Strategic Planning in England – Current Practice and Future Directions

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Dedication

In fond memory of Emeritus Professor Martin Boddy, a core member of the research team, who sadly died prior to the completion of the empirical research and publication of this report.

1. Introduction

1.1 Research scope

Strategic planning is widely understood as the co-ordination of activity across wide geographical areas like city-regions, and across multiple sectors including housing, transport, health and the environment (RTPI, 2023)[1]. The potential value of strategic planning practice has been recognised and provided for in institutional form (such as in Structure Plans, Regional Planning Conferences, Regional Planning Guidance, Regional Spatial Strategies) by every UK Government between the late 1960s and 2010 as an essential part of the planning system. In May 2010, the incoming Government (Conservative and Liberal Democrat Coalition) signalled its intent to abolish Regional Spatial Strategies in England, and with it this longstanding principle of strategic planning at a greater than local planning authority level, and a principle which remains in much of Europe (Berisha et al 2021)[2]. Since then, there has been no mandatory requirement for a nation-wide approach to the production of strategic plans in England.

For some local authorities the new-found autonomy was interpreted, at least initially, as needing to plan only according to needs assessed locally and resulted in immediate retrenchment of their strategic growth plans, and an ambivalence towards cross-boundary collaboration (Boddy and Hickman 2013)[3]. Others responded to this strategic vacuum by voluntarily progressing a variety of types and scales of strategic plans including statutory spatial development strategies, non-statutory strategic frameworks and joint local plans. More recently, some devolution deals at the city-region level, have provided for statutory strategic planning powers, albeit that these powers are not universal across all combined authorities.

This shift in approach has also taken place alongside a significant reduction in planning resources generally and strategic planning capacity specifically (see RTPI 2019)[4]. The result has been a highly variegated approach to strategic planning in practice, including places with little evidence of any meaningful cross-boundary working. As such, strategic spatial planning in England, to that extent that it exists, can best be characterised as a patchwork quilt, with varying approaches in different geographical contexts. It is also clear that in some places the logic of *"don't do anything unless you have to"* (Pemberton and Morphet 2021)[5] prevails.

Consequently, several organisations and commentators are now calling for a more comprehensive approach to strategic planning in some form (see, for example, Local Plans Expert Group 2016[6], Royal Town Planning Institute 2019[7], RTPI 2021[8], British Property Federation 2023[9], UK2070 Commission 2020[10], Building the Future Commission 2023[11], All Party Parliamentary Group on Housing Supply and Delivery 2023[12]). These are not, however, based on in-depth nationwide research of current practice. This report fills this gap, by providing the results of research commissioned by the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) to understand the nature of current strategic planning in England and the demand for alternative approaches in the future. The work was funded by contributions from the three northern English Regions of the RTPI.

The specific scope of this research was to:

- articulate a clear **rationale for strategic spatial planning**;
- **provide empirical evidence on current approaches** to strategic planning practice, identifying the successes and challenges and any barriers preventing the emergence of more collaborative approaches in the future; and
- to present findings in respect of **potential reforms necessary** to planning policy and practice to **enable more effective strategic spatial planning** in the future.

As such, the findings are relevant to a wide range of audiences, across Central and Local Government and the private sector, especially those involved in the delivery of sustainable growth and that have a role to play in infrastructure funding prioritisation.

1.2 Research method

The research was designed in five phases as illustrated in figure 1 below. Further detail is provided in the main body of the report in the relevant section.

Stage	Coverage in main report	Details
1. Background literature and practice review	Section 2	The research began with a review of recently published literature on strategic planning to present existing evidence and research relevant as context to this study. This intentionally covered by academic and wider policy literature. What followed was a desk-based review of current practice to provide an overview of practice in England in terms of geographical coverage, governance arrangements and status in the planning system.
2. National surveys	Section 3	Two national surveys – one of local authorities and one of wider (largely private sector) stakeholders – were conducted to gather information from a wide range of practitioners engaged in strategic planning in some form, to provide both quantitative and qualitative information from across England as a whole, about the effectiveness of current practice, and appetite for future arrangements. Across the surveys 352 people participated.
3. Six in-depth case studies	Section 4	Six in-depth case studies were conducted, chosen to reflect a range of geographical locations, governance arrangements, current approaches to strategic planning. These were: Leicester and Leicestershire; Liverpool Combined Authority Area; North East Combined Authority Area; South West Hertfordshire; West of England ; and, York, North Yorkshire, East Riding and Hull.
4. Four national focus groups	Section 5 and appendix 5	Four national online focus groups were held to test the validity of the findings with a wider audience of experts in the field and, critically, discuss options for future forms of strategic planning emerging. The four focus groups comprised: (1) Members of the RTPI's England Policy Committee; (2) Practitioners with experience of working in the RTPI's three Northern regions;(3) Practitioners with sector specific experience, such as transport, water, housing or the natural environment; and (4) Practitioners currently working in, or with previous experience in, local and sub-regional government.
5. Evaluation and conclusions	Section 5	The components of the research were drawn together into a series of findings and key areas for debate

Figure 1– Research design

2. Research background and context

2.1 Strategic planning in context

The policy and practice of strategic spatial planning has been the subject of a continual process of interpretation and reform since the founding of the "modern" planning system after World War 2 (Sturzaker and Nurse, 2021[13]). This evolution has reflected the ideology of the government of the day (Pemberton and Morphet, 2021[14]), but also the struggle to reconcile national and local priorities (Gallent et al, 2013[15]; McGuiness and Mawson, 2017).

Here, we consider the nature, scope and purpose of strategic spatial planning over time. We start by exploring the traditional distinction between types of planning designed to achieve balanced development *between regions*, and those that seek to resolve "larger than local" issues *within regions*. We consider the recent "localism" project, often presented as representing a strategic planning "void" and note that the debate on strategic spatial planning continues to be informed by multiple *normative* standpoints. These are reflected in the diversity of policy and practice post 2010, which is explored further in section 2.2.

2.1.1 Inter-regional strategic planning

Wannop (1993, p15)[16] defines inter-regional strategic planning as the '**balancing of resources to modify standards of living and disparities in economic conditions as between different parts of the nation**'. The philosophy of this model is fundamentally *redistributive*. It implies the need for strategic central government oversight of planning, although not necessarily embodied in a national spatial plan. Indeed, the lack of a national spatial strategy, in contrast to many European countries, has been a defining feature of planning in England (TCPA, 2006[17]).

This was the dominant ethos of the planning system that emerged after World War 2, influenced by the logic of Keynesian economics, and informed by the *Barlow Commission* (1940), for whom uneven regional development was the primary problem. The 1947 *Town and Country Planning Act* and associated initiatives provided for a "carrot and stick" approach to strategic planning, designed to steer development from London and the South East to the deindustrialising regions of the Midlands and North (Hall, 1997[18]), comprising:

- Financial subsidies (grants and loans to incentivise development in *Assisted Areas*), and
- Floorspace controls (*Industrial Development Certificates* to manage development pressure in growing regions).

The 1960s and 1970s represented the high tide of "traditional" national inter-regional planning, with some 20% of the population of the UK eligible for government support. Hall (1997) estimates that, between 1961 and 1981, some 600,000 manufacturing jobs were redistributed to the Assisted Areas. Inter-regional planning declined rapidly thereafter for multiple reasons (Martin and Tyler, 1993[19]):

- The economic crisis of the 1970s left limited growth to redistribute.
- The belief of the Thatcher government, elected in 1979, in free market equilibrium.
- The UK's accession to the European Economic Community in 1973, which limited the scope for direct government subsidies.
- The shift in government priority to urban areas following the inner-city riots in 1980 and 1981.

Uneven regional development has re-arisen as a topic of political debate since 2010. For example, the *Northern Powerhouse*, championed by former Chancellor George Osborne from 2014, is built on the idea of agglomeration economics; the major cities of the North (Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Sheffield), if integrated into a single functional unit, might provide a necessary counterbalance to

London; *"The cities of the north are individually strong, but collectively not strong enough. The whole is less than the sum of its parts. So, the powerhouse of London dominates more and more. And that's not healthy for our economy"* (Osborne, 2014[20]).

The Northern Powerhouse has been criticised for being a vague concept. It is unclear whether it represents a strategy (it is certainly not a formal "plan"), a narrative or a brand. It provides a focus for investment in intra-regional transport links, innovation, and culture, but is indistinct in respect of geography, aims and objectives, and funding (Lee, 2017)[21].

Latterly, the idea of *Levelling Up* presents an example of inter-regional thinking. It is motivated by an aspiration to address regional disparities, but it is not strictly redistributive. *"When I say level up, I don't mean attacking our great companies. I don't mean impeding the success of London. I believe in building people up, giving everyone growing up in this country the opportunity they need, whoever you are, whatever your ethnicity, whatever your background"* (Johnson, 2020[22]).

The *Levelling Up White Paper* (2022)[23] provides a theory of change in which the presence of certain assets or "capitals" (skilled labour, supply chains, connectivity, enterprise, place-based leadership) create a virtuous circle of growth (the "Medici effect"), and policy should seek to cultivate these. However, the contribution of strategic planning to levelling up, addressing market failure and unleashing the potential of place, has been noted (DLUHC, 2020[24]) but not fully exploited. Policy has tended towards an orthodox capital investment, project by project-based approach, providing through a process of competitive bidding, resources for local investment in transport, regeneration and cultural assets (Tait et al, 2020[25]).

2.1.2 *Intra*-regional planning

Wannop (1993) defines intra-regional strategic planning as **'resolving issues and local problems of growing metropolitan cities, spilling their population and their economic and social relationships and raising political disputes across their administrative boundaries'.**

This definition suggests a focus on city-region level planning and is typical of the most recent approaches to strategic spatial planning (see below). However, we can interpret intra-regional strategic planning more broadly to encapsulate planning for *larger than local* issues, *within rather than between regions*.

During the mid-1960s, the Government established a system of intra-regional planning which included Government led *Regional Planning Councils*, which produced regional studies, notably the *South East Study* (1964) leading to regional plans (e.g. the *South East Strategy* 1967). Alongside these were the conferences of local planning authorities (e.g. the *Standing Conference on London and South East Regional Planning*, later SERPLAN) which produced plans intended to implement the work of the Regional Councils. A key element of this approach was a commitment of central government funding, such as in the new towns of Milton Keynes, etc.

At the sub-regional level, the *Town and Country Planning Act* 1968 introduced a new two-tier (i.e. sub-regional / local) statutory planning system.

- Strategic *Structure Plans* were to deliver the strategic priorities identified in the regional plan, to set out broad policies for land use, including projections for housing, and identification of major development sites (Boddy and Hickman, 2013)[26].
- Detailed *Action Area or District Plans* for areas of major change or *Subject Plans* topics requiring special consideration in development control terms.

The elegant architecture of the 1968 Act was compromised by the *Local Government Act* 1972 which took most development control and plan making powers from County Councils but leaving them still with the Structure Plan to produce. It also split responsibility for key infrastructure provision, such as eduction and transport, form responsibility for planning and housing.

Structure Plans would be criticised for not being sufficiently strategic in orientation, their complex and lengthy production process, and weak alignment with functional geography (Baker and Wong, 2013[27]). From the very beginning, the Government specifically refused to align its agreement to Structure Plans to any form of public investment programmes, making implementation of the plans extremely challenging. However, they continued to perform a valuable function in terms of steering Local Plans, especially on matters of housing, countryside protection and Green Belts.

The 1980s were characterised by a rhetorically market led approach to planning, exemplified by *Enterprise Zones* and *Urban Development Corporations* (Thornley, 1990[28]), in which strategic planning was diminished, although Structure Plans continued to play a strategic role. However, by the end of the decade, in response to criticism of the failures of market led planning, the Major government introduced a new system of *Regional Planning Guidance* (RPG) (Breheny, 1991[29]). The RPGs were informed by the groupings of LPAs (e.g. SERPLAN) but set out government spatial priorities, espcially on housing (McGuiness and Mawson, 2017[30]). RPGs included a strategic vision for the region, county level housing targets, and annual monitoring requirements. The RPG system was criticised for its narrow focus on land use, its lack of regional specificity, and central control (Baker and Wong, 2013).

The so called "New Labour" governments of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown (1997 to 2010) set out an ambitious agenda for regional devolution, reflecting similar developments across Europe (Albrechts, 2004[31]). However, its regionalism programme was only partially achieved, ultimately impacted by the rejection by referendum of a proposal to establish an elected regional assembly in North East England in 2004 (Pemberton and Morphet, 2021). The objective of achieving democratic oversight of regional planning and policy was duly abandoned (McGuiness and Mawson, 2017).

The Blair / Brown Governments differed from previous Labour administrations in their rejection, in principle, of the latter's Keynesian style redistributive regional planning noted above. The Labour Government did not deny the existence of inter-regional disparities, rather, these were subordinated to intra-regional questions. It prioritised economic competitiveness and growth by supporting the market, rather than replacing it (McGuiness and Mawson, 2017).

The *Sustainable Communities Plan* (SCP) (2003) sought to address two contrasting housing market problems: housing shortages in London and the South, and low demand and abandonment in parts of the Midlands and North through two discrete initiatives:

- In nine sub-regions of the Midlands and North, a *Housing Market Renewal* partnership was established. These formulated a strategy to replace "obsolete" housing through demolition, new building and refurbishment, to produce a "better mix" of fewer homes.
- In London and the South East, the SCP provided for 200,000 new dwellings (in addition to those included in existing RPG) in four sub-regional *Growth Areas* (Thames Gateway, Milton Keynes, Stansted – Cambridge Corridor, Ashford).

In response to criticisms that it interpreted these challenges as separate and unrelated problems, rather than the consequence of a single process (Hall and Hickman, 2004[32]), the Government introduced a strategic growth initiative for the North; the *Northern Way* sought to engender a strategic partnership approach to development along two corridors, following existing transport links, Liverpool

(west) to Hull (east), and Newcastle (north) to Sheffield (south). In many respects, the Northern Way was a forerunner to the *Northern Powerhouse* (see above).

The Labour approach to intra-regional strategic planning was built on a specific institutional architecture;

- *Government Offices*, deconcentrated offices of the Civil Service, created by the previous Conservative administration, acted as coordinators of government programmes and funding agencies in the regions, and as intermediaries between Central Government and local authorities (Mawson et al, 2008)[33].
- The *Regional Development Agencies* were "business led" Non Departmental Public Bodies each charged with formulating a *Regional Economic Strategy* (Pearce and Ayres, 2009)[34].
- The *Regional Assemblies* were indirectly elected groupings of local authority nominees, whose principal role was democratic scrutiny of the RDAS and the formulation of the *Regional Spatial Strategy*, the upper tier of a new statutory planning system (Pearce and Ayres, 2007).

The *2004 Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act* (2004) introduced the RSS, which replaced the County Structure Plans, and the *Local Development Framework* (LDF), which replaced local plans. The RSS produced for each of the eight regions outside London, had multiple objectives, including (Pemberton and Morphet, 2021):

- To establish a spatial vision, and strategy to deliver it over a 20 year (minimum) period;
- To formulate regionally specific policies to address regional and sub-regional issues;
- To set out housing targets, to be realised by local planning authorities via their LDF;
- To include policies on transport, infrastructure, minerals and waste.

At the same time, a city region approach to strategic planning was gaining popularity (Morphet and Pemberton, 2013[35]). The Treasury's *Sub-national Review of Economic Development and Regeneration* provided for *Multi Area Agreements*, a prototype for *Devolution Deals* and *Combined Authorities* (see below). It also informed the 2009 *Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act* which effectively abolished regional assemblies and merged the RSS and RES into a single integrated regional strategy.

The shortcomings of the Labour regionalism project may be summarised as (Baker and Wong, 2013):

- Inadequate powers / resources of regional actors.
- Inadequate integration between economic and spatial planning.
- A lack of democratic mandate at regional level.

The last of these is particularly significant; while the regional governance infrastructure provided a good basis to engage key regional stakeholders, the lack of a parallel decision-making structure rendered inter-local mediation very difficult (McGuiness and Mawson, 2017).

The "top-down" ethos of the RSS, partly a response to Treasury priority afforded to house building, and the role of the National Planning and Housing Advisory Unit (NHPAU) in setting housing targets for each LPA, was perceived, especially by Conservative local authorities, as anti-democratic. More broadly, regionalism was rejected as "too European" by would be Brexiters (Pemberton and Morphet, 2021).

The period since 2010 has also witnessed a renewed emphasis on intra-regional strategic planning, focused on the city-region, and highly unevenly developed in practice. This has been underpinned by the domination of agglomeration economics (see above), the belief that city-regions act as a critical

mass of economic assets that might drive sub-regional economic development, and political lobbying from the *Core Cities* movement to empower city regional structures to lead this new direction in planning. The RSA's *City Growth Commission* RSA, 2020[36]), for example, argues that UK "metros" have been stymied in promoting growth due to the limited level of tax raising and policy powers they enjoy compared to European competitor regions. There is, therefore, an argument in favour of greater financial flexibility at city-region level, allied to reform of governance to promote place-based leadership along with openness and accountability.

These ideas have been institutionalised in the form of financial *Deals* between Central Government and groupings of local authorities, *Combined Authorities*, and Metro Mayors (Townsend, 2017[37]; NAO, 2016[38]). They represent at example of "earned autonomy". Additional powers, including strategic spatial planning, and resources are conferred in return for accepting an elected mayor model of local governance (McGuiness and Mawson, 2017). In response to the apparent strategic planning void and the imperative to resolve pressing larger than local challenges, several groupings of local authorities have undertaken voluntaristic exercises in strategic spatial planning, often aligning with ad hoc, functional or "fuzzy" boundaries in, for examples, the Oxford to Cambridge Arc and Thames Gateway (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009[39]; Valler et al, 2021[40]).

2.1.3 Localism

The incoming Coalition Government of 2010 was committed to the wholesale abolition of the infrastructure of regional policy and planning inherited from Labour. It promoted a "double devolution", from the centre and regions to the local level, and from local authorities to neighbourhoods and communities (Conservatives, 2009)[41]. Housing Minister Grant Schapps argued *"The Localism Bill will end top-down targets. In their place, communities with the visions and drive to build more homes will be given the power to achieve their ambitions, and this will be backed up with powerful cash incentives for councils that allow new development in their area".*

The so-called "Localism" agenda comprised multiple elements (Pemberton and Morphet, 2021):

- The compete abolition of the regional tier of planning alongside that of the regional institutional infrastructure inherited from Labour.
- The establishment of 38 Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) to lead on sub-regional economic strategy. LEPs had no formal powers in spatial planning or statutory functions but provided an important business voice into place-based policy and acquired significant influence over funding allocation, not least European Union resources (Pugalis et al, 2015[42])
- Simplified national guidance in the form of a new *National Planning Policy Framework* (2012) and supporting *Planning Practice Guidance* (2014);
- A strong devolutionary drive, with primacy afforded (rhetorically) to local plans and to new *Neighbourhood Development Plans*;
- The assumption of responsibility by LPAs for the determination and delivery of housing need, through a new *Standard Method*.
- A new *Duty to Cooperate* to fill the apparent strategic vacuum.

The localism project, despite its name, has entailed a significant degree of centralisation. Central Government influence on substantive planning policy is extended through the NPPF, and the proliferation of funding allocated by competitive bidding (Tait et al, 2020).

The revocation of the RSS programme proved highly controversial. Indeed, it was even challenged legally (initially successfully) by house builders (Boddy and Hickman, 2013). England is now the only

European country without sub-national governance structure for planning (McGuinness and Mawson 2017).

The Duty to Cooperate has, itself, proved to be a contentious instrument. It is designed to ensure adjacent local planning authorities discuss strategic, cross boundary, issues. It requires local planning authorities to conduct "meaningful discussions" on strategic planning issues, although the term meaningful is not defined. The Duty to Cooperate does not provide an effective means for resolving strategic dilemmas (McGuiness and Mawson, 2017). It has led to accusations of an appeal and court driven planning process. Indeed, it is one of the principal regulatory reasons for plans being found unsound (ibid.). *"The ability to recreate what Regional Spatial Strategies did via the Duty to Cooperate is difficult, politically and also technically. A key problem is that authorities, through no fault of their own, could be penalised because neighbours were not willing to cooperate with them"* (No5 Chambers).

The Government has responded to these criticisms with incremental rather than fundamental changes to its attempts to incentivise inter-local cooperation. The revised NPPF (2021, 2023) requires LPAs to publish a *Statement of Common Ground*. These are described as *'a road map and record' for cross-boundary co-operation on strategic planning matters'*. The 2020 White Paper *Planning for the Future*[43] proposed to abolish the Duty to Cooperate but did not put forward an alternative. To address this void, the RTPI proposed *Green Growth Boards,* to bring together, at a sub-regional level, local planning authorities, utilities, infrastructure providers and other business, statutory and community stakeholders to integrate the multiplicity of extant sub-regional strategies[44]. More recently, the government has proposed to revoke the legal Duty to Cooperate through the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act, replacing it with a policy-based *Alignment Test*, as yet not fully articulated.

The nature, scope and purpose of strategic spatial planning has, thus, changed significantly over time. Policy and practice since 2010 has been influenced by several of the themes discussed above. The challenge of levelling up highlights inter-regional disparities. The Devolution project (Combined Authorities, Deals) and more voluntaristic efforts at cross-boundary cooperation have been conducted at a sub-regional level. In most areas, the logic of Localism has prevailed, and strategic planning has been conducted in response to the Duty to Cooperate. As a result, recent policy and practice has been characterised by great diversity which is explored in greater detail in section 2.2.

2.2 Overview of practice in England since 2010

This section of the report provides an overview of recent practice since 2010, providing context for the detailed evaluation and key findings of the research. Although the focus of the research is on the English Planning System, the review includes a summary of current practice in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland for comparison purposes.

The 2011 Localism Act replaced the formal practice of strategic spatial planning with a new statutory duty on all LPAs – the 'Duty to Cooperate'. This requires LPAs to demonstrate how they have worked with neighbouring authorities to address "larger than local" issues and how they have tried to resolve these through their respective local plans. This legal requirement is supplemented with additional measures to facilitate voluntary cooperation through national policy set out in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), first introduced in 2012.

The 2023 Levelling Up and Regeneration Act (LURA) includes provisions that will impact on strategic planning practice if implemented through proposed planning reforms. These include:

- Revocation of the Duty to Cooperate, with a new 'policy alignment test' proposed which would be included in the NPPF if taken forward.

- Introduction of voluntary joint local authority spatial development strategies (SDS) in addition to the existing combined authority SDS, which will replace the current practice of joint strategic plans.

No further detailed information on either of these proposed reforms was produced and as of 4th July a new Government is in place.

2.2.1 Current strategic planning practice

In large parts of England there is no current strategic planning practice beyond meeting the requirements of the Duty to Cooperate. Where there is some form of strategic planning activity, this is being done on a voluntary basis (with the exception of Greater London – see below) generally using the following four models:

1) Joint local plans
2) Joint strategic plans
3) Spatial development strategies
4) Non-statutory strategic frameworks

Joint Strategic Plans (statutory)
1. South West Hertfordshire Joint Strategic Plan*
2. Greater Nottingham Strategic Plan*

Spatial Development Strategies (statutory)**
3. Liverpool City Region Spatial Development Strategy*
4. The London Plan

Joint LPs and Joint/Aligned Strategies (statutory)***
5. Plymouth and SW Devon Joint Local Plan
6. North Devon & Torridge Joint Local Plan
7. Central Lincolnshire Joint Local plan
8. South East Lincolnshire Joint Local Plan
9. Greater Norwich Joint Local Plan
10. Central Lancashire Joint Local Plan*
11. Gloucester, Tewksbury & Cheltenham Joint Strategic & Local Plan*
12. Greater Manchester Joint Plan (Places for Everyone)
13. South Worcestershire Development Plan*
14. Greater Cambridge Plan*

Strategic Planning and/or growth Frameworks (non-statutory)
15. Leicester & Leicestershire Strategic Growth Plan*
16. Norfolk Strategic Planning Framework
17. Suffolk Growth Framework
18. Surrey 2050 Place Ambition
19. West Sussex & Greater Brighton Local Strategic Statement
20. Heathrow Strategic Planning Framework
21. York, North Yorkshire, East Riding and Hull Spatial Framework
22. East Devon, Exeter, Mid Devon and Teignbridge Joint Strategy
23. South Hampshire Spatial Position Statement
24. Cambridge & Peterborough Strategic Spatial Framework*

Unitary Councils
County Councils
Metropolitan Boroughs Councils
London Boroughs Councils

* Emerging plans/ frameworks (or under review)
** Subject to their own defined legislation & Regulations i.e. not development plan documents
*** Only includes Joint local plans considered to be strategic in nature and does not include those developed under the 2004 system (i.e. joint core strategies)

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Figure 2 - Strategic Planning Activity (as at May 2024) – see Appendix 1 for further information

Strategic plans generally provide a shared long term 'vision led' growth and investment framework for local authorities (and partners) across sub regional areas and do not allocate sites for development (with the exception of model 1). They are usually based on administrative geographies, recognising that there are several different strategic 'functional' geographies operating across most local authority

areas. Strategic planning models (1) to (3) form part of the statutory development plan, whereas strategic frameworks in (4) are prepared outside the statutory planning system but are part of the evidence base informing the development plan.

Joint local plans that emerged after the pre-2010 regional planning process were predominantly in the East and West Midlands. As many of these have their genesis in the previous (2004 based) system, they provide shared spatial strategies (core strategies) and do not include site allocations which is usually left to the individual LPAs to manage through their 'part two' plans. In some cases, the plans have been prepared through individual (part one) plans but with 'aligned' strategies and policies included in each. Some, however, provide both a strategic spatial framework and detailed policies, with site allocations. For example, the Greater Manchester Authorities have recently adopted a joint local plan which involved nine LPAs.[45]

Although some earlier core strategies are now being reviewed and progressed as joint local plans (for example in Gloucester, Tewksbury and Cheltenham), in other areas work to replace earlier plans has not been taken forward, with the individual LPAs progressing their own local plans instead (for example, in Newcastle and Gateshead and in the Black Country). Practice around **joint strategic plans** (JSPs) came later and was an attempt to fill the strategic planning void left by regional spatial strategies (RSS) and address some of the more challenging issues, especially distribution of growth, providing a more robust approach than the Duty to Cooperate. These usually cover a much larger spatial geography than joint local plans. Work was initially started on five JSPs, in the West of England, Oxfordshire, Greater Exeter, South Essex and South West Hertfordshire, but at the time of writing, only the latter is being progressed (see section 4.6).

The weakness of decision-making arrangements in joint plans (strategic and local) has been a key feature in the relative success or not of joint plans. A small number of LPAs are preparing/have prepared statutory joint plans by establishing a single decision-making committee through S29 of the 2004 Act (now replaced with Clause 15J, Schedule 7of the LURA) which allows individual planning authorities to cede their local plan responsibilities to a shared committee. This model of decision-making allows decisions to be made on a majority voting basis and therefore in the interest of the greater good. For example, it has been successfully used for a number of years and local plans reviews in Lincolnshire for the two joint local plans xlii.

In areas where there is no single accountable body with majority voting, it has proved more challenging to prepare joint plans. Work on the Oxfordshire JSP was abandoned in August 2022 following a failure to agree on the distribution of growth - "*It is with regret that we were unable to reach agreement on the approach to planning for future housing needs within the framework of the Oxfordshire Plan".*[46] Work on the Greater Exeter JSP was abandoned in 2020 for a similar reason when East Devon District Council withdrew from the partnership.[47] In the Black Country, work on updating the joint plan was also abandoned when the LPAs could not agree on their approach to future development needs[48]). Although the Greater Manchester Authorities managed to adopt their joint plan this year, this does not include Stockport who pulled out of the joint planning arrangements in 2020 over disagreements on the spatial strategy and allocations.

Another factor influencing progress of JSPs is that the NPPF, which was written in 2012 for a system of detailed local plans and not long term and high-level strategic frameworks, is the main testing vehicle. This resulted in the failure of the first joint strategic plan in West of England at examination (see section 4.7) and the North Essex Authorities' attempt to set out aligned long term policy frameworks for three new garden communities. The authorities could not demonstrate that two of the three were viable and therefore deliverable, as only a framework for future infrastructure investment had been

developed at that point.[49] Although this was not a JSP as such, it was a similar product as it was to form the strategic framework (part one) for each of the individual local plans. Some small changes were subsequently made to the NPPF (Paragraph 22) to reflect this experience, linked to new communities, but not the wider issues linked to longer term strategic planning more generally.

Spatial Development Strategies (SDS) are prepared by Combined Authorities (CAs) which are established under the 2009 Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act.[50] The one exception is in Greater London where, since 1999, a bespoke strategic planning system has operated. The 1999 GLA Act requires the Mayor of London to prepare an SDS which provides the strategic planning context for the London Boroughs' local plans.[51] Some small changes to the form and scope of the London Plan are being implemented through the 2023 Levelling Up and Regeneration Act to bring it into line more with CA SDS.

The legislative framework underpinning the CA SDS is based on the requirements set out in the GLA Act but specific matters around governance and process are included in the individual CA Orders and specifically through the 2018 Regulations for SDS.[52] An SDS forms part of the statutory development plan and local plans are required to be 'in general conformity' with the relevant SDS. However, unlike in Greater London where the Mayor is required to keep the London Plan up to date, there is no timescale within which an CA has to prepare an SDS, therefore these powers can remain unimplemented indefinitely.

Only four CAs have agreed statutory strategic planning powers through their respective Devolution Deals; the Liverpool City Region CA, Greater Manchester CA, West of England CA and the newly formed North East CA (see Appendix 2). However, only the Liverpool City Region CA is currently implementing these powers (see Section 4.4). The West of England CA attempted to prepare a SDS but failed to reach agreement on how to progress this in May 2022. The Greater Manchester Authorities agreed to progress a joint local plan instead of an SDS. Although the Greater Manchester CA has had a role in preparing the plan and has a key role in its delivery, the CA has no formal decision-making responsibilities. Some CAs have other spatial planning powers, for example, the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough CA has powers to prepare a non-statutory spatial framework rather than a statutory SDS.

A key difference between the SDS prepared by CAs and the London Plan is the governance arrangements and accountability for the plan. The London Mayor has direct accountability for strategic planning (with the Greater London Assembly playing an important scrutiny role), including call-in powers to determine strategic planning applications. The original three CAs with SDS powers require unanimity at all key stages in preparation (as with most joint plans) and only the Liverpool City Region CA has call-in powers for strategic applications, similar to the London Mayor. However, the newly established North East CA has agreed a different governance structure; although all local authority partners and the Mayor have to agree to initiate preparation of the SDS in the first place, decisions at key stages of its preparation, including final approval, would be on a majority voting basis (see Section 4.5).

Similar to JSPs, there is limited national guidance or prescription for the scope and content of an SDS or for the testing process. The Liverpool City Region CA is therefore the pioneer of this new model (following the West of England's earlier failed attempt).

Despite the fact there has not been a requirement for LPAs to work formally together beyond the Duty to Cooperate since 2011, there have been some attempts to develop high level **non-statutory strategic frameworks** (i.e. they do not form part of the 'statutory development plan'). There are different drivers

for each, but common incentives have tended to be around developing a shared evidence base, especially to demonstrate compliance with the Duty to Cooperate, and to facilitate strategic infrastructure prioritisation and delivery. These frameworks have had different levels of impact on local plans depending on the issues they have attempted to address (see sections 4.3 and 4.8).

A specific impact on the practice of strategic spatial planning in large parts of England since 2010 has been the fragmented governance system in two tier areas where district councils are accountable for plan-making and county councils have a statutory role in a number of other policy areas that directly impact on planning, not least transport, nature recovery, public health and flood risk. As set out in section 2.1.2 above, county councils in England have historically played a key role in strategic planning, initially as structure plan authorities and latterly with a statutory role to support preparation of regional spatial strategies (as defined in S4.4 of the 2004 Act). This role extended into supporting the LPAs in the preparation and implementation of their local plans.

Since 2010, however, county councils have had little or no statutory responsibilities for spatial planning unless they are part of a S29 Joint Committee (established under the 2004 Act) or a constituent member of a combined authority with spatial planning powers. This has had a direct impact on local planning resources, alongside the impacts of austerity more generally. The absence of a clear statutory role in spatial planning, beyond that of a statutory consultee, has also clearly impacted on co-ordination and integration of public policy and investment decisions (County Council Network, 2020[53] and 2021[54]).

2.2.2 Pan-regional partnerships

There are currently five pan-regional partnerships established in England where local authorities are working with wider stakeholders to support growth and delivery, with a particular focus in most cases on strategic transport infrastructure delivery.[55] These do not generally have a role in spatial planning but do influence investment priorities and in some cases, actively support implementation of local plan priorities.

In 2018, the Government announced its intention to prepare a new spatial framework for the Oxford to Cambridge Arc to maximise the area's economic potential.[56] This was in response to an earlier report from the National Infrastructure Commission which concluded that one million new homes would be needed to support the economic growth of the Arc.[57] Work was progressed on the spatial framework in 2021, with a dedicated team established within government and new governance arrangements bringing together government representatives, the local authorities and other key stakeholders. By June 2022, however, work on the spatial framework was abandoned due to concerns that it was too 'government-led'. In January 2023 the Secretary of State endorsed a new pan-regional partnership for the Arc but work on a spatial framework has not been taken forward under the new arrangements.

2.2.3 Strategic planning for different sectors

There are a range of examples across different sectors as to how investment and policies priorities are "planned strategically" on long term timescales (for example to 2050 or beyond). This is both through a national approach and related sub-national or subregional based plans or frameworks. Examples include for infrastructure, transport, flood risk, nature recovery, coastal management, energy, and economic growth. Key examples (and not an exhaustive list) of subnational and subregional approaches and their geography include:

- **Strategic Transport Strategies** prepared by the seven Subnational Transport Bodies (STBs) in England along with Transport for London (TfL) and **Local Transport Plans** prepared by the

upper tier authorities (county and unitary councils). These set out transport and investment priorities for each area, with different but related roles for the different bodies.

- **Minerals and Waste Plans** which provide the statutory development plan for minerals and waste planning and are prepared by the upper tier authorities (county and unitary councils).
- **Strategic Infrastructure Frameworks** or plans setting out investment requirements and plans including for combined authority and county areas.
- **Flood Risk Management Plans** (2021 to 2027), strategic, plans which set out how to manage significant flood risk in nationally identified flood risk areas (FRAs) produced for river basin districts.
- **Catchment flood management plans** (CFMPs) considering all types of inland flooding, from rivers, groundwater, surface water and tidal flooding, grouped by river basin district.
- **Shoreline Management Plans** (SMPs) produced and updated for 20 coastal groups in consultation, identifying a sustainable management approach for each stretch of coastline across 25 year time horizons.
- **Local Nature Recovery Strategies – '**spatial strategies', establishing and mapping priorities and proposals to drive nature recovery, wider environmental benefits and climate change adaptation for 48 strategy areas covering the whole of England[58].
- **Strategic Spatial Energy Plan –** transforming electricity networks setting out what needs to be built, where, and when to deliver a clean energy vision & decarbonisation targets.
- **Strategic Economic Plans** were produced for Local Enterprise Partnerships, economic strategy functions have now been taken on by combined authorities or in their absence upper tier local authorities.

Planning in these sectors is taken forward through sub national and subregional plans and frameworks, on a county and cross local authority administrative boundary basis and on functional sub regions and wider sub national areas. The diversity in the geographic areas though makes alignment more difficult.

Eight Combined Authorities have been invited to co-develop proposals for **Investment Zones** and eight English **Freeports** – these provide good examples of **national priority locations** that have been established. The National Infrastructure Strategy, National Infrastructure Assessment and National Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIPs) provide examples of national 'planning' in practice. NSIP Innovation and Capacity projects highlight needs and opportunities for coordinating NSIP projects across area – in terms of coordination and resources (PAS - NSIP Innovation & Capacity Fund Round 1 Outcomes Report: December 2023). The National Grid's Holistic Design Network is a recent example of the planning exercise needed to support large scale delivery of critical infrastructure.

A key feature of the all the above approaches is their sectoral focus. Strategic spatial planning offers a key further opportunity for integration – a joined-up approach to further coordinate investment (thereby maximising benefits) and align investment and policy priorities. In the absence of this the above sectoral "planning strategically" approaches are not coordinated with future development growth (though they may reflect existing development plans). This appears to be a missed opportunity in terms of prioritisation and ensuring the delivery of growth through effective, proactive and planned infrastructure provision. Significant strategic thinking and planning is underway across England, in effect in 'silos'. The development plan/town and country planning system responds to this but particularly given the longer term timescales involved does not shape, direct and coordinate this strategic thinking and sectoral planning.

2.2.4 Strategic planning practice in the rest of the UK

The plan led systems in Scotland and Wales both include a level between the national and the local. Scotland's National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4) sets out eighteen national developments and regional spatial priorities. National developments consist of single large-scale projects and networks of several smaller scale proposals that are collectively nationally significant as a focus for delivery. **Regional spatial priorities** are included for five broad regions of Scotland. Future Wales, the national development framework, sets a direction for investment in infrastructure and development. National and/or Regional Growth Areas are identified in four regions with their growth to be planned through the preparation of Strategic Development Plans (SDPs). Both national frameworks/plans are long term and **spatial** – with strategies, components and priorities that address where things should happen - strategic development and national policy priorities for development and investment.

Regional Spatial Strategies (**RSS**) in Scotland **are not part of the statutory development plan** but have an important role to play in informing future versions of the NPF and Local Development Plans (LDPs) prepared for each planning authority area. The Planning (Scotland) Act 2019 establishes a duty requiring the preparation of RSS and **both the National Planning Framework (NPF) and Local Development Plans (LDPs) must take these into account**. A planning authority, or authorities acting jointly will prepare an RSS. Strategic Development Plans **(SDPs)** in Wales **form part of the statutory development plan** and the preparation of these is required in all four regions in Wales in the North, Mid Wales, South West and South East regions.

In terms of content, **LPAs in Scotland are allowed to develop a tailored approach to strategic planning for their area** that best reflects their local and regional circumstances. More effective regional collaboration is seen as leading to better outcomes for all parts of Wales, creating a fairer distribution of wealth and opportunity.

The Department of Infrastructure in **Northern Ireland** is responsible for the review, monitoring and implementation of a **Regional Development Strategy** (RDS) 2035 which was published in March 2012. The RDS is a long term plan which aims to deliver the spatial aspects of the Programme for Government which has an approach of balanced sub-regional growth and recognises the importance of key settlements as centres for growth and prosperity. It also complements the Sustainable Development Strategy and informs the spatial aspects of the strategies of all Government Departments. The RDS has a statutory basis and is material to decisions on individual planning applications and appeals. Local councils must take account of the RDS when drawing up their Development Plans.

To help facilitate practical co-operation, the Department for Infrastructure in Northern Ireland and the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government in Ireland jointly published the 'Framework for Co-operation - Spatial strategies of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland'. The Framework, which is a non-statutory document, sets out the approach to be taken both by the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Irish Government in co-operating in the implementation of their respective spatial strategies. The Framework was approved by the Northern Ireland Executive on 27 June 2013.

2.3 Looking ahead

In many parts of England, the logic of Localism established via the 2011 Localism Act still prevails. The limited formal strategic planning practice since 2010 is largely because, beyond the legal requirements of the Duty to Cooperate and outside of Greater London, it relies on local authorities voluntarily working together. It has mainly happened despite the system and not because of it. In some areas, strategic governance (but not necessarily strategic planning) has been enhanced through a Devolution Deal, embodied in a Combined Authority.

Building consensus through strategic planning appears to have been challenging, especially when overall levels of development needs and spatial distribution have been tackled. It has proved too easy for partners to walk away from joint – largely voluntary – arrangements, with what appears to be weak governance systems underpinning the partnerships which rely on unanimity for all key decisions. Successful joint planning arrangements since 2010 have tended to be underpinned by a single accountable body with majority voting arrangements, as in Lincolnshire.

The shift in approach that has been witnessed, has also taken place alongside a significant reduction in the planning resources generally and strategic planning capacity specifically (see RTPI 2019)[59]. As such, strategic spatial planning in England, to that extent that it exists, can best be characterised as a patchwork quilt, with varying approaches in different geographical contexts. It is also clear that in some places the logic of *"don't do anything unless you have to"* (Pemberton and Morphet 2021) prevails.

This exists in stark contrast to a formal approach to strategic planning that was considered core to the English planning system between the mid 1960s and 2010 and remains a key feature of the planning system in other parts of the UK, and across much of Europe. It is also striking that some strategic planning activity is taking place on a sector basis (2.2.3), but without the coherence of a cross-sectoral and more integrated approach offered by strategic spatial planning.

There is some suggestion that the recent Government has been fairly ambivalent about strategic planning given the lack of any real support or prescription over the last 14 years. It could also be that as we have moved away from the regional planning years, there has been less awareness at the government level around what strategic spatial planning is and its added value. The absence of a push through devolution deals appears to reflect this; *"The government appears relaxed about an era where spatially varied decentralisation outcomes are agreed in terms of the range of powers a combined authority can hold, with spatial planning appearing to be an option. It seems content for an iterative approach to decentralisation to evolve in ad hoc deals across England"* (McGuiness and Mawson, 2017).

However, more prominent is an increasing groundswell of opinion that this variegated approach to strategic planning is in fact highly problematic and is directly impacting on investor confidence. There has therefore been a number of recent calls for a return to a more formal approach to strategic planning to address a whole range of key issues, from freight and logistics to strategic employment sites, to climate resilience and housing distribution (see, for example, British Property Federation 2023[60], UK2070 Commission 2020[61], Building the Future Commission 2023[62], All Party Parliamentary Group on Housing Supply and Delivery 2023[63]). This very much reflects the strong rationale that existed for strategic spatial planning prior to 2010, that it is vital to monitor and analyse spatial change; to identify regional and local strengths, weakness, threats, and opportunities; to coordinate the responses of government, business, and community; to devise and deliver plans for change.

What is needed, however, is a renewed debate on the nature, scope and purpose of strategic spatial planning, informed by a very clear understanding of **the efficacy of current practice and appetite** for its future direction. This understanding of efficacy and appetite is the purpose of the empirical work that follows in sections three and four.

3. Strategic Planning Survey Findings

The following ten points represent the **key findings** from two national surveys on strategic planning, one with local authorities, and one with wider public and private sector stakeholders.

1. There was **overwhelming support for the need for effective strategic planning in England**. Factors ranked as most important for strategic planning were: (a) ensuring the appropriate planning and delivery of transport infrastructure; (b) developing desirable patterns of urban and wider spatial development; and (c) ensuring an appropriate level and distribution of housing.

2. There is a wide variety of types of strategic planning activity in England currently. This includes statutory strategic planning activity such as joint strategic-plans, joint local-plans, and spatial development strategies, and non-statutory strategic planning activity, **with 51% of local authority survey respondents reporting joint evidence-based work**.

3. However, **40% of local authority survey respondents reported no statutory strategic planning activity** and 25% reported no non-statutory strategic planning activity either.

4. **Lack of a national statutory requirement and lack of a national policy requirement for strategic planning were ranked as the most significant barriers to effective strategic planning** under current arrangements, followed closely by political challenges to cross-boundary and collaborative working.

5. There was little evidence in support of the current **variegated and largely voluntary approach to strategic planning**. This was described as **inherently risky**, allowing local politics to predominate, with the avoidance of unpopular decisions and creating competition between authorities.

6. Consequentially, there was an exceptionally strong majority in favour of a change to current approaches to strategic planning. **96% of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed a change is needed.**

7. There was also an **exceptionally strong majority in favour of strategic planning being mandated by government** with 80% of local authority respondents and 88% of wider stakeholders in favour.

8. Whilst some respondents wanted the option for strategic planning to be either statutory or advisory, **67% were in favour of strategic planning being part of the statutory development plan system**.

9. Although there was less unanimity about the preference for the spatial scale of strategic planning activity, there was a **stronger appetite for strategic planning to be based on appropriate functional geographies**, and at a sub-regional level, rather than a return to regional level planning.

10. **87% of respondents thought any new strategic planning arrangements should include some form of spatial plan** or framework at the national level.

3.1 Introduction

This section focuses on the results and analysis of two surveys— a Local Authority (LA) survey and a survey of stakeholders from the wider public and private sectors (wider survey). **The LA survey** focused on establishing what strategic planning activity was currently being undertaken by local and combined authorities, any earlier activity undertaken or attempted previously, and the drivers of these activities. It also sought to establish views on the future need for strategic planning and what form these arrangements should take. **The wider survey** was about gathering perspectives from a wide range of stakeholders on the effectiveness of current practice, and how strategic planning might be shaped in the future.

The surveys were conducted using Qualtrics and consisted of a design phase, a 'testing' phase (with networks and contacts), and then following edits, the publication and distribution of the survey. The survey was disseminated via the RTPI's national and regional newsletters and networks. The surveys were published in succession, with the LPA survey completed by the 17th of January 2024, and the non-LA survey completed by the 15th of February 2024 (both running for 4 weeks).

The survey was based on a range of questions to produce both quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data was explored and analysed using Qualtrics own statistical data analysis tools. The raw qualitative data (text from open-ended questions) was exported and then analysed thematically and inductively. Overall, the purpose of analysis was to look for key trends, patterns, and anomalies within this data. As noted through this report, the analysis also consisted of exploring any variations within this data (related to geography, type of LPA, and job role)[64]. However, the survey does not gather the views of LAs per se but planning professionals (e.g. directors, senior planners, planning officers) who work in different types of LAs across the diverse geographies in England. Therefore, it is important to note that it was possible for multiple people from the same LA to submit a response—which should be acknowledged in relation to any noted geographical or LA type variations[65]. In summary:

- There were **186** valid[66] responses to the LA survey and **166** to the non-LA survey (**total of 352 valid survey responses**).
- In the LA survey, 53% of respondents were directors/senior managers/team leaders, 30% were principal or senior planner, 9% planning officers, and 7% other.
- In the LA survey, 41% of respondents were from District Councils in a 2 Tier Area; 20% from a County Council in a 2 Tier Area; 15% from a Unitary Authority (Non-Met); 6% from a Unitary Authority (Met); 5% were submissions from two or more Local Authorities; 4% from a Combined Authority / or Greater London Authority; 4% from a London Borough; 4% from a Metropolitan District
- Geographical variation within the LA survey comprised 25% South East; 24% East of England; 12% West Midlands; 9% South West; 8% East Midlands; 7% North West; 6% London; 5% Yorkshire and Humber; 4% North East.
- The non-LA survey consisted of 40% private sector planning consultants, 33% other private sector, 13% public sector (non-LPA) and a small percentage of third sector, legal sector, and other.

3.2 Why strategic planning matters

Respondents from both surveys, and from across the public and private sector, considered strategic planning extremely important for addressing a whole range of key issues, from tackling housing need, and the identification of strategic development sites, to climate resilience and infrastructure provision. Local authority participants see strategic planning as important in relation to enabling completion of local plans, and private sector respondents see the value in providing longer term certainty within the system.

The survey asked respondents to rank several factors in terms of the importance of a strategic approach being needed (where 1 = not important and 5 = very important). Both the LA and wider stakeholder survey showed similar general patterns, with the results illustrated in figure 3.
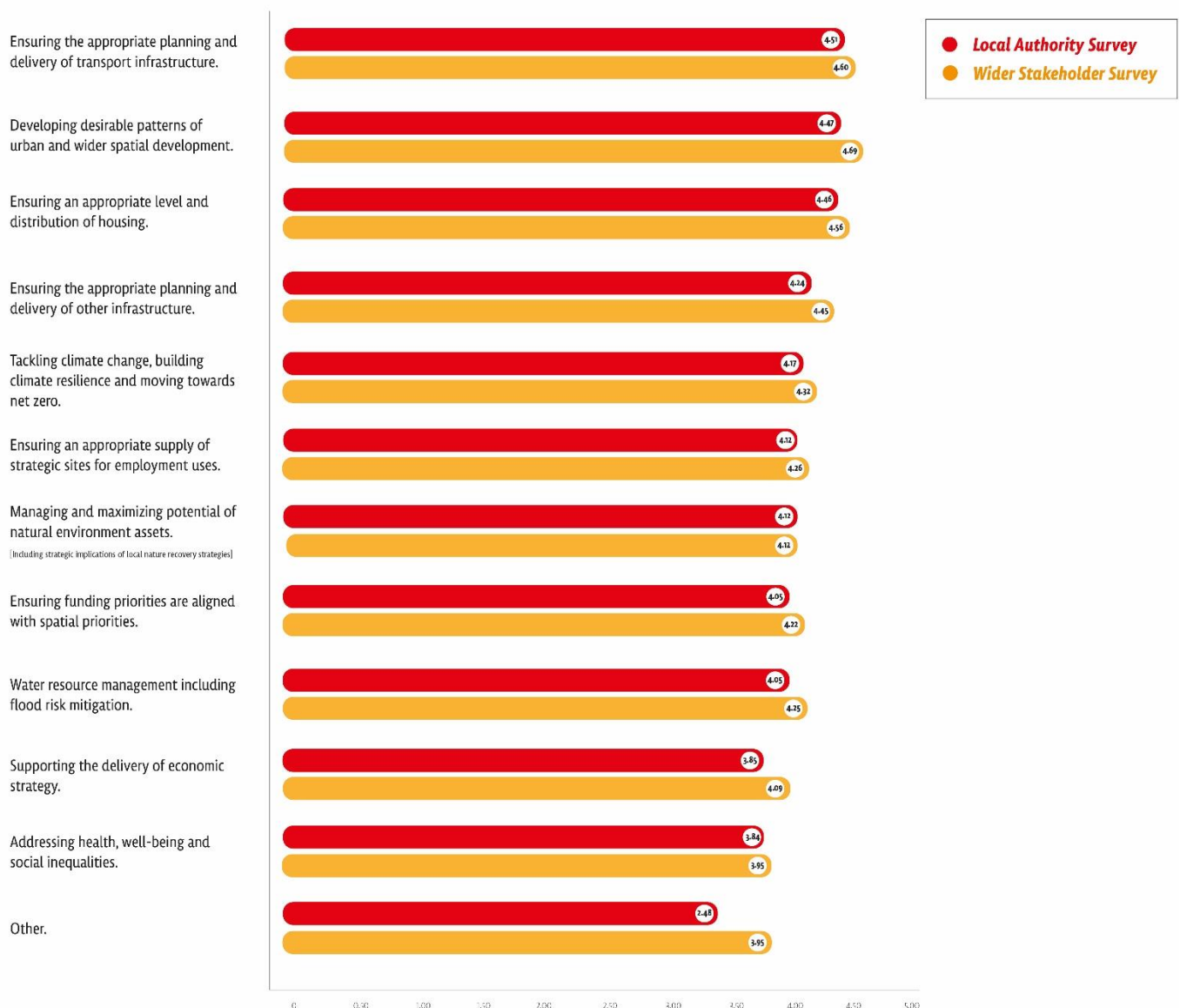

Figure 3 – Ranking of factors important for strategic planning

As illustrated above, the three factors considered most important for a strategic approach were: (1) 'Ensuring the appropriate planning and delivery of transport infrastructure'; 'Developing desirable patterns of urban and wider spatial development'; 'Ensuring an appropriate level and distribution of

housing'. 'Other' infrastructure was considered the fourth most important, although naturally this encompasses a broad range of responses rather than a single defined theme. Clarification of 'other' infrastructure included: education; utilities; health (including NHS); green infrastructure; nature conservation; energy and water. However, a lower ranking score (in relative terms) does not mean the factor was considered as 'not important', with respondents considering **all** factors important to different degrees. This is notable in the fact that even the two lowest ranked factors— 'Addressing health, wellbeing, and social inequalities' and 'Supporting the delivery of economic strategy'—were still ranked 3.88 and 3.97 (excluding the open ended option of 'other'). As one private sector respondent noted, "*we have identified all of the factors as important. This is an honest reflection that all identified matters function at a strategic level and have integrated relationships across governance boundaries*".

Respondents were asked to explain their ranking. This was an open-ended question, with table 1 below drawing together the key themes most commonly identified by respondents.

THEME	SUPPORTING EVIDENCE
Respondents argued that these issues required collaboration and cross-boundary working in order to address them.	"*Cross-boundary issues in a planning sense need to be addressed and should be via suitable plans and policy frameworks. This is about recognising that issues do not stop at administrative boundaries nor should solutions e.g. functioning economic geographies, housing market areas, environmental designations etc (District Council in a 2-tier area, West Midlands).*" "*Infrastructure or climate impacts do not stop at the boundary. We have to work collaboratively to maximise opportunities, share costs of evidence and have a greater voice than if worked on our own*" (London Borough Council). "*Delivery of sustainable patterns of development can best be considered cross boundary and coordination of strategies (economic, infrastructure, transport etc.) are more efficiently achieved through coordination*" (Unitary Authority, South West). "*All of the factors cross local authority boundaries to greater or lesser extents and therefore need to be considered strategically (by more than one authority) at an appropriate scale for the area in question*" (Private Sector, Planning Consultant).
Many factors were considered to be inter-linked, with respondents arguing that there was a need for a holistic approach.	"*Extremely hard to rank - all are interlinked and fundamental to sustainable planning at national level - which currently doesn't exist*" (National Park Authority, Yorkshire and The Humber). "*Whilst climate change is important, sustainable development patterns can lead to better climate resilience*" (District Council in a 2 tier area, North West). "*Strategic Planning should be the way in which we achieve joined up government, e.g. avoiding the chaotic approach to energy generation and distribution we currently face in England ... also ensuring that different levels*

	of planning from neighbourhood to national, terrestrial to marine, are coordinated" (Wider Stakeholder, Other). *"My organisation puts a lot of emphasis on the role of economic development in delivering the economic strategy but I firmly believe that if you get the planning right, make sure you maximise your natural environment and have a sustainable transport system you will have a thriving economy" (County Council in a 2 tier area, South East).*
Some of the lower ranked factors were justified by the limitations of strategic planning to address certain issues, with the need to consider a coherent systemic response.	*"The lack of importance I placed on both the 'health and wellbeing' and 'climate change/net zero' sections isn't because I feel like they shouldn't be addressed strategically. It's purely that in an ideal world we should be responding to these issues at all levels and they should be embedded in any strategy and decision-making (including in a strategic plan), rather than being dealt with distinctly at a strategic level" (District Council in a 2 tier area, East of England).*

Table 1 – Ranking explanations

In order to explore variations within these patterns, there was further analysis of the average ranking of factors by LAs in different regions and by type of LAs. The top three most important factors were important factors in all regions. However, there was some variation. For example:

- 'Ensuring an appropriate supply of strategic sites for employment uses' was considered the second most important factor in the North East (with 'Developing desirable patterns of urban and wider spatial development' not in the top three).
- The importance of 'addressing health, wellbeing, and social inequalities' varied, with respondents in London considering it more important (4.3[67]) and the North East (3.6), North West (3.8), South East (3.8), South West (3.9), West Midlands (3.2), and Yorkshire and the Humber (3.7) considering it a less important factor.
- 'Water resource management and flood risk mitigation' was considered a less important factor in the North East (3.6), West Midlands and Yorkshire and the Humber (both 3.5), and noticeably more important in the East of England (4.4) and East Midlands (4.2).

Further detailed analysis of these variations is provided in Appendix 3.

While the top three factors were all ranked as important, there was more variation within the top three most important factors for different types of LAs[68].

- Respondents in Unitary Authorities (met) considered 'Ensuring an appropriate supply of strategic sites for employment use' as the second most important factor.
- Respondents in Combined Authorities considered 'Tackling climate change, building climate resilience and moving towards net zero' as the third most important factor (in place of 'Ensuring the appropriate planning and delivery of transport infrastructure').
- Respondents from London Borough's, Metropolitan Districts, and Unitary Authorities considered 'Ensuring an appropriate supply of strategic sites for employment uses' as more important than those from Unitary Authorities (non-met) and Combined Authorities.

Analysis also considered whether there was variation related to job role—and, overall, the patterns were relatively consistent across different job roles. However, Planning Officers tended to rank 'Developing desirable patterns of urban and wider spatial development' and 'Ensuring an appropriate level and distribution of housing' lower than Principal or Senior Planners and Directors / Senior

managers / Team leaders. As such, the top three factors for Planning Officers were related to transport infrastructure, natural environmental assets, and tackling climate change/net zero.[69]

3.3 Current strategic planning activity

Participants in the LA survey recorded any **statutory strategic planning activity** their authority was actively involved in. **41% of LA participants reported no statutory activity**. As such, 59% of LA respondents were engaged in some form of statutory activity, including spatial development strategies, joint local plans, joint strategic plans and joint aligned strategies.

LA participants were also asked to record any **non-statutory strategic planning activity**. There were more LA respondents engaged in non-statutory activity, with 51% of respondents indicating that they were involved in joint-evidence work, 23% working on strategic plans, 20% working on strategic infrastructure plans and 16% involved in strategic growth frameworks[70]. However, 25% of respondents recorded **no non-statutory strategic planning activity,** of which there was higher response from respondents in the South-East, and from District Councils. This overall pattern illustrates the variegated nature of strategic planning in England currently, as reflected in section 2.2.

Some of the geographical variations in this data were consistent with the geographical variation in the response rate. For example, higher levels of both statutory and non-statutory activity were noted in the East of England and the South East, but this simply reflects the fact that these were also regions with the highest rate of respondents. Other variations are listed below.

- Higher percentages of respondents in the South East (64%) and Yorkshire and the Humber (60%) were not engaged in statutory activities – compared with the average of 41%. The East of England (19%) and North West (23%) were notably lower (suggesting more activity in these regions).
- There was significant variation for those engaged in Spatial Development Strategies—54% of respondents in London were engaged compared to 11% in the South East and 0% in Yorkshire and the Humber (compared to the average of 24%).
- 46% of respondents in the North West were engaged in Joint Local Plans (higher than the average of 20%), and significantly higher percentages of respondents in the East of England (35%) and the East Midlands (29%) were engaged in Joint Strategic Plans (higher than the average of 15% across LA respondents).[71]

We also noted geographical variation for the non-statutory activities:

- Higher percentages of those in the North West (38%), the North East (37%) and London (36%) were not engaged in non-statutory activities—and notably lower in the East of England (9%).
- Joint evidence based work was the highest average score (51% of total respondents) for non-statutory activities. However, this percentage was significantly higher in the East of England (72%), West Midlands (67%), East Midlands (64%) and North West (61%) and lower in the South East (27%).
- Higher percentages of those in the North East (37%) and South West (35%) were engaged in Strategic Plans (compared to average of 23%), and 49% of respondents in the East of England were involved in Strategic Infrastructure Plans (compared to average of 20%).

Wider stakeholders were asked a parallel question about what strategic planning activities they were currently advising or collaborating on. Unsurprisingly, responses here tended to mirror the distribution of activity recorded by LAs, although a higher 52% of non-LA respondents were **not engaged in any statutory activity**. Of those currently engaged in statutory activity, 32% of respondents were involved

in joint local plans and 28% were involved in spatial development strategies. **57% of the wider stakeholders reported no engagement with non-statutory strategic planning activity either**.

3.3.1 Reasons why Local Authorities *are engaging* in strategic planning

Those participants currently engaging in strategic planning activity were asked to indicate why their authority was doing so, with multiple answers allowed. Responses are shown in figure 4 below, with the predominant response, 'in order to address larger than local issues' (47% of total responses, half of which were from the South East and East of England).

01 — In order to address a larger than local-area issue (such as housing supply and location, land for employment, transport and infrastructure).

02 — Meeting requirements of the Duty to Cooperate.

03 — Other.

04 — As a part of a Devolution Deal.

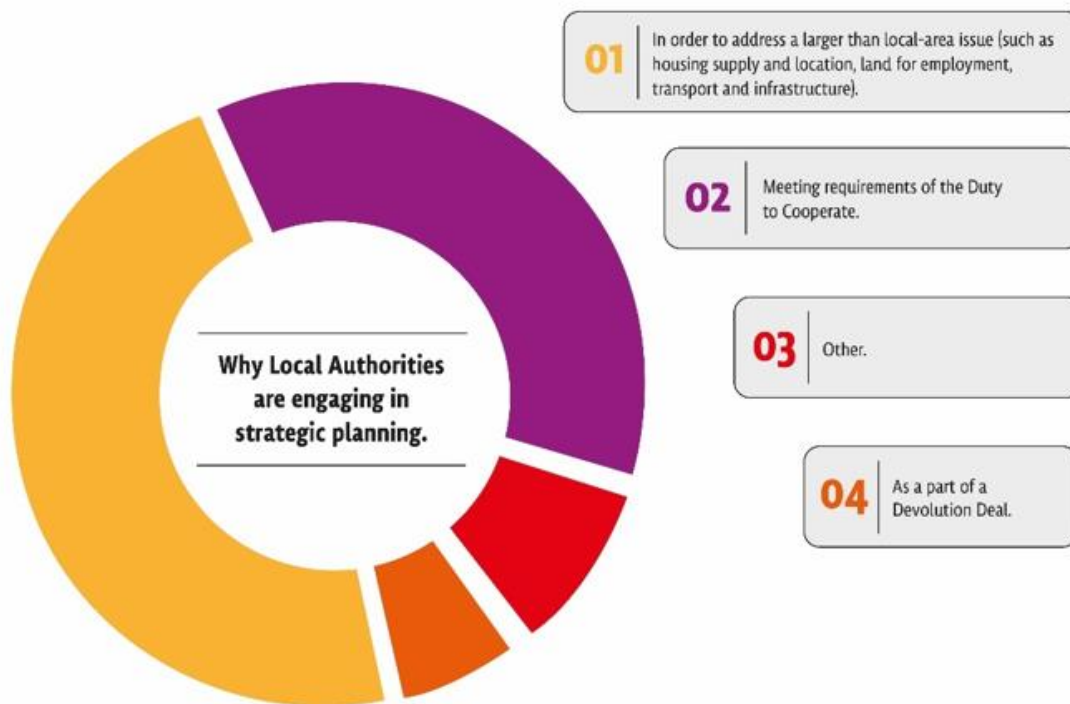Why Local Authorities are engaging in strategic planning.

Figure 4 – Reasons why Local Authorities are engaging in strategic planning

10% of total responses were 'other', with financial savings as the predominant answer (including specifically in relation to the preparation of evidence and examination), with one respondent reporting, "*Strategic Planning enables pooling of expertise and resources, resulting in cost savings, which is important for two relatively small rural local authorities. Planning jointly allows for a more strategic approach and provides for a stronger sub-regional voice*" (District Council, SW). Additional reasons cited, included the importance of strategic planning for minerals and waste and the implementation of environmental mitigation issues. One respondent simply stated emphatically, "*economies of scale, common sense*" (Unitary Authority, SW).

3.3.2 Reasons wider stakeholders report engaging in strategic planning

Within the wider stakeholder survey, participants were asked the open-ended question to indicate their main reason for engaging in strategic planning activity and the role they or their organisation was playing. The two most predominant answers given were **the provision of advice to clients** or **land promotion or representations on behalf of clients.** The latter was variously detailed as, "*making representations on draft plans and evidence as part of site promotion*" (Private sector, housebuilder),

"*promoting sites and making sure that the policies don't prevent development*" (Private sector, house builder) and "*leading project teams tasked with securing consent for and implementing the delivery of major strategic scale development*" (Private sector, planning consultant). One respondent observed their role in this respect to be an "*honest broker and critical friend. Our aim is to unlock delivery and provide solutions rather than problems*" (Private sector, housebuilder).

These answers were closely followed by those reporting the provision of evidence or studies to LPAs (including provision of software or technical support). Here, a wide range of services were listed, including advice on spatial options development, strategic housing land availability assessments, employment analysis and employment land review, Green Belt reviews, and landscape studies. One respondent specifically asserted their ability to provide support at scale: "*We have recently been procured for these activities as the analysis and tech we provide allows officers to scale their work more efficiently, and therefore makes sense for larger joint areas*" (Wider stakeholder, 'other').

Less frequent responses to this question included statutory consultee roles, provision of legal advice or simply 'provision of advice', academic interest and generalised mention of support for cross-boundary working.

3.3.3 Reasons why Local Planning Authority's report *not engaging* in strategic planning

Those participants reporting no strategic planning activity were asked an open-ended question to describe why this was the case. Only half of those reporting no activity chose to provide further detail. The most frequent explanations were in relation to either **lack of resources or a lack of resources in combination with a lack of interest**. One respondent simply stated, "*there is no interest in the region*" (County Council, NE). Five respondents noted recently adopted plans as the reason for a lack of current activity, implying that they may have been engaged in activity previously (although this cannot be assumed). Two respondents simply stated that there was **no urgent need for strategic planning currently**: "*there are no pressing issues at this time requiring a strategic approach*" (Unitary Authority, NE) or "*no significant boarder issues to justify resourcing any of these plans*" (Unitary Authority, SW). Similarly, two more respondents highlighted their relative "***geographical isolation***" (Unitary Authority, SW) or "*self-contained geography*" (Unitary Authority Y&H) as an explanation for no current activity. Critically, five respondents suggested that their appetite for strategic planning work had been impacted by **uncertainty over national planning reforms** and reported having paused work (including on joint evidence) pending further clarity.

3.4 Strategic planning barriers

Respondents were asked to rank six factors in terms of their significance as barriers to effective strategic planning practice (as shown in figure 5). There was unanimity in ranking across both surveys, with 'lack of a national statutory requirement' most selected as the highest ranked choice, 'lack of a national policy requirement' most selected as the second ranked choice, and 'political challenges to cross-boundary and collaborative working' just marginally ranked most in third.[72]

Figure 5 – Ranking of barriers to strategic planning

Interestingly, there was some variation within job-roles in relation to these barriers. While there was consistency of the top three amongst Principal or Senior Planners and Directors / Senior managers / Team leaders, Planning Officers considered political challenges and lack of national statutory requirement as less significant barriers. For Planning Officers, the top three were lack of national policy requirement, lack of appropriate governance arrangements and lack of skills or resources. This suggests that some of these barriers related to people's situated experiences and knowledge related to their specific job roles. For example, senior staff might be more exposed to the political challenges, while planning officers might be more aware of the lack of skills or resources.

Respondents were given the option to explain their choice. On a lack of national statutory and national policy requirement, comments were quite succinct and included: *"If there is no legal requirement for Councils to work together on cross-boundary matters, they won't"* (District Council, NW), and *"Councils won't/can't act unless required to do so. It is just too difficult and expensive.* (Private Sector, Consultant).

The **political challenges** associated with current arrangements were articulated repeatedly in response to questions across the surveys. In response to this particular question on barriers, respondents highlighted political challenges to have been exacerbated by the *voluntary* nature of current arrangements: *"Our first-hand experience has seen that when issues get too political on the housing front, authorities have the option to drop out of the strategic planning process and go it alone due to there being no statutory requirement"* (East Midlands, no authority selected). Some simply observed *"political disinclination to work together, especially when LAs are mainly from a different political party"* (County Council, West Midlands), or *"members are focused only on their individual issues within their areas. There is a resistance to relinquishing any individual council control of decision making"* (District Council, EE). Further consideration of political challenges follows in section 3.5 below.

In relation **to governance**, respondents bemoaned the fragmentation and variety of current approaches, suggesting the lack of clarity about how different bodies should collaborate as a significant barrier. Participants variously observed the current "*menu of different approaches*" (Private Sector, Other), and advocated emphatically that "*everyone simply needs to understand that there is a level of plan-making above local plans, that gives a number (or numbers) and spatial direction*" (ibid). Some, although not all, participants suggested consistency of approach to governance was important "*rather than places having to work out mechanisms for their area on an individualised basis*" (District Council, SE).

Importantly, however, whilst **lack of skills or resources, and weak incentives**, were ranking fifth and sixth, this did not mean they were perceived as insignificant barriers, as reflected here: "*It's actually a combination of a number of these factors - the political will to collaborate, the resources to do so and the incentivisation to overcome the first two* [lack of a national statutory or policy requirement]" (County Council, EE). Although there was acknowledgment elsewhere in the survey that effective strategic planning can be a cost saving in the long run (see section 3.9), others, mentioned that without a requirement to do strategic planning, the "*costs associated with strategic planning are sometimes prohibitive*" (District Council, EE). As one respondent observed: "*there is a lack of local authority expertise to lead on cross-boundary planning; many of the qualified Planners who worked on Regional Spatial Strategies are now nearing retirement or work in the private sector and therefore the cost of undertaking strategic planning on a cross-boundary scale is excessive as external resources will need to be used*" (District Council, NW). The issues of skills and resources is returned to in section 3.9.

3.5 Challenges of current approaches to strategic planning

The survey provided an opportunity for respondents to reflect on the challenges of the current approach. This was an open-ended question, with participant responses coded and analysed into common themes. The following table is based on thematically grouping the most common responses to this question.

THEME	SUPPORTING EVIDENCE
Its voluntary nature causes inaction or delay in action.	"*The challenge is that it is voluntary so, as soon as there are hard decisions to be made, partners can block them or drop out of the process entirely*" (National Park Authority, South East). "*The non statutory nature of the current approach means that many fall at the first decision making hurdle*" (Public Sector, Non LA). [Challenge is] "*The lack of certainty and related risk for public authorities undertaking strategic planning work, particularly in the absence of government guidance or endorsement*" (Self Employed Planning Consultant). "*Inertia. It's on the too difficult shelf in most places so we aren't tackling all the issues that need to be tackled at this scale which is storing up problems for future generations*" (Combined Authority, Anonymous).
It encourages a parochial and short-term outlook.	"*The short term and parochial approach to plan making and making planning decisions*" (two or more Local Authorities, East of England). "*There is no local political interest in strategic planning beyond the local administrative area.*" (District Council in a 2 tier area, South West).

	"Lack of political will to face up to and take difficult but essential long-term decisions" (Private Sector, Planning Consultant).
The lack of requirement causes competition over collaboration.	*"Local politics get in the way in terms of winning votes rather than accepting sometimes development has to happen in a certain area and standing up to that. There is no incentive or requirement to make authorities work together which can lead to an 'us and them' mentality" (County Council in a 2 tier area, South East).* *"The current system ultimately serves to incentivise authorities to row their own boat and ensure delivery to meet targets" (County Council in 2 tier area, East of England).* *"The system pitches authorities against each other in bids, housing numbers etc." (District Council in a 2 tier area, East of England).*
NIMBYism and LPAs passing the buck onto neighbours.	*"Making key strategic area decisions are often hampered by local issues and politics. The lack of a strategic approach to place shaping means other authorities sometimes defer housing and development allocation to neighbours (Unitary Authority (met), West Midlands)."* *"Primarily local political interest which does not serve wider strategic decision making well and is also subject to regular change" (Private Sector Consultant, Not Planning).* *"LPAs allocating sites with little planning merit other than the fact that they are located on the borders with other LPAs where the externalities in terms of transport can be easily exported." (County Council in 2 tier area, East of England).*
The current system contributes to rising public tension and frustration with LPAs and the planning process.	*"Politics and lack of resources within LPAs leads to delays in plan making and results in unplanned, speculative developments which may not have adequate infrastructure to support it. This leads to tensions with local communities who feel like they have not been able to influence the development of their area, as should be the case (Private sector, National)."* *"It's just so completely confusing, especially for people on the "outside", and there are so many options (statutory or non-statutory), that it is difficult to follow which "plan" is actually the one that is going to determine the level and distribution of development" (Public Sector, Non LA).* *"Societal frustration with ad hoc actions leads to rejection of any form of planning" (Third Sector).* *"Public disenfranchised with process and loses trust in all of planning" (Unitary Authority (met), South West).*

Table 2 – Challenges of current approaches to strategic planning

3.6 Successes or opportunities under current approaches to strategic planning

Respondents were also asked to consider the successes or opportunities that have emerged under the current approach. Considering the barriers and challenges already noted, it is unsurprising that many simply argued that there were **none, or few, successes or opportunities**. There were, however, some examples of successes and opportunities that have emerged under current approaches. The following table is based on thematically grouping the most common responses to this question.

THEME	SUPPORTING EVIDENCE
The potential for joint evidence work which contributed to cost saving and financial efficiency. powers to prepare	*"Allowing for an understanding of key issues across authorities and potential for further joint work on evidence-base documents and the potential cost-savings is the immediate success...The other opportunity that is likely to arise in the future is the ability to leverage additional government funding due to the multi-authority approach." (District Council in a 2 tier area, East of England)* *"Some joint working on evidence base brings economies of scale, reducing costs to individual LPAs." (Metropolitan District, Yorkshire and The Humber)* *"Significant financial efficiencies, through shared evidence preparation and sharing the costs of local plan examination." (District Council in a 2 tier area, East Midlands)* *Opportunities include the "Distribution and efficiency of staff resources and infrastructure resources" (Private Sector, National Planning Consultants).* *"There is both a need for it to tackle the complex and large-scale challenges that arise when planning strategically, but also increased opportunities for funding as budgets are often increased with collaboration across authorities" (Private Sector Consultant).*
Shared learning and resources and innovative approaches.	*"Greater resilience for lean local authority planning policy teams, enabling shared learning. Capacity benefits for lean local authority planning policy teams, as local authorities will have different specialisms and can lead on significant projects." (District Council in a 2 tier area, East Midlands)* *"Strategic planning activities that are taking place currently do provide an opportunity for innovative approaches, such as through the use of digital technologies" (Private Sector Planning Consultant).* *"One opportunity we now have is the whole field of digital planning, which makes mapping, modelling and option sieving so much easier and more flexible at scale than it used to be" (Academic/Past Strategic Planning Practitioner).*
It allows for a flexible and place-based approach which recognises and values the distinct context of local places.	*"Different approaches - Greater Manchester's approach shows how a collaborative approach to allocations and development distribution while Liverpool City Region is introducing and tackling issues and creating a consistent approach to issues such as climate change, environment, health and social value." (Metropolitan District, North West)*

	"Delivering a comprehensive joint local plan that marries up high level strategies for the whole area, with bottom up place specific strategies, tailored to the needs and ambitions of individual places." (District Council in a 2 tier area, South West) *"Provides local authorities with flexibility to follow approaches which are most appropriate to local politicians and senior officers." (Unitary Authority (non-met), North East).*
It provided the basis for tackling cross-boundary issues.	*"Strategic planning sees the bigger picture and looks at cross boundary issues better…Where planning jointly, it allows areas to manage growth of their area effectively and to target infrastructure improvements to deliver that growth. It allows some local control on how housing targets can be sustainably delivered." (District Council in a 2 tier area, North West).* *"Strategic planning presents an opportunity to fully understand functional relationships between areas to ensure development and other infrastructure is delivered in the right place at the right time" (Private Sector Housebuilder).*

Table 3 – Success or opportunities of current approaches

3.7 Desires for a change in approach to strategic planning

There was an exceptionally strong majority **in favour of a change** to current approaches to strategic planning across both surveys, as illustrated in figure 6. As an aggregate score across the two surveys, **96% of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed a change is needed**.
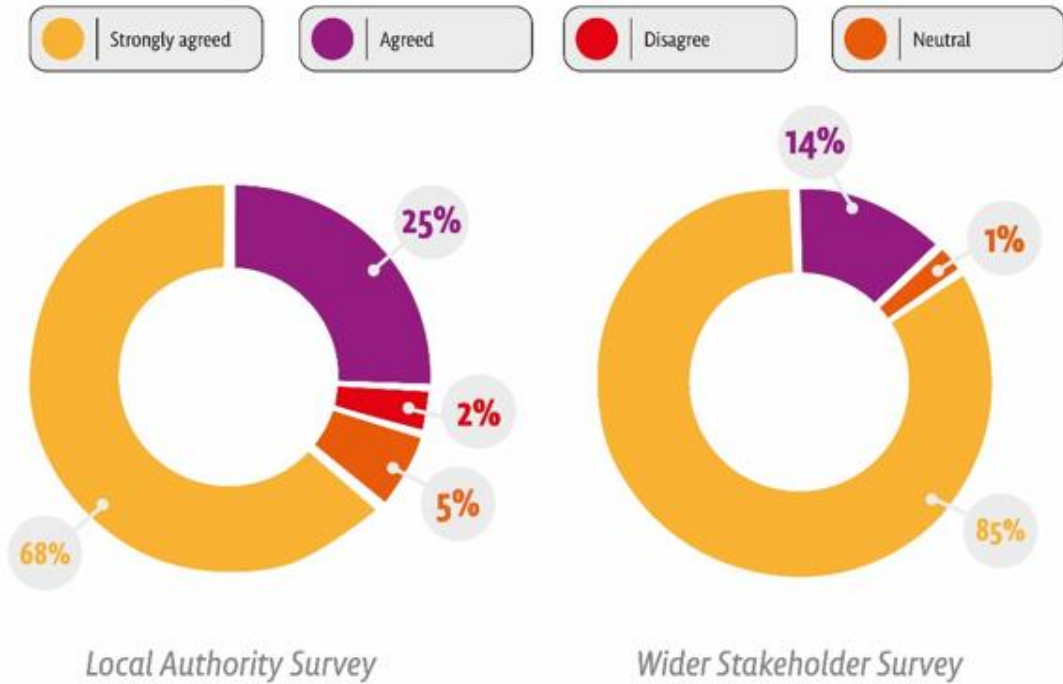

Figure 6 – Desires for a change in approach to strategic planning

80 local authority participants and 87 wider stakeholder respondents provided supplementary 'reasons' for their support in favour of change. As the table below indicates, these reasons strongly correlate with the challenges and barriers articulated in sections 3.4 and 3.5, but in presenting the further evidence in response to this question **substantiates the strong consensus about the desire for change**. These open-ended responses fell into the categories in the table below, listed in descending order of frequency of mention.

THEME	SUPPORTING EVIDENCE
Failings of the existing system and the insufficiencies of the duty to co-operate. Here, words such as 'sclerosis', 'dysfunction', 'decay', 'crisis', and 'chaos' were frequently used in addition to the widespread use of the word 'failure'.	*"The current system is failing to deliver strategic working on key areas, including housing delivery and social inequality" (Unitary Authority, North East).* *"There is a dysfunctional patchwork approach to planning above LA level. The planning system is a mess! Simply have a planning system which fails across so many areas and is overburdened by too many requirements requiring too much expertise against a backdrop of reducing planners and expertise to navigate and staff the ship! Change is needed from the strategic level down - a Government just has to be brave enough to stop tinkering with the system and start with an outcome based approach and make some perhaps difficult political decisions for the good of delivery to benefit people and the environment" (Private Sector, Planning Consultant).*
The need to think beyond the local and address the wasted resources of working on an individualised basis	*"We live in a small but highly diverse geography with a high population density. The idea that we can all do our own thing without considering the wider picture is ideological fantasy. Effective strategic planning could correct this pathway to decay" (Private Sector, Other).* *"Individual local planning authorities are too small, geographically and politically, to take strategic decisions. The result is sub-optimal decisions for everyone" (Private Sector, Planning Consultant).*
Local politics is too predominant in current approaches – high level decision making allows decisions to be more evidence than political led.	*"Within the north east there is a lot of competition for growth. Making these decisions at a higher level will allow the decisions to be more evidence rather than politically led" (Director, North East).* *"To deliver outcomes not constrained by political boundaries (Private Sector, Planning Consultant).* *"Planning at a strategic level provides political 'cover' for individual local authorities in terms of the distribution of new development (Public Sector, Non-LA).* *"The incentive for collaboration is weaker than the political pain many smaller authorities around major cities experience - or believe they will experience. There isn't really a system in place at the moment – it's just piecemeal. As a result we are really not dealing with big picture strategic issues properly - and end up with short term, political plans rather than longer term strategies that provide certainty and direction" (Director, Unitary Authority, East Midlands).*

Strategic planning can enable integrated thinking is needed across sectors. Here, respondents focussed most frequently on the importance of better aligning infrastructure investment with development priorities.	*"Current thinking is disjointed, silo, and inconsistent. Infrastructure is also delivered inconsistently and should be driving development (Public Sector, Non LA).* *"Strategic planning is the key stage/level at which an integrated approach can be defined at the outset. Creating a vision that considers not only projections for the economy, demography, households but considers the levers that influence them" (Private Sector, Planning Consultant).* *"There has been a complete failure to address the issue of distribution of investment in England" (Wider Stakeholder, Anonymous).*
A different approach is needed to tackle specific topic-based issues, with housing under-allocation and under-delivery most commonly cited, followed by tackling climate change and net-zero ambitions.	*"We are highly unlikely to be able to provide the housing that we so desperately need without a strategic approach which identifies housing requirements for local plans. The Duty to Cooperate and the use of the standard methodology to assess objectively assessed need have not been a success" (Unitary Authority, West Midlands).* *"We need a more coherent approach to delivering more homes reflective of housing market areas which are rarely confined to single LPAs (Private Sector, Housebuilder).* *"Without it we will fail in so many ways, especially in tackling the climate emergency" (Private sector, Planning Consultant).* *"We cannot waste any more time bickering about housing numbers it needs to be decided and then delivered in the most sustainable way (District Council, West Midlands).*
A voluntary approach to strategic planning is risky and allows participants to walk away.	*"A voluntary approach can very easily collapse, and this seems increasingly likely, in the current context with increased requirements for housing (e.g. 35% uplift)" (Unitary Authority, South West).* *"Because the current system does not force/incentivise authorities to do what is needed - to make difficult decisions and plan for the future of their area" (Yorkshire & Humber, LA type not specified).*
Strategic planning is needed to better support local plan making.	*"Strategic planning is a necessary tool to deliver national priorities and to make local plan-making faster/more efficient" (District Council, North West).*

Table 4 – Why change is desired

There was strong consistency between the LA survey and the wider stakeholder survey in terms of the dominance of particular themes. The only notable difference was that LA respondents placed more emphasis overall on the role of strategic planning in facilitating the local plan process and wider stakeholders placed greater emphasis on the impact of a lack of strategic planning on delivery of growth and uncertainty for developers and investors of the current fragmented approach. Here, a private sector participant observed that: "*Although they moan about the planning system, private developers actually like certainty. The current semi-randomised land use allocation process can't give them that, but strategic planning could*" (Wider Stakeholder, Private Sector).

3.8 Future strategic planning options

3.8.1 Mandating of strategic planning

The majority of respondents in both surveys thought that strategic planning should be mandated by Government, as illustrated by figure 7.
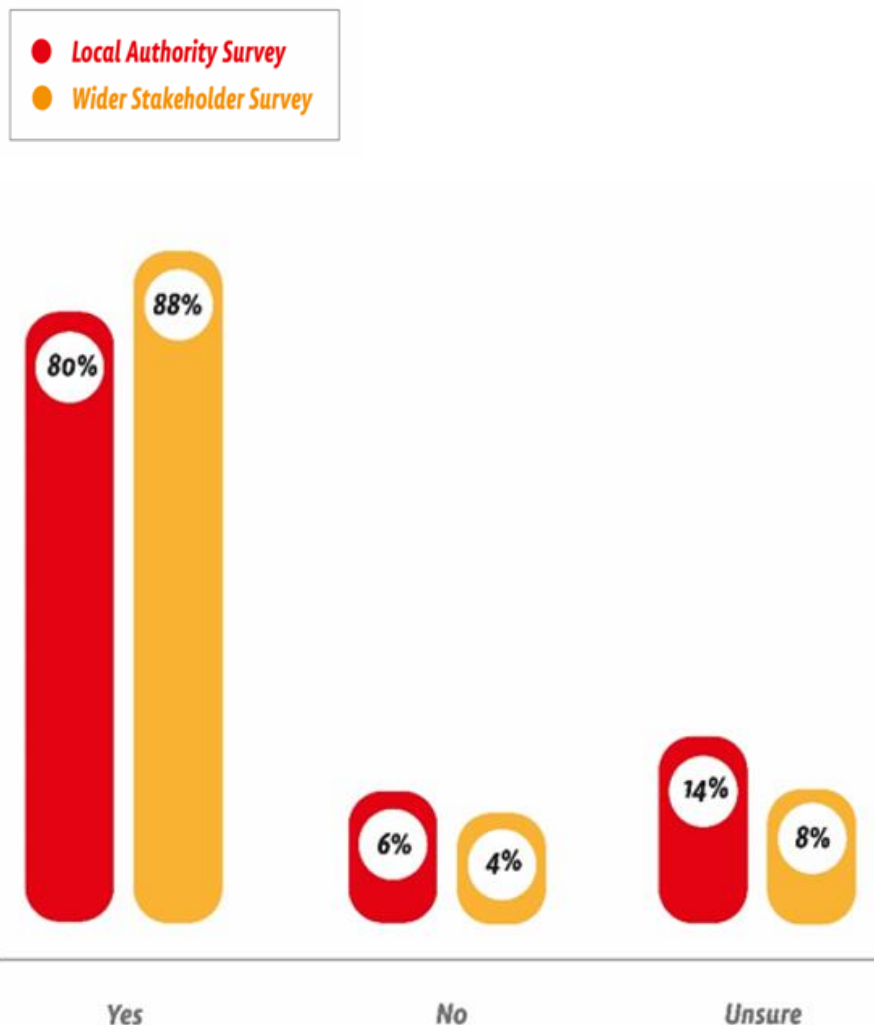
Figure 7 – Should strategic planning be mandated?

3.8.2 Forms of strategic planning

Respondents were then asked to choose whether strategic planning should be:

- 'Statutory, part of the Development Plan System'.
- 'Managed in another way (e.g., adding regional/sub regional guidance to National Policy)'.
- 'Conducted with the option, locally, for either a statutory or advisory approach'.
- 'Advisory (non-statutory), outside of the Development Plan system'.

A majority of LA respondents (67%) thought that strategic planning should be 'statutory', 17% claimed it should be 'managed in another way', 14% thought that it should be 'conducted with the option, locally, for either a statutory or advisory approach', and only 2% thought that it should be 'advisory (non-statutory)'.

In the non-LA survey, similar results were apparent. 71% thought it should be 'statutory', 19% 'managed in another way', 7% that it should be 'conducted with the option, locally, for either a statutory or advisory approach', and 3% 'Advisory (non-statutory)'.

The survey then asked respondents for their preferred spatial scale for strategic planning activity, via a ranking question (see figure 8). There was a marginal preference amongst both LA and non-LA respondents for strategic planning to be 'based on appropriate functional geographies' or 'at a sub-regional scale'. It is notable that strategic planning 'at the more local level' was a weaker preference.
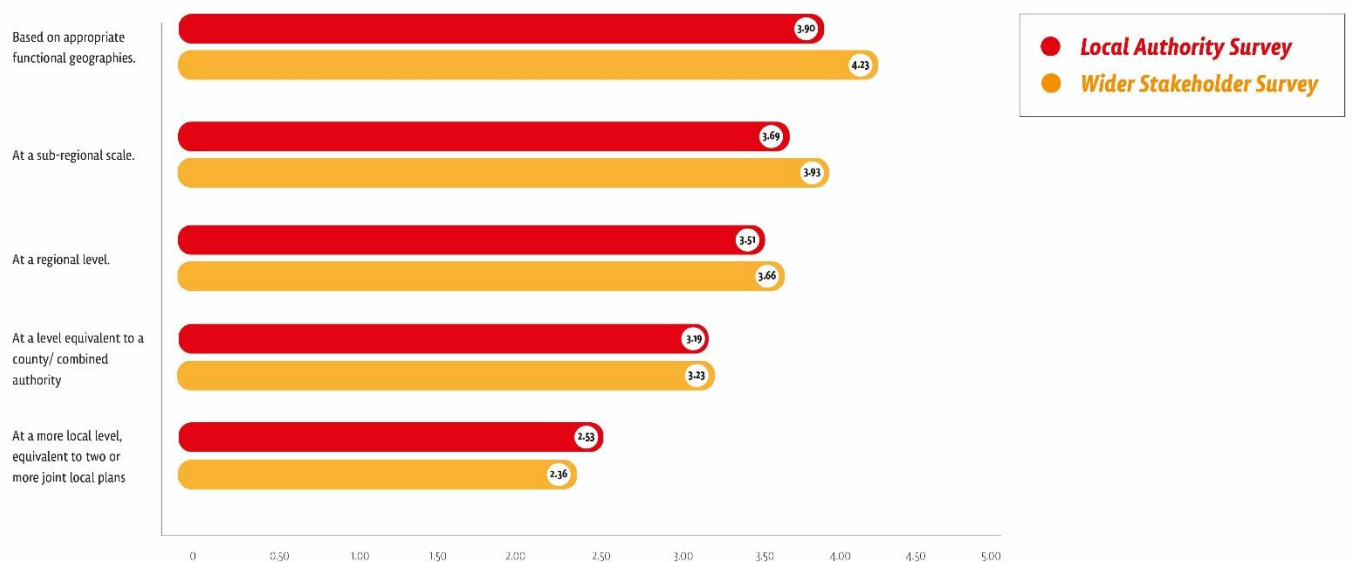

Figure 8 – Preferences for the scale of spatial planning

Beyond the combined data, the breakdown and disaggregation of data at this level demonstrates less **overall agreement over any defined spatial scale for strategic planning,** as further evidenced by some of the regional variations within this data.

- Respondents in the East of England, East Midlands, South West, and North West favoured 'appropriate functional geographies'.
- Respondents in London marginally favoured 'a sub-regional scale' (4) over 'appropriate functional geographies' (3.9)
- Those in the North East strongly favoured a 'sub-regional scale' (4.4) with 'appropriate functional geographies' second (3.8).
- Respondents in the South East and West Midlands favoured regional (3.7 and 4.1), with 'appropriate functional geographies' second (3.6 and 3.8).
- Respondents in Yorkshire and the Humber strongly favoured 'At a level equivalent to a county / combined authority' (4.3) with 'appropriate functional geographies' second (3.8)

There was also variation in relation to type of LA.

- Respondents from Combined Authority / Greater London Authority, District Council in a 2 tier area, Metropolitan District, and Unitary Authority (non-met) favoured 'appropriate functional geographies'.
- Metropolitan District respondents rated the 'sub-regional scale' as high as 'appropriate functional geographies'.

- Those from a County Council in a 2 tier area marginally favoured 'at a level equivalent to a county / combined authority' over 'appropriate functional geographies'.
- London Borough respondents favoured a 'sub-regional scale'.
- Unitary Authority (met) didn't strongly favour any option, marginally favouring 'at a level equivalent to a county / combined authority'.
- Respondents submitting from multiple Local Authorities favoured 'at the regional level'.

There was little variation related to job role, although planning officers favoured 'at the regional level'.

3.8.3 The role of a national spatial plan

Respondents were then asked whether they thought "that any new arrangements should include some form of spatial plan or framework at the national level?" **84% of LPA respondents and 90% of non-LPA respondents answered 'yes'.**

3.9 Looking to the future: facilitators of effective strategic planning practice

Finally, respondents were asked to consider the most important facilitators of effective strategic planning in the future. Given its position as the penultimate question in the survey, responses at this point were less expansive, but often quite emphatic illustrated here: "*Good Planners. Brave and principled local politicians*" (Director, East Midlands); "*Good Governance arrangements, making it a legal requirement, having the funding for it*" (Director, Yorkshire and the Humber), and "*Knowledge, willpower, tangible incentives and adequate resources*" (Director, Combined Authority).

Once again, there was strong consistency with the question asked earlier on 'barriers'. Facilitators were largely expressed as opposites to those ranked highly as barriers (albeit that this was an open ended rather than ranking question), with the need for a **national statutory requirement for strategic planning** spontaneously highlighted as the most important facilitator of strategic planning in practice by both LPAs and wider stakeholders. **Governance** was also highlighted as an important facilitator of strategic planning, but rarely was this elaborated on in more detail, beyond 'good governance', 'proper and accountable governance', 'effective governance' or 'governance is key'.

After that, most respondents tended to provide composite responses (as indicated in the opening quotes to this section), the most common of which mentioned **politics** in various forms - 'political will', 'strong political leadership', 'political leadership', 'stability of leadership', 'political buy-in' - in combination with a need for **increased resourcing and funding**. It was notable that some stakeholders in the wider survey referred, in various ways, to the need to 'take the politics out of it'.

Resourcing tended to focus on staffing, with staff shortages across both local government and in the planning sector more generally highlighted by a number of respondents. One respondent simply called for, "*Willing politicians, resourced stakeholders and skilled planners*" (WSS, VS), and another for "*a fully equipped planning workforce*" (WSS). Brief observations on funding focused on resources for implementation, particularly infrastructure funding, with the **alignment between strategic planning and investment seen as an extremely important precursor of effective strategic planning** by both public and private sector respondents: "*We need sufficient funding to underpin the needed infrastructure to support growth*" (WSS).

For several respondents, alignment of plans with infrastructure funding was about the importance of achieving an **appropriate balance between 'carrot' and 'stick'** with the need for appropriate incentives, "*or at least removing the disbenefits!*" (District Council, East of England). It was notable that some both public and private sector stakeholders referred more specifically to the need for a better link between national infrastructure planning (including NSIPs) requesting connectivity between

national infrastructure investment and strategic planning. Once again, reference was made here to the need for a clear national plan setting out critical infrastructure, and how it will be funded and delivered.

In part, this encompassed a wider plea for improved engagement from third parties, particularly infrastructure providers in both the public and private sector, in the preparation of strategic plans, and in the commitment to delivery. Some wider stakeholders suggested the need for contractual or quasi-contractual agreements for partners, including central government departments, to delivery. Others referred more generally to **input from statutory bodies and other agencies as an important facilitator**. More specific, was reference to the need for improved connections with / integration of existing strategies and plans of organisations such as National Highways or the Environment Agency, into the sphere of strategic planning such that a revived approach to strategic planning takes advantage of what is already there.

However, three important points of detail emerged on facilitators of effective strategic planning, that were not covered elsewhere in the survey. First, was **the importance of shared objectives or a vision for a functional area**, partners striving for a common understanding of issues and opportunities that transcend the local. For some respondents, this was about the need for acceptance that strategic planning is both necessary and beneficial, a common goal even though authorities collaborating might be diverse in nature. Second, was the **importance of clarity of focus**, and a generalised plea for strategic planning to have 'clear parameters of scope', be 'proportionate', 'focused on some key issues' and 'kept at a high level':

"I think it is crucial, that plans or strategies are kept short and sweet - and cover only strategic issues. Both the old Structure Plans and Regional Plans suffered from mission creep resulting in them taking far too long to produce, being more expensive to produce than need be, losing the strategic wood from the detailed tress and getting into local issues that made them unpopular with local councils" (Unitary Authority, East Midlands).

Finally, a small number of both LPAs and wider stakeholders specifically articulated the **need to remove the power of veto**, such that strategic plans could be at best be stalled or at worse fail, because of one partner walking away. Similarly, a small number of wider stakeholders articulated the need for 'recourse' where strategic plans are not prepared in a timely manner.

4. Case Studies

4.1 Background and purpose

Six case studies were carried out to provide **in-depth insight** into strategic planning activity as **currently practiced** in England. These studies were chosen from a long list of potential case studies, shortlisted to ensure coverage of the following criteria across the six chosen:

- A range of different types of strategic planning activity as indicated in the overview of current practice in section 2, including an example of non-practice;
- A range of geographies, with three chosen from the RTPI's three northern regions; and
- A range of governance arrangements and political leadership.

These studies are shown on the map below.
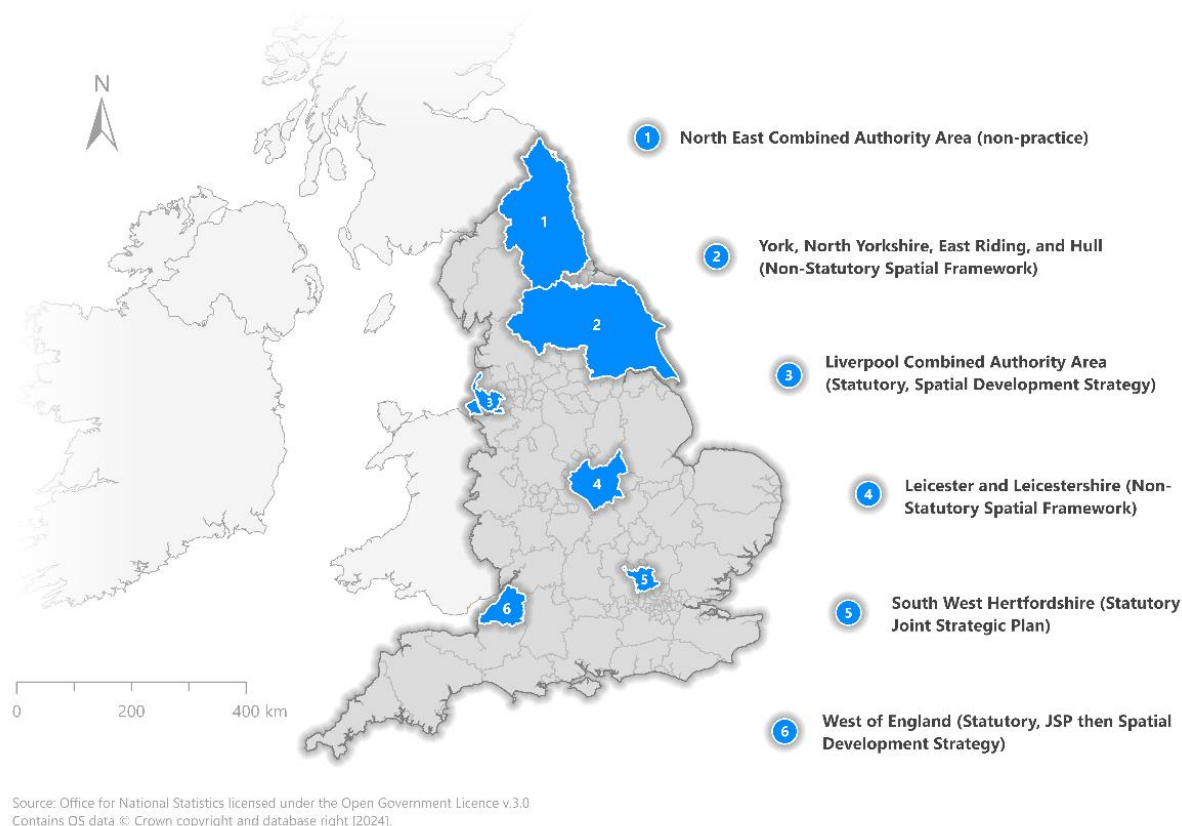
Figure 9 - Case study locations

Each case study comprised documentary review and interviews with people closely involved in strategic planning work or planning (in the case of North East England) in that area. The interviews were conducted using a common topic guide across case studies with the questions designed to encourage reflection on the successes and challenges based on their experiences. Precisely who was interviewed across each case study varied according to the context. For example, in the case of the West of England, interviewees at the sub-regional level were largely providing a retrospective view. Across the six case studies 30 interviews were carried out in total, with the majority of participants within the public sector.

A draft of each case study was written-up and then shared with all interviewees for confirmation that the case study provided an accurate reflection of their experience. They therefore reflect the views of those that participated, acknowledging that there may be wider views within the sub-region. Individual interviewees in each case study are identified by number (i1, i2 etc.), but for reasons of anonymity are not named. Each case study appears in full in sections 4.3 – 4.9 of this report. Supporting documents and further information on each case study is provided as Appendix 4.

As indicated above, the case studies intentionally represent very different mixes of local economic context (and development pressure), environmental constraints and political ideology (pro growth, pro constraint). By way of example, the North-East is pro-growth (politically) but characterised by relative (in contrast to other case study areas) weak levels of demand and problems of viability. Whereas the West of England and South-West Hertfordshire, for example, experience political challenges in response to the coalescence of growth pressures, including the role Green Belt plays in this, and environmental constraints. Consequently, there are **significant contrasts across the case studies** in terms of current experiences and the successes and challenges associated with progressing strategic planning under different models.

Nevertheless, it is possible to derive some over-arching findings from across these case studies as detailed below. Under each of the key findings, individual case studies are signposted for more detail.

4.2 Case study key findings

The journey back to strategic planning

With the exception of the **North East,** which has witnessed no formal, collective approach to strategic spatial planning since 2010, all case studies chart a journey of seeking to re-instigate some form of strategic planning in response to the negative impacts of its absence. Although existing relationships and past experience of working collaboratively across administrative boundaries has positively supported this process (**see Leicester and Leicestershire and Liverpool City Region**), the loss of technical knowledge and experience of strategic planning over the last 14 years has been challenging for all case study areas, particularly as there has been no single model with guidance and prescription on 'how to do it'. A notable challenge for officers has been the dwindling number of local (and national) politicians with experience and institutional memory of strategic planning. The job of strategic planning over the last 14 years has been one of hard work. This points to the **need for a re-building of the culture of strategic planning**

The cost of the strategic planning void

The value of effective strategic planning was unanimously articulated by all case study participants. Consequentially, the case studies **provide much evidence of the costs (and opportunity costs) of the piecemeal approach to strategic spatial planning post 2010.** In the 'non-practice' example (**the North-East**), this has manifested itself in the form of direct competition between LPAs for growth; those with plentiful greenfield sites overperform on housing delivery, while site-constrained urban authorities face more challenges. This also has the effect of creating a disconnect between planning for housing growth, on the one hand, and planning for infrastructure investment on the other.

In the **West of England**, the failure to finalise a strategic plan is perceived as negatively impacting the ability of the sub-region to fulfil its economic potential or tackle housing need. In other cases, the negative effects of incremental, piecemeal development have been observed, and strategic planning activity has focussed on seeking to consolidate development towards strategic locations or corridors (for example as in **Leicester and Leicestershire** and **YNYERH**).

Planning is not always understood as a positive enabler

Planning in general appears to be regarded by many (although not all) elected members as problematic, rather than a solution / positive enabler of change. Strategic planning and the value added it might bring in particular appears often misunderstood. Where strategic planning forms part of Devolutions Deals it does not appear to be central to the work of Combined Authorities (**West of England,** and the new **North East Combined Authority**), albeit where land, housing and infrastructure (planning in a broader sense) are priorities. In the **Liverpool City Region**, however, the profile of strategic planning through the SDS and its added value for local planning and other priority areas, especially on health, social value and climate change, is becoming more widely acknowledged largely as a result of the public engagement process underpinning the SDS preparation process.

Notwithstanding this, there is some evidence of positive political engagement with the value of strategic planning. This is particularly evident in **South-West Hertfordshire** and **Leicester and Leicestershire**, with the latter case study illustrating the value of strategic political alignment in the handling of the 35% urban uplift.

Governance is fragmented, complex and unstable

All case study respondents considered the tension of planning within the complex and often fragmented governance arrangements across different places, with no case study sharing the same arrangements. Reference in the **YNYERH** and **North-East** case studies was made to their changing governance arrangements (with the introduction of new and re-configured combined authorities). In the **Leicester and Leicestershire** case, changing arrangements in adjacent sub-regions were noted. The likely impact of these change on planning was not yet conclusive.

One area of consensus was about the impact of unanimous voting (or the power of veto) on statutory strategic planning activity. In the **Liverpool City Region**, the unanimity required has clearly impacted on progress of the SDS, with building consensus across all partners at every stage a key role of the officers and an impact on resourcing. In the **West of England**, the power of veto has enabled partners to walk away following a lack of consensus, halting work on the Spatial Development Strategy indefinitely. As with the mandating of strategic planning, removal of the power of veto was seen as important in order that strategic planning is not resigned to the 'too difficult' box.

Interest in strategic planning at a local level is often "resource led" and can be incentivised in this way

Strategic spatial planning can provide an important framework for central government to make investment decisions, to deploy limited resources (e.g. for infrastructure) most effectively. It is this investment that has a tangible effect on local outcomes, well-being, and helps resolve place-based problems (e.g. access, congestion, housing delivery). Strategic spatial planning is seen as a means for prioritising between places, whereas planning at local authority level is insufficient to achieve this objective. The strategic cooperation witnessed in, for example, the setting up of the Combined Authorities, has been largely based on securing additional government financial support (**Liverpool City Region, West of England, North East**); a perceived need to plan jointly to justify investment. This prompts an important question about the status of "in between places", those that do not (yet) benefit from the Devolution process.

Importantly, this fundamental connection between strategic planning and investment (particularly infrastructure invested) was emphasised in all case studies. There was a clear desire *to do* strategic planning in order to progress funding discussions with Government (**YNYERH**) and to prepare plans

"not just for planners" (**South West Hertfordshire**). Nevertheless, there was considerably more circumspection about whether plans, particularly non-statutory plans, had been effective in securing the infrastructure investment needed to support growth (**see Leicester and Leicestershire**).

A history of collaboration, linked to strong geographical functionality, makes a difference

Where there are signs of some success, particularly in relation to the progression of shared visions in the forms of non-statutory strategic plans, a key factor appears to have been a longstanding culture and approach of working together across boundaries, supporting by a strong functional geography (see, in particular, **Leicester and Leicestershire** and **South-West Hertfordshire**). The early agreement in **Liverpool City Region** to progress an SDS as part of the Devolution Deal was also driven by the strong existing relationship across the local authorities. A key question arising is, therefore, how you support effective collaboration without a preceding history of working collectively together in some form?

A focussed approach is strongly desired

Where strategic planning activity is taking place, there is a strong desire for this to be focused on setting a clear vision for a sub-region (the non-statutory frameworks of **YNYRH** and **Leicester and Leicestershire** are seen as successful in this regard) and tackling key strategic issues. Whilst this could, in part, be seen as a pragmatic response to resources available, it is clear that there is very little appetite for strategic plans to become 'big local plans' (see **South West Hertfordshire**).

Repeated reference was made across all case studies to a process of simplification, reducing the necessary evidence base (e.g. to a map with simply expressed spatial priorities), and a focus on outcomes rather than process. The new Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS) were cited by some (see **North East**) as a model for a streamlined form of strategic spatial planning.

Statutory versus non statutory planning?

The case studies detailed a range of both non-statutory and statutory approaches to strategic planning. The main advantages of a non-statutory plan appear to be the avoidance of conflict laden processes via voluntarism, which has certainly enabled speedier production (**Leicester and Leicestershire**). Here, the local plan has done much of the 'heavy lifting'. Nevertheless the voluntary non-statutory approach was seen as risky, having no glue to keep partners together, the non-statutory plan being observed as "*being a bit like a chocolate fireguard*" (**South-West Hertfordshire**). Those case studies that had chosen to produce a statutory plan emphasised its value in "having teeth" and therefore saw a statutory approach as better able to impact planning decisions and outcomes, a benefit that those currently pursuing non-statutory plans observe as lacking within their current activities.

Some level of Central Government prescription is desirable

The lack of Central Government prescription in, for example, the content of the **Liverpool City Region** SDS was seem as affording a valuable degree of autonomy / flexibility for the plan to address matters of local concern, as identified through local participation e.g. climate change, health, and inclusive growth. This was considered particularly important in the context of the devolved authority. This flexibility has also provided space for innovation (see also **South-West Hertfordshire** and **North-East** on digitisation and data sharing). Conversely, however, local autonomy was seem as permitting LPAs to avoid politically more contentious issues (notably, although unsurprisingly, housing distribution). On balance, all case study participants, felt some level of prescription (particularly mandatory housing figures) was needed in order that strategic planning tackle the issues for which it is most needed.

Strategic planning needs staff resourcing

Staff resourcing was a key theme of all case studies. Both the **Liverpool City Region** and **Leicestershire and Leicester case studies** suggest that dedicated staff team or resource is best to ensure independence and impartiality, and to ensure that work continues to be progressed. This was also evidenced by work on the Joint Spatial Plan in the W**est of England**.

More broadly, there is a concern about the cumulative impact of austerity on local planning, especially on the planning policy function. This sets important parameters for what type of strategic spatial planning is seen as feasible in the future. It also restricts case study participant's expectations of what is desirable or feasible, seeing the need for pragmatism in approach rather than wholesale change which might be more resource heavy.

All case studies noted a deficit in planners with strategic planning experience and the challenge of finding staff with the right skills and experience (**see Liverpool City Region**). There was a strong sense that certain skills were critical for effective strategic planning (see, for example **South-West Hertfordshire** on the soft skills necessary for maintaining joint working across boundaries). Others observed the costs associated with the need to buy-in skills to carry out strategic activities where no resource or skills were available amongst the constituent authorities (**see YNYERH**). It is important to note, there is significant scope for cost saving in, for example, joint commissioning of evidence base (**see Leicester and Leicestershire**).

Strategic plan examination is challenging

All case studies point to plan examination as a challenging phase (see **West of England**), raising concerns about the basis of examination (see **South-West Hertfordshire**). Questions have been raised, about the appropriateness of the current tests in the NPPF given the limited appetite for strategic planning to be conceived as big local plan. There is some uncertainty about how this will unfold in the case of the **Liverpool City Region**, where the nature and scope of the SDS is new both to the Combined Authority and to the Planning Inspectorate, responsible for its examination. Critically, those LPAs that have experienced a local plan examination describe it as a significant impediment to broader political support for planning. It is perceived as laden with risk, especially for politicians. There was the sense across all case studies, however, that strategic plans done effectively should help simplify, streamline and de-risk the local plan examination process, with efficiencies for the Planning Inspectorate in turn.

4.3 Case study 1- Leicester and Leicestershire

Summary

The nine local authorities in Leicester and Leicestershire, together with the Leicestershire Local Enterprise Partnership (operational until 1st April 2024) have voluntarily collaborated to prepare a non-statutory Strategic Growth Plan. Published in 2018, this provides a high-level vision for the sub-region up to 2050, sets out its housing and economic development needs, and the intent to focus growth on key strategic areas. The desire to address the negative effects of ad-hoc development and to stimulate infrastructure investment to support strategic growth, together with a strong sense of its functional geography with the city at its heart, have been key to generating cross-party political support for the Plan. This work would not have happened without strong pre-existing relationships across the sub-region both at officer and member level, and the clear governance provided by the Members Advisory Group, together with the Strategic Planning Group comprising senior officers and the joint funding of an officer to work exclusively on strategic planning, independent of any one authority. The positive impact of this work has been most evident in the coherent and collective response to the urban uplift in housing growth, and the signatory of all authorities to the Leicester and Leicestershire Statement of Common Ground setting out how Leicester's unmet need would be managed across the sub-region, despite changing leadership in some partner authorities during this process. Notwithstanding this positive impact, the voluntary approach to strategic planning was seen as having limitations, with more inherent political risks than a statutory approach, and lacking a clear route to delivery (with local plans remaining sovereign). A statutory footing for the Growth Plan - whilst taking more time to produce and being more exposed to uncertainties over changing Government strategic planning policy - was seen as likely to have more impact in the dialogue with Government and other stakeholders on the infrastructure investment needed to support growth.

Leicestershire County Council

Local Authority Boundaries
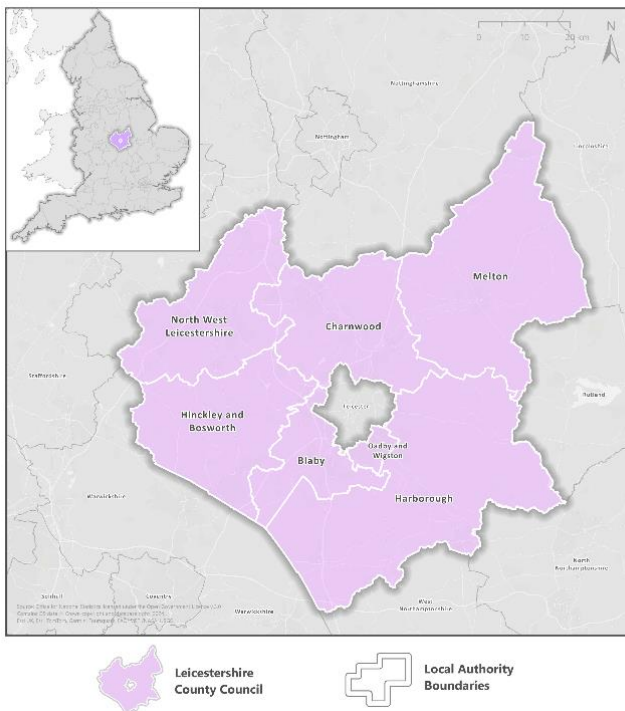
Background and context

Situated in the East Midlands, Leicester and Leicestershire (L&L), with the City of Leicester at its heart, has a population of over a million. The North-Western part of the area is particularly well-connected to national road and rail networks and has an international airport. Whilst it has several strengths (particularly its growing economy, its three universities and its thriving market towns) the area also has its challenges: congestion on the road and rail network; gaps in connectivity (particularly east-west links); high levels of commuting; and pressure on existing communities from new development. The area has many distinctive environmental assets, but no green belt designations.

Administratively, the area comprises the two upper tier authorities of Leicester City Council and Leicestershire County Council, and the seven local borough and district authorities of Blaby District Council, Charnwood Borough Council, Harborough District Council, Hinckley & Bosworth Borough Council, Melton Borough Council, North-West Leicestershire District Council and Oadby and Wigston Borough Council. Political leadership across the area is mixed, with Conservative, Liberal Democrat and Labour led authorities. After a period of relative stability, elections in 2023 saw some previously conservative-led administrations shift to no-overall control. Leicester City Council has been under

Labour control since 2007 and has had a directly elected Mayor since 2011. As of May 2024, of the 10 parliamentary constituencies covering the area, 6 are held by Conservatives, 2 by Independents, and 2 by Labour.

All the local authorities have adopted plans in place but are committed to producing new plans to be adopted by 2026 covering plan periods that expire between 2036 and 2041. Two authorities have submitted plans for examination. Five authorities have undertaken or about to undertake Regulation 18 consultation. One authority is preparing for Regulation 19 consultation imminently. As one participant observed: "*We are cracking on with our plans … we don't want a return to the wild west, planning by appeal*" (i2).

Key strategic planning issues

"*We've got a vision to open up the South and East of Leicester, we've got to build at scale. We can't keep adding on little bits because not only have residents had enough of that kind of development, the highway network can't cope with that kind of incremental development ad infinitum. We need to do something … we're not anti growth, but we do need the infrastructure to support that growth*" (i2).

Case study participants consistently cited the following factors, as the **most** significant strategic planning issues in the area:

- **Growth management** across the area, but with a particular focus on meeting Leicester's unmet housing need;
- **Balancing recent and ongoing pressures for growth** in the North, the area with closest proximity to the M1, with opportunities in Southern and Eastern areas;
- **Securing infrastructure funding to support growth**, ensuring the viability and sustainability of new communities and urban extensions; and
- **Addressing the complexity of North West Leicestershire**, with the East Midlands Development Company (in the East Midlands Airport Area) and the Freeport, and joining up cross-boundary agendas - those with Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire being particularly highlighted.

Strategic planning activity post 2010

Frustration – including political frustration – was reported at the abolition of the East Midlands Regional Spatial Strategy which was depicted as having started to deliver on the distribution of housing numbers across the region. A strong desire was reported to "*carry on planning, at least at the HMA level*" (i1). Work on a joint approach began in 2015 with discussion at the L&L planning officers forum. Initially, this focused on the importance of joint evidence and developing a shared sense of direction but this "*bloomed into a bigger thing … the preparation of the strategic growth plan*" (i4). The drivers for the work were considered to have been both "*strategic and tactical*" (i6), with *strategic* drivers reflecting the planning issues identified above, and *tactical* drivers considered as: addressing Leicester city's unmet need; enabling local plan progress; and harnessing the potential benefits of co-operation across the area. Broadly, there was a strong sense that "*much was to be gained from working in a cohesive manner … we couldn't disconnect ourselves from the city*" (i7), and "*we all recognized the collective benefit of strategic planning, taking control of the future, and avoiding the ad-hoc*" (i5).

The Plan - **'*Leicester and Leicestershire 2050: Our Vision For Growth*'** - was published in December 2018. It is a non-statutory framework, covering 2011-2050, setting out the total housing and employment land needs over this period ("*by crudely rolling forward the standard method*" (i1)), and

a commitment to shifting the focus of development by building 'more development in major strategic locations' (page 18), with 'notional capacities' given for identified strategic growth areas (page 25).

Member engagement in the work was driven by acceptance (at least to some degree) that "*growth is coming anyway, this work is about how to manage it effectively*" (i6). In part, this motivation was about positioning for infrastructure investment to support growth: "*I think we all recognized that without a plan you can't justify the infrastructure and the need to look long term in order to be able to look at more substantial ambitions was really critical*" (i1). However, it was also about addressing the impact of "*bits of accretions on all the villages"(i1)* the cumulative impact of which members were observed as disliking. It was observed that, "[Our Members] *are very pragmatic … they know we have to plan for growth and they have a strong preference towards doing that through strategic site delivery. You have to do that on a HMA area*" (i3). It was also observed that councillors recognized "*without a green belt – more of Leicester and Leicestershire is potentially exposed to possible unplanned growth and it was important we got our act together*" (i4), and with some of the LPAs struggling with lack of a five year land supply, this could continue to be problematic.

It is important to note that at the time the discussion about the need for a strategic approach was happening, the practice of joint strategic plans in England was very limited. The sovereignty of the local plan process was an important part of enabling member support for the joint work: "*We stayed away from the hard red line issues* [such as site allocation]*. We wanted to get a spatial strategy agreed … but it isn't a contract to take growth. It sets the context for the approach to 2031 and helps position the local plans to do the heavy lifting on the big decisions of allocation*" (i1). The potential for a statutory approach was discussed with members, but the decision to pursue a non-statutory approach was unanimous: "*We decided to go for a non-statutory approach in order not to run into the sand of a drawn-out process. We wanted to keep it light footed and get a vision endorsed*" (i1).

Strategic planning governance and administration

"*Once we got into the business of plan making, we established the Member Advisory Group. Recognising that some of the stuff we're doing is a bit spiky, it's important to have members on board on the journey" (i4).*

The preparation of the Growth Plan and subsequent evidence-based work has been guided by a Members Advisory Group (MAG), comprising members from all 9 authorities, each supported by a chief officer or director. At the time of writing, it is currently chaired by the Conservative Leader of Blaby District Council and is normally attended by the City of Leicester Mayor and other local authority leaders (depending on availability). MAG was seen as critical by all participants but was acknowledged as having no decision-making powers "*it can only recommend things get taken back to its own councils, with implementation through local plans, so there is always a bit of uncertainty about how far you can push the advisory nature*" (i2).

MAG is supported by a Strategic Planning Group (SPG) attended by officers from all 9 authorities, and was also attended by County and City Highways, Public Health, Active Together, Homes England (and until it was disbanded, the LLEP). This is currently by chaired Charnwood Borough Council's Chief Executive. The authorities jointly fund the post of *Joint Strategic Planning Manager* – a bespoke role focused on strategic planning and accountable to the chair of the SPG. Support for this post was seen as fundamental for maintaining the momentum of the work and key to its success. Preparation of the Strategic Growth Plan was also supported by considerable engagement with a wider set of stakeholders throughout the three stages of the plan's preparation as well as evidence procurement.

Elements of success

There was strong consensus that **politicians within the sub-region had been able to think beyond the immediate concerns of their area**, and it was this that had enabled consensus to be reached both on the need for the plan, and its content. Officers were clear that "*politicians in L&L get it, they get the strategic need, and how to balance that with local interest*" (i6), with one stating "*I'm very proud of our members we've got strong leaders who really advocate for strategic planning and know the benefits of planning in general, and the advantages that planning for growth can bring*" (i3). In part, this was seen as consequence of strong officer support, with a bespoke resource for strategic planning independent from any one authority (noted above), and experienced staff, with several local authority officers having long-standing experience in the area, including on strategic planning. One officer observed that "*the building blocks for this work were already in place … we had existing working relationships without which it would have been more difficult*" (i7).

The **demonstration within the growth plan of a commitment to shared direction for the sub-region** was clearly celebrated. It was described as providing "*a locus for agreement and partnership working. It reminds us all that we are working together as one. We're not islands in a sea. We help each other, we're in it together, and you support each other recognising that local politics can spike in different authorities from time to time*" (i4). Furthermore, it was seen as having achieved a certain momentum which would make it harder to row back from: "*It has been the constant … We've had this vision that we've never moved away from and it's something that you can bring them* [members] *back to. The longer something's in place, the more confidence you get from it, don't you*?" (i3). Critical, however, to the achievement of this shared direction, was the early agreement to a "*a clear focus – we were not trying to do it all*" (i5). A more detailed, "*all encompassing plan*" (i6), was thought to have been less achievable, as compared to a tighter focus on key priority issues.

Work on the Plan had enabled **financial savings.** The SPG has commissioned joint evidence not just in support of the growth plan itself, but further evidence to support local plan processes, shared across constituent local authorities. All participants saw this as a major cost saving: "*we've saved a fortune from commissioning evidence jointly … they don't cost much money for an individual authority but help all of them when it comes to their local plan examinations*" (i2). One authority simply said: "*the cost effectiveness of collaborating on shared evidence commissioning was obvious to us*" (i1).

Enabling the signing of the L&L *Statement of Common Ground (SCG).* In January 2024, all constituent local authorities finally signed the L&LSCG (albeit caveated by a minor element of re-distribution not fully agreed by one partner council). This was variously described as a "*pretty unique achievement* (i1), "*wonderful*" (i2), "*a monumental piece of effort*" (i3) and "*quite remarkable*" (i4), especially in light of the 35% uplift for the City of Leicester, which "*hit*" (i1) after Leicester had concluded its Regulation 18 Local Plan Consultation in December 2020. The uplift resulted in an unmet need of 8,000 over the plan period, increasing to 15,000. Officers described a culture of "*finding a way to deal with this*" and it was evident from all participants that the evidence behind the growth plan, and the partnership work that had facilitated its preparation, was fundamental to the final agreement of the SCG:

"*I don't think I would have been able to get our members so strongly on board with the statement of common ground if we hadn't had the vision that sits above it … you've got something to link back to, it makes sense of it ultimately*" (i3).

"*I don't think the SCG could have been done without that track record of partnership and good political relationships and very good officers in terms of shaping the strategy of how you construct a redistribution formula that is that is capable of being accepted by a diverse set of authorities*" (i1).

Critically, one officer observed that gaining sign-up to the SCG was the first real test of the growth plan, because this was the first time the "*numbers in there were properly signed up to. It's a miracle*" (i3).

Furthermore, there was a strong sense that **progress on local plans** - and the commitment to achieving the June 2025 submission deadline – was – as with the SCG – directly attributable to the strategic work. One officer referred to the Charnwood local plan examination (underway at the time of writing) suggesting it "*would not have progressed to that point without the long-standing coherent vision for the sub-region*" (i2). Another referred to 'safety in numbers at examination': "*from a local plan perspective you want certainty, consistency and understanding … what you don't want is hostile neighbours … because planning is hard enough … it's very important to build consensus with your near neighbours because you need that solidity and support when dealing with the trickier issues that are coming from the development industry, or other stakeholders*" (i4)

Key challenges and limitations

Despite the reported successes, there was acknowledgement of the challenges and limitations of the approach to date. There was evident frustration that the sub-region has never received any funding from its bids for capacity funding to support joint working, and **infrastructure funding has not yet followed** the growth plan in the way intended. Several officers observed that whilst "*we've certainly been able to influence conversations*" (i4), "*could you directly attribute any of the investment to the growth plan? I don't know*" (i3), "*we've barely had a penny to help with all of this*" (i1). One participant described talking to an elected member who "*was cross about the fact we've said we're up for development but there's no sign of us getting any money*" (i2). More positively, one officer observed that whilst the plan may not have directly levered additional investment, it has been important in contributing to sub-regional understanding of what is needed beyond a local level. The key challenge now was observed as "*how to position ourselves to get that notice from government to actually be able to say, hey, look at us, we want to actually do something here*" (i2).

Here, there was a clear concern about losing out to other places, particularly being sandwiched between the new East Midlands Combined Authority and the West Midlands Combined Authority, which might put Leicester and Leicestershire in a relatively weak position for future funding to support delivery, particularly given the growth framework's non-statutory status. As one participant observed: "*What does devolution mean for gap areas? It feels like we are under siege (i7)*".

2023 saw major political shifts within the area resulting in just one conservative district compared to the previous five. Given the political maturity and strength of political and officer relationships noted above, there was evident concern that this shift would have a destabilizing effect on the joint work. It was observed that this was one of the inherent risks of a non-statutory approach, in that new members could call "*to rip the work up and start again, or not start at all*" (i6). Here, the result was the need for considerable effort to re-affirm with new members the "*opportunity of a strategic approach, and the risks without and the jeopardy of walking away (we'll give you all the growth)*" (i6). Continuity of staff, and continuity of both the chairs of MAG and SPG during this period, was largely credited for ensuring that the momentum for strategic work has remained: "*… were they going to upend everything? Actually, they didn't, they've been very respectful of the chair as the voice of experience. They are supportive of the continued direction of travel, albeit they voice frustrations from their communities*" (i3). However, one officer stated emphatically: "*we should not have to put in so much effort to persuade politicians that this approach is needed … We've been successful in managing that risk, but it would only take a different set of leaders, to wash that all away …*" (i6).

There was also frustration for both members and officers about the impact of **shifting policy goals nationally**. One key manifestation of this was in relation to the replacement of the duty to co-operate

with a new strategic alignment test. This motivated some MPs to try and stop the SCG from being signed. KC advice, (commissioned by one partner authority) was needed to confirm that the duty to cooperate elements of NPPF still existed for plans being submitted by June 2025, and to assist in manage the pressure from MPs on local councils.

Notwithstanding the benefits of the growth plan in supporting local plan progress, one officer noted the **limitations of a non-statutory approach for Local Plans** and the challenges of meshing the strategic growth plan with local plans that are progressing to different timescales**.** Ultimately, *"the trick is going to be to use the long-term thinking to get our foot in the door, to start allocating areas which we know form parts of much wider strategic growth options that are cross boundary, so that they will be able to deliver at the back end of the plan period" (i2).*

Looking to the future

Implementation work on the Strategic Growth Plan is underway, with the ongoing support of the MAG and SPG. Representative of the ongoing work was the publication in June 2024 of the Strategic Growth Options and Constraints Mapping Study, and the Strategic Transport Assessment Stage 1. There is no desire, currently, to review the growth plan.

Despite some of the successes of, and support for the non-statutory approach, case study participants proffered that "*we need to ask ourselves the hard questions about the strategic growth plans influence as a non-statutory plan*" (i2), "*does it have quite enough weight going forward*?" (i7). On balance all were unanimous in their instinctive preference for a statutory Government led requirement for strategic planning in the future required comprehensively and to clearly address what will replace the Duty to Co-operate in a more substantive and effective way than the as yet uncertain 'policy alignment' test. Overall, this was seen as less risky than a voluntary approach, because "*you just have to get on with – it addresses the risk of things falling apart under voluntary arrangements, you just have to swallow it and get on with it*" (i4). Critically, delivery of the strategy was thought to be challenging without the force of a statutory plan behind them, particularly in light of two adjacent combined authority areas:

"That is our big challenge, how we go about delivering actual sites, rather than big swathes of blobs in the growth plan. We are going to need to say these are our sites that we want to master plan. This is the infrastructure that we're saying is needed and it's going to cost us about this much and we need to ask government for support" (i2)

However, when reflecting upon how that statutory planning might be introduced, officers variously observed that there was "*not an easy answer, because of the current patchwork of devolutionary and governance arrangements*" (i6). Some officers were keen on a return to regional frameworks, others were adamant that strategic planning should not extend beyond a two-county area, and some were keen that LPAs should be able to decide for themselves on the most appropriate strategic geography for them, "*otherwise local government reorganization will be the only way*" (i4).

Notwithstanding the preference for a statutory approach in the future, one officer stated that *"whilst a statutory plan would probably make producing local plans a heck of a lot easier … would we have ever got there … who knows what stones might have been thrown at it at examination?"* and another, "*Statutory plans are more important now than ever, but at the same time, I think the likelihood of getting one through is kind of going the other way* (i3). In that respect, there was a strong desire to explore a "*light-touch*" (i6) statutory approach, avoiding protracted examination.

More broadly, all participants had two key "asks" for any future approach: firstly, that the shortage of planners and the deficit of planners with strategic planning experience be tackled; and, secondly, that

"strategic planning must be linked with infrastructure funding decision making to co-ordinate investment, "*plans are simply not going to make that much difference until you grasp that nettle*" (i6).

4.4 Case Study 2- Liverpool City-Region Combined Authority Area

Summary

The Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (LCRCA) is currently the only Combined Authority in England preparing a spatial development strategy (SDS). The powers to do this were included in the 2015 Devolution Deal but work on the SDS was not initiated formally until 2019. The SDS is still in preparation with the statutory 'Public Participation' stage expected to take place in Spring 2025 before submission for Examination. There is very little national guidance around the scope and content for SDS generally therefore the LCRCA spatial planning team has had to use their professional expertise, judgement and experience to develop the SDS, with minimal peer support. However, the limitations around national prescription have also created freedoms and opportunities to develop a spatial policy framework that better reflects the local priorities of the LCR (developed through the CA's public engagement processes) and has been able to be more progressive and innovative in some policy areas than local plans.

The lack of guidance nationally, together with challenges around the decision-making which requires unanimous support across the CA members, and the initial lack of understanding of what added value the SDS offers both within the CA and its partner authorities, has inevitably lengthened the time taken to prepare the SDS. However, the profile of the SDS has been heightened since the last engagement process earlier this year, with significant interest being shown in the return of strategic planning in LCR and work continues to progress positively in collaboration with partners.

Liverpool City Region Combined Authority | Local Authority Boundaries

Background and context

The Liverpool City Region (LCR) sits on the North West Coast of England and is home to a population of 1.55 million people. The area is predominantly urban with a long history in heavy manufacturing and shipping which have defined the development of the area and the post-industrial decline challenges. In recent years, the LCR has been going through a major transformation with regeneration of Liverpool and the other larger towns offering significant opportunities from the re-use of former industrial brownfield sites. Although shipping and logistics remains an important part of the LCR's economic and employment base, there has been an increasing focus on the innovation economy. Key challenges across the LCR area include building long term economic and climate resilience and addressing social and health disparities.

The Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (LCRCA) was established in 2014 and covers the local authorities of Halton, Knowsley, Liverpool, Sefton, St Helens and Wirral. All but Halton previously formed the Metropolitan County of Merseyside and there are therefore long-standing relationships and a history of collaboration on spatial planning, especially through the North West Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS). There is also a strong functional relationship with West Lancashire, which is an Associate Member of the CA.

The first Devolution Deal was agreed in 2015 and included an agreement to prepare a **"*Single Statutory City Region Framework*"** (later defined as a spatial development strategy) supporting the delivery of strategic employment and housing sites throughout the LCR. The Deal further stipulated that the

Framework would *"require approval by a unanimous vote of members appointed to the Combined Authority by the constituent councils"* and that it must not delay the development of local plans being prepared within LCR at that time.

The LCR local authority partners *"actively wanted strategic planning powers from the start"* [i1] as the local authority leadership, especially the Chief Planners, recognised the value of strategic planning through their recent collaboration to support preparation of the RSS. However, the recollection of the negotiations implies that it was the Government that wanted the framework to be statutory because of the wider powers (and funding) being asked for by the local authorities and the need for confidence around delivery. Similar negotiations were taking place at the same time with the Greater Manchester Combined Authority. *"The original driver to do a framework was more economic growth. It was only when the regulations came out in 2017 that we realised it was to be an SDS. It went from something that was about economic growth to something that had to look at the wider interests of sustainability, the environment, climate change and then issues around health inequalities were put in."* [i2] There were, however, some sensitivities at the time around the fact that the RSS had recently been abolished so negotiations across the partnership had to be managed carefully. A significant incentive was the funding that came with the Deal.

The Devolution Deal also allows for a number of other powers to support delivery and implementation of the SDS, including call-in powers for planning applications that are considered of strategic importance, the establishment of a Brownfield Register and a Land Commission. Apart from Greater London, the LCRCA is the only CA with strategic development management powers which were negotiated *"on the back of the discussion at the time, particularly with the Chief Planners who were very strategic, thinking that if you have a plan, who else is going to enforce the policies. If you don't have the DM powers, the local planning authorities can give less weight to the SDS and it becomes less important"*. [i1]

Having agreed to include the powers in the Deal, there were a number of drivers for progressing the SDS (there was no required timescale for this) some of which were directly related to the planning benefits and support the SDS would provide for the local plans being prepared and at early stages of review, especially in relation to housing and the Green Belt. *"It could help reinforce the Green Belt and protect public open space as there is a lot of pressure there because most of the LCR authorities had already reviewed their Green Belt and the need for potential Green Belt release to meet development needs through their local plans."* [i1]

Other drivers were linked to the wider issues impacting on the LCR, including town centre regeneration, climate change, social value and health, where the SDS could provide a strategic emphasis on policies and reflect more recent evidence or context. For example, it can provide a more explicit 'urgent' approach to climate change and nature recovery, or can develop the scope and offer a more consistent approach across the LCR to social value. There is also the potential for bringing in more investment and funding to the LCR to support implementation of key policies which also makes the SDS an attractive proposition. *"Some of the big issues are social value, health and climate change…. when local plans are being reviewed, they could still be up to date because of the SDS and save them from doing a fundamental review."* [i1]

Part of the evidence base was a Joint Strategic Needs Assessment on the health and wellbeing of the LCR which helped the team to develop an appropriate policy framework that reflected the strategic health issues impacting on the LCR but also some of the specific issues impacting on parts of the LCR. *"Health had become a huge issue and the SDS had that factored into it, so we had to tackle it. The*

Directors of Public Health were very supportive of us doing that and contributed because it helped them. [i1]

Strategic planning activity post 2010

The SDS will be part of the statutory Development Plan alongside the local plans within LCR. The legislative framework underpinning this and guidance for examining SDS make it clear that these plans should only deal with matters considered of strategic importance. They are required to set out the spatial strategy on a Key Diagram and can identify strategic areas for development but these must not be map-based (as in local plans). Beyond that, there is very little formal guidance on the scope and content of this form of strategic plan, including the testing process through examination (apart from procedural matters).

The key issues to be addressed in the SDS were developed from the early engagement processes that took place in 2019 and 2020 as part of the CA's wider community engagement initiative 'LCR Listens' (see Planning Advisory Service Case Study for more information). It was considered important that local communities were involved from the start and throughout the preparation of the SDS, with the overriding purpose being to make sure the SDS is "*shaped positively and meaningfully by the people of the Liverpool City Region*".

A set of key themes and draft policies were then developed and were the focus of the third and most recent consultation on an 'engagement draft plan' undertaken between November 2023 and February 2024. These cover climate change (decarbonization), tackling health inequalities, building an inclusive economy and maximizing social value. Addressing climate change and health disparities were consistently the top two issues in the first two engagements. A final (statutory) public engagement on the draft SDS is expected to take place later in Spring 2025, prior to submission for Examination.

"A Spatial Development Strategy is important in the future development of our whole area. The whole point of devolution is that it gives areas like ours the opportunity to chart our own course and invest in projects that can leave a positive, lasting impact on our resident's lives …. I've always been clear that throughout this process, our framework will only be used as a force for good – and in collaboration with our communities and our local authorities."

Steve Rotheram, LCR Mayor [LCR, November 2023]

A Statement of Common Ground (SCG) was signed early on in the process by the six constituent member authorities of the CA, the Mayor and West Lancashire Borough Council. This covers housing and some of the other key spatial policy areas, including the agreed approach to Green Belt. This would inform what strategic matters the forthcoming SDS would cover (i.e. its scope) and provided a commitment from the LCR authorities that they would work collaboratively in its preparation going forward. However, it was also agreed that these matters would be kept under review and subject to future agreement through the SDS process.

Since the SCG was signed in 2019, local plan progress has been slower than expected. Knowsley and Sefton already had adopted plans in 2016 and 2017 respectively and have since concluded that they remain up to date and do not therefore need to be reviewed. Halton, Liverpool and St Helens adopted their plans in 2022 although the Inspector examining the Liverpool Local Plan raised issues around achieving a better balance of housing type in the City and the role the SDS could play in this. The Wirral Local Plan is in the final post Examination stage and the Inspector has indicated that it is sound subject to Main Modifications. The West Lancashire Local Plan was, at the time, also expected to be prepared on an aligned timetable but work to replace the 2013 local plan has since slipped with the first (Regulation 18) stage consultation now not expected to take place until late in 2024. Further work has

subsequently been undertaken to consider housing (need and supply) to inform the SDS's approach and this remains a live workstream.

Strategic planning governance and administration

Accountability for the SDS sits with the CA which comprises the six local authorities and the Mayor, and not with the individual constituent member authorities. However, the legislation underpinning the CA makes it clear that consensus across all partners at each stage of the SDS must be reached.

The corporate priorities of the CA are set out in its vision document 'Plan for Prosperity' and through the Corporate Plan. Despite the fact that the SDS themes and draft policies reflect most of the CA's priorities and the SDS is one of the few statutory plans the CA has responsibility for, its visibility within the Vision document is low and it has no profile within the Corporate Plan. This is likely to be more of a reflection of the fact both documents were drafted in 2020/21 and the SDS had not progressed sufficiently by then as its profile has been much higher recently, for example, it was a strong feature of the Metro Mayor's Manifesto (for the May 2024 Mayoral Election).

The CA has a relatively small spatial planning team who work in collaboration with other officers and teams within the organisation. It is fully funded through the CA's core funding settlement. External consultants and specialists are commissioned to develop some of the technical evidence and to manage the engagement process. Local authorities are mainly involved through regular meetings of officers from the LPA.

Key successes and challenges

The **lack of national prescription has clearly had an impact on the scope of the SDS and the time it has taken to prepare it.** "*There is no clear guidance as to what an SDS is, what it should contain and how it should be prepared. We have the legislation, the regulations and London as an example but not a directly comparable one. Even now when we look at the NPPF references to strategic policies and the need for an evidence base that is proportionate, it could mean a lot of detail or a high level position.*"[i2] The commitment to prepare the SDS was also framed initially more within an economic remit but was changed to reflect its wider role through the preparation of a statutory development plan. "*We are working to our legislation which is all about delivering economic growth as a Mayoral authority but actually we will be tested within the framework of the NPPF and that has a much broader scope.*" [i3]

Despite the fact that local authorities will now be able to prepare Joint SDS through the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act (LURA] and therefore there could be many more areas actively involved in this form of strategic planning, there has been little reference to form, scope and content in any of the planning reform consultations. "*It's apparent that there is no clarity in Government about what SDS can do and there is potential for confusion around whether the new joint SDS will be different because the combined authority SDS are guided by their own Orders. They've introduced a new product but with limited guidance over what that new product is.*" [i4]

The three stages of engagement and consultation have helped the CA to shape the priorities to reflect those of the LCR and not to adhere strictly to a prescriptive set of national policies in the way local plans are required to do. Although there are some common issues that need to be addressed in all SDS, a key aspect of devolution is to allow the devolved authority to address the different and varying scales of challenges and opportunities that require bespoke planning interventions for their areas. The first question asked in the engagement process for the SDS was therefore: 'what do you want to include in the SDS?'. The issues that dominated the engagement processes were around how to address health

disparities across the city region and deliver on climate change/net zero objectives. The flexibility around the scope also allowed the SDS to respond to other CA priorities such as increasing social value.

The relative freedom to address LCR specific policy priorities and the later timeline for preparing the SDS (although some have ended up being prepared alongside the SDS) have allowed the CA to introduce policy areas that are not in the local plans or provide a more up-to-date policy response. The CA has also been able to develop more innovative and progressive approaches to some key policy areas, especially around climate change, health and social value, all of which are priorities for the Metro Mayor and the other political Leaders. Once adopted, there is also an expectation that the SDS will be able to lever in more investment, especially through developer contributions, to support the wider corporate objectives.

The absence of national guidance and prescription has meant that the team has had to use their professional knowledge and experience to work out what is needed for the SDS to meet its statutory requirements. *"We are having to take an approach that is robust based on professional planning experience rather than there being any specific guidance. It is fair to say that when we are challenged on the contents of the SDS, they* [stakeholders] *are judging it against how a local plan is prepared and the expectation that we should be doing the same."* [i3] For example, there is nothing on the scope and what 'strategic' means, on the proportionality of evidence or on implementation of the SDS once operational.

The team has also had limited peer support, mainly from the GLA, as other models are not considered to be comparable. *"if that* [more on scope and content] *is set out clearly then it would really streamline some of the process and would give certainty to the local authorities within the CA in terms of how the SDS and evidence base links to their work, where we can have economies of scale...and not just for planners as there's lots of people who could potentially be working more joined up if this was in the guidance. That's a key message we're getting from stakeholders."* [i3]

Whilst this has helped stimulate innovation, the SDS will still have to be independently tested and currently the main mechanism for doing this is the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) which is focused on the preparation and delivery of detailed local plans. This will therefore be the test case for any future SDS unless the examination process is changed before then to reflect the strategic nature of the SDS more appropriately.

Although there is limited legal and national policy prescription around the issues that the SDS has to include, it is clear that the overall quantity of new dwellings and the spatial distribution of development are key strategic matters. However, the profile this received through the engagement processes was low compared to most local plans where housing numbers tend to dominate debates.

The approach to preparing the SDS was initially set out in the 2019 Statement of Common Ground. Since then, progress on local plan preparation has been slower than expected with one local plan (Wirral) still to be adopted and a risk that some of the other local plans will be out of date by the time the SDS reaches the examination stage. Work has therefore been progressed through the SDS to update the evidence base for the LCR which will be used for the SDS and future local plan reviews.

There is acknowledgment that it is important to get the first version done to help get a better understanding of what impact the SDS has on the LCR and on the local plan framework, including how to make better use of the shared evidence base. *"Once we have an SDS we could start to understand what it does mean and see whether there is potential for the next version of the SDS to do more on things like aligning better with investment strategies and providing more of a spatial strategy across the city region that future local plans can respond to."* [i4]

A **dedicated spatial planning team within the CA to prepare the SDS was considered important** because of the statutory responsibilities of the CA. The team is fully funded by the CA *"Funding was from the preset. It was always argued that this was one of the statutory things the CA has to do so needs funding. The CA needs to be resourced enough to do the job."* [i1]

A dedicated team is also considered important to ensure impartiality with the team supporting the 'partnership' and not individual partners and to ensure that the SDS was 'part of the day job' and therefore a priority for the team. There is a good relationship between the team and planners across the CA who are supportive of the work and trust the team, helped by the fact that most have come from local authorities within the LCR. All the evidence is managed in-house with the use of external consultants where appropriate.

However, finding skilled strategic planners with experience to resource the team has been an issue and did impact on early progress *"It has been difficult to bring people in with the right skill- set and right level of experience."* [i2] There is recognition also that the strategic planning skillset is not just about technical knowledge but also about partnership working and political awareness. *"The evidence is one part of it, but the professional planning judgement plays a big part and part of that is being able to read the politics."* [i3]

The **choreography in preparing a new strategic strategy for the whole LCR and local plan preparation** also had to be managed carefully to ensure local plan progress was not impacted. There was a clear commitment (in the Devolution Deal) that work on the SDS would not delay local plan progress. On a practical level, it was considered important that any SDS engagements did not coincide with significant local plan consultations as this could result in conflation and confusion between the two. *"It was agreed at the start that we would avoid engaging with the local authorities or progressing the SDS at significant stages of the local plans."* [i1] In practice, however, some local plans have been prepared alongside the SDS and some will need to be reviewed when the SDS has been approved.

In addition to building the strategic planning capacity within the CA, uncertainty around planning reforms, the impact of the Covid Pandemic and the lack of drivers to progress the SDS have all had an impact on progress. There is no set timescale within which the SDS has to be prepared and no sticks to put pressure on delivery in the same way that there is with local plans, for example the need to meet five year land supply targets and the Housing Delivery Test. *" … there isn't sufficient buy-in and accountability from the senior officers in the CA to put pressure on the team to deliver X by Y in the way that they would if it was a local plan because there is a deficit in the 5 year land supply, for example…..it was in the 'too difficult' box which is all symptomatic of the fact there is no clear guidance on what it is, what it should do and how it should interact with local plans."* [i4]

The **need for unanimity for all key decisions on the SDS has also clearly impacted on timescale**. A considerable amount of effort and time has been invested to build support across the wider CA and to keep everyone on board with what the SDS is aiming to do. This has been an essential part of the lead officer role, especially in the early days, given the relatively limited understanding of what the SDS is, what added value it has in supporting the local plans but also wider CA objectives and priorities. A lot of groundwork had to be developed before the preparation of the SDS could begin in earnest, building trust across the CA partners and keeping them involved and interested, especially as key officers and political leaders changed over time. Agreeing the scope and developing a clear set of priorities through the early engagement, all helped. *"It took time arriving at consensus with all six* [partner authorities] *because we knew unanimity is needed and that has always been at the back our minds when moving*

forward. Working collaboratively and getting buy-in from officer level all the way up is, in itself, time consuming." [i2]

The profile of the SDS within the CA and partners around the opportunities it offers to support a wide range of public policy priorities across the LCR has clearly risen over time as awareness around its added value has grown. For those not directly involved in planning, the negative view of the planning system more generally may have also impacted on this in the early stages. *"Unfortunately planning was seen as a problem at the start, not the solution... but it could be a good thing politically because health is becoming more important as a devolved issue and the SDS can set your development framework and bring in S106 contributions. It can help join everything up."* [i1]

As the SDS process has evolved, its wider positive role in helping to address a wide range of priority areas for the LCR has become clearer. For example, there is now strong support from Public Health and the Police and Crime Commissioner for the innovative policy approaches the SDS is taking on health and crime but also in relation to the potential role of the SDS in levering more funding through developer contributions. There is also growing recognition of the weight the SDS is giving to the CA's strategic infrastructure priorities.

Despite the challenges faced by the Spatial Planning Team, especially in the early stages of the SDS preparation, the profile of the SDS today is much higher, particularly since the engagement draft SDS was published in November 2023. This means that the team has access to the 'top table' and is regularly involved in cross directorate work with various strategic directors, where the value of the SDS and the importance of involving the team is clearly recognised.

The much higher profile of the SDS and the positive role of planning is also reflected in the Metro Mayor's priorities set out in his May 2024 election manifesto. This identifies the SDS as a key driver in identifying sites for development, applying for funding, and delivering a major programme of council homes, as well as a number of spatial planning related commitments, for example, on delivering net zero and establishing design review panels. The recent Level 4 Devolution Deal will provide the mayor with a consolidated single pot for housing and regeneration funding as a stepping stone to a full single department-style funding settlement. All of this means that the LCR CA will be in a strong position to maximise the opportunities presented by devolution, with an up to date SDS setting out a strategic development framework supported by a strategic infrastructure plan.

Looking to the Future

The LCR is piloting the SDS process for the CA SDS and for the new joint SDS which can be prepared by local authorities under the provisions of the LURA. Key points from the learning so far which could be translated across all SDS but could also be used to inform other models of strategic planning are as follows:

There should be clear accountability for the strategic plan and a robust approach to decision-making. Whilst consensus should be an ambition of any strategic planning partnership, a robust decision-making structure (with a majority voting system) is needed to allow some potentially politically and technically challenging issues to be effectively addressed. This could support strategic decision-making in the 'interests of the greater good', could help speed up the process and could free-up resources to focus on the technical work.

There should be a clear understanding of the added value of strategic planning and how it could support wider public objectives and priorities. Strong leadership from the CA will be key to progress

this model of strategic planning and this requires a good understanding of the positive role of strategic planning, from its 'ringmaster' role, helping to integrate public policy objectives and priorities around 'place'; its investment role, aligning funding, levering in additional funding and delivering efficiencies in funding (e.g. through efficiencies of scale and alignment of funding streams).

It is vital to keep all teams within an organization that have a role in place-shaping and delivery involved and informed. Strategic 'spatial' planning provides an investment framework that can go beyond traditional land-use issues managed through local plans and often deals with issues that directly impact on a number of other public sector roles and responsibilities. Maximising the potential benefits of this requires strong political and officer leadership across all partners and for the lead officer to have sufficient experience and seniority within the organization.

More national guidance on scope, form and content of SDS is required but this must not compromise the freedom and flexibilities currently available to develop a strategy and policies that reflect the specific priorities of the area. The LURA has now widened the ability for local authorities to prepare SDS outside of combined authorities, therefore there will be a need for more guidance in future. This would help streamline the process and manage expectations of all involved and there will be some policy areas that will need some level of national prescription and universal application across all SDS. But there must also be scope to use strategic planning powers, especially where these have been agreed through a devolution process, to address locally specific matters and potentially go beyond the scope of national policies and objectives to support innovation where there is sufficient evidence. A specific national policy framework for strategic plans should therefore be developed which can be used for testing through the examination process. It should be clear that local plans do not need to address (reconsider) policies that are dealt with at the strategic level, including housing targets and distribution to each LPA.

4.5 Case Study 3- North East Combined Authority Area

Summary

The North East of England is included in this study as an example of "non practice". That is, there has been no sub-regional strategic plan since the revocation of the Regional Spatial Strategy. Planning in the North East, since 2010, has been characterised by a mix of competition (rural and suburban authorities possessed of plentiful greenfield sites have over-performed in respect of housing provision, whereas tightly bounded urban authorities, burdened with problems of viability, have struggled) and cooperation (e.g. on data sharing, digitisation and transport planning). The new North East Combined Authority (NECA), established 2024, has set out an ambitious agenda for housing (including affordable homes), infrastructure funding, employment sites, towns and high streets, heat networks, etc. However, this is not (yet) embodied in a formal strategic spatial plan despite the possibility afforded for this within the Devolution Agreement.

Indeed, a Spatial Development Strategy is not considered a priority for the new authority. This reluctance to commit to a formal approach to strategic planning is explained, in part, by the negative experience of local plan production in the sub-region (especially the adversarial, risk laden process of examination) and, in part, to limited local capacity following years of austerity. Participants in the North East argue in favour of a mandated, statutory approach to strategic spatial planning, but one that is "de-risked" politically, and focused on outcomes rather than process.

Background and context

The study area comprises the seven unitary authorities that form the new North East Combined Authority (NECA). These are two single tier County Councils (Durham and Northumberland) and the five Metropolitan Boroughs of the former Tyne and Wear Metropolitan County (Gateshead, Newcastle, North Tyneside, South Tyneside, Sunderland).

This is a large sub-region covering some 3,000 square miles with some 1.9 million inhabitants. It is polycentric in nature, with the Tyne and Wear conurbation at its core, but also areas of deep rurality, with self-contained local economies based predominantly on agriculture. It includes concentrations of multiple deprivation (especially in the urban core and former coastal and mining communities) alongside high quality coastal and countryside landscapes subject to tourism and visitor pressure.

North East Combined Authority   Local Authority Boundaries

The area, due to its geography, is a self-contained region, but has been active in wider Northern political, economic and transport activities.

The stage of local plan preparation varies. The County Durham Plan and Northumberland Local Plan were formally adopted in 2020 and 2022 respectively. The Sunderland Core Strategy and Development Plan was adopted in 2020. Gateshead and Newcastle are in the early stages of replacing their Joint Core Strategy and Urban Core Plan (2015) with two separate local plans. The North Tyneside Local Plan (2017) was subject to a five-year review in 2022. The draft South Tyneside Local Plan completed consultation in spring 2024 prior to submission to the Planning Inspectorate. It will replace the Local Development Framework (2007).
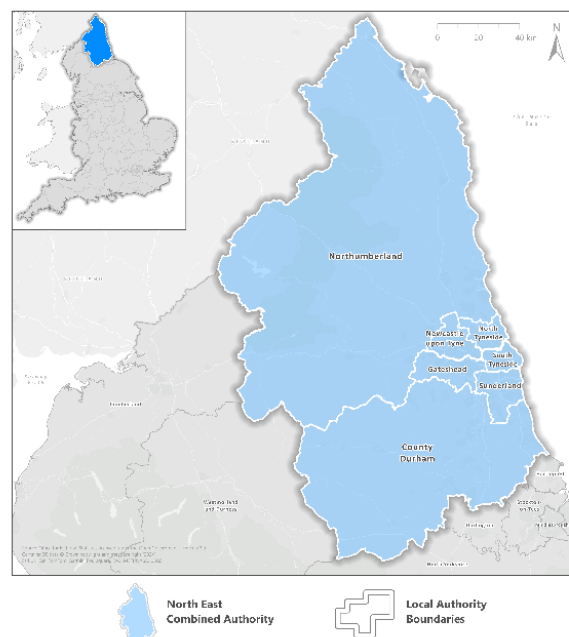
Key strategic planning issues

The North East of England Plan (RSS), adopted 2008, suggests a broad consensus on regional challenges and approach; reducing the productivity gap between and North East and the rest of England, while protecting the region's environment.

This consensus has been tested in the past 20 years (see below), but the primary strategic planning challenges remain the legacy of deindustrialisation. The urban core is characterised by declining population overall and decline of the working age population, in particular. A major challenge is health and well-being … with healthy life expectancy in some areas at 57 years, and a quarter of the population classified as obese … and increasing levels of economic activity within the working age population due to poor health and caring responsibilities. The policy discourse of the sub-region is, therefore, dominated by an emphasis on improving prosperity and well-being through economic growth, focusing on opportunities in, for example, offshore wind, deep water ports, and energy related emerging manufacturing sectors, perhaps, even in the views of *some* respondents at the expense of other (environmental) issues; *"business is going to be the only way. I don't think that's peculiar to the North East. I do think it's helped drive the narrative of jobs, jobs, jobs at the expense of sustainable communities" (i3).*

Viability is pervasive problem, especially in the urban core, and LPAs have repeatedly struggled to achieve defensible 5 year land supplies for housing. LPAs have been addressing the challenge of bringing forward brownfield sites for decades, so the undeveloped sites that remain are typically very problematic, requiring a subsidy of up to £50k per dwelling. Demand for previously developed urban sites is also supressed by the release of greenfield sites by neighbouring authorities (see below) and a tendency for Homes England to prioritise sites that maximise the number of units produced.

Strategic planning activity post 2010

The demise of the Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) regime provoked a mixed response from participants. The principle of producing a regional strategy and for LPAs to demonstrate compliance with it, through examination, was broadly welcomed; *"back in RSS days, it was simple, as we looked at what the regional ambition was, and then we did apportionment within that to reflect opportunities, ambitions and constraints" (i2).*

The RSS was commended for providing a platform to engage a range of stakeholders, especially environmental groups, that would not otherwise have the capacity to participate consistently on local plans. Conversely, RSS was thought to represent a democratic deficit, especially in respect of community engagement.

The transition from RSS to Duty to Cooperate (DTC), it was broadly agreed, involved a shift from a structured approach, with clarity of guidance, to one characterised by parochialism and inter-authority competition. This was compounded by the weaking consensus over regional development priorities (see below).

"It takes us back to the bad old days when we were effectively planning for growth on the basis of competition rather than collaboration, so there's a battening down of the hatches. The absence of a strategic dimension almost encourages undermining of neighbours" (i2).

"Duty to Cooperate wasn't necessarily a difficulty. It was sort of an agreement that we wouldn't really object to each other's plans … it never really came to anything and there was a gentleman's agreement that we wouldn't really step on each other's toes with the exception, that is, from a transport point of view" (i1).

Indeed, the DTC, combined with fiscal incentives to support house building, has enabled some LPAs, notably those with abundant greenfield sites (Durham, Northumberland, North Tyneside) to overperform on housing delivery, while those (urban) LPAs stymied by acute viability issues have struggled.

"You have a scenario where a lot of councils were, in effect, racing to the bottom. They were releasing a lot of greenfield sites … politically, there is a need for house building to get the New Homes Bonus, to get the Council Tax. If the region is declining in terms of working age population, demand is finite. A lot of authorities are chasing that … It's predatory. The Councillors want growth, whether our communities do is another matter" (i1).

A key dysfunctional outcome of this renewed municipal competition has been an observed disconnection between planning for housing, on the one hand, and planning for infrastructure, on the other, with local authorities seeking to communicate their individual, rather than collective, needs.

"Conversations with National Grid or Highways England feel like every local authority is shouting out that every one of its schemes is a special case. National agencies, like the Environment Agency or Homes England start saying, 'you can't keep building here because you're doing the infrastructure down the road, in another LPAs area'. So, there's an absolute need for some sort of infrastructure planning / strategic planning" (i1).

As part of the government's devolution agenda, the seven local authorities, and central government, established the North East Combined Authority in 2014. However, this initiative had collapsed within two years, reflecting, in part, divisions within the Labour Party locally. Subsequently, two differently constituted Combined Authorities were established on either side of the Tyne. The North of Tyne Combined Authority – comprising Newcastle, Northumberland and North Tyneside – was formally supported by a Devolution Deal worth some £600 million over 30 years, with new local powers in housing and skills (but not strategic planning), and a directly elected Metro Mayor from May 2019. The remaining authorities (Durham, Gateshead, South Tyneside and Sunderland) opted out of this arrangement in favour of the informal and voluntaristic North East England Combined Authority, with no deal and associated funding and powers devolved from central government.

This parting of ways was prompted, in part, by a dispute over post Brexit government funding, and, in part, opposition from some to the directly elected mayor model which was deemed to challenge local representative democracy; *"I think it was the imposition of a mayor that they didn't want and they didn't think that the goodies on offer were going to compensate for the money that they'd lost through austerity".*

This was compounded by a belief among some participants that, notwithstanding the polycentric morphology of the sub-region, the core city might naturally be prioritised for government investment; *"There's a risk that when you do the prioritisation exercise, naturally the bang for the buck may well end up being schemes around the core city. There's always a suspicion that the core city will be the focus and everyone else can pick up the crumbs. We are historically wary of that issue here" (i2).*

The North of Tyne Combined Authority did not seek and was not granted formal planning competences. However, and notwithstanding this, its achievements included the leverage of significant government investment to facilitate reclamation of brownfield land for housing, backed by a supporting "quasi-strategic planning" articulation of views on sustainable location. This contrasts with the experience south of the river which received significantly less government development subsidy. In practice, both groupings had limited powers in transport, except a controlling interest in

Tyneside Metro operator Nexus (now absorbed into NECA) and, collectively, a joint Transport Plan was formulated which was successful in harnessing government investment.

"The government will say 'there was a change in funding because we invested in the North of Tyne Combined Authority, you decided not to join the North of Tyne Combined Authority'. From a planning perspective, that had a big impact on the pattern of development. We all face challenges around brownfield development and viability. So, when funding streams change to reflect government initiatives, it has an impact on the spatial development" (i1).

In the absence of any formal sub-regional strategic plan in the North East, there has been much informal activity, often officer-led and often based on bilateral links between LPAs. This includes, for example, work on digitalisation, standardisation of data, and work of transport and infrastructure. Local planning stakeholders, including LPAs, consultants, the RTPI and the University of Newcastle have also been active in the production of the *Great North Plan,* which provides a spatial development perspective to accompany the broader debate on the government's Northern Powerhouse initiative. In short *"I think it's fair to say we've got pockets of engagement on particular issues. So, it's kind of happening inside pockets around the region, but not at the whole scale. "It's just sometimes project specific. You'd best describe it like a project by project sort of thing"* (i4).

The most significant bilateral initiative has been the Newcastle and Gateshead Joint Core Strategy and Urban Core Plan (2015). This was underpinned by a long-established culture of cooperation between the core urban LPAs, built on, for example, the Housing Market Renewal programme 'Bridging Newcastle Gateshead', a shared housing market area, and an unsuccessful bid for European City of Culture.

The Levelling Up White Paper (2022) announced the (re)establishment of the North East Mayoral Combined Authority (NEMCA). The new body will be supported by a Devolution Deal worth some £6 billion, including transport investment, over thirty years, including new powers in housing and transport, and an elected Matro Mayor from May 2024. A "deeper" Devolution Deal (2024) provided for additional powers and resources, including an energy board to support offshore wind development, and a coastal and rural task force.

Devolution provides for important powers in housing and planning, including mayoral development corporations and land assembly, plus an optional Spatial Development Strategy. However, it is unlikely that NECA will produce a formal strategic spatial plan, labelled as such, in the short term. The Devolution Agreement provides for such a plan, provided the majority of Cabinet are in agreement. Instead it is actively pursuing approaches based on vehicles which have more of a consensus support, and arguably appear less "threatening". This is typified in exercises such as the development of; creating a Strategic Place Partnership with Homes England; develop a Regional Affordable Homes Plan; developing a pipeline supply of strategic housing and employment sites in key locations across the Region; establish a NECA Towns and High Streets investment programme; developing infrastructure funding proposals including heat networks and digital infrastructure.

"I would say we are looking at it from a 'what do we need to do?' angle, rather than 'do we want planning?'. We have purposefully not called it a planning board, but there's a Housing and Land Board" (i1).

"I don't think there's really an awareness, a push, really on that (planning). I don't think it's the number one priority of the day, one of the many. The day one priority is funding. We can say from an infrastructure and economic development type of perspective, we're very much aligned whether we have a joint plan that demonstrates that is neither here nor there at the moment, but at least we're

kind of feeding in our transport asks, our infrastructure asks, and wider economic development asks, into the local plans and likewise reflecting their priorities back in the work that we are doing, So, I think that's the kind of way it's probably going to manifest itself" (i4).

Strategic planning governance and administration

The North East region has, traditionally, had a strong tradition of collaborative, partnership based politics, driven primarily by efforts to promote industrial diversification as a response to economic decline. This dates back at least to the inter-war years and the establishment of the English Industrial Estates Corporation. In 1977, the first Northern Regional Strategy was published and, in 1986, the Northern Development Company was launched, following the successful enticement of Nissan to the sub-region.

"There's always been a really good kind of working together, on what was the Northern Development Company, then the RDA, then the Government Office working with local authorities across the region. So, each of the local authorities had their own planning regime, but it fitted into an overall strategic plan … we've always had a kind of strong regional overview" (i3). .

The failure of the 2004 referendum to endorse an elected North East assembly (with 78% of voters rejecting the proposition) brought this long tradition of inter-authority cooperation effectively to an end. The collapse of the first North East Combined Authority in 2016 also undermined the historic collaborative ethos; *"I don't think you can take out of this the failed initial referendum on devolution that took place in the North East. The political landscape had an adverse reaction to devolution because of the public vote against it." (i3)*

"One thing that has happened in the past 10 to 15 years is we've kind of lost that strategic overview really because of the planning set up and mainly because of the fragmentation of governance …So, where we once had a strategy, we now have fragmentation. There's no real agreement on what the priorities are across the region. You ask the leader of Durham 'we need tourism because it's a cathedral city', you ask someone from Newcastle, their needs would be very different" (i3). .

The launch of NECA may (or may not) herald a return to a sub-regional consensus. Some reports suggest an unprecedented degree of unity among partners (LGC 19.3.21). Others suggest a continuing reluctance, or pragmatic expedience, certainly on the part of some LPAs. The constitution of NECA reflects the importance of engaging local political leadership. The leaders of the individual local authorities each lead on a given portfolio - Northumberland (rural, coastal), Newcastle (economic development), Gateshead (transport), Durham (culture, creative industries) – which will inform the work of the mayor. Given the priority of the new Mayor on the delivery of affordable and social rent housing, it is likely that this will be realigned to give a priority to the "Housing and Land" Board and its relationship to other work areas.

Elements of success

It is important to note that much recent collaborative activity, not least the acceptance of the mayoral Combined Authority and Devolution Deal package has been resource led and motivated by a fear of the area losing investment to other regions of England; *"tough times have pulled people together"* (LGC 19.3.21). The agencies of central government require a locally / regionally formulated framework of priorities to guide investment.

"There hasn't really been a willingness from some authorities to club together. There was a failed North East combined authority that sort of fell out when Gateshead didn't want to play anymore. It's like that compared to some other regions. So, you look at somewhere like Greater Manchester, they've got their act together a bit more and up here they haven't, so it's infrastructure, but its governance as well" (i5).

"The opportunity costs (of no strategic planning) has been that if you are trying to identify priorities on a single local authority basis, that does not get the traction with national agencies. When you're doing your business case to government about funding a scheme, government naturally think that you are arguing that every scheme in your patch is the best thing since sliced bread. If it's been looked at objectively, strategically and evaluated and deemed to be a collaborative priority, that short cuts the process … the first question should be 'how does this help deliver local and regional priorities'" (i2).

Key challenges and limitations

A key finding is the lack of commitment in the North East to formal strategic spatial planning. This is attributable, to a significant degree, to the arduous, adversarial process of local plan preparation and examination … one that foregrounds process over outcome and requires a complex and voluminous evidence base … and the limited capacity with planning locally, following a decade of austerity.

"To get a local plan through, for councillors, the political capital is immense. It's a bit like snakes and ladders. You know, you can get to 99 and step on the snake and down you go. Poor Durham, they're on 99 and they slide back to 10. The political capital, the costs, the emotion, it's very difficult, it's not easy … the politicians are in the firing line, the lawyers, developers don't help themselves" (i1).

The highly contentious local plan process is, thus, a significant impediment to a political commitment to planning, albeit that this commitment is essential.

"They know that it's going to be good for the region, but it's one of those things if you need seven leaders to agree plus the mayor, they're probably thinking to themselves 'are we really going to get into a position where we're ever going to agree this'? You know, business rates, council tax. If you say to Northumberland 'you're building way too much and you've not got the infrastructure, you're going to have to curb back, and Gateshead saying we're going to have a bit more'. Those are very difficult debates politically, and because they are going to be super difficult political debates, they argument is 'well, why do we need to have a political debate'"? (i1)

There is widespread concern that more than a decade of austerity has significantly undermined the capacity of local planning authorities to produce plans and manage development. This imposes important constraints on the type of approach to strategic planning that might be feasible, in a purely technical sense (see below).

"There is an absence of capacity. They (local government) have lost money through austerity. I mean, they're all going bankrupt now but it's more to do with they haven't got people on the ground. So, I think the planning functions have gone as well, in local government. I think you know policy teams struggle, the planning team struggle at a local authority level with resourcing and skills. We don't want to kind of just introduce something new to say 'you've got more work to do with fewer resources'". (i4)

Looking to the future

Participants argued that a future system of strategic regional planning, given the constraints outlined above, must be based on a set of statutory duties; *"The problem is that, without a mandated approach, then there will always be the risk that it is in the 'too difficult to do' box" (i1)*

In this context, a key priority is to "derisk" planning politically. For some, the answer lies in a simplification of process, at the strategic level.

"It's about derisking it politically. The local planning process is so risky. I don't envy politicians facing up to a local plan because it's so risky for them. For me, it would be about simplifying if we need a regional strategy. We do need some way of decluttering it, it's quite simple, you map what you've got. You set out what your spatial priorities are and then you map those priorities and you identify broad

areas. We did talk recently about merging the part ones of our local plans and leaving some of the detail about numbers to a lower level. We'd try to take some of the political risk out of it, but even then, that was too hard". (i5)

"The heftier it is, the more evidence you need. Then the slower it becomes and the more challenging it becomes. We're reviewing our local plan and we're desperately, desperately trying to keep away from numbers, because as soon as we start talking about numbers, people start saying 'I want to see your evidence'. There's a perverse logic. The more detail you have, the more evidence you have, the longer it will take and the more irrelevant it will become. We've got into a situation where you need reports just to justify what's blindingly obvious. Weve got absolutely fixated on process, not outcomes" (i1).

The Local Nature Recovery Strategy model was cited by several participants as a useful point of reference.

"If we're going to go down a regional planning route, LNRS is probably a model that we should possibly look at. They're really clearly laid out, what the data standardisation is, they're really clear that, you know, this is the magic map! As a planner, they're an absolute breath of fresh air. Oh my God! DLUHC could learn a lot from DEFRA about writing a spatial plan. Yes, it's a spatial plan for nature, but it's no different. What a brilliant thing!" (i1)

There was a consensus among participants that a future system of strategic spatial planning would need to reflect the diversity of economic and political circumstances across the country.

"Not only do achieve 270% of our housing delivery target, but our members are up for more growth that fits well with the ideology of using strategic planning. This is to specifically address matters of market failure that cannot be tackled by high overall levels of delivery. I do recognise that in the south east of England where most of the planning legislation is drawn up in mind, that will be a deeply unpopular sort of mindset because housing is regarded as a problem. You need to keep tinkering because, clearly and manifestly, different areas use the same system to achieve completely different goals. The perversity we've got up here is that we're up for growth, but we have weak development pressure, whereas the converse of those two dimensions is true in the south east of England. So, how do your write a system which can cope with both and be politically acceptable?" (i2)

4.6 Case Study 4- South West Hertfordshire

Summary

The statutory South West Hertfordshire (SWP) Joint Strategic Plan (JSP) covers a functional area based on the 5 District / Borough Council areas of Dacorum, Hertsmere, St Albans City and District, Three Rivers, and Watford, with Hertfordshire County Council also a key partner. Comprehensive Governance structures were put in place in 2018 - Leaders, Chief Executives, Portfolio Holders, senior officers, and local plan leads are all actively involved. A small dedicated strategic planning team leads the plan making approach. Work completed to date has included a range of evidence studies and a vision-based consultation, which led to the endorsement of "South West Hertfordshire 2050, Our Vision for Realising our Potential" in December 2023. Ongoing work includes a Strategic Spatial Options and Multi Modal studies.

A digitally innovative approach has been taken to engagement, with a targeted emphasis on young people. Significant work is also underway to develop and apply GIS and AI based approaches to understanding and interpreting data. Since a 2018 the most substantial output achieved has been the 'Vision'. Whilst technical work is nearing completion on potential spatial options, the critical and contentious plan making stage of identifying and agreeing on the broad distribution and broad location(s) of development has yet to be reached, despite eight years of collaborative working. The nature and pace of progress has been slow reflecting key identified risks – the voluntary arrangement, the need to maintain relationships and the clear and shared position that the JSP will shape the next round of Local Plans, not the current/emerging round. Programme and budget management is also undertaken on a year-by-year basis. The commitment to producing a JSP remains, and a significant amount of work has been undertaken, reflecting a lot of effort and political and corporate commitment. The key concern is the time taken to get to this point.

Hertfordshire County Council

Local Authority Boundaries
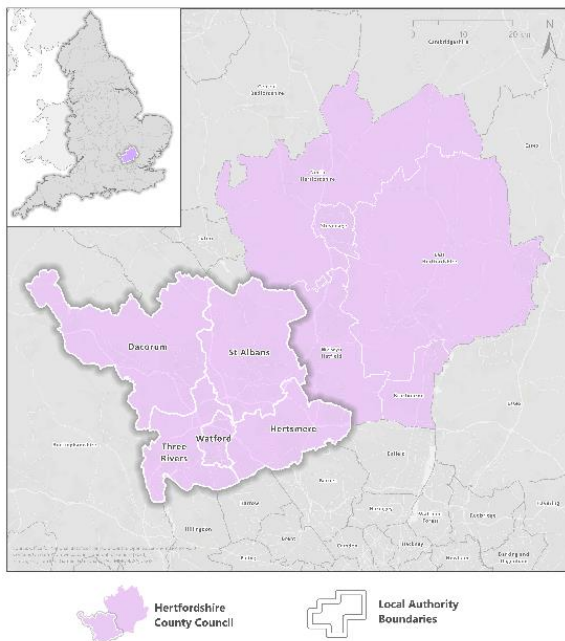
Background and context

Hertfordshire is in the South East of England, immediately to the north of London and adjoining the counties of Buckinghamshire, Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, and Essex. South West Hertfordshire (SW Herts) covers the Council areas of Dacorum Borough, Hertsmere Borough, St Albans City and District, Three Rivers District and Watford Borough. All the documents produced as part of the SWP can be found at Key Documents | SW Herts Joint Strategic Plan (swhertsplan.com) and Governance papers and arrangements can be found at Governance & Background Papers | SW Herts Joint Strategic Plan (swhertsplan.com)

The SW Herts Joint Strategic Plan (JSP) is a statutory plan which will provide a collective ambition and long-term blueprint for the future of the area to 2050. The five local planning authorities (LPAs), supported by Hertfordshire County Council, are working together to produce the JSP. Each council remains responsible for preparing their own Local Plan, the JSP will set the strategic framework and shared priorities within which future Local Plans are prepared. The JSP looks beyond the round of Local Plans that have been recently or are currently being prepared – with a need for "*Local Plans all to be in place, then we can look forward to 2050 and move on*" (i3).

The area has a varied 'character' - a "mix of authorities" (i4). For example, Watford has a tight administrative boundary as an "*urban based authority*" (i3) being "*more constrained*" (i4). The presence of the Green Belt and the Chiltern National Landscape present very different circumstances elsewhere in more rural parts of SW Herts. The focus on functional economic and housing geography has successfully served to maintain and support SW Herts as a geographical spatial planning area/unit. The geographic focus reflects both this functionality and a longstanding culture and approach of working together. Participant responses reinforced that there is agreement that the five Local Planning Authority areas constitute a single SW Herts Housing Market Area (HMA) and Functional Economic Market Area (FEMA). Working together across SW Herts is considered a "*natural fit*" (i3) and "*functional areas are not forced*" (i5). The size of the area is also seen to offer advantages for decision making – "*if the area is too big then you get groups within groups*" with less likelihood of "*shared interests and priorities*" (i3). "*What matters is recognizable geography*" (i5). In summary SW Herts is an area that is a "*manageable size*" (i3) and able to support a "*coalition of the willing*" (i4)**.** The disadvantages of a bigger area were seen to be that you "*loose granularity*" (i4) with less likelihood of "*willing partners*" (i4).

The broader split of joint planning activity in Hertfordshire between the SW and a North East Central (NEC) area also reflects functionality and a broader history and willingness to work together (linking back also to the Hertfordshire Structure Plan). Broadly shared party politics across the leadership of the south west Hertfordshire district administrations has been seen as "*making things easier*" (i4) but equally views were also expressed such as that "*the political balance has changed but not upset the approach*" (i5). Having the County at the table is seen as "*essential*" (i3) particularly given their "*heavy role for upper tier authorities*" (i5) in delivering "*education, transport, and social services*" (i3).

Key strategic planning issues

A memorandum of understanding was agreed by the 6 Councils in 2018 setting out how cooperation would be managed on strategic planning issues. In 2021 a Joint Strategic Plan Statement of Common Ground was also signed which identified strategic policy matters common across all five local planning areas, summarised as follows:

- Future Growth – including a spatial strategy, growth distribution, hierarchy of town centres, strategic growth areas and a long-term Green Belt approach.
- Development Needs – setting strategic housing and employments requirements.
- Environment Priorities – for blue & green infrastructure and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs).
- Strategic Infrastructure Priorities – for transport, utilities, and community facilities.
- Climate change – addressing mitigation, adaptation, energy use and zero carbon.
- Good growth - promoting health, social inclusion, and high-quality design.

The above policy matters provide a helpful tight focus for the JSP, reflecting cross-boundary issues and long-term strategic concerns and opportunities. Responses from participants in the case studies further reinforced this. Themes of needing to look long term, addressing growth needs and levels, generating different options, identifying optimal locations for growth, and considering infrastructure needs and delivery were consistent across the interviews.

There is an evident intent for the JSP to have a limited number of policies with a related recognition that it is "*not a Local Plan*" (i1) which will still be left to do "*the heavy lifting*" (i1) i.e. making site allocations and setting detailed policy requirements. The wider spatial investment role that the JSP can fulfill is recognized with an intent to "*not to prepare a plan just for planners*" (i1) and to provide "*a

better footing on investment asks" (i4). There is an opportunity to provide greater certainty with a long-term strategic plan less affected by "*the here and now with political cycles and policy changes* (i3)."

Strategic planning activity post 2010

Between 2010 and 2018 the local planning authorities (LPAs) cooperated on technical work but relied on the Duty to Cooperate (DtC) to manage strategic priorities. In 2014 the Hertfordshire Authorities, through the Hertfordshire Infrastructure and Planning Partnership (HIPP), used external consultants to facilitate a workshop to help the authorities take forward the DtC. Ultimately the DtC proved not to be an effective mechanism and resulted in 'failures' at local plan examinations. Most notably the St Albans Local Plan was found to be unsound by an Inspector, failing the duty to cooperate with objections at Examination from the other SW Hertfordshire districts. The culture and approach of collaborative and cooperative working though continued, with an overall "*willingness*" (i2) to work together.

The development of a joint planning approach felt like a "*natural next step*" (i1). Expert independent facilitation again had a key role to play in 2018, with a further POS Enterprises workshop exploring and developing the approach. The outcomes of this workshop and a three-month period of working together gave a clear sense of direction and next steps for the JSP authorities to follow. Leaders and Chief Executives were fully involved, and the exercise wasn't considered just to be a 'planning' process. This approach provided the platform and direction towards producing a statutory framework and a long-term vision for SWH. Commendably the recommended approach has been very much followed through and delivered.

The need to produce a statutory plan was seen in 2018 and this remains the same today. In 2018 Leaders and Chief Executives considered that the non-statutory option was too risky. There remains an ongoing and shared recognition that the JSP needs 'to have teeth' and be binding on the districts. The experience of Local Plan Examinations, particularly on the issues of housing and employment need fostered a "*battle hardened approach*" (i1). A non-statutory plan is seen as "*being a bit like a chocolate fireguard*" (i1) and "*you don't have to take it on board having put the time in*" (i3). Fundamentally a statutory plan "*gives more weight*" (i4).

Strategic planning governance and administration

Comprehensive governance arrangements provide a robust structure for partnership working and plan preparation. Terms of reference have been worked through, formalised, written down and made publicly available. The 2018 MoU provided a clear starting point for joint working. A Governance Structure Refresh (2021) and the Statement of Common Ground (2021) have also followed. These all provide ongoing shape, coherence, and structure to the governance of the JSP. Fairness is evident with the basis of the joint working being that "*all chip in an equal amount and have an equal say*" (i3).

The JSP arrangements have subsequently established strong links with the Hertfordshire Growth Board which is made up of the County Council, 10 district and borough councils, the NHS Hertfordshire & West Essex Integrated Care Board (ICB), Homes England, Hertfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership and the Police and Crime Commissioner. It involves Leaders supported by Chief Executives. The Board fosters wider buy-in and oversight for both joint planning approaches - for SW and NEC Herts. This brings a focus on "*growth in its widest sense*" (i2). The JSP is a "*core strand*" (i2) of the work of the Board but the Board does not have any statutory or approval role.

Members are directly engaged in the JSP process. The Strategic Planning Members Group (SPMG) sets the direction of the JSP with political membership from each Authority consisting of the Leader or

Portfolio Holder, so that there is authority to make decisions. This group scrutinises the process and recommends sign-off of key documents and decisions to respective Councils for their approval. 1-2-1 sessions are held with each member-lead before SPMG meetings to ensure any local concerns are flagged and addressed upfront before the meeting. There is no joint committee. Any formal decision therefore needs to go through each council's relevant committee / approvals process.

Officer work is coordinated with appropriate seniority and expertise applied – effective strategic and operational management is evident. A JSP Steering Group defines the scope of the JSP programme, provides strategic direction and oversees the work of the JSP team and officer group. Core membership is on a corporate director/ chief officer level and is chaired by a Chief Executive from one of the SW Herts authorities. This provides a senior strategic interface between the local authorities involved in the JSP.

The Strategic Planning Officers Group works closely with the JSP central team, with a more operational, day-to-day working and regular meetings (every three weeks) focusing on project planning, defining activity, budgeting and project delivery. It focuses on plan making, information and evidence gathering – the input and outputs needed to prepare the JSP.

The tiered governance structure and associated briefing meetings/activity bridges technical decision making/work with overall political decision making and serves to "*translate planning into a common language for Member briefing*" (i4). The staged levels of governance also ensure that "*nothing is sprung on anyone, people feel and understand this operates in a strategic place*" (i4). As a result, the "*strength of the partnership has grown*" (i4). A strong partnership with good foundations is apparent.

Hard work by officers to maintain joint working using an array of "*soft skills*" (i4) is very evident. Significant commitment is given to "*resource intensive cross local authority work*" (i4) and much briefing and "*informal discussion*" (i5) also takes place between Members and in wider officer groups, outside of the formal governance structure meetings. "*There is a lot of contact, all types*" and "*informal and formal*" (i5).

Elements of success

Delivery – much strategic planning work has been delivered and produced including a Statement of Community Involvement, topic papers for a range of key issues, a Strategic Infrastructure Baseline, a Settlement Hierarchy Study, a climate change study baseline, and a vision document. A 'SW Herts Your Future' poll was undertaken in 2020 to get a better understanding from those who live and work locally about what they like about the area now, and what future priorities should be. Work is ongoing on a Strategic Spatial Options Study, a Multi Modal Study and working with the districts on updates to the SW Herts Economy Study and Local Housing Needs Assessment. It is envisaged that these will culminate in a Regulation 18 Spatial Options consultation stage. These are all significant building blocks.

Vision led – the production of the JSP Vision significantly raised the profile of the JSP, it was "*more than a document*" (i1). Starting with a vision enabled the 6 Councils to work together and co-produce a document. This lifted the profile of the work locally, it "*got Members talking about it (the JSP)*" (i2) and gained their "*support*" (i3), facilitated "*community engagement*" (i2) and raised "*profile with Government*" (i1). In summary "*doing the vision is essential to get the buy in*" (i3). Understanding what you get from it (the JSP) has been seen as an ongoing challenge – the vision has been important to "*get corporate support*" and "*manage the messaging process*" (i3).

Effective Governance – the arrangements have led to a "really impressive level of political commitment" (i4) which has fostered a "quality of relationships and trust between Leaders which is a

bold and brave thing to do when the outcome is unknown" (i4). Corporate buy-in and a corporate approach has been achieved. Leaders, Chief Executives, Directors, Heads of Planning and Local Plan lead officers all work together. The arrangements avoid the situation that "buy in can't rest with a small group of politicians as the whole Council votes (on the JSP)" (i4) and have achieved "buy in from the wider organization" (i5). Members are fully involved and work together, its "important for Members that they are not doing it alone" (i3). To embody "political leadership it has to be the Leader and Chief Executive" (i5) and this is the case. The working arrangements have been supportive of a "changed culture" (i5) of District-District and County-District working relationships. Both 'vertical/up & down' and 'horizontal/across' partnership working is evident in SW Herts.

Dedicated & Expert Resource - "*Central, shared and dedicated resources*" (i5) with "*permanent roles*" (i4) has been key. A Director was appointed in 2018 bringing strong experience of strategic planning, working alongside a joint strategic plan lead officer and senior officer who both joined the team in 2021. This resource has brought expertise, impartiality, and dedicated time. "*The importance of the Secretariat is critical as the local authority has not got the resource*" (i3). "*The central team has led the charge*" (i5). A reduction in JSP team capacity and recent team changes will be "*a test of the partnership*" (i5). Good and effective use of external strategic planning expertise was made in the early stages of considering and formulating an approach, through the two workshops in 2014 and 2018.

Innovation – digital working has been a major feature including "how spatial information is held and shared" (i3), with the JSP "bringing together these evidence bases" (i3). A "digitally enabled" (i3) approach "would not have happened at a district level as there are not enough resources to do this" (i3) and provide the necessary training. Engagement, consultation and the "use of technology" (i4) has a had a strong focus on "young people and future generations" (i4). A 'digital first' approach using PROPTECH funding was used for consultation, with a specific intention of targeting the under 25-year-olds. This involved a 'quick-fire poll' hosted on social media, a web-based survey, explainer video, a poster, and a business card advertising campaign, with QR codes. Work is currently underway (with PROPTECH funding) to explore whether there is a technological solution to help pull together and simplify the time / effort spent reporting the extensive numbers of consultee responses to planning consultations. A project has also recently concluded looking to explore and develop the role of GIS to provide key information about the area in a clear and understandable way, including the development of a clear 'dashboard' to help people navigate through and understand all the data sets - a 'Spatial Portrait' for SW Herts that can be interrogated at a district / large settlement level. As part of this work an 'App' has been developed using the GIS data to help Members understand and explore potential spatial options as part of the Strategic Spatial Options Study.

Plan Led – in identifying future locations and in turn land for future development there were shared concerns that the current Local Plan led system focuses on "*least bad*" (i1) sites, "*uses the least worst development solutions*" (i2) and is "*not plan led, its call for sites/moment of time led*" (i3). The JSP is taking a strategic approach focused on identifying the optimal and most sustainable spatial option for growth, shaping future local plan site allocations.

Wider Benefits – joint working between the authorities has also "*led to other conversations on service delivery*" and "*opened up questions about operational planning*" (i4). The opportunity to enable transport connectivity improvements is to the fore (i2, i5) with a focus on "*East-West settlement to settlement links*" and "*mass transit system*" (i5) opportunities related to potential strategic growth areas.

Key challenges and limitations

A fundamental role of a strategic plan is to set out a long-term strategy for accommodating growth, including the distribution of development across the plan area and the identification of a preferred spatial option for growth. This requires the consideration of contentious issues such as the Green Belt and housing numbers. The MoU was signed in 2018, joint working has since been underway for an eight-year period, a significant amount of plan making time. Whilst a strategic spatial options study and multi modal study are currently underway the critical stage of establishing and consulting on potential spatial options has not yet been reached. Participants in the case studies acknowledged this with comments such as that in terms of "*blobs on a map*" (i3 & i4) the authorities are "*just starting to get into that*" (i3) with a general acknowledgement that 'things had taken longer than expected.' The case study interviews provided common insights as to why this is the case, key factors behind this include:

- The voluntary nature of the arrangements and intent to produce a strategic plan - the "*risk of voluntarism as we can all walk away*" (i5).
- The need to carefully manage and maintain relationships - "*the danger is that someone loads the approach or thinks it's being loaded* and generally that "*it only takes one dispute*" (i3) to cause a problem.
- The challenge of keeping everyone on board- "*Potential political change/issues within the partnership that could lead to a withdrawal or variation in support to the Programme from one of the partners*" is Risk 1 in the latest SW Herts JSP Risks Register (July 2023 v17).
- The requirements from partner authorities not to be seen doing anything that would undermine current and emerging local plans. A clear decision has been made that the JSP will "*guide and advise on future rounds of Local Plans*" (i1).
- Whilst there is no ceding of sovereignty the decision making process involving each Council's individual approval results in a long process (particularly if scrutiny stages and both cabinet/executive and full council meetings are required) with more further briefings needed.
- The JSP would currently be examined in the same way as a Local Plan, testing against the NPPF's deliverability and viability requirements does not sit well with a long term strategic plan.

Significant risks are therefore being managed in progressing the SW Herts JSP. This has resulted in a deliberately "*slow burn*" (i2) preparation approach to date. The long-term plan is being prepared through a short-term work programme, reviewed regularly and rolled forward annually. The "*year by year approach*" (i1 & i2) involves the budget being signed off annually. The financial and resource commitment of each partner is therefore short term and retains much flexibility as to how joint work is undertaken - "*the process is flexible to take a pause*" (i4) if needed. Central JSP team contracts are short term (generally two years maximum) or involve secondments.

The 'slow burn' 'step by step' approach reflects a focus on managing significant risks, in a voluntary arrangement between different partners. This has been seen as fundamental to maintainingmomentum and ensuring that progress is made. Wider community and political risks of this approach emerged through the interviews. For the community there was potential frustration in that, as yet "*there is nothing to object to*" (i1). With "y*early elections in some authorities*" (i4) the longer the plan making process takes overall the greater the likelihood of political changes - which could materially affect the whole process. Views on the political risks included on the one hand that "*the political cycle doesn't lend itself to making bold strategic decisions*" (i4) whilst on the other hand "*1/3rd elections give stability for a few years and a good run*" (i5).

A broadly consistent evidence base has been beneficial for the current round of Local Plans helping to resolve differences in approaches, as have ongoing working relationships. However slow and delayed progress on Local Plans has resulted in the strategic plan getting pushed further back in order to sequence the different levels of plan.

National policy is a key factor. "Change in Government and/or changes to national policy/legislation in relation to encouraging and facilitating statutory strategic planning approaches. Impact of the Levelling Up Bill and any impacts it could have on strategic planning processes" is Risk 2 in the latest SW Herts JSP Risks Register (July 2023 v17). Fundamentally there is the "risk it falls apart" with "no legislative requirement." Without this requirement there is not the associated "resource and support" which is needed (i5). There was an overall sense that national planning approaches "can easily kill off strategic planning" (i2). Mindful of strategic planning experience elsewhere there were practical concerns that the JSP will be "examined on local plan rules" (i1) based on the NPPF with a view also that "the role of the Inspectorate should be more of an audit, the plan belongs to the Council" (i5).

Looking to the future

Much effort has been put into partnership working, evidence base work and vision development work. The fundamental challenge to the strength and robustness of the JSP approach is yet to come. "*The biggest limitation is how you put self-interest aside*" (i3). The "*tension*" with the 'preferred' spatial strategy will come when Members need to "*go back and get it through their Councils*" (i5). All case study participants highlighted that those decisions on the location of growth had not yet been made. Observations included that "*the big challenge is to come around growth locations*" (i5), "*we are not at the stage yet of blobs on maps*" (i3) and we are "*not there yet planning for a different longer-term timescale*" (i5).

The JSP has strong foundations, technical and partnership based, which should provide the basis for making 'crunch decisions' about growth. Robust governance structures will support this. "*People understand it's an intellectual challenge, we need to use a rules and evidence based approach*" (i5) and we can "*not jump to blobs on plans*" (i4). The challenge of keeping everything together and moving forward has presented so many risks that have had to be managed. This has resulted in a situation where after 8 years the only major plan document that has been produced is the vision. The real test of the SW Herts is imminent as the partnership moves from a technical spatial options study to a series of potential spatial options for growth, a preferred option, and ultimately an adopted plan. Until this stage is reached the ultimate impact of the JSP on local communities and the achievement of sustainable development and on future local plans remains unknown.

There is clear recognition of the "*need to plan for infrastructure to support housing growth*" (i4). To date the JSP has enabled conversations to take place on future infrastructure opportunities and particularly a Hertfordshire and Essex Rapid Transit system (i2), as part of a joined-up land use and transport approach. Integrated infrastructure and growth planning remains to be achieved as part of the next steps for the JSP. Supply of water and other 'big' resource and infrastructure issues will come more to the fore. Whilst some capacity has been built there is a clear sense that more needs to be done. In looking ahead infrastructure providers are "*not set up for plans to 2050*" (i1). Capacity has been built with some infrastructure providers (such as "Homes England & the NHS") but "not utilities" (i2)). Wider concerns about the lack of clarity in the planning system for the provision of infrastructure were very evident with insight that viability currently offers a "*get out of jail clause*" (i3).

Bespoke examination procedures, with less emphasis on viability, national requirements becoming "the stick" to undertake strategic planning, and resourcing were seen as key factors that could drive strategic planning going forward. "*A statutory/legislative requirement*" for strategic planning would be

a "*game changer*" (i5), showing clear Government support. The introduction of voluntary joint local authority spatial development strategies (SDS) outside of combined authority areas presents a key opportunity (along with anticipated changes to the NPPF and regulations). Under the 2023 Levelling Up and Regeneration Act (LURA) the SDS would replace the current practice of joint strategic plans as the route forward for a statutory strategic plan.

Mechanisms for enabling "*delivery at scale*" (i2) in the future were also flagged up, in particular if large urban extensions and/or new settlements are to be taken forward. The joint work on strategic planning is seen as a "*more efficient way of doing things*" (i2), given that approximately each district will spend over £1m on producing a Local Plan. "*Local Government Finance*" (i2) will be a critical factor moving forward and "*with fewer planners we can't all do Local Plans"* (i2). The "*financial position*" does make it "*hard to justify spending on a central team*" (i5) but this clearly is achieved year by year. Capacity funding has been critical to support the establishment of the central team (Planning Delivery Fund) and to deliver strategic planning activity.

4.7 Case Study 5 - West of England

Summary

The West of England case study illustrates an ambitious, but ultimately unsuccessful, attempt by four local planning authorities to formulate a statutory Joint Spatial Plan and, on the cessation of this initiative, a further unsuccessful attempt by the West of England Combined Authority to deliver a statutory Spatial Development Strategy. The case study, thus, provides lessons on the limits of two different models of strategic sub-regional planning. The key challenges encountered in the West of England were, in part, contextual; it is a growth area with a high level of unmet housing need, especially in the core city of Bristol; much of the surrounding area is subject to extensive protective regulation (e.g. Green Belt); the adjacent local authorities (controlled by different political parties) have faced difficulties in accommodating large scale housing growth. These problems have been compounded by the governance model – as with all regions outside of London, decisions must be taken by unanimity, rather than majority voting – adopted by the Combined Authority. There is currently no sub-regional plan in preparation for the West of England.

West of England Combined Authority   Local Authority Boundaries
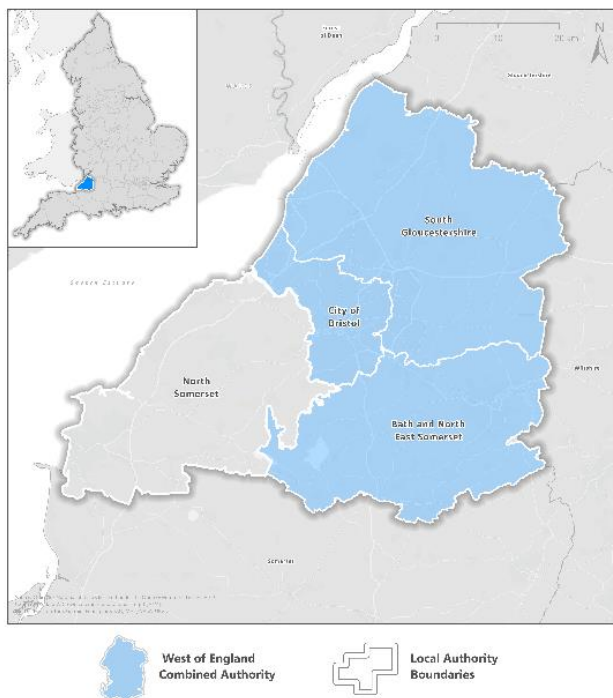
Background and context

The West of England sub-region covers the area comprising the four unitary authorities of Bristol, Bath and North East Somerset, South Gloucestershire, and North Somerset. The West of England Combined Authority (the Combined Authority), was established in 2017. It is chaired by the elected Metro Mayor, and includes the Leaders of three of the four unitary authorities (the Combined Authority does not include North Somerset).

This is a diverse subregion of 1,300 square kilometers, with a population of 1.1 million people. While most of the population live within the core urban settlements of Bristol, Bath and Weston super Mare, the area also incorporates outstanding coastal and countryside landscapes, including two AONBs. It has a high value-added local economy, with 44% of residents educated to Level 4 or above, compared to 33% in England and Wales (2021 Census). The combination of dynamic local economy and high environmental amenity has underpinned rapid population growth and, thus, development pressure including within the Green Belt. The subregion has high levels of housing demand, unmet demand (especially in Bristol), and low ratios of housing affordability (i.e. average property price / income), exceeding a factor of 10 in some areas (e.g. Bath). In stark contrast, 7.8% of the population live in neighbourhoods, predominantly in Bristol and Weston, classified as within the most deprived decile in England (IMD 2019).

All the authorities have an adopted local plan (Core Strategy), and all are currently developing new local plans. Bristol submitted a new local plan for examination in April 2024, South Gloucestershire consulted (phase 3) on a new local plan to 2040 in December 2024, Bath and North East Somerset is preparing a new local plan to 2042, and North Somerset consulted on its pre-submission draft local plan to 2039 in Autumn 2023.

Key strategic planning issues

Aligned with the description of the sub-region (above), repeated attempts to activate strategic planning in the sub-region have been framed around the following factors identified as the **most** significant issues justifying the need for a strategic approach:

- Tackling housing affordability across the whole of the sub-region and addressing Bristol's unmet housing need in particular;
- Identifying the most appropriate strategic locations for both housing and employment growth; and
- Supporting growth by improving local and strategic infrastructure in a co-ordinated way.

The rationale for the joint approach to strategic spatial planning adopted in the sub region from 2014 to 2020 (see below) was described as follows:

 "There was a common commitment to working together to address infrastructure challenges and housing need … recognition that we could, none of us, solve our housing crisis and, particularly, Bristol wasn't in a position to do that … working together, we could start to address our numerical housing crisis and our affordable housing crisis. There was a big commitment across the Local Authorities for joint working" (i5).

Strategic planning activity post 2010

In 2010, LPAs across England were obliged to respond to the abolition of Regional Spatial Strategies (RSS). The four West of England authorities were, thus, preparing their own local plans in the absence of any strategic guidance. In due course, all the authorities were in the list of the top ten local authorities nationally in terms of the scale of proposed reduction in housing allocations as compared to figures in the draft RSS for the South West. The RSS was politically challenging and for some local politicians, the abolition of the RSS was *"seen as an opportunity to look again at development in the green belt because we saw the greenbelt as sacrosanct"* (i1).

Others, especially officers, were more balanced in their assessment of RSS, citing the certainty that a prescriptive approach to housing targets entailed as an advantage, while expressing reservations about the limited evidence based and perceived democratic deficit.

"The RSS had clarity, but it was top down, driven with numbers at the time. So, everywhere was allocated. I think the key things where it fell down in the south west was that it was felt that there was no evidence base to demonstrate what those numbers were. So, the evidence base wasn't there to support the allocation of the numbers and trust in the planning system was eroded" (i5).

By 2014, a collaborative approach to strategic spatial planning began to re-emerge. The four LPAs signed a memorandum of understanding setting out their intention to collaborate on a Joint Spatial Plan (JSP) for the West of England. In June 2015, the JSP process was launched, pledging to shape the future of the West of England, and to balance demand through: a 'plan led' approach; making strategic planning decisions locally; balancing growth and the environment; adopting a sequential approach to site allocation; and, integrating spatial and transport planning. The key motivations for the JSP were: the need to co-ordinate the reviews of existing local plans (all four local plans produced post abolition of RSS had been approved subject to early partial review, requiring greater consideration of cross-boundary issues, in particular Bristol's un-met housing need); the need to respond to new housing and employment growth figures; and to support growth by co-ordinating strategic investment in infrastructure. Crucially, the JSP was to be prepared on a *statutory* basis, and subject to formal consultation and external examination. The plan, which provided for more than 100,000 new homes

to 2036, was submitted for inspection in April 2018, but was ultimately withdrawn following examination in August 2019, with concerns raised by the inspectors about the robustness of the evidence in support of the strategic development locations proposed. It is important to note, however, that concerns had already been raised by stakeholders during pre-submission consultation about the credibility of the spatial locations for growth in light of the evidence - transport evidence in particular - with some participants in this study concerned about "political interference" (i4) in the process of spatial allocations. The PINS report reads: *"We conclude that robust evidence has not been provided to demonstrate that the 12 Strategic Development Locations proposed in the plan have been selected against reasonable alternatives on a robust, consistent and objective basis"[73]*

Local planning stakeholders, interviewed as part of our study, rued this missed opportunity, that had come very close to successful realization: *"That is a shame really, because what is often missed is that a green belt review had been undertaken and the plan was releasing eight additional locations, strategic development locations that were significant, you had complete alignment between Bristol, BANES, and South Gloucestershire and you had agreement from North Somerset" (i5)*

The JSP was built, initially, on cooperative work on transport infrastructure, especially joint bidding for government investment, including support from Homes England to deliver new communities, which soon broadened to housing targets and other matters of spatial planning:

In contrast to many local authorities in England at the time deciding in favour of non-statutory strategic planning frameworks, if at all, the West of England LPAs, felt a statutory plan would give policies their full weight and material consideration through the planning process and secure central government funding; factors that were considered at the time to justify the additional workload compared to a non-statutory plan, particularly in relation to the supporting evidence required for examination. The four LPAs were, in effect, pioneers of this approach. Notwithstanding its ultimate failure, respondents were keen to emphasize the widespread optimism that underpinned the plan's formative stages.

"I think the JSP was probably the golden era, although we didn't realise it at the time, because you had all the support work done on transport, a really coherent strategic framework, and genuine political will to come together". (i6).

Nevertheless, the complex inter-authority relationships, especially in respect of housing demand and supply, and the lack of collective "buy in" to the idea of a Bristol City Region, were evident from the outset. To some extent, as a result, the JSP resembled an aggregation of four spatial strategies.

"The challenges were that the numbers in Bristol would not be serviced within the Bristol boundary alone. Some would interpret this as having to make provision to meet Bristol's housing need because they see it where the need arises … as opposed to we operate in a travel to work area and an economic region" (i5)*.*

The key questions posed at the Examination in Public, upon which the plan ultimately foundered, centered on the Sustainability Appraisal of the Green Belt Review, its consistency, and the extent to which reasonable alternatives had been considered. A narrative that the LPAs had failed, effectively, to *"look at all the options"* emerged: *"I think the interpretation, particularly of the development industry, was that they felt very strongly that there were other options that should have been considered"* (i5).

The local authority participants in our study argued that options had been duly considered but rejected on environmental grounds. They reaffirmed their belief that the evidence base of the plan was sound but acknowledged that more could have been done to communicate a shared vision and clear narrative

of spatial distribution of development to the examination, perhaps reflecting the different positions of the individual authorities.

"We had made every endeavour to deliver a sound plan. The evidence base was checked at every gateway. We worked with PAS to review the evidence base. We had legal advice. So, we had all those things in place. But, for me, we didn't have the right narrative at the examination and we didn't have the right answers. We couldn't answer the assertion of why we had not considered all the options consistently why the solution that was put forward instead was a reasonable alternative. We didn't give the inspector what he needed for clear and intelligible reasons" (i6).

In 2020, there was a further attempt to re-instigate strategic planning following the withdrawal of the JSP, this time using powers in the devolution deal to prepare a Spatial Development Strategy (SDS) for the sub-region. Work on the SDS did not include North Somerset, as the authority is not formally part of the Combined Authority. This was described by the then Mayor as "*a fresh start and will see our region working together to create a framework for the future*"). Participants in our study described the SDS as a natural progression, building on the experience of joint working for the JSP but with an opportunity to deliver a new evidence base and a new plan.

"It was striking while the iron was hot. So, when the opportunity did present itself, 'hey, we can move forward with the Combined Authority and still achieve something here'. So, it felt like all the ingredients were there and we had alignment" (i6).

Preparation of the SDS was halted in 2022, with Labour Mayor Dan Norris writing to the Department for Levelling up, Housing and Communities explaining that officers had been instructed to stop working on the strategy as "unanimous agreement on the plan by councilshad not been reached"[74]. Study participants attributed the failure to reach a consensus on the SDS to changes in the political dynamic since the demise of the JSP three years earlier and the continued pressure of unrealistic national housing targets; *"The dynamic was then very different.. The JSP, people had put politics aside, but they were working constructively .. the SDS became more politically difficult" (i2).*

At the time, no draft versions of the SDS had emerged and no conclusions had been reached on cross-boundary policies, nor the apportionment of Bristol's unmet housing need across the sub-region, although several statements of common ground had been published and signed, alongside key strategic pieces of evidence on, for example, habitats, net zero, housing and employment land requirements.

At present, the Combined Authority is not formally involved in the statutory planning process. Local plans are being pursued by individual authorities, through the Duty to Cooperate, with the Combined Authority committed to supporting its constituent councils deliver their individual local plans to address both strategic and local planning issues.

Notwithstanding that, the Combined Authority leads formally several development agendas, including a Green Infrastructure Strategy and a Joint Local Transport Plan, and supports joint commissioning of evidence.

Governance and stakeholder arrangements

The West of England case study provides insights into a number of different, and shifting, patterns of governance and leadership in strategic spatial planning, reflecting the different "episodes" of strategic planning activity in the sub-region since 2010.

In the immediate aftermath of the abolition of the Regional Spatial Strategy, and once again, since work on the SDS was halted, individual LPAs assumed primary responsibility. As we have observed,

post RSS, the authorities took the opportunity to step back from some of the development commitments therein. More recently, the sub region has been characterized, similarly, by a strategic vacuum.

The formulation of the JSP and the SDS, although ultimately unsuccessful, represented ambitious attempts to develop a statutory sub regional strategic plan through two different collaborative platforms. The JSP was developed by a voluntary partnership of the four local authorities working together, with an officers group driving the work, supported by staff at the Combined Authority and with sign-off required via each of the leaders of the constituent LPAs ahead of examination. It reached an advanced stage of preparation before its demise. The SDS formed an element, as many study participants noted of the WoE Devolution Deal, with the Deal devolving powers to *"adopt a statutory spatial development strategy which will act as the framework for managing planning across the West of England region"*[75]

Work on the SDS was led by the new Mayoral Combined Authority, in partnership with the three committed LPAs. It was observed by participants that this shift in relationships and governance presented a challenge both for officers and members:

"It was quite difficult and messy because we went from a space where we had four equal partners supported by the regional planning team where the role was to support the local authorities to coordinate and find agreement. When we moved into the SDS, we got a political vote as an organisation" (i1).

An important clause within the Deal, returned to below, required that the SDS be approved by unanimous vote of the members Combined Authority, deferring a power of veto to any one constituent council.

Key challenges and limitations

The West of England has not been successful in finalising a plan, despite a desire – certainly at a professional officer level, and, initially at least, at member level too – to prepare a plan in recognition of the sub-region's challenges (particularly in relation to housing growth and affordability) and the real potential of a plan to better co-ordinate growth and the investment needed to support it: "*We were trying to do the right thing, for the region … overall it felt like the right thing to have a spatial strategy that applied across the region because of the constraints on Bristol and Bath and how that needed to be managed. It was huge amounts of time, resource and energy*" (i1).

Participants felt that there were some positive derivatives from the strategic work undertaken (particularly on shared evidence) that was seen as enduring in influence. For example, one participant observed "*we were moving on transport, congestion and private vehicle use – bringing others to a more progressive view – I think the legacy of that thinking is continuing*" (i1). Another suggested that "*strategic thinking encouraged by the planning work has been evident in the allocation of some funds*" (i2).

Notwithstanding these positives, all study participants expressed a strong feeling that the West of England remains **negatively impacted by the absence of a strategic plan**, with the West of England "*failing to deliver on housing or to fulfil its economic potential*" (i2). Indeed, many of the spatial challenges the JSP and SDS intended to address, remain unresolved, not least the problem of unmet housing need in Bristol, made even more challenging by the 35% "uplift" requirement.

The challenges faced in progressing a strategic plan for the sub-region have been considerable and have varied over time, particularly with shifts in the political dynamic of the sub-region. Nevertheless,

there have been some common themes over this period. **First**, has been the **lack of clarity about the shared vision for the sub-region**. The JSP, for example, was not sufficiently convincing on the alignment between **vision, evidence and spatial strategy** (including the twelve strategic development locations). Whilst there was evident frustration from participants about the failure of the JSP at examination, particularly from those who had been invested in the process from the start, and there was acceptance of the criticism by planning inspectors of **"*the incoherence in the spatial strategy*"** (i3). Other participants saw the outcome of the examination as more predictable, given their prior concerns about the evidence noted above.

Second, opposition to green belt development, reflected in the initial response of the four authorities to RSS abolition, has been as an ongoing influence, despite some of the progress, at least initially (and as noted above):

"Politically, there were very different ideologies around green belt. From a planning perspective, I would say it's a planning tool. I think others would say that it determines the quality or protection of identities of places, and that spectrum, from ideology grows different thoughts on what strategic planning should or shouldn't do and where it should or shouldn't go" (i6).

Third, whilst the Combined Authority model was observed as providing – at least in theory - a positive relationship between strategic planning and implementation, offering the opportunity for alignment with key infrastructure funding and investment that could incentivise positie engagement by partners, participants observed the **incentives as "*weak*"** (i4), suggesting that for local authorities "*greater rewards were needed to enable green belt release*" (i4), with "*cast iron guarantees of funding to support partners in embracing the SDS*" (i2). Importantly, the power of veto (noted in relation to the devolution deal above), has arguably enabled **ongoing political dissonance** rather than the facilitation of resolution: where agreement has been lacking, partners have walked away, with "*strategic planning no longer seen as a joint endeavour like it had been under the JSP*" (i3). Some participants, therefore, observed that the failure of the SDS process could be seen as a consequence of the governance model of the Combined Authority and its inability to deal with the legacy of political fall-out in the sub-region:

"All authorities needing to sign-off, it's difficult, bureaucratic and stifling. The Governance has to be right, even with a statutory requirement to do it, otherwise it will fail" (i1)

For the Mayor, there was the suggestion that more or different powers might have encouraged the continuation of the SDS process further.

Finally, participants in this study were critical of the **lack of national leadership on strategic planning,** both in general, and more specifically in relation to the West of England. All were emphatic that given that powers devolved to the sub-region, Central Government   could have intervened after work on the SDS was halted to say: *" 'you have to do' it because it's in your devolution order, whereas then they didn't. They just shrugged their shoulders"* (i3). Instead, one participant observed, "*It was just too difficult for ministers. They weren't interested and had no understanding of the benefits*" (i1)

Looking to the future

The West of England case study demonstrates very clearly the limits to voluntaristic action on strategic planning, and the local political constraints upon it. There was a very clear view that, while suitable incentives (e.g. funding) are a prerequisite for successful joint working, so to is an element of compulsion; strategic planning will only work effectively if it is mandated. The Devolution Deal makes the production of an SDS an obligation on the part of the Combined Authority and sub-regional partners. However, it is unlikely that one will proceed unless and until strategic planning becomes

subject of majority voting (as in London), and commensurate government infrastructure funding makes substantial additional housing development serviceable.

"It's about incentivization and about duty. You need to get a balance. You need to have both hand in hand to bring people together. So, there's got to be something in it for them … but they've also got to do it, if that makes sense? So, they would be my asks" (i6).

There was also consensus that the changing nature of planning practice, especially the increasing burden placed on local authorities to produce detailed evidence on all matters, and the risk laden, adversarial nature of planning in the context of a sub-region characterized by strong development pressures, on the one hand, and equally strong conservationist politics, on the other. As such, it was widely considered that contemporary planning has tended to prioritise process over outcomes.

"I think we go too far, too great a level of detail and complexity over demands and need. I wish we could stop faffing about and just build the houses … you're spending so much time and so much money opening yourself up to criticism because there is so much detail, there's more to criticize and more to challenge, that you're not actually delivering the product. You've forgotten what the product was. You've got stuck in the process" (i6).

"I think planning is very holistic socio-economic place shaping. It's everything, isn't it … but planning has become adversarial conflict, a huge risk to authorities, it's all about reputational risk without the gain and it's all about housing numbers and actually it's not about that at all, it's about place shaping and people's future, isn't it?" (i5)

It is important to note that the JSP was examined according to a process designed to provide for detailed scrutiny of local plans. Acknowledging some of the inherent flaws of the JSP, it might have fared better in an alternative inspection process*.*

4.8 Case Study 6- York, North Yorkshire, East Riding and Hull

Summary

The York, North Yorkshire, East Riding and Hull Spatial Framework is a non-statutory plan focusing on the period of 2035-2050. An ambitious plan that, at the time, was an important step in developing a coherent future vision across a large sub-region with complex political and governance arrangements. As such, while it can be considered as a springboard for the eventual devolution deal, its success as a strategic plan was largely constrained by wider political factors—including the difficulty in navigating the needs of diverse partners. Therefore, while there were strategic planning outputs (vision, strategy, and locations for growth) that emerged from the SF, the delivery of these plans into tangible outcomes was limited for a number of political reasons. The recent political reorganisation of the new North Yorkshire Council and the Combined Authority means that its long-term success is largely dependent on the emerging plans within these new structures.
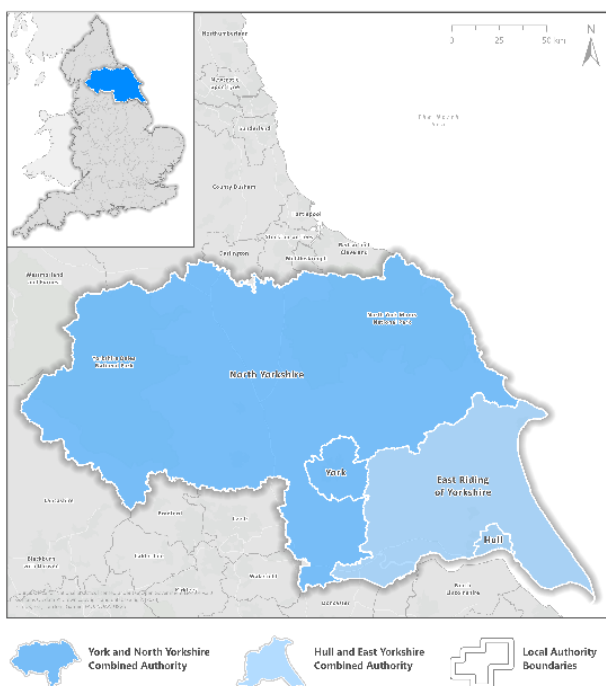
Background and context

The York, North Yorkshire, East Riding and Hull (YNYERH) Spatial Framework (SF) is a non-statutory plan focusing on the period of 2035-2050. It consisted of a partnership between North Yorkshire County Council, its 7 district or borough authorities (Craven District Council, Hambleton District Council, Harrogate Borough Council, Richmondshire District Council, Ryedale District Council, Scarborough Borough Council, and Selby District Council), City of York Council, East Riding of Yorkshire Council, Hull City Council[76], and North York Moors and Yorkshire Dales National Park Authorities. YNYERH is an extremely large area, comprising a complex meshwork of diverse geographies, politics, and economies.

It consists of major cities (Hull, York), market and coastal towns, greenbelts (York and also West Yorkshire), rural geographies, historic heritage places, and large national park areas and natural landscapes of ecological importance.

Since the completion of the SF, there has been significant changes in the governance of the area, with the two-tier (North Yorkshire County Council and its 7 district/borough authorities) combining to become a single Unitary Authority in April 2023 (now known as North Yorkshire Council). A devolution deal was secured between North Yorkshire Council and City of York Council, leading to the launch of the York and North Yorkshire Combined Authority in February 2024. In May 2024, there was the first mayoral election for the Combined Authority. The other Councils (East Riding and Hull) remain unchanged. It is crucial to highlight that these new administrative and political reorganisations provide a new and dynamic context within which this Spatial Framework, and its future, should be understood.

Key strategic planning issues

The diverse nature of the YNYERH area's geography, environment, economy, and politics means that there are a number of strategic planning issues that require cross-border working. As the SF document states, the large and diverse area means that a 'one size fits all' approach is inappropriate. There are a number of localised challenges related to its urban areas—such as York, with issues related to heritage, greenbelt boundary, and flood risk—and the more rural geographies with dispersed populations, commuting towns and villages, and large national park areas. Participants recognised a range of issues related to connectivity, transport, housing, and nature recovery in the sub-region. Importantly, its relation with wider geographies (such as Teesside or Leeds) was considered important:

"We actually often don't look at York and North Yorkshire in isolation. We look at how we connect to Teesside to the north and to the Humber to the South and then West Yorkshire to the West. It's understanding then at a spatial level how those connections operate and therefore where would you be best putting your growth." (i6)

Despite these multiple and inter-dependent strategic issues, the SF itself was never agreed as a comprehensive strategic plan, but its focus was predominantly on economic growth in the area. Other (such as social or environmental) issues were arguably secondary, although the SF plan itself highlights a wide range of planning challenges in the area, including:

- Key economic opportunities relating to: energy, bio-economy, and visitor economy.
- Managing future economic challenges and drivers (automation, ageing, flexible and mobile working etc).
- Clean growth.
- Boosting supply of new homes.
- Sustainably managing water security, quality, drainage, and wastewater.
- Managing local gas and electricity distribution.
- Protecting and restoring habitats, green corridors, and historic environmental assets.
- Flooding and coastal change.
- Poor air quality.

Strategic planning activity post 2010

Before the recent Political changes, the complex and fragmented governance arrangements made it a challenging and complex environment for any collaborative strategic planning efforts. Before the SF, a collective or long-term vision was lacking and Local Plans were often working in silo and at different stages of development:

"The different local plans obviously were, you know, sort of looking to a 10 to 15 year horizon. In various stages of preparation or ageing. Some work, one or two were sort of relatively fresh and fit for purpose. Others were donkeys years old behind the times." (i3)

There were clear tensions between county and districts/boroughs, and as a result difficulty engaging strategically with the wider challenges that required cross-border and multi-institutional collaborations. There was a sense that the sub-region was a *"dysfunctional mess, unambitious, no real kind of USP for the region"* (i6) and that at a national level it was *"seen as a bit of a rural backwater"* (i3).

Therefore, there was a desire to develop collaborations within the area that would counter these problems and to develop something of scale which recognised an ambitious and long-term growth strategy. The main driver for the SF was undoubtedly political—*"to show we were working together*

and thinking about the future" (i7), and in doing so sending a message to central government that *"we can do this in the longer term if you give us funding"* (i5). **The York, North Yorkshire, East Riding and Hull Spatial Framework** emerged as a non-statutory plan focusing on the period of 2035-2050. It was published and endorsed by all local authorities and partners (including National Park Authorities) in 2018, with the aim to provide a long-term and co-ordinated vision for economic growth by outlining visions and priorities, developing a spatial strategy, and identifying broad locations for growth. It focused on a development corridor approach which would cut across the diverse geographies of the sub-region with a focus on 6 Strategic Development Zones (SDZs).

Strategic planning governance and administration

The SF was lead by 'Directors of Development', who worked with the leaders and chief executives of Local Authorities and partner bodies, and with officers. A non-statutory plan was seen as the only realistic option at the time, partly because *"there was far too much politics that would have been way too complicated"* (i2), but also because of concerns related to resourcing, preparation, and time for developing a statutory plan. There were fears that the SF would be biased and led by the county council, and as a result that the SF would impose upon pre-existing Local Plans. In order to appease these concerns, an independent consultant was brought in to develop the SF, *"so it wasn't actually being imposed by any one authority"* (i3). Additionally, the SF itself was conscious of avoiding conflict with any Local Plans[77] by focusing on a medium/long-term period (2035-2050) beyond the focus of any Local Plans.

Elements of success

The changes in governance structures have meant that the context of this SF have changed substantially. While this has resulted in difficulties in measuring and observing the tangible impacts of it—this was made even more difficult by its long-term vision, where the more practical aspects of the work had yet to be developed. In many ways, it is *"just too early to say"* (i6) whether it has had its desired impact. While it perhaps has not had the desired impact on transport infrastructure development or SDZ development, for example, interviewees argued that it provided an important collective and long-term vision and thinking for the region that was severely lacking at the time.

"There's a lot of value to what happened, actually, in terms of setting the scene and just a mindset of thinking about planning at that level rather than, you know, eight individual borough or district levels" (i4)

"I think it it's helpful to have a tool that looks at things across the patch and that wider strategic view and connectivity." (i1)

In this way, the SF was arguably ahead of its time—it set the scene for future changes in governance, and according to many it contributed to the success of a devolution deal. Many considered it to be an innovative plan for future thinking across the sub-region as it adapts to the new structures within the combined authority:

"The opportunity which I think will come through in the next couple of years is as North Yorkshire looks to bring 7 local plans into one and create its own new North Yorkshire local plan. What you've got now is a strategic document which identifies within those where you would naturally put your growth. So as opposed to just having these seven, like I said, disparate district ones that you bought together, there is some kind of strategic narrative now that actually says this is where you should be focusing your attention and your growth and it shouldn't be just spread evenly across the parts." (i6)

The SF established an overall spatial strategy (corridor-based) to provide a unifying strategy across the area, and identified 6 Strategic Development Zones (SDZs) as the broad locations for growth. As such,

the SF provided an important piece of evidence, spatial thinking and planning, and a collective future vision for the area. However, these were dependent on the relevant district/LPA to develop detailed proposals in order to establish the appropriate development solutions within these SDZs. Only one progressed their SDZ (Craven DC for Skipton/Aire Valley SDZ), although this wasn't completed. As a result of this, these developments didn't progress to the stage of being deliverable, with many of these responsibilities being devolved onto Local Plans over a longer time scale.

Key challenges and limitations

While this SF acted as a potential springboard or precursor to devolution and the transition to a combined authority, other interviewees considered this as a limiting factor too—with one interviewee arguing that it was disrupted initially by the pandemic[78], and then by the local government reorganisation immediately after. However, it was also apparent that some felt that the plan was limited by conflicting barriers and interests amongst the partners. As noted, the SF was navigating challenging political territory—in particular the relationship between the county council and the district and boroughs. It was very concerned with not affecting, disrupting, or limiting the development of pre-existing local plans. However, this dynamic resulted in some issues:

"It didn't suggest anything radically new because it goes back to that fundamental point, it was all done within the district boundaries really… it was all tied back to not wanting to disrupt existing local plans." (i2)

There was a perception amongst some that it was *"stitching together a jigsaw really"* (i1) and that it *"concentrated and overlapped with existing policy…so you know putting a new village where we'd already identified a new village"* (i7). Some were concerned that, as a result, it wasn't strong enough on the tangibles such as infrastructure or housing, for example, but *"it's looking to the future…it's a bit more abstract"* (i7). As a non-statutory plan it was a *"document that they could either follow in the future or just ignore"* (i4). This dynamic was neatly summarized by one interviewee:

"It's a strategic articulation of consensus about a future direction of travel at the moment, but without the delivery plan element to say exactly how they're going to do it…Probably a little bit of reluctance with some of the authorities to commit to doing that. Partly because of capacity and resources within local planning authorities and the fact that they needed to get local plans produced. But also because of any worries and anxiety that might impact on local plan processes that they already had in train. So, I think they were up for doing it, but wanted just to put it into a long grass for a little bit until it was a convenient time to then do that work." (i3)

This reinforces a previous point—that there was a lack of subsequent activity to implement and deliver the SF beyond the plan itself.

Ultimately, however, these limitations should be considered as part of deeper political challenges within which the SF was operating rather than a limitation of the plan itself. There were concerns related to wider buy-in, with a perception amongst some that it was a County-led activity, with one interviewee claiming that it felt *"a bit like we were a consultee rather than an active partner"* (i4). Others claimed that the plan failed to go beyond officer level and that it didn't have sufficient public or political buy in. However, the document was signed off by the leaders and councils of each partner organisation, and as another interviewee argued, this was more of an issue of resource rather than 'buy-in' necessarily:

"As is always the case, some people are passengers. It doesn't mean they didn't buy into it, they just didn't have the resource or the inclination…so some drove it more than others." (i6)

Lack of resources, skills, and capacity within the component local authorities to engage with and deliver the SF was an issue noted by others.

Looking to the future

While the SF has faced many challenges, it is also apparent that it might become more important as the new governance structures settle into the future. While some felt the political reorganisation risked it becoming an outdated plan, most considered it still relevant and important for thinking about strategic planning in the region—since the fundamental issues it was tackling were largely unchanged. There are questions, therefore, as to what the new Combined Authority does and their vision for strategic planning. Some interviewees thought that this SF could contribute to the first North Yorkshire statutory plan, for example, but undoubtedly there was a widespread sense of uncertainty and opportunity in relation to these unfolding developments:

"There was a requirement [in the devolution deal] for a statutory plan for the whole area. But there was discussion whether that was in addition to your local plans that you've already got for the respective areas. And if that's the case, what does it add?...and then the word statutory was taken out. Once the Mayor's in place, he or she might have other ideas and the combined authority might push to change that. So I don't know." (i1)

Aside from these opportunities, all interviewees were passionate about the need for broader change in the future beyond the *"adhoc and inconsistent"* (i5) approach that is in place. Others considered the tension of planning within the complex and often fragmented governance arrangements across different places, while at the same time developing a coherent and consistent approach nationally. Of course, there was a need to think about the appropriate geographical scale. In particular, the need for some form of a National Spatial Plan was referenced regularly in order to *"properly level up"* (i4) and also to help *"manage an increasingly pressured but finite supply of land in this country…to be able to divide multiple benefits from any particular parcel of land"* (i3). One participant argued that there was an urgent need to develop a system which was capable of tackling *"the existential threats that now face us—whether that's climate, nature, economy, health"* (i3), and others claimed that this required a more national approach due to the scale of these challenges:

"Climate change – looking at that at a strategic level, and nationally, but that is quite difficult because the development industry will lobby government quite hard not to push forward too quickly in terms of changes to the planning system, to accelerate what we need to do to mitigate climate change. But, from a local authority perspective, it would be a lot easier if more was done at that level [national] rather than everybody trying to grapple with these issues individually." (i1)

Participants also recognised the importance of being able to develop metrics to monitor its effectiveness:

"A national guidance and everyone's monitoring the same thing, for example. Then you tend to have the information coming out that's really comparable. So you can, you know, aggregate it together." (i7)

Other political and governance factors were also considered important. One interviewee suggested that it wasn't a matter of being statutory or not, but that there were underlying factors such as developing long-standing, committed, and trusting relationships. Related to this was the issue of long-term strategic planning being inevitably in conflict with—and disrupted by—short-term electoral cycles. As such, an ongoing challenge will be to consider possibilities which transcend these political disruptions for long-term planning. One interviewer claimed that *"the days when the government is going to impose things on people through usual planning…have gone"* (i5), and that there was a necessity to develop a collective vision for the future beyond top-down and bottom-up limitations:

"You're never going to get it right. Because top down doesn't work as everyone hates the regional plan, and bottom-up doesn't work because the people at the top don't get what they want. So, I think it's almost a case of all of us having to sell the thing in terms of we need a long term vision for these areas" (i5).

A number of other constructive interventions were also considered beyond these grand policy changes—including developing and promoting strategic planning as a profession in Universities, establishing long-term public settlements for planning authorities, and giving more recognition to factors such as Local Nature Recovery Strategies (which naturally cover a wide geography).

5. Key findings

Key finding 1 – Strategic planning as currently practised is highly fragmented, resulting in sub-optimal outcomes

> *"Although they moan about the planning system, private developers actually like certainty. The current semi-randomised land use allocation process can't give them that, but strategic planning could"* (Survey Respondent, Private Sector).

Strategic planning, as currently practised in England, is highly fragmented, comprising a range of statutory and non-statutory activities, managed through a wide range of governance and administrative arrangements. Significantly, there remain parts of England with no strategic planning activity; 40% of local authority survey respondents reported no statutory strategic planning activity and 25% reported no non-statutory strategic planning activity either.

The case studies chart the journey back to strategic planning since 2010. This has been a challenging journey everywhere, including examples of stalled processes (see West of England). Prior experience of working collaboratively across administrative boundaries has positively supported this process (See Leicester and Leicestershire and Liverpool City Region). However, the loss of technical knowledge and experience of strategic planning has hampered progress, particularly as there has been no specific model, guidance or prescription.

Key finding 2- There is a clear unmet need for a more effective approach to strategic planning between the national and local levels

> *"Infrastructure or climate impacts do not stop at the boundary. We have to work collaboratively to maximise opportunities, share costs of evidence and have a greater voice than if we worked on our own"* (Survey Respondent, London Borough).

The survey demonstrates a strong consensus in favour of strategic planning on the part of public and private sector stakeholders; 96% of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed a change to the current approach to strategic planning is needed. Strategic planning is widely regarded as vital for the management of key issues that cannot be addressed properly at the local scale, for building economic, climate and nature resilience, and articulating long term development and infrastructure needs. Effective strategic planning provides a long-term framework that derisks decision-making, providing more stable conditions for building investor confidence and delivering long term government objectives. It also offers an important opportunity to make savings with economies of scale being realised with evidence production and procurement (see Leicester and Leicestershire).

Its current, fragmented form is seen as an ineffective approach to strategic planning. Survey respondents emphasized the predominance of local politics and the avoidance of unpopular decisions, and provided evidence of key issues remaining unresolved as result, including large areas where housing needs are not being met (for example in the West Midlands and the South East). The case studies provide much evidence of the costs (and opportunity costs) of the current piecemeal approach. In the North-East the paucity of strategic planning manifested itself in the form of direct competition between Local Authorities for growth; those with plentiful greenfield sites overperform on housing delivery, while site-constrained urban authorities face more challenges. In the West of England, the failure to finalise a strategic plan is perceived as negatively impacting the ability of the sub-region to fulfil its economic potential or tackle housing need. In Leicester and Leicestershire and York, North Yorkshire, East Riding and Hull, LPAs have sought to reinstate strategic planning to address the negative effects of piecemeal development, and to consolidate development towards strategic locations or corridors.

Key finding 3- Strategic planning should be mandated by Government and implemented across England

"Our first-hand experience has seen that when issues get too political on the housing front, authorities have the option to drop out of the strategic planning process and go it alone due to there being no statutory requirement" (Local Authority Survey Respondent, East Midlands).

The lack of a central government mandate for strategic planning was ranked in the survey as the most significant barrier to effective strategic planning under current arrangements, followed closely by political challenges to cross-boundary and collaborative working.

A voluntary approach to strategic planning has progressed in some areas (see Leicester and Leicestershire and York, North Yorkshire, East Riding and Hull). However, voluntarism comes with significantly more risks. The absence of strategic planning in many areas has negatively impacted on local plan preparation, which in turn impacts decisions to invest without the certainty that a shared and long term planning strategy provides (focus groups 3 and 4). There was thus an exceptionally strong majority in favour of strategic planning being mandated by government with 80% of local authority survey respondents and 88% of non-local authority respondents in favour. This would help address the influence of local political concerns in current models, and to provide more stability in decision-making.

It was also widely considered that strategic planning should take place across England. However, achieving this is likely to be more straightforward in some places than others, due to the extent of existing practice and the maturity of strategic partnerships. There may be a need for flexibility in the transition to strategic planning depending on the circumstances of each area and the role they play nationally (for example, if there are links to national infrastructure or have a key economic role to play). This should also be considered against issues around local plan progress in each area.

Key finding 4 – Strategic planning should be embodied in a statutory document, but not be 'a big local plan'

"It's not an easy answer, because of the current patchwork of devolutionary and governance arrangements" (Case Study Participant, Leicester and Leicestershire).

The survey found the majority in favour of strategic planning being a 'statutory, part of the development plan system' (69%). The case studies currently pursuing a non-statutory approach (Leicester and Leicestershire and York, North Yorkshire, East Riding and Hull) observed the potential benefits of a statutory approach (greater weight in decision making, likely greater impact on outcomes) and likened a non-statutory plan to *"a chocolate fireguard"* (South-West Hertfordshire). The research does not provide conclusive evidence on what model of strategic planning is likely to be the most effective (e.g. a Joint Strategic Plan versus s Spatial Development Strategy). The survey findings and case studies reflect the different journeys many places have been on since 2010, and their own experiences. For example, there is a limited number of people currently practising with any experience of pre-2010 approaches to strategic planning. The context in which planners work (austerity, constrained capacity, pragmatism) also sets parameters for the nature and scope of change that they expect, or even aspire to, prompting support for incremental, rather than radical, reform.

There was consensus, however, about the need for a strategic planning model that derisks the process as much as possible but does not get drawn into detailed matters such as site allocations or detailed boundary changes to Green Belts i.e. a Strategic Plan is not a 'big local plan'. This was the thinking behind the decision in Liverpool City Region to progress a Spatial Development Strategy and not apply

the Greater Manchester model of a joint local plan. A summary of the relative merits of potential future models is provided in the main report (Appendix 6).

Key finding 5 - Strategic planning should focus clearly on long-term vision and key cross-boundary issues. There should be sufficient flexibility to address local needs and allow innovation

"I think it is crucial, that plans or strategies are kept short and sweet - and cover only strategic issues. Both the old Structure Plans and Regional Plans suffered from mission creep resulting in them taking far too long to produce, being more expensive to produce than need be, losing the strategic wood from the detailed tress and getting into local issues that made them unpopular with local councils" (Local Authority Survey Respondent, East Midlands).

The case studies and focus groups identified that to be effective, strategic planning needs to be tightly focussed. Similarly, the importance of a shared vision, setting the ambition that all partners across a given geography can sign up to, was highlighted. A long-term perspective helps avoid parochialism, and to build investor confidence.

Overall, the different research strands point to the critical components of strategic planning being: the long-term vision for the area; a spatial distribution of development requirements between the constituent authorities; key broad location(s) for accommodating strategic growth (e.g. new settlements, major settlement extensions, the regeneration/transformation of existing places, or the expansion of several places for example along a transport corridor - or a combination of any of these); an implementation framework, so that it is clear how the strategic plan is to be put into effect (including the national and sub regional transport, utility, community and blue and green strategic infrastructure required & associated funding responsibilities); and shared metrics, enabling progress and success/failure to be tracked.

However, the key strategic planning issues may vary between different strategic planning areas and therefore local discretion will be needed in determining the scope of the strategic plan. The case studies, for example, the Liverpool City Region, demonstrate why there also needs to be some local discretion on what the scope of the strategic plan is, especially to allow policies to drive innovation and support more progressive approaches across the strategic planning area.

Key finding 6 - Strategic planning should provide a sustainable growth led framework for prioritising and coordinating investment in infrastructure

"Strategic investment doesn't follow local plans currently. It retrofits itself to it and local politics overrides strategic need and that gets in the way of so much good strategic planning. Strategic planning should provide that hook to link to other infrastructure investment plans". (Focus Group Participant, Focus Group 3)

The case studies highlighted that strategic planning should, but does not currently, play a key role in prioritising, aligning and realising investment. The opportunity for strategic planning to provide a proactive and strategic approach to investment and infrastructure provision was a particularly recurrent theme in the focus groups. It should be clear how a strategic plan is to be put into effect. An implementation framework should include the main investment and organisational infrastructure required to make the strategic plan happen. This will help to improve the coordination of government agencies and departments. Identified investment priorities should lock in the commitment of relevant delivery agencies and infrastructure providers, secured through their involvement in the preparation and agreement of a strategic plan and its implementation framework (see North East). This role of strategic planning as a spatial investment framework further reinforces the need for a 'systems'

approach to ensure alignment with other plans and strategies across sectors and operating at different geographies/spatial levels. Better data sharing between agencies will also help to underpin this approach.

Key Finding 7- Strategic planning should have a sub-regional focus and seek to validate existing structures and processes where possible

"The question with geography in my mind is working with existing partnership structures. We don't really want to reinvent the wheel, where there are the structures and existing relationships between people and different authorities at both an officer and political level … if we start reinventing the wheel there, we essentially start moving backwards before we can move forward. The question comes to what happens to the gaps in between"? (Focus Group Participant, Focus Group 1).

There was no consensus about the preference for the spatial scale of strategic planning activity in the future, either from survey respondents or case study participants, reflecting the diversity of current practice. Within the survey, there was a slightly stronger appetite for strategic planning to be based on appropriate functional geographies and at a sub-regional level, rather than a return to regional level planning. Case study participants had a wide variety of views as in the case of Leicester and Leicestershire, where a return to regional frameworks, two county areas, and local autonomy to decide, were expressed by different participants.

The appropriate geography for strategic planning was thus a key topic for discussion in focus group testing. Here, it was observed that strategic planning is likely to get progressively more challenging the larger the number of LPAs involved and there is therefore no majority of opinion in favour of a return to regional strategic planning. Most recent practice is conducted on a sub-regional geography (county or city region) scale, often based on historic relationships and a degree of pragmatism using existing administrative boundaries, rather than 'ideal' functional geographies. Positive working relationships often take a long time to evolve. Given this, it was argued that any new arrangements should, where possible, build on existing structures and processes. This might, for example, involve alignment with the recently established (48) areas for Local Nature Recovery Strategies.

A number of additional issues were flagged that should be considered when establishing the spatial geography for any new arrangements, including: ensuring the democratic legitimacy of the chosen geography; clarifying the role of the Combined Authorities and County Councils, given their extensive competences in spatial development and influencing investment priorities; ensuring the inclusion of those areas that are not neatly covered by any existing partnerships or administrative arrangements; keeping the strategic planning areas relatively small to make it easier to interact and support strategic planning, both in plan preparation and implementation; and, building links across wider functional strategic geographies, for example, across some of the larger and/or more complex city regions, across pan-regional partnerships, or along river catchment areas.

Key Finding 8 - Strategic planning should be underpinned by clear and comprehensive governance arrangements within a majority voting structure, with direct organisational or individual accountability

"All authorities needing to sign-off, it's difficult, bureaucratic and stifling. The Governance has to be right, even with a statutory requirement to do it, otherwise it will fail" (Case Study Participant, West of England).

Survey respondents frequently cited the array of different governance arrangements as 'baffling' and saw 'proper and accountable governance' as a key facilitator of effective strategic planning, to manage often challenging political and technical issues. All case study respondents considered the tension of

planning within the different, complex and often fragmented governance arrangements. In some cases, these were subject to profound on-going change. Reference in the York North Yorkshire, East Riding and Hull and North-East case studies was made to their changing governance arrangements (with the introduction of new and re-configured combined authorities).

One area of consensus was about the impact of unanimous voting (or the power of veto) on statutory strategic planning activity. In the Liverpool City Region, the unanimity required has clearly impacted progress of the Spatial Development Strategy, with building consensus across all partners at every stage a key role of the officers and an impact on resourcing. In the West of England, the power of veto has enabled partners to walk away following a lack of consensus, halting work on the Spatial Development Strategy indefinitely.

In short, governance structures must be capable of making decisions 'in the interests of the greater good' with an ability to build consensus around a shared vision. There should therefore be clear accountability for decisions underpinned by a majority voting structure and with no power of veto.

Strategic plans also need to be prepared within the wider 'family' of plans that contribute to sustainable growth, especially in relation to housing delivery, climate change, nature recovery and infrastructure. There are a wide range of stakeholders involved in both developing these plans and delivering them, especially in relation to investment and funding prioritisation, which includes government agencies and departments. Stakeholder involvement, particularly where they have a key role in implementing the strategic plan, will be a major factor in the success of any new arrangements, whether through formal governance structures or in an advisory capacity.

There are a variety of existing models of stakeholder participation. These include Growth Boards (e.g. Thames Estuary Growth Board, Hertfordshire Growth Board) and Development Corporations (Ebbsfleet Development Corporation) and the RTPI's proposed Green Growth Boards. There are also past models of Leaders Boards which combined locally elected representatives with board members from the regional agencies. Further discussion is needed about the role stakeholders should play and specifically whether this should be formalised.

Key finding 9 – There is a role for a national spatial framework within which strategic plans can be prepared

"A National Spatial Plan is needed to properly level up and to help manage an increasingly pressured but finite supply of land in this country" (Case Study Participant, York, North Yorkshire, East Riding and Hull).

A national framework is something that could add value to the planning system, with strategic planning able to give effect to national policy and investment priorities. 84% of local authority respondents and 90% of non-LA survey respondents agreed that a national framework or plan is needed. There was also a clear appetite for strategic planning to address the current disconnect between planning (both at the national and local level) and planning for infrastructure, particularly nationally significant infrastructure (focus groups 3 and 4). Strategic planning could provide some spatial articulation of National Policy Statements and provide integration for other sector specific spatial plans. Provision of a clearer national spatial context (especially if using the many national data sets already available) would provide a more effective mechanism for integrating national policies and investment priorities with a spatial impact through the strategic and local planning system.

There is also a need for a limited level of national prescription in respect of strategic plan content to ensure that there is a strategic solution to some of the key national priorities. For example, whilst this was not explicitly tested, there was a strong view expressed in the case studies and through focus

group discussion that housing targets have historically worked better when set nationally with the distribution (i.e. local plan allocations) tested through the strategic planning process. Similarly, strategic Green Belt reviews, where relevant, could also be undertaken at this level with the strategic plan setting the 'general extent' of Green Belt in each area and identifying where more detailed changes to boundaries are needed through the local plan process.

Key Finding 10- The testing of strategic plans needs to be reframed to be proportionate and focussed on the long term

"We are working to our legislation which is all about delivering economic growth as a Mayoral authority but actually we will be tested within the framework of the NPPF and that has a much broader scope" (Case Study Participant, Liverpool City Region Combined Authority Area).

The examination in public was considered to represent a resource intensive and risk laden stage of the planning process. Concern about the proportionate examination of strategic plans was raised across all case studies, some in retrospect (West of England), and some in future anticipation (Liverpool Combined Authority Area/South West Hertfordshire). There was a strong desire for the testing of a strategic plans to better reflect the remit of strategic planning and its role as a long term integrated spatial strategy. The NPPF as presently drafted, which sets out rules for local plans, is not seen as an appropriate basis for testing strategic plans, particularly with respect to deliverability and viability requirements over the long term. There were clear views that a strategic plan still needs to be robustly tested (focus groups 2 and 4) but with different views expressed on community, business and stakeholder involvement in achieving adequate scrutiny and wider buy-in. Strategic planning goes beyond land use planning and the testing approach should reflect this broader role. Strategic plans also enable local plans to be more proportionate, with reduced evidence base, preparation and examination costs and time. Addressing strategic matters across a wider area avoids repetition at different local plan examinations. This offers efficiencies to local authorities and to the Planning Inspectorate.

The potential basis on which future strategic plans might be tested, was a key topic for discussion in focus group testing. A set of 'strategic conditions' was observed as offering potential as the basis of the examination of a strategic plan, including whether the plan is: founded on an integrated and long-term vision for the area; based on an appropriate and justified spatial planning approach that will bring about the desired spatial change; aligned with national, pan-regional, and regional objectives and priorities and consistent with the spatial strategies for neighbouring areas; clear in its intended impact, providing sufficient clarity for local plans, other plans and strategies, and to secure investor confidence in the area.; capable of being implemented, with the necessary commitment of relevant infrastructure providers and delivery agencies (including government departments / government agencies) demonstrated.

Key finding 11 – There is a need to rebuild the culture, capability and capacity of strategic planning

"Effective strategic planning needs willpower, tangible incentives and adequate resources" (Local Authority Survey Respondents, Combined Authority).

There is a clear need to rebuild the culture, capability and capacity of strategic planning. Dedicated, impartial and independent resource and expertise will be needed to deliver strategic plans, but the research has clearly highlighted the scarcity of experienced strategic planners and the need for the re-establishment of the strategic planning sector. Many planners have only experienced planning under localism and have not practiced in a planning system with a strong strategic tier (focus group 4). Wider organisations have also lost their strategic capacity, struggling to contribute effectively to such a large

number of local plans (focus group 3). The cumulative impact of austerity on staff resourcing was thus a key theme across the research, with all case studies noting the challenge of finding staff with the right skills and experience (see Liverpool City Region) and observing the costs associated with the need to buy-in skills to carry out strategic activities where no resource or skills were available amongst the constituent authorities (see York, North Yorkshire, East Riding and Hull).

The realistic situation in the short term is that resource will need to be sourced from the 'same pool of planners' to deliver any new requirements in the planning system. More broadly there are opportunities to support and improve planning practice that could be used to support strategic planning and help rebuild capacity and expertise, such as: Planning Advisory Service (PAS) support programmes; an Expert Advisory Panel or a Strategic Planning Taskforce that can be called on (akin to the High Street Taskforce); working with the planning education sector on CPD for professionals as well as in the training of strategic planners of the future; and sharing and avoiding the reinvention of existing practice through the production of advice/practice toolkits (which could form part of the other options). There is also a need to consider what long term options there are for supporting spatial planning capacity more generally. Consideration should therefore be given to joint (multi-functional) teams that have a core role in strategic planning but can also support the LPAs with their local plans in the way structure plan and regional planning teams previously did. This reflects the thinking behind the RTPI model of Planning Agencies, a voluntary shared services model for local planning authorities to bring their planning teams together pooling resources, offering multi-disciplinary support and developing expertise and capacity at a sub-regional level.

Appendix 1- Strategic planning activity in England (as at May 2024)

Spatial Geography *case study	Type of Plan/ Framework	Further Information
Statutory plans		
1. **SW Hertfordshire***	Joint Strategic Plan	Currently being prepared SW Herts Joint Strategic Plan (swhertsplan.com)
2. **Greater Nottingham**	Joint Strategic Plan	Currently being prepared to replace aligned core strategies Greater Nottingham Planning Partnership (gnplan.org.uk)
4. **Liverpool City Region***	Spatial Development Strategy	Currently being prepared by the LCR Mayoral Combined Authority Spatial Planning	Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (liverpoolcityregion-ca.gov.uk)
4. **Greater London**	Spatial Development Strategy	Updated by the GLA Mayor in 2021 The London Plan	London City Hall
5. **Plymouth and SW Devon**	Joint Local Plan	Adopted 2019 Plymouth and South West Devon Joint Local Plan	PLYMOUTH.GOV.UK
6. **North Devon & Torridge**	Joint Local Plan	Adopted 2018 North Devon and Torridge Local Plan	North Devon Council
7. **Central Lincolnshire**	Joint Local Plan	Adopted 2023 Homepage	Central Lincolnshire Local Plan (n-kesteven.gov.uk)
8. **SE Lincolnshire**	Joint Local Plan	Adopted 2019 www.southeastlincslocalplan.org
9. **Greater Norwich**	Joint Local Plan	Adopted 2024 Adoption	GNLP
10. **Central Lancashire**	Joint Local Plan	Currently being prepared Home - Central Lancashire Local Plan
11. **Gloucester, Tewksbury & Cheltenham**	Strategic & Local Plan	Currently being prepared and will replace joint core strategy and individual LPs Strategic and Local Plan - Gloucester City Council
12. **Greater Manchester**	Joint Local Plan	Adopted 2024 Places For Everyone - Greater Manchester Combined Authority (greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk)
13. **South Worcestershire**	Joint Local Plan	Adopted 2016 and currently being reviewed South Worcestershire Development Plan - South Worcestershire Development Plan (swdevelopmentplan.org)
14. **Greater Cambridge**	Joint Local Plan	Currently being prepared Greater Cambridge Local Plan (greatercambridgeplanning.org)
Non-Statutory frameworks		
15. **Leicester & Leicestershire***	Growth Framework	Currently being updated Strategic Growth Plan LCC (llstrategicgrowthplan.org.uk)
16. **Norfolk**	Strategic Planning Framework	Last updated in 2021 Norfolk Strategic Planning Member Forum - Norfolk County Council
17. **Suffolk**	Growth Framework	Suffolk Growth	Bringing together public sector organisations across Suffolk and beyond, to promote countywide economic growth and drive positive change
18. **Surrey**	Place Ambition	Surrey 2050 Place Ambition version 2 - 2023 - Surrey County Council (surreycc.gov.uk)
19. **West Sussex and Greater Brighton**	Local Strategic Statement	WS & Greater Brighton Strategic Planning Board - Coastal West Sussex

20. **Heathrow**	Strategic Planning Framework	Heathrow Strategic Planning Group :: Home
21. **York, North Yorkshire, East Riding and Hull**	Spatial Framework	Spatial Framework Core Approach Dec 2019 (hull.gov.uk)
22. **East Devon, Exeter, Mid Devon and Teignbridge**	Joint Strategy	Replaces the statutory Greater Exeter Strategic Plan and was agreed by all partner LAs in January 2024 - Our shared coordinates, a joint strategy for East Devon, Exeter, Mid Devon and Teignbridge
23. **South Hampshire**	Spatial Position Statement	Replaces and earlier version (2016) and was agreed by partners in Dec 2023 PfSH Spatial Position Statement 2023 - Partnership for South Hampshire (push.gov.uk)
24. **Cambridge & Peterborough**	Strategic Spatial Framework	Phase 1 prepared by C&P Combined Authority, phase 2 'under development' Non Statutory Spatial Framework Phase 1 (cambridgeshirepeterborough-ca.gov.uk)

Appendix 2 – Combined Authority powers

Combined Authority Spatial Planning Powers (June 2024) Established under the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act*	
Cambridgeshire & Peterborough MCA	The MCA has powers to prepare a **non-statutory Spatial Framework**. A high level 'Part 1' has been prepared.
Greater London Mayor/GLA	The London Mayor has powers to prepare a **statutory Spatial Development Framework** (The London Plan) under the GLA Act 1999. The Mayor is directly accountable for the London Plan.
Greater Manchester MCA	Although the MCA has powers to prepare a **statutory Spatial Development Framework** the local authority members (apart from Stockport) have prepared a joint local plan (Places for Everyone) instead.
Liverpool City Region MCA	The MCA has Powers to prepare a **statutory Spatial Development Strategy** which is currently being prepared. Unanimity in decisions on the SDS is required throughout the process.
North East MCA	The newly established MCA has powers to prepare a **statutory Spatial Development Strategy** but these have not been implemented. Although unanimity is required to initiate work on the SDS, a majority vote is required on the SDS at key stages, including adoption.
South Yorkshire MCA	The MCA agreed to powers to prepare a **non-statutory Spatial Framework** in its initial Devolution Deal in 2015 (as the Sheffield City Region MCA) and retains these powers under the later 2020 Deal with the renamed South Yorkshire MCA. These powers have not been implemented.
Tees Valley MCA	**None**
West of England MCA	The MCA has powers to prepare a **statutory Spatial Development Strategy** and although progress was initiated on the SDS, it was abandoned when agreement could not be reached on spatial distribution as unanimity is required.
West Midland MCA	**None**
West Yorkshire MCA	The MCA agreed to prepare a **statutory Spatial Development Strategy** in the original Devolution Deal with the Government but conferral of powers were postponed in March 2021 pending outcome of proposed planning reforms. This has not since been taken forward although the MCA actively works with its partner LAs to support spatial planning across the MCA.
York & North Yorkshire MCA	**None**

* The Levelling Up and Regeneration Act makes provision for new Combined County Authorities (CCAs) but spatial planning powers are currently not allowed to be conferred on CCAs under the Devolution Framework.

Appendix 3 – Additional survey analysis

Why Strategic Planning Matters – Ranking Factors Regional Variation

- 'Ensuring an appropriate supply of strategic sites for employment uses' was considered the second most important factor in the North East (with 'Developing desirable patterns of urban and wider spatial development' not in the top three).
- The importance of 'addressing health, wellbeing, and social inequalities' varied, with respondents in London considering it more important (4.3) and the North East (3.6), North West (3.8), South East (3.8), South West (3.9), West Midlands (3.2), and Yorkshire and the Humber (3.7) considering it a less important factor.
- 'Water resource management and flood risk mitigation' was considered a less important factor in the North East (3.6), West Midlands and Yorkshire and the Humber (both 3.5), and noticeably more important in the East of England (4.4) and East Midlands (4.2).
- 'Managing and maximizing potential of natural environmental assets' was considered the third most important factor in Yorkshire and the Humber (with 'Ensuring an appropriate level and distribution of housing' not in the top three.)
- 'Tackling climate change, building climate resilience and moving towards net zero' was considered the third most important factor in the North West (with 'Developing desirable patterns of urban and wider spatial development' not in the top three).
- Respondents in London, East Midlands, and East of England consistently ranked all factors highly and there was greater variation across other regions (especially in West Midlands and Yorkshire and the Humber).
- Yorkshire and the Humber and the South East considered 'tackling climate change, building climate resilience and moving towards net zero' as relatively less important (3.8 and 3.9) than others.
- Although 'Ensuring an appropriate level and distribution of housing' was ranked as important everywhere, it was ranked highest by respondents in London LPAs (4.9).

Why Strategic Planning Matters – Ranking Factors LPA-type Variation

- Respondents in Unitary Authorities (met) considered 'Ensuring an appropriate supply of strategic sites for employment use' as the second most important factor.
- Respondents in Metropolitan Districts considered the distribution of housing as slightly less important than 'Tackling climate change, building climate resilience and moving towards net zero', 'Ensuring an appropriate supply of strategic sites for employment uses', and 'Ensuring an appropriate supply of strategic sites for employment uses'.
- Respondents in Combined Authorities considered 'Tackling climate change, building climate resilience and moving towards net zero' as the third most important factor (in place of 'Ensuring the appropriate planning and delivery of transport infrastructure').
- Respondents from London Borough's ranked all factors very highly (average of 4.8). Respondents from County Councils ranked every single factor higher than those from District Councils (in a 2 tier area).
- Respondents from London Borough's, Metropolitan District, and Unitary Authorities considered 'Ensuring an appropriate supply of strategic sites for employment uses' as more important than those from Unitary Authorities (non-met) and Combined Authority / Greater London Authority.
- London Borough's ranked 'Addressing health, wellbeing, and social inequalities', 'Managing and maximizing potential of natural environmental assets' higher than others.

Appendix 4 – Case study further information

Case Studies: List of further information and resources

Leicester and Leicestershire

Leicester & Leicestershire 2050: Our Vision for Growth (2018):
https://www.llstrategicgrowthplan.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Final-LL-SGP-December-2018-1.pdf

Leicester & Leicestershire Statement of Common Ground (2022):

Updated-SoCG-FINAL.pdf (llstrategicgrowthplan.org.uk)

Strategic Growth Options and Strategic Transport Assessment (2024):

https://www.llstrategicgrowthplan.org.uk/latest-updates/publication-of-strategic-growth-options-and-strategic-transport-assessment-stage-1/

Liverpool City Region Combined Authority Area

LCR Devolution Deal (2015): Liverpool devolution deal - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

Further information on the LCR SDS: Spatial Planning | Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (liverpoolcityregion-ca.gov.uk)

LCR SDS Statement of Common Ground: Microsoft Word - Liverpool City Region SoCG Oct 2019 v2.1_FOR MM SIG.docx (liverpoolcityregion-ca.gov.uk)

LCR Planning Advisory Service Case Study: Strategic Planning Case Study - Liverpool City Region Combined Authority | Local Government Association

Guidance on examining SDS: Examining Spatial Development Strategies - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

North East Combined Authority Area

Great North Plan - "Ambitions for the North" (2019):
https://www.rtpi.org.uk/media/1913/ambitionsforthenorth2019.pdf
North East Devolution Deal (2022): https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/north-east-devolution-deal--2
North East Deeper Devolution Deal (2024): https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/north-east-deeper-devolution-deal/north-east-deeper-devolution-deal

South West Hertfordshire

All the documents produced as part of the SWP can be found at Key Documents | SW Herts Joint Strategic Plan (swhertsplan.com) and Governance papers and arrangements can be found at Governance & Background Papers | SW Herts Joint Strategic Plan (swhertsplan.com)

West of England

West of England Joint Spatial Plan: Issues and options for consultation (2015):
https://n-somerset.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2020-03/CC20%20West%20of%20England%20Joint%20Spatial%20Plan%20Issues%20and%20Options.pdf
Note – the West of England Joint Spatial Plan is no longer publicly available
Planning Inspectorate letter following examination of the West of England Joint Spatial Plan (2019):
https://www.n-somerset.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2022-03/G14%20-%20inspector%E2%80%99s%20letter%20%E2%80%93%20joint%20spatial%20plan.pdf
West of England Combined Authority webpage on spatial development (2024):
https://www.westofengland-ca.gov.uk/what-we-do/planning-housing/spatial-development-strategy/
West of England Devolution Agreement:
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a80254340f0b62305b8972f/160315_West_of_England_Devolution_Agreement_Draft_-_FINAL.pdf

York, North Yorkshire, East Riding & Hull

York, North Yorkshire, East Riding and Hull. Spatial Framework: A Vision for Growth:
https://www.yorkshiredales.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/2020/03/Spatial-Framework-Core-Approach-Dec-2019.pdf

North Yorkshire Council Economic Growth Strategy 2024-2029. Report of the Corporate Director (2023):

https://edemocracy.northyorks.gov.uk/documents/s23675/Economic%20Growth%20Strategy%202024-2029%20Appendices.pdf

Chief Executives' Group – North Yorkshire and York. Report of the YNYER Directors of Development Group (2019):

https://nypartnerships.org.uk/sites/default/files/Partnership%20files/Chief%20Executives%27%20Group%20-%20North%20Yorkshire%20and%20York/2019/3.6.19/Agenda%20item%208%20-%20Report%20of%20the%20YNYER%20Directors%20of%20Development%20Group.pdf

Appendix 5 – Focus group details

FOCUS GROUP 1 – RTPI Policy Committee	
X 4 members of the RTPI's Policy Committee	**Headline themes** • Support for the survey and case study findings as described. • Mandating of strategic planning necessary to make it happen. • Strategic planning should be part of the development framework, not just guidance, to be implemented in practice. • Housing numbers should be decided nationally, and distribution sub-regionally. • Preference for working with existing partnerships as a determinant of an appropriate future geography of strategic planning, but geographies need to be 'big enough' to make sense in strategic terms. • Challenges of current testing frameworks when considering potential 30 year time frames – harder to test viability and deliverability. Soundness testing is important, but could a simplified process be achieved for strategic plans? • Strategic planning needs to help channel the conversation between government departments. • Clear lines of accountability in decision making are needed, such as in the GLA model. • Getting the governance right is critical, but it takes time to build partnerships. • Potential benefit of more formalised involvement of government agencies, and infrastructure providers in the activity of strategic planning.

FOCUS GROUP 2 – Practitioners with experience of working in the three RTPI Northern Regions	
X 6 practitioners, including academics, planning consultants, environmental organisations and transport bodies, and RTPI northern region representatives.	**Headline themes** • Support for the survey and case study findings as described. • Strategic planning must be framed around a long-term vision about what needs to be improved in a given area – and how different agendas are to be balanced. • Work is needed to persuade politicians that strategic planning is important for solving problems and in allowing the 'up-scaling' of responsibility for challenging decisions. Commitment at the highest level is an important facilitator of the process. • Devolution deals should include strategic planning as standard not as a negotiable – but questions raised about "gaps", places not covered by devolution. • Potential benefit of local flexibility in geography and arrangements that build on local knowledge and experience. • Strategic plans must have statutory plan to have "teeth", something that government has to give due regard. • If strategic planning is re-instated on too larger areas, achieving consensus will be much harder that a pragmatically smaller geography. However, the work of strategic planning needs to nest with pan-regional partnerships. • A range of stakeholders should be involved – broader engagement with infrastructure providers is particularly key. They will benefit from simplification. • Level of scrutiny of strategic plans need to reflect the importance attached to their role (and weight in decision making). • The role of smart data – and better data sharing between agencies – should facilitate strategic planning.

FOCUS GROUP 3 – Practitioners with sector specific experience

X 10 practitioners from across a range of sectors, including energy, housing (both public and private), academia, law, infrastructure, water, transport and environment.	**Headline themes** • Strategic planning needs to be kept tight in scope – avoid lots of detail, outcome focussed and not a big local plan. • Opportunities to use existing Governance arrangements, such as combined authorities, counties and recent Local Government reorganisation, the geography may be imperfect. • Approach would be different with a national spatial plan playing an important role. • Important for all infrastructure providers to understand the vision for an area. • Government mandate is important and needs universal application - a flexible approach could involve starting with a non-statutory and moving to a statutory approach. • Geography may need to vary and be issue responsive, some issues are pan regional and require large scale discussions, such as at the sub national transport body level. • Need planning to proactively influence a strategic investment approach, influencing and coordinating the actions of infrastructure providers and agreeing delivery priorities. • The issue of different Local plan timescales and horizons needs to be addressed. • Needed to address sub regional/cross boundary issues including minerals, waste climate change, ecological recovery, energy, logistics, blue and green infrastructure. • There aren't enough planners and not sufficient strategic planning experience and expertise – potential for roving/parachuting role for an expert group(s).

FOCUS GROUP 4 – Practitioners with experience in local, or sub-regional government

X16 planning practitioners from across a range of governmental bodies including local planning authorities, county councils and combined authorities.	**Headline themes** • Democratic accountability is important for hard decision making. • Strategic planning needs a national mandate and links to funding opportunities are powerful incentives. • Evidence availability (e.g. housing market areas) provides a strong steer and basis for geography and political buy-in, the bigger the area the more complicated it gets. • There are follow on advantages with a statutory plan such as conformity functions. • Provides a platform/focus for investment by both local and central Government. • A pragmatic approach is required rather mandating a new geography, use existing sub regional arrangements and what works best for that area. • A focus on outcomes could provide flexibility as to models and choice as to how to do strategic planning, particularly as part of a universal requirement. • Shared priorities and performance measures are important in driving collaboration. • There are significant financial savings that could be made with Local Plan production. • A strategic plan needs to be a very focussed document.

Appendix 6 – Strategic planning options

Strategic Planning Options	PROS	CONS
Part of the statutory development plan (e.g. spatial development strategy*)	Would have direct relationship with local plans as they would have to be 'in general conformity' with SP. Would help streamline local plans as no need to repeat strategic policies. Would provide the basis for planning decision-making where a local plan is out of date.	Would be restricted to matters that can be addressed through the 'Town and Country Planning' system. Would (potentially) be subject to a more detailed (legal) testing process and could therefore take longer to prepare.
Not part of the statutory development plan but with statutory status (e.g. like local transport plans or local nature recovery strategies)	Would have direct relationship with local plans and would be a material planning consideration (as long as this is clearly stablished in national policy/legislation). Would provide a potentially more flexible framework as would not be restricted to T&CP statutory requirements and therefore could include wider policy framework. Although likely to require some testing as part of statutory status, could be more 'light touch' and prepared on through a faster and more streamlined process.	Could not be used as the basis for planning decision-making in the absence of an up to date local plan. Impact on local plans and planning decisions more challengeable through law.
Non-statutory frameworks (with no formal statutory or policy status)	Would form part of the evidence base for local planning although the weight given to these could be significant if they were required by Government. Could be faster to prepare and more flexible and responsive to change.	Direct impact on local plans dependent on how it is used by LPA as no requirement to take into account. Could not be used as the basis for planning decision-making in the absence of an up to date local plan.
Non statutory framework but with national policy status (signed-off by Government e.g. Ox-Cam Arc Spatial Framework, Regional Planning Guidance)	Would form part of evidence for local plans and a material planning consideration – although non-statutory, would have same weight as national policy. Could be more flexible and responsive to change. Would provide a potentially more flexible framework as would not be restricted to T&CP statutory requirements and therefore could include wider policy framework. Although likely to require some testing as part of national policy process, could be more 'light touch' and prepared through a faster and more streamlined process. Could help derisk process as Government accountable body.	Could not be used as the basis for planning decision-making in the absence of an up to date local plan. Could result in less ownership from local planning authorities, with impact on implementation, especially if prepared by government (i.e. through civil service).

Research team biographies

Hannah Hickman, MRTPI	Hannah is a policy specialist and professional town planner with over 20 years' experience and a background in both the public and private sectors. She is currently Associate Professor of Planning Practice at the University of the West of England and was selected as The Planner's "Women of Influence 2022: Academia" in which she was highlighted as a "*go-to researcher*". Hannah has held senior-level roles in large organisations involving managing sizeable teams and budgets and advising senior managers and elected representatives. Before joining academia, she was Assistant Director of the Government Office for the South West, responsible for strategic planning, prior to which she was Deputy Director of the South West Regional Assembly. She is passionate about research informed practice, and practice informed research and is regularly invited to contribute to policy and practice debates, including as an expert witness to UK and Welsh Government Select Committees. She is an experienced qualitative researcher and project manager. Her most recent projects have included: the role of local planning authorities in delivering brownfield land (for the Planning Advisory Service in 2022); improving post-planning processes to deliver better places (for the West of England Combined Authority and winner of the 2021 RTPI Sir Peter Hall Award for Research Excellence); and project-hindsight: post-decision implementation (for the National Infrastructure Planning Association in 2023). Together with Professor Martin Boddy, she has co-authored a number of publications on the impact of the abolition of regional spatial strategies and subsequent attempts to re-introduce strategic planning.
Dr Stephen Hall	Dr Stephen Hall, Associate Professor of Urban and Regional Planning, has worked at the Faculty of Environment and Technology, University of the West of England Bristol, since 2009. He was previously Lecturer in Urban and Regional Economic Development at the Centre for Urban and Regional Studies (CURS) at the University of Birmingham, having completed his doctoral thesis on local economic policy there in November 1993. Dr Hall has two decades' experience of applied research and consultancy. His principal interests and expertise are in area regeneration policy in England. He has undertaken research for the Economic and Social Research Council, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Department for Communities and Local Government, Homes and Communities Agency, Local Government Association, European Commission, British Academy, British Council, Plan Urbanisme Construction Architecture (PUCA), Centre National des Recherches Scientifiques (CNRS) and has wide experience of evaluation of regeneration projects in different parts of England. Dr Hall has developed an international profile, including research, teaching, journal editorial roles, research council refereeing work, and keynote lectures to academic and practitioner audiences in Europe and beyond. He has been a member of the Urban and Rural Development Standing Review Panel of The Swedish Research Council FORMAS, has held a number of visiting positions at French universities, and contributes regularly to seminars organised by prestigious academic and practitioner networks in Europe. He has acted as a referee for a variety of international journals and has been a member of the editorial boards of Géocarrefour and Planning Practice and Research.
Dr Owain Hanmer	Owain joined the Centre for Sustainable Planning and Environments in August 2023. Owain's research is interested in processes of democratisation and participatory governance, focusing especially on the transformative potential of community development and public participation. Prior to this, Owain was working at Cardiff University on a large inter-disciplinary and multi-organisational project called Infuse (Innovative Future Public Services), a collaboration between Cardiff University, Nesta, and the 10 Local Authorities in the Cardiff Capital Region. Owain was the lead in the 'supportive communities' element of this project, delivering content and supporting practical experimentation in relation to community development and resilience in a knowledge exchange partnership. Before this, his PhD at the School of Geography and Planning (Cardiff University) focused on the governance of urban gardens as spaces of community action. He has also carried out research relating to the governance of the Communities First project in Wales (the Welsh Government's flagship anti-poverty programme which ended in 2017), and worked on a project for the Scottish Government on 'Implementing Healthy and Sustainable Catering in Scotland's Public Sector'. He is a qualitative researcher with experience in a number of methods, including in-depth interviews, focus groups, and ethnography.

Catriona Riddell FRTPI	Catriona is an independent consultant providing support on a wide range of spatial planning issues but focuses on strategic planning. Since starting her consultancy Catriona Riddell & Associates Ltd in 2011, Catriona has supported a large number of local authorities and partnerships across England, helping them develop their approaches to strategic planning and establishing new and governance arrangements to manage this. She has authored three major publications recently on the subject of strategic planning practice and decision-making on behalf of the County Council Network and has contributed to several other national studies. Previously Catriona was Director of Planning at the South East England Regional Assembly and was responsible for the South East England Regional Strategy (The South East Plan). Before that, Catriona was the Head of Strategic Planning at Surrey County Council, with responsibility for the Surrey Structure Plan. In 2022 Catriona was awarded an Honorary Doctorate from Oxford Brookes University for her services to Planning and was elected as a Fellow of the Royal Town Planning Institute. Catriona was also one of the Planner Magazine's Women of Influence in 2022, recognising her as "an intelligent, well-informed champion of strategic planning". Catriona is a Member of the RTPI's England Policy Committee, is Deputy Chair of the Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA) and Strategic Planning Specialist for the Planning Officers Society (POS). Catriona is also a regular guest lecturer on strategic planning at Oxford Brookes and Kent University Universities and is a judge on both the Planning Magazine and RTPI South East Awards.
Richard Wood MRTPI	Richard is an independent consultant and a chartered town planner. Since setting up Richard Wood Associates in 2016 Richard has provided a range of plan making and development planning support for individual and groups of local authorities. Strategic planning services have included the coordination and production of strategic spatial frameworks/plans, development strategies and infrastructure delivery plans. Richard has acted as a strategic planning advisor to local authorities for the Planning Advisory Service (PAS), supported the preparation of Local Plans and Joint Local Plans and contributed to the preparation of the RTPI 'Ambitions for the North, A spatial framework for people and places.' This consultancy practice has built on Richard's extensive strategic planning experience, which includes leading the production of the statutory Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) for Yorkshire and the Humber and the Joint Structure Plan for Hull and the East Riding. He has been a practicing strategic planner for over 25 years, working collaboratively with multiple stakeholders, politicians and officers. Richard has worked across the public, private and partnership sectors. Previous roles have included working for small and national multi-disciplinary consultancies, as a Chief Officer in Local Government and as Head of Strategy at a Regional Assembly. Richard's wider roles include being the inter professional lead on the Yorkshire RTPI Regional Activities Committee and a member of the TCPA Policy Council. He is a previous policy advisor and chair of RTPI Yorkshire.

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Section 3 endnotes

[64] Where this data was considered notable (e.g. the researchers considered a variation within the data significant), this is noted in the report.

[65] The researchers felt that it would have been methodologically problematic to get a single response per LPA, particularly since it would give undue authority to a single respondent as reflective of the experiences of multiple people within that LPA. As such, we hoped to also capture the subjective nature of these responses—recognising that people within the same LPA might have different responses (e.g. based on their job role).

[66] Qualtrics automatically records all responses to the survey and as such there are inconsistent numbers. We considered valid responses to be those where participants had completed a substantial part of the survey and filtered out responses that did not meet this threshold. There were drop offs and inconsistencies (e.g. skipping questions) throughout the survey. For example, not all 186 LPA respondents completed every question, and the sample size was 122 by the end of the survey. Out of the 166 non-LPA respondents, the sample size was 100 by the end of the survey. Such drop off in surveys is normal, and this analysis accounts for these inconsistencies without discarding the valuable data within the survey.

[67] Respondents were asked to rank factors on a scale from 5 = very important to 1 = not important.

[68] It should be noted that relatively low numbers of Combined Authority/Greater London Authority (5), London Borough (4), Metropolitan District (5), and Unitary Authority (met – 7) makes it difficult to make generalisations.

[69] As noted in the introduction, the small sample of Planning Officers and the large number of responses from Principal or Senior Planners and Directors / Senior managers / Team leaders should be noted.

[70] These were multiple-choice question which aimed to capture the broadest range and scope of statutory and non-statutory planning activities amongst respondents. The data is represented as a percentage of the total respondents, which provides an accurate representation when respondents might be involved in several of these activities. For example, 51% of LPA respondents working on joint-evidence work reflects that 95 out of 186 respondents ticked this response, and 23% of those involved in strategic plans reflects that 42 respondents ticked this response.

[71] Some of this data might have been skewed by several respondents from the same LPA – however, this does provide an overall picture of strategic planning in different regions.

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[76] Hull City Council were not originally part of the partnership, but invited in part-way through at request of East Riding Council and in light of the exploration of devolution geographies in the area.

[77] The early stages of the Strategic Framework, a YNYER spatial plan was developed which was essentially an amalgamation of existing local plans in order to develop a baseline at the sub-region level.

[78] However, the Strategic Framework was developed pre-pandemic and agreed in 2018, and its practical implementation was focused on the longer term (post-pandemic).