2025, we will turn our attention to issues of inclusive infrastructures and the dynamics of regional transformation.

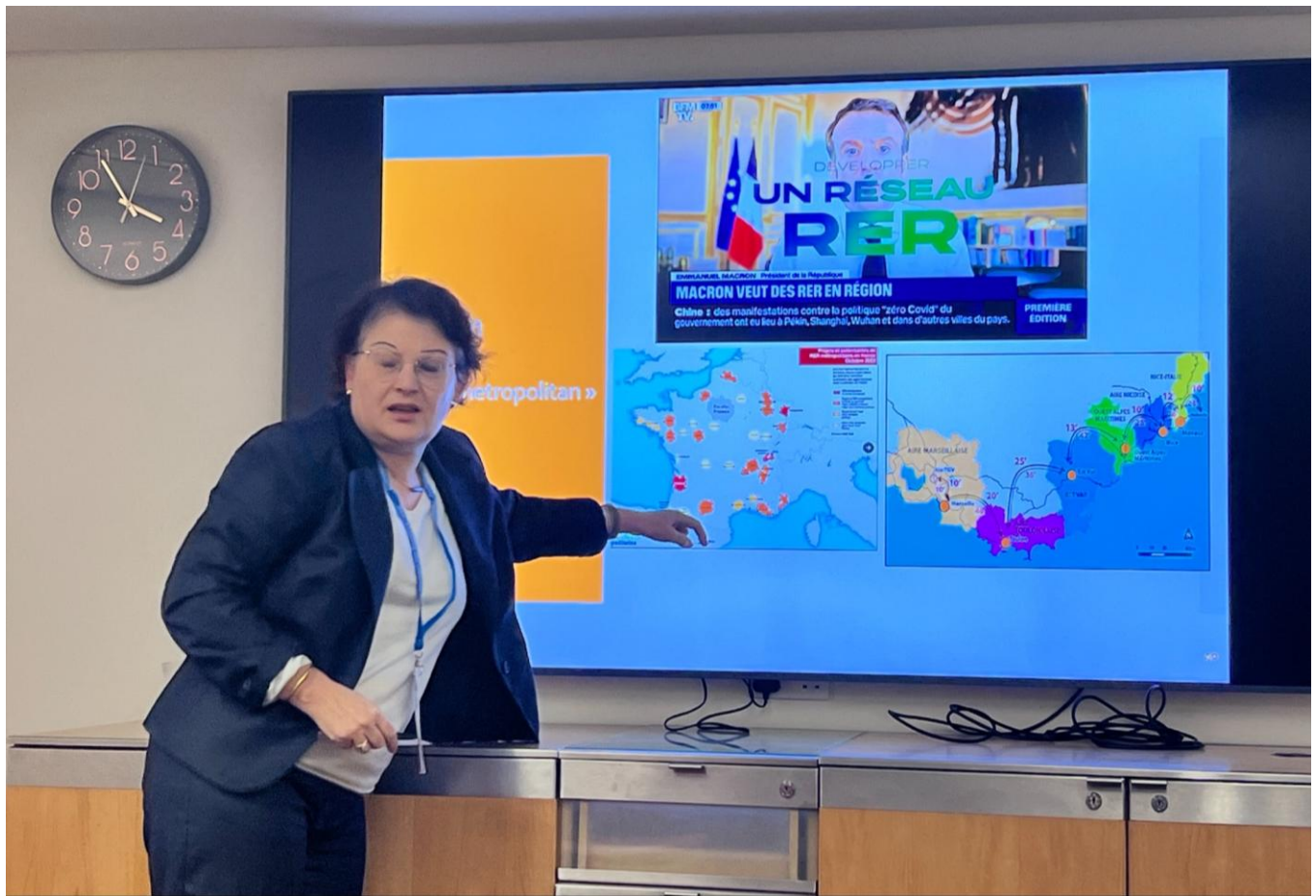
- Please outline below how you promoted the Association at your event and whether any follow up actions are planned.

At the outset of the special paper sessions, NOIR's co-ordinators acknowledged the financial and logistical support provided by the RSA and encourage those attending the sessions to consider applying for RSA Research Network grants in future rounds. The RSA logo was featured on PowerPoint slides from the NOIR team. We have sent a follow-up email to the session presenters, which included the below information regarding the RSA e-bulletin.

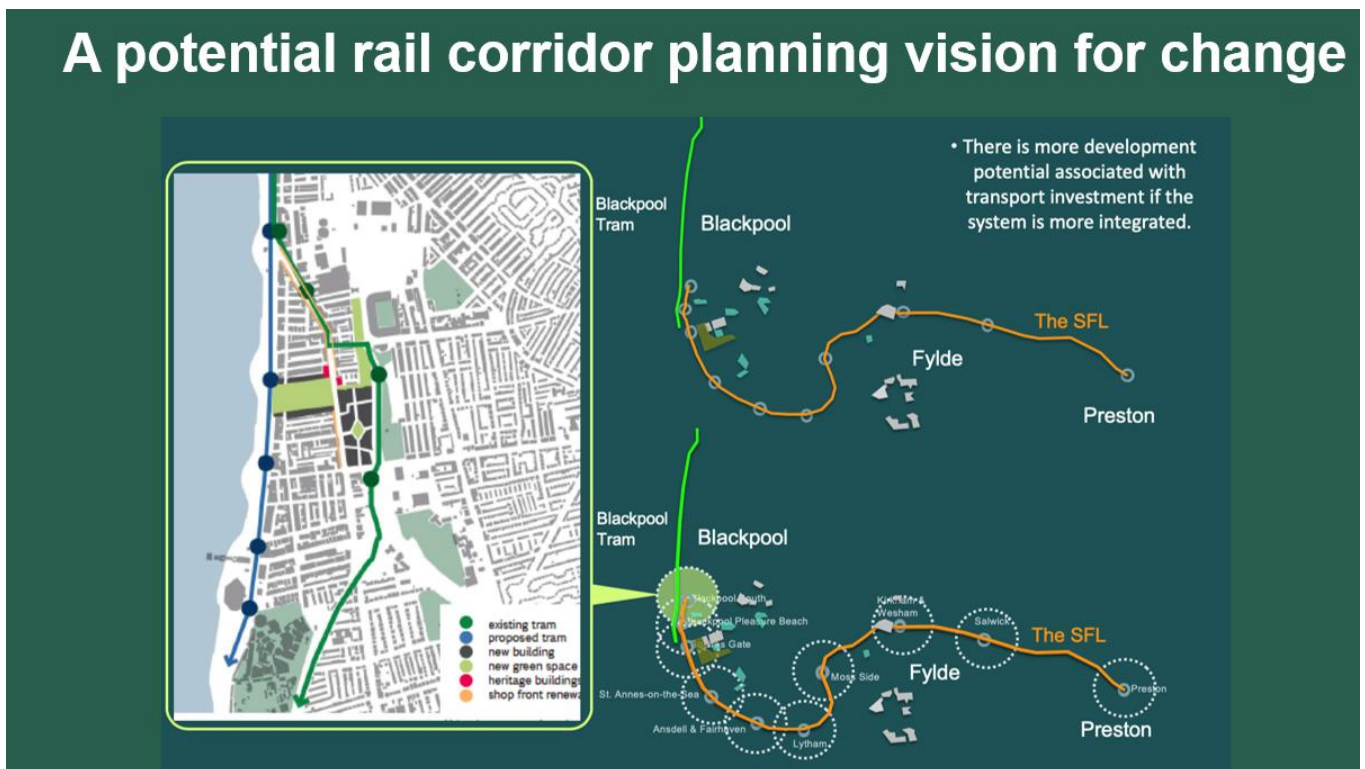
- Please include a short biography from/on behalf of the author of this report (author's title, institutional affiliation, and research interests, max 40 words) and attach an ID picture (this may be published in *Regions*) in Jpeg format.

Jen Nelles is Senior Research Fellow with the Innovation Caucus and Co-Director of the Oxford Regions, Innovation, and Enterprise Lab (ORIEL) at Oxford Brookes Business School. She specializes in innovation and productivity policy, urban and metropolitan governance, regional economic development, infrastructure, and system dynamics.

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- Please send an email addressed to researchnetwork@regionalstudies.org attaching any presentation or additional material that you have permission to display on the Association's website.
- Please confirm that you have either provided the RSA with a list of delegates' emails or that you have sent an email to the delegates containing a paragraph on the RSA and the link to sign up to the e-Bulletin as follows:
 - The Regional Studies Association (RSA) is a learned society concerned with the analysis of regions and regional issues. It is the multidisciplinary global community for regional and urban research, development and policy. An RSA membership gives you access to publications, funding opportunities, conferences and events, networking opportunities, discounts and much more. The RSA sends out news on its activities and deadlines via its monthly newsletter, so if you have not yet signed up to the monthly e-Bulletin, please do so [here](#).



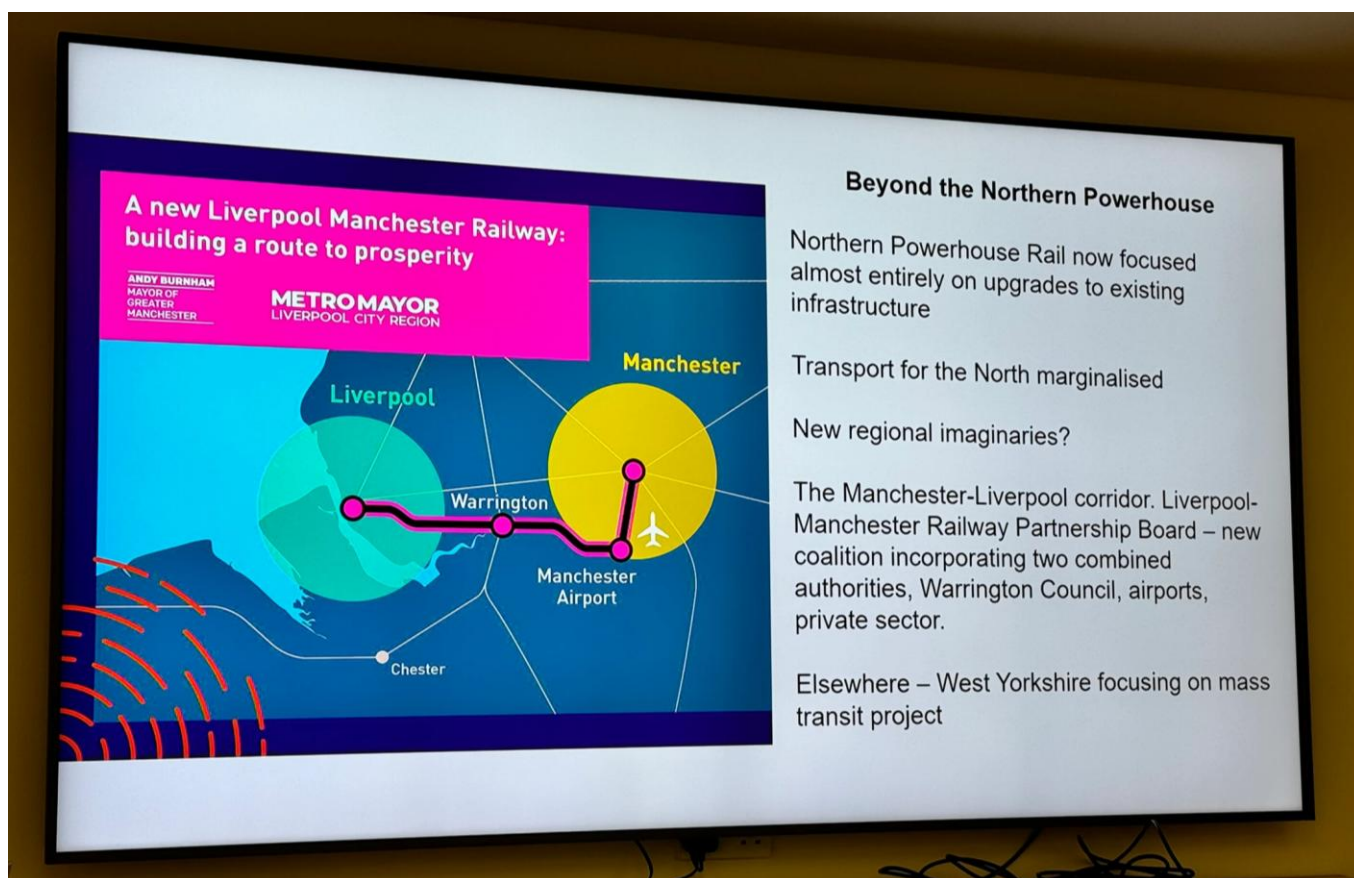
Nacima Baron illustrating a European perspective on regional rail in the Cote D'Azur.



A slide from Chai-Lin Chen's presentation on regional rail infrastructure planning in South Fylde.



Dan Durrant presents his research on HS2's high speed imaginaries.



Tom Arnold provides a view into regional rail connectivity and the Northern Powerhouse in the UK.