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## Special Issue

Francesco Bandarin | Luis Manuel Basabe Montalvo | Luca Bertolini | Marco Cremaschi | Frank Eckardt | Nick Gallent | Marius Grønning | Joerg Knieling | Carlos Llop | Ali Madanipour | Gabriele Pasqui | Paola Viganò

Andrea Di Giovanni | Giulia Fini | Patrizia Gabellini

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# A Century of Rural Planning in England: A Story of Contestation, Fragmentation and Integration

## Introduction

There has, in recent times, been a clear shift in the principles underpinning the theory and practice of rural planning in England: from the narrow resource protection approach, in which rural and urban spaces were regarded as distinctly separate entities, towards an integrated spatial approach that recognises their interdependency. Acceptance that the countryside had become a much more complex and contested space, and home to a variety of competing policy agendas and constituency interests was fundamental to this shift, though implementation of ideas has sometimes lagged behind the theory. Until very recently, English rural planning policy and practice – which is distinct from the rest of the UK – remained steadfast to the principles set out in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: to protect the countryside from inappropriate development and preserve quality landscapes and agricultural land. There are some signs today however that the scope of rural planning is significantly broadening beyond its traditional ‘preservationist’ remit, and slowly recognising the differentiated and multifunctional nature of the contemporary countryside. This paper reviews the competing policy agendas and constituency interests that make the countryside before considering the role that local planning plays in mediating between these agendas and shaping rural places. The paper is structured to consider: the roots of rural planning; the system’s early priorities; why the rural agenda, post 1947, was highly fragmented; and attempts made, post 1997, to move towards more integrated rural policy delivery; and the degree to which the ‘reinvention’ of a more holistic brand of local governance and planning since 2004 – with planning becoming a potential ‘place shaper’ in rural areas – chimes with the complex realities of modern rural areas. Lastly, the paper considers the strategic dilemmas of sectoral integration and territorial policy contiguity that have reemerged in the wake of recent central government reorganization, a streamlining of the planning system and attempts to empower local communities in local decision making under a Localism agenda.

General public concern for the state of the countryside evolved into a distinctive planning response – into what is now often described as ‘rural’ or ‘countryside’ planning – during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Gilg, 1996). In the previous century, industrialisation and the rapid growth of towns and cities had focused attention on urban problems such as bad housing, inadequate infrastructure and poor public health (Hall, 2002). But the planned responses to this growth, through the outward expansion of urban settlements including suburban development along major trans-

port arteries, also threatened to spill onto the surrounding countryside, potentially endangering food and timber production, and also undermining the rural tranquillity enjoyed by the upper classes and the aristocracy (Robinson, 1990). By the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a movement emerged to campaign to protect the country's 'rural resource', and this aspiration was eventually taken forward in legislation in the 1930s. This was achieved through the creation of a system of urban containment to prevent sprawl and in the protection of the best agricultural land, thereby halting aspects of the original planning movement's desire for better housing with improved densities and wider roads in its tracks (Hall et al., 1973).

This desire to prevent urban sprawl and preserve farming land formed a new paradigm for town and country planning that developed further during the 1940s and 1950s, through green belt designation (Herington, 1990), policies to protect areas of high landscape value, and the designation of selected new settlements – the new towns – in areas beyond the green belt (Aldridge, 1979). Such prevailing attitudes towards the countryside continued as principles of the planning system well into the 1980s (Hodge, 1999).

During the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a new consensus emerged: that the planning system's treatment of the countryside was fragmented and focused disjointedly on distinct 'policy regimes'. Planning for food production went its own way, as did planning for landscape and wildlife protection; economic planning amounted to little more than the protection of agricultural land; and planning for the rural built environment (for housing, services and transport) seemed to be of secondary concern, relegated behind the needs of farming and the rural landscape (Winter, 1996). These agendas (social, economic and environmental) were championed by separate government departments, their own national agencies, their own distinct lobby groups, and planning authorities had little capacity to think holistically about the future of rural space. Indeed, they had no means of influencing farming activity, little say over economic development and only limited means of advancing the needs of rural communities.

But the ambition for rural areas and for planning has now shifted. Over the past decade there has been growing acceptance that space is 'multifunctional', always serving economic, social and environmental needs (Mander et al., 2007). For example, tourism is a major economic driver in rural areas, but always reliant on the sustained quality of the rural environment, and ultimately a support mechanism for rural communities. Likewise, rural communities will only flourish where there is a viable economy, and it is people in the countryside who have championed the wellbeing of the environment for at least the last 100 years. In this context, it is now realised that someone or something needs to take responsibility for the coordination of actions that make rural space. Separate policy regimes, separate agendas and different priorities and values are a social and political inevitability in a fragmented governance arrangement, but it is now believed that local government can use the planning process as a means of 'place shaping' and stitching these agendas together at a regional, sub-regional and local scale (Lyons, 2007). It is also believed that the great weakness of planning in recent decades has been its tendency to 'go it alone' and its failure to recognise that its repertoire of powers (mainly over land use change) may be insufficient to shape places when places are 'made' or 'shaped' by the policies, plans and actions of many groups (Tewdwr-Jones, 2008). These groups – landowners, farmers, developers, housing associations, education departments, housing departments, health care trusts, communities, land trusts etc – require planners and

other officials to shape outcomes in an integrated manner between these groups.

The means of doing so was created by the modernisation agenda within local government - associated with a reformed planning system - allowing the development of new community governance mechanisms (Tewdwr-Jones et al., 2006). Principally, partners or stakeholders come together in 'strategic partnerships', decide on priorities, agree responsibilities and actions and then play a part (alongside the formal democratic local planning process) in delivering against a vision that is formulated through community strategies and other delivery vehicles. Planning has played a role in co-ordinating this process, and local planning intervention should, in theory at least, serve this joined-up, integrated agenda (DCLG/RTPI, 2007). This has been the optimistic view for spatial planning, rather than town and country planning, a process able to negotiate different agendas, help build consensus, and no longer stuck in the 'go it alone' mindset.

In this paper, the narrative outlined above is reconstructed more fully into the story of rural planning's transformation during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, from a mechanism designed to preserve the 'rural resource' into a process of facilitation actions that is intended to deliver greater economic vibrancy, social wellbeing and capacity, and environmental quality in the modern countryside.

### **The Question of Rural Planning in England**

For the last 50 years, the popular image of the countryside – contented workers occupying thatched cottages or the vernacular equivalent – has diverged from the reality: a countryside where housing is often unaffordable to those on local wages, services are declining, jobs are increasingly scarce and a pastoral landscape comprising a patchwork quilt of smallholdings is giving way to a landscape of intensive farming serving the needs of powerful grocery chains rather than rural communities. Where did it all go wrong? This question, fairly or unfairly, is often levelled at planners. Why haven't services been maintained; why have rural economies declined; why have small schools closed; why has the countryside been swamped by 'townies' and whose bright idea was it to sell all those houses to rich second-home owners? A great number of the claims made about the state of the countryside are based on anecdotal evidence. However, evidence published in the annual reports of the recently abolished Commission for Rural Communities showed compelling evidence confirming that concerns over the price of rural housing, the decline of rural services, and rural wage levels were – and still are - generally well-founded (CRC, 2006). Likewise, Natural England has consistently reported that many landscapes and rural habitats are at risk not only from development but also from tourism pressure and from what it views as unsound farming practices (NE, 2006). For its part, the National Farmers Union – often in unison with the Countryside Alliance – gives priority in its own analysis of the state of the countryside to food security, the continuing need to invest in agricultural production and traditional links to rural communities, sometimes supporting the pro-hunting campaigns of the Countryside Alliance (NFU, 2003; CA, 2004).

Rural areas can be fairly described as a hotbed of dissatisfaction, disaffection and conflict (Cloke and Little, 1990). There are many competing views of what the countryside should be and many claims as to who has the right to live and work in rural areas. For some, it is clear that policy and planning should support a 'working countryside', permitting development of all kinds to serve both local populations and to bring more people into rural areas so that services can grow and expand. But

this is an anathema to those who believe that rural areas are simply not the right context for development, that further housing is unnecessary and that, fundamentally, the countryside remains a resource for food production and quiet landscape enjoyment.

There is a fragmentation of attitudes towards the countryside that mirrors the fragmentation of governance and policy process: different responsibilities that evolved in the 20<sup>th</sup> century for communities, for farming, for economic development, and for the landscape. In the next section, the first three elements set out at the end of the introduction are considered, the aim being to provide essential context and background for this topic.

## **The Roots of Rural Planning**

The risk of urban growth and associated urban problems spilling onto the countryside in the 19<sup>th</sup> century galvanised support around the need for ‘urban containment’: a brake on the outward spread of towns and cities (Hall et al, 1973). There were two rationales for such containment: first, agriculture needed protection so that the country could achieve greater food security (a German naval blockage during World War I had demonstrated the case for protecting domestic farming); second, the English countryside (in particular) was increasingly viewed as a ‘retreat’ from grimy industrialisation, and as an ‘idyll’ that stood in contrast to the ‘dark satanic mills’ (to quote William Blake) of the industrial revolution. Together these two rationales added up to one thing: that the countryside was a resource requiring protection. In this context, the word rural became strongly associated with idyllic pastoralism, and strongly disassociated with the word development which was the realm of the urban and, more particularly, was associated with the town planning movement. The influential planner Patrick Abercrombie wrote the book ‘The Preservation of Rural England’ (1926) and inspired the creation of the Council for the Preservation of Rural England, also becoming its first chairman. The philosophy of the CPRE has undoubtedly been shaped by Abercrombie’s belief in an obligation to ‘preserve and save’ the countryside as a whole:

The need to protect rural space from urban encroachment became the critical mission of rural planning, and found expression in both the Town and Country Planning Act 1932 (the change in title from previous ‘Town Planning’ legislation notable here) and the 1935 Restriction of Ribbon Development Act. This view also triggered the process of establishing statutory green belts.

But more generally, the view that rural areas represented a ‘productive’ (agricultural) and ‘landscape resource’ was taken forward in debates on the future of planning, farming and landscape protection held during the period of World War Two. The war itself had compounded the effects of two decades of economic recession during the 1920s and 1930s. The reconstruction agenda was central to the creation of a stronger, more pervasive system of land-use planning, the case for which was established in a series of significant reports produced in the run-up to the 1944 Planning White Paper, and which paved the way for the Town and Country Planning Act 1947, the cornerstone of the planning system, emerged from the need for post-war reconstruction.

The Barlow Report, published in 1940, was principally concerned with urban areas and problems associated with unbalanced regional development (HM Government, 1940). After the war, the idea of greater national control over strategic and local



development – rooted in Barlow – became a core principle of intervention through the planning system. The Uthwatt Report, prepared in 1941, was concerned with the implications of nationalising development rights (and how landowners would be compensated) (HM Government, 1941).

The Scott Report, or the ‘Report of the Committee on Land Utilisation in Rural Areas’ (1942), focused primarily on agriculture. It argued strongly that farming land should be exempted from planning regulations and indeed that agricultural land, wherever possible, should be protected from urban encroachment (HM Government, 1942). Consequently, agriculture acquired special status and exemption in the post-war planning system. The Scott Report also recommended the creation of National Parks (as part of a ‘national limitation of land areas’) culminating in two separate reports - The Dower Report (on National Parks in England and Wales, 1945) and The Hobhouse Report (of the National Parks Committee, 1947) - paving the way for the creation of National Parks (HM Government, 1945, 1947).

It was the Scott Report (and the subsequent Dower and Hobhouse Reports) that carried forward inter-war attitudes towards rural areas. They resulted in a carving up of rural agendas, with Scott prompting the creation of an ‘agricultural policy regime’; Dower and Hobhouse creating a ‘landscape regime’, Barlow strongly associated with ‘regional economies regime’, and Uthwatt/Barlow concerned with planning for the established ‘built environment regime’. The principles of rural planning were established, alongside a division of responsibilities (a fragmentation of ‘rural policy’ delivery). Agriculture was legislated for in the Agriculture Act 1947, with its own ministry and support agencies; the rural landscape became the focus of the 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act; and rural settlements were subject to the provisions of the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act, but hemmed in by powerful agriculture and landscape lobbies. The landscape protection element of the planning process was further strengthened through Abercrombie’s London Plan of 1944, which created a green belt around London, and nationally through the policy on green belt designation of 1955. No single act brought together the shared interests of the countryside and no single body co-ordinated the delivery of what-we-may-term ‘rural policy’. In fact, the concept of rural policy was entirely absent: the rural became a disjointed mix of agricultural, landscape and settlement planning policies, with emphasis firmly given to the preservation of the rural resource, as Abercrombie and the CPRE in the interwar years hoped it would be.

These rural regimes continued largely intact for the following 40 years. In the last 25 years, challenges to the post-war regime consensus have emerged more prominently. There have been calls to lift the burden of planning on private sector development interests, particularly in relation to housebuilding in the urban fringe and the countryside. The argument that a slow and bureaucratic process has been stifling entrepreneurial enterprise has gained political support especially when house prices have remained high and there has been a perceived shortage of housing to meet demand in the south of England (see Barker, 2004). But this perspective is not new: an anti-planning, pro-market philosophy began to build momentum during the period of Conservative government in the 1980s (Thornley, 1991). In 1983, two separate draft circulars – ‘land for housing’ and ‘Green Belts’ - both questioned the wisdom of rigid adherence to green belt policy when long-term development needs might be threatened (Elson, 1986: 235). They implied the need to review development plan policies towards green belt protection but were met with strong opposition that eventually resulted in their withdrawal and replacement with alternative Circulars the

largely stressed the status quo in 1984. Attempts by the government to allow further new housing developments in the countryside in the latter 1980s were also fiercely opposed, ironically enough by factions of the then Government-supporting public, leading to a policy u-turn for the Conservative Party and to a commitment towards what was termed at the time local choice to determine planning issues (Allmendinger and Tewdwr-Jones, 1997). Friction between market and planning perspectives are of course commonplace in rural discourse, but this episode suggested that the post-war policy towards rural areas had become so embedded within the public conscience that alternative approaches would be difficult to implement politically.

It is perhaps inevitable that political priorities, policy frameworks and agency responsibilities come to reflect the interests and agendas that shape a particular area of broad public concern. This certainly happened in relation to rural policy. Farming interests gravitated towards their own ministry (the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries by the 1990s) and their representative body, the National Farmers Union (NFU); landscape and conservation interests eventually became the concern of the Department of the Environment (DoE) and an Environment Agency (again, by the 1990s) and rural settlement planning, although also the responsibility of the DoE (with inputs from the Department for Transport), became a largely separate concern. This hiving off of the rural built environment is perhaps the critical element of this fragmentation. A general policy presumption against development in the open countryside from 1947 onwards, and the free rein given to farming combined with the creation of protected landscapes (National Parks, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, Sites of Special Scientific Interest and so on) meant that rural communities often became islands, cut off from the surrounding landscape. These communities were contained within settlement boundaries beyond which they could not spread and beyond which their incumbent planning authorities had little or no control. Irrespective of the state of the farming economy, authorities had little say on agricultural matters. And national landscape designations were simply not within their jurisdiction. But during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the farming economy transformed: it weakened, becoming more subsidy dependent; farming practices changed in response, becoming more intensive and radically altering the landscape; and the sector modernised and mechanised, meaning that it required less local labour. So as well as transforming the rural environment, the changing nature of the farming economy had huge impacts on rural society: jobs became scarcer or seasonal and wage levels declined. In fact, changes in the landscape and the economy beyond rural communities had a profound impact, reconfiguring these communities. But planning could do little to steer change or respond to the challenges confronting people in the countryside. Growing recognition of this fact through the 1990s prompted a fresh look at rural policy and how it might be better co-ordinated.

### **Towards Integrated Rural Policy Delivery**

The previous sections have brought us to the 1990s. The institutions of rural governance, it seemed, were presiding over a rural disaster. Rural areas were not, on the whole, becoming poorer because counter-urbanisation from the 1960s onward had brought a steady stream of more affluent people into the countryside together with retiring households and second home buyers. But the residual rural population, those who relied on a working countryside, were enduring an increasing level of economic deprivation, compounded by the loss of rural services and a shortfall in housing supply caused, in part, by rigid planning constraint. How might this situation be rectified and how might rural policy be delivered in a more co-ordinated

manner? This question was answered at two levels: first, at the level of broad policy design and delivery (i.e. nationally) and secondly, at the level of local governance and implementation, in part, through the planning system

In 2000, the Labour Government's first Rural White Paper - 'Our Countryside – The Future: A Fair Deal for Rural England' (DETR and MAFF, 2000) - was published. This was the first time in over 50 years that the broader aspects of countryside policy had been reviewed in a coordinated manner, and significantly, the paper emerged from a partnership between departments with oversight of settlement planning, farming and landscape protection. Two key outcomes of the White Paper were the creation of DEFRA (Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) in 2002 and the setting up of a Review Commission (under the chairmanship of Lord Haskins) to consider how DEFRA might better deliver future rural policy. Lord Haskins was asked to formulate a strategy for:

- Simplifying or rationalising existing delivery mechanisms and establishing clear roles and responsibilities and effective co-ordination;
- Achieving efficiency savings and maximising value for money;
- Providing better, more streamlined services with a more unified, transparent and convenient interface with end-customers; and,
- Identifying arrangements that [could] help to deliver DEFRA's rural policy and Public Service Agreement targets cost-effectively (Haskins, 2003:7).

The Review prompted DEFRA to initiate a Modernising Rural Delivery (MRD) programme and to look at the agency arrangements (rooted in the wartime deliberations described earlier) for delivering rural policy. Critically, government departments are supported by non-departmental public bodies (NDPB) that play a significant role in the delivery of national policy but are not formally part of the structure of government. In the 1990s, the policy development and delivery work of DoE and MAFF had been supported by the Environment Agency, English Nature, the Countryside Commission (and then the Countryside Agency) and the Rural Development Service. The culmination of the MRD was the creation of two new agencies in 2006: Natural England and the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC).

Natural England subsumed the functions of English Nature, the 'landscape' remit of the Countryside Agency, and the functions of the Rural Development Service. The CRC took on the 'community' and 'services' functions of the Countryside Agency, minus its rural development function which went to the regional development agencies. Some of the advocates of a more co-ordinated approach to rural policy delivery questioned the integrity of this reorganisation: on the face of it, Natural England can claim a more holistic overview of landscape issues (though it needs to work with the Environment Agency on issues such as climate change and flood risk), but settlement policy was arguably more isolated from wider rural concerns having lost its rural development focus within the confines of the CRC (though the commission is a strong advocate of diversity and change within the rural economy). Moreover, the rural planning function and rural governance remained outside the remit of government's 'rural ministry' (i.e. DEFRA), which remain the sole concern of the DCLG (Department of Communities and Local Government), which is the heir to the DoE's planning functions.

The argument employed by Lord Haskins and the architects of the MRD was that these new agency arrangements had reduced the net total of support bodies and

contain a wider array of expertise within more powerful and effective agencies: overlaps have been reduced and these NDPBs had what they needed to support their parent department. It is also the case that these are not delivery bodies (though they may channel funding to some community and environmental initiatives) and it is at the level of delivery that integration was essential.

### **Rural Place Shaping and Spatial Planning**

Sir Michael Lyons used the phrase ‘place shaping’ in 2007 to describe the broadening role of local authorities in delivering against local aspirations and policy agendas (Lyons, 2007). A key criticism of the planning system in recent years has been its claimed inability to ‘shape’ places, mainly because the forces and processes of change are frequently beyond the control of conventional planning intervention (Healey, 2007). What does this mean in practice? The planning system, as instituted in 1947, has been concerned with plan-making and development control: the business of drawing up land-use plans and controlling development (i.e. material changes in land-use) in accordance with a plan. But some things that ‘shape a place’ – influence the vibrancy of its economy; generate social mix; or sustain environmental quality – cannot be steered directly by this form of planning. Land-use planning can create or deny opportunities, but in order to directly shape outcomes, other individuals and groups have to be engaged (often on a voluntary basis) and their programmes and investments brought in line with a vision shared by a range of partners. This is as much a symptom of the decline of direct state service provision and control and the fragmentation of governance as it is about the form of planning. Although the phrase integrated rural planning implies a desire for some form of control and coordination in the spirit of pre-1979 state mechanisms, the intention was not presented as the goal of an integrated framework for land use control (delivering a better land use mix within a locality), but as the practice of planners ‘getting out more’ to shape rural communities and their environs.

The Local Government Act 2000 was particularly significant to notions of place shaping, even before the Lyons Inquiry, since it handed local authorities a responsibility for ensuring ‘well-being’ (a broad concept that can mean many things) and led to the creation of ‘local strategic partnerships’ (LSP) intended to promote and coordinate local stakeholder, community and business involvement in local decision-making (Morphet, 2007). The LSP became the forum through which ‘community strategies’ or latterly the ‘sustainable community strategies’ (SCS - after the Sustainable Communities Act 2007) were prepared, and the SCSs in turn formed an essential element of the Local Development Framework (LDF) – the statutory planning documents produced by local planning authorities across England and Wales. These strategies aimed to show how well-being will be promoted (and what the promotion of well-being means in the local context: stronger economies, healthier communities etc); they were conceived as an expression of the aspirations and goals of LSP members (rather than local government per se) and set out the social, economic, environmental issues that local government should be addressing through a range of policy tools including, but not restricted to, land-use policies.

The LSP produced an integrated guiding vision and priorities for the future development of an area. Delivery of the plan was secured by way of a local area agreement (LAA) – in effect a memorandum of understanding between key actors and agencies - or a multi-area agreement (MAA) where the LSP had to function across jurisdictional boundaries. LSPs provided a forum for rural ‘power players’ such as Natural England, the Environment Agency, Local Authorities and Regional Development

Agencies to work collaboratively on issues of mutual concern. This horizontal integration between actors, agencies and organisations operating within rural areas is recognised as a being critical to the success of delivering sustainable development in rural areas (and throughout the territory as a whole), in addition to dealing with the complex problems relating to social change and economic restructuring in rural areas (Owen et al., 2007).

Further legislative reforms under the 1997-2010 labour administration also sought to strengthen the vertical alignment of planning and strategic decision-making in rural areas. The 2000 Rural White Paper for England introduced the parish plans initiative as a means of catalysing community involvement in local planning and service delivery. The Rural White Paper acknowledged that 'sustainable' rural development was not achievable through centralised state intervention and that 'communities could play a much bigger part in their own affairs and shaping their future development' (DETR and MAFF, 2000: 145). Parish plans were viewed as a means of encouraging communities to actively engage in matters of direct local concern (Owen, 2002: 455) and official guidance encouraged a broad scope, in order to give people the opportunity to voice their concerns and influence policy agendas (DETR and MAFF, 2000: 162). Parish plans were championed as a direct community link with the formal planning process insofar as they would enable rural communities to have greater influence over planning decisions and policies in their areas by influencing higher tier strategies such as Sustainable Community Strategies and Local Development Frameworks (Owen, 2002: 449).

### **Restructuring and Localisation**

Although extensive, the reforms made under the 1997 – 2010 Labour administration have not proven to be durable, partly because particular elements were subsequently deemed to be 'undemocratic' and because it was regarded as overly bureaucratic and complex by opposition parties. Since 2010 therefore, a restructuring of the planning system, which began as part of the incoming Coalition Government's 'Big Society' agenda, has attempted to create a downward shift in decision-making and to re-orientate the system away from reliance on agenda set by the centre and on the basis of targets formulated by NDPBs, cascaded in a top-down manner through the regions to local planning authorities. Rather, the emphasis has been on strengthening a local planning tier deemed to be better able to engage with local communities, through provisions for Neighbourhood Planning (Gallent & Robinson, 2013). The reforms that have been instigated since 2010 and embodied in a 2011 Localism Act, have incorporated four main elements (Haughton *et al* (2013). The first has been the removal of centrally produced 'dogma' in the form of detailed planning guidance and the production of targets, and its replacement by a looser National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) allowing planners working with communities greater freedom to set their own agenda. The second element has been the removal of an 'undemocratic' regional tier of planning that played a critical bridging role between central policies and targets (such as for housing) through Regional Strategies that provided firm direction for implementation at the local level. Closely associated with both elements has been a broader attempt to streamline government through the closure of democratically 'unaccountable' bodies in a 'bonfire of the QUANGOs' (the alternative acronym for NDPBs – Quasi non-governmental organisations). The autonomous Commission for Rural Communities was formally closed in March, 2013 with core responsibilities brought back into DEFRA once again by way of a newly established Rural Communities Policy Unit (RCPU) within the ministry. The third element consists of the 'soft' structures of strategic governance in the form



of Local Enterprise Partnerships and recently formed Local Transport Bodies that perform several of the strategic coordination functions previously undertaken by the regional tier. Lastly, a neighbourhood planning tier has provided the opportunity for local communities to directly shape the places in which they live, through long term neighbourhood development plans, focussed development orders and a set of community rights for specific proposals, with a majority vote in a local referenda the key democratic device. In summary therefore, the reforms have introduced:

a new form of governmentality in the making, one which excoriates the target culture and democratic deficits of the New Labour approach, and instead envisages a stronger role for local actors to create locally distinctive planning arrangements that in theory are less tied by national policy directives (Haughton *et al*, 2013:229).

At the outset, it was widely felt that neighbourhood planning could be more readily workable in rural communities, partly because of an ancient parish council structure that remains largely intact, and also because of the ‘communitarianism’ characteristic of village life that can create the conditions for engagement (Gallent, 2013). In other words, the principle of localism had deep roots to tap into. Perhaps unsurprisingly therefore, rural parishes have been in the vanguard - their urban counterparts having faced the elementary hurdle of defining the boundaries of their neighbourhoods. Although the provisions of the Localism Act have created opportunities for local communities to engage directly in place shaping, the powers available to neighbourhood fora should not be overstated. For example, a neighbourhood development plan is precisely for the purpose of development – it cannot supersede or block the requirements of an adopted higher order plan and, to the initial disappointment of some, cannot therefore be used as a means for facing-off development proposals.

The abolition of the CRC has had only a limited effect so far. The agency was created as a means to enhance the ‘rural voice’ in central government and invoke a better understanding between rural communities and politicians in the aftermath of the Countryside Alliance marches in London of 2002. A ban on fox hunting in the early years of Tony Blair’s Labour government proved to be a ‘lightning rod’ for rural protestors against what they saw – with some justification - as a government formed largely from urban constituencies that was unsympathetic and uninterested in their values, traditions and needs. The CRC was one measure to shrink that particular gap. In the present day, the Conservative and Liberal Democrat of the Coalition Government draw heavily from rural constituencies, and are better able to maintain the dialogue between the countryside and the centre, but this current balance would alter significantly again in the event of administration change.

Multi-sectoral coordination remains a significant challenge for rural regions. The abolition of the multi-sectoral CRC - and the formation of the RCPU within DEFRA can be considered to be symbolic of attempts to shift planning away from central government control and shift powers downward. In the absence of a coordinating agency for rural regions within central government, together with the diverse competencies of the former regional bodies, it has fallen to planning authorities to coordinate planning policy across the range of sectors. In a bid to reduce red tape and streamline the local mechanics of the planning system, the LSPs have had their remit severely diminished – being no longer required to produce their SCS, whilst a vague ‘Duty to Cooperate’ has replaced the LAAs and MAAs - requiring councils to ‘engage constructively’ on strategic planning issues but not actually requiring author-

ities to agree to action (HMG, 2011). Indeed, the entire issue of strategic territorial governance in England remains unresolved, but the question has once again been re-ignited by September 2014's referendum on Scottish independence and the promise of further devolved powers to Scotland by the three main unionist political parties on the eve of the vote (Economist, 19<sup>th</sup> September 2014). The northern English regions in particular were quick to seize on the promises made by Westminster to the Scottish electorate to underline the imbalances that would be furthered by further devolution. The idea of regional assemblies has once again been resurrected, but would the idea gain traction today, given the failure of similar proposals for English Regional assemblies under the Blair administration a decade earlier? To an extent, the coalition government has already prepared the ground devolution to the English regions through funds set up for urban and sub-regional economic development initiatives and provisions for a system of directly elected executive city mayors. Several cities have succeeded in carving greater political and financial autonomy – notably Manchester with its dynamic economy and political leadership, and Liverpool and Bristol with their newly elected executive mayoral administrations. However, despite the functional economic territories mapped out by the LEPs, and the public-private boards appointed to oversee them, urban administrations across the UK remain administratively divorced from their rural hinterlands, and in some instances at loggerheads in pursuing incompatible agenda. The discontinuities between urban and rural are readily observable in development planning, infrastructure and public transport provision, which have a tendency to diminish steeply at the urban boundary (Sloman *et al*, 2003). The relationship between urban and rural remains a vexing and defining issue, maintaining the distinctive environmental and social qualities and physical separateness that became a core concern of planning in the early half of the twentieth century and retains its currency in national identity to the present day, whilst recognizing and supporting the functional economic and social connections of today and tomorrow.

## Conclusions

This paper has connected debates on the changing nature of planning in England to concerns over the state and future of rural areas: their communities, economies and landscapes. The planning system available to local authorities comprises a set of tools with which to exert influence over private interests with a view to achieving wider public objectives. Permission to build new housing, for example, is given under the proviso that landowners and speculators will contribute towards community infrastructure, sometimes providing low-cost housing for local needs. Since 1947, planning has been seen predominantly as an instrument for controlling the use of land in such a way that will steer economic growth, protect sensitive environments and, latterly, assist communities. But a land-use remit does not always provide local government with the means to influence changes that have been exempted from planning control (as in the case of farming, increasingly dominated by Common Agricultural Policy agendas), or those that are incremental and beyond planning intervention (such as housing consumption pressures). These changes drive social change, reshape attitudes towards the countryside and ultimately determine who controls local planning and how it is used, in the pursuit of a developmental or environmental agenda (Murdoch & Abrams, 2000). The architects of the post-war planning system never envisaged planning becoming an *indirect* means of influencing change: rather, they aspired to the creation of a 'comprehensive' system that would directly lead rather than follow, and shape the natural and built environment through its initial visioning and subsequent delivery. But the truth, at least by the early 2000s, was that planning had fallen short of this aspiration, partly because the

high aspirations were never achieved, but also because the comprehensive framework was as much dependent on a coordinated governmental state response. As soon as the key mechanisms were in place, the vested interests and various constituencies that comprise the rural agenda sought to pull the process towards their goals; this affected not only the overall vision but also compromised any attempt to develop an integrated rural policy approach. Different government departments and agencies have grappled with different aspects of the rural agenda, leading to a situation in the 1990s and 2000s that the only inevitable option for government was to stress the need for integration. In 2004, government brought forward legislation – the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act - that it hoped would correct planning’s retrenchment into a land-use focus, and result in its restoration as a change-leader rather than follower. But the key problems with the rural agenda remain – a fragmented governance landscape, overlapping and contradictory policy processes, separation from functional issues relating to both the urban and rural, an inability to control aspects of the rural agenda since they are set outside government control (such as within the EU), disagreement on what the countryside is there to serve, and a lack of knowledge concerned with wider notions of rural biodiversity and climate change threat.

Nowhere has the limited remit and results of the 1947 style statutory planning process been more apparent than in the countryside, where local authorities were handed curtailed powers to govern land-use change through the planning system and where the focus of rural planning, on the protection of rural resources has made it difficult for the system to achieve broader economic and social objectives. For this reason, effective rural planning has always been viewed as more than merely the correct operation of the statutory system. Bishop and Phillips (2004: 4) argued, for example - before the arrival of the 2004 Act - that planning in the countryside extends beyond the boundaries of ‘town and country planning’ (a combination of local authority plan-making and development control) to embrace the initiatives that are taken forward by other actors – including central government departments or agencies, and by different local partners – and which aim to shape the countryside through policy, project and programme intervention. But this extension leads to the inevitable question of who co-ordinates this potentially complex array of interventions. In the first decade of this century, ‘spatial planning’ came to encapsulate the idea that planning *is* the statutory system *plus* other actions and interventions - public, private or community-led - which make or shape places. In other words planning was to go ‘beyond traditional land use planning to bring together and integrate policies for the development and use of land with other policies and programmes which influence the nature of places and how they function’ (ODPM, 2004).

The ethos of an integrative approach to planning persists, in spite of a recent overhaul of the planning system and the downward reorientation of power to local authorities, neighbourhoods and rural parishes. The recent restructuring of a planning system that rarely achieves a steady state has emphasized the important and enduring strategic issues over policy integration of spatial and sectoral boundaries. In particular, two key questions emerge:

1. whether policy and agency integration - resting on the abilities and desires of actors to work together holistically in a disjointed governance framework - will be able to deliver long term on strategic rural concerns or whether more radical responses are required to deal with a sustainable form of rural land use; and
2. whether it is time rural issues were not treated as a separate polity, but rather



were considered in an integrated way with urban issues through a functional territorial process based on land resources and critical capacities.

As we face the next 100 years with the challenge of climate change, and the likelihood of food shortages, water depletion and energy concerns, our attitudes towards the countryside will have to change further. Some of the enduring policy regimes, the fragmented and integrated processes, and the way the rural is treated as a distinct governmental silo separate to urban issues, will not be appropriate or remain fit for purpose against the backdrop of emerging environmental and social crises. Since 1909 we may well have moved from a period of highly distinctive policy regimes to a process of spatial integration, but perhaps this is more of an interim arrangement.

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