

The London School of Economics and Political Science

**Strategic spatial planning – a case study from the Greater
South East of England**

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Declaration

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to investigate, through the method of a case-study at two levels (development site and sub-region), the historical development of and current mechanisms used to deliver strategic spatial planning (large scale housing development). The theoretical underpinnings of strategic spatial planning are examined, including some key planning paradigms such as the 'green belt', 'city regions' and 'spatial planning'. The key dichotomy of current policy – the 'desire to devolve' through localism and the counteracting 'centralising tendency' as expressed through urban containment policy is then discussed. The substantive element of the research is an examination of these policies in practice, through a case-study at two levels. The first level of the case study is a site-level forensic examination of the West of Stevenage development, first put forward in the early 1990s but which is currently in abeyance without a single home having been built. The second level of the case study is a sub-regional study of the issues facing those with tasked with implementing strategic spatial planning across three very different local authorities – Stevenage, Luton and North Hertfordshire. This element of the research has been carried out largely through the medium of qualitative interviews with senior planning professionals, senior local politicians and a senior executive at a Local Enterprise Partnership. One significant piece of quantitative research is also presented in the research: a highly accurate, Great Britain wide survey of land use based on up to date Ordnance Survey data. The research concludes by offering five suggestions to improve strategic spatial planning in a growth area like the wider South East of England (four practical, policy-related steps and one theoretical reconceptualising of the discipline).

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Chapter 1

Purpose and aims of research

1.1: Overview of research

This thesis examines current approaches, placed within their historical contexts, to what has consistently been one of the most challenging aspects of urban policy in England: strategic spatial planning, through the medium of a case-study. This Chapter begins by examining the main theoretical concepts necessary for an understanding of strategic spatial planning (in the context of this research taken to mean significant housing development, along with associated infrastructure). The first of these broad concepts is the role of ‘planning paradigms’, such as the green belt, city regions and spatial planning within the ‘doctrine’ of the discipline. The overarching political and economic framework within which strategic spatial planning operates is then discussed, through the framing devices of neoliberal planning and ‘spatial liberalism’, which are more helpful concepts in an urban context than the catch-all container of neoliberalism. Important spatial manifestations of neoliberal planning, principally ‘Functional Economic Areas’ (FEAs) and ‘city regions’, characterised by Allmendinger and Haughton (2009) as ‘soft spaces’ with fuzzy boundaries are introduced before the core sections of the Chapter present the key dichotomy of the research: the incompatible political ideals of localism (‘the desire to devolve’) and urban containment (‘the centralising tendency’). Short sections on power, planning and vested interests and central-local relations in the context of strategic spatial planning complete the theoretical introduction to the research. The Chapter concludes by acquainting the reader with the substantive subject of the research: the role of strategic spatial planning in the housing question, and the critical, but often neglected, issue of the infrastructure necessary to support significant new development.

Chapter 2 details the Methods employed in the research, employing the straightforward

and standard format of 'Subjects and Procedures'. In essence, the research is a qualitative, interview based study of a case-study at two levels: a site-level study of a proposed greenfield development more than two decades in the making (and which has yet to see a spadeful of earth turned or a brick laid), and the wider sub-regional context of which the site forms but one part of the strategic spatial planning puzzle. After detailing the processes used to select the case study and the interview participants, the 'Measures' section sets out the practicalities of the interview process and the procedures followed to ensure the ethical integrity of the research, including obtaining consent to record and transcribe the interviews and the measures taken to preserve the appropriate level of anonymity of the participants. This Chapter concludes by introducing the one significant piece of quantitative analysis of the research: a highly accurate, Great Britain wide survey of land use using Ordnance Survey data. One of the principal weapons of the anti-development lobby is the claim that Britain is in danger of being 'concreted over' if, for example, green belt policy is in any way relaxed. The results of this survey are presented in Chapter 6, 'Discussion and Conclusions' and provide a firm rejoinder to these claims.

Chapter 3 is an in-depth analysis of the historical development and current state of strategic spatial planning, with a particular focus on what has come to be known as the 'wider South East' or the 'Greater South East'. After tracing the various mechanisms of regional planning including SERPLAN, Growth Areas and the rise and fall of New Labour's byzantine apparatus of regional governance, the principal policies for delivering strategic spatial planning under the current Conservative government are analysed. These include, as elements of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), the 'duty to co-operate', and the New Homes Bonus. The Chapter closes by discussing the other two principal policies which impinge on strategic spatial planning, Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) and the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL).

Chapter 4 introduces the case study material at the site level - the West of Stevenage development - through a forensic analysis of a range of documents including official reports,

council committee minutes, local and national newspaper articles, and public representations to the various Planning Inquiries. The purpose of this Chapter is to link the more traditional, academic desk based analysis with the day-to-day materials of planning in practice. Issues connected with urban containment, housing targets, co-operation across local authority boundaries and the thorny issue of infrastructure provision form the core of this Chapter.

Chapter 5 moves to the sub-regional level, examining the strategic housing issues faced by planners, local politicians and LEP executives in three contrasting authorities: Stevenage, Luton and North Hertfordshire. This Chapter is where the bulk of the interview material is introduced and analysed and again addresses the central issues of cross-boundary co-operation, housing targets, green belt reviews and infrastructure provision. In addition, a number of the moral, ethical and professional issues faced by those tasked with delivering strategic urban policy, which are difficult to detect from secondary sources alone, are analysed, with their implications for the discipline of planning. This Chapter closes with a short examination of a different kind of strategic spatial planning in the Cambridge sub-region.

Finally, Chapter 6 recapitulates the most significant finding of the study, namely that a curious inversion of roles seems to have occurred, with politicians emphasising the rational, technical aspects of strategic spatial planning, and the professional planners stressing the highly political, people-centred nature of the discipline. It is widely recognised that the current system of strategic spatial planning has many flaws and so the core sections of this Chapter focus on five steps, including four substantive policy changes and one plea for a theoretical reappraisal of the discipline. After noting the main limitations of the research, the thesis closes with a 'big-picture' view of main issues connected with strategic spatial planning in England.

'Strategic spatial planning': each of these three words carries significant meaning. 'Strategic' implies development (principally residential – the focus of this thesis – but can also mean commercial) of a certain scale that, crucially, requires new or additional infrastructure (an important theme further developed below) to support it. 'Spatial', when associated with

‘strategic’, signifies activities which do not necessarily fit neatly within traditional boundaries, whether they be administrative (e.g. local authorities), statistical (e.g. Census units) or even functional (e.g. travel-to-work areas). Finally, ‘planning’, even when taken as a stand-alone concept, connotes a plethora of meanings across a range of contexts. When combined with ‘spatial’, ‘planning’, is usually understood as a particular way of doing planning, with an associated ideology. Typically, governments have approached the problem of strategic spatial planning in one of two ways: ‘top down’ or ‘bottom up’. The current trend is very much ‘bottom up’ or at least that is what the government would like to have us believe, having replaced what was, under the previous Labour administration, very much a ‘top down’ system.

The incoming Conservative-led coalition government’s narratives of the ‘Big Society’ and ‘localism’ trumpeted a reversal of top-down, centralizing tendencies (Painter, 2013: 7). In terms of ‘larger than local’ or strategic spatial planning, this meant the (eventual) replacement of regional governance with a deregulated system of sub-regional groupings (principally Local Enterprise Partnerships, ‘city-regions’ and entities like the ‘Northern Powerhouse’, which has necessarily increased the potential for increased asymmetry (Deas, 2013: 67). Although Rogerson (2011) argues that, “the Government have sensibly resisted calls to over-prescribe what strategic planning frameworks should look like in different places”, Featherstone et al (2012: 178) argue that both Labour and coalition governments have failed to recognise these asymmetries, preferring instead a simplistic view of localities as, “discrete and unitary entities that are somehow awaiting governance.” In the planning lexicon, ‘strategic’ has often been substituted for ‘larger than local’. The phrase came into common currency through a letter produced by the RTPI in August 2010 and co-signed by 28 other groups which gained front page coverage in the Financial Times (Pickard, 2010) and a slot on Radio 4’s *Today* programme (BBC, 2010). The letter defines ‘larger than local’ planning as, “democratic decision-making that is larger than the local, but smaller than the national” - a phrase borrowed verbatim from a speech given to the Local Government Association by the then Planning Minister Greg Clark in July 2010. Given the huge gulf – across spatial, social, economic, and governance domains – between the national and the local, this definition is not especially helpful or insightful. It

does, though, have the virtue of simplicity, and a theme that will be developed throughout this work is the importance of easy-to-grasp concepts which can be deployed by the various vested interests across the principal, very public, battlegrounds – the print, online and visual/audio media. Strategic spatial planning is a process that, on one level, is very much played out ‘on the ground’ in the white heat of argument, counter-argument and bitter enmity – a fact that was grasped early on in the research.

As noted above, ‘spatial planning’ is a loaded concept, upon which Louis Albrechts (2004, 2006) and Vincent Nadin (2007), in particular, have written extensively. It is helpful to set out Albrechts’ (2015: 511) most recent views on what strategic planning entails:

Strategic planning is defined as: a sociospatial process through which a range of people in diverse institutional relations and positions come together to design planmaking processes and develop contents and strategies for the management of spatial change; an opportunity for constructing new ideas and processes that can carry them forward; collective efforts to reimagine a city, urban region, or region and to translate the outcome into priorities for area investment, conservation measures, strategic infrastructure investments, and principles of land-use regulation...Defined in these ways strategic spatial planning is as much about process, institutional design, and mobilization as it is about the development of substantive theories.

A number of key themes which run throughout this research are suggested in this interpretation of strategic spatial planning. The first of these is the multi-scalar institutional nature of the process. In the context of planning in England, this has come to be known as ‘central-local relations.’ Also made explicit is the expectation that practitioners will seek out and establish partnerships with a wide range of other stakeholders. Albrechts then enumerates some of the activities such cross-scalar, partnership-based groups will undertake, including land-use regulation and infrastructure investment. In the context of housing development this means financing ‘fixed assets’ such as schools, healthcare facilities and adequate network infrastructure (principally broadband, sewage and transport links). Due to the symbiotic dependencies between ‘fixed’ infrastructure and the inherently mobile and ‘fluid’ nature of networks (whether they carry electronic data, waste-water or the quotidian flows of commuters), this issue is one of the most contested aspects of strategic spatial planning.

Finally, Albrechts' definition ends by alluding to the contested, context- and place-specific nature of strategic spatial planning. However, the single most important idea to take from Albrechts' work (over several decades) on strategic spatial planning is that it is an explicitly normative concept, as opposed to more traditional, socio-technical forms of planning (e.g. Albrechts, 1999, 2003, 2015).

Although Albrechts is one of the outstanding theorists of strategic spatial planning, his perspective is an explicitly pan-European one, and as the concept has come to take on a particular set of meanings in England, Vincent Nadin's work is helpful in this context. He identified two important features specific to the English context, firstly, that "the reality of spatial planning will be built and defined in practice through the creation of regional spatial strategies" (Nadin, 2007: 44), and, secondly, the focus on *outputs* (e.g. in terms of housing numbers) rather than *outcomes* (e.g. in terms of housing affordability or economic growth) (Nadin, 2007: 48; Cullingworth and Nadin, 2006: 242-43). A less positive reading of spatial planning in the English context is provided by Allmendinger and Haughton (2012: 98), who explicitly categorise the concept as, "an unstable fix and only ever likely to be a temporary phenomenon". They argue that these characteristics make spatial planning similar to "much of the other apparatus of neoliberal governance" (*ibid.*). One of the traits of such apparatuses, they argue, is that, "genuine oppositional political debate [is] often shifted to arenas outside the apparatus of mainstream consensus-building within planning (*ibid.*), with the result that those unhappy with the planning system are increasingly turning to mechanisms outside the system, principally judicial review, for redress. This process forms an important element of the case-study, the proposed Stevenage West development.

According to Allmendinger and Haughton, the "carefully stage-managed processes" of strategic spatial planning (2012: 90) leave disgruntled communities and individuals little choice but to turn to judicial review as a way of being 'heard' (2012: 98). This apparent failure raises the (oft-asked but yet to be satisfactorily answered) question of what planning is meant to achieve? For many decades (at least since the Planning Act 1968), it has been recognised

that the activity of planning should not be undertaken in isolation from the economic and social objectives which it was supposed to serve. More recently, increasing concern with the environmental impacts of development has meant that 'sustainability' has been added to the economic and social factors to be weighed when making planning decisions of strategic spatial importance. However, the inability of the planning system in England to adequately address the interrelationships between these three goals has resulted in fierce criticism, particularly in its perceived failure to make the correct links between housing supply and demand signals.

1.2: Paradigms and planning doctrine

Of central importance to the persistence of concepts such as, listed in chronological order, the green belt, the city region, and spatial planning, are their acceptance as 'paradigms' within the overarching 'doctrine' of the activity of planning. As Healey and Williams (1993: 712) note, the planning and containment of Greater London has been managed as much by "a collective ideology or spatial planning doctrine...as by formally coordinated policies." 'Paradigm' is used here in the Kuhnian sense (i.e. "universally recognised scientific achievements that for a time provide model problems and solutions to a community of practitioners" (Kuhn, 1970: viii). Clearly, the word 'scientific' needs to be substituted for 'planning' to bear a fuller relation to the topics at hand, and, as Therborn (2011: 272) notes, social scientific urban research has been "driven by a hegemonic conception, a paradigm in a loose, not-quite-Kuhnian sense." On the other hand, Harvey (1969: 47), argues that social and natural sciences should be treated in the same way since, "the demand for methodological differentiation between natural science and the social sciences and history on the grounds of major conceptual differences cannot be sustained."

Kuhn himself (1970: 15) notes that "it remains an open question what parts of social science have yet acquired such paradigms at all...the road to a firm research consensus is extraordinarily arduous." To 'doctrine', the Oxford English Dictionary applies the following definition: "a body or system of principles or tenets; a doctrinal or theoretical system; a theory;

a science, or department of knowledge” (Simpson et al, 1989). Lakatos (1974, as cited in Faludi and van der Valk, 1994: 23) makes a distinction between paradigms with negative and positive heuristics; those paradigms with negative heuristics do not allow the ‘hard core’ of the research programme to change, whereas paradigms with positive heuristics encourage the development of a ‘protective belt’ of theories and models which may undergo some modification over time. We may conclude that green belt policy is a paradigm with positive heuristics, since its purposes have been modified several times since its inception. Faludi (1999: 340) asks “whether European planning is in a ‘pre-doctrinal’ situation? The potential for doctrine seems to be there.” It seems indubitable, though, that urban containment in England has reached the status of established doctrine (Hall, 1973). Friedmann and Weaver (1979: 2) emphasise the importance of tracing the important historical developments of regional planning since this

will help to throw [doctrinal development]...into relief by revealing its origins, the options that were received, the influence of circumstantial events, alternative formulations that were neglected, and the new forms of doctrine that are beginning to emerge.

Foley (1963: viii) detects the development of planning doctrine in England in Abercrombie’s post-war plans produced for London, which contained “the influence of certain ideas, the crystallization of a reinforcing web of these ideas into doctrine, and the need to review this doctrine in the light of ongoing experience.” He explains this in terms of the way that the Greater London Plan converted “disparate and utopian” ideals into “more specific, graspable spatial patterns and development goals (ibid.: 52). Jacqueline Tyrwhitt (1948: 592-93) expands on this theme, attributing much of the popularity of Abercrombie’s scheme to the “simplicity of its concepts”. Allied to its simplicity, the ambiguity of the green belt concept is a further important reason for its popularity, since this ambiguity means that several differing interpretations of its purpose can be held (Munton, 1983: 1). Foley (1960: 219) reports the (possibly apocryphal) anecdote of the high-level civil servant with responsibility for town planning who is said to have asserted that the green belt was “the one goal he could readily understand and work toward with conviction!”

In order for a planning paradigm to gain widespread acceptance, it needs an easily graspable central metaphor/image, or what van Eeten and Roe (2000: 58) call a “fiction”. Using the example of urban containment in the Netherlands - the ‘Groene Hart’ (‘green Heart’) - they argue that this central tenet of Dutch planning policy does not in fact exist, and that even its proponents accept this, though they maintain that it still provides the soundest basis for policymaking. This ‘mythmaking’ has links to Flyvbjerg’s (1998) account of rationality and power, and how power can perpetuate planning myths. The essence of a metaphor or ‘figure’ like the green belt is that it is an idea that goes beyond its original, literal meaning, evoking a particular set of mental images and/or emotions in people’s minds. More technically, Genette (1982: 47, as cited in Faludi and van der Valk, 1994: 21) describes a ‘figure’ as a linguistic device where, “between the letter and the meaning...there is a gap, a space, and like all spaces, it possesses a form. This form is called a figure.” However, figures as successful and durable as the green belt are few and far between. How many people are familiar with concepts from the London Plan’s (GLA, 2009) *Key Diagram*, such as the ‘Western Wedge’ or ‘London-Luton-Bedford Corridor’?

Allied to metaphors, symbols also play an important role in paradigm formation, since “[a] symbol functions to give people a feeling that they belong to a discourse” (Hajer, 1989: 45). They are powerful because, as Kunzmann (1996: 144) points out, “visualised concepts can contribute more to achieving certain political goals than legal and financial instruments” as they reduce complexity and facilitate communication. Because of this, Faludi (2002, as cited in Dühr, 2003: 935) emphasises that “cartographic visualizations of spatial policy require a higher degree of consensus”, and indeed, the design of visual expressions of the spatial policy expressed in the ESDP proved to be the most controversial part of the whole policy process (Faludi and Waterhout, 2002). In the final European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) document (EU Commission, 1999), no attempt was made to map complex, contentious concepts like polycentricity; the document restricts itself to simple descriptive cartography (e.g. daily mean temperature, land cover types). Cattán (2007: 126) argues that many of the well-known images used to visualise uneven development at the European scale (e.g. the

'Blue Banana', 'European Pentagon', 'Golden Triangle') are based on the classic, outdated, core-periphery paradigm and are merely relational (i.e. without a reliable, standardized quantitative base). Little work has been done to date on the symbolic significance of planning maps and diagrams at the national (English) scale. The combination of metaphors and symbols entails what Faludi (1996: 94) describes as the 'frame-setting approach', which enables complex, amorphous realities to be simplified, made sense of and acted upon.

Paradigm and doctrine development is a far from straightforward process; as Foley (1960: 12) argues, doctrine, by its very nature, quickly tends to take on a self-justifying, ultra-rational tone. There are also problems with how one evaluates the success or otherwise of a particular doctrine or paradigm (Alexander and Faludi, 1989: 130-31). On the positive side, Faludi and van der Valk (1994: 22-23) argue that, by performing its role as 'normal' planning (in the Kuhnian sense - i.e. bureaucratic, professional and administrative in nature), doctrine reduces the burden of plan-making, which in turn allows planning to become more of a cumulative and progressive process rather than a succession of spikes. Plan-led systems are by their nature technocratic and rational, as opposed to sociocratic (where greater weight is attached to the views of a wide range of stakeholders) or communicative approaches (Faludi and van der Valk, 1994). The main difference between technocratic and sociocratic/communicative approaches to planning is that the former is a more 'individual' approach, internal to the protagonists involved, whereas the latter two are far more interactive between actors (Alexander, 1998: 670).

How do we know whether we are in the process of moving from one paradigm to another? According to Kuhn's prescription, the move from 'normal' to 'extraordinary' research involves, "the proliferation of competing articulations, the willingness to try anything, the expression of explicit discontent, the recourse to philosophy and to debate over fundamentals". Using these signals as a guide, we may indeed be moving towards such a situation in the debate over urban containment. It is argued by Foley (1963: 143) that the erosion of planning doctrine is a process that has been happening slowly, over several decades, by the erosion of the strong legal and fiscal features at the heart of the planning legislation of the 1940s. Despite the high profile

that the future of the Metropolitan green belt has received in recent years, we must be careful not to conflate problems of political strategy with those of real substance (Foley, 1963: 150).

Before turning our attention to the current political and economic framework within which planning operates, it is perhaps useful to reemphasize the fundamental question - what *is* planning? An influential article by Aaron Wildavsky poses this very question and provides us with a number of valuable lessons. Wildavsky (1973: 140) argues that planning as a form of 'future control' is not only doomed to failure, but, by conflating the distinction between preparing plans and implementing them, the very act of planning loses its intention, since this act is:

no longer immutable but problematical, a subject for bargaining, a counter in the flux of events. The stage shifts from the intentions specified in the plan to a multitude of actors whose intentions are alleged to be the real ones. The success of planning depends entirely on whose plans one has in mind.

These words could have been written with green belts very much to the fore of the author's mind. As a consequence of this, Wildavsky (1973: 149) goes on to argue, "planning is not a solution to any problem. It is just a way of restating in other language the problems we do not know how to solve." Taking the example of urban containment, Batty (1987: 1) posits that "the garden cities and new towns, green belts...represent centrally managed and somewhat simplistic solutions to really rather complex problems" but that this is planning at its best. This idea of being able to cast a problem and its solution in simplistic terms is an important tenet of planning doctrine and will be explored in more depth below. The question of what planning is was taken up by Forester, who emphasised the inherently political nature of the activity of planning and went so far as to implicate planners in their willing involvement in Lukes' 'third face of power', in that they encourage the participation of some individuals and groups at the expense of others, play an active role in 'restricting' and 'opening' particular topics for debate and essentially "focus citizens' attention selectively" (Forester, 1989: 19).

Recent work by Brenner and Schmid has challenged many of the epistemological foundations

of the discipline of built environment studies, in particular, “the categories, methods and cartographies” (Brenner and Schmid, 2015: 155) through which urban life can be understood. By invoking the epistemic shift engendered by the previous generation of radical critical geographers such as Castells and Harvey, who emerged during the late 1960s and early 1970s and challenged the field’s:

broad consensus on...the equation of the urban with a specific spatial unit or settlement type - the city, or an upscaled territorial variant thereof, such as the metropolis, the conurbation, the metropolitan region, the megalopolis, the megacity, the megacity region and so forth

Brenner and Schmid (2015: 154) call for a similar reinvigoration of the current interpretative frameworks we use to understand ‘the urban.’ They offer the increasingly common ‘urban age’ trope as evidence of a debate whose aim has been, “to promote a vision of cities as bounded, technologically controlled islands of ecorationality that are largely delinked from the broader territorial formations in which they are currently embedded” (Brenner and Schmid, 2015: 157). These authors point to the many books and papers that have begun with some reformulation of the idea that, at some point in the recent past, society has moved from being predominantly rural to urban. Instead of utilising binary concepts such as the ‘urban age,’ Brenner and Schmid (2015: 165) argue that, “the urban is not a (fixed) form but a process; as such, it is dynamic, historically evolving and variegated.” The same authors (Brenner and Schmid, 2015: 174) also argue that a second binary distinction, the urban/rural divide, “which has long served as an epistemological anchor for the most basic research operations of urban studies, has today become an increasingly obfuscatory basis for deciphering emergent patterns and pathways of sociospatial restructuring”.

Further clarification of the urban/rural dichotomy as a ‘fiction’ or framing device, and which thus explicitly identifies it as a paradigm within planning doctrine, is provided by Wachsmuth (2014: 80), when he describes it as “a phenomenological category - a practical understanding of urban space - which distorts what it represents”. Importantly, though, there are words of caution against the tendency towards the search for ‘new’ urban forms as “an intellectual trap”

(Brenner and Schmid, 2015: 176) since, “the concept of the city is not dead...[it] is ideological” (Wachsmuth, 2014: 80).

Although both Brenner and Schmid and Wachsmuth theorise from a global perspective, their work can be transposed to the English context and the processes described in the preceding paragraphs has led Robson (2014: 2) to conclude gloomily that, “there is more than enough evidence to support the view, in Peter Hetherington’s words, that for the first time in forty years we now have no urban policy.” It is clear that by ‘urban policy’ both Robson and Hetherington mean a coherent, thought-through, realisable set of ideas (what would have been described as ‘joined-up thinking’ in the heady early days of New Labour).

What would the conceptual basis of such ideas look like? Firstly, there is a pressing need to better incorporate some of the dynamic aspects of city life into urban systems analyses if they are to be more successful in their aim of representing such processes. Perhaps the most important dynamic process is people’s (in)ability to access goods and services across the urban environment. Kaufmann’s (2011) work on the concept of ‘mobility’ is instructive, particularly his tripartite classification of space as *areolar* (a static conception of space as enclosed, with an inside and outside, i.e. with identifiable, Cartesian limits; this has been widely used in traditional spatial representations, e.g. in two-dimensional maps produced by government agencies), *reticular* (topological, network-based representations of space in which accessibility is a key concept and which modern GIS are able to capture in increasingly advanced ways) and *rhizome* (a non-Cartesian space in which distance is subsumed by time, exemplified by electronic financial markets or Internet communities such as Facebook or YouTube). Kaufmann prefigures one of Brenner and Schmid’s key arguments by emphasising that attempts to ‘reconceptualise’ the city based, for example, on networks or flows (i.e. reticular space), and which fail to take account of the other two typologies, therefore fall into an intellectual trap, with Sassen’s (2001) work on ‘global cities’ offered as an example (Kaufman, 2011: 19).

Secondly, the unit of analysis (and policy implementation) needs to be much more nuanced. Simple, binary distinctions like urban/rural¹ or 'urban age' are unhelpful; indeed, and in support of Brenner and Schmid, Pugalís (2015: 129) argues that we need to move beyond "solely territorial definitions of 'urban'" since such, "blunt territorial parcels lack regard to the structure, form, nature and history of sociospatial formations" (ibid.). At the same time, and again following the advice of Brenner and Schmid (2015) and Wachsmuth (2014), such constructs should not be abandoned in favour of new spatial fixes. It is here that the tectonic plates of qualitative and quantitative urban theory grind together somewhat uneasily. Technocratic concepts such as 'functional economic area' and 'city-region' are always likely, in some respect or other, to meet the ire of critical spatial theorists from a largely qualitative tradition, like Brenner and Harvey.

At the heart of this disjuncture is the question of whether urban policies should be directed towards 'people' or 'places' (e.g. so-called Area Based Initiatives (ABIs) such as New Labour's New Deal for Communities (NDC)). The pendulum has currently swung very much away from ABIs in favour of the people-based narrative of localism and the 'Big Society'. The principal implication of the rejection of ABIs for strategic spatial planning is that "improved national economic performance may come at a cost in terms of widening spatial disparities at national or regional level" (Cheshire et al, 2014: 13). In other words, less well-performing areas should be left to stagnate (or, be subject to 'managed decline' to use a euphemism popular with right-of-centre urban policymakers), with resources targeted at making successful places even more successful. Those in favour of this socially Darwinistic form of urban policy point to the perceived failure of large-scale ABIs such as Detroit in the United States (Moretti, 2012) or the Thames Gateway in south east England.

Acceptance of, if not agreement with, this phenomena under current conditions comes from a surprising source. Harvey (1973: 113) warns us that the untrammelled free market has a built-in propensity to resist any attempts to redistribute capital flows away from the most profitable (sub)regions. This suggests that any attempts to rebalance inter-regional economic

1 The 'rural-urban' classification is an ongoing output of the UK Census.

imbalances between the wider South East and the rest of the UK are futile under the present system of spatial liberalism. In a similar vein, Brownill and Carpenter (2009: 253) question the extent to which private sector interests pursuing a “competitiveness agenda” are privileged at the expense of locally based, horizontal governance networks. The increasing flexibility of the labour market is in stark contrast to an ever more inflexible housing market which presents significant barriers to geographical mobility for many people (Clapham, 2006: 60). In fact, as Gallent and Tewdwr-Jones (2006: 67) point out, the prevailing market philosophy has “created a comfortable, fairly well-housed majority, but left a very badly housed minority in its wake.”

This type of thinking is extended to question ‘popular policies’ like the green belt, which, it is argued, are based on the misconception that, “differences that may appear to be spatial are, in reality, often driven by differences between people rather than places” (Cheshire et al, 2014: 6). Spatial processes are certainly at work, it is argued, but this are driven by individuals in a process of ‘spatial sorting’ rather than by larger-scale mechanisms. Reflecting the more historically class-based nature of British society, Gibbons and Overman (2012) estimate that individual (i.e. ‘sorting’) effects account for 70% of disparities between areas, compared with a 50-50 split between individual and area effects in France. While this may seem depressing to those who believe that effective strategic spatial planning can bring about real change for the better to both people *and* places, it highlights the need for urbanists to think in terms of what Graham and Healey (1999: 642) describe as, “*relations and processes* rather than *objects and forms*” (emphasis in original). In other words, concepts such as ‘green belt’, ‘sustainable urban extension’ or ‘compact city’ have become reified and need to be ‘re-humanised’ in terms of the specificities of their impacts on particular localities. Kaufmann’s (2011) work on ‘motilities’ is of particular utility in this respect.

1.3: The ‘ugly sisters’: neoliberal planning and spatial liberalism

As a phenomenon which is “always a political project” (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2013: 7), it is a truism to state that ‘neoliberalism’ is an overused, oft-misunderstood concept.

Brenner et al (2010a: 184, original emphasis) describe it as, “something of a *rascal* concept – promiscuously pervasive, yet inconsistently defined, empirically imprecise and frequently contested.” However, the same authors go on to describe neoliberalisation as, “a keyword for understanding the regulatory transformations of our time” (Brenner et al, 2010b: 327). Whilst acknowledging the concept’s significance and all-pervasiveness, this research steers clear of mainstream debates which are discussed in depth elsewhere (e.g. Harvey, 2005; Chomsky, 1999) and instead focuses on two less well-researched strands of the framework, the ‘ugly sisters’ of neoliberalism if you will. These are ‘neoliberal planning’, characterised in recent years as “austerity urbanism” by Peck (2012), and ‘spatial liberalism’, a concept championed in the English context by Nick Clarke and Allan Cochrane (Clarke and Cochrane, 2013). The British planning system has its roots in the welfare state, itself a reaction to the inequalities of the Victorian age (Batty, 1987: 1), and which, at its best, was expressed in the garden cities, New Towns and green belts of England.

However, the certainty offered by these policies belongs to the past; today, planners must learn to work within the multiple spaces, both ‘soft’ and ‘fuzzy’ identified by Allmendinger and Haughton (2009) and discussed above. One of the major contradictions of neoliberal planning is the reliance of the ostensibly market-oriented development industry on a system of regulation (land use planning) to prevent all kinds of market failures and negative externalities (Taşan-Kok, 2012: 1-2). This contradiction has become even more pronounced in recent years, as Lord and Tewdwr-Jones (2014: 347), following the regime-level account of Peck and Tickell (2002), outline in their characterisation of changes to the English planning system since the election of the first Blair government in 1997 as one of “roll out/roll back neoliberalisation”, with the ‘roll-out’ phase corresponding to the launch of ‘spatial planning’, and the more recent ‘roll back’ phase characterised by state retrenchment and ‘austerity urbanism’.

Clarke and Cochrane (2013: 17) explicitly locate localism (discussed in depth in the following section) within a framework of ‘spatial liberalism’ and they raise two key questions for the localist project, firstly, what it conceives as “rational and responsible local action”, and

secondly, what its “preferred technologies of government for ensuring such action” are. By examining whether strategic spatial planning (in the form of significant housing development and associated infrastructure) constitutes ‘rational and responsible local action’, as well as the mechanisms employed by local and central government to enable (or hinder) such action, this research tackles both these questions. A feature of spatial liberalism, and one of the aspects of the system of government in the United Kingdom that European planning academics find noteworthy is the possibility for dramatic policy swings following General Elections (Waterhout, Othengrafen and Sykes, 2013). Through spatial liberalism, planning has become, in Haughton’s (2012: 98) turn of phrase:

almost a paradigmatic example of a sector used as a ‘political football’, one that every incoming administration attempts to use to explain the failings of the previous administration and demonstrate its own radical credentials. This makes for a bruised sector, accustomed to multiple reforms intended to ‘cure’ a problem that has been misdiagnosed.

Although ‘niche’ approaches to the study of neoliberalism such as neoliberal planning and spatial liberalism are less fashionable than ‘grand theories’ of the phenomenon, Allmendinger and Haughton (2013: 7) argue that “more abstract, macro-level and more nuanced, policy focused accounts of neoliberalization” are in fact “complementary, rather than one being seen as conceptually subordinate” (ibid.), and, just as in the case of spatial scales, they warn against the ‘Russian doll’ approach to policy periodization. At an abstract level, it was only within the last decades of the twentieth century that capitalism was able to overcome most of the friction of time and space, due to technological advances, coupled with deregulation and liberalization policies (Castells, 2010: 101). This has led to a new ensemble of spatio-temporalities... neither disconnected nor chaotic though [they are]...conflictual and dynamic” (Harvey, 1996: 287). From this flow of ‘spatio-temporalities’ are hewn what appear to be ‘permanences’ - the physical and institutional entities which surround us - although as Harvey (1996: 261) warns, these “‘permanences’ - no matter how solid they seem - are not eternal but always subject to time as ‘perpetual perishing.’” De Angelis (2008: 68) sees ‘neoliberal governance’ as oxymoronic and exhorts us that the latest round of spatio-temporal permanences are “an

attempt to manage clashing value practices in an increasingly marketised, socially polarised and environmentally unsustainable world.”

Interestingly, however, Baeten (2012: 209) offers a different, less gloomy, more human, perspective on the ‘glamour’ and ‘temptations’ of neoliberal planning, describing:

the thrill of competing for funding, pushing through plans, seeing spectacular architecture rising from the soil, or contributing to favourable statistics on investment, population, [and] local GDP.

This, he argues, can be more stimulating, rewarding and achievable than, “the search for democracy, equity and diversity in the city” (ibid.). In any event, the neo-classical economic foundations of neoliberal planning are not going to go away any time soon; as Whitehead (2012: 126) points out, “it is difficult to believe that the neo-classical model will be superseded, as opposed to complemented, by other economic models.”

1.4: ‘Soft spaces’ and fuzzy boundaries: functional economic areas and city-regions

What are some of the spatial effects of neoliberal planning and spatial liberalism? A current ‘buzz-phrase’ in strategic spatial planning circles is ‘functional economic areas’ (FEAs) - delineated areas which are a more ‘natural’ fit than historic/ceremonial/administrative boundaries in terms of how places are linked (by flows of people/information/services). They are an attempt to tackle what has been known since at least the middle of the last century as the ‘Modifiable Areal Unit Problem’ or ‘MAUP’ (e.g. Yule and Kendall, 1950) but which is “still often badly understood” (Openshaw and Taylor, 1979). Put simply, the MAUP affects all area-based spatial analyses in terms of the unit of analysis chosen (e.g. Census Output Area, local authority, ward, Parliamentary constituency, Travel-toWork Area); when boundaries are redrawn across the same area, the changes, however slight, will produce a new set of results. There are in fact two facets of the MAUP - the ‘zonal problem’ and the ‘scale problem’ (Wong, 2009). The zonal problem occurs when the number of areal units is stable or relatively

fixed and when the internal boundaries of these zones are redrawn (e.g. after redistricting or following changes to statistical zones for Census purposes). The thornier 'scale problem' is posed by the more fundamental question of setting the most appropriate level to conduct analysis at; i.e. a study area can be partitioned in an infinite number of ways but problems arise when different, sometimes conflicting data sources at different resolutions are melded together without an appreciation of the inconsistencies this can give rise to.

As Cheshire et al (2014: 161) note, there is a "surprisingly long history" of conceptualising urban areas in terms of functional, as opposed to merely customary or historic, units of analysis. The US Census Bureau invented the Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area (SMSA) for the 1940 Census as there was a dawning realisation that processes of suburbanisation were rendering obsolete existing urban boundaries. By the mid-1960s, the concept of the 'functional economic area' (FEA), based on labour markets and travel-to-work areas had become common currency on the other side of the Atlantic (Fox and Kumar, 1965). Whereas traditional units of analysis (e.g. based on local authority, ward or other administrative boundaries) are largely static, 'functional' analyses capture dynamic concepts, such as flows of people, money or data between areas. As noted in the introduction, these flows are linked to static locations by infrastructure and are thus a key aspect of strategic spatial planning. The FEA concept has many supporters, Robson (2014: 3) describing the - somewhat belated - move in England towards it as, "a hugely welcome thrust...long overdue". However, and as an indication that the MAUP lingers on, the paradoxical situation arises that, "the defining theoretical features underpinning functional area discourse are obliterated by the operational tendencies to construct hard boundaries" (Pugalis, 2015: 127). In other words, the very concept supposed to incorporate notions of fluidity, interconnection, and exchange itself becomes ossified through a process of spatial fetishism. A quite remarkable instance of this tendency to regard the FEA concept (in particular its current incarnation of choice, the 'city-region') as a 'magic bullet' is revealed in a paper by Freeman and Cheshire (2006: 3), who argue that:

it is our view that having a common standard is more important than having the right standard since in some senses if there is a common standard which represents city-regions in a reasonably consistent way then that itself is the 'right' standard.

In other words, establishing some metric which allows us to compare FEAs is more important than the underlying data used to define these areas, or, put more succinctly, comparison is necessary, never mind what is being compared. To some, this quest for ‘functionality’ is merely one of the last vestiges of the ‘city-as-a-system’ trope propagated by the Chicago School of urban theorists in the 1920s (Wachsmuth, 2014: 83-84). This perspective argues that, despite the significant technological advances of recent decades, attempts to use large-scale datasets to quantify urban interconnections merely recalls the gargantuan land-use/transportation models of the 1960s, when it was believed that such models could create optimum spatial systems (Marshall, 2007: 124). Naturally, there is much modern-day scepticism about the efficacy of such an approach. The past four decades since the publication of Herbert Simon’s landmark article on ‘bounded rationality’ have taught us that optimal solutions to strategic problems are often subordinated to ‘satisficing’ approaches, which retain, “more of the detail of the real-world situation, but settling for a satisfactory, rather than an approximate-best, decision” (Simon, 1972: 170). Clearly, then, although there are a number of advantages to the FEA concept (the key one being a realisation that it is better to attempt to fit policies to ‘real’ geographies rather than forcing them into artificial, if convenient, units), a merely technical approach will not get us very far, since strategic spatial strategy formulation, “is a messy, back-and-forth process, with multiple layers of contestation and struggle” (Healey, 2007: 182).

Operating at a sub-regional scale, FEAs are an attempt to offer more flexible geographical configurations which have come to be known as ‘soft spaces’ with fuzzy boundaries, as opposed to the ‘hard spaces’ of central/local government with their non-functional administrative boundaries (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009), beyond which are spatial policy “cliff edges” (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2010: 813) and which could be described as the policy equivalent of the MAUP. These are created through a process of what Allmendinger and Haughton (2009: 10) describe as “functional scalar privilege”, where the coincidence of ‘in vogue’ boundaries such as housing market areas or travel-to-work areas can lead to, “a reinforcement of activity through focused resources and consensus” (ibid.). This need not be an inherently bad path to follow, although, analogous to the argument advanced by Cheshire

et al (2014), this can lead to the ‘managed decline’ of those areas not fortunate enough to be at the intersection of the prevailing units of policy delivery.

A particularly vertiginous ‘cliff edge’ surrounds London, because of the current “exceptional English circumstance, whereby the country is bereft of a sub-national democratic economic development settlement” (Pugalis and Bentley, 2013: 864) beyond the capital. Perhaps there ought to be greater awareness of a ‘MIUP’ (Modifiable Institutional Unit Problem), where different perspectives and ‘stories’ emerge depending on the institutional scale addressed. Perhaps in an attempt to counteract the effects of the MIUP, one think-tank, the Adam Smith Institute, proposes a completely descaled planning system, allowing different local systems to compete in a social-Darwinian battle of the fittest (Papworth, 2012: 8). In other words, as Pennington (2002) argues, planning should devolve completely to the local scale in a “Hayekian discovery process” quite the opposite of centrally planned economies. It could be argued that human lives, neighbourhoods and communities are rather too precious to allow untrammelled free market activity of the type that a truly Hayekian discovery process would entail.

Although it has taken many guises over the years, in its recent formulation the ‘city-region’ approach appears to offer the most effective representation of the FEA concept in practice. The notion can arguably be traced back a century ago to the work of Geddes (1915: 34) who used the term, defined by him as ‘town aggregates’, and then went on to suggest ‘conurbation’ as a more appropriate term (Coombes, 2013: 2-3). Storper (2014: 116) identifies an implicit paradox within the city-region paradigm, since, although they, “exhibit the most robust of the many complex systems of governance that humanity has devised...fragmentation is their inevitable condition”. This fragmentation at the level of governance is merely a reflection of the increasing ‘splintering’ (to paraphrase Graham and Marvin, 2001) and discontinuity of many individuals’ lives and is most clearly reflected in what Castells (1989) conceptualised as the ‘space of flows’, comprising people, money, data and a host of other phenomena. In a belated understanding of this, and an important step forward in the definition of an appropriate unit

of policy analysis and implementation, is the realisation, in the words of Davoudi (2008: 57) that:

there is no single city-region boundary. Instead, the city-region geometry is best characterised by multiplicity, fuzziness and overlaps, manifesting only an approximation of self-containment that is likely to vary for different kinds of activities, flows and functions.

Allied to this idea, an important criterion for the selection of the case-study area was the realisation that city-regions often extend beyond their rural hinterlands, including green belts, resulting in ‘leap-frog’ commuting (Painter, 2007: 8) and other important consequences related to housing choices for strategic spatial planners.

1.5: The desire to devolve: localism and strategic spatial planning

The current Prime Minister set out his thinking on localism well before his party went into coalition with the Liberal Democrats, when he described it as “absolutely essential to our economic, social and political future” (Cameron, 2009). Taking his lead, the concept of localism is explored by breaking it down into its political, environmental and spatial components, (although there are large areas of overlap between these domains).

Politically, localism is fundamentally about the spatial distribution of power between different tiers of government, and can be conceptualised as ‘resistance’ (i.e. the periphery’s bid for greater autonomy from the centre) or, in contrast, as ‘efficiency’ (i.e. the centre’s perspective on devolving power) (Madanipour and Davoudi, 2015: 16). As these two authors note, these agendas are, “riddled with tensions between progressive and regressive potentials” (Davoudi and Madanipour, 2015: 1). These tensions have in recent years been characterised as “austerity urbanism” (Peck, 2012) and, more specifically, as “austerity localism” (DeVerteuil, 2013: 601).

Cameron’s pronouncements on “radical decentralisation” through a three-pronged pledge² are

² Firstly, to give people to instigate referenda on local issues. Secondly, to give local authorities a ‘local power of competence’ to enable them to “carry out any lawful activity on behalf of their community” (Cameron, 2009). Thirdly, to devolve political power to cities through elected mayors (subject to support for this system through

merely the latest incarnation of his party's ideological commitment to 'small state' government based on supply-side economic theory. As Clarke and Cochrane (2013: 14) argue:

the apparent plan is to complete moves begun in the 1980s and continued, sometimes hesitantly, over the last three decades: from local government to local governance; from Local Authorities to local partnerships; and from representative democracy to participatory democracy.

It is however possible to trace the ideological commitment of the centre-right to localism much further back. Friedrich Hayek (1945: 525-26) made the case for decentralisation just after the end of the Second World War:

If we can agree that the economic problem of society is mainly one of rapid adaptation to changes in the particular circumstances of time and place, it would seem to follow that the ultimate decisions must be left to the people who are familiar with these circumstances, who know directly of the relevant changes and of the resources immediately available to meet them. We cannot expect that this problem will be solved by first communicating all this knowledge to a central board which, after integrating all knowledge, issues its orders. We must solve it by some form of decentralization. But this answers only part of our problem. We need decentralization because only thus can we ensure that the knowledge of the particular circumstances of time and place will be promptly used. But the "man on the spot" cannot decide solely on the basis of his limited but intimate knowledge of the facts of his immediate surroundings. There still remains the problem of communicating to him such further information as he needs to fit his decisions into the whole pattern of changes of the larger economic system.

Localism, from an environmental perspective, can also be seen as a means of (partially) contributing towards the goal another highly contested concept, sustainable development (Davoudi and Madanipour, 2015: 2). Localism currently attains its spatial expression through the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). Although several aspects of the NPPF are discussed in detail below (e.g. the Duty to Cooperate, the New Homes Bonus), it is appropriate at this stage to briefly analyse this policy framework in terms of its impact on sustainable development. At issue is the efficacy of what has come to be known as the 'strong' versus 'weak' theory of sustainable development, in other words, to what degree 'natural' capital (e.g. greenfield land, with its perceived environmental benefits) can be substituted for 'human'

capital (e.g. development, with its perceived economic benefits), while attempting to balance the needs of future people ('intergenerational equity'). Taking the example of a proposed 5,000 home urban extension, the 'weak' version of sustainable development merely asks whether the new housing and associated infrastructure would add to, or subtract from, the *aggregate* (i.e. human and natural) capital stock, (thereby assuming a significant degree of interchangeability between these two types of capital)? The 'strong' interpretation of sustainable development challenges the view that both of these forms of capital are substitutable, arguing that some environmental assets are essentially irreplaceable (Owens, 1994: 442-43).

Beckerman (1994: 193) draws the important distinction between the 'technical' definition of a sustainable development path (i.e. "simply...one that can be sustained over some specified time period") and the notion as a normative concept (i.e. something that "*ought* to be followed". He then develops this basic distinction into a choice between technical or *de facto* sustainability and the normative concept of sustainable development as *optimality*, making the point that, "it is obvious that many economic activities that are unsustainable may be perfectly optimal, and many that are sustainable may not even be desirable, let alone optimal" (Beckerman, 1994: 194). Marcuse (1998: 105) goes even further, arguing that sustainable development as a normative goal, "just doesn't work...it is not a goal, it is a constraint on the achievement of other goals". More specifically, environmental capital "more and more becomes the limiting factor", therefore, "the importance of keeping it separately intact increases" (Daly, 1995: 53).

The point to be made about this rather abstract theoretical debate is that, although it uses a different vocabulary, it actually replicates what is at the heart of many conflicts over strategic spatial planning proposals. De Angelis (2008: 69) sees the whole concept of 'sustainable communities', which began under New Labour and upon which so much of England's housing and regeneration strategy has been predicated, as merely an attempt to address *within the neoliberal paradigm* the social and environmental problems raised by advocacy groups. Cochrane et al (2015: 13), writing specifically about the NPPE, support this view, arguing that the policy, "reflects a turn towards another version of corporatist neo-liberalism because of

the emphasis it places on viability (rather than sustainability) as the main criterion expected to determine what gets built.” It is instructive that the requirement to develop sustainably has been shifted from a statutory footing (in the 2004 Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act) to its current non-statutory status in the NPPF. This very much reflects the policy expression of sustainable development as a normative concept - something very nice to aim for - but which is subordinated to a range of other, principally economic, goals. The policy clearly goes against the weight of academic opinion (i.e. the dangers of treating sustainable development as a normative, rather than a technical, concept), but a cynical observer would perhaps remark that this merely reflects the current disconnect between theory and practice.

From a spatial perspective, localism is a contested concept. This is logical, since space is the container for elements of the political, social and environmental and their inherent complexities. One viewpoint is that ‘the local’ is one of the lower tiers of a nested hierarchy of distinct scales ranging from the micro to the macro. A metaphor that is often used to describe the way in which these successively larger scales are related, in this instance by Herod and Wright (2002: 7), is that of a set of Russian Matryoshka dolls:

each constituent doll and each constituent scale is separate and distinct and can be considered on its own, but the piece as a whole is only complete with each doll/scale nesting together, such that the dolls and scales fit together in one and only one way (a larger doll/scale simply will not fit inside a smaller one).

However, as Brenner (2001: 592) notes,

traditional Euclidian, Cartesian and Westphalian notions of geographical scale as a fixed, bounded, self-enclosed and pre-given container are currently being superseded – at least within the parameters of critical geographical theory and research – by a highly productive emphasis on process, evolution, dynamism and sociopolitical contestation.

Kaufmann (2011: 12) provides us with a more colourful metaphor when he states categorically that, “today the Russian doll has burst and sent pieces flying in every direction.” Clarke and Cochrane (2013: 15) argue that this more complex reading of scalar relations - i.e.

that, “localities are both produced by and productive of globalisation and the global” - is singularly absent in the localism of recent UK governments. Instead, ‘localities’ continue to be seen, naïvely, as “the natural units of political geography” (ibid.) and local actors as “those best placed to find the best solutions to local needs” (HM Government, 2010: 2). However, “localities are by no means natural...[and]...local needs are rarely homogeneous” - in sum, “localities are rarely autonomous such that effective solutions to local needs are found just at the local scale” (Clarke and Cochrane, 2013: 14). Both New Labour’s attempt to govern through community (Amin, 2005) and the current government’s ‘Big Society’ model fall into the trap of what Albrechts (1998: 422) calls ‘Balkanization’ (i.e. the dominance of the local - whether viewed from the perspective of ‘resistance’ or ‘efficiency’ - over other spatio-political frameworks).

1.6: The centralising tendency: the role of green belts in strategic spatial planning

It is of course much easier to defend, uphold, and indeed, obfuscate, a devolutionary concept like localism. A material, centralist policy like the green belt is much more contentious. The term ‘green belt’ is such a loaded concept that even the way it is written can betray one’s attitude towards it; thus ‘Green Belt’ appears to reify it through capitalization and ‘greenbelt’ seems to trivialise it through concatenation. There is of course a middle way, ‘green belt’ and so this more neutral designation has been adopted, unless it appears as quoted in a primary/secondary source. Rozee (2014: 12) argues that, “the one national spatial policy we have in England which has stood the test of time is Green Belt policy”, although she warns that it has been hijacked by those who benefit most from it, with the result that the policy has become a ‘sacred cow’. The debate around the mid- to long-term future development of towns and cities in England has tended to polarise around two rather extreme narratives, the first of which demands the removal of “sclerotic” planning regulations to enable people to build where, when and how they like, while the second hankers after a particular view of the ‘rural idyll’ and is extremely resistant towards any attempt to develop greenfield sites. Interestingly, both of these views have traditionally been held by those on the centre right of the political spectrum,

although this is not a new situation; during the 1980s Margaret Thatcher's Environment Secretary, Nicholas Ridley, pushed through legislation in the teeth of fierce opposition which facilitated the building of out-of-town shopping centres on green belt and greenfield sites (Moore, 2011). Clearly, neither of these narratives represent anything remotely close to reality, but such stark imagery illustrates how high the stakes are in the future development of the wider south east of England.

How has the green belt idea become a shibboleth of the planning system which has eclipsed the bonds of a technocratic lexicon to become "a British institution" (Thomas, 1990: 136)? At stake is whether the ongoing reforms of the planning system (which has guided change to our built environment for more than 65 years) are leading to a paradigm shift in attitudes towards housebuilding, infrastructure, and other development. Nowhere in the country is the 'housing crisis' perceived to be as acute as in the wider South East, where managing development has been described as akin to "riding the tiger" (Lock, 1989). The green belt could, quite reasonably, be described as the tiger's teeth, such is the fear or veneration, depending on one's perspective, in which it is held.

The onset of the most recent attempt to overhaul the planning system in England and Wales can be traced back to the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004, described by Nadin (2007: 44) as the result of "the most extensive discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the form and scope of planning instruments since the mid-1960s." This legislation heralded the importation into the United Kingdom of the European concept of 'spatial planning', defined by Gallent et al (2006: 182) as, "planning that reconciles competing interests and seeks to do more than merely control the use of land...an enabling force rather than a regulatory mechanism." In other words, planning aligned more closely with the social and economic objectives it was intended to serve (Cullingworth and Nadin, 2006: 129). The concept emerged during the process of negotiating the ESDP during the mid- to late 1990s and made a critical distinction between land-use planning as a *regulatory activity* and spatial planning as a *strategic enterprise* (Faludi and Waterhout, 2002: 27-28). Allmendinger and Haughton (2012: 92) argue that, just

as the green belt concept offers a little of something to a wide constituency of interest groups, so 'spatial planning' appealed to a range of vested interests, at a superficial level at least. They contend that we have now reached a 'post-spatial planning' stage, since, "like much of the other apparatus of neoliberal governance, [it] was an unstable fix and only ever likely to be a temporary phenomenon" (ibid.: 98) and attribute its demise to two factors: its failure to streamline the development plan - planning permission process and the worsening economic situation from 2008 onwards (ibid.).

One of the consequences of an instrument of statutory regulation such as the green belt operating in a neoliberal economic framework is that it encourages rent-seeking behaviour. As Webster (2002) outlines, those fortunate enough to live within the green belt are members of an exclusive club which benefits disproportionately from the economic benefits (in the form of increased land and property values) and their ability to directly consume the social and environmental advantages of the surrounding land. Evans (1973) argues that green belt policy fails microeconomic reasoning on two counts: it is inefficient, since people find themselves on higher bid-rent curves than they would otherwise be on in urban fringe areas, and it is also inequitable because of the extra benefits accruing to residents in and around areas of urban containment. green belt policy also impedes the 'creative destruction' of free market economic growth (Gordon and Richardson, 1997: 101) since it generates pressure to maintain the status-quo - once new owners have paid inflated prices for property then it is very much in their interests to restrict further growth (Willis, 1982: 65). The granting of planning permission in and on the fringes of green belt land becomes a valuable economic right in itself and this encourages lobbying and interest group activity (Evans, 1988). All of these factors combine, according to Pennington (1997: 101-02) to create a system, which in its attempts to eliminate land-use externalities through statutory regulation, instead of through institutional reforms of the bundle of rights and responsibilities associated with property ownership, concentrates benefits on vested interests and bureaucrats, and disperses costs across the remaining bulk of urban consumers. Prior and Raemakers (2007: 595-96) argue that green belt policy is a "litmus test" for assessing the goodness-of-fit between the planning system and

the regime of accumulation, and they provide the examples of Edinburgh, where green belt policy was substantially overridden, and Dundee, whose green belt was abolished in 1980, as evidence for what happens when the “immovable shibboleth” of urban containment meets the “irresistible force” of the post-Fordist economy.

There are, though, a number of paradoxes and contradictions in the green belt which may have contributed to, rather than detracted from, its longevity. Firstly, and somewhat against the grain of what undergraduate planning students are generally taught about the almost predetermined foresight and legacy of visionary figures like Howard, Geddes and Abercrombie, the green belt was a clear example of a distinct lack of policy coordination in strategic spatial planning terms, or what would have been described as ‘regional planning’ in the post-war period. What would appear, at first glance, to be two mutually reinforcing policies, the green belt and the New Towns were in fact arrived at in a haphazard, fortuitous manner because of the significant time-lag (in the case of Milton Keynes, decades) between the (highly incremental) implementation of green belt policy and the much later designation of New and Expanded Towns (Herington, 1990: 17). Secondly, despite being seen by the overwhelming majority of the general public, along with protectionist campaign groups, as a rural policy, it is in fact an urban policy designed to contain sprawl, protect the character of particular towns and villages and, more recently, to assist in urban regeneration through the ‘brownfield first’ policy initiated under New Labour (Gunn, 2007: 596), and which continues to be espoused by the current government judging by the, “no need to build on the green belt” comments made by Business Secretary Sajid Javed on the *Today* programme on 10 July 2015 (BBC, 2015).

Thirdly, and most seriously, the green belt has moved away from its original purpose as an, “urban shaping device designed to manage growth on a *regional* and *sub-regional* scale” (Elson, 1994: 154, emphasis added). Instead the policy has been expropriated by central government and is used rather like a set of thumbscrews on local government, to be relaxed or tightened, usually depending on the proximity of elections. That the Greater London green belt has

significant impacts on housing markets is undeniable; Cheshire et al (2014: 101) calculate that 25 per cent is “certainly an underestimate” for the total cumulative increase in house prices attributable to green belt policy in the UK.

In March 2010, just before the last General Election, a largely unheralded document was published which slipped under the radar probably due to a combination of the impending vote and its rather dry and unappetising title: *Housing in the South East: First Report of Session 2009-10*. Contained within its pages, however, were perhaps the first attempts by policy makers, as opposed to policy wonks in think-tanks, to ‘think the unthinkable’ and envision the biggest shakeup for decades to one of the world’s oldest, and, by extension, most successful, urban strategies:

We think it is appropriate for there to be selective reviews of the green belt in the South East. The green belt policy has advantages, but is also has disadvantages...it was designed for a different time, and it is now working against the ideal of sustainable communities which hope to encourage people to work, rest and play in the same local area. As a result, there are areas of the region where the green belt is adding stress to the immediate transport network and inadvertently placing pressure for development on valuable areas of greenspace within urban areas.

This paragraph is a distillation of the strategic spatial planning issues described above: the greenfield/brownfield debate, transport infrastructure and planning policy qua/versus the market. Apart from being perhaps the most sustained and withering attack on the green belt concept from within Parliament since its inception, this Report signals the desperation with which policy makers are responding to the ‘housing crisis’ and provides the backdrop to the times in which we live - a time of stark, unpalatable choices and difficult decisions.

Fundamentally, what is at stake is whether the ongoing housing crisis is best dealt with by building vertically or horizontally, and whether a quality or quantity approach is more appropriate. Although this may appear at first glance to be a somewhat simplistic synopsis of the problem, it encapsulates the greenfield/brownfield debate as well as the importance of housing densities (which in turn have effects on travel patterns and choices). In an interview

with a *Guardian* correspondent, an unnamed local authority Chief Executive described the discomfort faced by communities opposed to development in their local areas as “nothing compared to the aggregate pain that people feel in this country because there is insufficient housing for them and their families” (Fearn, 2013). Because building ‘up’ or ‘out’ is intrinsically associated with the type of housing we create, questions of homeownership, and the wider culture of owning one’s property in the UK, are also relevant. In view of this argument, according to some commentators, “protecting the green belt is a promise that cannot be kept” (Lainton, 2013).

Supporters and opponents of the green belt concept alike both point to a survey carried out for Kate Barker’s *Review of Land Use Planning* (Barker, 2006: 44), which indicates that only 13% of those interviewed gave a correct answer to the question, “What proportion of land in England do you think is developed?”; 54% of respondents believed that at least 50% of England was developed. Of course the true figure for the proportion of developed land in England is considerably lower than this - around 11% according to a Briefing Paper produced by the Adam Smith Institute (Papworth, 2012: 3)³. Opponents of urban containment argue that the widespread national support for green belts is therefore based on a “comprehensive misunderstanding of the situation and a lack of knowledge of the true facts” (Evans and Hartwich, 2007: 11). The actual proportion of developed land in the UK is, surprisingly, a matter of some debate. Nick Boles, the current Planning Minister, stated in a BBC *Newsnight* interview broadcast on 28th November 2012 that just 9% of Britain was built on and that increasing this to 12% would allow a million new homes to be built, “and we’ll have solved a housing problem” (Hope, 2012b). Boles’ pronouncements were derided as “back of the fag packet” calculations by Ben Cowell of the National Trust (Ross, 2012). The fact that fundamental variables such as the total area of the country that is developed are subject to widely varying claims illustrates the polemical and dogmatic nature of the debate. In an open letter to *Planning Magazine*, Ian Anderson, the Executive Director of Icen Planning,

welcomed Boles’ comments about the need to develop another 3% of open land, but he went

3 The figures in the Briefing Paper are themselves referenced from 2012 ONS Land Use statistics which have been subject to rounding and are of uncertain provenance (see <http://www.iea.org.uk/blog/land-use-planning-the-corn-laws-of-our-times>). A more accurate, up-to-date calculation of land use across Great Britain is presented in Chapter 6, ‘Discussion’.

on to criticise the Planning Minister's "rhetoric" that this development could take place without encroaching on green belt land, since, as he stated (Anderson, 2012) much non-green belt open land is:

land of high agricultural value, high landscape value, flood plain, sports fields, land of outstanding natural beauty, sites of special scientific interest, strategic gaps, land of ecological value, scheduled ancient monuments, land blighted by infrastructure, and other more bespoke designations that have evolved through the careful analysis of the country by numerous generations of town planners.

On the other hand, much of the green belt, Anderson argues, is of lower quality than other open land and is "often arbitrary in its coverage." However, there were plenty of people ready to take issue with Boles' central argument, including the conservative philosopher of aesthetics Roger Scruton, who argued that "in Britain, everyone has a right to the country" and evoked images of Wordsworth, Coleridge and *The Archers* amongst others. To build on another 3% of England's open land as Boles suggests, would, muses the philosopher ruefully, "take away the heart of England" (Scruton, 2012). The former Poet Laureate and current Chairman of the Campaign for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE), Andrew Motion, was also critical of Boles in Rojas (2012), arguing that,

on just about every level what he said was wrong...[he] doesn't take into account the collateral effects of development. About 50 per cent of our land is already compromised in some way or other.

This argument points to one of the central issues surrounding the future of greenfield land in the Greater South East: the disjuncture between the 'idea' of these open spaces held by many (or most?) people - England's 'green and pleasant land' with associated images of rural idyll - and the reality of many greenfield plots - monotonous swaths of low-grade agricultural or semi-industrial land, often virtually impossible to improve due to the draconian nature of the planning legislation attached to it. However, once greenfield land, of whatever quality, is developed, its previous status is lost forever; as Jane Owen, editor of *House and Home* put it, "You don't know what you've got till it's gone" (Owen, 2012). Despite the seemingly

almost universal acceptance of the green belt concept among the general population, research published in Kate Barker's Interim Report into Land Use Planning (Barker, 2006: 155) indicates that respondents to a survey of the social benefits of open space value core urban green spaces (e.g. parks, squares, playgrounds) 60 times more than urban fringe green belt.

In a report written for the Policy Exchange think-tank at the peak of the last housing bubble in 2007, two critics of the planning system conceded that "[t]he argument in favour of quicker, simpler and less restrictive planning will be hard to win" (Evans and Hartwich, 2007: 5). Six years and an ongoing economic crisis later and it is opponents of greenfield development who are on the defensive. Such interest groups point to two strategies that could be implemented before greenfield development is even considered: bringing empty properties back into use and prioritising brownfield development. On the issue of empty homes, Griffiths (2010) reported that more than 450,000 properties had been empty for more than six months. Using Communities and Local Government (CLG) housebuilding figures and population projections, this equates to almost a two year supply of new housing. Bringing empty homes back into use was a policy pushed by the Liberal Democrats (Aldred, 2010: 15). However, when one considers that the waiting list for council house accommodation is in excess of 5 million people, it becomes clear that any empty homes proposal can form only a small element of an overarching housing strategy (Papworth, 2012). In any event, the UK vacant property rate of 3.4%, whilst significant in absolute terms, is one of the lowest in Europe (Eurostat, 2010, as cited in Niemietz, 2012).

In terms of brownfield development, a report by a prominent, non-partisan think-tank, the Centre for Cities, argues that, after fifteen successful years, the policy has run its course. Virtually all of the most suitable sites have been developed by now, and other potential land uses which qualify as brownfield development, such as back gardens, are starting to come under increased pressure from developers (Cook, 2012). In any case, even at the policy's dawn at the turn of the millennium, there was a spatial mismatch between the north of England (many brownfield sites but low demand) and the south, particularly the Greater South East

(comparatively fewer brownfield sites, but considerably higher demand). Seemingly in agreement with these sentiments, in *The Plan for Growth*, the coalition government removed the previous administration's 60% target for new development on brownfield land (HMT, 2011).

Opponents of greenfield development point to research carried out by the United Nations entitled *Planning Sustainable Cities* (UN, 2009) in which 'compact cities' are linked with lower greenhouse gas emissions compared with more sprawling urban developments (CPRE, 2010: 20). This is, however, a contested finding, since the amount of 'leapfrog' commuting may significantly reduce any benefits from constraining urban form. The CPRE concedes that atmospheric emissions (largely transport-based) and other pollutants are a "particular problem" in the green belt (CPRE, 2010: 64). In terms of 'leapfrog' commuting, opponents of London's green belt claim that it creates a commuter belt that "stretches from Lincolnshire to the Isle of Wight and from Oxfordshire to the Isle of Thanet" (Wiles, 2012). The green belt, by virtue of its very existence, fuels the need for a more extensive road- and public-transport network (Papworth, 2012).

Proponents of greenfield development highlight the fact that the four English towns with the fastest-growing affordability gap between earnings and house prices - Oxford, Cambridge, London and Bournemouth - have one thing in common: green belts. As is so often the case though, correlation does not necessarily mean causation. Research critical of urban containment has castigated the planning system for actively imposing hidden costs on residents; for example, recent work by Cheshire *et al* (2012: 4) suggests that costs resulting from planning constraints were equal to a 4p in the pound tax for households in Reading. Those who believe that greenfield development is necessary also point to the vast land banks assembled by developers, for whom a strategy of 'wait and see', as ever scarcer land continues to rise in value, is more profitable than actually building on land for which they already have permission. As both Kate Barker and John Calcutt pointed out in their Reviews into housing supply point out, by assembling these land banks, developers are simply responding as

rational economic actors to the uncertainty generated by the planning system (Aldred, 2010). According to Kirkup and Hope (2011), the potential to deliver 300,000 new homes - equivalent to two year's building at current rates - exists in these land banks. At the same time, we are told by the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) that the number of new homes planned on green belt sites has almost doubled - up to almost 150,000 from 81,000 in August 2012 (Press Association, 2013). It should be noted that this figure of 150,000 is obtained principally from local authority Core Strategy planning documents, which relate to potential developments up to twenty years hence (many, if not most, of which will remain unbuilt in developers' land-banks). The Core Strategy documents themselves are at widely varying stages of completion, with differing levels of validity as 'material considerations' accordingly.

Interestingly, although green belts up and down the country were an important issue during the last election, the Metropolitan green belt has been virtually a non-issue during the four London Mayoral elections to date, suggesting that those charged with the future development of nation's capital believe that growth can be accommodated within its existing boundaries. However, on May 29th 2013, the European Commission entered the debate by criticising the principle of urban containment in their verdict on the UK's economic reform programme by stating that, "the planning system, including green belt restrictions, continues to be an important constraint on the supply of housing" (EC, 2013: 4).

1.7: Power, planning and vested interests

Planning and development are inherently political acts; this is an inescapable fact. Despite how convenient it would be if development patterns were to follow similar scientific laws as those found in biology or physics, the reality is that urban form evolves in a far from deterministic fashion (Schiller, 2001: 8). The nature of planners' work means that how they "organise attention is the central political problem of their practice" (Forester, 1989: 19), stressing some issues and downplaying others. A useful filter through which to examine the political arena in which planners work is Steven Lukes' 'three dimensions of power' model (Lukes, 2005).

Specifically, Lukes traces the means by which particular issues are debated/ignored through the first and second dimensions ('pluralistic' and 'nondecision-making' respectively) to the third dimension ('insidious power'), where those who wield power are able to gain the acquiescence of those outside the circles of influence, largely by getting the dominated to take on the values of those in power (Dowding, 2006: 137).

One important way that Lukes' theoretical framework is played out in planning practice is through 'open' and 'restricted' policy debates. Rydin and Myerson (1989: 473) argue that, due to the overwhelming level of support the green belt concept enjoys, debate on this issue is essentially 'restricted,' since to hold a view contrary to the vast majority would be to reduce one's level of 'ethos' (i.e. personal authority). Another question, such as housing, they argue, is much more 'open,' since a wider range of opinions on the issue are possible. At the time that Rydin and Myerson were writing the green belt was very much a 'non-issue' (in the parlance of Lukes' (2005: 39) framework it was a case of elite interest groups acting in concert to keep an 'unacceptable' issue out of politics). However, the future of the green belt is by no means such a 'restricted' or 'unacceptable' issue for discussion; as noted at the start of this chapter, some influential interest groups have begun to 'think the unthinkable' regarding the future of the green belt (e.g. Birrell, 2012). Even so, as Starkie (1987: 269) points out, becoming an 'issue' is no guarantee that policies will change; in other words, becoming an issue is a necessary but not sufficient condition for strategy revision.

An illuminating study of how processes of power and agenda-setting play out 'for real' was written by Bent Flyvbjerg (1998), in his case study of a major redevelopment of the Danish city of Aalborg. Far from the existence of an objective 'rationality' which experts only need reach an easy consensus over, "rationality is context-dependent and the context of rationality is power" (Flyvbjerg, 1998: 2). This relationship between rationality and power, although symbiotic, is unequal: "power has a rationality that rationality does not know, whereas rationality does not have a power that power does not know" (ibid.). The single most important conclusion we can take from Flyvbjerg's work, so Faludi and Waterhout (2006: 9)

argue, is that

there can be no question of evidence forming a self-evident, objective basis for action. Rather, on methodological grounds, it is clear that what is accepted as decisive evidence is a matter of choice, and as such is value-laden and political.

Moving down the layers of abstraction, from power as a concept to power as it plays out in a case study, what evidence do we have relating to how power manifests itself in the strategic spatial planning process? Perhaps the first thing that becomes apparent from even a cursory examination of the development process is the sheer multiplicity of interest groups from across the whole political spectrum who are competing to have their voices heard. Gordon and Richardson (1997: 102) argue that “cities that are the most captive to special interests are the least likely to adopt growth-oriented policies”; this would suggest that the Metropolitan green belt is a place of stasis. It is often the case that an impressive coalition of forces align themselves against major developments, and especially against any perceived eroding of the green belt; Murdoch et al (2003: 82) identify five main groups who are strongly preservationist: local councillors, professional planners, developers, residents and environmentalists. However, Hoggart (1997: 259) argues that preservationists, even when acting in concert, are no match for pro-development interests who often have the support of powerful national interests - “the opposition of village residents to particular developments is very real but highly constrained”.

This idea that everything is ‘up for grabs’ is reflected in development plans - the very documents whose aim is to provide certainty in the planning process. Healey (1993: 84) argues that the plans have become “an arena of struggle” between different interest groups, a view that fits very closely with Lukes’ analytical framework. The results of these battles over the content and message of development plans has necessarily impacted on how the functions and purposes of the green belt have been regarded over time. As Amati and Yokohari (2006: 138) succinctly put it,

The green belt’s function was used as a way of ensuring its implementation. Thus, the function changed according to the group whose support was enlisted and according to

the period during which this support was sought.

An interesting perspective on the importance of governmental scale is provided by Munton (1983: 10), who argues that the further up the chain of government, towards the centre, one travels, the more “clear-cut, principled and highly generalised” the views on the functions of the green belt become. It is only as one travels in the opposite direction, to the level of individual developers, farmers and residents that things become messier, with opinions becoming “sharp, specific and self-interested.” Put another way, central government has always considered the green belt to be a strategic planning instrument with a certain amount of built-in flexibility to adapt to local needs (i.e. an assumption that limited development would occur) (Munton, 1983: 49). Before we look in detail at central-regional-local relations, it is useful to examine the theory behind spatial thinking across all governance scales.

1.8: Central-local relations and institutional scalar linkages

Despite the decentralist rhetoric of localism (and the wider UK narrative of devolution), England remains one of the most centralised territories of all OECD countries, with approximately 75 per cent of local authority income deriving from central government, placing it, “at one extreme of the European spectrum” (CLG, 2009: 46), in contrast to countries like Sweden and Denmark, where local government raises around three-quarters of its own revenue (Pugalis and Townsend, 2013a: 105). This privileging of the national over the ‘local’ and the ‘regional’ can be traced back to the Second World War and ‘post-war consensus’ which oversaw the creation of the welfare state within a Keynesian economics framework (Murdoch et al, 2003: 31).

Disconnects between the aims of central and local government in England are not a recent phenomenon; the 2007 Lyons Inquiry into Local Government criticised the previous thirty years of reforms as, “a series of well-intentioned devolution initiatives which have often evolved into subtle instruments of [central] control” (Lyons, 2007: i). For example, both

Regional Policy Guidance (RPG) and its successor policy, Regional Spatial Strategies (RSS), were roundly criticised as, “being more akin to central government strategies for a region as opposed to locally distinctive and accountable strategies of each region” (Baker and Wong, 2013: 92). Fenwick (2015: 10) argues that the root of the problem lies in the conflict between two incompatible messages offered from the centre: that local government should both ‘think big’ (in terms of city regions, joint procurement, shared services and collaboration with public-private partners), yet simultaneously ‘think small’ (for instance by embracing localism, neighbourhood and community government). Jones (2010: 375) describes the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (which became the CLG) in the early 2000s as resembling:

a gigantic think-tank, commissioning and producing a stream of reports and policy papers making varied recommendations for the spatial organisation of economic development, much to the confusion of those trying to guess the likely direction of government policy.

While such ‘alphabet soup’ policy outputs appear as the *symptoms* of the confusion which has reigned as to the best way to structure central-local relations, the *cause* of the problem would seem to be ongoing uncertainty as to the appropriate spatial units of analysis and implementation. City-regions seem to have emerged as the preferred option, although since many of them bear a striking resemblance to metropolitan counties which were abolished over thirty years ago, it is questionable whether they are not simply a convenient re-hashing of ‘zombie’ sub-regional administrative boundaries. There has been a historic unwillingness to follow through on policies which adapt the spatial units used to deliver local government; for example, the 1995-98 reorganisation created unitary councils only in some parts of England; central government refrained from a comprehensive application of the process on the basis that, “different parts of England have different needs and hence require differing local structures” (Fenwick, 2015: 9). As noted above, this additional complexity has created unintended consequences in terms of planning and transport policy in LEPs based on old County boundaries.

Even were an effective set of such spatial units to exist, there remains the problem of sufficient

cross-departmental central government ‘buy-in’ to follow through on agreed policies. Brian Robson (2014: 2) in an article entitled, ‘*Does Britain no longer have an urban policy?*’ notes that many of the senior civil servants who had experience of, and a commitment to, urban policy have disappeared from the scene (CLG was the most heavily culled central government department, congratulated by the Chancellor on having reduced itself by 60%). What expertise in urban policy remains seems to be concentrated in a group called the ‘Cities Policy Unit’, which is part of the Cabinet Office (and thus not a spending department). However, where the CLG and its predecessors had difficulty in persuading other departments to cede control to local actors, it appears that the localism agenda has achieved far greater success in spreading the message of decentralisation (Cheshire et al, 2014: 173).

As noted above, there has been an ongoing battle between various Whitehall departments over the ownership and future direction of strategic spatial planning. The principal causes of this tension have their roots in the ‘planning doctrine’ versus ‘economic development’ paradigm battle, which itself is a function of the degree to which one believes in concepts such as spatial equilibrium and spatial justice. A degree of friction emerged between the CLG and BIS over the disposal of the business and physical assets of the defunct RDAs, many of which were a complex patchwork painstakingly obtained as parts of a wider regeneration strategy (Pugalis and Townsend, 2012: 168). On a personal level, the two former leaders of these departments could not be more different - Eric Pickles, the rabble-rousing ex-local politician, and Vince Cable, the urbane economist who saw the value of retaining some vestiges of regional structures and was thus in favour of retaining at least some elements of the RDAs, which were viewed more favourably than the RSSs (Bentley *et al*, 2010: 553). As noted in the preceding section, six ‘BIS Local’ teams were created to give the department an England-wide presence outside Whitehall⁴. There was further conflict over the guidance issued to potential LEP partnerships - Pickles did not want to be too prescriptive about LEPs, urging local businesses and councils to define their own priorities, whereas Cable and Mark Prisk, the Business Minister responsible for LEPs wanted Pickles to be more open about what functions

4 The six teams are named: ‘South Central and West; London and East; West Midlands; East Midlands; North West; and North East/Yorkshire and the Humber.

central government saw LEPs carrying out. Cable also thought, along with the Department for Transport, that there should be fewer than 30 LEPs, since they needed to be of a certain scale to properly take on strategic spatial/transport functions (Hayman, 2012: 78-79). Matters came to a head when *The Times* published a leaked letter from Prisk to Cable and Pickles, in which Prisk warned that the LEP policy could result in “likely failure in large parts of England” (Hayman, 2010).

Tensions are not limited to CLG-BIS relations; the exchange of views between George Osborne and Eric Pickles described above is indicative of an ongoing battle between the Treasury and the CLG. In an ideal Treasury world, there would be little or no planning restrictions, and the economy would grow in tandem with the nation’s towns and cities, whereas Pickles and the CLG have to be far more sensitive to the needs and desires of local authorities, many, if not most, of which are firmly anti-development (as far as their own ‘back yards’ are concerned). Paul Goodman, Executive Editor of Conservative Home, writing in *The Telegraph*, stated that the Treasury preferred Labour’s centrally managed RSSs, which dictated housing targets to local authorities (Goodman, 2012). As often happens, policy moves in a cyclical pattern; central government attempted to control local councils during the 1980s through so-called ‘planning by appeal’ - using planning inspectors to overrule those decisions of local councils which ‘went against the grain’ of central government policy (Morton, 2012: 6). These personal relationships are described because it is important to remember the human element in policy formulation and implementation, especially at the central level, which can seem very, very far away.

The biggest bone of contention between central and local tiers of governance is perhaps the negotiation and agreement of housing targets. Using the latest household projections from the Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG), a total of 5 799 000 new households are forecast to emerge between 2008 and 2033 (CLG Live Table 401). Assuming a mean household size at 2008 levels of 2.33 persons per household, just under 250,000 new houses per year, every year, need to be built. Since household sizes are projected to decline over

the coming decades, this is a conservative estimate. A glance at the housebuilding completion rates in England since 1990-91 show that on average, 144,780 homes have been completed each year, a shortfall of more than 100,000 homes per year (CLG Live Table 209). Extreme caution should be attached to household projections, since they are based on a range of assumptions, and are highly sensitive to migration rates in particular (Aldred, 2010). Even so, it is long-term population projections, combined with housebuilding figures such as these that have fuelled the narrative of the 'housing crisis' that politicians tell us, on an almost weekly basis, afflicts the Greater South East of England in particular. The eradication of regional governance has had immediate, and significant, consequences on housing targets.

Cheshire (2009: 1) argues that the planning system "is the last element of that period of post war reconstruction which has not been modified to take into account market realities." One of the reasons why the planning system has remained so intact over the past 70 years is the "considerable discretion" (Kelly and Gilg, 2000: 338) enjoyed by local planning authorities which has led to a robust system where few changes need to be made centrally as most interpretation is carried out at the local level. Naturally this leads to wider variation in the implementation of planning policy 'on the ground' than there would be in a much more tightly run, "top-down command and control" regime (Gordon and Richardson, 1997). Brotherton (1992) goes so far as to suggest that local authorities take the lead in determining policy tightness, with central government generally content to give development control departments their head, beyond a few very contentious planning applications. It could be argued that the planning system in England is analogous to the common law tradition, with the important exception that precedent is built from the base upwards, rather than handed down from on high, since Healey *et al* (1988) argue that the 'legitimacy' of planning decisions is established by locally elected members deciding cases.

The literature on a specific bundle of central-local relations of particular interest - implementation of green belt policy - sheds an interesting light on the preceding discussion. Due to the very strong presumption against development enjoyed by areas subject to green belt

designation an interesting, and extremely rare phenomenon can occur, in which central-local relations are turned on their head. In other words, as Elson (1986: xxv) notes:

this unique quality gives it the potential to shift the initiative in central-local relations from the centre to the locality...green belt is thus a very desirable policy for a local authority seeking to retain or enhance its power to affect local events.

Much of this paradoxical situation springs from the almost total absence of a common understanding of the purposes of the green belt. Munton (1983: 137) argues that central government views the green belt as an instrument to achieve certain goals, a means to an end, whereas local actors see it as an end in itself - a concrete reality to be defended at all costs. The further one descends down the spatial and governmental scales, the more difficult it becomes to take a strategic view of the green belt, or, as Gallent *et al* (2006: 165) argue, green belts become a “generic intervention, designed to achieve wider objectives, without a specific purpose tied to the area of designation itself” - that is, until one finds oneself implementing policy in such areas. In any event, as Kelly and Gilg (2000: 336) warn, we should be wary in drawing straightforward cause-and-effect links between policy formulation and its implementation. It could be argued that the combined effects of scale (both spatial and governmental) and temporality (i.e. the passage of time) have led to the ‘diffusion’ of green belt policy to the point where it is used as a negotiating tool between the various tiers of government/governance and the various competing vested interests (Elson, 1986). As Bulkeley (2005: 876) argues, there are:

manifold ways in which such issues are created, constructed, regulated and contested between, across and among scales, and through hybrid governing arrangements which operate in network terms.

A related, and important, strand of policy - strategic housing development - has undergone precisely the opposite paradox in recent years, with increasing central government intervention in the development and implementation of housing policy, leading to the “demise of the local”, according to Robinson (2003: 249). The balance of power in housing policy

shifted dramatically towards central government under the previous Labour administration (Dixon and Adams, 2008), a state of affairs which the much heralded Localism Act 2011 attempted to redress, mainly by employing 'carrot and stick' approach (i.e. by means of the New Homes Bonus), using indirect forms of 'steering' to incentivise local actors to 'voluntarily' follow the desired course of action, especially in regard to building new housing. However, Broughton et al (2011: 88) argue that, far from transferring power from the centre to localities, the Act has consolidated the "real power" to decide resource allocation in the hands of central government, in a form of "centralised localism".

Even though the influence of the regional tier of governance has been greatly reduced during the terms of the coalition and current Conservative government, the remaining tiers of planning, from parish meetings to local and County Councils and upwards towards the several central government departments with an interest in strategic spatial development, have their own agendas and motivations (Gallent and Tewdwr-Jones, 2007: 151). What is clear is that our ability to make appropriate connections between and across different spatial/governmental scales "is grossly underdeveloped" (Smith, 1992). This underdevelopment may partly be due to the imperceptible merging of what Bulpitt (1983) described as the 'dual polity', whereby local government was allowed a certain degree of autonomy in highly specific domains, at the cost of successive central governments increasing their scope to promote their own policy interests at the local level (for example in terms of setting the green belt agenda); a process which Catney (2009: 48) contends happened on an ever more frequent basis during the 1980s and 1990s. There has been a counter-current of thought which dates as least as far back as the Redcliffe-Maud Report 1969 (Redcliffe-Maud et al, 1969: vol. I, 1), which argues for local government which is able to:

develop enough inherent strength to deal with national authorities in a valid partnership; and to adapt itself without disruption to the present unprecedented process of change in the way people live, work, move, shop and enjoy themselves.

These sentiments embrace not only a desire for more balanced central-local relations, but

also hint at the need to tackle issues (e.g. travel and new housing development) in a way that transcends arbitrary administrative boundaries. Doel (2012) argues that Lord Heseltine's Report into local growth (Heseltine, 2012) resonates strongly with Redcliffe-Maud, although she goes on to contend that a few stones have been left unturned, including an almost complete absence of discussion of the evidence base left by regional governance. The NPPF, with its requirement that councils must identify a minimum of 5 years' worth of housing supply (CLG, 2012a: para. 47) ensures that Whitehall remains poised to step in should any council step out of line, thus the scope for central-local conflict remains very much alive.

1.9: Strategic spatial planning and the housing question

House building in the UK has been characterised as 'speculative', and often takes the form of large-scale schemes built by a diminishing number of volume producers. A focus of recent work on the economics of house-building has tried to establish whether or not those who are responsible for the supply of new homes (i.e. developers and builders) employ strategies geared towards achieving market monopoly. Such strategies could include deliberate withholding of supply ('land-banking'), collusion among large construction companies, and 'drip-feeding' land for new development according to market conditions/forecasts. A report by the Office of Fair Trading found no systemic evidence of these behaviours, although they noted that volume home builders carried out their trade according to land *transactions* rather than through the creation of new housing *units* (OFT, 2008). Specifically, the OFT report concluded, "we found no evidence that individual homebuilders have persistent or widespread market power or that they are able to restrict supply or inflate prices" (OFT, 2008: para. 1.7) and that, "we have not found any evidence that homebuilders have the ability to anti-competitively hoard land or own a large amount of land with planning permission on which they have not started to build" (OFT, 2008: para. 1.8). In fact, they conclude that the largest 'landbank' may be held by the public sector (*ibid.*).

In any case, as Barker (2014: 72) notes, undeveloped planning permissions need to be

renewed every three years, with attendant costs and uncertainty, which is itself a “considerable incentive” for developers to build. Even removing from the equation the strategising and inclination of volume housebuilders to develop particular sites, there are significant questions surrounding the sector’s *capacity* to deliver the kind of levels of housing it has been suggested are necessary to keep pace with socio-demographic changes, principally because of its inherent conservatism and indifference to innovation and market research (Jones and Watkins, 2009: 34). However, those on the other side of this argument contend that, by constricting the supply of new homes (and therefore raising the price of those which are built), volume housebuilders are simply following a tried and tested economic model. As Richard Jones, group head of regeneration and growth at EC Harris straightforwardly put it, “Having established a model that delivers good margins, large housebuilders won’t want to destroy that by throwing lots of houses into the marketplace” (Mayes, 2012).

In Cochrane et al’s (2015: 11) work on housebuilder activity in the Milton Keynes and South Midlands (MKSM) Growth Region, they found that the most common rate of delivery on any one site was 50 new homes per year, meaning that a 1,000 home development could take twenty years to complete (if only one firm was involved). This is symptomatic of a wider problem affecting strategic spatial planning, that large scale sites are simply not attractive to both developers and planning authorities, because of the increased risks from working with a greater number of partners and the starker line between success and failure for larger sites (IPPR/Shelter, 2015: 26). The equation between land availability and the delivery of new housing is therefore not a simple one (Cochrane et al, 2015: 11). These phasing issues have knock-on effects on travel behaviour, since until a ‘critical mass’ is achieved to stimulate employment close to a strategic development site, newly arrived residents will have to commute elsewhere (Raco and Henderson, 2006: 509). Much of this complexity is created by a scalar mismatch between developers and planners, with the former privileging a scale below the sub-region though above specific sites (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009: 9), a functional scale which is absent from the lexicon of many public sector planners, who tend to focus on a spatial level either above or below this.

Of course, much of the criticism of housebuilders stems from a perception that they are failing to build new homes at a fast enough rate to cope with demand, and one of the principal methods used to determine demand are projections - of migration, population change and ultimately household formation. Forecasting has long formed one of the principal activities of both land use and transport planning, especially those working at central government level (Gallent and Tewdwr-Jones, 2006: 104), although the heady days of regarding demographic change as a 'science', with uncritical acceptance of the projections it provided have passed into distant memory (Foley, 1963: 20) and bitter experience has taught planners and other built environment actors to remain rather skeptical when faced with prognostications of any kind. Unlike weather forecasting, there seems to have been little improvement over time in the field of household projections; Barker (2014: 28) notes that ONS projections of household formation for the 2001-2006 period were estimated to have been 17% greater than actual rates. By far the biggest problem with demographic projections in England is that they have tended to be used as a disciplining influence from the centre, serving to, "draw actors together into a shared set of behaviour patterns" (Counsell and Haughton, 2004: 109-10). In the process of 'cascading' figures down from central, through regional (when that tier existed) to the local level, the 'objective' calculations tend to become highly subjective, "determined not by real demand or need but by the agendas of competing political groups" (Gallent and Tewdwr-Jones, 2006: 145).

In other words, the "complexities of space" need to be kept at bay in the passage of projections across the scales of governance (Murdoch, 2000: 509), a Sisyphean task if ever there was one. There is an important point to be made about the direction in which housing targets travel (i.e. from the centre to the local or vice versa). Recalling the debate around 'hard' and 'soft' sustainable development, Murdoch (2000: 505) argues that truly sustainable development must be brought "down to earth", and based on much more robust assessments of particular spatial contexts. This appears to be a plea to allow those at the local end of the spatial/governance scale to have a much greater say in calculating their needs. There is, however, a separate

argument which contends that, even if perfect projections of the number of new houses we need were produced, these would only be one factor in the relative determinants of growth in demand for houses and space (Cheshire et al, 2014: 98). In other words, projections should be regarded as merely one piece of the puzzle in a complex decision making process that should also take in a wide range of other information, including housing market behaviour (MacLennan, 2012: 23). In fact, Cheshire (2009: 13) argues that the real driver of house price inflation is income growth rather than growth in household formation, caused by the strong elasticity of demand for space.

This point goes to the heart of the debate surrounding the perceived housing crisis. The argument is frequently made, mainly by right of centre economists and think-tanks, that rising house prices which far outstrip real growth in household earnings is the major *symptom* of the predicament and that it is thus logical to suggest that the problem is rooted in supply-side issues (e.g. Cheshire et al, 2014). The major *cause*, it is argued, is the disconnection between the planning system and the housing market, largely caused by the inflexibility of the twin pillars of the plan-led approach and development control (Gallent and Tewdwr-Jones, 2006: 5). Kate Barker's two *Reviews* into housing supply and land use planning at the height of the last housing bubble were directed at this very question (Barker, 2004; 2006). In her recent monograph which revisited the housing question (Barker, 2014), she identified the inherent difficulty in distinguishing between 'good' increases in property values and 'bad' ones reflecting land supply constraints. This problem is exacerbated by the failure of the planning system to take a sufficiently strategic view of land supply; instead decisions are taken on an authority by authority basis, which reflects, "the total absence of economic analysis in planning" (Cullingworth, 1997: 946). It is important to make the point that the planning system only constrains the supply of housing indirectly, through directly constraining land (Cheshire et al, 2014: 90). A recent report by the Institute of Public Policy Research and Shelter found that land prices have become even more volatile than house prices (IPPR/Shelter, 2015: 10)

In addition, even were the planning system better able to take account of price signals in a general sense, there are two features of the housing market which are particularly distorting in the wider South East of England, namely the impact of green belts on land supply and house prices, and the appropriate density and tenure mix at which to build (given the conflicting goals of housing policy and developers' profit margins). According to the monocentric model of urban economics developed, among others, by Alonso (2013 [1964]) and Muth (1969), the effect of the green belt on the negative house price gradient that one would expect to encounter as one moves out from the Central Business District (CBD) is to introduce a sharp discontinuity in this gradient. Jones and Watkins (2009: 47) describe the house price gradient of an urban area surrounded by a green belt as "an umbrella with holes", with the green belt acting as the umbrella and the urban areas as the 'holes'. Thomas (1970: 100), quotes a 'senior officer' of the (then) Ministry of Housing and Local Government, who described the Greater London green belt as a "blanket full of moth-holes". These distortions are further compounded by the difficulty in developing a financial mechanism which captures the uplift in land values for sites granted planning permission that would allow the necessary infrastructure to be built along with the proposed development. The highly speculative nature of house building in England is closely linked to the uncertainty, delay and risk inherent in the planning system. This often leads to a confrontational approach to major new development, with lawyers representing different sides frequently busier than planners and designers.

However, while a number of these criticisms of the planning system are valid (particularly those concerning delays and blanket urban containment), several should, and have been, rebutted. MacLennan (2012: 13) argues that, "it is more than unbalanced analysis to assume that slow supply-side responses always and everywhere stem from the planning system stalling the responsive hand of an otherwise competitive, informed housing provision system". This point is emphasised by Gallent and Tewdwr-Jones (2006: 19) who note that, "if planning were merely about efficient land release, then there would be little to distinguish it from a world of big business corporate planning." Indeed, Kate Barker is said to have "rethought" aspects of the liberalisation of planning that she pressed for in her second *Review* (Docherty and Mackie,

2009: 3). It is therefore important to look at all aspects of the housing supply chain, inclusive of both the planning system and developers since it is currently characterised by low output and high development risk (IPPR/Shelter, 2015: 21). A general point should also be emphasised, *viz.*, that in the overall picture, demand side factors are significantly more important than supply side issues, since new build housing accounts for just a fraction of total supply and transactions (Grigson, 1986 as cited in Bramley, 1993: 1024). Barker (2004: 18) estimated that in any one year, new build housing accounts for only 10 per cent of all transactions and adds just 1 per cent to the overall stock. Any set of progressive strategic spatial planning policies will, however, not seek to rely on this and will attempt to address supply side issues since these will, over the long run, significantly affect demand side behaviour.

On a more conceptual level, it is worthwhile questioning the efficacy of the market to fully capitalise the sorting mechanisms people use (by trading off housing and transport costs with the benefits of a particular location, within the constraining factor of their wages) - in other words, to achieve 'spatial equilibrium'. Although Cheshire et al (2014: 30) argue that this is a, "highly reasonable assumption", there is plenty of evidence to suggest the contrary, either in the form of multiple equilibria - the housing market area model (Goodman, 1978), or, more likely, spatial disequilibria (MacLennan et al, 1987). Simple common sense should tell us that factors like social housing, the existence of significant informational asymmetries between different actors, and serious inequalities in transport and accessibility have the effect of distorting the concept of spatial equilibrium beyond any helpful meaning, or, as Jones and Watkins (2009: 73) somewhat more diplomatically put it, such distortions, "render the concept of equilibrium inappropriate as a basis for analysing urban housing systems".

Rather than focusing on an abstract 'grand unifying theory' like spatial equilibrium, a more productive way of analysing the interactions between the planning system, housing markets, and travel and transport patterns is through the prism of spatial metrics such as density. Density is, for some, well on the way to becoming a tenet of planning doctrine, with Alexander (1993: 182) describing it as, "a complex concept involving the interaction of perceptions with

the concrete realities of the built environment”. The requirement to build at higher densities only becomes relevant when we look at development strategically; as Marcuse (1998: 107) points out, “If we look at each landscape separately, we are unable to ecologically justify plans for dense urban development. From a regional perspective, however, aggregation of urban and residential land uses may in fact be preferable.”

An important area of research for strategic spatial planning is establishing whether a relationship exists between density and distance travelled to work (e.g. Gordon et al, 1989a; Pushkarev and Zupan, 1977). Levinson (1997: 148) argues that densification is similar to polycentricity in that it is the market’s response to minimise spiralling interaction costs. However, the relationships between urban density and travel patterns have become much more complex in recent decades. Gone are the days when people’s ‘activity spaces’ and opportunities for social interaction took place within a much smaller radius, including the distance between home and work. What seems to have been one of the principal drivers towards higher density development, however, is that the demand for accessibility is less elastic than the demand for space, which is more of a luxury (Gordon, 2008: 4653). Much of the credit for establishing a (negative) correlation between higher density and per capita energy (i.e. fuel) consumption, thus encouraging a ‘pro-density’ perspective from many policy-makers, is due to Newman and Kenworthy’s oft cited (1989) paper. However, their work has been criticised in recent years, principally on the grounds that it grossly simplifies causality (i.e. higher density equals lower per capita energy use). It is argued that, instead of higher densities being the cause of lower fuel consumption, it is rather the case that higher transport costs give rise to higher densities (Echenique et al, 2012). It should be noted that Newman and Kenworthy attribute 60% of energy consumption to urban density, with the remaining 40% due to other variables related to fuel costs and vehicle efficiency (Mindali et al, 2004). A meta-analysis of studies carried out by Ewing and Cervero (2010) concluded that increasing density only has a marginal impact on reducing car travel, and other work has argued that high densities are responsible for negative externalities including traffic congestion (Sorensen et al, 2008) and respiratory disease (Schweitzer and Zhou, 2010).

Gunn (2007: 610) argues that the Greater London green belt assumes even greater importance as densities increase in the metropolis, as it provides much needed recreational space and respite from urban life. This is something of a circular argument, however, since protecting the green belt will necessarily lead to higher density urban development, which makes the green belt ever more sacrosanct, thus strengthening the case for further urban densification, and so on. It is widely recognised that the green belt, by restricting the supply of land for housing, increases rents and house prices and encourages house builders to develop at higher densities than they would otherwise (Willis, 1982). Although higher density development often costs more in the short term, due to direct capital costs (e.g. the same type of apartment will be significantly more expensive in a 12-storey block than in a 2-storey building), over the longer term it yields higher financial and social returns (Keith, 2008: 64). Higher density development is also subject to diminishing marginal savings, since ever higher residential densities generate fewer land savings (Goodchild, 2008: 210). In fact, Cheshire and Magrini (2009) found that, at the strategic scale, and having controlled for other factors including city size, higher densities were associated with slower economic growth. At the level of individual developments, poorly planned higher densities can cause negative externalities including noise, loss of privacy, lack of personal space and reduced parking opportunities (although some would not necessarily class the last factor as a drawback) (Gunn, 2007: 598).

1.10: Infrastructure: The role of transport in strategic spatial planning

Just as the planning system is expected to contribute to ‘sustainable’ growth and development, so is the transport network, as set out in the coalition Local Transport White Paper (DfT, 2011). Even more so than spatial land use planning, transport infrastructure benefits significantly from economies of scale and a strategic approach (Stafford and Ayres, 2013: 134). At the same time, the relationships between ‘larger than local’ planning and travel patterns are complex and non-linear, a state of affairs not helped by the long established lack of integration in the United Kingdom between spatial and transport planning (Hull,

2005). Foley was bemoaning this lack of integration more than half a century ago when he wrote that, “a most serious segment that has never been given fully to town planning is highway and transport planning” (Foley, 1960: 229). Contemporary examples of this lack of coordination abound. For example, under the New Labour administration, developers and RDAs were occasionally taken aback by the refusal of the Highways Agency to accept planning applications for large development sites if they would take traffic levels above the design capacity of the neighbouring road network (Townsend, 2009: 650). Professional barriers and cultural differences have resulted in situations such as land use planners seizing on the concept of ‘co-location’ of development without a proper understanding of the travel behaviours this might generate, and, on the other side of the coin, there have been situations where transport planners have failed to fully grasp the development consequences of new infrastructure (Martin, 2013: 56). Revealingly, there was little mention in either of Kate Barker’s *Reviews* into the housing supply and the planning system of the need for strategic transport infrastructure to support the proposed levels of development (Bolden and Harman, 2008: 311). A combination of ongoing ambiguity over the appropriate spatial scale at which to take strategic spatial infrastructure decisions and the extremely long lead-in times needed to deliver such projects has contributed to the cleavages between land use and transport planning. For example, according to Martin (2013: 71) the £5 million ‘price tag’ used to define whether Local Transport Plan schemes are ‘major’ has been unchanged since the 1980s. Development continues to be ‘housing led’ rather than ‘infrastructure led’ in that housing targets in local plans mean little if they come without the necessary schools, healthcare facilities and roads (Cochrane et al, 2013: 794). This lack of certainty surrounding infrastructure funding and delivery was one of the principal concerns cited by these authors’ recent work on MKSM (Cochrane et al, 2015: 7).

More recent developments have demonstrated the complexities and, in a few cases, outright contradictions inherent to the localism debate as it relates to transport and travel. In March 2011, the Transport Secretary, Philip Hammond drew attention to how the localist agenda had damaged transport, in particular local bus funding. In a speech to the Local Enterprise

Partnerships Network in September 2011, the Transport Secretary appeared once again to veer 'off message' when he talked of, "unleash[ing] the potential of our regions" (Hammond, 2011), with the 'r' word positively taboo by this stage. Transport planners and practitioners have generally responded negatively to the revocation of Regional Strategies, with Hickman, Hall and Banister (2013: 218) describing this as "a huge retrograde step". However, in an example of a 'no-win' situation for government, the centralist policy of green belts also conflicts with strategic transport policy, since urban containment is highly likely to result in higher vehicular carbon emissions as a result of 'leap-frog' commuting patterns and increasing distance between people and the shops and services they wish to access (Cheshire, 2009: 14).

A high profile news item in November 2012 was the publication of the results of the UK's commitment, under Phase I of the Kyoto Protocol, to reduce baseline emissions of six major greenhouse gases by 12.5% during the period 2008 - 2012. The UK failed to meet its target, although not by a wide margin; including sources of pollution due to land use, an 11% cut, relative to 1990 levels, was achieved (Clark, 2012). Achievements by individual nations count for little, of course, if the global trend shows only a slow reduction in harmful emissions, or, as in the case of non-Kyoto countries like China, sharp increases. Over the medium to long term, the Climate Change Act 2008 commits the UK to cutting greenhouse gases by 80% (relative to 1990 levels) by 2050 (HMSO, 2008). In the wider south east, the strong impetus for growth (principally in terms of housebuilding) over the short to medium term, means that particular care will need to be taken in the planning of large-scale developments since badly planned housing can lead to much greater spatial separation of homes and workplaces, with the inevitable consequence that harmful, transport-based, emissions will rise. In other words, a strategic approach to planning homes and transport infrastructure needs to be taken. As Headicar et al note (2009: 9):

The attractive proposition is that, if the relationships between a range of urban structure variables (say population density, settlement size, mix of use, etc.) and travel can be understood, then, by implication, land use planning (and other spatial planning methods) become very important tools in managing the growth in travel demand.

In any event there needs to be far greater integration of spatial and transport planning. Current indications are not good; there appears to be a widening gulf between the priorities of the Department for Transport (DfT) and the Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG), with the DfT recently launching Britain's biggest road-building programme since the £24 billion 'roads for prosperity' scheme launched under Margaret Thatcher in 1989, which was billed as "the biggest road programme since the Romans" (Vidal, 2012). Many of the 150 or so schemes identified by the Campaign for Better Transport are 'zombie roads' - previously dead schemes which have been resurrected to supposedly boost the nation's flagging economy. A number of these proposed schemes have implications for the green belt, including the A602 Ware to Stevenage road widening, the Harlow Bypass and the M11 Junction 6 - 8 lane widening project.

One of the principal areas of contention in the land-use - travel demand debate is the extent to which morphological characteristics (such as density, transport network attributes and the spatial distribution of homes and workplaces) can affect travel choices and patterns. The debate has become somewhat polarised, with some academics convinced that there are strong links between urban morphology and travel behaviour (cf. Kitamura et al, 1997: 126; Cervero and Landis, 1995: 2), while others are less persuaded by the strength of this link (e.g. Evans, 1998: 137), since, as Breheny (1995: 83) points out, one of the main reasons why land-use policy often has questionable or diluted effects on travel demand is because the price signals associated with car travel (e.g. car tax, fuel duty) have tended to ensure that few motorists are discouraged from travelling longer and further in their cars. A third group is equivocal: according to Boarnet and Crane (2001: 842), "[i]t...appears premature to either conclude that the built environment can be reliably used as transportation policy tools at the margin or that it cannot". In any case, it would be wise to keep Handy's (1996: 162) warning in mind, when she states that,

finding a strong relationship between urban form and travel patterns is not the same as showing that a change in urban form will lead to a change in travel behavior, and finding a strong relationship is not the same as understanding that relationship.

This warning applies especially to cross-sectional data, even where regression analysis produces strong correlations between land-use characteristics and travel patterns, since any links between variables may or may not be direct (Stead and Marshall, 2001: 131). Residential self-selection is another potential source of error - do residents in dense neighbourhoods travel less not because of the morphological characteristics of the urban fabric but simply because these areas attract people who prefer not to travel by car? (Crane, 2000: 13). A problem specific to the UK is the severe disjuncture between spatial (land-use) and transport planning which has meant that major transport infrastructure has often been implemented with scant regard for its wider land-use implications; often local planning authorities have simply had to accept centrally-planned network alterations as a basic input around which they must adapt their own plans (Cullingworth, 1997: 951). It is also the case that pricing signals (in the form of e.g. fuel or road pricing) are far stronger than any land-use measures can possibly be in the current distorted market of cheap car travel with motorists paying for little or none of the externalities associated with automobiles (Cervero and Landis, 1995: 9). Docherty and Mackie (2010: 3) contend from their reading of the Stern (2007) and Eddington (2006) Reports that “an enhanced and more interventionist planning system to act as a (partial) surrogate for pricing” offers some hope in terms of reducing transport emissions as part of Stern’s graduated approach. It is, however, unlikely that any policy formulation with the words ‘interventionist’ and ‘planning system’ will meet with much favour under the current coalition. However, since travel demand is directly linked to economic growth, a very small silver lining in the current cloudy economic situation is that overall transport use has fallen since 2008 (DfT, 2012).

The land-use - travel debate is of course especially relevant to the case at hand of morphology resulting from urban containment, since, as Rydin and Myerson (1989: 470) point out, “transport networks within an urban area can still come under pressure if commuting takes place across the green belt from residential developments in the outer metropolitan area.” This travel behaviour is caused when “development restrictions have pushed the city’s suburbs to leapfrog to the far side of a protected zone” (Champion, 2007: 34), but little analysis has been carried out into the interplay of socio-economic and morphological characteristics that may

affect these choices. What is clear, however, is that improved transportation infrastructure has allowed people who once would have had to move home from Outer London or the South East to work in the city centre to commute instead, although, as Leunig and Overman (2008: 76) point out, transport can substitute for migration over relatively short distances, but it cannot (yet) replace it over medium or long distances.

A substantial piece of transport infrastructure is planned which is a good practical illustration of the theoretical discussion above of the interplay of power, planning doctrine and vested interests, which, if it goes ahead, will have significant effects on house prices, linkages between towns and villages and which may (indirectly) lead to the opening up of the green belt. Phase 1 of the proposed High Speed 2 (HS2) railway linking central London with Birmingham is planned to cut through 40km of the metropolitan greenbelt. The proposed route of HS2 Phase One is shown in the map overleaf. An interesting example of what Flyvbjerg (1998: 35) describes as the 'rationalization of a prior political decision' appears to have occurred in the downgrading of the 'value' of greenbelt and other protected open spaces. In a 2010 assessment by HS2 Ltd, the corporate entity responsible for building the line, the 'landscape impact' caused by the section of line passing through the green belt and Chiltern AONB was estimated at just under £1.1 billion, a figure which was reduced to £114 million in the most recent Department for Transport estimate (DfT, 2012). DfT officials claimed that this tenfold reduction in impact was made possible by 'green tunnels' (roofed-over cuttings) and other mitigation strategies. A more cynical view might be that the technical exercise of 'landscape impact' assessment has been 'rationalised' to conform to an overriding political goal. In other words, as Flyvbjerg (1998: 36) explains, "Power, quite simply, produces that knowledge and that rationality which is conducive to the reality it wants." Quite simply, the vast majority of the cost reduction was achieved by designating green belt and AONB land as 'urban fringe/greenbelt', valued at £889/ha/yr on a scale of seven open space types used in cost-benefit exercises by the CLG. The only category which is valued less on the CLG scale is 'intensive farmland', worth just £103/ha/yr, with 'urban core public space/city park' the most 'valuable' open space at £54,000/ha/yr (CLG, 2012b). These types of normative valuation exercises

highlight the disjuncture between the 'sacrosanct' nature of green belt land in policy discourse and its 'true' value as an exploitable economic resource.

Further antagonism of the anti-HS2 lobby, and what might appear as suspiciously 'on-the-hoof' policy making was provided (once again) by the Planning Minister, Nick Boles, who suggested that HS2 could stimulate housebuilding along its route (Hope, 2013), despite the fact, that by its very nature and purpose, HS2 is a high-speed service with no stops between London, Birmingham and the two northern city destinations which form Phase 2 of the project. Housing built alongside the route of HS2 is likely to suffer from noise pollution, vibration and other disbenefits. Of more significant interest when Phase 1 of HS2 opens (currently scheduled for 2026) will be the degree to which inter-regional long-distance commuting increases (i.e. from London-Birmingham and eventually to destinations further north). Will the rise of so-called 'super-commuting' signal the final victory of time over the friction of distance, and reduce still further the importance of urban form on travel patterns and choices?

Chapter 2

Research design and methodology

2.1: Introduction

Having set out the main conceptual issues that the research will deal with in Chapter 1, the purpose of this Chapter is to outline the methods used to address these issues. This thesis employs both qualitative and quantitative methods in a research design which has come to be known as ‘triangulation’ (Campbell and Fiske, 1959). The aim of the triangulation process is not simply (or even necessarily) to validate the quantitative analysis by a series of confirmatory qualitative interviews, but rather to “capture a more complete, holistic, and contextual portrayal” of the phenomena under study (Jick, 1979). By ‘triangulating’ a range of interdisciplinary research techniques, in terms of primary sources (interviews/large scale datasets) and analysis (academic, professional and journalistic secondary sources/descriptive statistics) it becomes possible to arrive at a more nuanced treatment of the research aims (Næss, 2006: 38). As Bennett (2001: 1513) points out, “the comparative advantages of case study and statistical methods are largely complementary and...can thus achieve far more scientific progress together than either could alone.”

2.2: Subjects and Procedures

There were two important questions to be addressed at the outset of the research process, namely the appropriate study area and the identification and selection of the interview participants. A total of thirteen proposed major developments was identified and shortlisted by a lengthy process of consulting the planning portal of each local planning authority across the Wider South East. The majority of these websites are very similar in structure and offer the facility for searching according to the type of application (e.g. Major Housing, Office to Residential, Conservation Area). The West of Stevenage case study was chosen

from this shortlist of thirteen as it best met the four main criteria for selection: firstly, that it was located in an area subject to high housing pressures; secondly, that it was located in a politically contested area; thirdly, that it contained areas with limited available brownfield; and finally, that it involved an underbounded local authority. As Hamiduddin and Gallent (2012: 517) explain, ‘underbounded’ settlements are those “that have grown to the extent of their administrative boundaries but continue to experience pressure for further expansion.” The first criteria (high housing pressures) meant that the study area would come from the greater South East. Having identified a particularly interesting strategic development at Stevenage West, it was a logical extension to include the underbounded local authorities of Stevenage and Luton, along with the more rural (and politically contrasting) district of North Hertfordshire. The series of maps on the succeeding pages shows, in order, the location of the study area in relation to London and the wider South East, the town of Stevenage and the location of the strategic West of Stevenage site, aerial photography of the site itself, showing the zones located within Stevenage and North Hertfordshire, and, finally, the proposed masterplan of the site, had planning permission been obtained and the development been built.

Having selected the study area, qualitative interview material was gathered from eight in-depth interviews conducted with a range of built environment actors spanning planning practice (four senior local government and County Council planners), local government (three councillors representing both main political parties in England) and economic development (a senior official from a Local Enterprise Partnership). The principal strategic purpose of the interviews was, as Healey (2007: 182) describes, to achieve, “a fine-grained understanding of the institutional contexts and situated trajectories (pathways) of efforts at spatial strategy making for urban areas”. Put more prosaically, the main aim of the interviews with practitioners was to gain practical insights into the implementation of strategic spatial planning in practice, including issues of cross-boundary co-operation with neighbouring authorities, relations across and between the various tiers of governance and problems with ensuring that the necessary infrastructure for housing development was in place. Furthermore, one of the principal aims of the qualitative interviews was to link the desk-based research with

an attempt to decipher the “visual language of spatial planning” (Dühr, 2007), as it relates to the different strategies employed in strategic spatial planning. Three concepts are intrinsic to understanding these strategies: spatial practices (the material consequences of the exercise of socio-spatial power relations), symbolic meanings (the importance of representations, symbols and discourses in framing socio-spatial relations) and the politics of scale (how meaning is attached to spatial practices across a set of interconnected scales) (Ek, 2007).

All of the participants hold (or held) senior roles within their respective organisations or political parties (this was a deliberate strategy as an important goal of the interview process was to hear from strategy makers and highly experienced professionals and politicians). Potential participants were identified from planning documentation, committee minutes, and local authority websites. They were approached by email and permission was requested to interview them. Once agreement had been obtained, further email exchanges established the date and time that the interviews would take place on. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and one hour. Prior to the start of each interview, the nature of the research was explained to each participant, and permission was obtained to make an audio recording⁵, which was later transcribed. Full transcriptions of all eight interviews are included in the Appendix. Although recent work based on semi-structured interviews (e.g. Boddy and Hickman, 2016) has stressed the benefits of using specialist software (e.g. NVIVO) to code and thematically analyse qualitatively harvested material, it was felt that the number of interviews was just within the bounds of manageability without the use of such software, which would have added an additional level of complexity. Imposing quasi-quantitative procedures, such as coding, to the material were rejected due to the manageable size of the material (51 322 words across the eight interviews) and the fact that only one researcher (i.e. myself) was working with the text. In contrast, Boddy and Hickman (2016) interviewed a total of twenty participants in their work on strategic planning in the Cambridge sub-region. Each participant is identified only by their role, i.e. ‘Senior Planner’, ‘Senior Local Councillor’ or ‘Senior Exexecutive’. Permission to present the research in this way was obtained from all participants.

5 Interviews were recorded using an Olympus Digital Voice Recorder, Model WS-450S.

AUTHORITY	NAME	POSTCODE	REFERENCE	DECISION	SCALE
Aylesbury Vale	Land at Valley Farm, Leighton Road	LU7 0JJ	10/00500/AOP	Refused	900 dwellings, with commercial & primary school/ health centre
Barnet	Stonegrove & Spur Road Regeneration Project	EN5 1RH	H/03635/11	Approved	999 dwellings
Basildon	Land north of Station Ave, Wickford	SS11 7AY	07/00801/OUT	Approved	150-200 dwellings
Broxbourne	Hertfordshire Golf & Country Club	EN10 7PY	7/1130/07/F/HOD	Refused	Removal of tennis dome & replacement with hotel
Chelmsford	Land at Temple Farm, Ship Lane, West Hanningfield	CM2 8XB	08/00476/OUT	Approved	69 296 sq m employment development
Chiltern	Former sawmill site, Bell Lane, Little Chalfont	HP6 6PD	CH/2006/1772/OA	Approved	250 dwellings
Hounslow	Bedfont Trading Estate, East Bedfont	TW14 8EE	00096/B/P43	Approved	Redevelopment of existing industrial estate
North Herts/ Stevenage	Land west of A1 at Stevenage	SG4 7JT	01/01408/1	Approved	3,600 or 5,000 dwellings with business, social & community facilities
South Bucks	Pinewood Studios	SL0 0NH		Refused	Expansion of existing film studios and associated transport infrastructure
Spelthorne	London Irish RFC	TW16 5EQ	12/00369/OUT	Approved	206 dwellings & sports training facilities
St Albans	Oaklands College	AL1 3RX	5/08/0620	Approved	85 dwellings
Thurrock	Land south of Oxford Road, Stanford-le-Hope	SS17 0NW	10/50235/TTGOUT	Approved	350 dwellings
Waltham Forest	Land at Billet Works, Kimberley Industrial Estate, Walthamstow	E17 5DT	2008/1709	Refused	562 dwellings & retail floor space

Table 1: List of case-studies selected for further investigation

Wider South East Study Area

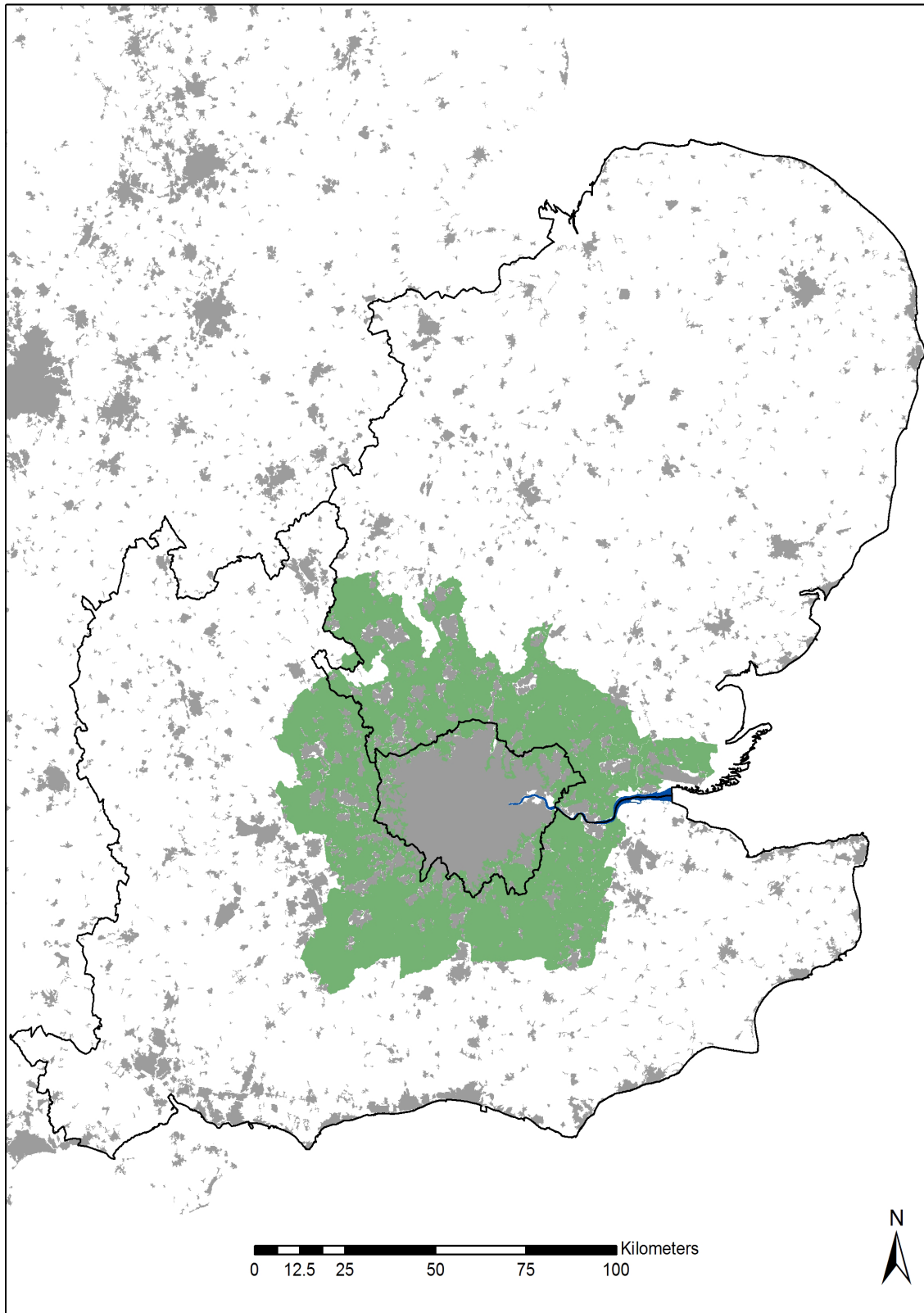


Figure 1: The GSE, showing Greater London green belt and urbanized areas

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Study area in relation to London

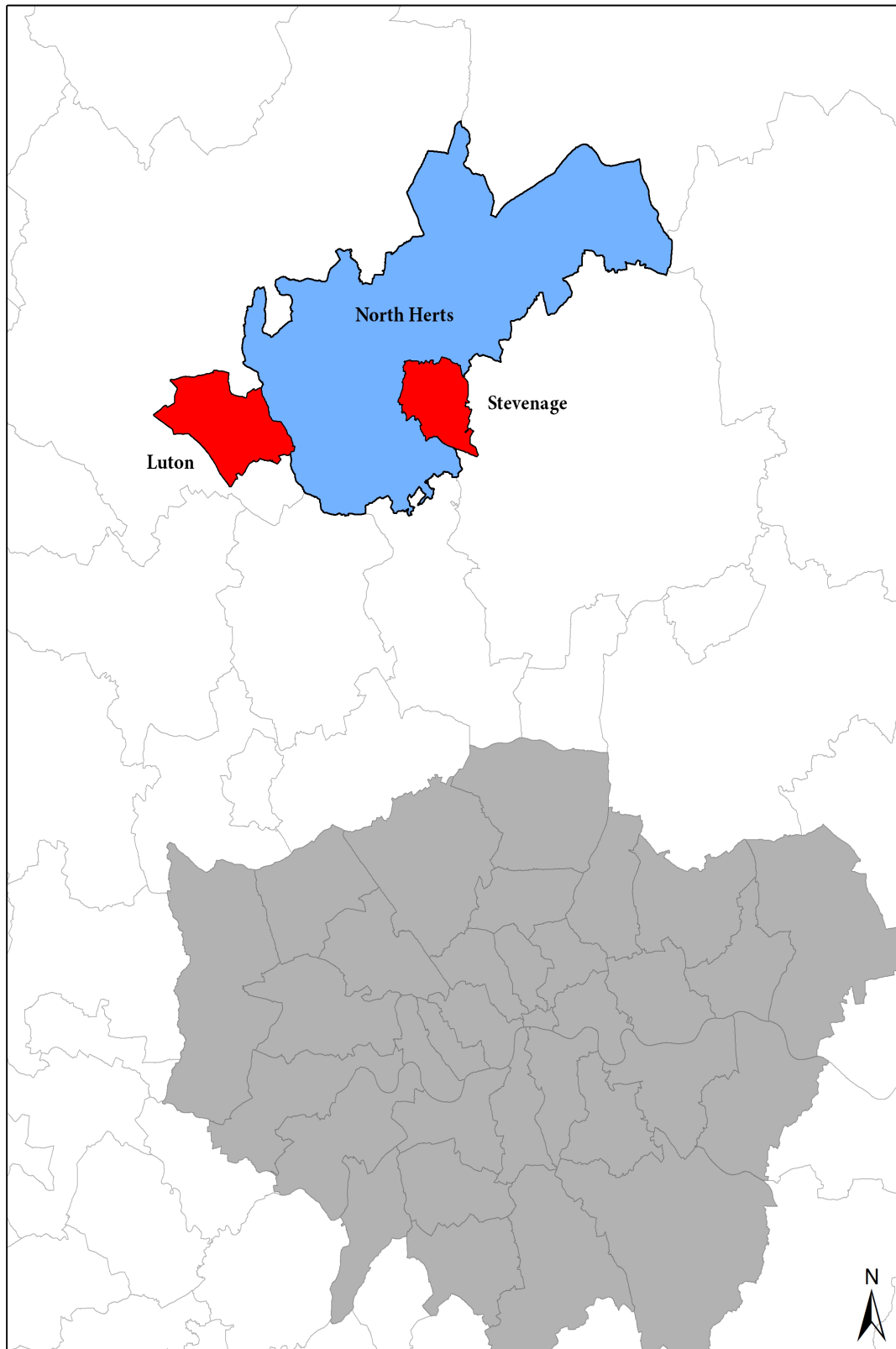


Figure 2: The study area local authorities in relation to the GLA

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West of Stevenage site in relation to town and A1(M)

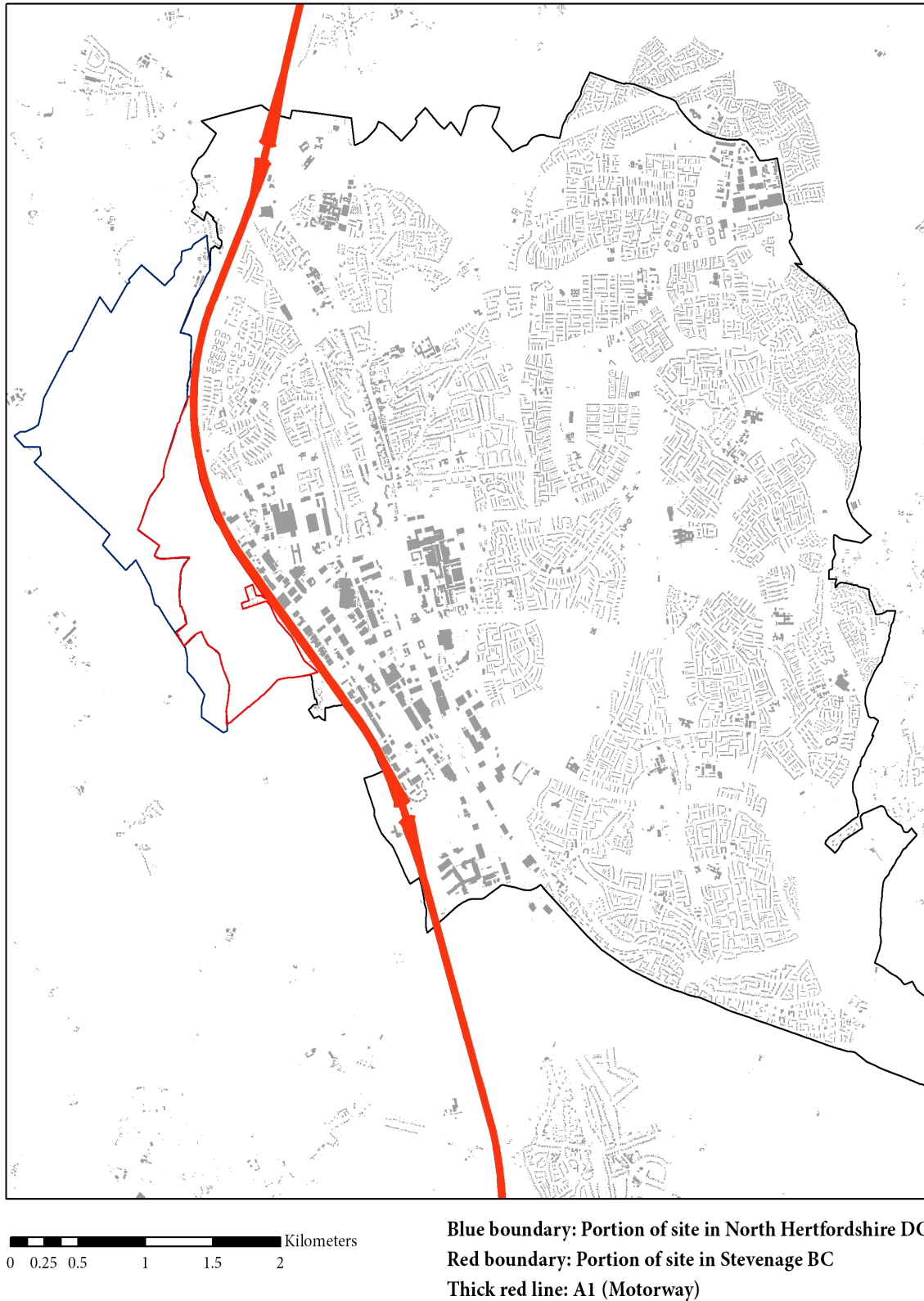


Figure 3: The West of Stevenage site in relation to A1(M)

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West of Stevenage strategic development site



Figure 4: Ordnance Survey aerial image of the West of Stevenage site

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Participant	Organisation	Date
Senior Planner	Luton Borough Council	7 March 2014
Senior Labour Party Local Councillor	Luton Borough Council	7 March 2014
Senior Planner	Hertfordshire County Council	11 March 2014
Senior Planner	Stevenage Borough Council	12 March 2014
Senior Conservative Party Local Councillor	North Hertfordshire District Council	13 March 2014
Senior Planner	North Hertfordshire District Council	14 March 2014
Senior Labour Party Local Councillor	Stevenage Borough Council	21 January 2015
Senior Local Enterprise Partnership Executive	South East Midlands LEP (SEMLEP)	25 February 2015
Senior Planner	Stevenage Borough Council	15 March 2015

Table 2: List of interview participants and interview dates/locations

2.3: Measures

As Flyvbjerg (2006: 223) notes, “concrete, context-dependent knowledge” in the form of case-studies is perhaps the most important form of theory-development in the social sciences. This is principally because of the inherent difficulty of constructing reliable predictive theory across social-scientific disciplines, due mainly to the complexity, emergent properties and feedback loops that characterise many social systems (e.g. Beinhocker, 2006). Recalling Kuhn and the development of paradigms, ‘normal’ science and scientific revolutions, Flyvbjerg (ibid.) also argues that in-depth case-studies facilitate the development of the type of tacit, context-dependent knowledge necessary to allow researchers to “develop from rule-based beginners to virtuoso experts”. According to Walton, 1992: 129), “case studies are likely to produce the best theory”. Although lack of generalizability is a valid criticism made of certain types of case study research, what Massey (1994: 156) describes as the ‘uniqueness’ or “specificity of place...the product of layer upon layer of different sets of linkages, both local and to the wider world” means that place-based research which employs carefully selected case-studies from a number of geographical contexts is capable of providing “a base for more ambitious synthesizing and generalizing” (Næss, 2004:156).

Methodologically, the case study involves two kinds of issues, those *intrinsic* to planning and wider questions relating to the *framework* within which strategic spatial projects are negotiated and progressed or retarded. Intrinsic planning issues include large-scale housing development, associated transport and travel implications and the greenfield/brownfield debate. Wider questions resulting from the evolving framework within which strategic spatial planning must operate include the under-boundedness of certain local planning authorities, and the resulting need for neighbours to work together to deliver large-scale housing developments.

2.4 Qualitative measures

Prior to the interviews, forensic analysis of, initially, the Stevenage West case study, and later expanded to cover the strategic spatial planning dilemmas faced by Luton and North Hertfordshire, was carried out over an 18 month period between September 2013 and March 2015. This involved close reading of a range of council committee records, legal reports, academic journals, books, book chapters, newspaper articles and trade magazine pieces. Although not typically written with the rigour of academic research the latter two categories of sources were important to read since they reflected the intensity of the various elements of the debate within the policy cycle. This long period of research and reflection formed an important preparation in advance of going into the field to interview senior professionals and local politicians.

The interviews were loosely-structured and open-ended in order to allow participants freedom to express their viewpoints and explore tangential issues, many of which proved to be enlightening and of value to the research. However, the broad topics for discussion were prepared in advance and were tailored to each participant's background and knowledge. Although it is common for post-graduate researchers to 'outsource' tasks like transcribing interviews to professional transcription agencies - often overseas, which therefore links the research process to global networks of accumulation (e.g. see Prasad and Prasad, 2012) - it was felt that doing this task 'in-house' would constitute a valuable part of the process of getting to

grips with the nuances of the material.

2.5 Quantitative measures

One significant piece of quantitative analysis was carried out as part of this research project. A central question which goes to the heart of some of the issues introduced in Chapter 1, including planning doctrine, urban containment, and vested interests, is the issue of just how much land at a macro-level is developed. On the face of it, this appears to be relatively straightforward to answer, however, an exhaustive search of the literature reveals just one source, itself derived from an uncertain provenance⁶. The definitive and most accurate source of data relating to land use in Great Britain is the Ordnance Survey's 'MasterMap Topography Layer' product, which is a vector representation of all permanent, above-ground features of the British landscape, divided into ten broad themes, four of which (buildings, land, roads, tracks and paths, and water) cover over 99.5% of all of the surface area of Great Britain. GB-wide coverage of the product was initially downloaded⁷ in 100km square chunks (the maximum permissible) in November 2014 and this took almost six months to process on a 32GB, quad core computer using ArcGIS and Productivity Suite software. Duplicates were removed and the Topography Layer product was split into its constituent themes. It is possible to derive the total surface area of domestic gardens from the 'land' category by using the following SQL syntax within ArcGIS's 'Select by Attributes' dialogue box: "DescGroup = 'General Surface' AND DescTerm = 'Multi Surface'". By subtracting the total surface area of domestic gardens from the total surface area of the 'land' theme, it is possible to create a second derived category, 'Undeveloped non-domestic land'. Calculations of the five categories of buildings, gardens, undeveloped non-domestic land, roads and water were made on a regional basis, in addition to Scotland and Wales. Similar data for Northern Ireland is not currently available to academic researchers. The results of these calculations are presented in Chapter 6, 'Discussion'.

6 <http://www.iea.org.uk/blog/land-use-planning-the-corn-laws-of-our-times>

7 From <http://digimap.edina.ac.uk/>, available to registered academic users in the UK

Chapter 3

Strategic spatial planning in the Greater South East

3.1 Introduction

Having set out, in ‘broad-brush’ fashion, the main issues associated with strategic spatial planning along with the research methods to be employed, it is useful at this point to explicitly recapitulate the aims and objectives of the research. By tackling the issue of strategic spatial planning - one of British planning’s thorniest problems - the overall aim is to highlight a range of disjunctures between planning theory and planning practice. Essentially, it seeks to link theory and practice through the prism of a multi-scalar, cross-disciplinary case study. Jessop et al’s (2008) influential essay which introduced the ‘TPSN model’ - Territory (T), Place (P), Scale (S) and Network (N) - can be regarded as a template for this research. Table 3 below shows the original TPSN model as depicted in Jessop et al (2008: 395), followed overleaf in Table 4 with a modified version of the model as it applies to the current research.

Structuring principles	Fields of operation			
	Territory	Place	Scale	Networks
Territory	Past, present and emergent frontiers, borders, boundaries	Distinct places in a given territory	Multilevel government	Interstate system, state alliances, multi-area government
Place	Core-periphery, borderlands, empires, neomedievalism	Locales, milieux, cities, sites, regions, localities, globalities	Division of labour linked to differently scaled places	Local/urban governance, partnerships
Scale	Scalar division of political power (unitary state, federal state etc)	Scale as area rather than level (local to global), Russian doll	Vertical ontology based on nested or tangled hierarchies	Parallel power networks, NGOs
Networks	Origin-edge, ripple effects (radiation), stretching and folding	Global city networks, polynucleated cities, intermeshed sites	Flat ontology with multiple, ascalar entry points	Networks of networks, spaces of flows, rhizome

Table 3: Jessop et al’s original Territory, Place, Scale, Networks model (Jessop et al, 2008: 395)

Structuring principles	Fields of operation			
	Territory	Place	Scale	Networks
Territory	Stevenage, Luton, North Herts	Variegated political patchwork	NPPF, 'localism'	'Duty to cooperate'
Place	Vested interests, underboundedness	West of Stevenage site	Travel to work patterns	Local Enterprise Partnerships
Scale	Unitary Authorities, District Councils, County Councils	National-regional-local policy regime	Greater London Green belt	Anti-development groups, NIMBYism
Networks	Policy 'cliff edge' effects	Influence of London, polycentric development	Infrastructure (transport, services)	Greater South East

Table 4: Modified Territory, Place, Scale, Networks model as it applies to the current research

The four 'dimensions' of socio-spatial relations along the diagonal (in blue in the preceding tables) can be read as the key sites of negotiation/contestation/regulation of the built environment, from which a range of multi scalar/multi actor interactions take place. The salient point, as Jessop et al (2008: 392) argue, is to avoid the problems of 'one-dimensionalism' by, "combining different dimensions of sociospatial analysis with other features of the research object in question." It will be seen that Jessop et al's highly abstract model translates well into the more concrete issues tackled by this research. The authors' advice (Jessop et al 2008: 392) is that:

as one moves towards increasingly 'thick description' and/or tries to provide spatially sensitive explanations of more concrete-complex phenomena, analyses should involve the dynamic articulation of at least two or more among the four dimensions.

Following this advice, the focus in this research is primarily on issues at the interface of the dimensions of territory and place (i.e. issues of underboundedness, the impact of the NPPF, the 'duty to cooperate' and localism), but the overall coherence of the framework is recognized by reference to interactions between/across the other dimensions of scale and networks.

3.2: The dismantling of the regional tier and the ascendancy of the sub-regional approach

It has been argued that strategic spatial planning in England has its genesis in the greater South East, expressed specifically through Sir Patrick Abercrombie's *Greater London Plan* (Abercrombie, 1945), the New Towns programmes of the 1940s and 1960s and SERPLAN (the London and South East Regional Planning Conference), which ran from 1960-2001 (Marshall, 2007: 115). All of these were, of course, attempts to cope with London's expansion up to, and, in some cases, beyond its administrative limits⁸. Macmillan (1992: 18) argues that Abercrombie's Plan was, "one of a kind...the product of a single mind...[a]s such, it had a coherence and 'vision' that subsequent plans have struggled to emulate." However, being the product of a single, albeit brilliant, mind, Abercrombie's vision failed to take account of the single most important consideration in strategic planning - uncertainty. Abercrombie, according to Macmillan (1992: 21) simply, "pretended it did not exist". Instead, although the 1947 Planning Act provided for quinquennial 'reviews' of Abercrombie's Plan, his work, once implemented⁹, was envisaged as reaching the ideal 'end-state' for their areas (Saunders, 1992: 7). SERPLAN (1990) recognised the scale of the housing problem a quarter of a century ago, in their report *Access to Affordable Housing*, which stated, "as we enter the 1990s a significant proportion of households in the South East is effectively excluded from market housing and dependent on a shrinking stock of affordable housing."

Having identified this problem in its relatively early stages, it is safe to conclude that they were unable to do much to tackle it, although it should be noted that SERPLAN did show remarkable prescience on at least two occasions. Firstly, after the successful 1962 Conference, it was agreed that the area it should cover should be that, "containing the principal daily movements of people into and out of inner London" (Buckle, 1992: 11). It thus tentatively anticipated the current vogue of FEA and city-region strategic spatial planning by around four decades. Secondly, the then Chairman of the GLC Planning Committee, George Nicholson (1992: 77), called for SERPLAN's membership to be increased, "to include representatives

⁸ As defined by the GLA (Greater London Authority), which came into being on April 1st 1965.

⁹ Of course, his vision was never fully realised.

from Business, Community, Trade Union, Amenity and Recreational interests”, foreseeing the typical membership of Local Enterprise Partnerships by a good twenty years.

With the demise of SERPLAN (in 2001) and structure planning (in 2004), central government inherited a sub-regional vacuum and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) filled it with the *Sustainable Communities Plan* in 2003 (John, Tickell and Musson, 2005: 104). By identifying four major ‘Growth Areas’ across the Greater South East, (Thames Gateway, Milton Keynes-South Midlands (MKSM), Ashford-Kent and the London-Stanstead-Cambridge corridor), along with regeneration areas (nine ‘Housing Market Renewal Pathfinders’) in the North West of England, the SCP has been described as, “the closest the Labour government ever came to a national spatial strategy” (Pritchard, 2013: 38), although, like so many strategic spatial planning initiatives before and since, it carried no formal, legislative weight. The Growth Areas idea is a clear example of what Allmendinger and Haughton’ (2009) characterise as the ‘soft spaces’ and ‘fuzzy boundaries’ of neoliberal governance.

Recent work on MKSM by Allan Cochrane and colleagues has identified a number of problems with the Growth Area model, including the organisation’s lack of strategic leadership, or ‘brand’ (Cochrane et al, 2013: 796) and the serious disjuncture between MKSM’s ability to *plan* for growth as opposed to the powers it was (not) given to *deliver* this housing (Cochrane et al, 2015: 6). In effect, a number of ‘Local Delivery Vehicles’ were set up across MKSM’s ‘patch’, with significant variation in their powers and responsibilities, relating for example, to land assembly. Thus the LDV responsible for delivering growth in Milton Keynes inherited land from the former Milton Keynes Development Corporation and had planning powers of its own, whereas the two equivalent LDVs covering Northampton had no such inherited assets, meaning that when it came to negotiating with central government for infrastructure funding they were at a significant disadvantage (ibid.). However, the use of ‘Strategic Land and Infrastructure Contracts’ (SLICs) from 2006 onwards in Milton Keynes was generally regarded as an innovative and effective means of funding the necessary infrastructure for 18,000 new homes in the town (Cochrane et al, 2015: 8). The ‘Milton Keynes Tariff’ worked

by borrowing money up front from the Treasury (equivalent to around £18,500 per new home built) and recouping this in the form of staged payments from the developers over a ten year period (later extended), in essence combining the site-specific elements of s106 Agreements and the strategic funding element of the Community Infrastructure Levy (Walker, 2012: 5). The success of the Milton Keynes Tariff was, however, the result of a specific bundle of path-dependent factors (largely related to the area's designation a New Town) and is therefore going to be difficult to reproduce on a wide scale elsewhere.

One of the principal problems with the *Sustainable Communities Plan* overall was a lack of County/local authority 'buy-in', with central government leading the way, a state of affairs which Marshall (2007: 121) argues, led to a "crisis of legitimacy". For example, housing and employment projections were simply cascaded down from Regional Spatial Strategies (RSSs), through the Growth Areas and down to local authorities, with the latter having little or no say in the process. In the final analysis, what Cochrane et al (2013: 797) describe as "the implicit market utopianism" of the SCP largely failed to deliver on its promises as the impending shadow of global financial meltdown approached and housebuilders prepared for a lengthy period of rationalization and retrenchment.

Following the phasing-out of old-style structure plans (introduced by the Town and Country Planning Act 1968 and formally abolished in the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004), along with most County-level responsibilities for strategic spatial planning, the only statutory mechanism for 'larger than local' planning was the embryonic regime of regional planning, of which RSSs were the spatial expression, and RESs¹⁰ the economic. Although many counties were opposed to the abolition of structure plans, it has been argued that their eradication provided some of the more proactive counties the opportunity to, "to intervene flexibly and effectively in the key areas, up, down and across the governance tree" (Marshall, 2007: 122). However, the effect of s.4(4) of the 2004 Act, followed by the deletion of this section in the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009, was to put this advisory role for the County Councils on an entirely voluntary basis and Catriona

¹⁰ Regional Economic Strategy.

Riddell (2013: 19), formerly Director of Planning at the South East Regional Assembly, argues that the transition from Structure Plans and Regional Planning Guidance to RSS and RES, “ignored the sensitivities around changing roles and was simply too fast”. The 2009 Act, although never enacted due to New Labour’s defeat in the 2010 General Election, also “re-regulated” the importance of sustainable development, in effect relegating it below economic growth by replacing RSSs and RESs with an integrated ‘Regional Strategy’ (RS) (Lord and Tewdwr-Jones, 2014: 351-52). It is noteworthy that the abolition of structure plans and their replacement with RSSs was, in effect, a “dramatic scaling up of the whole system” (Marshall, 2007: 107), whereas, in a form of reverse symmetry, the phasing out of regional planning and its replacement with ‘localism’ is, *prima facie*, an equally dramatic scaling down of the system.

Perhaps the most important element of the coalition’s drive towards localism was the abolition of the regional tier of governance, in particular the Labour government’s Regional Spatial Strategies (RSS’s) which imposed centrally-derived housing targets on local planning authorities. From a situation in the early 1990s where the region, “was widely seen as an appropriate scale for policy intervention and regulation in Britain” (Baker and Wong, 2013: 84), strategic spatial planning through regional governance was subjected to an extraordinarily vitriolic, ideologically driven attack. The housing figures imposed by RSSs were described in typically robust and colourful language by Communities Secretary Eric Pickles as “failed Soviet tractor-style top-down planning targets”, which “worst of all threatened the destruction of the green belt” (Hope, 2010). In a single sentence the former Secretary of State managed to attack the anti-localist tendencies of regional governance, while simultaneously accusing them of damaging the great centralising mechanism of the planning system. While such soundbites comprise the headlines of papers and magazines, it is worthwhile getting behind the rhetoric and analysing the rise and fall of regional spatial planning in England. Riddell (2013: 19) argues that the unseemly speed with which Regional Assemblies were put in place, well in advance of the 2004 legislation, risked losing local planning authority buy-in, both to the Assemblies and the plan preparation process. As noted above, the Regional Assembly structures were fatally undermined in any case by the disastrous North East England regional

RA referendum on 4th November 2004, which rejected the John Prescott championed devolution proposals with 77.9% of the electorate saying, 'No' on a turnout of 49%. England's fate to remain "the gaping hole in the devolution settlement" (Hazell, 2000) was thus sealed for the foreseeable future. However, Harrison (2012b: 1244) argues that, "as the door closed on plans to establish elected regional governance the door to a framework of city-regional governance opened."

The proposed Assemblies were just one element of a "mish-mash of sub-national initiatives" (Shaw and Greenhalgh, 2010: 458) including Local Authority Leader Boards (LALBs), Multi-Area Agreements (MAAs), Economic Prosperity Boards (EPBs) and The Northern Way. The key question, then as now, was how to bridge the "historic fissure" (Baker *et al*, 1999: 763) between (sub)regional planning and economic development. However, all too often the regional tier of government has been used aspatially, as a 'means to an end', rather than as "an appropriate level for the reconciliation of local and national concerns" (Cowell and Murdoch, 1999: 665). For instance, it is easily forgotten that, during the 1980s, one of the main reasons for maintaining the policy of urban constraint across the wider south east was its use by the then Conservative government as a form of regional policy. The 'bright idea' behind this policy was that, by pushing land and house prices up through containment, firms would be encouraged to relocate to economically depressed areas such as the North East (Evans and Hartwich, 2007: 21-22). Of course, no government on either side of the political spectrum today would admit the efficacy of planning as regional economic policy nowadays, given its failure to attract many firms to economically depressed areas, as well as the extremes to which local housing markets across the Greater South East have overheated.

Importantly, it should be noted that the Labour government diverted almost £400 million funding from RDA budgets in 2008/09 to other priorities (Ferry and Bachtler, 2013: 263), with further cuts planned had they remained in power. This was used by the coalition government as evidence that the outgoing Labour government had largely given up on regional governance (Spelman and Clarke, 2010). The process of revoking Regional Spatial Strategies took longer

than the Communities Secretary initially anticipated; after announcing the revocation of RSSs “with immediate effect” in May 2010, his decision was challenged through the law courts by CALA Homes until the building company’s claim that Pickles’ decision was unlawful was thrown out by the Court of Appeal in May 2011 (Marrs, 2011). After all the legal wrangling, the first Order revoking a RSS (the East of England RSS) was laid before Parliament on 11th December 2012; further such Orders relating to the other seven RSSs were laid over the course of the following weeks and months. Orders to officially revoke the final three RSS’s were laid before Parliament in May 2013.

As noted above, RSSs had *already* been scrapped and replaced by integrated Regional Strategies through the Local Economy, Construction and Economic Development Act 2009. Interestingly, and this is possibly a function of the dying days of the last Labour government, this legislation attracted little attention at the time, even *within* government (Morphet and Pemberton, 2013: 387). The incoming coalition government was certainly unaware of the precise legal status of RSSs, since Mr Pickles’ initial attempts were to scrap them, rather than the RSs as they had become. Naturally, lawyers pounced on this misunderstanding and held up the process for a time, though it was merely a stay of execution for Regional Strategies. Steve Quartermain, the CLG’s Chief Planner, published a letter to all local planning authorities (LPAs) on 10th November 2010 (the same day as the CALA Homes judgment was handed down) reiterating the government’s intention to abolish RSs (the correct formulation this time) through a clause in the Localism Bill then working its way through Parliament. Importantly, he went on to advise LPAs that this intention was to be regarded as a ‘material consideration’ in deciding planning applications. Once the CLG’s lawyers had correctly identified the piece of legislation that they wanted to rescind, CALA Homes’ application for judicial review was dismissed on 7th February 2011 and a final, unsuccessful attempt to overturn this decision was made to the Court of Appeal on 27th May 2011.

The fact that CALA Homes was prepared to fight its case all the way to the Court of Appeal demonstrates the concerns of the housebuilding lobby when confronted with a move away

from centrally imposed housing targets towards 'localism' and generally lower new housing targets over much of the Greater South East. Rather hopefully (some might say foolishly), in the context of the south east of England, the coalition's expectations were that by revoking the RS system and allowing local authorities to set their own housing targets would lead to higher levels of permissions and housebuilding. One can confidently conclude that the acuity of the housebuilding lobby somewhat trumped that of central government. A 2012 Report by planning consultancy Tetlow King (commissioned by the right leaning think-tank Policy Exchange) found that housing targets across England had been reduced by a total of 272,720 dwellings since the demise of regional planning in 2010 (Tetlow King Planning, 2012). This figure was arrived at by examining each planning authority's proposed housing targets under the old, regionally-derived targets and subtracting this figure from revised housing targets under the new, Local Plan system. It could be argued that this figure is somewhat spurious since housing targets were never achieved under the old system anyway. Even at the peak of the housing market in 2007, only 176,000 new homes were built (Morton, 2012b: 4). This research was questioned by Eric Pickles before the CLG (2011a: para. 90), drawing a rebuttal from Tetlow King, who stated that just 12% of the total figure of housing reductions came from "unofficial tip-offs or estimates" (CLG, 2011a: para. 91).

The coalition has come in for criticism, however, by eradicating almost every trace of regional governance, rather than just the RSSs and RDAs, even from within its own ranks. Michael Heseltine - who as Secretary of State for the Environment from 1990 - 1992 was largely responsible for driving through legislative instruments such as Enterprise Zones and Urban Development Corporations which bypassed the 'normal' planning system (Thornley, 1993: 200) - bitterly complained about the coalition's decision to abolish the Government Offices for the Regions (GORs) along with the RSSs, stating that by doing so they "threw the baby out with the bath water" (Marrs, 2012). As Deputy Prime Minister during the last two years (1995 - 1997) of John Major's Conservative government, Heseltine had overseen the creation of Government Offices for the Regions in 1994. It is also interesting to note that many private sector organisations, notably the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) continue to operate

on a regional basis, despite the dismantling of public sector regional governance (Fenwick, 2015: 12). The absurdity of the government's position was highlighted in a speech given by David Cameron to the Institute of Civil Engineering in London on 19th March 2012, in which the Prime Minister praised Abercrombie's "visionary plan" of 1944, of which the best elements were the green belt and New Towns (Cameron, 2012). A Prime Minister, one of whose first priorities was to dismantle regional governance, praising the most regional piece of planning ever carried out in the UK, without which it is questionable whether any of the New Towns or the Greater London green belt would ever have been implemented.

According to Riddell (2013: 26), the Labour government had, through endless tinkering, already destroyed the validity of strategic spatial planning as a concept. The final "nail in the coffin", she argues, was the creation of the National Housing and Planning Advisory Unit (NHPAU) in 2006, which took over final responsibility for the setting of housing targets from local authorities. From a system which was a success "against all the odds" (ibid.), the formation of yet another QUANGO was seen by local authorities as further evidence of the government's attempts to run localities from the centre. However, a different perspective on the NHPAU is provided by Leonora Rozee, a former Deputy Chief Executive of the Planning Inspectorate, who lamented the loss of this unit and the evidence base it had assembled, a state of affairs which brought 'planning by appeal' a step closer (Rozee, 2014: 12-13). Cheshire et al (2014: 132) merely note that the unit was not in existence long enough to allow for a rigorous evaluation of its merits. The Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA) also bemoaned the loss of the mechanisms that produced detailed research and data collection on strategic housing and transport issues (CLG Committee, 2011a: para. 21). However, it should be noted that spatial analysis, interpretation and monitoring under the regional system, "all too often... degenerated into unfocussed data collection and 'bean counting' without any strategic purpose (Baker and Wong, 2006: 678). The human and financial cost of ending the regional governance experiment was significant, with redundancy costs for more than 2,000 RDA staff estimated at over £100 million (Ward, 2012), and overall winding-up costs estimated at £1.5 billion - more than the initial £1.4 billion value of its successor, the Regional Growth Fund (Tomaney, 2012).

In practical terms, the speed with which higher-level (regional) policy changed (especially in relation to housing targets) compared with the glacial progress of lower-level (local) Core Strategies created further difficulties in central-local relations (Shaw and Lord, 2009: 427-28). In effect, although the regional system made it easier to *allocate* land for strategic spatial planning, they manifestly failed in terms of implementation (new homes actually built). Cheshire et al (2014: 132) argue that the ‘bean-counting’ described above meant that, “targets could be met in ways which did little or nothing to satisfy demand.” Perhaps the most scathing criticism of the regional experiment is provided by Gordon (2012), who identifies the complete absence of any recognition of the ‘super region’ (i.e. the Greater South East) - “the nation’s economic heartland, and the scale at which the economic welfare of all its residents is determined” - in any regional plans or strategies (e.g. the London Plan, East of England Plan or South East England Plan). The current situation under localism means that a “gaping hole now exists between national planning (centrally orchestrated) and the 12 LEPs [Local Enterprise Partnerships] operating across this geography” (Harrison, 2012a: 93). This necessarily means that “the institutions for governance of the global mega-city region [i.e. the Greater South East] will be weaker under new, new localism” (Pain, 2011).

3.3: The new machinery of strategic spatial planning

3.3.1: The National Planning Policy Framework - Overview

Having largely unencumbered itself of the regional tier of governance - the ‘ghost of planning past’, the coalition then turned its attention to what it saw as planning’s future. Familiar themes - protection of the green belt, advancing the cause of sustainable transport and tackling the housing crisis - were reiterated. Battle lines were drawn in the summer of 2011, when the government published details of its vision for planning, the draft *National Planning Policy Framework* (NPPF) (CLG, 2012a) - or, as Bird (2013) somewhat facetiously dubbed it, the ‘Nearly Perfect Policy Framework’. In fact, a leaked draft version of the NPPF dated 13th

June 2011 was seen by *Planning Magazine* on 1st July and was widely circulated. At the Tory party conference in October 2011, Eric Pickles, the Communities Secretary, emphasised that the government would “strengthen the green belt” while pressing ahead with plans to simplify and streamline the planning system by reducing guidance from over 1,000 pages to 50 pages (Mulholland, 2011). In terms of the volume and complexity of planning literature and legislation, Lord Taylor’s *External Review of Government Planning Practice Guidance* (CLG, 2012c) rubber-stamped the government’s intention to commit a benign form of libricide: over 7,000 pages of outdated best-practice, ‘guidance’ and advisory material should be done away with, preferably by the first anniversary of the publication of the NPPF (28th March 2013). In its place will come ‘planning in the cloud’ - a constantly updated, “web-based guidance resource” (CLG, 2012a: para. 13), a fraction of the size of the old, paper based system. This is, of course, not the first time that Conservative government printers have minimised “damage to the world’s stock of trees” (Breheny, 1991: 238); the five-volume *Strategic Plan for the South East* (SEJPT, 1970) was reduced to two pages in 1980, doubling to four pages by 1986. As Breheny (1991: 235) went on to argue, this was a reflection of both the new government’s much reduced opinion of planning, as well as, “the timidity of the planning profession that...was willing to accept it.”

The government published its draft version of the NPPF for public consultation on 25th July 2011. This period of consultation (on a document which was slightly more compendious than Mr Pickles’ estimate at 65 pages in length) closed on 17th October 2011. Launching the document, the Chancellor, George Osborne, claimed that delays to development caused by the current planning system “cost the economy £3 billion a year” and were a “deterrent to international investment”, assertions derived from British Property Federation calculations and described as “ridiculous” by Sir Simon Jenkins, Chairman of the National Trust. Jenkins went on to describe the NPPF document as a “lawyer’s banquet”, as the presumption in favour of sustainable development appeared to give the green light to development where existing plans are incomplete or non-existent (Jenkins, 2011). There was widespread criticism of the draft NPPF from a broad front of environmental groups, as well as other organisations, including,

somewhat bizarrely, the Women's Institute (Hope, 2011). Less surprisingly, various members of the Royal Family made public pronouncements on the draft legislation. Prince Charles, supported by Lord Rogers of Riverside, warned of the potential of the NPPF to unleash unrestricted, Los Angeles style sprawl that would destroy forever the country's green belts (Bloxham, 2011) and the Duke of Cambridge took to *YouTube* to plead for the conservation of playing fields and parkland for future generations. In November 2011 it emerged that a consortium of Britain's biggest house builders, including Barratt, Bovis and Redrow, had lobbied the government to get a clause setting out a default presumption in favour of planning applications written into the NPPF (Booth, 2011).

Shaun Spiers, Chief Executive of the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) said that the draft NPPF represented the biggest change in planning law since the Town and Country Planning Act 1947, except that this time the emphasis was weighted very heavily towards promoting economic growth rather than on protecting the countryside. Naturally, pro-business lobby groups including the British Chambers of Commerce and the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) were very much in favour of the proposed legislation (Rowley, 2012). As the summer progressed the pro- and anti- development lobbies became increasingly entrenched and strident in their criticisms of the other side. In August 2011, the then Planning Minister, Greg Clark, hit back at claims from the National Trust that large areas of green belts across England would be threatened by the NPPF, describing the organisation as being "guilty of nihilistic selfishness" and wanting only to "preserve in aspic" towns and villages up and down the country. Clarke went on to criticise the "risible idea" that the NPPF would usher in a wave of development akin to that of Los Angeles (Kirkup, 2011). Frank McDonald in *The Telegraph* (McDonald, 2011) argued that a further, sinister foreshadowing of the kind of development that the draft NPPF could allow could be seen in the Republic of Ireland, where individual, 'one-off' houses account for more than half of Co. Kerry's total building stock. At the height of the 'Celtic Tiger' boom, developers in Ireland were building 90,000 new homes a year - almost the same as in the UK despite the vast disparity in population (4.5 million versus 60 million). The Irish example serves as a warning to those who advocate building

willy-nilly as a solution to the housing crisis - many of the estates in Ireland currently stand empty or half-built, evoking images of urban and fringe development more akin to South East Asia during their crippling recession around the turn of the millennium than of a supposedly advanced economy in western Europe. The number of 'ghost estates' is estimated at 2,881 containing 179,900 homes in various states of (in)completion.

On the 8th September 2011, the government felt it necessary to issue a three page 'Myth Buster' document to counter what it viewed as some of the more egregious misunderstandings of the proposed NPPF. Foremost among these was the belief that the document was a "developer's charter" where "every [planning] application has to be accepted" (CLG, 2011b: unpaginated). The root cause of these fears was the 'presumption in favour of sustainable development', which is described as a "golden thread running through both plan making and decision taking" (CLG, 2011a: para. 14). Both the draft NPPF and the final document deal with the issue of 'sustainable development' in an interesting way. The draft version references the Brundtland Commission definition of 'sustainable development' (i.e. "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Brundtland Commission, 1987)). However, as Cheshire (CLG, 2011c: Q48) pointed out in his evidence before the Communities and Local Government Select Committee, "who could be against the Brundtland formulation of sustainable development? My worry is: how do you translate that into actual decision making about parcels of land?" Dr Hugh Ellis, the Chief Planner of the TCPA complained before the same audience that Brundtland was "out of date" and that "it was very surprising to see it represented in the NPPF" (CLG, 2011c: Q48). The final version of the NPPF again references Brundtland, with the addition of the 'five guiding principles of sustainable development' as set out in *Securing the Future: the UK sustainable development strategy* (HMG, 2005). Both of these definitions appear at the start of each document and are not referred to again. A rather more explicit definition of what 'sustainable development' is appears in para. 6 of the final NPPF (CLG, 2012a):

The purpose of the planning system is to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development. The policies in paragraphs 18 to 219, taken as a whole, constitute the

Government's view of what sustainable development in England means in practice for the planning system.

As noted above, this quite simply appears to mean that sustainable development is no more and no less than what the government says it means. Another way this can be construed is to say that sustainable development, "is synonymous with what [central government believes] is necessary or desirable in the public interest" (Bird, 2013). Tony Barton of Civic Voice worried that the presumption in favour of sustainable development was effectively a *double* presumption in favour of development, since the local development plan already has a presupposition in favour of sustainable development locked into it (CLG, 2011b: Q223). Significantly, the government declined to include the presumption in a clause in the Localism Bill, which would have given it legislative status (Bullock, 2011: 31). In fact, one of the criticisms of the draft NPPF was that it was not clear enough in recognizing its own status as national policy advice (as opposed to legislation) and therefore to be treated as no more and no less than a material consideration in determining planning applications (Ricketts and Field, 2012: 152). It should of course be remembered that a presumption in favour of development (sustainable or not) is not a new concept in English planning. Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government produced a White Paper, *Lifting the Burden* (DoE, 1985, para. 3), which stated:

There is therefore always a presumption in favour of allowing applications for development, having regard to all material considerations, unless that development would cause demonstrable harm to interests of acknowledged importance.

This more permissive regime remained in place until s.54 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 changed the formulation in favour of determination to accordance with the development plan, unless material considerations indicate otherwise (Bullock, 2011: 10). Although there have been many changes to the 'plan-led' system over the past quarter of a century, it is important to remember that the NPPF does not have the status of law; instead, under s.38(6) of the Planning and Compulsory Planning Act 2004:

where in making any determination under the planning Acts, regard is to be had to the development plan, the determination shall be made in accordance with the plan unless material consideration indicates otherwise.

It could be argued, then, that the current planning regime has not yet reached the limits of *laissez-faire* attained under the Thatcher government. In fact, by failing to attach legislative authority to the NPPF, the potential for uncertainty, delays and expense resulting from extensive appeals and judicial reviews has increased (Bullock, 2011: 31). Ricketts and Field (2012: 222) worry that instead of being a properly 'plan-led' system, many strategic planning decisions will "become led by the moment, i.e. the community's reaction and the political priorities of the LPA at the relevant time."

The final version of the NPPF was published on 27th March 2012 and was described as "a lesson in the art of politics" (Ricketts and Field, 2012: 161), since it managed to placate both the development industry and some of the fiercest critics of the draft version, such as the CPRE and the National Trust. By the time the NPPF Bill had passed through Parliament, the 'Hands Off Our Land' campaign run by *The Telegraph*, along with the lobbying of the groups described above, as well as a sizeable contingent of David Cameron's backbenchers, could claim several important victories in terms of changes to the legislation. The most important of these was related to the 'default yes' which was dropped and replaced by a requirement that local authorities set out clearly where development can take place (Hope, 2012a). This, however, presumes that local authorities have a valid plan in place, a state of affairs not yet achieved by many councils. In fact, by the first anniversary of the publication of the final NPPF, only 48% of authorities had an adopted Core Strategy and just 7% of LPAs had a compliant Core Strategy (Millar, 2013). Where authorities have no such plan in place, the presumption in favour of sustainable development still exists, and carries significant weight (to the extent that it could be determinative). Ricketts and Field (2012: 152) describe the presumption as a kind of "cultural sign-post - an indication of the function that the planning system should be performing." Finally, the inclusion of an explicit clause relating to the development of brownfield land before greenfield sites, where possible, was also heralded as an important triumph by protectionist

interest groups.

Any sense that these were anything but pyrrhic victories by the protectionist lobby, however, was surely dispelled when Parliament reconvened after the summer recess in 2012. Following a television interview, rumours that the Chancellor was preparing to make it easier for councils to relax green belt protections in an attempt to kick-start the economy led Richard Harwood, a leading planning law barrister, to warn that any such moves would “have a paralysing effect on the rest of the planning process”, as councils would delay decisions on development and put their local plans on hold until more clarity began to emerge (Hope and Winnett, 2012). An online poll with the question ‘Should controls on green belt land be relaxed to encourage business growth?’ led to 80% of the 4,711 respondents voting ‘No, we must preserve the countryside for future generations’ (as opposed to 20% voting ‘Yes, the government needs to do everything it can to boost the economy’) (Hope and Winnett, 2012). Natalie Bennett (2012), the leader of the Green Party, described the Chancellor’s plan as:

half-baked... [w]hat is most likely to be created is identikit suburban enclaves of expensive detached homes, predominantly in the southeast of England... likely to be car-dependent, and at the outer limits of energy-use regulations.

Following the Chancellor’s comments Eric Pickles, the Communities Secretary, was quick to emphasise that green belts would be protected and pointed to the example of Cambridge, which had been “pretty smart” in its review of green belt boundaries, by releasing lower quality areas for development and reclassifying other pieces of land as protected (Parker, 2012). Pickles had recourse to the stick, as well as the carrot, though, when he vowed that councils who had a consistently poor track record in terms of the speed or quality of its development control decision making would be stripped of their planning responsibilities; planning decisions would instead be made by the Planning Inspectorate (Hope and Kirkup, 2012). As the NPPF entered its second year of operation and a number of test cases had been examined against its criteria, criticisms were voiced over its weaknesses when faced with ‘larger-than-local’ planning issues (Garlick, 2013).

3.3.2: The National Planning Policy Framework - The 'duty to cooperate'

The act of planning spatially in any setting (urban/rural) and across all scales (neighbourhood/urban/regional/national) necessarily entails cooperation between a wide range of professional and non-professional built environment actors (Lord, 2012). Strategic spatial planning in particular requires actors to work together across administrative boundaries, even though this may be a distasteful, even onerous, task in many circumstances. In recognition of these difficulties (or, perhaps, more indicative of a 'head in the sand' approach to them), previous Conservative government policy was designed to "focus almost exclusively on development agendas within...designated boundaries" (Raco, 2005: 143). In a form of what might be described as 'anti-strategic spatial planning', "cross-boundary connections and processes were downplayed as were the relationships between their development areas and the broader strategic planning frameworks in which they were embedded" (ibid.). Specifically, this approach was taken with the Urban Development Corporations, which began, bombastically, with the London Docklands UDC in 1981 and ended, ignominiously, with the Thurrock Thames Gateway UDC in 2014.

However, this approach has, in principle, largely been abandoned, and a central plank of localism is to 'enable' such collaboration through the 'duty to cooperate' placed on local planning authorities, County Councils and small number of other public bodies by s.110 of the Localism Act 2011. 'In principle' because there is evidence that, in practice, and despite the legal requirement to cooperate, there is an ongoing reluctance to address strategic planning issues and instead discussions have centred around single issues (Morphet and Pemberton, 2013: 391). The duty to cooperate is being played out in practice on an ongoing basis, with new test cases coming to the courts on a regular basis (and thus becoming practical examples of what Allmendinger and Haughton (2012: 98) describe as the move of "genuine political oppositional debate" shifting from outside the planning system into the legal arena, alluded to in Chapter 1). In support of their contention, the original formulation of the duty in the

Localism Bill 2010 was heavily criticised by the CLG Select Committee (CLG, 2011a, para. 69) as, “bad law, poorly conceived, shoddily drafted, and opening the door to judges, rather than democratically elected representatives, deciding on how the planning system operates.” It would therefore be fair to say that the description of the duty as “one of the great unknowns” by Ray Donson of Barratt Homes, who appeared before the CLG Select Committee (CLG, 2011a: para. 63) is accurate. Fundamentally, as Hildreth and Bailey (2013: 246) point out, the question of how stronger authorities will be incentivised to work with weaker places has yet to be adequately addressed.

A number of LPA's key development plans have failed examination by the Planning Inspectorate because of issues associated with the duty to co-operate, including several in the Greater South East. For example, Aylesbury Vale District Council's *Local Plan* was found to be unsound. Reasons given by the Inspector included “minimal” evidence of engagement with neighbouring authorities on housing provision and a failure to participate “constructively, actively and on an ongoing basis” with these neighbours (Ward, 2014: para. 3). The Inspector who scrutinised Brighton and Hove City Council's *City Plan* found it to have met the requirements of the duty to co-operate, although such co-operation, “has not led to a positive outcome, in the sense that [no neighbouring LPA] has offered to assist B&H by offering to meet all or part of the objectively assessed needs that cannot be met in [the city]” (Graham, 2013: 1).

Brighton and Hove therefore finds itself in a situation analogous to that of Stevenage, i.e. underbounded and with little prospect of assistance in its attempts to expand from neighbouring councils. Mid Sussex District Council also failed on the duty to co-operate, with the Inspector stating that, “I would describe the foundations upon which the approach of the district council is based, as at best, shaky” (Hogger, 2013: 1). Mid Sussex happens to be one of Brighton and Hove's neighbouring councils. As part of the materials submitted to the Inspector, Mid Sussex included a brief synopsis of what the authority considered to be three examples of fruitful collaborative involvement, but these exemplars (Gatwick

Diamond Memorandum of Understanding, Northern West Sussex Position Statement and Memorandum of Understanding between Mid Sussex and Lewes Council) received short shrift from the Inspector. As an indication of how seriously the duty to co-operate is being taken, despite the fact that Mid Sussex proposed to provide 10,600 new dwellings, thus exceeding the objectively assessed need *within* the authority's boundaries, the fact that it had failed to properly engage with its neighbours (including Brighton and Hove) in meeting their needs was considered grounds for finding the *Local Plan* unsound.

Outside the Greater South East, Coventry City Council subsequently withdrew the Core Strategy it had submitted for Inspection in October 2012 when it was found that it had “not engaged constructively with neighbouring local planning authorities on the strategic matter of the number of houses proposed in the Plan” (Yuille, 2013). This Plan proposed 11,373 new homes between 2011 and 2028, a significant reduction from the 33,500 proposed in its previous plan approved three years ago (the previous plan having achieved notoriety by being itself withdrawn on the very day it was due to be adopted due to a change in political control of the city council, from Conservative-led no overall control to Labour overall control). A far more successful cross-boundary collaboration is occurring in East Anglia, where a group of eight East of England councils centred around Cambridge and Peterborough reached an agreement to provide 93,000 new homes by 2031, although this collaborative effort has yet to be tested at examination (Carpenter, 2013a). The current situation is confusing in that there is both a legal test of whether an authority can demonstrate that it has “engaged constructively” with its neighbours, as well as a stricter policy soundness test of “successful co-operation” (CLG, 2011c: Ev W21). This policy soundness test sounds suspiciously like an expectation that neighbouring councils will need to agree rather than merely co-operate.

Although laudable in its aims to get neighbouring authorities working together on strategic spatial projects, there is a fundamental problem with the duty to co-operate, which is simply that local councillors are not elected to collaborate across LA boundaries. They are elected, for the most part, to uphold *local* interests, which may well include ensuring that the nasty

neighbours next door do not get permission to build an urban extension on *our* hallowed turf. Under the duty to cooperate, planning authorities now need to have regard to the extent of how their development needs affect, and are affected by, neighbouring councils. As Paul Rogerson (2011: OP57), a former Chief Executive of Leeds City Council, succinctly points out, “a less tidy world may therefore, be upon us and, if this is the case, there are many who would say, ‘bring it on.’” Such people, Rogerson contends, believe that a high price has been paid for the rigid, single-model approach to strategic spatial planning espoused by successive governments since the 1980s (ibid.). Stuart Hylton, Head of Strategic Planning and Transport at the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead drew an important distinction about the duty in his appearance before the Communities and Local Government Select Committee when he stated that, “a duty to co-operate is not the same thing as a duty to agree” (CLG, 2011b: Q174). The small number of public bodies to which the duty applies¹¹ is seen by some, including Dr Hugh Ellis, Chief Planner for the TCPA, to be problematic, since no private sector interests (especially infrastructure providers such as Network Rail) are bound by the duty (CLG, 2011b: Q61).

Shortly before the 2015 General Election, the Labour party espoused a ‘Right to Grow’ policy, which would have given underbounded authorities the right to compulsorily purchase land in neighbouring LPAs, a situation which would have been very much welcomed by Stevenage. Indeed, the Labour leader, Ed Miliband, visited the town on 16th December 2013 and, playing to the local gallery, complained that growth of the town had, “for decades” been, “thwarted by home blocking councils on its borders.” He went on to describe the principal culprit, North Herts District Council, as “a home blocking council, bad for its neighbours, bad for its own residents where the housing waiting list has got ever longer”, and finished with a flourish: “[North Herts] is a stick-in-the-mud council. But a Labour government will not let desperately needed housing be stuck in the mud of North Hertfordshire” (Carpenter, 2013b). Predictably, in a House of Commons debate, the Communities and Local Government Minister, Eric Pickles, described Miliband’s plans as a, “Labour land grab to allow Labour councils to dump

¹¹ Environment Agency, English Heritage, Natural England, Mayor of London, Civil Aviation Authority Homes and Communities Agency, Primary Care Trusts, Office of the Rail Regulator, Highways Agency, Transport for London, Integrated Transport Authorities, Highway Authorities, Marine Management Organisation and Local Authorities

urban sprawl on their rural neighbours and rip up green belt protection” (Donnelly, 2014). The Labour MP for Luton South, Gavin Shuter countered with his support for the policy, stating that his town requires 30,000 new homes up to 2030 but only has space for 6,000 within the borough. Pickles, warming to his theme, invoked the Communistic imagery he reserves for his fiercest attacks on Labour and derided, “the return of Stalinist top-down planning, and the biggest threat to the green belt that the country faces.” He stated that he had visited North Herts and that neighbouring councils (presumably Stevenage and Luton) should “stop trying to bully NHDC...[by]...using terror tactics and being extremely unpleasant”(HC Deb 8th January 2014, vol. 573, col. 321).

3.3.3 The National Planning Policy Framework - The New Homes Bonus

Whereas the duty to cooperate can very much be described as the punitive element of the ‘carrot and stick’ approach of the NPPF, the ‘carrot’ took the form of the New Homes Bonus (NHB). Closely aligned with Business Rates Retention (BRR), the NHB pays local authorities an annual grant equal to the Council Tax associated with each new house built, for an initial period of six years (Cheshire et al, 2014: 138). The CLG forecasted that this incentive would increase housing supply by 140,000 units over ten years, a contention which was scrutinised by the National Audit Office (NAO, 2013). The NAO criticised the assumptions underlying CLG modelling and pointed out a serious arithmetical error which, the NAO claimed, caused the CLG to overestimate the impact of the NHB by as much as 25 per cent.

A veritable torrent of criticism about the scheme was expressed to the CLG Committee, however, with Lawrence Revill, managing director of planning consultancy David Lock Associates, identifying a disconnect between national objectives for housing delivery and housing need (CLG, 2011a: para. 114), and Miles Butler, President of the Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning and Transport, describing the NHB as, “what Sir Humphrey might call ‘a bold experiment, Minister’” (CLG, 2011a: para. 125). In effect, as evidence to the CLG Committee (CLG 2011a: Ev 73-74) given by Roger Tym & Partners sets

out, the NHB is a 'quasi-market', where central government attempts to 'buy' the consent of host authorities to satisfy housing demand, much of which is cross-boundary (i.e. households moving from one LPA to another). However, Stewart Baseley, Executive Chairman of the Home Builders Federation, stated that the NHB has the potential to become a significant income stream for many local authorities and could offset cuts from central government (Baseley, 2011).

Senior figures within local government are more sceptical about the capacity of the NHB and are of the belief that the 'legal stick', rather than the 'financial carrot' will be required to deliver the necessary levels of housebuilding (Rogerson, 2011). Larkin et al (2011) argue that the level of NHB currently paid out would need to be doubled or even tripled for the policy to have a significant impact on the willingness of local authorities to allocate land for development in their areas. When considering green belt land, the sum paid for each new home would have to be multiplied even more. Financial and environmental considerations aside, there is also a significant political risk for local councillors on planning committees who are seen to be pro-development, because of the long time-lag between the granting of planning permission and the payment of NHB, which only occurs once homes are actually built (Bullock, 2011: 15). This gap can be decades for strategic housing developments of the type discussed in this research and is therefore completely 'out of sync' with the local political cycle.

3.3.4: Local Enterprise Partnerships

There has been a resurgence internationally of what Brenner (2009) describes as "state rescaling", particularly in terms of sub-national economic development policy. In keeping with this trend, the second major initiative of the coalition government, besides the NPPF, was the creation of Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), formed during 2010-11 by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS). LEPs have been described by practitioners as 'fleet-of-foot' partnerships (Pugalis, 2011), a term used to describe spatial coalitions which operate without a statutory basis, and which involve the coalescing of a small core of staff in pursuit

of common objectives (Pugalis and Townsend, 2013b: 699). Consistent with Clarke and Cochrane's spatial liberalism hypothesis, LEPs are constituted as public-private partnerships, with 50 per cent private sector representation on LEP boards and private sector chairs (Cheshire et al, 2014: 174).

A short letter of less than two pages of guidance was released jointly by CLG/BIS on June 29th 2010, with the deadline for initial proposals set for September 6th. A total of 62 bids were received by this date, of which 24 were accepted by central government. It was not until after this deadline that the *Local Growth White Paper* (HMG, 2010) fleshed out the scanty detail of the CLG/BIS letter. Pugalis and Townsend (2012: 164) contend that this delay was caused principally by inter-departmental clashes, particularly the "rabidly anti-regional" CLG Secretary of State, Eric Pickles, and his BIS counterpart, Vince Cable, who was far more amenable to the idea of maintaining some sort of regional economic governance structures (and indeed pushed through the creation of six 'BIS Local' headquarters in order to "provide the department with a 'policy presence outside of Whitehall'"). However, this is arguably another attempt by the centre to manage and discipline the local, in much the same way that the Government Offices for English Regions (GOs), established under John Major's Conservative government in 1994 and wound up in 2011, were described as reflecting, "the presence of central government in the regions - rather than a regional presence within government" (Fenwick, 2015: 7). According to Baker et al (1999: 768), the GOs did, though, have the virtue of:

providing the degree of regional cohesion necessary to maximise financial assistance garnered through the EU structural funds, and, from within the Commission itself, as representing one of the building blocks around which embryonic EU spatial planning structures might be constructed.

Arguably, the coalition's main priority was to save money, and savings were achieved by closing RDAs (which had a budget of just over £1.4 billion in 2010/11, down from £2.3 billion in 2007/08), although closing these organisations resulted in significant transitional costs (National Audit Office, 2012). The disposal process was complicated by the fact that

BIS was responsible for the ‘business assets’ of the former RDAs, with CLG owning the physical infrastructure of the bodies (Pugalis and Townsend, 2012: 168). The news that these strategic and business assets would not be transferred across to them was a major source of disappointment to the nascent LEPs (and arguably a significant waste of resources), although it is understandable, given that the government would not want to be seen to be directly replacing one ‘Quangocracy’ with another.

As of now there are 39 LEPs, a number of which cross old GOR boundaries. Remarkably, 33 of these LEPs closely match old 1974 County Council boundaries, including 17 with the same boundary and name, eight based on 1974 counties plus an expansion into adjoining lower-tier districts, four comprising a pair of 1974 counties (e.g. Essex and Kent), three comprising a 1974 County with subtractions (e.g. Solent) and one comprising three former counties (the North Eastern LEP). Initially viewed as the successors to RDAs, as well as carrying out the core competencies of their predecessors (i.e. local economic priorities and job growth) they took on responsibility for strategic spatial planning matters including housing and transport in late 2014.

The Essex-Kent LEP and its relation to its FEA is of particular interest; originally comprising just the two unitary authorities (neither of which have particularly strong travel-to-work flows across the Thames), it was expanded by the addition of East Sussex, Medway, Southend-on-Sea and Thurrock to become a ‘super-LEP’ (indeed the biggest LEP outside London). The resulting LEP was referred to by a participant in Pugalis and Townsend’s (2013c: 14) study as a “forced marriage” and a “behemoth”. However, the (pre-expansion) Essex-Kent LEP was singled out for praise by the then Planning Minister, Greg Clark, as better reflecting an economic geography that had artificially separated the two authorities under the old, regional system (CLG, 2011a: para. 62). The degree to which individual LEPs match the borders of their FEAs is therefore very much an ongoing topic for discussion.

Although 39 LEPs is certainly an advance on 9 regions in terms of a better fit to FEAs, the

fact that the coalition government created the Regional Growth Fund is proof in the eyes of some commentators that they have not adopted, “the ‘functional vision’ of market forces shaping economic geography” (Ferry and Bachtler, 2013: 262). With current resources of £2.6 billion, the RGF is one of the principal sources of funding for LEPs, although it has come in for criticism for not allocating funds quickly enough (Burn-Callander, 2014). The amount of political ‘horse-trading’ that went on during the period of LEP formation has, in some cases, reduced the functional fit at the expense of suspicion of “them lot over there” (Pugalis and Townsend, 2012: 167).

The main criteria for determining whether a LEP bid was accepted or not appears to have been whether it had a minimum of 75% of people living and working in the proposed area. Interestingly, the least self-contained successful bid came from Hertfordshire where just 69.9% of people live and work within the LEP’s boundaries (Townsend, 2012: 43). Examples of failed bids include Greater Lincolnshire, which fell victim to the curse of underboundedness, and rival bids from both sides of the river Humber, where old ‘turf wars’ threatened to derail the process (Pugalis and Bentley, 2013: 868). Humber LEP managed to put its differences behind it and now, rather grandly, sees its destiny as the ‘Aberdeen of the North’ [of England, presumably] (Shutt *et al*, 2012). Even Michael Heseltine, the guru of sub-regional economic development, has reservations about whether some LEPs match FEMAs as well as they can, although, as he concedes, delineating such boundaries is not an exact science (Heseltine, 2012: 47-48).

The verdict on LEPs from the nation’s capital was not altogether positive, with the late Deputy Mayor of London, Sir Simon Milton commenting acidly in October 2010 that, “the government has still not been entirely clear what problem LEPs are the solution to” (Ward, 2012: 6). In fact, a review of the literature has identified no fewer than seven problems with LEPs in their current format. Firstly, they are not discrete entities - there are overlaps, in fact Pugalis and Townsend (2013b: 705) have estimated that 4.3 million people across 38 local authorities are located in two LEPs. Clearly, this has little or no effect on these individuals,

however, there are serious implications in terms of how funding is allocated to these LEPs and this can be the decisive factor in whether or not particular strategic spatial planning projects go ahead or not. Secondly, and directly correlated to the overlaps issue, is the amount of political infighting that went on across the country during the phase of LEP formation (alluded to above in the case of Humber), and which in some cases, is ongoing (as the interview material reveals). Cheshire et al (2014: 163) argue that “local political bargaining and coalitions” have, in some cases, hindered the creation of LEPs based on ‘true’ FEA geography, and one of the respondents involved in Pugalís and Townsend’s (2013b: 705) research went so far as to say that ‘too many local authorities want the LEP to fail’, blowing out of the water the “misguided assumption that all LEPs are composed of partners of the willing”. Joint committees, as LEPs are composed of, may be less likely to take difficult decisions and of course particular interests may be privileged over others (Morphet and Pemberton, 2013: 394).

Thirdly, it is argued that there are simply too many LEPs. As noted above, there were originally 62 LEP submissions across England, whereas central government had expected between 30-40 bids, reflecting a “range of competing spatial visions to reflect their interests or interpretation of functional economic space (Pugalís and Townsend, 2013b: 705). Whereas the nine GORs provided a recognisable and easy fit with European funding mechanisms, this is no longer the case with the 39 LEPs, an issue that will be developed from the interview material. Fourthly, there is significant variability between LEPs, in terms of governance structures, monitoring frameworks and general accountability, with many of these processes still “shrouded in mystery” (Pugalís and Townsend, 2013b: 711). Fifthly, there are ongoing concerns about the ability of the planning profession to handle the simultaneous upward and downward rescaling responsibilities imposed by the move to LEPs, particularly in the light of significant, ongoing cuts to the sector (Pugalís and Townsend, 2012: 170).

Sixthly, the non-statutory basis of LEPs means that they may be reduced to “toothless tigers” or “talking shops” (Pugalís and Townsend, 2013a: 115) when confronted with strategic spatial planning proposals with significant cross-boundary implications, since there will be

a reluctance to vitiate all the efforts put into carefully constructed relationships under the LEP banner. Finally, and most seriously, there is a palpable lack of democratic accountability associated with LEPs as they are currently constituted, since they have no direct (or even indirect) election procedures. As Morphet and Pemberton (2013: 393) explain, quite apart from people's general aversion to such bodies, there are specific dilemmas to be confronted, particularly when it comes to strategic planning and transport. In those LEPs which have been created from former counties (a significant proportion, as noted above), planning powers reside with lower tier authorities which are represented as a single group and are consequently not involved in all the decision-making processes of the LEP. Democratic accountability is in any case a legal prerequisite of decentralised transport functions (Pugalis and Townsend, 2013a: 116).

However, it should be noted that, despite the problems enumerated above, LEPs are in some respects an advance on the previous regional system. Baker and Wong (2013: 99) argue that:

A greater focus on more tightly drawn, and functionally-based, sub-regional geographical areas-as opposed to the more constraining dominance of traditional regional boundaries that were, arguably, too large to have any real meaning-could be a genuinely positive development. Equally, the more voluntary approach to sub-regional collaboration may mean a greater chance of innovative and visionary outcomes, jointly formulated and delivered by willing collaborators, as opposed to politically-driven lowest common denominator blandness.

Importantly, as Pugalis and Townsend (2013b: 709) posit, internal LEP relationships are generally better than the 'spatial politics' that were an unwelcome and widespread feature of the previous regional governance system (e.g. the conflict between Devon and Cornwall that hindered the South West of England). Somewhat more hopefully, the same authors (2012: 171) offer the prospect that LEPs' "greatest success may lie in arbitrating spatial competition between neighbouring localities, promoting the merits of cooperative advantage."

Despite (or perhaps because of) the rescinding of the regional apparatus, the Conservative government has affirmed its commitment to cross-boundary spatial planning, mainly, it

would appear, through the mechanism of LEPs. Morphet and Pemberton (2013: 392) raise the possibility that central government might increasingly be tempted to use LEPs as a means of delivering housing targets, since this would entail responsibility for unpopular decisions shifting from the centre to the local politicians who make up the LEPs. In other words, central government would prefer to avoid being tainted in the same way that malign central influence was blamed for unpopular housing targets under the RSS system. However, as Morphet and Pemberton (2013: 392) point out, this raises the possibility that LEPs might become “as stalemated as the RSS, and [this] will detrimentally impact on their economic functionality”. However, Larkin (2010: 6) argues that LEPs can help to avoid the “excessive localism” (another way to describe what Albrechts called ‘Balkanization’) of individual councils and deliver strategic spatial planning.

How is the issue of partnership working tackled under the LEP system? Unlike the presumption in favour of sustainable development, the duty to co-operate has a legal basis, as set out in s.110 of the Localism Act 2011 (this section amends s.33(a) of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004). However, although the legislation applies to planning authorities in that they must have regard to the activities of the relevant LEP(s), the duty to co-operate does not apply to LEP activities themselves. Since a number of think-tanks have made the case for LEPs to have spatial planning powers (e.g. Larkin, 2010; Bolton, 2011) and a role in housing (e.g. Ward and Hardy (eds), 2012), it would be anomalous if the duty to co-operate were not to apply to LEPs if this indeed became the case.

The short- to -medium term future of LEPs appears reasonably secure, although they merited just a single mention in the Conservative Party’s Election Manifesto. However, although they were described as such by more than one interview participant, they are not quite the ‘only show in town’, since, in following the classic central government tactic of ‘divide and rule’, ‘City Deals’ now cover two thirds of England’s population and tensions are now starting to appear between constituent members of LEP who now find themselves belonging to different (and thus opposing) City Deals (Pugalis and Townsend, 2013b: 709). The even more venerable

central government tactic of ‘fudging the issue’ appears to have been adopted in the City Deals process, which, due to a highly laissez faire process of boundary definition, are “not as credible” as FEAs (Pike et al (2012), as cited in Coombes (2013: 5)). They therefore fall far short of the principles and potentialities for city regions set out above.

Indeed, under the current arrangements, serious doubts as to the capacity of LEPs and ‘City Deals’ to fulfil ‘larger than local’ planning functions were expressed by Cameron Watt, formerly Head of Neighbourhoods at the National Housing Federation. The reasons he gave for this were twofold: firstly, a mismatch between LEP boundaries and housing market areas (which raises the question - are HMAs more relevant than functional economic areas?), and, secondly, and reinforcing the point made above, the distinct lack of democratic accountability of LEP boards (CLG, 2011a: Q234). Shutt *et al* (2012) ask rhetorically, ‘How many people remember the fate of Training and Enterprise Councils?’, and see possible “institutional oblivion” for LEPs, with subregions “once again” the losers. To end this section on a rather grisly note, “the subnational economic development landscape is full of institutional corpses” (Pugalis and Bentley, 2013: 871) and LEPs, being a creature of central government, “will, in their turn, be either axed or mercilessly interfered with after the next turn in the political cycle” (Jones, 2010: 375).

3.3.5: Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL)

A consistent theme throughout this research has been the importance, and difficulty, of ensuring that the necessary infrastructure (transport, social - e.g. schools, health, sewage, and digital) is provided as an integral element of strategic spatial planning. Failure to adequately address the infrastructure issue can mean that it causes separation and segregation, rather than enhancing connectivity and opportunity (Graham and Marvin, 2001). Neuman (2014: 796) argues that we have entered an ‘infrastructure emergency’, characterised by slow-burning, incremental effects that take a long time to become apparent, analogous to the frog placed in warm water that is slowly brought to the boil. The government has attempted

on multiple occasions to tax increases in land value, without success, in 1947, 1967, 1973 and 1976 (Cullingworth and Nadin, 2006). Quite simply, planners do not want to be seen as tax collectors and see CIL as merely another land tariff (Falco, 2015: 15). However, there is an important distinction between CIL and previous efforts to tax ‘uplift’ in land values which is that CIL is aimed specifically at mitigating the negative externalities associated with development and covering the costs of infrastructure. In effect, CIL and s106 Agreements are ‘planning gain’ mechanisms, where a much higher proportion of monies raised remains within the local community, whereas the previous ‘betterment levies’ of 1947, 1967, 1973 and 1976 typically result in most of the finances being channelled back to the centre (Bowers, 1992: 1338). This meant that, initially, s106 Agreements were welcomed and the introduction of CIL has received a largely positive reception from local authorities (CLG, 2011).

Dissatisfaction with the system of Section 106 Agreements largely stemmed from the burdens they placed on developers and planning authorities alike in terms of administrative and financial costs (CLG, 2010). There were also widespread informational and skills asymmetries between public sector (i.e. local authority) planners and lawyers and their private sector counterparts representing the interests of developers, particularly when it came to negotiating the terms of s106 Agreements (CLG, 2011), with the advantage very much on the side of developers. Unfortunately, as Shostak and Houghton (2008: 122-23) argue, despite the folly of relying on a single mechanism, itself largely dependent on a buoyant housing market, s106 Agreements have come to be viewed by central government as the principal means of delivering affordable housing in England, and especially in the wider South East. The pragmatic decision to impose CIL while retaining s106 Agreements (and allowing local authorities to set their own rates of the former) has been described by Cheshire et al (2014: 151) as “very counterproductive”, since this results in CIL being implemented, “in a piecemeal, apparently haphazard way” (Cheshire et al, 2014: 136). There is a further significant problem with the way CIL is calculated, namely that local authorities need to set out *in advance* what infrastructure is needed and how much it will cost (CLG, 2008). This makes the heroic assumption that such forecasts, involving a range of demographic, transport and economic

variables can be correctly identified (the traditional 'predict and provide' paradigm), whereas the transport planning sector long ago abandoned such methods (Goodwin, 1999).

Chapter 4

Strategic spatial planning at the site level: The West of Stevenage proposals

4.1: Overview of the development process

Late on the evening of Friday, 3rd April 1998 an Extraordinary Meeting of Hertfordshire County Council approached its climax. Only three out of a total of seventy-six Councillors were absent and the business at hand was a vote on a motion which proposed to postpone the adoption of the County Structure Plan until the Secretary of State for the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) reduced Hertfordshire's strategic housing requirement. This requirement currently stood at 65,000 new homes up to 2011 and the main reason that the proposer and seconder of the motion were arguing for a downwards revision of this target was that this would remove the need for green belt development to the west of the A1(M) – a site which straddled the boundaries between the two local authorities of North Hertfordshire and Stevenage. A minor revision to the motion was called for. Amidst scenes more reminiscent of a rowdy House of Commons session than a sleepy commuter belt County Council, the vote on the revised motion was taken: 37 Members in favour of the motion, and 37 Members against. The Chairman cast his deciding vote in favour of the amendment and a final vote on the substantive motion was taken, and carried unanimously. Hertfordshire County Council thus registered en bloc its disapproval of 'top-down' housing targets in general, and with the proposed strategic urban extension of Stevenage in particular. Hertfordshire's hopes had been raised by a statement by the then Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott, announcing the government's intention to move away from producing housing forecasts based on 'predict and provide' towards a sequential approach, making use of Previously Developed Land (PDL). However, in answer to a letter from the Chairman of Hertfordshire County Council seeking, amongst other things, permission to delete the Stevenage West proposals from the Structure Plan, the then Deputy Prime Minister replied on 23rd April 1998 to the effect that he saw no reason to depart from the conclusions reached

by the Examination in Public in June 1997 (Lavender, 2004: 146). Therefore, on 30th April 1998, the County Council's Structure Plan was approved, containing an endorsement of the Stevenage West site as Policy 8. The site was described as:

the best way forward to meeting the bulk of the remaining [housing] requirement not provided elsewhere and that none of the alternatives put forward come near, individually or collectively, to matching the advantages of this location" (Hertfordshire, 1998: 54).

It is scarcely credible that those Members involved in the April 1998 vote who remain active today are still dealing with the fallout of the Stevenage West proposals more than 15 years on, with not a spadeful of earth dug nor any resolution of the issue in sight; this despite the arguments having moved from the planning domain to the highest courts in the land.

After the publication of the Hertfordshire Structure Plan in April 1998 there were still many months of wrangling before the applicant, known as the West of Stevenage Consortium (WSC – a group of development interests including Persimmon Homes, Taywood Homes, Bryant Homes and The Garden Village Partnership) resubmitted two pairs of proposals to North Herts and Stevenage.

The first pair of proposals, submitted on 24th July 2001, related to:

- 5,000 dwellings and business premises, shops, leisure, social and community facilities, along with open space and landscaping and provision of infrastructure, highways and public transport facilities. These proposals were refused, on the grounds that Herts CC viewed any proposal over 3,600 dwellings as being in excess of its 1998 Structure Plan housing requirement for the period 1991-2011.

Although WSC was not in agreement with Herts CC's contention, in response to this, a second pair of proposals was submitted to North Herts and Stevenage on 31st August 2001, relating to:

- 3,600 dwellings and business premises, shops, leisure, social and community facilities, along with open space and landscaping and provision of infrastructure, highways and public transport facilities. WSC views the applications relating to the 3,600 dwellings as 'PA3' and the remaining 1,400 dwellings as 'PA5' of the development, although 'PA3' was formulated as an application which could stand independent of 'PA5' if necessary. Of these homes, 2,600 are located on land in North Herts, with the remaining 1,000 dwellings located on land in Stevenage.

'PA3' was originally intended to be completed by 2011, with 'PA5' due to be finished in 2014. Due to the complexity of the proposals, and their tendency to polarise opinion, the applications were 'called-in' for adjudication on 7th November 2002 by the then Secretary of State. More than a year passed before the Inquiry convened on 20th January 2004, sitting for a total of 41 days up to 25th October 2004. The Inspector produced his compendious Report of 279 pages on 1st December 2004 (Lavender, 2004). This Report is by far the most comprehensive treatment of the proposals and the main arguments presented by the opposing sides. Although strategically important development proposals such as Stevenage West usually involve investigation of a wide range of issues, four particular topics are of especial importance to the research at hand, specifically:

- The issue of co-operation between North Herts DC, Stevenage BC and Herts CC
- The identification and implementation of strategic housing targets
- Transport and travel (strategic and site-specific)
- Issues of green belt designation (wider policy and site-specific)

A strong argument can be made in support of the proposition that these have also been the most critical issues in all of the arguments surrounding the Stevenage West proposals to date. It is important to note, as did North Herts DC in their submissions to the Inquiry, that this development is concerned with the "application and not the formulation of policy" (Lavender, 2004: 166).

4.2: The site

There have been proposals of one form or another for an urban extension of Stevenage since 1972. Much of the complexity surrounding the Stevenage West proposals stems from the fact that, as noted above, the site straddles two local authority boundaries, with a County Council (Hertfordshire) covering both authorities having responsibility for strategic planning matters. The entire site covers some 283.18 hectares, with 185.99 hectares located in North Hertfordshire District Council and the remaining 97.19 hectares coming under the jurisdiction of Stevenage Borough Council¹².

4.3: The local plans and their relationship to the Structure Plan

On December 8th 2004, exactly one week after the publication of the Inspector's Report, in which permission was refused for 'PA5' (i.e. the development of 5,000 homes) but granted for 'PA3' (i.e. the development of 3,600 homes), Stevenage Borough Council deposited its District Plan Second Review 1991 – 2001. As a result of the changing planning policy landscape at the time, in particular Planning Policy Guidance note 3 (PPG3) and the imminent introduction of Planning Policy Statement 3 (Housing), Policy H2 of Stevenage's updated District Plan appeared to 'row back' from the local authority's previously unequivocal support for the urban extension. Policy H2 refers to Policy 8 of the Hertfordshire Structure Plan, which earmarks land for 1,000 new homes on land owned by Stevenage BC and 2,600 dwellings on land owned by North Herts DC as "strategic locations for supplementary housing development" (Hertfordshire, 1998: 56). Stevenage's updated Local Plan makes clear, in bold, capitalised letters, that the Stevenage West site is to be "safeguarded from development, pending reconsideration and acceptance of its strategic justification." The explanatory text immediately below this statement goes on to say that,

only if that review of the structure plan...determines that Stevenage West is required to meet the County's development needs up to 2011 can the site be considered as

allocated and available to be released for development (Stevenage, 2004: para. 3.2.13).

The most germane element of PPS3 which was probably responsible for Stevenage BC's decision to 'row back' and 'play for time' was the target of at least 60% of new development to be located on 'previously developed land' (PDL) (CLG, 2006: para. 41). As so often happens, even the best-intentioned central government initiative usually leads to a period of paralysis, if not outright revolt, at the local level. Stevenage BC's updated District Plan, was, in effect, 'passing the buck' to Hertfordshire County Council by claiming that it was the duty of a Structure Plan Review to determine whether the Stevenage West site should be allocated and released for development, safe in the knowledge that such a Review was unlikely to be completed in the short to medium term.

4.4: Main issues connected with green belt designation

On occasion, questions which, at face value, seem to be relatively straightforward such as, 'Is this proposed development in the green belt?' actually turn out to be far more complex on further investigation. Such was the case with the Stevenage West proposals. At the national level, Planning Policy Guidance Note 2 (ODPM, 2001) set out the government's position on green belts and this guidance is reflected in the relevant regional policies during the lengthy period required to determine the Stevenage West proposals. Regional Planning Guidance 9 (RPG 9) for the South East acknowledged that where settlements are tightly constrained by the green belt (as Stevenage certainly is), there may be a case for boundary review provided an urban capacity study has been completed and all other alternative locations for development have been considered (GOSE, 1994). The Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) for the East of England specifically mentions the need for "strategic reviews of green belt boundaries" at five locations, including Stevenage, "involving land in Stevenage and North Hertfordshire" (GOEE, 2008: Policy SS7: 14).

The relevant policy during this period at County Council level was the Hertfordshire Structure

Plan Review 1991 – 2011 (HSP), approved in April 1998 (Hertfordshire, 1998). Policy 5 of this document acknowledged the need for a review of green belt policies in the area west of the A1(M) at Stevenage to accommodate up to 10,000 new homes (Hertfordshire, 1998: 38-39). This land was selected, defended and allocated for this purpose by Hertfordshire CC at the Examination in Public. The Structure Plan was reviewed in 2003 and by now the possibility of “strategic scale development” west of the A1(M) at Stevenage had been put in abeyance (Hertfordshire, 2003: para. 68). Instead, there is a rather vague intention to allocate this land, in extremis, for 3,600 homes, with “at least” a further 1,400 to follow by 2011 (Hertfordshire, 2003: para. 83(d)). Thus we can see that the plans for 10,000 new homes articulated in 1998 had been slashed to 5,000 (or 3,600) by 2003.

At the local level, the relevant planning documents at this time were the North Herts District Local Plan (NHDLP), adopted in 1996 and the Stevenage District Plan (SDP), adopted in 1994. The NHDLP makes no mention of any potential development west of Stevenage and merely recapitulates national green belt policy as set out in PPG 2. The Proposals Map of the SDP includes an adjustment of green belt boundaries for that part of the Stevenage West site that falls under the Borough Council’s jurisdiction and emphasises the need for co-operation with North Herts to bring forward the rest of the site for development.

The wording of the County Council Structure Plan (Hertfordshire, 1998) was sufficiently ambiguous as to lead to differences in opinion between pro-development and anti-development interests, over the question of whether the green belt boundary had, or had not, been adjusted to accommodate Stevenage West. What was not at issue were the implications arising from the application of green belt policy should it be held to apply, since such policy is clear from PPG 2. Indeed, the key issue of whether “very special circumstances” existed which would override the general presumption against development on green belt land was dealt with in a case brought by Chelmsford Borough Council against a traveller family in 2003. When the defendant moved her family from an authorised site to an unauthorised site on the green belt she was refused planning permission to station caravans on the new

site. When she appealed, the planning Inspector concluded that ‘very special circumstances’ existed because the defendant’s children had settled in well to the local school within walking distance of the new (unauthorised) site. In other words, although ‘limited harm’ was caused to the green belt by the caravans, this was outweighed by the ‘very special circumstances’ of the children’s educational needs. The then Secretary of State agreed with the Inspector’s findings and Chelmsford Borough Council appealed to the Administrative Court to quash this decision. In Court in a judgment given on November 25th 2003, Justice Sullivan held that the then Secretary of State had been mistaken in agreeing with the Inspector that ‘very special circumstances’ existed. Justice Sullivan failed to see that the educational needs of two children constituted ‘special circumstances’, never mind ‘very special circumstances’. The key phrase ‘very special circumstances’ should be given its “ordinary and natural meaning”, not merely ascribed to a situation because a decision-maker chose to describe it that way (The Weekly Law Reports, 2003). This judgment would therefore appear to have ‘raised the bar’ when ascribing ‘very special circumstances’ to development in the green belt.

Before the publication of the Hertfordshire CC Structure Plan in 1998, all previous plans at County Council and local authority level had defined the Stevenage West site as being within the green belt. At the Examination in Public into the 1998 Structure Plan, it was successfully argued that ‘exceptional circumstances’ existed such that the land west of the A1(M) should be released for strategic development. It should be noted that the terms ‘exceptional circumstances’ and ‘very special circumstances’ are used interchangeably throughout PPG 2. This allocation of the land west of the A1(M) for development by the EiP was used by the West of Stevenage Consortium as one of the central planks of their arguments in favour of development. However, matters were complicated by further ambiguities in depicting the site on the Key Diagram of the Hertfordshire CC Key Diagram. On this map, the Stevenage West site is simply overlaid on the existing green belt (in contrast to proposed development at Hemel Hempstead on the same map, where strategic development is shown as part of the built up area). Since Structure Plans were legally comprised of both a Written Statement and a Key Diagram, it would be very helpful if they were both in accord with each other.

Although the North Herts District Local Plan, as updated in 2000, acknowledged that, “with the adoption of [the Hertfordshire County Council Structure Plan 1998], the Green Belt in North Hertfordshire has been reduced to take account of the proposed development west of the A1(M) at Stevenage” (Lavender, 2004: 50), on the Key Diagram, only enough space for the ‘PA3’ (3,600 homes) and ‘PA5’ (1,400) developments was shown (i.e. no further room for the remaining 5,000 dwellings). In fact, this version of the Local Plan was rather hurriedly withdrawn and North Herts reverted to the anti-development stance set out in its 1996 Plan (NHDC, 1996). Naturally, the boundaries of the site on the Key Diagram of the Stevenage Local Plan clearly excluded the site west of the A1(M) from the green belt.

As the Inspector at the first Inquiry noted, “[d]evelopment of greenfield sites is in some regards inherently unsustainable because of the irreversibility of permanent housing” (Lavender, 2004: 218). Accordingly, one of the few areas of common ground which emerged between the contending parties was the need to redesignate other land as green belt in the event of the Stevenage West proposals finally going ahead (so that the overall total of green belt land in Hertfordshire would not be reduced). The land to be redesignated was located between the Metropolitan Green Belt and Luton Green Belt. Something which emerged in the Inspector’s Report of 2004, and of interest to the current research, is how the same body (North Herts District Council) applied three different approaches to the implementation of policy as it related to this green belt extension land:

- From April 1998 to June 2000, North Herts DC took the view that the area for extension was not subject to green belt policy as the status of this area would be dealt with under Policy 5 of the North Herts District Local Plan 2000, then in preparation.
- In June 2000, a case was decided on appeal by an Inspector whose opinion was that the Hertfordshire Structure Plan clearly intended that this land was in the green belt. Therefore, between June 2000 and March 2003, North Herts DC applied green belt policy to this land between the Metropolitan Green Belt and the Luton Green Belt.

- In July 2002, a proposal to redevelop a garden centre was refused on green belt grounds. However, it was suggested to North Herts DC (presumably by the applicant) that the application of green belt policy was incorrect. North Herts DC therefore consulted with Hertfordshire County Council and took legal advice, the result of which advice was that the area between the Metropolitan Green Belt and the Luton Green Belt should not be subject to green belt policy.

At the first Inquiry, the Inspector found that the question of whether it was the task of the Hertfordshire CC Structure Plan/emerging Regional Spatial Strategy/Local Plans/emerging Local Development Frameworks to provide the necessary adjustment to green belt boundaries to accommodate the Stevenage West proposals to be a matter of law (Lavender, 2004: 219). Accordingly, since it was the function of Local Plans to record the detailed boundaries, not the general extent, of green belts, the development site was held by the Inspector to remain within the green belt. The Inspector noted that this finding could lead to an inconsistency in the application of PPG2 (Green Belts), since the Inspector responsible for approving or rejecting the updated Stevenage District Plan recommended a detailed boundary readjustment of that part of the site that lay within Stevenage's green belt.

This Inspector also made a parallel recommendation that the whole principle of development west of the A1(M) should be the subject of a strategic review, thus opening the possibility for an early green belt boundary readjustment back to its original position if the strategic review came down against Stevenage West (Lavender, 2004: 249). Such 'fiddling' with green belt boundaries goes against Paragraph 2.1 of PPG2, which states that, "[t]he essential characteristic of Green Belts is their permanence. Their protection must be maintained as far as can be seen ahead" (ODPM, 2001). The Inspector at the first Inquiry concluded that both 'PA3' and 'PA5' of the proposed development lay within the green belt, and that to grant permission to either scheme would therefore be in "direct conflict with the aims, purposes and objectives of including land within Green Belts" (Lavender, 2004: 249). However, the Inspector

found that ‘very special circumstances’ existed, for ‘PA3’ of the proposed development only, since the Hertfordshire Structure Plan 1998 had made specific strategic provision for up to 3,600 homes (Lavender, 2004: 249).

4.5: Persimmon Homes takes legal action against Stevenage BC

This state of affairs led, in April 2005, to what must have seemed extraordinary to those who had not been closely following the labyrinthine twists and turns of the development: Persimmon Homes (one of the members of the Stevenage West Consortium) taking Stevenage BC – previously Stevenage West’s staunchest supporter – to the High Court over whether the District Plan Second Review was ‘in general conformity’ with the Structure Plan, as well as an issue of law over where green belt boundaries had been drawn in relation to the site. This second issue was purely technical and a matter of common ground between the two parties, and merely required the Proposals Map to be corrected. Judge David Mole QC found, on the substantive issue of ‘general conformity’, that the prefix ‘general’ inferred a degree of flexibility in terms of the relationship between Structure and Local Plans. In effect, the judge found that Stevenage BC had committed no breach of law in its cautious wording of Policy H2. Reservations about the proposed development can be traced back to 2002, when political changes at Hertfordshire County Council, in the shape of a Conservative regime which had replaced the previous ‘No Overall Control’ administration in the 2001 local elections resulted in a sharp backlash against strategic sites, including Stevenage West. In parallel with Stevenage’s plans to update its District Plan, Hertfordshire County Council set in motion the process of updating the Structure Plan by publishing a first consultation draft alterations document which would cover the period 2001 – 2016. This document replaced Policy 8 with a bare statement that no strategic scale housing developments were necessary. Therefore, a combination of pressure from Hertfordshire County Council at the public Inquiry into Stevenage’s updated District Plan Second Review, as well as uncertainty surrounding the impact of PPS3 resulted in Stevenage rephrasing Policy H2 of its District Plan from an original form which clearly designated the site west of the A1(M) as suitable for development to the

much more ambiguous, ‘wait and see’ formulation detailed above. In actual fact, Hertfordshire abandoned its intentions to update its Structure Plan after adverse comments from the Government Office for the East of England (GoEE) during the summer of 2003.

Undeterred, Persimmon Homes, along with other members of the WSC, pursued their case to the Court of Appeal, from whence judgment was handed down on November 22nd 2005. At issue was the phasing of the construction, with Persimmon Homes et al arguing that the rephrased Policy H2 of Stevenage’s District Plan effectively stretch the already long lead-time of the development beyond any realistic prospect of being built by the target date of 2011. In fact, Policy H4 of Stevenage’s District Plan sets out quite specifically that 400 of the intended 1,000 homes to be built on Stevenage land are to be constructed during the period 2004 – 2007, with the remaining 600 to be erected between 2008 – 2011 (Stevenage, 2004: Policy H4). In a 2-1 majority verdict which found against the claimants (i.e. Persimmon Homes et al), Laws LJ also found long lead-times to be the crux of the matter, although rather than pointing to the lengthy period required for planning delivery, as Persimmon Homes had done, he focused on the timeframes involved in the formulation and implementation of overlapping elements of planning policy. Laws LJ noted in his judgment that, as a consequence of these lengthy lead-times, “the needs and exigencies of good planning policy are likely to change over time” (The Weekly Law Reports, 2006).

In other words, just as Judge David Mole QC had done in the original case at the High Court, Laws LJ favoured a looser approach to the issue of ‘general conformity’ between structure and local plans. In his dissenting judgment, Lloyd LJ opined that Persimmon Homes was facing a situation akin to stalemate, since the Hertfordshire Structure Plan review was no longer going ahead and that therefore the issue of the availability or otherwise of the land at Stevenage West was deferred indefinitely – “to the Greek calends” in his own words (The Weekly Law Reports, 2006). Once again, it is important to bear in mind the macro-policy situation at this time, with the sweeping planning reforms ushered in by the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 resulting in many local planning authorities delaying or suspending work on their

local plans in order to see what the altered planning landscape might look like. Of course, if authority 'A' waits to see what authority 'B' might do, and authority 'B' is watching anxiously to see what the response of authority 'C' is to the changes, then it is quite obvious that the whole system may well grind to a halt as stakeholders play 'the waiting game'.

As a final comment on the legal action pursued by Persimmon Homes et al during 2005, it is interesting to note that one of the most senior legal minds in the country, Lane LJ, in his short judgment in support of Laws LJ's opinion, stated that, "this is a highly specialist area...the function of the court under section 287 [of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990] should be limited to review on *Wednesbury* principles" (The Weekly Law Reports, 2006). '*Wednesbury* unreasonableness' is defined as reasoning or decision-making that is so unreasonable that no reasonable person acting reasonably could have made it (EWCA, 1947) and refers to a more stringent test of common sense applicable to public bodies. This statement substantiates the widely held view that the interpretation of planning policy and legislation is very much a 'black box' activity, ergo an undertaking fraught with the potential for multiple, conflicting viewpoints where true consensus and common ground can be rare indeed.

4.6: Central government's role in the Stevenage West proposals

Following the Inspector's Report of December 2004, the Secretary of State's Decision Letter was released on the 20th October 2005. This was an unusually lengthy period of time and reflects the ongoing uncertainty relating to the proposed development. The involvement of the Secretary of State can be traced back to 7th November 2002, when both the 'PA3' and 'PA5' proposals were 'called-in' by the ODPM for determination instead of being dealt with by the relevant local authorities, as are the vast majority of planning applications. It is an interesting exercise to follow the Secretary of State's reasoning for and against the various elements of the proposals, as set out in his letter of 20th October 2005. Neither of the relevant local plans gave unqualified support for the urban extension (North Herts District Local Plan 1996 omits mention of the proposals entirely and, as noted above, support for both 'PA3' and 'PA5' in

the Stevenage Local Plan 2004 was ‘safeguarded’ from development until a strategic review had been carried out. Instead, the Secretary of State focused on the “considerable support” that proposal ‘PA3’ gained from Policies 8 and 9 of the Hertfordshire Structure Plan 1998 (Macintyre, 2005: para. 19) – despite the fact that structure plans were formally abolished with the commencement of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 in mid-July of that year, and, more importantly, that Policies 8 and 9 no longer accurately reflected the current mood towards Stevenage West within Hertfordshire CC. It should be noted that late-2005 was a time when regional planning bodies were busily preparing the documents that would become Regional Spatial Strategies (RSSs), and that transitional provisions enabled the prolongation of structure plans beyond their formal revocation date.

The Secretary of State agreed with the Inspector that there was “no obstacle” to determining the applications before the Housing Capacity Study to be undertaken by the regional planning body had been completed (Macintyre, 2005: para. 21). There was, therefore, rather tenuous support for the proposals from the suite of documents that together comprised the ‘development plan’ for the area (at that time, of course, in transition to the ‘Local Development Framework’ regime). One of the undoubtedly many perquisites of being a Minister of State, though, is that one can ‘magic away’ unpalatable instances of planning doctrine with phrases like ‘material considerations’ and ‘very special circumstances’. In this case, the ‘very special circumstances’ related to overriding green belt policy as set out in PPG2 and simply amounted to the need for strategic housing development at Stevenage West. Proposal ‘PA5’ fell victim to the novel concept of ‘prematurity’, whereby any development could conceivably compromise a development plan document in process of creation by dint of its sheer scale. The Secretary of State was concerned about the potential impacts of ‘PA5’ on the embryonic RSS (whereas ‘PA3’ apparently posed no threat to this process). In terms of housing need and provision, the Secretary of State judged that ‘PA3’ would accord with PPG3/PPS3 by “widening housing opportunity and choice” (Macintyre, 2005: para. 47), whereas ‘PA5’ would cause “an overprovision of housing” (ibid., para. 47). In terms of the other principal issue, transport, the Secretary of State, echoing the Inspector, agreed that both ‘PA3’ and ‘PA5’ should not be

permitted without assurances that a range of measures would be taken to improve travel and transport in the wider urban area (Macintyre, 2005: para. 52). However, after this normative statement, the Secretary of State invokes the concept of fairness by acknowledging that such a programme of improvements would be outside the scope of the developers, and would therefore be “unreasonable to deny the applicant permission” (ibid., para. 52).

As noted in the Chapter One, one of Eric Pickles’ first decisions was to announce the end, “with immediate effect”, of the Regional Spatial Strategies (RSSs). This pronouncement precipitated what can justly be described as a seismic shift in policies relating to strategic housing allocations. At a North Herts Council Cabinet meeting on Tuesday 15th June 2010, it was resolved to cancel an upcoming meeting of SNAP (the Stevenage and North Herts Action Plan) due to be held on the following Tuesday, 22nd June, and indeed to cease all work on SNAP until there was “clarity on future numbers of new houses and jobs.” North Herts took the view that, given the sudden revocation of the East of England RSS, a revised Core Strategy was necessary, which meant a new round of public consultation and updated housing capacity studies (SHLAA, SHMA, Housing Options) . Stevenage clung to the belief that the growth proposals outlined in its Core Strategy (based on figures in the East of England RSS) were still relevant and the basis upon which future development should be negotiated. Another impasse between the two LPAs was reached, one which in practice would mean a further delay of several years to the Stevenage West proposals.

4.7: Housing targets & ‘urban capacity’

The process whereby housing targets in England and Wales are produced must surely rank as one of the more arcane and abstruse elements of the discipline of spatial planning, regularly described as a ‘black box’ activity (Allmendinger, 2011: 41). In a statement on 24th July 2002, the then Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott, announced the first steps in the government’s ‘Sustainable Communities’ initiative. One of the central planks of this policy was the identification of 42 strategic sites to be brought forward for regeneration, including

Stevenage West . It is interesting that this greenfield site was included in a list of predominantly brownfield sites.

In the updated RPG9, issued in March 2001, Policy H1 of Regional Policy Guidance 9 stated that the South East should provide 39,000 new homes annually during the period 2001 – 2006, of which 3,280 should be built each year in Hertfordshire (DETR, 2001: 48). Policy H5 of the same document states that local authorities should seek to build at least 60% of new housing on Previously Developed Land (PDL).

The Hertfordshire CC Structure Plan (Hertfordshire, 1998) grudgingly conceded that, “on balance”, guiding strategic development towards the County’s New Towns (i.e. Stevenage, Hemel Hempstead, Hatfield and Welwyn Garden City) was preferable to locating it in more rural areas or on the edges of older settlements, due mainly to the well planned road networks of the New Towns. The concession was grudging because there was a recognition that expansion of the New Towns would have consequences for the green belt because of the ‘under bounded’ nature of the New Towns, especially Stevenage. The Structure Plan (Hertfordshire, 1998: 30) settled on a total of 65,000 new homes to be built during the period 1991 – 2011, with provision of this total divided among three ‘limbs’. The first limb was defined as “planned regeneration” (Policy 6) and focused on sites on Previously Developed Land within the boundaries of the County’s urban centres. This limb was the main development strategy. The second limb was defined as “limited peripheral development” (Policy 7) and was to kick in once all of the sites available through the first limb had been exhausted. The third limb was given the somewhat unwieldy title of “strategic green field locations for supplementary housing development” (Policy 8) and included ‘PA3’ and ‘PA5’ of Stevenage West. As the Inspector noted at the Inquiry, Hertfordshire CC, “never lent wholehearted support to the third limb of the strategy” (Lavender, 2004: 211), since they believed that the first two limbs were sufficient to provide the necessary housing capacity. Importantly, however, it had been established at the Examination in Public of the Hertfordshire CC Structure Plan in June 1997 that the third limb (strategic greenfield sites) was not included merely on a ‘contingent’ basis (i.e. only to be

used if the first two limbs failed to deliver the necessary capacity), but was an important, 'free-standing' element of the overall provision of new housing (Lavender, 2004: 211).

By 1995, as the Structure Plan explains, 44,000 new homes had either been built or had sites identified, leaving a total of 21,000 homes outstanding for the remainder of the Plan period up to 2011 (Hertfordshire, 1998: 50). At a rate of just over 1,300 new homes per year, this could have been achieved without the need for strategic greenfield sites such as Stevenage West. However, for reasons yet to be fully explained, the Government Office for the East of England (GOEE) stepped in at this point and mandated that it would be impractical for more than 10,000 out of the 21,000 shortfall to be provided in existing built-up areas by 2011. It would appear that the GOEE felt that it was desirable that around 11,000 new homes should be earmarked for strategic, greenfield sites. It was also the case that there was disagreement between Hertfordshire CC and the local authorities in the County, with the local authorities siding with the GOEE in support of a ceiling of 10,000 new homes that planned regeneration on PDL could deliver.

During the Examination in Public of the Hertfordshire Structure Plan in March 1997 a compromise of sorts between the County and the local authorities was reached, with the Panel concluding that it would be prudent to plan to achieve 14,000 new homes on Previously Developed Land (PDL), thus leaving a shortfall of 7,000 new homes to be built on strategic greenfield sites. However, due to the delays in reaching agreement on Stevenage West, the proportion of housing that the development could deliver by 2011 fell from 3,600 ('PA3') to 1,600, with none of the 1,400 homes planned for 'PA5' able to be delivered by 2011. North Herts DC used this as an argument against the proposals, since the Structure Plan only ran until 2011 and a new Plan would have to be drawn up (Lavender, 2004: 172). In reality, by this time Structure Plans were being phased out and replaced by Regional Spatial Strategies (RSSs), of which the East of England RSS was germane to the Stevenage West proposals.

A number of issues arose during the Inquiry concerning housing targets and the manner in

which they were arrived at. The West of Stevenage Consortium argued that the target of 65,000 mentioned in the Structure Plan was “not a maximum limit on provision but a minimum or near minimum requirement” (Lavender, 2004: 145). Stevenage Borough Council argued in support of the development, citing figures from the Chelmer Population and Housing Model which suggested in 2004 that Stevenage needed to build another 6,000 homes up to 2021 to meet natural population change, a figure which rose to 8,000 if recent migration patterns were taken into account (Lavender, 2004: 157). Given the under-bounded nature of Stevenage, the Council argued, this growth could only be accommodated on strategic greenfield sites. At this time, during the first Inquiry, a further source of argument was the weight that should be given to the draft Regional Spatial Strategy for the East of England. Hertfordshire CC and North Herts argued that very little, if any, weight should be given to the housing targets in this document as it had not yet been put out for public consultation. After weighing all the arguments concerning housing targets and urban capacity, the Inspector at the Inquiry found that there were no reasons to “inhibit or delay” construction of ‘PA3’ (3,600 dwellings), although he found that ‘PA5’ (1,400 dwellings) could not “be held to accord with present strategy” (Lavender, 2004: 218).

The Inspector at the 2004 Inquiry found that ‘PA3’ of the proposed development would contribute to the provision of housing in Hertfordshire in a way that was consistent with PPG3 (Housing). Although not giving approval to ‘PA5’ at this time may have created issues concerning the ability of ‘PA3’ to become fully self-sufficient, the Inspector decided that it would be wrong to “over-provide” by permitting ‘PA5’ at this stage. The Inspector further found that the government’s emerging approach to ‘sustainable development’ “would not be compromised by a comprehensively planned urban extension at Stevenage West” (Lavender, 2004: 252).

4.8: (Non) cooperation and planning doctrine

Even though Policy 8 of the Hertfordshire Structure Plan 1998 was quite clear in designating

land west of the A1(M) for strategic development, there was disagreement as to whether permission could be granted for 'PA3' or 'PA5' before both of the Local Plans, relating to North Herts and Stevenage had been adopted, as well as what weight to give to each of these three plans in the decision-making process. Hertfordshire CC argued that, according to Section 38(6) of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990, the valid development plan comprised both the Structure Plan(s) and Local Plan(s). In other words, the valid development plan for Stevenage West was comprised of the Hertfordshire CC Structure Plan 1998, the Stevenage BC Local Plan 1994 and the North Herts District Plan 1996. They pointed to the precise wording of Policy 8 of their Structure Plan, which set out that the land will be (not is) identified in the relevant Local Plans – an indication that the development could only proceed once the two Local Plans – not in existence when the Structure Plan came into being – had been written, approved and adopted. Hertfordshire CC argued that it is the role of the Structure Plan to set out general policies with an approximate Key Diagram and that it is the purpose of Local Plans to present detailed proposals with specific development site boundaries. Even if the Structure Plan clearly set out the rationale for development at Stevenage West, Hertfordshire CC reasoned, since neither of the Local Plans were in place, the applications by the West of Stevenage Consortium were invalid (Lavender, 2004: 159). This requirement, however, leaves open the possibility (which was acknowledged by Hertfordshire CC) that a local authority hostile to development could simply neglect to bring forward a Local Plan review. In the event, the High Court ruled that North Herts was within its rights to withdraw its Local Plan in 2000 because of the need to assimilate changes to PPG3 (Housing). In any case, according to Section 46(10) of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990, unless a Local Plan has been found to be not in general conformity with the Structure Plan, in the event of a conflict between Structure and Local Plans, Local Plans are to prevail. Hertfordshire CC also contended that the entire issue of the necessity of the urban extension to Stevenage had come under question as a result of the move away from 'predict and provide' to a 'plan, monitor and manage' regime (Lavender, 2004: 166), since this policy shift emphasised the primacy of brownfield sites over greenfield/green belt development.

A number of people who appeared before the Inquiry suspected a 'hidden agenda' whereby Stevenage Borough Council was supporting the proposals as a means to obtaining 'Unitary Authority' status (e.g. Lavender, 2004: 187, 190, 191). In the subsequent case which Persimmon Homes et al pursued to the Court of Appeal, Lloyd LJ, in his dissenting judgment, explicitly condemned Hertfordshire County Council for attempting (and, as it transpired, succeeding) to "subvert" Stevenage's local plan process by having the wording of Policy H2 changed, as discussed above (Weekly Law Reports, 2006). Few, if any, signs of cooperation were thus apparent during this stage of the narrative.

4.9: Main strategic transport policy issues

As the first New Town, Stevenage underwent dramatic redevelopment in the early 1950s, a time when the motor car was firmly in the ascendant, and therefore the road network is impressive, with many broad streets, roundabouts and a high degree of separation of modes (e.g. foot-paths, cycle-paths). The pedestrianised town centre was the first in the UK, opened by the Queen in 1959 (McKean, 1982: 174). Indeed the Inspector's opinion at the first Inquiry was that "the existing travel and transport network deriving from the period of New Town development [was]...a significant advantage over most towns in Hertfordshire" (Lavender, 2004: 228)

Regional policy as expressed in RPG 9 enunciated a range of normative transport and travel goals, three of which have direct relevance to the current research. These are:

- Firstly, the need to plan development "holistically to minimise the need for movement and to facilitate and encourage safe movement on foot, by cycle and public transport" (DETR, 2001: Policy T1 (a) (ii)).
- Secondly, a shift towards non-motorised modes of travel should be encouraged, especially in urban areas (GOSE, 2001: Policy T1 (b) (i)). Walking and cycling are to be "vigorously promoted" with the aim of creating a fourfold increase in cycling trips on

1996 levels by 2012 (DETR, 2001: Policy T4).

- Finally, public transport to be improved to enable it to compete more effectively with private vehicle-based travel (DETR, 2001: Policy T5).

These three goals – integrated land-use and transport planning, nudges towards an increasing proportion of non-motorised travel modes and improved public transport – can be viewed as the ‘holy trinity’ of more sustainable travel-to-work. In the East of England Regional Spatial Strategy, Stevenage is designated as a ‘Regional Transport Node’ (thus becoming a focus area for improved public transport) and is located along the ‘London – Huntingdonshire Corridor’, which brings it into the category of ‘Transport Investment Priorities’. Such areas are recognised as likely to come under increasing transport pressure, primarily as a result of other policies in the RSS (GOEE, 2008: 48).

At the sub-regional level, Hertfordshire County Council is required to publish a Local Transport Plan, to be updated every five years. In the second iteration of this document (covering the period 2006/7 – 2010/11), the proposed development west of the A1(M) is merely described as a “potential challenge” (Hertfordshire, 2005: 20). An indication of Hertfordshire CC’s lack of enthusiasm for the Stevenage West proposals can be glimpsed in the Consultation Report produced after publication of the Local Transport Plan. As one of the stakeholders of the Plan, Stevenage Borough Council was approached for feedback. Buried within this Consultation Report, there is a trenchant complaint from Stevenage, to the effect that, given Hertfordshire CC’s “disinclination” to support the proposals for Stevenage’s expansion, SBC has had to spend £60,000+ on a report from Arup investigating the transport and highways implications of the strategic development on land west of the A1(M). A rather sheepish response from Hertfordshire CC is noted beside this complaint, to the effect that, “It is recognised that there is a need for HCC and SDC [sic] to better co-ordinate all of its transport related work that is being undertaken. The urban plan will work towards this” (Hertfordshire, 2006: 41).

Regional policy throughout the ten-year period from 2000-2010 aspired to bring the East of England from a position of 34th in 2000 into the top 20 regions in Europe in terms of GDP by 2010 (GOEE, 2000: para. 4.12). WSG argued that the Stevenage West proposals would directly contribute to this aim (Lavender, 2004: para. 12.7). Principle MP15 of WSG's Masterplanning Principles states that land allocated for employment in the proposals will be located close to passenger transport routes and will be served by a network of footpaths and cycle lanes linked to residential areas (WSG, 2000: 16). WSG argued that the development would increase Stevenage's local labour force by at least 5,000 and thus that "there is every likelihood that out-commuting from Stevenage would reduce" (Lavender, 2004: para. 12.11). They further contended that, rather than dissipating new housing throughout the town, concentrating development at Stevenage West would create the 'critical mass' necessary to stimulate local economic development. In their arguments against the development, a local action group, CASE (Case Against Stevenage Expansion), argued that in-commuting would only increase if employment was provided at a level for 'PA5' proposals (i.e. 5,000 dwellings), thus not if permission was only granted for 'PA3' (i.e. 3,600 homes). Paradoxically, this could be interpreted as backhanded support for the larger development from the action group fighting tooth and nail against any development of the site.

A strategic objection was raised by CASE (Case Against Stevenage Expansion), the gist of which was that, since one of the main aims of the Stevenage West proposals was to satisfy regional housing demand, they would necessarily create regional travel demand (i.e. long-distance commuting and other trips). In other words, due to the proximity of the proposed development to the A1(M), regional commuting patterns between Stevenage, Cambridge, London and Peterborough would become more established. They further argued that the demographic profile of the development (fewer elderly people than in the rest of Stevenage), levels of bus ridership would be lower (Lavender, 2004: 128). The West of Stevenage consortium refuted this by pointing to the proposed development's proximity to the town's existing employment areas, and by arguing that most home moves are local in character, and

that people tend to move closer to their place of work.

4.10: Site-specific transport issues

Stevenage, along with the other New Towns differs from most other settlements in the wider South East because of its highly planned nature, whereby most of the residential areas are located east of the town centre and the majority of the commercial/industrial /entertainment areas, along with the principal transport nodes (railway and bus stations) are situated west of the town centre. The only areas that are currently served by bus to the west of Stevenage town centre are the residential neighbourhood of Symonds Green and the Gunnels Wood industrial estate (Lavender, 2004: 121). The sharp distinction between residential and employment areas in Stevenage means that much of the town is not conducive to shorter, more sustainable travel patterns. This should not be confused with the excellent travel networks, described above, which emerged from Stevenage's New Town development, since at that time vehicular transport (especially by private car) was king. Hertfordshire CC argued in their submissions to the Planning Inspector at the first Inquiry that, "[e]ven if HCC is held to be wrong on wider strategic issues, refusal of planning permission would be warranted on [site-specific] transport issues alone" (Lavender, 2004: 118).

Since the A1(M) creates a great deal of severance between the Stevenage West site and the rest of the town, one of the key issues was how best to link the development with the rest of the built-up area. The proposals for Stevenage West took the form of a linear development, with a main road ('Central Transport Spine' - CTS) from which two main links (underpasses under the A1(M)) were intended to provide access between the site and the rest of the town. To avoid further burdening of the already overstretched key road infrastructure, there was to be no direct access from the site to the A1(M) or B656. However, it was argued that, even without direct access to the A1(M), the proposals would result in an increase of some 20% of vehicles on the motorway, a figure which equates to an extra 8,000 – 10,000 vehicles daily (Lavender, 2004: 185; 192).

Hertfordshire CC argued that the proposed two links between the Stevenage West development and the rest of town were inadequate, given that 'PA3' (3,600 homes) equates to three existing neighbourhood areas (Lavender, 2004: 117). There was disagreement over whether the CTS should be for buses only, or at least have a dedicated lane for buses. In his appearance before the Inquiry, Peter Lilley, the MP for Harpenden and Hitchin, argued against the proposals on the grounds that the A1(M) would create too much of a barrier between the urban extension and Stevenage town, with residents of the new development likely to seek their employment and leisure opportunities in neighbouring towns other than Stevenage, causing increased traffic and congestion on the area's road network (Lavender, 2004: 183).

As part of their submissions in support of the development, the West Stevenage Consortium argued that the development lent itself to meeting wider sustainability objectives by creating a new sub-centre which would lead to a better balance between residential and non-residential uses. Hertfordshire CC's Structure Plan also explicitly linked the planned development at Stevenage West with shorter journeys overall and an increase in the proportion of non-private car-based trips (Hertfordshire, 1998: 55). This, however, was a position the County Council retreated from subsequently. In her appearance at the Inquiry in support of the development, the then MP for the area, Barbara Follett, argued that the proposals should be approved because they would bring much needed diversity to the types of housing currently on offer in Stevenage. As the first New Town, most of the town's housing stock was of the same age, size and type. She argued that more high quality housing for skilled personnel would help to reduce congestion on the A1(M) as well as 'rat-running' through neighbouring villages (Lavender, 2004: 182).

When it came to forecasting mode share and traffic modelling, there was, unsurprisingly, much scope for disagreement between the three warring parties, a situation exacerbated due to the fact that they each used differently specified models to support their perspectives. The inherent fuzziness of transport modelling (especially for a new development built on

undeveloped land) is surely an area where, to paraphrase Flyvbjerg (1998), rationalization trumps reality and rationality is replaced by Realpolitik. The West of Stevenage Consortium argued that their 'Local Model' was considerably more sophisticated than both Stevenage's spreadsheet based calculations (produced for them by engineering consulting firm KBR as a 'check' on Local Model forecasts) and the model created by Harrison Webb for Hertfordshire CC. WSC pointed to what they believed were errors in the Harrison Webb model, such as their prediction that just 45% of Stevenage residents would work in the town, when the 1991, 2001 and 2011 Census produced results of 61%, 57% and 59% respectively.

Hertfordshire CC countered by complaining that access to the assumptions and methodology behind the Local Model were far too closely guarded, leading to charges of a 'black box' approach to the forecasting process with too many 'fudge factors' obscuring and obfuscating the final outputs. Not so, retorted the West of Stevenage Consortium; access to the internal workings of the model were restricted simply to allow for operator training and for reasons of simple commercial confidentiality (Lavender, 2004: 105). At issue was the proportion of car drivers who could be persuaded to use bus services and the level of bus ridership. To this end, and somewhat oddly, the West of Stevenage Consortium used Cambridge as a comparator, describing the ancient university town as a "medium-sized, self-contained town with a strong rail service and a substantial existing employment and social base" (Lavender, 2004: 108), where the share of car trips for the journey-to-work was less than 40%. Hertfordshire CC were quick to dismiss the relevance of this comparison between Stevenage and Cambridge, arguing (quite correctly and factually) that the university town had a unique travel-to-work profile based largely on non-motorised modes (i.e. cycling and walking). In a further parallel with Flyvbjerg's analysis of the redevelopment of Aalborg, there were disagreements at this stage over the need to replace/renew Stevenage's existing bus station, in particular the type/amount of contribution that should be paid by the West of Stevenage Consortium in order to remodel the existing bus station and to increase capacity at the bus/rail station interchange (Lavender, 2004: 208).

It was finally agreed that there would be two bus routes along the Central Transport Spine of the development, one of which would operate all day at 10 minute intervals between Stevenage West and the Lister Hospital ('the principal route'), and the second which would operate at peak hours only, connecting Stevenage West with the town's principal employment areas off Gunnells Wood Road (Lavender, 2004: 232). The West of Stevenage Consortium was prepared to subsidise bus patronage to the tune of £1 million, until the development was fully populated and the bus services became self-supporting. However, Hertfordshire CC argued that the operating deficit would be closer to £5 million (Lavender, 2004: 234). At the heart of the issue was the extent to which a "step change" would be achieved in travel behaviour, in terms of a modal shift from private car to bus use.

The Masterplanning principles of the Stevenage West development stipulated that 98% of the development would be within 800 m of a local centre, 92% within 600 m of a primary school, 88% within 1500 m of the proposed secondary school and 95% within 800 m of useable open space (Lavender, 2004: 103). It should be noted that these figures are based on 'as the crow flies' (i.e. straight line) distances. Real life (i.e. network) distances mean that people need to travel further to reach their destination). Based on forecasts produced by their bespoke software (the 'Local Model'), the West of Stevenage Consortium predicted that this configuration of homes and workplaces would allow the development to achieve three key sustainability goals related to transport and travel patterns:

- A reduction of over 30% in peak hour car journeys
- A doubling of the number of peak hour journeys by bus, bicycle and on foot
- Over 80% of the total movements during the morning peak to be contained within the development site and built-up area of Stevenage (Lavender, 2004: 117-18)

Hertfordshire CC strongly disputed these projected transport benefits, arguing that, due to an error in calibrating the 'Local Model' (whereby the model failed to recognise that most pupils would travel to school on foot or by bicycle, thus grossly overestimating the proportion of trips

by bus), there would be no such “step change” or “decisive shift” in travel behaviour (Lavender, 2004: 121). Perhaps because it took so long to correct, having been identified in 2001 but only remedied in 2004, the error actually acquired its own identity (the ‘education mistake’), a state of affairs very much in keeping with a Flyvbjergian reading of the ongoing battle between rationality and rationalisation. Interestingly, Hertfordshire CC argued that they were not opposed in principle to a development which properly exploited the “significant locational advantages” of the site and which delivered a development which could really result in a step change in terms of modal shift away from the car. Instead, they argued, the West of Stevenage Consortium proposals were merely “tinkering at the edges”, with virtually no changes to car travel off-site (Lavender, 2004: 122). The West of Stevenage Consortium argued that the proposals would strengthen Stevenage Railway Station’s role as a regional interchange centre, with high quality transport links between the site and the station (Lavender, 2004: 155).

In terms of the modal split that the proposed development would generate between car, bus and non-motorised journeys, Hertfordshire CC contended that the figures produced by the Local Model, of 49% of trips by car, 13% by bus and 34% on foot/by bicycle were too unrealistic and rosy (Lavender, 2004: 107-08). Pointing to the recent closure of the BAe factory as well as a high vacancy rate among the warehouse and office stock of Stevenage, Councillor Morgan, representing Codicote Parish Council, argued that the trend was towards more people working outside the town than within it, and that the proposals would merely exacerbate this trend, rather than alleviate it (Lavender, 2004: 186-87).

In his Report, the Inspector at the first Inquiry found that the number and location of the access points and their crossing points of the A1(M) to be acceptable. Interestingly, he distanced himself from the arguments concerning the validity of each side’s transport modelling techniques, giving five detailed reasons which all cast doubt on the efficacy of such ‘black box’ processes (Lavender, 2004: 233). In terms of the expected “step change” from private car to bus use, the Inspector professed himself disappointed with the figure of 13% bus mode share predicted by the West of Stevenage Consortium. He went on to state

that a figure of 20% bus share (as originally intended) would have been more appropriate (Lavender, 2004: 234), as well as making the important point that off-site measures to facilitate bus travel might be equally, if not more important, than on-site measures. The Inspector concluded by stating that the traffic, transport and travel measures put forward by the West of Stevenage Consortium, “do as much as can reasonably be expected to satisfy the specific aim of maximising the locational advantages of the site” (Lavender, 2004: 239), with the caveat that he remained “unconvinced” about the potential for more sustainable travel beyond the site and the town centre. In any case, as he noted, responsibility for these wider goals is “largely in hands other than those of WSC” (Lavender, 2004: 239).

Chapter 5

Strategic spatial planning at the sub-regional level: Stevenage, Luton and North Hertfordshire

5.1: Cross-boundary co-operation

This chapter begins with a second, short lexicographical note. Just as ‘green belt’ is a highly loaded concept at the national level, during my research in the Hertfordshire/Bedfordshire sub-region, the manner in which one referred to the development to the west of Stevenage gave a clear indication of one’s opinion of it. Thus those opposed to it merely refer to it as, ‘West of the A1(M)’ (with the clear implication, ‘Why would you want to build a settlement right beside a motorway?’) and those more amenable to it usually call it, ‘West of Stevenage’ or ‘Stevenage West’. In order to present as neutral a position as possible, all of these forms are used.

The overwhelming message to emerge from the interviews was that the duty to cooperate is not working, at least in its current guise. Responses ranged from “incredibly difficult to operate” (Senior Planner, Hertfordshire CC) to “wholly inadequate” (Senior Planner, Luton BC). This type of response is neither particularly original nor limited to the Greater South East. However, some interesting nuances regarding the duty to cooperate emerged from two respondents in particular. According to a Conservative politician, the duty to cooperate is “nothing new” (Senior Local Councillor, North Herts). He, quite correctly, pointed to bodies like the Hertfordshire Infrastructure and Planning Group and Hertfordshire Planners’ Group, which have been operating for decades as examples of strategic spatial planning. This Conservative politician did concede that what was new about the duty was the legal test – of which there have been a number of interesting examples – which, he argued, made the duty, “a bit of a misnomer”. Instead, according to him, the essence of the duty is shared Housing Market Areas and the technical concept of ‘unmet need’ (situation particularly affecting

‘under-bounded’ authorities like Stevenage and Luton). This sentiment reflected an interesting tendency during the interviews of the politicians to emphasise the rational/technical aspects of planning, and the contrasting propensity of the planning practitioners to focus on the political nature of the process. Perhaps the most insightful comment on the nature of the duty to cooperate was provided by a Senior Planner at North Herts DC, who described it as “a non-redistributive policy” compared to the previous, Regional Plan led system, where growth was distributed across regions in a top-down fashion. Interestingly, this officer was unsure if this non-redistributive quality of the new system, “was the government’s intention or not”. This notion of unintended consequences was a recurring feature to emerge from the interviews. As he went on to point out, if you were an authority whose growth was being redistributed elsewhere under the Regional Plan (such as Stevenage), “you were actually doing all right”. Now, for these authorities, the duty “has come home to roost”, causing a wide variation in attitudes and approaches to the duty.

Intrinsic to, and inseparable from, the duty to cooperate is the notion of ‘unmet need’. What emerged from the interviews is that both politicians and practitioners are keenly conscious of the different types of housing need to affect their areas. Overall housing targets are based on an authority’s ‘own’ projected need, as well as an element of ‘unmet need’ from one’s neighbours – and not necessarily one’s immediate neighbours. It was explained that a significant component of housing targets under the previous system were to “mop-up needs from across the whole region” (Senior Planning Officer, North Herts). It was quite apparent from the interviews that one’s ‘own’ needs were of an entirely different order of importance than ‘unmet need’ from other, perhaps quite far away authorities, especially for net receivers like North Herts.

Although, as noted above, there was an attempt by at least one of the politicians interviewed to ‘de-politicise’ the issues associated with the duty to cooperate, the “intensely political” (Senior Planner, Hertfordshire CC) nature of the process was a recurring theme. Labour-run Luton felt particularly vulnerable because they were surrounded by Conservative authorities (around 85% of their border is Central Bedfordshire, with the remaining 15% North Herts). The latest

figures for their need were estimated at 18,000 new houses up to 2031, of which 6,000 can be accommodated within the borough boundaries. Thus, “even if it wasn’t opposing politics, are you thinking one council is suddenly welcoming 12,000 houses?” (Senior Planner, Luton BC). Recent interventions by senior politicians were particularly bemoaned – specifically the recent letter by the Planning Minister, Nick Boles, in which he professed himself to be “disturbed” by what he perceived to be an attack on the green belt in Reigate and Banstead (Boles, 2014) as well as Ed Miliband’s December 2013 speech in Stevenage, as noted in Chapter One – this type of activity was branded as “political mischief” (Senior Planner, North Herts DC).

In effect this type of activity highlights one of the many fissures in central-local relations as well as the fact that what may be viewed as ‘helpful interventions’ from the centre can have unhelpful consequences at the local level (again recalling the phenomenon of unintended consequences). Ed Miliband’s Stevenage speech was described as “Sharon Taylor’s [Labour Leader of Stevenage BC] election campaign starting a year early” (Senior Conservative Local Councillor, North Herts), and was met with a distinct lack of enthusiasm by the Senior Planner at Stevenage, who believed that it would be little different in practice to the previous, regional system, in fact he described himself as “...totally pessimistic. The ‘Right to Grow’ as currently constructed will be no better than the duty to cooperate.”

Nick Boles’ intervention to defend the sanctity of the green belt, although a probable vote-winner at national level, could, in the opinion of the Senior Planner at North Herts, have even more pernicious effects than Miliband’s electioneering in Stevenage. Having reminded his elected members, “a few times” that:

Green belt is only half a policy – if you want to stop growth going somewhere you have got to say where growth is going – don’t just say, ‘We’re green belt, that’s our policy, we defend that’. It’s too weak, the trouble is you get Nick Boles’ letter coming out and effectively saying, ‘Well, it’s green belt’.

A number of interesting and contradictory views regarding the green belt emerged from the interviews. The Senior Local Councillor from Luton was forthright in her view that much

of what is currently designated as green belt around her town is in fact low-grade disused agricultural land and should thus be reviewed. The Senior Planner at Stevenage extended this line of thought by contending that,

...a lot of the arguments we've had over the years about West of Stevenage have not been about green belt or any of those environmental arguments, they've been, 'These are our fields, these are not Stevenage's fields, these are North Herts' fields, how dare you think that you can build on North Herts' fields.

The Senior Planner at Luton focused on the level of variation that individual Secretaries of State/Ministers can have on the interpretation of green belt policy by noting the enhanced level of protection currently afforded it by both Mr Pickles and Mr Boles. He also referenced Mr Boles' intervention, three days after 'clarifying' his position on the green belt, by directly refuting Ed Miliband's 'Right to Grow' policy in a series of bullet points published online, specifically:

...we have considered and rejected the proposals of HM opposition to allow councils to undermine green belt protection and dump development on their neighbours' doorstep.

Although housing, and specifically the crisis of affordability affecting first-time buyers, was a significant issue across the political spectrum in the run-up to the 2015 General Election, specific policies relating to the green belt, urban expansion and strategic transport infrastructure were very thin on the ground beyond general assurances to build x hundred thousand new homes by 2020 (x being gradually ramped up as the respective campaigns progressed).

The Senior Planner at Luton made the astute point that, with the loss of the regional tier of governance, a "mega-strategic policy like the green belt" is now being reviewed, "on an individual borough basis...it needs a more strategic approach." This vacuum reveals a serious disjuncture affecting strategic spatial planning, namely the inability of either central or local

government to adequately manage and implement urban containment policy, since central government is usually unaware of the particular local circumstances and amenity value of land classified as green belt, with individual local authorities unable to take a sufficiently strategic approach to reviews, for a range of obvious reasons. It is clear, however, that the centre still exerts huge control over green belt policy, acting as, “the final arbiter” on strategic development proposals in affected locations, as the Senior Labour Local Councillor at Stevenage put it.

A “massive conflict” between the duty to cooperate and green belt policy was identified by the Senior Local Councillor in Luton, specifically between the need for varied, creative approaches to strategic housing needs (i.e. urban extensions, entirely new settlements), which, in the Greater South East would almost certainly require green belt land. It would appear that the more pro-growth authorities have undertaken recent green belt reviews, whereas a persistent tactic of those opposed to new strategic development is to “hunker down and put the blinkers on” (Senior Planner, Stevenage) – i.e. to keep the status quo and put off any green belt reviews until the last possible minute.

Since the interviews were held across a period of over one year, and involved a repeat visit (to talk to the Senior Planner at Stevenage), it was possible to hear directly from the principal actors of interesting developments. The biggest of these was undoubtedly the “epiphany” (Senior Planner, Stevenage) experienced by North Herts, who had taken, “a major intellectual step forward” (Senior Labour Local Councillor, Stevenage) in their attitude towards strategic housing development, progressing their Local Plan, and agreeing to a green belt review. These were, of course, all seen as very positive developments by the Stevenage participants, although the optimism was tempered by the realisation that any concrete decisions were still a long way off and that North Herts would have to, “keep their nerve” (Senior Labour Local Councillor, Stevenage). When asked in the repeat interview about possible reasons for North Herts’ change of heart, the Senior Planner at Stevenage conjectured that there were two principal drivers; firstly, the impact of the NPPF, and specifically the presumption in favour of development

where there was no up-to-date Local Plan or five year supply of land, and, secondly, the difference between North Herts' buoyant housing market and Stevenage's, which he described as, "dead as a dodo". He believed that, after not having an updated, adopted Local Plan since 1996, North Herts was fearful that key strategic development control decisions might be taken out of their hands, especially in the context of a highly pressured housing market. However, despite this breakthrough in cross-boundary relations, Stevenage have crafted an entirely new strategic development focus, putting the West of Stevenage proposals on the 'back-burner' and focusing instead on a town-centre first policy (branded 'Stevenage First'), which is projected to yield between 2,000 and 2,500 new homes, as opposed to the 1,300 unit total possible on that portion of the Stevenage West site within the council's boundaries. This change of focus has been brought about largely by infrastructure concerns, since the West of Stevenage development will need a £10 million underpass to connect it with the town, whether 1,300, 3,600 or 5,000 homes are built, and so, without public money, "you can kiss that particular development goodbye" (Senior Planner at Stevenage, repeat interview).

5.2: Creative solutions to the strategic spatial planning conundrum

In the face of such difficulties with cross-boundary co-operation, there were two rather creative solutions suggested by representatives of both Labour and Conservative run councils. The Senior Planner at Stevenage, immediately after noting North Herts' rage that Stevenage should "have the temerity to want to build on their fields", suggested that, "if that's the principal obstacle, why don't we make your fields our fields?"

In other words he was suggesting no less than a redrawing of local authority boundaries and he provided two examples to back up his argument. Pointing first to Luton, he argued that this was a good example of the – often arbitrary – nature of local authority boundaries. Luton and Dunstable are one and the same built-up area, with the boundary between the two running, "just down the middle of a road, 1930's houses on each side and so Dunstable is just really part of the conurbation" (Senior Planner, Luton). Due to this quirk of boundary-fixing, Luton is

incredibly under-bounded and is becoming one of the biggest problems in the Greater South East in terms of strategic spatial planning, even more so than Stevenage (Senior Conservative Local Councillor, North Herts). The Senior Planner at Stevenage then pointed to Bedford as an eminently sensible example of how to draw local authority boundaries, with the town in the centre surrounded by a significant hinterland, meaning that decisions on where to expand can be made by Bedford with little need to consult its neighbours. When this comparison was put the Senior Planner at North Herts, he pointed out that, “planning is not the driver of how boundaries get redrawn”, but, referring to the last Labour government’s 2009 redrawing of boundaries in Bedfordshire, agreed that:

...what they should have done is put South Bedfordshire with Luton and then Luton, Dunstable, Houghton Regis would have been one Unitary [authority] dominated by Luton, but it would also have covered most of the Luton hinterland and it would certainly have covered all of that urban area...but political reasons, financial reasons, all get in the way of what might make sense in planning terms...

However, the Senior Conservative Local Councillor at North Herts made a valid analogy that, for some authorities, agreeing to boundary changes meant they would cease to exist or be largely swallowed up by a neighbour, so this would be a case of “turkeys voting for Christmas”. This politician offered a rather different solution to the problem of unmet need for places like Stevenage, which according to him, could be met by building in the most appropriate place, not necessarily adjacent to their boundaries:

...there isn’t necessarily the assumption that it has to be immediately adjacent to Stevenage, and if it is adjacent to Stevenage it doesn’t have to be to the west of it. It may well be that there is a better solution somewhere else because it will deliver affordable housing.

Although he did not explicitly draw the link, this Senior Conservative Local Councillor was perhaps anticipating Chancellor George Osborne’s announcement on Monday 17th March 2014 that Ebbsfleet had been chosen as the site of a ‘proper’ 15,000 home garden city announced on the BBC’s *Andrew Marr Show* (Carpenter, 2014). The article relating to this story on the BBC News website quickly attracted over 500 comments, largely split down the

middle between support and opposition (BBC, 2014).

5.3: Using strategic spatial planning as a tool to achieve political goals

Although these two creative solutions to strategic spatial planning problems were offered during the interview process, there were also some indications of planning being used to achieve political goals, which of course operate over a much shorter cycle than strategic development. It is hard to see that the duty to cooperate has been in any way successful in the Hertfordshire/Bedfordshire sub-region when there are utterly opposing positions to what should be straightforward, factual questions such as, 'Does Stevenage have unmet housing need?' Clearly there are nuances to this question, such as whether one is referring to a particular five-year cycle, but the Senior Planner at Stevenage was adamant that:

...at the moment we don't believe we can meet the borough's requirement within the borough boundary...so currently if I don't get some cooperation from one or other of our immediate neighbours, I'm in deep, deep difficulty. Deep difficulty, because I can't deliver a Local Plan which is compliant with the NPPF. So we too will be sitting on our hands.

This was refuted thus by the Senior Conservative Local Councillor at North Herts:

Well, at the moment Stevenage have no requirement for expansion into North Herts, because they have no requirement that they can't meet. There will be new figures coming out...Who knows what they'll say? Maybe they'll say that Stevenage does have some unmet need.

This exchange touches on two further matters of importance: Stevenage's long-term goals, including whether it is using strategic developments like West of the A1(M) to achieve Unitary Authority status (which would free it from the shackles of Hertfordshire County Council) and the manner in which highly technical sub-national population projections, initially provided by the ONS and subsequently converted into household estimates by CLG, become highly politicised and one of the principal battlegrounds of the duty to cooperate.

Three written representations to the 2004 Inquiry specifically mentioned Stevenage's use of the West of the A1(M) proposals as a means to help it achieve Unitary Authority status (Lavender, 2004: 187, 188, 190). This assertion was put to the Senior Planner at Stevenage who responded as follows:

I think that, if push came to shove, and you asked my members, 'Would you like to be free of the shackles of Hertfordshire County Council', I've no doubt they would say, 'Yes, absolutely, we'd love to embrace that'...[but] the threshold for becoming a Unitary Authority has tended to shift over the years.

The officer's reference to 'thresholds' was a tacit acceptance that it would be difficult for Stevenage – with a current population of around 82,000 – to achieve Unitary Authority status, even if it reaches its aspired population of 100,000 – 120,000. The prospect of Stevenage achieving Unitary Authority status was met firstly with hilarity, then with a counter-proposal, by the Senior Conservative Local Councillor:

Well Stevenage will never get Unitary status! It's tiny, Stevenage is only 80,000 people. North Hertfordshire has got 120,000 – we're much bigger! But put Stevenage and North Hertfordshire and East Hertfordshire together, perhaps throw in Welwyn Hatfield – then you've got a Unitary worth having!

The Senior Labour Local Councillor gave a more nuanced answer to the question of Stevenage's Unitary Authority aspirations by stating that, "the answer is, would Stevenage like to be a Unitary Authority – yes. Is it basing its planning policy on becoming a UA, the answer is no." This would appear to reveal once again the 'de-politicisation' of planning by local politicians, with this figure then going on to explicitly link UA status with the ONS population projections, from which household formation forecasts are calculated and which ultimately will determine the speed and direction of travel Stevenage Borough Council will take on its journey towards Unitary Authority status.

5.4: The 'alchemy' of turning historical trends into future projections

The thorny issue of the ONS/CLG population projections, which play such a contested role in the duty to cooperate, was a recurring theme throughout the interviews. The principal point of contention was whether they really are merely ‘a starting point’ as the ONS stress, or if the Planning Inspectorate as is treating them as *de facto* housing targets, as was argued by the Senior Planning Officer at North Herts:

Certainly the Planning Inspectorate are treating those CLG projections as *de facto* housing targets unless you’ve got exceedingly good evidence as to something else, and I’ve yet to see a Plan that gets through with exceedingly good evidence as to why there should be something else.

Interestingly, the Senior Conservative Local Councillor at North Herts took the opposite view to his officer, attempting to convince me that:

The Inspectors have been told very clearly that the ONS numbers are projections, not targets. Now, it would appear from the early cases that some Inspectors appeared to treat them as targets, but that’s because there was no evidence to show them that they weren’t.

This would seem to be another example of politicians involved in the planning process attempting to ‘depoliticise’ the process, emphasising the technical, rational characteristics of the system. Somewhat paradoxically though, this same politician succinctly summarised the essential problem with forecasting demographic trends as the “alchemic process of attempting to turn projections based on the past into targets based on the future”. That is not to say that the current system cannot be improved, however. The Senior Planning Officer at Hertfordshire County Council referenced a meeting in which the Planning Minister, Nick Boles, had visited Hertfordshire to issue a ‘rap over the knuckles’ about a failure to identify ‘correct’ housing targets:

...last year a number of the districts got called into a meeting with Nick Boles. And it was, ‘You’re not doing very well here, are you? Get on with it!’ It was a typical Ministerial meeting in terms of Nick Boles coming in for ten minutes then jumping out of the meeting. Then we had a big discussion in terms of politicians there, leaders of councils, and they’re saying, ‘We don’t understand this, the guidance says it should be a starting point, so why are you bashing us over the head with it? If we can come up with reasons why we can’t do that, isn’t that good enough?’

The evidence coming from recent duty to cooperate cases like Brighton and Hove and Mid Sussex would strongly suggest that Inspectors are placing a very high value on the ‘starting point’ projections produced by ONS/CLG. The key phrase in the process of transforming these numbers into spatially differentiated housing targets is ‘objectively assessed need’, which sounds like a technical, non-political process. Not so, according to the Senior Planning Officer at Hertfordshire County Council:

...it’s a sham, sadly... The problem comes back to ‘objectively assessed needs’ and the interpretation of those. ‘Objectively assessed needs’ and ONS population projections are a ‘starting point’ – well, no they’re not, they’re not being treated as a starting point, they’re being treated as, ‘This is what you will do on an individual district basis’, unless you can come up with the most incredible reason why you shouldn’t do them, unless you can come up with someone else to take your housing levels for you.

The population estimates are comprised of two elements: ‘natural change’ (i.e. births minus deaths) and net migration. Clearly migration is much more susceptible to fluctuations than natural change, particularly if a strategic development such as an urban extension is built onto an existing urban area. The important issue of what complexity scientists describe as ‘sensitivity to initial conditions’ was raised by this officer, when he noted the convention to calculate net migration from five year ‘chunks’:

Whoa! Hold on a minute! Your population projection is done then, if it’s done two years later it’s like that! So you’re saying that we plan on the basis of the next twenty years in terms of those numbers? That can’t be right, can it?

It was clear from the interviews that the population experts at both ONS and CLG were very unwilling to get involved in the ‘nitty-gritty’ business of extrapolating housing targets on an individual district level. For example, it is well known that there are particular population ‘anomalies’ in Hertfordshire. The Senior Planning Officer at Hertfordshire County Council takes up the story:

So they [CLG] said, ‘Feedback these anomalies and we’ll take them to ONS’, but there was no ownership of the issue, it was, ‘Yeah, yeah, we know there’s problems,

we know there's issues, but still they wouldn't go that extra mile to say, 'Yes, we see you've got some anomalies, we'll make a note to the effect that you should have your Examination on whether those are actually the right numbers for you.' It was, 'Oh well, put something in and I'm sure that ONS will do something about it.' Well, ONS have had the recent round of consultation on their latest draft numbers where they actually narrowed down the basis upon which you could comment'. So we couldn't even raise the things that we wanted to raise.

It would appear that ONS produce the projections as that – purely straight-line projections – and in the process at CLG where these numbers are transformed into household formation forecasts they take on the quality of “Gospel truth” (Senior Planning Officer, Stevenage). Whereas previously the regional bodies would ‘play’ with the CLG numbers, and could lobby central government far more powerfully, in their absence local planning authorities are told by CLG, “Yes, that's what we want, that's what your housing requirement is” (Senior Planning Officer, Stevenage). In any event, quite significant discrepancies were discovered in the ONS population projections when the 2011 Census data was released. In effect, most districts in Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire had to revise upwards their housing targets; in Stevenage's case that meant going from 5,300 to 7,800 and in Luton from 18,000 to 26,000 – “so everybody... is looking appalled at these projections” (Senior Planning Officer, Stevenage). The Senior Planning Officer at Hertfordshire felt that planning was returning to the “bad old days of ‘predict and provide’” and felt that there was surprisingly little resistance to this, “the planning profession just bent over really, just swayed with it.”

The Senior Labour Local Councillor at Stevenage substantiated this by questioning the impartiality of the Planning Inspectorate, opining that, “this idea that the Inspectorate is independent is quite wrong, there are ground rules under which they operate and they're set by the Department [CLG].” Therefore housing figures, in tandem with green belt policy, appear to be ongoing techniques and instruments through which the centre disciplines and exerts control over the local in key areas. This disciplining is often expressed in informal channels; the same Senior Labour Local Councillor recounted an anecdote relating to a recently retired Inspector who was subsequently employed by the CLG to visit authorities who were experiencing difficulties with cross-boundary co-operation and have ‘chats’ with them. The

essence of these ‘chats’ was that central government would not even entertain any housing figures arrived at by local authorities which were less than those published in the (by now defunct) Regional Plan. In this way, the ‘ghost’ of regional planning lingers on and we are still rather far away from the truly localist scenario of housing need being determined from the bottom up.

5.5: Cross-scalar governance relations

What emerged time and again from the interviews was the inherently people-centred nature of strategic spatial planning which completely gave the lie to the discipline as a purely (or even principally) technocratic-rational activity (Campbell and Marshall, 1999: 469). These ‘glimpses of humanity’ tended to emerge when the participant was talking about interactions with other professionals or politicians working at a different spatial or governance scale. For example, an assertion made by the Senior Planning Officer at Stevenage was that few, if any, of the people with responsibility for spatial planning at the CLG actually have any planning qualifications or background in planning:

I’m not making this up, and I’m not making a rude assertion, but all of the planning officials at CLG are not planners. None of them are planners. I went to a presentation, it must have been about two-and-a-half/three years ago now, organised by CLG to talk about population, it was actually about neighbourhood planning in truth. There were several young members of the planning team there – who were all remarkably senior for such young planners – and the person who was in charge opened the day in front of a room full of qualified town planners from local authorities all over the UK by saying, ‘I’m the Senior Planner yadda yadda, I don’t have any planning qualification, I’ve never worked in planning, I’ve never worked in a local authority’. And then proceeded to tell us what we were expected to do. I thought to myself, ‘What kind of authority do you carry when you are not a qualified planner, you patently don’t understand the issues, you’ve never worked in a local authority, and you know nothing about the subject you’re talking about?’

The Senior Planning Officer in Luton gave a potential explanation for the hard-line approach taken by many Planning Inspectors:

The other thing that I don’t think was ever expected was how the Planning Inspectorate would finally interpret what’s written into those four paragraphs [in the NPPF]. I

personally think that their views weren't taken into consideration when the thing was being drafted. I think they said, 'This is unworkable', and the Planning Minister said, 'We're going to do it anyway'. So therefore, I think they're taking a bit of revenge, to a certain extent. They are doing it literally, so when it says, you've got to discuss with all your neighbours on a continuing basis, all the time, which essentially is what it says – that's impossible, right?

One of the major bones of contention between Stevenage and Hertfordshire County Council/ North Herts District Council was whether the West of Stevenage proposals were a genuine urban extension or virtually a new settlement, given the huge barrier effect of the A1(M) and the fact that only two underground tunnels were planned to link the development to the rest of the town. After asking me where "I heard that from?", the Senior Planning Officer at Stevenage was genuinely annoyed that his colleague at Hertfordshire County Council was, "not still peddling that old number is he? Dear me. I know [him] very well, but he shouldn't be peddling that kind of idea."

Drawing on his thirty years of experience in public sector planning, the Senior Planner at Stevenage, in our repeat interview, outlined some of the difficulties inherent under the old regional system, which, he argued, were, "a recipe for argument, disagreement, delay, obfuscation and outright lying on occasion." This was particularly the case at a point around 2000, under New Labour, where strategic spatial planning was subject to Regional Plans, Structure Plans and Local Development Frameworks, "and that was an absolute nightmare". He went on to recount some of the strategies employed by local authorities and County councils against their regional overlords at the East of England Regional Assembly, including feeding them:

literally thousands of pieces of information to EERA and not tell them what it meant, and not to give them any decision about where it should go, and, if they were asked a difficult question, well, basically they'd lie to them.

Since the Regional Planning Bodies responsible for drawing up RSSs contained private sector representatives on their boards, they were criticised by local authorities and County councils

as lacking democratic accountability, and the Senior Planner at Stevenage raised the question of why they haven't been complaining as vociferously about LEPs - as he put it, "because they don't have planning powers." In other words, this participant concluded, planning:

works best when you've just got one planning authority. As soon as you start having two or more you've got a recipe for argument, disagreement, delay, obfuscation and outright lying on occasion. There came one point when we had regional planning, structure plans and local plans and that was an absolute nightmare. You certainly didn't need three tiers.

An interesting facet of local-regional regions to emerge from the interviews, and not as much discussed in the literature as central-local relations, was the rather fearful attitude of the local authority actors (both professional and political) towards London, which is of course the only area of England to have some form of regional governance. The Senior Labour Local Councillor at Stevenage confessed that, "the sheer London factor [and] the way London is operated [is] a bigger fear for all of Hertfordshire and to Luton...exactly how many of their people is Boris [Johnson, Mayor of London] going to house?"

5.6: The new machinery of strategic spatial planning: LEPs, the NHB and CIL

Each interview respondent was asked for his/her opinion on how the Local Enterprise Partnerships were functioning, particularly in regard to strategic spatial planning and cross-boundary cooperation. The principal message to emerge was that LEPs are not particularly well suited to strategic spatial planning as it relates to housing. LEPs are potentially much better suited to strategic transport matters, as discussed below. The Senior Executive at SEMLEP admitted that, "when the LEP was set up there wasn't a great deal of thinking about strategic planning." Phrases used to describe LEPs as they related to strategic spatial planning were "clunky" (Senior Planner, Luton) and "curious" (Senior Planner, North Herts). The two main problems are the weak elected member and public sector involvement in LEPs and the lack of ownership of strategic spatial planning. There were also concerns raised by the Senior Planner at North Herts that the private sector were involved mainly to follow their own

agendas:

The private sector have gone into it with the mindset of, 'Oh, this might be something that we might be able to get something out of', in terms of plugging something here, or promoting something there.

There appears to have been a bifurcation in the strategic direction taken by most LEPs, which, according to the Senior Executive at SEMLEP, either became largely driven by their local authority members (this was particularly the case for those LEPs which were created from County council boundaries) or adopted a private sector driven ethos. The latter approach was taken by SEMLEP, which made the conscious decision, "to be completely separate from the local authorities" (Senior Executive, SEMLEP) and so based itself in the science and technology 'innovation hub' of Cranfield University. The geography of LEPs across the study area is rather complex, with North Herts a member of both the South Cambridgeshire LEP and the Hertfordshire LEP, and Luton in the South East Midlands LEP (SEMLEP). Those authorities, like North Herts, in more than one LEP therefore "look both ways" and the process of extracting funding is certainly made more difficult, "when we go to Hertfordshire for things, they say, 'Oh, well, you're only getting half funding', because the other half of our funding comes from Cambridge (Senior Planner, North Herts).

SEMLEP's strategy of distancing itself from its constituent local authorities was by no means unique, with the Senior Planner at North Herts complaining (in respect of the Hertfordshire LEP) that local authorities "were almost discouraged from being put on it". It was therefore no surprise to hear that Luton's experience as members of SEMLEP was largely negative and confirms Pugalís and Townsend's (2013a: 115) perception of LEPs as "toothless tigers" or "talking shops", as noted in Chapter Three:

Well, I go to the planners' SEMLEP coordination meeting and all that I read, see is them moaning about the inadequacy of the duty to cooperate, so we all agree that we'll produce a complicated spreadsheet of all our cross-boundary issues, and somehow that'll do it? Of course it won't! All it does is raise the problem, all we're doing is collating the problem.

A more serious problem is the fact that LEPs in general, and the Hertfordshire LEP in particular, “has got no stomach at all for promoting levels of growth” (Senior Planner, Hertfordshire County Council). The draft version of the Hertfordshire LEP’s vision for the future – the Strategic Economic Plan (thus, in the unavoidable jargon of planning, ‘LEP SEP’) – was recently criticised by central government:

It’s all about economic growth but then as soon as LEPs start preparing their Strategic Economic Plans or whatever they might be, the government are saying, ‘Well, where are all your houses?’ Well, we weren’t set up to be housing bodies! They are finding their way, and I think the government is trying to find their way, but in effect they actually replaced one unaccountable, unelected setup with another at which you can level almost all the same criticisms, just at a different scale of geography. (Senior Planner, North Herts).

Virtually the same complaint was made by the County Council:

The feedback that they’ve had on the draft LEP SEP has been, ‘Great analysis, not a bad idea in terms of where you want to go in terms of the economy, but you, LEP, should be pushing the housing agenda in Hertfordshire and getting more houses built’. The LEP have basically gone, ‘What? So you tell me everything that I’m here to do in terms of the analysis is fine, but you want me to do something else entirely, which you’ve taken the machinery away yourself.’ (Senior Planner, Hertfordshire County Council).

The Senior Planner at Stevenage, in our repeat interview, went so far as to describe this change of focus as, “interesting abuse of a body that government had set up for one purpose and then gave it another.” He explicitly linked this change in emphasis to the national political cycle, noting that:

When this government first came in in 2010, it was, ‘Build all over the green belt, don’t worry, just build all over it. It’s housing, housing, housing, housing.’ Then about two years ago it was a case of, ‘This is down to local councils, it’s up to them to make decisions about the balance’. In the last twelve months, it’s been, ‘No, no, no, you never, ever build in the green belt.’ And of course, a lot of LAs are not nimble enough to keep up with that. If you’re in a fairly inflexible plan-making process and you started out when it was, ‘Build all over the green belt’, and suddenly you’re now finding that you’re having to say to your members, ‘You know we told you we had to build all over the green belt, well, you don’t!’

This requirement to be agile, reflecting Allmendinger and Haughton’s (2009) ‘soft spaces’ of

LEP 2015 Growth Fund per capita spend

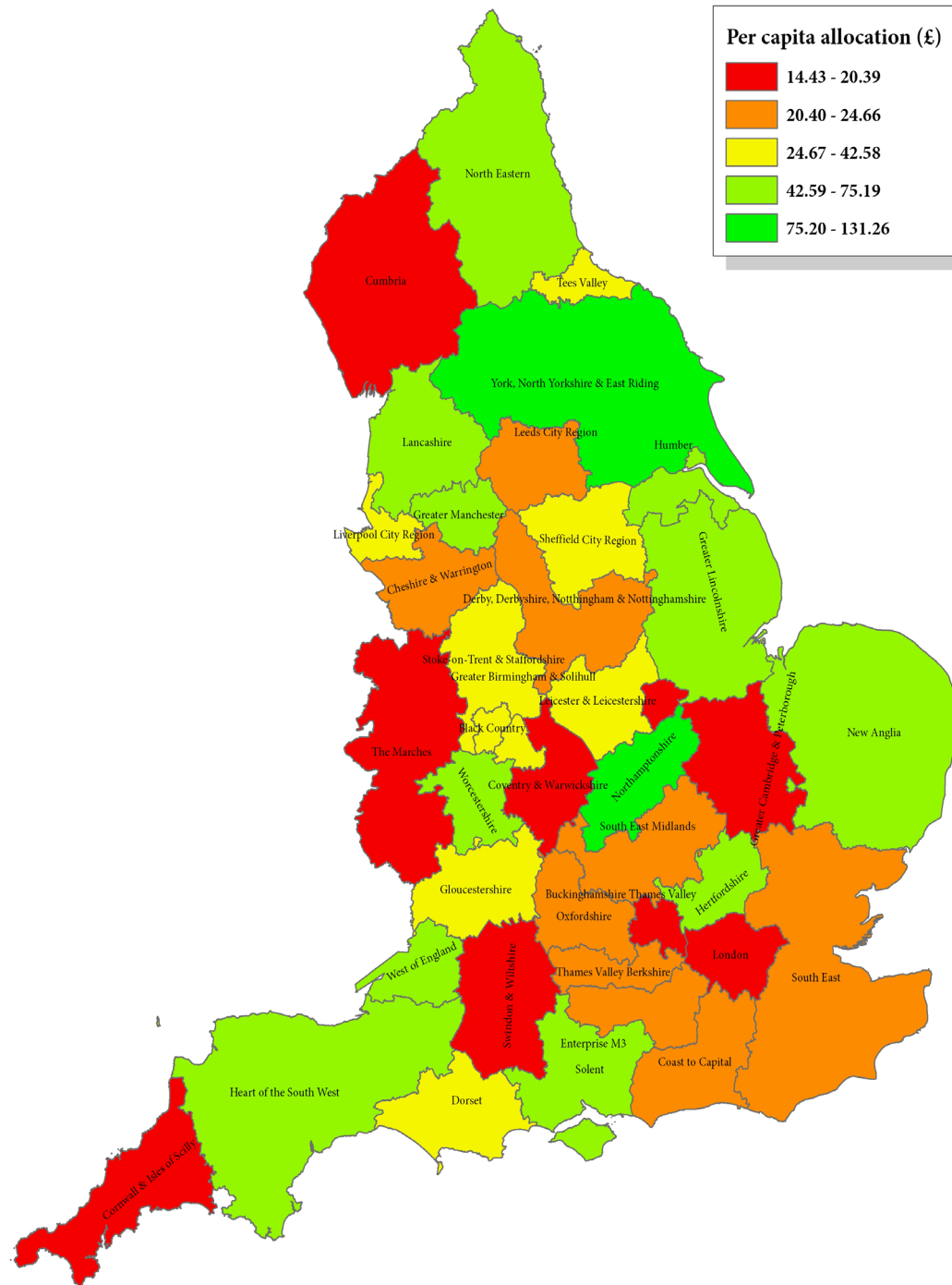


Figure 5: LEP 2015 Growth Fund per capita spend (DCLG, 2014)

governance and Pugalys and Townsend's (2013b) 'fleet of foot' partnerships was particularly difficult for some elected members to grasp, as recounted by the Senior Planning Officer at Stevenage, in our repeat interview:

There are a couple of authorities in Hertfordshire which have found themselves with their pants pulled down around their ankles – Broxbourne, St Albans, where their members have had a presentation from somebody from central government and suddenly the members are turning round to their officers and saying, 'What the bloody hell's going on here, you told us we had to build on the green belt and now we're being told we don't have to!'

This same participant also argued that the behaviour of the Planning Inspectorate in relation to approving Local Plans was also affected by the political cycle, citing the period between 2010-2013 where, "clearly the briefing that had been given to PINS was, 'It doesn't matter what housing numbers are in them, just approve them, get them through.'" Therefore many Local Plans were approved, including some in Hertfordshire, "where the housing numbers [were] abominably low." However, as the parties jockeyed for position in the long run up to the 2015 General Election, the system was "sharply tightened up" and this resulted in the non-compliance or outright rejection of a large number of Plans. This participant concluded that the Inspectorate was, "clearly being told something very different today from what they were being told at the beginning of this government", and that they were, "serving their masters well."

Lack of funding was also mentioned as a problem, or, even where funding appears to be available, the difficulty in 'unlocking' it. As noted in Chapter One, the funding landscape is complex, with the Growing Places Fund ("relatively small beer" according to the Senior Planner at Hertfordshire County Council), Regional Growth Fund and the Heseltine-Report inspired Single Growth Pot. This latter source of funding was expected to be significant, of the order of £8 - £10 billion, however it is no more than £2 billion at present. As the Senior Planner at Hertfordshire County Council went on to explain about the Single Growth Pot:

In Year 1 nearly all of it has been allocated, but with, it's not even a string, it's more like

a rope attached to it by the donating department, and a lot of it is already committed, so it's not even new money. So it's not going to make a great deal of difference. It's going to be used and highlighted and badged as unlocking 'x' number of jobs and 'x' number of houses, but it's really by the looks of it and the feedback that we've got is that government is looking for very, very, very short-term gains and short-term wins in terms of unlocking sites that are all ready to go and are just stalled on the basis of a little bit more infrastructure money. To be honest, we haven't really got that type of site in Hertfordshire.

The perception that policy was very much made 'on the hoof' in the early days was confirmed by the Senior Executive at SEMLEP, who described the confusion over the purpose of the Strategic Economic Plans that each LEP was asked to produce. Were they, as their name would seem to suggest, long term planning documents or were they actually part of the bidding process for the first round of the Heseltine-inspired Growth Pot funding? The Senior Executive admitted that not much further clarity had been reached on this question. In fact, by the time the scanty guidance on producing Strategic Economic Plans had been issued in July 2013, SEMLEP had already produced an Infrastructure Plan, based on the Local Plans of its constituent authorities (although these were at various stages of progression). Creating this Infrastructure Plan was no easy task, as the Senior Executive at SEMLEP admitted, although it was indicative of the proactive and technocratic approach taken by her organisation, which went on to produce a detailed Transport Strategy in collaboration with global engineering consultancy WYG (SEMLEP/WYG, 2014). This focus on transport appeared to be a sensible strategy, since almost half of the initial £2 billion available to bid for from the first year of the Growth Deal was provided by the Department for Transport.

However, SEMLEP's tactic of bidding for this funding for four prioritised transport projects, supported by detailed modelling and appraisal documentation produced by ARUP did not pay off as expected, with a disappointing per capita allocation, as detailed on the map overleaf. It is quite clear from the map that funding on a per capita basis was directed to the north of England, with the wider South East generally losing out (with the exception of Hertfordshire LEP). Hertfordshire LEP pursued a different strategy of producing a much more general, high level Strategic Economic Plan, without any supporting detailed modelling and appraisal

documentation, which was used to bid for a larger range of “small beer” projects, such as putting a roof over a pedestrian bridge, according to the Senior Planning Officer at Stevenage in our repeat interview. This ‘shotgun’ strategy appears to have paid off, with Hertfordshire LEP awarded per capita funding equivalent to £54.22 as opposed to the per capita allocation of £22.73 to SEMLEP. When questioned about the possible reasons for this disappointing allocation, the Senior Executive at SEMLEP expressed disappointment with the opacity of the process, which, “was handled in a very odd way”, with, “a lot of politics involved”. She intimated that central government had a bias in favour of certain projects, a number of which were, “barely developed yet, which I’m just amazed at.”

A more tangible issue which negatively affected SEMLEP and a number of other LEPs was that of overlaps. In funding terms, areas in two LEPs were paid funds on the basis of half of the population of the affected areas, but the Senior Executive at SEMLEP alluded to the political differences and difficulties in cross-boundary co-operation that overlaps created, providing the example of Aylesbury Vale, which was, “being pulled towards Buckinghamshire; Bucks South Thames LEP are openly hostile to the fact that Aylesbury Vale is part of SEMLEP”. They apparently pursued this hostile agenda by writing letters to local newspapers insinuating that Aylesbury Vale, through its membership of SEMLEP, was ‘taking money away’ from Buckinghamshire South Thames LEP, specifically European funding. The unsuitability of LEPs as a vehicle to disburse European funding was conceded by the Senior SEMLEP Executive, who noted that, “basically the EU doesn’t recognise LEPs and to some extent I can understand why”, going on to list their lack of democratic accountability, widely varying governance arrangements and sheer number as reasons for this.

It would thus appear that any expectation in the short- to medium-term that LEPs are going to be the decisive factor in whether strategic sites like West of Stevenage get past the drawing-board appears to be a pipedream. This question was put to the Senior Planner at North Herts:

I’m not sure that they’ll go that far. I think they’ll talk far more about overall housing numbers. That’s just my experience of the local LEP we have here, it might be that other LEPs elsewhere in the country are more imposing.

His use of the verb 'talk' in this answer is rather telling: a combination of the Hertfordshire LEP's unwillingness to 'roll up its sleeves', 'get its hands' dirty' in deciding on strategic sites and the local authorities' refusal to be dictated to by LEPs would seem to confirm the Stevenage Senior Planner's pessimism about any positive action on West of Stevenage. In a further twist, it appears that LEPs are now being cast as 'the baddies' pushing a pro-development agenda; the Senior Executive at SEMLEP recounted how she had recently had a deputation from the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE), who had been told by a group of local authorities that, "all these new homes that they didn't want built across the patch" were down to LEPs, something she found, "slightly mischievous".

Even if LEPs were to be given much wider powers in respect of strategic spatial planning in the future, early indications are that their ambitions in respect of housing are much more limited than those of the old Growth Areas or Regional Plans. This was certainly the case with SEMLEP, which, although it covers a much larger area than the former MKSM, had a target of 224,000 new homes by 2021 compared with SEMLEP's target of 86,700, albeit over a shorter time span. The effects of the recession which started to appear in 2008 should also be factored in to the equation. In any case, by focusing prioritising strategic infrastructure over housing it could be argued that SEMLEP is putting the 'horse before the cart' and taking a common sense approach that will pay off over the long term.

When questioned on the practicalities of the NHB, respondents were, once again, generally negative on its efficacy. The main problem was that, just like the Single Pot, it was not 'new' money, rather it was funding rechannelled from central government grants to local authorities. In this sense it is not strictly a 'bonus'. In fact, the Senior Labour Local Councillor at Stevenage explicitly linked the NHB to processes of 'austerity urbanism' when he stated that, "southern [English] councils, regardless of their political complexion, have probably found it as quite useful during this period when we've been facing 27% cuts", although he noted that a number of councils had got themselves into difficulties by using NHB funds for revenue (i.e. day-to-day

running costs) instead of for capital projects (ideally building new homes, although this is not compulsory since the NHB is not ‘ring fenced’). As the Senior Executive at SEMLEP pointed out to me, this was a risky strategy since authorities need to borrow against this income stream as it is ‘future funding’, paid out only on completion of new properties. This same local politician agreed with my assertion that, in any case, the NHB was more suited to small-scale development, particularly through the community ‘Right to Build’ mechanism. The Senior Conservative Local Councillor at North Herts was privy to the embryonic development of the NHB:

When Grant Shapps first announced it, which was long before the coalition government, and I know because he told me about it in Tesco’s car-park in Hatfield. He said, ‘Effectively we’re going to bribe you, we’re going to pay you to build houses.’ But in fact, no, it’s not that. You could argue that it’s the other way round, ‘We’re going to fine you if you don’t build houses, because we’ve taken it away from the core funding to get it back.’

Both Senior Planning Officers at Stevenage and North Herts confirmed that the NHB “would not be a decisive factor” in stimulating them to build more housing. In another interesting appeal to planning ethics and the ‘rights and wrongs’ of strategic spatial planning, the Senior Planner at North Herts went on to say:

Just pragmatically, it feels wrong, because s106 Agreements – it’s a fundamental principle of the planning system that you shall not buy a planning permission – well, what is New Homes Bonus? I know they put in clause 142 of the Localism Act saying, ‘Local finance considerations are a material consideration’, but I don’t think it’s likely, certainly locally in my experience, it is not a determining factor.

The same Senior Executive also noted that a significant failing of Business Rates Retention (BRR), the NHB’s ‘sister’ policy, was that it lacked an assessment of needs element; in other words, the policy was unresponsive to attractive places like Milton Keynes, the fastest growing urban centre in the country according to the Centre for Cities (2015) and which are facing “step change” in terms of the facilities such as schools and hospitals that they need to provide.

The Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) did not emerge as a particularly pertinent issue

for participants across the study area, an indication perhaps of its unsuitability for national implementation. The Senior Labour Local Councillor at Stevenage did note that, “six out of ten authorities don’t think they’ll operate CIL in Hertfordshire, because there just isn’t any money to take out”, and that work done by the Hertfordshire Infrastructure Partnership (HIP) indicated that, “CIL would never have raised more than a third of general infrastructure costs”. The Senior Executive at SEMLEP was also critical of CIL, stating that, “it’s not a good way of providing the necessary forward funding.” She compared CIL unfavourably to the Milton Keynes tariff, discussed in Chapter 3 in the context of Growth Areas, and which raised around £18,000 per new home and which was used to forward fund the necessary infrastructure, as the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) was able to pay local authorities up front in anticipation of completions. The timing of payments from mechanisms designed to fund infrastructure, such as CIL or NHB, is therefore key, with funding which was injected into the development far earlier much more preferable.

5.7: Strategic transport issues

As noted above, the LEPs in Hertfordshire/Bedfordshire were seen to be quite a useful forum for the identification of strategic transport issues, far more so than for housing. This was principally because there was widespread acceptance across the political spectrum that the sub-region needed significant investment in infrastructure before/in order to support housing developments like West of Stevenage, as stated by the Senior Conservative Local Councillor at North Herts:

One of the reasons, of course, that we can’t be much more aggressive [in building housing] is because of infrastructure, and that’s the problem we have in Hertfordshire. We have an infrastructure deficit, we’ve had it for years, and it’s got bigger. So if we can’t tackle the deficit, how are we ever going to tackle the future?

The transport network was identified as the most serious infrastructure problem, with the bottleneck between Junctions 6 and 8 of the A1(M) a particular problem, and a similar bottleneck in the rail network north of Stevenage. Plans to widen the A1(M) from two to

three lanes were progressed under the last Conservative government (John Major), at a cost of around £167 million (“peanuts...compared to the damage it’s caused now”, according to the Senior Conservative Local Councillor), but these plans were quickly shelved by the incoming Labour government. There was widespread acceptance that these types of transport problems would have to be solved by central government; therefore early in 2014 a lobbying body called the Hertfordshire A1 Corridor Consortium was created, its membership consisting of local authority elected members, officers, LEP Board members and the Highways Agency.

A problem with using LEPs as a vehicle to deliver transport infrastructure was identified by the Senior Planner at Luton:

Now the logic of having Local Economic [sic] Partnerships is that it would be the top-tier authorities that would deliver infrastructure, so the districts, they’re not going to benefit from this, because the money’s not going to go to them. So actually Luton, Central Beds, Bedfordshire and Milton Keynes could apply for some money from a big piece of infrastructure kit, because they’re doing the transport. So that could be logical, but the others, that are in theory part of the LEP, well they’re not going to get the money, it’s going to go to the County.

The Senior Planner at North Herts brought up the issue of commuting patterns, particularly the sub-region’s links with London, and the increasing pressure that new development would put on already strained road and rail networks. The most illuminating responses to questions related to strategic transport and the duty to cooperate were given by the Senior Planner at Hertfordshire County Council; unsurprisingly, since the County Council still has responsibility for these matters. In yet another example of unintended consequences at central government level, this officer claimed that:

I’m quite sure that the government doesn’t realise that they’ve still left things like Local Transport Plan requirements on the statute. It’s one of those things where I’m sure if someone nudged them and they knew it they’d sweep them all away.

Interestingly, having been “side-lined” from more mainstream strategic spatial planning activities since the abolition of, first, Structure Plans and, subsequently, the Regional Plan

system, the County Council seized on the need to update its Local Transport Plan as an opportunity to:

stitch some of these strategic issues together via the medium of transport. Which is a strange way of doing it, but it's the only game in town in terms of it covering the whole County (Senior Planner, Hertfordshire County Council).

5.8: Other strategic infrastructure issues

During the interview process, transport was by no means the only infrastructural deficit identified. Education, sewage and broadband were also mentioned as significant stumbling blocks on the road to strategic housing developments. One of the legal grounds on which the High Court judge ruled against the West of Stevenage Consortium was improper education provision. It was at this point that further information, not accessible from the documentary evidence, relating to non-cooperation between the landowners emerged. The West of the A1(M) site was split between eight or nine owners, but they had failed to agree amongst themselves a satisfactory land value equalization process. So, the person(s) who owned the land upon which the schools (one secondary, two primary) were to be built stood to make significantly less profit than other landowners whose land was principally to be used for housing. This was “sloppy practice in putting together the Consortium, to be frank” (Senior Planner, North Herts) and was the main cause in the delay between permission for PA3 being granted in 2005 and 2009, when a Unilateral Undertaking (as opposed to a full s106 Agreement to which the local authorities involved were also signatories) was finally agreed by the Consortium. This four year gap was the key delay, since, if the developers had been able to agree matters somewhat quicker, the final approval for going ahead would have occurred under the much more favourable Regional Plan system. The Senior Labour Local Councillor at Stevenage gave the example of a school in the Old Town which, under the old East of England Regional Plan, was to have been closed and reopened in Great Ashby, a new development at the northern tip of the town (and which was built uncontroversially as part of the ‘SNAP’ arrangements between Stevenage and North Herts). However, the demise of regional planning meant that ownership of the site reverted to the County Council, who then handed it over

to North Herts, who themselves proceeded to grant planning permission for (much more profitable) housing, meaning that Great Ashby still needs a school.

The sewage issue concerned the capacity of the major water recycling works at Rye Meads in the Lee Valley, which the Senior Planner at North Herts argued had set back the publication of their Local Plan by two years from 2008-2010, due to a European Directive on bird protection which forced the council to undertake a “stupidly expensive” water cycle study. He offered this as an example of being surprised at how far back the ‘ripple effects’ of the duty to cooperate (before it was officially known as such) operated. These ‘ripple effects’ were also identified by both the Senior Planner and Senior Labour Local Councillor at Luton as another example of the unintended consequences of the duty to cooperate:

Going back to the Planning Inspectorate, they want you to consider the wider implications, the cross-border issues. Where is too far? Where is far enough? Let’s say we are asking our neighbour to deliver 5,000 houses; if they did it they are delivering 5,000 more than they wanted, or were going to plan for. Does that mean they’ll try to get their neighbour on the other side to do 5,000 more? So, potentially, this duty to cooperate ripples up and down the country, east, west, north, south” (Senior Planner, Luton).

The response of the Senior Labour Local Councillor at Luton on this issue can be seen as a direct rebuttal of the ‘creative solution’ offered by the Senior Conservative Local Councillor at North Herts that unmet need from a particular urban area need not be provided adjacent to that area:

I think [he] is right about the ripple effect as well, that kind of makes it nonsensical, so if we’ve got a need, which we have, unmet need around Luton, we need the new housing as near as possible to Luton, that’s our view, and our neighbour says, ‘We can deliver ‘x’ number, but then our neighbour going to deliver ‘x’ number’, then they become further and further away – how does that help us, actually? When does it get to the point where we say, ‘Well, it’s very nice that we’ve got houses on the other side of Bedford, but actually, people in Luton need a place close to where they work and their children go to school etcetera etcetera, and we’re having to relocate them.

This touches on an intensely party political issue which reverberates around the practical issue of the duty to cooperate as well as the ‘technical’ process of transforming projections into

targets: the demographic trends of particular urban areas based on migration patterns. Luton was described to me by the Senior Conservative Local Councillor at North Herts as:

...a very unusual case in that, its growth over the last thirty years particularly has been largely through immigration and it's a 'port' where people come in. We think about ports as being, you know, around the coast but this is a port. So people come in there, and the first thing they're going to do, they're going to stay. But then they'll start to migrate out, and the next generation – we're now into the next generation – will also move out. So a first generation may come in, they have a family, that family grows up, they go to university in Bristol. Well, they may like to stay in Bristol! Or perhaps they may find that they have links that go up to Northampton, or Bradford, or Glasgow! And so that one off effect has changed migration over the last thirty years.

A key idea which emerged strongly from the interview material is that planning is essentially a cyclical activity, with the unfortunate characteristic that planning's cycles – around ten years to allow a policy to properly 'bed-in', according to the Senior Planner at Luton (himself a former planning policy advisor to central government) – are very much out of sync with the much shorter political cycles of central and local government:

...so we go in cycles. Some governments say they just want to remove regulation and red tape, which actually just undermines the ability of the planning system to function... unfortunately in this country we don't believe enough in planning just to say, 'Leave it alone'. If it's not working very well then just work at it a bit harder rather than change it all... So you end up with botched reform, not a long enough time, and then a reaction against that, and so we end up with this cause and effect – it's virtually impossible at the national level to work out what the cause and effect is.

5.9: Moral, ethical and professional issues associated with strategic spatial planning

Issues associated with professionalism, pride, ethics and even morally correct behaviour emerged from the interviews. The question 'How do you, as a local politician elected to serve the needs and interests of your constituents, reconcile this with the new duty to consider the needs and interests of areas outside – sometimes very far outside – your constituency?' was asked of both the Labour and Conservative local councillors. The Luton Labour councillor reported that at meetings with Central Bedfordshire, local councillors there told her that it was "morally wrong to ask our council tax payers to pay for houses for people who live in Luton." She went on to disavow this way of thinking, stating that, "I think if we need houses, we need

houses, and where the people end up living is neither here nor there.” It could be argued that this statement sounds like something that a central government politician might say, rather than a local councillor defending his/her ‘turf’ and once again reflects the enormous differences in outlook between councils who were previously ‘net recipients’ or ‘net exporters’ of housing need. Indeed, the Luton councillor’s statement that “where people end up living is neither here nor there” rather strongly supports a criticism of ‘net exporter’ authorities made by the Senior Planner at North Herts, when he said:

...some of our neighbours who were previously giving their growth elsewhere and it was, ‘out of sight, out of mind’, they frankly didn’t care where it was going, it just wasn’t met by them.”

This type of disjuncture would suggest that more work needs to be done by both sides, with former ‘net exporter’ authorities needing to be more realistic about where their unmet housing need can be accommodated, and previously ‘net importing’ councils in their turn being more understanding of the difficult situation faced by those areas who cannot meet their own needs within their boundaries.

Councils on both sides of the political divide raised issues relating to professional competence. The Senior Planner at North Herts, when talking about SNAP (Stevenage and North Herts Action Plan), the joint working arrangements with Stevenage which ended abruptly in 2010, complained that:

to be frank, Stevenage did not do a particularly good job of the first drafts... They didn’t include any maps, and fundamentally, as a planner, I like to see maps in documents and it was a series of wishy-washy statements.

When questioned on the same issue, the Senior Planner at Stevenage felt that working on SNAP was the, “worst experience of my life” and accused officers and elected members at North Herts of a serious lack of professionalism when they failed to turn up for an arranged meeting, instead phoning Stevenage an hour later to say, “Oh yeah, we’re not coming after all,

we've decided to stop work" (Senior Planner, Stevenage). This same officer went on to describe the "real vitriol" involved in the West of Stevenage application:

Some of the political discussions over the years have been extremely bitter – really bitter – some of the angriest and bitterest that I've ever seen in the best part of thirty years working in local government.

When describing the work on the green belt review that Stevenage undertook in the summer of 2013, the Senior Planner at Stevenage was highly critical of his neighbours, who, he alleged, had refused to cooperate with his team:

We offered them the opportunity at the outset, 'Do you want to come in, do you want this to be a joint study?' And both sets of officers said, 'No, we're not prepared to touch this with a barge pole. If our members ever found out that we were involved in this, they will crucify us, so we're not getting involved in this.'

This comment provides a fairly obvious clue to the influence exerted by the elected members in what the officers know to be 'politically unacceptable' issues. Clearly it is crucial that democratically accountable councillors should be the final arbiters of decisions across the entire gamut of local government. However, this example appears to reveal a scenario in which qualified experts (i.e. planning officers) are being prevented from even initiating investigation into an issue. Herein lies the crux of the issue. Remove the politicization from the issue and planners are generally content, nay happy, to get on with the technical essence of an activity, whether that be a green belt review, a Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) or a transport impact study. It occurred to me that cross-boundary co-operation, as currently expressed in the 'duty to cooperate' is essentially a version of the 'prisoner's dilemma' - the strand of game theory developed by, among others, Rapoport and Chammah (1965) and Axelrod (1984) – where mutual cooperation, although it yields a better outcome than mutual betrayal, is not actually the rational outcome because cooperation at the level of individual authorities is not rational from a purely self-interested viewpoint.

This struggle between rational/irrational behaviour at different spatial scales can lead to some actors engaging in so-called 'gaming the system' practices, such as 'sitting on their hands' in terms of (non) plan preparation, dishonest practices in meeting targets or even the 'rule setters' (i.e. central government) using rules against another part of the system that they themselves created. An example of this would be the discordance between the duty to cooperate and green belt protection. The Senior Planner at Stevenage gave a back-handed compliment to North Herts' tactics in managing to stall development on the West of the A(1) site for well over a decade when he said, "it is an example of how you can manipulate a system that is supposed to be about delivering new development to ensure that development is never delivered." Supporting this contention, the Senior Labour Local Councillor at Stevenage stated that, "I think it's a very good example of how, under the current system, those who object to something have significantly more possibility of success than those who want to do something."

The Senior Planner at Stevenage, at the end of our conversation, allowed himself to reminisce about the 'good old days' of planning:

Plan-making these days is so difficult as to be almost impossible. It's significantly changed since I first came into local planning. It used to be quite an enjoyable and a relatively simple straight-line process. Nowadays you're expected to know everything about everything and you're expected to be able to square the circle and you're expected to be able to shove a square peg into a round hole simultaneously. It's no wonder that so many of my colleagues are now retiring early, having nervous breakdowns, leaving the profession – I don't blame them.

The other noteworthy aspect of this issue to do with green belt reviews was one of professional ethics. The Senior Planner at Stevenage noted that, after refusing to cooperate with his borough on a joint review, the neighbouring authorities (North Herts and East Herts) had done their own, in-house reviews. Having brought in external consultants to carry out the Stevenage green belt review, the Senior Planner there was irked that, "at least we went through the motions of hiring external consultants to do it, they've not even had that fig-leaf"

The idea inherent in this statement - that commercial consultants brought in from 'outside' are, by definition, more objective, and produce work that is somehow more 'trustworthy' than that done in-house - is an interesting one. Its most important expression is in the Strategic Housing Market Assessments (SHMAs) that are an important building block in determining whom one needs to cooperate with, and the spatial extent of such cooperation. From the interviews it became apparent that one consulting company, ORS (Opinion Research Services) was responsible for the delineation of Housing Market Areas in most of Hertfordshire and all of Bedfordshire. Whilst one could argue that it is useful in terms of continuity for one organization to produce these boundaries for a larger area, surely it is of greater importance to hear a second, or third, or even fourth opinion in what actually constitutes a Housing Market Area? There was an interesting exchange with the Senior Conservative Local Councillor, who was under the (mistaken) belief that these boundaries were drawn up by central government. It is true that a particular methodology for determining HMAs designed by CURDs (Centre for Urban and Regional Development at Newcastle University), and funded by the now defunct National Housing and Planning Advisory Unit (NHPAU), appears on the CLG website, but this is merely one methodology among several, albeit perhaps the most well known and certainly the most detailed in terms of methodological explication. Commercial confidentiality would appear to prevent some commercial consultants from even going into detail in terms of their methodology. To return to ORS and their activities in determining most of the Housing Market Areas in Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire: it emerged from the interview with the Senior Planner in Stevenage that HMAs had been written "on district boundaries", thus defeating the entire purpose of these cross-boundary entities:

East Herts, for instance, have done a Strategic Housing Market study for East Herts district, and then they've simply apportioned that figure to the different HMAs. So they haven't done a SHMA for the Cheshunt corridor, for the Harlow corridor, for Welwyn Garden City, they haven't been partners thus far for the work we've been doing with North Herts and with Central Beds. They've simply said, 'Yeah, we're not really terribly interested', because from their perspective why would you bother, it's all far too difficult. People don't want to learn the lessons which are coming out of decisions like Aylesbury Vale and Coventry. What they want to do is pretend that it's not happening, and then they're slowly coming to a realisation that, 'Oh my God, what the hell do we do?' But a lot of them, like Central Beds, are still pressing on. A lot of them, like East Herts, are still pressing on, despite the fact that they've done no work on Functioning

Economic Market Areas, they've not done any genuine work on SHMAs, they've not done genuine greenbelt reviews or any of the basic work that you would expect to find underpinning a modern Local Plan. They've basically just put the blinkers on, 'This is what we're going to do, this is a spatial strategy that we can sell to our politicians, and it doesn't really matter whether there's an evidence base to underpin it or not, because I'd rather go ahead with something, rather than go ahead with nothing' (Senior Planner, Stevenage).

5.10: The art of the possible: strategic spatial planning in the Cambridge sub-region

This chapter ends with a brief look at current developments in strategic spatial planning, in a sub-region not geographically distant from the study area, but which is quite some distance away in terms of issues like cross-boundary co-operation, infrastructure funding, and, perhaps the most joyful element of planning, visioning. The constraint of development around Cambridge can be traced back to the establishment of its green belt in 1950 and the Report of that year which argued that, "one cannot make a good expanding plan for Cambridge" (Holford, 1950: viii). This anti-expansionist attitude prevailed until the Structure Plan process which culminated in the publication of a joint plan with Peterborough City Council in 2003 (Cambridgeshire CC, 2003). One of the principal points of interest of the Cambridge sub-region case study is the fact that a not-for-profit organization called 'Cambridge Futures' which operated from 2004 - 2011, was instrumental in the Structure Plan process. Described by Echenique (2005: 114) as, "a group of local business leaders, politicians, government officers, professionals and academics investigating possible planning alternatives for Cambridge and its surrounding area", its membership bore a striking resemblance to the range of actors Sir George Nicholson had called for years before in relation to SERPLAN (Nicholson, 1992: 77). By producing seven options ranging from 'Minimum Growth' to 'Green Swap' (exchanging parts of the green belt) through to 'Densification', Cambridge Futures "was widely considered...to have provided the basis for those that favoured future growth" (Boddy and Hickman, 2014).

According to Patsy Healey (2007: 163), one of the reasons why the Cambridge sub-region is important is because it has become:

...a key economic driver in a regional and national context, an important locale in the wider economic nexus of southern England, positioned in a group of locales globally significant for a particular industrial form that emerged around new technologies in the late twentieth century.”

In fact, as Moules and Pickford (2013) argue, with its world-class university and ‘silicon fen’ coterie of science firms, Cambridge and its sub-region is “Europe’s leading high-tech start-up cluster.” There are around 80,000 jobs in the city, with less than half of these held by residents, therefore creating some congestion issues in and around Cambridge (Baker, 2010: 296)

As one of the four sub-regions selected for major growth in the Labour government’s Sustainable Communities Plan (ODPM, 2003), the Cambridge sub-region was one of the few places to have ‘bucked the trend’ and continued to grow during the recession (Centre for Cities, 2013: 29). In common with places like Stevenage and Luton, Cambridge is under-bounded (the city is entirely surrounded by South Cambridgeshire District Council, of which much is green belt land). Politically too, there are similarities between the case-studies, with urban Cambridge City Council controlled by the Liberal Democrats, with Labour close behind, and the city’s rural hinterland very much a Tory heartland. As in Hertfordshire, a two-tier system is in operation, with Cambridgeshire County Council above the local districts, although, again in common with various parts of Hertfordshire, there have been calls to create a single, Unitary Authority embracing Cambridge and its hinterland (Boddy and Hickman, 2014). However, not everything is rosy, with the Centre for Cities (2013: 23) identifying 2,188 ‘stalled sites’ in the city and a 60% slump in house-building between 2007 - 2011 exacerbating an already serious affordability crisis (Havergal, 2012).

There was wide variance between the Cambridge’s 2006 Local Plan which anticipated building 12,500 new homes up to 2016 and the requirement of the East of England Plan, which was 19,000 houses up to 2021, with a further 1,000 minimum per year up to 2025. Cambridge City Council is currently working on a draft Local Plan which is at the internal scrutiny stage before being submitted to the Secretary of State for examination. Just as protest organisations like CASE (Campaign Against Stevenage Expansion) and GASP (Graveley Against Stevenage

REGION	Land	Gardens	Buildings	Transport	Water	TOTAL
London	46.3	23.8	13.5	14.3	2.1	100.0
South East	84.9	6.6	2.1	4.1	2.3	100.0
East of England	87.5	4.4	1.5	3.2	3.4	100.0
GREATER SOUTH EAST	84.6	6.1	2.2	4.2	2.9	100.0
South West	92.2	1.0	1.3	3.1	2.4	100.0
East Midlands	89.3	3.8	1.6	3.1	2.2	100.0
West Midlands	88.0	5.2	2.1	3.6	1.1	100.0
Yorkshire and the Humber	90.2	3.5	1.7	3.2	1.4	100.0
North West	83.2	7.5	2.2	3.9	3.2	100.0
North East	91.9	2.5	1.2	3.0	1.4	100.0
Wales	92.0	1.9	0.8	2.4	2.9	100.0
Scotland	93.9	0.9	0.3	1.2	3.7	100.0
GREAT BRITAIN	90.1	3.4	1.2	2.4	2.9	100.0

Table 5 Ordnance Survey MasterMap analysis of Great Britain
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Proposals) sprang up in Hertfordshire, so similar protest groups like Stop BAD (Borne Airfield Development) and Greenbelt SOS (Save the Cambridge Greenbelt) have come into being.

Where the Cambridge sub-region differs significantly from the Hertfordshire/Bedfordshire case study is the much greater willingness of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough local authorities to work together under the duty to cooperate to produce a Memorandum of Understanding on growth figures (90,500 by 2031). A group of eight rural and urban authorities struck a “pioneering deal” in September 2013 (Carpenter, 2013a). The total number of houses is 2,500 less than the 93,000 identified by the Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA), so it remains to be seen whether the Planning Inspectorate consider that the legal requirements of the duty to cooperate have indeed been met. Developers are not impressed by this seeming display of unity, with Marcia Whitehead, Bidwells Head of Cambridge Planning, describing the 90,500 target as, “woefully short of what is required. In addition the distribution is not right” (Carpenter, 2013a). While it is safe to conclude that Cambridge is, “undoubtedly the leader and exemplar of the housing growth agenda” (IPPR/Shelter, 2015: 24), actual output remains low (despite having one of the most buoyant housing markets in the UK) and this merely reinforces the gulf between aspiration and delivery in strategic spatial planning.

Chapter 6

Discussion

6.1: Significant findings of the study

This research has examined the difficult issue of strategic spatial planning through the prism of the history and recent developments of the discipline. Successive governments have tinkered with the system in an effort to stimulate housebuilding, although most of these attempts have been described as ineffective. The first principal finding of the study has been that boundaries still matter a great deal; despite attempts to create 'soft' spaces with fuzzier boundaries, at some point lines of demarcation still have to be drawn and these lines can have significant impacts on whether strategic development goes ahead or not. Secondly, delays and long lead times are very much an inherent part of the system. This may be no bad thing; indeed, it is prudent to weigh up the potential impacts of significant over period of months (or in very complex cases, perhaps one or two years). However, to take over twenty years over a development with no final resolution in sight is clearly not what the planning system was intended to do. Most of the planners and politicians involved with the West of Stevenage proposals in the early 1990s have either moved on to new jobs elsewhere or retired. It cannot be sound strategic planning that a generation of built environment professionals spent the best part of their careers on a single development proposal, which still remains undecided as they approach retirement or move on in their careers. Thirdly, an interesting reversal of roles was observed during the interview process, with the local politicians keen to emphasise the rational, technical elements of the planning process (e.g. housing projections, transport modelling), whereas the professional planners instead stressed the highly political, human-centred aspects of the development process.

6.2: Suggestions for reform of strategic spatial planning in England

This research draws to a conclusion by briefly identifying, in an explicitly normative fashion (and thus somewhat against the grain of recent trends in qualitative research, but which reflects the work of a previous generation of planning theorists including Healey (1997) and Friedmann (1973)), the most promising areas for future research in the field of strategic spatial planning. A total of five steps - four policy-related, and one theoretical, are suggested as ways of making strategic spatial planning more effective.

6.2.1: Unit of governance for strategic spatial planning

The single most important direction for future research is undoubtedly further investigation into the most appropriate spatial level to plan and implement strategic spatial planning. This is one of the most intractable problems, spanning the political, economic and technical domains. Storper (2014: 120) provides a succinct summary of the nature and scale of the problem when he says:

metropolitan areas will always have political geographies where our preferences and needs are going to be bundled so as to conflict with those of others. As a result, the agents or authorities set up to govern or provide public goods are going to satisfy only some of these preferences and will have to compromise on what they give us. There is no single geography or organization of governance that could ever resolve this innate problem of bundling in a definitive way. There is also no voting system that can ever resolve it.

However, whilst accepting that there is unlikely to be a definitive solution to this problem any time soon, there are 'better' and 'worse' ways of coping with it. Steps in the right direction will need to address two issues: firstly, the disjuncture between 'ambition' and 'delivery' (e.g. plans on paper which confidently state that x thousand homes will be built over the coming twenty years; twenty years later few, if any of these homes have actually been built). Secondly, as Cheshire et al (2014: 227) note, policy mechanisms need to be developed and implemented which are better at matching the scale at which costs and benefits are incurred (as noted below,

these scales are often very different).

One such mechanism which was suggested by one of the interview participants was that of redrawing boundaries when, as in the case of underbounded authorities such as Stevenage and Luton, their ability to meet their strategic development needs is seriously compromised. In fact such a mechanism currently exists - known as a Principal Area Boundary Review - but the fact that boundary changes cannot currently be implemented without the consensus of all affected authorities means that it is rarely used (LGBC, 2011). The recent IPPR/Shelter Report into housing therefore argues that, “if all other reasonable options are exhausted and the city’s administrative boundaries continue to impede sufficient new development then there must be the ultimate backstop of a boundary review” (IPPR/Shelter, 2015: 12).

6.2.2: Development control

It is quite clear that the twin pillars of development control and what is still known in many local authorities as ‘forward’ (i.e. strategic) planning are becoming increasingly mutually incompatible, since they address different spatial and temporal scales of development. This is evidenced by the historic and ongoing failure of the English planning system to facilitate the necessary levels of housebuilding to keep affordability for first-time buyers within reasonable limits, and to compensate for the precipitous decline of the social housing sector. As noted throughout this research, the problem is by no means caused by or confined to public sector planning alone (developers, institutional investors and housebuilders also play significant roles in perpetuating and deepening the crisis). However, the work that forward planners do in identifying and allocating land for development all too rarely translates into positive development control decisions; as the recent IPPR/Shelter Report into housing puts it, “housing ambition is often penalised by poor housing delivery” (IPPR/Shelter, 2015: 26). This need not be the case; if one takes the example of the Netherlands, the ten year VINEX programme increased the national stock of housing by 7.5%, building 450,000 new homes in 90 new settlements, of which 285,000 were on greenfield sites or urban extensions between

1996 and 2005 (Falk, 2008: 13-14).

Cheshire et al (2014) argue for two things: firstly, a *rescaling* of the planning system, since, while the *costs* of developments are localised, the *benefits* they create (such as lower house prices and more jobs) are dispersed over a larger area, thus creating weak incentives for supporting new development. Instead of keeping strategic spatial planning at the local authority level, Cheshire et al (2014: 176) argue, it should be rescaled to the city region level, since this would lead to a pooling of incentives across administrative boundaries and mitigate the negative impacts. The second suggestion they make is to replace development control with rule-based local plans drawn up to national specifications, thus removing much of the uncertainty and local variability from strategic development decision making (Cheshire et al, 2014: 152).

6.2.3: Urban containment

In addition to dealing with the problems of poorly-drawn local government boundaries, a coherent, reasoned and strategic reappraisal of the main centralising and disciplining tool of central government - green belt policy - is widely recognised as a necessary step to addressing the housing problem from a range of commentators across the political spectrum (e.g. Cheshire et al, 2014; IPPR/Shelter, 2015). It is at this point that the significant piece of quantitative analysis alluded to in Chapter 2 ('Methods') is introduced.

Table 3 overleaf shows the proportion of Great Britain's surface area covered by, respectively, undeveloped non-domestic land, domestic gardens, buildings (domestic and non-domestic), transport infrastructure (roads, railways, paths and tracks), and inland water. Taking Great Britain as a whole, this analysis tells us that over nine tenths of the island's surface area is undeveloped, non-domestic land. Focusing on the Greater South East, this figure is almost 85 per cent, and far higher than the 54 per cent of people who believed the country was more than 50 per cent developed cited in the Barker Review. The key figure, however, is the

proportion of undeveloped, non-domestic land available across the wider South East, ranging from 46.3 per cent in London to 87.5 per cent in the East of England. Of this undeveloped, non-domestic land, 22.1 per cent is designated as green belt in London, 12.5 per cent is designated as green belt in South East England and 10.2 per cent is designated as green belt in the East of England. Quite simply, central government must not only refrain from using green belt policy as a disciplining tool to be used at the appropriate stage of the electoral cycle, but must take the lead in encouraging local authorities, many of whom are likely to be hesitant initially, to conduct green belt reviews and release low-grade, low amenity value land for development.

6.2.4: Infrastructure

It is well known that providing increased road capacity tends to result in an increased volume of traffic (Goodwin, 1996), in much the same way that Parkinson's law somewhat facetiously suggests that, "work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion" (Parkinson, 1970). Consequently road pricing is widely regarded by many transport specialists as the best way of dealing with negative externalities including increased greenhouse gas emissions from vehicles, noise, time delays from congestion, accidents and damage to infrastructure (Anas and Lindsey, 2011: 66). On the face of it, introducing congestion charging across the wider South East would be deeply unpopular and would probably be regarded as political suicide; nevertheless, as the current leadership election for the Labour Party shows, there appears to be an appetite across large swathes of the electorate for taking decisions that would have seemed unthinkable a just a few years previously. One is reminded of the words of Niccolo Machiavelli (2005 [1532]: 22), which he used to describe the difficulties of introducing any political innovation:

One should bear in mind that there is nothing more difficult to execute, nor more dubious of success, nor more dangerous to administer, than to introduce new political orders. For the one who introduces them has as his enemies all those who profit from

the old order, and he has only lukewarm defenders in all those who might profit from the new order.

The key difficulty with congestion charging is ensuring that benefits are concentrated *amongst* and visible *to* road users, rather than dispersed and thus largely invisible (King et al, 2007: 111). By allowing the revenues raised from congestion charging to fund the construction of new infrastructure (not necessarily more roads) and support public transport (Manville and King, 2013), to be disbursed at a sub-regional level - i.e. through the mechanism of genuine city regions - road users could start to see tangible benefits that have a direct influence on improving their journeys.

6.2.5: Theoretical development of strategic spatial planning

This research concludes with a conundrum: in order to make cities and their hinterlands better places to live, we need to conduct a certain amount of experimentation. This issue can lead to conflicted opinions even among some of our most eminent urban thinkers. For example, Cheshire et al (2014: 229) point out near the end of their recent book that, “cities are too important to be treated as sandpits for policymakers”, yet, in an earlier chapter, in relation to their suggestion that development control be replaced by a more rule-based system based on a set of national guidelines, they propose that, “the changes should be introduced in a randomly selected set of perhaps 50 to 60 LAs” (Cheshire et al, 2014: 152). This is a good example of what Storper (2014: 124) describes as ‘bricolage’ or ‘tinkering’. This need not necessarily be a bad thing, since, as Storper argues, “when there is little or no tinkering, it is probably a sign of a paralyzed political system” (ibid.). However, utopian idealism tends to affect policymakers, leading to extreme forms of bricolage such as Brasilia (Holston, 1989) or the planned £100 billion ‘King Abdullah Economic City’ on Saudi Arabia’s Red Sea coast (Moser et al, 2015). Bricolage can be inspiring and change peoples’ lives for the better, and at the very least it shows some recognition that the current system is not working. When planning strategically however, difficult decisions will always need to be made and for too long government (both

central and local) has been content to muddle along. Targeted reform of the green belt, the rescaling of the planning system as it relates to strategic development, a recognition that there needs to be more of a direct link between infrastructure costs and infrastructure users and, finally, a recognition that we need to move beyond outdated concepts of governance and ‘reheated fudge’ as LEPs and the current incarnation of city regions are, will mean that future generations will have a better chance of finding somewhere to live that they can afford and which is suitable for their needs.

6.3: Limitations of the research

Despite the advantages of the case-study approach, as set out in Chapter 2, there are clearly limitations with this method of research to be borne in mind. Principal amongst these is the small sample size of interview participants. A further dimension to the research would have been added by interviewing one or more central government actors, but ultimately this was not possible due to time constraints. When carrying out qualitative interview research, one is of course always aware of the highly subjective nature of the material gathered and the value judgements made according to the participant’s beliefs and understanding of particular issues. In addition, any ‘filtering’ process employed by the interviewer exposes him/her to the charge of ‘researcher bias’ (Chenail, 2011). Poggenpoel and Myburgh (2003: 419-20) enumerate a number of possible causes of researcher bias, including, “the researcher not being sufficiently prepared to conduct the field research”, “the researcher not being able to analyse interviews in depth” and “the researcher not being able to do member checking on findings” (i.e. repeat interviews).

These issues can affect much, if not all, sociological research, however their deleterious effects can be lessened by a range of strategies, including having a thorough theoretical and practical grasp of the subject material and taking sufficient time to let the interview material ‘percolate’. As noted in Chapter 2, ‘Methods’, it was possible to carry out one repeat interview with a participant and this was a valuable experience and worth the extra effort. The fact that the

interview process was carried out over a one year period was beneficial to the ‘percolation’ process. One of the most insidious problems, however, with qualitative material, and one which unfortunately tends to correlate linearly with an increased knowledge of the subject, is that of approaching the data with preconceived ideas (Sax, 1968). To someone trained in urban planning, it is difficult not to have opinions on subjects of broad importance such as the green belt, sustainable travel and affordable housing. Having worked intensively with the interview material over many months, and having included it in its entirety in the pages that follow, it can only be hoped that it is difficult to detect any noticeable political or sociological bias from the questions asked of the participants.

6.4 Discussion and reflections on the research

One of the major issues facing any social scientist is the generalizability of their research. This is especially so in the context of place-based studies, bound as they are to the particular bundle of attributes that, together, create the uniqueness and specificity of an area. It could be argued that the Stevenage West proposals, involving a tightly-underbounded authority, a severely disconnected site as a result of the motorway, and a particular set of political circumstances, were doomed from the outset and thus do not provide us with an especially enlightening set of lessons which we can apply in other situations. However, by framing the research within Jessop et al’s (2008) ‘TPSN’ model, with an explicit focus on territory-place interactions, it is hoped that, although the West of Stevenage and wider sub-region is itself the result of a unique set of circumstances, the methodology employed by this research is reproducible in other contexts, perhaps with a focus on a different pair of socio-spatial dimensions (e.g. scale-networks or territory-scale).

As Boddy and Hickman (2016: 32) have pointed out, the impacts of localism have resulted in “opportunistic reductions” in both housing targets and completions in precisely those areas across southern England, “with the potential to boost national economic growth” (ibid.). These authors are in no doubt that it is not a coincidence that the majority of these areas are

Conservative Party heartlands, and this research reinforces the highly ideological nature of the debate surrounding strategic spatial planning. However, the evidence from this research and elsewhere suggests that strategic spatial planning in England has entered a paradigm shift in terms of changing attitudes to previously sacrosanct tenets of planning doctrine, with particular reference to the green belt. This research has illustrated the seismic shift in relations between Stevenage and North Herts in terms of their approach to underboundedness and housing shortages that occurred in just a single year, made apparent during the follow-up interview with the Senior Planner at Stevenage. Although little progress has been made on the impasse at the West of Stevenage site, there has been much progress made on other sites and, more generally, of a belated recognition to work together more effectively and in better faith. More generally, there has been an increasing acceptance of the need to ‘think the unthinkable’ in terms of selective reviews of the green belt (e.g. Lyons, 2014: 22). Work by Bramley (2015: 159) has forecast significant housing supply and affordability increases from releasing 1-2 per cent of existing green belt land for development (of the order of a 32 per cent increase in supply and a 13 per cent increase in affordability year-on-year).

The localist narrative has been accompanied by a radical move away from the highly structured regional governance under New Labour towards much more ad-hoc asymmetrical and transactional ‘deal-making’ characterized by Local Enterprise Partnerships and City Deals. This has resulted in “highly uneven and inequitable social and spatial outcomes across the UK” (O’Brien and Pike, 2015: R15). Central to the formation of these spatial coalitions is the issue of boundedness, with urbanized local authorities such as Manchester increasingly wishing to expand their tax base in order to capture (usually) higher-income suburban populations (Ward et al, 2016: 4) as well as providing new opportunities for housing development. While Stevenage’s aspirations are clearly not as grandiose as those of Manchester, the issue of boundedness will remain important for the foreseeable future, since there are no guarantees of continuing cooperation with neighbouring authorities.

In conclusion, looming large over all of the sub-regional dynamics described throughout

this research are the power politics played out in the London arena. While selective reviews of green belt land seem to many commentators to be an eminently sensible approach to take to the housing issue, both principal contenders in the upcoming London Mayoral elections have explicitly ruled out development on the city's green belt, with the Conservative Party candidate, Zac Goldsmith, claiming that its protection is "top of his list" (Hill, 2016). The Labour Party candidate, Sadiq Khan, has stated in his manifesto that the green belt, "is even more important today than when it was created" (Khan, 2016: 66). These statements are of course no surprise, considering the political appeal of protectionist rhetoric towards the green belt and they illustrate the widening divide between London's core and its suburbs. As Holman and Thornley (2015: 496) argue, the current Mayor's election victories were largely fought on a platform of fighting for the city's 'neglected' suburbs by devolving powers, including planning decision making, to the boroughs - localism in action.

Additionally, the biggest 'ripple effect' (discussed above in Chapter Five in the context of Stevenage/Luton/North Herts) is caused by London, with protectionist attitudes putting increasing pressure on already overheated housing markets beyond the M25. Furthermore, UK infrastructure strategy (if such a thing exists in a coherent form) is largely London led, with the multi-billion pound investments in HS2, Crossrail and Crossrail 2 clear examples of this line of thinking. This cannot fail to have deleterious consequences for infrastructure proposals beyond the capital city. So, although London is often presented as a beacon of enlightenment in terms of its structures of governance, there are significant disjunctures between its strategic priorities and those of the authorities within its sphere of influence, but without the benefit of a voice at its table. It is therefore clear that all of the site level, extra-local and sub-regional processes described above need to be viewed within a larger context (just as London itself is a container of and is contained by networks of national, supra-national and global socio-spatial interactions).

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Appendix

The Interviews

The eight interviews, carried out between March 2014 and March 2015, have been transcribed in full and are reproduced in the pages overleaf. Throughout the interviews, the following abbreviations have been used:

DC	David Church (the Interviewer)
SP	Senior Planner
SC	Senior Local Councillor
SE	Senior LEP Executive

INTERVIEW ONE

Participants: Senior Labour Party Local Councillor
and Senior Planner, Luton Borough Council

Date: 7 March 2014

Location: Luton Borough Council, Planning Offices

DC If I could just begin by asking about the duty to cooperate, what's happening around it at the moment?

SP Well, if we put in context Luton's situation, then it'll provide a context for everything else we talk about. Luton, as you can see, is incredibly tightly under bounded, so there's basically no more space to expand. We've got some industrial sites, the old Vauxhall site, which we've just given permission for – a mixed use scheme – there's Power Court, the sort of rugby-ball shaped one in the town centre. Those are probably the two biggest sites. We've got some employment areas which are slowly being built out, one or two other bits and pieces of sites, we've got nothing else to play with basically.

We've got a housing requirement over the plan period, we're doing a Plan from 2011 to 2031 – actually, this morning we've just got our latest figure for our Strategic Housing Market Assessment, and it's saying a minimum of 18,000 houses is needed during the Plan period. We think we can do 6,000 over the Plan period, and that is a whole mixture of stuff – bringing forward employment land and actually the Councillors are, let's say, not entirely convinced that we can do 6,000. So, let's just call 6,000 a maximum. We need three times what we can do. So, we were working on a [sub]regional plan, because it's a bigger issue, the conurbation actually, you've got... this is the boundary of Luton, and it's just down the middle of a road, 1930's houses on each side and so Dunstable is just really part of the conurbation.

So, we were doing a joint Core Strategy with Central Beds, which actually surrounds us on three sides, so all the way round past the airport, and so it's only really one quarter of it, probably less geographically, that's North Herts. So we were doing a joint Core Strategy with them, delivering the regional plan, and the [sub]regional plan just looked

at this saying...to deliver the sort of growth that the whole area needed and that was being effectively set by government or the [East of England] region as being the way forward, and we were all contributing to a wider picture, given Luton's circumstances.

So, the duty to cooperate, being a replacement for it, is wholly inadequate, because Luton is surrounded by opposing politics, and even if it wasn't opposing politics, are you thinking, one council is suddenly welcoming 12,000 houses? So, it's a wholly inadequate response, and I think the origin of the duty to cooperate...there's two bits of the Conservative Party's thinking on this stuff, one is the suburban, Tory voting NIMBYs, who the localism agenda came out of. So it was, 'Give local control on planning decisions and you'll get the votes.'

DC Basically, to restrict new housing?

SP Exactly, so that's what some of the localism debate was about. When they got into government, Treasury said, 'you're not having that, because do you realise no houses will get built, we'll have a massive problem.' So therefore that localism idea ended up being changed in the NPPF and other stuff. It was an uncomfortable setup, and also the RTPI and a few other organisations said that, 'what you've written in your draft NPPF is inadequate. So it was done much tighter, and Greg Clark [the then Housing Minister] wrote a much tighter four paragraphs on the duty to cooperate. That has actually caused no end of problems. The Planning Inspectorate said, 'This is unworkable', but they were ignored, I would guess. So, the duty to cooperate is wholly inadequate for the sorts of places like Luton. I don't know what other angle you would like to put on it, SC?

SC From our point of view, from the politician's point of view, the duty to cooperate is an easy thing to say, but not such an easy thing to do, because there's nothing concrete around it in terms of, 'Ok, we need houses and you've got land, what are you going to do to help us? Are we going to give you that land, are we going to gift you those houses, what's coming back the other way?'

DC There's a very real conflict, you're elected by your local area to represent your local area's interests, but now you have this new

- situation where you have to look beyond your borders.
- SC Exactly. Some of the comments coming back from Central Beds councillors were, 'It's morally wrong to ask our council tax payers to pay for houses for people who live in Luton.' I don't see it that way, I think if we need houses, we need houses, and where the people end up living is neither here nor there. Of course we're constrained by boundaries and we're elected by different authorities, so we've had some difficulties there because, although it sounds like a nice idea, there's no substance behind it. What does it actually mean in real terms? Can we force them to give us land? Can we force them to build houses for us? And then we've got the difficulties around how much do they have to do to meet the duty to cooperate? So they will make an offer of, say, 'We're going to build x number of houses and you can have x number of those over the [Plan] period.' It's a really small figure, less than double figures, and we've got to pay for them!
- SP We'll have to come onto that, the delivery of affordable housing, because the duty to cooperate, when it was drafted, I'm quite sure no-one worked through the legal implications or the issues involved with that. The duty to cooperate, I think, was drafted with the idea that a small county town might need a few hundred houses in a neighbouring authority simply because it couldn't be accommodated anywhere else. Something like that. I don't think it was ever really 'road-tested' on the sorts of figures we're talking about, Birmingham, Coventry...
- SC It's massive, SP is right, we're in different political arenas. So we're a Labour council surrounded by Conservative councils, we've had meetings with them, we've had discussions with them. It's like, 'Well, we can offer you a few houses but you're going to have to pay for them', or, 'Let's not bother meeting at all because we don't even want to talk about it'. I think we've moved on from there now because there are Plans that are being found unsound, the reasoning being a failure to cooperate.
- DC Places like Aylesbury Vale, Brighton and Hove...
- SC Exactly. It starts to give you a bit more teeth. So some of these authorities now who are writing their Plans are thinking, 'Oooh, hang on a minute, maybe we will have to do something', but there's no guidance, there's no law there's nothing that says how much that's got to be or how the finances work and who pays for it. It's kind of like having a discussion without any real background guidance.
- DC So in terms of central-local relations, you're not really getting very much help or guidance from DCLG?
- SC Well...
- SP A number of things that we're trying to do, because we're pretty high on their Richter scale in central government, we've had a number of meetings with them, we've even met Ministers. We raised a number of issues, for instance, the fault lines with this duty to cooperate is that the national guidance says you have to do 'objectively assessed need'. So that has been a nightmare. We're doing a SMHA with Central Beds, we've actually got a steering group with seven authorities in total, because they're all potentially affected, and in fact even beyond. The assumptions that go in to a SHMA can affect, probably by 50% what the [final housing] figure will be. There's no hard and fast rule about what is in those assumptions. So North Herts, Central Beds and Luton went off to see the population experts in CLG and ONS to ask, because we can't agree, 'What assumptions should we have?' and the look on their faces was, 'We don't want to get involved'. The fact is that CLG had written this guidance that you have to do this, we're asking, 'Could you help us please', and it was, 'Ohhh, we don't really want to'. Anyway, we're trying to, we're writing, we're keeping them involved etcetera etcetera. In the end, Central Beds and us have just agreed that we'll get in a bunch of independent consultants to write it.
- Coming back to the problems with the duty to cooperate, because I don't think it was ever really thought through in terms of the scale of unmet need, probably what also wasn't thought through was the fact it wouldn't just be housing numbers that would have to be delivered next door, it would have to be affordable housing. So

we've got, roughly, a need for affordable housing that equates to our urban capacity, and yet the viability of development in Luton is very low, because of its brownfield land, house values are quite low, land values are quite low. There's no way we can do more than 15-20%, so therefore a huge amount of affordable housing has got to be delivered elsewhere. Local government has got a 'best value' requirement, set in law that they've got to deliver best value for their residents. So that law, or that interpretation of it, is being thrown at us, to say, 'You might have a need for affordable housing in the neighbouring authority, but we can't possibly provide it for you ourselves'. So actually, what we're saying is, if you've got a duty to cooperate, if you can't meet your needs, and affordable housing needs have to be met in the neighbouring authority, you've got to pay for it as well. An authority like Luton is not in a position to pay for affordable housing in its own borough, let alone anywhere else. So we just haven't got the money and yet we've got the need. Therefore it's a manifestly unworkable system, whereas if we'd been doing it through the sub-regional Plan, the government would be essentially taking ownership of this, and they'd be going, 'Well, let's talk to the Homes and Communities Agency or whoever and work out how we deliver it'. So it would be an overall approach, so you'd put in for funding from the HCA or from the DfT Capital Programme or whoever, whatever is needed would have to be part and parcel of it.

The other thing that I don't think was ever expected was how the Planning Inspectorate would finally interpret what's written into those four paragraphs [in the NPPF]. I personally think that their views weren't taken into consideration when the thing was being drafted. I think they [the PI] said, 'This is unworkable', and the Planning Minister said, 'We're going to do it anyway'. So therefore, I think they're taking a bit of revenge, to a certain extent. They are doing it literally, so when it says, you've got to discuss with all your neighbours on a continuing basis, all the time, which essentially is what it says – that's impossible, right? Therefore, unless you have absolutely talked with everybody, all through the processes, then potentially you're going to be found unsound. If you look at the Aylesbury Vale decision recently, we weren't

the primary reason why that was found unsound, we were a subsidiary reason. But even then we had four or five paragraphs saying Luton tried to talk to them. We said can we have a discussion about unmet need, because our housing market area just creeps into Aylesbury Vale. They said, 'Not really, we're not interested, we're not interesting in talking just with you, we might talk in general terms', but they didn't start that duty to cooperate debate to inform the plan, they just did what they had worked out based on their own figures.

SC The [Inspector's] Report is quite stark, there's some quite strong language in it as well. The Inspector has written, 'A complete failure under the duty to cooperate'. In Luton's case, Aylesbury's contact amounted to one phone call, I think that's the actual sentence. It really lays it out on stark ground that you've actually really failed on this. It's quite strong wording that probably I've not seen anything in that kind of way before and it makes you wonder what the reason is behind it? When we met Nick Boles, he did say that actually, this was something he was really going to push on.

SP 'No stone unturned', was the phrase that was used.

SC So that kind of gives us a bit of encouragement.

SP They [Aylesbury Vale] are part of the wider steering group for our SHMA, and they'll be invited to a meeting with us next week to discuss this latest piece of work. Going back to the Planning Inspectorate, they want you to consider the wider implications, the cross-border issues. Where is too far? Where is far enough? Let's say we are asking our neighbour to deliver 5,000 houses; if they did it they are delivering 5,000 more than they wanted, or were going to plan for. Does that mean they'll try to get their neighbour on the other side to do 5,000 more? So, potentially, this duty to cooperate ripples up and down the country, east, west, north, south. Ok, so for instance, Bedford, they're not directly affected by our housing market area, but they're sitting there looking at our SHMA work, because, if Central Beds takes more, Central Beds might try to put more into their [Bedfordshire's] area, right?

SC The knock-on effect.

SP How far is enough to prove to the Planning Inspector that you've done the duty to cooperate? No answer is the point, there's no way of knowing. So you don't know what is enough until you've had your Plan found unsound, that's rather late, you've probably spent a million quid writing the Plan only to find out that, no, that wasn't enough. So it's a very blunt instrument and, I think, in 2013, definitely 50% of Plans were stopped either because of the duty to cooperate or that the SHMA wasn't an adequate, broad enough SHMA. They're essentially the same issues, where's housing needed and where is it going to be provided? I think it's more like 70 or 80% of Plans were stopped, it just that the reasoning is not obvious; the Planning Inspectorate don't write in a sort of honest reason, it's just 'delay' or whatever. But I know that 50% have been delayed because of that, it might be more. I don't think CLG, when they finalised NPPF, had in mind the Planning Inspectorate stopping 50% or more of the Plans in the subsequent year on the grounds it didn't meet this test. I don't think anyone would have written it that way.

SC I think Chris is right about the ripple effect as well, that kind of makes it nonsensical, so if we've got a need, which we have, unmet need around Luton, we need the new housing as near as possible to Luton, that's our view, and our neighbour says, 'We can deliver x number, but then our neighbour going to deliver x number', then they become further and further away – how does that help us, actually? When does it get to the point where we say, 'Well, it's very nice that we've got houses on the other side of Bedford, but actually, people in Luton need a place close to where they work and their children go to school etcetera etcetera, and we're having to relocate them. One of the councillors I've spoken to from one of the other counties said, 'There's plenty of homes available up north', so it's kind of like this idea that we've got a need for housing and they're saying, 'Up north there's empty properties, why don't we start shifting people', well the whole idea away from their jobs, away from their families, that seems to be, 'Well that's an answer', rather than having anything built on our 'green belt' – I don't believe a lot of it is green belt.

SP So, coming back to the PINS, how much is enough. We have informal sessions with

them, where we talk about where we're getting to and they give us advice, and we said, 'Well, in reality, how are you going to test this?' During this particular meeting, I think they said, 'Uncharted waters' at least four times in the legal context because of unusual circumstances, the scale of what we're dealing with, there are so many issues. 'Uncharted waters' was the thing they kept coming back with, and it was, 'Well, we'd expect you to keep working with your neighbours to have some sort of formal arrangements as to how you're going to do this, so a Memorandum of Understanding or something like that'. And we're saying, 'Well, the chances of every authority, let's say you've got four or five authorities that you're working with, all being at the right stage of their plan, where they can actually secure an MoU, even if they wanted to – write an MoU saying we'll deliver 2,000 houses or a thousand houses – is that worth the paper it's written on, because they might be at the wrong stage, or the elections might be coming up and the next lot might say, 'No, we're not doing that'. So the practicality, even if they wanted to, of securing this in order to get this council to get its plan found sound...

We might prove to a Planning Inspector that we've actually got exactly the right number – 6,000 houses or whatever it might be – we might say our role for the sub-regional economy is proven, we've published an employment land study which shows the role that we play and therefore why we need our employment land. Also, how the neighbouring authorities, how people come in from there and take the better jobs, that's all documented and so therefore we are providing a role to the wider area, but we haven't got the space and it would be the wrong thing to do to build on our employment land because of the proximity to the railway line, the motorway, the airport.

You wouldn't want to lose the whole of Napier Park, we have put in quite a lot of high-quality offices there – you might get four or five headquarter office buildings in the next ten years. If you wanted to have access to four hundred million people within three hours you probably couldn't find a better location, because you can get to the whole of Europe. So the location is fantastic, but it does mean that housing

- which is actually easier to do because you can turn a field into a housing area
- needs to be done, but the pressure, the mechanism is so back-ended that the Plan might have been found unsound two years down the line. Well, there might have been a change of government by then. Even a different Secretary of State might have taken a slightly different view of the green belt versus another one. Our current SoS is currently getting really, really excited about the green belt, well, another SoS might say, 'I'm more relaxed about that'. I think he's [Eric Pickles] holding on to a whole load of travellers' sites in the green belt. I think the Planning Inspectorate has got a backlog of about 200 gypsies and travellers' sites in the green belt, I just think he's sitting on them because he doesn't want to do anything before the next election.
- The evidence that we're required to produce is quite large, even though it just says in the NPPF that it's got to be 'satisfactory' or some phrase like that, actually then the Planning Inspectorate is asking for an awful lot. If you have any delays you've got to do the stuff again, so it's actually really quite complicated. The duty to cooperate has just made it exponentially that much more difficult.
- SC There's a huge amount of bureaucracy.
- SP And then if you factor in that there are different politics, so if they don't want to do it you're looking at a virtual impossibility.
- DC SC, you mentioned a moment ago about the green belt, could you expand on that please?
- SC Yes, well I have my suspicions that a lot of land that's labelled as 'green belt' is not actually green belt, in that it's not green, rolling, luscious hills or anything like that. There is a lot of land around the area in Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire that's disused agricultural land. There is some beautiful green belt, some Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, that's absolutely fine, I don't have a problem with that, but I think that people use the phrase 'green belt' to cover any land that's not built on, in order that it might be offered some protection. There's a lot of it that's disused, there's a lot of it that farmers are quite happy to get rid of if they had the opportunity. And there's areas where people just wander through and walk their dogs and things like that. Although it's important to have open green space, whenever a planning application comes in anywhere around Luton, they're always jumping up and down about how we're building on their beautiful green land, when, if you went out and had a look at it, it's just scrubland and disused agricultural land.
- DC Stevenage did a recent review of their green belt land, are there any strategic green belt reviews upcoming around Luton?
- SP Well, we have done a review of our green belt land, but it's tuppenny ha'penny, a little bit round the airport, some slivers up there etcetera. Stocksley Common is the biggest bit. I don't think that Central Beds have done a strategic green belt review. I think the plan that they're proposing is more of a single issue, these are the developments we want, this is where we're going to. On the guidance that's come out yesterday, the NPPF guidance notes, there are some bullet points that Nick Boles on the website has done. It's quite interesting because it's quite a political set of bullet points. The bottom one says, 'Contrary to the Opposition, we are not going to allow urban authorities to dump...
- DC It's all very evocative language isn't it...
- SP It's the CLG website! Somewhere else in it, they're saying, 'Unmet need is not necessarily a satisfactory reason to remove the green belt' – it's just emphasizing your point SC that green belt has this mythical status that everyone latches onto. It was originally designed to provide a bit of structure for urban areas. That was set I don't know how many years ago, thirty, forty, whatever and it needs to be reviewed fairly regularly because when they did it the population was probably half of what it is now, the problems were very different. The green belt is now requiring a mega-strategic policy and yet we've been asked to review it on an individual borough basis! We don't have much to review, so according to the original logic of the green belt it doesn't really make much sense. It needs a more strategic approach and anyway it is quite logical to build, let's say for the South East they need 100,000 houses – given what's happened over the last 200 years you'd say, 'Right, we need some urban

- extensions, some new settlements, we need this mixture.' Well, how can you get this mixture? You can't, you're into urban extensions and urban sites. You're not into anything else, because new settlements are almost impossible to come through unless it just so happens that one borough decides that it's almost the whole of its solution. In that context, that urban authority is going to have a few sites and a few locations where you can do it and therefore they're going to argue against it, because almost by definition it's not going to be big enough to deliver the sort of scale of infrastructure that would be required. So therefore, inevitably, this duty to cooperate, this lack of a regional approach is meaning that we haven't got the menu that we need as a region.
- SC Well, it's conflicting policies, isn't it? The duty to cooperate conflicts massively with what they're saying about the green belt, because, as Chris has quite rightly pointed out, we need a mixture of different developments in order to get the kind of housing numbers we need. But if the authorities are saying, 'No, no, no', we're not building on any of the green belt, where do we go? The duty to cooperate is telling them that they've got to consider unmet need, but where are they going to put it? They're two massively conflicting policies, and I think the fact that he's [Boles] writing stuff on there that you can't be dumping housing... what he's trying to do is appease his Tory councillors who've been saying, 'What the bloody hell are you doing!?' And he's trying to say, 'It's ok'...
- SP It's the same ones who wanted the localism agenda at the beginning – that bullet point is aiming precisely at them.
- DC Next year it could all be very different...
- SC But the removal of the green belt, it's possible, because that was part of the deal with regional strategies, because the justification was the need for houses for the removal of the green belt, so what's different?
- SP But you need to do it at a scale that's big enough. If you took what's going on in the South East to its logical conclusion, the investment that's going in, the business opportunities, you've got a lot of new businesses coming into Cambridge, you've got infrastructure, you've got Stanstead Airport. You'd put a Milton Keynes near Stanstead Airport if you really, really wanted to deal with the scale of what's going on. That would be logical, it would strengthen the investment in the transport network, as well as whatever else we're doing. It's just that that's not available, is it? Because you're not doing anything at a regional scale, so therefore you can't actually consider... a Milton Keynes can't come through this process, a Stevenage can't come through this process, you've just got a thousand house village really, well that's not even enough to build a primary school off. The solutions are – unless you're bolting it onto an existing town – you haven't got...
- SC Stevenage have had the same problem as us for a longer period, really. They've been battling with North Herts...forever! They haven't got anywhere.
- DC Ok, so what about Local Enterprise Partnerships? I've actually tried, pretty hard in fact, to get in touch with someone from the South East Midlands LEP. These are supposed to be the solution to the sub-regional quandary...
- SP Well, if you look at that map up there, that is the SEMLEP area. You've got Corby up at the top there, Kettering, Daventry, South Northants, Milton Keynes, Aylesbury Vale, Central Beds, Bedford and Luton. There are four unitaries in that, so Bedford, Central Beds, Milton Keynes and Luton. That would probably make a more sensible Local Economic [sic] Partnership, with three cities and a town to deal with, to get a proper strategy going.
- DC Do you know why they decided on this particular LEP boundary?
- SC Why did they decide on it...I don't know, but I do know that Northampton have got another LEP, the Northamptonshire LEP, so it's got really complicated in terms of the stuff that's coming through from Northants, you know, should that actually go through the Northampton LEP? Chris is right, it should have been a much tighter thing it would have made much more sense. I'm not sure about the history, about why it became like that, but SEMLEP has been up and running for three years...

- SP It was to do with the Milton Keynes/South Midlands sub-regional plan – that was its origin. But what you've got here are quite a lot of districts almost on their own. Now the logic of having Local Economic [sic] Partnerships is that it would be the top-tier authorities that would deliver infrastructure, so the districts, they're not going to benefit from this, because the money's not going to go to them. So actually Luton, Central Beds, Bedfordshire and Milton Keynes could apply for some money from a big piece of infrastructure kit, because they're doing the transport. So that could be logical, but the others, that are in theory part of the LEP, well they're not going to get the money, it's going to go to the county.
- SC And then you add the complexity of politics, when you all sit round the table, there's still that kind of, 'Well there's some money there, we want some of that, you want some of that.' I find it massively frustrating, the most frustrating committee I've ever sat on. We go there, and we're three years down the line – and what have we had out of it?
- DC I get the impression that planning and transport are down the list of LEP priorities...
- SP Well, I go to the planners' SEMLEP coordination meeting and all that I read, see is them moaning about the inadequacy of the duty to cooperate, so we all agree that we'll produce a complicated spreadsheet of all our cross-boundary issues, and somehow that'll do it? Of course it won't! All it does is raise the problem, all we're doing is collating the problem. You end up with a bilateral discussion, say between us and Central Beds, but if you think about bilateral discussions that have to go on in order to get a bigger area working... The way the Local Economic [sic] Partnerships are meant to work is that they promise a load more housing and they'll get given infrastructure money by the government. So we can't promise them any of our housing, we haven't got any space for it. So we can't be part of the deal if it's just us, therefore we need to work together with our neighbours, they need to deliver the housing and between us we'll deliver the infrastructure. We've got the airport, we've got the train station, and we've got the motorway junction, so actually we're helping! But if they don't want to deliver extra housing on our behalf in order for us all to qualify for extra money, it's not going to work, is it? It's a really clunky, difficult...
- SC It is clunky. You've got the strategic idea that we can all work together, so the infrastructure that affects the whole of the SEMLEP area and everyone benefits and blahdy blahdy blah. But the bottom line is, and I can say this – it's politicians from opposing parties trying to agree. Everyone becomes parochial – Bedford needs this, Milton Keynes needs that, and then they form little cliques, so Milton Keynes gets together with Central Beds...
- DC I've read in various places that some local authorities want LEPs to fail!
- SP Yes, if Luton had much more space, if it was like a Bedford, a proper town with a surrounding hinterland, if we were in the same position, then it might work a lot better for us, because effectively we could be in control of the extra growth and then we could say, 'Right, ok, we'll be part of that deal, as long as we get whatever infrastructure is needed, we will contribute to that. We'll try to persuade the local people to accept more housing in order to be part of that overall deal and therefore we'll explain to them that we'll be getting extra infrastructure for it. But because we haven't we rely on our neighbours, and if our neighbours don't want to agree to it, the whole lots falls down.
- SC We're constantly reviewing in our minds, you know, what's the value of being in SEMLEP? We're being told constantly that any money that's going to come will be through SEMLEP, so you've got to be in it to win it kind of thing. Equally, we're constantly re-evaluating it, because SEMLEP itself is a whole growth industry, the number of meetings, there's something like 27 separate groups underneath SEMLEP that actually meet, and where have we got?
- DC It's also dramatically underfunded compared to the previous regional system, isn't it?
- SC Yes, I think they've got five full-time employees that work for SEMLEP, which is probably not enough for the kind of work they want to do, so it's slow progress, I

- know these things are always slow progress anyway. You have to constantly question, I know we're putting a lot of time into it, we've got our officers working on unending piles of documentation that is being asked for. Where do you say, 'Well, you know what, we're not getting anything out of this'.
- SP The problem is, all the government money for regeneration and investment in transport and whatever is coming through the LEPs, so therefore, even if you feel that you're hitting your head against a brick wall, you've got to be in there, because otherwise you actually will not get any.
- SC As an aside, European funding is now coming through SEMLEP as well. It's just going to be that that's going to be the holding pot, but they don't even have the ok to dish out the money – it's still going to be government that decides where the money's going to go.
- SP I think the problem of the Local Economic [sic] Partnerships was that there was no great logic, there were no rules about what your average one should be. It could be as big or as small as you liked, so we've got a huge great mixture, it makes sense to have a Hertfordshire LEP, where there's ten authorities, a million people, they're all within the administrative boundary of the county – that's easy, that's straightforward. It probably isn't big enough but it's going to work. I know they've got about ten staff, whereas ours is a hotchpotch, and so you had some bizarre discussions as to whether or not Cherwell – what's Cherwell got to do with the rest of it? I think it was more a border issue, that they didn't want anything to do with the Thames Valley. So you've got some really silly stuff, whereas if they had set out some clear criteria, but they didn't want to do that, because they wanted it to be localism. So probably the idea that you just leave everyone to sort it out wasn't necessarily going to deliver you a logical set of outcomes, so probably it was compromised from the start. If they'd said, 'We want LEPs to be roughly this population, therefore we want 20 of them in the country, and we actually want to work together with you, but ultimately we'll create them.' For instance, in the South East we probably should have had three or four, something like that.
- SC A really good example is the most recent meetings we've been having which have been about what the priorities of the projects that we want to deliver within the SEMLEP area, and they've got a private company to look at all the different projects that people have come up with, and graded them. So, ones that are spade-ready, ones that deliver a benefit across a wider, across the whole of the SEMLEP area, ones that deliver more jobs, how much they cost, where the money is coming from. They looked at all these different criteria and they've given them all a ranking and the whole meeting was just arguing the toss about whether that was actually right or not because that wasn't fair...
- SP We do that all the time SC!
- SC So it's not strategic at all! It's about, 'Well, we need this road', that's the kind of thing you get down to. How we're ever going to get down to this consensus...
- DC Then you look at somewhere like Cambridge, I think there's eight authorities, they seem to be able to work together quite well, is that just local circumstances, or...?
- SC Yes, I mean you're always going to have that, especially when you've got an outside organisation, and they've done the criteria-setting and evaluation of it, then what comes out of it comes out of it and you'll have to live with it. But when something comes out and people are questioning it, like, 'That's already got £10 million funding from the Transport Board, you know, hang on a minute, how can that be a priority, it's just a road, where are the jobs? So we ended up just arguing and it makes you wonder how they ended up actually coming to that view. I have grave misgivings about SEMLEP, but like I said, we have to be part of it.
- DC Ok, so about transport, I'm very interested in the strategic picture as far as transport is concerned, now that the regions have gone, how are transport issues getting picked up, or not getting picked up?
- SP Well, we've got someone who is very strategic who runs my Transport Strategy unit, and they basically put quite a lot of their time into leading with the other all-SEMLEP authorities. So, they had the

- Local Transport Board, which was the four authorities I've mentioned, so Central Beds, Milton Keynes, Bedford and us. Originally we set up a Local Transport Board for that, and our officer effectively wrote the Terms of Reference and so we were engaging on that, and we were quite capable as a group of four authorities of drafting an infrastructure investment strategy for transport. We were going to have the governance of the transport investment for that Local Transport Board, and then the government changed the ball-game, they changed the rules when they said, 'No, we're not going to have Local Transport Boards, they're going to be one and the same with the LEPs'. So now actually, we've got, in theory, a load of districts who have got nothing to do with this – so the four authorities who actually had the top-order powers – we're sort of merging that into whatever it now is, and our person is going on to that. But it's just a bit of a mess really, because we had set it all up and then they changed the rules. Actually we're quite capable, between us all, of doing some reasonable, joined-up approach.
- SC And a lot of the high-level discussions there about East-West rail and that type of discussion, they still ongoing, but they're going on more positively because everybody's signed up to the same idea. There are a few small differences...
- SP So transport's not too difficult, it's partly because the government has had so much involvement in transport, you know with Highways Agency doing the roads and Network Rail, so there's a bit more national involvement in transport. It's housing that's a more local issue.
- DC You've got Philip Hammond saying that transport is damaged by the localist agenda, it's another conflict...
- SC Yes, it is conflict again, more policies that are kind of antagonistic against each other.
- DC So, just to hypothesise, say there's a change of government next year, would the sub-regional plan be picked up again?
- SC To be honest, I don't know, I don't know what would happen, and I think that that's always difficult when there's a change of government, everyone's kind of saying,
- 'Reverse this, but keep that', and it never really goes the way that you expect or want it to be.
- DC Planning has changed so much in the last 20 years...
- SC I mean, the 'Right to Grow' thing, we're like, 'Yes, that's a great idea', obviously we would, wouldn't we? Obviously the people around us would be saying, 'That's terrible'. But I'm not sure how far they'll get with that.
- DC These things take so long to implement anyway...
- SC Yes, it'll be years... we'll still be running down this route for some considerable time yet.
- SP I've worked in central government writing national guidance for ten years, and I've watched how Ministers decide what they're going to do. So they write guidance, and then within about nine months they're irritated that things haven't happened in the country, and yet the guidance was about plan-making. So all that's likely to happen in nine months is that the local authorities have read the thing, worked out that they're going to have to plan something...
- DC Wait for the first one to make the move...
- SP Exactly, so actually there's a big time lag. So if you change the planning system, and say, 'Right, this is going to be a different set of rules', unless you've drafted it perfectly, there's going to be a lot of questions that need answered and they're going to be answered through case law, so who wants to be the first guinea-pig to hit the case law? So therefore there's going to be a little bit of a lapse of time, so you might get a few plans through in five years and then there'll be a bunch over the ten year period. Well, we've had three changes to the planning system in about ten years haven't we, so from the old Local Plan to a new system and then we've actually been changing from that into yet another system. So actually that ten year period wasn't enough, they were just beginning to come through, weren't they?
- Unfortunately, in this country, we have a really odd relationship with the planning system. In somewhere like Germany, or France, or Holland, there's a national psyche

- that they think planning is a good thing, and they understand that you have to do this as a collective thing and that you have to do it together and that it's for the public good. There's different ways of doing it, but they actually believe that it's ok and that they're going to do it, however much hassle it feels. They actually want to do it, whereas we've got this attitude in this country that there's this tussle between business and intervention in the market, and you go in cycles.
- DC 'Jobs locked in filing cabinets' type thing?
- SP Yeah, so we go in cycles. Some governments say they just want to remove regulation and red tape, which actually just undermines the ability of the planning system to function. Therefore in the eighties we ended up with a load of out of town business parks because there was just this presumption in favour of development, so therefore stuff that was not a logical thing to do ended up happening. So in the nineties we had traffic jams on ring roads because of...right? The wrong decisions were taken then about what you're going to do about that, and then it [policy] isn't allowed a long enough time to bed in and then someone's changed it again, so you get all these odd, perverse decisions. So, unfortunately in this country we don't believe in planning enough just so say, 'Leave it alone', if it's not working very well, then just work at it a bit harder rather than change it all.
- Instead of tinkering with the Local Plan system, because they could have just said, 'The Local Plan system is getting a bit too detailed, let's just say it could be a little bit simpler'. We don't need legislation and they could have delivered some of the stuff that was needed. Just say, 'We don't need that much detail at the Planning Inquiries', but no, we had to change it all. So you end up with botched reform, not a long enough time, and then a reaction against that, and so we end up with this cause and effect – it's virtually impossible at the national level to work out what the cause and effect is – but someone summarizes it for a minister. I used to do it, you put it on a page, you know, this isn't working because, and you throw a few facts in and somehow that is the truth? I was just about leaving at that point when they were bringing in the legislation about 2001 for the last changes, and the House of Lords absolutely ambushed it and put a load of extra caveats in there, which was the downfall of that particular ten year period of the planning system. They put so much in it because they weren't happy with the principle so that was its downfall. So you just get this mess, cause and effect.
- DC Last thing, and you may not even have an opinion on it, but as you know the duty to cooperate is a legal requirement – s. 110 of the Localism Act – but peppered throughout the NPPF you have the recurring phrase, 'sustainable development' which is basically defined as being what the 48 pages of the NPPF say it is, but this has not been made into a legal requirement. So my question is why did they go down the legal route for the duty to cooperate and not for sustainable development, why not do both one way or both neither way?
- SC My guess is because to legislate for some of the other stuff, that upsets all the businessmen and the developers. The government are very good at doing this, they'll legislate on some things and they'll tell the councils what they've got to do, but they won't do it to big business and a prime example of that is the fire service. They want it written into the law that sprinklers should be fitted in commercial premises, if you just had it written into the law that that's what the developers have to put, you wouldn't have the argument, they'd just have to do it. They'd have to bite the cost. Well, the developers don't want that because they don't want to bite the cost and accordingly the government don't want to upset the big players, so it's kind of a bit like that. It depends how many people are pulling your strings before you decide...
- SP I think the reason why is because they were removing regional guidance, which was a statutory thing, and therefore they felt that they had to make it a statutory requirement in order to fill the void, because the duty to cooperate just being a policy thing, someone would have challenged it legally. So I think it's why they had to put something in there. On the sustainable development stuff, what they're saying, what they're defining sustainable development as – the 50 pages of the NPPF taken as a whole – it just means effectively that if they wanted to rewrite that slightly, that would be a new definition of sustainable development.

Defining a concept like that is fraught with difficulty because it changes over time...

SC So it's too difficult to do, how can you legislate for it?

SP If you just take shopping as an example, sometimes everyone drives to a big supermarket, ten years later half of them still drive to the supermarket and the other half do stuff online. Well, that land use then has changed its nature, and so the definition of what it is probably needs to change over time. So trying to define what sustainable development is – we could be in a different ball game if the sea rises by another metre – we might say, 'You know what, we'll define sustainable development slightly differently now'. So it's just a changing thing, you can't legislate for it.

INTERVIEW TWO

Participant: Senior Planner, Hertfordshire County Council

Date: 11 March 2014

Location: Hertfordshire County Council, County Hall

DC Ok, so the focus of my research is on the duty to cooperate, examined through two main case studies – Hertfordshire and the Cambridge sub-region – so contrasting case studies, one where people are finding it more difficult to work together and obviously Cambridge is a little bit different. What are your initial feelings on the duty to cooperate?

SP I think in practice it's proving to be incredibly difficult to operate. It's quite interesting that, as an authority, the county council was very heavily engaged in regional planning and was very critical of a lot of aspects of it and I suppose the new government came in, we heard all these words and everything was swept away. It was a case of, 'Ok then, off you go and do it yourself'. I don't think that, as a concept, it was ever really thought through properly, so my take on it was that it was pretty much a political reaction to a system which there were a number of problems, in terms of its operation – it wasn't perfect...

DC It would be good to hear your opinions on

the previous regional regime...

SP No problem, we can go back to that. So it wasn't a perfect system, but sadly it's a combination of the complete pendulum swing of approach and the fact that the new approach really wasn't thought through and was probably a political initiative rather than it being a technical response to the issues of how you plan strategically and deal with bigger issues. So, as usual with these things, the planning authorities and local government are having to try to find a way through it, and that varies completely as your research will pick up according to local circumstances and history across the country. So I'm not impressed, basically. The other thing is, I have to kind of say, I work for a county council, I was in charge of the strategic planning function. Strategic planning, in terms of a requirement and a responsibility got swept away, so I would feel aggrieved, wouldn't I? Certainly we're struggling with the new system.

DC Ok. It would be good to get your take on the whole Stevenage situation...

SP Sure, so it started off back in the 90's with the county council preparing its Structure Plan, so regional planning numbers to deal with and we had issues in terms of where it was going to put development or how to cope with the development. Because we're very heavily constrained in terms of green belt, which there was both a political and professional line to try to preserve as far as possible and a policy imperative to keep it unless you really have strong reasons to take land out of the green belt. The Structure Plan was struggling – it went for a policy of identifying two specific locations to deal with the shortage of sites for housing – a fairly predictable approach really inasmuch as for a county with a lot of dispersed, medium-sized settlements, it identified Stevenage and Hemel Hempstead as the places which had the most potential for coping with growth. So for Stevenage, a big step, development west of the A1(M), that was included in the Structure Plan. A lot of work then went on jointly between the county council, North Herts and Stevenage to try and deliver that, something called 'Garden City 21' as a project in terms of bringing this forward in the most sustainable way, because it was recognised that this was quite challenging. It's almost

- going to be a new community separated from Stevenage by the A1(M), there was going to have to be a need for it to have a high level of sustainability.
- DC That's interesting that you describe it as a new settlement, rather than as an urban extension...
- SP Well, the best of the schemes boiled down to two access points underneath the motorway, so I think that psychologically and physically it was always going to be a difficulty overcoming that barrier and I think it was being planned on the basis of trying to achieve a high level of self-containment. You know, its own secondary school, two primary schools and trying to ensure that it didn't generate huge amounts of movement out almost. So it was challenging, everyone working together, and then, not to put too fine a point on it, a change of political leadership at county level, we had a new Conservative regime who came in. They had campaigned on minimizing the impact of development on greenfield/green belt land, and were committed to trying to stop West of Stevenage, so from that point onwards the county council withdrew its support and opposed the development and North Herts took the same position as well. From that point onwards, then, Stevenage was trying to push something upwards up a very steep hill. During the early noughties, Stevenage tried to get their Local Plan through, that didn't go through so the West of Stevenage development got bogged down in the superb bureaucracy of the planning system and eventually everything just fell apart.
- DC Ok, could you talk a little bit about SNAP [Stevenage and North Herts Action Plan]?
- SP Oh yeah, and what happened there? I think the thing is, by that time, when we had a Structure Plan and when West of Stevenage was in the Structure Plan, the county council was very active in terms of promoting...during 2005/2006 when SNAP was starting to come forward our role was actually far less and we were engaged in it in terms of Highways Authority and education planning and strategic transportation planning. But SNAP really was an attempt by the two districts to try to get a joined up approach.
- DC Was SNAP primarily central government led?
- SP No, as far as I'm aware that was a local response to the fact that the two authorities had to try and work together to deal with the issues. You'll go to Stevenage and they'll say, 'Well, North Herts never really committed, we had years and years and years of meetings and then eventually they walked away', and North Herts will say, 'We were never really happy with the content of the development proposals.' It is quite difficult, I think politically the county council's position changed in relation to not driving it forward and trying to find solutions. I think it is genuinely true that the form of development that came forward in the planning application, and the issues that that raised in terms of trying to get the right infrastructure in there meant that the county council withdrew its support for the development on a technical basis. We could never quite get the developers to a position where we felt we needed to in terms of the sustainability of the overall scheme.
- DC Would it be fair to say that county councils – we had the Structure Plans, then the regional system, where the county councils were very much involved – now it seems that they've been somewhat side-lined or left out of the strategic spatial planning process?
- SP We are side-lined. It was 2004, Structure Plans gone, 2008 we had the changes to sub-regional planning where it was decided that the initial input should come from the strategic planning authorities. We had a statutory role in terms of taking the initiative there and then 2008 and the changes to Regional Spatial Strategies from Regional Plans effectively and the RDA taking a far stronger role in the development of the overall Plan. We've really been side-lined since that point.
- DC Maybe next year, with a change of government the cycle will repeat again?
- SP Ha ha ha! Going back to where we are, the Localism Act system based on the District Plan being the unit of plan-making in the country and no statutory role for us in planning. To be honest, the fact that there's any resource left here at all which could be badged as strategic planning is almost

- due to the respect Members have for me, they could have stripped it out and lots of other authorities have done. For a variety of reasons we can't play a strategic role in the county as of right, we can only play a role if we're invited in by the districts, and we haven't been invited in. But we still play a leading role in strategic planning issues outside of the county, so districts look to us to take the lead on things like aviation, the airports, the London Plan, so that's the reason that we've retained a little bit of the strategic planning resource.
- DC Under the previous regional system, the county council was very much involved housing targets, and coming to those figures?
- SP Yes, exactly. The way the system was meant to work, obviously different regions operated in different ways, in the first instance our Regional Assembly would turn to the county and the county groupings of authorities and say, 'What are you going to put on the table, what's your vision?' We weren't particularly good at that I've got to say, the county as a whole has always been ambivalent about growth and the impacts that that would have. But we were very heavily engaged in the discussions.
- DC Ok, the other main part of my work is the Local Enterprise Partnerships, which of course are supposed to take up the mantle of strategic planning. How are things going with the LEP? I've tried to get in touch a number of times without success but I'll keep trying...
- SP Try in April, because they're so snowed under in terms of their SEP [Strategic Economic Plan]. Well, we've obviously got a county based LEP, which makes life in some ways a lot easier, in as much as you're not trying to work with a number of other geographies. It's exactly the same as the county boundary. The county council has been instrumental in the establishment of the LEP, in so far as we funded it and in fact the staff it has got was our Economic Development Unit.
- DC There are around ten full-time staff, something like that?
- SP Well, there won't be as many as that, they're cutting back so it will be about six I think.
- So, the county council put up a lot of money, gave its Economic Development Unit effectively to the LEP and basically supported the initiative. But I think, and I don't want to put words in the mouths of the LEP, the LEP has got a clear idea of what their role should be. Obviously the business component of the LEP, it's something like three public sector representatives and seven business people. Their remit is basically economic development, economic growth and bringing what businesses can do to influence investment...
- DC Another way to put that is to say that spatial planning is some way down the list...
- SP Yep, they don't want to do it.
- DC One of the early documents the LEP produced, I think near the end of it, there's something very bland along the lines of, 'We want to see the county develop in a sustainable way'...
- SP Yes, exactly. The Chairman of the LEP, John Gould, he's like, 'No, we're business, we want to talk about growth, economic development, getting the right conditions for that and there are other people who are better placed, better resourced, who have got far more skills and experience and so decisions about quantities of housing growth should be the remit of the local authorities.' The feedback that they've had on the draft LEP SEP has been, 'Great analysis, not a bad idea in terms of where you want to go in terms of the economy, but you, LEP, should be pushing the housing agenda in Hertfordshire and getting more houses built.' The LEP have basically gone, 'What? So you tell me everything that I'm here to do in terms of the analysis is fine, but you want me to do something else entirely, which you've taken the machinery away yourself.'
- DC So the phrase 'West of Stevenage' is pretty much taboo at the LEP then?
- SP Well, what the LEP would say is, 'If the authorities come to the table, and they want to grow and they want to discuss with us how we can support them, then of course we'll look to influence government about investment or doing that sort of joining up. The LEP has got no stomach at all for promoting levels of growth. I

- think it was very much a case that their strategy, their vision was very much on the basis of, 'We want an economic vision for the future of Hertfordshire that's not based on shedloads more jobs at any cost'. Hertfordshire's strengths looking forward, the types of sectors that have the potential for growth means that we want to retain a good environment. We've got high skills levels, we need to build on that. We want to concentrate on increasing the GVA per head, rather than just total GVA at any cost, and we want smart growth because we're not interested in destroying Hertfordshire's attractiveness. So the sorts of industries that we've got, the bioscience sector or whatever, in a lot of ways in relation to the geography of Cambridge and Oxford and London they could go in loads of places but they've developed here, but we could piss off the people who've decided to locate here by just letting growth go unchecked.
- DC I was in Luton last week, they're in the South East Midlands LEP, and they were saying that, first of all it's far too big and secondly there is money there, but it hasn't been unlocked, they can't spend it. Is that the same scenario here in Hertfordshire?
- SP The LEPs have had a very small amount of money so far – it's only just got some core funding to fund its own staff – the county council will still be funding a big chunk of staff time. So there's the Growing Places Fund, which is relatively small beer, the Regional Growth Fund and then finally the Single Growth Pot which the LEP's now bidding into via the SEP.
- DC Then there's European money as well?
- SP Yes, we've got a reasonable chunk of European money which is almost a continuation of the levels that would have been drawn down through the regional level in the past decade, so they've got some funding there. But the Single Growth Pot, you know, Heseltine's single pot into which LEPs are going to bid for funding, it's nowhere near the sort of levels that he envisaged, £8 billion, £10 billion a year, it's £2 billion and in Year 1 nearly all of it has been allocated, but with, it's not even a string, it's more like a rope attached to it by the donating department, and a lot of it is already committed, so it's not even new money. So it's not going to make a great deal of difference. It's going to be used and highlighted and badged as unlocking 'x' number of jobs and 'x' number of houses, but it's really by the looks of it and the feedback that we've got is that government is looking for very, very, very short-term gains and short-term wins in terms of unlocking sites that are all ready to go and are just stalled on the basis of a little bit more infrastructure money. To be honest, we haven't really got that type of site in Hertfordshire.
- I think in the Greater South East the economy pushes a lot of sites forward because the level of viability is that much higher. The issue that we have is that if you did want to increase housing levels big time and you could get that agreed politically – overcome strategic planning issues like green belt – you're into very, very big infrastructure investment because there's very little capacity left really in the existing infrastructure. So a couple of million for an access road isn't the issue, you're talking about places like Broxbourne in the east of the county, they're up for growth, they will push back, they will develop on greenfield sites, but their major spine is the A10 and it needs tens of millions of pounds worth of investment to actually unlock the capacity.
- DC Ok. To go back to the old regional system, would it be fair to say that a fair chunk of the resources and output of that system were about data collection, intelligence gathering as opposed to actually doing...
- SP Creative planning! It was a pretty slim organisation and regional planning in this country always has been pretty slim. Going from the almost voluntary arrangements like SERPLAN, where everybody voluntarily chipped in, yeah, EERA had a very small team. It did have money, so consultancy thinking time if you like which was bought in. As a body, I think you have to remember that the Regional Assembly was tasked with a lot of other things, you know, the whole employer-employee liaison thing and a lot of employment law, all sorts of rafts of things which government just devolved to the RA, you know, 'You can take care of that'. In that sense, they were slim. The body that had the clout to actually deliver was the RDA and that was a different beast. That had the people, the expertise, the money...

- DC Yes, if Labour had remained in power, the RSSs would have become RSs under the RDAs.
- SP Well, that's the ultimate irony – it's almost one of the biggest lessons you can learn from the last fifteen years in planning in this country. Every policy change in planning, in plan making has a long term delaying effect, and you really, really – rather than it being a political football, or like a tennis ball going backwards and forwards – an incoming administration needs to think long and hard before you reach for a policy change or legal change in terms of the system. It causes an immense disruption. Our district councils are being beaten up at the moment by government, who're saying, 'You're rubbish! You're not delivering, you can't get your plans out the door, what's wrong with you, you're awful'. The fact is that being a planner at a local level is almost like being a doctor in the NHS. It's been ten years of constant change.
- One thing that was totally and utterly underestimated was the 2004 changes and the introduction of Local Development Frameworks, and how disruptive that was, and how much time it took to bed in. That came in with the evidence-based approach to planning, so a new regime of plans, the Structure Plan gone, new regional plans to be developed, a new plan-making system at the local level based on a lot more information gathering than those authorities had done in the past. I mean, it's not the wrong thing to do, but in doing that you almost have to do a risk assessment to see actually how many authorities are going to be capable of making these changes, gearing up budgets, employing people who can do this sort of work. So that all slowed things down. Then regional plans were being fought and challenged, we challenged the East of England Plan, you know took it to the High Court and won, got bits of it squashed...
- DC Could you go into the details of that please?
- SP Yes, sure. We were fighting the levels of development that were being proposed for in particular the Central Herts area and our rationale was that there hadn't been sufficient work done to actually assess the impacts of that development, both in

sustainability i.e. environmental and in infrastructure terms. So that was our case, that the Plan had not adopted a responsible and reasonable approach to plan-making. What happened, and this is the way that legal challenges go, so we agreed, should we legally challenge, yes, in principle that's what the politicians said. We didn't think that they [EERA] understood what the impacts of these levels of development are, and they can't articulate it, so let's challenge on that basis. We won the case, but we won the case on the basis that they'd missed steps in the SEA regulations. You go to court and you need a bit of law that they've missed rather than...it can be the worst plan in the world, but if you've done everything that the law says you've got to do, it's not about quality sadly it's all about process and legal requirements. And the Regional Assembly had not actually done the right assessment in terms of SEA, so they hadn't gone through the process of modelling alternatives to that pattern of development and comparing the environmental impacts of all of those scenarios. So that was what we did to the regional plan, and unfortunately that was part of the 'noise' that the opposition party were hearing. Obviously we're a Conservative authority, there are messages going out to the Tory opposition, 'Look, this system doesn't work, they've screwed up on that, they're not listening to us in terms of what we can tell them about the impacts locally.' So that all transferred itself through to the entire system being swept away.

As you rightly said, if things had been left alone, we'd be three and a half years into the next Labour administration, the Regional Plan would have been there substantially, local plans would have had to have been prepared in conformity with it, and the RDA would have been pushing forward and actually getting investment and unlocking sites as they went along. So the housing numbers – obviously you've got the recession to factor into this – but the housing numbers would have been higher and certainly the plans would have been a lot further forward. But now some of them have had to stop because the regional plan had big holes in it, others, like Stevenage, just ran afoul of the duty to cooperate.

- DC Recently we had Ed Miliband in Stevenage saying, 'If we get into power next year then

- towns like Stevenage will have the 'Right to Grow' and then Nick Boles popped up in North Herts basically saying the opposite. So next year is going to be interesting...
- SP Yes, it is, yes.
- DC I read that the National Housing and Planning Advisory Unit was seen by counties and local authorities as a really retrograde step, central government taking yet more power into its hands. Previously the local authorities had fed a lot of their housing targets work directly into the regional plan. Then this NHPAU comes along and the local authorities largely disengage from strategic spatial planning?
- SP I totally agree. It is intensely political. So, basically you had a regional planning system which in the great tradition of English planning fudged a way forward. If you think about the way the system was set up, you'd have government coming along saying, 'Well, here are our population projections, go away and play with them, test them', and so at a regional level you would test them. Our Regional Assembly actually looked at the numbers and said, 'Pffft, I don't think we can do those, we just don't have the capacity, the environmental consequences are so big'. You actually had a discussion at the Regional Assembly and the Regional Assembly came up with a fudge figure which it could get agreement on largely across the region and then that was tested through an EiP. Then usually with the Inspector it would be another fudge, with him saying, 'Oh, I think you can do a bit more lads, I really think you can, but I hear what you're saying about these numbers, they are awfully high aren't they – I can see you'll never deliver them and you've got environmental problems there and there and there and climate change there – so how about I go back to government and recommend this figure, which is slightly higher than yours but lower than my original?'
- So that's where we would have been – it's an old school, almost civil servant way of doing the deal. It was even more 'soft' before that with voluntary Regional Assemblies of course. That 'soft' – government set these numbers, go away and talk about them, Regional Assemblies talk about them have some discussion and you end up with a number. The NHPAU – yeah, it was top-down, 'These are the numbers and you've got to deliver them'. And so, at the regional level these were non-negotiable. Of course, that approach just got everybody's backs up. It's a number of things: it's 'predict and provide'. What I find very interesting is that the current system of planning under the NPPF is 'predict and provide' – I've been brought up in an era when 'predict and provide' was the worst thing you could possibly do, but effectively that's what NHPAU were doing, government were getting more and more frustrated that the housing numbers weren't getting delivered, so they put in a degree of compulsion – 'These are the numbers, you're going to do them'.
- DC That's really interesting what you've just said about the NPPF being 'predict and provide'. The key phrase in the document is 'sustainable development'...
- SP But it's not, it's a sham sadly. If you take the words of the NPPF and its focus on sustainable development, you'd end up in a completely different place to where we are. The problem comes back to 'objectively assessed needs' and the interpretation of those. 'Objectively assessed needs' and ONS population projections are a 'starting point' – well, no they're not, they're not being treated as a starting point, they're being treated as, 'This is what you will do on an individual district basis, unless you can come up with the most incredible reason why you shouldn't do them, unless you can come up with someone else to take your housing levels for you. It's effectively 'predict and provide' through the back door.
- We've been wrestling with this in North Herts collectively, so much so that last year a number of the districts got called into a meeting with Nick Boles. And it was, 'You're not doing very well here, are you? Get on with it', and it was a typical ministerial meeting in terms of Nick Boles coming in for ten minutes then jumping out of the meeting. Then we had a big discussion in terms of politicians there, leaders of councils, and they're saying, 'We don't understand this, the guidance says it should be a starting point, so why are you bashing us over the head with it? If we then come up with reasons why we can't do that, isn't that good enough?' We had a subsequent

- meeting with CLG and their population expert, and again, to our faces the CLG have said, 'Of course, ONS is the starting point and you can come up with your own projections – if you come up with your own projections which say this is not the case then they have to be taken into account.'
- DC Luton said that the ONS and the CLG population people really didn't want to get involved...
- SP No, of course not, they just repeat the same mantra. Even at that population session there were Executive Members of planning who were saying, 'But that's not how you're treating it, that's not how Inspectors are interpreting it – what don't you hear about what we're saying.' What confuses me about 'predict and provide' is that this approach would have been vilified by the profession ten years or fifteen years ago and nothing is said about it at the moment. Similarly, when the NHPAU came in the planning profession just bent over really, just swayed with it.
- DC Would you agree that 'spatial planning' as opposed to mere land use planning has had its day for the moment?
- SP I think that's right. Again, the kind of confusion is, you read the planning framework and it says a lot of the right things in there, but actually that's not the way it's being interpreted when it comes to plans trying to get over the hurdles and through Examinations. The second thing is, going back to this meeting with CLG and the population numbers, so we had discussions with them about the basis of some of the ONS population projections and their household projections and there were some 'anomalies' in Hertfordshire. So they said, 'Feedback these anomalies and we'll take them to ONS'; but there was no ownership of the issue, it was, 'Yeah, yeah we know there's problems, we know there's issues', but still they wouldn't go that extra mile to say, 'Yes, we see you've got some anomalies, we'll make a note to the effect that you should have your Examination on whether those are actually the right numbers for you.' It was, 'Oh well, put something in and I'm sure that ONS will do something about it.' Well, ONS have had the recent round of consultation on their latest draft numbers where they actually narrowed down the basis upon which you could comment.
- So we couldn't even raise the things that we wanted to raise. A big issue in Hertfordshire is, 'How far back do you base your projections on?' Migration trends in Hertfordshire have been going up and down like that. The convention is to take a five year migration trend! Whoa, hold on a minute! Your population projection is done then, if it's done two years later you've got a projection like that! So you're saying that we plan on the basis of the next twenty years and there's no negotiation in terms of those numbers? That can't be right, can it? I think that goes back to relying too heavily, and again, the words in the NPPF are right, they should be the 'starting point'. Your objectively assessed needs should be a starting point. So you do a piece of work which says, 'If the world stays the same as its been over the next five years, it's likely that this number is going to be the issue.' What does that say about the future that we're trying to achieve in this area? Sadly, it's just this slavish reliance on, 'There's the number and that's what you've got to do.' It calls into question why planning is here at all to be honest.
- DC Ok, the last main area, and I think this is very relevant to yourselves as the county council, is strategic transport and travel. So we have Philip Hammond saying that transport is being damaged by the localist agenda...could you say something about Hertfordshire CC's role in transport?
- SP Sure. It's the area where there is at least some form of strategic function. I'm quite sure that the government doesn't realise that they've still left things like Local Transport Plan requirements on the statute. It's one of those things where I'm sure if someone nudged them and they knew it they'd sweep them all away. So we are still a Transport Authority as a county, we are still trying to think more strategically, and in fact one of the things we're trying to do this year, we're going to refresh the vision and strategy end of our LTP. And it is going to be our attempt to stitch some of these strategic issues together via the medium of transport. Which is a strange way of doing it, but it's the only game in town in terms of it covering the whole county. The only other document we have is the LEP SEP so

it's an excuse to produce something which does have a bit of vision about the future of the county and at least gives us a transport response to it.

DC It's interesting that you can use this strategic transport document to highlight other issues.

SP I think the debate is going to be around LEP SEPs insofar as, almost their very being will create a discussion about whether there should be an alternative vision, or whether we should seek to influence the future iterations of the LEP SEP, to take on board the conventional sustainability agenda of spatial planning. I think this time round it's been so quick, the system's almost been written as LEPs are doing it. They were promised guidance on what the SEPs should be and it's never arrived. I think it's going to be an interesting summer as there'll be a whole load of SEPs out there – somebody painting a vision of the future, supposedly an economic future, but they've been pushed to cover other things. It will be interesting to see whether there is a response by the local authorities to sort of say, 'All right, we're not required to come together to think like this but perhaps we need to come together to think like this', and plan a different level of resolution to actually get the things that we want to get. That's a hope, if you like. We've just had, ten days ago, a duty to cooperate workshop facilitated by Catriona Riddell. That was driven very largely by the fact that, as a county, we've got four districts that have got Core Strategies adopted, but the others are sort of struggling really.

So North Herts haven't got one, East Herts, Stevenage, Welwyn Hatfield... it's easier to do the ones that have got their Strategy! Hertsmere, Dacorum, Watford and Three Rivers have got them. So the discussion was, 'Housing numbers are a problem', but almost it was a kind of discussion of, very similar to your piece of work, 'We have this duty to cooperate, lots of plans are falling foul of it' – the Aylesbury Vale one which almost terrified a lot of them – so it was, 'What do you have to do, how far do you have to cast the net? What sort of timeline do you have to consider?' It was almost an exploration of would it be an idea for the Hertfordshire authorities to think of trying to work together to actually get a measure of protection on the duty to cooperate

issue in the county? Get some fundamental principles agreed that everybody would sign up to and which could offer some protection at Examination, so that if you went into an Examination with nine other authorities, ten including the county council, were sitting there saying, 'Yes, we agree with them, Inspector, and yes we have cooperated and we have discussed this issue'. Aylesbury Vale would say, 'Well, that's Hertfordshire, but you need to take on board South Cambridgeshire and Luton and whatever', but almost trying to make some form of sense of it.

You've got this geography, you talk a lot, you have talked a lot in the past, try and use this to try to get some sort of traction with the duty to cooperate issue, so you've got more of a chance of getting over the finishing line with your plans. It's better to have a plan with a bigger number in it than just be on the receiving end of loads of appeals. Places like Hertfordshire, once the economy picks up, you'll be under enormous pressure. So, that's the nature of the discussions that we're having at the moment. An adjunct to that was, 'Well, it may be worth having that work being used in terms of a discussion with the LEP, coming from an economic perspective. If the planning authorities have got a common view on some of these issues then why don't we seek to influence the LEP and its investment patterns and its influence with government as well? It's basically about trying to make the best of a system that's almost structurally impossible to work with.

INTERVIEW THREE

Participant: Senior Planner, Stevenage Borough Council

Date: 12 March 2014

Location: Stevenage Borough Council, Planning Offices

DC Could I just kick off by asking you what your initial feelings are on the duty to cooperate?

SP It doesn't work, basically. I don't think that's a particularly original thought, a lot of us thought that would be the case as soon as we saw the Draft NPPF come out. The problem is as we all know, particularly in this part of the world, people

- do not want to see new development. The public are strongly resistant to it, so their elected councillors are resistant to it. People have an expectation, not unreasonable in a democracy, that their elected representatives will mirror their feelings. So if you're an authority that wants to grow, like Stevenage, or needs to grow, like Stevenage or Luton and you can't grow within your own administrative boundaries, you are reliant upon your neighbours. We have the two largest authorities in Hertfordshire as our immediate neighbours and they've made it pretty clear over a number of years that they're not willing to cooperate with Stevenage, certainly in the context of helping it to expand or meeting its development needs. East Herts have continually said, 'No', to us, they're still saying, 'No', at the moment. North Herts – well you know the long and sordid history of our relationship with North Herts going back more than twenty years – where, despite the fact that they've had Stevenage growth forced upon them, first of all by the county Structure Plan and then by the East of England Plan, they've staunchly resisted it every step of the way. There was a pair of planning applications from the summer of 2001 and they've successfully staved off all the development plans for Stevenage West, they've successfully staved off the two planning applications. It is an example of how you can manipulate a system that is supposed to be about delivering new development to ensure that development is never delivered.
- DC Ok. Could you talk a little bit about the political machinations involved in the Stevenage West development?
- SP Ok, I shall refer to my notes. This effectively covers the history of the New Town, so it covers the previous two attempts to develop to the west of Stevenage. Because the New Town was designated in 1946 we're talking about the area to the west of the designated area. So there was a proposal in '62/'63 which was ultimately spiked by government and then there was another attempt, again at the behest of government in '71/'72 which was then subsequently spiked by another government which came into office. So the most recent scheme was actually initiated here in Hertfordshire. It began back in the early '90s – '92,'93,'94 – when the new Hertfordshire CC Structure Plan Review to 2011 began to be put together. Then, as now, the county council and all of the district councils got together, sought to identify what the housing requirement was Hertfordshire, identified that the housing requirement could not be met within the existing urban areas. At the time the concentration was purely on brownfield development. Stevenage was being promoted by the Borough Council as being a place that would like to grow, but that could only happen by greenfield development which would cross the boundary between Stevenage and North Herts DC. North Herts opposed that from the off but the county council, at that point, supported it together with all of the other districts, so it was essentially everybody else in Hertfordshire against North Herts...
- DC Right, so the situation then was almost a mirror image of what we have today?
- SP Yes, almost, yes. Essentially the role that Stevenage was then performing was all of the growth that was not being taken in the south of Hertfordshire ended up partly going to Hemel – there should have been an urban extension at Hemel but that didn't happen – and a larger urban extension here at Stevenage, which was originally supposed to be 5,000 homes. I won't go into the sordid details of how it ended up being 3,600, suffice to say that it was considered that there was only a need for 3,600 by the end of the Structure Plan which was 2011, as part of an overall 5,000 unit development. When it came to the Structure Plan Examination, the Panel said, 'Actually, we think there's potential for up to 10,000 in the longer term.' So, that was in 1997 – by that point we'd seen a change in political control at North Herts DC – the previous Labour administration had been, 'Ok, we might go along with this', to be much more strongly anti-development. There was a by-election in 1999 which changed the political control of the county council. Up to that point it had been a Labour/ Liberal Democrat coalition which had been supportive of Stevenage West. After that it was a violently anti-Stevenage West Conservative administration. So they were looking to kill our Local Plan, which we had submitted to them as we were required to do in order to obtain a certification that it was in 'general conformity' with the Structure Plan. Again, I won't go into all

of the details surrounding that, but suffice to say they tried every trick in the book to ensure they didn't have to give such a certificate. In the meantime, in 2001, we had two pairs of planning applications...

DC PA3 and PA5...

SP Yes. Basically because the development crosses the boundary you have to submit a planning application to each of the two planning authorities. The WSC originally only lodged a pair of 5,000 home applications and we said to them, 'No, you need to submit 3,600 homes applications, because 3,600 homes is all that the Structure Plan says should be provided'. It turns out that that was sound advice, because the Secretary of State ultimately refused the 5,000 applications, saying that they were premature. Then basically, you have the whole process as set out in the timeline – the District Plan Inquiry, where the county council and North Herts were arguing against the West of Stevenage allocation.

In the meantime, the planning applications were chugging their way towards the Secretary of State calling them in for his own determination, which led to a call-in Inquiry in 2004, which was the same year that we adopted the District Plan. The West of Stevenage application in there was made on a contingent basis, because the argument that the county council had made, and which we were not able to refute, was that Stevenage West was no longer needed in the new, emerging Structure Plan that was being prepared at that time. That there was enough land within the existing urban areas of Hertfordshire – something that we contested – but plainly we couldn't give evidence about something that was happening in Dacorum or Three Rivers. The Inspector said, 'Well, I haven't heard any evidence to that fact, so instead of making a 'pure' allocation as the Structure Plan requires, I'm going to make this a contingent allocation', which we then spent a lot of time and effort lobbying EERA and we got them to include a specific wording to a scope of development to the west of Stevenage in the emerging East of England Plan which ended up being the adopted version.

In the meantime the Secretary of State had refused the 5,000 dwellings applications;

he said he was minded to grant the 3,600 applications, but that was subject to a revised s106 undertaking. We'd not been able to agree a s106 because of obstacles put in our way by North Herts and the county council, so the developers had put in a unilateral undertaking. The Inspector was generally happy with the agreement, as was John Prescott, but there were some things that he didn't like about it, and I think it took from October 2005 when the 'minded to grant' letter came out until December 2009 to vary the unilateral undertaking. So we lost four years. Then the new Secretary of State granted planning permission. North Herts DC and the county council both objected and took the SoS to court.

There was no great rush in anybody's minds to get it into the courts. So, that didn't finally happen until March 2011, with a decision coming out in June 2011, by which point we had moved on from the District Plan and were preparing a Core Strategy in alignment with current legislation. Where the District Plan said that we and North Herts should prepare joint and coordinated plans for development to the north and the west of Stevenage – by this time north of Stevenage had been added into the mix by the East of England Plan – a larger scale development, so 15,000 rather than 5,000. When we got to the Core Strategy Examination it was quite clear, even before the day opened, that the Inspector had been briefed to ensure that he found the Core Strategy unsound.

DC Briefed by...?

SP Well, I think it was clear he had been briefed by [Conservative] Ministers. Stevenage West had been a party political issue right from the late 1990s. I think when William Hague was Leader of the Conservative Party he launched their [1997] election campaign standing on Stevenage West saying, 'This is the kind of development that I will never allow to happen when I'm Prime Minister' – tee hee. Some of the political discussions over the years have been extremely bitter – really bitter – some of the angriest and bitterest that I've ever seen in the best part of thirty years working in local government. There was real vitriol involved in the expansion of Stevenage, and in particular the West of Stevenage proposals. So, anyway, the Inspector said to us, 'Your Core

Strategy is unsound, because North Herts aren't willing to cooperate with you.' So we said, 'They're legally obligated to cooperate with us, they don't have any choice in the matter so you're wrong.' We took him, and the SoS who sits behind him, to the High Court. Unfortunately the judge agreed with them rather than with us. So the whole of our LDF got canned at that point. In parallel with that we have the decision of the High Court in respect of the applications, where the High Court judge said, 'Hmmm, yes, there are a couple of things I'm not happy about here, I'm sending this back to the SoS', at which point, after the best part of a year the SoS says, 'It's now been eight years since the original call-in Inquiry, life has moved on, things have changed, I want to hold a new call-in Inquiry', and of course by this point, the developers had lost their options with the land-owners. They couldn't deliver a new unilateral undertaking – they'd already spent a seven-figure sum trying to deliver this scheme, they weren't willing to spend any more money attempting to deliver it, so eventually last summer they withdrew the planning applications.

So the current situation is, planning applications: none. We are currently holding pre-application meetings with the same consortium of land owners and developers about a smaller-scale West of Stevenage scheme purely within the borough boundary. So that's going moderately well. We've paused work on our new Local Plan, because of the decisions that we've seen coming out in terms of Aylesbury Vale and Brighton and Hove, because there hasn't been any serious duty to cooperate work in terms of Hertfordshire. If you talk to most of the districts in Hertfordshire they'll say, 'Of course, it's the cornerstone of our work'. Actually, it isn't. We sit down as a group once a quarter and chew the cud about various issues, but we don't actually agree anything or even discuss housing numbers or how we're going to apportion housing numbers. There's no consensus on Strategic Housing Market Areas, for example, across Hertfordshire, but we have in the last six months been working with North Herts and Central Beds to create a sort of faux Housing Market Area for the A1 HMA, which is this green area here.

DC Would this be a successor to SNAP, in some ways?

SP No, well, this is an evidence study as opposed to a joint plan. Having worked with North Herts on SNAP, I think I would rather resign than attempt to work with North Herts again on a joint plan. It was the worst experience of my life. They didn't even have the courtesy to tell us that they were contemplating stopping work on SNAP back in June 2010. Their officers were due to come here the next morning after they'd made their decision, us being unaware that such a decision was in the offing, and I got a phone-call about an hour into when the meeting should have been occurring saying, 'Oh yeah, we're not coming after all, we've decided to stop work', and I thought, 'Well!'

DC This was on the basis of the CALA Homes decision?

SP Yes. Well, it was done on the basis that the SoS the East of England Plan and all other Regional Strategies within the next 20 seconds, then he found out that he couldn't.

DC Yes, they were Regional Strategies by this time instead of Regional Spatial Strategies and he had got a bit mixed up! I heard something pretty interesting yesterday from Hertfordshire. They considered the West of Stevenage more as an entirely new community rather than an urban extension, because there were only two links under the A1(M) joining it to the rest of the community.

SP Well, it's not linked to anywhere else. It's an urban extension and that's clearly how it was designed to be. That's how they promoted it to us when they were the strategic planning authority. They said, 'This is a sustainable urban extension'. I'd be interested to hear who you heard that from?

DC [SP Hertfordshire CC].

SP [He's] not still peddling that old number is he? Dear me. I know [him] very well, but he really shouldn't be peddling that kind of idea.

DC Ok, so these Local Enterprise Partnerships were supposed to take up the mantle of sub-regional strategic planning. What are your experiences of the LEP so far?

SP Well I think that came as something of a surprise to the LEP as it did to the Hertfordshire Local Authorities, because

- we'd all been working on the premise that it was about economic development, including the LEP. The bids that we had suggested we would like to make to the LEP had primarily been orientated around employment or regenerating the town centre here. We had suggested to them, because we were aware that there was some interest in housing delivery, and we were also then talking to the developers that if you want to deliver a larger scheme than 1,300 units to the West of Stevenage – in other words to go across the border into North Herts – that you need to build a new underpass at one of the principal crossing points. That means Meadway, which we know from the developers is expensive...
- DC Tens of million?
- SP Well, around the £10 million mark. That was one of the principal drags on development, even had it received planning permission which had not been overturned. So, we'd suggested that to the LEP, that that was something that they might like to support, and then they had their feedback from government, which was basically, 'Don't worry about economic development, just concentrate on delivering large numbers of houses, which didn't go down terribly well with the Hertfordshire districts when they were told about it a month or so ago, because the LEP has no statutory responsibilities in that direction. I think that most of the districts thought that the LEP telling them how many housing units to build was totally unacceptable, in the sense that the district's members feel, quite rightly, that they are directly elected whereas the LEP is not democratically accountable to anybody. So all the kind of arguments about democratic deficit which were used here as criticisms of Regional Planning Boards, we're now starting to hear from the LEPs. I mean there's a couple of councillors on them, the RPB used to be dominated by councillors – they made up two thirds of the membership. On the LEP Boards they represent a quarter.
- DC I heard that the Hertfordshire LEP would prefer that the local authorities thrash out housing issues between them?
- SP They've certainly made no attempt to steer the process. I mean, all of us, the districts, the county council and the LEP, all meet together on a regular basis and chew the cud. The LEP is well aware of the difficulties the districts have in agreeing a development strategy for Hertfordshire, let alone agreeing a development strategy which has much more housing in it. In North Herts you have a local authority that hasn't produced a valid Local Plan since 1996, in St Albans you have a local planning authority that hasn't produced a valid plan since 1994, in East Herts, our other neighbours, you have a local planning authority that until a month ago was saying, 'We don't have a Local Plan and we don't have any intentions of producing one' – now it's gone out for consultation.
- DC Surely, under the NPPF areas without a valid plan, it's 'sustainable development' that trumps all?
- SP I think if your St Albans or North Herts you look at your track record over the last twenty years and think to yourself, 'Well, life hasn't been that bad'. In fact, green belt protection is still very strong, St Albans is all green belt where it isn't development, North Herts is either green belt or AONB, there's relatively little of North Herts which isn't one or the other. So, if you're St Albans or North Herts you can think to yourself, 'Well, does it matter? We don't have a five-year housing supply but this government isn't helping us any more than the previous government, why don't we just hunker down and wait for another change of government and see whether they are any more help to us'.
- DC Didn't we have Ed Miliband in Stevenage a few weeks ago, with his 'Right to Grow'?
- SP Yep.
- DC So things could swing around again very much in Stevenage's favour?
- SP It depends how it works. From what I understand of it, it won't be any different to the situation that we had when we had the East of England Plan in reality.
- DC So there would still be an impasse?
- SP Yes, because North Herts would remain the local planning authority. So they might have Stevenage housing numbers foisted upon them, they might be told that they've got to

- have 5,000 homes to the West of Stevenage, but if they're determining the planning application, they can do what they did between 2001 and 2011, they can just say, 'No, we're not going to determine this in any hurry and if we do it'll be refused. We'll wait for a call-in Inquiry and oppose it every step of the way. We'll take any permission to the High Court. We'll slow the entire process down and at some point there'll be a Conservative government which will come along and be much more sympathetic to our position.'
- DC So basically you're rather pessimistic about Stevenage West?
- SP Oh, I'm totally pessimistic. The 'Right to Grow' as it's currently constructed will be no better than the duty to cooperate. The only thing that is going to change for under-bounded authorities like Stevenage, like Luton, like Norwich, like Nottingham, is if you move the boundaries. That's interesting, because a lot of the arguments that we've had over the years about West of Stevenage have not been about green belt or about any of those 'environmental' arguments, they've been, 'These are our fields, these are not Stevenage's fields, these are North Herts' fields, how dare you think that you can build on North Herts' fields.'
- DC So whether it's on green belt or not... obviously the green belt helps?
- SP Yes. They then deploy the green belt argument and all the rest of it that sits behind that. The real outrage is that we should have the temerity to want to build on their fields, which of course holds no planning weight whatsoever. But I have thought to myself, 'Well, if that's the principal obstacle, why don't we make your fields our fields, and then there isn't a problem, is there?'
- DC But then what do North Herts get out of that?
- SP I don't really care what they get out of it! I'm charged with delivering Stevenage's development requirements, principally housing, but at the moment we don't believe we can meet the borough's housing requirement within the borough boundary, we don't believe we can deliver the borough's employment requirement within the borough boundary, we're struggling to find sites to meet our retail requirements within the borough boundary, so currently if I don't get some cooperation from one or other of our immediate neighbours, I'm in deep, deep difficulty. Deep difficulty, because I can't deliver a Local Plan which is compliant with the NPPF. So we too will be sitting on our hands.
- DC This is where the duty to cooperate completely falls down.
- SP If you have an authority that does not want to cooperate with you, that will block you at every turn, that will use every means in the book, fair or foul to stop you, you are not going anywhere. What is happening at the moment is effectively that North Herts' unwillingness to prepare a Local Plan, because of the implications of that which they're not willing to address, is stopping us from preparing a Local Plan. That's all because of the duty to cooperate. If we had a higher tier of planning, or we had different boundaries so you didn't have under-bounded authorities – when you consider that, for the most part, local authority boundaries were redrawn in 1974 – they were done on the basis of the previous administrative boundaries for rural and urban districts. Those boundaries in turn go all the way back to the Poor Law Boards of the 1840s! So you think to yourself, 'Well, how relevant is it that Luton's boundary is as tight on the edge of Luton as it is? How ludicrous is it that Dunstable, obviously a part of the urban conurbation, is in Central Bedfordshire, rather than with Luton?' That's entirely because Luton is Labour controlled and Dunstable and Central Bedfordshire are strongly Tory controlled. So the politicians just say, 'I am not willing to go into an organisation with an authority controlled by an opposition party'. And that's a very similar situation to Stevenage and its relationship with North Herts and with East Herts. It does very much come down to party politics. You can sit in behind all the environmental and the planning arguments, but the basic reality is it comes down to party politics. If the will was there to make it happen, it would have happened. The will is not there.
- DC The boroughs in London are under a compulsion to work together...

- SP Yes, they've still got regional planning in terms of the Greater London Plan.
- DC So, despite all its flaws, the previous regional system was working?
- SP We were quite happy with the regional plan, because it gave us what we wanted.
- DC So West of Stevenage would have been built if the previous system had continued?
- SP Well, North Herts would have been required – I don't imagine for a second that even had there not been a change of government in May/June 2010 – if we'd still had a Labour government the situation would still have been...the East of England Plan would still be in situ, our Inspector would have been briefed presumably to find our Core Strategy sound, despite the fact that North Herts were not prepared to cooperate. The High Court would still have overturned the planning permissions and would have reverted them to the SoS, but a Labour SoS would have found a way, presumably, of granting planning permission. It would not have changed North Herts' stance in terms of opposition to Stevenage expansion, the process isn't going to get any easier or shorter or quicker and it isn't going to lead to delivery. You'll still have to go through the process of: it has to be allocated in a Local Plan, then you've got to have a planning application, then that's got to be called-in by the SoS, then you get the legal challenge. So you've still got to go through that process. Given the volatility of the political climate at the moment you're going to have another government in place by the time you've gone through all of that process. When you consider that Stevenage West was first mooted in the current era in 1994 and here we are, twenty years later, not a single brick has been laid, not a single dollop of tarmac has been put onto the roads – nothing has happened, but millions of pounds have been spent by local authorities and by the developers, either to make it happen or not to make it happen. It's just a huge waste of money and effort and it is not productive effort.
- DC Can I ask you about the New Homes Bonus? Is that likely to be a significant incentive to spur house-building in the borough?
- SP It won't be an incentive to us, because most of the Stevenage West development is actually in North Herts, so they will get the New Homes Bonus and won't pass it to us. But nonetheless, all those people in Stevenage West – despite the fact that Jon Tiley seems to think that it's a new village that we're building – all of those people will have to drive into and then go out of Stevenage. They will look to Stevenage for all the facilities that they will use but Stevenage Borough Council will not be able to provide any of those facilities because it doesn't have the money from the New Homes Bonus – that will all be retained by North Herts. So in that sense, no, it's not an incentive. I don't think it's an incentive to any local authority to be frank. I mean, what happened with the NHB, as you're probably aware, is that local authorities got money taken away from their basic grant which was then going to be doled back out to them in the form of NHB...
- DC Non-ring fenced...
- SP Non-ring fenced, so you could do what you liked with it, but of course you were using it to plug holes because you've already lost money, but most local authorities have just said, 'Sod that for a game of soldiers, we'll just take that as being money lost. If we get anything from the NHB, well, marvellous, but we're not going to bend over backwards to make development happen.' I've never heard anyone in Hertfordshire suggest, 'Yeah, we'll allow this development to happen because we'll get a lot of NHB'. I think it just doesn't work that way. I suspect you could offer authorities in Hertfordshire a million pounds per new house and they still would not take it. The opposition to new development is so strong a financial incentive is not going to be enough to make it happen. As far as people are concerned, 'I've got my house, I'm going to pull up the drawbridge, and I don't want anyone living near me.' Even very intelligent people who understand the arguments, 'Well, you must have children or grandchildren – where are they going to live?' 'Well they'll live somewhere else, somebody else will provide a house for them. I'm prepared to help them buy a house, but I'm not prepared to let other people's kids live anywhere near me.' They don't make that connection, they don't see the bigger picture, but they're clever enough to see that there is a bigger

- picture, but they choose to blind themselves to it. That's the scale of the self-deception that is going on in this process. The NHB has absolutely no influence on the scale of development that we're proposing or any of our neighbours are proposing, in my opinion.
- DC Could you talk about the methods that you use to calculate 'objectively assessed need'? Have you had meetings with ONS and/or CLG regarding this?
- SP I haven't personally, but our members have and our Strategic Director has. We've not had a one-to-one meeting between Stevenage and representatives of ONS, but I know what CLG's line is and I know that CLS's line is slightly different from the line given out by the ONS. The ONS say, 'These are population projections, they are purely straight-line projections, they take no account of changes of policy, they take no account of planning considerations, they are purely straight-line population projections based on trends in the last five years. But then CLG turns round and says, 'Yes, that's what we want, that's what your housing requirement is', and that's the message that they give to the Planning Inspectorate and that's why you're getting the decisions that you're getting coming out on Core Strategies and Local Plans. There is a crude acceptance that these equally crude population projections are just the Gospel, and you cannot stray from them.
- DC And of course it very much depends on what set of five years you take in terms of what the projections will tell you.
- SP Yes. And because we only have Censuses every ten years – I understand the government is now contemplating doing away entirely with them – but that's something that I would be opposed to, as I think most authorities would in Hertfordshire, because one of the things that has come out of the ONS population projections, which we've been using until the 2011 Census results came out, proved to be quite significantly wrong. Certainly here in Hertfordshire, they were projecting our population far too low. So, currently, in the Local Plan that we put out for consultation last summer, based on best advice from the ONS at the time, we said our preferred housing target was 5,300 which just so happened we could build within the borough boundary with some new urban extensions to the west, the east and the north of the town. Now we are advised that the latest population projections which will come out in a few months' time, will say, 'No, your housing requirement is about 7,800', which is a big change for a small local authority like Stevenage.
- If you go to Luton you'll find that their figure is even bigger, because they can only accommodate something like 6,000 but their requirement is 26/28,000 something like that. So everybody in Hertfordshire is looking appalled at these projections, quite rightly in my view, because the projections are a guide, they're not Gospel, and when you consider the scale of housing under-provision that has been made certainly here in Stevenage since 1980, when the Development Corporation was wound up, you've got this huge backlog of housing requirement to meet, which is wrapped up in your housing need. The development industry hasn't even been building a fifth of the quantum of development that was being built by the Development Corporation, which is even smaller than what is needed, and you think to yourself, 'Well, who's going to build all these houses, even if we identified the land?' There aren't the developers out there, there isn't the money out there, there aren't the mortgages out there, and there aren't the skills out there. Even if we allocate the land, even if we go through all of that pain – the politicians of course are the ones who have to go through the pain – unless they force us officers to go along to public meetings and justify proposals, which they quite often do – how is this ever going to happen?
- The gap between what the government says and reality is just getting ever further and further apart. They're living in a fantasy world entirely of their own creation. I'm not making this up, and I'm not making a rude assertion, but all of the planning officials at CLG are not planners. None of them are planners. I went to a presentation, it must have been about two-and-a-half/ three years ago now, organised by CLG to talk about population, it was actually about neighbourhood planning in truth. There were several young members of the planning team there – who were all remarkably senior for such young planners

- and the person who was in charge opened the day in front of a room full of qualified town planners from local authorities all over the UK by saying, ‘I’m the Senior Planner yadda yadda, I don’t have any planning qualification, I’ve never worked in planning, I’ve never worked in a local authority’. And then proceeded to tell us what we were expected to do. I thought to myself, ‘What kind of authority do you carry when you are not a qualified planner, you patently don’t understand the issues, you’ve never worked in a local authority, and you know nothing about the subject you’re talking about?’ And because they then make these naïve assumptions that population projections are the Gospel you end up in the situation that we’re currently in.
- My suspicion is that plan-making in the UK is about to grind to a total halt, because local authorities will look at the figures that they’ve been given and they’ll say, ‘These are totally undeliverable, they’re politically unacceptable, they’re poison, why on earth would we want to go close to this’. I suspect that most local planning authorities will dig their heels in, cross their arms and say, ‘You want us to do something, you change the population projections’.
- DC Yes, the previous fall-guys for housing targets would have been the regions...
- SP Yes, but I think the regions would have acted as a powerful lobby to go back to government and say, ‘You can’t use population projections in this crude fashion, but because the government has, quite cleverly, done away with the regional bodies, what have you got, three hundred and odd local planning authorities, all of them small, and the government can just say, ‘Well, you’re just small, you’re not important, I’m not listening to you’. That’s exactly the message that’s coming out of the meetings that CLG and ONS officials have had with elected members and with senior officers here in Hertfordshire. Basically they’re saying, ‘Yes, it’s a terribly interesting idea, but, you know, so what?’
- DC You said something briefly earlier about disagreement over Housing Market Areas. How do you go about delineating these important boundaries? Is it a case of an external consultant coming in?
- SP Well, what you’ve got here are the local authority boundaries, and these are the Housing Market Areas that were identified by one firm of consultants. Now, that firm of consultants have worked for Luton, Central Beds and North Herts. They’ve also worked for some others elsewhere in Hertfordshire. They haven’t worked for us, but we have agreed with North Herts and Central Beds that that is a Housing Market Area. So the three of us are talking about how we identify and then satisfy the needs generated in the Stevenage and A1 corridor Housing Market Area. There is no such consensus anywhere else in Hertfordshire.
- DC But there are a number of SHMAs that have been written across Hertfordshire?
- SP But they are all written on district boundaries. So they’re either whole districts or multiples of districts.
- DC Surely that defeats the purpose of genuine Housing Market Areas which cut across administrative boundaries?
- SP That’s my view, but I cannot persuade the rest of my colleagues in Hertfordshire that that is right. East Herts, for instance, have done a Strategic Housing Market study for East Herts district, and then they’ve simply apportioned that figure to the different HMAs. So they haven’t done a SHMA for the Cheshunt corridor, for the Harlow corridor, for Welwyn Garden City, they haven’t been partners thus far for the work we’ve been doing with North Herts and with Central Beds. They’ve simply said, ‘Yeah, we’re not really terribly interested’, because from their perspective why would you bother, it’s all far too difficult. People don’t want to learn the lessons which are coming out of decisions like Aylesbury Vale and Coventry. What they want to do is pretend that it’s not happening, and then they’re slowly coming to a realisation that, ‘Oh my God, what the hell do we do?’ But a lot of them, like Central Beds, are still pressing on. A lot of them, like East Herts, are still pressing on, despite the fact that they’ve done no work on Functioning Economic Market Areas, they’ve not done any genuine work on SHMAs, they’ve not done genuine green belt reviews or any of the basic work that you would expect to find underpinning a modern Local Plan. They’ve basically just put the blinkers on, ‘This is what we’re going

- to do, this is a spatial strategy that we can sell to our politicians, and it doesn't really matter whether there's an evidence base to underpin it or not, because I'd rather go ahead with something, rather than go ahead with nothing'.
- DC Last year Stevenage undertook a strategic review of its green belt – although you don't have a significant amount of green belt...
- SP We did, which also looked at bits of the green belt in North Herts and East Herts around us, because, as you say, we've got so little and the quantum of development we require would entail roll-back of the green belt in North and/or East Herts.
- DC Did you get cooperation on that review from your neighbours?
- SP No. We offered them the opportunity right at the outset, 'Do you want to come in, do you want this to be a joint study?' And both sets of officers said, 'No, we're not prepared to touch this with a barge-pole. If our members ever found out that we were involved in this, they will crucify us, so we're not getting involved in this.' We got no comments from either of them when we published the methodology. We haven't had significant comments back from them since we published the results of the green belt study and our proposals last month in our Local Plan. I mean, plainly, they've both said to us, 'We don't accept the findings of your green belt study', but they've not challenged them in the sense that they've actually said, 'This methodology was wrong, that part of the study was wrong', they just don't like the findings, although, interestingly, both of them claim that they are doing their own green belt reviews in-house, which come to different conclusions which suggest that there's no need to roll-back the green belt around Stevenage. At least we went through the motions of hiring external consultants to do it, they've not even had that fig-leaf.
- DC That's interesting. The last main area I'm interested in is the transport and travel implications, first of all at the site level at West of Stevenage.
- SP Ok.
- DC I know there was a lot of disagreement between the Harrison Webb model used by the county council and the WSC's Local Model, can you say something about the transport implications of the proposed development?
- SP That's an area I know relatively little about. I should say I wasn't involved in the determination of the West of Stevenage planning applications, but all of the staff who were are no longer here. So I know about it from the Local Plan side primarily. I've picked up bits and pieces about what happened on the planning applications side over the years, so I can't speak in-depth about the transport side of things. But yes, you're quite right, there was quite strong disagreement between the county council and the Consortium's transport consultants over what was being proposed in terms of transport mitigation. My understanding is that the developers were suggesting quite high, one might almost say heroic, levels of modal shift in order to make the development 'stack up'. However, although the Inspector heard all these arguments at the call-in Inquiry, and there's a lengthy Report from him which discusses all the issues, and transport was not one of the issues where he said, 'I side with the county council'. So, for the county council to still be saying, and I know they're still saying, 'It was all wrong, it was a bodge, guv'nor, you can't make this work', doesn't stack up, because an independent Inspector said that they were wrong and the developers were right.
- DC I read somewhere that Stevenage were allegedly using West of Stevenage as a means to achieve Unitary Authority status. Could you comment on this please?
- SP That's an argument that's always been thrown at us.
- DC How would that even work? How would building a new development at West of Stevenage, would that take you above a certain threshold?
- SP It would be fair to say that our members do have aspirations, irrespective of any arguments which might be based on population projections. They have aspirations to be the size of about 100,000 to 120,000...

- DC From a current population of...?
- SP Currently we're about 82,000. So they believe that a town of 100,000 to 120,000 will be more self-sustaining, it will be able to support a range of facilities which Stevenage currently is not, it would act as a genuine anchor for this part of northern Hertfordshire. I think that, if push came to shove, and you asked my members, 'Would you like to be free of the shackles of Hertfordshire CC', I've no doubt that they would say, 'Yes, absolutely, we'd love to embrace that', but no, none of them have ever said to me that they want to be a Unitary Authority in those terms, and of course, as you've identified, the threshold for becoming a UA has tended to shift over the years. If you look at the UAs that were being created under local government reorganisation under the Labour government, the thresholds seemed to shift from about 150,000 to about 250,000 and by the time they left office and the process ended, you were up to about half a million, 700,000, which is why you ended up with sort of 'unitary counties' in some parts of the country, which, to my mind, makes no sense whatsoever. It's a completely irrational basis for a Unitary Authority in my experience, I've worked in a Unitary Council. So no, I don't think that is a fair accusation, but if you'd said that Stevenage members want Stevenage to be a city, that they want it to be a significantly bigger place than it is today, that's absolutely true, and that's something that's always been violently resisted by all of our neighbours.
- DC I'd just like to tidy up a couple of small matters before we finish.
- SP Sure, that's ok, go ahead.
- DC Under the old regional system, was there a big difference in the involvement of local authorities when the National Housing Planning Advisory Unit came into operation in terms of setting housing targets?
- SP I remember that there was something of a furore at the time when it was proposed that they should be abolished. I think there probably is a need for a more informed and intelligent understanding at central government level of what population projections mean, and how they can be

applied and used, and their relationship to household numbers and their use in the planning process. Which perhaps the [NHPAU] would have provided in the old days. There seems to be a level of ignorance/arrogance at central government level at the moment, which just says, 'Take the population projection levels as they are, stop whinging, just start building the number of houses that it tells you to build. If you want to build lots more houses than that, whoop-de-do, we'll be foursquare behind you.' I mean, it's just fantastical, that the government, and I mean it was equally true of the Labour government before them, attempting to face in two entirely different directions simultaneously. One is, 'Let's not build on green belt and maintain greenfield sites, but in parallel with that, let's build lots of houses.' I don't see how you square that away, to be frank.

Until that dichotomy is addressed in central government guidance and the advice they hand down to local authorities, I really don't see that this problem is going to be resolved. You can tinker with 'Right to Grow', duty to cooperate, you can call it whatever name you like, but until you resolve the advice that is coming down to local authorities and you can establish a reasonable and realistic and deliverable level of housing numbers for local authorities to provide, which is to some extent what the regional tier of planning used to provide, we're going nowhere. Plan-making these days is so difficult as to be almost impossible. It's significantly changed since I first came into local planning. It used to be quite an enjoyable and a relatively simple straight-line process. Nowadays you're expected to know everything about everything and you're expected to be able to square the circle and you're expected to be able to shove a square peg into a round hole simultaneously. It's no wonder that so many of my colleagues are now retiring early, having nervous breakdowns, leaving the profession – I don't blame them.

INTERVIEW FOUR

Participant: Senior Conservative Party Local Councillor, North Herts District Council

Date: 13 March 2014

Location: Councillor's home, Codicote

- DC My research is basically about the duty to cooperate, in particular how it relates to strategic spatial planning issues like new housing development and transport. Could you just outline to me your initial feelings on the duty to cooperate, as a politician?
- SC Well, I think it's essential that, when you're doing planning, you take into consideration the whole area, because we don't actually have spatial plans as such now, we have local plans and they have to fit together. Where Housing Market Areas cross boundaries, which they do all the time, then yes, it is very important there. And it's not new either, we have always consulted with neighbouring authorities on planning matters and on strategic matters like transport, and we work together. Hertfordshire is particularly good at this I think, because we have ten local authorities and the county council, and in terms of planning, particularly, we've had joint meetings, forums, for years. So Hertfordshire Infrastructure and Planning Panel is the member group, and then the Herts Planners' Group which is the officers' group. So that's being going on long before duty to cooperate. So duty to cooperate is nothing new. We also have to work across county boundaries, so in North Hertfordshire we work with Central Bedfordshire and Luton, we do have a small boundary with Uttlesford in Essex, but it's a few hundred metres so it doesn't actually... Cambridgeshire is the other one of course, we have a very close relationship with parts of Cambridgeshire, in particular Royston. So the idea of duty to cooperate is nothing new.
- What is new is the legal test that's being put in place around duty to cooperate. I think that what's becoming clearer now is that duty to cooperate is a bit of a misnomer. It's not really what it's about. What it's about is shared market areas, so if one authority needs more houses than it's got capacity for then it looks around to the others, and that's not about cooperation – ok, it's partly about cooperation – it's a bit more specific than that, so I think that's become very clear lately.
- DC Ok. Obviously the particular development that has caused a lot of conflict over the years is West of Stevenage.
- SC No, completely wrong! Absolutely wrong! West of Stevenage is often used as an example of bad cooperation – it's rubbish. First of all, when the Regional Spatial Strategies were in place, we cooperated with Stevenage very closely. We had a lot of joint planning meetings, we were doing joint Masterplanning and all the time that we were compelled by the RSS and after Denham granted the permission, then we worked very closely. We didn't believe that it was needed, and actually, Stevenage knew that it wasn't needed for them. What it was – it was to take unmet need from Norwich and Essex and the whole – because the region was so large. And Stevenage said, 'Oh, we'd like to grow, we'd like to expand, we'll take some extra housing – we haven't got anywhere to put it, so we'll put it in North Hertfordshire.' We didn't support that idea because, at the time, it wasn't required. On the specifics of the west of the A1(M) site, the developers, instead of negotiating a s106 Agreement, put forward a Unilateral Undertaking, which wasn't fit for purpose. It would not have provided sufficient infrastructure, it meant that they put some money over, but then it was up to the county to build the schools. Well, if the money they put over wasn't enough, the county would have to make up the shortfall. So, it was never fit for purpose, and that was the reason we objected to it. We withdrew from SNAP, which was the joint working party, we never cancelled it, we never stopped, we simply said, 'We won't progress this any further until the uncertainties have gone.'
- DC I was in Stevenage yesterday speaking with Richard Javes, and he said that SNAP came to a very abrupt end, it was a case of North Herts not turning up to a meeting and phoning an hour later to say, 'We're not doing this anymore.'
- SC Well...essentially, the moment that we could see that we were no longer compelled to do it, because we didn't think it was the right thing to do, we said, 'We'll just stop work on this, because we don't want to put effort into stuff that might not go anywhere.' And it hasn't done so far, so all those resources can be put into other things, which they have been. So it was the right decision to make, and, also at the time, Stevenage clearly wasn't meeting their own

- 'objectively assessed needs' to use the jargon and they've since done their own study and agreed that they don't require it. So, they have no need for it, it would be completely additional to their needs. Now, they may have aspirations, and that's up to them or any authority to have aspirations to do things, but the idea that the article that was in Inside Housing – I don't know if you've seen that one from a few years ago –
- DC The cartoon depicting the fight across the hedge!
- SC Yes, I've got it up on my wall [chuckles]...
- DC So it wasn't like that then?
- SC No, journalistic fun. [SC, Stevenage] and I have a very good relationship and we meet regularly. In fact, I was over there a few weeks ago. We are continuing that dialogue. What sites will be put out – the west of the A1(M) has come back in, from a different consortium, with a different plan, and it's being considered. Having said that, clearly we recognise that, were that site to be developed, the particular bit of land that's in North Hertfordshire would not be deliverable if it wasn't done in conjunction with the Stevenage side. So, should that be one of our chosen sites – and we haven't declared our chosen sites yet – but were that to be included, it is certainly in the candidate list, then we would want to do some joint masterplanning with Stevenage. But the developers, of course, would have to prove that it was deliverable, and that includes a tunnel under the A1, which doesn't come cheap. Now with all the questions on viability, my fear would be that they say, 'Oh, we can develop this, but you won't get any affordable housing there,' because all the money would have gone into a tunnel under the A1. Well that doesn't really meet anybody's needs.
- DC Could you talk a little bit about the Local Plan? There hasn't been an updated Local Plan in North Herts since 1996.
- SC No, well we did go out with a draft Core Strategy but we had to withdraw that when there were changes of rules and changes of government. At the moment though, and this is where the duty to cooperate is working very well – it's Luton. Because we don't have any requirement from Stevenage, we've met with them and they've made it very clear from their published figures that they can meet all their unmet need within their boundaries, based on current figures. We have looked to Luton, and Luton is the reason. We were going to publish our Local Plan in January, and the reason we didn't is clearly in the Cabinet Reports. There were two reasons, one we wanted to understand what the implications of the judgment on Castle Point were going to be – you're familiar with Castle Point? –
- DC Yes.
- SC So the confirmation was, greenbelt is greenbelt and, as long as you've got a Local Plan or are working towards one, then greenbelt stays as greenbelt until you've done your greenbelt review. So that was one of the reasons we delayed, but the other one was Luton's need, and Luton have been recalculating the numbers that they were assigned by the ONS. We've had meetings with DCLG, they've had meetings with DCLG. We're expecting them to come out any day now with a revised number, which we are confident will be lower than the ONS numbers and that they will have the back-up evidence to support that. Once we've got that number, then we can start working with Central Beds, with Luton, with Aylesbury Vale, with all the other local authorities, St Albans, Dacorum, even as far away as East Herts, Bedford...
- DC That's what Luton were saying, it's difficult to know how far away you need to go under the duty to cooperate...
- SC No, and the further out you go, the less...
- DC The 'ripple effect'...
- SC Yes, and it will be there, because Luton is a very unusual case in that, its growth over the last thirty years particularly has been largely through immigration and it's a 'port' where people come in. We think about ports as being, you know, around the coast but this is a port. So people come in there, and the first thing they're going to do, they're going to stay. But then they'll start to migrate out, and the next generation – we're now into the next generation – will also move out. So a first generation may come in, they have a family, that family grows up, they go to university in Bristol. Well, they

- may like to stay in Bristol! Or perhaps they may find that they have links that go up to Northampton, or Bradford, or Glasgow! And so, that one off effect has changed migration over the last thirty years. New migration coming forward is much more from the European Union and they're not so attracted to Luton, because that's not their natural place. They tend to go somewhere else. So all these things Luton are aware of and they're doing their sums there. So, once we've got that number, we will then sit down and basically carve up the cake and say, 'Ok, Luton, you've got this, and we'll check that' – and we think that they will be able to squeeze in a bit more than what they've said they can –
- DC They mentioned a figure of 6,000...
- SC Yeah, they might be able to...you put a few more, they've got height, they're a town, there's no reason why they can't go up a bit. Look at some of their industrial areas and say, 'Well, do you really need all that empty land there?'
- DC They're convinced that they do need it all...
- SC Well, there's a bit of discussion to be had there, but at the same time, we certainly accept that we've got two numbers to meet. We've got our own numbers and we've got 'x' and 'x' is the unmet need from Luton. We will contribute towards that. We will not solve their problem, and I doubt that all the authorities around, joined together, will solve the problem. There will still be some unmet need, that's just the nature of planning, that you can never be that precise. What we've got to do is ensure that we can meet the need for the next five years, and have that as a rolling five year programme, because actually in twenty years' time, who knows what the situation will be then? So we need to be solid on the five years, pretty solid on the next five years and then the last five years, we can say, 'We've got ideas for there, but of course we will address those ideas as we come closer.' I'm quite confident that working with Luton, and with Central Bedfordshire and with the other local authorities...
- DC So the Stevenage situation is closed for the moment, as far as you're concerned?
- SC Well, at the moment Stevenage have no requirement for expansion into North Herts, because they have no requirement that they can't meet. There will be new figures coming out, they're always coming out round about October when we're expecting the next release of ONS figures. Who knows what they'll say? Maybe they'll say that Stevenage does have some unmet need. If we've published our Local Plan by then, clearly we'll have to look at it and say, 'Is there anything in reserve?' There may be some sites which we don't want to develop, we don't think they're the best to be developed, we don't think they're necessary to be developed, but they could be brought forward if they were actually required. Again, it's the unmet need, and Stevenage can certainly meet its unmet need for the next five years. It may be the five years after that, and the five years after that, it starts to look like it.
- We're only one, of course, bordering Stevenage. There's also East Herts. It's the same thing again though – to meet Stevenage's unmet need, should there be any, there isn't necessarily the assumption that it has to be immediately adjacent to Stevenage, and if it is adjacent to Stevenage it doesn't have to be to the west of it. It may be that there is a better solution somewhere else because it will deliver affordable housing.
- DC That's interesting, but surely if people are directed to a wholly different area it no longer counts as Stevenage's unmet need?
- SC But that's what migration is – what unmet need is! Everything outside Stevenage is not Stevenage. When people look around, they do migrate. Codicote, the village you're in now, has got nowhere near enough houses for its youth to live in, so they migrate out. My children all live in Hitchin. It's a different scale, but it's the same issue. So the answer is, yes, we could grow Codicote to accommodate it, but actually it's probably better to, it's more efficient, it's more sustainable, it's more cost effective to grow Hitchin a little bit. Because it's a tiny little growth on Hitchin, rather than a massive one on Codicote. Now, they're just examples to show that I don't believe that it is necessary, and I don't believe the NPPF or the guidelines require you to have the unmet need directly adjacent. I'm not saying it's not appropriate – it may well

- be – but the sites have to be looked at and assessed, particularly if there's a sustainable site ten miles away which may be much better to bring forward than a SSSI adjacent, for example.
- DC You've had meetings with ONS and CLG population experts. What came out of those meetings?
- SC The ONS people are very clear that ONS figures are projections, they are not targets, and they are projections based on history. Of course, what we've got to do is meet targets based on the future, and there is the problem. You can look at your ONS figures, and they will give you one story, or you can look in your crystal ball and that will give you another one. All DCLG is saying is, 'You can't ignore the ONS figures, they should be your starting point', but they're not a magic number! If you think that your needs are going to be higher (or lower) then fine, as long as you can come up with the evidence base, that's ok.
- DC These ONS numbers seem to be important to the Inspectors...
- SC But they're not! The Inspectors have been told very clearly that the ONS numbers are projections, not targets. Now, it would appear from the early cases that some Inspectors appeared to treat them as targets, but that's because there was no evidence to show them that they weren't. You can't just say, 'The ONS figure is 10,000 but we're going to do 8,000' and end it there, that doesn't work. In that case I would expect the Inspector to throw it out, or go back and say, 'No, go back and do it again.' But if you said, 'The ONS figures are 10,000 but we can do 8,000 and the reason is because we actually built a new 2,000 settlement, so that's distorted the figures.' And if you build a new settlement – 3,000 houses, 4,000 houses – that is going to be a one-off growth. If you then project against that, you've got a false figure, because it was a one-off. It will have some growth associated with it, but not the whole amount again. So I genuinely believe that, as long as the evidence base is there, then the ONS figures are simply that, they are very informative, very useful, very helpful, we will always take account of them, but we will not take them as being targets, because they're not.
- DC That's very clear. The Local Enterprise Partnerships are the new sub-regional mechanism for delivering economic growth certainly...
- SC I wouldn't use the word sub-regional, I suppose it depends how 'sub' you go. No, Local Enterprise Partnerships are an excellent idea, good concept. We're very much involved with the LEP, we work very closely. I sat on the Strategic Infrastructure Board until a couple of months ago when they reorganised it and they made it more private sector. We work with them on the Strategic Enterprise [sic] Plan. We are aware that there was a little bit of criticism on the Hertfordshire LEP SEP in that it wasn't quite aggressive enough on housing, that was an observation that was made. That was a comment that was on there, although overall it was felt to be a bit of a 'beacon' plan, but that was the one thing that came out from there. One of the reasons, of course, that we can't be much more aggressive is because of infrastructure, and that's the problem we have in Hertfordshire. We have an infrastructure deficit, we've had it for years, and it's got bigger. So if we can't tackle the deficit, how are we ever going to tackle the future?
- DC Specifically, the road network?
- SC Yes, the road network is a major part of it. Education is another challenge, the schools are pretty much fit to bursting and the money for building new ones is not there anymore. That's the biggest challenge there – it's all very well saying, 'Well, we'll just build another school', but there either isn't enough land and even if there is, is there the money? We don't see hordes of Academies coming in with funding, so that's another one there. Sewage has been an issue, and water. Now, I believe there are statutory responsibilities on water companies and electricity companies and gas companies to provide all these things, but they don't plan that far ahead. So it would be poor planning to just assume that they can take care of it unless they've got some evidence there.
- So there are infrastructure deficits there, but I think road and rail are perhaps the key ones. We've got a major rail restriction in the two-lane section at Digswell, both the bridge and the tunnel, which is a bottleneck. The A1 should have been widened, it was

all set to be widened twenty years ago, all the land was bought, it was all ready to go – and I'll be political here – the Labour government came in and John Prescott cancelled it.

DC That's something that would have cost tens of millions?

SC It was going to cost £167 million at the time – peanuts, it really was, compared to the damage it's caused now. It would cost far more now – all the land has been sold back off again. So that's a huge one there, that's in our part of the country. Of course we have the M1 and the A10 and lots of other roads and the east-west links are very poor. Trying to get from Stanstead to Luton is very difficult, getting from Stevenage to Luton is pretty difficult, you've got to go through Hitchin, Hitchin needs a bypass and even a huge development there wouldn't provide a sufficient bypass. None of this is going to be done with local money, it's got to be done with external money, and we've got to draw that in.

DC That's where the LEP – theoretically – comes in?

SC Yes. Yes. But other infrastructure – we are a rural community, Hertfordshire is a rural country [sic]. Although it is the most highly populated of the Shire Counties, in terms of density, that tends to be concentrated in the South and further out we have a lot of rural communities and broadband is a huge issue there. So because people can't work at home, or can't work locally, businesses are moving out and so there's a lot more commuting. If we had proper broadband, proper superfast broadband across the county...

DC That would have an impact on travel patterns?

SC A huge impact, it would reduce the journeys massively. Companies could work more locally, people could work more locally from home, and it's got worse because more and more people are logging on to the network. So infrastructure is a big issue which the LEP has to solve and it can only solve it huge amounts of money, a lot more than is being offered at the moment.

DC Ok. I'm jumping around a little bit here, but this is something I asked Sian Timoney from Luton. As a local councillor, how do you reconcile the duty to cooperate i.e. across all sorts of boundaries with your need to represent the local interests of the people who elect you, often on an issue like Stevenage West?

SC Actually we've got to represent the long-term interests of the people and sometimes – and it's a difficult message to put across – sometimes you have to see the bigger picture and the longer-term picture and that's where one's skill as a politician comes in. We have to put persuasive arguments forward to bring the people with us – that's a fact! I can't get a Local Plan through my council if I can't convince my councillors and my councillors won't be there if they can't convince their electorate. So absolutely, the people are the important ones there, but that doesn't mean they have to be a barrier. We have to educate them and demonstrate to them the need. In Hertfordshire and North Hertfordshire we are not anti-growth. We recognise the need for growth, but we want to have the right amount of growth in the right place, and that's where we work with the people, and that can be done through debates and discussions and education. They can do it through Neighbourhood Plans, if they feel that's an appropriate way. I like to think that a Neighbourhood Plan is not required, because if anyone wants a Neighbourhood Plan they should come and talk to us and we'll put it in the main Plan! In the first place, why do you need a Neighbourhood Plan? I love the principle of Neighbourhood Plans, but the practicality of it in small areas... I think they work very well in Thame, but that was a bit of a special case.

DC These recent cases – Aylesbury Vale, Brighton and Hove, Mid Sussex – they've been sending shockwaves throughout the rest of the Greater South East, haven't they?

SC No, not shockwaves! Cases where Plans have either been found unsound – actually there are very few cases of Plans being found unsound – mostly they're sent away to do more work. These cases are where local authorities have tried to short-cut, tried to turn a blind eye, things like that. If you watch, of course we watch these cases and as more and more come out we enlarge our evidence base, but if you follow the guidelines and do what is required and work with your neighbours to solve problems – and that can be in inventive ways – so it's not a 'duty to agree', but it's not a 'duty to argue' either. In most cases, I think, with proper negotiation and with a realistic attitude from all parties then these things can be solved. But it has to be inventive, the solution is not always, and in many cases not at all, the first one that is put on the table.

DC Right. A few weeks ago Ed Miliband was in Stevenage...

SC He was!

- DC ...proclaiming that places like Stevenage...
- SC The 'Right to Grow'! I don't believe they have any right to grow. If growth is the appropriate way of developing, then that's fine, and if they've got the land to do it and the land is appropriate, then that's fine. I'm very much against coalescence of towns and that's one of the concerns – I would not want to see 'Lutonage'. About a year ago I spent some time in Bradford and other towns around there and, frankly, you can't tell which town you're in, because they are one continuous urban sprawl and I do not want to see that happen. That's the purpose of the greenbelt – the main purpose – it's very important. That may be a constraint on growth, and it may well be that Stevenage – and I'm not saying that it is, but it may be that Stevenage has reached its capacity, so the next solution isn't to grow it any further, it's to start again somewhere else. That's been done very successfully in Milton Keynes. I know that, because I moved to Milton Keynes in 1976, before it was built! It had some roads but very few houses, my house wasn't built when I moved there, I worked in an air tent. But it's been very successful, Stevenage itself wasn't there fifty or sixty years ago, and before that Letchworth, of course, which is in my own patch, was one of the very first of these new settlements. So there are other alternatives – I don't believe there's a right to growth, but it may be that growth is appropriate. Ed Miliband was simply – it was very political. That was Sharon Taylor's [Labour leader of Stevenage council] election campaign starting a year early.
- DC Ok. I visited Hertfordshire County Council earlier this week, that was interesting.
- SC Who did you meet with there?
- DC [SP, Hertfordshire CC]. He's disappointed that the county council has been 'side-lined' in his words from a more hands-on approach to strategic spatial planning.
- SC Well, that's not true at all.
- DC All right, they still have responsibility for particular matters like minerals and waste planning...
- SC No, no, no...also [he] knows his job well enough to know that he's not being removed. They don't have the responsibility for the spatial plan, that's not to say they don't have a huge amount of influence, and they do. They are a full member of the Hertfordshire Infrastructure and Planning Partnership and the LEP, so, no, we work very closely with the county and I don't believe they have been side-lined at all. Of course they would like it to still be the Hertfordshire Structure Plan, that may even be a good thing. But we haven't got that at the moment, so we have to work with what we have got. I could argue – I have argued, and continue to argue – that, actually, I don't like two-tier authorities. I think Unitary Authorities are a much more sensible way of doing things. Hertfordshire would be too big as one, but it would make two very good Unitaries.
- DC I've heard it argued that Stevenage were using strategic developments like West of Stevenage as a way to get Unitary status...
- SC Well Stevenage will never get Unitary status! It's tiny, Stevenage is only 80,000 people. North Hertfordshire has got 120,000 – we're much bigger! But put Stevenage and North Hertfordshire and East Hertfordshire together, perhaps throw in Welwyn Hatfield – then you've got a Unitary that's worth having!
- DC But how would you overcome the political differences?
- SC That'll never happen, of course it wouldn't, not locally! You would need a reform like that which was done in 1974, when most of the urban district councils and rural district councils disappeared, and they were brought together. But that would never have happened if it had been left to the individual councils because, what do they say, 'turkeys voting for Christmas', so of course it would never happen. That doesn't mean it shouldn't happen, or won't. In fact, the last Labour government was actually doing that, they did force some Unitaries through – one of the few things I agreed with them on!
- DC You're reasonably satisfied with the NPPF?
- SC Hmmm, like any document like this it's worded such that it can be interpreted in a way that gives lots of work to the lawyers. No, overall the principle of the

- NPPF, absolutely – ‘sustainable growth’! But the key word there is ‘sustainable’, you mustn’t just go for the growth without the sustainable part. It’s interesting that that’s all there was going to be and all these thousands of pages were going to be destroyed. Well, now they’ve brought more back in the NPPG website! Because it’s a website, of course, you can’t count the pages. I think that’s because there was a bit of a vacuum left with the NPPF. At least they’re more searchable than lots of documents, but it does mean that you have to consult them, you just can’t look at the NPPF, you’ve got to look at these guidelines as well. If you’ve got a fifty-page detailed document replaced by one page, it’s not going to cover everything. With the website now, I think a lot of that detail is coming back in, which is probably a good thing, it makes it easier for the planners. Consistency is important; we don’t want everything the same, but we don’t want radically different situations in different parts of the country, certainly not in neighbouring authorities.
- DC Will the New Homes Bonus play any kind of significant role in a place like North Herts?
- SC It’s very significant because it’s part of our funding!
- DC Stevenage basically told me, ‘No’, it wouldn’t for them...
- SC No, it’s very, very important because it’s part of our funding. Will it affect the number of houses we build, no, probably not. You could say, ‘Well, it’s a ‘bribe’, well, it’s not, it’s actually core funding, and that’s the thing. If the New Homes Bonus had been genuinely a bonus, i.e. it was completely separate – new money – that would have been one thing, but it’s not. When Grant Shapps first announced it, which was long before the Coalition government, and I know because he told me about it in Tesco’s car-park in Hatfield. He said, ‘Effectively we’re going to bribe you, we’re going to pay you to build houses.’ But in fact, no, it’s not that. You could argue that it’s the other way round, ‘We’re going to fine you if you don’t build houses, because we’ve taken it away from the core funding to get it back’. Unfortunately, it gets a bad name because a lot of organisations believe that, ‘Oh, it’s New Homes Bonus, so it should be reinvested in homes.’ Well, that means you’re not going to get your waste collected or something else like that, because it isn’t ‘new’ money. Now, were it new money, then yes, for every house you build we’ll give you this much and with that you can then go and build some more houses, yes that might be a good thing. But that’s not the way it’s done. The government is no longer, or only in a very limited way, subsidising affordable housing.
- DC Ok. You spoke near the start about Housing Market Areas. How did you go about defining those in North Herts?
- SC Well, we don’t have a Housing Market Area, we have several HMAs. And yes, we use consultants, we particularly use ORS and they define the HMA and look at its need. Actually, aren’t HMAs defined by the ONS?
- DC No, there are various definitions of HMAs depending on who you talk to.
- SC Humph...well, that’s a technical detail that I don’t know much about. Somebody defines them, I only get to see what they define. We straddle them, of course, we have the Luton HMA which we have a little bit to do with, but not a lot. The whole of the A1 corridor is a HMA, because it’s the easiest thing to do, if you’re working at one point and you move north you can still commute from there to there. And then of course Royston, for us, is quite a separate HMA because it’s much more linked towards Cambridge. Stevenage is really part of the A1(M) corridor. That HMA goes from Hatfield, Welwyn Garden City, Stevenage, Hitchin to certainly Letchworth and Baldock. I suppose Letchworth and Hitchin link in to a certain extent with Central Bedfordshire. But they are a bit fluid, and there are plans that the Thameslink service will go, and you’ll be able to get on a train at Stevenage and get off at the south coast, maybe even Paris, and certainly into and beyond central London, so south London, Croydon, places like that can become commuting destinations. So actually, you could argue that we’ll be linked with their Housing Market Areas because we may well work there and live here!
- DC Well, Luton said they were linked with 400 million people...

- SC Well exactly!
- DC ...within three hours...
- SC So yes, to that extent HMAs are a bit meaningless.
- DC Ok. You're pretty much of the opinion that this new system is much better than the old, regional way of doing things...
- SC I didn't say that!
- DC Sorry, don't let me put words into your mouth...
- SC No, please don't...
- DC Ok, let me rephrase that...
- SC I think that inevitably there was a bit of throwing the baby out with the bath water. It was a huge leap to go from Regional Spatial Strategies which were unwieldy, far too large, far too complicated and very dictatorial to what we have now, where if you did it wrong, there is no link. The duty to cooperate brings some incentive, but it's still, it is limiting, and this is where I do have some sympathy with the county. Some umbrella planning, some strategic planning across a larger area is important, so, yes, to some extent, perhaps that went. So their abolition was welcome but what's replaced it isn't ideal, we will work with it, we'll continue to work with it until it changes, which it will. Whatever happens, it's going to change. What's the old adage, 'The only constant is change'? But no, what we've got, we work with and make the best of.
- DC Well, that's pretty much it, unless you wanted to go into more detail into the political machinations surrounding West of Stevenage or planning in general?
- SC No, I... Planning isn't really political – it isn't party political anyway – all right, everything's political. I don't believe that's a productive way to go. When I meet with John Gardner in Stevenage or Sian Timoney in Luton, I don't think, 'Ooh, they're Labour members', they're councillors trying to do their job the same as I am, and I hope they respect me in the same way!

INTERVIEW FIVE

Participant: Senior Planner, North Herts District Council

Date: 14 March 2014

Location: North Herts District Council, Planning Offices

DC Ok, if I could just start off by asking you what your initial feelings are about the duty to cooperate?

SP It's a very different concept to clearly a Regional Strategy system or even a county structure plan system and I think the thing that has thrown a lot of councils, particularly in the south east, is that is a non-redistributive policy. I don't know if that was the government's intention or not, but that is in effect what they've given us with the duty to cooperate. So, whereas until 2010/11 we had the Regional Plans effectively redistributing growth over the place, which wound up various authorities for various reasons; they objected because they were being recipients of growth that was being redistributed from elsewhere. Now they're having to meet their own needs, and if you are an authority whose growth was being redistributed to someone else, you were actually doing all right under the regional strategy as far as most local politicians in the south east were concerned. So the bit that has come home to roost, particularly for the authorities in the south east close to London – whose growth was always affected by the greenbelt – it was a case of, 'Oh, your growth will have to go to a Mark I New Town', whatever it might be. So the duty to cooperate has taken a fair length of time to bed in, because authorities were coming at it from very different starting points.

So an authority like mine, which was effectively one of the recipients of growth under the Regional Strategies – we were taking growth that wasn't to meet local need, it wasn't even to meet the needs of our neighbours – it was to 'mop up' needs from across the whole region. We are going into it knowing that our [housing] numbers are coming down because we're effectively having to meet only our own needs, but they are still high and demanding and the rest of it. But some of our neighbours who were previously giving their growth elsewhere and it was 'out of sight, out of

- mind', they frankly didn't care where it was going, it just wasn't being met by them, thinking particularly of the southern Hertfordshire authorities, the St Albanses and Hatfields and all them. They are coming at it with a very different point of view. Suddenly they've been told, 'Well, you've got an objectively assessed need for housing, greenbelt, well, yes you've got a greenbelt but you've got to consider whether reviewing it might be the way of delivering it', and that is such a radical change of mindset for them that it's quite interesting how we managed to piece together what's going on.
- DC Ok. Could I ask you specifically about the West of Stevenage development? I've read all that I can get my hands on and I've asked everyone I've met during this past week for their version of the story.
- SP Ok, my version of the story. All right. Again, it goes back to this redistributive point. The 1998 Structure Plan couldn't find enough land within Hertfordshire, so there was a quick look around at the urban capacity and we ended up with West of Stevenage and East of Hemel Hempstead as the two strategic locations. So they got into the 1998 Structure Plan and at the time, yes, this authority opposed West of Stevenage. That was for various reasons but essentially boils down to politics, it was a redistributive thing, we didn't like the idea that we were taking lots of other people's growth. We weren't that keen on the site, because of its separation from Stevenage by the motorway and the industrial estate.
- DC [SP, Hertfordshire CC] emphasized this point, that the county considered West of Stevenage as virtually a new urban village because it would be linked to Stevenage only by the two links under the A1(M). However, Richard Javes at Stevenage totally refuted this assertion by asking where else were the people going to travel into and out of on their way to work and leisure.
- SP Yes, that sort of thing does still get quite heated today. My politicians insist on calling it 'West of the A1(M)', Stevenage politicians insist on calling it 'West of Stevenage'...
- DC Emphasizing its disconnect from the town...
- SP Yes, we don't name the town that it joins, it's West of the A1(M), it adjoins a motorway, why would you want to...? So there's all sorts of political spin like that, it's very difficult and delicate. Anyway, it was redistributing growth. Stevenage never needed it for its own needs but there was a lot of rhetoric coming out of particularly Stevenage politicians, saying that this was to meet their housing waiting list and the rest of it. Then PPG3 came out in 2000 saying, 'You shall not release greenbelt land unless you've done the capacity study'. Neither the county council in preparing the Structure Plan nor us nor Stevenage had at that point. So it took a good couple of years to do the urban capacity study, but we did a fairly rigorous urban capacity study then and found that there was actually a lot more urban capacity in Hertfordshire than previously thought.
- This has been borne out by the fact that the county Structure Plan was originally predicated on in 1998 delivered its numbers, and more, early without West of Stevenage or East of Hemel Hempstead ever having been built. In part that is because of the encouragement for the use of brownfield urban sites and the rest of it that came round, 'Tapping the Urban Potential', the Rogers Report and things like that that came round in the early 2000s. This did lead to much better use of the urban land within existing settlements. Maybe we went too far down that route, and I know that some areas are now feeling that they've had so many flats squeezed in all over the place that it's gone too far, and to an extent we've seen a reaction against that with PPS3 being changed almost as soon as the current government came to power.
- Anyway, I digress slightly. We had the planning applications in 2001 I think it was. 3,600 or 5,000 – a lengthy public Inquiry took up most of 2004. The Planning Inspector refused the 5,000 in 2005...
- DC On the basis that the maximum permissible in the Structure Plan was 3,600?
- SP Yes, the Structure Plan shortfall after lengthy evidence was decided at 3,600 which was deemed to go towards meeting Structure Plan needs by 2011...
- DC With the remaining 1,400 to come after

- 2011...
- SP Well, the application for 5,000 was actually refused, and that was in 2005. The 3,600 was 'minded to grant' because of its role in meeting the shortfall to 2011 which was the end of the Plan period. In effect, once they'd gone to the 3,600 that might pave the way for more but the big scheme was refused. At this point, in late 2005, we had this letter from the SoS saying he was 'minded to grant' the scheme. Politically, of course, we didn't like it, but Regional Plans were coming in, the East of England Plan was on its way and the drafts of that consistently had the site at the West of Stevenage. But again, it was redistributive, not just mopping up just the needs of Hertfordshire but the whole of the East of England which, as far as most of the residents of North Hertfordshire were concerned was such a nebulous area that we don't feel we have much connection with East Anglia.
- DC Yes, you moved from South East England to the East of England in 2000.
- SP That's right, Herts, Beds and Essex were transferred. We don't feel we have a huge connection with the East Anglian authorities, but nevertheless that's where we found ourselves. So in 2008 the East of England Plan was adopted and that says, 'We'll have Stevenage', again to mop up other needs from elsewhere, not to meet local needs. So we were actually given a split housing target, we were given 6,200 for our own needs and 9,600 as a footnote to the Stevenage thing... Stevenage's housing target in the East of England Plan was expressed as 16,000 dwellings, but then there was a footnote saying, 'Of these 16,000, 6,400 will actually be in the borough, the remaining 9,600 will be in North Hertfordshire.'
- By this time it had become apparent that for Stevenage to grow to the extent that the Regional Assembly thought it was useful for it to grow to, on the basis that they couldn't find enough land anywhere else, it had to be west and north of Stevenage and so, from that point onwards we started talking about not just West of Stevenage but actually quite substantial west, north and then later northeast as well. We have been looking at west, north and northeast of Stevenage since 2008 as options. I think the interesting thing between 2005 and about 2009 is what
- the landowners and people there did.
- DC The Unilateral Undertaking...
- SP Yes, they really struggled to get together a coherent package of measures.
- DC Infrastructure related?
- SP Yes, particularly... education was one of the main ones, but the whole package of infrastructure. I think there were quite a few problems, in particular the tunnel at Meadway. Tunnelling under the A1 is, as you'd imagine, a very costly business...
- DC I heard it would have cost around £10 million, something like that?
- SP If not more, but yes. So there was that. There was also this secondary school, which they'd put out on the edge of the development here, but with its playing fields essentially going down the slopes towards the Langley Valley. Now playing fields on slopes, not great...
- DC The first half it's all right, but the second half, going uphill...
- SP Yes, you'd have to swap sides each half, the 'uppers' and the 'downers'... but in landscape terms you could see why somebody would put the playing fields there, it's on the edge of the development and the rest of it. But it just didn't work, and the cost of terracing the land sufficiently to make it work was high and actually would completely undermine why you'd put the school there in the first place. But underlying that sort of landscape, land use planning side of it, it had a land ownership function in that the site is not in one ownership. It's split between a good eight or nine, if not more, land owners, some of whom are more gung-ho than others...
- DC Well they all stand to make a considerable profit...
- SP But they hadn't managed to sort out, at least this is my understanding, the land equalisation agreements properly between themselves. So whoever was getting the secondary school on their land was actually getting a relatively low return, whereas those whose land was mostly being given towards housing were getting quite good

- returns. Now that is sloppy practice in putting together the Consortium, to be frank. You need to accept that you are all dependent on somebody putting in a bit of land that the school can go on. You don't then tell that person that they have to take a lower level of profit than the rest of you. For that reason it took a good four years after the SoS's 'minded to grant' letter in 2005 before they could finally do a Unilateral Undertaking in 2009. By the time they did, we suspect, we've never been able to prove – that some of the options on the land had lapsed. I mean, options are not a public document, we don't know that for certain, but that is the rumour, and certainly that is borne out by the way they were behaving around 2009...
- DC Were they sort of desperate or in a big rush?
- SP We were not engaged to the extent that we would expect to be engaged in discussions. Ideally, of course, with a development of this size, you would expect it to be a full s106 Agreement to which the landowners, the developers and the councils would have been party. The fact that it was a Unilateral Agreement already suggests that there was a degree of fall-out between them. Our council had opposed it on principle, but I don't think that that was a reason not to engage properly in the putting together of the financial package, because whilst the county Structure Plan was in place and while the East of England Plan was in place we were able to say politically, 'This has been imposed on us from above' and we were producing Local Plans, we produced one in 2000, but had it in as an allocated site, but that got withdrawn after PPG3 came out and we were doing joint work with Stevenage Borough on...
- DC The SNAP...
- SP The SNAP, around 2007/8/9/10
- DC SNAP was described to me as a very painful process, it could have been much better...
- SP I'm sure it could have been better, but we were engaged with it. I think, moving forward, we will be able to do some sort of joint working again, be it with Stevenage, Luton, any other of our neighbours and we will probably end up doing joint masterplans again at some point in the future. At the moment, of course, I can't say for certain whether it might or might not include this particular site, because I've got a long list that we're working through. I think, SNAP as well...to be frank, Stevenage did not do a particularly good job of the first drafts. We had said, 'Fine, this is your thing, you do it', and they produced some drafts which were frankly appalling.
- DC Appalling, because...?
- SP They didn't include any maps, and fundamentally, as a planner I like to see maps in documents and it was a series of wishy-washy statements. Professionally, we were not happy with that, we wanted to have much stronger things, and we did do a lot of work jointly. Politically, it was always, 'We don't like doing this, but we recognise that it is incumbent on us to do it'. That of course all fell apart, I think it was both the end of the last government and the start of this one, they were both partly to blame for the demise of SNAP.
- DC In what sense...
- SP In 2009, the last government was in a bit of a 'slash and burn' mood I think, frankly, and we had...I think it was John Denham who was SoS in 2009, who actually granted it towards the end of 2009, I think within 48 hours of receiving the final Unilateral Undertaking from the landowners.
- DC So it basically hadn't been properly considered?
- SP It hadn't been properly scrutinised and I think it was very much a case of, 'Well, this is a planning application, let's grant it, let's get it on the books and then see what they do with it'. It wasn't properly scrutinised and that Unilateral Undertaking didn't do the job properly and we ended up taking it to court, along with the county council. It got quashed.
- DC Various elements of it were found unsound...
- SP Yes, I think we challenged it on about nine grounds, and three of them were successful, something like that.
- DC And of course you only need one of them to go in your favour.

SP Yes. The main one was temporary education facilities, which I think Jon Tiley may be better to advise you on, but there were problems with it, it hadn't been properly scrutinised, even though it had taken them four years to put together. Part of that was they hadn't negotiated properly with the bodies that would have to implement it. So that all fell away. Then of course the government changed and the new one came in and they also put spanners in the works in terms of trying to actually get housing growth delivered by saying, 'It's localism, Regional Plans all torn up', and then it took them three years to tear up the Regional Plans, as I'm sure you know, all that saga and CALA Homes and all the rest of it. In which time we did not feel able to proceed with SNAP, because we had this thing saying, 'Localism is coming in, provided you've got evidence you can choose your own number'. And from our point of view, that was a very attractive offer for our politicians, because of course, you're moving from a redistributive thing, where we were the recipients of a lot of growth from Hertfordshire and the wider East of England to a situation where we can meet our own needs.

Now our own needs have been consistently assessed fairly modestly. Natural change rates are about 6,000 or so; our old East of England target was 6,200 for ourselves plus whatever we ended up taking for Stevenage, so we thought that it would be something like 6,000, 7,000, something of that order. That meets our own needs, we're not having to mop up needs from anywhere else, and therefore that'll do. But then of course gradually the duty to cooperate has been talked about, then legislated for and with the Planning Inspectorate starting to get, as you say, Aylesbury Vale, Mid Sussex... there are some interesting decisions coming out, and we recognise that, and we also recognise the greater emphasis being given to ONS projections, or CLG household projections based on ONS sub-national population projections.

The National Planning Practice Guidance, they slightly softened it in the final draft that came out last week, but the original draft was very much, 'Well, that's your starting point, if you want to do something different, you've got to have really good evidence as

to why'. I think they have softened it slightly in the final version, but not a lot. Certainly the Planning Inspectorate are treating those CLG projections as de facto housing targets unless you've got exceedingly good evidence as to something else, and I've yet to see a Plan that gets through with exceedingly good evidence as to why there should be something else. I've seen a lot of Plans that tried for something lower, the joint South Worcestershire authorities, and Wiltshire and all sorts of other places who've tried for something lower.

DC There is quite a large difference between the CLG projections for the next five years and the evidence coming out from the 2011 Census in certain parts of the country...

SP Not for us, I mean ours have been going up, and I think the particular thing is that we had thought, when we were doing Consultations and things around 2011, we did a natural change thing, so births minus deaths. Clearly the NPPF came out and said, 'You've got to take into consideration migration and the NPPG said, 'You've got to take into account unmet need from neighbours'. When you take into account migration, ours go up to more like the 10-12,000 mark and that's what we've been planning for. We did a consultation last year which said 10,700. Just as we closed that, the ONS projections came out and said 12,000. So, 10-11-12,000; something of that order for our own needs. That in itself will be exacting for my councillors to take. It's a relatively strong level of growth over twenty years if you consider that the district only has about 53,000 houses at the moment, so it's approaching a quarter increase. So, over a twenty year period, you can understand the concerns that the politicians have and indeed the public, and we have to consult on, explain and talk to.

But the unmet need from other authorities, you asked about whether the projections have changed...yes for Luton, no for Stevenage. Stevenage, still, can accommodate all their needs within the borough boundaries. So this is where there's a bit of a mismatch between the Stevenage rhetoric and reality. They need something like 5,500 dwellings and at the moment they can fit them all within the borough boundary.

- DC I've read in a couple of places that Stevenage viewed strategic developments like West of the A1(M) as a means to achieve Unitary Authority status.
- SP I haven't heard that. Their boundaries are already tightly constrained, I recognise that, but they still do have some sizeable chunks of greenfield sites. The southern third of [the A1(M)] site is within Stevenage. They've also got a tract of land to the north and to the southeast. They aren't what you'd call vast swathes of rolling countryside but they are decent sized for a modest urban extension and they certainly can accommodate the needs for the next twenty years. Beyond that, then, yes, they might be full, but for the time being they're ok. Luton, on the other hand, who we also border, has such different demographics to Stevenage, it's much more akin to parts of central London...
- DC Yes, I've heard it described by Cllr Brindley as a 'port' – you think of ports as being coastal, but no, this is an inland port.
- SP Yes. It is a port of entry and it's a very curious town, the way I've heard it described is that it's like a doughnut, the outer ring very much behaves like virtually anywhere else in the south east in terms of its demographic make-up and behaviour. The inner, Victorian suburbs of Luton are like parts of East London – it's such a radically different mismatch between the town and its suburb. Then again, the difference between Luton and North Herts and Central Beds who border it, is marked.
- DC It was mentioned to me by [SP, Stevenage] that many local government boundaries are an anachronism. He gave the example of Luton, where there is the bizarre situation that the boundary between Luton and Dunstable runs down a street even though they are one and the same built-up area. His only hope, he told me, was that the boundaries around under-bounded towns like his would be redrawn so that Stevenage would have more land to play with.
- SP Yes, well they did redraw the boundaries in Bedfordshire of course, in 2009, but planning is not the driver of how boundaries get redrawn. I quite agree, when they abolished Bedfordshire county council, what they should have done is
- put South Bedfordshire with Luton and then Luton, Dunstable, Houghton Regis would have been one Unitary dominated by Luton, but it would also have covered most of the Luton hinterland and it would have certainly covered all of that urban area. And then they would have put Mid Bedfordshire with Bedford, similar strong relationships, but political reasons, financial reasons, all get in the way of what might make sense in planning terms, and so we end up with this thing where you have Bedford and Luton as Unitaries and then the rest of Bedfordshire is Central Bedfordshire in between. So Central Bedfordshire goes right up to the edges of Bedford, right up to the edges of Luton, it doesn't have a major town of its own, Dunstable is its major town and Dunstable is de facto a suburb of Luton, not that I'd say that in Dunstable... So I don't think boundary change is likely in the near future and we have to do our best to work together.
- DC Can I ask you about the New Homes Bonus? Obviously if West of Stevenage did go ahead, most of it would be in North Herts and therefore you would potentially receive a larger share of NHB. Would that be a significant, even decisive factor, in any decision to go ahead with development?
- SP I don't think it would be a deciding factor, and for that reason it's not really doing the job that government intended. Part of the reason for that is that it is almost entirely recycled money. If it was genuine, 'new' money on the table that was on top of our previous levels of grant that we receive from central government – although we collect council tax, most of the money still comes from central government – if it was genuinely on top of that, that would be ok, but they reduced all those grants and then took the money they saved from that to fund the New Homes Bonus. It's recycling old money that we probably would have had, had they not changed it, but we now have to work harder to get it. So it's not seen as the determining factor around here. Just pragmatically, it feels wrong, because s106 Agreements – it's a fundamental principle of the planning system that you shall not buy a planning permission – well, what is New Homes Bonus? I know they put in clause 142 of the Localism Act saying, 'Local finance considerations are a material consideration', but I don't think it's likely,

- certainly locally in my experience, it is not a determining factor. It's nice to have, we are pleased to have the New Homes Bonus, but in some ways we would have been even more pleased had they kept our old grants the way they had been.
- DC Ok. So the Local Enterprise Partnerships, they're supposed to be taking over sub-regional strategic planning. What are your impressions of these bodies?
- SP Ok, well we straddle two Local Enterprise Partnerships. We're in the Hertfordshire one, but we're also members of the Greater Cambridge/Peterborough LEP. So we look two ways.
- DC In a way does that sort of double your chances of drawing down LEP funding for different areas?
- SP Not entirely, because the LEP's funding that they receive is factored downwards to account for the fact that we straddle two...
- DC Of course, otherwise everyone would be in three and four LEPs!
- SP That's right. So when we go to Hertfordshire for things, they say, 'Oh, well, you're only getting half funding' because the other half of our funding comes from Cambridge. I think they've got different degrees of working, I'm not too much involved with the Cambridge one myself, my colleague deals with that more. The Hertfordshire one is... I think the difficulty of having one here is that the LEPs, for a start, when they came in we weren't sure what they were for. And they came in just as the government abolished the Regional Assemblies, the Economic Development Agencies, so EERA and EEDA, the two East of England ones disappeared. And part of the reason they went was criticisms about, 'Well, these aren't democratically accountable, they aren't accessible to local people', and all the rest of it. Effectively, they were 'talking shops' for whoever wanted to be a part of it.
- So we introduce a Local Enterprise Partnership to be about the economy, and businesses can be on it, local authorities were almost discouraged from being put on it. They have to have a private sector chair. Fine, ok, but what are they doing? It's all about economic growth but then as

soon as LEPs start preparing their Strategic Economic Plans or whatever they might be, the government are saying, 'Well, where are all your houses?' Well, we weren't set up to be housing bodies! They are finding their way, and I think the government is trying to find their way, but in effect they actually replaced one unaccountable, unelected setup with another at which you can level almost all the same criticisms, just at a different scale of geography. Indeed, more so, in that whilst people were not elected to be on the regional body, lots of people who went on it were elected local councillors representing an area, even if they weren't formally elected to that.

The elected and public sector input to the LEPs at the moment is weak. Ok, the public sector is not the main deliverer of houses on the ground, but we are critical to the delivery of infrastructure – the roads, the education and all the rest of it. They have got to work with the public sector to deliver, and at the moment, the LEPs – rightly, because that's what they were told to be – are private sector led. The private sector have gone into it with the mindset of, 'Oh, this might be something we might be able to get something out of', in terms of plugging something here or promoting something there. So at the moment they aren't really fit for purpose in terms of being able to take a strategic role. The government in effect are asking them to do the job that County Structure Plans did in the past, without having planning expertise, without having sufficient representation from the public sector. So we have the dominance of the private sector without having an understanding of the responsibilities... now, we are trying to recast it as best we can, but it's us working as outsiders, saying, 'Look, LEP, you need to take more account of this', and so, for instance, all eleven authorities in Hertfordshire work together through Joint Infrastructure Panels and all the rest of it, and we've been trying to increase the links between the existing public sector groupings and the LEP to get them working.

We have been giving them as much information as we can about housing growth, accepting that, with ten districts in one county, all our Plans are at different stages at any one time. So we give them the best information available. But the Treasury now seem to be saying to the LEPs, 'Well,

- if you want the money you've got to be telling your districts what to do, and the LEP actually feel very uncomfortable then, because who are they to be telling the districts what they should be doing? I'm not sure where that one's going, because the LEP have put in a draft plan to the Treasury, the Treasury have said, 'Hmmm, no, go away and think about your housing some more'. I'm not sure how the LEP will get to that, because they're being asked to do something far beyond what they originally thought the LEP was being set up to do. It was all about economic growth originally.
- DC Is it conceivable, that at some point down the line, they could be the ones to decide on a development like West of Stevenage?
- SP I'm not sure that they'll go that far. I think they'll talk far more about overall housing numbers. That's just my experience of the local LEP we have here, it might be that other LEPs elsewhere in the country are more imposing...
- DC At least with the regions you knew where you stood, all right, there was some variation, but generally...
- SP There was variation, but they had an understanding that it was a statutory duty of them to prepare a Regional Strategy which set housing numbers which had to be followed by the Local Plan, so there was a clear structure, there was a clear chain of command and local authorities inputted into the regional planning process. We may not have liked the outcome, but we had a statutory duty to get on with it. The LEPs – where's that clear structure? They've been formed, they've been told to say something about housing numbers, but then where's the legal impetus? The LEP says you've got to do something, Ok, well, we'll look at it, but not necessarily do anything, because Local Plans are now the only planning document, well Neighbourhood Plans below them, but Local Plans are the most strategic form that it gets. Now, we are trying through duty to cooperate to work together as planning authorities...the role of the LEPs is curious.
- DC Could I ask you about your Local Plan? I think the 1996 Plan is still in force...
- SP It is. Well, as I was saying, we've tried a couple of times to get new ones in place but each time they've been actually scuppered by national events changing. So we did have a Plan in 2000 that we published in draft consultation which had the West of Stevenage site in it, but that one, as the consultation closed, the government published PPG3, it got withdrawn and we ended up going to the High Court about whether we were allowed to withdraw it, it was quite a long saga. In 2007/8 we were doing a Local Plan based on the East of England Plan figures. That got bogged down for a couple of years because the East of England Plan hadn't sorted out water and sewage, so we ended up doing a stupidly expensive water-cycle study. It was something that was a strategic matter, so you would ordinarily expect the strategic body to sort it out, but there was a bit of a bust-up between the Environment Agency and the others about, 'Well, where is all this sewage from Stevenage going to go?'
- I don't know if you've heard of Rye Meads sewage plant? The East of England Plan had put an awful lot of growth into the catchment area of Rye Meads sewage works. The sewage works doesn't really have much capacity to expand, and where it would expand is a wildlife site of European importance, and the EA aren't convinced that you can actually do much there, because it's on the Lea and the River Lea at that point is one of London's main water supplies. The new river that was dug in the 1600's from Ware to London still is one of the major sources of London's drinking water. So to increase the size of an already enormous sewage-works, especially in the light of the European, 'You shall have no detriment to the water environment' directive. It's very difficult because we did spend the best part of two years looking at Rye Meads – duty to cooperate – it's nowhere near North Herts but it does serve where some of our sewage goes. So that went on for a couple of years.
- In 2010 we were almost on the point of having solved the water issues, we'd got this draft SNAP document from Stevenage – which in the end we did most of the maps for – I was quite pleased with the maps! I drew some of the maps, and they're good maps! But the document was never finished and the General Election came so we stopped again. Since then, it's been a

- few sort of abortive attempts to get going. Localism, but you've still got a Regional Plan in place, so you try and do something there but you're told, 'No, you've got to wait for the East of England Plan to go in January 2013'. In 2013 we started again a bit more earnestly – a couple of consultations last year on potential housing sites and numbers – we're hoping to get a Plan out later this year, and that will be based on, as I was suggesting, the sort of 10,700 figure from last year, but mindful of the slightly higher figures that have come out. So it might be that we review that. We're looking at unmet need from other local authorities – at the moment Stevenage are not asking us to take any of theirs. So any development we do on the edge of Stevenage at the moment would be one of two things: it would be either us saying, 'We've looked at all the sites in North Herts and we think actually that the best site to accommodate development happens to be on the urban edge of Stevenage, which is possible, or it might be that we put in something saying, 'We know that Stevenage would like to grow, we know that they probably will fill their borough boundaries eventually, whether it's in this Plan period or not and we are mindful of the fact that the projections are changed on a reasonably regular basis – more regular than we are able to produce a Plan for – so it might be that we want to have a contingent thing if Stevenage is able to prove a case, this is where we would look to put it'. I don't know if that will get through the members or not, but that's something we're looking at.
- On top of that 10,000 for our own needs, we would almost certainly need to be making an allowance for unmet need in Luton, because they have needs of the order of 18-22,000 and they've only got land for 6,000. So a fairly massive amount of unmet need. Central Beds wrap around them on...I think they've got 85% of the border, we've got 15%.
- DC And is that the way the unmet need would be apportioned?
- SP We haven't had that discussion yet. For the last six months we've been trying to sort out what exactly Luton's unmet need is – we're nearly there on that and once we've got a number we can start having the discussions between ourselves and Central Beds and other authorities in the HMA, so that also includes places like Aylesbury Vale and Dacorum, arguably it also includes places like Milton Keynes, Bedford and St Albans.
- DC Yes, Luton described to me the 'ripple effect' where it's hard to know exactly how far back you need to look in the duty to cooperate.
- SP Yes, and I think the Inspector's decision we've seen recently in Mid Sussex about Brighton was very interesting and then Aylesbury Vale – it was specifically Luton who were one of the authorities that they hadn't fully cooperated with. So Aylesbury Vale are now coming to our meetings at Luton. So we tried to sort out the duty to cooperate there. But then of course politics comes in again, I don't know if you saw the letter from Nick Boles last week?
- DC Yes, and we had Ed Miliband in Stevenage a few weeks ago...
- SP 'Right to Grow', yes, yes, that's winding up which is political mischief and it doesn't help either the officers or the local politicians, most of whom would just like to get a Plan in place. I think there's a recognition that the best way of protecting most of your district is to do a Plan which says exactly where the growth is going to go. Something I've said to our members a few times is, 'Greenbelt is only half a policy – if you want to stop growth going somewhere you have got to say where growth is going – don't just say we're greenbelt, that's our policy, we defend that'. It's too weak, the trouble is you get Nick Boles' letter coming out and effectively saying, 'Well, it's greenbelt'.
- DC That's not very helpful, is it!
- SP More than unhelpful!
- DC Ok. Just generally, do you feel the NPPF is performing adequately?
- SP I don't have too much of a problem with the NPPF, although they condensed it a lot most of what was in there, in the old guidance, the essence is still there. I have more of an issue with the Planning Practice Guidance, simply in that it's very difficult to see how much guidance there is, because there's no pdf copy of the document. So, just from a simple presentational point of view, you've got paragraphs with twelve-digit

- reference numbers – I don't fancy quoting those in Committee reports all over the place.
- DC Ok. So the last main area is transport. I've heard over the past week that the LEPs are actually quite a good forum for doing strategic transport.
- SP The Local Transport Board is proving quite effective, and they do liaise with the LEP through the Strategic Infrastructure Board, but transport does remain one of the main issues both from a public perception point of view – we always get attacked from that, 'Well, there's no infrastructure, how are we ever going to get anywhere?' The A1 is already clogged, it's already standing room only on the trains, which are all fair points. We did have the situation where the Highways Agency was effectively saying for quite some time, 'Growth in this area should be limited because the A1(M) is so close to capacity. Stevenage used to come into every meeting saying, 'Well, the Highways Agency said we can't do more than a thousand'. A thousand houses is clearly nothing compared to anybody's growth around here. The Highways Agency have now changed position on that now, but there remains the problem on the A1, particularly between Junctions 6 and 8, where there are only two lanes and it's three lanes north and south of that. So at both of those points, and particularly Junction 6 you get this funnelling effect which causes considerable delay, particularly in the rush-hour. It's difficult.
- DC Of course this is covered by the A1 Housing Market Area...
- SP Well, we assessed HMAs in our SHMA and we used the same consultants that most of the Hertfordshire and all the Bedfordshire authorities used (ORS) and they defined what they called the 'Stevenage and A1 Market Area'. We are working together with Stevenage and Central Beds, trying to sort out what that means in terms of the NPPF, working across HMAs. It doesn't include Luton, and the needs of the Stevenage and A1 HMA are much more modest than those arising from Luton, and are much more in line with what draft Plans were trying to do anyway. It's a big area for Stevenage because it's the only HMA they've got and I think officers there do dwell on it as one of the big things they're working on. We straddle five HMAs, I'm in discussions with so many other councils, so it's one of many but it's not actually the most complicated one. Luton is the one that's really proving difficult.
- Going back to travel and transport, trying to get improvements to the A1 in particular – although also the East Coast Main Line at almost exactly the same point – so both on the railway and the road there is this break-point near Welwyn, north of which is harder to get sufficient infrastructure if you're talking about transport into London. When you look at the economy, we struggle to get local jobs here. A lot of the employment movements are all about assuming that existing commuting patterns into London will continue, and if you're going to have the same proportion of the new residents in these new houses who've migrated here, so not the natural change but new migration – if they're going to carry on commuting into London in the same proportions – that is going to be more people on the trains, more people on the roads. And the pinch-points are very, very costly to sort out.
- DC Is this something that the LEP can help with?
- SP The LEP is working with the planning authorities along the A1 and either side of it, who have joined together to form a Hertfordshire A1 Consortium which is working with the LEP and with the Highways Agency to try to lobby for improvements to this stretch of the A1. Effectively it's asking the government to say, 'You want growth in this area, we can't actually pay for it' – and this goes back to what I was saying before about the way the WSC weren't actually able to sort things out between them to pay for it. It's a very costly site to develop. You need public sector money to be put in to pay for the big bits of kit, be it the tunnel under the A1 there, be it widening the A1. Once those are sorted, if you've got a guarantee that they're coming then people's objections start to fall away, and if the Highways Agency particularly are able to say, 'Ok, we're not going to use our power to direct refusal to stuff around the A1, because we know that it's programmed in, it'll be widened to three lanes in 2024, that would be fine, but we're not there yet!

INTERVIEW SIX

Participant: Senior Labour Party Local Councillor,
Stevenage Borough Council

Date: 21 January 2015

Location: Stevenage Borough Council Offices

- DC Okay, so during this past year I've interviewed a number of people, Richard Javes here...
- SC Have you been to Luton?
- DC I've been to Luton, yes, I spoke with [SC, Luton] and [SP, Luton]. Also [SC, North Herts] from North Herts...
- SC He's gone.
- DC Really? I didn't know that.
- SC He wasn't selected by his own party.
- DC Well I know he was very busy renovating his home...
- SC So he's got more time to do that.
- DC Okay, basically what my project is about is how do you plan strategically – housing – across different local authority areas.
- SC Indeed – how do you plan strategically when there is no national plan? That's a real dilemma. No national plan from which regions then have a responsibility for part of. The real difficulty for the DCLG is that, having a created an expectation for what they call localism, there was no doubt a fond belief among some local authorities that they were going to be able to choose their own housing numbers. Probably though, the housing numbers are just as rigorously applied at national level as they were under the regional system, but nobody will get up and say what they all add up to, so how do you decide where they go?
- DC If I could just ask for your views on one particular development please? The reason I originally got interested in Stevenage and the wider area was the proposed development west of the A1(M).
- SC Absolutely. I suppose the issue of the west

of Stevenage highlights one of the fault lines in the UK planning system, in that it was first identified in the 1996-98 period, agreed under the old Structure Plans which were at County level, as a suitable site to take a significant proportion of Hertfordshire growth. It went through the planning system during progressive changes when the new government came in in 1997 and it got into people's Local Plans and went through three levels of public enquiry and was found to be one of the most sustainable sites there was. This was then challenged in court and two areas needed addressing which haven't been addressed. During the course of all this, the developers, having taken out options on land, the landowners saw house prices going up and decided that they wanted more money so they weren't willing to renew [the options] at the previous price. Then of course there was the crash, and suddenly their land was worth less than it would have been when they first agreed to sell it, so not a single house has been built. In crude terms, 5 000 people who should have had a home under any decent planning system within five years of it being identified still haven't. So it's not really anything to be proud of, in terms of a national planning framework. I think it's a very good example of how, under the current system, those who object to something have significantly more possibility of success than those who want to do something.

- DC What's the latest on the development? I read a couple of months ago that there was a possibility of a new consortium of developers coming together.
- SC In our emerging Local Plan we have taken the portion of west of Stevenage that was inside the borough, which accounts for 1 200 roughly of the homes and there is a consortium that does have the options over that. They are working on it and within the last 48 hours there have been discussions between our officers and the HCA on issues such as the ransom strips that exist for entry into that area. Clearly, though, the cost of going under the A1(M) for a development of 1 200 homes is not going to be in the same ratio as it would have been for a development of 5 000 and it was going to be difficult enough with the 5 000. So, yes, it is going down that path. I would say of course, now, North Herts are out consulting on

- their preferred options which do propose a Green Belt review and this review takes their portion of the West of Stevenage development out of the Green Belt. We view that as very positive – they call it ‘set aside’ land – to meet the potential growth of Stevenage beyond the Plan period, in other words beyond 2031.
- DC If I could just come in there on the issues of planned growth and Stevenage’s needs, I’ll give you ex-councillor Brindley’s viewpoint, he was arguing that Stevenage itself doesn’t actually have that much need. He was talking about ripple effects causing people from Norwich and Essex to migrate and so need was an artificial construct. It’s no secret that Stevenage would like to grow and gain Unitary Authority status.
- SC The answer is, would Stevenage like to be a Unitary Authority – yes. Is it basing its planning policy on becoming a UA, the answer is no. The figures for growth are figures that are determined on ONS population projections and household formation rates calculated by department. Tom knew that as well as he was leaving. Those figures have consistently gone up every twelve months. The latest figures were due in December and were then delayed by government until early January. They’ve now been delayed until the end of January and everybody’s prediction is that, by and large, across the South East they’re all going to show an increase. There are always some variations of course and clearly, those figures do take into account outward migration from other areas of the UK. But those are not driven by governments, are they, they’re driven by economic factors and where people see opportunities.
- House prices drive people out of an area, economic growth attracts people into an area if there are jobs. So it’s that balance – you could say that both governments do at least acknowledge that you don’t only have to provide housing, you also have to provide job opportunities. Realistically, probably both governments, both major parties to different degrees agree that you have to try to get economic growth where you can get economic growth. So that’s really determined by communications etcetera and where industry wants to be because it’s more convenient, more cost effective for them to be, and at the moment that’s still the problem with the North-South divide. So at the moment the South East is going to take the brunt of that. And then of course you get the sheer London factor and you get the way London is operated.
- That’s a bigger fear for all of Hertfordshire authorities and to Luton and Bedford – exactly how many of their people is Boris going to house? At the moment the market situation in London is just really forcing people, average families out of London, or the children of average families out of London, if they can’t inherit their parents’ property. That’s a major factor, and of course every so often when they have meetings with the London Plan, well, it’s under constant review, isn’t it? There clearly is a limit as to how many houses he can build within their boundaries, but at the moment it seems like he’s more interested in selling them to people who don’t live in London. So that has a major effect. In one way, Tom is right, other than economically, the Local Enterprise Partnership identified about four areas in the county for growth, of which the Stevenage/North Herts area is one. I think that North Herts have gradually realised that they don’t have any other option but to meet the housing needs figure.
- DC So do you think that designation by the LEP was quite an important factor in the change of policy by North Herts?
- SC Yes, quite an important factor. Where they want to put their money, well we say ‘their’ money, although it sounds a lot it’s not actually all that much in Hertfordshire terms. And the same applies to Hemel Hempstead and Dacorum etcetera, it’s the same type of situation there. It’s a bit easier there in that Dacorum is much bigger than Hemel.
- DC Okay. Can I ask you about this ‘duty to cooperate’?
- SC Well the duty to cooperate – we have a thing called the Hertfordshire Infrastructure Planning panel (HIP), to which all the districts and the county belong. We, very early on, said that we ought to discuss housing figures because that’s what matters and then we can talk about distribution, on the basis that if Three Rivers don’t house all their growth, then somebody else is going to have to do it. Whether they have a duty

- to cooperate or not, those people are going to live somewhere and they'll go next door and then if they don't meet it, it goes next door, and so on and it works its way up the county effectively. If you took London as a starting point for it – and that might be unfair, there are other factors – and of course they didn't want to do that. That was in the days, they thought, 'Great, we're going to determine our own figures, and probably there were one or two districts that were very bullish on that, Broxbourne was one, where the leader said, 'Nobody's going to tell me how many houses to build, we'll decide how many houses', and of course over a three year period it became obvious that the government recognised that they had a problem. They think they can determine their own housing figures from the NPPF, but they can't, because the Inspector will want to see the evidence. Now, why does the Inspector want to see that you're meeting ONS requirements – because the Department [CLG] has asked the Inspector to see! So this idea that the Inspectorate is independent is quite wrong, there are ground rules under which they operate and they're set by the Department.
- DC Yes, I've heard it said that the Planning Inspectorate – because they were totally left out of the NPPF drafting process – this is in a way their revenge, the Inspectors are going out and really hammering everyone...
- SC I don't see it like that. I see it as the government using them, because they do realise that – some people tell me, some of my colleagues, say that they don't know what they're doing – they know perfectly well what they're doing, but they've ended up with a problem. They do realise that it's an emerging social problem and it's going to cause massive social unrest at some stage, if a government isn't seen to try. So they had to be seen to try and they couldn't really have ONS saying the population is going up by this and someone else calculating the household formation rate and saying, 'Oh look, there's a widening gap between the number of families and the number of houses'. I mean, it's obvious, and if it got beyond the pages of The Observer and The Independent and The Guardian etcetera and started appearing in the tabloids, they would be really worried. So I think they effectively said to the Inspectorate, 'You've got to make sure that these figures coming from local authorities have got a good evidence base'. I think this may be exemplified even more by the ex-Chief Inspector who retired last year. He was then employed by DCLG to go around and have 'chats' with those authorities that were having difficulty co-operating. So, he came and he saw Tom [Brindley], he came and he saw us. So he said, effectively their ground rule is any figure you come forward with, you don't even put forward a figure that is less than was in your Regional Plan. Even though there are no Regional Plans, that's our starting point. You've got to produce the evidence, here's ONS, here's the regional figure, you've got to be somewhere above those.
- DC But what has happened in a lot of draft Local Plans is that they have reduced their figures from the Regional Plans, so now it looks like there's been a bit of a backlash against that?
- SC Yes, the Duty to Cooperate meetings have become much more constructive now than they were. It's concentrated the mind, in that one way or another we've got to help each other get out. It's still a very crude system... why should I say poor old Inspectorate, no body, whether it's us or the Inspectorate can claim that all their decisions are right. Clearly, intellectually, that's not a viable statement. It's just how wrong they are that you've got to look at in terms of decisions. They still have to consider one authority at a time, so an astute Inspector will say, 'Where's your evidence base, have you talked to your neighbours etcetera'. You've been to Luton, you've spoken to them. Well, they held a number of round tables and we went to their Duty to Cooperate meetings. I mean, they had ten different authorities at that roughly, including Aylesbury Vale and Central Beds. And of course the other ingredient, which does have a spatial element to it, is the Housing Market Areas. So a lot more work has been done on establishing what your housing markets are. Now, in the case of Luton, certainly Luton more than us, you know our housing market area is going to other authorities who have about three different housing market areas which can be affected by requests relating to the Duty to Cooperate. A classic example of that is Central Bedfordshire.

- We've had Duty to Cooperate meetings with North Herts, East Herts, Welwyn & Hatfield and Central Beds. We've had other discussions with Luton because we have a mutual interest in North Herts, from different ends of it, and of course the fact that we are political colleagues of Luton, so clearly we do try to make sure that we're saying roughly the same things. So, 'what's your line going to be?' and 'if you're going to ask for 15,000 houses in North Herts and we're going to ask for 15,000, how would they ever answer that?' I think Luton did a lot of work on those meetings. So, the Duty to Cooperate is more focused, more concentrated, so if somebody says, 'No, I can't take any of your houses', they realise they have to have a really good evidence base for that, whereas they might be able to argue about a green belt review getting their own houses in.
- They probably would feel that they were in a weak position arguing a case for moving the green belt, which the SoS is the final arbiter on anyway, than if they were meeting somebody else's requirement. It would be interesting to see how Pickles would react to that. At some stage that's going to happen I assume, he will be faced with that kind of thing from objectors. Purely in terms of housing numbers it might work. In terms of what drives us in our planning I hope, it's 'What is the social purpose of building?', in other words it's the argument about sustainability, you know, we want sustainable developments and when we say sustainable, we want them to be economically sustainable, certainly, we want them to be environmentally sustainable and we want them to be socially sustainable. But they might not be socially sustainable, and that was brought home to me fairly forcefully in a difference of discussions between North Herts and Central Beds. To some extent Central Beds...
- DC Are we talking about percentage of affordable housing?
- SC Yes. They're quite happy to build houses, what they're not happy about is building affordable houses. But that's not required under the Duty to Cooperate. You can only insist on saying, 'Will you take some of my housing need?' You know, Luton can say, I forget how many...
- DC 18,000
- SC Yes, indeed...but they could find some Russian oligarchs, they could build 300 homes and let them off at £2 million a time if they wanted, but that won't meet the social needs of Luton, but of course it will count as part of their housing requirement. So it's a real problem, and of course, Central Beds' approach is to sell off their housing, although North Herts actually set up a mutual in terms of North Herts Homes, and what they're consulting on has a 40% affordable housing requirement, the same as us. In their Preferred Options document, in their options to the north of Stevenage, all of those they say they would do in conjunction with Stevenage, because they acknowledge that they're essentially garden suburbs of Stevenage.
- DC That would be part of their green belt review?
- SC Yes, that would be part of their green belt review to the north.
- DC Pardon my ignorance, but I know from looking at aerial photography that there's a relatively new development to the north east of Stevenage?
- SC Yes, Great Ashby.
- DC But that's in North Herts?
- SC Yes, part of it's in Stevenage, part of it's in North Herts, and there are two more developments there, one with 300-odd houses which they've got a planning application for, but they haven't done anything with it until they did their Plan, and there's another one with 500-odd, combined it comes to 827.
- DC OK, so there has been co-operation between yourselves and North Herts across this area?
- SC Well, we would prefer the West of Stevenage to come first. They've got their own rationale, so I'm not knocking that for a moment. When you do a Local Plan as you know, you go out and you ask people who own land whether they're willing to sell it for housing, are they thinking about selling it for housing, but if you get zero replies... another thing you're meant to be able to prove to an Inspector is that it's a viable

plan, you're not just putting figures down relating to a piece of land that nobody's ever got any intention of building on. You're meant to be able to show an intention to build, so by showing a letter which says, 'Look, this person has an intention to sell their land, then they'll believe you. So, in their estimate at the moment they are suggesting bringing forward the sites to the north before bringing forward the sites to the west. But we're happy about the ones to the north. They were in what Richard [Kelly – North Herts] would describe as the 'SNAP area' which was the area under the old Regional Plans. Historically, we would have loved to have seen West of Stevenage come about, but houses are houses and if they're within commuting distance...

In my view, the sustainability argument shouldn't really be affected by where the planning authority's boundaries are. If somebody is three miles from work, it shouldn't matter that that three miles starts in another authority, it's a fairly sustainable journey. If it's thirty miles, it's not a sustainable journey. You know, it's the first time for 22 years that they've actually gone out for consultation and identified sites. So it's a major intellectual step forward. That doesn't mean it's sold, because if you follow the local presses around here at the moment, all their meetings at Baldock, Letchworth etcetera have been packed out and there's been loads and loads of objections. So we'll see whether they can keep their nerve and when they go out with, 'This is our choice, based on the consultation'. If they stick to what's in there then it will have been a major step.

We think it's a good bit of sustainable planning. I've spoken to people with a planning hat on who happen to live in North Herts and who all agree that it's quite a sensible plan that they've gone forward with. We can argue between the West of Stevenage and the north, but, since Local Plans have to be reviewed every three years, if it's set aside for the future development of Stevenage, then it's still a sensible thing to do. And it does include, by the way, things like employment land for Stevenage and Baldock. If we're going to fit more houses within the borough boundary we've got less land available for employment. If there are, say, a couple of hundred people from Baldock who currently commute

into Stevenage to work and we've got employment land there, they'll be able to reduce their journeys. It's the distances that people are living from their jobs that's the important factor. North Herts have concentrated the majority of their growth around their towns. They've been very good at categorising villages, protecting those with the greatest character as there are and giving them virtually zero growth.

DC And of course, it's not just distances, it's how people are travelling.

SC Exactly, it's how people are travelling, very much so. Clearly, within the sustainability and the viability argument is the infrastructure costs associated with each of the developments. Great Ashby is an example, probably about two thirds of the current Great Ashby is in North Herts, but all those North Herts people commute on Stevenage roads to get to the station, if they want to go to hospital they have to go down Stevenage roads and clearly we would wish to see another connection so that if they want to get on to the A1(M) they don't have to go into Stevenage, for their sake and for the sake of the residents whose roads they use at the moment.

So there are clearly issues like that – schools, for example, are another issue. One of the sites they brought forward is where, under the old Regional Plan, one of the Stevenage schools was going to be moved – Thomas Alleyne in the Old Town – it would have closed and re-emerged in Great Ashby. They've now taken that site, which had been granted planning permission by themselves, because it's a County Council facility and handed it back to North Herts who are now proposing to build homes there. But, they still need a school! So somebody will have to find some land for that. The fond belief that both main parties had, going back to the mid-2000's that you could have a CIL system or roof tax, taking money out of every development and using it – well, six out of ten authorities don't think they'll operate CIL in Hertfordshire, because there just isn't any money to take out. Even then, by the time the current government got into power the work we'd done at HIP began to show that CIL would never have raised more than a third of general infrastructure costs.

- DC Right. On a similar note, could we talk about the New Homes Bonus, what kind of a role has it played so far?
- SC Well, there's lots of different views on the New Homes Bonus, isn't there? I don't think Mr Lyons is particularly taken with it. There's clearly a difference between different regions. There's been more housing growth in the south, so there's been more New Homes Bonus money coming to southern councils. Northern councils are not that supportive of New Homes Bonus. Southern councils, regardless of their political complexion, have probably found it as quite useful during this period when we've been facing 27% cuts. I think the difficulty some have got into is that they use it for revenue purposes; we don't use it for revenue purposes. I mean, some have had to cut services and they've used New Homes Bonus money to not make those cuts so deep. We've tended to use it for capital projects to benefit the community, but there is the temptation to use it in other ways. At the moment an incoming Labour government is probably not committed to maintaining the New Homes Bonus, although that's not always the way things turn out after a government's elected, is it! Whether it ever was the deciding factor in an authority granting permission because they were going to get New Homes Bonus I don't know...
- DC For small-scale developments, yes, but not on a strategic level as far as I'm aware.
- SC No, not on a strategic level. You might persuade a village if they're going to get a new community hall out of it, because the parish council will get a certain percentage of the New Homes Bonus. So, if you're heavily parished, you could see it. I won't say bribing...
- DC Talking about an incoming Labour government, I remember Ed Miliband was here, promoting his new policy, the 'Right to Grow'. That sounds pretty good from Stevenage's perspective, doesn't it?
- SC Yes, depending of course on how it's going to be implemented. Is it actually going to bring with it compulsory purchase or not?
- DC You need the compulsory purchase in order to assemble the land?
- SC Yes. If you take the West of Stevenage as an example, here we've got the reluctant land owners, all waiting to get the kind of prices they were previously offered. You've got the developers – they can afford to pick and choose which sites to develop which will give them the best return, so they don't necessarily want to develop the sites you've chosen for good spatial reasons. Whereas, with compulsory purchase, you would say, 'Ok, we'll go through the courts, we'll do a compulsory purchase for the land at West of Stevenage and it might bring them to their senses.' I mean, the whole thing is distorted by what people laughingly call the 'housing market'. But it's not a housing market, it's a financial market! You've got developers on the one hand, saying, 'You do realise that land costs so much' – they drive the land price up. So it's not in their interest to increase capacity. It's much easier to be able to pick your sites, get in, build, and get out. It's very hard to get the current government to admit what the total housing figure is, but to actually build the total number of houses that we need per annum – probably well over the 200,000 figure that's bandied about – well, the TCPA held a regional conference at Cambridge and Barritt's were there and he said, 'You're right John, between us we can't build more than 160,000 – it can only be done by public intervention.' In some ways, even though it's against their economic model, it's nice to be able to build your 160,000 under market conditions and then for the government to pay you build the other ones that society wants.
- DC That's quite an admission from one of the leading house-builders, that they can't do it all themselves!
- SC Yes, and neither party have seriously talked about how to modify the housing market, other than saying, 'Well, we want to build more, and that will bring the price down.' Well, yes it will, but clearly you've got to build an awful lot of new houses for that to happen.
- DC Barely a month goes by these days without another report on the green belt and it's a strange one because it's the right who seem to be most vociferous in calling for it to be chipped away at or even scrapped.
- SC Well, maybe we should address the five

purposes and bring it down to coalescence and get people to understand that that's the primary purpose of the green belt. When Ed was visiting, we were sitting in the kitchen of a house in a new development and the point about the green belt came up. One of the people there asked – in my view quite rightly – 'When are Hertfordshire going to realise that the best way of protecting the market towns is to have growth around Stevenage and have growth around Watford and have growth around Hemel?' The danger with the extreme right wing view of 'Let's do away with the green belt' is that you get endless 'executive estates' all over the countryside. Get rid of the green belt and we'll have ribbon development all over again.

DC Ok, so the last main area I'd like to ask about is the role of LEPs.

SC Well, you have to work with the partners you have and the vehicles you've got. Do LEPs have some virtues? They have some virtues but they're exceedingly limited I would say, and that's not a criticism of the people. They're not democratically accountable bodies. Fortunately, to some extent they recognise that. It's convenient to have a LEP that is co-terminous with your county boundaries but in another way it's probably unrealistic because we've got Luton and Milton Keynes which are big influences on us and yet you have to talk to another LEP. So if you're all chasing the same thing and you're all saying you're going to grow by 20% - well, are you? Or is one of you – who's actually going to do it?

So I think accountability is a problem. If I go to a meeting about housing growth and I say, 'Well, this is supported by the LEP', 95% of the audience wouldn't know what I was talking about, they don't know what a LEP is, so there is no visual accountability in the public's eye. Yet here they are, shaping the future. I think a lot of LEPs don't want to get drawn into housing numbers or where houses should be. They do want to say, 'Well you're on a railway line and you've got a main road going through you etcetera and you've got a good cluster of businesses so this is a good place for expansion.' They want you to then go away and work out where to put the houses. There was a time I think that local authorities feared that the government was going to give LEPs

planning powers – that all their planners would be TUPE'd over to LEPs and then if they weren't under our control, would they be working for us or for North Herts? So there was a worry that you would be taking planning out of being democratically accountable and I think government saw it as a 'bridge too far'.

INTERVIEW SEVEN

Participant: Senior Executive, South East Midlands Local Enterprise Partnership (SEMLEP)

Date: 15 February 2015

Location: UCL Institute of Education

DC If I could start by asking you about the Growth Areas, especially MKSM which you had a leading role in, and how they compare with LEPs?

SE The Growth Areas under the previous government were designated in 2004 – the Plan for Sustainable Communities – and there was a Regional Spatial Strategy for all of the regions, but also for MKSM which covered parts of the East of England, parts of the East Midlands and parts of the South East, so it was pulling together parts of three plans and having this ambitious target to deliver new homes. So it was my role to bring the local authorities together and overcome the challenges to delivering housing.

Then, with 2010, obviously there was the change of government which was very intent on getting rid of strategic planning and moving away from what was called 'top-down housing targets'. So localism was the order of the day and lots of organisations were scrapped – the RDAs went, Government Offices went, and a lot of elected members, particularly in Conservative authorities, felt that they didn't have to deliver all these new homes, localism is about doing what we think is necessary. So I think that, initially, there was a feeling of relief not to have the large-scale strategic plans.

LEPs came along as you know, following a very simple letter from Vince Cable and Eric Pickles to all local authorities saying, 'How would you like to work together? You can set up these LEPs. There aren't any

rules, they should be focused on functional economic areas. We're not going to tell you how to set them up, but you should have a Board which is private-sector led, so a majority of private-sector members. In MKSM there was a lot of discussion amongst local authorities and some of them, like Northamptonshire, wanted to look towards the East Midlands and maybe join up with Leicester and Leicestershire and basically we've ended up with quite a complicated geography in our area. So we're a slightly unusual LEP in that we have big overlaps, we have seven district authorities and four unitaries and there are no counties, which does make life a little difficult when we get into bidding for strategic transport planning. So a big area.

DC Which area has taken the lead on strategic transport planning then?

SE When the LEP was set up there wasn't a great deal of thinking about strategic planning. I have a background in that area, so I was really keen to try to get people to think in that way but there was a strong feeling that LEPs were about jobs and jobs were about businesses and business support and maybe skills, but not really about infrastructure and planning. So I think that was true for about the first year and LEPs didn't have much funding for about the first year. We set up our own company, but some LEPs, particularly those with county councils, were very much driven by their local authorities. We wanted to be completely separate from the local authorities so we located ourselves in Cranfield in an innovation centre, rather than being located in council offices which a number of LEPs were.

So, completely separate, with an initial focus on business, but then people gradually started to realise – and we did business surveys – that infrastructure is really important for business growth and the recession really hit the number of new homes that were being built across the patch so people started to want to resurrect the previous strategic plans. So, in SEMLEP, we decided that we would pull together our own infrastructure plan, based on the plans of local authority areas. Of course, as you'll know, each local authority was in a slightly different position, some of them had got rid of their previous Plans and were developing

new ones, in other areas local politicians didn't want to deliver as many homes as they had previously agreed to deliver, so everybody was in a slightly different state.

Interestingly though, because a lot of work had already been done to identify the potential housing sites and commercial sites as well as identifying the various bits of infrastructure that were needed, we have quite a bit to build on. So we pulled together an infrastructure plan, and that involved getting all the Heads of Planning of the different authorities to work together. It was quite a difficult process at first but once they got into it they realised that it was actually quite useful to find out what was going on in other parts of the patch.

So we published this Plan on our website at about the same time that central government decided that they would ask LEPs to produce Strategic Economic Plans. So each LEP was tasked with producing one of these things. Again, there wasn't a lot of guidance about what it meant, although the suggestion was that the Plan would be used as a basis for bidding for money following the Heseltine Review ('No Stone Unturned'). So, we set about doing this huge task with not much resource and not being sure whether it was a bidding document or whether it was a long term planning document and I'm still not sure we've got much more clarity on that now!

Although everyone tends to say this, I think we do have an interesting strategic location, just north of London, halfway between London and Birmingham and then this Oxford – Cambridge arc. You probably will have followed the Centre for Cities Report issued last Monday where Milton Keynes was named as the fastest growing place in the country, basically because of its strategic location. So we produced the Plan and, going back to your question about transport which is a very interesting one, I was really keen to get the surrounding county councils working with us to produce a Transport Strategy, but that has proved to be very difficult to implement at a political level because Northamptonshire CC did not want to work with SEMLEP, they wanted to work with Northamptonshire LEP, who have no background in transport planning as they were originally set up as the economic development arm of Northamptonshire CC,

and the CC did all the transport planning itself.

What I did was set up an officer-level group and I invited the CC Heads of Transport to come along. That at least enabled us to meet with the counties and we developed a Transport Strategy. We're hoping to take this work one step further and have a transport model that covers the whole area.

DC Yes, I did see the very detailed Transport Plan that you produced. I'm not sure that many other LEPs have gone into that sort of detail regarding their transport strategy, certainly Hertfordshire hasn't.

SE No, Joan Hancock is my opposite number at Hertfordshire and we exchange emails and so on, so I know that their LEP is just not really focused on transport. What really pushed all LEPs towards transport was when the Local Transport Boards were about to be set up by the government. In our patch the LTB would only have been the four unitaries (Milton Keynes, Bedford, Central Beds and Luton). So that process was underway and they were looking at Highways Authority projects in the area and prioritising those when government decided that all of that funding for transport would come through LEPs and that was a big change.

So, of the £2bn that was available for the first year of the Growth Deal, I think around £800 or £900 million of that had come from the DfT and all of the prioritisation that had taken place as a result of the LTB process then fed into this. So, in our Plan, we just put the top four projects as being our strategic transport prioritised projects and the funding for those has now come through LEPs. So this has been a huge change for LEPs, and I know that a number of them have struggled with this, particular understanding the appraisal process because the DfT expects a very high level of modelling and appraisal for their transport projects, whereas a number of LEPs were pulling together Plans at a fairly high level – you know, asking businesses what they thought the key priorities were, which could range from anything from, 'We need more broadband', to 'We need something done about the M6', depending on where you were in the country and so not really terribly focused on specific

projects. I think that, because we have this background as a growth area, and we had developed a transport strategy in the old MKSM days which set out the key pieces of infrastructure that needed to be addressed, we managed to deliver a good Transport Plan.

Skills, of course, was the other big area and I think we got good assistance from the universities in our patch. So we're based at Cranfield, and the university is very supportive of the LEP, we've also got the University of Bedfordshire, the University of Northampton and the University of Buckingham – we've got seven in total, and we've got a good grouping, they set themselves up quite quickly as the South East Midlands Universities Group. With the FE colleges, though, it was a bit more difficult to get them to work together. They're naturally competing for the same pool of students. But once they realised that the LEP was holding the ring on the money that used to come from the Skills Funding Agency then they wanted to get to know us and they've set up a Schools and Colleges Group now. With our first tranche of Growth Fund money for 2015-16 were funding a couple of quite big projects with colleges – a new campus at Daventry and then an engineering centre at Leighton Buzzard.

DC Okay, so you mentioned the first round of Growth Fund money. Now, I know that you've trained as an economist so I'm a bit scared to show you this, but this map shows the projected per capita spend of the first round of the Growth Fund and it tells an interesting story, certainly across London and the South East which largely seems to have lost out in comparison to the rest of the country. The exception, of course, is Hertfordshire LEP which has done comparatively well on a per capita basis. Could you tell me your thoughts on this?

SE Well, this is really interesting. Actually, I did a bit of analysis about this because we weren't very happy. When the amounts came out we thought, 'Oh, we've done reasonably well' given the type of projects that we put forward. Then there was lots of analysis going around, on the basis of exactly what you've just shown me, amounts per head and then it was apparent that SEMLEP was near the bottom. So our

Board Members picked up on that and, instead of saying, 'Great, we've got £79m,' they were saying, 'Why did we do so badly compared with Manchester?' So we had a bit of a hard time over that.

I thought initially that this was due to the large area of overlap. When we had Growing Places funding allocated, which was the first little pot of money that LEPs got back in 2012, there was a formula attached to that. Where there were areas of overlap, they paid out on the basis of half the population. So I thought if we recalculated this, taking account of our areas of overlap, it would look very different. So I did that, to the extent that it's possible to do that, and it still didn't look great. Basically, we and others in this part of the country did not do as well and I think there was a lot of politics involved, although BIS and DCLG will not say that.

The whole process was handled in a very odd way. My background is in local government finance and I did the first Revenue Grant Support Settlement under the Community Charge, so I'm used to running a process where you're absolutely clear what the criteria are, it's all transparent and open and people know what they're getting. I mean, they can argue about it, but at least they're very clear on the criteria that has been used. However, this process was very, very different. There was no guidance on what we were supposed to submit. In terms of timing, Greg Clarke said, 'It's a dialogue, it's a something for something, it's a deal.' So we said, 'Well, how are you going to assess the quality of our Plans, how are you going to assess the projects we've put forward – such a mixture of projects, a transport project and a college extension project – what are the precise criteria that you're going to use so we can understand?' Well, he didn't really give us any criteria at all so I think a lot of the process was politically driven.

I think there were some very early decisions made – LEPs are all at different stages, some of them have come from pre-existing organisations and they are very strong; Greater Manchester being a case in point. Some of the county-based ones are not particularly strong in terms of being a LEP, but they have the CC's resources at their disposal, and the government got very

exercised about governance arrangements. They felt that because of our overlaps, they couldn't understand how we were going to deliver transport projects when we didn't have the counties involved. So they were questioning our governance arrangements and I think that led them to decide that they weren't going to put as much money into our area as they did in some other areas.

Also, I think there were particular projects that government favoured. I think that the rigour of the assessment was such that some LEPs seem to have been given money for things that are barely developed yet, which I'm just amazed at. With all of our projects we went through an independent process, so it wasn't our Board saying, 'Well, I like that one, I don't like that one,' we got ARUP to help us do an appraisal of all the projects against the usual criteria, so we knew that we had projects that could be delivered. So you can only assume that there has been a combination of a bit of politics and a bit of influence going on here and not terribly rigorous analysis, because it was so difficult to know what the government were expecting. When we asked officials, they use the same approach for everybody, obviously they're not going to say anything other than that, so they say, 'It depends on the strength of your Plan and the leadership of your Board.' Well, it's very difficult to argue about that!

So I think there's a general view that in places like Greater Manchester there was a much more cohesive view about what they wanted, whereas in our patch we've got eleven local authority leaders, and they work together pretty well, but there isn't sort of one LA that stands out above the others. Basically the overlaps make life very difficult. Our Board feel that they spend a lot of time discussing the politics in Northamptonshire, rather than focusing on SEMLEP as an area. Down here, in Buckinghamshire, Aylesbury Vale is being pulled towards Buckinghamshire; Bucks South Thames LEP are openly hostile to the fact that Aylesbury Vale is part of SEMLEP. They do things like writing letters to the local newspapers saying, 'Do you know that Aylesbury Vale is taking money away from Bucks?' They use the rule of half that influenced the Growing Places fund distribution, and they've said, 'European funding, half of Aylesbury's entitlement is

- actually being given to SEMLEP' and they try to get the local councillors worked up about it. But Aylesbury Vale so far has stood with us. So there's lots of positioning going on.
- [Shows LEP funding per capita map]
- This is an interesting map. So Bucks, Thames Valley didn't do particularly well, we didn't do particularly well.
- DC Hertfordshire did, though, do quite well.
- SE Did they have a view as to why they'd done so well?
- DC Well I haven't actually managed to speak to anyone from the Hertfordshire LEP, but as everywhere, it seems that there were a lot of politics involved. What was the rationale behind being able to be in two or three LEPs at the same time? Clearly it would be a lot simpler just to have a one-to-one ratio of membership?
- SE Yes. Well, the rationale was that, when LEPs were first being set up, it was all about, 'Tell us what your FEA is and you can have a LEP'. Government was absolutely adamant that this was all about localism, they weren't going to prescribe anything so many proposals came forward. We put together a good economic case to say, 'This is the Functional Economic Area' and it was accepted. We were one of the first wave, I think there were something like 24 proposals that were initially accepted towards the end of 2010. Then there were some 'white areas' as they called them around the country that didn't have a LEP at all. So the second wave of LEPs was when it got rather more contentious, when people started to wake up to the fact that if they didn't have one of these things then they might miss out on something, although they weren't quite sure what that something was. So it was this second stage when people were desperately scrabbling around and government didn't want any uncomfortable gaps left basically. They weren't going to be prescriptive, although there was a bit of 'behind the scenes', there was the odd telephone call from Eric Pickles to the leader of Northamptonshire CC, but he didn't really understand what was being said...
- DC Eric Pickles didn't understand?
- SE No, Jim Harker didn't hear what was being said, he thought Eric Pickles was saying, 'Yes, of course you can have a Northamptonshire LEP, when really what he was saying was, 'Well, have you thought about the alternatives'. So it was that second wave and it happened all over the country. The government was desperate to fill in all the gaps and therefore just let people go with LEPs. I don't think at that stage that they were thinking about giving significant resources to LEPs, which is when the overlaps issue really started to make a difference, when you're using a distributional mechanism.
- DC So the gradual increase in funding and powers to LEPs is basically an admission by the government that they cannot do completely away with regional/sub-regional planning?
- SE Yes, absolutely, I think that's right. The Heseltine Review was the first stage and I think that a lot of people thought that they would say, 'Thank you very much Lord Heseltine', and then quietly put it to one side, but they didn't, they said, 'Well there are some good things here'. So that's when we started down the Local Growth Deal path and then European funding was the other really big difference, because without RDAs and GORs there wouldn't have been any mechanism to disperse European funding. So they said, 'We've got these LEPs, we can use them'. I don't know how close you are to the European issue, but there should have been a 2014 – 2020 programme of European funding but we're still arguing about it now. It might start in the middle of 2015. Basically the EU doesn't recognise LEPs and to some extent I can understand why. I mean, there are 39 of them, which I think is far too many and we don't have any statutory entity, we're all set up in different ways, very small numbers of people...
- DC A lack of democratic accountability?
- SE Absolutely. So I'm sure if you were sitting in Brussels, you'd probably have concerns as to how all this was going to work! So I think it was the European funding issue when the government realised that they needed something, they couldn't just deal with the whole of England and I think it's

moved on from there. So there's almost too much being placed on LEPs at the moment, given that we still don't have any statutory responsibilities. So when we use strategic planning, we're very much building on what the local authorities have put in place. As an example, I had a deputation from the CPRE a couple of weeks ago because they'd been told by the local authorities that it was all down to LEPs now, so that was slightly mischievous, all these new homes that they didn't want built across the patch, well they should go and talk to the LEP about it! So I had to explain that that wasn't quite the case.

DC Ok, great. So if I could move along to housing and what appears to have been quite a major shift in focus compared to MKSM. I've just pulled a couple of numbers out of the main report. Correct me if I'm wrong, but MKSM had a target of 224,000 new homes by 2021 and now with SEMLEP the target is 86,700, so significantly less.

SE Yes, it is significantly less, although those numbers are over a slightly shorter period, because the MKSM number started in 2004. Obviously the recession hit in 2008, actually just as MKSM was really just getting underway and delivering quite a lot of new homes. So these are the housing starts and completions in the south east Midlands, so we were going along reasonably well up to 2008 and then fell like a stone. Under the Growth Area plan there was some funding – I mean, at the time we didn't think it was a lot of funding – and this was given to what were called Local Delivery Vehicles, there were six in our patch but they all folded up in 2010. So it was a combination of the economy not doing well, potential buyers not being able to get mortgages and uncertainty around jobs and this feeling amongst local authorities that they no longer had this push to deliver housing numbers that they had under the previous regional planning regime as well as lack of funding for infrastructure, which is the really big issue. Most of our priority projects are about enabling development.

On this map, all the orange bits are strategic housing sites, which were basically designated under MKSM days, they're still there. Some of them are getting underway again now, but it's been a struggle. Developers have just sat on the land and

not moved forward because of the lack of infrastructure. So they've tended to build small numbers of new homes. In our area we're fairly unusual in that most of our strategic housing sites are sustainable urban extensions and they're big. East of Kettering, that's 5,400 new homes. At the moment we are delivering just under 6,000 new homes a year. To be up with where we stated we would be in our Plan we need to be delivering nearer 11,000 new homes a year, so we've got a long way to go.

The key to delivering new homes is the funding structure, the forward funding of infrastructure is absolutely essential to deliver these big sites. So the government can talk about garden cities and so on but that's absolutely the key to it. And the Community Infrastructure Levy has not helped at all, it's not a good way of providing the necessary forward funding. In Milton Keynes, there was something called the Milton Keynes tariff, which enabled developers to know in advance that there was a particular tariff on each new home that was built, it was about £18,000 per house but the Homes and Communities Agency could then forward fund the infrastructure ahead of getting the money in from the completions, whereas CIL is entirely reliant on getting the money in first, so that hasn't helped. The New Homes Bonus, which was the other way the government wanted to fund the infrastructure, again, the districts don't feel that this is something which should be pooled and used to fund infrastructure.

There's also a feeling that New Homes Bonus won't continue, it's something that this current government put in place and you can't rely on a funding stream going on forever. So to borrow against this income stream, which is what you'd need to do in order to fund the infrastructure up front, is just too risky and nobody would underwrite that. So the government's approach to funding and helping housing to be built is an issue in my view. Oh, and the other one is the business rate retention. That was clearly a Conservative policy to encourage growth, but in doing so they've effectively removed the element of the distribution of the Revenue Support Grant which relied on an assessment of needs. So, for example, Milton Keynes – the fastest growing place in the country – that population increase

is not being reflected in the amount of government grant they're getting and so if the retained portion of the business rates is not increasing sufficiently quickly to provide the services that you need for that growing population...when you're population is growing that quickly, it's not just a question of a few more children in local schools or a hospital being a bit fuller than it was, you've got to provide new facilities, it's step change.

So that's a big issue, we've put that issue to government through a City Deal proposition and we had lots of discussions with DCLG around that, but basically what they've said is, 'What's different about you from any other local authority area?', and we say, 'This is growth at a level that other places aren't experiencing'. In the end they said, 'You can do a deal if you commit to delivering even more homes than you said you would deliver', and we said, 'Well it's going to be difficult to deliver what's actually in the Plan at the moment' for the reasons I've just explained, so it was just a bit of a stand-off in the end really. Ministers told our local politicians, 'Well, you need to commit to even more houses', and they said, 'Well, we've been through public consultation and these numbers are in our Plans, we can't commit to more and in order to deliver even these we're going to need some help'. And that is the position we're maintaining and so post-election I'm sure we'll be making more representations around that.

DC The last issue I'd like to cover is the idea of co-operation, formally set out of course in the Duty to Co-operate. What's co-operation been like from the perspective of the LEP?

SE Not as good as it could have been, but I think probably better than it would have been had we not had some of these structures in place. So, for example, I explained how when we decided to draw up an infrastructure plan, we actually managed to get planning authorities talking to each other. We set up something called the Planners' Forum and that now meets regularly and discusses issues of importance. I think that a lot of local authorities thought that the Duty to Co-operate was initially just really a sort of a tick-box exercise. Aylesbury Vale was

particularly caught out by this, they had their Plan rejected and they were told that they needed to be working not just with Milton Keynes but with Luton so that came as quite a shock to them.

Then over here we have Luton and Central Beds who are at loggerheads most of the time over planning issues and a lot of their problems were down to the not very helpful way that Bedford and Central Beds were created, with Luton having very tight boundaries around it. So for Luton to grow, it has to either grow into Central Beds or into Hertfordshire and that's not very popular with either of them. So they're always, always arguing with each other about something. People haven't really understood what's wanted of them and it has been difficult. When we had the sub-regional strategy for MKSM there was some housing developments which people were reasonably happy with, which are the ones that have survived, but there were others which it was felt had been imposed, particularly by the South East Plan and in the last iteration of that there was a particularly contentious site on the border of Bucks and Milton Keynes which caused a lot of political difficulty. Milton Keynes felt that Bucks was just sort of pushing its new homes up here and that people would just use all the schools and services in Milton Keynes.

DC The election is of course on the horizon, and there is a possibility that LEPs themselves may not continue, at least in their present form. Is there any way you can plan for this eventuality, or do you just keep going?

SE Well, the Conservatives have pledged that they will continue LEPs in one form or another and so has Labour, I mean they have been talking about 'county regions' and city regions. I'm not really quite clear on what 'county regions' are, clearly this idea is a little bit worrying for us with our overlaps and multiple counties. My view is that it's going to be an interesting few months, there's going to be a lot of tactical positioning.

INTERVIEW EIGHT

Participant: Senior Planner, Stevenage Borough Council (repeat interview)

Date: 15 March 2015

Location: Stevenage Borough Council, Planning Offices

DC Okay, so it's been almost a year since the last time I was here...

SP A year of change!

DC So that's basically my first question, what's changed during the past twelve months?

SP Well, we've carried on exercising our Duty to Cooperate with North Herts and other Hertfordshire councils. We've extended it to include Central Beds, which we'd probably done when we met a year ago, but we've got closer to mutual understanding about where the three key councils are; that is: us, North Herts and Central Beds. East Herts have basically indicated that they don't want to play, which is fair enough, that's entirely up to them. North Herts have been through a bit of an epiphany and have decided that building on the edge of Stevenage is a jolly wizard idea and that building lots of houses is a jolly wizard idea and that helping Luton out with its housing numbers is a jolly wizard idea. If you'd asked me that question a year, eighteen months, two years ago, I'd have said there's no chance whatsoever of them ever doing that, or indeed that there's no chance whatsoever of them ever producing a Local Plan, because it involved them making far too many, far too difficult decisions. But fair dos to them, they've grasped the nettle, they've started making those difficult decisions and obviously their Local Plan is out for consultation.

We haven't asked them for any housing land but they acknowledge in their Local Plan that their housing allocations that they're making currently to meet their housing requirements immediately to the north of Stevenage could be used to meet any unmet need from Stevenage, which is actually quite a generous step. They've agreed to take their part of the 5,000 homes West of Stevenage development out of the green belt to meet our longer-term housing needs. Again, we're very grateful for that. We've also had discussions with them about our almost certain inability to meet our employment land requirements within the borough boundary and they've identified some land for us at Baldock, which, again, is very

generous of them. I don't have any problems with that, my members have problems with that, but we can come back to that. So we've established a good, working rapport with North Herts and we've got a lot more out of that relationship than I would ever have anticipated.

DC What, in your view, has brought this about?

SP Well I don't know for a fact, if you ask them that question you get evasive answers. I think after 22 or 24 years of not having a Plan, they've finally become embarrassed about not having a Plan. I think with the change that was introduced in the NPPF in 2012, I think they finally started to realise that if they don't have an up-to-date Local Plan, they're ceding control of what happens in the district to the market and to the Planning Inspectorate. So I think they just wanted to claw some of that control back again, and we'll be in a not too dissimilar situation in the not too distant future. We're fortunate, we don't have a five year land supply, we don't have an up-to-date Plan as defined by the NPPF but there's no real pressure from the development industry here. You can look out the window there and you won't see a single crane, you won't see any house building activity going on, it's as dead as a dodo. Even when the market picked up 18 months ago, before it went into its current 'mini-dip' there was no real interest in building in Stevenage. I mean, we had lots of pre-app discussions, many of which have come to naught, so we never actually started to see things taking off on the ground. So we've not yet felt the same pinch as North Herts and others have done, which is what I think has prompted them to move forward.

Can I just go back and talk about relationships with others? The relationship with Central Beds, obviously that's developed over a much shorter period and the three of us – North Herts, Stevenage and Central Beds – are the principal components of the Stevenage/A1(M) corridor HMA, as we all accept. When John Gardner and I met with his equivalent, so the planning portfolio holder, and my equivalent, they made lots of positive noises about wanting development and being willing to help us. But when their Local Plan was produced, it didn't actually say any of that so we've been engaged in what you

might call increasingly difficult discussions with them over getting them to stick to their promises. So one of our team is actually at the Central Beds Inquiry arguing that they've not fully exercised the Duty to Cooperate and that they've not been as helpful in meeting our unmet requirements as they could have been.

So we've developed a closer working relationship with those local authorities that we need to develop a closer working relationship with and they've been a lot more productive than we would have thought a year ago.

DC One possible reason mentioned by [SC, Stevenage] for North Herts doing this U-turn was the LEP and their Plan, is that a valid point?

SP Well, [SC, Stevenage] may well have had discussions with his counterpart at North Herts at which I wasn't present, so that may well be true; it may equally be speculation. We know from experience that the existence of the plans of others for growth in North Hertfordshire district matter not a jot to North Herts DC. So I'd be a little bit surprised if that was one of the motivations. Their officers have never advanced that to me as being a reason for why they've done what they've done.

DC Okay. So, Hertfordshire LEP has done really well in terms of per capita allocation from the Growth Fund compared to other LEPs, especially across the wider South East. I spoke to the Head of Planning, Transportation and Infrastructure at SEMLEP and they were pretty disappointed with what they had been given. So will this money act as a spur to getting strategic housing finally built?

SP Well, let's take that one piece at a time, because there are a lot of issues actually wrapped up in that. Again, things have moved on quite significantly in the course of a year. The projects that we applied to the LEP for funding a year ago are not the projects that we're funding today. That's because we've had a change of Head of Service, we haven't had a Regeneration Team for the last year, so I've been Acting Regeneration Manager as well as Planning Policy and Transport Manager, and holding down three jobs has not been easy. But

we've moved on a lot in terms of our thinking and our ambition. So when we applied for funding about 14 or 15 months ago we were looking for small beer really. You've probably walked across from the railway station and that bridge across Lytton Way, the sort of urban motorway, which takes you into the Leisure Box, which used to be a Blue Corridor and now has all those attractive photos of famous Stevenage people. Well, we had applied for money to put a roof on that bridge, so that was probably one of the more expensive things that we'd applied for money for.

However, over the course of the last year we've said, 'No, that's not ambitious enough.' That's partly been driven by the need to push the delivery of our housing numbers up. The last Local Plan consultation that we undertook was in the spring of 2013, at which time we thought our housing requirement was going to be 5,300. We now think that this will go up to somewhere between 7-7,500, which is a big jump, about 40%. So where were those numbers to come from, because we were building on small brownfield sites and we have three urban extensions, so where the hell do we find an extra couple of thousand homes from? And at that point we were expecting that we'd get absolutely no help whatsoever from North Herts, so we came here to the town centre and we embarked on a programme of talking to all of the landowners and developers associated with the town centre and sites immediately adjacent to it, and we started saying to them, 'Look, it's time you got off your arses and you came up with schemes to redevelop your sites because they're sat there festering away underachieving'. And we're one of those landowners too, we're probably the biggest landowner in the town centre.

So we said, 'We need you to come back to us with major, high rise, high density residential schemes, and if you do that you will have our support'. And because we'd won £16m for the town centre on the back of the small-scale schemes, we started saying to them, 'We're prepared to financially support you'. So, as opportunities have come up, like the plaza over the road here, we've bought that site and that sent a positive signal to the market. We've got a planning application next door, where the Matalan unit is. We've had a

number of prior approvals for office-to-resi conversions which we've supported. We've gone out and talked to people like Legal & General who own the whacking great leisure park site on the other side of the railway station, and said to them, 'Well, how about it, we'd like to see a retail redevelopment of this site'. After a good deal of prompting, they've come back and said to us, 'Well, ok, let's talk about that'.

So we've been quite proactive about going out there and saying, 'We want to deliver something that is different, and the LEP money will help us to do that. We're also kicking in quite a fair chunk of our own money, and we're not just buying property and seeking to redevelop property, our management team have just agreed to a £150,000 programme of environmental improvements in the town centre, which is small beer, but it'll give the town a refresh.

So the things that we've done with the LEP – and we've had a difficult working relationship with the LEP – will enable us to do things that we would otherwise have found much more difficult. In terms of delivering strategic housing sites, no, they did not bid for money from West of Stevenage, it's one of their longer-term projects. It's actually been a bit of a disappointment to us because they bid again this year and they've just had their award announced and we weren't aware that there was this opportunity for us to bid, they didn't ask us to bid. They decided to go on the principle of Buggins' Turn, you know, everybody in Hertfordshire gets their go, so it might be another 11 years before we get another bid!

DC So the main thing you'd like to bid for is the underpass under the A1(M)?

SP It is, yes, and that's somewhere north of £10m. So no development of 1,300 homes is going to be able to afford that, so unless some public money goes in there, you can kiss that particular development goodbye. But one of the interesting things is, that development, purely within the borough boundary, 1,300 homes, now we're thinking in and around the town centre, maybe 2-2,500 homes. So this is suddenly the biggest site to bring forward. So that's why we're keen to concentrate our money and our effort here and that's why we're

intervening in the market in the way that we are, by buying sites like the plaza when the opportunity arises, so that we can pull what is a failed development down and put up something which better meets the needs of the town as a whole.

I should mention, in all fairness to the LEP, that we the borough council have established a partnership, which we've called the Stevenage First Town Centre Taskforce. So 'Stevenage First' is a brand name that we've come up with, which we're going to use on all of our regeneration projects. The 'Town Centre Taskforce' brings together principally the borough council, Hertfordshire CC, the Herts LEP and you've also got people like the Highways Agency, the town centre management company and six or seven other stakeholders. People who can assist us in delivering the town centre regeneration.

We haven't really got that on its feet as yet, to be honest, because we haven't had the staff, we haven't had the resources to put into it to make it work better than it is working currently. What they're looking at at the moment is the creation of a town centre framework, which would actually be paid for by the borough council, which would help shape what kind of town centre we're going to have in the future. By bringing in all these partners, we're getting everybody to commit to that particular vision. So we've just received the bid documents last Friday, we're going to do the first round of interviews next week and the second round the week after, with the aim of getting external consultants started sometime in March. So we're moving towards a situation where we have a shared vision and we can start delivering on that shared vision for the first time really because we'll have money of our own and we'll have money coming to us from the LEP.

DC Ok, so West of Stevenage is currently on the back burner, even in its cut-down form of 1,300 homes?

SP Yes, again for a variety of reasons.

DC Is it a case of, ok, North Herts are becoming more amenable so let's play the waiting game and we can get the whole 5,000?

SP No, not really. There are infrastructure problems to be overcome even with 1,300 homes purely within the borough boundary and basically the developers – WSC, Persimmon and Taylor Wimpey – have said to us that they can't fund it, it's not viable in the current market, which is what a lot of people are saying to us about development in and around Stevenage at the moment. It's partly complicated by the fact that the HCA and we are two of the key landowners whose cooperation is necessary to bring forward development on that site. Now, we're both keen to do something but the developers don't have options on our land, they've not been willing to negotiate options on our land. They don't have options on most of the actual development site. Basically what they've said to us is, 'We're going to take our 20% profit, we're going to pay the private landowners a premium sum to get hold of their land, but you public sector landowners, we're not going to give you anything, we expect you to give us your land for free.' Unsurprisingly, we've said to them, 'Well, you can go swivel then.'

So there's nothing very much happening on West of Stevenage at the moment, but we are open to discussions and we are open to bringing that land forward. It's basically the fact that you've got a group of bloody-minded developers who won't come and live in the real world with the rest of us. There's a deal to be struck there, they just don't want to strike it. One of the things we've started doing is saying, 'Well, because they don't have options on our land, and because they don't have options on most of the land that is the development site, why are we just talking to them?' Why don't we talk to other development companies and see if they're more willing to play? One of the problems with Taylor Wimpey and Persimmons is that they've been with the site since 1999, they've spent all this money on the abortive 5,000 and 3,600 home planning applications, one of which got refused, one of which they withdrew, so they've got a backlog of several million pounds worth of investments which has gone nowhere and they're trying to claw that back, basically at our expense. We're not going to have that. You wouldn't expect us to, we've got to get the best deal for the people of Stevenage.

DC Okay, great, so that's recent developments covered. So the main thing I wanted to ask

you about, drawing on your thirty-odd years of experience, was this question of how you plan strategically in the absence of regional or sub-regional plans? I mean, have you always worked at Stevenage?

SP No, I started my career with East Sussex CC and then moved to Kent CC, then moved down the road to Maidstone borough, which was the first time I really dabbled in the real world, as opposed to the lofty world of county councils and ethereal structure planning. Then I moved to Medway council and then I moved here. So I've moved around, I've worked for both county councils, district councils and unitary councils, so I've seen the various different planning models that existed. I think county and district, the two-tier system, didn't work for me. There was a disconnect, and, in some instances, an outright hatred between counties and districts.

Counties had lost their rights to grant planning permission with the local government reorganisation of 1974, which might seem like a long time ago, but when I first started working in local government that must have only been 15 years previously. And county councils still bitterly resented the fact that they'd had to hand over their powers. So they dealt with people from district councils as if, 'Well, you're not going to have planning powers for very much longer are you, I'm not going to talk to you.' They had a very patronising, arrogant attitude which used to get the backs up of everyone who worked in district councils. And it wasn't just down to personalities, it was down to the fact that the planning system of structure plans and local plans was never designed to be split between two tiers of local government. It was designed for old-style county boroughs and counties, so all of the planning powers would have been held either by county boroughs or by county councils. Little district councils would never have had planning powers.

So planning, to my mind, works best when you've just got one planning authority. As soon as you start having two or more you've got a recipe for argument, disagreement, delay, obfuscation and outright lying on occasion. There came one point when we had regional planning, structure plans and local plans and that was an absolute

- nightmare. You certainly didn't need three tiers.
- DC Is this around 2000 that you're talking about?
- SP This would have been...yes, it would have been around 2000, you're right. The county councils lost their plan making powers in 2004, which was when the East of England Plan was published in draft. I have to say that then the county councils acted as useful intermediaries, because clearly, we as piffling little districts, weren't used to dealing with whacking great regional bodies, but it did tend to depend very much on what the attitude of the county council was. In other parts of the East of England region, for instance, councils engaged positively with EERA, the regional planning body, but here in Hertfordshire the plan was to make life as difficult for EERA as it was possible to do. So EERA asked the county council, in conjunction with the districts, to come up with answers to the various questions that it posed around what levels of development were needed, what levels of development could Hertfordshire take and basically the stance that was adopted by the nine other districts and the county council was to just feed literally thousands of pieces of information to EERA and not tell them what it meant, and not to give them any decision about where it should go, and, if they were asked a difficult question, well, basically they'd lie to them. There's no two ways about it, they absolutely resisted EERA and having regional planning bodies. They would talk about the democratic deficit, because you've got private industry sat on the board of these RPBs. How strange that they don't seem to object to LEPs having a very similar composition? But of course, they don't have planning powers.
- DC Not yet.
- SP Not yet, but it did come as a surprise to all of us when the government said to the Hertfordshire LEP, who then said to us, 'It isn't about supporting the economy, it's about building lots more houses, and if you promise us lots more houses then we'll give you big money'. Interesting...interesting abuse of a body that government had set up for one purpose and then gave it another. It kind of suggested that they didn't have any confidence in the HCA.
- So I'm not sure that regional planning really worked. I'm not sure that county councils' structure plans really worked. I probably wouldn't have said that to you a year or so ago, because at that point we were still having a fraught relationship with North Herts and we believed that we would need their active cooperation. We now don't believe that we need their active cooperation in terms of delivering housing numbers but they have gone through this epiphany so now they want to build – apparently. So I think, where you've got voluntary partnerships like that, where you've got willing partners, it works really well and far better than imposing it.
- One of the drivers of North Herts' sudden change may well be that it's the difference between being in control of your own destiny – whether that's because you're wresting control back from the NPPF or whether it's wresting control back from a structure plan or a regional plan – they're in control of their own destiny and ideas which seemed utterly abhorrent to them when they were being proposed by other people suddenly seem like jolly good ideas when they're coming up with them. It's up to their local politicians to justify that to the local populous and to live with the consequences of that, but it's a much easier relationship when you've got somebody who is a willing partner rather than an unwilling partner because, as our experience was showing with West of Stevenage, that had first appeared in the County Structure Plan, it then got picked up in the East of England Plan. North Herts had fought it every single step of the way; they'd fought it at every public inquiry, they'd fought it at every meeting, they'd challenged it at every opportunity, they'd refused the planning applications, they'd challenged the Planning Inspectorate when it came to the call-in inquiry, they'd challenged the decision that was issued by the SoS and got it part overturned – they fought it every single step of the way. And how long did that take? That took up, what, 12, 15 years of delaying tactics and you've gone through all this expenditure and in the meantime not a single house was built. Wouldn't it have been far better to have cooperated from the outset and to have come up with a solution that was mutually acceptable to everyone? Now,

maybe they had to go through that cathartic process over 12 or 15 years. Maybe it's only because they've been through all that shit that suddenly they think to themselves, 'You know what, it's not that bad actually, it has been fully researched, we do fully understand it, the public are fully aware of it, they're sick to death of it, they just either want it to go away completely or they want it to be built'.

So I'm not sure that I would have adopted the same position that I would have adopted a year ago. I'm not sure that top-down planning necessarily works, but it's finding the right mechanisms to make the voluntary partnerships work, and I think that's where the NPPF comes into play, the fact that these councils who have long out of date plans and are not meeting their housing numbers, are suddenly finding they're losing control over day-to-day development management decisions. I mean, the proof of the pudding will be when planning applications start coming in, because you can put stuff in a plan but then you can drag your feet for years over the planning applications.

DC That's just what I was going to ask...in this country the Local Plan is the 'Holy Grail' and it takes years to prepare in many cases, and then it's almost out of date by the time the ink is dry on it!

SP It's a difficult process. I've had sight of some of the Labour Party's thinking in the run up to the next election about what they're going to do, and I have to say that I don't necessarily agree with some of their proposals because I don't think that they're entirely realistic. I would think that sharpening up what's already in the NPPF about the validity of Local Plans would be quite a strong incentive. At the moment we, and other councils that don't have an up to date Local Plan, can still use our [out of date] Local Plan, but only as a material consideration. So you've got the NPPF, and that's the primary thing you have to use when you're determining a planning application, but you can use your out of date Local plan as a material consideration, so to some extent you can 'offset' what's in the NPPF – you can't give it as much weight – but you can still offset it. So I would think that if you said to local councils, 'That's fine, but from now on any Local Plan that

is more than five, six years old, not only will the NPPF have primacy, but after five or six years you won't be able to use it as a material consideration, it will be pure NPPF.

If I'm right about what the drivers are in encouraging local authorities to start preparing Local Plans when they never wanted to prepare one before, then it is derived from the loss of control over the NPPF. So putting something in there that says, 'Well, after five years you won't be able to use this anymore, I think that should be a strong encouragement to get LAs to move, rather than imposing an arbitrary deadline – i.e. you need to have a Plan in place by such-and-such a date and if you don't then the government will intervene and the Planning Inspectorate will prepare a Plan for your area. Of course, a lot of councils will say to themselves, 'That's brilliant! We don't need to make any difficult decisions, we'll just hand them over to the Planning Inspectorate and then we can let them cop the shit. We don't need to ever take any kind of difficult decisions!' And of course, this will require primary legislation, so it'll take several years to introduce and in the meantime, councils will sit on their hands. For some local authorities, if you offer them that as an out, they will take it. They're copping it in the neck from all over the district because they've had to put so much development all across the district. If you're a local councillor, and you've just gone into local politics to sort out people's drains and to help them, and suddenly you're continually catching it in the neck – why would you do that? Why would you not just sit on your hands and let somebody else make the difficult decisions for you? So I'm not sure that the Labour Party have fully thought through what the real incentives are here.

Whilst in the past I've been a severe critic of successive governments who've continually tinkered with the planning system – the Labour government did exactly the same before it left office in 2010 – tinkering with the mechanisms to find what works is actually quite useful.

DC The way I see it – and I'm not sure if you'd agree with me – since Thatcher it's been a case of Conservatives coming in and pretty much bulldozing the planning system, then Labour coming back and rebuilding it and

this cycle repeats...you know, a two-page letter from Michael Heseltine and that was regional planning in the eighties.

SP Yes, I think that's probably true, and certainly this government has gone about dismantling the planning system with gusto, but of course I would say that, I'm a vested interest as a town planner. I think that the problem is that you never seem to be capable of finding an effective means of managing change, encouraging LAs to do what you want them to do whilst they exercise effective control over what development happens in their area and central government staying out of it. The Labour Party has a tendency to over-manage and interfere too much, so you get this vast bureaucracy of top-down planning, which everybody at the bottom end just bitterly resents, so they just dig their heels in and do as little as is necessary to make the system work. Or, you do what the Conservative governments have tended to do, which is to say, 'If you're not prepared to take charge, if you're not prepared to be adult about it, then I'm going to take your stereo away, your TV away and you can just come downstairs and sit with the family.'

So I think that's why we've seen the loss of control that LAs have experienced, they've taken away our powers, but they have given us more responsibility. The criticism I would have of this government is that, like its predecessor, it has continually tinkered and it hasn't come up with necessarily the right answers and it hasn't been consistent. I mean, green belt for instance, that's an absolute nightmare. When this government first came in in 2010, it was, 'Build all over the green belt, don't worry, just build all over it. It's housing, housing, housing housing.' Then about two years ago it was a case of, 'This is down to local councils, it's up to them to make decisions about the balance.' In the last twelve months, it's been, 'No, no, no, you never, ever build in the green belt.' And of course, a lot of LAs are not nimble enough to keep up with that. If you're in a fairly inflexible plan-making process and you started out when it was, 'Build all over the green belt,' and suddenly you're now finding that you're having to say to your members, 'You know we told you we had to build all over the green belt, well, you don't!'

There are a couple of authorities in Hertfordshire which have found themselves with their pants pulled down around their ankles – Broxbourne, St Albans, where their members have had a presentation from somebody from central government and suddenly the members are turning round to their officers and saying, 'What the bloody hell's going on here, you told us we had to build on the green belt and now we're being told we don't have to!' You need consistency when you've got a long plan-making process. You can't afford to be jumping about and changing the advice and guidance that you've been given every eighteen months or so. Government just needs to settle on a system that works and that leaves local authorities to get on with things.

DC But has that system ever obtained during your career?

SP No. No. Governments just can't resist tinkering. To some extent it's because they believe – and to some extent they're probably right – that the system just doesn't work. The problem is that people want a laissez-faire system when the development is something that they want, but they also want an absolutely hard-nosed, foot-dragging system when there's a development that they're violently opposed to. So you'd actually have to have two completely different systems running in parallel and when somebody submitted a planning application, what you as a local planning authority would do would be to stick your head out the window and ask, 'Do people like this? Because it depends which system we put it into, if you like it, we'll put it into this one, and if you don't like it, well, it'll go through this one.' Of course, you can't work that way, it's got to be an equitable system for everybody and developers have to have the confidence that, if they put a planning application in, they know with a reasonable degree of certainty what result they're going to get. At the moment, it's very much a lottery. That's always been the case, it just seems to have got a lot worse in the last few years, which I'm guessing is why this government has increasingly put emphasis on the plan-making system and having plans made.

DC Okay, last question is just your views on the pressures that central government

- have exerted on local planning during the last twenty or thirty years, and how these pressures have changed over time?
- SP I think there's a lot greater emphasis on housing numbers and on deliverability and evidence. I can remember when I worked at Maidstone, which isn't that long ago – maybe sixteen, seventeen years ago – we had housing numbers given to us by the Structure Plan. We weren't particularly comfortable with them but, you know, it was up to us where we put them. There wasn't green belt surrounding Maidstone, it was just outside the outer green belt boundary...
- DC So did they end up getting built?
- SP Well...no. After I left, the planning regime and control of the council changed, and so what happened in Maidstone that had been planned for didn't actually happen. But we started out in the fairly lazy tradition of what LA planners had always done, 'Oh well, we've got housing numbers, let's just build a new suburb on the outskirts of the town.' There was no real pressure to build brown before green, that didn't really come along until shortly after I'd left there and moved on to my next job. So that was a big change. Since I've been here, it's been housing, housing, housing. Increasingly recently, it's been CIL, CIL, CIL which is related to the Infrastructure Delivery Plan, which is linked to, 'You've got to be capable of demonstrating that you can build this.'
- When I worked at Maidstone, we had some housing allocations that had been in our Local Plan for about fifteen years, and when I worked at East Sussex there were some allocations that were reflected in the Structure Plan which had been there for about thirty or forty years, and which never stood any realistic chance of ever being built, they were utterly uneconomic.
- DC But they counted towards your target.
- SP Yes, they counted towards our target! Nowadays you just can't get away with that, so there's a lot more emphasis on practicality and deliverability and being able to demonstrate those things.
- DC That's got to be a good thing though?
- SP Yes, it's got to be a good thing, but one of the consequences of that and one of the consequences of greater public interest in the planning process is the process has slowed down. It's become an awful lot slower to prepare a Local Plan. I'm sure if you looked at the stats, you know, compare how long it took to prepare a Local Plan twenty years ago to how long it takes to prepare one today, you'd probably find that the development period for a plan had gone up from about three years to around five and a half, six years. That's because of the increased emphasis on detail, on public consultation, at one point it was getting ridiculous. Even without those, it's still a long, difficult, complicated process and at the end of the day – and nobody's going to thank me for saying this – but the reality is local people and elected members are not my principal customer that I'm thinking about when I'm making a Local Plan, they just aren't. I'm thinking about, 'How do I get this past a government Planning Inspector?' If LAs had complete free rein to prepare Local Plans that only they had to be content with, they'd look very different from the plans that are produced today, where you have to keep the Planning Inspectorate happy, and they are being driven by the briefings that they are getting from government ministers.
- DC Has the Planning Inspectorate become more powerful, draconian over the past couple of decades?
- SP They've certainly become more powerful, definitely with regards to plan-making. Whether they've become more draconian, their stance over the last five years, since this government came into office in particular, has been quite variable. It was quite clear in the early years of this government, when we were talking about Core Strategies, before we went back to Local Plans, particularly here in Hertfordshire, where a lot of LAs had sat on their hands waiting for a change of government and hadn't produced Core Strategies in conformity with the East of England Plan. So clearly the briefing that had been given to PINS was, 'It doesn't matter what housing numbers are in them, just approve them, get them through.' So you had a lot of Core Strategies that were approved between 2010 and 2013 in Hertfordshire where the housing numbers

are abominably low. Since then, government has sharply tightened up what the nature of the content of a Local Plan must be and they've changed the message that they've given to the Planning Inspectorate, and consequently a lot of plans have been rejected or found non legally-compliant. So in that sense they've become more draconian, but they are serving their masters well. They're clearly being told something very different today from what they were being told at the beginning of this government. Although, this close to a General Election is a good time to be taking your Local Plan through Inspection. I suspect that if this lot are still in power after May we will find that the advice that the Planning Inspectorate are being given is once again tightened up and it will be much, much more difficult to get your Plan through.