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The rescaling of sub-national planning: Can localism resolve England's spatial planning conundrum?

David McGuinness and John Mawson

This paper analyses the recent reorganisation of sub-national planning in England. The abrupt termination in 2010 of regional spatial strategies (RSSs) left England as the only major country in north-western Europe without effective sub-national governance structures (outside London) for spatial planning. Drawing on in-depth interviews with public-sector planners and other research material, this paper analyses the impacts of the demise of regional planning for 'larger-than-local' policy coordination in England. The paper seeks to question whether localism can succeed where regionalism is perceived to have failed in dealing effectively with the strategic spatial dilemmas integral to planning. It concludes by assessing whether the evolving decentralised forms of sub-national governance (combined authorities and local enterprise partnerships (LEPs)) emerging through the government's 'devolution revolution' can develop to fill the current strategic planning void and resurrect some form of spatial planning throughout England.

Keywords: localism, regional planning, rescaling, combined authorities, England

This article explores the ongoing ramifications of the decision in 2010 to revoke regional spatial strategies (RSSs) in England. This decision expunged the drive towards long-term coordinated strategic spatial planning from the sub-national governance process. Building on prior research by Pemberton and Morphet (2013), Baker and Wong (2013), Boddy and Hickman (2013) and Roodbol-Mekkes and Van den Brink (2015), the paper investigates the unfolding impacts of the reforms of land-use planning in England and considers whether some form of spatial planning will return to the English system. In this context Roodbol-Mekkes and Van den Brink (2015, 185) argue, 'In spatial planning the concept of rescaling has been used in a more narrow sense [than in wider economic geography literature] to analyse the redistribution of powers and responsibilities between the various tiers of government or the rise and fall of various tiers in spatial planning.' The paper critiques the de facto strategic spatial planning vacuum that was created by the coalition government in removing the regional tier of planning and moving to a more localist approach to planning which aims to

bring power closer to local people. Drawing on in-depth interviews it explores practitioner's responses to the decommissioning of spatial planning and the effectiveness of policies that have subsequently been introduced to facilitate 'large-than-local' cooperation (i.e. the duty to cooperate).

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It proceeds to consider the potential of evolving decentralised governance spaces to fill the strategic spatial planning void and facilitate the return of forms of spatial planning to the currently dislocated English planning system. Gallant et al. (2013, 569) question whether the new localist system of planning in England allows government to deal effectively with the strategic dilemmas integral to governing. Evidence provided in this paper and in other studies (Boddy and Hickman, 2013; Pugalys and Townsend, 2013 and Roodbol-Mekkes and Van den Brink, 2015) suggests that strategic dilemmas (e.g. the distribution of strategic housing allocations between neighbouring authorities, major infrastructure projects and responses to climate change) are unlikely to be effectively addressed via the existing duty to cooperate. This duty was introduced via the Localism Act (2011). It is a statutory requirement for neighbouring local authorities to collaborate and is assessed upon submission of a local plan for examination by the Planning Inspectorate. In England, new sub-national governance approaches (particularly combined authorities) are emerging which may gradually 'fill in' elements of the strategic spatial planning void in parts of the country. However, the present asymmetrical development of combined authorities is generating concerns of fragmentation in spatial planning coverage, creating 'a patchwork quilt' of governance approaches, which may accentuate existing economic inequalities between localities in England (Colomb and Tomaney, 2015). In order to address the above issues, the background research involved two steps: a desk-based analysis of literature relating to the abolition of regional planning and a review and analysis of the subsequent spatial policy void, followed by a survey involving semi-structured interviews with planners in all eight core cities and a sample of planners from twelve (of the twenty-six) key cities in England. The twenty semi-structured interviews took place between March and September 2014. To maintain anonymity for respondents they were identified by a generic job title and location (e.g.

Planner, North East). The paper begins by providing some context about the history of regional planning in England.

The rise and fall of regional planning in England

Regional planning has experienced 'a mercurial and often ephemeral' history in post-war England (Wannop, 1995, x). Until the turmoil unleashed by the Thatcher governments in the early 1980s, there was a degree of political consensus about the need to address regional imbalances with the focus on floor-space controls and regional financial assistance to encourage the relocation of largely manufacturing employment from the then prosperous regions of the Midlands and South to government-designated development areas in the North and West. In parallel within regions, public policy addressed congestion and urban regeneration via housing overspill and the construction of new towns within the framework of joint central–local government regional strategies (Hall, 1973). Wannop (1995, xv) summarises two distinct forms of regional planning: 'the balancing of resources to modify standards of living and disparities in economic conditions ... between different parts of the nation' (which we define as regional economic planning) and 'intra-regional planning' (which will be the primary focus of this paper), an approach which 'attempts to resolve issues and local problems of growing metropolitan cities, spilling their population and their economic and social relationships and raising political disputes across their administrative boundaries'. Some commentators (Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger, 2007, 30) argue that reincarnation of regional planning under New Labour introduced a less prescriptive form of regional planning, focusing on 'economic competitiveness and growth within a neo-liberal framework of supporting the market rather than supplanting it'. English regional planning (in its varying forms) has experienced its zenith during periods of Labour administration, where the terms 'regional' and 'spatial' planning have become conflated within some political and professional perspectives, as 'top-down' governance, redistribution and interventionism. In contrast, Houghton and Allmendinger (2012, 3) argue that in much of continental Europe, spatial planning is seen as 'a progressive largely technical movement', rather than being linked overtly to political agendas.

The current vacuum in strategic planning in England was initiated by the (former) Secretary of State, Eric Pickles, who used the Localism Act (2011) to rescale sub-national governance and remove (in his view) a costly and bureaucratic tier of governance. He stated, 'I've set about abolishing all the

Rs. Regional Spatial Strategies, Regional Housing Targets, Regional Assemblies, Government Offices for the Regions and Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) ... The arbitrary regional tier of government administration and bureaucracy was unpopular, ineffective and inefficient' (Pickles, 2010, n.p.).' During the post-war era the application of English planning policy has occurred within the context of several centrally determined changes in the structure and processes of local government, notably the setting up and abolition of metropolitan councils, the establishment of district councils and the creation of unitary authorities. Pemberton and Morphet (2013) state that the churn within governance approaches occurs partly due to the philosophy and ideological stance of the national government of the day, combined with 'system shifts' which often relate to a response to economic crisis when the priority may become supporting macroeconomic policies, subordinating social and environmental imperatives and reorganising local government. Upon the demise of RSSs (and with the prior demise of structure plans), a fundamental component of the post-war architecture of statutory land-use planning had been extracted from the system in England. Pugalis and Townsend (2013) state that in most mainland western European countries, stable structured systems of 'meso'-level government and statutory legal powers enshrined in federal (and other) constitutional arrangements provide a more embedded approach and greater continuity in their 'larger-than-local' planning approaches. This also makes it significantly harder for an incoming government to eradicate a tier of governance as happened in England in 2010.

Situating the recent reorganisation of sub-national governance in England within a wider European context, Olesen (2014) and Roodbol-Mekkes and Van den Brink (2015) identify a growing neo-liberal turn in terms of downgrading strategic spatial planning across many north-western European countries, with neo-liberal 'development-oriented' agendas prioritising economic growth and the competitiveness of cities becoming the default position. Olesen (2014) and Roodbol-Mekkes and Van den Brink (2015) identify England as the outlier in terms of its almost complete eradication of sub-national governance structures for strategic spatial planning (outside London), but find a comparable trajectory away from spatial planning in Denmark, Belgium and the Netherlands. Olesen (2014, 293) associates this shift in several north-west European countries with the growth of planning scepticism, which began during the regulatory 1980s when planning systems were dismantled due to 'roll-back neo-liberalism'.

Regional spatial strategies in England were created during the second term (2001–2005) of the Labour Administration (1997–2010). In 2004 the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act replaced the previous cooperative and advisory approach to regional planning and made spatial planning a legal requirement. Pemberton and Morphet (2013, 2021) state that the 2004 Act spurred the ‘shift away from land-use planning to a broader leadership vision around “place shaping” and integrated delivery’. Gallent et al. (2013, 564) describe a significant statutory (and interventionist) shift from a system where ‘local development planning needed to “have regard” to the content of regional plans, to a system of required compliance’. The theoretical drivers behind Labour’s version of spatial planning sought to achieve strategic integration of local development documents between neighbouring authorities and to coordinate a wider range of public policies and public expenditure systems within the context of place making (Mawson et al., 2005). Regional spatial planning was designed to provide a form of institutional cohesion, ‘joining up’ efforts to respond to larger-than-local issues like strategic housing allocations, environmental pressures and major infrastructure projects, which due to their scale and complexity transcend local administrative boundaries. Spatial planning was an ambitious agenda and contrasted significantly with the more confined regulatory land-use planning approach of the previous two decades (Haughton et al., 2009). As the 2010 election approached, the RSS process was regarded by its critics as achieving only modest success in attempts to facilitate joined-up government. However, research commissioned for the collective body of regional assemblies (English Regions Network (ERN)) found that not all Whitehall departments were ‘on board’ in making the necessary adjustments to introduce greater coordination of public policies and expenditure within the regions (Mawson and Snape, 2005).

The political dimension of the demise of regional planning

The termination of RSSs had been widely touted by the Conservatives in opposition. Successive Green Papers (Conservative Party, 2009; 2010) stated that regional planning would be revoked. Amongst stakeholders there was a mixed reaction to the demise of RSSs (and the lack of an alternative), and the decision generated consternation within elements of the academic, professional and planning communities. Tewdwr-Jones (2012, 133) criticised the Conservative’s ‘myopic’ critique of RSSs, focusing on contentious issues of housing targets and ‘not the wider economic, environmental, infrastructure

or strategic integration matters' that RSSs engaged with. In contrast, some Conservative politicians (particularly at the local level in southern England) were delighted to witness the demise of what they perceived as profoundly 'undemocratic' and top-down regional planning. However, Mawson (2007) seeks to qualify this viewpoint given that two-thirds of seats on regional assemblies which oversaw the development of RSSs were held by local politicians from across the region concerned. Gallent et al. (2013, 564) observe that, historically, regional planning had performed two functions, as a 'counterbalance to the risk of local interests subverting planning's broader purpose' and as a shield to deflect politically damaging criticism about strategic 'greater-good' decisions (particularly major housing developments) from local politicians. Upon the demise of RSSs, local authorities were now responsible for determining their own housing needs without a strategic mechanism for resolving with their neighbours the location of excess housing demand and politicians no longer had the regional tier to shelter them from criticisms. Indeed, the local government 'leaders' of a number of regional assemblies were prepared to admit in private to ERN-commissioned researchers the value of the assemblies in providing a powerful negotiating device with central government over housing numbers and securing additional infrastructure support (Mawson, 2006).

It would be disingenuous to portray the demise of regional planning in England as solely a partisan decision by an incoming administration with a divergent ideology to that of its predecessors. Mawson (2007) notes that the prior Labour era was characterised by significant tension within government between supporters of a regional approach (the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister) and supporters of a city-region approach (the Treasury). Boddy and Hickman (2013, 745) identify the 2007 Treasury Sub-national Review of Economic Development and Regeneration as the point where supporters of a city-region approach within government began to exert control in this Whitehall tussle. The review contained an 'increasing emphasis on sub-regional, city-region focus and started to question European-style planning at regional scale'. The Labour government subsequently transferred the responsibility for preparing a 'single regional strategy' to the RDAs and a council 'leaders' board', although these arrangements were swiftly followed by a change in government (Pearce and Mawson, 2009). The 2007 Sub-national Review also introduced multi-area agreements (MAAs) as innovative 'soft governance mechanisms' to promote collaboration across local authority boundaries (Pemberton and Morphet, 2013). MAAs can be seen as a proto-type for the current combined-authorities model (which is discussed later in the paper).

Against the background of the dismantling of Labour's spatial planning framework and our analysis and interpretation of these developments, the article turns to the reflections of practitioners working in the field of strategic planning on this marked policy shift. The views of these twenty senior English local authority planners about the effectiveness of RSSs broadly fell into three categories, those who valued RSSs and were opposed to its revocation (thirteen), those who were neutral about the demise of RSSs (six) and those who welcomed the demise of RSSs (one).

The majority (twelve) felt that although RSSs 'were by no means perfect' and to some extent could be criticised for being top-down and cumbersome to develop initially, they were a useful vehicle 'to get all stakeholders involved, allowing tricky spatial planning decision to be resolved' (Planner, West Midlands). Several (six) of the planners made related comments about the new and innovative RSS process being 'painful' during its long gestation, but only really realising the value of RSSs in hindsight: 'whilst it was a lengthy and painful process, it was important and we miss it' (Planner, North West). Concerns aired by planners during the research about the current difficulty of engaging with a strategic 'larger-than-local' approach to planning correlate with Gallent et al.'s (2013, 569) observation that the downscaling of planning may cause some authorities to 'lose sight of broader and longer-term objectives'.

Critical points were raised about the politicisation of regional planning in England since 2010. Some respondents felt that the concept of regional spatial planning was valuable in terms of an inclusive approach to governance and to negotiating controversial spatial planning issues like the development and location of major infrastructure projects. However, such mediation was made more difficult without the region-wide structure of decision making that accompanied it. It was commented that under the local planning regime it would be more difficult since 'ultimately there are compromises and everyone has to have their fair share ... it's not regional planning in its purest form' (Planner, North East).

Most planners were sceptical about whether the rescaling of the system to a localist approach would be more effective at mediating political conflicts between communities of interest and long-term spatial objectives because of the tensions between strategic priorities and local political pragmatism. A respondent from the West Midlands articulated a prevalent view that localism might prove a chimera: 'A lot of local authorities felt they were going to get more control of the scale and location of development with the removal of RSS ... the reality is that under localism, duty to cooperate and objectively assessed housing need ...

things could get worse.’ The dominant view (eighteen) was that the removal of RSSs had been a political decision, based on dogma – ‘payback’ for Conservative councillors and an element of austerity pragmatism. Regional planning appears to have been partially blighted by a change in government and an associated shift in underlying political values. The issue of different perspectives of the regional approach at the national level was articulated strongly in the interviews: ‘Conservatives associate regionalism with top-down socialist planning, tied in with a strand of anti-European thinking; we are not a country of regions we are a country of shire councils’ (Planner, East of England). This identification of an anti-European dimension within Conservative ideology corresponds with Tewdwr-Jones et al. (2010, 246) observation that regional planning has been interpreted by some commentators as the ‘*Europeanization*’ of UK planning, which ultimately sought to create a Europe of the regions. This may be another reason why regional planning is held in such contempt by many Conservatives. Over three-quarters of the planners (seventeen) felt that the Secretary of State’s revocation of RSSs was injudicious, and a number of respondents queried the wisdom of revoking RSSs without establishing an alternative approach: ‘There is an element of dogma, in the way they were abolished, announcement made, challenges made, then a retraction. Rather than thinking through what a replacement system might look like’ (Planner, East Midlands). A planner from the South East added context to the orthodox thesis that RSSs were ultimately scrapped because of the imposition of perceived top-down housing targets: ‘It was purely politically, to do with the South East and predominately Conservative councillors. It wasn’t the regional assembly and it wasn’t regional planning, it was the National Housing Advisory Unit ... they were seen to be imposing very large, potentially very damaging, housing numbers on South East authorities’ (Planner, South East). Prominent amongst the respondents that felt RSSs were not fit for purpose or were neutral about RSSs was a strong representation of Yorkshire and Humber authorities:¹ ‘Regional assemblies, producing documents which don’t seem to be delivering much but loads of people are moaning about them. Government must think, “if we can get rid of them and save money, would anyone miss them?”’ (Planner, Yorkshire and Humber). Yorkshire and Humber was the region which produced the most comments during the interviews about ill-fitting (artificial) regional boundaries and a lack of cohesion with the economic geography of cities. It is difficult to conclusively ascertain whether these issues have soured opinions about RSSs,

¹ Some respondents stated that the Yorkshire and Humber region was ‘too big and made little economic or political sense’.

but they do suggest strong political tensions within this standard region. This seems to be confirmed by the difficulties which local government in the Yorkshire and Humber former planning region have experienced in agreeing (amongst themselves) an appropriate geographical basis for negotiating combined authorities with central government. Comments from respondents about the asymmetry of strategic fit created by inflexible regional administrative boundaries support Baker and Wong's (2013, 92) observations of a strategic conundrum inherent in spatial planning relating to the lack of workable institutional structures.

The policy implications of the abolition of RSSs

The abrupt revocation of RSSs led to a legal challenge, *Cala Homes (South) Ltd v Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government* (2010),² which upheld the view that the decision to revoke the policy by the Secretary of State had been premature.³ Despite the controversy over revocation, Allmendinger and Haughton (2013, 954) contend that regional spatial planning was 'an unstable fix and one only ever likely to be a temporary phenomenon'. This can be attributed in part to a powerful local government lobby which resented the imposition of a 'meso-tier' tier of strategic planning and a government ideologically opposed to the approach. Swain et al. (2013) highlight the 'received wisdom' of a number of weaknesses in Labour's regional spatial planning system:

- 1 democratic deficit and lack of regional autonomy;
- 2 insufficient inter-regional coordination;
- 3 separation of economic planning from spatial planning;
- 4 imposition of high (top-down) regional housing targets;
- 5 RSS became too detailed and strayed beyond appropriate influence of regional planning; and
- 6 preparation of plans overly long and complex.

In the case of the 'democratic deficit', however, the regional assemblies did enable a range of regional stakeholders from private, voluntary and civic society to formally engage in the spatial planning process, whilst at the same

² Cala Homes successfully appealed against the Secretary of State's guidance to revoke RSSs; eventually revoked March 2013.

³ In revoking RSSs the Secretary of State had not given appropriate consideration to statutory European obligations (Strategic Environmental Assessment).

time senior local authority representatives retained the majority vote on all statutory planning matters (Snape and Mawson, 2004). This is in marked contrast to the current arrangements for the combined authorities. Further, a more detailed exploration of the evidence submitted in various official reports considered as part of the Review of Sub-national Economic Development and Regeneration (HM Treasury et al., 2007) suggests a more measured critique of the RSS sub-national governance model which reveals more effective working relationships than implied in Swain et al. (2013) (Audit Commission, 2005; DCLG, 2006; HM Treasury, 2006; 2007).

The Labour approach of transferring planning powers to regional structures set in train what Haughton et al. (2009, 5) describe as new 'soft spaces' of governance, 'involving the multiplicity of newly created sub-national spatial identities around which new understandings of spatial development possibilities are being created'. The RSSs, in association with the regional-assemblies approach, brought new actors and a reassertion of the importance of a partnership approach to strategic planning, but there was no easy path to mediate intractable conflicts between local politics and the more strategic 'greater-good' drivers of spatial planning. Ultimately, the Labour regional planning experiment was perceived by powerful critics in central and local government as being incapable of facilitating economic growth (particularly housing development and coordinating transport policy). An alternative interpretation of the period would suggest that the Labour government failed to impose its original aim to require the coordination of spatial investment by government departments and quangos. The concept of democratic regional governance, incorporating a strong strategic regional planning function, was never fully supported by senior figures in the Labour government (Mawson, 2007), and institutional regionalism lost political credibility after the North East Referendum in 2004.⁴ Post-2004, the Labour government retained elements of functional regionalism via the RSSs and Regional Economic Strategies (RESs), but it began to explore forms of city-region and sub-regional planning initially through the work of the RDAs. The 2007 Labour government White Paper *Communities in Control: Real People, Real Power* can be seen as a forerunner of aspects of the coalition's localism agenda, and it shares many central themes

⁴ In November 2004, 78 per cent of voters (turnout was 48 per cent) opposed a North East regional assembly. Advocates of reform argue that the Labour government's proposals did not offer the electorate sufficient powers and resources to justify the establishment of a new 'meso' tier of government.

within an omnipresent neo-liberal discourse. At the end of the decade, with the formation of the coalition government and the bonfire of regional structures, the English planning system was about to be fundamentally rescaled back towards a more development-oriented regulatory approach, notwithstanding the optional introduction of (a micro level) of neighbourhood planning.

Is the duty to cooperate capable of filling the strategic planning void?

These changes posited the transference of any residual strategic planning to a new or alternative tier of governance. In the event, post-revocation of the RSSs, local plans have functioned largely in the absence of a strategic planning framework. Baker and Wong (2013, 96) note 'a serious institutional void between the need for some forms of strategic spatial planning and the government's localized approach to plan-making'. In this void the incoming government installed the 'duty to cooperate', which requires local planning authorities to undertake 'meaningful discussions' with neighbouring authorities around strategic planning issues. There was, however, no clarification forthcoming from government about what constitutes 'meaningful discussions'. The government's streamlined planning guidance, the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) (DCLG, 2012) makes clear that an up-to-date local plan is the statutory planning document against which planning applications should be judged. In terms of the wider strategic function of planning (formerly covered by RSSs), the NPPF is largely silent, stating that 'public bodies have a duty to co-operate on planning issues that cross administrative boundaries' (DCLG, 2012, para. 44). This parsimonious level of detail about how local planning authorities (LPAs) should collaborate in developing a coordinated vision for the 'larger than local' has led to claims of a 'planning fudge'. Ultimately, the duty to cooperate is a weak requirement to consult neighbouring authorities and not a compulsion for local authorities to agree about cross-boundary priorities. The duty has been criticised as a 'voluntary and light-touch' form of strategic planning (Swain et al. 2013, xvi). Boddy and Hickman (2013) concur, stating the duty lacks teeth where local communities and authorities do not wish to collaborate or wish to take a unilateral (negative) stance to development. The resultant confusion relating to the duty is cited as the catalyst for many draft local plans failing at the examination stage (e.g. Aylesbury Vale). The arbiter of effective consultation between neighbouring local authorities has become

national planning inspectors at the examination stage of the preparation of the local plan. The growing influence of planning inspectors and the courts has sparked concerns about a fragmented era of 'appeal and court-driven planning', contrary to the ethos of 'localism' as a quasi-judicial approach which generates a loss of local democratic input into the planning process (TCPA, 2015, 13).

When asked about policies which have been developed to mitigate the removal of spatial planning, there was an almost unequivocal negative response from respondents (planners) about the effectiveness of the duty to cooperate. 'Naive to expect it to work in the South East ... to expect anybody to take other authorities' housing numbers is unrealistic' (Planner, South East). And, 'if you set off with a blank sheet of paper to devise an approach to strategic planning, you wouldn't come up with the duty to cooperate' (Planner, West Midlands). Respondents reported concern about the lack of initial guidance from central government about the duty and how to achieve satisfactory levels of cooperation between authorities: 'put into the legislation as a duty, without much explanation about what it meant and how it was supposed to operate ... we have all been making it up as we go along informed by various decisions of inspectors and the courts' (Planner, South East). Interviewees held divergent opinions about the seriousness with which LPAs were approaching the duty to cooperate: 'we will all find cosmetic ways to say we have done it' (Planner, South West). At the other end of the spectrum there was serious concern expressed about the growing tendency for policy to be clarified by planning inspectors: 'many authorities have had local plans fall down at inspection, due to failures in the duty to cooperate. It wasn't spelt out well enough in the first place!' (Planner, South East). There was also concern about the perceived lack of consistency with inspectors' decisions: 'some of the inspectors' decisions that are coming through aren't that consistent' (Planner, North West). A planner from the South East encapsulated the sentiments of the majority of planners who were interviewed about the longer-term impact of the duty: 'The duty has not adequately filled the void left by regional planning; the consequences are less structured development and more planning by appeal' (Planner, South East). These views support Boddy and Hickman's (2013, 759) analysis that the duty to cooperate is a 'highly restricted' version of strategic planning when compared with the historic role of structure plans and RSSs, which is of particular concern at a time of national housing shortage. Fundamental questions were also raised by planners about whether the duty to cooperate fitted with a localism narrative or whether it was a

covert form of centralism: 'On the one hand they say, make it up yourself ... then they say your plan is unsound because you have not done what we wanted you to do, it's actually more centralisation' (Planner, North East). The government has recently acknowledged failings within the present system, stating that existing guidance relating to the duty to cooperate will be strengthened, 'to ensure that housing and infrastructure needs are identified and planned for' (HM Treasury, 2015, 45). However, the majority of planners interviewed were unconvinced that localism via the duty to cooperate is a positive step in delivering coordinated strategic planning responses across administrative boundaries. There were some positive examples of existing collaboration between local authorities highlighted, but it is unclear to what extent these arrangements have been facilitated by the present localism narrative. They appeared to be largely based on pre-existing links, a track record of working together between local authorities and/or pragmatic decisions to collaborate in a climate of austerity. Examples highlighted included joint planning arrangements in the East Midlands established since the Planning & Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 that have endured because of their statutory status (PAS, 2015), and joint planning initiatives between authorities around the Hull conurbation driven by economic development imperatives.

'Rescaling' from regionalism to localism

Localism has been heralded by successive UK governments as a panacea to engage the wider electorate with the planning process and as an antidote to opposition to development. However, beyond the alluring rhetoric, Allmendinger and Houghton (2011, 314) warn of localism approaches 'with thinly disguised libertarian political agendas to reduce State influence'. Davoudi and Madanipour (2013, 560) expand on the 'Janus-faced' nature of localism, describing a concept simultaneously capable of illustrating 'exclusionary and regressive' and 'inclusive, innovative and transformative forms'. Localism is therefore an extremely malleable concept which can take multiple forms. Against this background the paper now turns to explore the government's narrative surrounding the transference of planning powers to the local level and investigates the degree to which this is actively the case. Roodbol-Mekkes and Van den Brink (2015, 186) state that where rescaling takes place in planning, it invariably must include 'the two, often concurrent, processes of centralisation and decentralisation – the movement of tasks in an upward and downward direction'. Within the English system the transfer of

some planning functions down to the local scale has coincided with muscular centralising initiatives from national government. This is, perhaps, to counterbalance the parochial political tendencies often inherent in localist approaches and to protect the omnipresent thrust for economic growth. The government has tried to entice communities and authorities to accept new development with financial incentives like the New Homes Bonus whilst simultaneously attempting to underpin growth by requiring all LPAs to facilitate challenging land supply targets for housing, or lose their discretionary scrutiny role over development. Pugalis and Townsend (2013, 107) state that prior attempts at rescaling governance in England have involved 'concentration in larger units, including innovations to fill the "missing middle" between the local and the national'. In contrast, the recent rescaling of planning has extracted altogether the regional spatial approach, seen as a restrictive, bureaucratic, top-down process, but without an alternative effective mechanism to address critical cross-boundary opportunities and challenges, offering instead what might be described as fuzzy notions of collaborative localism. The subliminal development-oriented economic imperatives within the NPPF are evidence that despite the populist rhetoric of localism, the English planning system ultimately still functions as a regulatory system, with a strong central drive to deregulate planning to facilitate economic growth. Recent critiques of the government's brand of localism suggest that it proffers *responsibility* without commensurate *resources* (McGuinness et al., 2014), whilst facilitating shrinkage of the state, enabling the government 'to deny responsibility for failure and to claim any success' (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2011, 314). Allmendinger and Haughton (2011) observe that as localism has gained traction in England it has reinforced a crude dualism which states "'local" good, "national government" bad'. In planning terms the localism approach prioritises the local statutory development process (within the regulatory framework of a centrally determined NPPF), expunging remaining regional approaches and offering an optional tier of neighbourhood planning (see Gallent and Robinson, 2012).

Emerging soft spaces of governance: local enterprise partnerships and combined authorities

The paper now moves on to consider emerging sub-national governance structures which have evolved since the end of the Labour government in 2010. The demise of regionalism and the rescaling to city-regions and localism has heralded another chapter in the volatile evolution of sub-

national governance in England. The state has to resolve the conundrum of how to effectively reform sub-national governance structures which reflect the political and economic realities in complex rural, dispersed urban and often polycentric city-regions. Hall (2013, 3) states, 'The individual city or town is no longer an adequate framework to understand or plan for the future'. It is evident that a 'one-size-fits-all' spatial approach to sub-national governance in Britain is problematic due to the country's complex political and physical geography.

Under its devolution agenda, the government is not inclined to be prescriptive about a preferred approach to strategic planning and governance, preferring to task neighbouring authorities to come up with governance solutions that will be effective for their locality (House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee, 2016). The government maintains that the duty to cooperate was not designed as a proxy measure to replace RSSs. A solution to the deficiencies of the duty may be emerging in some localities (e.g. Greater Manchester and the West Midlands), involving the existing institutional vehicles which have been created to enable groupings of local authorities to work collaboratively, via combined authorities and local enterprise partnerships (LEPs). The combined-authorities approach is a form of earned autonomy whereby consortia of local authorities must conduct a governance review and then can join together to form combined authorities; they can then develop a proposal to government that, if successful, will allow additional control of aspects of policy areas like economic development and skills and transport policies. Combined authorities in metropolitan areas can apply to expand their powers, but in exchange they must establish an elected mayor (Sandford, 2015). The primary driver for local authorities' creating combined authorities appears to be financial, including the lure of a combined funding pot and greater autonomy over decisions for economic development, skills policies and transport infrastructure. Strategic planning appears to currently be a secondary priority for the majority of 'devolution deal' negotiations taking place with government. However, within the Cities and Local Government Devolution Act (2016) the Secretary of State has reserved the right to devolve further powers (e.g. strategic planning) to combined authorities and this may prove to be one next step in their evolution.

At the outset of this research (2014), LEPs appeared to offer a pragmatic interim medium to reinvigorate some form of spatial planning (Pemberton and Morphet, 2013; Pugalís and Townsend, 2013). There are currently thirty-nine LEPs of varying sizes in England, with some LPAs inhabiting more than one LEP boundary. However, a recent RTPI (2015, 2) study states that LEPs 'lack

clarity in terms of their role in the planning system'. The LEPs have absorbed elements of the economic strategy role that was formerly delivered by the RDAs via the development of non-statutory economic plans known as strategic economic plans (SEPs). However, it remains unclear where, if at all, this leaves the environmental and social pillars of strategic planning that were integral components of the holistic RSSs approach under Labour.

In terms of the potential for LEPs to engage in strategic planning, a number of recurrent issues were raised during the interviews, including a clear democratic deficit, lack of capacity within LEP teams, lack of desire for LEPs to go beyond their economic remit and a reluctance from the private sector to become mired in intractable strategic planning issues: 'LEPs could have a role in identifying a framework for planning issues; the difficulty is LEPs have an economic focus rather than one geared around environmental or inequality issues' (Planner, Yorkshire & Humber). The perceived myopic economic focus of the majority of LEPs was a feature of the interviews, and the overriding view was that under the current disjointed structure of sub-national governance combined authorities would be a more suitable forum for addressing strategic planning issues, such as reviewing green belt policy. The Great Birmingham and Solihull LEP (GBSLEP) was highlighted as innovative in that it had been directly involved with local government in the development of a strategic spatial plan which was designed to dovetail with the strategic economic plan. The Planner interviewed from the West Midlands commented, 'We produced the strategic plan in a true partnership way, with topic groups led by ... the private sector, under the RSS that would have never happened.' The Spatial Plan for Recovery and Growth (SPRG) will draw together the main elements of the individual local plans from the nine GBSLEP local authorities. It was suggested that this approach might present a model for other areas. However, the interviewee from the West Midlands acknowledged that the 'crunch' was yet to come in negotiating difficult decisions about the scale and distribution of growth for housing and employment sites in a LEP area which encompassed nine local authorities. Earlier attempts at central-local government inter-agency economic and spatial planning in the West Midlands and elsewhere in the 1970s and 1980s have identified a tendency for individual partners to seek to maximise their own resource gains and autonomy whilst fudging intractable issues surrounding the location of housing overspill (Mawson and Skelcher, 1980). Moreover, while Greater Birmingham and Greater Manchester may appear to be relatively stable city-regions, it remains to be seen whether this model of governance can be effective, especially in localities where there are deeply contested

boundaries and polycentric power struggles between cities and related localities.

The government appears relaxed about an era where spatially varied decentralisation outcomes are agreed in terms of the range of powers a combined authority can hold, with spatial planning appearing to be an option (enabling the creation of statutory spatial strategies). It seems content for an iterative approach to decentralisation to evolve via ad hoc deals across England. The Secretary of State recently stated, 'rather than having administrative tidiness ... it's going to look like how England is... a combination of different places' (Clarke, 2015). Theoretically, there is synergy between the Government's laissez-faire approach to sub-national decentralisation and Deas's (2013) concept of 'creative chaos', which engenders a free-market competitive ethos between localities, a process where winners are perceived as innovators and successful places. Creating a funding climate which requires strong political leadership and robust organisational capacity at the local level to succeed does raise concerns about the future of localities which are lagging and do not possess the political and organisational attributes to succeed in this competitive environment. Nonetheless, this competitive approach which central government appears to trust will spur creativity amongst authorities and drive the new leaner local state, and this multi-speed approach to the evolution of sub-national governance structures is rapidly evolving. There is much detail that needs to be clarified before the impact of this approach can be ascertained, particularly impacts on perceived 'failing' localities.

At the time of finalising the paper there were five agreed combined authorities,⁵ with over thirty further collaborations of authorities submitting expressions of interest to central government to progress devolution proposals.⁶ The benchmark combined authority under the new governance arrangements is Greater Manchester, and the Greater Manchester Agreement, announced in 2014, empowers the city-region 'to create a statutory spatial framework for the city-region' subject to unanimous approval by the ten local authority leaders and the Greater Manchester mayor (who form the combined authority cabinet) (Sandford, 2015). Subsequently, devolution deals in West Yorkshire and the West Midlands do not contain powers for spatial planning, and the draft for the Sheffield deal did not initially include spatial planning although a

⁵ Combined authorities agreed by 2014: Greater Manchester, North East, West Yorkshire, Sheffield and Liverpool. Future combined authorities 2016–2017: Tees Valley, West Midlands and North Midlands.

⁶ Thirty-four applications for devolution deals were submitted to government; six separate applications from within Yorkshire.

subsequent draft (October 2015) now includes comparable powers to those of Greater Manchester for spatial planning. The Teesside Combined Authority has also recently received approval for a non-statutory plan with a focus on land development. This suggests an era of fragmented and piece-meal approaches to spatial planning emerging across England. This research was completed when the concept of combined authorities was nascent; therefore this paper cannot provide comprehensive analysis of the evolution of combined authorities. However, the empirical data generated for this article do include practitioner's views of the potential influence of combined authorities as a governance approach and their potential to take on a greater strategic planning role. Planners were concerned about perceptions that combined authorities meant further depletion of planning staff, and there was a strong sentiment that the subliminal political drivers for combined authorities would be further rationalisation of public services and a push to combine dwindling resources at the local level: 'Combined authorities is a process driven by national perceptions, of how local authorities work, resource needs, efficiency and savings, rather than being driven by the best organisational way to do things' (Planner, Yorkshire & Humber). This view echoes Pugalís and Townsend's (2013, 117) assertion that recent rescaling of governance in England 'has more to do with the politics of dwindling public resources and ideological viewpoints than it does with locating a more appropriate spatial scale for the leadership and operation of sub-national planning'.

There was a level of concern that strategic planning (other than SEPs) had been not been central enough in the initial negotiations around combined authorities: 'Combined authorities look to be about economic development, transport and housing, not planning. The City Deal was a bribe basically, civil servants saying to ***** look at how well Manchester has done, if you go for a combined authority ... we'll give you money and freedoms' (Planner, North West). A significant concern that planners repeatedly raised was a fear that local politics and city rivalries would intervene as some cities or towns might perceive that their identities are being eroded and in turn subvert the most effective technocratic (although not necessarily geopolitical) solution for devising combined authorities in terms of functional economic geography: 'The push will be on for local authorities to join up to make best use of resources, but it doesn't mean they will join with the local authorities that make most sense in terms of strategic planning' (Planner, South East). There was clear anxiety from some planners that although government might be successful in the short term by cajoling local authorities to combine for enhanced autonomy, ultimately, historical political rivalries could implode and stymie the

longer-term prospects of the approach; many second-tier cities and towns were wary of being consumed within a 'big-city' brand.⁷ One interview stated he was sceptical about combined authorities due to 'a lack of local political appetite for it' (Planner, East Midlands). A number of comments were made about the calibre of municipal leadership present in Greater Manchester over the past two decades, together with common urban problems, and the predominant control of local councils by the Labour Party. Respondents warned about underestimating the importance of political capability and the presence of other positive local circumstances which encouraged neighbouring local authorities to go beyond lowest-common-denominator politics: 'Combined authorities will take time to mature ... there is a danger you end up with lowest-common-denominator politics. Manchester has been successful but it has taken twenty years' (Planner, North West). However, planners also noted that the stick of being excluded from access to funding had 'focused minds' beyond political squabbles and encouraged more strategic thinking.

Conclusion

Regional spatial planning in England during the Labour era proved problematic because of a seemingly intractable struggle between strong strategic planning ('the greater good') and vocal (political and community) interests within local democracy—a problem now faced by the localist model. Some critics argue the RSS model was stymied by their lack of formal democratic accountability due to Labour's failure to establish an elected political tier at the meso (regional) level (Swain et al., 2013). In some regions the standard regions were criticised as providing the basis for statutory spatial planning when it was felt they did not adequately reflect functional economic areas and had not gained local political acceptance (Pugalis and Townsend, 2013; Baker and Wong, 2013). However, achieving a universally accepted institutional fix for sub-national governance has been a recurring quandary in England; Wannop (1995, xxi) sagely observed that 'regional planning and governance can never be perfectly arranged, except in the moment'. The demise of RSSs and the subsequent rescaling of governance towards a localist approach undoubtedly left a strategic spatial planning void across much of England during the term of the coalition government. Hence Gallent et al.'s (2013)

⁷ Non-core city authorities within Merseyside and West Yorkshire fear becoming subsumed within a Greater Liverpool or Greater Leeds brand.

question – whether the new localist system of planning in England allows government to deal effectively with the strategic dilemmas integral to governing. The first five years of localism suggest that for most localities the answer is categorically negative. The duty to cooperate has clearly not evolved to fill the spatial planning void. The TCPA (2014, 2) recently described the state of sub-regional planning in England ‘as one of fragmentation and contrast’. Planning practitioners interviewed during this research were broadly supportive of the need for some form of spatial planning but recognised some of the limitations of the English RSS approach. Planners’ overriding concern was the unsuitability of the current institutional fix (duty to cooperate). After a period of stagnation in spatial planning the Conservative government appears to have recognised that the duty to cooperate fails to provide sufficient incentives within the planning system to encourage all local authorities to strive for collaborative approaches to strategic dilemmas. The government has vowed to ‘beef up’ the duty but it is unlikely that tweaking existing policy will be sufficient to fill the strategic spatial planning void. It is perhaps naive to assume that central government can conclusively solve the intractable conundrum of a comprehensive approach to sub-national governance in England without a constitutional settlement. Nevertheless, it is equally naive to assume that organic localist approaches will emerge in all localities to span the chasms within the current planning framework. In the autumn of 2015 a number of devolution deals were negotiated between government, city-regions and county-level groupings of authorities across England. It appears that in some areas (e.g. Greater Manchester and Sheffield) the new ‘soft spaces’ of governance will offer an opportunity for innovative forms of spatial planning to return to the policy agenda. A clear message from the government’s devolution approach is that ‘one size does not fit all’. It appears comfortable about iterative decentralisation and the emerging asymmetrical (patchwork quilt) system of devolved powers and governance approaches developing across England. The clear difference from regional spatial strategies is that spatial planning in the current government’s approach is non-mandatory. This raises a question about fragmentation in national spatial planning coverage which potentially could accentuate existing economic inequalities between successful places and lagging places, and make it more difficult to resolve the national housing crisis (Colomb and Tomaney, 2015).

Ultimately, there are still many questions to be answered relating to the government’s ‘devolution revolution’. Currently the approach contains insufficient contextual detail and if the experiences of negotiating RSSs are a precedent, the requirement to achieve unanimous political support from

the 'combined authority cabinet' for a spatial strategy to proceed could prove challenging. Nevertheless, the kaleidoscope of governance in England has been decisively shaken, and a new constellation of actors is emerging in the 'soft spaces' of sub-national governance. It will take time for the new structures to settle, and for some the reality of localism may match the rhetoric. However, critical questions of social equity arise: what is the future for those places that struggle to respond to the opportunities of localism and/or those places where local political rivalries implode? Equally, the financing formula for combined authorities is another major question which requires clarification. Concerns are being expressed about unequal financial settlements in the new funding environment and whether all new emerging sub-national governance structures around the country will be adequately resourced to rise to the holistic (economic, social and environmental) spatial planning challenges. Again, does central government have the capacity to engage? If some form of spatial planning is to comprehensively return to the English planning landscape, will additional resources be forthcoming to bolster the depleted ranks of public-sector planners or will those few remaining local authority planners be expected to expand their workload to deliver the new era of spatial plans? Ultimately, it seems localism will allow some forms of spatial planning to resume in England, but the extent to which the English spatial planning conundrum will be resolved is still a matter for much enquiry, empirical research and debate.

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