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To cite this article: Abbas Ziafati Bafarasat, Eduardo Oliveira & Guy M Robinson (2022): Re-introducing statutory regional spatial planning strategies in England: Reflections through the lenses of policy integration, Planning Practice & Research, DOI: [10.1080/02697459.2022.2061687](https://doi.org/10.1080/02697459.2022.2061687)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02697459.2022.2061687>



Published online: 12 Apr 2022.



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Re-introducing statutory regional spatial planning strategies in England: Reflections through the lenses of policy integration

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ABSTRACT

Statutory regional spatial strategies were abolished in England, United Kingdom in 2010. There are, however, increasing calls in favour of a re-introduction of statutory comprehensive spatial strategies at the regional level to enhance integrated economic growth and address exacerbating spatial inequalities. Through a survey and in-depth interviews conducted with experts and policymakers of the North-West region of England, this paper explores whether the introduction of such statutory strategies could find justificative grounds through policy integration of transportation, housing, and employment policies. We conclude with a set of mechanisms that could foster this re-introduction serving regional geographies beyond the North-West.

KEYWORDS

Policies; integration; strategies; housing; employment; transportation; England; UK

Introduction

Spatial planning has emerged with aims, among others, of pursuing the integration of various policy sectors of a given territory (Kidd, 2007; Nadin, 2007). To this end, regional spatial planning strategies appear as spatial planning instruments aimed at supporting inter-sectoral and vertical policy integration across jurisdictional and administrative levels of governance (Ziafati Bafarasat *et al.*, 2022). Inter-sectoral integration means bringing different policy domains together. Vertical policy integration refers to the coherence between policy frameworks at supranational, national, regional, and local levels of government (Howlett *et al.*, 2017). Policy integration is streamlined when regional spatial planning strategies are prepared by both formal and informal organisations across spatial boundaries and policy sectors (Riddell, 2013). For example, Vigar (2009) argues that planners in the UK ‘wanted an obligation on actors from other policy sectors to engage with planning (...) but legal provision would do little but force people to pay attention to each other’s strategy without real integrative effort’ (p. 1587). In this context, it was the informal institutional arrangements that would make such legislative requirements work. Despite a few positive considerations regarding regional spatial

strategies in bringing together stakeholders and fostering the participation of formal and informal organisations, in England they were short-lived. Statutory regional spatial strategies were implemented in 2004 and abolished in 2010. Gordon and Champion (2020) argue that this abolition must lead to a transition towards a variety of shorter-term, specialized, and localized plans that are coordinated by flexible modes of governance.

It is against this backdrop that we draw on the results of an empirical survey focused on the abolished plans in the North-West region, one of nine official regions of England. The North-West region consists of the administrative counties of Cheshire, Cumbria, Greater Manchester, Lancashire, and Merseyside. This survey was complemented with interviews with regional stakeholders. Considering recent dynamics, including post-Brexit scenarios and the insights of the UK2070 Commission, we assessed what policy-integration mechanisms could still work, should England decide to reintroduce statutory regional spatial planning strategies. The UK2070 Commission is an independent inquiry into the city and regional inequalities in the UK. It is chaired by Lord Kerslake, and it has been created to conduct a review of the policy and spatial issues related to the UK's long-term city and regional planning and development (UK2070 Commission, 2020). Accordingly, the UK2070 Commission has put forward recommendations for future comprehensive spatial planning that imply re-introducing arrangements like, and even stronger than, the abolished statutory regional spatial planning strategies (UK2070, 2020).

The paper is organised as follows. The next section provides an overview of regional spatial planning strategies with examples from Europe and England. Case study selection and research methods are then explained. The subsequent sections will then analyse the performance of regional spatial planning strategies in the integration of transportation, housing, and employment policies in the North-West region of England. The conclusion section will synthesize empirical analyses and identify the policy-integration mechanisms that could be available to support a re-introducing of regional spatial planning strategies in England.

Regional Spatial Planning Strategies and Policy Integration

Strategic Spatial Planning at the Regional Level: A Review

Regional spatial planning strategies or overall strategic spatial planning are important instruments supporting policy integration (Vigar, 2009; Olesen, 2016). However, as discussed further in the paper, there are many approaches to regional spatial planning strategies across Europe (Ziafati Bafarasat, 2015), on a spectrum from having a statutory status to a non-statutory or voluntary status (Oliveira & Hersperger, 2018). An interesting case for this debate emerges from Vienna, Austria. Vienna's strategic spatial plan is a non-legally binding document for the local level, but its implementation, for example within the housing and intra-urban transportation sectors, is efficient because public and private actors are voluntarily committed to the plan (Oliveira & Hersperger, 2018). In the Finnish urban region of Helsinki-Uusimaa, a recent governance reform led to a directly elected regional parliament, which also lead to making the *Regional Land Use Plan for Helsinki-Uusimaa 2016*, legally binding for local authorities (Oliveira & Hersperger, 2019).

Regional spatial planning strategies are defined in this paper as a socio-spatial process through which a range of stakeholders, in diverse institutional settings, come together to design plan-making processes and develop contents and strategies for the management of spatial change (Albrechts & Balducci, 2013; Albrechts, 2017). To this end, stakeholder mobilization and institutional design emerge as two defining features of this type of strategy (Albrechts, 2004; Stead & Meijers, 2009), primarily to streamline negotiation of objectives and prepare long-term visions (Sartorio, 2005; Mäntysalo *et al.*, 2015). Institutional design is reflected, for example, in building metropolitan and regional associations of diverse institutional characteristics, which co-produce objectives and policies through mutual learning (Healey *et al.*, 2003; Albrechts *et al.*, 2017). In a non-statutory planning context, the value of the ties between institutions, mutual awareness of a common stake, and structures of the coalition (Coulson & Ferrario, 2007) are more important than, for example, a plan-making process (Friedmann, 2004). However, Hajer and Zonneveld (2000) argue that these practices are merely ‘added on’ without a proper legal embedding in the system and therefore erode ‘whole-of-government’ processes (p. 352). Salet *et al.* (2009) contend that informal regional spatial planning strategies are a response to a rise in conflicting demands for space, which require new legal instruments supporting their effectiveness on the ground, for instance through making them legally binding to different levels of governance.

Planning literature suggests that legally binding or statutory regional spatial planning strategies should be undertaken on a transparent platform seeking to ensure all stakeholders are represented, consensus over decisions is partly or fully reached, sound evidence is applied, policy domains are feasible, and impacts are independently evaluated (Swain *et al.*, 2013). Hillier (2017) contends that reconciliation between the inherent hierarchy of this system and flexible collaboration in a shared power context is one of the tensions at the core of regional spatial planning strategies. Ziafati Bafarasat and Pugalís (2020) observe that these tensions could be addressed by devolving to regions the decision to undertake statutory regional spatial planning. Other authors advocate more powerful regional spatial planning strategies, for example, in terms of producing a national spatial strategy to which sectoral policies need to adjust (Wong, 2002), or replacing regional associations with elected regional governments (Pearce & Ayres, 2006). Whereas Baker and Wong (2013) talk about the delusion of regional spatial planning strategies in the absence of these political powers, others argue that they have the capacity to bring to the table unwilling stakeholders but do not have the means to force policy integration (Ziafati Bafarasat & Baker, 2016).

Examples of regional spatial planning strategies that take shape across institutional boundaries can be located across England and Wales (Ziafati Bafarasat, 2016), for example, the strategies of West Cheshire/North East Wales Sub-Regional Spatial Strategy. This jointly defined strategy provides a non-statutory framework for expanded cross-border cooperation and development between the two entities over the period from 2006 to 2021 (West Cheshire/North East Wales, 2012). The post-2010 planning context at the city-regional level in England has seen the integration of housing, employment, and transportation policies moving from original Local Enterprise Partnerships and City Deals towards more formal initiatives in quest of supporting economic growth (Grove *et al.*, 2020). Local Enterprise Partnerships ‘can be understood as a group of disparate actors that come together to try to positively influence the course of local (economic)

growth' (Pugalis & Bentley, 2013, p. 866). City Deals can be viewed as a reframed form of urban governance 'involving infrastructure investments based upon negotiated agreements between central and local governments on decentralised powers, responsibilities, and resources' (O'Brien & Pike, 2019, p. 1450). The effects of Brexit are partly behind this move (Billing *et al.*, 2019). However, these policy-integration arrangements are seen to be less effective not only within their own economic agenda but also in terms of widening territorial disparities by their selective sectoral focus, patchy territorial coverage, and loosely defined integration requirements (Davoudi & Brooks, 2021). We debate further the strategic spatial planning approach in England.

The Strategic Spatial Planning Approach at the Regional Level in England

The origins of the strategic spatial planning approach in England can be traced back to 1990 when the central government embarked on producing Regional Planning Guidance (RPG) for the English regions with advice from regional planning conferences of local governments (Baker *et al.*, 1999). Subsequently, ten government offices (GOs) were created in 1994 in response to the 1992 Conservative Party manifesto calling for regional integration of appropriate Whitehall departments so that the business community and local government would have one port of call rather than several (Spencer, 2002).

The election of New Labour in 1997 had a range of implications for the relationship between spatial planning and policy integration. These included the assignment of more departmental responsibilities to GOs, and the establishment of a Regional Coordination Unit (RCU) in the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) to provide a channel of communication between GOs and the centre and facilitate a more corporate approach to regional issues across Whitehall (Ayres & Pearce, 2005; Pearce & Ayres, 2006). However, the more distinctive approach of New Labour involved institution building for collaborative integration of a wider range of interests based on a national vision of sustainable development (Mawson, 2007). The establishment of regional assemblies (RAs) of local councillors and regional interests taking over from the centre the production of RPGs was the main step taken in 1998 to pursue this agenda (Tewdwr-Jones & Allmendinger, 2007). Also established in 1998, Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) were appointed to prepare Regional Economic Strategies (RES) with a mission to boost the economic output of their region while tackling disparities so that the outcome was a contribution to sustainable development (Shaw & Lloyd, 2000; Pearce & Ayres, 2009). Consensus building and relation brokering to converge the objectives of various stakeholders in the RA, on one hand, and to do the same between the regional planning body and RDA on the other hand, became the basic component of policy integration (Thompson & Dimitriou, 2007).

When the government published its first strategy for sustainable development, *A Better Quality of Life*, in 1999, the strategy required all the English regions to produce a Regional Sustainable Development Framework (RSDf) as an overarching platform for the integration of RPG and RES (James & Donaldson, 2001). Meanwhile, early experimentations with broader and collaborative RPGs led to calls for a stronger spatial strategy (Baker *et al.*, 2010). The Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act of 2004 (HM Government, 2004) replaced RPGs with Regional Spatial Strategies (RSS) which were intended to be even more broad-ranging and inclusive (Morphet, 2011). The Act also

abolished county-level structure plans and made the sub-regional policy a part of the RSS remit (HM Government, 2004). These implied that regional spatial planning strategies were set to undergo a major test of policy integration in England.

Planning Policy Statement (PPS) 11: Regional Spatial Strategies (ODPM, 2004) attempted to predict and provide for a wide range of policy conflicts at different levels. It regarded RSDFs as the background against which all regional strategies including RSS and RES would be prepared and integrated (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), 2004). The Regional Transport Strategy (RTS) was introduced as an integral part of RSS, which was also intended to provide the long-term spatial planning framework for other regional strategies, even those that were owned by sectoral focused organisations such as the health and higher education and skills strategies. At the local level, the Local Development Frameworks (LDFs) needed to be prepared regarding RSS, for example, in the scale and distribution of new housing (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), 2004). However, RSS was not given a key role in the strategic steering of employment investment – including the identification of specific sites, and its role was restricted to the setting of land-use criteria and identification of broad areas (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), 2004). RES, prepared by RDAs, were the main territorial reference of employment policies (HM Government, 1998; Pearce & Ayres, 2009).

Building on the experience of RTS in the prioritization of transport projects, a Regional Funding Allocation (RFA) process was also introduced in 2005 (House of Commons, 2011). Each region provided coordinated advice to the government on how indicative funding across transport, housing and economic development should be better spent to help meet regional priorities, placing a stronger emphasis on RSS as a framework for public administration (Martin, 2013). The government's attempt to meet its integrative focus on housing, employment and transport through the RA-RSS apparatus was controversial in some areas, especially in the South (Hager, 2012). In the final years of the New Labour administration, the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009 (HM Government, 2009) replaced RAs with regional Leaders Boards of the same composition but with reduced planning powers. It was also intended that RSS and RES would be combined into new integrated Regional Strategies (RSS) (Riddell, 2013). The main responsibility for preparing the latter was given to the RDAs, although they were required to do so in cooperation with the Leaders Boards (Baker & Wong, 2013). These reforms were aborted following the 2010 election of a Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government which abolished regional strategies and institutions altogether in its neoliberal pursuit of economic growth (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2013).

Methodology

Over the last two decades, as the ideas associated with strategic spatial planning have been debated at the European level, they have become also more widely disseminated across the UK, particularly in England (Atkinson, 2010). Since the devolution of powers in 1997 to Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, planning systems in these territories of the UK are different from planning systems in England. Investigating the re-introduction of statutory regional spatial planning strategies by focusing on England reveals it more advantageous for a broader contribution to policy integration in the context of broader spatial planning processes. To find a suitable English region, we reflected on Flyvbjerg's (2006) argument

about the selection of ‘least likely’ case studies in the social sciences. With this logic, a system of policy integration that works in the least likely context will have a higher chance to be effective in other contexts too. Therefore, with the intention to extract transferable implications from findings, it was decided to choose a fragmented and heterogeneous region. The North-West region of England was an ideal choice of a case study as it has been previously identified as one of the most divided regions in politico-institutional, economic, and environmental terms (Burch & Holliday, 1993; Thompson & Dimitriou, 2007). It incorporates Greater Manchester, Liverpool City Region (Merseyside), and the sparsely populated sub-region of Cumbria along with Lancashire, which involves significant diversity between its urban centres and rural areas, and a Cheshire sub-region which includes wealthy wards in some of its local authority areas, such as Cheshire West and Chester (GONW, 2003, 2008). The North-West region also involves distinctive experiments with informal strategies and associated institutional arrangements, which render investigations into policy integration in this region highly productive for theoretical lessons and international practical learning with a planning-policy nexus.

We selected housing, employment, and transport as our policy domains of interest in this empirical investigation. We studied inter-sectoral and vertical integration of these policy domains in the North-West. Housing, employment, and transport were fundamental themes of regional planning in England. Regional Spatial Strategies, by statute, covered housing and transport. Employment was covered by Regional Economic Strategies that were prepared in coordination with Regional Spatial Strategies. We wanted to explore the extent to which Regional Spatial Strategies (RSS) integrated these core policy domains within their planning powers and through various mechanisms beyond those powers.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews and an associated survey. Interviews and the survey were conducted with 38 interviewees from diverse organisations and with different interests consisting of civil servants, local politicians, planning officers, business and civic representatives, delivery partners, and experts. From these, 28 were conducted in person between 2012 and 2014, and 10 were undertaken by digital means between 2018 and 2019 to generate a balance between precision and refinement benefits of immediate and delayed post-phenomenon inquiry. The selection of interview participants from each group of organisations and sectoral domains of transportation policies, housing policies and employment policies was undertaken via purposive sampling to select those interviewees who exhibited better prospects of making a significant contribution to the research.

In the questionnaires, participants were asked to express their views on a Likert scale from very effective, effective, neutral, ineffective, totally ineffective, to undecided regarding the effectiveness of policy integration in the North-West under the RSS. These were supplemented with opportunities to express their open reasoning and quoted examples. The structure of analysis, therefore, primarily relied on nuanced interview accounts.

The Integration of Transportation Policies

Inter-sectoral Integration

Empirical data suggest the RSS approach of sustainable mobilities achieved a substantive level of success in the North-West. Most stakeholders interviewed (70%) suggested the subsidiary relationship of the Regional Transport Strategy (RTS) and the Regional

Funding Allocation (RFA) with the RSS resulted in the successful integration of transport policies with other priorities such as social inclusion and community cohesion, CO₂ reduction, and equality of access (Figure 1). The RTS went through spatial planning iterations which were observed to reduce some of its sectoral edges in each round of negotiation with other interests. It was also suggested that the representation of a wider range of communities of interest in strategy-making procedures helped explore some common objectives and develop the necessary relationships to reflect on these connections.

With a more progressive view of regional spatial planning strategies, some stakeholders criticised the regional plan-making arrangements, arguing the unification of planning units is critical for the adoption of joined-up policies: For example, one interviewee commented that *'I personally don't think that the regional transport component of the Regional Spatial Strategy relates at all well to the rest of the document. That was written by a different little team'* (Interview R7, regional entity). While there are coordinative advantages in assigning all policy themes to a single unit, it might compromise the technical quality of policies, especially in such fields as waste, transport, and energy. A lack of systematic communication between the RTS planning unit and the rest of the RSS teams appears less likely because the transport section of the RSS appears well contextualised, making references to other policy themes and strategies throughout (GONW, 2008, pp. 70–88).

Some critics argued for a stronger statutory apparatus than RSS to enforce the genuine integration of policies. Indeed, innovative consensus-building techniques were applied in the making of RSS, but we found that an important driving factor for innovation has been the resourcefulness of the legal framework, as one of the interviewees contended that *'it would be in everyone's interest to get sorted out before it got to a formal examination stage'*

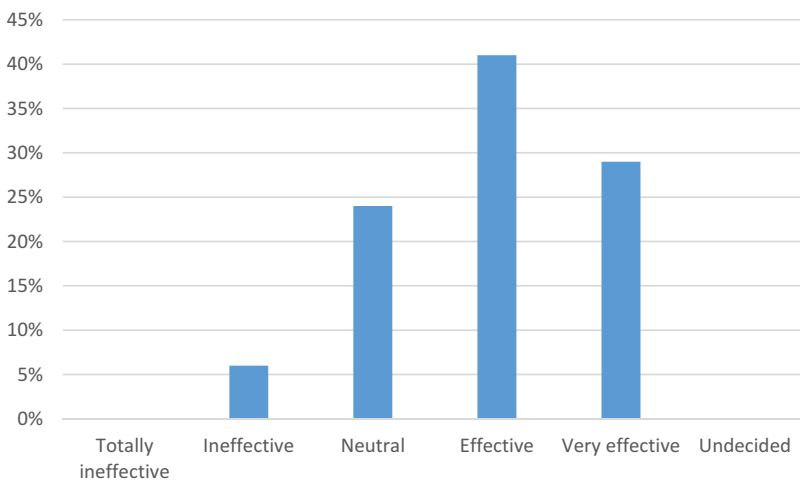


Figure 1. Survey findings for the inter-sectoral integration of transport policies. Authors' own.

(Interview E6, environmental policy expert). There was also a view that integrative considerations should be re-defined more widely to steer strategic transport investment beyond movement and growth considerations.

Not all the RSS critiques were premised on the effectiveness of statutory broad-ranging plans; some had concerns about policy integration compromising the quality of policies in some fields considered to be more fundamental, such as transport. Interviewees highlighted that *'The classic case of we want thousands of houses, but we don't want anyone to travel to them or from them . . . The problem is that whenever we talk to planners they are like "well, we want to know where people live, work and play". We're not really fussed about how they get between the three . . . I don't know, maybe we are coming from a different viewpoint that the transport is more fundamental than that'* (Interviews G4 & G5, government agency). Some believed RSS was too holistic, suggesting that *'In inter-sectoral [terms], they set themselves an ambitious target'* (Interview A1, academic expert). Surprisingly, these views were not from the business sector, but they were economic policy advisors and local politicians from less advantaged areas who believed their constituencies require a 'growth first' policy approach.

Vertical Integration

The RSS was partly meant to facilitate the vertical integration of transport policies with a top-down element, as explicitly required by the government: 'The RTS should set out how national transport policies and programmes will be delivered in the regions' (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), 2004, p. 58). Although some interviewees argued that a national spatial plan would leave the government stranded in endless consensus-building between the main owner of each policy theme and other departments, the higher variations in responses with some 'totally ineffective' ratings for the vertical integration of transport policies indicates its avoidance causes inconsistencies between different territorial levels. Besides, the making of such a plan would reveal less visible area-based conflicts. Despite all its communicative shortcomings, the passion with which several local authority interviewees talked about 'their' RSS implies if there was a national spatial plan for which ministers had engaged in lengthy negotiations, some of them might have developed a similar sense of ownership and this would have facilitated consistent vertical policy communication across government departments.

Nevertheless, the existence of the Regional Coordination Unit (RCU) helped overcome some difficulties in inter-departmental adjustments for multi-level governance from the Northern Way to regional and sub-regional organisations such as the Mersey Dee Alliance and the remaining county councils in the region. This helped reduce the level of vertical noise by the re-definition and mutual adjustment of central policies based on their territorial coverage. There were occasions of frictions between these organisations, especially between the Northern Way, which sometimes favoured the 'predict and provide' model of transportation planning to support out of town investment, and the North West Regional Assembly, which advocated demand management, but, overall, these levels of strategic planning made three major contributions to vertical policy integration: the re-territorialization of sectoral agendas, relation-building, and the imposition of policies on some local authorities that were more inclined to pursue their own agendas. Consequently, the 70% success rate for the vertical integration of transport

policies (Figure 2) is the aggregate result of the advantages of a statutory system of multi-level strategic planning and governance and the negative impacts of the lack of a national spatial strategy.

The lack of a national spatial plan and the weaker cross-regional dimension of *Planning Policy Statement (PPS) 11: Regional Spatial Strategies* directives (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), 2004) meant the integration of transport policies beyond the North-West was not the preoccupation of the RSS (Government Office for the North West (GONW), 2008). But there was a business case, and central interest crystallised through the Northern Way (Northern Way Steering Group, 2004). As far as the RDA was concerned, better connectivity could potentially add to the accumulation of a high-skilled workforce and investment in Greater Manchester and Liverpool City Region, provided the connectivity strategy did not imply resource displacements but reflected arrows pointed at these service hubs. The following statement of a senior civil servant from the RDA indicates how the organisation's 'Northern attitude' escalated after it became clear that the region's interests could be put on the agenda without much difficulty. The interviewee stated that '*when the Northern Way was created – it was long John Prescott's idea – we were all extremely sceptical about it . . . they seized what was then known as the Manchester Hub and is now known as the Northern Hub . . . and this was all about essentially making the case for strategic rail investment . . . And many components of that have now been accepted by government*' (Interview R7, regional entity).

The success of the Northern Hub in mounting the priority lists of the three regions was mainly related to the new arena in which it evolved – avoiding interest conflicts between a multitude of already established claimants and policy owners. The Northern Way attempted to communicate established objectives, for example, prioritising setting exercises by putting forward the Northern Transport Compact (Northern Way Steering Group, 2004). However, as the case of its Regional Transport Board's proposal, which caused frictions with the North West Regional Assembly suggests, the integrative

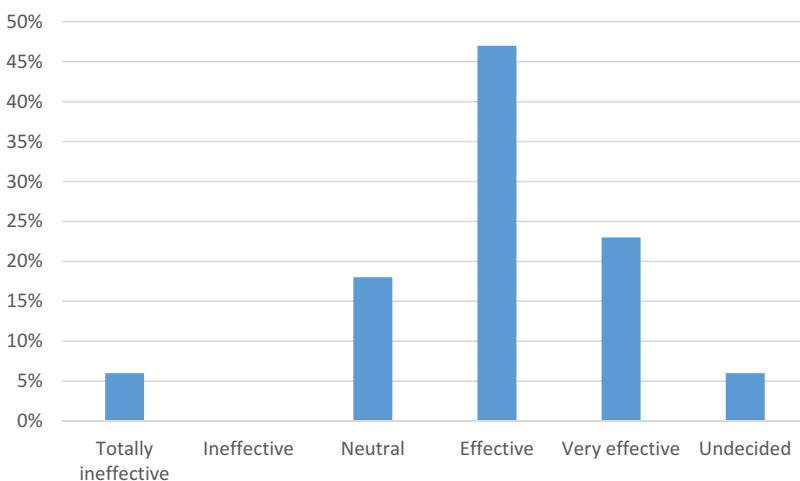


Figure 2. Survey findings for the vertical integration of transport policies. Authors' own.

attempts of the Northern Way proved more effective within new policy arenas such as rail infrastructure through less interference with the assertion of the Regional Assembly on devolved regional affairs.

Given the political and resource implications, new arenas of policy integration were more difficult to create at the lower levels. However, 69% of survey respondents believed RSS arrangements were successful in integrating transport policies across the North-West. Depending on the spatial levels, this was facilitated by community and market forces, consensus building, learning effects and statutory enforcement. Within city regions, community and market demand for integration was dominant but cross-city regional integration was usually a challenge. In some cases, the mobility requirements of different functional areas were too fragmented to forge a consensual deal for policy integration. Even in such circumstances, a level of policy cooperation or coordination was usually secured through the learning effects of the collaborative exercises of the RSS and RFA. However, the statutory enforcement of regional priorities was sometimes problematic, especially in terms of power relations in defining these priorities and how their collective benefit could be verified. Some argued statutory enforcement worked in favour of metropolitan areas which managed to bend the RSS discourses of 'strategic' and 'sustainable' towards their own transport priorities. One interviewee stated that *'the North West documents tended to be focused very much on Manchester and Merseyside ... We got questionnaires and things to fill out, but I don't think really that we had a great deal of influence over what was written ... A lot of things were imposed upon us, and we weren't very happy about it to be honest'* (Interview L8, local government).

The Integration of Housing Policies

Inter-sectoral Integration

According to 71% of survey respondents, the RSS arrangements were successful in the inter-sectoral integration of housing policies (Figure 3). Indeed, none of the survey respondents believed that these arrangements failed in incorporating wider objectives of housing policies. The highest levels of positive responses were from civil servants (100%) and then planning officers and the voluntary sector (each 67%) while local politicians and the business sector tended to be more critical. The positive rating from the voluntary sector verifies the interview findings that the holistic approach was not based on a self-indulgent technocratic view of planning in which experts decide on the application of their comprehensive insight of public affairs or otherwise. Indeed, comprehensiveness and inclusivity were intertwined; inclusivity meant policy inputs came from as many communities of interest and place as possible (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), 2004), so this demanded a widening of policy fields as well as joining up the diverse sets of inputs. An interviewee stated that *'In negotiations between the priority groups of the RSS, some social insights were expressed which housing specialists had not considered ... Stakeholder learning and argumentation helped in planning the locations, numbers, and quality of housing in a way that combined concerns about homelessness with accessibility, green field and cultural heritage protection, private capital interests, and climate change'* (Interview P14, regional planner).

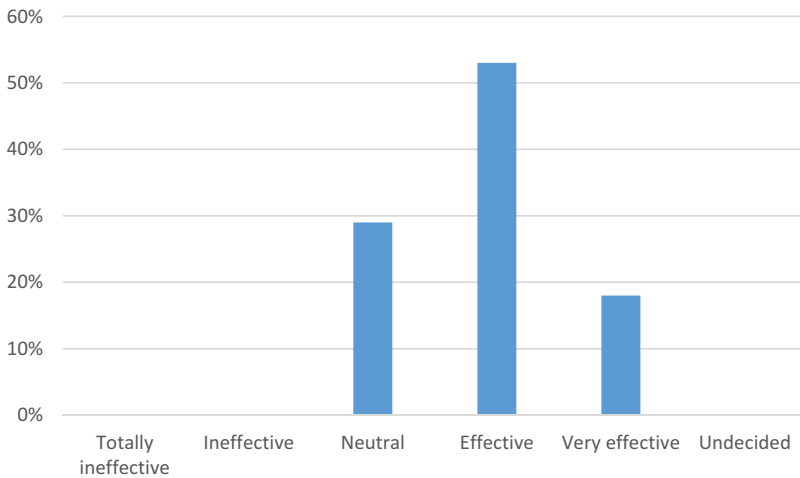


Figure 3. Survey findings for the inter-sectoral integration of housing policies. Authors' own.

Vertical Integration

The 64% success and 12% failure scores (Figure 4) for the vertical integration of housing policies can be interpreted by some unfavourable supra-regional and some positive intra-regional factors. Regional assemblies had an indirect democratic mandate and articulated a clear spatial vision of housing policies, putting them, particularly in the North-West, in an assertive position while their colleagues at the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister/Department for Communities and Local Government had to deal with eight diverse regions with a relatively abstract vision. However, such spatial strategy assertiveness did not amount to significant bottom-up input from the regions. This meant regional stakeholders followed central guidelines on housing while sometimes having different agendas and values. At other times conflicts of values between the centre and the regional planning body were reflected in the regional plan; in the North West RSS (Government Office for the North West (GONW), 2008), the co-promotion of a comprehensive regeneration agenda and the government's housing market renewal is an example of such vertical policy integration frictions.

From the regional level down there was a more positive picture of the vertical integration of housing policies as social and environmental considerations constituted the Regional Assembly's powerbase and the identity of its RSS as well as local political concerns in the boom years. However, some local levels of government lead by the Conservative Party had similar priorities to development lobbies, putting pressure on regional planning for fewer restrictions on house building. The responses developed to these conflicting priorities mainly involved policy imposition at the regional level and, subsequently, the vilification of the region by the local politicians facing development pressure. However, some local interviewees argued that in setting the housing targets in the RSS: *'all the districts in the North-West broadly agreed what the numbers were and how they wanted [the*

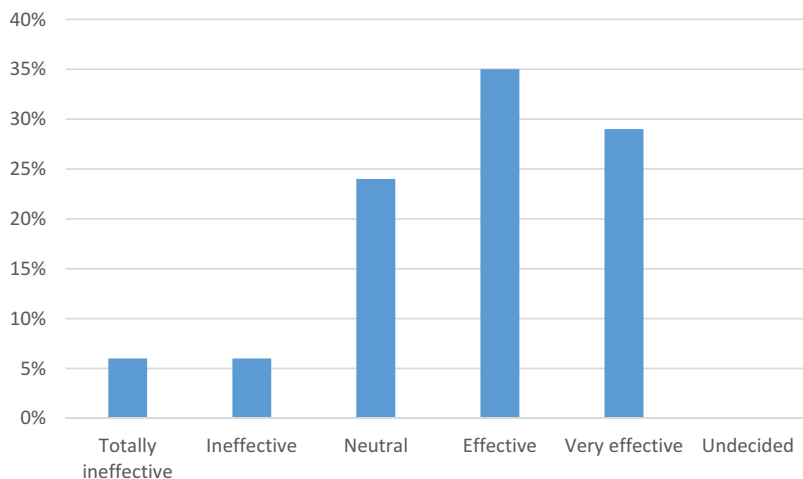


Figure 4. Survey findings for the vertical integration of housing policies. Authors' own.

numbers] to be apportioned spatially' (Interview L10, local government). A Conservative politician from Cumbria challenged this view and echoed the voice of his counterpart in another district by saying, *'One thing I didn't approve of under the New Labour approach was the very centrist direction that we had in terms of, say, housing allocations; we were told how many new houses we could approve'* (Interview L8, local government). Local politicians had an exceptional opportunity for win-win policy options under the RSS; while a local holistic approach was consistent with the interests of community groups, the voluntary sector and the statutory RSS, pro-development voices were often silenced by the 'our hands are tied' discourse.

There was a 69% positive rating for the essentially controversial integration of housing policies across territorial constituencies, which verifies the importance of viable inter-organisational networks developed through strategy-making exercises as well as the influence of statutory commitments created by the RSS, as the relationships are horizontal and between equally empowered parties. The RA arrangements enabled iterative negotiations on such issues as restraint or oversupply of new housing in one jurisdiction to stimulate the housing market or support rapid employment growth in a neighbouring locality. The statutory status of the RSS had two implications. First, it encouraged sustained inter-local negotiations in the hope that the outcomes would be less reversible in case the political climate of the partner locality changed. Second, this broad statutory apparatus enabled informal agreements on the compensation of housing concessions in other policy fields, as qualified by a planning officer. *'There were informal [interest] exchanges on the formal platform of the RSS whereby one locality released more housing land in favour of its neighbouring constituency which did not have enough [land] because of rapid growth in employment, and instead contributed to transport infrastructure between the two [localities]'* (Interview P14, regional planner).

The Integration of Employment Policies

Inter-sectoral Integration

As regards the inter-sectoral integration of employment policies, the lower success (50%) and more neutral (31%) ratings (Figure 5) indicate the alignment of rhetoric through *Action for Sustainability*, the region's Regional Sustainable Development Framework, was less effective in persuading the RES to temper its output-based approach and integrate with the RSS objectives in this field. An interviewee stated that *'In terms of the strategic employment sites ... we had disagreements with North West Development Agency who tended to look at development sites as being big areas of land next to motorway junctions whereas, as strategic planners, we didn't necessarily agree with that and we thought strategic sites should be in urban centres where there's better public transport'* (Interview R10, regional entity). However, the RDA funding represented less than 2% of regional public spending (Pearce & Ayres, 2009), *'so an awful lot of employment and activity was determined by default by decisions taken in Whitehall'* (Interview R7, regional entity).

Rhetoric was inevitable in New Labour's discourse shift from 'equality' to the less distinctive 'social inclusion' and 'collaborative governance' (Lister, 1998; Newman, 2001). Although it was thought to be less cumbersome for the party, the new discourse was structurally problematic as genuine collaborative governance would bring to the fore public good and regulatory frameworks to secure it, whereas the resources to deliver many aspects of public good, such as employment, basically came from private capital. Whilst Gershon's (2004) *Independent Review of Public Sector Efficiency* equipped the 2004 Spending Review (HM Treasury, 2004) with an 'efficiency' discourse for cuts in public sector jobs, the North West RSS (Government Office for the North West (GONW), 2008) talked about the maximisation of potential to boost the relatively high level of public sector employment in the region, which is interesting given metropolitan areas would be the major beneficiaries of such an increase. However, throughout the RSS, this proportion remained below 23% of all employees (Millard, 2007; Matthews, 2010).

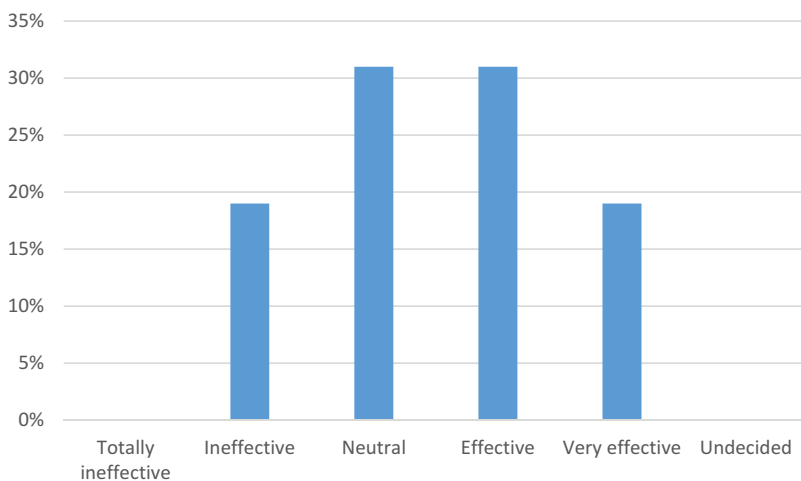


Figure 5. Survey findings for the inter-sectoral integration of employment policies. Authors' own.

Employment policy needed to ‘ensure that substantially more private sector investment is attracted into the region’ (Northwest Regional Development Agency, 2006, p.19). Whilst the housing sector is also mainly dependent on private finance (White & Allmendinger, 2003), it is more receptive to comprehensive frameworks, partly due to the complexities of moving to a totally different geography.

Vertical Integration

Not surprisingly, only 44% of survey respondents believed different tiers of decision-making used the same goals and similar priorities in their employment policies (Figure 8). Indeed, the issue was partly about the government’s inevitable cascading down of some inconsistent directives because of the lack of a national spatial vision (e.g. HM Government, 2005; Barker, 2006). The role of regional planning in aligning central priorities could not always be accomplished. In this regard, one interviewee contended that *‘In a sense a different part of Whitehall led on the various issues. And those things didn’t always join up, which wasn’t very helpful. Our job was to try and make them joined up in terms of the regional plan, but it was hard at times to work with different parts of Whitehall to make sure that it was joined up’* (Interview R4, regional entity).

Policy actors at different levels had enough political and economic incentives available to adopt different agendas and still justify these with central guidance. The needier localities, for example, were less convinced by the DCLG and RA’s discourses of setting a strategic spatial context in looking at employment opportunities (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), 2004; Government Office for the North West (GONW), 2008). The following interview quote helps qualify this argument: *‘I think the regional [arrangements] failed in getting people like Cumbria and others, smaller fractions, together and to encourage them. We felt isolated when there were [investment] decisions made’* (Interview L9, local government). Meanwhile, being less optimistic about a unanimous local view on metropolitan-focused employment, New Labour applied a level of territorial administration by giving RDAs responsibility to lead employment policies. On the other hand, Regional Spatial Strategies was proscribed from identifying specific sites for inward investment (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), 2004). All these issues explain the weaker performance of the regional apparatus in the vertical integration of employment policies in the North-West.

The vertical policy integration of employment policies was considered successful by 47% of survey respondents (Figure 9). This is a notable proportion given the highly contentious nature of employment policies, especially in less attractive areas for investment. Based on the very diverse economic geographies of the North-West, it would be normal for growth deficient areas such as Cumbria to try to influence public spending outside the formal planning system through, for example, the establishment of sub-regional networks and strategies to highlight their own employment priorities to government (CSP, 2008). Meanwhile, employment was not amongst the main policy themes of regional spatial plans, reducing the scope for associated inter-local negotiations which could benefit from the collaborative planning assets of the RA. As one interviewee argued, vertical integration of employment policies could have been the most interesting test for regional spatial planning strategies in incorporating the objectives of lagging areas, but it was avoided due to central government’s fear of never-ending conflicts.

Although some believed that cluster specialisation could help resolve such conflicts through the concentration of localities on their distinctive, yet complementary, potentials, this approach was seen to be difficult to realise at the regional, as opposed to sub-regional, level. A local government interviewee, therefore, suggested that *'In the North-West scale, any reference to vertical integration of employment policies in effect meant selecting a few strategic inward investment sites, and asking many other areas which did not have them to not undermine the infrastructure and marketing focus on those sites'* (Interview L11, local government).

Conclusions

The experience of the North-West region of England is illustrative of the critical role economic growth plays in fostering or hindering policy integration. In this region, regional spatial planning strategies were effective in the integration of its most clearly established areas of involvement, namely housing and transport. This contrasts to employment policies which were elaborated instead mainly in regional economic planning terms. The lowest success rating from the surveys of transport was that of vertical policy integration with 69%. Employment was the only policy field whose success ratings in inter-sectoral and vertical policy integration did not exceed 50%.

There was a significant consensus in the survey ratings between the inter-sectoral and vertical integration of each policy theme surveyed. This corresponds with, for example, Vogeler *et al.* (2021), who, in the context of policy integration in the water-food-health nexus, suggest that consensus is fitted to balance a range of interests towards a successful policy integration. However, a key issue was related to the vertical integration of policies, which mainly owed their relative success to the statutory status of regional spatial planning strategies. This supports findings of a meta-synthesis of regional spatial planning in England by Ziafati Bafarasat and Baker (2022) but contradicts Albrechts *et al.* (2019) as they argue that 'statutory plans in terms of form and content (legal certainty, comprehensive, detailed, etc.) are often a negation of change, dynamics, uncertainty' (p. 1492).

There was less input to national planning policy from the region and less input to regional policy from small districts. Smaller districts had to play by the rules of regionalism, partly determined by the centre and partly defined by Greater Manchester and Liverpool City Region; they could not challenge the 'strategic' and 'sustainable' by which the marginalisation of their local agendas was de-politicised and was subsequently made indefensible within the formal planning apparatus. This led less powerful localities to find other ways of pursuing their own objectives, aided by some conflicting central guidance, thus undermining spatial strategy priorities.

Based on the assessed case study in England we conclude that statutory regional spatial planning strategies are effective for policy integration through the following mechanisms: (i) Mutual inter-sectoral learning, (ii) Creating certainty for interest exchange, (iii) Diversion of parochial pressure from local governments that would be required by law to integrate within a larger spatial framework; and (iv) Refining of individual policies in iterative planning steps. However, forced concessions, in which a smaller entity acceded to the demands of a larger/more powerful one, were widely applied in vertical aspects. This could lead to more policy imposition than integration. Recent reports calling for the

reintroduction of statutory regional spatial planning strategies such as the UK2070 Commission could reflect better on how a consensual means of exchange could replace forced concession in the controversial task of vertical integration. Specifically, the UK2070 Commission's virtuous circle involves comprehensive spatial strategies at the regional level (UK2070 Commission, 2020, p. 4).

With a broad range of voluntary deal-making experiments between central government and localities in the 2010–2020 period in the form of City Deals and other incentive-driven vertical contracts underway, it seems that a possible new round of regional spatial strategy-making would gain from incorporating this experience into a statutory spatial planning platform. Furthermore, the ability of statutory spatial strategies in stimulating more encompassing informal deals is of high importance to the integration of policies in controversial fields such as employment, and between stakeholders with power differentials. As lessons learned in other geographical contexts, we contend that statutory regional spatial planning strategies have the capacity to enhance policy integration not only in the fields of housing, transportation, and employment, which will foster territorial competitiveness but also across wider domains to support a socially equitable and environmentally sustainable future in countries struggling to adapt their policies to achieve a more integrative and prosperous future.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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