

towards a second generation of spatial planning in the UK?

John Tomaney, Lucy Natarajan, Elisabete Ilie and Iqbal Hamiduddin open the special section by reviewing the recent history of spatial planning

Spatial planning has a chequered history in the UK. In the mid-2000s spatial planning looked like the incoming tide. The Labour government had committed to a comprehensive system of spatial planning in England, which led to the creation of Regional Spatial Strategies (RSSs). In Scotland, the Planning etc. (Scotland) Act 2006 established a National Planning Framework (NPF) and Strategic Development Plans for four city regions, while the Wales Spatial Plan was published in 2004. In Northern Ireland, the Good Friday Agreement stipulated the production of a spatial development plan, which resulted in *Shaping Our Future*, the Northern Ireland Regional Development Strategy, published in 2012. But this wave of activity seemed quickly to recede.

RSSs in England attracted the ire of Conservative politicians, and their abolition was one of the first acts of the coalition government in 2010, although statutory spatial planning continued in London. In Wales and Northern Ireland spatial planning continued to exist on paper but failed to gather the momentum that was visible in Scotland during the 2010s and was reflected in a succession of National Planning Frameworks and attendant planning reforms.¹

By 2019, however, there was evidence that spatial planning was experiencing a resurgence. Alongside continued spatial planning in London and Scotland, the National Assembly in Cardiff has enacted the Planning (Wales) Act 2015, which establishes a 20-year National Development Framework and sub-national Strategic Development Plans. Efforts

to create frameworks for spatial planning are being pursued by some metro mayors in England and by a range of local authority partnerships. (In Northern Ireland the political impasse limits progress.) Below we suggest this amounts to a second wave of spatial planning in the UK.

This collection of articles surveys the spatial planning scene, drawing on papers presented at a seminar organised by the Bartlett School of Planning, University College London (UCL), in May 2019, which included international contributions from the OECD, the United States, and Ireland, and from senior spatial planners in London, Scotland, Greater Manchester, and elsewhere in the UK.²

Spatial planning and the regional scale

Spatial planning can be seen as the fulfilment of the ambition to place planning at the centre of the co-ordination and integration of social and economic development. According to Rydin, planning for sustainability:

*'... is about looking at all the different aspects of urban development ... to create something that will really enhance a local area and contribute to sustainability. It is about thinking of all the different needs of, and opportunities for, an area in order to guide where new infrastructure investment should go. It is about taking as comprehensive a view as possible by engaging with relevant stakeholders.'*³

Classically, spatial planning goes beyond the mere regulation of land use to engage with complex



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Glasgow - within the UK Scotland stands out as a pioneer of spatial planning

problems in an integrated way, allowing for the creation of strategic visions of shared futures at a larger-than-project-level scale. In this perspective, the planner acts 'not just as a regulator of land and property uses, but as a proactive and strategic coordinator of all policy and actions that influence spatial development; and [does] this in the interests of more sustainable development'.⁴

The shift toward spatial planning reflects ambitions of sustainable place-making, better integration of employment, housing and infrastructure, and the inclusion of wider stakeholders in the policy-making process for sustainable development. It is an approach set out in the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) of 1999⁵ which seeks to widen the horizon of planners beyond purely sectoral policy measures, to focus on the overall territorial situation and consider comprehensive development opportunities. Accompanying statements, notably the *European Charter for Participatory Democracy in Spatial Planning Processes*, stressed the degree to which spatial planning is an inclusionary process.⁶

For New Labour, spatial planning accorded with its technocratic 'Third Way'; a modernised social democracy which accepted the role of markets, but emphasised a regulatory role for the state. Spatial planning formed an element of its programme to modernise infrastructure and institutions, and lent itself to the associated evidence-based public policy approach. The creation of Regional Development Agencies in 1999, the formation of Regional Assemblies of local authorities and the strengthening of regional Government Offices reflected an emphasis on the regional scale for planning and how 'the region was widely seen as an appropriate scale for policy intervention and regulation'.⁷

But this was a regional scale answerable to and implementing the priorities of central government.

The spatial planning approach was legislated in the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004, and outlined in associated Planning Policy Guidance.⁸ Critics identified the inadequate powers of regulation and limited resources available to implement plans; the continued lack of integration between land use, environmental planning and economic planning; and the lack of democratic accountability of the new arrangements.

The new structures were targeted by the Conservative Party while in opposition in its *Open Source Planning* document, which railed against the 'broken system' of Whitehall targets, unelected quangos and red tape, which were 'bad for democracy, bad for the environment and bad for business'.⁹ This was the prelude to the swift destruction of the system of spatial planning in England after the election of the coalition government of 2010. Conservative Ministers described the planning system as 'a deterrent to international investment, and a barrier to the expansion of home-grown enterprise ... a brake on growth, and on the much needed new jobs and new businesses, ... and as a tool to say 'no' to growth; as a means to delay and block'.¹⁰ David Cameron promised reform, starting with 'getting the planners off our backs'.¹¹

Underpinning this rhetoric was HM Treasury research which claimed to show that planning impedes productivity growth, increases the cost and uncertainty of investment, and hinders competition by raising barriers to entry, adaptation and expansion. Moreover, it claimed that planning constrains the agglomeration of firms and the mobility of labour and encourages firms, households and financial institutions to speculate on land, diverting resources away from productive activities.¹² In particular, the planning system was held



Greater Manchester has been the pacemaker in devolution in England outside London

responsible for inadequate rates of housebuilding. Localism was briefly the mantra, but the term quickly fell out of use.

The limits of this new orientation were swiftly identified. Even some right-wing voices doubted that the planning system was the primary cause of the failure to build sufficient houses, instead identifying the absence of controls on the explosion of low-cost credit, increased buy-to-let, the influx of foreign money into the housing market, immigration, and the increase in parents drawing down their own housing equity to help their children buy.¹³ The Localism Act 2011 legislated a 'duty to co-operate', requiring local planning authorities and other public bodies to co-operate to maximise the effectiveness of policies for strategic matters in Local Plans. But there is now a substantial body of research which identifies the failure of the duty to co-operate to create effective spatial planning at the larger-than-local scale.¹⁴

Recent history in the UK and beyond

In this context it makes sense to review the state of spatial planning in the UK and beyond. Tamara Krawchenko and Abel Schumann's article in this issue reports on the results of a survey of land use policies in OECD member states. They show that all countries struggle to manage the costs and benefits of development. They note that academic research offers contradictory messages about whether planning policies are too permissive or restrictive of development. Across jurisdictions, the ambition of spatial planning to integrate approaches across different policy domains raises questions of institutional capacity. Spatial planning requires effective institutions at the right geographical scale, and this proves a challenge in many countries. Inter-municipal co-operation is widely used to meet

this objective but raises questions of democratic accountability.

Another common challenge is aligning the wide range of public policies with the objectives of spatial plans. Krawchenko and Schumann call for more flexible and less prescriptive approaches to spatial planning and commend the recent Dutch reforms as a model worthy of further attention.

Ireland is a country which has recently moved to strengthen spatial planning, as Niamh Moore-Cherry describes in her article. Regional planning has a long pedigree in Ireland, but the creation of the National Spatial Strategy for Ireland 2002-2020, inspired in part by the ESDP, aimed to accelerate growth outside Dublin. This episode was widely deemed to be ineffective, not least because a large-scale decentralisation of civil service jobs was undertaken in ways which undermined the stipulations of the plan.

In 2018 a new National Planning Framework was instigated. This time it was accompanied by a National Investment Plan, designed to align land use and public expenditure policies. New metropolitan planning and inter-municipal governance arrangements have also been established. In theory, at least, this new approach displays some of the precepts of the OECD's vision of good practice set out by Krawchenko and Schumann, although the process is at an early stage and the creation of metropolitan plans through municipal co-operation is proving challenging.

London is the only jurisdiction in England that has consistently pursued statutory spatial planning since 1999. From her position as Head of London Plan and Growth Strategies at the Greater London Authority, Jen Peters reflects on lessons learned, making the key point that it would be impossible to accommodate London's growth without strategic planning. In era when spatial planning has been

politically denigrated, it is noteworthy that the only jurisdiction with a comprehensive plan saw the fastest economic growth.

The evolution of the London Plan is a story of continuity and change, of which the latest instalment is Sadiq Khan's plan, under preparation, but committed to the notion of 'good growth'. As Peters notes, the challenges facing London are intensifying while the options for addressing them have become constrained and potential solutions more complex. Yet lessons can be learned from earlier efforts. A notable feature of the current plan preparation is the extensive consultation that has been undertaken, although, in a city of London's size and complex needs, planning remains highly contentious.

Within a UK context Scotland stands out as a pioneer of the spatial planning approach. NPF1 was enacted in 2004. NPF2 was given a statutory basis in 2009 and presented an evolving vision of territorial development – a framework for infrastructure investment and large-scale national developments. Spatial planning was subject to parliamentary scrutiny and public engagement on a hitherto unprecedented scale. NPF2 also proposed Strategic Development Plans (SDPs) for the city regions of Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen and Dundee. NPF3, issued in 2014, refreshed the broad approach and employed even wider public engagement.

'Even governments ideologically opposed to strategic planning end up, however half-heartedly, coming to terms with the need for it'

Spatial planning in Scotland has not been without its controversies, as evidenced in the debates about the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019, which, among other things, abolished the SDPs created only ten years earlier. In her talk to the UCL seminar, Fiona Simpson, Assistant Chief Planner with the Scottish Government, identified five key lessons from the Scottish experience:

- National spatial planning generates public interest, requiring significant political resources.
- Views on national priorities can shift over time.
- The legal context is important.
- Collaboration and transparency are central requirements.
- A long-term perspective is important.

Greater Manchester has been the pacemaker in terms of devolution in England outside London. Powers over strategic planning were devolved to the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA)

as part of the Greater Manchester Devolution Agreement in 2014. In addition, Greater Manchester saw the creation of a £300 million Housing Investment Fund, the Greater Manchester Land Commission, and powers to establish Mayoral Development Corporations and introduce a Community Infrastructure Levy. The GMCA is the product of a history of collaboration by the ten local authorities in Greater Manchester, but the election of a new metro mayor in 2017 added a new democratic innovation. Creating a Greater Manchester Spatial Framework (GMSF) has tested these new governance arrangements. The original draft, which attracted some public opposition, was withdrawn following the election of Andy Burnham as Mayor and a new draft was prepared.

Anne Morgan, Head of Planning Strategy at GMCA, told the UCL seminar that producing the revised draft of the GMSF required the agreement of ten borough leaders and the Mayor and the creation of a new city-regional mindset, underpinned by a new evidence base. New policy narratives of 'inclusive growth' inform the new draft, along with challenging targets on affordable housing and net zero carbon contribution. All of this is being undertaken with very limited human resources. Meanwhile, the delivery of the GMSF is made difficult by shifts in the government's approach to devolution, new political dynamics at the local scale and lack of public trust, amplified in age of social media, which precludes careful deliberation of complex policy alternatives. Such processes have an impact upon the timely provision of infrastructure, land value capture opportunities, and the role of the GMCA.

Elsewhere in England, despite the bonfire of RSSs in 2010, spatial planning is making an uneven and partial comeback, as Catriona Riddell's article in this issue notes. Notably, the 2017 Housing White Paper specifically called for spatial planning at the larger-than-local scale. The means by which spatial planning is achieved varies widely, ranging from the statutory plans of metro mayors to voluntary arrangements elsewhere. Moreover, as Riddell notes, after 2010 the planning system was designed around the premise that planning should be done at only the neighbourhood or local scale. While there are signs of a renewed interest in spatial planning on the part of government, this is being retrofitted onto 'localism', rather properly designed and resourced.

Emerging lessons

What conclusions can we draw from this recent history? First, there is a recurrent realisation of the need for spatial planning. This emerges from the overview of developments in OECD countries and from recent developments in Ireland and England. Even governments ideologically opposed to strategic planning end up, however half-heartedly,

coming to terms with the need for it. Second, the case for spatial planning as the instrument of integrating the sustainable development of land use with the provision of infrastructure and to meet environmental challenges remains strong, even if applying these instruments in practice remains challenging.

Within the UK, we can identify a *second generation of spatial planning*, which can draw upon the lessons of earlier efforts both at home and abroad. This new approach recognises that earlier efforts at spatial planning were hampered by a lack of connection to other policy sectors. The new Irish approach connecting land use planning to public investment may provide useful lessons. Another example of the second wave is provided in Wales. The Planning (Wales) Act 2015 is one element in a suite of legislation, alongside the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and the Environment (Wales) Act 2016, which together set out a framework for sustainable development in Wales. In late 2019, the Welsh Government began a consultation on a new draft National Development Framework 2020-2040.¹⁵

Third, key to effective spatial planning is public engagement, which looms large in second-generation approaches. But achieving wide agreement is more difficult than ever in an era of public distrust in government. A key task for planners, then, is to rise to this challenge, connect with communities and engage with their knowledge and experiences. The second wave of spatial planning is likely to rest on the effectiveness of this approach.

Ultimately, spatial plans are not technical exercises but expressions of cultural and political values. At a time of political polarisation, as it enters its second wave spatial planning is likely to continue to prove both necessary and contentious.

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Notes

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- 2 We are grateful to the Bartlett School of Planning, University College London, for funding the seminar and to Turner and Townsend for hosting it in their London office. The seminar and subsequent publication forms part of UCL's input in the UK2070 Commission, chaired by Lord Kerslake – see the UK2070 Commission website, at <http://uk2070.org.uk/>
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- 9 As described by the then Shadow Communities and Local Government Secretary Caroline Spelman at the launch of the Conservative Party's Green Paper *Open Source Planning* in Feb. 2010 (available at https://issuu.com/conservatives/docs/open_source_planning/21)
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