



# town & country planning

The Journal of the Town and Country Planning Association  
November/December 2020

Vol. 89 • No. 11/12

- **Special Section: The UK2070 Commission and rebalancing the UK economy**
- **Robin Hambleton on regrounding policy in caring for people and the planet**
- **Gavin Parker, Matthew Wargent and Emma Street on reasserting the value of planning and planners**

## information and subscriptions



**tcpa**

**Town & Country Planning**  
**The Journal of the**  
**Town and Country Planning Association**

ISSN 0040-9960 Published monthly  
November/December 2020 • Volume 89 • Number 11/12

Town & Country Planning is the Journal of the Town and Country Planning Association, a Company Limited by Guarantee. Registered in England under No. 146309. Registered Charity No. 214348  
Copyright © TCPA and the authors, 2020

The TCPA may not agree with opinions expressed in Town & Country Planning but encourages publication as a matter of interest and debate. Nothing printed may be construed as representative of TCPA policy or opinion unless so stated.

**Editorial and Subscriptions Office:**

Town and Country Planning Association  
17 Carlton House Terrace  
London SW1Y 5AS  
t: +44 (0)20 7930 8903

Editorial: Nick.Matthews@tcpa.org.uk

Subscriptions: tcpa@tcpa.org.uk

Editor: Nick Matthews

**Contributions:** Articles for consideration are welcome. Material should be submitted to the Editor, preferably by e-mail and in Word-readable form. Reproduction-quality illustrations are welcome.

**Advertising:** Rates (not including VAT): Full page £800. Inserts from £400 (weight-dependent). Half page £400. Quarter page £300. Ten per cent reduction for agents.

**Subscriptions:** £125 in the UK; £152 overseas.

Subscription orders and inquiries should be addressed to: Subscriptions, TCPA, 17 Carlton House Terrace, London SW1Y 5AS

t: +44 (0)20 7930 8903

e: tcpa@tcpa.org.uk

Payment with order. All cheques should be made payable on a UK bank. Payment may be made by transfer to: The Bank of Scotland (account number 00554249, sort code 12-11-03). MasterCard and Visa accepted.

Town & Country Planning is also available through TCPA membership. See the TCPA website, at [www.tcpa.org.uk](http://www.tcpa.org.uk), for membership rates, or e-mail [membership@tcpa.org.uk](mailto:membership@tcpa.org.uk) for details.

TCPA membership benefits include:

- a subscription to Town & Country Planning;
- discounted fees for TCPA events and conferences;
- opportunities to become involved in policy-making;
- a monthly e-bulletin;
- access to the members area on the TCPA website.

Printed by RAP Spiderweb Ltd, Clowes Street, Oldham OL9 7LY

Printed with vegetable-based inks on chlorine-free paper from sustainably managed sources.

# contents

Town & Country Planning

November/December 2020 ● Vol. 89 ● No. 11/12

## regulars

- 358 **On the Agenda**  
**Fiona Howie:**  
In search of holistic and inclusive planning reform
- 360 **Talking Houses**  
**Becky Tunstall:**  
Black housing matters – has it improved over time?
- 362 **Off the Rails**  
**Robin Hickman:**  
Are we really still just predicting and providing?
- 425 **Going Local**  
**David Boyle:**  
Towards an antidote to the McDonaldisation of planning
- 426 **Earth Rights**  
**Martin Stott:**  
Will we be remembered as ‘good ancestors’?
- 428 **Letter from Languedoc**  
**Graeme Bell**
- IBC **Inside America**  
**Michael Teitz:**  
Coming to terms with climate change

Special Section on the UK2070 Commission and Rebalancing the UK Economy, pages 384-424.  
Cover illustration by Clifford Harper.  
chcliffordharper@gmail.com

## features

- 366 **COVID-19 opens a new political window**  
**Robin Hambleton** on possibilities for a better future
- 371 **Planning by gaslight – on reforms, skills and political work in planning**  
**Gavin Parker, Matthew Wargent and Emma Street** on what it means to be a planner today
- 374 **Planning for large-scale growth – so where does the White Paper take us?**  
**Rob Smith** on strategic large-scale growth and the Planning White Paper
- 377 **How planning can deliver better water management**  
**Peter Bide and Andrew Coleman** on new water management guidance for planners
- Special Section: The UK2070 Commission and Rebalancing the UK Economy**
- 384 **Go big or go home...**  
**Bob Kerslake** on the UK2070 Commission’s work and spatial planning’s role in ‘levelling up’
- 387 **Brexit, COVID-19 and ‘levelling up’ – where are we?**  
**Philip McCann** on addressing major regional economic imbalances in the face of Brexit and COVID-19
- 391 **‘Levelling up’ – the case of Eastern Germany, post-1990**  
**Thomas B Fischer** on lessons from German unification
- 396 **The case for an ‘MIT’ for the North**  
**Stephen Nicol and Ian Wray** on increasing investment in R&D in the North through a major new centre for science and technology
- 404 **Transport across the UK – the required revolution**  
**Jim Steer** on a national public transport system that supports both ‘levelling up’ and net-zero carbon
- 409 **Decentralising governance in England**  
**Andy Pike, Mike Coombes, Louise Kempton, Danny MacKinnon and Peter O’Brien** on decentralising governance in England
- 417 **Two masters – the dilemma of central-local relations in England**  
**Mark Sandford** on central-local government relations

# in search of holistic and inclusive planning reform



Although the consultation period has come to an end, the Planning White Paper inevitably remains a hot topic of conversation. We await formal confirmation from the government about its next steps. But, in early October, in the context of encouraging local authorities to continue developing Local Plans and supporting the development of Neighbourhood Plans, the new Chief Planner, Joanna Averley, wrote:

*'There will be a period of policy development after the receipt of the responses to the White Paper. This will in turn be followed by the preparation and progress of any legislation required to implement the planning reforms. This will take some time and it's therefore important that local areas have a plan in place. As part of the detailed design of the reforms a suitable transition period from approved to new local plans will be implemented.'*<sup>1</sup>

The TCPA has been clear since the publication of the Final Report of the Raynsford Review in late 2018 that there is a need to reform and improve the planning system. Some changes are needed urgently – specifically the need to make sure that the planning system has climate change at its heart. But in our response to the Planning White Paper we encouraged government to make sure that it gets any major reform right. Because planning is too important a tool to get wrong.

Alongside our detailed response to the White Paper,<sup>2</sup> we also published *Common Ground: A Shared Vision for Planning Reform*.<sup>3</sup> This short, new report aims to set out an alternative vision for reform of the planning system, focused on democracy, climate change, and housing delivery. To achieve that it sets out six reform priorities to establish a system fit to tackle the health, housing and climate crises:

- **a statutory purpose for planning** – so that the planning system has a clear, ambitious and shared objective that sets our nation on a pathway to a sustainable future;

- **building public trust** – through a system that is democratically accountable and genuinely participative;
- **minimum standards for homes and communities** – adopted by government to deliver homes and communities that support people's health and wellbeing;
- **strategic co-operation** – as argued by the UK2070 Commission, we need a system that can effectively co-ordinate development and enable local action;
- **a focus on practical delivery** – because too often a planning consent is regarded as an end-point, not the start of a delivery process and a tool to facilitate investment; and
- **sharing development values** – because harnessing and sharing the profits of development is at the heart of building successful places.

We will continue to make the case with decision-makers for these priorities, and on the need for any planning reform to be truly holistic. Because we are concerned that if these points are not adequately addressed we will go through the upheaval of reforming the system but be left with a system that is still not fit for the future. But, as highlighted by Joanna Averley, in the meantime, we must also continue to work with the system we have.

A theme in the Planning White Paper was the importance of working to engage more people with the development of Local Plans. This, of course, is a priority for many local authorities, regardless of the reform agenda, and isn't new. The TCPA's annual Frederic J Osborn Memorial Lecture – held in October and kindly supported by the Lady Margaret Paterson Osborn Trust and Social – was delivered by the Westminster government's former Chief Planner, Steve Quartermain.<sup>4</sup> In his lecture Steve quoted John Burns, the promoter of the Housing and Planning Bill in 1909, who urged the House of Commons 'not to lose this opportunity of giving communities, especially growing and industrial communities, the opportunity of consciously shaping their own development in a better way than has occurred in the past'.

While it isn't a new theme, I hope the emphasis is now on 'how' rather than 'if' we need to try to engage more people in planning, because, despite examples of high levels of responses to local consultations,<sup>5</sup> we know that there are some groups



# black housing matters – has it improved over time?



Housing matters; and housing inequalities matter. What are the key trends here?

A decade ago, in 2008, households in England with a Black, Asian or minority ethnic (BAME) 'household reference person'<sup>1</sup> were slightly more likely than White-headed households to be in homes free from any housing health and safety hazard, such as a risk of falls, excess cold, or damp. Their homes were slightly more likely to have the highest A-C energy efficiency ratings, central heating and the then relatively new combi boilers. On the other hand, BAME-headed households were slightly more likely to be in homes that failed the Decent Homes standard. They were much more likely to be overcrowded: over the period 2004/05-2006/07, 11% of BAME-headed households were overcrowded, compared with 2% of White-headed households – a very marked inequality.<sup>2</sup>

BAME-headed households were also much less likely to be satisfied with their homes: in 2008/09, 78% were satisfied, compared with 92% for White-headed households.

Demographics, class, employment, tenure, location and other factors intersect with ethnicity and provide part of the explanation for these ethnic differences.

Over the past decade, access to good-quality homes has improved. This is an under-appreciated housing good news story for England, achieved despite austerity and limited growth in real incomes. Over 2008-2018, the proportion of homes in England that met the Decent Homes standard rose from 67% to 83%. The proportion of homes with no health and safety hazard rose from 78% to 90%. The proportion with central heating nudged up from 90% to 93%, and the proportion with the highest energy efficiency rating increased from 11% to 35%. However, at the end of the decade, rates of overcrowding and rates of satisfaction with the home remained unchanged from the beginning, at 2% and 91%, respectively.

BAME-headed households gained from improvements during 2008-2018, and inequality decreased for some measures, a case of levelling up.

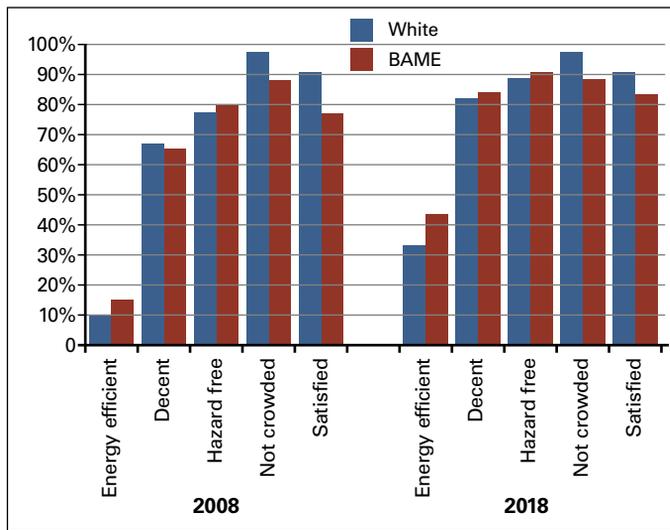
In 2018, BAME-headed households were both absolutely and relatively more likely compared with White-headed households to be in the most energy-efficient homes. They remained very slightly ahead on access to hazard-free homes. They had fallen slightly behind on central heating, but retained a slight lead on access to combi boilers. By 2016/17-2018/19, there had been no progress either on the proportion of BAME-headed households experiencing overcrowding or on inequality between BAME and White groups: the figures were exactly the same as 12 years before, at 11% and 2% of households, respectively. However, by 2018/19, the proportion of BAME household heads who were satisfied with their homes had grown to 84%, markedly reducing the inequality with the figure for White-headed households (see Fig. 1).

Of course, lumping all BAME-headed households in one group conceals significant variations. Households with a Pakistani or Bangladeshi head were worst off among the BAME group on many measures. Similarly, the large White-headed household group also contains considerable variation.

Housing tenure is another aspect of housing conditions. Home-ownership, the tenure most favoured by public and politicians, and the only one that allows residents to build wealth, has been in constant decline for more than a decade. Mortgaged home-ownership peaked in 1995, and home-ownership overall in 2004. However, this process has not exacerbated ethnic inequality – instead, there has been a modest reduction in inequality in access to home-ownership, a case of levelling down.

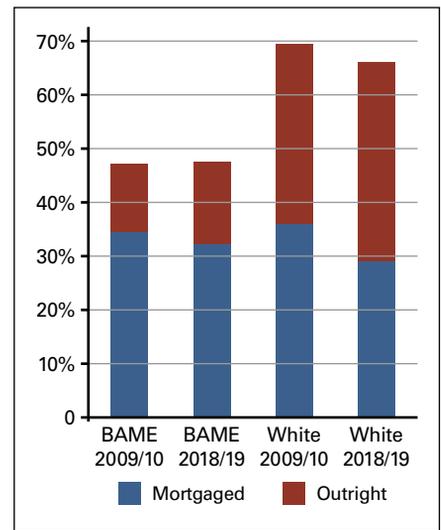
In 2009/00, only 47% of BAME-headed households were home-owners. This was very different from the 70% figure for households with a White head. However, most of the disparity was accounted for by the very big gap in rates of outright ownership – 13% of BAME-headed households were outright owners, compared with 34% for White-headed households.

Outright ownership is usually achieved in later life through paying off a mortgage, based on earnings over past decades. The 2011 Census showed that 35% of the total English population but just 15% of BAME people were from the right generation to have paid off a 25- or 30-year mortgage, aged 50 or more. Mortgaged home-ownership, dependent on current income and ability to borrow, is perhaps a better measure of contemporary opportunities: 34%



**Fig. 1** Proportion of households in homes with different quality characteristics in England, 2008 and 2018, by ethnic category of household reference person

Sources: *Housing in England in 2008-09*. Department for Communities and Local Government, 2010; English Housing Survey Live Tables; and *Overcrowded Households*. Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Sept. 2020



**Fig. 2** Proportion of households in home-ownership in England, 2009/10 and 2018/19, by ethnic category of household reference person

Source: *Housing in England in 2008-09*. Department for Communities and Local Government, 2010; and English Housing Survey Live Tables

of BAME-headed households were mortgaged home-owners, compared with 36% of White-headed households (see Fig. 2).

The most recent data are for 2018/19. They show that the rate of ownership for BAME-headed households had increased very slightly, from 47% to 48%, while the proportion of White-headed households who were owners had decreased, from 70% to 66%. This represents a reduction in inequality between ethnic groups. Mortgaged home-ownership had reduced overall and for both groups. For BAME-headed households it reduced slightly, from 34% to 32%, but for White-headed households it fell faster and further, from 36% to 29%, which meant that, by 2018/19, ethnic-minority-headed households had higher rates of mortgaged home-ownership than White-headed households. Meanwhile, as both groups aged, outright home-ownership grew slightly, from 13% to 16% for BAME-headed households, and from 34% to 37% for White-headed households.

Despite the fact they were probably the least-advantaged households in terms of employment and income, in 2009/10 it was Pakistani/Bangladeshi-headed households that had the highest rates of mortgaged ownership, at 45%. They were followed by the generally more advantaged Indian and White groups, at 42% and 36%, respectively, and then by other and Black groups, at 32% and 27%, respectively. By 2018/19 rates had fallen for every group except

Indian-headed households. Rates for Pakistani-/ Bangladeshi-headed households had fallen furthest, to 38%. There were also income and class effects which interacted with ethnicity. Both in 2008/09 and in 2018/19 fewer than 15% of households with a mortgage had incomes in the lowest two-fifths.

In summary, by several measures of quality, BAME-headed households had the same or better chances of good-quality housing as White-headed households, even a decade ago. The last decade has seen improvements in housing conditions, which BAME- and White-headed households have shared. However, important differences remain – between BAME groups and the majority White population, between BAME groups, and within the White population. In particular, rates of overcrowding remain three times higher for BAME-headed households than for White-headed households. There has been a period of levelling up for BAME-headed households in terms of quality, but reductions in inequality in access to home-ownership are the results of levelling down.

● **Becky Tunstall** is Joseph Rowntree Professor Emerita of Housing Policy at the Centre for Housing Policy, University of York. The views expressed are personal.

**Notes**

- 1 Similar to the household head
- 2 On overcrowding, multiple years of data need to be combined because of small numbers

# are we really still just predicting and providing?



Inspired by the last issue of *Town & Country Planning* and some of the critical commentary on the Planning White Paper,<sup>1</sup> I consider in this article the latest government policy papers on transport planning. Here, we have two recent intriguing documents: *Road Investment Strategy 2, 2020-2025* (RIS2)<sup>2</sup> and *Decarbonising Transport*.<sup>3</sup>

We can all see that the UK Government is taking incompetence to new levels across multiple dimensions. A prime example is the Planning White Paper – a vacuous assault on the planning system, driven largely by ignorance of the rationale and potential for urban planning. It involves a simplistic ideological drive to reduce public intervention (see Tim Marshall's article in the September/October issue of *Town & Country Planning*<sup>4</sup>), a favouring of private financial interests over public, and a brazen misunderstanding of the operation of alternative approaches to planning development, such as zoning (see Richard Wakeford's article in the same issue<sup>5</sup>). All of this wrapped up as making the system simpler, faster, and more predictable – 'cutting red tape, not standards' – and giving us more housing.

I would like to consider the transport elements of the Planning White Paper and write a critical riposte – however, transport does not even get a mention, apart from a commitment to revise the *Manual for Streets* (on page 46). It is as if the originators of the Planning White Paper do not realise that urban and transport planning are integrally intertwined. If we have no transport strategy, and do not locate urban development in areas of good public transport accessibility, then even internally well designed development will be car-dependent. I will overlook the wider machinations of Brexit, the response to the Coronavirus epidemic and even the supposed 'Levelling up' agenda, as if these are incidental.

Instead, let's initially consider RIS2. The first words of the Ministerial foreword from Grant Shapps MP and Baroness Vere of Norbiton suggest, promisingly, that 'This Road Investment Strategy is not a blueprint

for pouring concrete, laying tarmac or welding steel.' But the strategy then goes on to give details on the expansion of highway capacity to be 'future ready', with a planned £27.4 billion investment in motorways, A-roads, and major local routes. RIS2 is a five-year programme for highway investment, including such luminous projects as the Lower Thames Crossing and multiple route widenings and junction upgrades. Schemes to be developed 'in the pipeline' include a Trans-Pennine Tunnel and the Oxford to Cambridge Expressway. OMG – some of these have been continuously rejected for decades, and others will hopefully remain mere pipe-dreams.

The strategy states that the value of individual journeys on the network:

*'combine to deliver extensive benefits, without which life in the UK would be fundamentally poorer, for example:*

- *Facilitating economic growth and international trade ...*
- *Helping people to choose where they want to live and work, in both rural and urban areas, giving [...] a greater chance of enjoying a fulfilling life with friends and family.'*

A failing network that lacks capacity will apparently 'limit what people can achieve'. Hence Highways England has really got its act together, making the case for huge investment, associating road capacity with much positive phraseology – with very little evidence for the associations being made. I do not get any of this from my trips on the M25.

The strategy suggests that 'not all the issues facing the [strategic road network] can be solved in any single RIS'. Indeed, RIS2 follows RIS1, which invested £17 billion on highway schemes from 2015 to 2020. Hence there is an ongoing programme planned: receipts from vehicle excise duty are being diverted into a National Roads Fund, and this allows investment to continue over decades. Traffic growth is projected to rise in *Road Traffic Forecasts 2018*,<sup>6</sup> which is seen as 'strong and positive in all scenarios', in which traffic growth on the strategic road network ranges between 29% and 59% by 2050. This is driving (literally) the demand for new road capacity.

The commentary in RIS2 on electric, and even autonomous, vehicles is also carefully crafted. New technologies may change the composition of the

Kathy @zenitarka / Unsplash



**The government is pursuing a massive roads investment strategy as a fundamental element of its transport policy**

fleet, but not the increasing demand for vehicles. Hence Highways England is saved – we will need more road capacity as vehicle numbers increase; it's just that the vehicles will be clean. The number of people killed or seriously injured on the strategic road network is reported favourably to have fallen by 6% from 2015 to 2018, and now there are 'only' 2,000 people killed or seriously injured in each year. As we build more road capacity to support increased mobility, the premise is that we will overlook the still horrendous casualty figures and the adverse impact of vehicles on urban areas.

RIS2 is the 'largest ever' roads programme, according to Chancellor Rishi Sunak. I assume that he thinks this is a positive feature – lots of money + roadbuilding = good; and the more the better: if we can spend more than previous generations or other countries, then we really are leading the world. These plans surpass even those set out in *Roads for Prosperity*,<sup>7</sup> the infamous 1989 White Paper from the Thatcher government, billed as the largest roadbuilding programme for the UK since the Romans – with 500 road schemes at a cost of £23 billion. The programme included schemes such as the M25 and M1 widenings, the M3 Twyford Down extension, and the Newbury bypass. Many of these projects were hugely controversial among environmental activists and local communities, but most were still built, even if subject to delays.

Subsequent debates on induced traffic, disappearing traffic and the need for more balanced, integrated transport strategies, including investment in public transport, have been forgotten. Again, the government is pursuing a massive roads strategy. It is aiming for a 'smoother, smarter, sustainable' strategic road network, and few seem to have noticed.

The problem is that, at the same time, we have a climate crisis – and transport is the one sector not contributing to a reduction in carbon dioxide emissions. The government recognises this, of course, and is

preparing a 'Transport Decarbonisation Plan', due to be published sometime in the remainder of 2020. This was preceded by the publication of *Decarbonising Transport: Setting the Challenge*,<sup>3</sup> which consulted on the context and challenges being faced. In his foreword to this document, Transport Secretary Grant Shapps says that 'public transport and active travel will be the natural first choice for our daily activities. We will use our cars less ...'. Most tellingly, he says that 'from motorcycles to HGVs, all road vehicles will be zero emission' – and 'we will lead the development of sustainable biofuels, hybrid and electric aircraft to lessen and remove the impact of aviation [and shipping] on the environment by 2050'.

There are six strategic priorities, which are largely as you might imagine. They cover mode shift, decarbonising freight, decarbonising road vehicles, place-based solutions, technology, and international air and shipping. But, really, the strategy is reliant on cleaning the vehicle fleet, while doing little to change travel behaviours. Again, the government is saying that we can maintain our mobility patterns, as long as we travel in cleaner ways – this will solve the climate problem.

The planned investment in public transport, walking and cycling and urban planning is much too unambitious – some new zero-emission buses, £350 million for cycling, and little else. The UK is put forward as a global leader in low-emission vehicles, with more than 750,000 electric or hybrid vehicles.<sup>8</sup> But the document fails to mention that there are over 40 million vehicles in Great Britain, including over 20 million petrol-fuelled cars.<sup>9</sup> The rate of take-up of low-emission vehicles is much too slow, and the number in use is, as yet, fairly insignificant. Carbon dioxide emissions from vehicular travel are actually rising as people are buying larger vehicles.

Much of the document is therefore (ironically) little more than hot air, and certainly inconsistent with very significant road-building plans. There is a tendency



**Global case studies in sustainable urban mobility - what can we learn from them?**

to adopt the rhetoric of sustainable mobility, but then simply invest in highway infrastructure and overlook the other modes. The responsibility for reducing carbon dioxide emissions is pushed towards individual behaviours and supposed choice – ignoring the more fundamental role that governments can play. There are societal structures in place that mean people cannot yet choose to use public transport, walking or cycling in most locations across the UK. There is no effective rail or light rail in most urban areas, and even less so in the surrounding regions; the bus system has been consistently eroded over decades through privatisation; there are few high-quality, segregated cycle networks; and urban development is dispersed to locations where public transport accessibility is poor.

The public are not involved in the decision-making process, and indeed often are not prepared to support sustainable travel options and restrictions on traffic, such is the lack of awareness and debate. There is a huge task here if we are to achieve sustainable travel behaviours, and we are not even near starting on it. The Transport Decarbonisation Plan is unlikely to offer the range of public transport, walking and cycling infrastructure and traffic demand management measures required – and the Planning White Paper will not help in shaping a compact, polycentric built environment.

Grant Shapps gloats that the UK is the first major global economy to adopt 'net-zero' greenhouse gas

emissions by 2050. But there is no plan to achieve this aim. The government is showing a heady mixture of ideology and ignorance – a sophomoric strategy that will not help to achieve sustainable urban mobility.

To take a very different approach, beyond the jingoism, we have been preparing an online course on sustainable urban mobility, developed by UCL (University College London) and the Transformative Urban Mobility Initiative at Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technischer Zusammenarbeit (GIZ). This examines global, progressive good practice in sustainable urban mobility, in an attempt to learn from the implementation of sustainable transport projects and think through a better decision-making process for transport planning. Our intended audience is transport practitioners and wider interested actors in the Global South, so that knowledge can be disseminated and learnt from elsewhere more easily. We explore many innovative urban transport projects (in locations shown in the map above).

There is much to be learnt from this fascinating practice abroad – ranging from cycling and urban development in Utrecht and Freiburg, through traffic demand management in Rio de Janeiro, bus rapid transit in Bogotá and Guangzhou, electric buses in Shenzhen and Medellín, to participatory planning in Madrid. All offer lessons for more progressive practice in the UK – many of these cities are taking away road capacity and investing massively in public

transport, walking, and cycling. In comparison, the UK's transport systems are woefully inadequate – it takes years to build even average projects. We do not usually allow effective participation in developing projects. If we do, the public struggle to engage as they are not aware of the public policy challenges that we face, or at least they do not relate these to their own lives.

We should be developing a process for participatory and deliberative transport planning, alongside a strengthened urban planning regime – this is what we learn from the progressive transport planning under way internationally.

● **Robin Hickman** is Professor at the Bartlett School of Planning, University College London. He is Director of the MSc in Transport & City Planning. e: [r.hickman@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:r.hickman@ucl.ac.uk). The views expressed are personal. Thanks are due to the Transformative Urban Mobility Initiative (see [www.transformative-mobility.org](http://www.transformative-mobility.org)) and Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technischer Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) (the German overseas funding agency) for funding the e-learning course on sustainable urban mobility – part 1 ran from Monday 2 November 2020 and part 2, 'Components of transport planning for sustainable cities', starts on 11 January 2021 (see [www.futurelearn.com/courses/introducing-sustainable-urban-mobility](http://www.futurelearn.com/courses/introducing-sustainable-urban-mobility)).

### Notes

- 1 *Planning for the Future*. White Paper. Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Aug. 2020. [www.gov.uk/government/consultations/planning-for-the-future](http://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/planning-for-the-future)
- 2 *Road Investment Strategy 2: 2020-2025*. Policy Paper. Department for Transport, Mar. 2020. [www.gov.uk/government/publications/road-investment-strategy-2-ris2-2020-to-2025](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/road-investment-strategy-2-ris2-2020-to-2025)
- 3 *Decarbonising Transport: Setting the Challenge*. Department for Transport, Mar. 2020. [www.gov.uk/government/publications/creating-the-transport-decarbonisation-plan](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/creating-the-transport-decarbonisation-plan)
- 4 T Marshall: 'The White Paper's ideological core'. *Town & Country Planning*, 2020, Vol. 89, Sept./Oct., 304-06
- 5 R Wakeford: 'To zone, or not to zone; is that the question?'. *Town & Country Planning*, 2020, Vol. 89, Sept./Oct., 320-23
- 6 *Road Traffic Forecasts 2018*. Department for Transport, Sept. 2018. [www.gov.uk/government/publications/road-traffic-forecasts-2018](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/road-traffic-forecasts-2018)
- 7 *Roads for Prosperity*. Cm 693. White Paper. Department of Transport, May 1989
- 8 'Vehicle ownership in the UK surpasses 40 million, with many still on the roads supporting nationwide coronavirus response'. *SMMT News*, 21 Apr. 2020. [www.smmt.co.uk/2020/04/vehicle-ownership-in-the-uk-surpasses-40-million-with-many-still-on-the-roads-supporting-nationwide-coronavirus-response/](http://www.smmt.co.uk/2020/04/vehicle-ownership-in-the-uk-surpasses-40-million-with-many-still-on-the-roads-supporting-nationwide-coronavirus-response/)
- 9 T Shale-Hester: 'UK vehicle ownership passes 40 million mark'. *Auto Express*, 21 Apr. 2020. [www.autoexpress.co.uk/news/352086/uk-vehicle-ownership-passes-40-million-mark](http://www.autoexpress.co.uk/news/352086/uk-vehicle-ownership-passes-40-million-mark)

Anthony Collins  
solicitors

# CREATING GREAT OUTCOMES FOR COMMUNITIES

We can help you  
to find long-term  
planning and  
stewardship  
solutions.  
If you want to  
explore this,  
please get in touch.

contact

David Alcock

0121 212 7431

[david.alcock@anthonicollins.com](mailto:david.alcock@anthonicollins.com)

Birmingham | Manchester  
[anthonicollins.com](http://anthonicollins.com) | @ACSLLP

# COVID-19 opens a new political window

**As well as causing appalling suffering and misery, the COVID-19 pandemic is also opening up new possibilities for the future, says Robin Hambleton**

All praise to the TCPA for orchestrating, in two recent publications and in the September-October issue of *Town & Country Planning*,<sup>1</sup> such thoughtful responses, at great speed, to the government's misguided 2020 White Paper, *Planning for the Future*.<sup>2</sup> These contributions have not just provided incisive analysis of the fundamental flaws in the White Paper, but have also offered an alternative vision for reform – one that is designed to respond to the climate change emergency, deliver good-quality housing, address social and economic inequality, and revitalise local democracy.

Several writers in these pages have rightly drawn attention to the ideological underpinnings of the unwise White Paper proposals. For example, Tim Marshall explains how the proposals stem from the wish of some figures in the Conservative government to bring about a fundamental shift of the planning system towards a much more liberalised form, one that involves a dramatic erosion of democratic control of decision-making relating to urban development and local place-shaping.<sup>3</sup>

In this article I suggest that the government's approach, not just to planning, but to public policy in general, is continuing to disregard the way in which the COVID-19 pandemic has altered public perceptions of what most citizens now expect from the state in modern society. This seismic shift, which partly explains the decision of US citizens, in November 2020, to reject right-wing incumbent President Donald Trump and elect Joe Biden, the collegial Democratic candidate, has already altered the political and public policy landscape.

## **Understanding the impact of COVID-19**

An uplifting feature of the way that communities have responded to the COVID-19 calamity has been the spectacular expansion of self-organising

community groups working at neighbourhood or village level to help the vulnerable and the needy.

Across the world we encounter heart-warming stories of how local communities have responded with great imagination to the disruption of local food supply chains, taken steps to protect the most vulnerable in society, and are continuing to engage in all manner of creative, community problem-solving activities at the local or hyper-local level.

Rutger Bregman, in his magisterial analysis of human nature, *Humankind: A Hopeful History*, explains that this is no accident.<sup>4</sup> Contrary to right-wing ideology, close examination of early human history reveals that people are not selfish, but compassionate. Bregman sets out, in breathtaking detail, how hunter-gatherers realised that everything is connected:

*'They saw themselves as a part of something much bigger, linked to all other animals, plants and Mother Earth. Perhaps they understood the human condition better than we do today.'*<sup>5</sup>

The experience of living with, and responding to, the COVID-19 disease has taught us, if more evidence were needed, that we are all inter-dependent, that we can make each other sick, and that we can try to make each other well.

It follows that the mindset that asks *'What's in it for me?'* – a way of thinking that came to influence British public policy in the 1980s – is a misguided way of viewing the prospects for society. COVID-19, a brutal teacher, reminds us that, as our forebears of 30,000 years ago knew all too well, the central question confronting modern societies is not *'What's in it for me?'*, but *'How do we solve these problems together?'*



Clifford Harper

**A useful measure of governmental performance can be developed by focusing on the concept of caring for others and for the planet**

**Adopting an international perspective**

It is useful to examine international examples of effective planning and civic leadership, as this can enhance our understanding of how to introduce progressive thinking into post-COVID-19 recovery strategies here in the UK.

In my new book, *Cities and Communities Beyond COVID-19*,<sup>6</sup> I provide examples of inspirational community leadership from around the world and, just as important, new thinking tools that can help planners and other civic leaders co-create imaginative solutions.

Modern societies face fiendishly complex challenges. The threat to public health presented by COVID-19 is only one element. Civic leaders now need to address four major challenges at once:

- the COVID-19 health emergency;
- a sharp, pandemic-induced economic downturn;
- the climate change emergency; and
- the disastrous growth in social and economic inequality in many countries.

The good news is that many cities and localities are already doing just this. Allow me to offer a



**Freiburg, where civic leadership is collaborative and community based**

couple of examples. Take Copenhagen, a city already recognised as the healthiest capital in Europe.<sup>7</sup> Lord Mayor Frank Jensen and his colleagues are now aiming for the city to be the world's first carbon-neutral capital in 2025 – yes, that's in five years.

Interestingly, the city is promoting cycling as an effective way of responding to the COVID-19 emergency. The political leaders know that, while the city already has more bicycles than cars, much more can be done. Their strategy recognises that cyclists incur a lower risk of infection and that promoting cycling is a good strategy for reducing obesity levels in the population.

Freiburg, Germany's southernmost city, has established itself as a world leader in good city planning and urban design.<sup>8</sup> As in Copenhagen, citizen participation in decision-making is highly developed, and this promotes an approach to civic leadership that is both collaborative and community based. The *Freiburg hält zusammen* (Freiburg holds together) digital network, launched in April, bundles together numerous citizen-oriented information services and activities designed to help local people recover from the COVID-19 calamity.

### **The Bristol One City Approach**

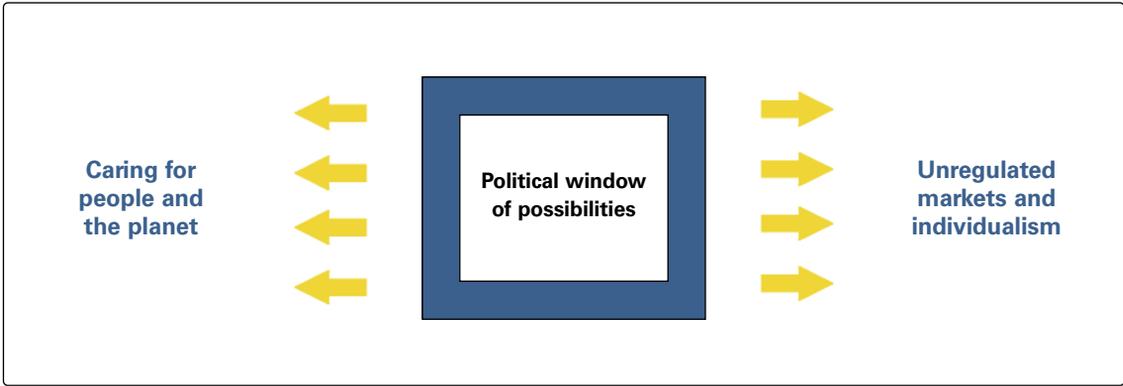
Over the last four years Bristol has developed a truly innovative One City Approach to urban problem-solving.<sup>9</sup> Instigated by Mayor Marvin Rees in 2016,

this inclusive way of governing, orchestrated by a small city office, has built trust, strengthened the civic capacity of the city, and led to the co-creation of a One City Plan, setting out a 30-year strategy for the city. This approach has brought into being what Mayor Rees describes as 'a readiness to move'.

This readiness has enabled civic leaders from the public sector, business community, trade unions, third sector, universities and others to interact effectively right through the lockdown, and new strategies have been co-created – for example, the innovative Bristol One City Economic Recovery and Renewal Strategy launched in October 2020.<sup>10</sup>

Interestingly Bristol's One City Plan commits the city to a vision of freedom from racism and prejudice. The toppling of the statue of Edward Colston, a prolific slave trader, during a Black Lives Matter protest on 7 June 2020 heightened awareness of Bristol's complex relationships with race. Mayor Rees, probably the first leader of a European city who can trace his ancestry to slavery, has shown remarkable leadership in explaining how the One City Approach can help the whole city 'understand who we are, how we got here, and whom we wish to honour'.<sup>11</sup>

My recent international research on post-COVID-19 urban strategies suggests that Copenhagen, Freiburg and Bristol are not alone in providing inspiring examples of how imaginative civic leadership can address the four challenges I mentioned earlier at one-and-the-same time.



**A new window of political possibilities**

Source: *Cities and Communities beyond COVID-19*, p.67 <sup>6</sup>

**A critique of the Overton window**

In his insightful book *The Establishment: And How They Get Away With It*, Owen Jones provides a revealing account of the role of right-wing think-tanks in reshaping the political discourse about the role of the state in Britain in the period since the 1970s.<sup>12</sup> He explains how these think-tanks operated as ‘outriders’, extolling extremist, even dangerous, ideas that right-leaning politicians could then draw on.

He rightly gives attention to the so-called ‘Overton window’. Named after Joseph P Overton, the late Vice-President of the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, based in Michigan, US, this window concept claims to describe what is politically possible, or reasonable, at any given time within the prevailing politics of the day.

The window analogy is, in fact, rather helpful, as it suggests that those seeking bold change, in whatever direction, need to think beyond the development of new policies.<sup>13</sup> Radical reformers need to work out how to move the location of the window in the direction they favour. The chief problem with Overton’s version of the window is that it misunderstands the nature of freedom in the modern world.

In line with Overton’s position, right-leaning politicians take the view that weak, or minimal, government is superior to strong government – at root they claim that ‘less government’ delivers ‘more freedom’. This is, of course, the primary motive driving the government’s misguided Planning White Paper.

To be fair, the state does, indeed, limit individual freedoms, usually to bring about significant societal benefits. For example, anti-pollution laws limit the freedom of polluters to ruin the natural environment, and laws banning physical assault and murder limit the freedom of violent individuals to do harm to other people. And, of course, planning laws prevent individual landowners from executing developments that would have devastating impacts on neighbours and society at large. Even those on the right of the

political spectrum recognise that not all individual freedoms are good for society.

However, the experience of living through the COVID-19 calamity teaches us that the very framing of this debate about ‘freedom’ is misconceived. Focusing attention only on individual freedom is a peculiarly narrow, even bizarre, way of conceptualising freedom. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates that, as mentioned earlier, we are all inter-dependent.

In recent months societies across the world have favoured strong intervention by the state to meet the COVID-19 challenge precisely because citizens value freedom – meaning freedom from sickness, freedom from suffering, and freedom from death.

These radical shifts in public perception of what really matters in modern society suggest that we need a more capacious way of measuring and evaluating state intervention – one that goes well beyond the simplistic question ‘*Is this state limiting my individual freedom or not?*’

**COVID-19 opens a new window of political possibilities**

The suggestion I wish to make here is that we can build a useful measure of governmental performance by focusing on the concept of caring for others and for the planet. In her book *Caring Democracy: Markets, Ecology and Justice*, Joan Tronto argues that care, not economics, should be the central concern of democratic life.<sup>14</sup> She explains how societies now face a caring deficit, and COVID-19 has shown her analysis to be prescient.

By drawing on the well established literature on eco-centrism (see, for example, Robyn Eckersley’s book *The Green State: Rethinking Democracy and Sovereignty*<sup>15</sup>) we can add to caring for ourselves and for each other the critical importance of caring for the natural environment on which we all depend. The diagram above presents a new way of considering future political choices, one that steps beyond the outdated framing provided by the Overton window.

### What lessons emerge from this analysis?

Self-evidently we need to move the window towards caring for people and the planet and away from unregulated markets and individualism. Going beyond this, what are the specific steps that need to be taken?

First, while place clearly matters a great deal in public policy, it is seriously neglected by Ministers in Westminster. The current super-centralisation of decision-making in Downing Street, as many Members of Parliament and most local authority leaders already recognise, needs to be reversed.

The international evidence shows that empathetic local leadership, not top-down edicts, can provide numerous routes forward for post-COVID-19 strategy. The remarkable upsurge in compassion and caring that we have witnessed in recent months in communities across the country provides the lodestar for societal recovery.

## **‘These inspirational efforts stem from local understanding and are rooted in rich social networks that, in many cases, are hyper-local. It follows that the power of place in UK politics must be given a massive boost’**

These inspirational efforts are place-based; they stem from local understanding and are rooted in rich social networks that, in many cases, are hyper-local. It follows that the power of place in UK politics must be given a massive boost.

Second, values matter. As noted above, the window of political possibilities needs to move towards caring for people and the planet, and away from unregulated markets and individualism. It is clear that the core value of caring – for each other, for ourselves, and for the environment on which we all depend – should now take centre stage. It could be that every policy proposal should now be assessed against this new window. *‘Is this proposal moving policy towards ‘caring for people and the planet’ or not?’* should be a question that is considered by decision-makers at all levels of government as they consider each decision they make.

Third, planning matters. This is a key finding from the disaster studies literature.<sup>16</sup> Cities and localities that look ahead, develop a far-sighted vision for their area and have firm strategic plans in place are far better placed to respond to a crisis. Having a vision, preferably a well known vision that enjoys public support, enables leaders to move swiftly from being reactive to being proactive, even as disaster strikes.

It follows that the UK government should invest in strengthening the capacity of all local authorities to plan effectively for the future.

● **Robin Hambleton** is Emeritus Professor of City Leadership at the University of the West of England, Bristol. He is the author of *Cities and Communities Beyond Covid-19: How Local Leadership Can Change Our Future for the Better* (Bristol University Press, October 2020. <https://bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/cities-and-communities-beyond-covid-19>). The views expressed are personal.

### Notes

- 1 See *Common Ground. A Shared Vision for Planning Reform*. TCPA, Oct. 2020. [www.tcpa.org.uk/commonground](http://www.tcpa.org.uk/commonground); *The Right Answers to the Right Questions?* A Report by an Independent Group of Planning Academics. TCPA, Oct. 2020. [www.tcpa.org.uk/the-right-answers-to-the-right-questions](http://www.tcpa.org.uk/the-right-answers-to-the-right-questions); and *Town & Country Planning* ‘Special Issue on the Planning White Paper’, 2020, Vol. 89, Sept./Oct.
- 2 *Planning for the Future*. White Paper. Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Aug. 2020. [www.gov.uk/government/consultations/planning-for-the-future](http://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/planning-for-the-future)
- 3 T Marshall: ‘The White Paper’s ideological core’. *Town & Country Planning*, 2020, Vol. 89, Sept./Oct., 304-306
- 4 R Bregman: *Humankind: A Hopeful History*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020
- 5 *Humankind. A Hopeful History* (see note 4), p.72
- 6 R Hambleton: *Cities and Communities Beyond COVID-19: How Local Leadership Can Change our Future for the Better*. Bristol University Press, 2020
- 7 ‘Copenhagen crowned Europe’s healthiest capital city’. News Story. Health Europa, 21 Jan. 2020. [www.healtheuropa.eu/copenhagen-crowned-europes-healthiest-city/96778/](http://www.healtheuropa.eu/copenhagen-crowned-europes-healthiest-city/96778/)
- 8 *The Freiburg Charter for Sustainable Urbanism*. Second Edition. Academy of Urbanism and Stadt Freiburg, 2012. [www.academyofurbanism.org.uk/freiburg-charter/](http://www.academyofurbanism.org.uk/freiburg-charter/)
- 9 The Bristol One City Approach is discussed in detail in Chapter 5 of *Cities and Communities Beyond COVID-19* (see note 6, pp.107-132). See also the Bristol One City website, at [www.bristolonecity.com/](http://www.bristolonecity.com/)
- 10 For more on the Bristol One City Economic Recovery and Renewal Strategy, see ‘Strategy to support Bristol’s economy launched’. News Story. Bristol City Council, 16 Oct. 2020. <https://news.bristol.gov.uk/news/strategy-to-support-bristols-economy-launched>
- 11 M Rees and A Craig: ‘Why leadership matters and how the One City approach is fundamentally important for encountering institutional racism’. *Journal of Race, Ethnicity & the City*, 2020, Vol. 1(1). Published online, 29 Sept. 2020. [www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/26884674.2020.1814592](https://doi.org/10.1080/26884674.2020.1814592)
- 12 O Jones: *The Establishment: And How They Get Away With It*. Allen Lane, 2014
- 13 I Wray: ‘Re-sizing the Overton window’. *Town & Country Planning*, 2020, Vol. 89, Aug., 256-59
- 14 JCTronto: *Caring Democracy: Markets, Equality and Justice*. New York University Press, 2013
- 15 R Eckersley: *The Green State: Rethinking Democracy and Sovereignty*. MIT Press, 2004.
- 16 L Jones: *The Big Ones. How Natural Disasters Have Shaped Us (And What We Can Do about Them)*. Icon Books, 2018

# planning by gaslight – on reforms, skills and political work in planning

**Gavin Parker, Matthew Wargent and Emma Street** reflect on what it means to be a planner in the 21st century amid further reforms to the planning system



René Müller, on Unsplash

Professional planners are implicated not only in the shaping of sustainable (or, perhaps now, beautiful) development, but also in the politics of governance. In this short article, we argue that a widespread denial of the agency of professional planners in shaping public views and the politics inherent in this aspect of planning go some way to explain the continual degradation – or ‘gaslighting’ – of planning by politicians. If planning’s poor public image is to be combated, a new *political* orientation designed to positively promote planning is necessary.

Although the latest critique of the planning profession contained in the Planning White Paper<sup>1</sup>

was a prompt for this article, here we are drawing upon several years’ work researching the profession as it continues to diversify and evolve. In particular, we are reflecting on in-depth discussions held across two symposia considering the future of the profession held in 2019 and 2020.<sup>2</sup> These events revealed the need to reflect on professional identity, planning skills, and education, and, of course, resources.<sup>3</sup> Questions of public trust in the profession were also recognised, and undoubtedly such issues required urgent attention before the latest proposed reforms. Here, we argue that the *political act* of brokering public engagement in,

and support for, planning is *just as necessary* as improved resourcing<sup>4</sup> or refining the knowledge and skills required for admission to the profession.

Professions are said to be consummate in wielding power in contemporary society.<sup>5</sup> We reassert the view that power is both a resource and a relation – it is not to be found solely in decision-making (i.e. power *over* a development proposal or a policy document) but is also found in the power *to* shape values, and is produced *with* communities and others to create better places. Recognising and embracing the value of ‘power *to*’ and ‘power *with*’ is a central part of reclaiming and asserting the value of planning.

### Views from practice

We take seriously the existential threats that planning faces as both a discipline and a profession (starkly laid out by Hugh Ellis recently<sup>6</sup>); in light of this, the views expressed at the two symposia highlighted the need to ‘sell’ planning much more effectively. The participants also foregrounded other factors necessary for effective public planning, *inter alia*:

- Addressing a lack of *confidence* – especially in some parts of the public sector.
- Advocating over issues of *resourcing* in order to effectively formulate and implement policy.
- Reflecting on both the *development of outcomes and future visions* and ensuring that they are consistent across sectors.
- Recognising the role of professional institutions in actively patrolling the boundaries of good or ‘*ethical*’ planning.
- *Engaging* more effectively with other professionals and communities.

Instead of addressing all of these in turn here, we argue that there is an overarching need to reassert the value and values of planning as part of that agenda. One of the arguments made is that a much better articulation of how planners’ knowledge and skills can serve to help specific places is required. This is important as the public is largely unaware of the benefit derived from planning outcomes, and the effort to work synoptically in the public interest is seldom recognised. Conversely, ‘failures’ or poor decisions loom large – especially in local politics. Similarly, the risks of an absence of good planning must be conveyed accessibly and persistently (the lesson of permitted development is surely relevant here). This involves demonstrating how positive outcomes are accentuated where good planning is applied.

### Professions, expertise, and power

The impetus for this article emerges both from recent discussions and from research, but also from recent calls for greater attention to be given

to understanding professions: examining how they work, and how agents form, maintain, and adapt institutions.<sup>7</sup> This is apposite as planning once again goes through – in Boris Johnson’s words – ‘radical reforms’. The proposed changes in the recent White Paper disrupt assumptions about planning knowledge, skills, and authority – and appear to be, at least partly, a consequence of a lack of public support for the achievements of the planning profession in England, and elsewhere too.

Expertise is produced, codified and validated by professions. However, the intrinsically political nature of such expertise is too often neglected (or even suppressed) by the profession itself. The result is that planners are often not sufficiently adept in the political behaviours necessary to maintain the profession’s standing in the public eye, and in ensuring that planning systems and reforms are not co-opted by sectional interests.<sup>8</sup> This is quite different from the political diplomacy skills displayed by planners in dealing with developers or local politicians.

Other interests have developed sophisticated systems for lobbying and promotional activities, ones that moreover involve a critique of planning. While this can be decried, the situation needs to provoke more than our exasperation. At present, the culture is to avoid the role of promoters. The lack of effective counter-argument and wider education – the wielding of soft power – about the need for good planning results in a dissonance between planning professionals, elected politicians, and the general public. Current efforts to address this are simply not enough.

### Politics and planning identity

In this vein, there have been claims that planning requires more ‘leadership’, and the kind of political work described above is part of this. Yet the importance of developing a more public-facing profession is such that it cannot be left to a small group of senior planners. In such times, professional planners (working in whichever sector), who are more than likely to be adherents to ‘public’ values, need to be visible and publicly recognised as part of an engagement with everyday politics.

If the very status of planners remains weak, then others will be selected to service whichever ideological agenda currently dominates the stewardship of the built environment. If, as we suspect, politicians view planners as a threat to their freedom to act, then antagonism will inevitably be present in the everyday work of planners. Planning as a profession is uniquely positioned in terms of the myriad policy concerns it intersects with, alongside its points of connection with politicians at national and local levels. That the skills and knowledges *qua* ‘expertise’ of the profession require critical thinking, analytical ability and ‘joining-

up the dots' is not in question. The question that arises – and may in part explain the regularity of critique that the profession attracts in the UK – is the tension between a profession whose basis rests in serving the public interest, set against ideological trends that prioritise market liberalism and deregulation.

Meanwhile, boundaries around 'who is doing the planning' blur, as tasks become distributed between public, private, and third sectors, academia, think-tanks, and communities. Furthermore, the platforms used to depict planning have multiplied, and thus the capacity to generate political interventions on behalf of planning becomes more widespread but also more fractured. And so, while the fresh air of debate is welcome, it does require that all protagonists are active.

## 'Now is the time to re-assert political skills and public-facing behaviours which ensure that the value of planning is better understood'

In order to sustain political support, planners need to win the hearts and minds of the wider public. This underlines the importance of power as a web of relations: planning as a profession derives power in part from its linkages and networks in a fragmented governing space and 'across more liquid, diverse, and decentered power structures'.<sup>7</sup> In contemporary planning, professionals need to recognise and make concerted efforts to promote the aims of planning through strengthened networks, and generate an awareness of their own skills and abilities in the public mind, while navigating the politics that inevitably characterise day-to-day planning work.

### Conclusion

Debates over sustaining the profile and merits of planning are long-standing, yet the need for planning – for example in combating climate change, in addressing the housing affordability crisis, and in rebalancing the UK's regions – is stronger than ever. To quote the late Sir Peter Hall, 'we need not less planning, but more'.<sup>9</sup> But achieving a strong and responsive profession appears to be proving harder than ever, as planning continues to fragment across tasks, knowledges, and sectors.<sup>10</sup> The question of what skills or characteristics are essential for the work of the professional planner is as old as the profession itself, and we have no definitive answer to this; but we do believe that now is the time to re-assert political skills and public-facing behaviours

which ensure that the value of planning is better understood.

Planning professionals are producers and repositories of vital and valuable knowledge. This expertise gives them political influence: this needs to be recognised and to be used. Of course, such a contention raises further questions, not least how to maintain professional integrity while advocating for planning publicly. Nonetheless, as planning pauses on the precipice of fundamental reforms, now is the time for the profession and its representative bodies to dedicate even more effort towards promoting a mainstreaming of planning's value and accept this as an ongoing political act in striving towards greater public understanding.

● **Gavin Parker** is Professor of Planning Studies at the University of Reading. **Matthew Wargent** is a British Academy Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University of Reading. **Emma Street** is Associate Professor of Planning and Urban Governance at the University of Reading. The views expressed are personal.

### Notes

- 1 *Planning for the Future*. White Paper. Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Aug. 2020. [www.gov.uk/government/consultations/planning-for-the-future](http://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/planning-for-the-future)
- 2 'The Future of the Planning Profession' symposium, 'FPP1', was held in September 2019 at the University of Reading, sponsored by the British Academy, and a second event, 'FPP2', was held in September 2020 as part of the UK-Ireland Planning Research Conference
- 3 An exploratory set of open-access essays published after the first FPP symposium explore future directions for professional planning in the 21st century – see G Parker, M Wargent, O Linovski, *et al.*: 'Interface: The future of the planning profession'. *Planning Theory & Practice*, 2020, Vol. 21 (3), 453-80
- 4 The RTPI recently called for a boost of £500 million to support public planning – see [www.rtpi.org.uk/press-releases/2020/september/rtpi-calls-for-500m-boost-to-england-s-planning-system-in-csr-response/](http://www.rtpi.org.uk/press-releases/2020/september/rtpi-calls-for-500m-boost-to-england-s-planning-system-in-csr-response/)
- 5 M Foucault: *Discipline and Punish*. Penguin, 1991
- 6 H Ellis: 'The fight for the soul of the planner'. TCPA Blog Entry, 19 Feb. 2020. [www.tcpa.org.uk/blog/blog-the-fight-for-the-soul-of-the-planner-hugh-ellis](http://www.tcpa.org.uk/blog/blog-the-fight-for-the-soul-of-the-planner-hugh-ellis)
- 7 M Kuus: 'Professions and their expertise: Charting the spaces of 'elite' occupations'. *Progress in Human Geography*, published online 21 Aug. 2020., p.2. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132520950466>
- 8 The day-to-day of planning practice can be intensely political, but predominantly in the diplomatic sense of *mediating between interests*. Here, we refer to the political act of affirming planning's value both within and without professional spaces as part of everyday politics
- 9 P Hall: 'Reflections on a lifetime of town planning'. *The Guardian*, 1 Oct. 2014. [www.theguardian.com/cities/2014/oct/01/sir-peter-hall-reflections-on-a-lifetime-of-town-planning](http://www.theguardian.com/cities/2014/oct/01/sir-peter-hall-reflections-on-a-lifetime-of-town-planning)
- 10 G Parker, E Street and M Wargent: 'The rise of the private sector in fragmentary planning in England'. *Planning Theory & Practice*, 2018, Vol. 19 (5), 734-50

# planning for large-scale growth – where does the white paper take us?

**Rob Smith** looks at the issues and challenges that the Planning White Paper proposals present for longer-term strategic growth and planning for larger-scale development such as new settlements

Much is said about the issues and challenges of planning for large-scale housing growth and the difficulties of the current planning system. We have all now seen the government's approach to reform as set out in the Planning White Paper.<sup>1</sup> There is so much that is worthy of debate, and the September/October issue of *Town & Country Planning* went through many important topics. But what does it mean for the very largest proposals, such as potential new settlements and 'garden communities'?

It is true that the system has really struggled over recent years with the approach to strategic long-term planning. Recent experiences in places such as North Essex<sup>2</sup> and the Uttlesford and Hart district council areas have illustrated some of the challenges and pitfalls. Practitioners and other interested parties have been watching things closely, with the White Paper providing a key opportunity to address some of the problems.

While various proposals set out in the White Paper have merit, there is a lot still to be worked through. There are various references to the proposals being able to support planning for urban extensions and new settlements, and the 'growth' area land category proposed in the White Paper seems to be intended to provide a new way to take them forward as part of the approach to Local Plans. But the proposals introduce a range of new issues and challenges which may make places considering larger proposals such as new settlements think carefully about their options.

## **Local Plan timescales**

The only reference to the potential timescale of new Local Plans refers to 'a minimum period of 10 years'. With the related suggested approach to

defining housing requirements, many councils will focus on the least-difficult proposals that can deliver in the defined timescale. The shorter the timeframe, the less strategic plans will become, leading to a potential continuation of piecemeal proposals, not properly grappling with strategic vision or infrastructure implications and involving a fair amount of can-kicking down the road.

## **Strategic co-operation**

It has been recognised by many that some form of strategic, 'larger than local' approach is now needed, and it was disappointing that the White Paper did not set out the government's thinking on this. Strategic growth will inevitably require co-operation and collaboration across boundaries, with the larger sites relating closely to neighbouring areas and having relationships to wider market considerations and strategic infrastructure.

Maybe the intent is for new Local Plans to be primarily concerned with shorter-term supply. If so, is a different approach needed for larger-scale, longer-term matters? Should the very largest proposals such as new settlements be better considered through a separate and new 'larger than local' approach? We are seeing the situation play out in the Oxford-Cambridge corridor, with the difficulties of establishing a locally led approach and a potential move towards a Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government led process to evolve a spatial framework, which could have statutory status. Again, without any incentives or requirements to secure positive co-operation between neighbouring authorities, will places be put off from thinking strategically about future growth?



**The largest, strategic and most complex sites are very different from smaller-scale, short-term proposals**

### **'Best in class' public engagement**

The White Paper approach puts considerable extra pressure on front-loading of engagement and participation. It feels like the reforms are being too ambitious in shoehorning the larger and most controversial proposals into a standardised and time-bound process. Communities may well feel let down that major projects get rushed through the system. Large-scale development promoters themselves may feel that the reforms are rushing a process that works better through a staged system of engagement, building up the detail and de-risking.

### **'Growth' areas and planning permission**

The approach to be taken to Local Plans appears to be heavily driven by the ambition to streamline the consenting regime. A 'Growth' area category seems very close to a revamped site allocation approach. This may work for proposals that are intended to be delivered in the early years of the plan period and in full (or substantially in full) within its lifetime. It is, however, not suited to the needs of longer-term strategic growth, which could span several plan periods and requires flexibility to adjust to influences over time.

Within 'Growth' areas the reference to Local Development Orders and Development Consent Orders seems to recognise that some form of subsequent permission is inevitable. It seems sensible to have these as options for large-scale residential schemes, but neither mechanism has been proven as being effective for these types of projects, and care will be needed in their application.

The constrained Local Plan timescale, and the expectation that a considerable amount of supporting

information will be produced to provide some form of planning permission, risks fixing parameters, masterplans and codes for (the entirety of) schemes that may still have understandable uncertainties over specific aspects and may be expected to deliver over periods of up to decades to come. Notwithstanding the amount of work required, this may not actually suit the needs of investors and developers, who may prefer the stepped approach to site promotion and de-risking, rather than moving too fast.

### **Infrastructure funding**

The Planning White Paper recognises issues with the funding and delivery of infrastructure. The position on viability is key, with problems that are identified due to the often protracted process of negotiation and renegotiation and the inconsistency of application and decision-making. Expectations may be raised but communities let down when promises are not realised.

The proposed solution is a shift away from site-specific negotiations to an overall 'Infrastructure Levy' approach. But the White Paper says little about how the value of any new levy would be set. It may be an area where some form of standardised and simplified approach could apply to certain types and scales of development, but it does not seem appropriate for larger, infrastructure-intensive proposals. For these, the traditional Section 106 mechanism should surely be retained in some form as it provides clarity and certainty to all parties on what is required and performs a key role in making developments and their impacts acceptable.

A perennial problem that must be fixed through the reform process concerns the land value expectations resulting from changes from agricultural to development values. Planning Policy Guidance (PPG) is now clear that they must reflect infrastructure and policy considerations. It does not look like this has had a chance yet to filter through (but the early signs do not look too promising). Planning guidance must be properly followed, to consider the need to include all policy and infrastructure requirements within land value expectations. Negotiations could be improved by clearer guidance, and PPG could be strengthened through standardised assumptions on viability, including defining an appropriate 'premium' when considering land value thresholds.

The greater expectation being put on councils to take responsibility for the funding and delivery of infrastructure will also cause problems. Larger sites such as new settlements involve the provision of costly strategic infrastructure which will be required at early stages in the development process. This will not fit with the profile of levy receipts. The suggested new approach would pass the responsibility and funding risk over to local planning authorities, who would be expected to forward-fund provision (via debt), but without control over payback (build-out

rates and securing levy payments). While there may be contractual solutions (such as fixed sequences of payments, long-stop dates, etc.), it is difficult to imagine the majority of local councils being willing or able to take on such major financial responsibilities. Further detail is needed here, setting out how the new approach will be effectively delivered – will larger entities such as counties, combined authorities or Homes England be better placed to take the lead?

### Delivery vehicles

The White Paper is pretty silent on delivery vehicles and therefore provides no reassurance or mechanism through which local authorities may be able to secure delivery at the pace required, related to the amount of work that they will need to do and the risk that they may need to take on. There are no penalties suggested should sites not be brought forward by developers as anticipated.

More strategic, long-term thinking requires strong public sector vision and leadership. This helps to safeguard the delivery of quality, can facilitate long-term patient funding, and helps to ensure that there is a positive approach to community development and stewardship. In this regard there is a model to look back on which may well provide a more all-embracing solution – deploying the powers of the New Towns Act (as amended) to co-ordinate the place-making and delivery process.

Pre-COVID-19, the March Budget had already stated an intent to set up such bodies in the Oxford-Cambridge corridor. We await further information on the precise ideas here, as well as the government's response to the consultation on Development Corporation reform from late 2019.<sup>3</sup> Now may well be time for government to ramp things up further with this tried-and-tested approach, especially given the current economic situation and the opportunity that this may open to invest in local economies, build local support and provide new infrastructure, all with a focus on design quality, addressing climate change, and promoting healthy living.

### Capacity and resourcing

If the government is serious about the reform delivering results, then it will need to show how the planning system will be funded and delivered. There is reference to the costs of operating the new planning system being principally funded by landowners and developers – it is not made overly clear how, but it appears that the new 'Infrastructure Levy' may be used to achieve this, with reference to a proportion of the monies raised earmarked to cover planning costs. In the absence of any information on the scale of any levy or the funding it may provide, it is not possible to judge if this is a suitable proposal. It would, however, further dilute the ability and purpose of the levy to fund necessary infrastructure. The timings are also out, as there

will be a need for higher upfront funding for plan-making, with levy receipts spread out into the future.

### Where does this all leave us?

Overall, there is much in the reform proposals that may well be appropriate for small/medium proposals which can deliver development over the short and medium term. But there are many reasons why the proposals do not work for the special circumstances of longer-term strategic growth, which could span several plan periods and require related flexibility to adjust to various influences over time.

There could be some relatively simple ways to take things forward. First, there are many aspects which could be tidied up through amendments to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and PPG. Secondly, the gap on strategic planning needs to be filled. And thirdly, resources will need to be provided to enable councils to take a lead with what is required.

A common theme throughout is a need for recognition that the largest, more strategic and complex sites which deliver later on in and/or beyond the end of a plan period are very different from smaller-scale, short-term proposals. An amended expectation on these types of project will be needed to avoid any unintended consequence of pushing councils away from planning strategically.

Let us hope that the government reflects on the wide feedback it will have received on the proposals and makes the changes that will be necessary. This will not only help to safeguard many of the objectives that the reform proposals are intended to address, but will also help to protect and enhance the important role of 'planning' to achieve effective, strategic, and visionary place-making for the benefit of future generations.

● **Rob Smith** is Director at town planning, masterplanning and place-making consultancy Hyas Associates ([www.hyas.co.uk](http://www.hyas.co.uk)). The views expressed are personal.

### Notes

- 1 *Planning for the Future*. White Paper. Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Aug. 2020. [www.gov.uk/government/consultations/planning-for-the-future](http://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/planning-for-the-future)
- 2 See, for example, 'Bringing forward Garden Communities through the current planning system – reflections on the North Essex experience'. 'Our View' Story. Hyas Associates, Sept. 2020. [www.hyas.co.uk/views/garden-communities-north-essex/](http://www.hyas.co.uk/views/garden-communities-north-essex/)
- 3 *Development Corporation Reform: Technical Consultation*. Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Oct. 2019. [www.gov.uk/government/consultations/development-corporation-reform-technical-consultation](http://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/development-corporation-reform-technical-consultation)

# how planning can deliver better water management

**Peter Bide** and **Andrew Coleman** explain how guidance for planners can help to deliver climate resilience, better water quality, enhanced biodiversity, and more liveable and valuable developments



**View over a man-made lagoon at North West Cambridge, a development featuring a comprehensive integrated water management system**

AECOM

Better management of water through the planning system is vital to making places more resilient to the climate crisis, delivering healthier and more liveable local environments, reducing the impact of flooding, ensuring the availability of drinking water during times of scarcity, and delivering biodiversity net gain.

The May/June 2018 issue of *Town & Country Planning* introduced the Construction Industry Research Information Association (CIRIA) research project Delivering Better Water Management through the Planning System.<sup>1</sup> The project aimed to discover, analyse and set out good practice on how spatial planning for water delivers multiple benefits and helps our towns and cities to become greener, healthier, wealthier, more attractive, and more resilient to climate change. More recently, Peter Jones and Daphne Comfort<sup>2</sup> set out in this journal

some of the water resource challenges that spatial planners need to be aware of, concluding that: *'those charged with responsibility for spatial planning may need to review and revise their thinking, and the planning community may wish to keep a watching brief on how water issues are addressed within spatial plans and on how that influences the determination of planning applications.'*

The CIRIA guidance resulting from the Delivering Better Water Management through the Planning System project was launched in two events in November and December 2019 – a workshop held in Leeds and a webinar. Over 150 people took part in the two events. The guidance, and resources that can be used to persuade others to use it, are free to use.<sup>3</sup>

The project deliberately set out to break down the normal 'silo' approach to water issues by looking at the water cycle as an integrated whole – and in this way discover the *critical success factors* needed to deliver better water management *outcomes*. Another objective was to produce *practical and useful* integrated water management (IWM) guidance for planners and other key actors. The guidance provides the most up-to-date picture of how water challenges and opportunities are being addressed and therefore goes some way to providing the help that Jones and Comfort identified as needed.

### Project development

The project was co-ordinated by CIRIA project managers and benefited hugely from that organisation's contacts, experience and expertise in developing guidance aimed at the development industry, especially the industry-standard *SuDS Manual*, on sustainable drainage systems. A Project Steering Group guided and shaped the research and outputs. It comprised representatives from the water industry, planning organisations (the TCPA, the RTPI and the Planning Officers Society were members), flood risk experts (including Environment Agency staff) and representatives from several lead local flood authorities (LLFAs) and wildlife charities, especially the Wetland and Wildlife Trust.

An initial survey received over 200 responses and helped the research team to identify challenges and opportunities in delivering better water management through the planning system, as well as potential case studies. Stakeholder workshops helped to turn this work into the key themes of the research and guidance. A challenge in providing relevant guidance was the constant changes in English planning policy guidance, but the final document reflects the 2019 National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). The guidance is also relevant to Wales, and reflects the latest version of Planning Policy Wales.

### Guidance format

The guidance has been designed to be as accessible and useful as possible. The online version of the guidance<sup>3</sup> contains hyperlinks to speed the reader from one section to the rest of the document and to external sources. The guidance is structured to enable in-depth reading or 'dipping' in and out. As well as the main guidance (**Part A**), four other parts contain detailed examples and guidance:

- **Part B** – physical case studies;
- **Part C** – examples of good local policy;
- **Part D** – national policy review; and
- **Part E** – characteristics of good local policy.

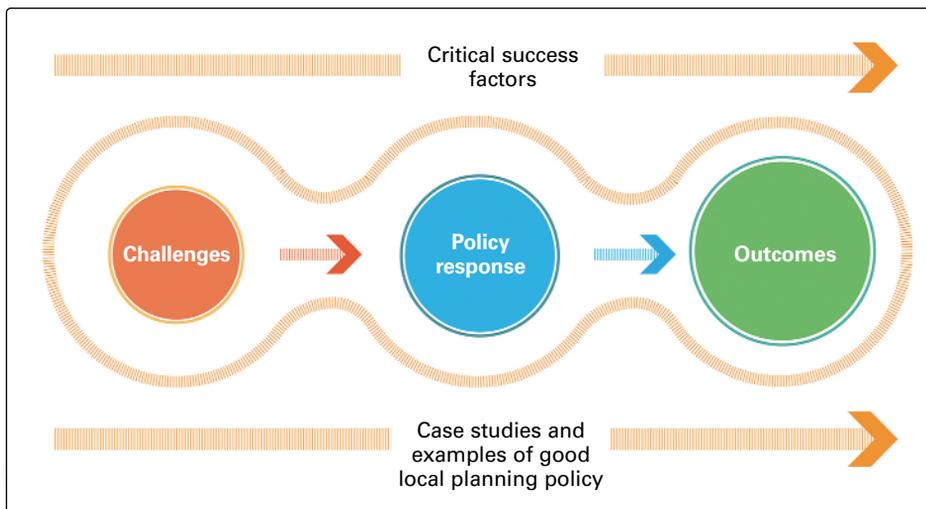
Parts B and C are structured to provide readers with a snapshot of how 12 projects and 15 Local Plans were delivered and the outcomes they are aiming to achieve, including any challenges that they had to overcome. Part D provides the English and Welsh policy and guidance 'hooks' that planners and other actors can use to justify a better water management approach. Part E emerged during the work because it was obvious that (in England at least) there was a need for generic guidance about how to write good local policies that would help to deliver better water management and be found 'sound'. This was partly derived from the Mainstreaming Green Infrastructure project guidance.<sup>4</sup>

A recording of the launch webinar and the slide pack that was used is available on the susdrain YouTube channel,<sup>5</sup> and an animation explaining how to deliver better water management through planning is being developed.

### Key findings and themes

Some of the key (negative) findings of the survey were as follows:

- The vast majority of respondents had experienced localised flooding in recent years.



**Fig. 1** The 'golden thread' of good IWM practice

- The main challenges in securing good water management outcomes are resistance from developers based on misconceptions about the extra cost of IWM; lack of national policy and guidance (and poor local interpretation of it); and local planning authorities' lack of resources (staff) and understanding of the benefits of and technical requirements for IWM.
- IWM interventions (particularly SuDS) are too often an afterthought rather than a precursor to good design.

But the survey also found that:

- Good IWM delivers amenity benefits and makes places more attractive to people and businesses looking to relocate to the area – bad water management reduces the amenity value of open space, which has a negative effect on local people.
- Pre-application is the most important stage of the development management process for engaging with developers on water management issues.
- The best ways of achieving good water outcomes would be a statutory basis for IWM (particularly SuDS) and statutory national standards; early engagement; good policy in Local Plans; clear rules/procedures for adoption; breaking down institutional barriers and changing the mindsets of key stakeholders; appreciation of IWM's multiple benefits; robust evidence to challenge viability arguments; educating local planning authorities and developers to enhance their understanding of IWM and its benefits; more integration and partnership working; and strategic (catchment/ landscape scale) planning for water.

The project set out to overcome the misconceptions about and lack of awareness of IWM, partly by identifying examples of local planning policies, masterplans and 'on the ground' projects that are helping to deliver better water management, and analysing them to identify:

- **critical success factors** – how the policies/projects had been developed; and
- **outcomes** – what aspects of better water management the policies/projects were achieving.

Arising from this, the authors identified a 'golden thread' running through many of the examples of good practice – identify the water-related opportunities and challenges for the community (such as environmental quality, water supply/quality, flood risk); identify the appropriate IWM response; put in place policies to enable IWM; and facilitate the partnerships to achieve the outcomes (see Fig. 1).

### Critical success factors and outcomes

Drivers for the policies and projects varied, but analysis of how the policies had been initiated, justified and delivered revealed some significant

## Box 1 Critical success factors

### Understanding IWM

- Knowing which IWM interventions are appropriate.
- Identifying IWM possibilities at an early stage.
- Showing that IWM is effective and efficient.
- Breaking down institutional barriers and changing mindsets.

### Supportive local policy

- Clear and understandable Local Plan policies.
- Clear, supportive plans and strategies from the LLFA and water company.

### Early engagement

- With the water company, developers, the LLFA, and other areas of local government.
- With the local community.
- With the catchment partnership and other stakeholders.

### Partnerships

- Good links with (and between) local planning authorities, LLFAs and water companies.
- Catchment partnerships.
- An engaged and supportive local community.
- Understanding partners' interests and drivers.

### Good management

- A strong champion.
- Early and clear identification of long-term management arrangements.
- Co-ordination of budgets and funding.
- Enforcement of conditions.

common themes among the **critical success factors** (see Box 1).

From the survey and discussions with the Project Steering Group, ten better water management **outcomes** that are achievable by applying the guidance were identified, including reduced risk from flooding; increased water efficiency and reduced water stress; better blue/green infrastructure; and mitigating and adapting to climate change – but also enabling new housing; and facilitating economic growth and regeneration. The full list is set out in Table 1.

Fig. 2 gives an idealised example of good water management to show the interventions that can help produce the multiple benefits of IWM across a water catchment.

The main guidance (Part A) explains how these critical success factors come together to deliver the outcomes and how planners can pull the right levers, even with diminished resources, to achieve better water management.

**Table 1**  
**IWM outcomes**

Outcome	How IWM contributes to multiple benefits
	<p>Reduced risk from flooding</p> <p>Reducing risk of flooding from a range of sources and scales, from landscape scale (thorough natural flood risk management), reducing the risk of river flooding to sustainable drainage systems (SuDS), and reducing and attenuating run-off to reduce the risk of local flooding</p>
	<p>Increased water efficiency and reduced water stress</p> <p>Reducing potable water use, including rainwater harvesting and use and greywater and wastewater recycling/re-use, can reduce demand on the public water supply. If this is linked to water efficiency measures in buildings, the savings can be significant</p>
	<p>Clean and good-quality water environment</p> <p>Reducing or removing pollution from surface water and groundwater, and providing a more natural and biodiverse water environment</p>
	<p>Enabling new housing</p> <p>Providing water management and improvements to overcome challenges such as flood risk, availability of water, lack of drainage capacity, and poor urban environment</p>
	<p>Facilitating economic growth and regeneration</p> <p>Improving urban economies and environments and enabling sustainable redevelopment. Enhanced value of development with better green spaces and water views</p>
	<p>Enhanced biodiversity</p> <p>Providing a vibrant, more natural environment, introducing a range of habitats and species. Providing ecosystem services and enhancing natural capital, contributing to net environmental gain</p>
	<p>Better blue-green infrastructure</p> <p>Providing functional and connected blue and green spaces which deliver multiple benefits and connect urban places for water, wildlife and people</p>
	<p>Improved accessible public spaces and places, and improved wellbeing</p> <p>Providing good-quality open space which, as well as managing water, is accessible, creates more liveable places, and promotes health and wellbeing. Connecting places and people to water</p>
	<p>Mitigating and adapting to climate change</p> <p>Providing sustainable urban green space at a range of scales makes urban areas more resilient by reducing the urban heat island effect, reducing energy consumption, making better use of water, and enabling our towns and cities to better cope with more extreme weather events</p>
	<p>Using resources more sustainably and effectively</p> <p>Cost savings and efficiencies, particularly through partnership working, delivering multiple benefits, make schemes affordable, and more can be done for less</p>

**Partnership working**

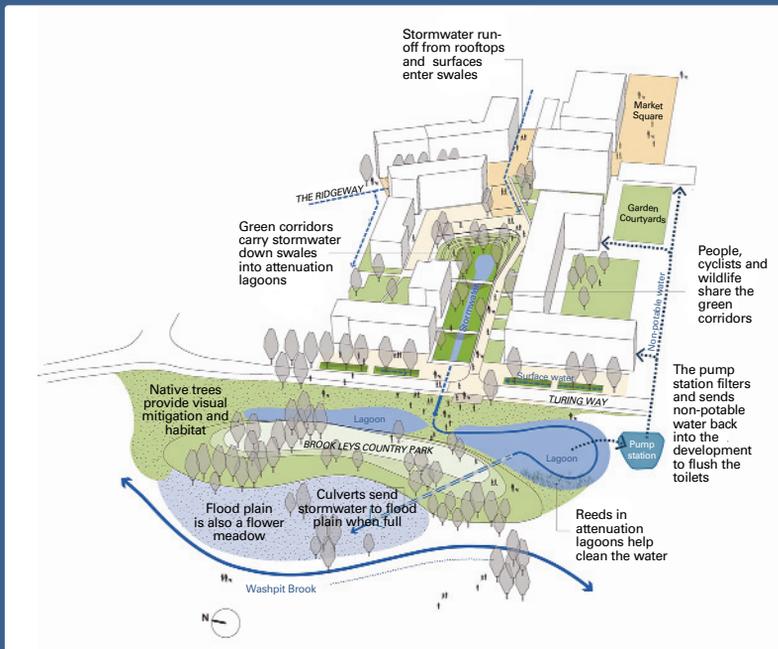
One extremely important critical success factor that almost all the case studies exhibited was a good relationship between local authorities, water companies, and environmental regulators.

The driver for making successful and effective partnerships is delivering multiple benefits through IWM interventions. Working in partnerships and pooling resources enables delivery of projects that are not affordable for individual partners on their own. Additionally, the sum of the pooled resources

can be greater than the threshold cost of the scheme, allowing more to be achieved for the money spent, or for savings to be made by the partners. Either way, this amounts to getting more for less (see Fig. 3).

This partnership working was sometimes crystallised in the form of a water cycle study or integrated water management study (IWMS), which are extremely useful when there are multiple water issues to address – often there are current and future flooding, water stress and water quality issues, in areas which also have a great need to deliver new

## Box 2 North West Cambridge



AECOM

**North West Cambridge  
SuDS strategy**

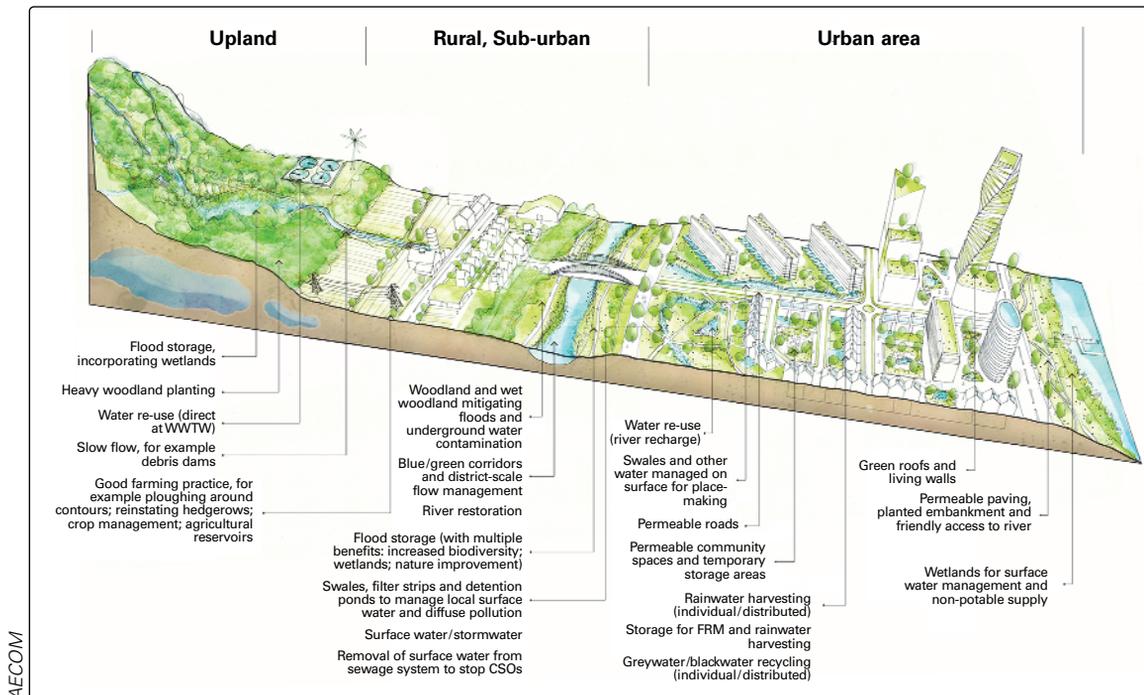
Cambridge is located within an area of water stress (East Anglia has the lowest regional rainfall in the UK and is described officially as semi-arid) and is also at high risk of surface water flooding. The local communities downstream regularly suffered flooding from two different brooks so there was no capacity within existing watercourses to accommodate additional surface water from new development. Cambridge planning policy requires sustainable drainage and sets stringent standards for water use.

The North West Cambridge project is a 150 hectare development with a comprehensive IWM system reducing off-site flows to below greenfield run-off rates. It hosts what will be the largest water recycling system in the country, capturing rainwater to reduce potable water demand by up to 45%. In particular:

- The development will deliver 3,000 homes and 100,000 square metres of other uses.
- The IWM is driven by Local Plan policy.
- The development incorporates a site-wide IWM system.
- Swales, blue and brown roofs and green corridors manage water through the site into man-made lagoons.
- Treated rainwater is pumped back into the homes, in what will be the largest rainwater harvesting system in the country.
- Flow and volume discharged will not exceed greenfield run-off rates.

North West Cambridge demonstrates the application of all the critical success factors for IWM and the full range of IWM outcomes. In particular:

- The development will capture 25%-45% of rainwater for recycling.
- The water recycling scheme will cut water consumption to 80 litres per person per day (compared with the Cambridge average of 150 litres per person per day).
- The rainwater harvesting system will reduce mains water consumption across the site by over 45%, a daily saving of approximately 595,000 litres – the equivalent of 8,500 baths of water.
- The IWM system will enable a discount on customer bills by charging different tariffs for potable and non-potable sources.
- A consequence of the IWM will be less water in local watercourses and reduced risk of downstream flooding.
- The cleansed water that is discharged from the development reduces the risk of contaminating sensitive water courses.



**Fig. 2 An idealised good water management example**

housing. Added to that are requirements to deliver net biodiversity gain, to adapt to climate change, and to deliver developments that are attractive (and therefore can be sold for a premium). A water cycle study or IWMS can help reveal where the challenges and opportunities are and can bring the various parties together to identify solutions, including using blue/green infrastructure. Part A contains guidance on how to scope out, create and deliver an IWM strategy based on real-life examples.

Practising planners can find inspiration for delivering projects on the ground or Local Plan policies in the collection of good examples. Part B contains the case studies of what can be achieved if the guidance principles are followed. Each is set out in the same format, with illustrations, so that they are easily accessible – detailing:

- what was done;
- the outcomes that were achieved, and how the critical success factors contributed;
- how the development relates to planning policy;
- the organisations that were involved; and
- references and links to further information.

In nine of the 12 physical case studies planning policy supporting IWM had influenced the development – the golden thread. In two cases (Croydon and Sheffield), the project had influenced the development of IWM-supporting planning policy – a ‘reverse golden thread’.

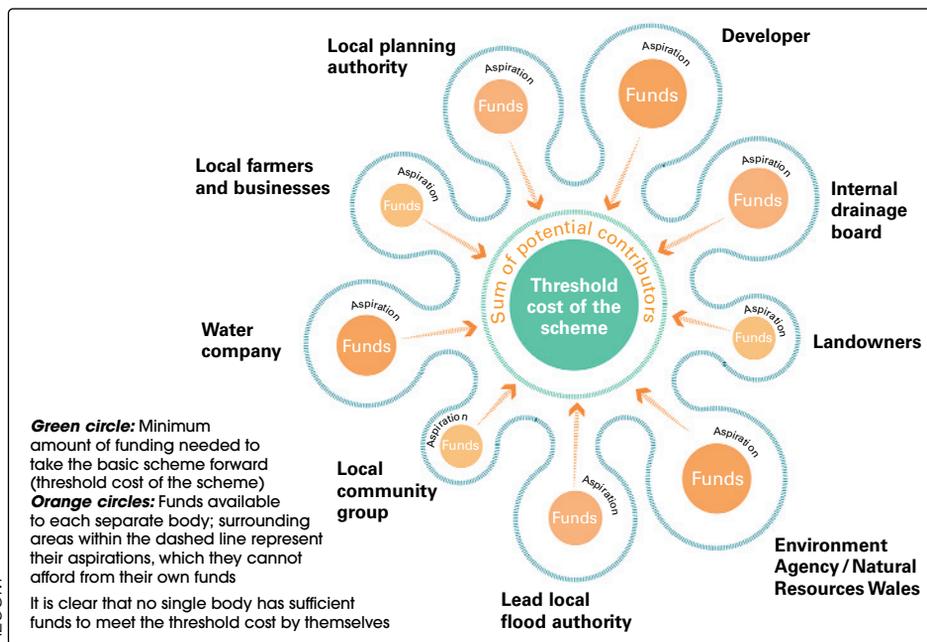
Part C of the guidance contains the case study local policies from NPPF-compliant Local Plans

around England drawn up by a variety of local planning authorities, including a regional planning body (the London Plan), unitary and district councils, and a National Park. They show how different water issues are being treated to produce an integrated approach. Each is drawn up under the same template so they are easily accessible. They:

- list the relevant plan and policy or policies;
- summarise the issues that the policies are addressing;
- outline local challenges or opportunities;
- identify and explain the critical success factors to getting the policy into the plan and the intended better water management outcomes; and
- contain links for further information.

Drawing upon the ‘lessons learnt’ from studying these planning policies, Part D of the guidance sets out the relevant policy hooks from national policy and guidance. Part E attempts to help hard-pressed local policy-makers by outlining the following key characteristics of good local policy for better water management (although the principles are applicable to any policy):

- **Evidence based:** The guidance provides a list of documents that are essential or useful for planners to use as part of their evidence base for sound local policies, such as Strategic Flood Risk Assessments, Local Flood Risk Management Strategies, River Basin Management Plans, Water Resource Management Plans, Catchment Management Plans, water companies’ Drainage



**Fig. 3 Partnerships - getting more for less**

and Wastewater Management Plans and Water Resource Management Plans, green infrastructure strategies, viability assessments, and other relevant evidence.

- **Vision:** IWM policies should help to deliver a clear vision for sustainable development, or follow a theme such as ecosystems services or climate change adaptation.
- **Strategic:** Local Plans should include a strategic policy that integrates managing flood risk, water quality, water efficiency and blue/green networks, and should set the framework for any non-strategic Local Plan or Neighbourhood Plan policies.
- **Avoidance of simple duplication:** NPPF or PPW policy should not simply be reproduced, but should be translated into locally specific policies and guidance.
- **Clear and positive:** Strong language should be used in emphasising the requirements for new development to deliver positive benefits, preferably identified as targets (for example what constitutes 'reduced water demand' or 'better water quality').
- **Co-operative:** Policies should be developed with strategic partners and neighbouring local planning authorities, and IWM issues should be included in Statements of Common Ground to help pass the soundness test.
- **Deliverable:** IWM should be included in Infrastructure Delivery Plans and longer-term masterplans, which should also identify long-term management arrangements and partners.

Part E also provides of good examples of clear 'technical asks' in Local Plan policies, such as for water efficiency in new development.

## Conclusion

Managing the implications of development on water – and vice versa – is an existing challenge that will only intensify in the future. Spatial planning has a crucial role in delivering both resilience to flooding and water stress and enhanced biodiversity. With the multiple institutional actors, agencies and drivers that exist, a partnership approach and good guidance is crucial to achieving better integrated water management. The CIRIA guide shows planners the tools they need to help deliver better water management.

● **Andrew Coleman** is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Brighton and an independent consultant who was formerly a spatial planner working for the Environment Agency's national Sustainable Places team ([colemanplanenv@gmail.com](mailto:colemanplanenv@gmail.com)).

**Peter Bide** was formerly team leader for water and natural environment policy at the former Department for Communities and Local Government (now the MHCLG) ([peterbide@aol.com](mailto:peterbide@aol.com)). They co-authored the CIRIA *Delivering Better Water Management through the Planning System* guidance. The views expressed are personal.

## Notes

- 1 A Coleman: 'Towards integrated approaches to planning for water'. *Town & Country Planning*, 2018, Vol. 87, May/June., 215-19
- 2 P Jones and D Comfort: 'Water resource issues and spatial planning'. *Town & Country Planning*, 2020, Vol. 89, Jan., 34-40
- 3 P Bide and A Coleman: *Delivering Better Water Management through the Planning System*. CIRIA, 2019. The guidance may be downloaded in whole or in parts at [tinyurl.com/planforwater](https://tinyurl.com/planforwater)
- 4 See the Mainstreaming Green Infrastructure project website, at <https://mainstreaminggreeninfrastructure.com/>
- 5 *Better Water Management through the Planning System*. YouTube video. susdrain, Mar. 2020. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=2VRaFrhMqu0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2VRaFrhMqu0)

# go big or go home...

## UK2070 Commission Chair **Bob Kerlake** outlines the work and recommendations to date of the UK2070 Commission on rebalancing the UK economy, and considers the role of spatial planning in delivering the levelling-up agenda

Given the current pre-eminence of the COVID-19 emergency and its immediate impacts, it might at first glance seem odd for *Town & Country Planning* to produce an issue on the work of the UK2070 Commission, which addresses spatial inequalities in a consciously long game – looking 50 years back and 50 years forward, albeit with shorter-term recommendations. But its work is highly relevant to how we as a country recover from the effects of this terrible virus.

### The UK2070 Commission and rebalancing the UK economy

The Commission's first report, published in May of 2019,<sup>1</sup> provoked a considerable response, even though the existence of regional inequalities was hardly news. What was striking about the report was the comprehensive evidence it set out on the depth and direction of those inequalities, and on the continuing economic, social and political consequences for this country if we do not tackle them.

The comparison work done by Professor Philip McCann at Sheffield University showed that, on a basket of 28 indicators, the UK came 28th out of 30 countries in terms of spatial inequalities. The modelling by Dr Ying Jin at Cambridge University showed that, on a high-growth scenario, over half the new jobs created would go to London and the wider South East. This might look like good news for the South, but the consequences of the growing imbalance are bad for everyone. In a higher-growth scenario, London and wider South East face the challenges of increasingly unaffordable housing, longer commuting times, and growing environmental pressures. In a low-growth scenario – which is what we may now be about to experience following the onset of COVID – some regions even go backwards. In short, everybody loses.

What particularly hit home in the Commission's first report was the comparison with Germany, which seemed to have made much better progress

in closing the economic gap following German unification.

Just one further statistic from the Commission captures the scale of the challenge: jobs growth in London and the wider South East in the last ten years has been at more than twice the rate of that in the North – a million more jobs were created.

The Commission's Final Report, *Make No Little Plans*,<sup>2</sup> was published in February this year, just before COVID-19 took over as the dominant news item. Its focus was on action, setting out a ten-point plan to reverse the trend and rebalance the UK:

- Ensuring an explicit spatial dimension to plans to get to zero carbon by 2050.
- Delivering a transformed public transport network between cities, within cities, and beyond cities.
- Creating new networks of research and development excellence to complement the so-called Golden Triangle of London, Oxford, and Cambridge.
- Strengthening the foundations of our local economies, tasking local leaders to produce inclusive growth plans.
- Recognising housing as a part of national infrastructure and planning now for the housing consequences of levelling up.
- Harnessing our cultural and environmental assets outside of London.
- Devolving more powers and funding away from Whitehall.
- Developing a national plan to raise attainment and ensure that we have the skills we need for the future.
- Tripling the Shared Prosperity Fund to £15 billion per annum, while ensuring fairer access to funds.
- Tasking the National Infrastructure Commission to produce a national spatial plan for England.

Our Final Report argued that delivering change effectively on this scale would require a change not just in **what** government does but in **how** it does it. It set out the changes to the way government

works, to our institutions and processes, that we thought were vital to success. This included a national outcomes framework to measure progress, strong political leadership with a powerful cross-government committee to oversee delivery, and a dedicated national team to lead the programme across government.

In between the two reports, a new Conservative government was elected, pledging to 'level up' the country. We have welcomed this pledge but have argued that, to be effective, the government needs to have a large-scale, comprehensive and long-term plan. Anything less would raise expectations without delivering. In short, the government needs to 'go big or go home'.

Dealing with challenges of Brexit and now COVID may have delayed the government's work on levelling up. But the need for a plan addressing the priorities set out in our Final Report remains no less essential.

In the period since COVID first hit, the UK2070 Commission has not been standing still. We have produced two excellent new sets of think-pieces, issued as the UK2070 Papers, in which expert contributors have explored different aspects of the levelling up agenda (available for free from the UK2070 website<sup>3</sup>).

We have also published a further report in October, *Go Big. Go Local*,<sup>4</sup> exploring in greater depth the impact of COVID-19 and its effects on the priorities set out in our Final Report's action plan. In summary, we find that COVID-19 reinforces the vital importance of making progress on levelling up, and that a proper plan to deliver this has become even more urgent. However, this national plan needs to be combined with a step-change in the devolution of powers and funding. The COVID crisis has taught us much about the problems created by being such an over-centralised country.

### Spatial planning

One of the recommendations in the Commission's Final Report was that England should have a national spatial plan, as exists in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, and indeed in much of Western Europe. This would provide a vital context for decisions on infrastructure and development. Our ideas are very much in accord with the work that Professor Cecilia Wong (one of the UK2070 Commissioners) at the University of Manchester has done for the RTPi over the years,<sup>5</sup> and it also sits well as the findings of the TCPA's Raynsford Review report.<sup>6</sup> However, the UK2070 Commission Final Report unpacks these ideas and sets out a potential way forward. A national spatial plan for England should be:

- prepared by a reconstituted National Planning and Infrastructure Commission (NPIC);
- linked to the country's priorities and funding regimes;
- endorsed by Parliament;

- independently audited in a 'State of the Nation Report';
- co-ordinated with the devolved administrations;
- integrated with sub-national and departmental programmes;
- reviewed in line with parliamentary cycles; and
- treated as a material planning consideration.

The national spatial plan must be developed from the bottom up and not just imposed top-down. It must be informed by, integrated with and delivered through sub-national strategies and devolved mechanisms. The RTPi's *Ambitions for the North* and *Blueprint for a Great North Plan* show what is possible. This national plan should form part of a wider renaissance of spatial planning and urban development. In his final book, *Good Cities, Better Lives*,<sup>7</sup> Sir Peter Hall looked to the UK's near neighbours in Europe to learn lessons about creating better places in which to live, work, and play. It was published in 2014 at a time when local authority planning departments were suffering large cuts, often in the very capacity needed to deliver a creative planning process. But at the heart of successful and sustainable European cities lies effective spatial planning and the powers and resources to see those plans through.

Many of the inherited assumptions about transport, density, the role of town centres, and home-working will have to be rethought in the light of what we have learnt in responding to COVID-19. But the need for more effective planning at all spatial levels remains as strong as ever. Above all, the planning profession should be seen as a *creative* profession, leading the work on spatial planning, not reduced to a controlling profession focused only development control. The current planning regime does need move on from the over-engineered, under-resourced and litigious process that it has become – reform is needed, but does the Planning White Paper provide the right answer?

### The Planning White Paper

Starting with the positives, it's hard to argue with the Planning White Paper's aims. Who wouldn't want more beautiful developments on tree-lined streets, applauded by their local communities? The support for greater use of digital technology is welcome, as is the commitment to simplify the Local Plan process. But at the heart of the problem with the White Paper is the belief that the planning process is the root cause of our failure to produce enough high-quality housing developments – despite copious evidence over many years, from the Lyons Report to the Letwin Report, that this is not the case. As a consequence of this basic error it proposes changes that will have the opposite effect to the government's stated intentions. Let me give four examples:

- First, the importance of genuinely affordable housing in both boosting supply and meeting an essential need is seriously underplayed. The

proposal to rely on a commuted sum rather than require mixed-tenure developments through Section 106 agreements risks going back to mono-tenure estates. Replacing a negotiated sum with a fixed levy might look like a simplification, but will bring with it its own complexities and challenges.

- Secondly, moving to a zonal, rules-based approach to planning approvals in growth areas rather than approving individual applications will drastically reduce local democratic engagement and create greater rigidity. When individual schemes come forward, the public will not be happy to be told that their opportunity to comment and influence has already effectively passed. It will also reduce the scope for trade-offs that the current process allows.
- An imposed top-down figure for increased housing numbers takes us right back to the divisive, self-defeating debates of a decade ago. Grant Shapps, the first Housing Minister during my time as Permanent Secretary in the Department for Communities and Local Government, could not have been clearer in his opposition to top-down housing targets. A decade on, he forms part of a government that is going in exactly this direction. Moreover, consultants Lichfields have calculated that, of the extra 100,000 homes proposed, 90% would be in London and the South, which does not sit at all well with the levelling-up agenda.
- Fourthly, the proposal to further expand the use of permitted development rights will compound the problems that the current extension has already created – of poorly designed schemes with little or no affordable housing. What was originally intended as a limited and temporary counter-cyclical measure is now to become a fixed malignancy, working directly against the ambition of more beautiful homes.

These are just four examples of the unwelcome consequences of the White Paper proposals, but there are many more. Above all, anyone who thinks that the White Paper will remedy the current complex, contested and litigious nature of the planning process in the high-demand areas outside London is sadly mistaken. It will just alter where the battles take place. For regeneration areas, where planning is the least of the problems, the White Paper offers very little to help them address their needs.

Someone once said to me that they didn't mind people making new mistakes; it was the repetition of old mistakes that they objected to. Sadly, the Planning White Paper is a missed opportunity at best and a serious retrograde step at worst.

### Urgency and high ambition

There is, nevertheless, now a common recognition across the political parties that the UK will not flourish without rebalancing. We all agree on the ends if not yet the means.

The title of the UK2070 Commission's Final Report, *Make No Little Plans*, comes from Daniel Burnham, who took a leading role in the masterplans for the development of a number of American cities. It is worth considering the words from which this title was drawn:

*'Make no little plans; they have no magic to stir men's blood and probably themselves will not be realized. Make big plans; aim high in hope and work, remembering that a noble, logical diagram once recorded will never die, but long after we are gone will be a living thing, asserting itself with ever-growing insistency.'*<sup>8</sup>

If now is not the right time for urgency and high ambition, then I am not sure when it will ever be.

- **The Rt Hon. The Lord Kerslake**, formerly Head of the Civil Service, is Chair of the UK2070 Commission. This article is based on Lord Kerslake's recent presentation at the online 2020 Joint Planning Law Conference, which can be viewed at [www.jpplc.org/conference/conference-video/](http://www.jpplc.org/conference/conference-video/) (the 2021 conference will take place in Oxford on 17-19 September – see [www.jpplc.org](http://www.jpplc.org)). The views expressed are personal.

### Notes

- 1 *Fairer and Stronger: Rebalancing the UK Economy*. UK2070 Commission, May 2019. <http://uk2070.org.uk/2019/05/30/first-report-of-the-uk2070-commission-to-be-published-on-thursday-30th-may-2019/>
- 2 *Make No Little Plans: Acting at Scale for a Fairer and Stronger Future*. Final Report. UK2070 Commission, Feb. 2020. <http://uk2070.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/UK2070-FINAL-REPORT.pdf>
- 3 The UK2070 Papers are available from the UK2070 website, at <http://uk2070.org.uk/2020/07/30/the-uk2070-papers-series-1/> (Series 1 papers) and <http://uk2070.org.uk/2020/09/03/the-uk2070-papers-series-2/> (Series 2 papers)
- 4 *Go Big. Go Local: A New Deal for the Levelling Up of the United Kingdom*. UK2070 Commission, Oct. 2020. <http://uk2070.org.uk/2020/09/30/go-big-go-local-the-uk2070-report-on-a-new-deal-for-levelling-up-the-united-kingdom/>
- 5 For example, C Wong, M Baker, S Hincks, A Schulze Bäing and B Webb: *A Map for England: Spatial Expression of Government Policies and Programmes*. RTPI, Mar. 2012. [www.rtpi.org.uk/media/1984/map-for-england-final-report-2012.pdf](http://www.rtpi.org.uk/media/1984/map-for-england-final-report-2012.pdf)
- 6 *Planning 2020 – Final Report of the Raynsford Review of Planning in England*. TCPA, Nov. 2018. [www.tcpa.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=30864427-d8dc-4b0b-88edc6e0f08c0edd](http://www.tcpa.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=30864427-d8dc-4b0b-88edc6e0f08c0edd)
- 7 P Hall, with contributions from N Falk: *Good Cities, Better Lives: How Europe Discovered the Lost Art of Urbanism*. Routledge, 2014
- 8 Reported in 'Stirred by Burnham, Democracy Champion'. *Chicago Record-Herald*, 15 Oct. 1910. See <http://mysteriouschicago.com/finding-daniel-burnhams-no-little-plans-quote/>

# brexit, COVID-19 and 'levelling up' – where are we?

The twin shocks of Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts present the UK with major policy challenges in addressing serious regional economic imbalances, says **Philip McCann**



Rocco Dipoppa on Unsplash

**'On all spatial dimensions Brexit will lead to the UK becoming more unequal'**

UK inter-regional inequalities are the highest in the world for any large industrialised country, and, across a range of different indicators, greater than for any other OECD country.<sup>1</sup> Countries with large inter-regional economic inequalities and regionally unbalanced growth processes have no national growth advantages over those with balanced growth.<sup>2</sup> The UK has been an outlier by international standards, with only a very modest long-run productivity growth performance allied with rapidly growing inter-regional inequalities.

In many countries these inter-regional imbalances have led to a growing 'geography of discontent',<sup>3</sup> with voters in localities that perceive they are being 'left behind' using the ballot-box to extract political and institutional 'revenge' for these inequalities. This has taken place in many parts of the world,<sup>4</sup> and both the 2016 'pro-Leave' EU membership

referendum vote and in some ways the December 2019 general election result can also be understood this context.

Yet, what is really curious is the extent to which the UK national governance institutions, right up to ministerial levels, have given so little thought to these questions for so long. Part of the problem is the widespread lack of awareness of these problems among the UK's high-level institutional and governance set-up – including the national media,<sup>3</sup> London-based think-tanks, and even many university and research bodies, as well as much of Whitehall and the parliamentary system.

The extreme London-centric nature of the UK's governance system means that for decades the perceptions of the problem from the centre have been fundamentally different from many local perceptions. Moreover, evidence from other OECD

countries suggests that these inter-regional economic imbalances are in part related to the domestic political choices that have been made within the UK regarding its own governance systems,<sup>2</sup> choices which have left the UK ill-equipped to respond to the three-decade shocks of modern globalisation faced by many regions.

It is only very recently that there seems to have been a shift in public debate and understanding of the need for 'levelling up' or rebalancing. However, the curious thing is that none of these economic issues are in any way recent,<sup>5</sup> so why exactly 'levelling up' should only now become a major political theme is rather puzzling.

Yet, whatever the reasons for these recent political shifts, in terms of regional issues the UK finds itself today at a crucial juncture. The coming months will usher in profound changes, many of which are way beyond what the general public has any real awareness of, and well beyond what the UK governance system is currently capable of responding to. There are three aspects to this – namely, Brexit, COVID-19, and the policy challenges involved in genuinely 'levelling up'.

## Brexit

If we consider Brexit, to much of the general public Brexit has already been 'done' – a slogan repeated frequently by politicians; yet as of late November 2020 a final post-Brexit UK-EU deal had not yet been agreed. This is important because in economic terms Brexit has not yet even started. The transition period has in effect been a period of no change whatsoever, and in this sense nothing has been 'done'. Rather, the economic changes coming down the line very soon will be profound, and far beyond what large swathes of the general public as yet have any real consciousness of.

In particular, the final likely design of any UK-EU post-Brexit trade agreement is actually very close to a 'No deal' scenario, and very much at the so-called 'hard Brexit' end of the spectrum of the post-Brexit UK-EU trade arrangement options. Almost all UK and international analyses of the overall consequences of Brexit find that it will have adverse long-run consequences for the overall future prosperity of the UK economy;<sup>6</sup> and the harder the post-Brexit arrangement, the greater will be these long-run adverse implications.

Indeed, not only a 'No-deal' Brexit,<sup>7</sup> but even the scale of Brexit ushered in by any UK-EU agreed deal is likely to have greater long-run economic implications than the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>8</sup> As such, far from allowing for more funding for the UK health service, in comparison to our European and OECD competitor countries Brexit is likely to limit the long-run ability of the UK to fund public services and public investments in general. There is still very little public awareness of these issues.

In terms of regional issues, any final agreed deal is likely to have profound implications for the fortunes of different places, implications which, again, differ markedly from the public consciousness. The UK's economically weaker regions are more exposed to Brexit than the UK's more prosperous regions, and, as such, these weaker regions will have to adjust more in economic terms in order to respond to the economic challenges associated with Brexit than will more prosperous regions.<sup>9</sup> Ironically, the UK's economically weaker regions also tended to vote most strongly to leave the EU, even though their economies were more dependent on EU markets than were those of other regions.<sup>10</sup>

Very recently published research<sup>11</sup> also demonstrates that the adverse effects of Brexit on the competitiveness of UK regions are very serious, and especially for the UK's economically weaker regions. Because the economically weaker regions of the UK are more exposed to Brexit, they also face greater cost increases for all parts of their industrial fabric, and consequently greater losses of competitiveness.

Moreover, these effects are evident not only in terms of inter-regional differences, but also in terms of intra-regional differences. Brexit will not only adversely affect the competitiveness of the UK's poorer regions more than that of the UK's more prosperous regions, but this will also be the case for areas *within* regions. Brexit will more adversely affect the weaker areas within regions than the economically stronger areas within those same regions.<sup>11</sup>

As such, inter-regional imbalances are likely to increase between the UK regions and also within those same UK regions. In other words, on all spatial dimensions Brexit will lead to the UK becoming more unequal. Moreover, these findings are barely affected according to whether the UK does or does not finally agree a post-Brexit trade deal. The adverse economic effects of Brexit on the weaker regions of the UK are largely unresponsive and insensitive to the nature of any agreement.<sup>11</sup> While so much political and media energy and theatre is focused on the deal-brokering process and personalities, in actual fact, for the economically weaker regions of the UK, an agreed deal makes little or no difference to their long-run fortunes.<sup>11</sup> The consequences of Brexit for these regions are serious, and largely unchanged according to whether a deal is or is not finally brokered. Brexit is likely to work directly against 'levelling up'.

Politically, it may be the case that Brexit is almost 'done', but, in reality, in economic terms it has not yet begun. The economic shocks of Brexit, most of which will be slow-burning and long-lasting, are likely to be profound, and the ability of local government to respond to these likely local

economic impacts is very limited. UK sub-national and local government have levels of decision-making autonomy akin to countries such as Albania and Moldova, and, relative to our scale, the UK has by far the most centralised and top-down governance system in the industrialised world. Even prior to the UK's vote to leave the EU, its governance system was almost uniquely ill-designed and ill-equipped to address the UK's inter-regional productivity problems,<sup>5</sup> and Brexit has only accentuated these challenges in two ways.

## **'Both individually and in combination, the Brexit and COVID-19 shocks will work directly against any 'levelling up' agenda'**

First, Brexit is likely to exacerbate the existing inter-regional economic inequalities, for the reason outlined above. Secondly, the sub-national tiers of UK governance have been almost entirely locked out of the UK-EU negotiations, except for some very limited inputs by the devolved administrations and representatives of London and the City.<sup>12</sup> As such, UK sub-national governance is in many ways still in the dark, largely unprepared and without the tools required to address these challenges.<sup>13</sup> The prognosis is not good, and the role which sub-national governments can play in any process of 'levelling up' is, as yet, almost entirely unclear.

### **COVID-19**

On top of Brexit we have COVID-19. The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed and highlighted many of these underlying structural problems. Although the early stages of the pandemic heavily affected London, and in particular the poorer areas of London, since then the brunt of the pandemic has been borne by the economically weaker parts of the country, and especially poorer urban areas in the economically weaker regions.<sup>14</sup> Much of the focus is currently on the challenges facing sectors such as high-street retail, hospitality, travel, and tourism.

However, in regional and urban terms the longer-term impacts of the pandemic are likely to be both qualitatively and quantitatively different from these specific issues. The reason is that the pandemic induced major shocks to the global financial system, shocks which will increase in the coming months as the scale of global and national insolvencies and bankruptcies rises.

As we know from the last major financial shock, the 2008 global financial crisis, the long-run implications are to widen the gap between the

yields on investments – the required rates of return on investments – in prosperous and weaker places.<sup>15</sup> In environments of uncertainty and escalating risk, investors move capital away from riskier places and into safer places. This increases the liquidity in more prosperous places, reduces the local price of capital there, and also improves the collateral position for local investors as local real estate markets move upwards. In contrast, economically weaker places face rising costs of capital, shrinking local liquidity, and declining collateral positions.

Prosperous cities and regions become, in effect, an extension of the global bond markets. This happened in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis and accounts to a large extent why we observe inter-regional divergence in most OECD countries in the last decade.<sup>16</sup> Overall, these geographical capital shocks enhance the local entrepreneurial opportunities and recovery possibilities for the more prosperous places and reduce those in weaker places. As such, the current pandemic is likely to have largely similar effects, working directly against 'levelling up'.

Both individually and in combination, the Brexit and COVID-19 shocks will work directly against any 'levelling up' agenda. The differences, however, are in terms of the origins of the shocks. Brexit was an internally generated shock to the UK economy, in the sense that it was an explicit political and societal decision, whereas COVID-19 is a genuinely external shock unrelated to any domestic decision-making processes. While there may be questions regarding some of the decisions made by the UK government in its handling of the pandemic, it is still fundamentally an external shock. Yet the implications are likely to be broadly similar, and the external pandemic shock has therefore thrown much sharper light on to the long-run impacts of governance centralisation due to political and policy decisions made over many decades, as well as those made very recently.

### **Levelling up?**

Coming so soon after the recent Planning White Paper,<sup>17</sup> we now have a flurry of announcements of new initiatives, including a new 'Levelling Up Fund', a new British Development Bank,<sup>18</sup> a revised Green Book,<sup>19</sup> along with a new National Infrastructure Commission strategy document.<sup>20</sup> In terms of the 'levelling up' agenda, these potentially represent welcome steps forward, although at present we are still waiting to hear more concrete details regarding the devolution agenda or the Shared Prosperity Fund – the post-Brexit replacement for EU regional policy. Until we hear the details on these crucial aspects, it is, as yet, very hard to assess the extent to which the 'levelling up' agenda is being moved forward.

As the UK2070 Commission Final Report<sup>21</sup> made clear, the scale of resources required in order to seriously advance the 'levelling up' agenda is far bigger than the sums of money outlined in the November 2020 Budget. Moreover, and unlike the process underpinning the 'Town Deals',<sup>22</sup> a clearly articulated and long-term strategic focus needs to be built into the 'levelling up' agenda from the outset.

Given the sheer scale of the Brexit-related and COVID-19-related challenges that the UK now faces, on top of the existing inter-regional inequalities, developing a national narrative about 'levelling up' that is consistent with what is required to achieve it would be an important step forward.

● **Professor Philip McCann** is Professor of Urban and Regional Economics at University of Sheffield Management School. The views expressed are personal.

## Notes

- 1 P McCann: *Perceptions of Regional Inequality and the Geography of Discontent: Insights from the UK*. Think Piece. UK2070 Commission, Jan. 2019. <http://uk2070.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/01-McCann-UK-Regional-Inequality-Debates.pdf>
- 2 A Carrascal-Incera, P McCann, R Ortega-Argilés and A Rodríguez-Pose: 'UK interregional inequality in a historical and international comparative context'. *National Institute Economic Review*, 2020, Vol. 253, Aug., R4-R17
- 3 P McCann: 'Perceptions of regional inequality and the geography of discontent: insights from the UK'. *Regional Studies*, 2020, Vol. 54(2), 256-67. [www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00343404.2019.1619928](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00343404.2019.1619928)
- 4 A Rodríguez-Pose: 'The revenge of the places that don't matter (and what to do about it)'. *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy & Society*, 2018, Vol. 11(1), 189-209. <https://academic.oup.com/cjres/article/11/1/189/4821289>
- 5 P McCann: *The UK Regional-National Economic Problem: Geography, Globalisation and Governance*. Routledge, 2016
- 6 LA Winters: *Brexit and Covid: Experts – Who Needs 'Em? 'Long Read' Paper*. UK in a Changing Europe, Nov. 2020. [https://ukandeu.ac.uk/long-read/brexit-and-covid-experts-who-needs-em/?mc\\_cid=fc3ee95486&mc\\_eid=c7b0cbd5eb](https://ukandeu.ac.uk/long-read/brexit-and-covid-experts-who-needs-em/?mc_cid=fc3ee95486&mc_eid=c7b0cbd5eb)
- 7 R Partington: 'No-deal Brexit to cost more than Covid, Bank of England governor says'. *The Guardian*, 23 Oct. 2020. [www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/nov/23/no-deal-brexit-to-cost-more-than-covid-bank-of-england-governor-says](http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/nov/23/no-deal-brexit-to-cost-more-than-covid-bank-of-england-governor-says)
- 8 T Sampson: *The UK Economy: Brexit vs Covid-19*. Commentary. UK in a Changing Europe, Aug. 2020. <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/the-uk-economy-brexit-vs-covid-19/>
- 9 W Chen, B Los, P McCann, R Ortega-Argilés, MThissen and F van Oort: 'The continental divide? Economic exposure to Brexit in regions and countries on both sides of the Channel'. *Papers in Regional Science*, 2018, Vol. 97(1), 25-54. <https://rsaiconnect.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/pirs.12334>
- 10 B Los, P McCann, J Springford and MThissen: 'The mismatch between local voting and the local economic consequences of Brexit'. *Regional Studies*, 2017, Vol. 51(5), 786-99
- 11 MThissen, F van Oort, P McCann, R Ortega-Argilés and T Husby: 'The implications of Brexit for UK and EU regional competitiveness'. *Economic Geography*, published online 20 Oct. 2020. [www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00130095.2020.1820862](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00130095.2020.1820862)
- 12 C Billing, P McCann and R Ortega-Argilés: 'Interregional inequalities and UK sub-national governance responses to Brexit'. *Regional Studies*, 2019, Vol. 53(5), 741-60. [www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00343404.2018.1554246](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00343404.2018.1554246)
- 13 C Billing, P McCann, R Ortega-Argilés and D Sevinc: 'UK analysts and policy-makers' perspectives on Brexit: challenges, priorities and opportunities for sub-national areas'. *Regional Studies*, published online 6 Nov. 2020. [www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00343404.2020.1826039?tab=permissions&scroll=top](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00343404.2020.1826039?tab=permissions&scroll=top)
- 14 D Binns: 'The north sees red: Anger as most of south, including London, escapes the strictest Covid curbs'. *Metro*, 27 Nov. 2020. [www.metro.news/the-north-sees-red-anger-as-most-of-south-including-london-escapes-the-strictest-covid-curbs/2236202/](http://www.metro.news/the-north-sees-red-anger-as-most-of-south-including-london-escapes-the-strictest-covid-curbs/2236202/)
- 15 P McCann and R Ortega-Argilés: 'The Covid-19 shock: the UK national and regional implications in the light of international evidence'. In P McCann and T Vorley (Eds): *Productivity and the Pandemic: Challenges and Insights from Covid-19*. Edward Elgar, 2021 (in press)
- 16 M Daams, P McCann, P Veneri, R Barkham and D Schoemaker: *Capital Shocks, Real Estate Risks and the Effects of the Global Financial Crisis in US Cities*. Discussion Paper. Rebuilding Macroeconomics, Social Macroeconomics Hub. National Institute of Economic and Social Research, 2020
- 17 *Planning for the Future*. White Paper. Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Aug. 2020. [www.gov.uk/government/consultations/planning-for-the-future](http://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/planning-for-the-future); and see G Garton Grimwood: *Planning for the Future: Planning Policy Changes in England in 2020 and Future Reforms*. Briefing Paper 8981. House of Commons Library, Oct. 2020. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8981/>
- 18 G Davies and T Christie-Miller: *The Case for a British Development Bank*. Onward, Oct. 2020. [www.ukonward.com/bdb/](http://www.ukonward.com/bdb/)
- 19 *Green Book Review 2020: Findings and Response*. CP331. HM Treasury, Nov. 2020. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/937700/Green\\_Book\\_Review\\_final\\_report\\_241120v2.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/937700/Green_Book_Review_final_report_241120v2.pdf)
- 20 *National Infrastructure Strategy: Fairer, Faster, Greener*. CP 392. HM Treasury, Nov. 2020. [www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-infrastructure-strategy](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-infrastructure-strategy)
- 21 *Make No Little Plans: Acting at Scale for a Fairer and Stronger Future*. Final Report. UK2070 Commission, Feb. 2020. <http://uk2070.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/UK2070-FINAL-REPORT.pdf>
- 22 *Review of the Town Deals Selection Process*. HC 576 Session 2019-2021. National Audit Office, Jul. 2020. [www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Review-of-the-Town-Deals-selection-process.pdf](http://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Review-of-the-Town-Deals-selection-process.pdf); and *Review of the Town Deals Selection Process: Web-only Appendix*. National Audit Office, Jul. 2020. [www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Review-of-the-Town-Deals-selection-process-appendix.pdf](http://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Review-of-the-Town-Deals-selection-process-appendix.pdf)

# 'levelling up' – the case of eastern germany, post-1990

**Thomas B Fischer** looks at lessons that can be drawn from the experience of investing in infrastructure and regeneration in order to support socio-economic stabilisation of the depressed economy on Eastern Germany after German unification in 1990

Infrastructure and regeneration investments are frequently seen as essential contributors to attempts to stimulate economic regeneration in depressed economies. The underlying ideas are rooted in Keynesian economics,<sup>1</sup> where the aim is to stimulate demand through increased government expenditure. Examples of infrastructure investment being used to enhance economic development and growth can be found throughout the world – the most recent example with global implications being the Chinese Belt and Road policy initiative.<sup>2</sup>

In particular, in developing countries and in countries in transition there is evidence that investment in infrastructure development can support economic development.<sup>3</sup> Funding of big infrastructure projects is therefore an investment priority of development organisations and banks, such as the World Bank and other regional development banks. In the European Union (EU), the European Regional Development Funds (ERDFs) aim to strengthen economic and social cohesion in the EU by attempting to correct imbalances between its regions. Its Cohesion Fund<sup>4</sup> includes investment into the EU's Trans-European [infrastructure] Networks programme (TENS).<sup>5</sup>

This article reflects on the infrastructure and regeneration investments made in the area of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) – usually referred to as Eastern Germany) – after unification with the Federal Republic of Germany (Western Germany) in 1990. It summarises some basic cornerstones of the associated policy and some of the lessons learned, and it describes the economic situation in Eastern Germany following unification and outlines the aims of, and actions taken under, the 'Transport Projects of German Unity' (*Vekehrsprojekte Deutsche Einheit*) infrastructure investment programme. Whether the associated 'Solidarity

Treaty' policy of the Federal and *Länder* (states) governments introduced in 1994 can be portrayed as a success story is explored. An overall critical evaluation of infrastructure investment is provided, before conclusions are drawn.

## The GDR's collapsing economy post-1990, and regeneration efforts

The near total collapse of the economic system of the GDR following the July 1990 currency union and the October 1990 political unification with the Federal Republic of Germany was distinctly different from what happened in other Eastern European countries at the same time. Just before the currency union, the territory of the GDR had witnessed dramatic levels of out-migration (since the creation of the GDR in 1949, about 3 million citizens had fled the country up to 1989 – nearly 350,000 left in 1989 alone before the fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November). Stopping or at least slowing down the drain of human skills, knowledge and labour to the West, which continued after 1989 with another half a million people leaving before 1991, became a key political priority.

The dominant political opinion at the time was that exchanging East to West German currencies (GDR mark to D-mark) partially at rates of 1:1 and 1:2 (the 'unofficial' exchange rate was about 1:9 in October 1989<sup>6</sup>) was the best way to stop people flocking to the West. However, it was also clear that this would make most GDR businesses (usually state-owned) uncompetitive – literally overnight – because infrastructure, machinery and products were outdated compared with Western Germany; and because it would be impossible to sell products to the (former) socialist Eastern European countries, economically organised within COMECON (the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, covering the USSR, Poland,

Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Mongolia, Vietnam, Cuba and the GDR), which was in existence between 1949 and 1991.

Predictably, in the years immediately following unification, the economy in the territory of the former GDR went into what can only be described as a 'freefall', and every third job was lost (among which were over 80% of all jobs connected with industrial production<sup>7</sup>). Particularly serious initially was the near total loss of trade with the COMECON countries.

There was consensus in Germany overall (including in Western Germany, where at the same time the economy experienced a sustained boom as a consequence of unification and the decline of the Eastern German economy) that the situation required a decisive public response in order to stabilise what became known as the 'new' German *Länder*.

### Infrastructure investment in Eastern Germany aimed at stimulating growth

A political agreement between the federal government and all the German *Länder*, called the 'Solidarity Treaty' (*Solidarpakt*), was adopted in 1993. It ran from 1995 to 2004, before it was extended by the federal government in 2004 to run until 2019. The ensuing programme, '*Aufbau Ost*' (Rebuilding of Eastern Germany), consisted of numerous elements, including substantial subsidies for investment in regenerating and renewing cities, towns, regions, and infrastructure. A 'Transport Projects of German Unity' programme was directed at transport infrastructure development, as explained below.

While it is impossible to provide for an exact estimation (all the figures are contested), it has been suggested that by 2014 about 1.5 trillion euros of public money had been made available by both the western and eastern parts of Germany to support rebuilding the 'new' *Länder* (Schmid *et al.*<sup>8</sup> mention a figure of up to 2 trillion euros). By 2009, about 100 billion euros were being invested every year.<sup>9</sup>

All this equates to about 100,000 euros per person over a period of 25 years, or 4,000 euros per person per year. In comparison, Poland, as the biggest net beneficiary of EU funds in 2019, received about 220 euros per person per year.<sup>10</sup> With regard to infrastructure renewal and investment in city/town regeneration, there are estimates that about 500 billion euros were spent by 2014, i.e. over 30,000 euros per person or roughly 1,300 euros per person per year over a period of 25 years.<sup>11</sup> About 40 billion euros (i.e. around 8% of the total amount) went into the above mentioned 'Transport Projects of German Unity', a major infrastructure investment programme consisting of one waterway, seven motorway and nine railway projects. Fig. 1 on the following page shows the locations of these projects, which included extensions of existing as well as new transport infrastructures. The remainder of the 500 billion euros went into various actions, in

particular for subsidies for investment in regeneration and renewal projects.

### The Solidarity Treaty – an economic necessity?

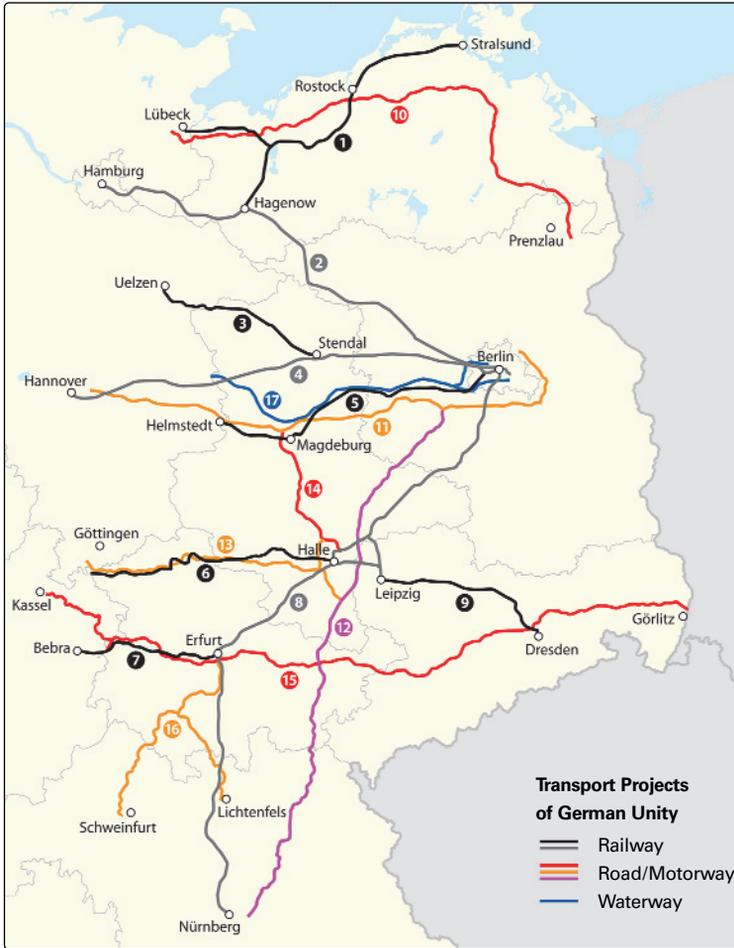
Overall, there can be no doubt that the substantial infrastructure construction efforts, as well as the investment subsidy for renewal and regeneration projects, played a key role in stabilising the 'new' German *Länder* at a time of major job and population losses as well as serious economic woes. Furthermore, the creation of a functioning, modern infrastructure has been an important factor in keeping and attracting businesses that have invested and created jobs (both in industry and services) since then. Importantly, initially the construction industry was one of the main factors in a rapid rise in GDP per person in Eastern Germany, which had stood at just over 30% of the figure in the West in 1990, and which subsequently increased to over 60% by 1995.<sup>12</sup>

Had there not been substantial rebuilding and regeneration, it is very likely that the out-migration of people and the decline of infrastructure, towns and cities would have continued at a much greater rate than what was actually observed. While average unemployment in Eastern Germany remained slightly higher than in Western Germany by 2019 (at about 7% compared with about 5%), it had fallen substantially from its peak in 2005 (when it was 19% in the East and 10% in the West). The overall employment rate in 1989 was higher in the former German Democratic Republic than it was in the Federal Republic of Germany, mainly owing to many more women being in employment. In 2019, it was still slightly higher in Eastern Germany (80% compared with 78%). Furthermore, average incomes in Eastern Germany in 2019 were somewhere between 85% and 90% of those in Western Germany.

### Critical reflection

While investment in infrastructure and regeneration was particularly crucial for the transition period, there has been criticism of how the investment was used, especially after the initial five-to-ten year period following unification. Funded construction projects tended to have short- to medium- rather than long-term effects. In this context, it is of particular relevance that, to date, relative productivity levels in Eastern Germany have remained lower than in the West, creating a continuing competitive disadvantage for businesses. There has been much criticism that this is still a key issue that has not been tackled sufficiently.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, while infrastructure and renewal investment has created much-needed jobs, frequently these required only low levels of skills.

In 2019, the average GDP per person in the 'new' *Länder* remained at about 70% of that in the Western *Länder* (albeit with considerable regional differences). However, total GDP had more than doubled since 1991. Furthermore, the contribution of the construction



**Fig. 1 Schemes carried out under the Transport Projects of German Unity programme**

Source: NordNordWest – [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Karte\\_Verkehrsprojekte\\_Deutsche\\_Einheit.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Karte_Verkehrsprojekte_Deutsche_Einheit.svg)  
Creative Commons by-sa-3.0  
(Key translated)

industry to GDP in Eastern Germany had decreased considerably, from 14% in 1994 to 6.8% in 2017,<sup>14</sup> with other economic activities gaining in importance. In 2017, services made up nearly 70% of gross value added to the economy of the 'new' *Länder*.

In this context, it is important to stress that regional differences in GDP per capita in countries throughout the world are not unusual, even in countries that do not have as dramatic a recent history as that of Germany. In the UK, in 2019 Wales had a GDP per capita standing at 73% of that of England (£23,866 compared with £32,857<sup>15</sup>). In the same year the GDP of the 'new' German *Länder* stood at about £27,000, compared with £ 38,700 in Western Germany. In Italy, the difference was even more pronounced, with Calabria having an average GDP per capita of only 60% of the Italian average. What is of particular importance here is that the gaps between different regions and nations in the UK and Italy have not been reduced over the last two to three decades. Also, regional differences in Germany in 2019 were smaller than those found in, for example, France, Ireland, Czechia, Belgium, Slovakia, or the UK.<sup>16</sup>

With hindsight, what should have received more attention and funding, in addition to investment into infrastructure, renewal and regeneration, was education and training, especially with regard to highly skilled jobs and innovation. This is in line with what was observed by this author with regard to the UK's 2011 National Infrastructure Plan, in an article<sup>17</sup> which suggested that 'regarding the goal of economic growth, there are some indications that this would be best achieved by using public monies to invest in education and training infrastructure'. While this did occur to some extent all over the 'new' German *Länder*, the amount spent was much smaller than the investment that went into construction-related activities. A main conclusion from the experiences in Eastern Germany is therefore that, while short- to medium-term infrastructure renewal and regeneration can play a highly important role in stabilising an economy in transition, a more substantial effort needs to be made in developing sought-after skills through education and training in the long term.

At this point, it is important to underline that this article does not attempt to reflect on whether the

money spent has always generated a good return, i.e. whether the benefits achieved can be said to have justified the costs. In this context, Ansar *et al.*<sup>18</sup> have warned that ‘investing in unproductive projects results initially in a boom, as long as construction is ongoing, followed by a bust, when forecasted benefits fail to materialize and projects therefore become a drag on the economy’.

Furthermore, while this article focuses on economic development, when considering long-term sustainable development goals there is also a need to reflect on environmental and social effects. With regards to the former, overall, in Eastern Germany air and water quality improved substantially following unification. The River Elbe, for example, was one of the most polluted European rivers prior to 1990 and is now considered to be one of the cleanest.<sup>19</sup> However, Germany is no different from most other European countries in that biodiversity is continuing to decline,<sup>20</sup> and there are clearly a number of negative environmental effects associated with the Transport Projects of German Unity.

## **‘An important lesson is that some serious effort should be put into addressing persistent regional inequalities, including economic inequalities between the nations and also within them’**

In this context, it is important to note that a key reason for a decline in biodiversity in Europe is severance, particularly through roads and railway lines. Building major motorways into sparsely populated regions (which some say are the under-used) is clearly problematic. For example, the Baltic Sea motorway, the A20, cuts through what was one of the largest remaining unsevered regions in Germany, with numerous implications for wildlife.<sup>21</sup> Similar criticism has been expressed for other projects.

Despite one of the projects (the extension of Havel and Spree rivers<sup>22</sup> – number 17 on the map in Fig. 1) being considerably scaled down as a result of public opposition, it is probably fair to say that projects were not as thoroughly assessed as they should have been when the programme was drawn up. While Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) was applied at the project level, no strategic assessment was conducted – such as Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA), for example.<sup>23</sup> This could have helped in developing a better understanding of strategic issues and cumulative effects – which, considering the scale of the projects, would clearly have been beneficial.<sup>24</sup>

With regards to social effects, many people initially became unemployed and felt left behind, which gave rise to some considerable tension. While tensions have reduced since the 1990s, a considerable minority still feel disadvantaged and disconnected from the ‘new’ country that they are living in – especially those who never found employment again. How these perceptions and feelings could have been avoided is difficult to say. However, it is likely that the considerable regeneration and investment efforts were able to mitigate at least some of this discontent. Overall, wellbeing in Eastern and Western Germany started to converge in about the mid-1990s.<sup>25</sup>

### **Conclusions**

The development of Eastern Germany since unification with Western Germany in 1990 bears witness to the importance of investment in regeneration and infrastructure to support the socio-economic stabilisation of depressed economies facing numerous serious socio-economic problems, particularly in the short to medium term. As a result of unprecedented levels of investment (up to 1.5-2 trillion euros), the economy in Eastern Germany was stabilised and out-migration slowed considerably. In 1990, GDP per capita in Eastern Germany was only 30% of that in Western Germany, but within a few years that figure rose to over 60%.

While a gap remains between the two parts of the unified Germany up until this day, overall, and particularly against the backdrop of persisting regional GDP differences in other countries, economic development in Eastern Germany since 1990 can be considered a success story. Importantly, average incomes in Eastern Germany in 2019 were somewhere between 85% and 90% of those in Western Germany. This is not to suggest that no problems remain – particularly with regard to a productivity gap between the East and the West, and also with regard to other (for example social) challenges. Furthermore, a more balanced approach should have been taken in the original investment programmes, particularly with regard to the development of education and training for highly skilled jobs and innovation, and also in terms of a more strategic and environmentally aware approach to development.

Overall, though, there can be no doubt that the story told in this article would have been a different one had there not been the same level of commitment to regeneration and infrastructure investment. Despite the criticism directed at some aspects of the Solidarity Treaty, the efforts to develop Eastern Germany since 1990 are well worth studying, particularly by countries and world regions in transition, facing economic depression and unequal regional development.

For the UK, and particularly considering the current government’s intention to ‘level up’ underperforming

and left-behind parts,<sup>26</sup> an important lesson is that some serious effort should be put into addressing persistent regional inequalities, including economic inequalities between the nations and also within them. This would need to include much higher levels of investment in regeneration and infrastructure, in particular for initiatives that support the development of highly skilled jobs and innovation.

● **Professor Thomas B Fischer** is with the Environmental Assessment and Management Research Centre, University of Liverpool, and with the Research Unit for Environmental Sciences and Management, Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences, North-West University, South Africa. The views expressed are personal.

## Notes

- 1 G Fletcher: *The Keynesian Revolution and Its Critics: Issues of Theory and Policy for the Monetary Production Economy*. Palgrave MacMillan, 1989
- 2 The Belt and Road initiative is an ambitious Chinese foreign policy, potentially including 70 countries and representing two-thirds of the global population. With a total value of over US \$8 trillion by 2049, the initiative aims at unprecedented levels of infrastructure development, extending across borders of countries and being located within and between world regions. See TS Aung and TB Fischer: 'Quality of environmental impact assessment systems and economic growth in countries participating in the belt and road initiatives'. *Impact Assessment & Project Appraisal*, published online 23 Sept. 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14615517.2020.1818520>
- 3 B Egert, T Kozluk and D Sutherland: *Infrastructure and Growth: Empirical Evidence*. OECD Economic Department Working Paper 685. OECD Publishing, Mar. 2009. [www.oecd-ilibrary.org/economics/infrastructure-and-growth\\_225682848268](http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/economics/infrastructure-and-growth_225682848268)
- 4 See the EU *Cohesion Fund* factsheet, at [www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/96/cohesion-fund](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/96/cohesion-fund)
- 5 See, for example, TB Fischer and O Sykes: 'The TEN-T – an environmental pitch'. *Town & Country Planning*, 2009, Vol. 78, Apr., 198–200
- 6 M Willms: 'Die wirtschaftliche Gestaltung des vereinigten Deutschland 1989/90. Ökonomische Fragen'. In J Elvert and F Krüger (Eds): *Deutschland 1949–1989. Von der Zweistaatlichkeit zur Einheit*. Franz Steiner, 2003
- 7 B Martens: *Wirtschaftlicher Zusammenbruch und Neuanfang nach 1990*. Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, May 2020. [www.bpb.de/geschichte/deutsche-einheit/lange-wege-der-deutschen-einheit/47133/zusammenbruch](http://www.bpb.de/geschichte/deutsche-einheit/lange-wege-der-deutschen-einheit/47133/zusammenbruch)
- 8 J Schmid, D Buhr, C Roth and C Steffen: *Wirtschaftspolitik*. Ferdinand Schoeningh, 2015, Second Edition
- 9 U Müller: 'Deutsche Einheit – 100 Milliarden Euro fließen pro Jahr in den Osten'. *Welt*, 21 Aug. 2009. [www.welt.de/wirtschaft/article4363237/100-Milliarden-Euro-fliesen-pro-Jahr-in-den-Osten.html](http://www.welt.de/wirtschaft/article4363237/100-Milliarden-Euro-fliesen-pro-Jahr-in-den-Osten.html)
- 10 *The EU Budget at a Glance*. European Commission, May 2019. [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/about\\_the\\_european\\_commission/eu\\_budget/budget-brochure-a5-17-05\\_interactive.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/about_the_european_commission/eu_budget/budget-brochure-a5-17-05_interactive.pdf)
- 11 A solidarity tax raised in all of Germany (i.e. the West and East) from 1991 onwards (initially 7.5% of the tax bill of wage earners and companies; post-1998 this became 5.5%) generated about 200 billion euros
- 12 *Jahresbericht der Bundesregierung zum Stand der Deutschen Einheit 2015*. BMWi (Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft und Energie), Sept. 2015. [www.bmfsfj.de/blob/83626/42c77b369149e0638d598980d30e0f52/jahresbericht-einheit-bundesregierung-data.pdf](http://www.bmfsfj.de/blob/83626/42c77b369149e0638d598980d30e0f52/jahresbericht-einheit-bundesregierung-data.pdf)
- 13 S Müller, E Dettmann, D Fackler, et al.: *Produktivitätsunterschiede zwischen West- und Ostdeutschland und mögliche Erklärungsfaktoren*. IAB Forschungsbericht 16/2017. Institut für Arbeitsmarkt- und Berufsforschung (IAB), Dec. 2017. <http://doku.iab.de/forschungsbericht/2017/fb1617.pdf>
- 14 *Jahresbericht der Bundesregierung zum Stand der Deutschen Einheit 2018*. BMWi (Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft und Energie), Aug. 2018. [www.bmwi.de/Redaktion/DE/Publikationen/Neue-Laender/jahresbericht-zum-stand-der-deutschen-einheit-2018.pdf?\\_\\_blob=publicationFile&v=4](http://www.bmwi.de/Redaktion/DE/Publikationen/Neue-Laender/jahresbericht-zum-stand-der-deutschen-einheit-2018.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=4)
- 15 *Regional Economic Activity by Gross Domestic Product, UK: 1998 to 2018*. Office for National Statistics, Dec. 2019. [www.ons.gov.uk/economy/grossdomesticproductgdp/bulletins/regionaleconomicactivitybygrossdomesticproductuk/1998to2018](http://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/grossdomesticproductgdp/bulletins/regionaleconomicactivitybygrossdomesticproductuk/1998to2018)
- 16 'Regional GDP per capita ranged from 31% to 626% of the EU average in 2017'. News Release. Eurostat, 26 Feb. 2019. <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/9618249/1-26022019-AP-EN.pdf/f765d183-c3d2-4e2f-9256-cc6665909c80>
- 17 TB Fischer: 'Best value for the taxpayer?'. *Town & Country Planning*, 2012, Vol. 81, Feb., 70–73
- 18 A Ansar, B Flyvbjerg, A Budzior and D Lunn: 'Does infrastructure investment lead to economic growth or economic fragility? Evidence from China'. *Oxford Review of Economic Policy*, 2016, Vol. 32 (3), 360–90
- 19 *Jahresbericht der Bundesregierung zum Stand der Deutschen Einheit 2020*. BMWi (Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft und Energie), Aug. 2020. [www.bmwi.de/Redaktion/DE/Publikationen/Neue-Laender/jahresbericht-zum-stand-der-deutschen-einheit-2020.pdf?\\_\\_blob=publicationFile&v=6](http://www.bmwi.de/Redaktion/DE/Publikationen/Neue-Laender/jahresbericht-zum-stand-der-deutschen-einheit-2020.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=6)
- 20 'Loss of biodiversity'. In *Europe's Environment – The Dobbris Assessment*. European Environment Agency, May 1995. [www.eea.europa.eu/publications/92-826-5409-5/page029new.html](http://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/92-826-5409-5/page029new.html) (page modified Apr. 2016)
- 21 C Kieß: *Die Sanierung von Biodiversitätsschäden nach der europäischen Umwelthaftungsrichtlinie*. Springer, 2008
- 22 P Neumann: 'Schiffahrt in Berlin: Sanfter Spreeausbau soll Naturschützer beruhigen'. *Berliner Zeitung*, 18 Jan. 2016. [www.berliner-zeitung.de/mensch-metropole/schiffahrt-in-berlin-sanfter-spreeausbau-soll-naturschuetzer-beruhigen-li.74231](http://www.berliner-zeitung.de/mensch-metropole/schiffahrt-in-berlin-sanfter-spreeausbau-soll-naturschuetzer-beruhigen-li.74231)
- 23 A Rehhausen, M Hanusch and TB Fischer: 'Multi-project Strategic Environmental Assessment – Practice in Germany'. In TB Fischer and A González (Eds): *Handbook on Strategic Environmental Assessment*. Edward Elgar, 2021, Chap. 2 (in press)
- 24 J Dusik, TB Fischer and B Sadler: *Benefits of a Strategic Environmental Assessment*. Regional Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe. UNDP, 2003
- 25 *Subjektives Wohlbefinden in Ostdeutschland nähert sich westdeutschem Niveau*. Informationsdienst Soziale Indikatoren, Jul. 1999. [www.gesis.org/fileadmin/upload/forschung/publikationen/zeitschriften/isi/isi-22.pdf](http://www.gesis.org/fileadmin/upload/forschung/publikationen/zeitschriften/isi/isi-22.pdf)
- 26 P Swinney and K Enekel: *Why Big Cities Are Crucial to 'Levelling Up'*. Centre for Cities, Feb. 2020. [www.centreforcities.org/publication/why-big-cities-are-crucial-to-levelling-up/](http://www.centreforcities.org/publication/why-big-cities-are-crucial-to-levelling-up/)

# the case for an 'MIT' for the north

**There is a major opportunity to help re-balance the UK's economy by increasing investment in R&D in the North, centred around a new, globally significant, northern centre for science and technology, say [Stephen Nicol](#) and [Ian Wray](#)**

The North of England was the cradle of Britain's Industrial Revolution. Its universities played a leading role in 20th century science. In 1917, the Nobel Prize winner Ernest Rutherford became the first person to create an artificial nuclear reaction in laboratories at Manchester University. Alan Turing worked at Manchester after the Second World War, where, on 21 June 1948, Tom Kilburn built and successfully operated the world's first stored-program electronic computer, later founding a Department of Computer Science.<sup>1</sup> At Liverpool University, Nobel Prize winner James Chadwick, who discovered the neutron in 1932, built one of the earliest cyclotrons, later leading the British team that worked on the Manhattan project.

In spite of under-investment in industry, de-industrialisation on an unprecedented scale since the early 1980s, and a relative concentration of government-funded research and development (R&D) elsewhere, the North retains a major base of science and innovation. Research carried out for the Northern Powerhouse (*The Northern Powerhouse Independent Economic Review*<sup>2</sup>) has identified a raft of economic strengths and innovation capacities of national and international significance. These include four 'prime capabilities': in advanced manufacturing, with a particular focus on materials and processes; in energy, especially in nuclear power and offshore wind; in health innovation; and in digital technology. These are described by the *Independent Economic Review* as 'international-class assets, expertise, research and businesses that are genuinely distinctive for the North, are highly productive and can compete at national and international scales'.

However, in economic and innovation terms the North remains something of a 'slumbering giant'. Productivity levels lag significantly behind the UK and OECD averages, and on most measures of innovation there is a substantial gap with London and the wider South East. This is a lost opportunity

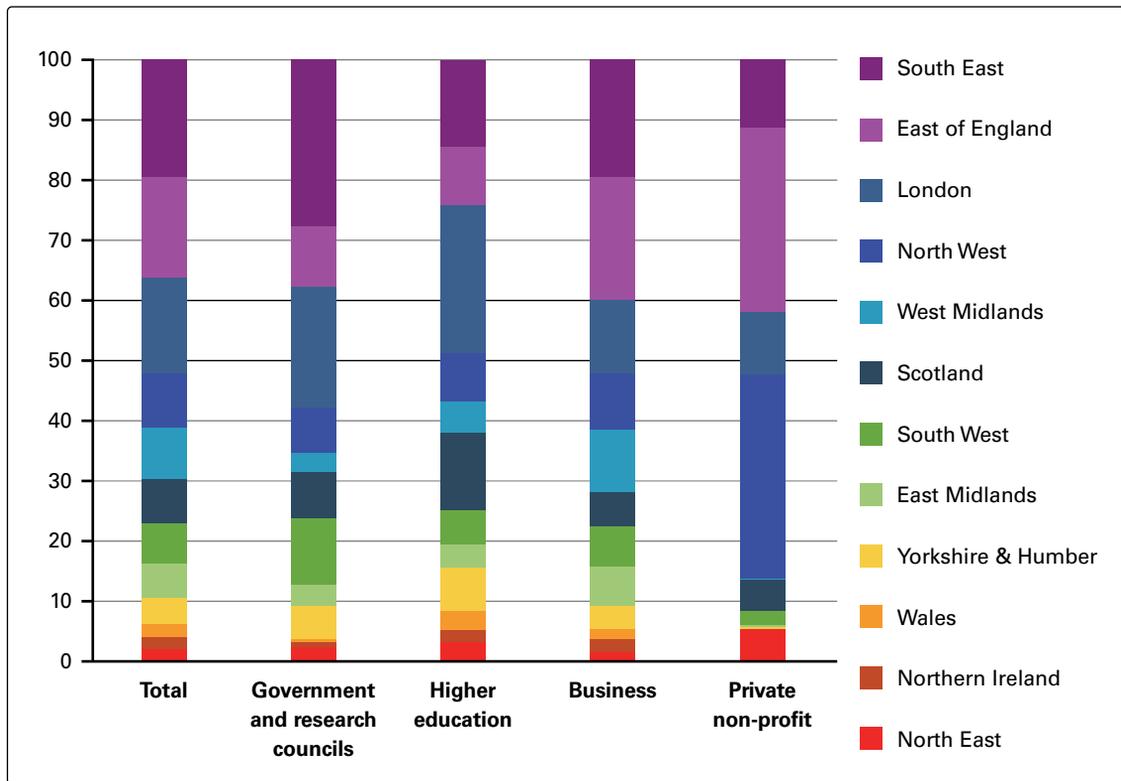
for the North and its businesses and people. It is also a lost opportunity for UK plc. But there is an opportunity to re-balance the UK's economy and in so doing enhance overall UK productivity and competitiveness.

The North has strong research capabilities across its universities and research institutions. But overall, as noted below, government-funded R&D activity is well below par in the North. A strong knowledge base is a critical component to economic success, as is the absorptive capacity of the economy to exploit ideas. The North has a large and diverse economy to absorb and develop ideas and a still-strong manufacturing base. There is a need to invest in the innovative capacity of the North to unleash this potential. This article argues for:

- an unprecedented increase in investment in levels of R&D in the North, particularly in translational research;<sup>3</sup> and
- an investment focus on developing a new world-class capacity in technological innovation that can deliver sort of the step-change that the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) achieved for the US, and particularly for the North East area around Boston.

## Patterns of national and regional R&D

As a nation, the UK spends much less than many others on R&D. In terms of government funding as a share of GDP, in an international comparison carried out by the Information Technology and Innovation Foundation in the USA, in university-led R&D Britain comes 20th, behind Switzerland, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Australia, Austria, Finland, Iceland, Netherlands, Singapore, and others, spending only 0.24% of GDP. The USA comes even lower, ranking 22nd. Furthermore, the UK's spend on all forms of R&D and as a share of its economy has been declining in relative terms. Over the last 30 years, the UK has slipped from being one of the most research-intensive



**Fig. 1 Share of the UK's gross expenditure on R&D by sector and region, 2017**

Source: Table 1 in *Industrial Strategy and Industry 4.0: Structure, People and Place*<sup>5</sup>

developed economies in the world to being one of the least.<sup>4</sup>

The government has committed to meet a target of 2.4% of GDP invested in UK R&D by 2027, and to a longer-term goal of 3%. This target is unlikely to be delivered through incremental projects and will need a major new institutional focus – and a quantum leap in thinking which should refocus the UK's research effort in the North.

Alongside a decline in the average level of R&D intensity, R&D activity in the UK is highly skewed. Perhaps the most profound of the UK's regional inequalities relates to research and science. In a knowledge-based economy, science and research are the bed rock of innovation and thus of economic growth and productivity. A knowledge-rich economy can prosper; a knowledge-poor economy cannot. Knowledge resides in books, research papers and institutions, but most importantly it resides in people's heads, and is transmitted by personal interaction, especially if the end result is to be applied, with innovation leading to profitable invention.

The distribution of science and research across the UK's regions is highly unequal, with R&D carried out by government through its research councils being particularly uneven. Research carried out by Professor Cecilia Wong and colleagues at Manchester

University's Urban Institute<sup>5</sup> shows that over 48% of this expenditure is accounted for by London and the South East, and a further 11% by the South West. Turning to the manufacturing regions the contrast is stark: the West Midlands' share is 3.23%, the East Midlands' 3.37%, and the North East's 2.19%. Only in the North West and Scotland was the share more than 6% (here, however, is something to build on).

The picture is similar in the distribution of higher education research, with over 48% in London, the South East and the East of England, and in the distribution of business R&D, with no less than 52% in London, the South East and the East of England. The picture for business R&D is better in the Midlands (10.4%), but remains poor across most of the North: Yorkshire and Humberside has 4%; the North East only 1.2%.

Fig. 1 and the maps in Figs 2-4 (above and on pages 398 and 399, all abstracted from a report by Professor Wong and colleagues<sup>5</sup>) graphically illustrate the issues.

There is recent evidence which suggests that things may be deteriorating in the peripheral regions to the benefit of the so called 'Golden Triangle' (bounded by London, Oxford, and Cambridge). In 2000 a major decision was taken to base a new 'Diamond Light Source' (synchrotron) project at the

Rutherford Appleton Laboratory in Oxfordshire rather than at Daresbury in Cheshire, which had been home to Britain's existing synchrotron. There was further debate in 2008 about the funding of a new light source facility at the Daresbury location or others in the Golden Triangle.<sup>5</sup> In 2007 the Francis Crick Institute project to consolidate biomedical research was launched in London and completed in 2016 – with 1,500 staff, including 1,250 scientists, and an annual budget of over £100 million, making it the biggest single biomedical laboratory in Europe. Limited or no consideration was given to a location outside the Golden Triangle.

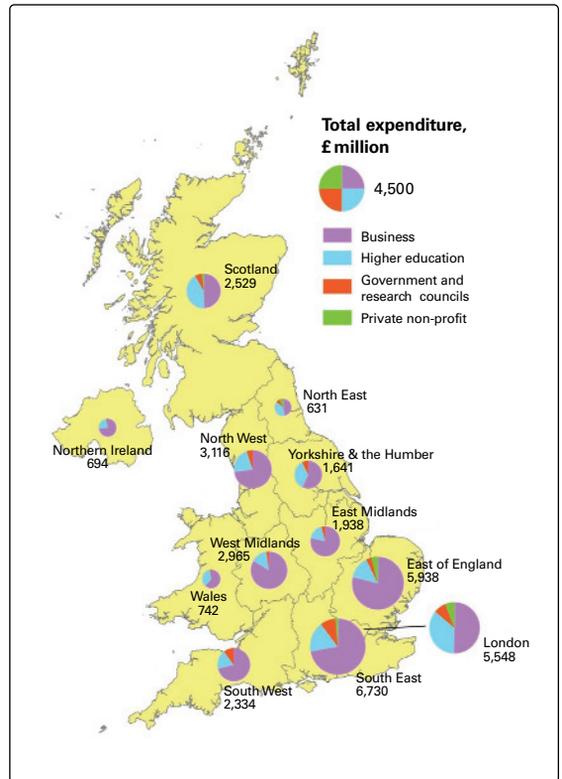
In his statement as Chancellor of the Exchequer in 2010, George Osborne announced significant national investment in science. Every major project in his list was in London and the South: the UK Centre for Medical Research and Innovation (London); the Laboratory of Molecular Biology (Cambridge); the Animal Health Institute (Pirbright), and Diamond Light Source (Oxford).

**The Cambridge story – how concentrated research spurs innovation**

Largely by accident, Cambridge has emerged as the foremost part of the UK in which a concentration of world-class research is coupled with a thriving business sector, creating a relatively small but internationally significant area of innovation and growth. The so-called 'Cambridge phenomenon' is well researched and stands out in the UK.<sup>6</sup> By the 2000s, biotechnology was emerging as a formidable part of the Cambridge high-technology cluster, caused in part by the development of human genome research, as well as high-profile engagement with big pharmaceutical companies. Cambridge has benefited enormously from the location of the government-funded Laboratory for Molecular Biology (LMB), established in 1947, where Watson and Crick announced their findings on the structure of DNA in 1953. The LMB has had direct long-term funding from the Medical Research Council and has new facilities at the £200 million Addenbrooke Hospital complex.

An important example of the 'Cambridge effect' is the alliance between Cambridge Antibody Technology, a company that emerged from the LMB, and the UK pharmaceutical giant Astra Zeneca. In 2014 Astra Zeneca announced the closure of its in-house research facilities in North West England at Alderley Park, near Manchester, and the relocation of its research facilities to Cambridge, where it could take advantage of knowledge transfer and alliances with institutions such as the LMB.

Cambridge has been extraordinarily successful at spinning off new high-technology companies across a wide range of sectors – although it has often lost promising start-ups to predatory international buyers. In 1984, John Butterfield, Vice-Chancellor



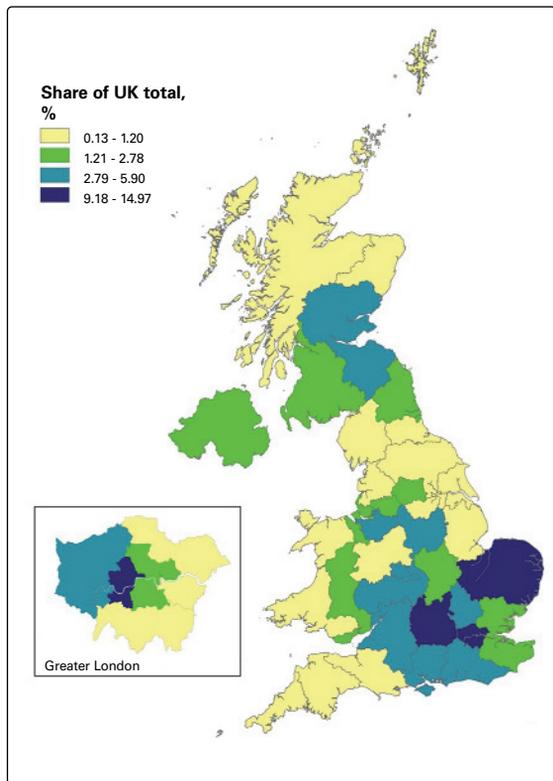
**Fig. 2 R&D expenditure by sector and region, 2017**

Source: Fig. 22 in *Industrial Strategy and Industry 4.0: Structure, People and Place*<sup>5</sup>

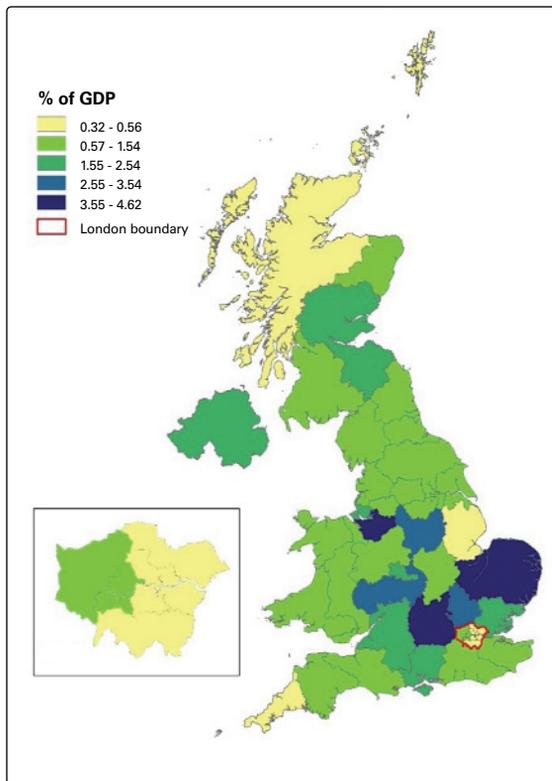
of Cambridge University, argued that among the many factors that had shaped Cambridge's success in high-technology business should be counted its relative isolation, and its 'sequestration from industrial society as it has evolved in Britain's cities since the last century'. However, it is arguable that the remoteness of Cambridge-based science research and innovation within the UK has deprived manufacturing in other regions of the opportunity for interaction with bright researchers and new ideas that have so readily entered the world market. In the USA that issue was put into sharp focus for the Massachusetts economy by Professor Michael Best of the Lowell Centre for Industrial Competitiveness:

*'We run the risk of turning into Cambridge, England: we'll have isolated clusters of the very best university research and a number of small R&D firms but not the downstream production, service and support jobs that make a vibrant economy. We'll create all the new ideas – but others will get too much of the benefit.'*<sup>7</sup>

Cambridge has certainly excelled at innovation; but largely in one (highly internationalised) model of high-end innovation. Like other institutions in the Golden Triangle, it has given powerful leadership –



**Fig. 3 Estimated R&D expenditure by NUTS 2 region, 2016**  
 Source: Fig. 23 in *Industrial Strategy and Industry 4.0: Structure, People and Place*<sup>5</sup>



**Fig. 4 Estimated local GDP used in R&D expenditure, 2016**  
 Source: Fig. 24 in *Industrial Strategy and Industry 4.0: Structure, People and Place*<sup>5</sup>

benefiting from its own institutional power and its close connections with powerful people (including, of course, its own alumni).

**Alternative models of innovation and funding**

In their discussion of the new American policies for innovation and specifically US Advanced Manufacturing initiative institutes,<sup>8</sup> William Bonvillian and Peter Singer at MIT identify several models of innovation:

- **Pipeline model:** This is the traditional US approach to provide ‘a stream of new scientific knowledge to turn the wheels of private and public enterprise’.<sup>9</sup>
- **Extended pipeline model:** Support is given all the way from front-end R&D to demonstration, test bed, and initial market creation, via defence orders. The pipeline bridges what is sometimes known as the ‘valley of death’ between research and implemented technology.
- **Induced innovation model:** Here technology comes from firms spotting opportunities; the market creates demand and technology is pulled rather than pushed into innovation.
- **Manufacturing-led innovation in technology, products, and processes:** This is a more purposeful version of induced innovation, in which

industry leads, but with strong government support. Applied R&D is integrated with the manufacturing process. Asian countries, including China, Japan, Taiwan, and Korea, have used this planned approach. It is a serious gap in US policy.

- **Innovation organisation:** Essentially, this is a hybrid model, taking the best characteristics of all the earlier models. It incorporates a pipeline component, an extended pipeline component, and manufacturing-led innovation and support for back-end production, going well beyond the extended pipeline model.

In Germany, the Fraunhofer Institutes implement a permanent programme for advanced manufacturing support, with no finance cut-off and with long-term strategic leadership outside government. The Fraunhofer Gesellschaft supplies overall leadership for the network of institutes, with a senate and general assembly representing the 60 institutes. Individual institutes are tasked with carrying out the organisation’s research work. This provides substantial autonomy, but under central guidance. The scale of funding is notable: German funding is in the order of \$2 billion per annum.

It is increasingly recognised in the USA that a significant government role is needed in securing

innovation, as in Germany and China. In particular, manufacturing institutes need to be joined together in a supporting network, with operational autonomy for each institute, but a public-private council to oversee broader performance.

Compared with Germany, UK levels of funding for R&D in general, and for the new advanced manufacturing institutes in particular, are very modest. In 2010 the coalition government provided £200 million to establish seven Catapult centres for advanced manufacturing over a four-year period (£50 million per annum). In his review of the UK's Catapult initiative in 2014, Dr Hermann Hauser called for a £1 billion per annum programme by 2020<sup>10</sup> – comparable with, but much less than, the German programme. In August 2018 the UK government announced a further £780 million investment in the Catapult network. The funding builds on the £180 million investment announced by the Prime Minister for centres in the North East earlier in 2018, taking the total of additional funding to almost £1 billion over the next five years.<sup>11</sup>

This sounds impressive but at £250 million per annum is only a quarter of the funding implied by Hauser's 2014 review, and only a fraction of the nearly £2 billion per annum provided in Germany.<sup>8</sup> A great deal is being done, and that is very welcome. But there needs to be a huge shift in volume and quality, with a strong new skew towards the North.

### An 'MIT' for the North

In summary, the UK spends too little on R&D compared with many other economically advanced countries. In particular, it spends much too little on innovation organisation and manufacturing-led innovation compared with other countries, and especially in comparison with Germany. The UK's national research efforts are overly concentrated in the Golden Triangle, distant from the North and much of the nation's manufacturing base.

Although there are some excellent research universities and individual departments in the North, the UK's globally important institutions, with scale and mass, are largely in the Golden Triangle, where government research institutes, and increasingly private sector research activity, are congregating. The North has been left out in the cold, and the opportunity to build on its excellent business base and sectoral strengths is hampered.

Our proposal for an 'MIT' for the North is designed to create a new northern institute for science and technology, tackling all these problems and related difficulties head on. It would aim to create a new, globally significant resource for science and technology in the North, able to rival Oxbridge on its own terms, just as the northern redbrick universities created in the 19th century outshone Oxford and Cambridge and woke them from a gouty slumber.<sup>12</sup> It could expect to attract very significant contributions

from the private sector and philanthropic institutions, both in the UK and internationally.

We have chosen to call this proposal an 'MIT' for the North in part to attract attention. However, it certainly would not be a carbon copy of the original MIT, based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA. It would not be a new plate-glass building, or a new university which would compete with existing institutions in the North. It would – like the USA's DARPA (Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency) model<sup>13</sup> – carry out high-level research on its own, pulling in some of the best research professors in the world. It would act as a national counterweight to the Golden Triangle. It would be required to work collaboratively as part of a distributed network, sharing funds and research contracts across the North. It would work in partnership with the N8 Research Partnership and other universities, with advanced manufacturing institutes, with the private sector, and with government research institutions, especially if they can be persuaded to relocate, in whole or part, to the North.

Draft objectives for the new institution would be as follows:

- **Prime objectives for the UK and the North:**

- To act as a focus for additional public, private and philanthropic investment in the UK in research, especially translational research to raise the nation's game internationally.
- To increase rates of innovation across the North, and so productivity.
- To bring to and retain in the North the best talent in the world.

- **Institutional objectives:**

- To create a new endowment-funded, world-class institution in the North, focused on science and technology, with scale, independence and longevity, which would become equal in status to Oxbridge or the top-flight London universities over the next two to three decades – built on government research and public funding, in tandem with international business and philanthropy.
- To work in a collaborative way as part of a network, working in partnership with the best of the North's existing universities, research bodies, and businesses.
- To act as the central and distributing institution for funding and supporting the North's current and future advanced manufacturing institutes, focused on turning new ideas into monetised products, services, and processes.

Making all this work would demand long-term thinking on a 20-50 year time horizon. It would have to be big, and would need to acquire huge institutional weight. It would require large-scale, long-term and consistent funding, at least on the scale of the



The web (own work), CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/index.php?curid=44645611>

**The Francis Crick Institute near St Pancras International in London. The project to consolidate biomedical research was completed in 2016 - with an annual budget of over £100 million, it is the biggest biomedical laboratory in Europe. Limited or no consideration was given to a location outside the Golden Triangle**

funding allocated to the German Fraunhofer Institutes – in the order of £1 billion to £2 billion per annum. This would give a ten-year public funding profile in the order of £10 billion to £20 billion, supplemented by private research contracts, international partnerships, and philanthropy. This sounds like a huge sum, but even the upper end is less than a quarter of the current estimated cost of HS2 (£86 billion<sup>14</sup>) and in the same order of magnitude as the costs of Crossrail, London's new rail tunnel (£18 billion<sup>15</sup>).

To ensure that the funding is sustained across political cycles, there would need to be effective ring-fencing, whether by use of endowment funding or, as in the case of the 19th century US technological universities (including MIT), through grants of land and property.<sup>16</sup> Cambridge University is the beneficiary of long-term returns from its extensive land-holdings.

We are conscious that there are different models for how such an institution could work. There needs to be a strong spatial focus to ensure cross-fertilisation and the place-specific development and generation of ideas. This *could* lend itself to a highly centralised institution in one location. However, equally there is an opportunity and indeed a need to work across the North, building on and enhancing the excellence that already exists. This points to a more distributed model, with outlets or nodes in several different parts of the North, and is essentially the

model for 'Centres of Excellence' supported by the UK2070 Commission in its Final Report and repeated in its recent follow-up report, *Go Big. Go Local*.<sup>17</sup>

Equally, there are different possible models for how the institution would work with other bodies in the North (and elsewhere in the UK). The pure MIT model would be very much a stand-alone institution, carrying out the bulk of teaching and research in-house, albeit working with others. An alternative model (similar to DARPA) would be one in which the new institution primarily works with other universities and bodies in the North to contract for research (and teaching).

Whatever model is followed, it will need to have its headquarters located in a place that is already strong on technology and R&D, with high-speed connections to the other northern university cities and to London, as well as international airport connections. It may be beneficial to have a link across to existing educational institutions, particularly in the early years of set up – acting as a host.

We realise that any decision on location would be contested and highly political, as indeed would the proposal as a whole if it is perceived as a threat to existing institutions. There will also be a legitimate debate about whether a similar institution is needed in the Midlands. With the arrival of HS2, the Midlands will be much better plugged into London's research base, as well as the rest of the Golden Triangle. At

this stage, the North should be the location, with a potential second, sister institution in the Midlands if good progress is made.

### What difference would it make?

What then are the potential benefits of our proposal, particularly the difference it could make to the North? An 'MIT' for the North would become a world-leading centre for science and advanced research. It would have stability and scale in funding, over long timescales, working in active partnership with, and giving support for, five-star-rated university departments and others across the North. It would become a focus for attracting government and private sector research institutes (within and beyond the UK), for attracting and managing national and international private sector and philanthropic funding on a very large scale, and for attracting and supporting venture capital funds into and within northern high-technology and business.

There is strong body of literature on the economic returns from investment in public R&D. A recent review report concluded that 'recent evidence, looking at how different industrial sectors interact with publicly-funded R&D, has estimated positive and significant social returns of around 20% for UK public R&D investments'.<sup>18</sup> The report also confirmed that private sector return on private R&D averaged around 25%-30% and that the wider social returns could be two to three times this figure (as a result of spillover benefits). Furthermore, it concluded that this estimate is likely to 'to understate the economic return to public R&D spending'.

It is also the case that public R&D spending can lever in international and private R&D spending, with 'every £1 of public spend leveraging about £1.40 of private spend' according to some estimates.<sup>19</sup>

This means that at a UK level the return from every £1 invested in public R&D on average could produce a wider economic return of £1.20 as the very minimum, but that the full returns could be as high as £4.50 to £5.00.<sup>20</sup> So, over time, a £2 billion per annum R&D boost via an 'MIT' for the North could see a boost of £4 billion per annum, and potentially as much as £11 billion per annum, to the UK's economy – but spatially concentrated in the North, thus helping both to boost overall UK economic performance and to bridge the gap between North and South.

A northern location should be an important attraction for top professors and leading research students, internationally. Because congestion and the cost of living is much lower in the North, it should offer a better lifestyle and work-life balance, with rapid access to the Golden Triangle and London via HS2.

An 'MIT' for the North would have the potential to supply stable long-term funding – on a much larger scale – for the North's advanced manufacturing institutes, with strategic direction from above on the

### Box 1 The economic impact of MIT

Research carried out by contacting the 104,000 living alumni of MIT has identified the major role that they play in creating businesses and jobs. As of 2014, the research estimates, MIT alumni had launched around 30,000 active companies, employing roughly 4.6 million people, and generating roughly \$1.9 trillion in annual revenues. Around a third of alumni setting up business had done so in the State of Massachusetts itself (compared with 8% of MIT students coming from Massachusetts).

MIT performs strongly in terms of commercialising its research. In the fiscal year 2018, its Technology Licensing Office received 822 invention disclosures, filed 425 new US patents, had 360 US patents issued, executed 154 licences and options, and saw 32 companies formed using MIT intellectual property. MIT employs around 13,000 staff and in 2018 had a total income of \$3.6 billion.

Source: EB Roberts, F Murray and JD Kim: *Entrepreneurship and Innovation at MIT: Continuing Global Growth and Impact*. MIT Sloan School of Management, 2015. <https://innovation.mit.edu/assets/EntrepreneurshipInnovationMIT-8Dec2015-final.pdf>; and the MIT website, at [www.mit.edu](http://www.mit.edu)

German Fraunhofer Gessellschaft model, promoting much stronger connections between thinkers and makers. We would expect to see, over time, substantial spin-outs, on the Oxford and Cambridge model. Especially in medicine and life sciences, already recognised as key northern strengths, there would be the opportunity to utilise a key challenge and a uniquely important research issue and database: ill-health and the relative stability of family cohorts.

There would be other wider benefits which would not be trivial. An 'MIT' for the North could help to transform the North's international image. It would bring significant and independent institutional power to the North. It would help to utilise and develop key current and future assets – Manchester International Airport, HS2, and northern high-speed rail. And there would be catalytic and symbiotic effects with urban regeneration, sustainable transport, and high-speed rail, especially in city cores.

The government is now committed to a major national expansion of investment in science and R&D.<sup>21</sup> The spring 2020 Budget set out plans to increase public R&D investment to £22 billion per year by 2024-2025. This is the fastest ever expansion of public financial support for R&D. The funds will be rolled out between this year and the financial year 2023-2024, aiming to take direct support for R&D

to 0.8% of GDP and placing the UK among the top quarter of OECD nations – ahead of the USA, Japan, France, and China. £800 million of this new funding is going towards setting up a new, high-risk, high-reward research agency modelled on the American DARPA, and £900 million is going to supporting nuclear fusion technology, the National Space Innovation Programme fund, and the e-vehicle supply chain.

Where will the new DARPA style facility be located – in the North, close to the research universities, Cumbria's nuclear industry, and critical components of the aerospace industry in Lancashire, or in the Golden Triangle? It will be a critical test for the reality of Boris Johnson's 'levelling up' agenda.

All of this new policy is welcome and, it might be said, long overdue. But our central argument remains unchanged: if a national 're-levelling' is to be secured, the North of England must become – and it must remain – a long-term focus for that increased level of public and private scientific investment. Without a powerful new institution in the North, we doubt that this can be achieved.

● **Stephen Nicol** is Director of Nicol Economics and **Ian Wray** is Visiting Professor at the Heseltine Institute for Public Policy, Practice and Place at the University of Liverpool, and an advisor to Lord Kerslake's UK2070 Commission. The views expressed are personal.

## Notes

- 1 S Lavington (Ed.): *Alan Turing and His Contemporaries*. British Informatics Society, 2012
- 2 *The Northern Powerhouse Independent Economic Review*. Final Executive Summary Report. SQW and Cambridge Econometrics, for Transport for the North and partners, Jun. 2016 [www.transportforthenorth.com/wp-content/uploads/Northern-Powerhouse-Independent-Economic-Review-Executive-Summary.pdf](http://www.transportforthenorth.com/wp-content/uploads/Northern-Powerhouse-Independent-Economic-Review-Executive-Summary.pdf)
- 3 A concept developed in medical research to describe the process of taking basic research and translating it into research and clinical developments that improve health outcomes
- 4 See RAL Jones: *A Resurgence of the Regions: Rebuilding Innovation Capacity across the Whole UK*. Department of Physics & Astronomy, University of Sheffield, May 2019. [www.softmachines.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/ResurgenceRegionsRALJv22\\_5\\_19.pdf](http://www.softmachines.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/ResurgenceRegionsRALJv22_5_19.pdf)
- 5 C Wong, W Zhang, A Schulze Baing, C Koksai and M Baker: *Industrial Strategy and Industry 4.0: Structure, People and Place*. Spatial Policy & Analysis Lab, Manchester Urban Institute, University of Manchester, Jun. 2019. <https://hummedia.manchester.ac.uk/institutes/mui/spal/research/reports/industrial-strategy-and-industry-4-structure-people.pdf>
- 6 See, for instance, Kate Kirk and Charles Cotton's work, exemplified by Kate Kirk's 'The Cambridge Phenomenon: Europe's leading technology cluster' presentation, at <https://alanbarrell.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/AB-K-Kirk-Cam-Phen-10-Sept-20182.pdf>
- 7 Quoted in T Minshall and M Gregory: *Evolutions of the Cambridge Phenomenon*. Institute for Manufacturing, University of Cambridge, 2013
- 8 W Bonvillian and P Singer: *Advanced Manufacturing: The New American Innovation Policies*. MIT Press, 2019
- 9 *Science – The Endless Frontier*. Report to the President by the Director of the Office of Scientific Research and Development, Washington. Government Printing Office, Jul. 1945. [www.nsf.gov/od/lpa/nsf50/vbush1945.htm](http://www.nsf.gov/od/lpa/nsf50/vbush1945.htm)
- 10 H Hauser: *Review of the Catapult Network: Recommendations on the Future Shape, Scope and Ambition of the Programme*. Review for the Department of Business Innovation and Skills, 2014. <https://catapult.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Hauser-Review-of-the-Catapult-network-2014.pdf>
- 11 See 'UK Government grants Catapult Network £780m in additional funding'. News Story. Cell and GeneTherapy Catapult, 10 Aug. 2018. <https://ct.catapult.org.uk/news-media/general-news/uk-government-grants-catapult-network-%C2%A3780m-additional-funding>
- 12 See S Rothblatt: *The Revolution of the Dons: Cambridge and Society in Victorian England*. Faber & Faber, 1968; and M Sanderson: *The Universities and British Industry 1850-1970*. Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972
- 13 DARPA (Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency) was created in 1963 to oversee the US space research programme, separating its civilian and military components. Through its support for high-risk R&D projects at the frontiers of research, implemented through contracting institutions, it became a crucial driver and funder in the creation of the internet
- 14 'HS2: High-speed line cost 'could rise by £30bn''. *BBC News*, 19 Jul. 2019. [www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-49048823](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-49048823)
- 15 S Farrell and G Topham: 'Crossrail faces further delays and will cost more than £18bn'. *The Guardian*, 8 Nov. 2019. [www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/nov/08/crossrail-faces-further-delays-and-will-cost-more-than-18bn-tfl](http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/nov/08/crossrail-faces-further-delays-and-will-cost-more-than-18bn-tfl)
- 16 See D Williams: 'Morrill Act's contribution to engineering's foundation'. *The Bent of Tau Beta Pi*, 2009, Spring. [www.tbp.org/pubs/Features/Sp09Williams.pdf](http://www.tbp.org/pubs/Features/Sp09Williams.pdf)
- 17 *Go Big. Go Local: A New Deal for the Levelling Up of the United Kingdom*. UK2070 Commission, Oct. 2020. <http://uk2070.org.uk/2020/09/30/go-big-go-local-the-uk2070-report-on-a-new-deal-for-levelling-up-the-united-kingdom/>
- 18 *Rates of Return to Investment in Science and Innovation*. Frontier Economics, for the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, Jul. 2014. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/333006/bis-14-990-rates-of-return-to-investment-in-science-and-innovation-revised-final-report.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/333006/bis-14-990-rates-of-return-to-investment-in-science-and-innovation-revised-final-report.pdf)
- 19 Estimate made by UKRI (UK Research and Innovation), based on *What is the Relationship between Public and Private Investment in Science, Research and Innovation?* Economic Insight, for the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, Apr. 2015. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/438763/bis-15-340-relationship-between-public-and-private-investment-in-R-D.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/438763/bis-15-340-relationship-between-public-and-private-investment-in-R-D.pdf)
- 20 The lower figure is based purely on the direct social return from public R&D; the higher figure also includes the estimates of additional private (and other) R&D levered in and the social return on that
- 21 *Budget 2020: The R&D Budget*. News Story. TechUK, 19 Mar. 2020. [www.techuk.org/resource/budget-2020-the-r-d-budget.html](http://www.techuk.org/resource/budget-2020-the-r-d-budget.html)

# transport across the UK – the required revolution

**Jim Steer** outlines the requirements of a fully functioning, national public transport system designed to support the ‘levelling up’ of the UK economy and meet the nation’s net-zero carbon ambitions

Improved transport connectivity has a role to play in meeting the government’s aim of ‘levelling up’. The chosen approach needs to be reconciled with another government objective: to achieve net-zero carbon by 2050. In a recent report prepared for the UK2070 Commission (*COVID-19, Cities and Public Transport*<sup>1</sup>), Greengauge 21 has set out a long-term pan-UK transport network to meet these two overarching government objectives within a very different post-Coronavirus world. The summer 2020 post-lockdown reliance on private car transport cannot continue without major road congestion and negative environmental consequences. The current price paid for carbon dioxide emissions will need to be increased to help achieve a shift back to more sustainable transport modes.

How the Coronavirus will impact on overall travel demand patterns in future depends particularly on what happens to cities and city centres. There are many unknowns, but cities have overcome setbacks repeatedly throughout history. While public transport use has been discouraged in the UK for much of 2020, evidence from the New York subway suggests that it is unlikely to be a major source of Coronavirus spread.<sup>2</sup>

The overall strategy set out for the UK2070 Commission has four elements:

- **re-allocation of road space nationwide** in support of a planned expansion of walking/cycling (active travel modes) to support local neighbourhoods;
- creation of a much more **user-friendly, nationwide, scheduled public transport network**, accessible by active and demand-responsive travel modes and essentially operated with electrically powered vehicles;
- ensuring that the national public transport system provides efficient **connectivity to well-off/high-accessibility places and less-well-off/peripheral places alike**; and

- creating a **national logistics network** that reduces dependency on HGVs, with electrified rail freight (and, potentially, hydrogen-fuel-cell-powered HGVs) linking a much expanded set of distribution centres from which customer fulfilment can be made by fleets of rechargeable electric vans and cargo bikes.

The need to re-allocate road-space in favour of active travel modes rules out an approach that would increase dependency on the national highway network for car-based travel: it will have insufficient capacity.

A radically improved, user-friendly public transport network needs to serve the whole nation, not just its more prosperous parts. Investment is needed because:

- The nation’s scheduled public transport system is **not joined-up**. Buses and trains are managed entirely separately. They have separate fare systems; they present very different challenges for mobility-impaired travellers; and, while interchanges between bus and rail exist, they are not always where they would be most expected and most helpful – even in London. Timetables are rarely matched for through-travellers, and information sources are scattered across the internet.
- Some parts of the public transport network are **seriously unreliable due to road and rail congestion**.
- Public transport is still provided to a significant extent through **diesel-powered vehicles, which need to be eliminated to avoid poor outcomes**, in terms of both carbon dioxide emissions and air quality.
- The public transport network suffers from **some serious gaps**.



**'A radically improved, user-friendly public transport network needs to serve the whole nation'**

The 2070 pan-UK transport network developed for the Commission operates, inter-connectedly, at three levels:

- inter-city (longer-distance travel);
- in urban-metropolitan areas; and
- across the wider urban-rural continuum.

It is at the third level that the most disadvantaged places, as measured by social mobility scores, are to be found. A truly national network has to be fully joined up across all three levels and avoid the economic inefficiencies that occur when different modes of transport fail to offer joined-up travel opportunities.

### Living on the periphery

It would be wrong to return to the *status quo ante* and earlier, pre-COVID-19, investment priorities. The challenge of 'levelling up' – the distributional component in transport policy – needs a higher priority and new thinking. Peripheral areas may not need high-capacity investment in motorways or fast rail links, but they do need to allow people day-by-day access in a timely and affordable way to jobs, healthcare facilities/hospitals, and higher-education opportunities. Very often, this means travel to the 'regional centre'. If this travel option is not available, those seeking advancement will make the choice to leave home, and, in doing so, deprive communities left behind of their personal skills, drive, and ambition. Supporting the ability to commute is a way to maintain age balance, support local economies, and strengthen the overall health of local communities.

EU funding which has been channelled as a matter of policy into areas of relative deprivation will soon end. A new funding programme is needed. Retaining and improving transport connectivity in the more peripheral and 'left behind' areas needs to be

prioritised. Current congestion-driven project appraisal approaches need to be changed.<sup>3</sup> Strengthening overall UK economic performance involves a shift away from investing just where the economy happens to be doing well (pre-COVID-19).

Places with the worst Social Mobility Index scores display a clear (and perhaps surprising) pattern across the country:

- Relatively few are in cities/conurbations.
- Most are in broadly rural settings, and most of these are in former single-industry areas (for example coal-mining and steel-making).
- Many are in coastal areas.
- More are on the eastern side of the country (in both England and Scotland).

Across the rural-urban continuum, many rail and bus services have disappeared over the decades as car ownership has grown. The pattern of public transport that remains is patchy and lacks coherence, with bus and rail subject to completely different funding and regulatory regimes.

Some quite small places, almost as if by chance, retain local rail stations; others have the fortune to be served by high-quality inter-urban bus routes. Provision of ongoing financial support for localised, demand-responsive transport services is going to be needed in the post-COVID-19 recovery period if increasing numbers of communities are to avoid being cut off.

People living in remote, peripheral and 'left behind' areas pay an economic price through lack of access to job opportunities and higher education; and a social and health and wellbeing price through isolation and inaccessibility to key services. This pattern is perhaps most severe for post-industrial towns. Whereas some have successfully transitioned (ex-steel town Corby, for example), others (ex-steel town Consett, for example) have struggled, even with financial support packages. In many places, the post-industrial regeneration task is incomplete, and they remain 'left behind'.

Cities with a good range of job and higher-education opportunities may be tantalisingly close to hand, yet still too hard to access for those on low incomes. In other cases – and this seems to be true of many (if not all) coastal towns that once relied typically on fishing industries and domestic tourism – transport network weaknesses stem from a failure to provide the good interconnectivity that is needed to attract new businesses. East Coast ports are already expanding in preparation for Brexit. The UK2070 report identifies the infrastructure and operational measures needed to make a difference:

- some rail line re-openings/new rail lines;
- connected inter-urban express bus lines;
- a set of mobility hubs (where transport modes come together for passenger convenience and to help foster services in the local economy) and

support for community-based and demand-responsive travel services;

- some new estuarial crossings, to expand the catchments and economic strength of disadvantaged coastal communities; and
- an integrated (national) fares and public transport information system for ease of use, and to support concessionary fares systems for those that most need them.

### City regions

There is a pressing need to enhance metropolitan rail networks. Funding programmes that were once available to city authorities to support the creation of, for example, the Tyne & Wear Metro and Liverpool's 'loop and link' networks in the 1970s no longer exist. Yet without better metropolitan rail networks, not only will economic development be held back, but the benefits of investment in better inter-city connectivity, now in hand, will not be fully realised.

New metropolitan-area *S-Bahn*-style rail services and networks need to be created for Birmingham, Bradford, Manchester, and Leeds. Bristol, Cardiff, Nottingham and Southampton each need to develop metro systems (Nottingham having a head start with its expanding light rapid transit (LRT) system). A set of LRT (or equivalent) systems are also needed for the 'next size down' cities and towns, accompanied by major improvements to the public realm in urban centres, with pedestrianisation measures. This programme should be used to prioritise active travel alongside an appropriate zero-carbon transit system for all cities over 175,000 population.

In all these cases, access from outlying areas to the services and opportunities that only larger urban centres can provide needs to be examined, unconstrained by historical administrative boundaries.

### Inter-city rail to become the mode of choice for longer-distance journeys

HS2 should be configured as an 'X'- rather than a 'Y'-shaped network, allowing it to perform a cross-country (inter-regional) function, as well as linking major cities with the capital. This proposition requires the implementation of the Midlands Rail Hub proposal, integrating Birmingham's Moor Street and Curzon Street stations (which adjoin each other) for easy passenger interchange. It will place Birmingham at the heart of the national high-speed network, rather than on a short branch line from it.

While some London HS2 services could serve the eastern side of the country, it is not possible to make the comprehensive switch achievable with the West Coast. Upgrading the East Coast Main Line (ECML) should become a high priority.

Government has expressed enthusiasm for a fixed connection (bridge or, as presumed here, tunnel) across the Irish Sea – specifically between South West Scotland and Northern Ireland. This could make

a major contribution (once built) to reducing UK carbon dioxide emissions, reducing the need for short-haul flights and lengthy HGV movements, as well as improving connectivity with Northern Ireland.

### The environmental imperative

HM Treasury's Green Book guidance was modified to take account of climate change as long ago as 2009.<sup>4</sup> But at current pricing levels, carbon dioxide and emissions affecting air quality such as nitrous oxides and particulates hardly affect cost-benefit appraisal outcomes. The polluter pays principle<sup>5</sup> means that a much higher price needs to be set on carbon. This would lead to an emphasis on measures that reduce the demand for travel and shorten trip lengths. Paris Mayor Anne Hidalgo reflects this with her 15-minute neighbourhood concept, with 'grocery shops, parks, cafes, sports facilities, health centres, schools and even workplaces just a walk or bike ride away'.<sup>6</sup>

This needs a complementary policy measure to ensure that sustainable and affordable connectivity is retained across the wider (city, regional and national) geography – provided by transport systems that are zero-carbon with ultra-low emissions. This should be based primarily on electrified rail-based systems. The South East of England is well placed in this regard, but the rest of Britain is lagging.

### A fairer and more equitable society

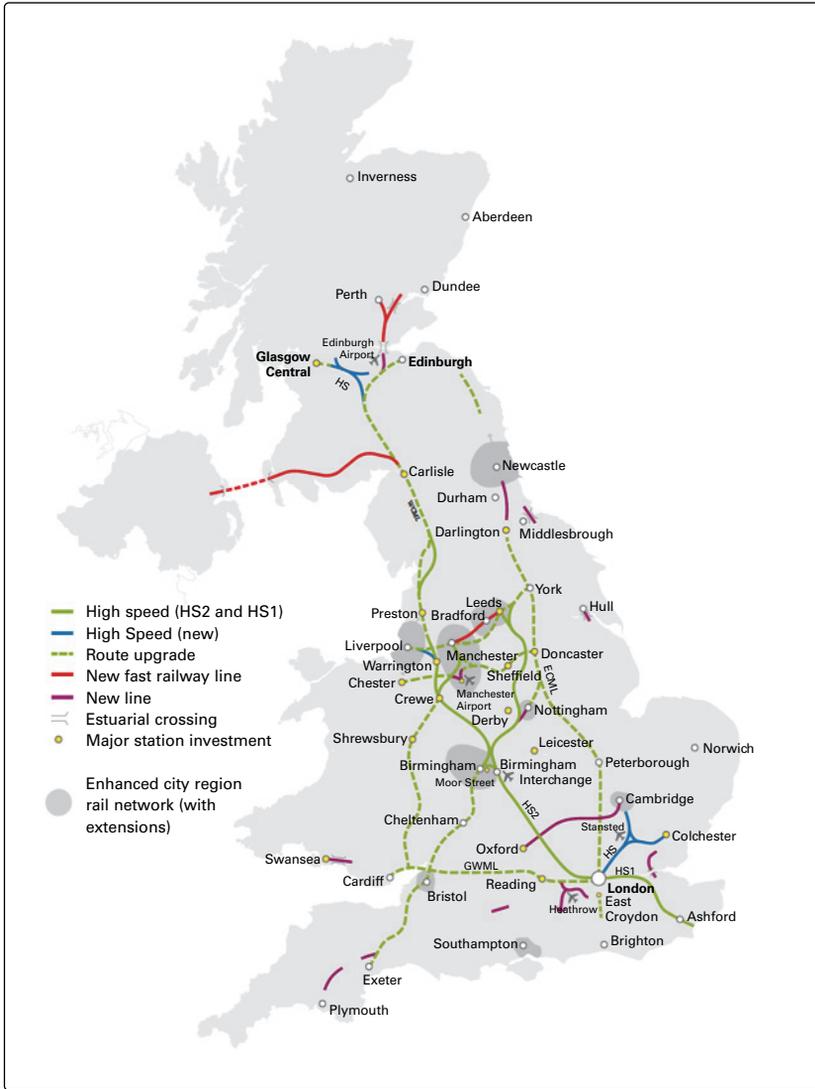
Transport improvements may not impact beneficially on labour markets as directly as some might suppose. This point was explained recently in the following terms, thinking about rail enhancements for the North of England:

*'No one expects unskilled workers in Blackpool to commute to jobs in Manchester. But more skilled workers can make the journey whether they are attracted to places with weaker economies by lower house prices or more likely because they have existing personal or family connections with these places. And once there their wages will inject spending power into the local economy creating jobs for those on lower wages. This is exactly the pattern which has emerged in the more successful US cities, where successful economies create well paid jobs and these in turn help to create a buoyant local service economy.'*<sup>7</sup>

Notably this ties together the question of stimulating local economies with the advantage of sustainable medium-distance transport (Blackpool-Manchester is a rail line that has recently been electrified). Transport is only one factor in tackling inequality, in levelling up; but it is an important one.

### Devolution is a factor in economic recovery

One of the biggest drivers of city economies, even in a country with such an established recent history of downsizing the public sector, is



**Fig. 1 UK2070 national public transport development plan**

government itself. The rationale for business co-location is very strong in supporting the functions of government, prompting this conclusion: ‘UK cities need devolution of powers and links to London to succeed.’<sup>8</sup>

With so much UK government activity centred on London (which contributes almost a quarter of the country’s output and broadly 30% of its economy-related tax take),<sup>9</sup> this adds to the problem of regional imbalance. The degree of centralisation in London deprives other centres of a share of this part of the economy. Cities with devolved governments, such as Cardiff and Belfast, have bucked wider economic trends, as their economies have built smaller versions of the wider business infrastructure that supports London. Between 2008 and 2010, London and Edinburgh were the only UK cities in the world’s top 20% worldwide by gross value added per head.<sup>10</sup>

### How public transport works

To function efficiently and provide a substantive nationwide alternative to car use, the public transport network has to offer an interconnecting set of routes that come together in a series of hubs, intersections, or junctions – the network ‘nodes’. On the rail network, these key nodes are generally found in cities, and usually in city centres. This is why, regardless of the likely long-term impact of Coronavirus on cities themselves, if public transport is to form the core medium-long distance national network, services to these key hubs, which are mainly in cities and major towns, must be retained – and improved where they are deficient. And places that lack good interconnections – even if they are geographically peripheral – must be provided with them, if public transport is to be a truly national facility.

Within the public transport network, it has to be recognised that inter-urban bus speeds are very

low compared with rail speeds. For example, in a Greengauge 21 survey of West Country inter-urban bus routes between places with over 5,000 population (so ignoring deep rural routes) carried out in 2018, of 98 services identified, only eight achieved end-to-end operating speeds of over 20 miles per hour. The other 90 were all in the range 10-20 miles per hour. Rail speeds are typically much faster, of course.

So, when it comes to a joined-up national network that can obviate or at least reduce car-dependency, a rail network, suitably backed up by limited-stop inter-urban (as well as local) bus services, is what is needed to join local communities with each other, and with regional centres, the national capital, and international gateways. In short: active travel locally, and public transport for medium- and long-distance travel.

### Implications for transport policy

The UK2070 Commission report, *COVID-19, Cities and Public Transport*,<sup>1</sup> sets out what such a network would look like, the investments needed to create it, and the necessary complementary policy measures.

The national public transport network serves the whole nation, not just its more prosperous parts, and should be designed to attract a widespread shift away from both short-haul flying and 'long-haul' car journeys – each of which has unacceptable carbon dioxide outcomes.

The rail network shown in Fig. 1 on the preceding page must be a fully joined-up system, with both local and inter-urban bus networks, and avoiding the idiosyncrasies of locally set fares systems and timetables defined separately for 'competing' modes of transport.

New technology will help with ticketing, and, in due course, with easier-to-negotiate ticket and security checks, it will also provide travellers with personalised guidance through complex hub stations. A simplified fares system – such as a national zonal design that can be extended to work on feeder transport modes<sup>11</sup> – will be needed, too. It must become easier for those with mobility difficulties to use the rail system, which often lags in this respect compared with what is on offer from the bus network. A renewed focus on network benefits, with live travel information and support, is long overdue.

These customer needs apply in the heart of a busy network, but also at its – sometimes neglected – periphery, where dependence on connections with low service frequencies can be especially challenging.

The overall strategy has to address the complex geography of places others refer to as 'left behind', and it achieves this through:

- a comprehensive approach to inter-city connectivity;
- a set of metropolitan regional rail plans to link surrounding towns and ex-industrial areas with growing commercial centres;
- selected rail line re-openings to reconnect places with the national rail network;

- attention paid to coastal areas where rail connectivity is still limited by a failure to provide estuarial crossings that have been provided for the highway network many years ago (new rail estuarial crossings could be highly beneficial for locations such as Grimsby, Hull, and Middlesbrough); and
- integration into the national rail offer of a set of connecting high-quality inter-urban bus services,<sup>12</sup> and also demand-responsive transport and mobility services.

● **Jim Steer** is Director of Greengauge 21. The views expressed are personal.

### Notes

- 1 J Steer, D Carson and J Jarvis: *COVID-19, Cities and Public Transport*. In Working Paper Series of the UK2070 Commission: Series 1. UK2070 Commission, Aug. 2020. [http://uk2070.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/The\\_UK2070\\_Papers\\_Series\\_One.pdf](http://uk2070.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/The_UK2070_Papers_Series_One.pdf)
- 2 C Goldbaum: 'Is the subway risky? It may be safer than you think'. *New York Times*, 2 Aug. 2020. [www.nytimes.com/2020/08/02/nyregion/nyc-subway-coronavirus-safety.html?referringSource=articleShare](http://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/02/nyregion/nyc-subway-coronavirus-safety.html?referringSource=articleShare)
- 3 *Rail Needs Assessment for the Midlands and the North*. Interim Report. National Infrastructure Commission, Jul. 2020. [www.nic.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/RNA-Interim-Report-Final.pdf](http://www.nic.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/RNA-Interim-Report-Final.pdf)
- 4 *Accounting for the Effects of Climate Change: Supplementary Green Book Guidance*. Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Nov. 2020. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/191501/Accounting\\_for\\_the\\_effects\\_of\\_climate\\_change.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/191501/Accounting_for_the_effects_of_climate_change.pdf)
- 5 D Helm: *Net Zero: How We Stop Causing Climate Change*. HarperCollins, 2020
- 6 K Willsher: 'Paris mayor unveils '15-minute city' plan in re-election campaign'. *The Guardian*, 7 Feb. 2020. [www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/07/paris-mayor-unveils-15-minute-city-plan-in-re-election-campaign](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/07/paris-mayor-unveils-15-minute-city-plan-in-re-election-campaign)
- 7 I Wray, D Thrower and J Steer: *Revisiting High Speed North*. Report for Greengauge 21, Apr. 2020. [www.greengauge21.net/wp-content/uploads/REVISITING-HIGH-SPEED-NORTH-.pdf](http://www.greengauge21.net/wp-content/uploads/REVISITING-HIGH-SPEED-NORTH-.pdf)
- 8 A Bounds: 'UK cities need devolution of powers and links to London to succeed'. *Financial Times*, 6 May 2014. [www.ft.com/content/35c7a600-d51f-11e3-9187-00144feabdc0](http://www.ft.com/content/35c7a600-d51f-11e3-9187-00144feabdc0)
- 9 *Devolution: A Capital Idea*. London Finance Commission, Jan. 2017. [www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/devolution\\_-\\_a\\_capital\\_idea\\_lfc\\_2017.pdf](http://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/devolution_-_a_capital_idea_lfc_2017.pdf)
- 10 M Parkinson, R Meegan and J Karecha: *UK City Regions in Growth and Recession: How Are They Performing at Home and Abroad?* Liverpool John Moores University, Mar. 2014. [www.ljmu.ac.uk/~media/files/ljmu/research/uk-cityregions-in-growth-and-recession-final-version.pdf?la=en](http://www.ljmu.ac.uk/~media/files/ljmu/research/uk-cityregions-in-growth-and-recession-final-version.pdf?la=en)
- 11 *Rail in the North: Stepping Stones to a Rebalanced Britain*. Greengauge 21, for Campaign for Better Transport, Nov. 2014. [www.greengauge21.net/general/rail-in-the-north-stepping-stones-to-a-rebalanced-britain/#more-2723](http://www.greengauge21.net/general/rail-in-the-north-stepping-stones-to-a-rebalanced-britain/#more-2723)
- 12 *Interurban Bus: Time to Raise the Profile*. Greengauge 21, Mar. 2018. [www.greengauge21.net/the-interurban-bus-network/](http://www.greengauge21.net/the-interurban-bus-network/)

# decentralising governance in england

**Andy Pike, Mike Coombes, Louise Kempton, Danny MacKinnon and Peter O'Brien** consider the UK2070 Commission's initial proposals for decentralising governance in England through trans-regional 'provinces', and argue for clarity on what decentralisation is for, what powers and resources it comprises, and how it works in England

The UK and, especially, England are among the most highly centralised major countries internationally.<sup>1</sup> The UK had a relatively stable level of decentralisation between 1950 and 1986, underwent further centralisation until the late 1990s devolution, and has settled at a relatively higher level. In addition, the UK and England have long-standing and persistent geographical inequalities in economic and social conditions that are high in an international context. While the causal relationship between centralised governance and spatial inequalities is not clear and direct, it has been a persistent association in UK political-economic and geographical history.<sup>2</sup> The need to find appropriate forms of decentralised governance for England has been a recurrent concern.<sup>3</sup> In the post-war period, decentralisation resembles a pendulum swinging between different geographical scales and institutional arrangements at the local, sub-regional and regional levels.

The limited decentralisation since 2010 has been ad hoc, incremental, and piecemeal. Multiple rationales have been presented, pulling decentralisation in different directions and muddling its objectives. These motives comprise local growth, public service reform, expenditure reductions, democratic renewal, and addressing societal challenges such as ageing and climate change. This episode has been based on the informal governance of deals and deal-making in negotiated central-local government agreements on decentralised powers, responsibilities, and resources. Differentiated combinations of powers and resources have been allocated to different areas. This kind of decentralisation has created a

complex map and patchwork of different governance arrangements across England.

Addressing the central problem of highly centralised governance and marked geographical inequalities, this article sets out the definitions, rationales, benefits and costs of decentralisation, and considers the UK2070 Commission's initial proposals for decentralising governance in England. Specifically, it examines the establishment of trans-regional 'provinces' by situating them in their national and international context in Europe and assesses their appropriateness as governance arrangements alongside mayoral and combined authorities. It argues for a more comprehensive and strategic approach to clarify what decentralisation is for, what powers and resources it comprises, and how it works in England. A clearer and more transparent policy is needed to articulate and progress this agenda.

## **Definitions, rationales, benefits and costs of decentralisation**

Decentralisation is defined as the allocation of powers and resources from national to sub-national levels of government. There are different kinds of decentralisation, distinguished by their powers and resources, ranging from the highest level, devolution, to the lowest level, administrative (see Table 1). What is called 'devolution' in the discussions about decentralised governance in England is more accurately termed 'delegation' because of the limited nature of the powers and resources involved.

The main rationales for decentralised governance are better matching of public expenditure and services to local preferences, mobilisation of local knowledge

**Table 1**  
**Forms of decentralisation**

Level	Form	Characteristics
Low ↓ High	Administrative	Administrative functions and responsibilities undertaken at the sub-national levels
	Deconcentration	Dispersion of central government functions and responsibilities to sub-national field offices. Powers transferred to lower-level actors who are accountable to their superiors in a hierarchy
	Delegation	Transfer of policy responsibility to local government or semi-autonomous organisations that are not controlled by central government but remain accountable to it
	Political	Political functions of government and governance undertaken at the sub-national level
	Fiscal	Autonomy over tax, spending and public finances ceded by central government to sub-national levels
High	Devolution	Central government allows quasi-autonomous local units of government to exercise power and control over the transferred policy

Source: *Decentralisation: Issues, Principles and Practice*<sup>4</sup>

**Table 2**  
**Potential benefits and costs of decentralisation**

Potential benefits	Potential costs
Devolved policies better reflect territorial preferences (allocative efficiencies)	Additional administrative costs of additional layers of government and/or governance institutions
Improved knowledge of territorial economic potential (productive efficiencies)	Loss of scale economies in policy formulation and delivery
Democratic accountability improves efficiency of policy formulation and implementation; fosters innovation	Increased 'rent-seeking' by interest groups better able to influence sub-national territorial rather than national institutions
Fiscal autonomy provides hard budget constraints, and (where applicable) tax-varying power allows marginal changes to taxation and spending	Weaker disciplines of monitoring and evaluation (national finance ministries as tougher drivers of efficiency than territorial institutions)
Lower co-ordination and compliance costs vis-à-vis the rest of the national territory	Budget constraints increasingly tied to territorial fiscal capacity
	Weak incentives due to lack of a mechanism linking public spending with tax revenues raised within sub-national territories
	Reduced co-ordination with the rest of the national territory, with possible negative spillover effects both on and from sub-national territories

Source: Adapted from BK Ashcroft, JK Swales and PG McGregor: *Is Devolution Good for the Scottish Economy? A Framework for Analysis*. Devolution Briefings No. 26. ESRC Devolution and Constitutional Change Programme, Mar. 2005.

[https://strathprints.strath.ac.uk/15669/1/Briefing\\_26\\_McGregor.pdf](https://strathprints.strath.ac.uk/15669/1/Briefing_26_McGregor.pdf)

on economic potential and costs, and increased accountability of local governments to citizens. Depending upon its form and combination of powers and resources, decentralisation can generate potential benefits and costs (see Table 2). While there are other countries, such as France, Italy and Spain, that have asymmetrical or geographically uneven decentralised governance systems with different powers and resources allocated to different areas, the degree of asymmetry in England is acute. Asymmetrical forms of decentralisation have specific potential benefits and costs, too (see Table 3).

### The UK2070 Commission's proposals for decentralisation

Addressing the problem of intermediate governance in England and the complex patchwork of current arrangements, in the UK2070 Commission's first report<sup>5</sup> proposals for 'effective devolution' comprised:

- increasing devolution of powers and resources to the 'local' level, to a 'comprehensive framework' of mayoral and combined authorities and rural counties;
- setting up four new 'trans-regional arrangements' for 'provinces' for the North, the Midlands, the

**Table 3**  
**The benefits and costs of asymmetrical decentralisation**

Potential benefits	Potential costs
Accommodating diverse preferences for autonomy across regions	Lack of accountability and transparency
Adapting the institutional and fiscal frameworks to the capacities of sub-national governments	Complexity and co-ordination costs
Advanced form of place-based policies	Lack of clarity for citizens
Experimenting	Potential risks of increased disparities (in capacities)
Sequencing decentralisation	Secession and autonomy
Providing the enabling institutional environment to design territorial development strategies more targeted to local needs	
Tailoring solutions for special challenges	

Source: Adapted from *Asymmetric Decentralisation: Policy Implications in Colombia*. OECD, 2019. [www.oecd.org/colombia/Asymmetric\\_decentralisation\\_Colombia.pdf](http://www.oecd.org/colombia/Asymmetric_decentralisation_Colombia.pdf)

South East, and the South West, constituted from existing local leaders and aiming to 'complement' strategic planning for pan-regional issues at the local and joint or combined authority level; and

- decentralising national government functions, responsibilities and budgets covering England to 'align with' the 'local and trans-regional devolution'.

Similar proposals were originally outlined in the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) Commission on Economic Justice recommendations to create a 'new tier' of 'English regional authorities' or 'economic executives' that would be 'responsible for regional economic and industrial strategy' and 'able to deploy significant assets and capabilities'.<sup>6</sup> The proposed Northern and Midlands Economic Executives would be created from the existing Northern Powerhouse and Midlands Engine institutions.<sup>7</sup> National consultation was suggested for the new South East and South West Economic Executives.

Focused on economic development functions at the regional level, the proposed responsibilities for the Economic Executives included:

- regional industrial strategies, including innovation clusters, supply chains and inward investment, and regional infrastructure planning, including transport, energy, communications, and environmental and resource management;
- regional immigration policy, and regional spending of a new 'Inclusive Growth Fund';
- oversight of inter-city rail networks and franchises, and a proposed new 'major road network'; and
- oversight of the regional divisions of a new 'National Investment Bank'.

The proposed Economic Executives were seen as large enough to represent their regions internationally in order to attract investment and people, exercise a political voice to secure resources from central government, borrow to invest through the National

Investment Bank's regional arms, and, following the examples of the Northern Powerhouse and Midlands Engine, overcome lower-scale rivalries between cities and towns. In terms of governance and democratic accountability, the proposal is that each Economic Executive would be governed by a new Regional Council, elected indirectly from their constituent local authorities. Proposed funding arrangements would be based initially on a block grant from the UK Treasury and then a new and more decentralised fiscal framework for England.

### English 'provinces' in context – regional governance geography in Europe

In the context of past regional governance geography in England, the proposed 'provinces' are remarkably large. This can be demonstrated by comparing them with the nine standard regions, now only used for statistical purposes but until 2010 constituting the regional tier of decentralised institutions in England. Two of the provinces (North, South East) each group three standard regions, and one other (Midlands) combines two. This geography raises the question of whether such large provinces are out of line in comparison with regional institutions with similar economic development responsibilities in comparable countries in Europe. Table 4 identifies the five larger European Union countries comparable to the UK in terms of size measures of population, economy, and land area. Table 5 then identifies each country's regional tier of institutions with decentralised economic development responsibilities, reporting their number and their average size on each of the three parameters.

This comparison suggests that the English provinces, when taken along with the other UK nations (Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland) which they are proposed to sit alongside, are rather out of line when their average size values are compared with those of the principal regional institutions in

**Table 4**  
Selected size measures of the UK and five broadly comparable countries

	Population 2019, million	GDP 2018, billion euros	Area, square kilometres
<b>France</b>	67.0	2,346	635,300
<b>Germany</b>	83.0	3,387	354,800
<b>Italy</b>	60.4	1,756	296,900
<b>Poland</b>	38.0	490	307,200
<b>Spain</b>	46.9	1,216	506,300
<b>United Kingdom</b>	66.6	2,399	244,700

Source: Calculated from Eurostat data

**Table 5**  
Average size of regions with devolved economic responsibilities

	Number of regions	Population 2019, million	GDP 2018, billion euros	Area, square kilometres
<b>French mainland regions</b>	13	5.2	180.5	48,900
<b>German Länder</b>	16	5.2	211.7	22,200
<b>Italian regioni</b>	20	3.0	87.8	14,800
<b>Polish voivodeships</b>	16	2.4	30.6	19,200
<b>Spanish autonomous regions</b>	17	2.8	71.5	29,800
<b>UK nations/provinces</b>	7	9.5	342.8	35,000

Source: Calculated from Eurostat data

the five comparator countries. The key reason is that there are only seven provinces/nations, whereas the other countries are divided into around two-to-three times more regions. The one size measure on which the UK regional average is not larger than all the comparators is land area: the highest average is that of the French regions, while the Spanish equivalent is close to that of the proposed seven authorities in the UK.

Although land area size might not seem very relevant to economic development policy, its significance stems from the long-term trend for the integration of previously distinct local economies. An authority with a narrowly defined area, such as a single city, might independently deliver some economic development policies (for example land use), but delivering a comprehensive regional economic strategy (and perhaps having some tax-raising powers) is usually given to an authority covering a larger and self-contained territory, such as Scotland. This is the economic geography of subsidiarity: the appropriate size of regions depends on the extent and nature of the powers which are to be devolved to them. The high level of interactions across the boundary of a geographically small region, such as London, means that policies operating solely within that boundary are unable to match the scale of the key relations and processes determining regional economic development.

Table 6 ranks by population the seven proposed provinces/nations, alongside all the regions with devolved economic development responsibilities in the five comparator countries whose populations are 5 million or above. France has seven such regions, Germany five, Italy four, Spain three, and Poland just one. This might suggest that the proposal for the UK is not out of line with practice elsewhere, as not only Germany but also France has more regions with over 5 million residents than would the UK, with its four English provinces together with Scotland. It is significant that France has the highest number of larger-population regions: several of these are recent amalgamations of previously separate smaller regions, and this is an example of a trend towards larger regions that is in part a response to economic relations and processes operating over wider areas.

Table 6, taken together with the count of regions in Table 5, offers some support for an alternative interpretation. Only two of the seven proposed UK provinces/nations – and none of those in England – have fewer than 5 million residents, whereas in four of the five comparator countries over two-thirds of their regions are of this smaller size. Even in recently reorganised France the proportion is almost half. At the other end of the scale, three of the four provinces proposed for England have populations of 10 million or more, a proportion unmatched in any comparator

**Table 6**  
**Regions with devolved economic responsibilities and populations of more than 5 million people**

Country	Regions/UK provinces/ nations	Population 2019, million	Area, square kilometres
<b>UK</b>	<b>England: South East</b>	22.7	39,800
Germany	Nordrhein-Westfalen	17.9	34,100
<b>UK</b>	<b>England: North</b>	14.9	38,200
Germany	Bayern	13.1	70,600
France	Île-de-France	12.1	12,000
Germany	Baden-Württemberg	11.0	35,800
<b>UK</b>	<b>England: Midlands</b>	10.1	28,600
Italy	Lombardia	10.1	23,800
Spain	Andalusia	8.4	87,300
Germany	Niedersachsen	7.9	47,600
France	Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes	7.9	69,700
Spain	Catalunya	7.5	32,100
Spain	Madrid	6.7	8,000
Germany	Hesse	6.2	21,100
France	Hauts-de-France	6.0	31,800
Italy	Lazio	5.9	17,200
France	Nouvelle-Aquitaine	5.9	84,100
Italy	Campania	5.8	13,700
France	Occitanie	5.8	72,700
France	Grand Est	5.6	57,400
<b>UK</b>	<b>Scotland</b>	5.4	77,900
Poland	Mazowsze	5.4	35,600
<b>UK</b>	<b>England: South West</b>	5.3	23,800
Italy	Sicilia	5.0	25,800
France	Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur	5.0	31,400
<b>UK</b>	<b>Wales</b>	3.1	20,800
<b>UK</b>	<b>Northern Ireland</b>	1.9	14,100

Source: Calculated from Eurostat data

country. All these three provinces also have land areas whose sizes put them at the upper end of the range among the large-population regions in Table 6.

England has been 'regionalised' by government several times previously, but none of these regional boundaries have been widely accepted, partly because none had the historical authenticity and cultural and political identities of regions such as Bayern, Lombardia, or Catalunya. The relatively large population and area size of the proposed English provinces might be seen as a realistic structure designed to tackle processes operating over large areas in a highly integrated national economy. Yet it is also arguable that the provinces are a technocratic proposal that is fated to fail as a result of a lack of popular identification with its new amalgamated regions.

Finding the appropriate balance and geography is challenging. Drawing lines on maps to limit jurisdictions is relatively straightforward, but creating meaningful local and regional boundaries is more

difficult. Since 2010 in England, the approach has been to prioritise 'functional economic areas', for example reflecting 'travel-to-work areas'. However, effective regional governance requires the support of citizens. Questions of local and regional identity matter because boundaries need to pay attention to a shared sense of place and patterns of belonging and attachment.<sup>8</sup>

Successful democratic polities operate across territories that are understood to have real meaning to citizens and voters. Where this is not the case, it can be a recipe for indifference, discontent, or dysfunction. Centrally determined boundaries, which may make sense in national government departments in Whitehall in London, can produce regions that have little popular affiliation. Such regions may dispense large amounts of tax-payers' money in ways which appear opaque, distant, and unaccountable. Equally, the deal-making approach to decentralisation can produce regions that are neither functional nor popular,

setting back the aims of democratic decentralisation. The recent experience in France demonstrates considerable dissatisfaction at the amalgamation of historic regions (for example Alsace, Lorraine and the Champagne becoming the new region Grand Est).

The conclusion is that while the proposed English provinces are relatively large on average, the only one notably out of line with regions in comparator European countries is the South East (as it includes both London and its wide hinterland). It is critical to recall that the appropriate size of regions depends on the extent and nature of the powers that are to be devolved to them. Large regions such as the proposed provinces may be appropriate for a highly integrated economic geography such as that of England, but perhaps only if each province is entrusted with powers similar to those of Scotland, including the ability to raise its own taxes.

### **Mayoral and combined authorities and rural counties and trans-regional 'provinces' as governance arrangements for England**

The UK2070 Commission's initial proposals for decentralisation aimed to move from the current patchwork towards a kind of multi-level governance system in England that is evident in other comparable countries. The proposals would effectively fill in the map of England with mayoral and combined authorities and rural counties at the 'local' level and introduce a new level of trans-regional economic executives at the level of the four new provinces. This reform would potentially create a more comprehensive and even coverage of governance arrangements across England. What kind of decentralisation this represents depends upon the powers and resources decentralised to the existing and new mayoral and combined authorities and the rural counties and provincial economic executives (see Table 1). Questions of the size of the regions would then need to be related to their purpose, powers, and resources.

Evaluating the potential effectiveness of decentralisation confronts difficult issues. Establishing whether or not decentralised governance enables better decision-making and generates benefits for economic and social outcomes and delivers on public policy objectives is not a straightforward question. This is because of numerous problems: the development of appropriate proxies relevant to particular national contexts; assembling available data of appropriate quality, historical coverage, and international comparability; disentangling and isolating the specific effects of decentralisation; and attributing causation among decentralisation's multiple relationships with broader economic and institutional change.<sup>9</sup>

Key questions emerge in considering the proposed new governance geography for England. Can these new arrangements maximise the benefits and minimise the costs of decentralisation, and what would the net outcome be? Could they better

match public expenditure and services to citizen preferences at the local and trans-regional levels? Would they gain enhanced knowledge on economic potential and costs? Would the arrangements increase the accountability of local governments to citizens? Indirect election is a feature of the proposed new arrangements at the local and trans-regional levels, potentially echoing the charge of weak accountability and scrutiny levelled at the Regional Assemblies/Chambers in England during the early 2000s.

Considering the political feasibility of the proposals raises difficult issues given the history of decentralisation in England and its ad hoc and piecemeal evolution of institutional arrangements since 2010. The pendulum swings have created churn and disruption, described as 'compulsive re-organisation' and 'perpetual restructuring'.<sup>10</sup> Further reforms and the establishment of new mayoral and combined authorities and rural unitary counties in areas currently without them may encounter resistance and would take time. Changing current two-tier local authority areas into single-tier unitaries will face political resistance, potentially from shire counties confronting reorganisation and especially from shire districts facing abolition and amalgamation. In other countries with asymmetrical decentralisation, such as Spain, the evidence is that areas seek the powers and resources they see granted to other places; and as new areas gain, the existing areas push for even greater levels of decentralisation.

Setting up new executives at the trans-regional level would be similarly challenging. While building upon existing institutions in the Northern Powerhouse area is a potential way forward, this is likely to be more difficult for the Midlands Engine, which lacks an institutional and legal basis and capacity in its current form. Crucially, this approach would be much more problematic in the South East and South West, given their histories and more recent antipathies to trans-regional collaboration. Existing co-operation – such as the Cambridge-Milton Keynes-Oxford Arc – is thematically focused and working on different and fuzzier geographies. Indeed, the description of the regional executives as a 'new tier' of institutions and administration would likely attract criticism from opponents who may characterise it as another layer of administration and bureaucracy and a talking shop for politicians – re-using the arguments from the campaign against the elected Regional Assembly in North East England in 2004.<sup>11</sup>

The proposed arrangements would encounter the issue of how to align, co-ordinate and integrate the new institutions between and across different spatial levels. How will their aspirations and visions, strategies and spending plans be aligned, co-ordinated, and integrated? Where will the legitimate locus of power to prioritise reside? How will new institutions and activities mesh with existing institutions? If the new

regional executives are tasked with writing a set of economic and spatial strategies, how will they connect with the existing institutions and plans? The fundamental test is whether the new governance arrangements would make people's lives better.

### **Future decentralising of governance in England**

Given the ad hoc, incremental and piecemeal nature of the recent episode of decentralisation in England and the difficulties in assessing its impacts, a more comprehensive and thoughtful approach is needed to thinking through and implementing further decentralisation in existing and new areas yet to be allocated powers and resources if the potential benefits are to be maximised and the costs and risks reduced. There is a need for clarification of the rationales and principles of decentralisation, with a road map and process to provide some clarity to the vision, direction, purpose, principles and strategy for decentralised governance of England in the round.<sup>4</sup> The current ad hoc, incremental and piecemeal governance needs to move towards a more planned, transformative and comprehensive approach. It will, however, need to resolve the patchwork of the different geographical scales, institutions of governance and funding streams that have emerged in England since 2010.

## **'Where decentralisation in England goes next – its form, nature and resources – is critical'**

This is not an argument for a top-down blueprint designed and delivered from Whitehall. It is a call for an open, transparent and systematic approach. Such a road map would provide greater fairness and equity in setting out what kinds of powers and resources are on offer for places. For those areas in the early stages of thinking about what decentralisation might mean for them, it would provide a normative sense of the kinds of powers and resources that specific types of areas *should* be seeking. Such a road map would remove the existing opaqueness and lack of accountability of the current deals designed, formulated and made between particular political leaders and senior officials at the local and national levels at specific points in time. Otherwise, the problems and costs of co-ordination, integration and alignment between governance actors and institutions will be reproduced and, potentially, multiplied as further pieces are added to the existing patchwork.

Given the changes in government in 2019, the impact of the 2020 pandemic, and Brexit, it is difficult to assess the current administration's commitment to decentralisation in England. Decentralisation slowed following the EU referendum in 2016 and

general election in 2017, afflicted by 'Brexit blight' and lack of political and administrative capacity in Parliament and Whitehall, and despite the appetite for decentralisation in parts of England. A 'Devolution Framework' could have provided some elements of a road map. Meanwhile, further devolution deals were agreed with the government in 2019-20.

The new government formed in December 2019 stated its ambition on 'levelling up' economic and social conditions across the UK. This includes 'levelling up' the powers and resources of decentralised governance institutions, enabling more to benefit from the mayoral combined authority model deemed successful in London and Greater Manchester and to exercise their voice in housing, infrastructure, public services, and transport policy. A new Devolution White Paper was in the Queen's Speech in December 2019 and was under development as the Brexit transition period started and the pandemic struck in early 2020, delaying its potential publication into 2021.

Where decentralisation in England goes next – its form, nature and resources – is critical. There is a need for the meaningful decentralisation of powers and resources to enable places to tailor place-based institutions, policies and public services to address their particular combinations of aspirations and needs.

Evident in government's moves on devolution policy, the current episode of decentralisation in England and its deal-making approach are reaching their zenith. First, areas that secured deals in earlier waves are increasingly seeking further deals in a bid to acquire additional powers and resources, reproducing governance by deals with all its benefits and costs.<sup>12</sup> Second, areas putting forward deal proposals are having to wait for Ministerial and civil servant consideration and response, demonstrating the lack of political prioritisation and administrative capacity at the national level, or receiving rejections for not meeting unstated criteria. 'One Yorkshire' proposals in 2018, for example, were rejected by the then Secretary of State James Brokenshire because they did 'not meet our devolution criteria'.<sup>13</sup> Yet no such criteria have been published.

Third, knitting together the strategic aims and work of the decentralised institutions and their differentiated powers and resources within the broader patchwork is becoming more difficult as it becomes more complex and heterogeneous. While there is evidence of co-operation and joint announcements among the higher-profile metro-mayors,<sup>14</sup> evidence is limited that the overall system of governance in England is working as coherently and effectively as it might in improving public policy outcomes and people's lives.

### **Conclusion**

The argument here is not against further decentralisation, especially given the highly centralised system in England and the UK. Nor is it a call for

further caution and a slower approach, or for a faster, radical and revolutionary ‘big bang’ strategy. Instead, the analysis highlights the need comprehensively to think through and clarify what decentralisation is for, what powers and resources it comprises, and how it works in England, and then set this out in a clear, open and transparent road map.

This task is especially important following the disruption of the 2020 pandemic, recession and economic recovery, as well as Brexit. Calls to ‘build back better’ following the crisis include the need for a more decentralised and even federalised polity in England, effectively to tailor local and regional economic recovery plans to the needs of places and cope better with any future public health emergencies than does the present more centralised system. Indeed, at the time of writing, the government is still planning to release an English Devolution and Economic Recovery White Paper, although it has been delayed to 2021. Decentralisation may also provide a ‘golden thread’ to Brexit and an opportunity to reverse centralisation and ‘take back control’ of local affairs from a distant and unresponsive national government and political establishment.<sup>15</sup>

There are political risks in limiting decentralisation, too. The lack of economic opportunities and voice for so-called ‘left behind’ people and places and its perceived unfairness has fuelled discontent and political fragmentation and division in recent years across the UK.<sup>16</sup> The current government’s ambition of ‘levelling up’ economic and social conditions across the UK is vital for future prosperity and wellbeing, but whether the powers and resources to address the scale and long-term nature of the task will be put in place remains in question.<sup>17</sup> Lack of public engagement and interest in the current episode of decentralisation is already evident – for example in turn-outs in devolution deal ballots and in metro-mayor and police and crime commissioner elections. Engaging the public more effectively suggests the need to decentralise governance in England in a different way.

● **Professor Andy Pike, Emeritus Professor Mike Coombes, Louise Kempton and Professor Danny MacKinnon** are with the Centre for Urban and Regional Development Studies (CURDS) at Newcastle University. **Peter O’Brien** is Executive Director of Yorkshire Universities and Visiting Fellow at CURDS. The views expressed are personal.

**Notes**

1 A Pike, M Coombes, L Kempton, D MacKinnon and P O’Brien: *A Response to the UK2070 Commission’s Second Report by the Centre for Urban and Regional Development Studies (CURDS)*. Centre for Urban and Regional Development Studies (CURDS), Newcastle University, for the UK270 Commission, Feb. 2020. <http://uk2070.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/PIKE-Final-Submission-UK2070-Commission.pdf>

2 P McCann: *The Regional-National Economic Problem: Geography, Globalisation and Governance*. Routledge, 2016

3 D Marlow: *English Devolution and Intermediate Tiers of Governance*. LGiU Briefing. LGiU (Local Government Information Unit), Dec. 2014. <https://lgiu.org/briefing/english-devolution-and-intermediate-tiers-of-governance/>

4 A Pike, L Kempton, D Marlow, P O’Brien and J Tomaney: *Decentralisation: Issues, Principles and Practice*. Centre for Urban and Regional Development Studies (CURDS), Newcastle University, May 2016. <https://research.ncl.ac.uk/ibuild/outputs/reports/Pike%20et%20al.%202016%20Decentralisation%20-%20Issues%20Principles%20and%20Practice%20-%20Final%20Draft.pdf>

5 *Fairer and Stronger: Rebalancing the UK Economy*. First Report. UK2070 Commission, May 2019. <http://uk2070.org.uk/2019/05/30/first-report-of-the-uk2070-commission-to-be-published-on-thursday-30th-may-2019/>

6 *Prosperity and Justice: A Plan for the New Economy*. Final Report. IPPR Commission on Economic Justice, Sept. 2018. [www.ippr.org/research/publications/prosperity-and-justice](http://www.ippr.org/research/publications/prosperity-and-justice)

7 D MacKinnon: *Reinvigorating the Northern Powerhouse? Recommendations for Policy Makers*. Centre for Urban and Regional Development Studies (CURDS), Newcastle University, Apr. 2020. [www.ncl.ac.uk/media/wwwnclacuk/curds/files/NPh%20Policy%20Briefing.pdf](http://www.ncl.ac.uk/media/wwwnclacuk/curds/files/NPh%20Policy%20Briefing.pdf)

8 J Tomaney: ‘A mess of pottage? The North of Tyne deal and the travails of devolution’. Blog Entry. LSE British Politics and Policy Blog, 4 Jan. 2018. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/the-north-of-tyne-deal-and-the-travails-of-devolution/>

9 A Pike, A Rodríguez-Pose, J Tomaney, G Torrissi and VTselios: ‘In search of the ‘economic dividend’ of devolution: spatial disparities, spatial economic policy, and decentralisation in the UK’. *Environment & Planning C: Government & Policy*, 2012, Vol. 30(1), 10-28

10 A Jones: ‘Here we go again: the pathology of compulsive re-organisation’. *Local Economy*, 2010, Vol. 5(5-6), 373-8; and G Mulgan: ‘RDA demise’. *Regeneration & Renewal*, 12 Jul. 2010

11 C Rallings and M Thrasher: ‘“Just another expensive talking shop”: public attitudes and the 2004 regional assembly referendum in the North East of England’. *Regional Studies*, 2006, Vol. 40(8), 927-36

12 See, for example, L Sharman: ‘Liverpool submits £230m ‘Green City Deal’’. *LocalGov*, 30 Jul. 2019. [www.localgov.co.uk/Liverpool-submits-230m-Green-City-Deal/47894](http://www.localgov.co.uk/Liverpool-submits-230m-Green-City-Deal/47894)

13 James Brokenshire, quoted in J Elledge: ‘James Brokenshire’s rejection of the One Yorkshire devolution deal absolutely stinks of partisanship’. *City Monitor*, 12 Feb. 2018. [www.citymetric.com/politics/james-brokenshire-s-rejection-one-yorkshire-devolution-deal-absolutely-stinks-partisanship](http://www.citymetric.com/politics/james-brokenshire-s-rejection-one-yorkshire-devolution-deal-absolutely-stinks-partisanship)

14 M Sandford: ‘Soft power and grant coalitions: the first six months of ‘metro-mayors’’. Blog Entry. British Academy, 28 Jan. 2018. [www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/soft-power-and-grant-coalitions-first-six-months-metro-mayors](http://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/soft-power-and-grant-coalitions-first-six-months-metro-mayors)

15 A Pike: ‘Devolution in England needs real powers and resources if it is to ‘take back control’ in Brexit’. Blog Entry. UK in a Changing Europe, Jun. 2018. <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/devolution-in-england-needs-real-powers-and-resources-if-it-is-to-take-back-control-in-brexite/>

16 J Tomaney and A Pike: ‘Brexit, devolution and economic development in ‘left-behind’ regions’. *Welsh Economic Review*, 2018, Vol. 26, 29-37. <http://doi.org/10.18573/wer.231>

17 J Tomaney and A Pike: ‘Levelling up?’. *The Political Quarterly*, 2020, Vol. 91(1), 43-48

# two masters – the dilemma of central- local relations in england

**Mark Sandford** looks at the thorny question of central-local government relations within initiatives to introduce – and aspirations to increase – devolution and decentralisation in England



Massimiliano Morasinotto on Unsplash

**'How does central government lead, fund and implement a transformative policy programme while acknowledging legitimate demand from local political actors to implement variations to the national government's aims?'**

The UK2070 Commission's task, to address the deep-rooted spatial inequalities of the UK, is a daunting one. Few political actors in the UK would challenge the existence, or salience, of the issue, and recent governments have frequently heralded large-scale policy programmes to address it. While it is hard to point to tangible policy impact in recent decades, it would be equally hard to argue that policy ideas themselves are underdeveloped: there is no shortage of research and think-tank reports advocating the wholesale transformation of UK governance. This suggests that obstacles to change exist at the stage of politics and implementation.

A transformative policy programme such as that explored in the Commission's first two reports

inevitably has implications for regional and local government institutions, and for the relationship between them and central government. The Commission's first report, *Fairer and Stronger: Rebalancing the UK Economy*,<sup>1</sup> recognises this, devoting a section to 'effective devolution and decentralisation'. It recommends 'enhanced local devolution, rolled out systematically with transfer of powers and resources to a comprehensive framework of mayoral and combined authorities, and for rural counties'.

This unassuming sentence highlights a long-standing conundrum – present in modern government generally, but one with particular bite in the UK. How does central government lead, fund

and implement a transformative policy programme while simultaneously acknowledging legitimate demand from local political actors to implement variations to the national government's aims? This article explores this question, and addresses some critical checks on productive central-local relations within the UK's existing system of governance.

### Central-local relations in the UK

Central-local relations are at the heart of implementation of the kind of policy transformation proposed by the Commission. And indeed, the Commission's *Fairer and Stronger* report<sup>1</sup> notes (on page 10) that 'we will therefore want to clarify the role of national policy in working with local government and other institutions who deliver and support the foundations of the local economies'. But this issue is rarely explored in depth. Most contributions gloss over the potential for conflict arising from the involvement of more than one elected tier of government.

A recent example – but by no means the only one – is Lord Heseltine's June 2019 report, *Empowering English Cities*.<sup>2</sup> This report states that 'no government with a parliamentary majority will accept the right of elected politicians at a subordinate tier to frustrate its manifesto pledges'. But on the very next page it commends metro-mayors' 'ability to think and act outside the legal box. They will push the frontiers and so they should. It will be a brave government that tries to put them back in the box where local public opinion is strongly behind them.' Some similar reports barely address central-local relations, assuming by omission that they will be unproblematic.<sup>3</sup>

This absence sits alongside a paucity of constitutional or political science thinking about the nature and purpose of local government in the UK. Two broad traditions of thought can be discerned over the last 50 years. One is a view that local government is principally a delivery vehicle for public services provided according to nationally set legal entitlements. This view, broadly dating from the Attlee government, was reflected in local authority practice for many years, and it also justified a finance system in which the majority of local government expenditure arose from central grant transfers.<sup>4</sup> The other tradition, dating roughly from the 1969 Redcliffe-Maud Report, sees local governments as *governments*, with a broader responsibility for the wellbeing of their electorates: a role described by the 2007 Lyons Report as 'place-shaping'.

These traditions of thought are largely unspoken, and have only a ghostly presence in present-day debates.<sup>5</sup> This in turn can have the effect of closing off critical questions, such as: if and when large-scale, transformative policy is delivered, how should an activist central government and a collective of strong, elected 'regional' governments interact?

How does 'place-based leadership' handle demands for a degree of transformation that requires a level of financial (and legislative) resource that is not available at the local level?

The stock answer to this type of question in current debates is to demand 'more powers' for mayors, combined authorities, local authorities, communities, individuals, and any other actor that is not part of central government.<sup>6</sup> Alternatively, arguments are made that central government, especially 'Whitehall', needs to 'let local government go' or 'allow more freedom', without any exploration of why such a worthy intention has been overlooked for 50 years or more.

Devolution of more power may be desirable, both administratively and politically – as argued by other contributors to the Commission. However, this article argues that devolving powers or functions is a necessary, but not, alone, sufficient, route to creating 'effective devolution and decentralisation'. Other aspects of UK governance practice have a decisive influence on central-local relations that is often overlooked. Identifying and exploring them is a critical ingredient of effective devolution: without this, central-local relationships are likely to continue to throttle attempts to devolve power, even against the better judgement of all involved.

### How does devolution of power work in England?

Powers have been devolved to mayors and combined authorities via parliamentary orders under the Cities and Local Government Devolution Act 2016. The powers devolved were agreed between government and local areas during 2015 and 2016 through a series of non-statutory 'devolution deals'. This process largely stalled under Theresa May's premiership, but the 2019 Boris Johnson government made a number of promises of future movement. The then Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sajid Javid, committed in September 2019 to a White Paper on English devolution, including a framework for devolution of more powers to a broader number of areas and for 'levelling up' of existing devolved powers.<sup>7</sup>

Many commentators have critiqued features of the 'devolution deals', on the grounds that the powers and funding available to them do not match the range of challenges they face, and have proposed the transfer of additional powers.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, it is also true that current English devolution policy contains more scope than its predecessors in the 1960s-1970s and 2000s for eroding centralism. Elected institutions have been created at sub-regional level, in statutory form, and they have been granted statutory powers and discretion over certain central funding regimes.<sup>9</sup> They have begun to carve out a local role via three main routes: convening local partner organisations to harmonise their aims; seeking to maximise

investment into their region from international investors and central government; and adopting 'orphan policies' that fall between the cracks of other tiers of government – for instance on homelessness, air quality, and mental health.<sup>10</sup>

### **Metro-mayors – governance constraints**

The government views metro-mayors principally as local delivery partners of choice for central government initiatives.<sup>11</sup> Although its statements emphasise mayoral accountability,<sup>12</sup> the broader sweep of policy implementation underlines the government's 'expectation ... that devolved governance and delivery structures should be rigorous and effective will remain a paramount consideration'.<sup>13</sup> Expressing local political preferences, and policy innovation or divergence, come second to *upward accountability*.

This government perspective is not, on the whole, enforced by overt political disagreements, but through structures of governance. The English devolution system diverts aspirations to policy divergence into bureaucratic process – preventing them from developing into energy-sapping political disputes. This is visible via two types of constraint upon metro-mayors seeking to develop distinct and independent policies: **structural constraints** and **accountability constraints**.

#### **Structural constraints**

Structural constraints take three forms. First, although metro-mayors have access to a broad range of powers, most of them are shared with other public bodies ('concurrent powers'). In practice, this means that they must develop relations with other public bodies, local authorities, and private sector actors. Their influence over these partners emerges from a blend of the 'electoral chain of command' and the strategic capacity of the mayor's office: creating a local vision that can be taken seriously.

For instance, mayoral strategic priorities can direct the spending of Local Growth Fund money, but this requires the approval of the area's Local Enterprise Partnership. In matters where mayoral combined authorities have minimal funding, such as housing provision, or gaps in powers, such as transport regulation, this leads their policy options to become dependent upon external relationships. This type of partnership working has a long pedigree, but it minimises the 'decision space' available to the mayor.

Second, consensus and partnership are built into many aspects of mayoral decision-making. Many mayoral policies must be agreed by a majority of combined authority members (representatives of the local authorities in the area), and some require unanimity.<sup>14</sup> Although the mayor can make many financial decisions alone, his/her budget can be rejected by a two-thirds majority of members.

Alongside the need to co-ordinate with other public bodies, this is likely to reduce the capacity of mayors to deliver manifesto commitments.<sup>15</sup>

Third, British governance provides no automatic link between assigning a function to a public body and providing funding to exercise that function. This means that 'unfunded mandates' – the practice of assigning a responsibility to a subordinate government without sufficient funding to exercise it – are common within English devolution. Examples include bus franchising, smart ticketing, local growth hubs, public land commissions, establishing mayoral development corporations, and spatial strategies.<sup>16</sup> The mayors have very limited capacity to raise revenue locally. Although most have a power to set a precept on council tax, only Greater Manchester and Liverpool City Region have used it to date – and in any event, the sum of money that the precept can yield is not transformative.<sup>17</sup> In short, the mayors' access to *exercisable* powers is not as broad as it appears from the devolution deals and the parliamentary orders establishing them.

## **'In short, the mayors' access to exercisable powers is not as broad as it appears from the devolution deals and the parliamentary orders establishing them'**

Taken together, these constraints mean that mayors often do not have the means to deliver expansive policy change. And the constraints would apply equally to any additional powers transferred by central government. For instance, metro-mayors took on powers over the adult education budget in 2019. This provides a substantial additional source of funding, but mayors will still need to work alongside other public bodies to have an impact.

#### **Accountability constraints**

Furthermore, the powers that mayors do exercise are subject to a number of reporting requirements. These comprise upward accountability to the government – and importantly, this accountability is *fragmented* as it is directed towards different government departments, whose aims may not align. The reporting requirements provide 'assurance' to central government that the devolved powers have been exercised in accordance with the 'devolution deals' which preceded the creation of metro-mayors. 'Assurance' covers both appropriate spending of public money (parliamentary accountability) and the delivery of objectives agreed with the government (contractual accountability).

In 2019, these requirements were consolidated in the 90-page *National Local Growth Assurance Framework* (NLGAF).<sup>12</sup> This includes requirements for a business case and an accountability statement for each of the powers devolved under the devolution deals; an evidence-based list of prioritised projects; a value-for-money and cost-benefit assessment; and plans for monitoring and evaluation. Localities are expected to use central government methodologies for these assessments, including WebTAG (the Department for Transport's appraisal guidance), 'Homes England good practice', 'Skills Funding Agency good practice', and the Treasury's Green Book (the financial management standard for the UK Government).<sup>12</sup> The NLGAF also includes assurance requirements for the 'single pot', which refers to a pool of certain funding streams devolved to mayors. If 'significant divergence' takes place after sign-off of the local assurance framework, 'adjustments may need to be agreed by the Accounting Officer for the Department, in consultation with relevant Accounting Officers across Government'.<sup>12</sup>

## **'Currently, there is a mismatch between the government's expressed aim to enhance local choice and accountability and the automatic introduction of bureaucratic systems that can work against those outcomes'**

### **The straitjacket of accountability**

These procedural requirements mean that the political 'decision space' available to mayors is likely to be small. It is possible to attribute these onerous upward accountability requirements to narratives of traditional British centralism, with an ingrained distrust of the capacity of local authorities. As the Institute for Government's report, *Achieving Political Decentralisation*,<sup>18</sup> succinctly put it in 2014 (on page 20):

*'ministers and civil servants simply do not trust sub-national government to competently exercise additional powers and – in the words of a former minister at our roundtable – constantly worry that they will 'do something barmy'. The centralised political and media culture of the UK contributes to this obstacle. Civil servants, whose instincts are to protect their ministers, will generally advise them not to risk devolving power without requisite accountability structures in place.'*

This type of concern should not be dismissed out of hand. Local failures can and do end up on

Ministerial desks. But this is an argument for acknowledging this issue and, if devolving power is a government's aim, explicitly working against a reflex imposition of assurance requirements. (This is not impossible: for instance, the government has resisted the temptation fully to take over the functions of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea following the Grenfell Tower fire in 2016.) Currently, there is a mismatch between the government's expressed aim to enhance local choice and accountability and the automatic introduction of bureaucratic systems that can work against those outcomes.<sup>19</sup>

Furthermore, this reflex approach to assurance aligns with UK constitutional norms. Devolution of power within England remains subject, both conceptually and actually, to the British constitutional doctrine of parliamentary accountability for government spending:

*'Parliament expects the Government to provide it (through the Public Accounts Committee) with assurance that the money voted to departments has been used for the purposes for which it was authorised (regularity), has been spent within the rules on propriety and that value for money has been achieved.'*<sup>20</sup>

The government recognised the potential clash between parliamentary accountability and devolution of power in its 2011 publication *Accountability: Adapting to Decentralisation*,<sup>21</sup> which states that 'the focus of Accounting Officers' accountability ... should be on ensuring that there is an effective system in place to ensure that funding that is devolved is used appropriately and, overall, secures value for money'. At first glance this is unobjectionable – no-one would argue for using funding inappropriately or achieving bad value for money. But this tells us nothing about what this 'effective system' should be. How fine-grained should it be? What reporting requirements should exist, and to whom? What reserve powers should central government hold? What veto points should exist, and what sanctions should there be for disregarding the system or for failure?

*Accountability: Adapting to Decentralisation* sets out a lengthy design for a system that includes multiple veto points and reporting requirements.<sup>21</sup> This is also reflected in the accountability requirements underlying health devolution in Greater Manchester, which provide a range of reserve powers and reporting requirements for the NHS.<sup>22</sup> In short, the reflex imposition of assurance requirements is a systemic issue.

Implicitly, the degree of upward accountability suggests a lack of faith in local accountability arrangements. Mayoral combined authorities appoint scrutiny committees from among back-bench councillors on their member councils. A



Chris Curry on Unsplash

**In English devolution to date, local electoral preferences have been given less weight than accountability to central government**

Centre for Public Scrutiny (CfPS) investigation noted limited resource availability and a focus on information-gathering, rather than 'forensic scrutiny', by these committees.<sup>23</sup> CfPS has been at the forefront of proposals for 'Local Public Accounts Committees' (LPACs),<sup>24</sup> better-resourced independent bodies tasked with examining the spending and decision-making of all public bodies in a given area.

### **The implications for central-local relations**

As things stand, even if substantial extra funding and/or powers became available to mayors, the type of assurance framework observed above would remain in place. This has implications for any proposal for large-scale public spending involving regional or local tiers of government, such as that set out in the UK2070 Commission's report. The question would quickly arise: what happens where a local politician is elected on a manifesto to implement the new policy in a non-standard way, or to pursue a quite different policy?

The current answer to this question is already visible, illustrated by developments in February 2019, when the government withdrew a £68 million housing funding package for the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA).<sup>25</sup> This funding had been made available on the basis that Greater Manchester would plan to deliver 227,000 new homes over 20 years. A revision to the Greater Manchester spatial strategy in January 2019 intended to reduce this figure to 200,800.

Several features of this decision can be identified. First, upward accountability trumped local preference: the spatial strategy rewrite resulted from local pressure, but the existing devolution agreement between the government and the GMCA was deemed to outweigh local democratic preferences. Second, Greater Manchester has no route to appeal against decisions of this kind; central spending decisions are entirely for the government. Third, the decision betrayed a central-local relationship that is transactional and unequal. For instance, the funding package could have been reduced commensurate with the reduced number of homes, rather than withdrawn. But no body of principle exists through which such a compromise might have been determined: the system operates through government fiat.

This decision sends a strong signal that, in English devolution, local electoral preferences rank below upward accountability to the government, even if the requirements of the NLGAF turn out to be light-touch and/or largely performative in practice. Consequently, unless there is a conscious effort to the contrary, it is reasonable to expect change of the type proposed by the UK2070 Commission to be directed from the centre, with local discretion restricted to matters on which the government holds no firm opinion. Aspirations towards policy divergence will continue to be diverted into bureaucratic procedures. This will amplify the sense that metro-mayors operate within a system in which they are not expected to function as political actors, despite their directly elected status.

Metro-mayors are well aware of the constraints that they face, and their acquiescence with existing practices has a clear logic. If the UK's territorial governance practices are so entrenched that change can only be glacial and incremental, then the existing devolution deal agenda is the optimum route to that change, because it does redirect some decision-making power while reassuring existing power-brokers via the language of partnership and assurance. The hope for metro-mayors would be that a time will come when they, and mayoral combined authorities, are sufficiently established institutions that transferring additional powers downwards and scaling back assurance will seem natural to policy-makers.

That type of narrative aligns with the expansive approach to economic and social policy adopted by

a number of metro-mayors, including an emphasis on 'generative power' – the idea that mayors' profile, legitimacy, and convening and envisioning powers obviate the need for responsibilities and money in order to get things done. Another response has been to advocate greater fiscal devolution for mayors, or 'fiscal autonomy' for English local government.<sup>26</sup> The logic is easy to see: if central government exercises control over local government via money, local government's best escape from that control is to establish direct access to alternative sources of funds.

### New narratives of accountability

Such perspectives accept the prevailing concept of parliamentary accountability, which amounts to 'he who pays the piper calls the tune'. At one level this is an intuitive definition of accountability: but, perhaps surprisingly, the practice of government in the UK already includes many examples of less stark approaches. Accountability need not be achieved solely through making one individual or body answerable for specific decisions: there are alternative approaches that reflect the messiness of decision-making with greater accuracy.

The assurance requirements for the devolution deals' 'single pot' represent a move, although small, away from distinct departmental accountability for spending. Elsewhere, since 2011 the government has referred to a 'London settlement' within parliamentary estimates:<sup>27</sup> the *Accountability Officer System Statement*<sup>28</sup> says of this that 'accountability for spending decisions rests solely with the Mayor of London and scrutiny of those decisions with the London Assembly'.<sup>28</sup>

Within *local* government more generally, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government has emphasised accountability to local councillors for policy decisions through the 2010s, refusing to become involved in active monitoring of local policy decisions. Intriguingly, it maintained this line in the face of concerns expressed by the National Audit Office (NAO) in the mid-2010s about parliamentary accountability and value for money. The NAO itself recognised that:

*A system of accountability in which local authorities and other local public bodies report to individual departments is at odds with emerging patterns of local service delivery in which local bodies from different sectors pool budgets and work across institutional boundaries to tackle complex local issues.*<sup>29</sup>

The clearest example in the UK of an alternative approach to 'accountability' is visible in the provision of grant funding running into billions of pounds, by the UK Parliament, for the Scottish Parliament, the Northern Ireland Assembly, and the National Assembly for Wales. There is no audit or accountability

relationship between these three bodies and the UK Parliament. They are not required to develop business cases or commission evaluations, nor are they threatened with a loss of grant funding if they deviate from central policy preferences. Responsibility for good working practices is theirs alone. The argument may be made that these are 'nations' with comprehensive political systems of their own. But the broader point stands: although the UK provides them with substantial grant funding, it does not call the policy tune.

This erosion of the idea that direct accountability must always accompany financial transfers parallels broader debate on local government accountability in the late 2010s. Critiques have emerged of the value of purely financial concepts of accountability.<sup>30</sup> Murphy *et al.*<sup>31</sup> suggest that shared understandings of its meaning are not always real: 'accountability is ... a 'chameleon' concept. It appears easily understood by the public, politicians, and academics alike, yet when financial and/or service failure occurs, and we start looking for people to hold to account, this shared understanding tends to come apart fairly easily.' The *Accountability: Adapting to Decentralisation* report<sup>32</sup> showed awareness of this in 2011:

*'local bodies have a number of different accountability relationships. To local people as users or taxpayers; to local third parties for their contribution to collective goals, especially where they are pooling resources; and to the centre for the funding they receive and their contribution to national outcomes.'*

### Strong governments working together

Metro-mayors have sought expansions in their powers almost since the day of their election: in a recent example, the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, has sought powers to impose rent controls in London.<sup>33</sup> But the devolution and operation of any such powers would, as things stand, take place within the structural constraints identified above. These would imply a lengthy negotiation of how the powers in question would be used, including reserve powers for central government; a business case being developed by the mayors seeking to take them on; a requirement for independent evaluation; and separate negotiation of any transferred funding, which would likely be provided for a fixed period.

In short, accumulating additional power will not in itself alter the relationship between central government and metro-mayors. Mayors wishing to become fully fledged political actors, advocating local electoral preferences that may be at odds with those of the national government, will need to pursue a more substantial change: towards **parity of esteem** between central and local government. While this sounds improbable, even alien, in the British context, a precedent has been set over the last 20 years in

Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. This demonstrates that the UK political system can easily accommodate different concepts of accountability – and therefore of central-local relations.

I suggest therefore that the UK2070 Commission's proposed 'local devolution, rolled out systematically with transfer of powers and resources'<sup>1</sup> cannot avoid engaging with the accountability relationship between metro-mayors and central government. And in doing this, it will engage, explicitly or implicitly, government perspectives on the role and purpose of metro-mayors and devolution. How might this lead towards 'effective devolution and decentralisation'? Potential ways forward include the following:

- A more explicit understanding of the ways in which Whitehall interprets requirements for policy and financial accountability; and how these could be relaxed to permit greater policy divergence. This implies a more strategic central government approach to relations with local government.
- Piloting of the concept of 'Local Public Accounts Committees'. These could be established relatively easily in mayoral areas. They would enable practical exploration of the alternative approaches to accountability outlined above, as they could cover both devolved and non-devolved spending decisions. This in itself would be a step towards the aim of parity of esteem.
- A realistic exploration of the options around fiscal devolution.<sup>34</sup> Many proposals for devolving taxes would face large differentials of tax incidence across England, and/or would raise peripheral amounts of revenue: any concrete proposals would need to take those factors into account.

● **Mark Sandford** is a Senior Research Analyst at the House of Commons Library, who has published many recent papers and journal articles on English devolution and local government finance. The views expressed are personal. The author would like to thank Akash Poun and John Tomaney for their helpful comments on a previous version of this piece.

## Notes

- 1 *Fairer and Stronger: Rebalancing the UK Economy*. First Report. UK2070 Commission, May 2019. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1DaPIONpLXwxS1IE2kLu3aQVQOEmFLwB/view>
- 2 M Heseltine: *Empowering English Cities*. Report for the six English Mayoral Combined Authorities, Jul. 2019. [https://englishcitiesmichaelheseltine.premediastudio.com/MichaelHeseltine/pubData/source/Empowering\\_English\\_Cities\\_\\_Lord\\_Heseltine.pdf](https://englishcitiesmichaelheseltine.premediastudio.com/MichaelHeseltine/pubData/source/Empowering_English_Cities__Lord_Heseltine.pdf)
- 3 For recent examples, see R Esteve *et al.*: *Decentralising Britain: The 'Big Push' Towards Inclusive Prosperity*. IPPR, Jul. 2019. [www.ippr.org/research/publications/decentralising-britain](http://www.ippr.org/research/publications/decentralising-britain); T Kibasi *et al.*: *Prosperity and Justice: A Plan for the New Economy*. Final Report of the Commission on Economic Justice. IPPR, Sept. 2018. [www.ippr.org/research/publications/prosperity-and-justice](http://www.ippr.org/research/publications/prosperity-and-justice); and J Fyans, B Roughley and Z Qureshi: *Hitting Reset: A Case for Local Leadership*. Localis, May 2019. [www.localis.org.uk/research/hitting-reset-case-local-leadership/](http://www.localis.org.uk/research/hitting-reset-case-local-leadership/)
- 4 See P John: 'The great survivor: the persistence and resilience of English local government'. *Local Government Studies*, 2014, Vol 40(5), 687-704; and M Sandford: 'Public services and local government: the end of the principle of 'funding following duties''. *Local Government Studies*, 2016, Vol. 42(4), 637-56
- 5 This is visible in the way that most commentators – including the 2070 Commission – do not critique or challenge the current system of mayoral combined authorities and devolution deals in England. The structure of these institutions and the process for devolving powers to them frame how they work and what they can achieve, yet they are mostly accepted as the stock starting point for further change
- 6 See, for instance, C Copus, M Roberts and R Wall: *Local Government in England: Centralisation, Autonomy and Control*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018; S Leach, G Jones and J Stewart: *Centralisation, Devolution and the Future of Local Government in England*. Routledge, 2017; and *Making Our Economy Work for Everyone*. Inclusive Growth Commission. RSA, Mar. 2017. [www.thersa.org/projects/archive/public-services-communities/inclusive-growth-commission](http://www.thersa.org/projects/archive/public-services-communities/inclusive-growth-commission)
- 7 H Jameson: 'Javid promises devolution White Paper'. *LocalGov*, 30 Sept. 2019. [www.localgov.co.uk/Javid-promises-devolution-White-Paper/48242](http://www.localgov.co.uk/Javid-promises-devolution-White-Paper/48242) The White Paper has yet to appear at the time of going to press (late November 2020)
- 8 See *Empowering English Cities* (see note 2); A Pike, L Kempton, D Marlow, P O'Brien and J Tomaney: *Decentralisation: Issues, Principles and Practice*. CURDS, Newcastle University, May 2016. <https://research.ncl.ac.uk/ibuild/outputs/reports/Pike%20et%20al.%202016%20Decentralisation%20-%20Issues%20and%20Practice%20-%20Final%20Draft.pdf>; J Tomaney: 'The limits of devolution: localism, economics and post-democracy'. *Political Quarterly*, 2016, Vol. 87(4), 546-52; R Martin, A Pike, P Tyler and B Gardiner: *Spatially Balancing the UK Economy: The Need for a New Policy Model*. Regional Studies Association, Mar. 2015. [https://3ffah3bhjub3knerv1hneul-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/SRTUKE\\_v16\\_PRINT.pdf](https://3ffah3bhjub3knerv1hneul-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/SRTUKE_v16_PRINT.pdf); and *Hitting Reset: A Case for Local Leadership* (see note 3)
- 9 M Sandford: 'Money talks: The finances of English Combined Authorities'. *Local Economy*, 2019, Vol. 34(2), 106-22
- 10 See M Sandford: 'Has devolution to England's cities worked?'. In A Poun and S Macrory (Eds): *Has Devolution Worked?* Institute for Government, Jul. 2019. [www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/has-devolution-worked](http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/has-devolution-worked)
- 11 See M Sandford: 'Signing up to devolution: the prevalence of contract over governance in English devolution policy'. *Regional & Federal Studies*, 2016, Vol. 27(1), 63-82
- 12 *National Local Growth Assurance Framework: The Framework for Mayoral Combined Authorities with a Single Pot Funding Arrangement and Local Enterprise Partnerships*. Version 3. Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Jan. 2019. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/768356/National\\_Local\\_Growth\\_Assurance\\_Framework.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/768356/National_Local_Growth_Assurance_Framework.pdf)

- 13 *Government Response to CLG Select Committee 'Devolution: the Next Five Years and Beyond'*. Cm 9291. Department for Communities and Local Government, May 2016. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/525867/CM9291-Select\\_Committee\\_Response.pdf\\_-\\_web\\_.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/525867/CM9291-Select_Committee_Response.pdf_-_web_.pdf)
- 14 See M Sandford: *Devolution to Local Government in England*. Briefing Paper 07029. House of Commons Library, Mar. 2020. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn07029/2019>
- 15 See the Centre for Cities' log of mayoral manifestos, at [www.centreforcities.org/publication/everything-need-know-metro-mayors/](http://www.centreforcities.org/publication/everything-need-know-metro-mayors/)
- 16 There are a small number of exceptions to this point where the government has provided one-off funds – for instance, bus franchising in Greater Manchester, and the South Tees Development Corporation
- 17 See 'Money talks: The finances of English Combined Authorities' (see note 9) for data on the revenue available to combined authorities and projections of the revenue that mayors could raise from council tax and business rates
- 18 T Gash, S Sims and J Randall: *Achieving Political Decentralisation: Lessons from 30 Years of Attempting to Devolve Political Power in the UK*. Institute for Government, Jan. 2014. [www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/achieving-political-decentralisation](http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/achieving-political-decentralisation)
- 19 There was some awareness of this tension at the outset of English devolution policy in 2014-15, but it largely fell away with the departure of George Osborne as Chancellor of the Exchequer
- 20 *Accountability: Adapting to Decentralisation*. Department for Communities and Local Government, Sept. 2011. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/6263/1994187.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/6263/1994187.pdf); see also *Accountability for Public Money*. HC 740. Committee of Public Accounts. House of Commons, Apr. 2011. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmselect/cmpubacc/740/740.pdf>
- 21 *Accountability: Adapting to Decentralisation* (see note 20)
- 22 See *Devolution – Proposed Principles and Decision Criteria*. Board Paper PB.24.09.15/04. NHS England, Sept. 2015. [www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/item4-board-29-09-15.pdf](http://www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/item4-board-29-09-15.pdf); and *Accountability Agreement*. Paper 5B. Greater Manchester Health and Social Care Devolution Strategic Partnership Board Meeting, 18 Mar. 2016. <https://democracy.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/documents/s5615/merged%20FINAL2%20Agenda%20Strategic%20Partnership%20Board%2018.03.16.pdf>
- 23 E Hammond: *Scrutiny in Mayoral Combined Authorities: Six Months On*. Centre for Public Scrutiny, Jan. 2018. [www.cfgs.org.uk/?publication=combined-authority-scrutiny-six-months](http://www.cfgs.org.uk/?publication=combined-authority-scrutiny-six-months)
- 24 'Local Public Accounts Committees'. Webpage. Centre for Public Scrutiny, Feb. 2018. [www.cfgs.org.uk/local-pacs/](http://www.cfgs.org.uk/local-pacs/)
- 25 J Middleton-Pugh: 'Government withdraws £68m housing deal'. *Place North West*, 26 Mar. 2019. [www.placenorthwest.co.uk/news/government-withdraws-68m-housing-deal/](http://www.placenorthwest.co.uk/news/government-withdraws-68m-housing-deal/)
- 26 See, for example, H Bessis: 'UK cities need more autonomy to compete with European rivals'. Blog Entry. Centre for Cities, 1 Dec. 2016. [www.centreforcities.org/blog/uk-cities-need-autonomy-compete-european-rivals/](http://www.centreforcities.org/blog/uk-cities-need-autonomy-compete-european-rivals/)
- A Call for Greater Fiscal Autonomy for Our Cities*. Metro Dynamics, 2018. [www.corecities.com/sites/default/files/field/attachment/Metro%20Dynamics\\_Core%20cities%20report\\_V12.pdf](http://www.corecities.com/sites/default/files/field/attachment/Metro%20Dynamics_Core%20cities%20report_V12.pdf); T Kitsos: 'Fiscal devolution in the UK – the facts'. City REDI Blog Entry. University of Birmingham, 26 Apr. 2017. <https://blog.bham.ac.uk/cityredi/fiscal-devolution-in-the-uk-the-facts/>; and *Devolution in England: The Case for Local Government*. HC 503. Session 2014-15. Communities and Local Government Committee. House of Commons, Jul. 2014. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmcomloc/503/503.pdf>
- 27 *Main Estimate 2018/19*. Explanatory Memorandum. Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. [www.parliament.uk/globalassets/documents/commons-committees/communities-and-local-government/Correspondence/MHCLG-Main-Estimates-explanatory-memo-2018-19.pdf](http://www.parliament.uk/globalassets/documents/commons-committees/communities-and-local-government/Correspondence/MHCLG-Main-Estimates-explanatory-memo-2018-19.pdf)
- 28 *Accounting Officer System Statement*. Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Jul. 2018. [www.gov.uk/government/publications/mhclg-accounting-officer-system-statement-2017-to-2018](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/mhclg-accounting-officer-system-statement-2017-to-2018)
- 29 *Local Government Funding: Assurance to Parliament*. HC-174. Session 2014-15. National Audit Office, Jun. 2014. [www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Local-government-funding-assurance-to-parliament.pdf](http://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Local-government-funding-assurance-to-parliament.pdf); see also *Accountability for Taxpayers' Money*. HC-849. Session 2015-16. National Audit Office, Feb. 2016. [www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Accountability-for-Taxpayers-money.pdf](http://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Accountability-for-Taxpayers-money.pdf)
- 30 See *Accountability: Adapting to Decentralisation* (see note 20); P Murphy, L Ferry, R Glennon and K Greenhalgh: *Public Service Accountability: Rekindling a Debate*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2019; and *Code of Audit Practice – Consultation*. National Audit Office (updated). [www.nao.org.uk/code-audit-practice/code-of-audit-practice-consultation/](http://www.nao.org.uk/code-audit-practice/code-of-audit-practice-consultation/)
- 31 *Public Service Accountability* (see note 30)
- 32 *Accountability: Adapting to Decentralisation* (see note 20)
- 33 J Elgot: 'Sadiq Khan calls for new powers to impose London rent controls'. *The Guardian*, 19 Jul. 2019. [www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/jul/19/sadiq-khan-calls-for-new-powers-to-impose-london-rent-controls](http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/jul/19/sadiq-khan-calls-for-new-powers-to-impose-london-rent-controls)
- 34 For recent studies, see M Sandford: 'Three monkeys on the back of fiscal devolution'. Blog Entry. Constitution Unit, 6 Oct. 2017. <https://constitution-unit.com/2017/10/06/three-monkeys-on-the-back-of-english-fiscal-devolution/>; *Financing English Devolution*. Independent Commission on Local Government Finance, Feb. 2015. [www.cipfa.org/~media/iclgef/documents/iclgef\\_final\\_report.pdf?la=en](http://www.cipfa.org/~media/iclgef/documents/iclgef_final_report.pdf?la=en); N Amin-Smith, T Harris and D Phillips: *Taking Control: Which Taxes Could Be Devolved to English Local Government?* Institute for Fiscal Studies, Mar. 2019. [www.ifs.org.uk/publications/13991](http://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/13991); and J Fawcett and R Gunson: *Thinking Bigger on Tax in Scotland*. IPPR Scotland, Sept. 2019. [www.ippr.org/research/publications/thinking-bigger-on-tax-in-scotland](http://www.ippr.org/research/publications/thinking-bigger-on-tax-in-scotland)

# towards an antidote to the mcdonaldisation of planning



It seems like an age ago, doesn't it, BC – or before COVID. Well, if you can remember as far back as January – when people were allowed to mingle freely in theatre bars or concert halls – I published a book called *Tickbox*. 'Tickbox' referred to the gap between official appearance and brute reality – when they tick the box to say, for example, that the cladding on Grenfell Tower is safe. Or when we're expected to say how we feel about every interaction with our bank, using a five-point scale, while staff suggest they would really appreciate a five. Or it might be the workers in schools or hospitals who are expected to tick boxes rather than look after the needs of the people they are supposed to serve.

Tickbox is particularly rife in big, centralised organisations, so we need to push for devolution, anti-trust action and localisation. But things will only shift when, as professionals or punters, we refuse to toe the line. Anything which overly simplifies would come under the same heading, especially when you find whole professions or institutions hollowed out by tickbox.

Planning has only been affected by the peculiar way in which people are prevented from discussing their planning applications with planners in some departments – unless of course they are wealthy developers – but, although this shares some assumptions about information (there is no such thing as informal information or intuition in the world of tickbox), this probably has more to do with austerity. But the *Planning for the Future* White Paper seems to me to introduce a serious tickbox element, as if you can 'zone' the whole country and capture every nuance. As if everywhere it is clear there is one best use (tickbox appears to have been created by the intellectual heirs of Frederick Winslow Taylor).

Here is the authentic smell of tickbox. Wherever complex human decisions are replaced by a non-human algorithms – which seems to me to be what is being proposed here – then you know you have been tickboxed.

In fact, whenever Whitehall wants to respond to accusations about centralisation we tend to get this kind of tickboxed, ersatz localism – whereby, because the decisions are transparent, it does not matter if they are bad decisions; they have been devolved, even if not to us but to some useless robotic machine.

We now have so many strategic goals for England that cannot be delivered without land – including a commitment to get to carbon net zero by 2050, a separate commitment in the 25-Year Environment Plan for nature recovery, and a new vision for farming in which funding follows the 'public good'. And there are a range of commitments to protect natural resources, including natural capital, water resources and quality, waste and plastic reduction, and making progress towards a circular economy. And building homes and planting trees. The problem is that these activities and the policies associated with them are siloed. They often contradict each other, and there are no means of prioritising one over the other when it comes to particular places.

OK, so decision-making is complex and slow, and we often fail to achieve any of the outcomes we seek. So we badly need something better – and it needs to go beyond an inflexible American zoning system.

Now, I am glad to say that the Food, Farming and Countryside Commission (FFCC) (full disclosure: I am working for them again – hurrah!) is promoting an idea to help resolve these tensions. It is designing a bespoke English land use framework, spanning any activities that fall within the planning system and those that do not. Its very existence would force local policy-makers to join up and prioritise all those conflicting policies I listed above. It would enable decision-making to respond to what is already there – the natural, human, and cultural capital – so that we can maintain the sense of identity and the special qualities of places while still moving forward.

So, in the great tradition of Ebenezer Howard – who famously did not wait around for government action – the FFCC plans to show what might be possible, hopefully starting in Devon. So if you want to see the opposite of the tickboxing, not to say the McDonaldisation, of planning – watch this space!

● **David Boyle** is the author of *Tickbox: How It Is Taking Control of Our Money, Our Health and Our Lives, and How We Can Fight Back (Little, Brown) and Nor Shall My Sword Sleep (Sharpe Books)*. The views expressed are personal.

# will we be remembered as 'good ancestors'?



The concept of the 'good ancestor' isn't exactly new. As Roman Krznaric acknowledges in his book, *The Good Ancestor*,<sup>1</sup> the term was coined by Jonas Salk, the man who developed the polio vaccine 60 years ago. He quotes him:

*'Will future generations speak of the wisdom of their ancestors as we are inclined to speak of ours? If we want to be good ancestors we should show future generations how we coped with an age of great change and great crises.'*

But in his book, sub-titled *How to Think Long Term in a Short-Term World*, Krznaric takes us on a journey both forward and backward in time. One of his most striking images is of the nature of time past and the impact of humans on it. If the age of the Earth is conceptualised as a line from the tip of our nose to the tip of our outstretched hand, one stroke of a nail file erases human history. Just as there is this 'deep time' behind us, so too is there 'deep time' ahead. The question he poses is: in that time ahead, will we be remembered as good ancestors, like we remember the people who developed agriculture or passed down cultural and intellectual inheritances ranging from language to feats of engineering such as the building of the Pyramids or the scientific advances of the past hundreds of years on which we rely so heavily?

At the moment, the answer to that question must lie in the balance. We could end up as 'bad ancestors' unless we act now. So how can we become good ancestors?

Krznaric is from Australia, and he deploys an interesting analogy from that continent. He argues that we – especially those of us in wealthy countries – have 'colonised the future', treating it like a distant colonial outpost where we can 'freely dump ecological degradation, technological risk, and nuclear waste, and which we can plunder as we please'. Just as when Britain colonised Australia in the 18th century it drew on a legal doctrine known as '*terra nullius*' –

'nobody's land' – to justify its conquest and the treatment of its indigenous inhabitants, so today we have an attitude of '*tempus nullius*', in which the future is seen as 'nobody's time', an unclaimed territory that is similarly devoid of inhabitants.

The book offers a set of six visionary and practical ways to cultivate long-term thinking, and starts from the principle that ideas matter, citing the view of H G Wells (arguably the most influential of all future thinkers) that 'human history is, in essence, a history of ideas'. One of the guiding principles is the idea that in our high-velocity, short-term culture there is a lack of concern for future generations who will face myriad threats, from environmental collapse to the proliferation of weapons and out-of-control AI or nano-technologies; that 'now' means seconds, minutes, or perhaps a few days. We don't have to look far to see that reality. This 'short now' has been challenged, yet it was back in the 1970s that musician and cultural thinker Brian Eno coined the concept of the 'long now'. As he put it: 'Our empathy doesn't extend far forward in time.'

For planners the idea of the 'long now' of thinking further into the future than a few days or months is ingrained. The clue is in the name. Many plans look forward 20 or more years ahead. So the ideas that Krznaric puts forward are not completely uncharted territory. In the battle of ideas between short-term thinking and a culture of longer time horizons, planning's territory is already clearly staked out. Perhaps that is one of the reasons why it is under attack by current ultra-short-termist political thinking.

Those six visionary and practical ways to cultivate long-term thinking – deep-time humility, a legacy mindset, intergenerational justice, cathedral thinking, holistic forecasting, and a transcendent goal – will not be completely new to anyone who has wrestled with some of the conceptual issues around what sustainable development means in practice; 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'.

For each of these six paths, the ideas thrown around and the examples given are fascinating, but, to focus on just one, cathedral thinking – i.e. long-term projects or goals realised for the sake of or for benefit of future generations (an area that planners are likely to be most familiar with) – illustrates both



Nicola @ Flickr Creative Commons 2.0

**Ulm Minster in Germany – a classic example of a long-term project undertaken for the benefit of future generations**

the benefits of deep-time thinking and the extent to which we have come to rely on good ancestors, perhaps without really being conscious of it.

For example, the polder water management system in the Netherlands was set up in 1533 and has been developed and extended over the centuries, but it is today essentially the same system that has operated successfully for almost 500 years. Ulm Minster in Germany – started in 1377 and today charmingly described as the world’s first crowd-funded project – was expected by the local burgers to take about 50 years to complete. It was finished in 1890. The Ise Jingu shrine complex in Japan has been in existence for over 1,000 years, but every 20 years, as an act of devotion, its two main shrines are completely rebuilt.

Fortunately such long-term thinking isn’t just confined to the past. The Svalbard Global Seed Vault in Spitzbergen was opened in 2008 with a planned lifespan of over 1,000 years. More prosaically, North Vancouver recently extended its city plan from 30 to 100 years. The problem is that such thinking isn’t very common, and initiatives are not integrated at a political and trans-national level.

There is a sense of both anger and playfulness in the way that Krznaric deploys his arguments – all to better effect. Taking apart the ‘let’s escape to other planets once we’ve wrecked this one’ approach of Elon Musk and others, he reminds us that the best way of ensuring a successful ascent of Mount Everest is to have a robust and reliable base camp (planet Earth) to come back to. Equally, economists are given short shrift for their concept of ‘discounting’, in which they make value judgements about the future that do not give a lot of value to their children, let alone grandchildren or great grandchildren. He describes their approach as ‘a weapon of inter-generational oppression disguised as a rational economic methodology’.

What, then, to do about all this? Krznaric offers a concluding section entitled ‘Bring on the time rebellion’. Naturally it is full of good ideas and gives due prominence to the work of Kate Raworth on ‘Doughnut economics’ (they are married to each other), ‘cosmo-local production’ (the idea that cities should produce everything they consume by 2054), and governance by citizens’ assemblies, among other things.

Visionary for sure, but I’m not so convinced of the resilience of some of the ideas. What happens to trade with cosmo-local production? Even the Phoenicians traded across the Mediterranean and as far as Cornwall, millennia ago, and they didn’t destroy the biosphere while doing so. Citizens’ assemblies are an interesting way of engaging groups in society often marginalised or alienated by conventional political structures and processes, but do they really have a longer-term perspective? After a couple of weekends of immersive engagement in the issue at hand, and a set of thoughtful recommendations at the end, they disperse, with no ownership of the actual nitty-gritty of putting them into practice over the next four years, let alone the next 40.

But, nevertheless, here is a set of ideas whose time has come. Written before the COVID-19 pandemic broke over our heads, one sentence feels apposite and hopeful:

*‘Throughout history, long term planning has frequently emerged from moments of crisis, especially when it has affected those in political and economic power.’*

Here’s hoping...

● **Martin Stott** is an independent sustainability practitioner – see [www.martin-stott.com](http://www.martin-stott.com). The views expressed are personal.

**Note**

- 1 R Krznaric: *The Good Ancestor: How to Think Long Term in a Short-Term World*. WH Allen, 2020



### Automne

#### **Bienvenue en France?**

The French border official at the Chunnel entrance asked for our destination. France was our reply. Wrong answer! Here's a tip: if you're asked, say Germany, Belgium, even Luxembourg; anywhere but France. He launched off into a speech about how France was high risk for us and we should stay in the UK. There were no restrictions regarding travel to France, albeit we would have to quarantine on return, so we were not going to do a U-turn. We wondered whether he would ask us to put a big yellow sticker on our windscreen...

We drove on, emerging in a country little different from our own. Masks on in the shops but not in the cafés and restaurants. But virtually no Brits. Normally one would see cars with GB stickers and hear English spoken, but not now. The newsagents have stopped stocking British newspapers – nobody to buy them. 'Brexit is here,' says the lady in the *tabac*. We seek to integrate, but we feel conspicuous.

But in our own village everyone is delighted to see us, and we them. It has been nearly a year. Social distancing is observed for us, whereas we notice that for locals no virus seems to be allowed to get in the way of the kissing – men too – even when a mask has to be pulled down to facilitate the gesture. Some things will never change.

#### **The home country?**

In Britain we like our allotments. Since the onset of COVID we like them more. My UK friend Colin is never happier than when he's self-isolating on his veg patch. In European countries, led mainly by the Dutch and Germans, but very popular down our way, too, there are the leisure gardens. These are a kind of allotment deluxe. Fruit and veg growing is a staple, but many also have small lawns, flower beds and quite attractive little pavilions, as opposed to the British sheds. In short, they provide the outdoor space that apartment residents don't have back at the ranch.

On the margins of Carcassonne and the other bigger towns, the leisure gardens have been a blessing for flat-dwellers during the pandemic, offering the whole family fresh air, recreation and exercise in a socially distanced environment. They must have saved social services and the wider

economy serious money, as people's physical and mental wellbeing was supported.

In UK towns and cities, in the push for more housing 'units', apartments are the developments of choice for policy-makers and developers alike. And the humble allotments that do exist are under scrutiny themselves for development, with little priority given to replacements. The kind of leisure gardens that we have here in the Languedoc could be life-savers to those staring at four walls in the country that builds the smallest homes in Europe. Some call the UK the 'home country'. It might have been once. Who cares now?

#### **The last rosé of summer**

It's *vendange* time again, and the grape harvesters are out in the vineyards, straddling the vines and hurling the bunches of black grapes into their hoppers. It has been a difficult year for the *vignerons*, with prolonged rain at the key stage when the grapes 'set'. The outcome is that the quantity is down by a half. However, those grapes are forecast to produce a super vintage, if only the heat would moderate. Alcohol levels will be soaring once vinification starts.

Indications are that there will again be record amounts of rosé produced in 2020 as the French market has doubled in the past 20 years and now accounts for a third of all wine sales here. Young people especially go for the colourful lightness through the long summer days and evenings. Some producers have resorted to mixing red with white in bulk when stock runs out. This is the process they use for producing the fizzy rosé, where arguably taste doesn't matter. It's a dilemma for wine producers, however, as rosé doesn't keep and buyers will not look at a 2019 vintage as soon as the 2020 hits the streets. You need an eye-catching label to attract the customer and have to hope you can sell all you make before the summer is out.

Meanwhile, out in the heat of the day the harvest goes on, but there's one difference that we spot. Normally there are white vans in the vineyards, but this year they're absent – no Spanish and Portuguese pickers because of COVID. So there are posh Renaults and Citroens parked up as family and friends take to the fields. It cannot be lost on them what exhausting work it is in the searing heat, carrying large plastic hoppers on their backs and trying not to snip a finger as they bend down to clip the bunches of grapes. Back-breaking work. And they may reflect on how little they pay the seasonal workers who sleep in their vans to save every cent.

● **Graeme Bell OBE** is a TCPA Vice-President and lives part of the year in the Languedoc. The views expressed are personal.

# coming to terms with climate change



Pixabay

Oil refineries on the Houston Ship Channel

Nowhere has been more resistant to an acknowledgement of climate change than Texas, dependant on oil and natural gas for its prosperity, as it has been for over a century. Still, nature tends to have the last word on such disputes, and it now seems that even Houston, the supreme oil city, must recognise facts. This season has seen 30 Atlantic hurricanes – a record number – move into the Gulf of Mexico, or Florida. The allocated personal names for the year have all been used up, necessitating the use of Greek letters. As I write this, Hurricane Iota, a category five storm, is moving on Central America, with reported winds of 90 miles per hour. After hitting Nicaragua, it may shift course afterwards towards the Gulf Coast, where three major storms have already hit coastal Louisiana.

Meanwhile, Florida cities are reporting falling land values in coastal areas, as homeowners realise that the ever-rising floods from high tides are not going away. Hurricanes are not simply becoming more powerful and frequent; they are changing their behaviour. Rather than diminishing rapidly in intensity after land fall, and moving on, they are stalling and delivering huge amounts of rainfall. The consequences for flooding and landslides are thereby increasing.

For Houston, now the sixth-largest US metropolitan area, the situation has become dire enough to prompt an effort to plan a response. It is long overdue. The

city and its sprawling suburbs lie on a flat plain close to the Gulf. It has long been prone to flooding during intense rain storms, but the real danger lies in the fact that the huge petrochemical complex on its seaward side along the Houston Ship Channel is located on very low-lying land, often former wetlands. With sea level rise becoming perceptible, and more frequent and stronger hurricanes, the entire complex is threatened. Even Texas oilmen are waking up to a new reality.

Climate scientists have long understood that the best way to deal with coastal threats is to create extensive wetlands to absorb the shock of hurricanes. However, after Hurricane Laura in the summer of 2020, voices in Houston, including the Mayor, called for movement on a coastal barrier that would prevent a storm surge from inundating the city and the petrochemical complex.

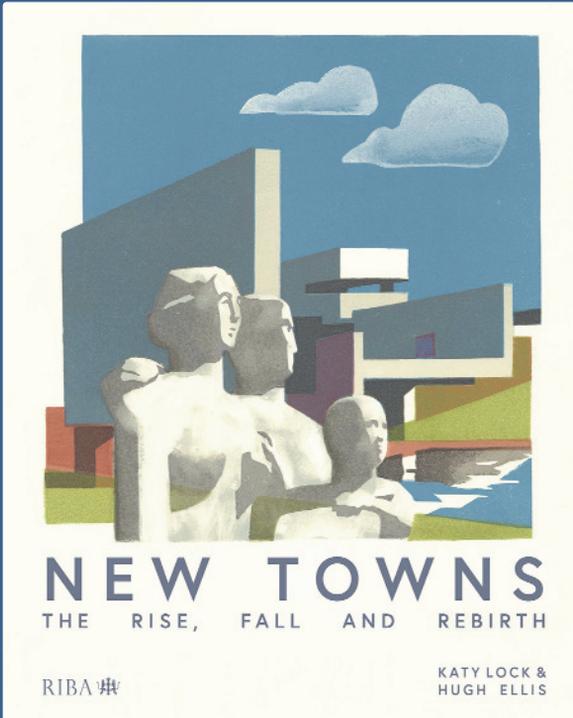
The idea is not new. Ever since Galveston, on the coast south of Houston, was destroyed with great loss of life in 1900, there have been proposals to curb the effects of hurricane surges. Most recently, advocates of a giant storm surge control project have raised their voices, even as the US Army Corps of Engineers is soon to release a study of such an effort. The most frequently discussed plan is to build an enormous floodgate – the Thames Barrier on steroids. The structure would be able to close the channel from the Gulf into Galveston Bay. Its cost is estimated to be about \$30 billion, most of which would come from the Federal Government. Even from Texas, this is a large amount. No-one is saying much about scaling back Federal hand-outs.

Meanwhile, in California, containment of the state's largest-ever wildfire was finally announced, even as the first real rain of the season is falling in Northern California. Four of the five largest wildfires in California's recorded history occurred in 2020. The largest, the August Complex, involved seven counties across the state's northern tier, and consumed over 1 million acres, more than twice the area of the next largest. Fire response agencies have grown more effective in their identification and response, but the scale of dry lightning has grown even faster. Costs are ballooning out of control. No clear policy for mitigation is on the horizon. It seems that this is one kind of disaster for which one cannot build a wall.

● **Mike Teitz** is Professor Emeritus at the University of California, Berkeley. The views expressed are personal.

designing new communities for the 21st century

# new towns: the rise, fall and rebirth



*New Towns: The Rise, Fall and Rebirth*  
By Katy Lock and Hugh Ellis  
Published by RIBA Publishing,  
May 2020, HB, 192 pp.,  
ISBN 978 1859469286, £40

Often misunderstood, the New Towns story is a fascinating one of anarchists, artists, visionaries, and the promise of a new beginning for millions of people. *New Towns: The Rise, Fall and Rebirth* offers a new perspective on the New Towns record and uses case studies to address the myths and realities of the programme. It provides valuable lessons for the growth and renewal of the existing New Towns and post-war housing estates and town centres, including recommendations for practitioners, politicians and communities interested in the renewal of existing New Towns and the creation of new communities for the 21st century.

Available through the TCPA website

£40 including postage & packing - 10% discount for TCPA members using the code MEMBER

Visit [www.tcpa.org.uk/shop/new-towns-the-rise-fall-and-rebirth](http://www.tcpa.org.uk/shop/new-towns-the-rise-fall-and-rebirth)