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How place narrative and the direction of place-based development interventions interrelate: Comparing local initiatives in England and Sweden.

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Abstract

This paper examines how local narratives form the foundations of local development interventions. Research centres on a qualitative study of two place-based development initiatives in England and Sweden. The English case involves the development and implementation of urban cultural and heritage strategies in the city of Gloucester. The Swedish case foresees an ambitious vision for sustainable food within future local development in Mjölby. As a result, three conclusions are presented. Firstly, while narratives for place-making nurture pride in historical foundations, the interpretation of the local past for future visions is negotiated. This formation of place-narratives depends on actor constellations and contemporary discourses for local development. Second, the roles of local governments for local development varies and what can be seen to depend on their position within respective national multi-level systems for England and Sweden. Thirdly, it remains important to understand place-making as a relational spatial activity. Motivations and resources for the initiatives reviewed here depend on broader governance and stakeholder interrelationships.

1. Introduction

This article addresses scholarly debates on place-based development. A paper by Barca et al. (2012), which constitutes an important starting point for this discussion, contrasted place-based and place-neutral approaches for development interventions. Those authors argued for the need to adjust development interventions with respect to the “variety of factors in diverse geographical locations that may affect the potential returns of interventions” (Barca et al., 2012, p. 149). In summative terms, they explained that the place-based approach has two fundamental aspects, which are that (i) local context really matters, and (ii) interventions need to build on local knowledge. Overall, this represents an approach to economic development, structural conditions and knowledgeable local actors, in some contrast with streams of recent debates, which consider place-based interventions as representing cultural politics embedded in narratives. Through narratives, meanings are defined and, in turn, affect how visions for future development are expressed (Beer, 2023; Görmär, 2024; McCann, 2002; McCann, 2023). From this approach it becomes important to understand the processes of actor collaboration, which exerts impacts on the evolution of place narrative and, ultimately, the design of place-based development.

The place-based development model described by Barca et al. (2012) is promoted through international political organisations, including the European Union and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), placing high expectations on sub-national political governments. Although the element of place in ‘place-based’ and ‘place-making’ should not be confused with regulated (e.g. democratic) local processes, its foundation is local. It follows that within local development interventions, when combined with facets of representative, democratic politics, the local government becomes a central actor and authority. Compared to regional governments, that in many national political systems have formalised and regulated mandates to implement regional development interventions, the role of a local government can be more implicit and has also received less attention through research (Mendez, 2021). Even so, research indicates that local councils claim legitimacy in place-leadership because they are democratically structured and have overall responsibility to strive towards goals to advance the common good (Huggins et al., 2023). Given such assumptions about the key role of local government for place-based development interventions, this paper aims to contribute to this research gap, by investigating how local authorities are involved in, and influence, the governance of development narratives and the management of development interventions. Local governments’ agency in the governance of local development is embedded in place-specific communities, which Nordberg et al. (2020) recognise as the interplay of local structures of actors and local values. Consequently, local governments involved in place-based development have an important role in facilitating interconnections between local actors and fostering shared local values and narratives.

For the local community to perceive place narratives driving the direction of place-based development interventions as plausible, they must be linked to a recognisable place trajectory - namely a shared recognition of the distinctive character of the place and its gradual adaptation, through time, towards an improved future. This means that place narratives can be seen to derive from the interweaving of stories of local trajectories for development pathways interlinked with promoted symbols, buildings and personalities (Görmar, 2024; MacKinnon et al. 2019; Lagendijk 2007; Pugh and Andersson, 2023). Understanding the embedding of local development interventions within narratives involves untangling local conceptions about what is a possible and desirable future; hence past and future narratives are connected. The question follows of how narratives establish consensus around a common vision to mobilize diverse support for local development interventions (Roessler, 2024). This is a key question for understanding how place-based development plays out and is what this paper investigates.

In light of this background, the aim of this paper is to investigate the ways in which the making of place narrative and the making of place-based development interrelate. The paper presents two empirical cases that reveal how locally-tailored development interventions are embedded within narratives (McCann, 2023).

An English case involves the development and implementation of an urban cultural strategy to structure social goals and to celebrate local distinctiveness in the city of Gloucester. This is principally through the 10-year Gloucester City Culture Strategy, initiated in 2016. The document was developed by Gloucester City Council (GCC) but is executed in partnership with a civil society organisation, namely the Gloucester Culture Trust, for which it is funded by the City Council. The second case is from the town of Mjölby, in Sweden, a place-making initiative integrating visions for sustainable food and economic development. This initiative is embedded within local policy since more than a decade to promote Mjölby to be a ‘food municipality’. Although these cases

cover different visions for place-making as well as contrasting governance structures for local development, they are connected in their use of narratives to promote place-making initiatives.

The paper is structured in five sections. This first section has introduced the theme and presented the study's aim. The next section offers a literature background that grounds the analytical approach to be applied for the empirical cases. Section 3 presents the research design, followed in section 4 by results and discussion. Finally, concluding remarks follow in section five.

2. Place narratives and place-making

In this section, the interrelationship between literatures on place narratives and place-making initiatives is explored in order to develop an analytical framework for empirical findings. In particular, the literature is helpful in discussing the formation of place trajectories, and the role of local government in framing and adjusting these, through place-based interventions. This begins with a concept for place-making that *'refers to the activity of turning a "space" into a "place", through giving meaning for the people who use it'* (Dupre, 2018). Place-making is about how places come to hold meaning and subjective values (Akbar and Edelenbos, 2021; Dupre, 2018).

Our interest is particularly linked to how varied goals for place-making are embedded in variations of local narratives that envisage a better future, articulating gradual shifts in foundational place-identities over time (Schlitte, 2016). Such narratives are culturally and geographically relational and require certain constellations of actors to engage with each other in dialogues about "how and in whose interests" places are to be developed (McCann, 2002, p. 387).

Place narratives result from, and are adjusted by, the constant layering, through time, of human and non-human interactions, resulting in what Clifford and King (2006) have called 'patina', by drawing on aesthetic descriptions of texture. When ordered ways of living in places change, bundles of cultural practices, or 'culturalisations', are empirically observable (Keech and Redepenning, 2020). Such practices reveal temporal cultural impositions on place, some of which may take a firm hold in local identity and prove difficult to adjust (Görmär, 2024). The recounting of material, structural and subjective place narratives informs place-making, based on the ordering, re-ordering, and debating of cultural and local identity over time. Such processes foreground the value of local knowledge in local development where *'narratives of current life experiences ... offer themselves up as tools for informing future visions and expectations'* (Keech and Olczak, 2024).

As suggested above, forming a place narrative is a social and political process, a form of cultural politics through which meanings are defined. Shared narratives that become established in a local community can be an important source for leveraging subjective factors such as identity with place, a sense of belonging, responsibility, urgency and common understanding, to drive actors to join forces for place-based development initiatives (Emerson et al. 2012; McCann 2002; Tan and Tan, 2023).

The objective of exploring the relations between place narratives and place-making, indicates a shift of emphasis, from the material fabric of places to processes of how places hold meaning, an expression of which requires subjective values (Akbar and Edelenbos, 2021; Dupre, 2018). In other words, while physical and geographical constructions (e.g. geology, weather, topography) combine with social structures (e.g. settlement patterns, infrastructure and organisations,

including companies) to inform place-making contexts, these factors also integrate with the formation and evolution of place identity (Csurgó and Megyesi, 2016).

In this paper, then, a close connection between local development trajectories, place narrative and place-making is conceived, assuming these to be spatially and socially relational. We highlight ‘...*narratives and practices of policy-makers, residents and organisations.*’ (Jayne et al., 2010) within two local environments in England and Sweden, paying attention to how narratives become established through local dialogues. In this, it is necessary to consider how the development of place-making narratives includes processes through which shared local visions are continuously negotiated and re-defined (McCann, 2002).

Consequently, particular actor constellations, including local partnerships (Broadhurst 2018), are integral within the intertwined processes of place narratives and place-making. Variations of subjective evaluation among actors about future narratives may be not solely context-specific but also sector-specific, highlighting local politics, civil society and private sector positions. For example, civil society interests are represented through various organizational models involving individuals, NGOs, social enterprises and co-operatives. Companies are distinct in their organizational structures designed for profit-making opportunities and the management of risks. Various cross-sectoral constellations have been conceived, for example as network governance (Provan and Kennis, 2008, Parker, 2007), where different but autonomous organisations come together to achieve their own, alongside shared, objectives; or hybrid alliances (Ferraris, 2018) enabling joint decision-making; or as a source of radical or incremental social innovations (Marques et al., 2018).

Place-based development initiatives represent facets of regional development policy. This means that domestic political structures, including the regulatory role of the national state and its influence on sub-national authorities are important. Keller and Virág (2022) consider this relationship to be insufficiently recognised in place-making research. It becomes necessary to recognise the effects of variations of multi-level government on the implementation of place-based initiatives if the conditions under which municipalities become place-making agents is to be understood.

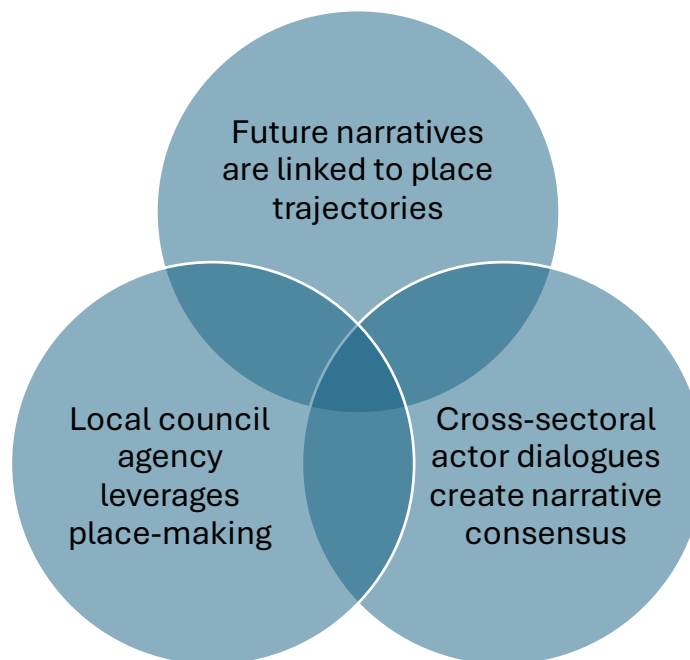
In general, municipalities (local authorities, local governments, local councils) are place-making institutions that rely on collaborations with actors across social sectors to develop and enact place-making policies. However, the autonomy and resources enabling local councils to act varies substantially between different national planning systems, in addition to specific local contexts. Many European countries have two tiers of sub-national authorities for regional and local levels. These have distinct, and often interdependently mandated functions and competences. An example of this is an interdependent but separate approach to strategic (regional governments) and spatial planning (local municipalities). National differences in the position of (in this case, English and Swedish) local councils within their respective national systems creates variations in how place-making processes evolve (Hankla, 2009; Treisman, 2007; Andrews & De Vries, 2007, Ladner et al., 2019). Surprisingly, within regional studies, reflections on the roles of local authorities in local development initiatives across national settings are uncommon. In one such study of Finland and Australia, important findings present institutional and governmental factors to explain hierarchical, structural, consensus-driven and leadership effects on place-making processes (Sotarauta and Beer, 2017).

Clearly, the resourcing and organisation of local councils varies nationally, with direct implications for their capacities “*to build vertical and horizontal alliances and to have a say in the*

definition of developmental goals” (Keller and Virág, 2022, p. 874). As political bodies, local councils enact the visions of elected politicians. Nevertheless, the roles of professional officers - council employees - need to be recognized because they guide and interpret the planning and decision-making processes of the authority. For example, while planners hold professional competences, they may also engage normatively in planning issues as public entrepreneurs, doers and boundary spanners (Purkarthofer and Stead, 2023). Equally, the loss of municipal professionals, can remove institutional experience and memory (Haughton et al., 2015), affecting the likelihood of meeting strategic objectives. The agency of planners and the impact they have for securing future visions is both enabled and constrained by the structure within which they work (Purkarthofer and Stead, 2023), indicating the importance of the organisational and financial dimensions of councils.

Drawing together these considerations on place narratives, their trajectory formation and the agency of local actors, especially councils, our analytical framework (Figure 1) is founded on three interconnected assumptions that affect how place-making initiatives are made. First, future narratives are linked to past characteristics of place to form place trajectories. Second, narrative-making is enacted through dialogues and negotiations between local actors. Third, local councils have important roles, assumed to vary by national contexts, in the process of defining narratives and converting these into leverages for place-making initiatives. This framework is illustrated in Figure 1, which is used for coding our empirical material and for organising the empirical discussion in section 4.

Figure 1. Analytical framework: interplay between narrative-making and place-making.



3. Research design and empirical context

3.1 Research design

This research examines two empirical cases in England and Sweden, within a qualitative cross-case analysis. Given the aim to contribute insights into causal interrelationships between place narratives and place-making, the cross-case analysis is useful for identifying “patterns between cases without losing the essential contextual details in a heterogenous sample” (South et al., 2024, p. 5).

The research employs a multiple methods design based on secondary data and interviews. Secondary data includes strategic planning and cultural policy documents generated by the local councils (Table 1), local news articles and websites. The selection of policy documents from the councils followed a type of snowballing, initially by reading documents related to the place-making initiatives in England and Sweden. These are marked in bold text in Table 1. In Gloucester, two additional documents were identified via preparatory searches, namely the Gloucester Heritage Strategy (GCC, 2019) and the Regeneration and Economic Development Strategy (GCC, 2016), both of which identify culture as a place-making asset for the city. In Mjölby, documents were identified that outlined how the Food Centre intervention was supported by the highest political leadership, alongside council documents that provided details about associated planning activities.

Table 1: Planning and policy documents in the empirical material

Gloucester	Mjölby
Gloucester Culture strategy; strategy update covering the period 2021-2026.	Mjölby kommun (2022). <i>Upplevelsecenter för Mat. Projektplan och slutrapport för projektet.</i> [In English: Experience centre for food. Project plan and final report for the project]
Gloucester City Regeneration Strategy (preceded by the City Centre Vision 2028).	Mjölby kommun (2023) Newsletters
Gloucester Heritage Strategy (HS) covering the period 2019-2029.	Mjölby kommun, yearly ratified Budget and plan.
‘Gloucester Together’ funding proposal successfully submitted to the Arts Council England.	Website for Mjölby kommun: www.mjolby.se

Qualitative, semi-structured individual interviews and group dialogues, which took place between July 2023 and May 2025, generated data about the processes driving the interventions. Research questions, common for both countries, were organised around three key topics, namely:

- What is the future vision of the strategies?
- How is improvement gain for local development judged?
- What are the roles of participants within the planned interventions?

Qualitative interviews were subject to ethical assessment by both universities, which required the submission to and scrutiny by ethics committees of research plans, data handling and storage procedures. Interviewees’ written consent was secured for participation in anonymised interviews, each lasting 35-60 minutes and were audio recorded. Recordings were transcribed into Word documents and checked for accuracy against the recording.

In England, five interviews were conducted: two with officers at Gloucester City Council involved in cultural and economic strategies; one with a Gloucestershire County Council expert in architectural and cultural heritage; the fourth interview was with a trustee of a cultural organisation in the city; the fifth interview was with a senior communications expert involved in cultural regeneration of Gloucester. In Sweden, three interviews were conducted. Two interviewees represented the municipality. The first was a senior official with long experience of strategy work; the second was involved concretely in strategy implementation of the intervention. The third interviewee was a local food producer, selected to assess the intervention as a potential beneficiary. Finally, a group dialogue was conducted with council representatives. The interviews and group discussion also built on a supervised report, mapping the timeline and governance context for the initiative in Mjölby (Khayat, 2024).

In summary, the analytical framework in Figure 1 guided the review of the empirical material, through which the results are discussed in terms of narratives for local development, actor dialogues and local council agency. To achieve this, we carried out a qualitative content analysis, allowing us to interpret the compiled empirical material (comprising policy documents and interview/group dialogue data).

3.2 National variations in local authorities' agency

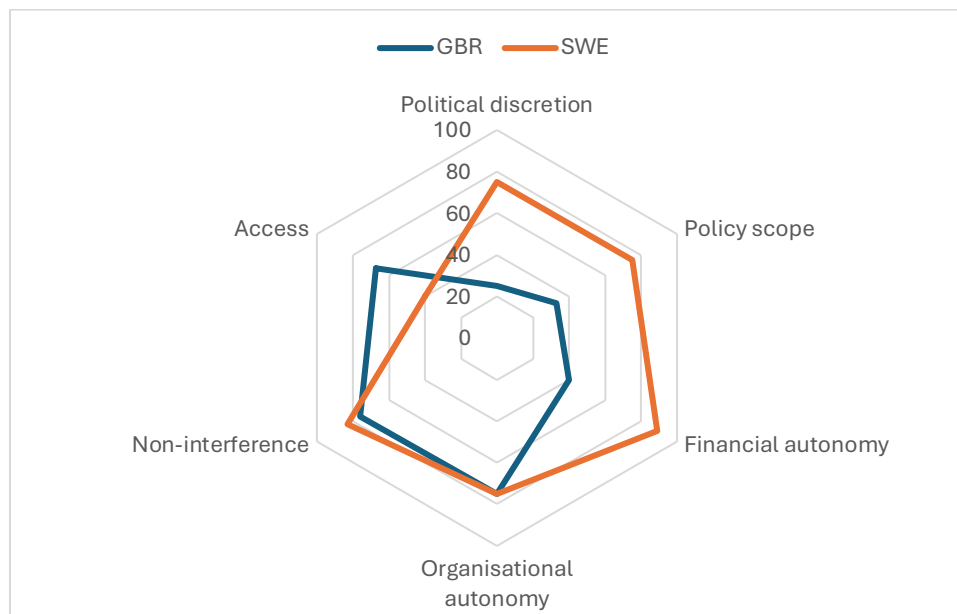
The interpretation of the empirical cases must account for distinctions of the positions of local councils in each country. Ladner et al. (2019) suggest that dimensions of functions, financial autonomy and organisational formations (see Table 2) represent structural factors of municipal autonomy.

Table 2: Perspectives, dimensions and descriptions for the autonomy of municipalities or local councils (adapted from Ladner et al., 2019)

Perspectives	Dimensions	Description
Functional	Political discretion	The formal distribution of power and the effective decision-making competences with respect to services delivery
	Policy scope	The scope of services for which local governments are responsible
Financial	Financial autonomy	The financial resources available locally and the possibility to decide on their sources (= fiscal autonomy + financial self-reliance + borrowing autonomy)
Organizational	Organizational autonomy	The free organization of local political arenas and administration
	Non-interference:	The extent of liberty left by higher levels of government in their control (= financial transfer system + administrative supervision)
	Access	The degree of influence of local governments on political decisions at higher levels of government

With these dimensions in mind and drawing on Ladner et al.'s (2019) typology of European local government, Figure 2 illustrates relative autonomy 'scores' for local authorities in Sweden, compared to Britain. Swedish councils score higher for political discretion, policy scope and financial autonomy, indicating that they enjoy a strong decision-making position, wider scope of competences, and extensive financial resources. These variations produce impacts on the roles local authorities have within place-making processes.

Figure 2: Relative local autonomy of local authorities in Great Britain (GBR) and Sweden (SWE) (data source: Ladner et al. 2019, reconfigured for national cases by author).



In Britain power is strongly held by the national state, although decades of cuts to local government have culminated in a consolidation of functions and the contracting out of local services. Additionally, the UK nation states have distinct planning autonomy. Gloucester relates to planning processes in England. Scope for access to higher levels of government than in Sweden (illustrated in Figure 2) results from the interdependences between national and local state. The levels of non-interference from national government for delegated functions and for organisational autonomy are similar in England and Sweden.

In Sweden, most municipal income comes from local income taxation in combination with some state support. Swedish local authorities have developed into extensive organisations with large economic budgets and many employees. This context is associated with high expectations among citizens and organisations for the municipality to deliver services, manage physical planning and take the initiative within local development (Hermelin and Trygg, 2021). This results in a distinct divide between the roles of the public and other societal sectors. In England, the contractual reallocation of service delivery to commercial and civil society organisations is well-established for the delivery of non-statutory objectives, including cultural development.

Another national contrast between the conditions for local government actions is how planning systems become institutionalised over time. The regular reorganisation of local government in England is in stark contrast with a stable and consistent structure in Sweden. Broadly speaking, England has a two-tier arrangement of public services, especially outside cities (usually single-tier unitary). This sets out and divides functions and responsibilities to county and (lower-tier) district councils. English local government will be reorganised again in 2027.

The research approach of documentary analysis, interviews and the clarification of local government contexts in national settings has been described. In the next section an empirical cross-case analysis is presented to examine how local councils build narratives from place trajectories to harness stakeholder support for place-making initiatives.

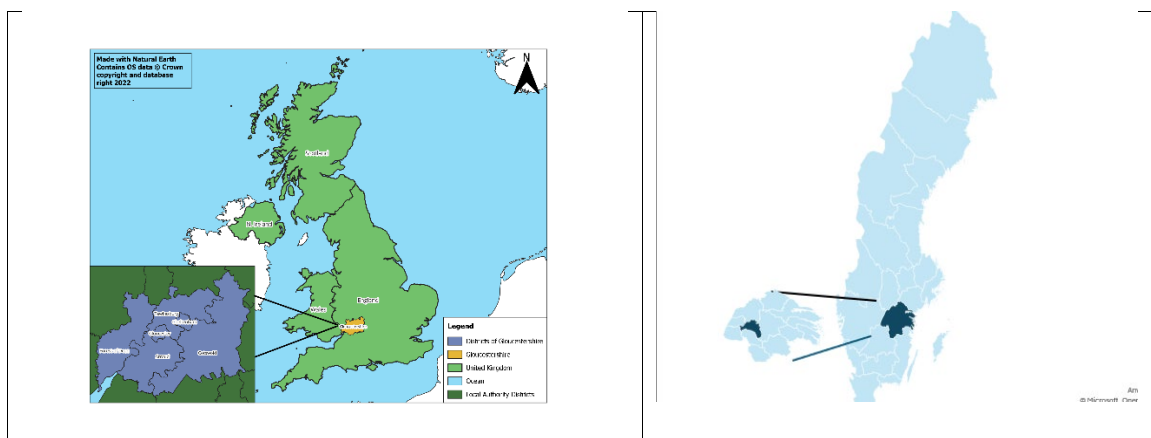
4. Results and discussion

This section discusses the investigated place-making initiatives in Gloucester and in Mjölby. It is introduced by an overview of geographical contexts and the profile of each initiative; and followed by discussion of results aligned with the analytical model (Figure 1). This means to discuss how the investigated local initiatives develop through the interrelationship between narratives, dialogues and agency of the local councils.

4.1 Geographical context and profile of the initiatives

Maps in figure 3 locate Gloucester (urban population c. 133,000) and Mjölby (c. 15,000). Gloucester is the administrative capital of the county of Gloucestershire. Mjölby is both the name of a town and the wider municipality.

Figure 3: Location of the case studies within their nations



Starting with the context for the English case, Gloucester is an ancient city, founded in 49CE as *Glevum*, soon becoming a key administrative centre of Roman Britain. Gloucester's importance continued as a monastic and royal administrative centre, but its political influence declined after the 16th century Reformation. Economically, the city was a trading hub for the regional wool industry. The cutting of the Gloucester and Sharpness Canal in 1827 connected the city to the River Severn estuary, north of Bristol, and improved the city's access for maritime trade. Subsequent industrialisation involved Gloucester in railway, milling and aerospace engineering, the latter remains a regional industry today¹.

Gloucester's trajectory includes contemporary social challenges. It is the most deprived of the county's six districts and 138th of 317 English districts. Social challenges relate to income, education and training, and health deprivation². This situation is a context for Gloucester City Council's successful application, in 2021, to the national government's 'Levelling Up' fund, which distributed £4.8bn as a tool for balancing regional economic growth.

The initiative in Gloucester focus on urban cultural and heritage strategies. In this case, £20million was secured for city centre regeneration. In addition, an Economic Development Fund made up mainly of income Gloucester City Council (GCC) receives from the sale of roadside tourism advertising, helped to fund the Gloucester Heritage Strategy 2019-2029. Additional funds came

¹ <https://www.gloucestercivictrust.org/a-brief-history-of-gloucester/> accessed 18th April 2024.

² https://www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/media/zcuuhvpp/iodfact2019_glos.pdf ditto

from two national agencies: Historic England and the Arts Council England. GCC successfully argued that heritage investment of a heritage strategy would help to prioritise expenditure to improve the city.

Moving to the Swedish case, the town of Mjölby has developed from being a grain milling village and its industrial basis was consolidated from the 1860s onwards with the establishment of a number of agro-industrial manufacturing companies (Jansson, 2009). The coming of the Stockholm-Gothenburg railway in 1873 was an important infrastructure boost for Mjölby. The present political-administrative municipality of Mjölby is the outcome of reforms, culminating in 1971, which incorporated smaller neighbouring municipalities. The population of the municipality has varied over time, including some decline from 1980 to 2000, although modest continuous growth is evident from 2000 onwards, associated with new residential areas in the town centre.

Present employment and industry structure of Mjölby is dominated by two main industrial plants. One of these is a branch plant of the global company Toyota, producing forklifts for warehouses, with 2000-3000 employees. The other industry is Väderstad, originating from a machinery workshop established in the 1960s which has since expanded to become a large-scale manufacturing plant producing agricultural machinery for global exports. This company has retained its original family ownership and employs almost 2000 workers. Väderstad is also the name of the location for the place-making initiative explored through this paper and which aims to establish an 'Experience Centre For Food'. (*Upplevelsecenter för mat*, in Swedish; hereafter: Experience Centre). The Mjölby Experience Centre integrates two main targets. One is to develop a platform for knowledge dissemination about food. The other is to become an attractive visitor destination with a focus on sustainable food production ([Mjölby kommun, 2022](#)). The idea for the Experience Centre integrates various dimensions like learning, digitization and sustainability.

From this background description of the initiatives, we now move to present cases from the different dimensions of the analytical model defined in Figure 1.

4.2 Narrative trajectories

Commencing with a consideration of how narratives for the interventions are embedded within place trajectories, the Gloucester Cultural Strategy and Gloucester Heritage Strategy are linked via concern for both the physical fabric as well as the vibrancy of the city. Gloucester's urban centre is experiencing familiar changes in the 'high street'. These include a reduction in retailing outlets as shopping moves on-line, exacerbated during the COVID-19 period and exemplifying what Madanipour (2018) terms as the intrinsic '*supply-side inefficiency*' of the commercial property market. Gloucester contains many historical buildings and reveals a shoulder-to-shoulder array of architectural styles including 16th century timber framing, industrial warehouses around the docks, and 1960s concrete modernism. In this respect, the cultural and heritage strategies combine the notion of an ancient city as the foundation for building future cultural prospects.

The 10-year Culture Strategy was a key mechanism to achieve cultural and social improvements in the city. Dedicated to both arts and heritage, it seeks to help Gloucester '*reach its cultural potential*' through multi-stakeholder partnerships to build on '*the strengths of our diverse communities*' and underline '*opportunities for the development of culture in the City*' (GCC 2016:4). The Culture Strategy is notable in its focus on multi-functional benefits of culture, including economic development, community regeneration and quality of life. It records that while Gloucester has a fascinating past and is undergoing vibrant change, it has suffered from being identified as a 'cultural desert' (GCC, 2016, p. 4-5). A review of the strategy's progress in

2021, restated a commitment to *'making Gloucester a better place to live, work and play... and recognising the 'role of arts, heritage and creativity as fundamental drivers of Gloucester's economic, social and community development, as well as health and wellbeing'* (GCC/GCT 2021). Specifically, culture is framed as a regeneration opportunity through collaborations with local businesses to set up a programme of cultural events, support the development of a cultural industries and infrastructure 'masterplan' and better *'researching, listening to and understanding current audiences to map demand opportunities and gaps'* (GCC, 2021: Action 16).

The introduction to the Cultural Strategy outlines a city *'on the up'* (GCC, 2016), in other words, a city where prospects are improving. This perspective contrasts with Gloucester's socio-economic profile. Yet the Cultural Strategy reveals a self-awareness, even pride, in the idea that the city's cultural profile is 'quirky' (idiosyncratic) and 'edgy' (implying tension, even danger). The Strategy has woven a narrative from three separate threads: (i) Gloucester has an interesting and distinctive cultural heritage; (ii) this should be at the 'heart' of the city; and (iii) culture should offer transformational benefits to all citizens.

During interviews, a City Council official concerned with economic development outlined how cultural heritage and city centre revival are important influences on the city's prospects:

'what we call heritage-led regeneration, ... mostly focuses around the cathedral quarter, which is essentially refurbishing, redeveloping old buildings, old heritage stock to create economic opportunities.'

Contrasts emerge from the cultural and heritage strategies which try to highlight the built heritage and social potential of the city into a future of revival and opportunity. This is important because (from the same interview) *'Gloucester doesn't really show its muscles ... its potential.'*

On the other hand, the desirability of 'cultural democracy' is indicated to broaden cultural possibilities and participation for everyone. In the words of a trustee of a local cultural organisation, the Cultural Strategy was:

'... instigated at a grassroots level ... there was a sense [of] a lack of direction around culture ... a need to do something strategically to leverage the potential of culture arts and heritage in the city. [...] a series of meetings were held that anyone could come along to ... in any sector who was interested.'

In these extracts, official and civil society voices have created a foundational narrative that Gloucester is intrinsically exciting but underplays its cultural assets and character.

However, the network behind the cultural vision for Gloucester can also appear as unfocused:

'...it's just there's so much going on, it's just really hard to distil it... there's not this shared identity that we're all part of something.'

This indicates that although there is a wealth of good will and support for a cultural revival in Gloucester, the reasons for supporting the strategy are varied, promising growth, investment, social inclusion, town centre regeneration and cultural vibrancy.

Moving to the Swedish case, the Mjölby's centenary anniversary book, produced by the local council in 2020 is a starting point to discuss how the narratives for the future can be linked to place trajectories (Mjölby kommun, 2020). This book includes a chapter on food, presenting food production as a foundation for the trajectory of local development in Mjölby. It describes local

food activities including a secondary school program for chef education, which aims to locate Mjölby on the national ‘food map’. This anniversary book also describes food production companies previously located in Mjölby, but which closed in the 1990s in the general wave of de-industrialisation. Also, the role of farming and specifically the local importance of potato production is stressed.

An interviewed senior official who has worked for the council in Mjölby for several decades recalls discussions about food as a representative symbol of local identity and a means for local development starting around 2004 (interview 1). Subsequently, the main political steering document for Mjölby outlined that the council, in collaboration with local food producers, would market itself to be a ‘food municipality’ (Mjölby kommun, 2012). This resulted in municipal funding for a large-scale potato sculpture placed in 2012 in the centre for a traffic-circle. This sculpture has become one of the most well-known symbols for Mjölby, resulting in some controversy among citizens who feel reluctant to have their town and district represented by a potato, although tolerance and even endorsement have gradually developed.

Media reports about the initiative for the Experience Centre in Mjölby have used different labels including ‘Food Land’ or ‘Potato Land’ (Johansson, 2022), with references to how the potato has become associated with the identity for Mjölby. On the municipal website, motivations for funding the sculpture are explained, illustrating how the local authority claims a role in defining the local narrative, with impacts on the vision and initiatives for local development.

[...]several companies linked to food production have developed. In addition to all the agricultural and agricultural companies ... The agricultural production of grain, vegetables and of course potatoes is extensive. ... Food recurs in upper secondary education. We are very proud of [hosting] one of Sweden's most successful chef educations. The students have won many fine awards and the Swedish Culinary Championships for high school students several times. Food is therefore particularly important in Mjölby municipality. To symbolize this, we have chosen to place a King Edward potato in one of our roundabouts.

(Potatisrondellen | Visit Mjölby/

<https://www.visitmjolby.se/gora/mjolby/potatisrondellen>, visited 4 September 2025).

Mjölby’s place narrative clearly revolves around food and illustrates how a local narrative is shaped over time, and for which the local council has a key role. This narrative involves that Mjölby should become a visible and attractive place to visit (Fransson, 2021). This represents a vision that signals hope for growth within a wider framework of sustainable development (Amirzadeh and Sharifi, 2024).

4.4 Actor constellations

In Gloucester, a cross-sectoral network of actors is interested in reviving Gloucester’s prospects. An example includes the Gloucester Culture Trust, a charity which works with the City Council to implement the Culture Strategy. The Culture Trust supports creative sector development and enterprise through its incubation centre *Jolt*, offering arts and music studios and a series of enterprise training workshops from a building owned by the city council.

Commercial networks such as the Chamber of Commerce and the county council Growth Hubs to attract industrial investment in the city, including tourism. In particular, the Gloucester Business Improvement District (a city centre commercial membership organisation), was a key

partner in securing the Together Gloucester investment from the Arts Council England, which also invested substantially in the city's library infrastructure. At the neighbourhood level, community charitable organisations employ outreach workers ('community connectors') to find out what local residents really want:

'...community connectors ... have been really important in helping local authorities and wider partners in Gloucester become much more aware of what [residents] would actually like from a culture strategy for Gloucester and what would encourage them to come into the city [centre].'

Meanwhile, the local university is expanding its cultural presence in Gloucester through the purchase in 2022 of a department store, opened in August 2025 as a teaching centre and gallery, incorporating the city's public library. According to a university manager:

'... there's a range of us all trying to agree a shared narrative ... around a [substantial] shared investment in the city ... This is a large amount of investment and it's about improving the lives of people in Gloucester.'

The 'range' mentioned above includes commercial builders of the city centre's Forum development³, which includes a new transport hub, hotel, office, leisure and residential developments.

In Mjölby, the vision to become a 'food municipality' was made more concrete through an action plan for a local 'food profile' that involved to invite different actors. This action plan was followed by a study trip in 2017 by delegates from Mjölby council, the regional council and Linköping University to Ede Food Valley, in the Netherlands (Interview 1). The trip offered knowledge and motivations to adopt a similar project in Mjölby (Fransson, 2021) and preparations began, to realise the Experience Centre.

Over time, Mjölby council has been able to recruit other actors to their vision and plan for the Experience Centre. The project plan describes steering and project groups that meet regularly. Members of these groups represent the regional administrative board, the regional council, business clusters, the trade organisation for agricultural industries, a national research institution with focus on innovation (RISE), and major manufacturing companies in the local area (Mjölby kommun, 2022). Actor involvement for the initiative in Mjölby has involved dialogues and co-funding arrangements.

In 2020, the Experience Centre received funding from the county government, half of which was secured from the European Agricultural Fund. Additional funding came from Väderstad AB (Johansson, 2022), being the industry for agricultural machinery, located in Mjölby. A newsletter from 2021 reported that more than 20 partners had committed support for the initiative (Mjölby kommun, 2021). By 2025, this number had increased to almost 50 organizations, representing local and extra-local partners (interview 1). In addition, the leadership group in charge of the project sought cooperation with other European regions with comparable projects to exchange experiences and to unlock additional European financial support. A second study trip by members of the project team followed, to England, in 2023 (Mjölby kommun, 2023).

In 2024 substantial funding was received by the municipality from ERDF, through which pop-up events in the summer of 2025 and 2026 are to be organised. These events are part of a so-called 'test lab' within a temporary exhibition environment in central Väderstad, where food, research

³ <https://www.forumdigital.co.uk/> accessed 11th April 2025

and sustainability are in focus. The ‘test-lab’ is run by Mjölby municipality in collaboration with the regional council, and a major national innovation platform in agriculture. For this event, food producers from the region are invited to present new food products for taste-testing and evaluation by visiting members of the public (interview 2).

4.5 Local government

As described, Gloucester City Council, with limited staff and financial resources, occupies an important role in facilitating collaboration and buy-in to the cultural vision for the city. The Council does own and manage several cultural assets: the city museum, two medieval monasteries and a contemporary concert venue, but its role is principally one of enabling innovation and cultural inclusion through the framework of the strategy. Community-based cultural development remains largely executed by third sector organisations and arts investments come from the Arts Council England. In recent years the City Council has been supportive of opening up its city centre estate (namely retail premises) for temporary use by local arts organisations – so-called meanwhile use (Keech, Sheppard and Hoerath, 2024).

For Mjölby, the recent local population growth, combined with consistent political leadership, are factors behind what seems to be a self-confidence of the municipality in establishing ambitious plans. The commitment of the local political leadership to this initiative is described through local media, the website of the municipality, and the long-term vision of the municipality. The municipal vision document for the Experience Centre extends to 2045. This time-line has been extended compared to earlier plans and foresees construction work starting from 2026 (Mjölby kommun, 2022).

Local political support paves the way for the allocation of financial resources by the municipality to the initiative. The municipality has allocated resources and officials’ time to elaborate detailed plans for the initiative that include developing detailed planning for the physical area earmarked for the Experience Centre. Land that is partly owned by Mjölby municipality and has been unused for several years will be developed. This area is adjacent to the main Swedish highway traversing the municipality.

4.6 Cross-case discussion

The cross-case analysis of the two initiatives for place-based development, following the analytical model in figure 1, is summarised in table 3.

Table 3: Case overview

Dimension	Gloucester	Mjölby
Place trajectories contextualizing the place -narratives for the future	Former status as a regional and national trading hub. City centre suffering from retail flight, economic disadvantages. Local identity with exciting culture and physical heritage excellence.	Population declines in the 1990s until 2005, from when the population has been growing. Local tradition from farming and farming industry, location for major manufacturing plants. Local identity with food.
Actor involvement	Gloucester City Council and its cultural institutions (libraries, museums, heritage sites). Gloucester Culture Trust.	The local government, regional council, local industry, Linköping University among others become involved.

	University of Gloucestershire. Funds from national agencies. Grassroots cultural associations and city centre business networks.	Almost 50 national organisations have declared interest in the Experience Centre. Funds from ERDF.
Local governments	County and city councils. The city council develops strategies for heritage and (principally) the city centre. The city is a deprived district and received “Levelling Up” funds.	The local government takes a leading role. Ambitions of a small municipality to work “bottom-up” towards regional and national levels and harness resources from regional, national and EU sources.

The first dimension on how narratives are grounded in place trajectories and direct the place-based development initiatives, is evident for both cases. The distinctive place trajectories of the locations is an important factor behind the contrasting narratives created around cultural development and in agri-environmental production profiles, respectively. In reviewing the cases, we nevertheless suggest one common thread that is evident in the idea of pride. In Gloucester, this narrative emerges from a sense of pride in deep historical roots, of which substantial physical fragments remain. In Mjölby, the narrative is derived from a pride in industrial development and being an agricultural region.

The focus of the initiatives can also be seen to reflect the relative location of these places, in the shadow of larger and dynamic urban environments. Gloucester is a city with economic challenges, and culturally in competition with nearby Cheltenham, an attractive Georgian spa resort, Bristol (regional capital) and Birmingham (national second city). Echoing Gloucester, Mjölby is overshadowed by Linköping, a nearby university city and economic centre. However, this geographical position of Mjölby, with connections to the highway and a station on the national railway network also offer prospects for local development by becoming functionally integrated into the dynamic labour and housing markets of nearby regional centre, and beyond.

The second dimension of the analytical model concerns actor involvement, which is affected by the local presence of actors in combination with the specific focus of the development narrative. The implementation of the Gloucester cultural and heritage strategies, which highlight multiple future improvements (youth support, social cohesion, sustainability, archaeological and architectural accessibility and cultural vibrancy) involves delegating functions to a civil society group striving for cultural inclusion and innovation. The local bottom-up approaches to official strategy development are taken seriously and cultural vibrancy is seen an outcome of unlocking Gloucester’s unsung distinctiveness (some of which is perceived as ‘edgy’ and hidden). For Mjölby, the municipality takes the leading role for the development of the Experience Centre and applies resources needed to sustain the project over many years. This involves facilitating actor dialogues with local, regional and national organisations and the securing of gaining national and EU resources.

According to the model, it is assumed that local councils impact place-based development interventions. In terms of the impact of the local authority on the narrative for place-development initiative in Gloucester, it is notable that the City Council retains ownership of several historical remnants and cultural venues. The Council presents these assets as important foundations of the city’s potential. As Gloucester becomes physically redeveloped, culture and heritage (especially the urban centre and the historic docks) remain a focus for the Council’s economic hopes. In

contrast to Mjölby, the council ‘hosts’ the narrative in the cultural strategy, rather than being a principal narrator.

For Mjölby, the local authority has had stable political steering over several years which created a platform from which to develop long-term commitments. The ways in which the Experience Centre combines objectives to educate children, attract visitors, augment the local profile and acknowledge local industry, aligns with the executive position of municipalities within the Swedish planning system. This involves major mandates within welfare (the children) and for physical planning to prepare the land where the Experience centre should be located. More extraordinary, in this case, is the ambition of a relatively small local authority to take leadership of a large-scale initiative, that needs to be acknowledged not just among local actors but also among representatives for the regional, national and EU level and “horizontal” actors located outside the local territory of the municipality. Hence, the Mjölby case represents a top-down project at the local scale, but bottom-up from a wider regional and national viewpoint. This indicates the different roles of local governments in the investigated place-making initiatives and is the third dimension in our model.

Nevertheless, and although the cases are embedded in different multi-level political systems, they share a particular and distinct role reserved for local councils in general. This relates to their duty to strive for the public good using democratic means. This does not, however, preclude that the respective place narratives are contested, especially if they risk marginalising important social values. For instance, that the cultural strategy for Gloucester may instrumentalise culture as a tool for social inclusion and growth, while the strategy for the Mjölby Experience Centre is primarily concerned with securing major investments, leaving the wider community uninvolved.

5. Conclusions

This paper investigates place-based development initiatives with a focus on how they are embedded in local narratives for development. In synthesising the results, we propose three main conclusions.

The first conclusion is directed towards how the narratives for place-making nurture pride in historical foundations. This relates to cultural heritage for Gloucester and industrial and agricultural production in Mjölby. The cases also illustrates that narratives for future visions are far from pre-destinated but depend on the agency through which stories of the past and told in combination with how artefacts and building are promoted to be symbols for the local identity. Both cases reveal that their local councils, within respective local constellations, influence this making of the narratives embedding the strategies for the interventions.

The second conclusion highlights the influence of national settings on the position of local governments for these processes connecting place narratives and place-making. The influence of local government depends on access to resources and motivations of local authorities to act. Gloucester, as a second-tier district-level city council has attracted cultural and urban development investment from national funding programmes. Yet the council’s direct responsibility for managing cultural buildings is a key motivation to support cultural and heritage development. The Swedish system of sourcing of income tax through municipalities is a fundamental context behind why local councils try to stimulate population growth for which employment opportunities and industrial growth become important. This explains Mjölby’s pro-

active capacity for involving local as well as national actors to support the project and the motivation to focus on attractiveness as a means for population and industrial growth.

This distinct position of local councils in the two national systems helps to understand the grass-roots approach to protect cultural assets and reviving the city's self-perceptions and vibrancy community involvement through Gloucester in contrast to targeting organisations within private and public sector through Mjölby. Our bi-national comparison indicates the importance of the positions and associated impacts of local governments in different national contexts. This is a factor that warrants additional research about the potentials of decentralised place-making initiatives.

Thirdly, our analysis strengthens arguments for the importance of understanding place-making as a relational spatial activity. Both cases require multi-space relations beyond their local borders. Gloucester's cultural animation renews its national and regional significance as an architectural, industrial and creative hub. In Mjölby, the Experience Centre initiative is supported by the EU and the development of the initiative includes public and industrial actors beyond the local realm. This argument indicates the importance of multi-level relations and the ability to scale-out place viable narratives to secure local and non-local actors (and their resources) to support the capacity and viability of place-making initiatives.

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