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## Scenarios 2026 for the South West of England

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### Purpose

This study (which took place in 2004) presents four 'socio-economic-political scenarios' designed to stimulate, guide and inform strategic thinking about the future of one of nine English regions, namely the South West. The scenarios portray distinct pictures of the social, political and economic background against which the strategies for the South West can be reviewed and developed. They provide a consistent approach and serve as practical thinking tools. The scenarios are also intended to help organisations in the South West to assess their vulnerability to forces of change and to plan appropriate adaptation strategies.

### Reflecting on Alternative Futures

The starting point for the development of the scenarios was a comprehensive futures research programme across five major themes – society, technology, economy, environment and politics. The results of the research programme were followed by the development of a number of future scenarios. The development of the scenarios has involved a combined process of consultation and research, through workshops with stakeholders and specialists at the regional level. The aim has been to develop a scenario framework through which various stakeholders are able to reflect about possible alternative futures, and to make sense of what this means for them in the context of the South West. Therefore, there was no intention to produce prescriptive results. On the contrary, stakeholders were encouraged to provide the texture of possible futures themselves, based on their own expert and local knowledge.

This inclusive approach was meant to allow stakeholders to build a set of internally consistent and plausible pictures of the future. These pictures were constructed around a series of simple propositions about how society and the economy could develop. It was pointed out from the outset that the future

would most likely be a combination of elements from all scenarios.

Four socio-economic-political scenarios have been developed and set in the timeframe to 2026. The aim was to describe situations in a range of possible futures that can be used to assess regional strategy and policy responses for the South West region. Five main dimensions of change have been identified:

- demography and settlement patterns,
- the nature of economic growth,
- the rate and direction of technological change,
- the nature of governance,
- social and political values.

In addition, there were four criteria for the development of scenarios:

- relevance (applicable to public, voluntary and private sector decision-making),
- consistency (based on coherent assumptions),
- plausibility (not over-estimating the rate of change),
- transparency (clear demonstration of assumptions).



## Values, Governance & Economic Activities Defining Four Future Scenarios

The scenario framework has segmented the future into differing possible views of the future in 2026 that were defined by 'values', 'governance' and the 'locus of economic activity'. The four scenarios were the following:

The **'Media World'**, in which values are dominated by the drive to increased private consumption and personal expression. The rights of the individual and the immediate present take precedence over those of the collective and the future. Resources are distributed through free and competitive markets, with the function of governance limited to guaranteeing trade and capitalist accumulation. It is a global, consumerist world that is manipulated by big business, the media and government.

In this world, the desire to be fashionable has driven society to a highly consumerist position, in which it has become increasingly superficial in terms of its values and beliefs. In turn, this leads to a short-term view on the use of environmental resources resulting in the degrading of the environment itself. In this scenario, a number of powerful forces combined over the period to 2026:

- pursuit of high economic growth,
- the development of powerful globalised markets,
- global markets take over personal values,
- consumption, culture and most public services are heavily market based,
- the increasing power of marketing and the media to manipulate attitudes,
- the supremacy of the individual over the community,
- big business interests dominate,
- social inequalities increase,
- private provision is favoured over public,
- the development of powerful international governance,
- growth of information communications technology (ICT) and biotechnology.

This scenario conceives the South West as particularly hard hit by these developments as the 'new' shopping centre experiences are only located in the ten largest cities, leaving the smaller urban areas and rural areas without proximal access to the 'old' shopping experience at all. A new wave of local 'boutique' start-ups to counter this trend, selling physical wares made by local residents and businesses, trading on the unique element of their fashion, rather than the mass-produced made-to-measure. There is a certain exclusivity to this local development, and traders exchange stock with other traders in areas over 20 miles away. While this does not become a massive sector of the economy, it is indicative of how the South West tries to beat some of the modernisation trends that are generated by the Millennium Generation and Generation X

before them. The age profile of the region supports such industrial endeavours and it supports the growth of small creative industries in the region, although how long this will survive beyond 2026 is questionable.

The main issue on the local agenda is the masts required for the increased levels of satellite communication activity. Despite numerous reports jointly sponsored by the media and government claiming that they are safe, the general public are wary about the health effects that the masts may generate. This is particularly the case in the South West, as the wide distribution of the population requires more masts per capita than the more densely populated areas require. While everyone wants access to the technology, nobody wants the mast in their 'back yard'.

In **'Community Life'**, values are shaped by concern for the common good. In this scenario, the individual is seen as part of a collective, with rights and responsibilities determined by social goals. There is greater concern about the future, equity and participation. Civil society is strong and highly valued, and resources are allocated through more deeply managed markets. Economic and political power is devolved to the regional levels.

Basically a society develops where there is a strong sense of community stemming from family and social bonds. This attracts older people to the region, who in turn are active in promoting the family and social bonds which underpin the community. In this scenario, a number of powerful forces combined over the period to 2026:

- disenchantment with consumerist values,
- the relative failure of globalised markets,
- the demand for sustainable lifestyles,
- the pressure for environmental sustainability,
- devolution of political and economic power to the regions,
- the influence of 'third agers' in the mature society,
- spiritual values take precedence over materialism,
- a rejection of economic growth in favour of quality of life,
- the adoption of the beliefs of social capitalism.

The key influence of the politicians is to devolve more power to the regions, and real power at that in terms of better budgetary control and legislative power within the range of issues that impact on the regions most, such as environmental control, planning regulations, housing policy and policing. The regions can set their own local income tax (which replaced the council tax in 2008) to meet the needs and desires of their region. This devolution of power has led to a greater sense of empowerment and involvement, as people really feel they can personally gain from the taxes they are paying.

As in the Media World scenario, a new wave of local 'boutique' start-ups takes off. They too sell physical wares made by local residents and businesses, focusing on uniqueness rather than mass-production. While this does not develop into a massive sector of the economy in this case either, it is in-

dicative of how the South West is developing regionally rather than trying to play the ‘globalisation game’. Another example is the growth of small holdings, purchased by whole villages rather than individuals, and farmed organically to provide good local produce which is home grown rather than mass produced to fit industrial instead of nutritional and ecological quality standards (such as apples that never go brown when cut).

The success of the local income tax leads government to devolve further power to the regions, eventually giving them control of health, education and welfare around 2020. This allows the South West to regenerate its economy as the ‘healthy’ place to retire to and the ‘centre of education for green, grey and global studies’. Healthcare and education continue to be the foundations of the South West knowledge economy, but the expertise in coastal management is a fast growing area, accounting for a reasonable percentage of the region’s economic growth.

In the ‘*Risk Society*’ scenario, the power to govern is centralised with the permission of the electorate. International, economic, political and cultural relationships strengthen, and regional and national boundaries become more enforced. There may be a role for regional decision-making and for regional particularities, but this will be in the context of globalised and national economic and political systems. In this scenario, a number of powerful forces combined over the period to 2026:

- a significant increase in terrorist activities threatening personal and commercial security,
- the increasing occurrence of environmental crises and disasters,
- the consequent demand for safety and security,
- the rapid application of technologies to provide solutions,
- the adoption of policies and practices aimed at reducing environmental risk,
- public acceptance of the compromising of some individual rights for security,
- a shift in public attitudes towards sustainability from lip service to commitment,
- a technology driven economy.

By 2010, virtually every street in every city centre has CCTV, so the average person is filmed 43 times in an average day. Cameras also watch and control the motorways, stations and airports. This constant surveillance gives a peculiar sense of security, as you know that if anything happens to you, someone is watching. Street crime has reduced, as has house crime in cities. Neighbourhood patrols have started to emerge in an almost vigilante fashion, although there is a general feeling that the government approves.

The borders are very closely monitored and immigrants have to go through such strenuous procedures to enter the country it is astounding that anyone makes it through at all. However, a certain number are needed each year to do the menial jobs that remain unfilled. Those who were previously employed in

these roles are now largely employed in the security industry. Despite the high levels of security everywhere, children do not feel safe to play on the streets or in the parks, and childhood has become networked. Children play life simulation games, such as Sim, where they can create a new life for themselves in a free and safe world.

The last scenario is the ‘*Populist State*’: economic and political power resides in Westminster, but continues to be influenced by European and global developments. Government is populist and in seeking to please all of the people all of the time fails on many fronts and achieves ‘half measure’ compromises. In this scenario, a number of powerful forces combined over the period to 2026:

- public disaffection with the political process,
- a political concern to be ‘popular’,
- conflicting social, political and economic agendas at all levels,
- pursuit of economic growth in the name of prosperity,
- the need for strong political and economic leadership,
- competing interests impede integrated planning,
- a reticence in society to change,
- a society of mixed fortunes and blessings.

In this scenario, taxes rise significantly and there is a general rise in interest rates in response to the US having to ‘get tough’ to secure its own economy. This pushes many second-homeowners over the edge, and a glut of ‘holiday homes’ appear on the South West property market. As homes repossession rates nationally increase, the housing market crashes, leaving many of these homes unsold for a number of years. The tourist industry is struggling as the UK population favours overseas sun, and overseas visitors prefer the attractions of the big cities to what the rural areas have to offer. Taking a regional decision to accept Euros as well as Sterling in all shops and restaurants has not really improved things. Finally, continuous natural disasters make the South West an expensive region in which to get insurance cover, if you can get flood cover at all. This buildings cover difficulty drives the property market down further.

## Creating a Buzz around the Future

Because the aim has been to develop a scenario framework through which various stakeholders are able to reflect about possible alternative futures, and to make sense of what this means for them in the context of the South West, there was no intention to produce prescriptive results or follow through with any implementation strategies. Differing scenarios on how the South West might function in the year 2026 were presented to more than 400 of the region’s top strategic decision-makers on 14 September 2004 at a conference called *Looking Forward to the Future*. The conference included some short role-plays that animated the different scenarios.

The foresight exercise and the conference formed the two main components of this project, which largely sought to edu-

cate stakeholders in the region about the rationales behind some of policymakers' decisions aimed at long term issues rather than more pending concerns. The project was also meant to generate a wider interest in the activities of the Regional Development Agency (RDA) and to create a community around it. English RDAs remain relatively new players in English policymaking (since 1999) and have had some mixed reviews from the public regarding their effectiveness. Thus, this foresight exercise was also meant to help the RDA integrate its planning better with the perceived needs of the local

community and to help it shape a consensus around a future vision of where the region should be heading in the years and decades to come. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the project aimed at forcing public sector workers to think long term and beyond their typical short-to-middle term concerns that often characterize the nature of their work. Judging by the number of people attending the conference (around 400), the project was successful in creating a buzz in the region around the idea of a collective thinking about the future.

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## Sources and References

This brief is a summary of the document *South West Scenarios 2026*.

<http://www.southwestrda.org.uk/downloads/document.asp?lang=&documentid=579&>

Conference website:

<http://www.southwestrda.org.uk/region/futures-conference/speakers.shtm>

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