

UK 2070: Response of the Royal Town Planning Institute to the June 2019 paper “Fairer and Stronger”

The Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) champions the power of planning in creating prosperous places and vibrant communities. As learned society, we use our expertise and research to bring evidence and thought leadership to shape planning policies and thinking. As a professional body, we have over 25,000 members across all sectors, and are responsible for setting formal standards for planning practice and education.

The RTPI’s response is arranged around the 4 themes of the UK2070 report.

1 Effective Devolution within England

The RTPI has worked on this issue for some years now, starting with our *Planning Horizons* publication [Making Better Decisions for Places](#) in our centenary year 2014. This concluded that ensuring decisions are **made in the right places** is one part of the task of dealing effectively with twenty-first century issues. Ensuring that each level of governance is equipped to make and implement these decisions in the best way possible is also crucial. This means strengthening governance from at all levels from national to local level, so that once the appropriate level for making a decision has been identified, the relevant body can make and implement decisions effectively.

The planning profession is intimately concerned with place. In this it sits somewhat at odds with “sectoral” disciplines such as engineering and education. We do not simply mean “place” in the French sense of a “square” or what is called public realm. We mean all that goes to make up a city or town : the buildings, the movement of people and goods, the jobs, the health of people the education of all citizens.

Even considering just one aspect of this, which is getting more houses built, the requirement to coordinate investment in hard infrastructure such as roads and soft infrastructure such as the NHS, means that often the key barrier to delivery is different organisations pulling in different directions – all dancing to a tune set by national ministries.

With effective devolution it should be possible for a city or county leader to call all the relevant local organisations together to drive progress. But they can only do this if freed from central dictat.

We have given some thought to the specific proposals to create 4 provinces. Large regions on the 1994 model have had a chequered history and foundered partly due to their size and the difficulty of establishing an identity and common purpose. In our [Strategic Planning paper](#) (2015) we set out that we feel that there are reasons in England for cooperation between strategic planning areas at more or less county size (but not necessarily actual counties) . However we feel that the precondition for these to work effectively the foundations need to be right. This means establishing good systems at function economic

area/ county / met level . Creating provinces on top of the existing variable structures risks them having insufficient backing lower down.

There is also a question of priority. If the key priority is to ensure more and more central government spending is devolved – be it education, local transport, health – then concentrating on geographies likely to be able to deliver this could be regarded as the priority. And once these geographies have proved their worth as mini-governments, they can start to cooperate on a larger scale.

If the devolution agenda is limited to certain policy areas the potential dividend would be curtailed, as territories would still need to engage with central government in key areas which are interrelated. The success of devolution to Scotland Wales and Northern Ireland has derived from the fact that the governments there can *make choices* on how spending occurs within their nations. These choices may not be zero-sum: better urban planning means less spent on health in future.

Looking at Northern England in particular, the difficulties surrounding the “binding” of a pan Northern region should not be underestimated. Whatever the outcome of formal processes there is a clear role for informal arrangements. These could include strong voluntary non-statutory arrangements to deal with cross boundary matters . An example could be the IPPR/RTPI [Blueprint for a Great North Plan](#), published in 2016 is illustrative of how such initiatives can operate in practice. The GNP Steering Group which oversees the delivery of the Blueprint is beginning to deliver strands of work relevant to a subnational strategic spatial planning framework for the North. These include the recently published RTPI report [Ambitions for the North](#) .

That document has examined the possible role of a spatial vision for the North. Its purpose would be to guide the spatial strategies at functional area level, where we see the key value to be added. One key issue to be looked at in a pan Northern way is are **ports, logistics, airports**. Another focus is to ensure that benefits of growth in successful parts of the North are spread. The especial concern is around rural and coastal communities – whether visually attractive locations (which generate their own challenges) or places visited less by outsiders.

In order to build towards a renewed approach to spatial planning across the North, the *Ambitions* report recommends that a spatial strategy for each functional area should be developed, building on the recommendations of the National Infrastructure Commission for transport, employment and housing. These should be extended to encompass functional areas beyond the current Combined Authorities, in order that all areas are given the opportunity to produce plans that align development, housing and infrastructure plans with a strategic vision to deliver prosperity.

These spatial strategies should be supplemented by local connectivity plans to ensure the delivery of important connections from strategic transport to integrate these with growth opportunities and local communities.

2 Harnessing new and local economies

The excellent urban planner Professor Sir Peter Hall towards the end of his immensely productive life wrote a book on how continental European cities had reinvented the “lost art of urbanism”. This was not, as you might think, a book about *architecture*, it was a book

about how place-centred policy has made some continental cities among the world's best places to live all round. He specifically refers the role of *local* city based research institutes:

[In Germany there are] two great groups of scientific institutes: one belonging to the Max-Planck Gesellschaft, devoted to high-level basic scientific research; the other belonging to the Fraunhofer Society, with the mission of applying that research. The research institutes of the Max Planck Society, nearly eighty in number, with their budget of some EUR1.4 billion, and the sixty Fraunhofer Institutes, with a budget of some EUR1.65 billion and a payroll of 18,000 scientists and engineers, go a long way to explaining predominance and economic success

By contrast 46% of UK Research Council funding in is Oxford Cambridge and London.

There is another way to do this in a place-based manner in which all the key local sectors – education, council and business – pull together on mission-led development. For example in Kassel (Germany)

In 1970 the city took a fateful decision to found a new kind of university; a so-called *Gesamthochschule*...centred on new-style interdisciplinary projects based on practical examples which would bring both students and faculty into direct contact with political issues.... [Rather than see the city tram system closed down] transport experts in the university then began to develop a radical proposal ... to connect the tram system to the neighbouring towns...Economic success was not the central aim but ...the city's ranking [is] ... Germany's most dynamic city

[P Hall 2014 p 136]

The RTPI would strongly support the idea that research hubs can then be used to have urban planning benefits. We think the idea of MIT-North has a lot of potential. However we would be concerned that sufficient allowance must be made for exploiting the strengths and potential for research-led growth *outside England* . Alternatively organisations such as UKRI should be disbanded and their roles devolved to national governments.

The Great North Plan “Ambitions” report recommended the establishment of a Northern spatial planning observatory with open source data to provide a dedicated resource for “disconnected” communities to ensure they have access to best practice and process for both economic and spatial planning and improvement.

“Ambitions” also recommended the introduction of informal “place” based network for both Northern rural and coastal communities, often excluded from economic improvement and which contain the seat of much poverty and inequality. This network would be designed to foster collaboration and innovation in local spatial planning and policy delivery. Such a network would have as its prime capabilities to firstly, properly tackle “left behind places” and secondly, to address the declining skills and resources in Local Planning Authorities (see *Ambitions* report, recommendation 3.1). The report sets out the level of substantially reduced resource availability for Local Planning Authorities across the three UK Northern regions. This trend will need a reversing in order to achieve the ambitions set out in the Commission's work, along with that set out in the RTPI *Ambitions* report.

3 Aligning our Ambitions

Our work on [Map for England](#) in 2012, undertaken by the University of Manchester and kindly quoted by the 2070 report, drew attention to the 95 different plans of government departments, most of which have non declared an implicit implications for individual places – and whose combined impact in certain places is severe. The subsequent 7 years have not

seen much attempt to address this problem. We drew attention to some of the most glaring inconsistencies, such as concentrating housing growth in areas which had previously had a lot of housing growth but which are also likely to suffer exacerbated water shortage and increased marine and fluvial flooding.

A “Plan for England” is a good idea provided that it actually results in the alignment of a good proportion of those 95 plans we identified. The [Irish National Planning Framework](#) is a good example where the spatial plan was published alongside and as part of a [broad cross government strategy](#) for the nation which covers all key areas of government activity.

Although UK2070 is about “inequalities” a lot of its recommendations would also benefit from there being more economic growth in poorer regions, which is currently being held back by lack of coordinated activity at local level. We will be publishing work in July 2019 on overcoming barriers to infrastructure delivery in three city regions in Scotland and England.

4 UK Renewal Fund

We agree that the way in which investment is determined by the UK Government has serious shortcomings. In particular we agree that

“the use of cost benefit analysis for evaluating alternative courses of action is suitable for individual projects with local impacts. It is unsound when dealing with projects which are part of a programme with widespread and long-term impacts.”

Also, the Treasury model has continually hampered economic growth by assuming that any investment in infrastructure merely moves growth around, but does not add to growth. This extraordinary system (in place for decades) needs to be dropped.

The proposals for the UK Renewal fund will work towards correcting the damage brought about by unsatisfactory methodology. In particular it is proposed that funding must be consistent with national and subnational spatial frameworks. It will also go some way to filling the gap created by the loss of EU funding. It would be useful to clarify if it is intended to apply to the whole UK.

Implementation

A Key concern of ours is that whilst spatial inequalities have persisted for a long time, and the need for strategic planning is well known among practitioners and academics in this field, the big barrier to achieving progress has always been lack of public support. The only test of devolution was the North East referendum and it was easily influenced by vested interests keen to play up the claimed costs of more government and down play the benefits. Current polling for greater powers at local level in England continues to show little support, despite calls for more “control”. The key focus for the Commission in our view should be to set out a campaigning strategy which will have traction in political circles.

The time does seem to be right, as on 10 June major Northern papers carried a campaign calling for more freedom for the North: [Power up the North](#). Evidence is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for change.