

London and the Wider South East- Current strategic planning context

LSE Roundtable
20th March 2024

Catriona Riddell BA (Hons) Planning FRTPI



The current Government's approach to strategic planning

Existing

- **The Duty to Cooperate:** Introduced by the 2011 Localism Act and required Councils and other public bodies to '*engage constructively, actively and on an ongoing basis*' to develop strategic planning policies where needed. No requirement to agree! Now being revoked through LURA
- **Joint local and strategic plans:** Voluntary joint plans allowed under the 2004 Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act (**one being prepared in WSE – SW Herts**)
- **Spatial Development Strategies:** Prepared by Mayoral Combined Authorities (MCAs) where spatial planning powers secured through devolution deals (**C&P Combined Authority has no statutory spatial planning powers**).
- **The London Plan:** The only strategic plan required by law to be prepared and with direct accountability to Mayor (MCA SDS require unanimous agreement).

Proposed

To be introduced through the LURA & full review of the NPPF) with implementation expected from Autumn 2024.

- **New policy 'alignment test':** new policy 'Alignment Test' to replace DtC and be introduced through review of NPPF but no details yet on how this will work or even whether it will be implemented.
- **New Joint SDS:** Voluntarily prepared jointly by LPAs. Expected to replace current practice of joint strategic plans but will not be allowed in areas covered by MCAs.
- **MCA and London SDS will remain part of the system.**
- **City uplift:** London, Brighton, Reading and Southampton all subject to required 35% uplift on top of own housing needs (as defined by standard method) to be met within own boundaries unless willing neighbours.
- **Long term plan for housing:** Cambridge to deliver significant boost to housing as part of targeted approach by Government. Major investment in other areas e.g. Thames Estuary

Planning across the WSE

Governance is messy!

Two tier areas (counties and districts) – 11

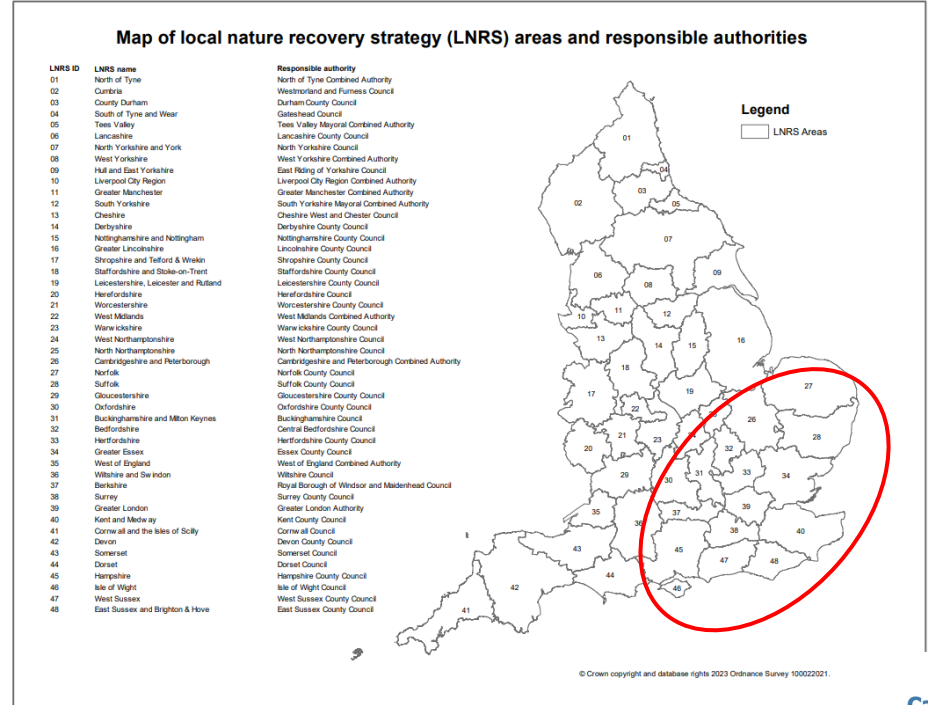
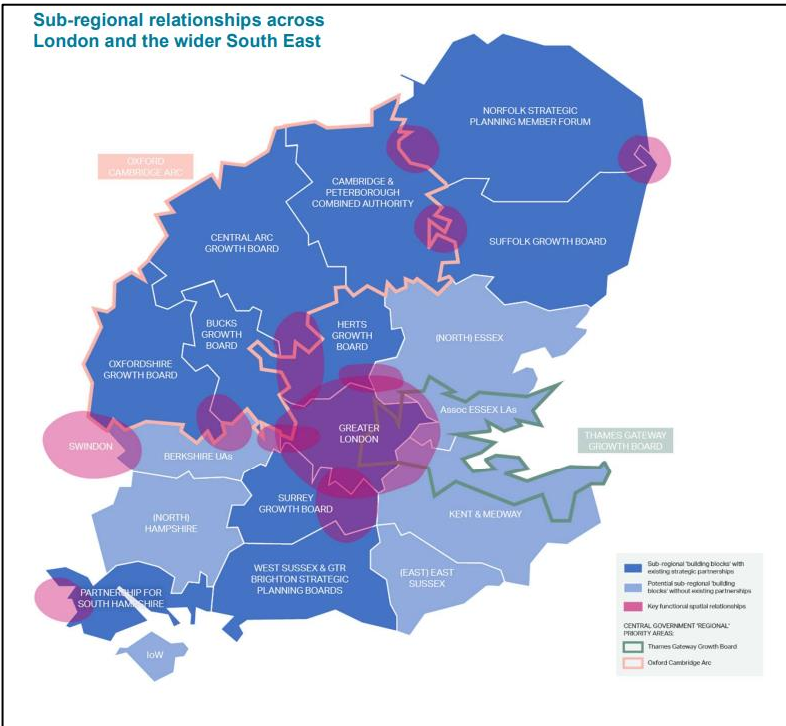
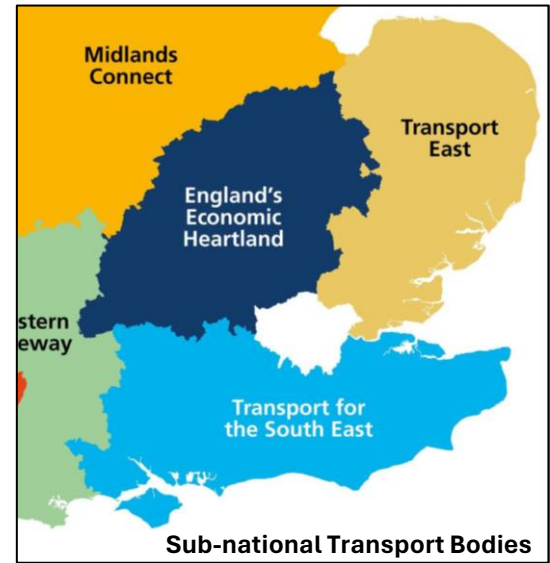
Unitary Authorities – 17

Combined Authorities – 1 (Cambridgeshire & Peterborough)

Sub-national Transport Bodies – 3

Local Nature Recovery Strategy Responsible Authorities – 15

Local Enterprise Partnerships - 11



© Crown copyright and database rights 2023 Ordnance Survey 100022021.

Other Contextual Issues

No mechanism for meeting unmet housing needs

- No requirement under revised NPPF to review GB (unless LPA determine ‘exceptional circumstances’) and no strategic mechanism to review the MGB.
- Housing targets set by standard method now to be treated as ‘advisory starting point’ and significant other constraints impacting on large parts of the WSE (e.g. lack of strategic infrastructure, water quality/ supply, flood risk and other national designations).
- London (and other cities with 35% uplift requirement) very unlikely to meet own needs, let alone 35% and no ‘willing partners’

Resourcing and lack of strategic planning expertise will be a block on progress

- Significant funding challenges in local government, in all tiers – collaboration across the WSE and with London not likely to be considered part of the day job (resources increasingly limited to statutory roles)
- Very little strategic planning capacity and capability - Very few strategic planners left with expertise and experience to implement any new arrangements quickly.
- Lack of a consistent approach to data collection, research and evidence across the city region.

Changing politics in the WSE will make strategic collaboration harder

- Very little appetite to work formally on joint plans in WSE – proposed new Joint SDS unlikely to get any traction (unless mandated)
- Local government political control continues to be very unstable across large parts of the WSE – a large number of LPAs in the WSE have elections in thirds therefore no long-term planning/ difficult political decisions.
- There is no parity in power between London Mayor and surrounding areas re planning across the city-region /no bodies with equal strategic planning powers. Unlikely to remain the case, even with any emerging voluntary WSE partnership arrangements.
- Too many councillors with a) no experience in strategic partnerships and b) representing independent /RA groups therefore not interested in strategic matters
- Devo deals mainly being progressed through ‘county deals’ which don’t include any spatial planning powers.

The Raynsford Review (2020)

[The Raynsford Review of Planning - Town and Country Planning Association \(tcpa.org.uk\)](#)

*“Such plans [strategic] may not be needed everywhere in England, but where they are prepared they must be placed on a formal footing, with a defined preparation process, an independent regional planning body, and clear and meaningful accountability and participation. **What is clear is that the decision taken in 2010 to abolish regional plans and the organisational and intellectual capital they contained was a major mistake and has made the job of producing sustainable growth much more complex.**”*

APPG Housing Supply and delivery Report (2023) [APPG-Housing-report-September-2023-Final-RGB.pdf \(appghousing.org.uk\)](#)

“A virtually cost-free policy lever, that can have immediate impact, is to undertake effective strategic planning. Critically, this must occur at the regional and subregional level to help effectively resolve the tensions between supplying homes in the South-East where the demand is primarily located and supporting the Government’s Levelling Up agenda elsewhere. In the latter case, policymakers and planners need to be shrewd about key infrastructure investment, a critical determining factor in the demand for homes. Simply put we need to consider introducing frameworks around ‘the what, the where and the why’, ensuring that these key criteria are applied in coordination with overarching policy objectives, here specifically, Levelling Up. The more localised and devolved these strategies are, the more likely they are to deliver the right homes in the right places.”

Building the Future Commission Report on Planning (2023) [Building the Future Commission: Planning to solve the housing crisis | Building](#)

*“Without a strategic planning tier, abolished in 2011, unmet housing need is not being picked up by neighbouring authorities, as there is no effective mechanism to force this to happen. The way to address these issues is by **reinstating a strategic planning tier to take decisions on key strategic (or larger than local) planning issues such as housing numbers and green belt.** In order to hit the ground running, this tier should be based on existing sub-regional institutions such as metro mayor-led combined authorities, unitary or county authorities, or combinations of them: no attempt should be made to reform the regional spatial strategies.”*

UK2070 Commission 2020

[The UK2070 Commission – An Inquiry into Regional Inequalities](#)

*“A National Spatial Plan for England is needed to contribute to the promotion of the UK’s global role, to tackle inequalities and to link up sub-national spatial frameworks. It should set out explicit long-term funded priorities, and integrate multi-agency urban and rural programmes of action to meet future development needs sustainably. It will facilitate collaboration with the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland governments. It will also provide a **stronger context and confidence for the preparation of sub-national spatial strategies, especially for the combined authorities, the Northern Powerhouse, Midlands Engine and Great Western Gateway and, most importantly, the national context for developing strategic plans for the long-term development of London and the Wider South East.**”*

Report to the Government from the Energy Network’s Commissioner (2023) [Accelerating electricity transmission network deployment: Electricity Networks Commissioner’s recommendations - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

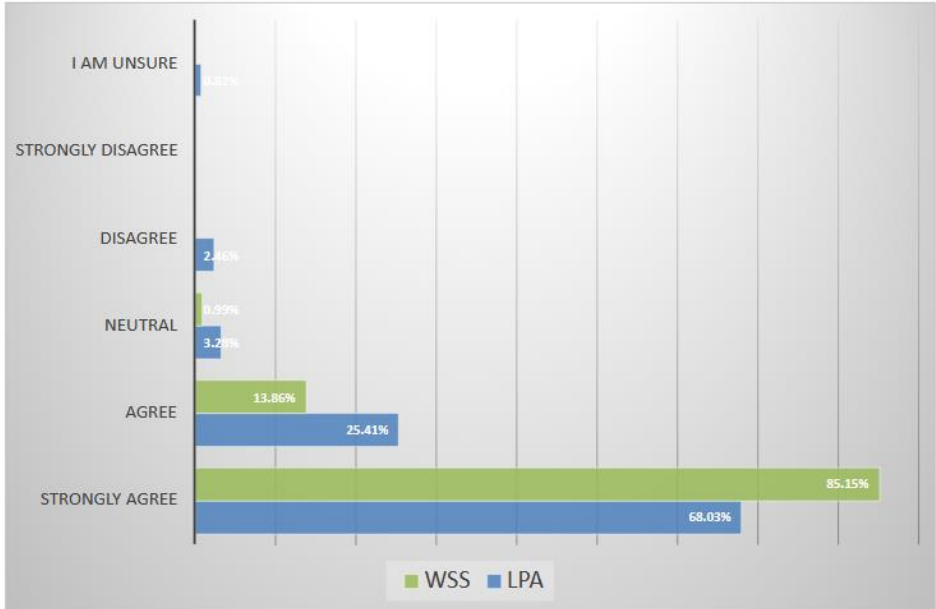
*The Energy National Policy Statements (NPS) are badly out of date and offer little guidance as to national engineering and environment priorities and trade-offs. **There is no long-term spatial plan to demonstrate the position and need for a new line within the integrated system.** There is no agreed and public guidance as to how, where, and why lines should be onshore or offshore, overhead or underground, lattice pylons or novel designs. There is no agreed and public guidance on how system design should balance different environmental benefits and costs and how to trade-off global, national, regional and local impacts.*

British Property Federation (2023) [BPF - BPF calls for return to strategic planning to create a more effective planning framework for freight and logistics](#)

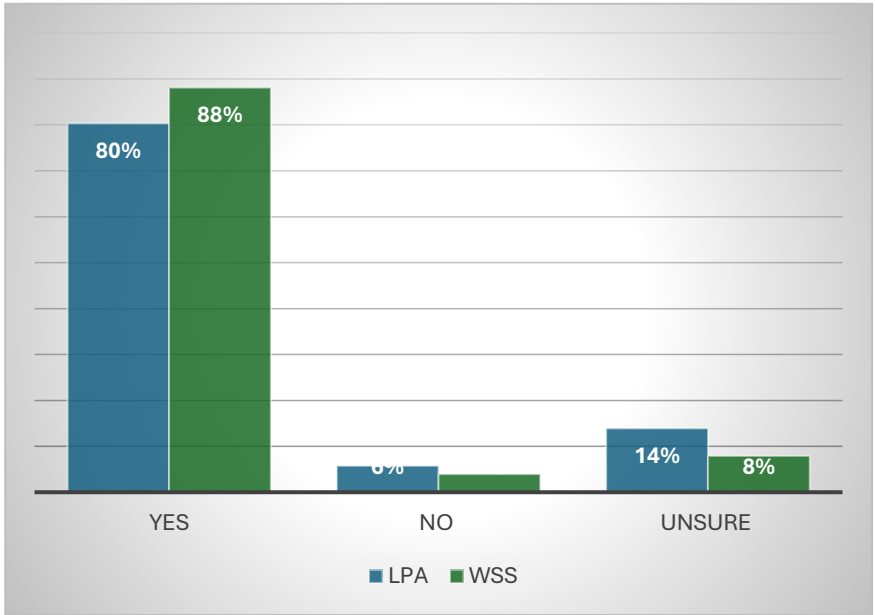
***Under the current system, strategic ‘larger than local’ logistics employment sites are simply not being planned for effectively as they rely on cooperation between authorities – with requirements for local authorities to work together through the planning system being less effective since the abolition of Regional Spatial Strategies in 2010.** This has been to the detriment of the wider economy and has undermined international investment with strategic employment sites tending to attract nationally and internally mobile business activity, as well as specific growth centres.*

Meanwhile voices in support of effective strategic planning are getting louder...

Is a change to in approach to strategic planning needed?



Should strategic planning be mandated?



Source: Strategic Planning Surveys (Interim findings UWE, February 2024)

We have been here before....

[THE SOUTH-EAST STUDY \(Hansard, 4 May 1964\) \(parliament.uk\)](#)

“There has been a good deal of time since 1955 during which the Government could at least have made the broad sketch of how they think that national development should go as a whole and so enable the diligent people, to whom we are grateful, who piloted the South-East Study to do their work with more force and relevance. ...

It would also involve a co-ordination of decisions about transport with the rest of policy affecting the location of industry.

It would also have involved a proper review of local government finance. ...

Swindon is just over the border of the south-eastern area—and, now I think of it, so is Peterborough just over the border. That raises the question why we need to stick rigidly to this area and whether we should not be considering the possibilities of accommodating some of this growing population further towards the southwest of England. ...

The answer to this commuter problem and the green belt problem and many of the problems of the South-East is to be found by looking at London. It is about London, if the subject is not too painful to the Government, that I want to say a few words. It is the growth of employment, and particularly of office employment, in London that produces the commuter population and the desire to live round London, which threatens the green belt and makes it difficult to establish anything like counter-magnets to London throughout the whole of the south-east region.”

Michael Stewart, MP for Fulham (Labour)

“...we must provide for it in an orderly way so as to improve life for all in the South-East. In particular, we must so arrange things that all those born or already living in London can be decently housed, either in London or elsewhere. We must relieve the pressure on London; we must hold the green belt; and we must provide enough land to meet the housing shortage while preserving the maximum possible amount of undeveloped land in the South-East.

We must achieve all these objectives without harming the rest of the country and without damaging the investment priorities which, for some years, have been promised to Scotland and the North-East. Since the South-East makes a great contribution to the national prosperity, we must also achieve all this without in any way hampering or crippling the prosperity of the South-East, which is a national asset.”

Sir Keith Joseph, Minister for Housing and Local Government (Conservative)

There are broadly three approaches to regional planning. One would be for the Government to set up machinery themselves and perform these functions from Whitehall, presumably with greater powers over the county authorities to direct them as to what they should do and how they should do it. I do not believe that would commend itself to us. I am sure that it would not commend itself to local authorities. I do not believe anybody here would advocate it as a solution this week, when many people are about to vote at the polls in local government. The second alternative, which has been discussed lately, is to elect a new tier of regional government. I believe that this would present enormous difficulties. I rather fancy that we shall hear something from the Liberal Party as to how it might be done.

There is a third alternative which I commend to the Committee, because the experiment is now being carried out in practice. It is the alternative of a [959](#) joint planning conference of the counties of a region, or of a substantial part of the counties of a region, coming together in a joint planning conference so that these autonomous authorities come together in the conference and set up the machinery to look at their county problems in the perspective of the region as a whole.

Sir Richard Nugent, MP for Guildford (Conservative)

A new government, a new approach?

“There is no way to meet housing need in England without planning for growth on a larger than local scale. However, this Government, for reasons I suspect are more ideological than practical, are now presiding over a planning system that lacks any effective sub-regional frameworks for cross-boundary planning.

The limitations of the duty to co-operate were well understood, but it at least imposed a requirement on local authorities to engage constructively, actively and on an ongoing basis to develop strategic planning policies where needed. Its repeal last year through the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act, coupled with the fact that no replacement has been brought forward, leaves us with no meaningful process for planning strategically across boundaries to meet unmet housing need, given the inherent flaws of voluntary spatial development strategies.

Indeed, the Government have now even removed from the NPPF the requirement to help neighbouring authorities accommodate development in instances where they cannot meet their areas’ objectively assessed needs. **If we are to overcome housing delivery challenges around towns and cities with tightly drawn administrative boundaries we must have an effective mechanism for cross-boundary strategic planning, and a Labour Government will introduce one.**

That is just one example of the kind of planning reform we believe is necessary; others include finally getting serious about boosting local plan coverage. It is appalling that we have a local plan-led system where nearly three quarters of local plans are now not up to date—that cannot be allowed to continue. Another example is **reintroducing a strategic approach to green-belt release, rather than the haphazard free-for-all we have had for the past 14 years.”**

“Sub-regional bodies (Combined Authorities) should be required to adopt a statutory spatial economic development strategy, which local spatial development plans should conform to. These strategies should be agreed by a qualified majority vote of local authorities, and should include plans for infrastructure including transport, energy and water, and an overall housing target. If they can't agree, mayors should have the power to impose a plan. Mayors should be able to "call in" decisions from local authorities if they do not confirm to the spatial development strategy”

[A Growth Policy to Close Britain's Regional Divides: What Needs to be Done | Harvard Kennedy School](#) (Ed Balls et al, Feb 2024)

Discussion

What should the new 'rules of engagement' look like and how would this work?

Some issues to consider...

- At the very least we need something to help align data/develop and manage research on a consistent (shared?) basis.
- Whatever is created, it needs to provide parity between GL and WSE – it can't be just about what London needs/ supporting London, there must be a 'quid pro quo' in the relationship and something in it for the wider area (particularly to support investment)
- What geography is the most appropriate / practical to work on – old 'RoSE'? i.e. focus on the areas where the relationship with London is strongest.
- How will this be resourced (there are still two existing bodies EELGA and SEC) – who will do the work, how will it be funded?
- If Labour win next GE there will be critical issues to consider e.g. urban uplift unlikely to survive (what will a new Government do about Cambridge?), strategic GB reviews likely to be introduced, potential for new towns in WSE, sub-regional strategic planning (re) introduced? How will this fit with wider national agenda around growth/levelling up?