



# 'Planning cultures' and delivering growth in the South East of England

To what extent are the possibilities for present and future planning shaped and constrained by past planning decisions and established local 'planning cultures'? This briefing, based on research conducted for the RTPI South East region by Oxford Brookes University and UCL, focuses on three case study areas in the South East of England – Oxford/Oxfordshire, South Hampshire and the Gatwick-Diamond.

The research builds on a previous project, funded under the RTPI's Small Impact Research (SPIRe) scheme, which investigated the efficacy of governance arrangements of planning for housing and employment growth in these sub-regions. This latest research included a series of focus group meetings interviewing planners working in the public and private sectors in these locations.

## Who should read this?

Central, regional and local policy- and decision-makers, and local planners, with an involvement in strategic planning growth, and researchers and commentators interested in planning and growth.

## Key messages for policy and practice

'Planning cultures' can be understood as how planning practice adapts to the context in which it operates. These contexts are informed by the planning history (or legacy) of areas. These cultures can play a significant role in decision-making but have been largely overlooked, especially at the local level.

Distinct sub-regional or local planning cultures can exist even where there are generally similar region-wide development pressures. This research highlights the different 'ways of seeing things' in each of the case study areas:

- In Oxford/Oxfordshire a culture of 'urban political dissonance';
- In South Hampshire (the Partnership for Urban South Hampshire area), a culture of compliance and collaborative working;
- In the Gatwick Diamond area, a culture of accepting and managing difference and uncertainty.

These case studies suggest that long-established planning cultures can exert a significant influence on development. At the same time, some of these local approaches represent entirely logical responses to how central government relates to localities.

Even though there has been widespread recognition of economic under-performance in each of these areas, only rarely have business interests, politicians or planners entertained the likely connection between this performance and some of the political compromises that have characterised planning approaches.

The loss of the former Regional Spatial Strategies and associated plans for sub-regional growth are significant in this respect. A more fragmentary and localised approach may reinforce established local approaches rather than encourage plans of greater scope and ambition.

In these areas, the incremental solutions adopted over the past 50 years may have reached their limits. Breaking out of these legacies may mean appealing to a new sense of the areas people relate to and a much broader constituency.

## Main findings

Discussions of local planning culture must be situated within the broader context of national political-economic trends and the longer-term dynamics of planning. This is to say, 'planning culture' more broadly has been gradually eroded from the late-1960s and government policy since the 1980s has – in varying ways – chipped away at planning's foundations and original ambitions (see further below).

Within this overall context however, the case studies examined in this research demonstrate that distinct sub-regional or local planning cultures can exist even where there are generally similar region-wide development pressures. Within the settlement pattern of the South East of England – with its London focus, the absence of counterweighting large city-regions and numerous market towns – the manner in which growth pressures have tended to be dealt with differently has formed part of these sub-regional planning cultures.

### 'Urban political dissonance' in Oxford-Oxfordshire

Planning in Oxfordshire has been marked by sustained periods of tension, as ongoing strategic action on the part of local authorities has resulted in some incoherent policy agendas. As a result it has sometimes been difficult to find compromise or workable policy resolution.

In particular, for the past 30 years or so development planning in the county has been marked by an evolving policy dilemma regarding the growth and physical expansion of Oxford city, which has critical implication for planning policy for the county and for the growth prospects of the city and sub-region.

In the face of opposition amongst the surrounding districts to the physical expansion of the city, the City Deal in Oxford-Oxfordshire reflected previous attempts to manage different policy agendas amongst the local authorities.

The City Deal bid was framed around questions of innovation and economic growth in order to avoid the immediate conflict which would accompany direct engagement with housing allocations. Avoidance of the key

issue of housing resulted in a lack of specificity in the City Deal proposal and ongoing conflict over the wider spatial strategy for the county.

### 'Compliance and collaborative working' in South Hampshire

Despite the different political complexions of the 12 authorities across the Partnership for Urban South Hampshire (PUSH) area, a relatively strong measure of co-operation and joint working represents an important continuity in planning in the area, particularly amongst planning officers working in the authorities concerned.

South Hampshire was identified as a potential growth area as early as the 1960s, when central government identified it as the location for a possible new town, and in response to analysis that the sub-region had under-performed in economic terms.

The accommodation of population growth and associated planning for housing and employment in South Hampshire has, from the onset of post-war economic recovery, been understood locally as Hampshire 'doing its bit' for the nation. At the same time, one of the main forces prompting a measure of co-operation has been the desire to pre-empt any central government attempt to dictate housing numbers or where houses should be located.

The lack of a stronger co-ordinated strategic approach has been partly addressed through the Partnership for Urban South Hampshire's (PUSH) sub-regional strategy, however a sense of compromise persists to this day.

### 'Accepting and managing difference and uncertainty' in the Gatwick Diamond

The core of the Gatwick Diamond are locations – namely, Crawley and Gatwick Airport – which stand out as distinct from the rest of the area.

The significant differences between urban, suburban and rural local authorities, together with two county councils, mean that the sub-region is associated with a diversity of planning policy responses and that the Gatwick Diamond area is perceived by some as an artificial construct. The sub-region has needed to grapple with historical and political



conditions which do not lend a natural harmony to the area and which do not provide an established foundation for coordinated planning.

Again however, addressing economic under-performance and the need to raise skills levels have been important concerns shared by both business and local government. Nonetheless, there have been very real achievements at various stages of the planning process for the area. Certainly there was evidence of real collaboration in the production of the Regional Spatial Strategy and preparation of a Local Strategic Statement in 2011.

### Implications for strategic planning

Academic interest in planning cultures has mainly been concerned with comparing spatial planning systems operating at a national scale, and has largely overlooked the enduring perspectives that can inform practice over a considerable time in individual localities.

These case studies show that long-established planning cultures can exert a significant influence on development. The research helps to bridge this gap in understanding of distinct local planning 'rationalities'. Planning cultures are shown to exist in local planning policies and designations as much as the operation of the national planning system, and may equally have originated in the distant past.

However, there is a sense in each of the areas examined that the incremental solutions adopted over the last 50 years since the designation of new or substantially expanded towns may have reached their limits. Breaking out of established planning policy legacies may mean appealing to a new 'spatial imaginary' (the areas which people relate to) and a much broader constituency.

The loss of the former Regional Spatial Strategies and associated plans for sub-regional growth is significant in this respect. Current planning arrangements under the Localism Act (2011), the generalised streamlining of the planning system and associated nudges such as the New Homes Bonus, are unlikely to have a significant impact on strategic planning.

Indeed, a more fragmentary and localised system seems destined to reinforce established and in some cases ossified local approaches, rather than encourage plans of greater scope and ambition.

Another way of putting this is that even though there has been widespread recognition of economic under-performance in each of these case study areas, rarely have business interests, politicians or planners entertained the likely connection between some of the political compromises that have characterised planning approaches in each of the areas and their economic under-performance.

It is too early to tell whether and how UK central government's ambitions for house building will further shape what have been renewed attempts to plan for growth inherited from the era of Regional Spatial Strategies. Political compromise may continue to constrain growth and development in the case study areas.

It remains to be seen then whether and how UK central government's ambitions for house building will further shape what have been renewed attempts to plan for growth inherited from the era of Regional Spatial Strategies. There is the distinct possibility that these compromise agreements will be insufficient to meet government ambitions for growth and development; it is also unclear how a further dismantling of planning in pursuit of 'growth', understood narrowly, will help in this respect.

### The influence of national planning dynamics

Land use planning enjoyed a measure of public support up until the 1960s. In part, planning was able to draw on a strong sense of public interest built on the war time effort. New towns provided an orderly and profitable way to build settlements and the requisite infrastructure, and remain an important legacy and ingredient in one of the case study areas (Gatwick Diamond).



This popular and political support, along with the position of planners as respected public servants, was short lived. It began to wane with objections to the ongoing effects of comprehensive town centre redevelopment schemes and was crystallised in critiques of the planner as 'evangelistic bureaucrat'

Politicians more recently have often been unwilling to make decisions that incur even modest opposition from their electorates, rather than offering a measure of insulation from such demands in favour of the wider public interest.

Three further factors are identified as undermining planning:

- The sense of the planning profession having been watered-down within local authorities, particularly the loss of the Chief Planning Officer role and their associated management teams and the shift in technical work and evidence gathering to private consultancy.
- The effect of persistent 'managerial reform'; changing policy objectives (including the scraping of regional spatial strategies); increasing breadth of/changes to legislation and onerous requirements for plan-making.
- Antipathy and distrust of planning by locally and nationally elected politicians. Examples include the unwillingness of local councilors to undertake training and a nagging suspicion that central government is intent on getting rid of planning altogether.

### Resolving the dilemma

The case studies show that planning cultures have a significant impact on the development of spatial strategies and consequently on economic and housing development.

Sub-regional areas present an opportunity to imagine alternative institutional forms and the possibilities this may present for place-making. However, breaking out of established policy legacies requires a level of transformational change which involves re-imagining the spatial context in favour of one which accords more closely to the way local people actually identify and relate to the spaces around them.

The case studies examined in this research demonstrate that incremental solutions and compromise such as the 'spreading of pain' (through tacking extensions onto villages and towns or encouraging dispersal) may have reached their limits. A distinctly new vision of planning for growth in the south east of England, offering new institutional forms and 'political spaces', is urgently required in place of the politically acceptable but second best solutions for development and growth.

### About the research

This briefing is based on research conducted for the RTPI by Dave Valler from Oxford Brookes University and Nick Phelps from University College London, funded through the RTPI's Small Projects Impact Research (SPIRe) scheme. The full report is available on the RTPI website at: [www.rtpi.org.uk/spire](http://www.rtpi.org.uk/spire)

### About the RTPI

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