

STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP AND PLANNING IN A LOCALIST AGENDA: LESSONS FROM THE NORTH WEST OF ENGLAND

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Abstract

Following the 2010 election, the new Coalition government in the UK abolished the English regional (planning and development) institutions and their strategies, establishing business-led bodies of Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) at the city regional scale, and a cross-local authority ‘Duty-to-Cooperate’ to feed in informal strategies and deliver projects around cross-boundary issues such as housing, transport, the environment, and strategic sites. Given the non-statutory status of the LEPs and the loose framework for the Duty to Cooperate, this paper draws on empirical case study research undertaken by the authors in three city-regions of North West England to investigate whether strategic spatial priorities can be effectively planned and delivered under this highly neo-liberalised and localised system. In other words, it asks whether strategic thinking can still take place in a weak strategic / sub-regional environment. In examining the inclination and ability of LEPs for spatial governance, we identified three typologies of their roles in the city-regions studied: ‘*expedient leader*’, ‘*ambitious mediator*’, and ‘*political and functional rival*’. These findings, along with those of the Duty-to-Cooperate in cross-local consensus building and delivery, result in lessons about building corporatist institutions of strategic governance as well as the institutional and legislative contexts of ‘bottom-up’ strategic planning.

keywords: Localism; City-Regional Leadership; Strategic Planning; LEPs, Duty-to-Cooperate

Introduction

Given the traditional lack of a directly electoral tier, the story of English regionalism is a recurring roll-in and roll-out of state apparatus (Roberts and Baker, 2002). The most recent wave of regional planning and institution-building was arguably the strongest and lasted for two decades from 1990 (Pearce and Ayres, 2006; Swain, et al., 2013). The peak of this wave involved the creation of a formal regional planning body, called the Regional Assembly (RA), which comprised 70% local authority members and 30% regional representatives of the voluntary and business sectors (Cullingworth and Nadin, 2006). They were subsequently put in charge of preparing statutory Regional Spatial Strategies (RSS) involving a cross-cutting and inclusive agenda (Riddell, 2013). The Government’s National Planning Policy Statement (PPS) 11: RSS (ODOM, 2004) required local authorities’ Development Plan Documents (DPDs), including Core Strategies, to be in conformity with RSS, thus establishing a cascading hierarchy of spatial planning policy from the centre to the locality.

Although generally known as regional planning bodies, Regional Assemblies were not the only organisations preparing regional plans. Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) were another institutional innovation whose business led and centrally appointed Boards were tasked with producing Regional Economic Strategies (RESs) (Shaw and Lloyd, 2000). In addition, the Government Offices for the Regions (GOs), which had been created in 1994 to act as integrated branches of central government (Pearce, et al., 2008; Sandford, 2013), played coordinative and mediation roles between RAs, RDAs, local authorities and other stakeholders whilst trying to empower the grassroots in regional decision makings (Baker, 2002; Pearce, et al, 2008). However, there were still issues around power relations, authentic consensus building and involvement of weaker parties in regional planning which surfaced in some regions such as the more prosperous South East and East of England (Hager, 2012; Allmendinger and Haughton, 2012).

Helped by the dissatisfaction of some local authorities with the so-called ‘democratic deficit’ of the top-down apparatus and the associated regional imposition of housing numbers, the 2010-elected Conservative / Liberal Democrat Coalition government embarked on the abolition of regional plans and institutions in England (House of Commons, 2011, Haughton and Hincks, 2013). The new government’s institutional alternative was city-regional and informal; the *Local Growth* White Paper (2010) introduced Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) of business and civic leaders to undertake the strategic steering of transport, housing and planning (HM Government, 2010). It was announced in the White Paper that these LEPs would be expected to fund their own day-to-day running costs, but they now receive core funding from the government (HM Government, 2010; DBIS, 2012).

While the abolition of the regional planning apparatus was not surprising, the Coalition government also abolished the GOs and all this created another strategic vacuum to be filled by central and local governments. In 2012, the Coalition’s *National Planning Policy Framework* (NPPF) was published, replacing the former series of detailed PPSs with just one document. The NPPF requires local authorities to work collaboratively, especially with their neighbours, on strategic planning priorities such as housing, infrastructure and the environment. Local authorities are expected to demonstrate they have fulfilled this ‘*Duty to Cooperate*’ when their Local Plans are submitted to the government’s executive agency, the Planning Inspectorate, for public examination. This could, for example, be via a joint policy making / planning committee, a memorandum of understanding, or a joint strategy (DCLG, 2012). In contrast to New Labour’s enthusiasm for spatial strategies as visionary, broad-ranging and integrative frameworks (Nadin, 2006; Haughton, et al., 2010), the NPPF uses the term ‘*spatial*’ only once in connection with Local Plans and this comes with an emphatic ‘*realistic*’ (DCLG, 2012: 37). So the basic form, and probably the most practical expression, of a joint strategy, as envisaged by the new Coalition government, would be some kind of supra-local land-use plan involving neighbouring authorities working together. Under these reforms, the Local Plan is thus expected to engage in a range of contentious decisions which used to be made at the regional level through RSS procedures. These include, for example, the scale and distribution of new housing, strategic transport and provision for gypsies and travellers (ODPM, 2004; DCLG, 2012).

A raft of experiments has subsequently unfolded in the context of the Government’s quick establishment of the localism project, particularly in the two core areas of city-regional leadership and ‘bottom up’ strategic planning. These initiatives have received mixed but mainly negative scores in subsequent evaluation studies. For example, Lowndes and Pratchett (2012) argue that the Coalition’s reforms show traces of an ideological commitment to localism which has the potential to deliver a radically different form of local governance. Putting forward a socially and geographically expansive alternative called ‘progressive localism’. However, Featherstone et al. (2012) are less optimistic and suggest the current austerity localism can have pernicious consequences. Lowndes and Pratchett (2012) see austerity as a political expediency of Government, while Haughton and Hincks (2013) talk about austerity politics. Nonetheless, these studies are unanimous about the potentially detrimental impacts of austerity on territorial management at the local and supra-local scales, especially for less affluent areas. Similarly to Gallent et al. (2013), Boddy and Hickman (2013) raise concerns about the loss of strategic planning objectives, for example in housing policy and delivery, under the new localist arrangements. The former authors (Gallent et al, 2013) observe a need to embed localist arrangements into a more vibrant local democracy to counter the loss of the ‘stick’ of regional planning by reshaping the relationship between communities and development. Meanwhile, Boddy and Hickman (2013) argue the Duty to Cooperate represents a problematic and reductionist view to the functions of the abolished regional strategies. Some shortcomings, they suggest, include: the need for a phenomenal political leadership to reproduce the inter-local housing exchanges of RSS; a lack of meaningful collaboration at the city-regional level despite the existence of LEPs and a range of other voluntary partnerships amongst localities; limited scrutiny of the Duty to Cooperate; and its inadequacy when there is no appetite for collaboration.

This paper therefore aims to contribute to this emerging literature by presenting empirically-based insights from one of the biggest regions in England (the North West) in which regionalist

arrangements have been replaced with localist alternatives. It is intended to examine (a) the extent to which the new architecture of city-regional governance, primarily based around the newly created LEPS, appears capable of exerting proactive territorial leadership at the sub-regional scale and (b) in terms of cross-authority cooperation and collaboration, whether the statutory ‘Duty to Cooperate’ is helping to reconcile the ‘*strategic*’ with the ‘*grass-roots*’. In terms of case study selection, it was recognized that the chosen region and the local case examples needed ideally to exhibit a degree diversity in their socio-economic, institutional and political circumstances to increase the validity of the findings whilst, on the other hand, the chosen localities should be reflect similar governance arrangements to those in place in other English regions to provide transferrable lessons from the empirical findings.

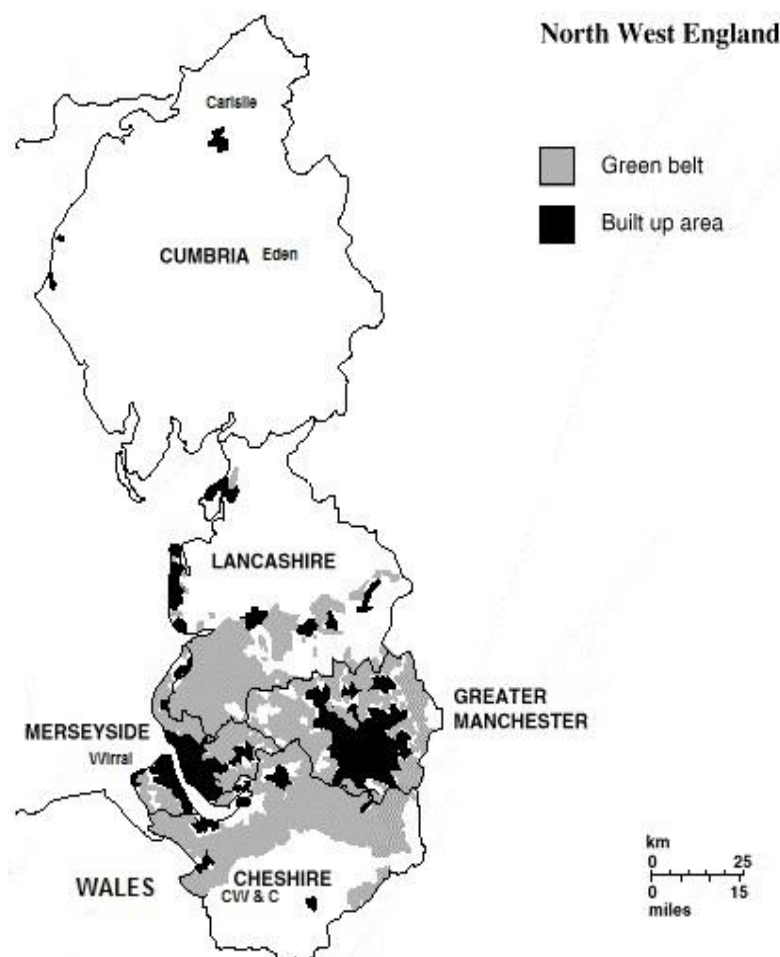


Figure 1: The North West Region (Source: House of Commons, 1998)

The North West region of England has a population of 6.9 million - the highest after London and the South East - of which around three-fifths live in the major conurbations of Greater Manchester and Merseyside or Liverpool City Region (see Figure 1) (Wilson and Baker, 2006; Young and Sly, 2011). Three of the five sub-regions of the North West are located on the national borders: Cumbria, which is largely rural with sluggish growth, borders Scotland to the north; Cheshire, which accommodates some of the region’s wealthiest wards, neighbours Wales to the west; and the Liverpool City Region borders Wales by water to the south. Administratively, the region comprises two counties (Cumbria and Lancashire), six unitary authorities, and 15 metropolitan districts within Greater Manchester and Merseyside (Young and Sly, 2011). In order to examine strategic leadership within the sub-regional geography of Cumbria, and to gain a bigger-than-sub-regional insight, Cheshire and Merseyside were chosen for more in-depth study. Cumbria has a two tier local authority system (county council and

district councils) and is located in the more isolated and self-contained northern parts of the region whilst Cheshire and Merseyside are made of one tier authorities and form two of the region's political and economic heartlands in proximity. These areas represent two extremes of political attitudes towards regionalism and localism. While in the regional planning process '*Cumbria in particular felt excluded and were "seeking equal status".*' (EiP Panel, 2007: 40), Merseyside was steering the decision making process and Cheshire were at the centre of the previous regionalism era's cross-border experimentations under which it signed up to a deal with North East Wales (see Cheshire County Council, 2006). However, these areas represent similar governance arrangements to many other English city-regions. Unlike Greater Manchester, which since 1986 and the abolition of metropolitan county councils has been partly governed by a powerful voluntary body called the Association of Greater Manchester Authorities (AGMA) (Leach and Game, 1991), the selected city regions have had less of a tradition of collaborative governance and it was felt could thus reveal more traceable impacts of post-Coalition central institutional innovation.

Based on 28 in-depth interviews with a wide range of policy actors, complemented by textual analysis of key policy documents, the next sections of this paper discuss developments in sub-regional governance and the role of the new Duty to Cooperate in two chosen case study areas: firstly, Cheshire and Merseyside and, secondly, Cumbria. At the more local scale, four neighbouring local authorities were selected in order to examine the effectiveness of the 'Duty to Cooperate' in more detail; one was in Cheshire (Cheshire West and Chester), one in Merseyside (Wirral), and two were in Cumbria (Carlisle and Eden).

Case Study Area One: Cheshire and Merseyside

Cheshire West and Chester is a unitary authority area that was established in 2009 from the amalgamation of some of the districts of the former county of Cheshire (Young and Sly, 2010). Bordering the Welsh local authorities of Wrexham and Flintshire to the west, Cheshire West and Chester constitutes the main English part of the West Cheshire / North East Wales sub-regional geography of housing and employment (see Figure 2). In order to address the policy-making and governance implications of this functional area, a non-statutory spatial strategy was published in 2006 as a result of cooperation between both Welsh and English local authorities, sponsored by the North West Regional Assembly and Welsh Development Agency / Welsh Assembly Government (Cheshire County Council, 2006; Wrexham Council, 2009). Among the wider referenced areas of this strategy in England is the metropolitan district of Wirral which is part of the Liverpool City Region. Wirral is a peninsula bordering Cheshire West and Chester by land, and other local authorities of the Liverpool City Region, as well as parts of north east Wales, by water.

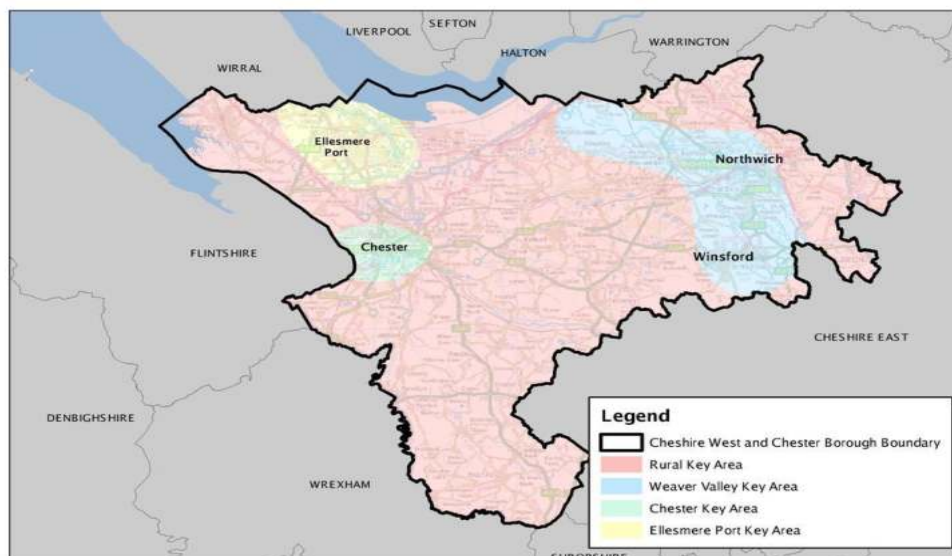


Figure 2: Cheshire West and Chester

Sub-Regional Governance

The process of preparing the West Cheshire / North East Wales Sub Regional Spatial Strategy is arguably at least as important as the final document itself, since it involved innovative consensus building that, for example, required Welsh authorities to provide for some of the housing demands of the English side. Indeed, despite initial tensions, it was the significant ‘relation-brokering’ aspect of the process that turned the initial cross-national study into an emerging spatial plan. As one interviewee commented:

"At the start of the process ... it was that fractious the relationships, and that was between Welsh authorities, between English and Welsh authorities, and between English authorities ... At the end of the process we got a lot of agreement on the high level principles, the way forward, and they were enabled to embed that into local development plans, LDFs and so on. I think that was a success and the fact that a piece of ... research evidence-gathering project turned into a strategy-making project probably shows the progress that was made there in those relationships." (Interview R8, regional body, 2012).

Although the scrapping of the West Cheshire / North East Wales Sub Regional Spatial Strategy in 2011 (Bangall, 2011) meant the end of its lifespan as a decision framework, its institutional legacy, namely the Mersey Dee Alliance (MDA), is still active. The original MDA was a cross-local authority organisation covering parts of Cheshire and Merseyside (Wrexham Council, 2009). The cross-national ‘4 Counties Partnership’ (the core local authority alliance engaged in the strategy making process) merged with the original MDA in 2007 to create a more powerful organisation to deliver the published strategy and act as an influential lobby at the regional and national levels (Wrexham Council, 2009; Celtic League, 2011). The recent tough political and financial circumstances have hindered the MDA’s visionary territorial leadership but it has nevertheless continued to act as a cross-national facilitator for officer-level meetings, as observed by a planning officer from Wirral: *"that is one of our main means of engaging with Wales ... it probably struggles from the lack of resources in terms of being able to do much, other than have meetings."* (Interview L12, 2012).

Since the LEP and the Duty to Cooperate do not include Welsh territories, the MDA is the only governance arrangement covering the whole area, but it currently has a more sectoral focus and is not dealing with unresolved issues around the imbalanced distribution of development costs and benefits between the Welsh and English neighbouring authorities (see MDA, 2012a: 4): *"it is increasingly important to focus available resources (people and money) in support of a limited number of deliverable projects"*. However, this is not the only barrier to adopting a more proactive leadership approach to this dynamic area as the political mood in Wales has become even less favourable. The West Cheshire / North East Wales Sub Regional Spatial Strategy has thus been seen by some Welsh community organizations and politicians as a means of making parts of North East Wales a suburb of Cheshire and Merseyside (see Celtic League, 2011; Deffro’r Ddraig, 2012). The Deffro’r Ddraig campaign, run by the People’s Council for North Wales - which ultimately managed to get the strategy scrapped (Bangall, 2011) - is now becoming even more assertive. The second phase of the campaign wants to eradicate the housing policy legacy of the strategy from existing Welsh local plans. Indeed, their aim is to recall all Local Development Plans across Wales and to scrap the use of the housing formula applied by the Welsh government which would supply for more than local needs (Deffro’r Ddraig, 2012).

The MDA is now a locally funded, cross-national, partnership whose political and financial fortunes has been decided by the same reforms that established LEPs and put them under the policy direction of the state. Considering the structural role of government in creating sub-regional divisions through its funding and political apparatus, it is tricky for the MDA and the two LEPs operating in parts of the same geographical area, to build any joint partnership. The Cheshire and Warrington LEP, which has been established in a relatively more open institutional culture than has been the case with other LEPs,

has managed to take a step beyond its initial institutional engineering by giving a board seat to a social partner. The aim is to: *“Develop an strategic alliance with other LEPs and North Wales via Mersey Dee Alliance.”* (Cheshire and Warrington LEP, 2012: 8). But there are few signs of a welcoming reaction by the MDA. Despite the new emphasis on acting as a network for business, employment and skill actors, the MDA’s Business Plan 2012- 2015 (MDA, 2012a) is silent as to how common concerns can feed into partnerships with the LEP.

Subsequently, in this highly connected functional area, the Cheshire and Warrington LEP has not developed ties with its counterpart in the Liverpool City Region or with neighbouring Welsh authorities. This inter-LEP governance failure is also related to their economic-output design; indeed, the LEP’s non-statutory status and central expectations (see HM Government, 2010) seem to have contributed to the effects of their core business membership so that: *“What they have promoted is greater competition between local authority areas and between Local Enterprise Partnerships,[but] far less incentive to cooperate”* (Interview E6, environmental leader, 2012). The Cheshire and Warrington LEP has so far failed to use the potential of the MDA to resolve its frictions with local authorities. For example, a partnership between the Cheshire and Warrington Enterprise Commission and the three local authorities of Cheshire West and Chester, Warrington and Cheshire East published a sub regional strategy in 2010: *‘Unleashing the Potential of Cheshire and Warrington’* (Cheshire East Council, et al., 2010). This growth strategy is now the key reference point for the LEP in their housing and employment policies (Cheshire West and Chester Council, 2011) and the strategy has acted as a point of difference between the LEP and the accountable body for the MDA, namely Cheshire West and Chester Council (MDA, 2012b).

The LEP would like Cheshire West and Chester to be more ambitious in its housing targets but the council is looking at 1050 dwellings per annum in its emerging Local Plan (Cheshire West and Chester Council, 2012a), which is nearly a third lower than the target of the sub regional strategy (Cheshire East Council, et al., 2010):

“One of the challenges we’ve got is that ... organisations like the Local Enterprise Partnership... private sector interests like Peel Holdings who obviously have quite a key interest around this part of the world, there are sort of competing strategies... ‘Unleashing The Potential’ was very much the sort of economic strategy and it’s still being used as a sort of driver to say ‘well, this should be our ambition for housing, this should be our ambition for economic development’, which currently, in terms of what we consulted upon with regards to local plan policy in Cheshire West, they don’t match... There might be aspiration for higher numbers but the delivery is going to be tricky.” (Interview R11, local government, 2012).

The situation in the neighbouring Liverpool City Region is complicated; the only significant sub regional body when the LEP was being introduced was The Mersey Partnership, a business network which subsequently merged with the LEP (Bartlett, 2012). This void was less tangible than in the previous era as the Liverpool City Region, along with Greater Manchester, were the main actors in the regional planning body which also had an explicit sub-regional mandate (see ODOM, 2004):

“I think what we have really seen is a Balkanization of local government and strategic government from which a strong sense of direction is yet to emerge... the institutions we have ... are quite incapable of giving the integration and strategic leadership which is needed especially as the regional tier has been abolished.” (Interview R7, regional body, 2012).

Some stakeholders we interviewed were excited about the LEP and believed it would provide the answer to the affliction of strategic leadership: *“there’s a real prospect of let’s say in three, four, five years time people saying ‘well the Local Enterprise Partnership made all the difference to the Liverpool City Region’.”* (Interview B2, business stakeholder, 2012). Others, however, suggested LEPs do not have the powers and resources to function in this way. On the other hand, any increase in

the LEP's strength could fuel further divisions and objection as some argue that: *"in the main, they consist of ad hoc groupings of business people who happened to be around in the right place at the right time."* (Interview V2, voluntary sector, 2012). There is also the question of whether the governance vacuum in which the Liverpool City Region LEP was created could gradually lead it to gain a territorially assertive position; amongst the challenges are that such position would require the LEP to open its Board composition to socio-environmental partners and to adopt a broad-ranging framework to guide partners' activities. However, these are clearly in conflict with the government's intention in putting forward, and funding, LEPs as primarily growth promotion partnerships (see HM Government, 2010).

The second challenge to an assertive leadership by the Liverpool City Region LEP comes from within its own Board. On 7 February 2012, it was confirmed that Liverpool City would receive new money and powers following its *City Deal* with Government. On the same day, the city council voted to have an elected mayor to lead the changes. Amongst the incentives is an Enterprise Zone for North Liverpool and the Central Business District (Liverpool City Council, 2012). However, the Enterprise Zone's prospectus (DCLG, 2011) says Enterprise Zones will be geographically defined areas, agreed between the "Local Enterprise Partnership" and government. This example of bypassing of the LEP, along with the city's distinctive growth arrangements such as Liverpool Vision, alarmed other localities and even the business actors of the LEP for a stronger governance arrangement.

Reporting on an independent study to address similar issues, Lord Heseltine and Sir Terry Leahy (2011: 13) argued: *"A metro Mayor is the best single solution to the leadership gap that currently afflicts the city region and constrains its growth."* But a Liverpool Mayor leading the entire metropolitan area was not the type of strategic compromise to which other localities were prepared to sign up and this recommendation was therefore shelved (Liverpool City Council, 2012). However, the idea of a combined authority, the Government's second favourite alternative (see HM Government, 2012), gained the support of some local authorities and major business stakeholders of the LEP, leading to the submission of a recent proposal to Government for the establishment of a combined authority responsible for transport, regeneration and economic development (see DCLG, 2013b). The director of the Mersey Gateway project, which is the largest private-led development in North England, for example, suggested: *"A combined authority could attract that investment more so than an individual local authority."* (InvestSefton, 2013). Liverpool City, which has lost the opportunity to represent the whole metropolitan area, seems to have been on the compromising side of this deal which is supported by the government and business partners. The initiative would harness the city's economic and political maneuvering space since a combined authority means any decisions would have to be approved by a simple majority of the members (Wiggins, 2013). This could be well understood by the following statements of the Liverpool City Mayor:

"The government are clear that this is a model of governance that will put regions ahead of the game in the race for funding. For me it is an absolute no-brainer and merely lays down the existing positive, informal, arrangements that already exist." (BBC, 2013).

Given the core interests of the Liverpool City Region LEP and the proposed combined authority are similar, especially in regeneration and economic development (see Liverpool City Region LEP, 2012; DCLG, 2013b) and because the businesses and central forces have been crucial in overcoming local political differences, it appears the LEP will exert significant influence over its indirect institutional product, namely the combined authority. A combined authority could adopt stronger positions, on behalf of its peer LEP, without facing the opposition of socio-environmental partners, especially as the Greater Manchester Combined Authority has provided an economic success story in which issues around governance representation have been overshadowed.

The Duty to Cooperate

The preparation of a *Core Strategy* for the Wirral started in 2005 in response to the then PPS documents and the RSS. Nine years on, the final draft was expected to be published for public comment in early 2014 before being submitted to the Secretary of State for public examination (Wirral Council, 2013). Despite starting later than Wirral in 2009, Cheshire West and Chester has now finished consultation on its final draft and was anticipating the examination stage in mid-2014 (Cheshire West and Chester Council, 2013). In the interviews held in Wirral, local planning officers believed that the emphasis of the Inspector would be on the outcomes of the increased frequency of meetings following the introduction of the Duty to Cooperate. Such an expectation could not be fulfilled in the political geography of Liverpool City Region by the introduction of general memorandums of co-operation as these would be regarded as a step back from what has already been achieved:

"we have a sort of structure of meetings set up as what's called the District Planning Officers Group, which is all the local authorities of Liverpool City Region...our main political links are really with the Liverpool City Region but, because of where we sit, we do have links with Cheshire West and Chester, and we share a border with Wales so we have to be aware of what's going on there as well." (Interview L12, local government, 2012).

However, all the partnerships and planning initiatives that the Wirral officers mentioned as evidence of their fulfillment of the Duty to Cooperate with the rest of the metropolitan area were established under the previous era of government and were usually initially sponsored by the former regional institutions. One example which indicates how a third party influence provided a context to extend networks beyond traditional political partners was a 'needs-and-supply' study of housing and employment land. The study was based on an innovative partnership between the districts of Liverpool City Region, Cheshire West and Chester, and West Lancashire, called *'Liverpool City Region Partners'* (GVA, 2010; Liverpool City Region Partners, 2011). Similar to the West Cheshire / North East Wales initiative, the support of regional institutions was pivotal; the regional Leaders Board for the North West (4NW) and the GO supported the partners to commission the consulting company in 2010 (GVA, 2010). The *Liverpool City Region Overview Study*, which was published in 2011, forms part of the evidence base for subsequent local development plans (Liverpool City Region Partners, 2011; Sefton Council, 2012). Planning officers at Wirral Council considered the study as a demonstration of cross-boundary cooperation. However, the NPPF does not mention either study networks or a jointly prepared evidence base as fulfilment of the Duty to Cooperate. This opens a wide gap for discretion and might distract local planning authorities from more fundamental cross-border studies which could have lasting political, institutional and planning yields similar to that of the West Cheshire / North East Wales study which turned into a strategy with lasting governance impacts: *"we are now looking over our shoulders and saying what we need to do [is] to avoid being challenged, rather than [saying] what we need to do[is] to work together effectively."* (Interview R9, local government, 2012). Wirral MBC has some other joint initiatives with its political and economic partners in the Liverpool City Region which again started before the Duty to Cooperate was introduced. In this context, a big ticket item for its *Core Strategy* examination will be the *Joint Merseyside and Halton Waste Local Plan* which began much earlier in 2006 (Halton Borough Council, et al., 2013).

Beyond the Liverpool City Region, Wirral will probably find it more difficult to demonstrate two of the three NPPF-envisaged outcomes of the Duty to Cooperate: namely, a joint planning committee and a joint strategy (see DCLG, 2012). Wirral planners have struggled to produce noticeable outcomes from their more frequent meetings, but when it comes to links with Cheshire West and Chester, *"there is more liaison than joint working"* (Interview L13, local government, 2013). Facilitated by good officer-level relationships, the two planning departments engage in regular communications regarding the evidence base and policies with cross border impacts, particularly on

housing, transport and out-of-centre retail. Nevertheless, as the following examples suggest, it has proved difficult to take these discussions to the level of strategic cooperation. Local authorities are not directly responsible for some of the strategic issues they commonly grapple with and therefore need to act in a lobbying capacity, for instance, concerning the future capacity of the M53 motorway and improvements to the rail lines from North Wales, through the north of Cheshire West, into the Wirral and to Liverpool. This needs close cooperation at the political (Councillors) level as planning officers do not have the means to lobby the Department for Transport. Since even such non- controversial alliances have not formed outside the MDA arrangements, it was not surprising to hear from a Wirral planning officer about their refusal to take up the housing burden of their neighbour: *"We have also formally responded to a request to make up a short term shortfall in housing land supply in Cheshire West and Chester to say that we could not help."* (Interview L13, 2012).

The Duty to Cooperate-induced consultations of Cheshire West and Chester are, however, not likely to progress to more serious stages as, in any case, the Welsh side is not covered by the Duty. The Welsh local councils have no reason to move against the core values of nationalist parties that are getting more vocal in the Welsh Assembly (see National Assembly for Wales, 2011). Since transport policies which can encourage population movements into Wales have been shelved, it is hard to imagine discussions of planned settlements:

"They see themselves very much part of the Welsh scene and want to work with their Welsh counterparts but not necessarily their English counterparts, particularly on transportation. One of the focuses that the Welsh authorities and the Welsh members have is north-south links within Wales itself rather than east-west links into England." (Interview L7, local government, 2012).

So Cheshire West and Chester is proposing to release land for up to 2000 new homes from the green belt around Chester in its emerging Local Plan (Cheshire West and Chester Council, 2012b) - a decision in which the NPPF pressure to identify sites for five years' housing supply (see DCLG, 2012) was critical. The halting of cross-national governance and the pro-development national planning policy therefore seem to have displaced conflicts to the English side where there is no longer the necessary funding and institutional arrangements to help with conflict resolution:

"they [Welsh opponents] were kind of trying to force Chester down the green belt release route but obviously that is a very contentious route and is being very heavily challenged at the moment from groups like CPRE." (Interview L7, local government, 2012).

The strong language used by many commentators against green belt revisions around Chester (see, for example, the consultation document: *Green Belt Background Paper* by Cheshire West and Chester Council, 2012c) as well as campaigns by some residents, voluntary groups and politicians such as the Member of Parliament for Chester suggest the plan and politics behind it might be challenged through non-planning routes after the green belt release appears in the adopted plan.

Similarly to Wirral, planning officers in Cheshire West and Chester believed the Inspector would look at things beyond just officer meetings. However, the latter had a more vivid and ambitious vision of central expectations, helped by a meeting they had with the Planning Inspectorate and Planning Advisory Service:

"there was a lot of emphasis there on it's not just about having a few face-to-face officer meetings, it's if there are particular issues that need dealing with, you have got to demonstrate if there are political decisions to be made, that you've got your various politicians together, so in other words, our senior politicians to meet senior politicians in the Welsh authorities and, if needs be, to thrash out agreements about 'well, this is what we're doing, you're happy with it and vice versa'. Or if there are actual joint initiatives, that those are set down in proper terms" (Interview R11, local government, 2012).

Whilst the Government is alert to the need for engaging local politicians if genuine and practical consensus building is to come out of the Duty to Cooperate, it appears less realistic to expect planning officers to convince politicians to talk, let alone sign off agreements on highly contentious issues, especially when officers have a more pragmatic interpretation of their role under the ‘localist’ arrangements: *“so yes, you’ve got to keep your head down and get that plan produced.”* (Interview L10, local government, 2012). Besides, not even a single department at, or between, the local councils studied has been established to embed the Duty to Cooperate; neither has an officer been designated to broker relations, especially at the political level: *“There’s not a specific officer who’s being given responsibility for undertaking this cooperation work and there’s no new institutions being created.”* (Interview L12, local government, 2012).

Case Study Area Two: Cumbria

Cumbria is a non-metropolitan county comprising six districts. The District of Carlisle incorporates the largest settlement in the county - the City of Carlisle - with its wider urban and rural areas. The District borders Scotland to the north via two unitary council areas: Dumfries and Galloway, and the Scottish Borders. Carlisle's Cumbrian neighbour to the south, Eden, is the district in which the first Neighbourhood Plan in the country was adopted; this plan, for the upper Eden valley, was approved by 90 percent of voters and was commended by the Communities Secretary (DCLG, 2013a). Carlisle and Eden have many common strategic grounds on which to work – these include the impact of the M6 motorway, especially in terms of transport and employment sites, rural affairs and the function of Carlisle as a service hub for the area. In the wider context, the isolation and relative deprivation of Cumbria made its relationship with the Regional Assembly and the RSS procedures problematic. Local politicians interviewed believed these arrangements worked to the benefit of stronger localities, most notably the metropolitan ones: *“Cumbria, because it is so large and so sparsely populated...we found we were not being listened to”* (Interview L9, local politician, 2012). This section examines how the ‘usual suspects’ of regionalism are now responding to the ostensibly opposite localist paradigm of the Coalition government.

Sub-Regional Governance

In the *Local Government Act* (2000), local authorities were given the duty to prepare community strategies, in consultation with other stakeholders and the community, as an agreed basis on which to join up partners’ activities (Jones and Stewart, 2009; Geddes, Davies and Fuller, 2007). This was a responsibility which they often undertook through a Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) (FoE, 2005). These non-statutory LSPs were promoted by the GOs to provide an umbrella for a variety of partnership structures and to bring together different elements of the public, private and voluntary sectors (Pearce, et al., 2008; Jones and Stewart, 2009). In Cumbria, this was a remit in which the North West GO was considered by some of the interviewees to be particularly effective:

“we got a lot of help from the Government Office when that was in Manchester, we got an awful lot of help from them – more from them than we did from the regional government [Regional Assembly]; the Government Office were very good to us. It tailed off towards the end. We built up this Cumbria Strategic Partnership, we had a number of other offshoots – JoPO, one was called, which was Cumbria Joint Planning Officers Group” (Interview L9, local politician, 2012).

The Cumbria Strategic Partnership (CSP), which basically depended on the GO and Cumbria County Council, published its community strategy in 2008 (CSP, 2008a) simultaneously with a spatial strategy to deliver it: the *Cumbria Sub Regional Spatial Strategy* (CSP, 2008b). In other areas, where there was a better relationship with the Regional Assembly, the sub regional dimension of the RSS (see ODOM, 2004) was taken forward by the regional planning body (see, for example, Cheshire County Council, 2006). Although the *Cumbria Sub Regional Spatial Strategy* replicates its main policies from the RSS (for example in setting out locations for major, moderate and small scale

development), it appears to distance itself from that of a sub-regional stem of the regional plan; indeed, there is only one mention of the RSS in the document (see CSP, 2008b).

After the 2010 election, and with the termination of the grants and functions of LSPs, the CSP underwent a period of inactivity. It was then re-launched in 2012 as a consultative network called the Cumbria Partnership Forum (CPF). With the GO no longer in place, the county council reached out to new partners, most importantly the LEP. The CPF also includes social partners such as the Third Sector Network (CPF, 2012a). Despite major changes, the CPF has maintained Cumbria's strategies as its mobilizing vision: "Membership of the Full Forum is open to any organisation entity or body which is actively supporting the delivery of outcomes in the *Cumbria Community Strategy*." (CPF, 2012b).

Theoretically, membership of the LEP in the Cumbria Partnership Forum could help secure the weight of the business sector alongside other partners to deliver Cumbria's strategies but there are indications of an opposite move. Rather than putting forward a more inclusive and sustainable alternative for sub-regional governance, agreed by partners through consensus building, the dominance of the LEP and its growth discourse is mainly driven by a sense of economic urgency as well as a reaction to the marginalization of the former collaborative regional procedures. The LEP has understandably adopted a business plan (see Cumbria LEP, 2013) which verifies the argument of a planning officer that:

"if the Cumbria example is typical, then LEPs are focused on particular things, putting money into business development, skills development, things like that, and they haven't really got to grips with strategic spatial planning." (Interview R6, 2012).

While the interviews in Carlisle and Eden suggest a low profile for Cumbria's strategies, the pursuit of the LEP's priorities is facilitated by the expertise and connections that sub-regional networks provide. Some of these networks were developed in reaction to the dominance of the metropolitan authorities (especially Greater Manchester and Merseyside) in the former regional planning body. For example, an institutional legacy of the CSP, called the Cumbria Strategic Planning Partnership (CSPP) and comprising the county council, district councils and the Lake District National Park Authority, is still to be seen in the LEP's Planning and Housing Expert Group. CSPP is engaged in brokering cross-border agreements to relax planning and boost development. A CSPP representative, for example, suggested:

"the Chairman of what they call the Expert Group is a very large developer ... he says 106 Agreements are stopping him building to the extent he would like. He would like to see 106 Agreements throughout the whole of Cumbria which says these are the things that you can ask for, I would agree with him... The [Cumbria] Strategic [Planning] Partnership at the moment is looking at having a pro forma [setting out what] you could ask for in a development on a 106 Agreement" (Interview L9, local politician, 2012).

The Duty to Cooperate

The *Draft Carlisle District Local Plan (2015-2030)* has now passed the consultation stage and, at the time of the research, was due for submission to the Secretary of State in mid- 2014 (Carlisle City Council, 2013). Being in the production stage of the Core Strategy at the time of the interviews, the main concern of the Council was how the independent Inspector would assess the soundness of the document and its compliance with the newly introduced Duty to Cooperate. Carlisle has held officer-level meetings with Dumfries and Galloway and the Scottish Borders to discuss cross-boundary issues as part of its Duty to Cooperate. Whilst these meetings were a response to the new procedures, planning consultations with neighbouring Scottish community councils had been running for some time. Surprisingly, despite the positive signs of Carlisle's cross-national policy communication, the District's relationship with Eden has been negatively affected by financial and political factors since 2010. Eden has placed most of its services that used to be executed by Carlisle (such as waste

services, transport and highways services) out to contract and previous cooperation on environmental issues has also stopped. Also, since the political balance in Carlisle Council changed in the May 2012 election from a Conservative / Liberal Democrat majority to Labour, cooperation between Carlisle and Eden - which has a Conservative / Liberal Democrat majority - has reduced and Carlisle is currently working more closely with Allerdale and Copeland than with Eden. These interview findings were later verified by the Carlisle statement of the Duty to Cooperate; the statement involves three counts of joint policy development (conservation and land-use agreements) but Eden is not present (Carlisle City Council, 2013).

When interviewed, a local politician from Carlisle responded to the question of whether the Duty to Cooperate is making real impacts on the level of strategic cooperation with Eden: *"The short answer is no. Eden is more rural and we have quite a lot of rural areas within Carlisle, but I don't think it will, and I don't think it will for political reasons rather than anything else."* (Interview L9, 2012). Although there has been an agreement between Carlisle, Eden and South Lakeland to support growth on employment sites along the M6 Corridor (Eden District Council, 2012), there is a long way from ad-hoc to more holistic partnerships and from land-use to spatial deals.

The Core Strategy of Eden District was adopted in 2010. The Inspector's report at that time argued that the *'encouragement to cooperate'* had been fulfilled:

"In line with the encouragement given in PPS12 towards joint working and addressing cross boundary issues, I consider that such shared interests have been satisfactorily addressed by the Council through various mechanisms including; reciprocal consultation on DPDs, regular meetings of Cumbria-wide officers' groups...and through the joint production of key aspects of the evidence base" (Bussey, 2010, p.9).

This is similar to the cooperation evidence that Carlisle has produced in the absence of regional arrangements (see Carlisle City Council, 2013). One exception appears to be the preparation of a joint evidence base with other Cumbrian districts for travellers' accommodation needs. However, the county council will have the main role in the proposition of indicative allocations across different districts. While other contentious, but territorially essential, debates around housing policy / number exchanges, provision for a manageable number of inward investment sites and alike remain untouched, even in raised subjects such as traveller sites, the Duty to Cooperate:

"doesn't solve the problem of where people don't want to cooperate ... I want you to take my housing [numbers]; you're going to tell me you can't for very good infrastructure and sustainable development reasons. It's not a duty to agree and as a result of which you can pass through the Duty to Cooperate without confronting strategic planning issues." (Interview P7, professional body representative, 2012).

A 'duty to agree' was considered a strategic necessity by some planners, but it was also accepted that this would create political, and even judicial, complexities around 'who needs to agree with whom' and the limits and interests conflicts in such a duty. Regardless of how this duty would apply to local authorities on national borders, there would be a danger of sub-urbanizing some localities to the benefit of economically growing districts instead of moving activities to less advantaged areas. Without having a supra-local spatial plan and its governance context, a heavy handed approach might actually lead to the opposite of what it is designed for. Holistic agreements could set a proper consensus building context in which the losses of local authorities hosting unwanted development are balanced out with a range of incentives, whereas an unsystematic duty with an agreement obligation is bound to steer backlashes against strategic thinking.

Conclusion

This paper started with two core questions about the Coalition Governments' recent changes to the regional and sub-regional policy landscape in England: firstly, the extent to which the centrally re-

designed city-regional governance structures in the case study areas, primarily based around the introduction of LEPS, appear capable of territorial leadership and, secondly, whether the statutory ‘Duty to Cooperate’ appears capable of reconciling the ‘strategic’ with the ‘grass-roots’ at the local authority scale? Based on the empirical findings of the case study areas in North West England, this concluding section of the paper thus aims to address these questions and reflect on some more general points about institution building and ‘bottom-up’ territorial management.

Territorial leadership and the role of LEPS

The three LEPS in the case study areas that were investigated in the research are not currently involved in strategic planning as a broadly conceived ‘place making’ tool. Given they are in an evolving state and primarily designed to serve an explicit growth leadership agenda, this is perhaps not that surprising. However, in more broadly examining their capability in providing territorial governance at the sub-regional scale, one interesting aspect was that the three LEPS appeared to differ in their approaches to engagement and interaction with the wider governance context in the three sub-regions studied. This may sometimes have been based on the political reception given to the newcomers in the existing governance context, but it also appeared to reflect the level of leadership ambition and/or interest in longer-term strategic planning by the LEPS themselves. In summary, three typologies appear to emerge from the case studies:

(a) *Expedient leadership.* At the top of the hierarchy in terms of leadership roles is the LEP for Cumbria. Here, the evidence suggests a relatively high degree of receptiveness of the existing local authorities and sub-regional networks to the potential steering role of the LEP, particularly in the absence of any other obvious alternatives or rival sub-regional institutions. In this sub-region, support for the LEP comes from the County Council but also appears to originate from the remnants of the former local-central institution building in the pre-2010 Labour Government era as a local alternative to the earlier Regional Assembly-centred regionalism which was perceived as marginalizing the Cumbrian sub-region in favour of the metropolitan cores of Merseyside and Greater Manchester. The LEP appears to be taking on the role of an ‘expedient leader’ in this sub-region. Rather than seeking unified political ties with the new central Government vision, the main incentives for alliance building with the LEP, and the provision of expertise and relation brokering support for its agendas, include a common sense of regional marginalization under the previous administration and the need to address the current economic urgency. Since this typology is essentially based on responses to economic crisis and feelings of peripherality and exclusion, the ability of the LEP in taking on a sub-regional leadership role relies on extensive dialogue and consensus building with the other local stakeholders. At present, there appears to be much local support and the LEP might therefore be expected to further consolidate its leadership position. However this could, of course, still be challenged if the LEP is not ultimately seen to be delivering the desired economic growth on behalf of Cumbria.

(b) *Ambitious mediation.* In contrast to the picture of generally shared consensus in Cumbria, there is evidence from our empirical research that the Liverpool City Region, which used to be amongst the main regional policy actors in the RSS era, has descended somewhat into a number of internal conflicts post-regionalism. The introduction of the LEP as the only city regional network of localities has, however, potential support from some of the metropolitan authorities who were concerned with the stance that Liverpool City Council was seeking through its individualistic growth approach. While the socio-environmental profile of the LEP appear low, and the City Council seemed initially less inclined to play by the LEP rules, the wider government and business stakeholders retain vested interests in a stronger city-regional (rather than City Council) leadership. So, following an initial role in networking localities and business partners, the LEP has arguably performed a mobilizing and mediating role for more formal institution building and, mirroring earlier moves in Greater Manchester, the latest moves have been towards the establishment of a formal combined authority as a potentially

more effective way to create collective commitment to strategic decision-making and business certainty than would otherwise be the case if the only institutional development at the city-region scale was the creation of the LEP.

- (c) ***Political and functional rivalry.*** Despite the tendency of Cheshire and Warrington LEP to extend its network and play a stronger leadership role, the concurrent existence of the Mersey Dee Alliance (MDC) provides a rival sub-regional governance architecture and the MDA's lack of vocal support to the creation of the LEP further suggests their coexistence is not necessarily going to be a reciprocal and supportive one. Since both the LEP and MDC arguably owe their fortunes and misfortune to the same localist reforms, the LEP has not been able to take advantage of the extensive consensus building skills of the MDA and has struggled to exert a strong sense of direction within its boundaries and resolve its differences with some key local authorities. Nor is there yet evidence of much success in establishing cross-LEP ties with the Liverpool City Region or in building networks with its Welsh neighbours. Given the MDA's recent move towards the adoption of similar priorities to the LEP, it is likely that the governance landscape will be characterized by more rivalry in the future. Even if some kind of consensus-building deal is brokered to resolve political divisions through the central recognition and sponsorship of the MDA, functional rivalries will still be dominant, thus leaving the LEP in the role of a political and functional rival to alternative governance arrangements.

Cross-authority collaboration and the 'Duty-to-Cooperate'

Especially in cross-border areas, the introduction of more regular planning consultations, and more frequent dialogue between the various authorities, are important initial achievements as they open institutional gates for the gradual building of more holistic networks and higher levels of engagement. But our two cross-border cases in which such links were initiated by the Duty to Cooperate do not show such promising signs. The establishment of planning consultations between Carlisle and its Scottish counterparts was facilitated by a relatively neutral political context, but functional relations do not seem to be substantial enough to provide incentives for more ambitious steps. On the other hand, although there are more significant employment, housing and infrastructure ties between Cheshire West and Chester and its Welsh neighbours, these currently suffer from divisive cultural and political agendas either side of the English-Welsh territorial borders.

With an inability to provide incentives for, and overcome fundamental barriers to, building supra-local alliances and strategies, so far the main outcome of the statutory 'Duty to Cooperate' in the four local authorities studied has been the coordination of planning policies for the avoidance of conflictual decision-making. Beyond its limited performance to date, there are however reasons to argue the 'Duty to Cooperate' is proving to be an insufficiently comprehensive piece of legislation which is prone to 'lowest common denominator' outcomes. It represents a static and simplistic understanding of how planning polity and networks develop. Ignoring the fact that "*political accountability is demanding different things for different parts of a joint committee*" (Interview P7, professional society, 2012). All this is exacerbated by a decline in localities' access to the required level of cross-local negotiation skills, for example, through job cuts under public sector austerity programmes. There are also political forces at the community and central levels putting pressure on local planning authorities to be less outward looking.

Nevertheless, there is an increasing local need for the consensus building and conflict resolution skills of strategic planners for several reasons. One of these concerns the rescaling of decision making on inter-territorially contentious policy areas (such as future housing figures and locations, inward investment sites, and provision for gypsies / travelers) from the regional to local level. Secondly, central funding is being reduced and local authorities are having to tighten their belts, be more competitive and explore new sources of revenue all of which might trigger cross-border friction more readily. Thirdly, the bidding mechanism of some major funding schemes, especially in employment,

such as Enterprise Zones (see DCLG, 2011) and the Regional Growth Fund (see DBIS, 2013), as opposed to the formulaic approach, creates a difficult context for relationship building between local authority groupings: *"we have to speak direct to central government as part of a number of often competing consortia from across the country for a scarcer pot of funding"* (Interview L13, local government, 2012).

However, despite this context of increasing demand for skills, local authorities will have lost a third of their budget by 2015, slashing as much as 58% from their planning budgets between 2012 and 2014 (Taylor, Murdoch and Butler, 2013; Booth, 2013). So in probability:

"at the end of this process, which has only just started, the councils will be severely disabled because they will have had to lose an awful lot of capable staff so they won't be able to play the kind of leadership role in the future that they have done in the past" (Interview R7, regional body, 2012).

It is hard to imagine that a possible shift of strategic planners to the private sector will deliver the same quality of relation brokering services which would have been rooted in their daily engagement in planning politics within and across local authorities.

In a Ministerial Statement in 2013, the Secretary of State once more highlighted the government's discourse around transferring powers to local people and making the planning process more accessible to local communities (DCLG, 2013c). Although the government appears to be getting more wary of its wording, local authorities have now started grappling with the consequences of what they consider as unrealistic community expectations regarding planning freedoms under localism. Concerns were even evident in the interviews with Conservative councillors who tended to see this phenomenon as a result of ill-managed localism and hasty announcements:

"we've had quite a few announcements from the Coalition government which seem to be saying communities can basically do what they wish... the Coalition government make announcements ... but they didn't tell you how in the planning context you could come to that... there is a danger that people will feel they have more freedom than they actually do have... that is a difficulty in itself, because people think 'oh, just put a planning application in, it'll be granted', and then, when it isn't granted, it has to come to the Development Services Committee or whatever, they want to know why." (Interview L9, 2012).

It is not only developers and land owners that have been pitched against local authorities; had those putting forward their abstract ideas in Whitehall conducted detailed discussions with experienced local politicians and planning officers, they would have probably faced the unfortunate fact that: *"people tend to make representations opposing or objecting to development rather than supporting it"* (Interview L8, Conservative local politician, 2012). But, the *'muscular localism'* (see Wintour, 2012) of the Secretary of State wants local government to move against the wishes of communities by accelerating decision making on planning applications with a pro-development approach. Those councils that show a *'poor-quality'* or slow decision making record will have their planning powers handed over to the central Planning Inspectorate (Wintour, 2012).

On the other hand, community expectations from the three-way pressure on local authorities (central government, developers and landowners, and local nimbysism) to focus on internal priorities make it a political gamble for them to adopt a strategic approach in a time of economic hardship. So there is not much that local authorities can contribute in city-regional leadership or can offer in the fulfilment of the Duty to Cooperate, especially when some of their resources are engaged at the neighbourhood level to make sure *local* strategic priorities are taken on board:

"I know the people that I'm dealing with who are trying to do Neighbourhood Plans, they're not interested in strategic issues... the people in [neighbourhood A] are not even going to think about the people in [neighbourhood B] - two Neighbourhood Plans in our

district - because they want a Neighbourhood Plan because they want to say what they want to happen in their parish.” (Interview R6, local government, 2012).

Ultimately, the wider lessons of this paper could be considered in relation to the two basic tenets of the localism project: 'bottom-up' territorial management and city-regional leadership. Our empirical research highlights the very fact that, paradoxically, a genuine bottom-up management of space cannot be achieved through a purely self-help approach. Indeed it is, arguably even more than top-down system, dependent on public spending and, therefore, the comprehensive sponsorship of the state. The downscaling of strategic decisions to the local and neighbourhood levels increases the need for institutional, financial and intellectual resources at these levels. Even more planning freedoms would require stronger incentives to establish a community mandate for supra-local considerations. So, in order to prevent a crisis of strategic territorial management, it is inevitable to have an element of centralism in the context of 'austere localism'. But even this combination has proved largely ineffective in the case studies, leading to a tick box and lowest common denominator attitude by some localities to the 'Duty to Cooperate' and discouraging them from genuine involvement in supra-local affairs. As regards city-regional leadership, it is argued that building new institutions of governance, such as seen with the LEPS, might be effective in areas where established arrangements are failing to secure local prosperity, or local political rivalries and differences thwart the exercise of strategic governance. Otherwise, it will almost certainly be more appropriate, and cost effective, to persuade and better equip the existing networks to double their efforts in relation to addressing new priorities, rather than usher in further institutional churn and uncertainty in an attempt to build new alliances from scratch.

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