

Key Issues for Spatial Planning

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Peter Hall
Bartlett School of Architecture and Planning,
University College London

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1. Three Key Issues

1.1 Environment/Global Warming

There is almost universal agreement among scientists and the general public that global warming is a priority issue that must be handled expeditiously, whether by changing patterns of living and working, or by very rapid technological developments. Less clear is the willingness of people to contemplate drastic changes in their lifestyle, which could entail (for instance) greatly reduced choice of goods and services (e.g. a more restricted choice of home-grown foods; restriction on the amount and scale of leisure travel), or the ability of politicians to take the lead in persuading them of the need for these changes while still remaining in office.

1.2 The Impact of Rising Incomes

It is almost self-evident that there is a long-running and deep-seated trend of rising productivity and rising incomes. Whether the growth trend is 2% per year compound or 3%, the result will be a doubling of real living standards over each 25-30 years. Even though there is also clear evidence that income disparities are growing (particularly through acceleration of the incomes of the top decile), the evident result for most people will be that they will enjoy living standards enjoyed

only by upper income groups today. This has some problematic consequences, since many of the resulting changes in consumption (in particular, increased travel) will be resource-consuming and will contribute to global warming. Many more households will own two or three homes (town, country, abroad), travelling between them regularly; they will also take more holidays to exotic and distant locations. One key question is how far these patterns are likely to be affected by policy changes, e.g. a sharp increase in the real cost of travel.

Another consequence is that, whether or not income disparities continue to grow, absolute differences between rich and poor are certain to increase, leading to increased envy and social strain. This will be associated with another trend already very evident: a prevalent culture of consumption, especially among youngest age groups, associated with the increased power of marketing. Evidence already suggests that children and adolescents increasingly judge themselves and their peers in terms of their command over stylish consumption goods. Among lower-income groups, where the phenomenon is exacerbated by family breakdown, this may be exaggerated to an obsession, since stylish personal display may become a substitute for a sense of failure in other more basic respects.

1.3 Education for the Knowledge Economy

There is abundant evidence, stretching back over several decades, of a severe and growing disjuncture in educational achievement between the majority (80-90%) who are achieving satisfactory qualifications to enter the “New Knowledge Economy” and a small minority who are failing to do so and are in consequence falling into a life of semi-permanent unemployment and unemployability, alcohol and drug abuse, early female pregnancy, anti-social behaviour, petty crime and violence. Though it is generally accepted that this group contributes disproportionately to crime and anti-social behaviour, impacting particularly on the poorer areas of cities and towns where the less acceptable social housing is concentrated, there is little agreement on the basic causes or possible remedies. It appears that these patterns tend to be transferred from one generation to the next through poor parenting, child abuse and taking into care, but untangling the

precise sequence of causation (some of it psychologically complex) has proved intractable; hence the difficulty in developing remedial strategies. Some of the most promising include very early learning assistance for deprived children, deep psychological counselling for the same children, and remedial education for adults (disproportionate numbers of prisoners have learning difficulties, but their prison terms are too short for effective remediation).

2. Spatial Planning Solutions

2.1 North v. South

A continuing issue for UK spatial planning, which has now continued since the 1930s, is the continuing imbalance between the economic dynamism of London and its surrounding Mega-City Region, and the much more sluggish growth of the Midlands and North, best represented as an “archipelago economy” of partial economic revival in the Core Cities (in part driven by expansion of public services such as Higher Education) and lack of economic recovery in the ex-industrial towns in the City Regions around them. This has impacted seriously on housing policy, with an increasing problem of shortage and affordability in the south contrasted with a problem of weak demand and housing abandonment in parts of the northern City Regions. The government has addressed this through its Sustainable Communities strategy, which simultaneously seeks to boost housing supply in three selected growth corridors in the south (now supplemented by growth centres in selected locations outside these corridors) while pursuing a policy of selective demolition and rehabilitation in nine Pathfinder areas in the north. In the medium term, following through the consequences, there appear to be a number of possible strategies which are not mutually exclusive:

- *Using the growth corridors to “grow” the southern economy into the Midlands.* One of these corridors already extends to Corby, 82 miles from London; another to Peterborough, 76 miles distant. It is conceivable over time that these corridors could extend farther to the West and East Midlands cities.

- *Bringing the north closer to the south* by improved transport infrastructure, notably the proposed north-south high-speed rail line. Though rejected by the Eddington report, which flatly denies that transport investment can revive lagging regions, this is still a live issue – particularly since Eddington leave open the possibility of building such a line in stages, first to relive existing congested lines within about 100 miles of London.
- *Bringing the northern ex-industrial towns closer to their core cities* through rail and light rail investments; again implicitly questioned by Eddington, but being pursued through such developments as the Manchester Metrolink extensions to Oldham and Rochdale.
- *Finding “New Economy” solutions for the ex-industrial towns*, as proposed for instance by the consultants Anthony Wilson and Yvette Livesey for Burnley. The challenge here is the vast scale of the problem and the need to develop unique and appropriate solutions tailored to the history and culture of each of these places.

These solutions in turn pose second-order problems, which are now discussed.

2.2 Challenges for the South

As the Sustainable Communities strategy unrolls in the South East Mega-City Region, three distinct and related issues have emerged, most notably in the development of Regional Spatial Strategies and their Examination in Public.

- *London’s Spatial Structure*: given the national importance of London’s Advanced Service economy, its spatial distribution and its relationship to the wider labour catchment area becomes crucial. The Mayor’s preferred strategy, as outlined in the 2004 approved London Plan and as developed in early draft versions of the 2008 review, is of strong concentration in the existing City-West End Central Business District with extensions eastward to Canary Wharf and the new Stratford City development just about to

start. In contrast development in the existing centres of outer London is given relatively little emphasis. This is in sharp contrast to the South East RSS, which is based on strong hubs in the ring 30-50 miles from the centre of London. However the preliminary draft of the Thames Gateway Plan seems to accord with the Mayor in accepting that the great majority of all employment will be concentrated in Canary Wharf and Stratford City, in effect making the rest of the Gateway into commuter suburbs stretching far down the rail lines into Essex and Kent. Related to this, the Mayor's Plan lays great emphasis on densifying new development and redevelopment wherever possible, most notably in the opportunity areas of the Gateway (Lower Lea Valley, Greenwich/Charlton, Deptford, Barking Riverside) but also around the Outer London centres, where it may conflict with existing Conservation Area policies; this issue is likely to loom large in the forthcoming debate on the Mayor's proposed new powers to override Borough policies on such issues.

- *Growth Corridors/Growth Areas: Near In or Far Out?* The East of England EiP Panel Report effectively challenged the DCLG strategy for the London-Stansted-Peterborough-Cambridge corridor, substituting a policy for more widely dispersed Growth Centres including greater emphasis on a "London Arc" of towns from Watford and Hemel Hempstead to Hatfield and Welwyn Garden City, 17-25 miles from Central London. One rationale for this is that it will release more new homes to meet demand close to London, thus helping reduce commuting costs and times; it happens to chime with the Barker Review recommendation for a review of Green Belt boundaries, including the possibility of selective release of Green Belt in exchange for upgrade of remaining Green Belt land for active recreation (the "Stockley Park" solution). But it conflicts with evidence that development farther out (beyond approximately a 40-mile ring from London) will help generate a much higher degree (75-85%) of self-containment within Travel to Work (Functional Urban Region) boundaries. Put simplistically: is the less bad solution to put development in the 20-35-mile ring, with more commuters over short distances, or in the 60-80-mile ring, with far few commuters

travelling over very long distances? This issue cannot however be separated from the one raised by the Thames Gateway Interim Plan: in that corridor, can strong employment centres be generated at greater distances from London, particularly in Essex where the most distant location (Southend) is only 35 miles distant?

2.3 Challenges for the North

The key challenges for the North are quite different:

- *Creating Family-Friendly Housing in the Core Cities:* Research by ippr suggests that the “Urban Renaissance” in the Core Cities, though impressive, has catered almost entirely so far for a clientele of students and young professionals who regard this as a temporary way station which they will abandon for a suburban lifestyle as soon as they begin to rear children. Imaginative developers like Urban Splash are seeking to develop family-friendly housing in Manchester that would allow these people, if they wished, to remain in the city, but they are finding that it involves a whole raft of other policies, including the provision of better city schools.
- *Developing a Commuter Economy in the City Region towns:* historical experience suggests that the remarkable growth of the London Mega-City Region in part resulted from the development of towns in the 20-40-mile ring as commuter dormitories for London in the 1950s and 1960s, allowing them in turn to develop a strong base of residentiary service employment and then, later, to attract decentralised offices to capture a part of the commuter labour force. The question is whether, with enhanced commuter service, the northern City Region towns could develop in the same way. But it appears that there are crucial differences: historically, these towns had a weaker base of service industry and of an accompanying white-collar labour force; also, their residential offer is much poorer. Indeed, it is now observable that there is a major gulf between these towns and their neighbouring rural areas, which invariably stand at the opposite end of the

scale in terms of the DCLG IMD 2004 and which typically have house prices 50-100% higher than in the next-door town. Ironically, therefore, the base for a southern-style commuter economy is more likely to be found in small rural towns like Clitheroe or Congleton than in closer ex-industrial places like Burnley or Stockport.

3. What Other Types of Policies?

It will doubtless be noticed that the spatial planning solutions outlined in Section 2 above are unrelated, or only weakly and indirectly related, to the key issues outlined in Section 1. This is because – in the author’s personal view – spatial planning issues are somewhat secondary to the central dilemmas facing Britain today. Insofar as they are relevant (for instance, through the effect of travel on energy consumption and global warming), other solutions than spatial planning ones may well be found to be more apposite and effective. Some illustrations are given below.

3.1 Environment/Global Warming

As discussed in the Stern report, fiscal/economic policies may be most appropriate to influence directly the behaviour of both users and suppliers, and thereby to trigger technological developments that could potentially alter the decision parameters. In particular, substantially higher rates of taxation could have a major influence on both the decision to make a journey (especially for leisure) and the mode of travel (substitution of ground travel, especially rail, for air). This could be usefully coupled with traded carbon credits for both consumers and producers. In the medium term, this could have two useful effects: (1) convergence of travel modes, whereby airline companies increasingly bought shares in rail operators to manage their short-distance feeds (as Lufthansa and DB are already doing, e.g. between Frankfurt and Stuttgart); (2) accelerated technological breakthroughs, in particular the development of a commercially-viable private vehicle using alternative energy sources such as a fuel cell.

3.2 The Impact of Rising Incomes

This is perhaps the least tractable problem, except that its solution may depend in part on developments under 3.1 (including the possibility that global warming may make leisure time in Britain a highly attractive option both for British and overseas customers). The key lies in development of alternative goods and services which will serve as effective substitutes for high-income options such as exotic holidays and second or third homes. This needs further development.

3.3 Education for the Knowledge Economy

Lower-qualified, lower-skilled workers will find themselves in increasing competition with well-qualified migrants from less-developed countries and continents, willing and able to work long hours at wage levels below those expected by UK recipients (as already seen since the East European accession of May 2004). This is already leading to a widespread political backlash, impelling the need to develop policies that will bring UK-born unemployed workers into the labour force – with what outcome, remains to be seen. If the unemployed workers are sufficiently incentivised, the supply-side policies will consist in a major attempt to raise levels of adult literacy and numeracy, coupled with training in the social skills necessary for many jobs in the new service economy. These will need to be developed at the local level in association with employers and employer organisations, so that they can be tailored to the needs of each local economy. They will need to be coupled with broader social and medical programmes, such as initiatives to reduce drug dependence.

The evident problem with such “tough love” programmes is that they may run counter to other parallel initiatives designed to reduce welfare dependence. To take an obvious instance, withdrawal of housing benefit and incapacity benefit from young lone mothers may make them even more dependent on other benefits as well as exposing serious physical or mental health problems. This

suggests that the appropriate strategy may be a complex one, whereby withdrawal of benefits is associated with entry into new programmes. Such policy bundles are most likely to be developed locally, with knowledge of the individual or the household. This has obvious implications for the future of mainstream and specialised social programmes. A major question here is how to provide a more effective and humane alternative to goal for the delivery of the workplace and social skills necessary to perform effectively in the Knowledge Economy.