STRATEGIC-LOCAL TENSIONS UNDER THE ENGLISH PLANNING SYSTEM: RECONSIDERING THE ROLE OF VALUES IN SPATIAL PLANNING

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Abstract
Strategic-local tensions occur when there is conflict between the strategic objectives of central government, and the aspirations of local communities. Such tensions were common under the New Labour administration in England, when 'spatial planning' was promoted to deliver neoliberal supply-side solutions to housing needs. Interestingly, however, the Cambridge sub region experienced relatively limited tensions, despite having to deliver major housing growth. This paper argues that effective mediation of strategic-local tensions in the Cambridge sub region, can be attributed to a distinct set of values, in particular the concern for social equity on a sub-regional scale. However, it also demonstrates how these value choices were made within the context of central government's meta-governance framework, as well as local politicians' selective privileging of particular values. This affirms the need for developing 'situated' planning theory, which relates value choices to the contingent contexts in which spatial planning takes place.

Keywords: *Spatial planning; values; strategic-local tensions; England*

1. Introduction

More than two decades ago, Eric Reade (1987) observed that "[planners] devote much time and energy to urging 'co-ordination', and to discussing possible changes in administrative arrangements, at the cost of neglecting the analysis of *the purpose which planning is meant to achieve"* [author emphasis] (p. 157).

Arguably, the introduction of the 'spatial planning' approach in England during the early 2000s, also involved a similar preoccupation with coordination processes, at the expense of considering the normative purpose behind planning. 'Spatial planning' was constructed by the New Labour government as a more effective approach to planning, given its emphasis on stronger 'integration' through the creation of multi-stakeholder partnerships (Nadin 2007). Questions surrounding the purpose of planning were buried under a series of vague discourses, such as 'sustainable development' or 'sustainable communities'.

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In reality, spatial planning in England could not escape the question of values, since all partnership decisions were inevitably guided by a set of normative values. It is not surprising, then, that towards the end of the New Labour administration, more critical commentaries on spatial planning emerged, which highlighted the role of spatial planning in perpetuating neoliberal values, through its emphasis on competitiveness and a supply-side agenda to meet housing and infrastructure needs in the south of England (Allmendinger & Haughton 2012).

What this paper sets out to do, is to bring values back into the analysis of spatial planning. This is not an easy endeavour, however, since there has long been a reluctance to engage with the question of values in planning theory. Part of this reluctance stems from recognition of the oppressive capacity of homogenising models, which assume that particular values can be generalised across different places (Campbell 2006, pp.99–100). Another cause of hesitation is the perception that normative planning theory is too generic, with little relevance to the context-dependent nature of practical planning decisions (Sanyal 2002).

Nevertheless, these concerns could possibly be addressed through development of what is known as 'situated' planning theory (Alexander 2003; Watson 2008). This suggests that it is possible to theorise the role of values in planning, through 'case-based' contributions to theory which relate value choices to the contingent contexts in which planning takes (Alexander 2003, p. 180).

This paper attempts to develop a case-based analysis of the role of values in spatial planning, by focusing on the Cambridge sub region in England. Under the New Labour era, many sub regions experienced tensions in delivering the objectives of spatial planning. In particular, there were tensions between the *strategic* housing development objectives of central government, and the aspirations of *local* communities, a problem which Gallent (2008) referred to as 'strategic-local tensions'. Interestingly, however, the Cambridge sub region experienced relatively limited tensions, despite having to deliver major housing growth.

As will be argued later, successful mediation of strategic-local tensions can be attributed to a distinct set of values, in particular the concern for social equity on a sub-regional scale. In other words, it reflects a concern for *spatial justice* (Upton 2002, p. 259). However, the study also illustrates how these value choices were made within the context of central government's *meta-governance* framework, as well local politicians' *selective* privileging of particular values.

Though focused on the New Labour era, the findings in this paper are relevant to current planning reforms in England. Given the rhetorical emphasis on 'localist' planning, and the simultaneous attempt of central government to retain influence through the National Planning Policy Framework, it is likely that strategic-local tensions are likely to intensify. Under these changing circumstances, which values are going to take precedence in the making of planning decisions? By bringing in the

concepts of central meta-governance and local selectivity, this paper provides insights into the interaction between national and local contexts in shaping value choices, and what this implies for the manifestation of strategic-local tensions in different places.

2. Key concepts

2.1 Spatial planning: it's all about integration

The notion of spatial planning has been around for a while – it became common currency across Europe in the 1990s, especially following the publication of the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP). However, there has been much confusion over what spatial planning actually means (Albrechts 2006; Faludi 2002; Nadin & Duhr 2007). In some EU member states, spatial planning has been used as a shorthand reference to the *system* in each state or region for managing land use (Dühr et al. 2010, p.26). In other member states, spatial planning has been used to refer to an emergent approach to *coordinate* the spatial impacts of sectoral policies across the European Union (ibid).

With respect to the English planning system, the emergence of a spatial planning approach has been distinguished by its central emphasis on *integration* (Nadin 2007; Tewdwr-Jones et al. 2010, p.247). This spatial planning approach was formally introduced by the New Labour government through a national planning policy statement, which suggested that spatial planning

> "goes beyond traditional land use planning to bring together and integrate policies for the use and development of land with other policies and programmes which influence the nature of places and how they function." (ODPM 2005, para.30)

The emphasis on integration was accompanied by a specific narrative on the mechanisms by which integration would be achieved, namely through partnerships, networks and 'joining up'. In other words, the New Labour government appealed to the notion of joined-up governance, as the solution to the perceived crisis of the bureaucratic state and the fragmentation problems under New Right marketisation (Bevir 2005).

More specifically, the New Labour government encouraged local authorities to deliver spatial planning objectives through the establishment of Local Delivery Vehicles (LDVs). These partnerships were seen as more flexible networks, involving coordination across administrative boundaries and policy sectors.

2.2 Spatial planning under New Labour: all about meta-governance?

However, the emergence of such partnership approaches to spatial planning was subject to a range of criticisms. In particular, Allmendinger and Haughton (2009) regarded spatial planning as a *political* project of New Labour, in the sense that it

was used to push forward major housing growth and infrastructure investment, in the high-growth areas in southern England. As the authors argued, this was achieved by linking spatial planning to the vague objective of 'sustainable development'. On the surface, this suggested that spatial planning was a neutral activity concerned with balancing between economic, environmental and social needs to achieve sustainable development. In reality, this masked the government's pro-growth ideology (Cowell & Owens 2006), in other words its normative bias towards economic growth.

Building on the above critique, spatial planning under New Labour has been labelled as a form of 'meta-governance' (Allmendinger 2011; Brownill & Carpenter 2009). The notion of meta-governance suggests that the central state is involved in steering the conditions for local governance (Jessop 2002). Meta-governance may involve utilising a range of strategies for steering networks, including linking financial incentives to political priorities of the state, or influencing the decisions of networks through political persuasion or network framing (Sørensen 2006; Sørensen & Torfing 2007; Stoker 2000).

What the notion of meta-governance suggests is that spatial planning under New Labour was not a value-free activity. Instead, the state attempted to retain control over the outcomes of local partnership working, through an institutionalised interpretation of sustainable development, which selectively privileged pro-growth interests. It is within this context that spatial planning in many places was fraught with strategic-local tensions.

However, strategic-local tensions were not manifested to the same extent in every area across England: in some areas like the Oxford sub region, there were intense conflicts between development and anti-development interests; whereas in other areas like the Cambridge sub region, there were relatively limited tensions. How can we explain the variation of experiences under the same meta-governance context?

2.3 Interplay between national meta-governance and local selectivity

In response to this question, a conceptual framework is proposed in this paper to link the concept of *local selectivity* with the concept of meta-governance to explain value choices in different areas.

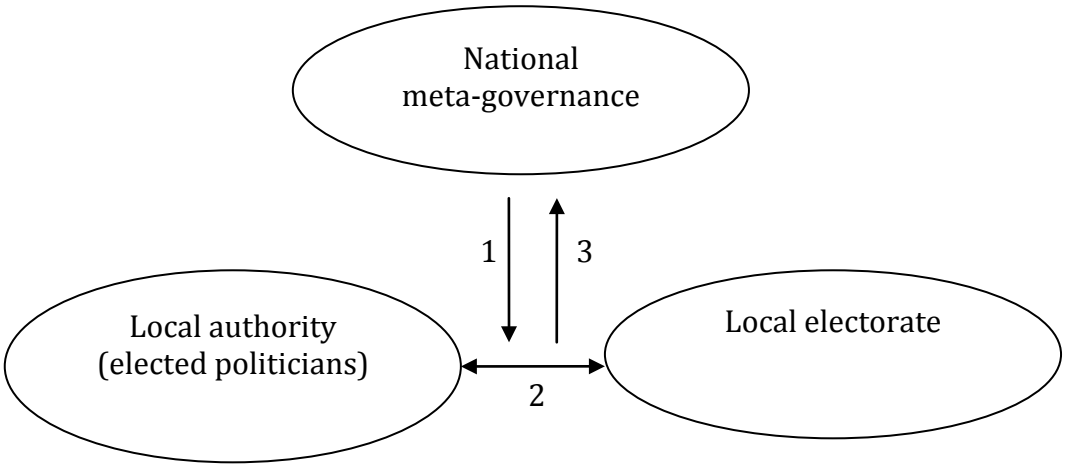
Significantly, the framework recognises that the selection of values is exercised not only at the national level through meta-governance, but also at the level of the local state. Local selectivity has been relatively under-researched (Jonas et al. 2004); likewise, there has been limited research on the role of local politicians as 'local metagovernors' (Sorensen, 2006).

What the framework suggests is that there is a two-way interaction between the values privileged by the national state, and the values privileged by elected politicians at the local level. Clearly, the value choices of local politicians are shaped by the opportunities and constraints inscribed in the national framework. However,

they are simultaneously shaped by the interaction between politicians and their electorate, where politicians need to appeal selectively to particular values to secure normative legitimisation from their electorate.

The conceptual framework is shown in Figure 1 below:

Figure 1: Interaction between national meta-governance and local selectivity



The framework suggests three pathways of interaction between national and local actors, including:

1: National state privileges particular values through establishing a meta-governance framework

2: Elected politicians appeal selectively to particular values to secure legitimacy from their electorate; local electorate respond according to their perceptions of the context

3: Local authorities (elected politicians) respond strategically to the meta-governance framework of the national state

This framework allows us to relate value choices made in a particular locality, with the strategic context which actors are embedded in. Additionally, what the framework suggests is that the extent to which strategic-local tensions are manifested, will depend very much on the specific interactions between pathways 1-3 in different places. This provides us with the conceptual tools to interpret how strategic-local tensions were mediated in the case of the Cambridge sub region, which is presented in the next section.

3. Methodology and case study

In this section, we set out to uncover how value choices have been made in relation to spatial planning in the Cambridge sub region. The Cambridge sub region is located in the East of England (see Figure 2), and the sub region is largely defined on the basis of five local authorities within Cambridgeshire County, including the historic City of Cambridge, surrounded completely by the rural district of South Cambridgeshire, as well as three rural districts adjacent to South Cambridgeshire (see Figure 3).

Figure 2: Location of the Cambridge sub region in England

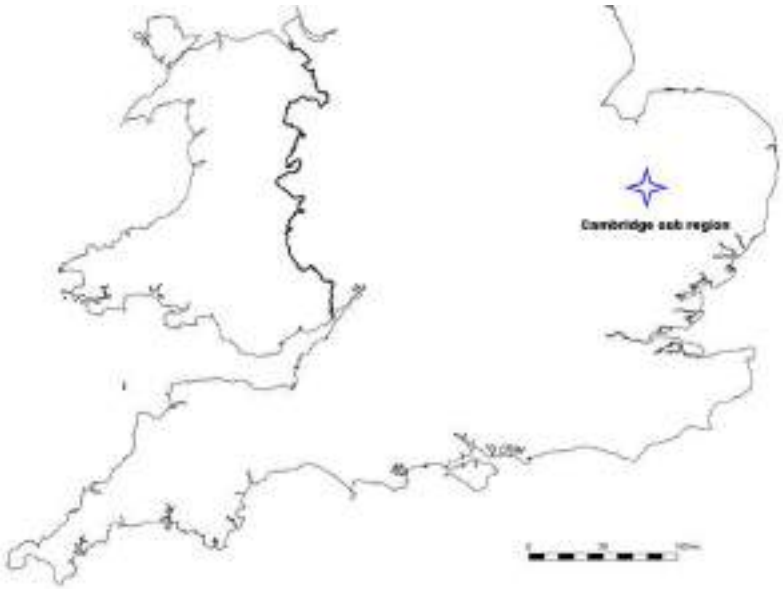


Figure 3: The five local authorities comprising the Cambridge sub region

1. Cambridge
2.South Cambridgeshire
3. Huntingdonshire
4. Fenland
5. East Cambridgeshire

The Cambridge sub region has been experiencing rapid household growth over the last decade, especially an influx of 'key workers' associated with research activities at the University of Cambridge and the high-technology businesses at the Cambridge Science Park. It is thus an interesting case to explore the values underpinning spatial planning, since it involves a strong entrepreneurial economy, co-existing with a historic environment which is sensitive to development pressures.

The empirical research in this case study is based on semi-structured interviews with planners, politicians and members of governance partnerships in the Cambridge sub region. It also draws on sub regional and local plans, planning studies and minutes of partnership meetings.

The case study spans a period of roughly ten years, starting from around 2001 when the spatial planning reforms were first initiated by the New Labour government, and ending in 2010, when the New Labour government was replaced by the Liberal-Conservative coalition government, thus bringing an end to the previous round of reforms.

3.1 Background: Inter-authority relations in the Cambridge sub region

Historically, the relations between Cambridge City and its immediate rural hinterland, South Cambridgeshire, has been uneasy. In the past, Conservative councillors in South Cambridgeshire District were often hostile to the pro-growth agenda of successive Labour and Liberal Democrat councillors in Cambridge City (While et al. 2004, p.289), which resulted in a series of high-profile conflicts over development proposals (Brindley et al. 1996).

However, there was a major reversal in the sub regional planning strategy upon the third review of the Cambridgeshire Structure Plan in the early 2000s. This strategy proposed major housing growth in and around Cambridge City, including three new urban extensions at the edge of the City, which would incur upon green belt land within South Cambridgeshire District, and a freestanding new town in South Cambridgeshire, which would be linked to the city by public transport.

Arguably, a range of values underpinned the change in the sub regional strategy. On one hand, change was driven by a 'competitiveness' logic, in other words a concern to meet the social reproduction needs of the labour force, through the provision of affordable housing and social infrastructure near to major employment sites. In turn, this concern was driven by a fear of losing out in the globally competitive economy. As a senior officer involved in strategic planning explained:

> "I think there was something along the lines that, well, we better all stick together guys, otherwise the growth will go away… so there was a bit of ganging together in adversity. There was a desire for all of the local authorities to say, right, we're pro-growth, it's hugely important to the economy, the quality of life in this area, therefore we want to plan together where that growth is going to go." (Interview, strategic planning officer)

On the other hand, the change in the growth strategy was also justified from the perspective of social equity:

> "We were realising that we were becoming a city for the rich, and for the very poor… you either had a council house, or you were rich. And that was it. Everybody else had to go way out somewhere, way outside the green belt, and we were becoming very, very frustrated and worried about this. We just realised we had to do a big green belt review and allocate some big sites." (Interview, Cambridge City councillor)

Thus the key principle underpinning the third Structure Plan adopted in 2003, was to improve the quality of life for all citizens in the sub region through a better balance between jobs and houses, in the form of major housing growth at the edge of Cambridge, close to major employment sites.

3.2 Changes to the national context for planning

Around the same time as the Cambridge sub region was reviewing its Structure Plan strategy, major changes were taking place in terms of the national context for planning. In 2003, the New Labour government published a national framework for planning in England, widely known as the 'Sustainable Communities Plan' (ODPM 2003). Though not a national spatial plan, the framework indicated the government's strategy for coordinating investment in targeted areas in the country. In particular, the Plan highlighted four major 'Growth Areas', one of which was the London-Stansted-Cambridge growth corridor.

Central government encouraged the establishment of Local Delivery Vehicles (LDVs) in the growth areas, which would provide the structures for coordinating delivery of housing and infrastructure, as well as coordinating bids to the new funding mechanism, which was initially known as the Growth Area Fund (GAF), and subsequently known as the Housing Growth Fund (HGF).

The introduction of this funding mechanism represented a major incentive for delivering new housing. A total of £164m was made available for he first round of GAF (2003-6); a total of £235m was made available in the second round (2006-8); and in the third and final round of funding (2008-2011), a total of £832m was available.

Significantly, these funds were earmarked for areas which were prepared to deliver major housing growth through a partnership approach. According to the guidance issued to all the Growth Area local authorities, the first and foremost criteria for appraising the bids to growth funds was the net addition to housing delivery (DCLG 2008) (criteria 1). In addition, the bids were assessed according to the robustness of local delivery mechanisms and partnership arrangements, meaning growth partnerships had to demonstrate high level of engagement and 'buy in' from major partners (criteria 2).

It is against this background of changes that we can understand the decision of partners in the Cambridge sub region to set up a joint delivery vehicle, known as Cambridgeshire Horizons. The process of setting up the partnership, however, was not short of tensions. Clearly, Cambridge City and South Cambridgeshire District could see the massive benefits of joining up to deliver the urban extensions and new town, since the government's growth funding represented a major stream of infrastructure investment which they had long been hoping for. Theoretically then, the local delivery vehicle could have been established based on partnership working between these two districts alone. And yet, when Cambridgeshire Horizons was created in 2004, the other three districts were also represented on the partnership.

What happened was that the 'outer' districts, in other words the three rural districts of East Cambridgeshire, Fenland and Huntingdonshire, lobbied hard for their representation on the partnership. They were concerned that a partnership based on the City and South Cambridgeshire alone, would suck up all the resources available from government, and leave the other districts struggling to deliver new development. These outer districts made their case by emphasising their interdependency with the urban core. They argued that their role as part of the travel-to-work area of the Cambridge economy, meant that many people who worked in the City were dependent on affordable housing in the market towns in the rural districts, and hence, it would only be fair for the outer districts to receive a share of growth funding to develop new homes and infrastructure.

Although initially reluctant, the 'inner' districts of Cambridge and South Cambridgeshire eventually agreed on the grounds of fairness:

> "It's important that we work with the market towns in other districts, and not only ourselves… it's absolutely right that places like St Neots and Huntingdon also get some money. The original concept was to spend the funds just for the major growth sites, but I think the others argued the case very well that we need to work together, that we need to look at the needs across the county." (Interview, Cambridge City councillor)

Thus, the final decision to establish the joint Delivery Vehicle based on all of the urban and rural districts in Cambridgeshire, was driven by a desire to address the needs across a wider geographical area. In other words, it was underpinned by a concern for spatial equity at the sub regional scale.

3.3 Implementation of the growth strategy

When it came to the actual implementation of the growth sites, a remarkable degree of unanimity was observed, both in terms of the relationship between the local authorities, and the relationship between developers and the local electorate. How do we explain the absence of political discord?

Again, it appears that values played an important role in the mediation of tensions at the implementation stage. First and foremost, the key decisions made at the implementation stage, including the prioritisation of housing growth funds, and the assessment of proposals submitted by developers, reflected the endurance of values and principles agreed at the plan-making stage.

When asked about the logic underpinning the spending programme for growth funds allocated to the sub region, interviewees repeatedly emphasised how the spatial strategy set out in the 2003 Structure Plan, was deeply embedded in the consciousness of all partners, such that everyone agreed that the use of growth funds was to be based on the vision set out in that strategy. The key principle, as we saw earlier, was to improve the quality of life in the sub region through a better balance between jobs and houses, to be achieved through major housing growth at the edge of Cambridge, adjacent to key employment sites. Thus, a major portion of growth funds were targeted at delivering the Cambridge urban extensions and new town in South Cambridgeshire.

At times, the outer districts wanted a greater share of the resources, but they also understood that they needed to respect the spatial strategy which had been agreed:

> "Looking back there was a remarkable degree of unanimity, which followed on from the Structure Plan strategy. We could hardly complain that a lot of money was going into developing Cambridge, because all of us had agreed that Cambridge needs to consume a bit more of its own smoke." (Interview, Huntingdonshire District planner)

The absence of tensions between the local authorities, however, is only one part of the story. The plan to deliver major housing growth on green belt land, with an impact on the historic character of the City, would certainly have been controversial in the eyes of the public. How can we explain then, that there was relatively limited opposition from the public, when major housing developments were actually proposed at the edge of Cambridge?

This draws our attention to how values played an important role in the interaction between local politicians and their electorate. The task of convincing the public about the need for housing growth was no easy one, since years of underinvestment in transport and social infrastructure meant that the public did not have a strong appetite for more houses to be built in and around Cambridge.

However, politicians framed the strategy for growth in a way that would be palatable to the electorate, by anchoring growth to local people's principal concern with housing affordability. In particular, politicians persuaded the public of the need for delivering the major growth sites, by suggesting that inaction would lead to difficulties for people's children to live in the same area in future, due to worsening housing affordability. Implicitly, these politicians appealed to the value of inter-generational equity The consequences of restricting housing supply were therefore relevant to the long-term well-being of families in the Cambridge area:

> "… if we didn't have growth, you wouldn't have a place for your daughter or son to live close to you… where is my family going to live? Have they got to live 40 miles away because there's no affordable housing? I think that was the point we pushed quite hard on… if you don't have growth that's what is going to happen to your family." (Interview, Cambridgeshire County councillor)

In addition, politicians managed to convince local people based on the promise that growth would be accompanied by investment in relevant infrastructure:

> "The public accepted that [growth] was the right way forward, provided that – and that was an important proviso – that there was infrastructure to support additional homes." (Interview, Cambridgeshire County councillor)

A similar view was articulated by developers, who believed that the promise of enhancing quality of life in the area was a key factor in achieving public consensus:

> "…..the public had enough confidence that elected politicians had the ability to ensure that better standards were enforced on these new developments" (Interview, urban extension developer)

Most importantly perhaps, these promises were not just empty promises, but they were actually deliverable given the substantial amount of growth funds which Cambridgeshire Horizons secured from central government. With these funds, not only were the local authorities able to deliver essential infrastructure *upfront*, including transport infrastructure, schools and community centres at the Cambridge Southern Fringe urban extension, they were also able to take a further step forward, through developing a framework for building sustainable communities, known as the Cambridghesire Quality Charter.

Although the Quality Charter is not a statutory document, it has been endorsed by both the local authorities and the developers for the major growth sites What the framework does is that it encourages partners to look beyond the planning system, by highlighting issues which can be addressed through the actions of partners across a range of sectors. For example, this Charter has encouraged the City, South Cambridgeshire District and Cambridgeshire County Council to create a joint Community Services and Infrastructure Group (CSIG), which coordinates the planning and delivery of *community* infrastructure and services across the growth sites. What this means is that growth is not just about delivering houses and physical infrastructure, but also about provision of a range of community services which are integral to the development of *sustainable communities*.

So it was the selective appeal to values by local politicians to secure legitimacy from their electorate, together with effective targeting of resources to deliver the promise of sustainable communities, which explain why political tensions were mediated during implementation of the major growth proposals.

Clearly, the values which politicians appealed to were not the only ones which mattered to local people. It would be fairly reasonable to suggest that some people also valued the principle of environmental sustainability, and hence would be opposed to creating urban extensions on green belt land. Nevertheless, local politicians attempted to legitimise their preferred growth strategy through a *selective* appeal to particular values, which resonated with the principal concerns of their electorate at that particular moment in time.

4. Concluding thoughts: the need for *situated* planning theory

This paper set out to demonstrate the role of values in spatial planning. The findings highlighted that the mediation of strategic-local tensions in the Cambridge sub region, was at least partly explained by the appeal to *relational* understandings of justice (Campbell 2006). This included appealing to the need for affordable housing, for people living across the wider sub region (spatial justice), and the need for affordable housing for the younger generation (inter-generational justice). These relational understandings of justice resonated with the concerns of the local electorate, which explains why resistance to major growth proposals was relatively limited in the case study area.

But the findings also illustrate how the national meta-governance *contex*t shapes the strategies adopted by local politicians. Given the privileging of high-growth economies through the spatial planning agenda of New Labour, the politicians in the Cambridge sub region were more capable of achieving success by positioning the sub region as a major contributor to competitiveness of the regional and national economy, to match the selectivities inscribed in the meta-governance context and thus tap into financial resources from the centre. Indeed, such strategic positioning enabled the Cambridge sub regional partnership to secure substantial resources for the actual delivery of affordable housing and community infrastructure. This, in turn, reinforced the confidence of the electorate of the possibility of delivering sustainable communities, and hence contributed to the relative absence of tensions.

Returning to the problem raised in the beginning of this paper, it is important for planning theory to engage with the question of values, in order to provide a satisfactory account of the complexities of spatial planning. This is not to suggest an abstracted theorisation of values. As Sanyal (2002) and Alexander (2003) have pointed out, normative theories of planning often suffer from the problem of not being able to take into account the role of context and how that leads to differentiation in practice. This paper echoes their view of the need for *situated* planning theory, which pays attention to normative issues, but which is also sensitive to the context in which such values are deployed. This paper has contributed by drawing on the concepts of meta-governance and selectivity, to illustrate how value choices in spatial planning processes are shaped by the national meta-governance context, as well as the selection of values within local political contexts.

The concepts of meta-governance and selectivity are indeed relevant to the current planning context in England, where the shift towards a more localist approach to planning has resulted in the creation of a new sub-local tier of neighbourhood planning. Within this changed context, local authorities are expected to play a role in overseeing the coordination of multiple neighbourhood plans, to ensure consistency with local plans. Simultaneously, local authorities are also expected to cooperate with their neighbours at the supra-local level, to ensure consistency with the objectives in the national planning policy framework.

This indicates the possibility of an emergent form of interaction between national meta-governance and local selectivity, where local politicians simultaneously engage with the selectivities in the national planning framework, while attempting to meta-govern sub-local neighbourhood governance processes.

Going back to the conceptual framework proposed in the beginning of this paper, we can see how an appreciation of the interaction between national meta-governance and local selectivity is crucial to our understanding of the tensions which emerge in particular places. Clearly, the three interactive pathways proposed in the framework are open to change: for example, the perceptions of the electorate may shift under changing socio-economic conditions. Similarly, values privileged by the national state will change under the election of a new government, while local selection of values will change when new politicians are elected into local government.

Whether strategic-local tensions are effectively mediated or not under the new planning context, will depend on how values are deployed by local politicians in their role as 'local meta-governors'. This suggests an interesting area for further research, to uncover how values are deployed under a changing socio-political context, to add to the development of situated planning theory.

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