why we need to think strategically and spatially

Outlining findings from the RTPI-sponsored ‘A Map for England’ study, Cecilia Wong, Mark Baker, Stephen Hincks, Andreas Schultz-Baing and Brian Webb argue that we cannot lose sight of the importance of strategic spatial thinking in policy-making in an age of localism

The past year or so has been an eventful period for planning in England. Driven by a change in national government, we have seen significant shifts take place in the planning policy landscape in England. While the gravity shift to a more localised approach to planning provides opportunities for developing more contextualised interventions in relation to particular policy challenges, history suggests that this is only likely to be achieved if there is a clear and well articulated national planning framework in place to provide local planning authorities with the parameters they need to effectively deliver their policies.

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) for England, published in March 2012, has attracted much debate within and beyond the planning community. One of the main criticisms of the NPPF is its ‘aspatial’ nature. Yet it is clear that government policies and programmes have wide-ranging spatial implications. Some of these spatial implications are more visible than others; the development of high-speed rail and capital projects outlined in the National Infrastructure Plan are obvious examples.

What is clear, however, is that if local authorities are to adequately prepare local strategies and plans to deliver the objectives of sustainable growth, and to mediate unintended spatial outcomes (as far as possible), then both central government and local authorities need to be aware of the interactions that exist between policies, and to understand how these interactions shape policy outcomes on the ground. Given the current policy climate, we are very unlikely to see old debates about the need for a national spatial plan for England resurface any time soon. Even so, the imperative for strategic thinking around spatial development remains as strong as ever, as illustrated by the recent RTPI-sponsored study – ‘A Map for England’.

A Map for England

A number of studies commissioned by the RTPI over the past 12 years have explored the changing spatial dynamics that are shaping England and Britain more broadly. The most recent of these studies – A Map for England, undertaken by the Centre for Urban Policy Studies at the University of Manchester – set out to examine the interplay between policy needs and spatial contexts by mapping the policies and programmes of government departments and their agencies and non-departmental public bodies that had explicit and implicit spatial components.

The research found that many government policies and programmes have strong spatial expression or, more importantly, significant spatial consequences. Yet, these expressions and consequences could potentially be missed given that the relevant information needed to understand the spatial dimensions of policy is often scattered throughout different sectoral policy documents and are contained within a range of formats – from maps to tables to text. While the aim of the study was quite simple, the message emerging from the research was stark: a shared vision of the future and an understanding of the spatial implications of decision-making are needed so that future development is not frustrated and is sensitively pursued for the mutual benefit (as far as possible) of different policy sectors.
The study of government policy documents raised a series of questions around whether current government policy has the scope to respond to strategic spatial challenges. For example, the question of the extent to which national road, rail and digital communication proposals will, in combination, concentrate resources along particular strategic corridors and/or complement the potential concentration of resources on eight core cities remains unanswered. Similarly, the relationships between these and other issues (such as the location of new power stations, or future airport capacity) and the spatial context of environmental constraints (for example National Parks and nature conservation sites) and risks (for example flooding) are given limited consideration at national level.

The review and the mapping exercise suggested that there was apparently little understanding in government policy of how these sectoral issues might complement or conflict with one another, creating synergies or tensions that might lead to future successes or failures in delivery and implementation, and ultimately contributing to, or frustrating, the future economic growth and sustainable development that the current Coalition Government has committed itself to achieving. Indeed, the delivery of policy priorities in one local authority does not happen in isolation of the delivery of policy priorities in other local authorities – adjacent or otherwise. The duty to co-operate has potential to bring policy-makers in different local...

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authorities together, but strategic spatial thinking is a skill that policy-makers can ill-afford to neglect in an era of localism. Without a strategic spatial perspective there are risks that strategic policy blindness will further undermine efforts to deliver more effective spatial policy co-ordination and will limit the capacity for policy to respond strategically to spatial outcomes resulting from localised decision-making.

The need for spatial policy co-ordination

A key strategic consideration in planning policy is the need to respond to future demand for housing, services and employment and the interaction of these policy sectors with environmental concerns.

Designations such as National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, as protected environments and landscapes within England, set out physical restrictions on the development of land. In addition, the longstanding planning tool of national green belt policy imposes further restrictions on development, often in areas of the greatest development pressures. Unlike national designations such as SSSIs and other nature conservation sites that operate at a localised site level, these strategic types of national designation cover extensive areas of land and, as a result, have significant implications for spatial development at both the national and sub-national scales.

When looking at projections for household growth during the 25-year period of 2008 to 2033, areas projected to have the highest growth are mainly found in commuting belts around major urban areas. In the East of England, high projected growth areas are found around the likes of Ipswich, Colchester, King’s Lynn, Cambridge and Northampton. London and the South East have long faced population growth pressures and the most recent household projections do not cut against this grain. Further west, the M5 corridor near Bristol and areas around Exeter...
and North Dartmoor are expected to experience intense growth over the next couple of decades. Many of the areas that are expected to face increasing pressures from population growth are also areas that contain high-value (often protected) landscapes. The likes of the Yorkshire Dales, Devon and the coastal areas of Norfolk and Suffolk (see Fig. 1) are just a few examples of where this conflict has potential to intensify as policies are developed to manage population growth pressures and conservation priorities. Ultimately (and this is a well rehearsed message), the strategic co-ordination of policies is vital, so that spatial synergies and conflicts are understood and reflected within policy.

Responding to a multi-speed England

There is a general political consensus that one size of policy does not fit all, and that more power should be devolved to local authorities in order to allow them to address their own policy priorities. However, it is important that the co-ordination of activities across boundaries is not lost, and that our understanding of spatial synergies and conflicts is sensitised to the long-term strategic priorities that lie beyond the policy agendas of individual local authorities. A Map for England illustrates that government policies and actions – even without a deliberate spatial framework – create spatial outcomes and that, cumulatively, create very stark spatial impacts.

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What is apparent from the research is that current government policy is producing, and has the potential to exacerbate further, a ‘multi-speed England’ (see Fig. 2). The National Infrastructure Plan strongly reinforces London’s dominant position, with major investments that strengthen its domestic spatial connections (via HS2), as well as internationally (to maintain its international aviation hub status) and virtually (by becoming one of the super-connected world cities via super-fast broadband provision). In contrast, judged on the rhetoric in policy documents, the North East’s position is less favourable and appears to be very much marginalised in terms of future major investment plans and projects.

A Map for England

The Map for England project website, where the report and a compendium of additional maps can be found, is at www.rtpi.org.uk/knowledge/core-issues/map-for-england/

In conjunction with software specialists Idox, the RTPI has launched a pilot website for the Map for England at www.idoxgroup.com/mapforengland/
The pilot will be live until 31 December 2012

It is clear that a pro-growth policy framework has been consistently applied across various government documents. As a result, there is a broad lack of attention paid to social and demographic drivers such as deprivation and demographic change, as well as the environmental drivers of climate change. In addition, the responsibility for co-ordinating the provision of future housing rests squarely on the shoulders of local authorities, with the NPPF deliberately avoiding giving strategic spatial direction.

While each local authority can deal with a wide range of spatial sectoral issues through their Local Plans, it will not be effective and efficient for multiple authorities to deal with these issues independently without some overarching guidance from central government. It is these kinds of acute tensions, synergies and conflicts, emerging from different policy agendas and coupled with the asymmetric consequences of devolved political responsibilities, that need to be more clearly understood, not only for England but across the UK as a whole.

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Notes


5 For a complete listing of publications, see www.rtpi.org.uk/knowledge/publications/local-plans-publications