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**Strategic spatial planning in a devolving  
governance context:  
A study of Sheffield City Region**

Thesis submitted for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
by  
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March 2020



# Abstract

The UK government's decision to formally abolish Regional Assemblies and Regional Spatial Strategies in 2011 produced a strategic planning 'gap' in the English planning system. The government concurrently embarked on a 'devolution' agenda that led to the formation of Local Enterprise Partnerships and Combined Authorities in city regions across England. These legislative and governance changes created a complex, evolving network of new governance spaces through which a plurality of voluntary strategic planning practices emerged, underpinned by a weakly-defined and under-resourced 'Duty to Cooperate'.

This research contributes enhanced understanding of how strategic spatial planning is approached in this devolving governance context, including the barriers to it, by presenting a detailed ethnographic study of Sheffield City Region; an area that currently lacks a strong, sub-regional planning narrative. Using qualitative research methods and a conceptual framework derived from historical and constructivist institutionalism, the research investigates how practices of strategic planning are shaped within this changing legislative, governance and territorial context.

In Sheffield City Region, institutionalised structures created an environment that promoted informal cross-boundary collaborative practices, whilst resisting a formalised approach to strategic spatial plan-making. Although lacking the power and resources to implement it, planning officers promoted an 'idealised' version of strategic plan-making, derived from their historically embedded strategic spatial planning experiences. Elected members' resistance of this approach was reinforced by 'post-political' forms of governance that developed within the Combined Authority, and increased austerity that promoted competition between local authorities. A combination of informal, formal and 'in between' governance spaces (and the interface between them) played an important role in enabling and constraining practices of strategic spatial planning and decision-making. The research highlights how Sheffield City Region's multiple, overlapping spatial geographies, when 'hardened' as political territories, acquired a structuring power that further constrained strategic spatial planning at the city region scale.

# Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisors, Malcolm Tait and Peter Bibby, for their invaluable guidance, support and feedback throughout the entire PhD process.

Thank you to everyone who participated in the research, especially the Forward and Area Planning Team at Sheffield City Council who kindly welcomed me into their workplace and made me feel like part of the team, and the other planning officers and elected members in Sheffield City Region who allowed me to observe meetings and took the time to participate in interviews. Without their kind efforts I would have no data to report.

Thank you to the UK Economic and Social Research Council who funded this research through an ESRC Studentship.

Thank you to all my friends and colleagues in the USP department for helping to make the whole PhD process far more enjoyable.

Thank you to all my family and friends for giving me much-needed emotional support and light relief during the past four years. A special thanks to: my parents, Kim and Dave Marsh, who, when I suggested I was thinking of doing a PhD, told me to go for it; Sian, Sush, Kiera, Sophia and the rest of my family, for putting a smile on my face when needed and helping me to, in the immortal words of Maisie Marsh, 'be happy'; the Endcliffe Collective, for ensuring my life as a PhD student didn't become all work and no play; and Tiffin and Jericho, the best working-from-home buddies and emotional support cats.

Most of all, thank you to my wonderful husband, Tim Ward, for giving me the encouragement to keep going when things got tough, and for making endless dinners and cups of tea.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this thesis to my Grandma, Thelma Martin, who loved words. These are dedicated to you, and I know you'd be proud that I got there eventually, with perseverance (cork and glue).

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## Acronyms and abbreviations

AMID	Advanced Manufacturing Innovation District
BMBC	Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council
CA	Combined Authority
CBC	Chesterfield Borough Council
CC	County Council
D2N2	Derby, Derbyshire, Nottingham, Nottinghamshire (LEP)
DC	District Council
DCC	Derbyshire County Council
DDDC	Derbyshire Dales District Council
DCLG	Department for Communities and Local Government (now MHCLG)
DMBC	Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council
DtC	Duty to Cooperate
ESDP	European Spatial Development Perspective
FAP	Forward and Area Planning (Team)
HEB	Housing Executive Board (Combined Authority)
HS2	High Speed 2 (railway line)
JAGU	Joint Authorities Governance Unit
LDF	Local Development Framework
LEP	Local Enterprise Partnership
LGYH	Local Government Yorkshire and Humber
LPA	Local Planning Authority
LSS	Local Strategy Statement
LTA	Local Transport Authority
MBC	Metropolitan Borough Council
MHCLG	Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (formerly DCLG)



NPPF	National Planning Policy Framework
NCC	Nottinghamshire County Council
NEDDC	North East Derbyshire District Council
PDNPA	Peak District National Park Authority
RDA	Regional Development Agency
REPC	Regional Economic Planning Council
RMBC	Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council
RPB	Regional Planning Body
RPG	Regional Planning Guidance
RSS	Regional Spatial Strategy
RTPI	Royal Town Planning Institute
SCC	Sheffield City Council
SCR	Sheffield City Region
SCRHOP	Sheffield City Region Heads of Planning (Group)
SCRIF	Sheffield City Region Investment Fund
SCRIIP	Sheffield City Region Integrated Infrastructure Plan
SCRPOG	Sheffield City Region Planning Officers Group
SEP	Strategic Economic Plan
SYCC	South Yorkshire County Council
SYHOP	South Yorkshire Heads of Planning (Group)
SYITA	South Yorkshire Integrated Transport Authority
SYPTE	South Yorkshire Passenger Transport Executive
UDC	Urban Development Corporation



# 1 | Introduction

This research is set within the context of the English planning system, where in recent years the landscape of strategic spatial planning has undergone significant transformation as a result of an array of legislative and governance changes that have been implemented by the UK government in pursuit of its ‘localism’ agenda. Notable amongst these changes is the abolition of the regional tier of government and Regional Spatial Strategies (RSSs), and the almost simultaneous embarkation on a period of ‘devolution’ to a sub-regional tier of governance comprising a network of new organisational structures, including Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) and Combined Authorities.

Cumulatively, these state-imposed changes in legislation and governance have resulted in a period during which strategic spatial planning has been increasingly characterised by its fluid, non-specific and fragmented nature of practice. The complex array of practices that are now being observed have emerged through a range of formal and informal ‘planning spaces’ and are performed by a variety of actors interacting within and across multiple organisations and governance structures. Whilst a number of studies have sought to examine the nature of strategic spatial planning in a devolving governance context, few have considered in detail *how* these practices of strategic spatial planning are enacted at the local actor level. Few have also considered the role played by devolved governance structures and organisations (such as Combined Authorities), together with their inherent complexities, instabilities and uncertainties, in constraining or enabling strategic spatial planning practices. As such, the aim of this research is:

To understand, through the analysis of detailed empirical evidence, how the devolving governance structures and other strategic contextual changes that have emerged in England in recent years are being understood and interpreted at the local planning actor level; and how sub-regional strategic spatial planning practices are being enacted within this changing context.

In this research, strategic spatial planning is broadly defined as those practices which are enacted across local authority boundaries for the purpose of envisioning and managing future spatial change (RTPI, 2015; Healey, 1997). Depending on the context, these may include actions directly linked to strategy- or plan-making but may also include other more informal practices aimed at the resolution of cross-boundary planning issues<sup>1</sup>.

As an introduction to this thesis, this chapter begins by briefly positioning the research within the context of current policy, practice and recent academic debates, and in doing so, highlights the gaps in our current understanding of strategic spatial planning that this research intends to fill. The research is then introduced by defining the questions it set out to answer and presenting an overview of the theoretical and

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter 4 further explains how ‘strategic spatial planning practices’ have been defined in the context of this research.

methodological approaches taken in this research. This chapter concludes by outlining the content and structure of the remainder of this thesis.

## **1.1 The changing context of strategic spatial planning in England**

Through the Localism Act 2011, the Conservative-led coalition government formally abolished the regional tier of government in England, which included the Regional Planning Bodies (RPBs) and the Regional Spatial Strategies (RSSs) for which they were responsible. These legislative changes meant that there was no longer a statutory requirement to plan across local authority borders; this having been superseded by what is arguably a comparatively weaker Duty to Cooperate that requires local planning authorities to ‘engage constructively, actively and on an ongoing basis’ on strategic matters through the preparation of their local development plans (DCLG, 2011: para.110). The formal governance structures that imposed a ‘top down’ approach to strategic spatial plan-making were replaced with a requirement for local authorities to work together to resolve strategic planning issues through informal, ‘bottom-up’ collaborative arrangements. This has resulted in what some commentators have referred to as a strategic spatial planning ‘vacuum’ at the supra-local level (House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee, 2011: 4).

Alongside these legislative changes, the UK government has been implementing an economic growth-driven agenda based upon the devolution of powers to a new sub-regional tier of governance in England that has produced an evolving, increasingly networked approach to urban-regional governance through its reinforcement of the scalar concept of the ‘city region’ (Harrison, 2011). This focus on city regions is reflective of a growing global trend that promotes city regions as functional areas of economic development and innovation, around which urban policy and governance is increasingly being shaped (Scott, 2019). This (ongoing) process of devolution, which began with the foundation of Local Enterprise Partnerships and has now progressed in some areas to the establishment of Combined Authorities, was purportedly pursued as a means of embracing localism by providing ‘local areas with the levers they need to boost productivity in local economies and improve and integrate public services’ (MHCLG, 2019: 2). Through the agreement of a series of ‘deals’ between these sub-regional groupings of authorities and central government, a range of powers and resources have been devolved to LEPs and Combined Authorities. It is also important to note the wider economic context within which these governance and legislative changes have emerged; in particular central government’s austerity agenda, which some argue has ensured that the changes enacted in pursuit of ‘localism’ have served to benefit the central state significantly more than they have the sub-regional level (Shaw & Tewdwr-Jones, 2016). The impact of austerity is a recurring theme underpinning many of the findings identified in this research, as will be discussed later in this thesis.

The picture that has developed of LEPs and Combined Authorities across England is one of complexity and to a certain extent, ambiguity, as these structures reflect a web of overlapping geographies that are self-defined, multi-scalar and non-contiguous. These areas have also been noted for their apparent lack of democratic accountability, and as such have been described as ‘contested ‘post-political’ spaces’ (Etherington & Jones, 2018: 53). The messiness that has recently been observed within the sub-regional tier

of governance is to some extent reflected in the practices of strategic spatial planning that have emerged since the revocation of the RSSs. Whilst some Combined Authorities have chosen to accept devolved powers over strategic spatial planning, they are under no obligation to do so, and as such, the picture of strategic spatial planning in England is one of sporadicity and fluidity in which no single, fixed approach or consistent geographic spread is being applied. The practices that have emerged are characterised by a lack of uniformity in terms of their spatial extent, mode of governance and approach to policy- and plan-making. Rather than being underpinned by 'hard' governance structures and a formalised, regulated approach, England is now covered by a patchwork of informal, voluntary arrangements and new, 'soft' planning spaces (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2010) through which practices of strategic spatial planning are being enacted. The aim of this research is to fill some of the identified gaps in our current understanding of how strategic spatial planning practices are being formed and enacted within this devolving governance context. These 'gaps' are discussed in the following section, which summarises the justification for this research.

## 1.2 Justification for the research

The study of strategic spatial planning practice is by no means a new area of concern for academic researchers. In the European planning context, in particular, a vast body of literature has emerged since the 'revival' of strategic planning in the late 1990s that is concerned with aiding theoretical and empirical understandings of various elements of strategic spatial planning, from practices of plan-making through to plan-implementation and strategic planning governance (see for example, Albrechts, 2006, 2009, Healey, 1997, 2004, 2009; Albrechts et al., 2003; Faludi & Salet, 2000). More recently, much of Western Europe has been experiencing a phase of 'deep and rapid change' in its urban and political environments (Albrechts, 2017: 2), which, some argue, has resulted in a 'neoliberal' and 'post-political' turn in strategic spatial planning (Deas, 2014; Olesen, 2014; Allmendinger & Haughton, 2012). The relationship between this changing governance and (post-)political context, and the types of strategic planning practices that are now emerging within it, is currently under-researched and requires much greater critical attention in academic planning literature. The English planning system is one such example of where there has been a significant shift away from 'strategic spatial planning as statutory duty' towards a new era of voluntaristic, fluid and informal approaches to strategic spatial planning<sup>1</sup>.

In terms of developing our understanding of strategic spatial planning in this context, this research identified a number of key gaps in current knowledge and literature that it has sought to fill:

Firstly, a need to better understand how recent changes in national planning legislation and policy are understood and interpreted by local planning actors<sup>2</sup>, and how these inform the practices of strategic spatial planning that are being enacted. In particular, Chapter 2 identifies little empirical research that considers how the Duty to Cooperate has been interpreted and enacted in practice.

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter 2 provides a detailed overview of the changing approaches to strategic spatial planning that have occurred in English planning practice.

<sup>2</sup> The term 'local planning actors' is defined in section 4.2.3.

Secondly, a need to better understand how new scales and spaces of sub-regional governance (including 'formal' and 'informal' planning spaces) are developing, interacting, being interpreted and shaping practices in the context of strategic spatial planning. Whilst Chapter 2 identifies research that discusses the formation of the 'soft' spaces of planning governance and collaboration that are emerging (for example, O'Brien, 2019; Haughton & Allmendinger, 2015; Allmendinger & Haughton, 2010, 2012, 2013), there is little literature that considers how, and the extent to which, the structures that are forming within and around Combined Authorities reflect the characteristics of these 'soft' space forms of governance. This research therefore develops previous work in this area by examining these spaces of governance in a devolving planning context, and exploring how local planning actors work within and between these spaces at a practical level.

Thirdly, this research presented an opportunity to apply existing theorisations of territorial and relational space to a detailed empirical study of the 'micro' practices of strategic spatial planning, in order to better understand the changing nature of, and interrelationship between, political territories and 'soft spatial imaginaries' of sub-regional governance, and how these are shaping strategic spatial planning practices in a devolving governance context.

Fourthly, to date, much of the post-2010 planning literature that examines strategic spatial planning in this context is primarily concerned with providing high-level, strategic accounts of the 'state' of post-devolution strategic spatial planning practice and governance across England (for example, McGuinness & Mawson, 2017). This research therefore presented an opportunity to contribute to this body of literature by studying a devolving sub-region in detail, particularly one in which a formalised approach to strategic spatial planning is less well-developed. Chapter 2 reveals relatively few detailed, place-based, empirical studies of strategic spatial planning in a post-devolution context; notable exceptions being Boddy & Hickman's (2013, 2014, 2016) work on the South West and Cambridge areas, the study by Valler et al. (2012) of 'Science Vale' in South Oxfordshire, and more recently, O'Brien's (2019) examination of the 'Mersey Belt'. Within these existing empirical studies there has been little discussion of the role of Combined Authorities in shaping practices of strategic spatial planning and their interrelationship with local planning authorities. As such, the practices of strategic spatial planning that are emerging in the current post-devolution context remain under-researched, not least because this context and the strategic spatial planning practices taking place within it are continuing to evolve.

Lastly, Chapter 2 reveals how the case studies that have been presented to date are mainly confined to 'growth' areas, where development pressures are highest (such as the South East of England) and where a coordinated approach to strategic spatial planning has been explicitly embraced (such as Greater Manchester). This research therefore presents an opportunity to study practices of strategic spatial planning in a more 'ordinary' location, one in which a formalised approach to strategic spatial planning has not yet been established. The research is therefore purposefully situated within one specific political and geographic context, that of Sheffield City Region, which has been examined in detail. Through its study of Sheffield City Region, this research contributes towards a more rounded definition and understanding of contemporary strategic spatial planning practice in England.

Whilst existing literature has made progress towards enhancing our understanding of how strategic spatial planning activity is undertaken at a supra-local level, what was also identified as missing in these mostly ‘high-level’ analyses was a more detailed, empirically-grounded insight into the actor-level ‘micro-practices’ (Healey, 2010) of strategic spatial planning that are being formed and enacted at the local level by local planning actors. It was determined that an actor-level examination of such practices would build upon existing literature by providing detailed insights into the processes through which ‘new planning spaces’ are formed and enacted, and offer a means of better understanding the complexities that are continuing to emerge within a fluid and evolving governance context. The literature also suggests that current studies of strategic spatial planning are becoming ‘over-theorised’ and are not sufficiently contextualised in the ‘real world’ (Olesen, 2014). This research therefore responds to these criticisms and gaps in the literature by presenting a detailed, actor-centred study of current strategic spatial planning practices, grounded in New Institutional theory, that clearly acknowledges the significance of the dialectical interactions between local planning actors, the changing legislative, governance and territorial contexts in which they are embedded, and the practices of strategic spatial planning that are emerging.

The ability to develop a comprehensive understanding of contemporary strategic spatial planning practices is to some degree limited by the fact that socio-political and governance contexts vary significantly between nations, regions, sub-regions and individual localities. As such, rather than seeking to develop a ‘catch-all’ theory linking each of the complex elements that comprise strategic spatial planning practice, the value of this research lies in its ability to offer detailed insights into the actions of local planning actors and how these actions are informed by and influence the institutional structures that are produced, reproduced and enacted within this changing strategic context, as the remainder of this thesis will explore. This research will also contribute towards a broader understanding of planning practice by enhancing our knowledge of the interrelationship between local planning actors and their strategic contexts, particularly during periods of contextual change, which may in turn have implications for shaping the direction of future planning legislation, policy and guidance.

### **1.3 Research approach**

This section outlines the approach to the design of this research project and demonstrates a clear continuum between the research rationale outlined previously, and the overarching aim, conceptual framework and applied methodology that are summarised below.

#### **1.3.1 Research aim and questions**

As noted previously, the overarching aim of this research is:

To understand, through the analysis of detailed empirical evidence, how the devolving governance structures and other strategic contextual changes that have emerged in England in recent years are being understood and interpreted at the local planning actor level; and how sub-regional strategic spatial planning practices are being enacted within this changing context.

Acknowledging that research is an iterative process, prior to commencing the fieldwork the ‘strategic context’ was rather broadly defined as ‘the external (structuring) factors or variables that form the setting through which actions emerge<sup>1</sup>. During the course of the fieldwork, I was able to refine this definition to focus in on a number of key contextual themes that began to emerge from the data and were also supported by areas of theoretical interest and ‘gaps’ in our knowledge that emerged from the literature review (as discussed in Chapter 2), namely: the national policy and legislative context, the governance and organisational context, and the political and territorial context. From these emergent themes, the following research questions were derived:

1. What does it mean to ‘do’ strategic spatial planning in a devolving governance setting? What strategic spatial planning practices are being enacted and by whom?
2. How are changes in the national legislative and policy context interpreted by local planning actors, and how are these contextual changes shaping the practices of strategic spatial planning that are being enacted in a devolving governance setting?
3. What role do formal and informal governance spaces play in shaping strategic spatial planning practices in a devolving governance setting? How are these spaces interpreted by local planning actors, and to what extent do they constrain or enable cross-boundary collaboration and strategic spatial planning practices and decision-making?
4. How are political territories and spatial imaginaries created, transformed and enacted by local planning actors? What role do these spatialities play in shaping strategic spatial planning practices in a devolving governance setting?

These research questions will be answered through the analysis of the empirical material that is presented in Chapters 6 to 8 and the conclusions presented in Chapter 9.

### **1.3.2 Theoretical approach**

In order to answer these research questions and to understand the nature of the strategic spatial planning practices observed in the research it was firstly necessary to find a way of conceptualising the interactions between the local planning actors, the practices, and the contexts in which these practices took place. Critics argue that strategic spatial planning theorisations are ‘too far from the current realities of the socio-political contexts in which strategic spatial planning takes place’ (Olesen, 2014: 298). This research goes some way to re-grounding these theorisations in the ‘real world’, by acknowledging the inherent complexities and uncertainties of current strategic planning practice and more explicitly referencing the socio-political and spatial contexts through which these practices are emerging.

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<sup>1</sup> This definition of ‘strategic context’ is discussed in detail in Chapter 3.



In order to do this, the research adopts a New Institutional approach in which strategic spatial planning is usefully conceptualised as a series of social processes embedded within a wider institutionalised context. The research draws on concepts derived from both historical and constructivist strands of New Institutional theory, including Bell's (2011) agency-centred historical institutional approach and Hay's (2006) constructivist institutionalism, to develop a broad framework for examining how a strategic context may acquire a structuring power (through actors' interpretations of this context) and subsequently shape the practices of strategic spatial planning that are enacted and observed. Importantly, the framework also recognises the relationship between context and conduct as dialectical, meaning that as well as actions being 'structured' by contextual forces, it acknowledges that actors have a degree of agency through which they are able to simultaneously shape the contexts through which they are acting. This provides a deeper understanding of how local planning actors and their actions are both structured by, and contribute towards, processes of production, reproduction and change within an evolving socio-political, spatial context.

In order to avoid an over-structuralised account of the practices that were observed, and to explore how certain institutionalised practices were embedded or changed, the concept of 'ideas' was introduced to the conceptual framework. Drawn from the constructivist form of institutionalism developed by Colin Hay (and detailed in Chapter 3), 'ideas' are understood as the 'frames of meaning' (Schmidt, 2010) through which actors interpret the institutional contexts within which they are situated. The concept of 'ideas' therefore helped to provide a means of understanding the interrelations between structure and agency, including how actors identified the constraints that shaped (but did not fully determine) their choices of action, and the interpretive struggles of actors in cases where there were ambiguities or inconsistencies in the strategic context.

New Institutionalism is not a novel approach in strategic planning or urban governance research, but in cases where it has been used, researchers have tended to apply the more agency-centred sociological strand of institutionalism (see for example Reimer, 2013; Healey, 2006; González & Healey, 2005). The New Institutional approach adopted in this research draws on concepts commonly applied to more structuralist forms in order to account for periods of institutional stability and so-called 'path dependencies', whilst also introducing the concept of 'ideas' which makes room for an element of actor agency and allows for the potential for change within an institutionalised setting. This framework therefore demonstrates how New Institutional theory can be applied to develop understandings of strategic spatial planning in a devolving governance context.

### **1.3.3 Methodological approach**

A major contribution of this research is its in-depth investigation of strategic spatial planning practices, as they are enacted, in the devolving governance context of Sheffield City Region using a detailed ethnographic approach. An ethnographic approach was chosen because it enabled a detailed study of the 'micro-practices' of strategic spatial planning within a continually evolving governance and institutional context and provided a means of observing the actions and interactions of local planning actors first-hand. These detailed

observations were obtained through ethnographic fieldwork that was undertaken in a local authority setting over an extended period of time. Ethnographic approaches are also little used in the examination of strategic spatial planning, and therefore this approach revealed detailed insights that would not have been acquired through other methods. These insights included, amongst other things, observational evidence of the day-to-day activities of local planning actors, the nature of their interactions with colleagues both within the same organisation and across organisational boundaries, and the ways in which these actors talked about and sought to resolve various strategic issues. This methodology supported the research aim and the conceptual framework, both of which demanded an approach to data collection that was sufficiently agency-sensitive that it was capable of revealing the actions of actors or groups of actors, and sufficiently structurally-sensitive that it was capable of capturing the nature of the wider strategic context through which these actions took place<sup>1</sup>. The ethnographic approach adopted in this research was therefore able to position these actors and their actions *in context*, and thus develop a picture of what was happening in Sheffield City Region in respect of strategic spatial planning and begin to answer the questions of *how* and *why* these practices were enacted.

Sheffield City Region was chosen as the case study for this research primarily because; a) it represents a devolving area of sub-regional governance; b) it does not form the basis of any recent (post-devolution) empirical studies in academic planning literature, unlike other devolved areas that have been more ‘active’ with regards pursuing a coordinated approach to strategic spatial planning, such as Greater Manchester; and c) Sheffield City Region is also not widely discussed in the growing body of literature that considers the politics and governance of city region devolution, with the notable exception of recent work by Etherington & Jones (2016, 2018), in comparison to which this research contributes a thematically different, actor-centred perspective<sup>2</sup>.

During the fieldwork I was primarily situated within the Forward and Area Planning team of Sheffield City Council, which provided a ‘base’ from which I was able to conduct ethnographic observations. This approach enabled the detailed recording and examination of the practices and interactions of local planning actors acting within and between the governance and organisational structures that comprise Sheffield City Region, which would not otherwise have been observed. These ethnographic observations were supplemented by document analysis and semi-structured interviews with key participants, which produced a comprehensive dataset of primary and secondary data that was then analysed using the approach described in Chapter 4.

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter 3 provides detailed theoretical discussion around how structure-agency interactions have been conceptualised in the context of this research.

<sup>2</sup> The work of Etherington and Jones focuses primarily on links between devolution, austerity and welfare reform, and is further discussed in Chapter 2.

## 1.4 Thesis content and structure

The previous sections of this introductory chapter have outlined the key contextual arguments that underpin the overarching aim of the research. In order to best address this aim, the subsequent chapters of this thesis are structured as follows:

The first part of **Chapter 2** positions the research within the legislative, policy and governance context of the English spatial planning system, with a particular focus on how approaches to strategic spatial planning have varied over time, before further elaborating on the contextual changes that emerged post-2010, as introduced briefly in section 1.1, and providing a critique of current empirical literature. The latter part of this chapter then reviews conceptualisations and theorisations of strategic spatial planning practice, and concludes by identifying gaps in our current knowledge of strategic spatial planning practice in a devolving governance context and providing justification for the overall aim of the research and its empirical contribution.

**Chapter 3** outlines the theoretical framework within which the research is set and through which strategic spatial planning practices have been conceptualised and the empirical data analysed.

**Chapter 4** provides detailed justification for the design of the research and the chosen methodological and analytical approach that has been applied. The chapter also discusses the various ethical and practical concerns that were considered in undertaking the research, including the selection of the case study and reflections on my positionality as both a researcher and a planner.

The empirical findings presented later in the thesis are contextualised in **Chapter 5**, which details the current spatial geography and organisational and governance structures of Sheffield City Region. This chapter also provides a history of the evolution of strategic governance and spatial planning across the geographies that shaped the foundation of Sheffield City Region and describes the events through which Sheffield City Region emerged as a devolved governance structure.

**Chapter 6** is the first of three empirical chapters that seek to address the research questions by presenting a detailed analysis of the data. This chapter is centred around the types of strategic spatial planning practice that were observed and actors' interpretations of the national legislative and policy context through which these practices emerged. This chapter provides answers to the first two research questions.

**Chapter 7** is focused upon the organisational and governance context, including the structures and spaces of collaboration and participation within Sheffield City Region, how these are formed, and how these structures (both formal and informal) constrain or enable action from a strategic spatial planning perspective. This second analysis chapter provides answers to the third research question.

The final analysis chapter, **Chapter 8**, focuses on the territorial and relational spatial context, by examining the role of the political territories and spatial imaginaries that permeate Sheffield City Region, and exploring how these spaces form, evolve, shape spatial coalitions and inform cross-boundary collaborative practices. This chapter also discusses the impact of austerity and how the availability of human and economic

resources affects the territorial interests of local planning actors. This chapter provides answers to the fourth research question.

The thesis is concluded in **Chapter 9**, which draws together the arguments from the preceding analytical chapters to summarise the main empirical findings that satisfy the overarching aim and questions set by this research, and define the key contributions to knowledge. This concluding chapter also identifies implications of the research findings for future planning practice, presents some final reflections on the theoretical and methodological approaches used in the research, and suggests some possible directions for future research.

## 2 | Strategic spatial planning

The purpose of this chapter is to frame the research within the context of current academic debates and understandings of strategic spatial planning practice. By examining historic transitions in strategic spatial planning practice that have occurred within the framework of the English planning system and providing a critical review of recent literature that seeks to understand and examine these transitions in both a UK and European context, this chapter identifies specific areas that require further investigation in the context of the contemporary strategic spatial planning practices that are currently emerging throughout England, and in doing so, provides justification for this research.

The chapter begins in section 2.1 by considering what is meant by the term ‘strategic spatial planning’, how it is conceptualised by others and how it is understood within the context of this research. This is followed in section 2.2 by an overview of the history of strategic spatial planning policy, practice and governance in the English planning context. This section considers how approaches to strategic spatial planning have evolved since the beginning of the twentieth century, with a particular focus on how changing political and economic agendas, and associated formal and informal governance arrangements, have helped to shape the variety and distribution of spatial coalitions through which strategic plan-making and cross-boundary collaborative practices have emerged.

Section 2.3 discusses the more recent contextual changes that have inspired this particular research, including the shifts in governance and legislation that have been introduced through central government’s ongoing ‘devolution’ agenda and which have informed the varied and sporadic nature of strategic planning practices that are currently being observed. This section also discusses some of the recent academic studies that seek to develop our understanding of the types of practices of strategic spatial planning that are being conducted within this devolving governance context in England, and how these practices are continuing to develop in response to ongoing changes in organisational structures, processes of devolution and the promotion of the ‘city region’ spatial concept that have emerged since 2010. This section concludes by defining the overall aim for this research.

Section 2.4 then considers some of the ways in which recent trends in strategic spatial planning practice, both within the UK and wider European contexts, have been conceptualised and understood, by presenting a critical review of recent academic literature around the following identified themes: the changing nature of strategic spatial planning practice; the changing scales and structures of strategic planning governance; and the evolving territories and spatialities of strategic spatial planning. The chapter concludes in section 2.5 by drawing on the findings of this critical discussion to present a justification for this research and identifying a series of specific research questions that align the findings of the empirical study with the overall research aim.

## 2.1 'Defining' strategic spatial planning

Strategic spatial planning as a practice has received periodical prominence in western Europe; having been particularly dominant during the 1960s, declining in popularity during the 1970s and 1980s, and then experiencing somewhat of a 'revival' from the late 1990s into the early 2000s associated with an increased emphasis on 'regions' as the spatial focus for growth (Healey, 1997, 2004; Wannop, 1995). This revival was in part driven by EU funding schemes, such as the European Regional Development Fund. In recent years, across many areas of north-west Europe including England, the Netherlands and Denmark (Olesen, 2014), it is argued that strategic spatial planning has not so much declined in popularity as witnessed a transformation, from a formal process overseen by systems of national and regional governance, to an informal plurality of practices shaped through 'soft' spaces of governance across 'fuzzy' spatial scales (Harrison, 2012; Allmendinger & Haughton, 2009), as further discussed in section 2.4. Given its continued widespread presence, strategic spatial planning has unsurprisingly received significant attention in academic planning literature, including some of the more recent literature discussed in sections 2.3 and 2.4. The purpose of this section is not to define 'strategic spatial planning' *per se*, but to explore some of the key characteristics of strategic spatial planning that are discussed in current literature and to describe how it is understood in a broad sense in the context of this research.

### 2.1.1 Strategic spatial planning as a social process

Often contrasted with other more 'traditional', regulated forms of statutory land-use planning that focus on managing change in the present (Servillo, 2017; Albrechts, 2015), in its simplest terms strategic spatial planning may be described as a process of envisioning and managing future spatial change. It can be considered 'strategic' in the sense that it involves 'the identification of long-term or overall aims and interests and means of achieving them' (Oxford University Press, 2018) and 'spatial' in the sense that it relates to a particular place or territory, or 'the where of things' (Healey, 2004: 46). However, this is a much-simplified way of describing what is, in reality, a complex, dynamic and often contested series of processes, interactions and outputs that encompass multiple actors, organisations and scales of governance.

As a reflection of these inherent complexities, strategic spatial planning is variously described within the literature as: an exercise in long-term, selective visioning (Mäntysalo et al., 2015); a set of procedures defining possible courses of action (Bryson, 2012); a process of analysis and synthesis (Mintzberg, 1994); an arena for deliberation (Albrechts, 2015); long-range planning for territorial development (Friedmann, 2004); a normative, socio-technical imaginary that enables innovation and transformation in existing planning practices (Servillo, 2017); an active force in enabling change (Albrechts, 2004a); a set of concepts, procedures and tools (Bryson, 2004); and a strategic way of thinking (Healey, 2007; Friedmann, 2004). These multiple and varied descriptions illustrate how strategic spatial planning is 'not one thing' (Bryson, 2004) but represents a wide range of processes and practices that are enacted by different actors within different spatial contexts and at different times.

In recent years, many academics have tried to make sense of the complexities inherent in strategic spatial planning. Notably, Patsy Healey (1997, 2006b, 2009) and Louis Albrechts (2004b, 2006, 2009) have contributed much to contemporary understandings and theoretical debates around strategic spatial planning, and are two of the few authors to have provided concise (and therefore frequently cited) definitions of strategic spatial planning, describing it respectively as:

‘a social process through which a range of people in diverse institutional relations and positions come together to design plan-making processes and develop contents and strategies for the management of spatial change.’

(Healey, 1997: 5)

and;

‘a public-sector-led, socio-spatial process through which a vision, actions, and means for implementation are produced that shape and frame what a place is and may become’

Albrechts (2004a: 747)

As these quotations highlight, for Healey, Albrechts and others, strategic spatial planning is understood to be a *social process* in that it is enacted by a range of human actors, from planning officers, politicians and decision-makers through to other public or private stakeholders, interacting through a communicative network of contingent social relations (Hillier, 2008; Friedmann, 2004) that develops within and between organisations, across multiple and evolving spaces and systems of governance, and through a hierarchy of power structures (Healey, 2009). This recognition of the role of social relations in strategic spatial planning is further emphasised by Albrechts & Balducci (2013) who identify these within a number of other ‘critical features’ of strategic spatial planning, summarised in Table 1.

The social and interactive nature of strategic spatial planning is represented in the ‘relational dimension’, which highlights the role of actors in ‘envisioning’ a future and driving forward a means of getting there, whether through the development of a plan or other strategic actions, and emphasises the importance of ‘co-production’ as a method of collective decision-making and engagement between the state and stakeholders. In terms of its ‘institutional implications’, strategic spatial planning is presented as having the ability to adapt to changing governance structures and territorial boundaries, and as such is considered the form of planning most suited to managing spatial change at the ‘supra-local’ level.

**Table 1** Dimensions and critical features of strategic spatial planning, adapted from Albrechts & Balducci (2013)

Dimension of strategic planning	Critical features
Content	Strategic planning implies a shift from comprehensiveness towards selectivity inspired by a broad long-term vision. Strategic planning is action- or project-oriented.
Form	'Becoming' as the ability to cope with action, movement, emergence, relationship, and creative experimentation. Working with uncertainty and being open to new concepts.
Relational nature	Focus on co-production. Ability to change and reformulate the mindset of actors. Ability to grasp the momentum.
Institutional implications	Coping with multi-level governance. Coping with changing boundaries. Making new ideas and concepts portable.

I would argue that the work of Albrechts & Balducci (2013), whilst insightful, is reflective of what Newman (2008) refers to as a 'normative orientation' in work on strategic spatial planning, which seeks to investigate practice in relation to an 'ideal' form of planning. Therefore, these identified 'critical features' might be criticised for presenting an overly-idealised or 'radical' (Albrechts, 2015) version of strategic spatial planning which does not necessarily reflect what is observed in practice. However, this conceptualisation nevertheless helps to highlight how strategic spatial planning is shaped by actors working *within* changing political, spatial and governance structures, rather than outside or distinct from them (Healey, 2013). Strategic spatial planning systems and practices, and our understandings of them, are therefore highly contingent on the contexts through which these practices emerge (Friedmann, 2004) and the social, political and economic dynamics experienced therein. In considering the strategic planning practices that are currently emerging within a devolving governance context, this research therefore seeks to adopt a more broad-minded view to understand how planning practices are shaped and enacted by local planning actors, rather than providing an assessment of strategic spatial planning against an academically idealised form of practice.

### 2.1.2 Strategic spatial planning as a plan-making process

Given the identification of strategic spatial planning as a social process, the spatial strategies, plans and other textual documents that emerge from these processes may therefore be understood as social products or constructions (Albrechts, 2018; Healey, 2007, 2009). Sartorio (2005) identifies these 'social processes' and 'social products' as the two 'souls' of strategic planning; the former represented by the actions of multiple actors resulting in the pursuit of differing and often conflicting goals, and the latter being the objective of devising and achieving a long-term vision of a 'potential' future state. Sartorio's emphasis on a 'potential' future is important as it shifts the focus away from a more positivist view of strategic planning as determining a fixed, pre-destined output, towards strategic planning as a transformative, deliberative process with the potential for multiple possible future outcomes (Albrechts, 2017; Bryson, 2012; Hillier, 2008). Healey supports this view by arguing that the visions presented in spatial plans and strategies do not represent a pre-determined future state, but instead do 'governance work' by accumulating the necessary power to shape the ideas of planning actors and mobilise action in particular strategic directions, including towards legitimising and supporting a particular future vision (Healey, 2009). Others have similarly



described strategic spatial plans as ‘frames’ (Albrechts, 2017; Balducci et al., 2011) or ‘guiding lights’ (Faludi & Salet, 2000) that hold the potential to be interpreted, and subsequently enacted, in many different ways and therefore present a myriad of opportunities for action. In practice, focus is often drawn to the plan or strategy as being the more tangible, and therefore significant, output of strategic planning activity.

However, for an increasing number of academic researchers, strategic spatial planning is as much about the plan-making *process* as it is about the plans, strategies or policies that derive from this (Oliveira & A. M. Hersperger, 2018; Healey, 1997, 2009; Albrechts, 2004a). Friedmann (2004), for example, argues that ‘good’ strategic planning does not necessarily lie in the production of a plan, but in the benefits that come from the processes that comprise strategic planning activity, including the encouragement of debate and development of ideas for prospective change. Similarly, Albrechts & Balducci (2013) state that strategic spatial planning is not just about the practice of plan-making and developing plan-making structures:

‘It is about building new ideas and processes that can carry these structures, thus generating ways of understanding, building agreements, and organising and mobilising for the purpose of exerting influence in different arenas’ (p.19).

Mazza (2013) further emphasises the need to distinguish between the processes of ‘idea formation’ and practices of ‘managing spatial change’ in studies of strategic spatial planning. Drawing on Healey’s definition of strategic planning, Mazza (2013) also suggests there is a need to better understand the reasons *why* certain actors ‘come together’ (Healey, 1997: 5) to develop strategies for managing spatial change (whether derived from a voluntary or statutory basis), *which* actors are engaged in and drive forward these processes of ‘coming together’ (whether politicians or planners), and *how* the ideas from which strategic plan-making practices emerge are developed.

In order to understand strategic spatial planning, this research argues that it is therefore necessary to understand the structuring factors, ideas and roles of actors through which practices of managing spatial change are developed and enacted. By understanding these factors, we cannot only better understand the plans, strategies and visions that emerge and their ‘real-world’ impacts (including their relative successes and failures), but we can begin to understand some of the broader complexities and uncertainties of strategic spatial planning, including how and the extent to which these plans are the product of the ideas, the changing spatial, political and economic contexts, and the networks of social relations and governance structures through which they emerge. After Fournier (2002: 192), whose work emphasises ‘journeys rather than destinations’, Hillier (2008: 29) applies this to the study of strategic spatial planning, arguing that our concern should be with ‘trajectories rather than specified end-points’. Further consideration of these trajectories of strategic spatial planning, including where particular practices have come *from* as well as where they are going *to*, has the potential to provide deeper understanding of the factors that are shaping contemporary practices of strategic spatial planning, particularly in the context of changing governance structures and political arrangements. With this in mind, consideration of the history of current practices in the English planning context is presented in the following section.

The main focus of this research is therefore on understanding the *processes* and *practices* rather than the *products* of strategic spatial planning, and as such, the theoretical framework and methodological approach I have chosen to use in this research (described in Chapters 3 and 4 respectively) reflect these concerns. The emphasis of study is therefore shifted away from the strategy or plan itself, including its process of implementation and outcomes; towards the socio-spatial ideas and practices that are developed and enacted in pursuit of ‘strategic spatial planning’; the actors that are involved in the enactment of such practices; and the changing contexts through which these practices emerge. As the review of literature outlined in sections 2.3 and 2.4 reveals, this focus on processes, practices and actions between local planning actors is something that is lacking in current research, particularly that which examines the devolving governance context of the English planning system.

## **2.2 A history of strategic spatial planning in England**

As noted at the beginning of section 2.1, approaches to, and affinities with, strategic spatial planning in practice and governance have changed significantly over the course of the last century. The purpose of this and the following section is to position this research firmly in the context of the English planning system by presenting a review of historic and contemporary approaches to, and understandings of, strategic spatial planning practice and structures of planning governance within this specific geographic context. As the previous section demonstrates, strategic spatial planning can be understood as a function of a complex web of social interactions and the political, governance and spatial contexts through which these interactions take place. An understanding of the historic context is therefore important as it allows us to better understand how contemporary ideas, practices and ‘episodes’ (Healey, 2004) of strategic spatial planning have emerged over time and how these are framed in relation to actors’ past experiences, interactions, understandings and expectations, and other historically institutionalised structures and practices. This section is complemented by discussion presented in Chapter 5, which provides further contextual detail relating to the history and evolution of strategic spatial planning in the Sheffield City Region case study area.

### **2.2.1 The emergence of strategic spatial planning**

The earliest examples of what might be defined ‘strategic spatial planning’ in the UK planning context include the regional plans of the early 1900s, such as those prepared by Sir Patrick Abercrombie, who sought to develop a strategic response to the issues of industrialisation and sprawling urbanisation that were seen as threats to England’s ‘green and pleasant land’. These early spatial plans were accompanied by what may be considered the first formal introduction of strategic planning legislation through the Housing and Town Planning Act 1919, which permitted local authorities to prepare regional planning schemes by allocating planning powers to a joint committee containing representatives from each of the constituent authorities. However, these were not a statutory requirement and so the take-up of such schemes was limited, and as Wannop (1995: 4) notes, ‘these voluntary arrangements stopped short of real machinery to implement regional proposals on a collective and consistent basis’. The Local Government Act 1929 then granted further strategic planning powers to county councils by allowing them to work with other local authorities to

prepare town planning schemes and granting them powers to enforce such schemes. However, the Joint Planning Committees that were established up until 1931 were again considered to be relatively ineffectual; being mostly advisory and covering only 20 per cent of England and Wales (Wannop, 1995). These early strategic planning efforts were later surpassed by the comprehensive local plan-making processes that became the focus of the post-war redevelopment efforts following the adoption of the Town and Country Planning Act 1947 and which continue to form the basis of England's present-day planning system.

Whilst, in retrospect, we may consider these aforementioned examples as representing some of the earliest forms of strategic planning, they were not referred to as such at the time. In fact, use of the term 'strategic planning' did not rise to prominence until the mid-1960s when it was used to describe the processes through which the Regional Economic Planning Councils (REPCs) that had been established for each of eight newly-defined economic planning regions across England set out to prepare a series of strategic plans. The strategic planning approach taken by the REPCs represented a shift from that previously undertaken by local planning authorities, as the focus was not only on the development of a long-term vision, but also on the *process* through which the plan was produced, including the key role of interactions between institutions (Sartorio, 2005). The REPCs consisted of representatives from local authorities, universities and other private sector organisations, and were set up in order to conduct analysis to identify and advise central government on the economic, physical and environmental issues of each region, and to develop a strategy or 'regional plan' for meeting their identified potential. The benefits of such collaborative working between local authorities in a strategic planning capacity was recognised by commentators at the time:

'...the Councils can do a great deal to encourage local authorities and unofficial organisations to adopt a regional approach to common problems. In many fields, such as technical education, the arts, tourism, and the rehabilitation of derelict land, the benefits are regional rather than local, and sufficient resources can be mobilised only by co-operative effort.'

(Peterson, 1966: 37)

However, the potential benefits of this strategic planning experiment failed to match reality, primarily because the REPCs lacked any executive powers and, in some instances, the support of their constituent local authorities. As a result, they were relatively ineffectual. Such problems of ineffectuality and lack of support 'from below' have also plagued subsequent incarnations of regional bodies charged with strategic planning responsibilities, as will be discussed later.

A review undertaken by the Royal Commission on Local Government in England between 1966 and 1969, commonly known as the Redcliffe-Maud Report<sup>1</sup>, sparked a period of local government reorganisation

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<sup>1</sup> The Redcliffe-Maud Report proposed the formation of 58 large single-tier, 'unitary' authorities and three two-tier authorities in the metropolitan conurbations of West Midlands, Greater Manchester and Merseyside, where a 'metropolitan authority' would be responsible for key strategic services, such as planning and transport, and the 'metropolitan districts' would oversee other areas, such as education and housing (Royal Commission on Local Government in England, 1969). Ultimately, the single-tier recommendations of the Redcliffe-Maud Report were not implemented due to the change in central government administration from Labour to Conservative in 1970.

during which a reconfigured two-tier system of governance was introduced. The Local Government Act 1972 resulted in the creation of new ‘shire’ (or in urbanised areas, ‘metropolitan’) counties throughout England. These formed the upper tier of local government and were each subdivided into a series of ‘non-metropolitan’ (or ‘metropolitan’) districts, which formed the lower tier. Around this time the Town and Country Planning Act 1968 was also passed, which introduced a new system of structure plans and local plans. Following the restructuring of local government that occurred in 1972, a statutory responsibility to prepare structure plans resided with the county councils that represented the ‘upper tier’ of planning governance, while the district councils, or ‘lower tier’ authorities were responsible for preparing their own local plans.

The county structure plans that were produced between the 1960s and the early 1980s were, on the whole, highly technical in terms of their preparation procedures and their comprehensive definition of policies. As such, the approach that underpinned the development of structure plans and sub-regional studies during this period reflected the oft-cited doctrine of Patrick Geddes, ‘survey before plan’ or ‘survey-analysis-plan’ (Davoudi & Strange, 2009). This led to criticism by some that they were far too complex and contained policies that were largely irrelevant to planning (Cullingworth & Nadin, 2006). The structure planning of this era has also been criticised for following a very determinist approach, with the core focus being on achieving the ‘end goal’, rather than sufficient consideration being given to the process itself.

In terms of its ongoing legacy, from a spatio-political perspective, structure planning led to the embedding of tensions between the district and county authorities (Roze, 2014); tensions that continue to shape the present-day interactions between elected members and officers of authorities in two-tier areas. Structure planning also introduced a linear, hierarchical form of strategic planning, in which processes of ‘strategising’ were undertaken by the higher tier authorities, and these strategies were then ‘translated’ into spatial plans by the lower tier authorities (Healey, 2013); an approach that was replicated in the later Regional Spatial Strategies. Such an approach tended to resist the strategic flexibility that may have been achieved by adopting a more non-linear, reflexive approach. In response to these identified ‘failings’ of the structure planning approach, the theoretical studies of strategic planning that were developed alongside these practices increasingly began to focus on process and decision-making rather than on content and outputs (Faludi & Salet, 2000), as previously discussed in section 2.1.

### **2.2.2 The fall and rise of strategic spatial planning**

A significant change in the organisation of sub-national government was introduced through the Local Government Act 1985. This resulted in the abolition of the metropolitan county councils (and the Greater London Council) and the devolution of most of their responsibilities<sup>1</sup>, including statutory planning powers, to the smaller, metropolitan borough councils. As part of their statutory planning responsibilities, the newly formed borough councils were then required to prepare their own unitary development plans, which would

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<sup>1</sup> Other responsibilities, such as control over public transport, fire and police services, were devolved to a series of new ‘Joint Boards’.

replace both the former local plan and the county structure plan. This abolition of structure plans in metropolitan areas reflected an effective retreat from strategic planning that occurred across much of western Europe during the latter half of the 1980s and the early 1990s. It has been argued that this retreat can be attributed to the growing postmodernist view of the time that progress ‘cannot be planned’ (Albrechts, 2004: 64), and the growth in neoliberal attitudes that tended to shift concerns away from strategic planning and towards more urban regenerative project-based initiatives (Albrechts, 2009) (as will be further discussed in section 2.4.1). This shift was exemplified in the Urban Development Corporations (UDCs) that were introduced in England during the 1980s (following on from the previously established New Town Development Corporations), and whose purpose was to regenerate urban areas and unlock the development potential of inner cities by taking over the planning and development control functions of respective local authorities. The UDCs were widely criticised for their lack of democratic accountability and the fact that they were seen to benefit only the private development industry over local authorities or residential communities (Lawless, 1988).

The government’s justification for the proposals that underpinned the 1985 Act was to reduce expenditure, ‘streamline’ the cities (Department of the Environment, 1983) and to ‘bring local government closer to the people’ (St Quintin, 1986: 111). What transpired was less about making structures more efficient, and more an exercise in increasing centralisation and augmenting institutional complexity and disruption. As O’Leary (1987: 380) stated in respect of these structural changes, ‘ideology legitimates decisions taken for other reasons’ and, as such, the true purpose of the exercise was a clear attempt by the Conservative administration to minimise political resistance by removing power from the large Labour-controlled metropolitan county councils and returning it to the districts (Leach & Game, 1991; McEvoy, 1985). This ulterior motive is emphasised by the somewhat contradictory implementation of measures to remove a structured system of governance that enabled strategic collaboration between authorities, whilst simultaneously extolling the importance of continuing to work jointly across boundaries; a point that was recognised by South Yorkshire County Council in their response to the ‘Streamlining the Cities’ White Paper:

‘The numerous references in the White Paper to the need to set up joint boards, joint working relationships and voluntary joint arrangements between the four District Councils in South Yorkshire following the abolition of the County Council is the strongest argument possible against the Government’s case that the strategic role is not important.’

(South Yorkshire County Council, 1984: para.1.4)

Although no formal arrangements were introduced in the metropolitan borough councils for advising on strategic planning issues (as was the case with the Joint Planning Committee in Greater London), the local authorities were encouraged to develop their own non-statutory joint working arrangements. Despite the borough councils being forced to step out into what Bradshaw (1986: 25) described at the time as a ‘strategic wilderness’, many of the linkages and collaborative practices that existed between the metropolitan boroughs continued to operate across the old county geographies for the purposes of overseeing certain issues, but the

chosen form and scope of these structures varied significantly between the metropolitan areas. These voluntary joint-working arrangements operated on a much more informal and self-directed basis than under the jurisdiction of the metropolitan county councils, and partly reflected the practical benefits of continuing the existing practices as a means of minimising disruption, but also the personal and political relationships between, and interests of, the council leaders, as well as other key individuals and groups (Leach & Game, 1991).

At a national level, the Association of Metropolitan Authorities (AMA) was also established at this time as a voluntary response to the abolition of the metropolitan county councils, in order to protect and promote the interests of the metropolitan councils on the national stage. The AMA represented an example of self-organisation amongst local authorities, and through which a formalised organisational structure was established whose key purposes were identified as ‘providing a channel for information between authorities; encouraging particular forms of practice through structured information and incentives; and coordinating and representing a joint response to other agencies, particularly to central government’ (Forsyth, 1989: 36).

From the late 1990s onwards, commentators observed a relative ‘revival’ of strategic planning, particularly within European planning discourse (Metzger, 2013; Healey, 2009; Faludi & Salet, 2000), where there was an increasingly recognised need to plan for the longer term (Albrechts, 2009). In the UK, this renaissance coincided with the election of the New Labour government in 1997, whose commitment to regionalisation and ‘joined-up’ thinking between authorities, gave momentum to the re-scaling of statutory planning powers from the local to regional level. Regional Chambers (which later became known as Regional Assemblies) and Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) were established under the Regional Development Agencies Act 1998. The RDAs were established to ‘act as the strategic leaders for economic development and growth in the English regions’ (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2006: 73) and tasked with preparing Regional Economic Strategies.

The Regional Assemblies included representatives from both the public and private sectors and were responsible for tackling the regional regeneration and development agenda, through enhancing partnership working and scrutinising the work of the RDAs. They were also encouraged, under Planning Policy Guidance Note 11: Regional Planning (PPG11), published in 2000, to take on responsibility for preparing a new form of Regional Planning Guidance that would concentrate on tackling strategic issues and include the development of a ‘spatial’ strategy. The strategic focus of PPG11 was strongly influenced by the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) published in 1999, which provided a framework to which all member states, including their respective regional and local authorities, should work in order to help achieve balanced and sustainable development across Europe. The ESDP emphasised the importance of cross-border cooperation at the regional and local level, at what it referred to as ‘internal frontiers’ (European Commission, 1999: 36).

As part of their ambition for regional empowerment, central government outlined proposals for elected Regional Assemblies in the 2002 White Paper, 'Your Region, Your Choice: Revitalising the English Regions'. This would have given the assemblies greater strategic planning powers, including the ability to direct local authorities to refuse planning applications that were not in the interests of the wider region. However, following the rejection by referendum of a North East Elected Assembly in 2004, these proposals were put on hold and no further referenda were allowed to go ahead.

Despite central government's continued interest in the regionalism agenda, the new Regional Planning Guidance did not gain statutory status until the Regional Assemblies became the official Regional Planning Bodies under the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004, which abolished structure plans and replaced Regional Planning Guidance notes with statutory Regional Spatial Strategies (RSSs). Through the 2004 Act, local planning authorities also became responsible for preparing a suite of local planning policy documents, known as a Local Development Framework, which was required to be in conformity with the policies contained in the respective RSS. The RSSs were required to identify a housing and employment land target for each local authority area that the local planning authority was then obliged to carry through to inform the site allocations in its Local Development Framework. This 'top down' imposition of targets was widely criticised, particularly in areas such as the south east of England where growth pressures were greatest. Despite this local antagonism towards RSSs, the focus on strategic planning at the regional level that emerged with the election of the New Labour government in 1997 began a wave of 'strategic energy' (Healey, 2007: 14) in policy rhetoric that was retained throughout the remainder of the Labour administration. Alongside Regional Spatial Strategies, a range of nationally-significant regeneration proposals were presented in the UK government's 'Sustainable Communities: Building for the Future' (ODPM, 2003), which was in essence a broad spatial plan whose primary objectives were to reduce levels of urban deprivation in the north and resolve the housing shortages in the south east of England. The plan initiated the development of the Thames Gateway and the Northern Way, the latter of which is further discussed in Chapter 5 in respect of the Sheffield City Region case study that forms the basis of this research.

Counsell & Haughton (2006) invoke the term 'mutant planning' to refer to the evolving characteristics of strategic planning in the early- to mid-2000s, in which planning powers were being reworked across different geographic scales. Formal responsibilities for planning were being rescaled from the county to regional levels, whilst informal, non-statutory scales of planning were emerging alongside; for example the 'meta-regional' scales of governance that were developed around the Northern Way. The scope of strategic planning policy was also being reworked and expanded beyond traditional land-use concerns, to include a broader range of topics including economic and social development. New ways of working were established to ensure that plans and strategies were informing one another, and 'those new practices that fail to meet expectations can expect to be allowed to wither or to be closed down' (Ibid, p.108). Evidence of such 'withering' was later observed following the dissolution of the Northern Way, and the reluctance of the successive Transport for the North and Northern Powerhouse initiatives to take up the mantle of spatial

planning at the supra-regional level. Ultimately, this episode of strategic spatial planning practice was one of fluidity and diversity.

### **2.2.3 Strengthening of the ‘regional’ agenda**

From the mid-2000s until its succession by the Conservative-led coalition at the May 2010 general election, the Labour government continued its policy of regionalism, placing particular emphasis on the concept of the ‘city region’ as the appropriate scale and geography at which to promote spatial planning and economic development. The 2006 White Paper ‘Strong and Prosperous Communities’ identified city regions as an appropriate scale for making key decisions; stating that, ‘strong cities make stronger regions and strong cities need strong regions’ (DCLG, 2006: 68). This formed part of a so-called ‘new urban renaissance’ in which city regions became a fashionable focus of policy discourse (Etherington & Jones, 2009). This was reflected in the White Paper’s proposals to devolve further powers to the city regions and promote decision-making and spatial planning at a supra-local level through their recognition that; ‘closer alignment between the geography of economic governance/decision-making arrangements and the economic footprint of a city makes a positive contribution to economic performance’ (DCLG, 2006: 79). The Core Cities<sup>1</sup> were very much seen as central to arrangements for strategic spatial planning and economic development at the city region-level (ODPM, 2006). However, the city region concept was somewhat limited by its lack of definition and exclusion of certain parts of the country whose functional geography did not easily relate to any one city, such as parts of Cumbria and the south west of England. While there was no statutory requirement to do so, local authorities were able to put forward proposals for collaborating at the sub-regional or city region level through the RSS process (DCLG, 2006); further continuing the trend towards so-called ‘mutant’ forms of strategic planning (Counsell & Houghton, 2006). A number of areas established voluntary arrangements for sub-regional strategic planning, including for example the Partnership for Urban South Hampshire (PUSH) whose 11 authorities joined together in the preparation of a voluntary sub-regional strategy (DCLG, 2006).

The final three years of the Labour administration represented a period of further restructuring in terms of sub-national institutional and governance arrangements. The ‘Review of Sub-National Economic Development and Regeneration’ (HM Treasury, 2007) proposed to simplify regional governance and enhance the role of RDAs. It was subsequently decided that Regional Assemblies would be wound down between March 2008 and 2010, and powers passed to local authorities and newly established Local Authority leaders’ boards. The RDAs assumed the role of Regional Planning Body, and in 2010 it was proposed that RSSs and Regional Economic Strategies would be merged and replaced by Integrated Regional Strategies. The intended role of the leaders’ boards was to scrutinise the RDAs and the Integrated Regional Strategies. Many of these proposed changes were short-lived however, as the election of the

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<sup>1</sup> The Core Cities Group was established in 1995 to give collective voice to England’s major cities (outside London) and the city regions that surround them. The group originally comprised the eight cities of Birmingham, Bristol, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham and Sheffield, and was later expanded to cover the wider UK through the inclusion of Cardiff and Glasgow in 2014 (Core Cities, 2019).



Conservative-led coalition government in May 2010 brought an abrupt and rather dramatic end to Labour's regional experiment and statutory strategic spatial planning at the regional scale.

#### **2.2.4 Summary**

As illustrated in this section, the history of strategic spatial planning in England is one in which practices were very much shaped around the following key contextual factors: the evolution of political agendas, as enacted by central government through changes in statutory legislation; changes in the scale and scope of strategic planning governance spaces, including its diversification amongst a range of 'formal' and 'informal' spaces; and the emergence of a series of new spatial geographies, such as counties, regions and more recently, city regions. The formal structures and spaces of sub-national governance that played a key role in shaping historic practices of strategic spatial planning included the REPCs, county councils and regional assemblies, which had a statutory requirement to deliver a form of 'strategic plan'. The literature discussed in this section also reveals how alongside these 'formal' spaces of planning governance, a number of 'informal' spaces of governance and cross-boundary collaboration emerged, including for example the collaborative arrangements that were established at the national level around the AMA and at the local level between small groups of metropolitan borough councils. These spaces are described here as 'informal' in the sense that they were established voluntarily, were not a statutory requirement and had no official planning powers. However, some 'informal' governance spaces, such as the AMA, also exhibited certain 'formal' organisational characteristics in the sense that they were structured around a series of committees with a dedicated staff resource. The discussion of how the context of strategic spatial planning in England further evolved in the post-2010 era continues in the following section.

### **2.3 Strategic spatial planning in a devolving governance context**

This section sets the context for this research by introducing some of the recent events that have shaped strategic spatial planning and governance in England in the period since 2010. This section further develops the discussion of the changing contextual factors that were identified in section 2.2 as having played a key role in shaping historic practices of strategic spatial planning by introducing some of the key literature that have sought to develop our empirical understandings of the type and variety of strategic planning practices that are emerging within this contemporary, evolving context. This section concludes by identifying current gaps in this existing body of literature and defining the overarching aim for this research.

#### **2.3.1 Towards 'localism' and a 'new era' of strategic governance**

Following the general election in May 2010, one of the first announcements by the newly appointed Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government was for the immediate abolition of the regional tier of government. Aside from regional government being criticised for its 'bureaucratic' and 'undemocratic' nature (Conservative Party, 2009: 26), the concept of regionalism was seen as a staunchly New Labour policy initiative from which the new Conservative-led coalition government wanted to break ties. This announcement represented the first major step in the implementation of this government's new

'localism' agenda, which promoted a process of decentralisation and empowerment of local communities alongside effectively removing the term 'region' (in the New Labour sense) from all future planning and economic development lexicon. The extent to which 'localism' has truly delivered on its promises of decentralisation and empowerment has been questioned by some (for example McGuinness & Mawson, 2017; Davoudi & Madanipour, 2013). However, what is clear is that the adoption of the Localism Act in 2011, which formalised the abolition of the RSSs, Regional Planning Bodies, RDAs and regional Government Offices in all areas outside London, marked the beginning of what Marlow (2015) describes as a new 'era' of strategic governance and led to the creation of a series of new formal and informal spaces of governance at the local and sub-regional level, as this section will now discuss.

Established in 2011, Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) were the first in a series of new formal governance structures to be introduced as part of central government's 'localism' agenda. The LEPs were public-private sector partnerships voluntarily brought forward by groups of local authorities to provide 'clear vision and strategic leadership to drive sustainable private sector-led growth and job creation in their area' (HM Government, 2010: para.2.6) and as such they assumed some of the responsibilities of the former RDAs. Despite the high level of take-up, with all local authorities across England included in at least one of the thirty-eight LEPs that currently exist, the LEPs have attracted a level of criticism from commentators in both academia and practice.

For example, these bodies are supposedly representative of 'functional economic areas', although some, including McCarthy et al. (2012), express scepticism as to whether the areas covered by each LEP accurately reflect local economic geographies, as many appear to be based on historically-embedded political connections and motivations rather than the 'real world' functionality of places and their market economies. Furthermore, Pugalis & Townsend (2014) demonstrate the role of historic arrangements in shaping the present geography of LEPs and identify how, in some areas, political tensions have resulted in the deterioration of previously existing spatial coalitions that might otherwise have produced more theoretically 'functional' LEP areas. The duplication of particular local authorities in more than one LEP area has also invoked criticism regarding their ability to effectively manage competing interests across what have been termed their 'fuzzy' boundaries (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2009; Haughton, 2009); an observation that will be further discussed in section 2.4. Other commentators have questioned the extent to which the LEPs represent legitimately 'voluntary' agreements, due to the limited availability of economic funding from alternative sources and the resultant increase in competition between territories, which has led to the suspicion that LEPs are more 'maiden coalitions of the obliged' rather than 'experienced coalitions of the willing' (Harrison, 2011: 2, cited in Gore, 2018).

In 2014, central government then introduced Combined Authorities, a move which further transformed the landscape of sub-regional governance in England. Combined Authorities were introduced as a means of statutorily formalising joint working arrangements between local authorities on a voluntary basis by enabling 'a group of two or more councils to collaborate and take collective decisions across council boundaries' (Local Government Association, 2016: 4). At the time of writing, nine Combined Authorities had been

established. Central government then decided to transfer, or ‘devolve’, powers to local authorities through a series of ‘deals’ focused primarily around the delivery of economic growth objectives. These deals were initially made between central government and the city regions, often with the support of their respective LEPs (known as ‘City Deals’), and since 2014 have been made between central government and the Combined Authorities (known as ‘Devolution Deals’). These location-specific deals have included the transferral of funding and powers over such areas as business support, public transport investment and spatial planning. The most recent round of Devolution Deals has also been contingent upon the election of a Combined Authority Mayor<sup>1</sup>; a factor which Townsend (2019) has claimed is responsible for the ‘piecemeal’ take-up of Combined Authorities across England to date.

Whilst some research, such as that by Lupton et al. (2018), claims that these newly ‘devolved’ governance structures are providing local policy makers with greater opportunities for innovation in the delivery of economic and social policy, such opportunities are highly caveated in light of the limited ability of many of these sub-national governing bodies to raise their own funds, as they continue to be fiscally dependent on central government. The institutional arrangements that underpin the Combined Authorities and the processes of ‘deal’ formation have also been critiqued by a number of commentators including O’Brien & Pike (2015) who highlight the unfair nature of the competition between territories that has arisen during this process and has resulted in enhanced inequalities across England. Other recent research has drawn out further limitations of Combined Authorities, including their lack of strategic leadership (particularly in those Combined Authorities that do not have an elected mayor), their poorly-defined rules of governance, and the historically-embedded political and spatial coalitions that have undermined certain deal formations, such as that in the North East of England (Lemprière & Lowndes, 2019). This has led to criticisms that Combined Authorities are not ‘fit for purpose’ (Shutt & Liddle, 2019b) and that they have failed to deliver the ‘devolution revolution’ (HM Treasury, 2015a) that central government initially claimed they would (Ayres et al., 2017). Indeed, a government committee reported in respect of the devolution agenda; ‘This is an untested policy and there are clear tensions emerging, with evidence of some devolution deals already beginning to unravel’ (House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts, 2016: 7).

As the previous discussion demonstrates, the context of sub-regional governance in England has become increasingly characterised by a complex and unstable array of newly formed governance structures, representing overlapping geographies, interacting across a range of spatial scales. Uncertainties in terms of their lack of strategic leadership and clear rules underpinning policy-making processes, combined with increased levels of competition for funding, have resulted in the emergence of tensions and instabilities within and between these new governance structures. In particular, the literature may cause one to question the extent to which this governance context is representative of true ‘devolution’ given the levels of regulatory control retained by central government. As this sub-regional governance context continues to evolve, local authorities and their constituent actors are therefore having to adapt and develop new ways of

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<sup>1</sup> To date, the election of a mayor has been required in Combined Authorities based within city regions, but not required in rural Combined Authorities, such as Cornwall (Sandford, 2017).

working within and between what are often unfamiliar and uncertain governance structures and scales. Developing our understanding of how local authority actors are working within, between and through these evolving institutional and governance arrangements is important for understanding how this broader context is shaping policy outcomes. This local actor level perspective is something that is currently missing from much of the existing literature referenced previously, which tends to adopt a macro- or organisational level perspective of change.

This research therefore seeks to contribute towards filling this gap by examining how this strategic governance context is influencing actions at the *local* level; particularly those practices related to strategic spatial planning. The following two sections consider what we know about the strategic spatial planning practices that are emerging within this devolving governance context, including a review of key literature and any identified ‘gaps’.

### **2.3.2 Changes in the ‘formal rules’ of strategic spatial planning: The Duty to Cooperate and the ‘hollowing out’ of local government**

Following the enactment of the Localism Act 2011, which formally abolished the regional tier of government and RSSs, a purported ‘strategic gap’ (Davoudi, 2011: 92) emerged in the English planning system, with no authority having statutory responsibility to undertake or oversee strategic spatial planning at the supra-local level. This attracted some early criticism by the Communities and Local Government Committee, which claimed that a ‘planning vacuum’ had been created together with a level of planning uncertainty that ‘...could have social, economic and environmental consequences lasting for many years’ (House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee, 2011: 4). Despite these concerns, and although coverage was much reduced, strategic spatial planning did not disappear completely from English planning practice but rather there was a shift in approach, as practices became increasingly dependent on voluntary collaborations across local authority boundaries rather than statutory joint-working arrangements. Examples of the types of voluntary collaborative strategic planning practices that have been implemented to date, and evidence of our understandings of these practices, is discussed further in section 2.3.3. Firstly, this section will introduce some of the key changes in planning policy and legislation that were introduced following the abolition of the RSSs, beginning with the Duty to Cooperate.

The Duty to Cooperate was introduced through the Localism Act in order to ensure that local authorities continued to strategically align their plans with those of their neighbouring authorities. This Duty to Cooperate became a legal test in the examination of local plans and was further embedded in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), which required that local planning authorities ‘work collaboratively with other bodies to ensure that strategic priorities across local boundaries are properly coordinated and clearly reflected in individual Local Plans’ (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2012: 42). The NPPF goes on to state that ‘joint working should enable local planning authorities to work together to meet development requirements which cannot wholly be met within their own areas’ (p.42). The body that represents professional planners in the UK, the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI), has also come to recognise strategic spatial planning as synonymous with ‘planning across local authority boundaries’ (RTPI,

2015: 8) and emphasises effective cooperation and collaboration between planning actors and the organisations working across these borders as the key to successful strategic planning.

However, the Duty to Cooperate has received criticism from those who believe it has not been a sufficient replacement for the RSSs, as it relies heavily on local authorities acting on their own initiative and falls short of requiring tangible planning outputs in the form of a plan or strategy. In their 2015 pre-election manifesto, for example, the Town and Country Planning Association (2015) described the Duty to Cooperate as ‘weak’, and in a Policy Briefing the RTPI called for ‘proper incentives to achieve strategic planning, where the duty to cooperate has not be effective, and to build on the momentum to harness the potential of the city regions’ (RTPI, 2015: 4).

In terms of understanding how local planning authorities are approaching the Duty to Cooperate, and the extent to which these approaches are capable of providing the grounding for voluntary, coordinated practices of strategic spatial planning, very few studies have considered this in detail. Notable exceptions include McGuinness & Mawson (2017), who highlight the policy’s ambiguity and its role as a barrier to local plan adoption rather than an effective means of mitigating the loss of statutory strategic spatial planning.

Bafarasat & Baker (2016) also assess the effectiveness of the Duty to Cooperate in embedding what they identify as five ‘key functions’ of strategic spatial planning in three LEP areas in the north west of England. Based on a series of interviews and document analysis they conclude that strategic consensus, particularly at the political level, is constrained due to a lack of strategic governance and oversight. They also identify a lack of strategic leadership capacity within local government, which appears to have further constrained the implementation of strategic planning in this spatial context. Furthermore, a study by Allmendinger et al. (2016: 42) draws on interviews with local planning actors across three English regions and identifies the Duty to Cooperate as a ‘key driver’ in shaping approaches to sub-regional planning in the post-devolution governance context, however little insight is provided into precisely how (or whether, in fact) the Duty to Cooperate and its enactment has strengthened these cross-boundary collaborative planning practices.

Therefore, given the acknowledged role played by the Duty to Cooperate in ‘driving’ current configurations of cross-boundary collaboration and strategic spatial planning, there is a need to better understand precisely how this policy is interpreted and enacted by local planning actors, and the role played by this policy and the wider legislative context in constraining (or enabling) strategic spatial planning in a devolving governance context. This is an identified gap in the current literature that this research will help to fill.

In considering some of the other key changes in planning legislation that were introduced as part of central government’s ‘localism’ agenda, the introduction of the ‘weak’ Duty to Cooperate is identified as one of several changes to have contributed towards a ‘hollowing out’ of local government (Town and Country Planning Association et al., 2013: 3). It is argued that this ‘hollowing out’ is reflected in the simultaneous emphasis within planning legislation upon both the sub-local and supra-local levels, which has led to a reduction in responsibility and resource at the local authority level, and an increased centralisation of the ‘rules’ guiding strategic planning practices and decision-making (Rozee, 2014). With the adoption of the

Neighbourhood Planning Act 2017, for example, central government acquired the power to force groups of neighbouring authorities to prepare joint spatial strategies. The revised NPPF that was published in February 2019 also places renewed emphasis on strategic planning practice by including a requirement for planning authorities to prepare and maintain statements of common ground as evidence of the Duty to Cooperate (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2019). However, these measures are positioned alongside ongoing reductions in local authority resources as a result of budget cuts and the removal of other planning powers (Shaw & Tewdwr-Jones, 2016) including; the introduction of a ‘permission in principle’ for the development of brownfield sites; further extensions to permitted development rights; and the transferral of responsibility, in certain cases, for preparing a development plan document from the local planning authority to the upper tier county council or Combined Authority.

The effect of these changes in national planning legislation and the ‘hollowing out’ of local government upon locally-led practices of strategic spatial planning have been discussed in research by Gallent et al. (2013), which reveals how the so-called ‘down-scaling’ of spatial planning away from top-down RSS to bottom-up, locally-driven approaches has resulted in an end to cross-border cooperation in some areas, particularly in relation to planning for housing. Valler et al. (2012) also identify how, even in the early days of ‘localism’, policy approaches continued to be informed by previous regional policy frameworks, thus indicating that locally driven strategic spatial planning approaches were partly constrained by availability of resources. However, as noted previously in respect of the Duty to Cooperate, much of the existing literature that examines the legislative and policy changes that have shaped recent practices of strategic spatial planning fail to consider in detail how these changes are interpreted and understood at the level of the local planning actor, and as such, how these contextual changes have helped to shape; day-to-day strategic planning practices; the emergence and reformation of spatial coalitions; and in some cases the establishment of more formalised strategic spatial planning approaches. In order to further refine the overarching aim of this research, the following section examines some of these more formalised approaches to strategic spatial planning that have emerged in a devolving governance context, identifies what the literature tells us about these practices, and acknowledges the key gaps in our knowledge of these practices.

### **2.3.3 Strategic spatial planning practices in a devolving governance context: A diversity of practice and opportunity for innovation?**

Positioning LEPs, Combined Authorities and other existing institutions alongside local planning authorities has created an increasingly complex network of strategic planning actors and organisational structures and, some argue, a ‘rescaling’ of territorial relations (Beel et al., 2018). As the Raynsford Review states; ‘It is hard to imagine a more complex and diverse institutional structure in which to try to conduct strategic planning’ (Raynsford Review Task Force, 2018: 28). These complexities are reflected in the wide-ranging sets of strategic planning practices that have emerged and the ‘new planning spaces’ (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2013) through which these practices are being enacted. This section provides an overview of the types of strategic planning practices that are currently emerging in the English planning context and

considers what we know about how these practices are being shaped and informed by the devolving governance context.

The ambition to pursue strategic spatial planning beyond that required to fulfil the Duty to Cooperate has so far been limited to a few voluntary ‘experiments’ (Bafarasat & Baker, 2016), some of which have been coordinated through the newly devolved governance structures (the LEP or Combined Authority, where one exists), whereas others have developed through voluntary collaborative arrangements established between individual local authorities (for example, in the preparation of a Joint Spatial Plan).

Prominent examples include the case of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, which was granted statutory planning powers through its Devolution Deal and where a spatial framework is currently being prepared by the Combined Authority (Colomb & Tomaney, 2018); the most recent draft having been published for consultation in January 2019. Other areas that have received devolved powers to develop a spatial development strategy (under a similar approach to that in Greater London) include the Liverpool City Region and the West of England Combined Authorities (HM Government, 2018). In Liverpool City Region it is understood that progress is being made, and their ambition is to publish a strategy by 2021 (Dewar, 2018). Initial progress by the West of England Combined Authority was understood to have been limited, particularly because a draft Joint Spatial Strategy was already being prepared by the four local authorities based on their history of voluntary collaboration on strategic spatial planning (as detailed in Boddy & Hickman, 2012, 2013). This Joint Spatial Strategy does not completely align with the geography of the Combined Authority, which comprises only three of the four authorities, and therefore matters of how this would relate to a spatial development strategy prepared by the Combined Authority remain unresolved.

The Sheffield City Region and Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authorities have also been granted powers to develop non-statutory spatial frameworks as part of their Devolution Deals (Sandford, 2018). No progress on a spatial framework has been made in Sheffield City Region, for reasons uncovered as part of this research. In Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, however, there has been a strong history of cross-boundary working and coalition building that continued to support a ‘path dependent’ form of strategic collaboration following the RSS abolition, as detailed in the work of Boddy & Hickman (2014, 2016) (building on the earlier work of Healey, 2007). These collaborative practices subsequently resulted in the Combined Authority adopting a non-statutory strategic spatial framework in March 2018.

Attempts at non-statutory strategic spatial planning have also been implemented in areas where no formal powers have been devolved. For example, in the Greater Birmingham and Solihull LEP area, authorities were working together to develop a Spatial Plan for Recovery and Growth; an approach that was described by the Head of Planning Strategy at Birmingham City Council as a form of ‘strategic localism’ (Carter, 2014). Despite being heralded initially by the Planning Advisory Service as a good example of local authorities’ fulfilment of the Duty to Cooperate through voluntary collaborative working (Planning Advisory Service, 2011), limited progress appears to have been made since the consultation draft was published in 2013 and its current status is unclear. These examples demonstrate that whilst a number of Combined

Authorities have been granted strategic planning powers, progress has so far been limited and take-up of voluntary strategic spatial planning within England remains patchy, meaning that the ‘strategic gap’ has yet to be filled.

By presenting case study-based examinations of local level responses to changes in strategic governance arrangements and associated planning reform, a number of further studies (including O’Brien, 2019; Allmendinger et al., 2016; Bafarasat & Baker, 2015, 2016, Boddy & Hickman, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2016; Valler et al., 2012) have also begun to reveal how local planning actors have responded to the changes in governance and legislation that have taken place since 2010, and in light of these responses, these studies comment on the variety of strategic spatial planning practices and cross-boundary collaborative partnerships and coalitions have emerged within these specific contexts.

However, despite these insights there remain significant gaps in our understanding of precisely *how* these strategic planning practices emerged, and *how* these practices and outcomes were informed by actors’ responses to the evolving legislative, governance and spatio-political contexts in which they found themselves. As such, the practices of strategic spatial planning that are emerging in the current post-devolution context remain under-researched, not least because this context and the strategic spatial planning practices taking place within it are continuing to evolve. Furthermore, the case studies that have been presented to date are mainly confined to ‘growth’ areas (such as Oxford or Cambridgeshire) or areas that have ‘pioneered’ a formalised approach to strategic spatial planning through a Combined Authority (such as Greater Manchester). There is therefore value in studying practices in other locations in order to acquire a more rounded definition of contemporary strategic spatial planning practice in England.

Within the studies reviewed above, there has also been little discussion of the role of new governance spaces in shaping practices of strategic spatial planning and their interrelationship with local planning authorities. Through a series of macro-level narratives, a number of commentators have suggested that the new spaces of governance represented by LEPs and Combined Authorities might present an opportunity for ‘innovation’ or ‘adaptability’ in strategic spatial planning practice (McGuinness & Mawson, 2017; Haughton & Allmendinger, 2013). Similarly, Pugalis et al. (2015) identify LEPs as ‘important actors in the sphere of planning’ (p.48), whilst Pugalis & Townsend (2013) recognise the scalar geography of LEPs as having a potentially significant role in planning at the supra-local, sub-national scale. Despite these identified opportunities, Allmendinger & Haughton (2010) question the potential role of sub-regional governance structures in shaping practices of strategic spatial planning due to the issues of local contestation, contingency and power struggles that inevitably come into play. Rozee (2014) also questions whether the new institutions established under the ‘localism’ agenda are capable of continuing to support a strategic approach to spatial planning, notably because the LEPs are described as being ‘poorly related’ (p.135) to local planning authorities and because strategies being prepared through these institutions are predominantly aspatial.



Much of this literature that considers the interface between the newly devolved governance structures (LEPs and Combined Authorities), local planning authorities and strategic spatial planning practices are ‘high level’ studies that are not empirically grounded, but instead based on conjecture of what the role of Combined Authorities and LEPs in shaping strategic spatial planning practices ‘might be’. As such, this review has revealed a significant gap in the literature; notably the need for greater empirical evidence to support an understanding of the forces that are shaping how practices of strategic spatial planning or ‘strategic localism’ are enabled or constrained in the context of these new governance structures. In particular, an understanding of how sub-regional governance structures, local planning authorities and local planning actors interact in shaping strategic decision-making through the Duty to Cooperate and other voluntary forms of strategic spatial planning, is something that has not yet been explicitly revealed within existing literature. A more detailed insight into the ‘micro-practices’<sup>1</sup> (Healey, 2010) of strategic spatial planning that are being formed and enacted by local planning actors would build upon existing literature by providing detailed insights into the processes through which ‘new planning spaces’ are formed and enacted, and offer a means of better understanding the complexities that are continuing to emerge through the fluid and evolving governance context. This is therefore a key potential area of contribution for this research.

#### **2.3.4 Summary**

In summary, this review of existing literature has revealed several gaps in our understanding of the strategic spatial planning practices that are emerging in the devolving English governance context. These noted gaps include a lack of detailed empirical evidence that examines:

- a) the actor-level ‘micro-practices’ (Healey, 2010) through which strategic planning practices are enacted;
- b) the role of the changing legislative and policy context in shaping strategic spatial planning practices, including the role of the Duty to Cooperate;
- c) the interactions between local planning actors and newly devolved governance structures (such as Combined Authorities) in the context of strategic spatial planning; and
- d) strategic spatial planning in ‘ordinary’ geographic contexts that are currently under-researched.

The reasons why some local planning authorities take the decision to engage in ‘proper’ strategic planning (whether through the Combined Authority or other voluntary forms of collaboration), whilst others choose to fulfil only the minimum requirements necessary to ‘tick’ the Duty to Cooperate box, still very much represents the ‘black box’ of strategic spatial planning. By filling in some of the ‘gaps’ identified previously, this research may help us to better understand the differential take-up of ‘strategic localism’, including the circumstances in which these decisions are made, and how strategic spatial planning activity is approached

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Micro-practices’ not only include those activities traditionally defined in the literature as ‘plan-making’ or ‘plan-implementing’, but also include the ‘every-day’ planning activities, processes or interactions that are continually played-out by local planning actors acting within and between organisations, and across administrative boundaries, such as knowledge and information-sharing, negotiation, and problem-solving.

by local planning actors acting within local planning authorities and alongside newly devolved governance structures in a climate of increasing coercion and austerity. These identified ‘gaps’ in our understanding of strategic spatial planning in the English planning context of devolving governance have therefore informed the overarching aim of this research, which is:

To understand, through the analysis of detailed empirical evidence, how the devolving governance structures and other strategic contextual changes that have emerged in England in recent years are being understood and interpreted at the local planning actor level; and how sub-regional strategic spatial planning practices are being enacted within this changing context.

The following section introduces some of the key literature taken from the UK and further afield that attempts to look inside the ‘black box’ of strategic spatial planning by theorising the relationship between strategic planning practices and the spaces and structures of devolving governance through which they emerge, and which has therefore assisted in further refining the objectives of the research and identifying a series of research questions.

## **2.4 Theorising change in strategic spatial planning**

As demonstrated in previous discussions, strategic spatial planning in England is in a state of flux. However, similar changes in strategic spatial planning practice have also been observed throughout Western Europe, as evidenced in the work of Albrechts, 2006, 2009, Healey, 1997, 2004, 2009; Albrechts et al., 2003; Faludi & Salet, 2000. Many of these studies note a ‘revival’ of strategic spatial planning having emerged since the late 1990s, which has sparked a growing body of theoretical and empirical literature aimed at breaking down the complexities and enhancing our understandings of strategic spatial planning; from practices of plan-making through to plan-implementation and strategic planning governance.

Having previously examined the empirical literature set within the English planning context, this section explores some of the wider theoretical literature that conceptualises various aspects of the strategic planning process, which may have useful applications in the context of this research. The literature reviewed in this section is divided into three themes that were drawn from within the literature itself (and were later reinforced through findings of the research) as concepts that might help us to understand some of the recent changes that have emerged in English strategic spatial planning practice and governance. The findings from this review have been used to refine the research questions that are outlined in section 2.5.

### **2.4.1 Transforming practices of strategic spatial planning: an era of neoliberalisation and post-politics**

This first theme discusses the macro-dynamics that are shaping processes of state rescaling and forms of strategic governance and which, some claim, have resulted in the recent shifts in strategic spatial planning that have been observed across Western Europe. The key words that permeate much of the literature, and that are introduced here in the context of strategic spatial planning, are ‘neoliberalism’ and ‘post-politics’.

Neoliberalism may be broadly defined as a ‘political economic ideology’ (Olesen, 2014: 290) that has shaped numerous forms of ‘market-led regulatory restructuring across places, territories and scales’ (Brenner et al., 2010: 183). Allmendinger & Haughton (2012) argue that spatial planning in England is increasingly reflective of a neoliberal form of governance, which rather than being driven by the deliberative or consensus-building approaches that underpinned ‘communicative’ or ‘collaborative’ forms of planning (see for example Healey, 1992), is increasingly constrained and carefully managed to achieve certain aims. These aims are frequently presented as being the preservation of society’s wider interests or the pursuit of ‘sustainable development’, but this often masks the neoliberal political ideology that underpins a government’s policy decisions.

Within the *realpolitik* of neoliberal governance, for example, planning is often framed as inefficient (Mäntysalo & Backlund, 2018) and therefore many of the attempts to remove regulation or minimise ‘red tape’ in the planning system (Roze, 2014) are implemented with the objective of pursuing economic growth. Some commentators assert that the LEPs and Combined Authorities share characteristics indicative of a wider trend towards ‘neoliberal localisation’ (Brenner & Theodore, 2002) or the ‘neoliberalisation’ of urban governance (Olesen, 2014; Davoudi & Madanipour, 2013); as reflected in these structures’ tendency towards decentralisation, a reduced role of the state, and spaces of governance that are increasingly characterised by competitiveness, financial austerity and privatisation. It has also been observed that these structures have resulted in a further institutional fragmentation of urban regional governance (Mäntysalo et al., 2015).

This neoliberal trend is further evidenced in the UK government’s decision to transfer, or ‘devolve’, powers to local authorities through a series of ‘deals’ focused primarily around the delivery of economic growth objectives. These deals may be considered to reflect what Davoudi & Madanipour (2013) refer to as ‘technologies of agency’; part of a ‘toolkit’ of neoliberal governmentality that mobilises the agency of groups of local authorities, enabling them to plan for and shape economic growth. However, these ‘technologies of agency’ are said to be granted alongside ‘technologies of performance’, which simultaneously regulate these bottom-up actions to ensure that they meet the overall top-down objectives of central government (Davoudi & Madanipour, 2013), as reflected, for example, in the requirement of (most) Combined Authorities to elect a mayor.

Further observations of the neoliberalisation of strategic spatial planning are presented by Oliveira & Hersperger (2018) who note the growing significance of funding mechanisms in shaping processes of plan-making and plan implementation. They also recognise how strategic spatial planning is increasingly business-led rather than public sector-led. This can be seen in the private-sector focus of the LEPs and the threat posed by a Combined Authority’s failure to agree a Devolution Deal, in terms of its inability to access funding. The potential implications of financial resource availability for strategic spatial planning also has particular significance in the English planning context given the austerity measures imposed by central government as a means of reducing public debts. Pike et al. (2016) found that this so-called ‘austerity state’ contributed towards the processes of state rescaling and the introduction of new institutional arrangements,

including the simultaneous decentralisation from national to city regional and local levels, and (re)centralisation from these sub-national levels back to the national level. This can be seen in the UK government's devolution of certain powers to Combined Authorities (such as the ability to prepare a strategic spatial plan, if desired), whilst they also retain control over deciding which groups of authorities will be granted this power and on what terms (such as the requirement to have an elected mayor).

Olesen (2014) identifies a key challenge presented by neoliberal forms of strategic spatial planning as the ability to 'keep politics in play'. A failure to meet this challenge has been interpreted by some as the emergence of an era of 'post-politics' in spatial and economic urban governance, in which decision-making is seen as a superficial or managerial exercise undertaken by only a select group of 'policy elites', with limited opportunity for debate, contestation or wider citizen engagement (Etherington & Jones, 2018; Deas, 2014; Allmendinger & Haughton, 2012). It is argued that this has been observed to some extent in the post-devolution English planning context, in which decisions on controversial strategic planning issues, such as planning for housing, are in some cases being deferred away from local authority planning actors (including officers and locally elected members) towards private sector or non-state actors based within sub-regional governance structures (in the case of strategic spatial plans being prepared by Combined Authorities) or local communities (in the case of neighbourhood plans) (Deas, 2013).

In progressing this research, it will therefore be important to reflect on this broader context and the role that neoliberal and 'post-political' forms of governance, as well as the broader context of austerity, might play in shaping contemporary spaces and forms of strategic spatial planning in the English planning context. These concepts may prove particularly useful in examining why certain policy agendas are promoted over others, how governance structures are formed, and why certain actors are engaged in decision-making processes (and their role in relation to these) whilst others are excluded. There is currently little empirical research that considers the extent to which 'post-political' forms of governance have penetrated practices of strategic spatial planning in the English planning context, which therefore presents a further opportunity for this research to contribute to existing literature.

#### **2.4.2 Changing scales and spaces of planning governance**

This second theme draws on literature that theorises the new spaces and scales of governance, and processes of state restructuring that are emerging in the context of strategic spatial planning. A number of authors have undertaken detailed analyses of the complex processes of state rescaling that are shaping contemporary arrangements of urban and regional governance, including for example Harrison & Macleavy, 2010; Brenner, 2004 and Macleod & Goodwin, 1999. The more recent of these studies note a reorientation of spatial governance structures within Western Europe towards 'meso-level' strategies that focus on the development of urban areas by promoting local economic growth and increased competition between places (While et al., 2013; Brenner, 2009). Such a process of state rescaling is reflected in the UK government's reorganisation of sub-national governance and the creation of new sub-regional institutions. Gore (2018) describes these changes in local and regional governance structures as reflecting a 'spectrum' between the

restructuring of sub-national governance imposed by central government on the one hand (a process which Jessop (2016) refers to as ‘metagovernance’, or the ‘governance of governance’), and the voluntary collaborations embarked on by local authorities on the other. These changes have also resulted in a shift in central-local government relations (Macleod & Goodwin, 1999); a shift which Valler et al. (2012) warns is liable to further change given the continually evolving (and devolving) nature of sub-national governance in England.

The processes of state rescaling that are accompanying the ongoing devolution to city regions have been described as ‘complex, multilayered and fluid’ (Harrison, 2012: 1245). In order to unpick some of these complexities, the strategic relational approach (SRA) developed by Jessop (2007, 2016) provides a means of understanding some of the political and economic restructuring processes that have been observed in Western Europe in recent years, including processes of ‘denationalisation’ and the ‘hollowing out’ of the nation state. Whilst the restructuring that has occurred in the UK governance context reflects more of a ‘deregionalisation’ and ‘hollowing out’ of local government (as discussed in section 2.3.2), the theoretical approach to understanding changing state-spatial relations introduced by Jessop is applicable at different scales and across different territories, as exemplified in Goodwin et al. (2005), and therefore may be usefully applied in the context of this research (as discussed in Chapter 3).

The SRA is further developed by Jessop et al. (2008) in the TPSN framework, which identifies four key dimensions (Territory, Place, Scale and Network) that the authors argue should be taken into account when theorising socio-spatial relations. By emphasising the ‘mutually constitutive’ and ‘relationally intertwined’ nature of these dimensions, this framework was developed in an attempt to overcome the methodological one-dimensionalism which the authors argue tends to permeate studies that examine the spatialities of state governance (Jessop et al., 2008: 389). Whilst this was considered a potential framework upon which to base this research, I ultimately concluded that (in line with the critiques of Varro, 2014 and Paasi, 2008) it was unsuitable because a) by bracketing each of the dimensions, the TPSN framework artificially constrains examination of the interrelationship between them, and b) the framework is too structuralist as it fails to properly account for the potential role of agents in inciting, interpreting and responding to change<sup>1</sup>. The four dimensions it alludes to however have undeniable significance in the socio-spatial governance relations that shape strategic spatial planning, and as such have been referred to, where relevant, throughout this research (albeit not explicitly in relation to the TPSN framework).

Developing an understanding of changes in the spatiality of state action, particularly the interrelationships that are evolving between different scales of governance (i.e. the sub-regional and the local), is important for enhancing understandings of spatial planning practice; as Gualini (2010: 76) suggests, the creation of new governance spaces ‘redefines the nexus between politics and spatiality’. In examining these ‘new planning spaces’ of contemporary spatial governance, Allmendinger & Haughton (2009, 2010, 2013) distinguish between formal, or ‘hard’ spaces of statutory planning governance and the informal, or ‘soft’ spaces of

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<sup>1</sup> The ‘structure-agency’ debate is continued in Chapter 3 which introduces the conceptual framework that has been developed for this research.

planning governance that do not have formal planning powers but that are ‘intertwined’ with these formal spaces and reflect the increasingly complex network of relational geographies that make up the contemporary landscape of English planning practice (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2010). These interrelations are exemplified in the recognition that ‘much of the real work of planning takes place outside the formal system for planning, but necessarily with strong linkages to it’ (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2009: 632). Others have utilised the concept of ‘soft spaces’ in their examination of strategic spatial planning practices, including McGuinness & Mawson (2017) whose research acknowledges the potential for emerging sub-regional government structures (including LEPs and Combined Authorities) and other ‘soft spaces’ of governance, to deliver strategic spatial planning, but notes that these structures need time to ‘settle’. Pugalis et al. (2015) and Pugalis & Townsend (2013) draw similar conclusions in their examination of the role of LEPs in the English planning system, pointing to the potential of ‘soft spatial frameworks’ as a means of filling the strategic planning ‘void’.

The concepts of ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ used in reference to spaces of planning governance are useful for distinguishing between the practices that emerge within the formal, statutory spaces of planning and those that develop through informal, less rigidly bounded, relational spaces of planning; and as such, have applicability in this research. However, these concepts remain weakly theorised in existing literature. In particular, this review identifies a need to better define these concepts in relation to our understandings of: how local planning actors work within and between ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ spaces of governance at a practical level; whether these spaces are permanent or transitory; and, whether the properties of ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ are mutually exclusive, or whether a governance space can be both, or somewhere in between. This research therefore presents a significant opportunity to further refine these theoretical concepts through empirical evidence gathered in the context of the new spaces of sub-regional strategic planning governance, including Combined Authorities.

In summary, the literature and concepts introduced in this section may be applied in the context of this research to develop an understanding of the multi-scalar nature of strategic spatial planning governance, including the interrelations and interactions between local, city region and national scales and spaces of governance. The concepts of ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ planning spaces may also assist in the examination of how strategic spatial planning practices are formed, negotiated and enacted within and between these spaces. Finally, this research presents an opportunity to further refine these theorisations of change in scales and spaces of spatial planning governance through the analysis of empirical evidence.

### **2.4.3 Evolving territorial and relational spatialities of strategic spatial planning**

This third theme introduces theorisations of the spatialities of strategic spatial planning and discusses how these might be applied in the context of this research. Broadly speaking, recent literature distinguishes between two types of space that have relevance in the practice of strategic spatial planning; relational space and territorial space. The concept of ‘relational space’ was introduced to the study of strategic spatial planning during the ‘relational turn’ in planning theory in which the traditional Euclidean notions of

bounded, 'container' space were rejected in favour of an approach that recognised the dynamic, diverse, contingent and interlinked nature of socio-spatial interactions and spaces of planning practice and governance (see for example Healey, 2004, 2006a; Graham & Healey, 1999). This relational understanding of space and place has been drawn into recent conceptualisations of strategic spatial planning, including the 'soft' spaces of planning identified by Haughton & Allmendinger (2015) that reflect a fluidity of practice in which multiple actors interact across a network of scales and organisations.

However, recent studies have identified how, alongside conceptualisations of 'relational space', 'territorial space' is understood to play an equally important role in shaping practices of strategic spatial planning (see for example, Phelps & Valler, 2018; Deas, 2014; Walsh, 2014; Faludi, 2013; Raffestin & Butler, 2012), not least because strategic spatial planning practices are embedded within structures of political and democratic decision-making (Walsh, 2014), often defined by administrative boundaries. In this context, territory can be considered as 'structures brought about through borders and bounding, and which give rise to divisions of 'inside' and 'outside'' (Healey, 2013: 1328). Whilst the concepts of territorial space and relational space are, as here, often defined separately, there is a growing recognition that these spaces are closely interlinked and that spaces of strategic spatial planning are both relational *and* territorial.

Hincks et al. (2017), for example, describe such spaces of strategic spatial planning as 'polymorphic' because they involve 'the interaction of bounded territorial units with unbounded political, economic and social processes' (p.644). In other words, the practices that are enacted between actors often do not align with 'hard' territorial boundaries but occur within 'soft spaces' (Ibid.). Paasi & Zimmerbauer (2016) describe this as the 'paradox' of strategic planning, in which planners are increasingly encouraged to work within and between 'soft', relational spaces whilst being simultaneously constrained within governance and political systems that are territorially bounded and often represent different spatial geographies. They go on to suggest that the borders between different planning spaces may therefore best be described as 'penumbral' as they only are manifested or enacted in certain situations or when undertaking certain practices. Painter (2010) goes a step further in examining the interrelations between different types of space by suggesting that territorial and relational spaces do not just co-exist, but they are formed of one another, describing territory as 'a product of relational networks' (p.1090). These notions of territorial and relational space will have relevance in this research, particularly in terms of providing a means of conceptualising the new spaces of strategic spatial planning and sub-regional governance that are emerging, and how these spaces are enabling or constraining practices of strategic spatial planning.

A number of studies have been published that consider the interactions between 'soft' relational spaces and the 'hard' territorial spaces in the context of city regionalism (see for example Haughton & Allmendinger, 2015). Many of these studies invoke the term 'spatial imaginary' as a means of describing how 'soft' relational spaces (as well as 'hardened' territorial spaces) are represented and performed in these contexts. Davoudi et al. (2018: 101) define spatial imaginaries as 'deeply held, collective understandings of socio-spatial relations that are performed by, give sense to, make possible and change collective socio-spatial

practices’; thus suggesting that these spatial imaginaries have the potential to become institutionalised<sup>1</sup> and acquire a certain ‘structuring power’. The ability of spatial imaginaries to shape action is discussed, for example, in a study by O’Brien (2019) who identifies how institutionally embedded spatial imaginaries, such as that of the Mersey Belt in the North West of England, provide a stable ‘frame of meaning’ that informs the policy response of local planning actors and demonstrates a resistance to change, including being usurped by newly-formed imaginaries.

The processes of institutionalisation of spatial imaginaries are discussed in further detail by Metzger & Schmitt (2012) and Harrison et al. (2017), the latter of which discusses how some regional spatial imaginaries remain ‘soft’, whereas others ‘harden’ and become institutionally embedded. This concept of ‘hardening’ or ‘institutionalisation’ of spatial imaginaries has also been applied in the work of Varro (2014) and their study of cross-border regional governance in the borderlands between Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands. Varro identifies how the institutionalisation of spatial imaginaries is informed by a range of factors including; institutionalised power relations, path-dependent and structurally-inscribed ‘strategic selectivities’<sup>2</sup>, the range of sites within which these imaginaries are implanted, and their alignment with the ‘spatial consciousness’ of local planning actors. The concept of spatial imaginaries is further considered by Hincks et al. (2017) which (in a similar way to O’Brien, 2019) traces the processes through which the Mersey Belt is institutionalised as a territorial imaginary. This research considers how the region is built through the production of ‘soft spatial imaginaries’, arguing that the process of institution building is key to giving recognition to these imaginaries and enabling them to become stabilised. This process of stabilisation was not without its difficulties, as multiple territories and soft spaces were seen to concurrently exist, which invoked contestation and the demise of particular territorial imaginaries as others endured and became further embedded (Ibid.). The process of making and embedding spatial imaginaries discussed here also highlights some of the conflicts between ways of thinking about space in territorial terms (with fixed administrative or political boundaries) and in relational terms (with more fluid boundaries).

Whilst there is a growing body of literature that considers the role of political territories and ‘spatial imaginaries’ in a devolving, sub-regional governance context, it is considered that there is still more that these theorisations can tell us about the nature and variety of the ‘everyday’ strategic spatial planning practices that are being enacted in particular spatial contexts. These concepts may therefore provide a useful tool for understanding how territorial and relational spaces of strategic spatial planning are understood by local planning actors, how these spaces are evolving, and how the institutionalisation of particular spatial imaginaries might play a role in shaping practices of strategic spatial planning.

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<sup>1</sup> Processes of institutionalisation are further discussed in Chapter 3.

<sup>2</sup> Concept of ‘strategic selectivities’ is further discussed in section 3.1.4.



## 2.5 Conclusion: Justification for the research

This research is derived from an identified need to better understand how practices of strategic spatial planning are being formed in the devolving governance context of the English planning system. The review of the evolving political, legislative and governance context, together with relevant empirical and theoretical literature, undertaken in this chapter reveals a strategic context that is characterised by increasing levels of complexity, fluidity and uncertainty in terms of the changes that are taking place. I conclude that this is a context that is currently under-researched, particularly in terms of the relationships and interactions between the emerging sub-regional governance structures, the individual local planning actors, and the types and variety of strategic planning practices that are being enacted. In particular, this chapter reveals a significant lack of detailed empirical evidence that examines the following aspects of strategic spatial planning practice in a devolving governance context:

Firstly, how recent changes in legislation and policy are understood and interpreted by local planning actors, and how these inform the practices of strategic spatial planning that are being enacted. In particular, section 2.3.2 identifies little research that considers how the Duty to Cooperate has been interpreted and enacted in practice.

Secondly, how new scales and spaces of sub-regional governance (including ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ planning spaces) are developing, interacting, being interpreted and shaping practices in the context of strategic spatial planning. In particular, whilst there is discussion of the formation of the ‘soft’ spaces of planning governance and collaboration that are emerging, there is little literature that considers how the structures that are forming within and around Combined Authorities have informed local and cross-boundary planning practices.

Thirdly, to apply existing theorisations of territorial and relational space in order to better understand the changing nature of, and interrelationship between, political territories and ‘soft spatial imaginaries’ of sub-regional governance, and how these are shaping strategic spatial planning practices in a devolving governance context.

Fourthly, to date, much of the post-2010 planning literature that examines strategic spatial planning in this context is primarily concerned with providing high-level, strategic accounts of the ‘state’ of post-devolution strategic spatial planning practice and governance across England (for example, McGuinness & Mawson, 2017). This chapter has therefore identified a need to study a devolving sub-region in detail, particularly one in which a formalised approach to strategic spatial planning is less well-developed. As discussed in section 2.3, there are relatively few detailed, place-based, empirical studies of strategic spatial planning in a post-devolution context; notable exceptions being Boddy & Hickman's (2013, 2014, 2016) work on the South West and Cambridge areas, the study by Valler et al. (2012) of ‘Science Vale’ in South Oxfordshire, and more recently, O’Brien's (2019) examination of the institutionalisation of the ‘Mersey Belt’ as a regional spatial planning imaginary. Within these existing empirical studies there has also been little discussion of the role of Combined Authorities in shaping practices of strategic spatial planning and their interrelationship

with local planning authorities. As such, the practices of strategic spatial planning that are emerging in the current post-devolution context remain under-researched, not least because this context and the strategic spatial planning practices taking place within it are continuing to evolve.

Lastly, the case studies that have been presented to date are mainly confined to ‘growth’ areas, where development pressures are highest (such as the South East of England) and where a coordinated approach to strategic spatial planning has been explicitly embraced (such as Greater Manchester). This chapter therefore identifies a need to study practices in other locations, including some of the more ‘ordinary’ areas where a formalised approach to strategic spatial planning has not yet been developed, to understand why this is the case and to acquire a more rounded definition of contemporary strategic spatial planning practice in England.

### **2.5.1 Research aim and questions**

In order to fill these identified gaps in our knowledge, this research presents a study whose aim is:

To understand, through the analysis of detailed empirical evidence, how the devolving governance structures and other strategic contextual changes that have emerged in England in recent years are being understood and interpreted at the local planning actor level; and how sub-regional strategic spatial planning practices are being enacted within this changing context.

This overarching aim has been broken down into the following research questions:

1. What does it mean to ‘do’ strategic spatial planning in a devolving governance setting? What strategic spatial planning practices are being enacted and by whom?
2. How are changes in the national legislative and policy context interpreted by local planning actors, and how are these contextual changes shaping the practices of strategic spatial planning that are being enacted in a devolving governance setting?
3. What role do formal and informal governance spaces play in shaping strategic spatial planning practices in a devolving governance setting? How are these spaces interpreted by local planning actors, and to what extent do they constrain or enable cross-boundary collaboration and strategic spatial planning practices and decision-making?
4. How are political territories and spatial imaginaries created, transformed and enacted by local planning actors? What role do these spatialities play in shaping strategic spatial planning practices in a devolving governance setting?

### **2.5.2 Research approach**

In order to answer these questions, this research seeks to enter the ‘black box’ of planning (Healey, 2006: 304) by developing an actor-centred perspective to understand the nature and complexity of the everyday interactions between local planning actors and the wider strategic context, as it is these interactions which have the potential to shape the foundation of new planning spaces and the enactment of strategic planning

practices. As a contribution to contrast much of the current literature in this field, there is an identified need for a greater focus on what ‘is done’ rather than what ‘should be done’, or what local planning actors do rather than how they should do it (Holgerson, 2015; Beauregard, 2005).

As Newman (2008: 1373) states: ‘Rather than transformative action we need to pay more attention to ‘non strategic’ and less ‘successful’ day-to-day work of actors tactically pursuing interests, perceiving constraints and calculating opportunities that may have limited horizons’, which is what this research seeks to do. The research therefore focuses more on the ‘ordinary’ politics of planning rather than what Newman (2008: 1373) refers to as ‘the grander expectations of strategic spatial planning’ or what strategic spatial planning ‘should be’. This is achieved by developing a ‘fine-grained analysis’ (Lowndes, 2005) of the ‘micro-practices’ of planning (Healey, 2010). Finally, Albrechts et al. (2017) argues that despite the growing number of studies of strategic spatial planning, there is a need to further develop strategic planning theory in the context of wider practice, which it is hoped this research will go some way to achieving.

In conclusion, the research aim and questions that underpin this research are derived from a need to better understand the interactions between local planning actors, their actions, and the evolving structural contexts within which these actions are taking place. As such, this research recognises a role for both agency energy and structuring forces in shaping practices of strategic spatial planning. This dialectic relationship between structure and agency is further conceptualised in Chapter 3, which develops a theoretical framework, derived from New Institutional theory, that is used to analyse the practices observed and data acquired during this research.

### **3 | A conceptual framework for understanding strategic spatial planning practice**

The strategic spatial planning system in England is currently characterised by a period of ongoing structural change and, to some extent, uncertainty, as the previous chapter has illustrated. Shifts in national planning legislation and policy, coupled with the introduction of new and evolving organisational structures and tiers of governance, are forging new planning spaces through which strategic spatial planning practices are enacted. These changes are coupled with broader contextual shifts, including increasing pressures on local government resources as a result of state-sanctioned austerity measures, which are also influencing processes of political decision-making and increasing competition between authorities at the sub-regional level (Etherington & Jones, 2018). The legislative, organisational and governance contexts through which strategic spatial planning practices are conducted may therefore be considered fluid and unfixed, as they continue to evolve as a result of measures imposed by central government. How these structural contexts, and the changes taking place within them, are interpreted and understood by local planning actors, and how (and the extent to which) these interpretations inform the behaviours of those actors and the practices of strategic spatial planning that subsequently emerge, is what this research set out to uncover through the questions identified in section 2.5.

The complexities and fluidities of the English spatial planning system and the wider system of sub-regional governance through which strategic spatial planning practices are performed are such that this research is unable to provide a perfectly formed explanation of how every aspect of these systems works. Instead, what this research does provide is a greater understanding of how local planning actors are responding to (adapting, conforming, resisting, or in some cases, recursively reshaping) the legislative, governance and territorial changes that are emerging within these systems, and the influence this has on the strategic planning practices that are being performed. This includes an understanding of how local planning actors interact with one another, how new planning spaces are emerging and evolving, and how strategic planning practices are performed and enacted.

The purpose of this chapter is to develop a conceptual framework through which the empirical data acquired within this research is explored and analysed in order to provide a deeper level of understanding of the strategic planning practices that have been observed as part of this study. In essence, it will enable the research to answer, or at least begin to answer, the question ‘how or why did that happen?’, as opposed to merely, ‘what happened?’. This chapter outlines the process of developing this conceptual framework in a fairly significant level of detail; firstly to demonstrate a theoretically-grounded understanding of the concepts being applied; and secondly, to explain how the concepts have been applied empirically so that this framework might be usefully applied in other studies.

The process of identifying an appropriate theoretical framework is not straightforward. The inherent complexities of society and human interactions mean there is no single theory (or combination of theories) that can be used to explain every aspect of life in the ‘real world’, and likewise, there is no single theory that will ever be able to fully explain the strategic spatial planning practices observed within a particular spatial planning system. Theoretical approaches can be likened to a lens through which the world is viewed, and which clarifies or sharpens a particular aspect of it. Different lenses will adjust our vision in different ways. It is a matter of choosing which elements we want to see mostly clearly and selecting a theoretical lens that will provide that clarity. In other words, the task is to choose the lens that best enhances our understanding of how strategic spatial planning practices are enacted at the sub-regional level and is able to account for the fluidity and occasional ‘fuzziness’ of the changing governance context within which these practices are performed. The fact that different theories have different conceptual bases should not be construed as a negative, as each theory can provide its own insights through its own way of perceiving the world. It may therefore be considered appropriate to employ a combination of different, complementary theories in order to provide the range and depth of insight required into a particular phenomenon.

The intention is not for the framework developed in this chapter to be a rigid and inflexible collar that reduces the freedom to fully explore the research context, or which constrains understanding to that which can only be explained by the concepts and theories contained within it. Instead, the framework presented here is intended to be used as a heuristic frame around which the research is shaped in order to enable a deeper understanding of the practices observed. Having a loose theoretical framework is helpful as a starting point from which to begin to conceptualise, analyse and understand the actions and practices that take place in a particular context. The process of analysis then enables this theoretical framework to be further developed and refined.

The framework that is outlined in this chapter is primarily based upon concepts and theory derived from New Institutionalism. As the first step towards developing this framework, the chapter begins in section 3.1 by discussing some of the ontological assumptions underpinning the research and how spatial planning practices might be understood as the product of structure-agency interactions. Section 3.2 introduces the concept of institutions and institutionalism as a theoretical means of understanding the structure-agency interactions and practices emerging in a spatial planning system. It then discusses some of the various approaches to institutionalist theory, in particular focusing on the different incarnations of ‘New Institutionalism’. Based on a critical assessment of the institutionalist approaches that are considered most suited for use in this research, section 3.3 details the concepts that will provide a heuristic tool for exploring and understanding the empirical material gathered during the fieldwork.

### **3.1 Structure-agency interactions**

An understanding of structure-agency interactions is particularly important in the context of strategic spatial planning because planning systems comprise a diversity of social actors interacting within an inherently ‘structured’ context, represented by, for example, complex systems of legislation and policy, political

frameworks and economic markets (Servillo & Van Den Broeck, 2012; Faludi & Salet, 2000). In order to develop an understanding of strategic spatial planning practices in a devolving governance context, it is therefore firstly necessary to consider how, and to what extent, the enactment of such practices<sup>1</sup> might be understood as a function of the interactions between local planning actors and the structures that comprise the wider spatial planning system.

In other words, in order to understand why actors choose to act in a particular way or perform certain practices, consideration needs to be given to the concepts of ‘structure’ and ‘agency’, including how the interrelationship between the two is conceptualised. Whilst my ontology (my understanding of what constitutes ‘reality’) precedes my epistemology (how I go about acquiring knowledge of this ‘reality’) it should be noted that my position on the structure-agency question is by no means presented as a ‘solution’ to the structure-agency debate, but merely expresses the way I have chosen to perceive the world in the context of this research.

### **3.1.1 Understanding structure and agency**

‘Structure’ may be defined as ‘the setting within which social, political and economic events occur and acquire meaning’ (Hay, 2002: 94) and ‘agency’ may be defined as ‘the ability or capacity of an actor to act consciously and, in so doing, to attempt to realise his or her intentions’ (Hay, 2002: 94). It may therefore be useful to consider agency as the ‘conduct’ of particular actors, and structure as the ‘context’ within which these actions take place (Hay, 2011).

The extent to which the capacity of actors to act (their ‘agency’) is perceived as being the result of ‘free will’ or as being informed or influenced by other external rules or forces (‘structures’) is one of the key debates in social science theory. Approaches to understanding social action in terms of ‘structure’ and ‘agency’ may be positioned on a sliding scale between, on the one hand, those that promote a voluntarist or ‘intentionalist’ (Hay, 2002) perspective, in which all social action is perceived as arising from each independent actor’s own free will without being subject to any external structuring force; and on the other hand, those that promote a wholly determinist perspective, allowing no opportunity for independent human agency in determining their actions, as action is considered to be entirely structured (Chandler & Munday, 2016).

My understanding of the origins of social action occupies somewhat of the middle ground between the two extremities identified previously, in that I perceive social action as neither solely the creation of independent human agency, nor as completely determined by other structuring forces. Instead, I believe that social action is ‘codetermined’ (Wendt, 1987) by the interaction of both independent agents and structural forces. This understanding is supported by numerous empirical studies that identify an ‘embedded non-actorhood’ (Meyer, 2008: 789), suggesting that there is something else governing the behaviour of individual actors aside from their own free will; there are ‘structuring’ influences.

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Spatial planning practices’ are defined in section 2.1.

In the context of spatial planning systems, these structures may derive, for example, from the strategic context (economic, political, historic or socio-cultural) through which planning practices are performed, or the various formal and informal rules, regulations and modes of governance that are constructed and implemented at various geographic scales. Such structuring forces are then reflected in the patterns of behaviours and social relations that are produced and reproduced within a particular system. Therefore, in order to understand social or political phenomena (which in the case of this research includes the practice of strategic spatial planning), it is necessary to find a way of conceptualising and understanding the relationship and interactions between these structuring forces (the 'context') and the agency (or 'conduct') of planning actors present within a spatial planning system.

### **3.1.2 Structure and agency interactions: dualisms, duality and dialectics**

One of the key criticisms of early social science theories that recognised a role for both structure and agency was their tendency to treat these concepts as independent from one another, representing a 'dualism', in which one concept was often emphasised over the other. Over the course of the past fifty years or so, mainstream social science thinking has come to recognise such as 'dualism' as a potential constraint on our understanding of social action, and theorists have advanced different ways of thinking about the concepts structure and agency that avoid giving primacy to one or the other. Notable amongst these is Anthony Giddens' theory of structuration (Giddens, 1979), which eschews the concept of a structure-agency 'dualism' in favour of a means of understanding human behaviour through a 'duality of structure'. This 'duality' implies that structures both shape human action as well as being continually shaped, transformed and reproduced by it (Varelas et al., 2015).

Rather than concerning itself primarily with one of either 'structure' or 'agency', structuration theory focuses on the point at which structure and agency meet through its perception of structure as the 'product of agency in action' (Graham & Healey, 1999: 632). In other words, structure and agency are not conceived as being ontologically distinct, but as relational concepts insofar as an actor's ability or desire to act in a particular way is influenced and shaped by structural forces at the same time that these forces are being altered and transformed by the actor's actions. Structures are perceived as existing only in a 'virtual', as opposed to a 'real' sense (Giddens, 1984), but they are enacted through the reproduction and production of social action in time and space. This emphasis on the importance of spatial and temporal specificities in shaping social action has proven useful for progressing our understanding of strategic spatial planning practice, having been used as the basis for relational planning theory (see for example Healey, 2006a, 2007).

Despite its continued widespread application in the social sciences and in planning theory, structuration theory has not been devoid of critique. It has been argued that its analytical conflation of structure and agency precludes the ability to properly explore the relationship between the two concepts, if one cannot be ontologically distinguished from the other. Archer (1982), for example, suggests that structures and agency exist independently of one another, and that once social structures are 'enacted' through agency, they develop their own causal powers and can influence an agent's capacity to act, by which point these

structuring forces are considered entirely independent of the agency that produced them (Varelas et al., 2015). Archer developed this way of thinking through her work on general systems theory, and in particular, the theory of 'morphogenesis' (King, 2010).

The theory of morphogenesis is underpinned by a critical realist perspective (see for example Bhaskar, 1979), in that its 'analytical dualism' perceives structures as having a form and properties that exist outside of the practices through which they are produced (Archer, 1982). This is contrary to the view of Giddens in which structures are represented and analysed through the patterns of recurring social practices that are continually being evolved and reshaped, such that they never embody a form independent of these practices. Archer argues that this makes it difficult to account for the independence of individual actors, and the fact that some actors' actions will be constrained by certain structures (a more deterministic influence), whilst others will be empowered to act on their own free will which may lead to structural transformation (a more voluntaristic influence).

I would argue that Archer's critique of Giddens' structuration theory, and their theory of morphogenesis, fails to recognise what I believe is the main strength of Giddens' theory, which is that structure and agency are so intrinsically linked that they should not be analysed separately. Perhaps it is Archer's realist ontology that prevents this acknowledgment (rightly or wrongly) that structures do not exist outside the actions through which they are produced, and therefore proceeds to analyse these separately, thereby reinforcing the 'dualism' that Giddens' theory fought to overcome. I would however argue that Giddens' understanding of 'duality' is also not without its flaws. Whilst it does recognise an interplay between structure and agency, I believe it doesn't go far enough in recognising the true interdependence of structure and agency, exhibited through its primary focus on the role of structure in an analytical sense (the main premise of structuration theory being the 'duality of structure'). Sewell (1992) also develops this critique of Giddens' theory, which he describes as having 'too rigid causal determinism' (p.2), in which structural influences are theorised as having too much prescription over agency, and calls for the balance to be redressed and for the transformative role of actors to be given greater consideration.

Hay (2002) also criticises structuration theory for its 'methodological bracketing' of structure and agency, in which Giddens considered it was not possible to analyse both conduct and the context simultaneously, and as such one or other of the agential and structural aspects of a particular situation must be 'bracketed off' at any one time. Hay argues that this approach effectively fails to achieve its intended objective of overcoming the structure-agency 'dualism'. Bob Jessop (1990, 1996, 2007) seeks to resolve this issue of the unintentional 'bracketing' of structure and agency through his development of the strategic-relational approach (SRA) which recognises a 'dialectical' and co-constitutive relationship between structures and social action, in which practices and structures are expressed and analysed in relation to one another (Servillo & Van Den Broeck, 2012). It is this dialectical understanding of structure and agency interactions that I have chosen to apply in this research.



Within the SRA, structure and agency are understood to be relational and mutually constitutive, in that one does not exist without the other. This relational and dialectical approach helps to overcome the ontological distinctions inherent in the approaches of Archer and Giddens, by bringing agency into structure, through its recognition of a ‘structured action context’, and structure into agency, through its recognition of a ‘contextualised and situated agent’ (Hay, 2002). A further key feature of the SRA is its notion of ‘strategic selectivity’, which proposes that structures favour certain actors, strategies and identities over others, and that each strategic action represents one of a range of possible actions an actor can choose to take within a particular strategically selective context (Servillo & Van Den Broeck, 2012; Jessop, 2005, 2007). Social action is therefore understood to have the capacity to reproduce and transform strategic contexts (Jessop, 2005).

The emphasis on the strategic context, including its recognition of the spatio-temporal properties of structures and social relations (Jones, 1997) also places the SRA in a prime position for assisting in our understanding of complex political systems and the dynamics of change that occur within them (Hay, 2002). Jessop (2005) posits that social structures have inherent spatio-temporal selectivities and properties, which therefore means that structures must be studied and conceptualised *in context*, as each context has its own structurally-inscribed, spatio-temporal strategic selectivities. This is particularly relevant in this research whose primary aim is to understand processes occurring within a complex planning system, as applied to a particular spatial context, and which continues to be subject to change over time.

The key relationship, as determined by the SRA, is the interaction between *strategic actors* and the *strategic contexts* within which they are situated, rather than the relationship between structure and agency itself (Hay, 2011). This transcendence from abstract concepts of ‘structure’ and ‘agency’ to more concrete notions of ‘actors’ and ‘contexts’ has the potential to assist with methodological applications of this theory (as reflected in the research questions defined in section 2.5). However, as Jessop (2007) himself acknowledges, the SRA is more of a ‘general heuristic’ than a fully formed theory; and therefore understanding what happens at the point of interaction between these actors and their strategic contexts (in order to answer the question of ‘why do actors behave in certain ways?’) requires a further set of theoretical and conceptual tools that build on the structure-agency dialectic introduced through the SRA. Therefore, in order to examine the dialectical interaction of the strategic context and strategic actors, this research draws on concepts derived from New Institutional theory.

### **3.2 Introducing institutions and institutionalist theory**

The term ‘institution’, in its broadest sense, may refer to a structuring entity that forms part of the strategic context and which constrains or shapes actor behaviour in some way (Berman, 2013). An important factor in developing the theoretical framework to underpin this research was its ability to represent an analytical balance between examining the roles of both structure and agency, without emphasising one over the other; therefore some might argue that institutionalist theory, by its very definition, gives primacy to the role of structural forces. However, as the discussion in this section illustrates, some institutionalist theories are more

(or less) determinist than others, and I have sought to ensure that the theoretical framework developed in this chapter is analytically representative of the ‘middle ground’ between voluntarism and determinism.

I also wanted to incorporate a way of thinking about ‘structure’ (or ‘institutions’) and ‘agency’ that highlights their interdependence, the role of spatio-temporal specificities and capacity for change; reflecting a theoretical grounding in the ‘dialectical’ and ‘strategically selective’ approach of the SRA described in the previous section. Concepts derived from constructivist and historical forms of institutionalism most closely align with these criteria, and have subsequently been drawn into the framework outlined in section 3.3.

### **3.2.1 Strategic spatial planning as an institutionalised practice**

As a local governance-based system, strategic spatial planning is considered by many to be an institutionally embedded field in that its practices are formed and enacted by actors situated and operating in an institutionalised context (Reimer, 2013; Healey, 2007; Alexander, 2005; Beauregard, 2005; Sartorio, 2005) or institutional ‘matrix’ (Lowndes, 2009). The word ‘institution’ in this sense does not refer to specific organisations but to structures or structuring forces that play a role in constraining or enabling actor behaviour. These might include, for example; ‘formal’ governance arrangements, rules and regulations; or ‘informal’ conventions, ‘cultures’ (Othengrafen & Reimer, 2013) and ‘schemas’ (Sewell, 1992) whose effects are exhibited through routinised practices and repeated patterns of behaviour.

Institutionalist theory provides a useful means of analysing how social practices and behaviours arise in an urban governance and spatial planning system context by advocating the presence of institutions; a theoretical construct whose key properties include a potentiality to interact with, influence or ‘structure’ human action. Institutionalist theory also provides a mechanism through which change (and indeed, stabilities) in social systems might be understood, through analysing how change is enacted (or resisted) within institutions and within the broader institutional context through which social action takes place; although some institutionalist theories are better at accounting for such processes of change and stability than others, as section 3.2.2 will discuss.

The application of institutionalist approaches in planning or urban political theory initially grew in popularity during the 1980s as a theoretical response to the increasing complexity of the range of groups and actors involved in the coordination and enactment of local government and planning processes, and the recognition that power no longer resided solely in the hands of local politicians (Lowndes, 2009). Institutions came to be viewed as a key concept in explaining human action, decisions and changes in political systems (Peters, 2005), and institutionalist approaches have since been employed by a number of planning researchers as a means of examining the nature and dynamics of planning governance, including processes of transitional governance and planning system change (see for example Sorensen, 2014; Taylor, 2013; Healey, 2004a, 2007; González & Healey, 2005). As Lowndes (2008) states, New Institutional theory is well-suited to the analysis of urban politics because it enables the analysis of:

- ‘The overarching rules of local governance;
- The complex nature of local governance environments;
- The contested and uncertain nature of local governance change.’ (p.157)

Despite these purported benefits, institutionalist approaches have not experienced widespread application in empirical planning research most likely due to concerns that institutionalist theory is too ‘structuralist’ (Rhodes, 2010) and ‘governance-centred’ (Boelens, 2010), and that it neglects the role of agency in shaping action. Contemporary planning theorists have instead tended towards more communicative and pragmatic approaches that, whilst in some cases borrow concepts from institutionalist theory<sup>1</sup>, focus primarily on the agency of individuals; or policy analysis and rational planning approaches that focus on outputs and decisions as a means of examining planning systems and practice.

Where institutionalist theory has been more readily applied, for example, in studies of political science or international relations, its application has tended to be primarily focused at the macro-level, as a means of examining shifts in national level policies and change over significant periods of time. Few studies consider the effect of institutional forces upon actions at the micro-level. This research will therefore demonstrate how an analytical approach grounded in New Institutional theory can contribute to our understanding of how local level actions emerge within a broader structured context. This approach also attempts to strike a balance between the more agency-centred or rigidly structuralist approaches by developing an understanding of how strategic spatial planning practices might be shaped as a product of both the constraining and/or enabling forces inherent in the spatio-temporally-situated, institutionally-structured contexts through which they emerge; and actors’ framings of these contexts relative to their own ideas and interests. The following sections elaborate the key tenets of New Institutional theory and briefly critique the most commonly used approaches that are bracketed within this heading, together with the ontological and epistemological assumptions that underpin them, before identifying those that were considered most suited for use within this research.

### **3.2.2 Institutional theory**

Institutionalist theory can be broadly separated into two distinct forms. The first institutional approaches, often referred to as ‘old’ or ‘traditional’, were highly structuralist; maintaining the structuring properties of formal institutions and rules as the prime determinants of human behaviour, and providing little scope for the role of agents in shaping their actions and institutionalised contexts. These approaches were widely criticised for their focus on institutional fixity and an inability to recognise dynamism and change in institutional structures. New Institutional theory was initially derived from the political, social and organisational sciences (Sorensen, 2018; Faludi & Salet, 2000; March & Olsen, 1996) as a response to these concerns; recognising a need to acknowledge the role of institutional forces in shaping action, whilst at the same time giving greater recognition to the agency of actors in attributing meaning to and shaping these structuring

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<sup>1</sup> For example, see Patsy Healey’s ‘collaborative planning’ (Healey, 2006b)

forces (Lowndes, 2009). The key characteristic of any New Institutional theory, therefore, is that it rejects structural determinism and instead seek to balance the views of institutions as structures that fully constrain human action, and of institutions as ‘malleable tools in the hands of powerful actors’ (Capoccia, 2016: 1100), although there is often still some discrepancy in terms of where on this scale each approach resides. New Institutional approaches also differ from those of traditional institutionalism in their recognition of the role of informal conventions and normative values, as well as formal rules, in shaping human action.

A review of recent academic literature reveals numerous forms of New Institutionalism, each of which is rooted in different traditions and disciplines of social science and different ontological perspectives. As a result, each theory tends to adopt (sometimes only slightly) different views on key conceptualisations, such as their understanding of structuring forces, agency and their interactions, the role of power, and explanations of institutional change (Sorensen, 2018; Bell, 2017). In light of these nuanced conceptualisations, it is useful to conceive of these different approaches as ‘loose camps’ (Pierson, 2004) or ‘schools of thought’ (Hall & Taylor, 1996) as opposed to clearly defined theories.

Four of the most prominent New Institutional schools of thought in contemporary social theory include those commonly referred to as rational choice institutionalism, sociological institutionalism, historical institutionalism and constructivist (or discursive) institutionalism. These approaches broadly reflect a spectrum between what Hall & Taylor (1996) refer to as the ‘calculus’ approach on one side, in which institutions are reproduced and persist because agents perceive them as providing optimal outputs, and the ‘cultural’ approach on the other side, in which institutions persist because they are ingrained in social life. Rational choice institutionalism falls more towards the former, calculus approach, and sociological institutionalism towards the latter cultural approach. Historical institutionalism and constructivist institutionalism fall somewhere between the two, focusing on ‘strategic action’ in which the institutional context favours certain actions over others, as opposed to action being solely the result of calculation or socially-inscribed cultural preferences. A brief critique of each of these predominant theoretical ‘camps’ is provided below.

### **3.2.3 Rational choice institutionalism**

Rational choice institutionalists focus on the formation of institutions by ‘rational’ actors who seek to maximise their interests, and whose actions are shaped by formal and informal socially constructed rules. Rational choice institutionalism most closely reflects the ‘calculus’ approach defined previously, and is linked to rational choice theory, in which action is based on the ‘logic of consequence’, where the behaviour of actors is based on what they interpret as delivering the best output, and hence being the most ‘rational’ choice. This perspective implies that institutions do not directly produce behaviour, but that they shape the context of a situation and provide incentives that influence which actions are selected by independent actors, acting in their own interests (Lowndes, 2009). This approach can be useful for predicting what actions may arise based on assessing individual actors’ perceptions of the anticipated outcomes.

Its applicability for use in the study of strategic planning practice is, however, limited by the fact that it fails to make sufficient allowances for the role of political power, which is contested as being one of the key forces shaping spatial planning practice (Metzger et al., 2017; Flyvbjerg, 2002; Yiftachel, 2001). It also makes the assumption that institutional change arises primarily as a result of market forces, which, whilst this may have useful applications in understanding those aspects of planning that are more economically-driven, such as land use studies (Sorensen, 2018), I would argue does not sufficiently reflect the changes in planning systems that arise as a result of political or cultural shifts. Its lack of focus on the role of power and recognition of the wider strategic context therefore make this theory incompatible with the main subject and objective of this research.

#### **3.2.4 Sociological institutionalism**

Sociological (or normative) institutionalist approaches tend to focus primarily on understanding the interactions between the actors (González & Healey, 2005) through processes of relation-building, and the social networks and nodes through which interactions take place and through which trust and knowledge develop (Healey, 2006c). Sociological institutionalists perceive these interactions as being shaped not only by formal and informal rules, but also by societal norms and moral values that are socially constructed and culturally framed (Schmidt, 2010; Healey, 2007), thus most closely reflecting the ‘cultural’ approach discussed in section 3.2.2. ‘Culture’ in a sociological institutionalist sense represents the cognitive systems and shared meanings that shape action.

Sociological institutionalists also have a tendency to focus their efforts on understanding processes of institutional change, issues of place-making and identity (Reimer, 2013; González & Healey, 2005), and the relationship and interaction between formal and informal institutions (Reimer, 2013). They tend to perceive action as defined by a ‘logic of appropriateness’, in which institutionalised rules determine whether an act is perceived as ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ by a particular actor (March & Olsen, 1996). This contrasts with the ‘logic of consequence’ adopted by rational choice institutional theorists.

Sociological institutionalism forms the basis of much recent urban and planning research that adopts an institutionalist perspective, such as the studies of Boddy & Hickman (2016) and Healey (2006b), as it is perceived as a way of ‘bringing the actor back in’ to institutionalist forms of analysis; aligning itself more closely with prominent communicative and collaborative planning discourse. However, unlike rational choice institutionalist approaches, it understands institutions as based on ‘shared understandings’, as opposed to individual actors acting on their own self-interest (Sorensen, 2018). I would argue that whilst the sociological institutionalist approach is better able to account for processes of institutional change and affords relatively greater agency to actors, in doing so it fails to take sufficient account of wider structuring forces, such as the role of political power.

### 3.2.5 Historical institutionalism

Historical institutionalism is the approach most commonly applied in political science due to its primary analytical focus on the rules that structure the interactions of political actors (Branch, 2015; Farrall et al., 2014). It bears similarities with sociological institutionalist approaches in its concern with formal and informal rules and conventions that arise within particular organisational settings, but unlike sociological institutionalism tends to avoid concerning itself with cultures, values or cognitive frames of meaning. As such, it is traditionally viewed as being more structuralist in its approach, as institutions are understood to exist 'prior' to human action; being embedded in organisational structures, rather than deriving from cognitive or cultural constructs. It is also traditionally realist, in that institutional structures are often considered to be ontologically 'real' (Blyth et al., 2016), as opposed to the socially constructed or 'as if' realisms that tend to underpin sociological institutionalist and constructivist institutionalist accounts, respectively.

Unlike other mainstream institutionalist approaches, historical institutionalism is considered particularly useful for examining the role of power in institutions and how this power is conferred onto actors (Hall & Taylor, 1998). A further key element of historical institutionalist analysis is its focus on 'path dependency'. This concept is used to explain how embedded institutions can shape and reinforce future behaviours through a cycle of positive feedback. Historical institutionalists often argue that this may be observed in practices and activities that continue to be enacted in a certain way because 'that's the way it's always been', rather than because they are based on any other rational logic.

Historical institutionalist approaches have not been widely applied in planning studies. This is likely due to conceptual difficulties associated with this notion of 'path dependency' which, it is often argued, results in a 'stickiness' and inability to account for endogenous change due to its structuralist roots, and the fact that it affords little agency to independent actors. Such approaches also have a tendency to focus less on developing an understanding of how actions are linked to institutional structures at the micro level (Hall & Taylor, 1998). As such, they are often considered most suited for examining processes of institutional change over the long-term and at larger, national or international scales, as opposed to studying practices at the local level, over the shorter term.

Despite these negative connotations, a number of theorists (see for example, Bell, 2011, 2017) have suggested that historical institutionalism is deserving of greater attention, not least because of the emphasis it places on the structuring power of political forces (that other institutionalist approaches tend to largely ignore) and its potential to overcome the inherent 'stickiness' and account for processes of institutional change by adopting a 'thinly' constructivist approach that makes room for the role of 'ideas' alongside the 'material' institutional structures. This will be further discussed in section 3.3, which examines the potential for incorporating some of these more useful aspects of historical institutionalist theory into the conceptual framework developed for this research.

### 3.2.6 Constructivist institutionalism

Constructivist (or discursive) institutionalism, as developed by (Hay, 2002, 2006, 2011, 2016), arose from a critique of historical institutionalism; in particular its purported over-reliance on the concept of ‘path dependency’, which constructivist institutionalists claim makes this approach unable to fully account for the endogenous forms of institutional change that are often observed in practice. In response to this critique, constructivist institutionalism was developed using the structure-agency dialectic of the SRA (Jessop, 1996, 2007) in which actors are seen as capable of implementing institutional change through their dialectical interaction with institutional structures, set within a broader strategic context. However, it is important to acknowledge here that the constructivist institutionalist perspective does present a slight ontological divergence from SRA through its rejection of the critical realist concern that structural contexts are ontologically ‘real’, in favour of a socially constructed ‘as if’ realism (Jessop, 2014). As such, the analytical focus of constructivist institutionalism tends to be on processes of institutionalisation and institutional change, rather than on the definition or identification of ‘institutions’ themselves.

Constructivist institutionalism regards politics as intrinsic to institutionalised processes, although political power is generally perceived as more of a creative and contingent force that is partly constructed by actors, rather than one that is rational or normative, as it is often perceived in other approaches (Hay, 2016). Institutional change is understood by examining the relationship and interaction between actors and their strategic contexts. This draws on the concept of ‘strategic selectivity’ introduced by Bob Jessop in his work on the SRA (previously discussed in section 3.1.2), in which actors are considered ‘strategic’ in that they seek to ‘realise certain complex, contingent, and constantly changing goals’ (Hay, 2006: 63) within an institutionalised context that is ‘strategically selective’; one which favours certain strategies over others.

Compared to the other approaches previously discussed, constructivist institutionalism also pays greater attention to the role of ideas in shaping ‘frames of meaning’ or provide ‘meaning contexts’ that inform agents’ interpretations of the institutional context, and in doing so, help to shape their thoughts, words and actions (Schmidt, 2010). In constructivist institutionalist approaches the actions of actors are perceived as being shaped by both an institutional context and also an ideational context which reflects the subjective and inter-subjective ideas of actors (Hay, 2006). These ‘ideas’<sup>1</sup> are perceived as being a social construct (Farrall et al., 2014) and may, for example, derive from actors’ moral and ethical values or their personal and political interests. Constructivist institutionalists argue that it is these ideas about the wider context, rather than the context itself, that are primarily responsible for shaping actors’ behaviours (Hay & Rosamond, 2002). This is the point at which constructivist institutionalism often falls out of favour with non-constructivist theorists, because rather than balancing the structuralist critique applied to historical institutionalism with a more agency-centred approach, it is often argued that constructivist institutionalism has travelled too far in the opposite direction. By attributing almost all causal power to the role of ideas, it is

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<sup>1</sup> Further discussion of the definition of ‘ideas’ is provided in section 3.3.2.

argued that they leave relatively little scope for material or structural factors, such as institutions, to play a role in shaping action (Bell, 2011; Marsh, 2009).

Although I would tend to agree with this critique, I also believe that the role of ideas should not be overlooked completely, as they provide a valuable conceptual tool for helping us to understand what happens at the point of interaction between actors and their institutional contexts, which I believe traditional historical institutionalist approaches often fail to achieve. Blyth et al. (2016), for example, describes the lack of consideration of ideas in current forms of historical institutionalism as an ‘unconscious uncoupling’, more due to circumstance as opposed to design, and suggests that there is room within these more traditional, materialist institutional approaches for consideration of the role of ideas in shaping institutional form and institutionalised action. The following section further discusses how conceptualisations of structure-agency and material-ideational interactions derived from the SRA and institutionalist theory have been incorporated into the theoretical framework that underpins this research.

### **3.3 A conceptual framework for understanding strategic spatial planning practice**

Empirical applications of New Institutional theories have a tendency to adopt a deductive approach; beginning with a theoretical model of how institutions work and using this as a means of analysis. The approach to this research has purposely sought to avoid being overly deductive or determinist, particularly as the spatio-temporal context for this research has not been widely studied and, as such, the processes in play are relatively unknown. The purpose of the framework developed in this section is therefore not to provide a series of hypotheses about the ‘way things work’ that should be tested, but instead draws together a range of complementary conceptual ‘tools’, derived from the New Institutional theoretical approaches critiqued in the previous section, that can be used as a heuristic guide to inform the analysis and understanding of strategic spatial planning practice in a changing governance context.

The institutionalist approach that forms the basis of the framework for this research draws on key concepts from the SRA and both historical and constructivist forms of institutionalism, recognising that ontological differences between the increasingly numerous types of New Institutionalism are narrowing (Lowndes, 2009). These institutionalist theories allow the research to consider how agents dialectically interact with and relate to their institutionalised and structured contexts (drawn from the SRA), and by adding a cognitive and behavioural foundation provide a space for the role of ideas (drawn from constructivist institutionalist approaches), whilst also allowing for consideration of the role of political forces (drawn from historical institutionalist approaches). This section focuses on developing a conceptual understanding of what institutions are and how their effects might be identified in the context of this research; how institutions might be understood to shape action, including the role of ideas and other structuring factors; and how institutions might become embedded, legitimised and develop over time.



### 3.3.1 Ontological assumptions

One commonality between all New Institutional approaches is their understanding that institutions ‘structure’ action in some way. However, there are differences in terms of how each of these approaches conceptualises institutions in an ontological sense. This research adopts a broadly critical realist understanding that conceives institutions as ‘real’ structures, meaning that although institutions may be unobservable, they have ‘actual’ structuring effects that may be empirically observed (Gorski, 2013). This may be contrasted, for example, with constructivist approaches in which structures are deemed to be socially constructed or ‘as if’ real (Hay, 2002), and where ‘the institutional order is real only so far as it is realised in performed roles’ (Berger & Luckmann, 1990: 96).

This critical realist approach enables us to explain how institutions might structure action and patterns of behaviour, because although institutions are arguably still subject to processes of agent interpretation or ‘actualisation’ (as described in section 3.3.3), the *existence* of the institutions themselves are not dependent on the interpretive ability of independent actors (as in interpretivist and constructivist ontologies); institutions are considered to be ‘ontologically prior’ (Blyth et al., 2016). Within this framework, structure is also considered to be ontologically distinct from agency, although when conceptualised as ‘context’ and ‘conduct’ they are considered to be continually interacting in a dialectical manner, as the following section will discuss.

### 3.3.2 Agent-institution interactions: How institutions can be understood to shape action

As introduced in section 3.1.2, this research is underpinned by an understanding of structure-agency interactions derived from the SRA, meaning that institutions are understood to form part of a wider strategic context, which is continually shaping, and being shaped by, the actions of strategic actors (Pastras & Bramwell, 2013). In other words, the behaviours and practices (‘conduct’) of individual actors and the institutional context within which these actors are embedded are considered to be ‘mutually constitutive’ (Lowndes, 2009: 102), as the institutions and the actions of actors are simultaneously both ‘structured’ and ‘structuring’. The SRA allows us to see planning as an ‘institutionalised practice’, because rather than focusing on institutions in planning as being distinct from practices and action, institutions are examined *in relation to* action and vice versa (Jones et al., 2004).

Institutions in the context of this research are considered to represent both the ‘formal rules’ and ‘informal conventions’ that play a role in shaping actions and practices by sanctioning and/or constraining certain types of behaviour. ‘Formal rules’ may, for example, include the regulations that are written into a professional codes of conduct, the legislation or constitutions that outline the statutory roles and responsibilities of local planning actors, or the organisational structures through which these actors are governed. Lowndes (2001) refers to these formal rules as ‘strong ties’. ‘Informal conventions’, on the other hand, might include the unwritten rules, values, norms, social obligations or accepted practices that set certain expectations and through which compliance is morally governed (Bell, 2011, 2017), including, for example, the informal

collaborations, coalitions or partnerships that develop between particular groups of actors, which Lowndes (2001) refers to as ‘weak ties’.

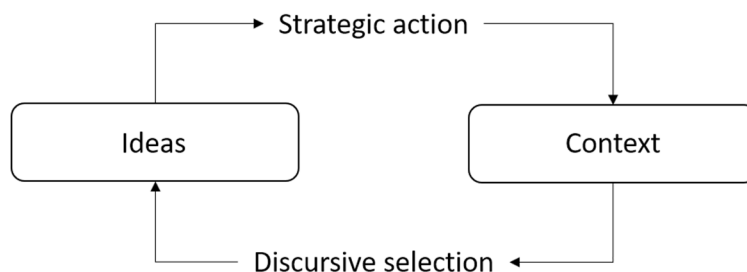
While these references to ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ ties might suggest a greater structural significance or structuring power of ‘formal rules’ over ‘informal conventions’, this is not necessarily the case, as Lowndes (2001: 1956) highlights, ‘‘weak ties’ can be as important as formal constitutions’. These references to ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ ties may instead refer to how deeply these institutions are embedded and the ease with which they are liable to change. Whether, and to what extent, there are differential structuring effects and rates of change within and between ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ institutions is something that has not been widely discussed in respect of institutions of strategic spatial planning systems (indeed, the analytical distinction between ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ institutions often lacks clear definition; as discussed in the context of the ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ spaces of planning governance identified in section 2.4.2), but is likely to be (at least partly) dependent on the processes through which these institutions are ‘actualised’, as will be investigated in this research.

In order to understand how institutions are ‘actualised’ and how institutionalised practices arise, it is necessary to consider how the institutional context is interpreted and given meaning by actors, and how, at the same time, actors’ practices reinforce and restructure this institutional context. Experience tells us that not all actors will behave the same in a given situation, which suggests that the meanings ascribed to particular institutional contexts differ between actors; they will depend upon actors’ own interpretations. In some cases, institutions may be interpreted as a constraining force on behaviour, by embodying rules or norms with which agents are willing to comply or that prevent certain actions. In other cases, institutions may be interpreted as an enabling force, by promoting or enabling certain acceptable behaviours or conventions over others, or by informing and empowering particular agents. As Lowndes (2001: 1960) states, institutions embody power relations by ‘privileging certain courses of action over others and by including certain actors and excluding others’, which results in differential structuring effects. In order to understand the ways in which institutional contexts structure action (and vice versa), it is necessary to consider the factors that are understood to inform these differential interpretations and the ways in which meanings are produced. For this we turn, in the following section, to the role of ideas.

### **3.3.3 Material-ideational interactions: The role of ideas**

The concept of ‘ideas’ has gained increasing prominence in institutionalist theory as a means of examining the interactions between actors and their institutionalised contexts, including the processes through which these contexts are interpreted and shape institutionalised action, forming what some have referred to as an ‘ideational turn’ (Berman, 2013). Recent constructivist and discursive institutionalist approaches in particular have given primacy to the role of ideas (see for example, Schmidt, 2008, 2010; Hay, 2002) as a means of better understanding the complexities of political systems. To these theorists, society does not just consist of actors and institutions, but it also includes actors’ *ideas* about institutions. It is the subjective and inter-subjective ideas held by actors that mediate actors’ orientation towards institutions and their subsequent

actions. In other words, ideas act as ‘filters’ through which institutions are viewed and actions are strategically selected (Hay & Wincott, 1998). Hay (2002) illustrates this process in what he refers to as the ‘material-ideational dialectic’, in which the strategic context within which actors are situated shapes actors’ ideas, and it is these ideas that inform strategic actions, which in turn shape the strategic context. In other words, it is through actors’ ideas that the strategic context is interpreted and acquires meaning, and through the strategic context that ideas acquire meaning (Hay, 2011).



**Figure 1** The material-ideational dialectic (based on Hay, 2002: 214)

One of the main criticisms of this ‘constructivist’ understanding of the material-ideational dialectic, is that by enhancing the agency of actors through the process of ‘ideational framing’ or ‘interpretation’ this effectively gives actors a ‘choice’ as to whether or not to adhere to institutional constraints, or whether to maintain or change institutions, thus serving to transcend any structuring influence of the institutional context, with any concept of pre-existing material structures in shaping human action being lost (Blyth et al., 2016; Berman, 2013) and ‘allowing agents to build the world as they see fit’ (Schmidt, 2012: 708). In contrast, a position that focuses primarily on the material and completely overlooks the ideational would equally lead to an overly determinist approach that perceives institutions and the actions they produce as a ‘fait accompli’.

In trying to balance these two positions, this research has chosen to adopt a ‘thinly’ constructivist middle ground, by acknowledging a role for ideas in shaping actors’ interpretations of their institutional contexts; and in order to avoid a descent into voluntarism, understanding institutions as being ontologically distinct and ontologically prior to the ideas through which they are interpreted. Institutions and other structures are therefore understood as interpreted, embedded, and in some cases re-shaped, through agents’ ideational abilities, but they are not constructed or formed solely of the ideas that actors hold about them. They exist independently from the ideational realm, but their structuring effects are ‘actualised’ through processes of ideational interpretation. As Bell (2012a) states; ‘institutions define roles and incentives, not final behaviours, and roles and incentives always need to be interpreted and appraised prior to action’ (p.667). The SRA also recognises that by acting within structured contexts, actors undertake a process of ‘(self)-reflection’ in which they interpret the ‘identities and interests that orient their strategies’ in relation to the contexts in which they are situated (Jessop, 2001: 1224). This helps us to understand why actors situated within the same spatio-temporal, strategic context may choose to behave in different ways. Further understanding of the ways in which actors, institutions, and actors’ ideas about these institutions, interact is informed by the empirical evidence gathered during this research, as presented in Chapters 6 to 8.

Having acknowledged a role for ideas, a further difficulty comes with defining precisely what is meant by 'ideas' and how ideational processes might be identified and analysed in the context of this research. The term 'ideas' has been applied somewhat inconsistently and ambiguously in recent New Institutional literature, reflecting both a lack of conceptual clarity and definition, but also the ontological differences that transcend the different theoretical approaches. Some theorists, for example, perceive ideas as being shaped by (but ontologically distinct from) an actor's interests, motivations, normative dispositions, beliefs, values and identities (Capoccia, 2016a; Hay, 2006; Goldstein & Keohane, 1993), or by an actor's perceived capability for action (their 'strategic power') (Jackson, 2010). Whereas, others conflate these distinct concepts *within* the definition of ideas (Béland & Cox, 2011; Campbell, 1998), for example, treating interests, values or beliefs as though they represent ideas in their own right, as opposed to being concepts that are interpreted *through* ideas, or *through which* ideas are formed.

Other theorists, that it might be assumed would choose to overlook the ideational in favour of the material (including some traditional historical institutionalists), have also come to acknowledge an ideationally interpretive ability amongst agents. The 'policy paradigms' introduced by Hall (1993), for example, have been used to describe the interpretive frameworks of ideas and standards that shape public policy. Hall argues that paradigmatic or ideational shifts may arise from exogenous factors, including the political power and resources available to particular individuals or groups of actors, and may result in institutional change as different ideas become institutionalised; a process that is further discussed in sections 3.3.4 and 3.3.5.

In the context of this research, and in order to assist with the empirical analysis, I have chosen to adopt an ideational conceptualisation that has been applied by a number of institutional theorists including, for example, Seabrooke & Wigan, 2015; Schmidt, 2012; Béland et al., 2011; Bell, 2011 and Béland, 2009. This definition draws a distinction between 'cognitive' and 'normative' ideational framing processes through which actors are understood to interpret and respond to their institutional contexts. Within this research, 'cognitive' frames are understood to comprise actors' perceptions of what constitutes behaviour that is in their own interests. As Béland et al. (2011) state, such frames;

'provide a cognitive filter through which the actor orients himself or herself toward his or her environment, providing one (of several) means by which an actor evaluates the relative merits of contending potential courses of action' (p.79)

Within this research 'normative' frames provide another means of orientation, through which actors' interpret their contexts in relation to their perceived values and understandings of what constitutes 'appropriate' behaviour or 'how things should be' (Seabrooke & Wigan, 2015: 360). It is usually a combination of both normative and cognitive framing processes, when applied to a particular institutional context, that will determine whether an actor will legitimise or reproduce a particular institution, or whether they will seek to resist or transform it.

As an illustration, the formal rules inscribed in planning legislation are intended to constrain or enable the actions of local planning actors in a particular way, for example when making planning decisions. However, these rules do not completely structure action. They must first be interpreted by actors in the context of their own values and interests, through a process of ideational framing. In most instances, the rules of planning legislation are so strongly institutionally embedded that compliance with these formally-inscribed rules will be cognitively framed as being in a local planning actor's best interests, given the potential repercussions for failing to abide by these rules, both in terms of the potential for disciplinary action and the negative implications for the reputation of the local authority. Compliance with these rules may also be normatively framed as something representing an appropriate form of professional conduct. There may however be instances, for example during planning committee meetings, where locally elected members may choose to approve or reject an application contrary to planning policy, thereby rejecting the formal rules inscribed in legislation. For example, a member's decision to reject an application for a proposed windfarm that is compliant with planning policy, may occur where the member's cognitive framing of the benefits of winning the support of their electorate by rejecting a locally-controversial scheme, or their normative framing of the implications of rejecting a scheme that they perceive would have an adverse impact on the local landscape, outweighs the structuring power of the formally inscribed institutional rules.

Therefore, these 'cognitive' and 'normative' ideational frames<sup>1</sup> enable us to understand practices of strategic spatial planning as embedded within a *dynamic* system, in which institutions and actors' ideas and actions, are continually being reshaped and reformed. As such, it is necessary to also consider the factors that influence change and stability within this system, and to provide a means of understanding the processes of institutional legitimisation, formalisation and transformation. These processes of legitimisation and change are discussed further in the following two sections, which seek to provide some initial answers to the following questions:

- How do institutions become legitimised, such that they enter into the inter-subjective conscious and gain structuring ability by being produced and reproduced within agential actions and practices over time?
- If institutions are predisposed to be reproduced, how does institutional change occur?

#### **3.3.4 Institutional legitimisation and transformation**

As noted previously, institutions can be understood as interpreted through the ideas of actors and subsequently articulated through their behaviours. In other words, their structuring abilities are 'actualised' through the actions and practices of social agents. According to Hay (2016), it is through these processes of ideational interpretation and actualisation that institutions are constituted and reconstituted. This suggests a dynamic as opposed to a static process of institutionalisation and re-institutionalisation. Therefore, whilst the institutional context is considered to be 'ontologically prior' at the moment of agent interpretation, it is

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<sup>1</sup> Further discussion of how ideational frames have been applied as an interpretive tool to assist with the analysis of the research data is also presented in Chapter 4.

argued that the actions that result from these interpretive processes dialectically interact to shape the institutional context, by either reinforcing or reproducing existing institutions (legitimation), or transforming them. Institutions are therefore not ‘created’ but they ‘evolve’.

As illustrated in the previous example of the planning committee meeting, the structural constraints or opportunities presented by an institutional context may be interpreted as favouring a particular form of action that is perceived as ‘appropriate’ because, for instance, it would result in a perceived positive outcome for a particular actor. In order for institutions to have structuring abilities, it is argued that they need to be interpreted in the same way by multiple actors. In other words, the ideas used to interpret institutions are formed by ‘constellations of actors’ who have particular interests, identities and capabilities (Jackson, 2010). This leads to behaviours and practices that are repeated as they become habitual or routinised, thereby allowing institutions to be maintained and reproduced over time. It is through this process that institutions can be said to gain legitimacy.

Legitimation may arise from the tendency of institutions to replicate themselves, due to the ‘quest for greater certainty’ (Bell, 2017: 729) expressed by human actors, and the fact that routinised or habitual behaviours can be seen as self-reaffirming due to positive social transaction costs (Taylor, 2013). Processes of legitimation have also been linked to expressions of power and the power possessed and exerted by individuals (Scott, 2001), and likened to a ‘formalisation’, in which rules and behaviours become accepted and normalised (Van Assche et al., 2014). Institutional legitimacy is not something that can be measured or readily perceived, but is reflected in the embedding of cognitive or normative validity in the institutional order – the process through which institutions receive cognitive and normative ideational support (Jessop, 2008; Scott, 2001).

This tendency for institutions to be reinforced over time is commonly referred to as ‘path dependency’, which can be defined as; ‘the dependence of current and future actions/decisions on the outcomes of previous actions or decisions’ (Lim, 2017: 1588), and through which institutions are said to become further embedded and more resistant to future change (Sorensen, 2014). Experience suggests that history and past experiences have an important role to play in shaping planning systems, however the concept of path dependence is traditionally seen as incompatible with the concept of ideas, as the former is associated with theories of institutional ‘stasis’ and the latter with theories of ‘change’. In order to overcome this, it is perhaps better to acknowledge a ‘history of ideas’ forming part of the spatio-temporally situated, strategic context within and through which agents dialectically interact, rather than a ‘path dependency of institutions’. In this way, it is possible to acknowledge that whilst institutions have a tendency to be reproduced, they also have a capacity for change. Indeed, the dialectical approach adopted in this research makes room for actors as ‘agents of change’ (Jessop, 2001), because by acting within an institutional framework they also act upon it (Beauregard, 2005) as actors’ ideas shape the institutional context within which they are situated.

Whilst there is no single theory of institutional change, many theorists highlight particular sets of circumstances or conditions during which ideas might allow agents to challenge existing institutions, for example by creatively applying different ideational interpretations to institutions and institutionalised contexts, which enables them to change and evolve over time (Rayner, 2015; Blyth, 2001). These ‘circumstances’ during which change is enabled are often associated with either endogenous or exogenous pressures or contextual shifts. Endogenous pressures may be conceptualised as those that emerge from *within* a particular institutional context including, for example, instabilities or uncertainties in existing institutional arrangements (Blyth, 2002), conflicts between institutions within the same structure, non-compliance with formal rules, or shifts in social coalitions (Capoccia, 2016a; Bell, 2011). These endogenous pressures are often associated with gradual or incremental periods of institutional change such as Reimer's (2013) six-stage process of institutional transformation that reflects a gradual transitioning between a state of instability and stability.

This conceptualisation of a gradual process of institutional change is often contrasted with conceptualisations of more radical periods of institutional transformation, primarily associated with the effects of exogenous forces acting *beyond* the institutional context. It is argued that such revolutionary developments, occurring over shorter periods of time, may arise as a result of ‘punctuated equilibria’ occurring at ‘critical junctures’ during which changes are for example triggered by political or economic shifts (Sorensen, 2014), or periods of ‘crisis’ when existing regulatory arrangements or social systems are threatened (Fuller, 2010), for example during periods of financial crisis or changes in political leadership. In such instances, institutional conditions may align in such a way as they provide opportunities for agents to enable (or resist) institutional change (Moulaert et al., 2016) and reduce institutional uncertainty (Blyth, 2002).

### **3.3.5 The role of power in institutional change**

As the previous section suggests, within a political system, institutional changes may arise in response to either endogenous or exogenous forces, or a combination of both; and that these changes may be gradual or rapid. However, studies suggest that not all endogenous or exogenous pressures result in institutional change, as there are other contextual factors that influence how processes of ideational and institutional change arise (Bell, 2012a). These might include, for example, spatio-temporal and historic contextual factors or particularities (Jackson, 2010; Lowndes, 2009; Jessop, 2005; Pierson, 2004), or strategic resources, such as tools and technologies, other material or human resources (Branch, 2015; Servillo & Van Den Broeck, 2012) and political power (Healey, 2006c; Jones et al., 2004). The latter of these is further discussed in this section as having particular significance to this research.

Strategic spatial planning can be considered a process that is infused with power relations; namely those connected to political power, as exercised by local politicians, and technical power, as exercised by planners or other ‘professionals’ (Murdoch, 2006; Flyvbjerg, 2002)<sup>1</sup>. Not all power is evenly distributed, and power

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<sup>1</sup> Other forms of power might include, for example, class and patriarchy. However, it is political and technical power that will form the main focus of this research due to their primacy within spatial planning systems.

imbalances exist within any spatial planning system. It is through such power differentials that structural change within institutionalised systems might occur. Therefore, in order to understand processes of institutional legitimisation and transformation, it is necessary to theorise the underlying power structures and imbalances that might arise and how they might be understood to play a role in shaping these processes.

In an institutional context, power relations can be conceptualised in numerous ways. Some theorists consider institutions as *embodying* power relations or structures of power through their privileging of particular actions over others (Healey, 2006c; Beauregard, 2005) or through the technological inscription of structures of power within rules of conduct and formalised practices (Gualini, 2010). Others see institutions less as an embodiment of power, but more as an *endower* of power, through the empowerment of particular actors or social groups. This distribution of power to actors is differential and some actors will be empowered to a greater extent than others (Hall & Taylor, 1996; Sewell, 1992).

As noted previously, the framework developed for this research sees structures as actualised through actors' ideational interpretations of the institutional and wider strategic contexts within which they are situated.

Within this framework, power is conceptualised as embodied within particular ideas, and is then transferred to particular actors by constraining or enabling their capacity to act. Different ideas are interpreted in different ways, with some ideas or interpretations of ideas empowering (or constraining) actors to different degrees (Sewell, 1992).

As well as being embedded within the ideational and institutional realm, power is also distributed amongst individual actors and groups of actors, for example in the form of political or technical power. These power relations may lead to institutional change through processes of ideational shift, in which particular agential ideas acquire greater structural significance than others, particularly during moments of 'crisis' (Bell, 2011). Individual actors who have access to particular forms of power may be able to establish supportive coalitions and resist or enable processes of institutional legitimisation or change more than others (Sorensen, 2014). Those with greater power are also able to embark on innovative or creative processes of ideational change (Lowndes, 2009; Sewell, 1992) for example, through processes of 'agenda-setting' (Capoccia, 2016: 1111). Other resources (human and non-human) that are identified as forming part of the wider strategic context may also be used by actors as a means of enhancing or maintaining their power within a particular institutional and ideational context (Bell, 2012a; Sewell, 1992). This research will consider the role of these different types of power (structural and agential) in processes of institutional legitimisation and development, in particular by developing an understanding of their influence upon the institutional context and the ideas held by actors.

### **3.3.6 Summary**

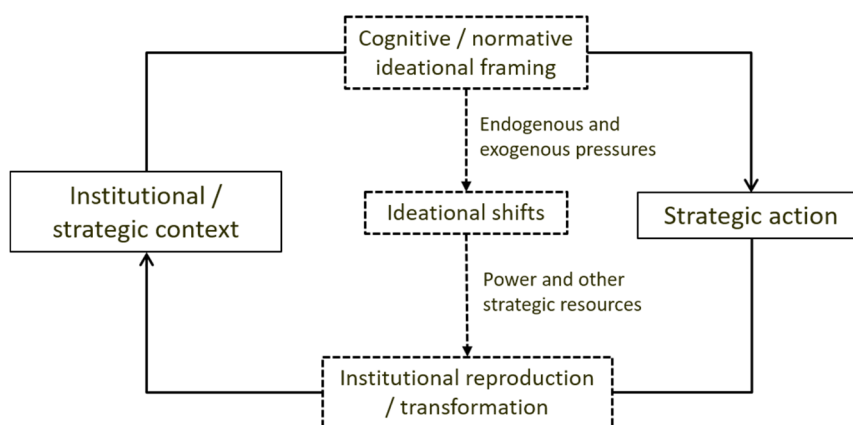
The conceptual framework that underpins this research is grounded in the SRA and constructivist and historical forms of New Institutional theory. The framework recognises that strategic spatial planning practices are performed by local planning actors acting within and through institutionalised, strategic contexts. These contexts provide structuring frames which are ideationally interpreted and which therefore



shape, but do not fully determine, the actions that take place. This section has demonstrated how ‘institutions’ and ‘ideas’ may be employed as heuristic tools for conceptualising the structuring forces that play a part in shaping the actions and practices observed in a particular strategic context.

In summary, the broad conceptual framework developed in this chapter is based on the following theoretical assumptions (as illustrated in Figure 2 below):

- There is a dialectical interaction between agency and structure, or between strategic actors and their strategic contexts (following the SRA). Strategic actors and their strategic contexts are considered to be analytically and ontologically distinct.
- The strategic context comprises institutions and other structuring forces that are spatially and temporally situated. Institutions are understood to comprise both formal rules and informal conventions. Other structuring forces may include, for example, the wider political or economic context.
- The strategic context is considered to be ontologically ‘real’ in that whilst it may not be observable, it has ‘real’ (although always interpreted) causal effects. This context is also considered to be pre-given, in that it is ontologically prior to the actors that arise within this context. Indeed, these structures must be ‘knowable’ by at least some agents within a system in order to be interpreted by them (Bell, 2011).
- Agents interpret their strategic contexts by ideationally framing these through subjective and inter-subjective interests (cognitive frames) and values (normative frames). The structuring effects of institutions are therefore mediated and actualised through these ideas. These structuring effects have the ability to both empower/enable and constrain/disempower actors.
- While institutions have a tendency to be reproduced, exogenous and/or endogenous pressures may provide opportunities for ideational shifts. Some agents have the power and strategic resources to transform institutions by enabling or resisting these ideational shifts.
- Agents, their ideas and institutions are mutually constitutive and interact in a dialectical manner.



**Figure 2** Conceptual framework

This conceptual approach avoids a static analysis of the institutional framework, and instead enables a focus on the fluid and dynamic nature of spatial planning systems, including how the legitimisation and transformation of institutions plays a role in structuring the actions and practices that are performed within a strategic context. It also acknowledges the significance of historic and spatio-temporal contextual particularities and allows for an assessment of how agents may become empowered to deal with such contingencies when they respond to or seek to drive institutional change. The approach to operationalising this conceptual framework through the analysis of the empirical data is outlined in Chapter 4.

### **3.4 Conclusion**

The purpose of this chapter has been to explain how the social processes that comprise spatial planning systems, and the enactment of strategic spatial planning practices in particular, might best be understood in theoretical terms by devising a broad conceptual framework that provides an institutional, strategic-relational ‘lens’ through which to analyse the empirical material gathered during the research. The framework presented in this chapter demonstrates how the concepts drawn from the SRA and New Institutional theory, in particular its constructivist and historical institutionalist forms, can provide an integrated approach to thinking about institutions, agency and ideas.

An understanding of structure-agency interactions derived from the SRA provides a dialectical interpretation which emphasises the temporal and spatial contingencies that shape the interactions between the strategic context and contextually-situated, strategic actors. By introducing this understanding to an institutionalist approach that incorporates the concept of ‘ideas’, this framework seeks to provide a clearer conceptualisation of how the dialectical interactions between ‘context’ and ‘conduct’, and the ‘material’ and ‘ideational’ might arise, and how opportunities for institutional change might occur and be acted upon. Through this focus on agent-ideational-institutional interactions and transformations, the conceptual framework developed in this chapter provides a means of capturing and understanding local planning actors’ responses to their strategic contexts, including the legislative, governance and territorial changes that are emerging through the processes of devolution, and will help to provide a greater understanding of how strategic planning practices are being shaped within these changing contexts.

## 4 | Research design, methodology and analysis

The key tenet underpinning the design of this research project, its methodological approach and the methods used is the need, derived from the overarching research aim, to observe and capture in detail the actions and interactions of local planning actors, the nature of the contexts in which they are embedded, and the strategic spatial planning practices that emerge. The methodology derives from the ‘thinly’ constructivist ontology that underpins this research, as well as the research questions and conceptual framework previously introduced, which point towards a subjectivism in the way that reality is constructed. In order to ‘know’ this reality, it is necessary to understand actors’ perspectives of their own constructed realities, for which an interpretivist analytical approach is adopted (based around the concept of ‘ideational frames’ introduced in Chapter 3), as discussed later in this chapter.

The chapter begins however in section 4.1 by providing justification for the methodological approach developed to uncover evidence required to answer the research questions; that of a single comprehensive case study. Section 4.2 then outlines the reasoning behind the selection of the case itself and section 4.3 explains the choice of research methods deemed suitable for interrogating the practices and interactions taking place. Section 4.4 provides further detail of how the data collated during the research has been analysed and interpreted in relation to the theoretical framework outlined in Chapter 3. The final section then discusses some of the practicalities and limitations of the research, including issues relating to research ethics and some brief reflections on my positionality and integrity as a researcher.

### 4.1 Methodological approach

The aim of this research identifies a need to better understand strategic planning practices and responses to organisational and institutional change from a local planning actor perspective. Relatively few of the academic studies that have been undertaken to date in relation to strategic spatial planning practices in England have adopted such an actor-focused perspective<sup>1</sup>. The empirical contribution of this research lies in its ambition to understand not only *what* practices were undertaken in a particular circumstance, but also *why* and *how*. As explored in Chapter 3, the research adopts a ‘thinly’ constructivist approach, in which institutional structures are ontologically ‘real’ but their structuring effects are ‘actualised’ through actors’ ideational interpretations (as discussed in section 3.3.3). In order to identify and understand the ideational framing processes of actors, it was necessary to find a way of observing, in detail, the interactions or ‘micro-practices’ that were being enacted within the context of the contemporary planning system, and to interpret the ideas and meanings behind these actions. This evidence would enable the research to develop an understanding of how strategic spatial planning practices are being shaped within this context.

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<sup>1</sup> Many previous studies of strategic spatial planning practices acquire data from interviews with planning practitioners and document analysis, rather than direct, ethnographic observations.

In this research I chose to adopt an ethnographic case study approach. Many academic studies of planning systems and practices utilise a case study-based approach, primarily because it is considered to be an approach well-suited to studies that seek to answer questions of 'how' and 'why', and is particularly appropriate to the study of contemporary events which occur in circumstances outside the control of the researcher (Yin, 2014). I also became intrigued by the use of ethnography as a form of case-based research due to the added depth and level of detail that ethnographic research methods could bring to the empirical data. Neyland (2007) defines ethnography as the observation of, and participation in, a particular group or groups with the intended purpose of understanding 'how a particular group operates, what it means to be a member of a particular group and how changes can affect that group' (p.1).

I therefore chose to undertake embedded, or situated, ethnographic research as it has the benefit of allowing for a detailed study of the 'micro-practices' of everyday life for local planning actors (Rhodes, 2016; Hay, 2011) as well as being an efficient way of revealing knowledge about acts and unearthing some of the more nuanced socio-political issues that other methods may struggle to identify (Neyland, 2007; Yanow, 1999). An ethnographic methodology also tends towards the emic study of individual actor behaviour in 'everyday' contexts and in doing so, enables a contextually-grounded, close-up view of the practices that arise from these interactions (Majoor, 2018; Rhodes, 2007), and the development of a thick, descriptive narrative that is capable of providing insights into a politicised system that is context dependent and often highly contested (Healey, 2009; Lowndes, 2009).

'Ethnographic research' is a broad term representing multiple different approaches, the most common of which can be distinguished as those informed by a realist-objectivist approach, in which the observer is objective and sets out to identify factual reality of 'what precisely is happening'; and those informed by a constructivist-interpretivist approach, in which the observer interprets the social realities that are constructed by the actors involved (Majoor, 2018). The approach adopted in this research most closely reflects the latter of these by developing a methodology that seeks to understand the actions of local planning actors and their experiences of the spatial planning system within which they are situated. In this way, 'ethnography' represents much more than just participant observation, it is a methodology for understanding social action 'from within' and can include a range of data collection methods. Brewer (2000) (after Hammersley, 1990) describes ethnographic research as that which has the following features:

- 'People's behaviour is studied in everyday contexts rather than under unnatural or experimental circumstances created by the researcher;
- Data are collected by various techniques but primarily by means of observation;
- Data collection is flexible and unstructured to avoid pre-fixed arrangements that impose categories on what people say and do;
- The focus is normally on a single setting or group and is small-scale;
- The analysis of the data involves attribution of the meanings of the human actions described and explained' (p.18-19)

The institutionalist perspective adopted in this research also lends itself to an ethnographic methodology, and it is this detailed anthropological understanding of the day-to-day practices of local planning actors and the relations between these actors, their actions and their changing strategic contexts that will prove essential for answering the questions posed by this research. As Searle (2005) states:

‘Because the institutional ontology is subjective, it must always be examined from the first person point of view. Institutional facts only exist from the point of view of the participants and for that reason no external functionalist or behaviourist analysis will be adequate to account for them. You have to be able to think yourself into the institution to understand it.’ (p.22)

Ethnography therefore represents an appropriate methodology for studying strategic spatial planning practices and is relatively underutilised in academic research in this field – most likely due to issues of access and the required commitment of resources over a prolonged period – but, through its detailed empirical focus, it has the potential to help narrow the gap between planning theory and practice.

## 4.2 Research design

After deciding to proceed with an ethnographic approach, the next stage in the research design process was to select an appropriate case study around which to base the empirical investigation. The analytical context chosen for this research was that of the ‘city region’, because this best represents the spatialised clusters of ideas and practices through which new planning spaces and forms of strategic spatial planning governance are emerging. It was therefore pragmatic for the empirical limit of the research to be set at this geographic scale. More specifically, the spatial definition of ‘city region’ adopted in this research reflects the geographic scale covered by LEPs and/or Combined Authorities (where these exist).

Organisationally, each of these new planning spaces comprises a number of local authorities working within and alongside the LEP and/or Combined Authority, and in some cases other partner organisations. Given the potentially large number of formal organisations and individual actors operating within these contexts, and the inherent relational complexities that exist between them, it was therefore determined that a *single* city region would be the most appropriate unit of study for this research.

Whilst it has been argued that there are certain analytic benefits associated with multiple or comparative as opposed to single case studies (Yin, 2014; Thomas, 2011), it was considered that working through and developing an understanding of the complex practices taking place within one particular city region would yield greater insight and provide a fuller narrative of how strategic planning practices are enacted within a particular spatial context. As Flyvbjerg (2006) argues, there are no major disadvantages of choosing to base research on a single case, as the ‘force of example’ is often undervalued. In other words, there is as much to be gained from understanding the ‘complex specificity’ (Rhodes, 2016) of a particular context as from the ability to make generalisations. A larger number of cases would have precluded the feasible use of intensive research methods, thereby preventing a sufficient depth of research within the available time and resources. Through focusing the research upon a single city region, considering the interactions within and between

actors within its constituent local authorities and in doing so their interactions with the overarching Combined Authority or LEP, the research embodies some of the characteristics and associated benefits of ‘embedded’ case research (Yin, 2014), which considers multiple cases ‘nested’ within a wider, principal unit of analysis (Thomas, 2011).

#### **4.2.1 Case study selection**

The criteria for selecting the case study for this research was not related to its ‘uniqueness’ nor its reflection of a particularly ‘critical’ case (Yin, 2014). Instead, the choice was based primarily on reasons of empirical interest – Sheffield City Region being an area that had not previously formed the subject of intensive academic investigation (as discussed in section 2.3.3) – as well as reasons of pragmatism and feasibility, as this section will discuss.

Since 2011, some thirty-eight LEPs and nine Combined Authorities have been established in England (Local Government Association, 2018). A number of these have formed the geographical basis of previous empirical studies related to recent governance changes and the associated implications for strategic spatial planning practices. Some areas have been studied to a greater extent in academic literature than others, with certain cases being used in multiple or repeat studies. This includes those areas that have a longer, more established history of formalised collaborative or strategic spatial planning practices, such as Greater Manchester (Lupton et al., 2018), Greater Cambridge and Peterborough, and the South West of England (see for example, Hincks et al., 2017; Boddy & Hickman, 2012, 2013, 2016; Bafarasat & Baker, 2015 and Healey, 2007, as further detailed in Chapter 2).

Sheffield City Region was established as a LEP in 2012, and a number of its constituent authorities joined together to form a Combined Authority in 2014. At the time the research was being designed, the Sheffield City Region Combined Authority was still in a state of transition, with a second Devolution Deal with central government in the process of being agreed<sup>1</sup>. Sheffield City Region was not selected because it was considered a particularly paradigmatic or revolutionary case, but because it represented a ‘high potential’ case (Bafarasat & Baker, 2016) in which strategic spatial planning practices would likely be observed during the period of study.

To date Sheffield City Region has formed the basis of relatively few detailed empirical studies of processes of devolution and strategic spatial planning. The main exceptions being the work of Herrschel & Newman (2002) whose book ‘Governance of Europe’s City Regions’ draws on some of the history of Yorkshire and Humber to illustrate the role of Sheffield in planning for a poly-centric region, and Martin Jones and David Etherington, whose work focuses on the role of city region governance and the state in reinforcing and resolving socio-spatial inequalities (Etherington & Jones, 2009, 2018; Jones & Etherington, 2009). A further study was undertaken by Dabinett (2010), which analyses processes of strategic development and spatial justice in South Yorkshire in relation to values introduced by the European Spatial Development Perspective.

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<sup>1</sup> Further detail on the political, governance and organisational context of Sheffield City Region is provided in Chapter 5.

However, relatively little has been added to the story of strategic spatial planning in Sheffield City Region since the abolition of the regional tier of government.

In addition to the relatively minimal attention paid to Sheffield City Region in recent academic literature and its high potential as a case of strategic spatial planning ‘in action’, Sheffield City Region was also chosen for an additional practical reason. The choice of a single case study meant that a period of fairly intensive fieldwork would be necessary to acquire a sufficient depth of evidence, and therefore the geographic location of the case study was an important consideration. I live in Sheffield, and therefore choosing Sheffield City Region as a case study meant that I was able to minimise travel and subsistence expenses and maximise the amount of time I spent in the field. From an ethnographic methodological point of view, this ability to become ‘immersed’ in the environment under study was essential.

#### **4.2.2 Fieldwork location**

After selecting Sheffield City Region as an appropriate case study, it was necessary to decide the best way of approaching this case from an ethnographic perspective and to determine how to gain access to the primary evidence and data required to fulfil the research aim. Whilst the broad spatial unit of analysis for the research was that of the City Region, in order to gather the level of ethnographic data required, methodologically it was considered most practical to situate myself within the planning policy team of one of Sheffield City Region’s nine constituent local authorities; this being one of the key contexts in which it was assumed that the enactment of collaborative practices and discussions relating to strategic planning matters would be taking place. This approach enabled me to become embedded in this environment and to witness activities, interactions and practices as they occurred. I was also better placed for observing internal meetings and informal conversations, as well as developing a rapport with potential research participants and having the flexibility to work around their schedules in terms of arranging interviews. Furthermore, it provided a key point of access to actors and meetings in other authorities and organisations across the City Region, including the Combined Authority. I was able to use this local authority ‘base’ as a gateway for accessing the wider case study and undertaking observations of meetings that included local planning actors from all SCR authorities; enabling me to closely observe how a single authority and its constituent officers and elected members related to the wider City Region.

I chose Sheffield City Council (SCC) as the authority within which to conduct the field-based research for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is the City Region’s largest authority and at the time the research commenced SCC was preparing its draft local plan. Given Sheffield’s ‘under-bounded’ nature (Hamiduddin & Gallent, 2012), evidenced by the fact that its urban settlement boundaries are tightly constrained by Green Belt, the prospect of the research coinciding with an observable period of strategic or collaborative work between SCC and its neighbouring authorities within the wider City Region was likely. Secondly, SCC planning officers were, at the time the fieldwork was undertaken, responsible for chairing and hosting the monthly Sheffield City Region Planning Officer and Heads of Planning meetings, which enabled easier access to these and other related City Region officer meetings for observational purposes. Thirdly, when I made initial

contact with the manager of the Forward and Area Planning (FAP) team at SCC they expressed an interest in and support for my research, and a willingness to welcome me into their team for the period of time I had set aside for conducting the fieldwork.

This final point was essential for confirming my choice of fieldwork location, as without gaining the full support of the senior managers in the team whose actions would form the basis of much of my observational research, and who would provide access to documents and other sources of information, it is likely that, at worst, I would not have been permitted to undertake fieldwork in that authority, and at best, my experiences in the field would likely have faced numerous obstacles or barriers. On reflection, the support that I gained from the FAP team manager and SCC's Head of Planning was essential for ensuring the success of the fieldwork and the quality and comprehensiveness of the data I acquired.

#### **4.2.3 Defining the scope and empirical limits of the research**

To ensure the effective implementation of this research it was necessary to prescribe some analytical limits to the study, including a clear definition of the case itself, together with its spatial and temporal boundaries. These units of research are outlined below.

**Spatial scale of the research:** For reasons of practicality and the need to observe the phenomena of interest in a high level of detail, the fieldwork was primarily focused upon the observation of practices and interactions occurring within SCC, and between SCC and the other Sheffield City Region authorities. Although I was based within a single authority for much of the ethnographic observation, the case study itself was still focused at the scale of the wider City Region, and other sources of primary data were gathered and analysed at this scale.

The definition of 'Sheffield City Region' as the case study area for this research is not intended to suggest that the City Region is a self-contained entity with impermeable borders. It is recognised that social phenomena do not occur within a closed system, and therefore there may be influences, actions and mechanisms occurring outside this setting that would need to be considered. Indeed, as Chapter 2 illustrates, England's city regions, as defined by the geographies of LEPs and Combined Authorities, are not completely independent of one another, and quite often exhibit overlapping or 'fuzzy' boundaries. This recognition of the geographical complexities associated with different scales of governance therefore extended certain aspects of research interest beyond the case study area to the wider region(s) and nation state.

**Temporal scale of the research:** Due to the relatively constrained timescales within which I was able to undertake the fieldwork and the level of detailed observation required it was not practical to undertake a longitudinal study. Instead, the timeframe reflected in the fieldwork (approximately ten months) bears greater resemblance to the temporal characteristics of a cross-sectional study. This is not to say, however, that the events around which data were collected necessarily occurred within the timeframe of data collection, as my approach sought to develop an understanding of historical as well as current events based upon the recollections of interviewees and historic document analyses. The purpose of this was to develop a



picture of events, socio-political interactions and outcomes over time to understand how historical contexts, ideas and possible path dependencies may have influenced present day practices.

**Objects and entities of the research:** Whilst the research was focused geographically upon Sheffield City Region, the primary objects of interest included what I have defined in this research as ‘local planning actors’ and their enactment of ‘strategic spatial planning practices’.

In defining ‘local planning actors’, the research purposely adopted a broad definition, acknowledging that strategic spatial planning is a social process that engages multiple actors across multiples levels of governance, not just those employed as ‘planners’. Taking inspiration from organisational ethnographic approaches, the actors of interest to this study were also defined as those operating within the confines of a particular ‘organisation’, in this case, the local planning actors working within Sheffield City Region. As such, the local planning actors of interest in this research included:

- Planning policy officers based within the nine local authorities (and two county councils) that form part of Sheffield City Region;
- Other officers and elected members who were engaged in strategic spatial planning or decision-making within these authorities (for example, economic development officers or members of a local authority’s Planning Committee or Cabinet);
- Elected members that were represented on the Sheffield City Region Combined Authority Board; and
- Officers of the Sheffield City Region Executive Team.

Delimiting precisely what may be identified as a ‘practice’ of strategic planning was not a straightforward task. Alexander (2016), for example, distinguishes three types of practice; practices as pre-defined categorisations of activity; practices as activities defined by what particular people do or are expected to do, i.e. ‘planning is what planners do’ (Vickers, 1968 in Alexander, 2016: 91); and practice as ‘institution of meaning’ (p.92). In line with the latter of these descriptions, Healey (2007: 22) defines ‘practice’, in the context of strategic spatial planning, as ‘the effects, meanings and values embedded in what those involved in governing activity actually do’. Therefore, in identifying strategic spatial planning practices, this research sought to uncover what local planning actors ‘do’ in the context of what they understand to be ‘strategic spatial planning’<sup>1</sup>.

It was determined that such actions were likely to be represented by both the outcome of interactions between local planning actors, and the process of the interaction itself (Branch, 2015). Therefore, whilst it was not possible to fully delimit *all* of the practices represented in the ‘doing’ of strategic spatial planning, it was considered that these were likely to include actions, interactions and outcomes related to: policy writing, plan-making and strategizing; policy, plan and strategy implementation; problem identification, mediation, and resolution; and governance and decision-making. The observable element of these practices, which

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<sup>1</sup> How strategic spatial planning is understood and defined by the actors involved in its enactment will be discussed later in this thesis.

formed the basis of the empirical data gathered during the fieldwork, included conversations and verbal interactions between local planning actors, and written forms of communication, documentation and texts. Whilst I was unable to directly observe or acquire access to *all* of the strategic spatial planning practices that were enacted, the types of practices that I was able to gain access to are detailed in the following section.

### **4.3 Research methods**

As a methodological approach, ethnographic case study research is relatively broadly defined. In most of its applied forms, ethnographic research points towards a less structured, more exploratory approach than other types of research and I found that, as a researcher, it gave me the freedom to adopt a more inductive approach, broadening my perspective to the context within which I was situated and keeping my mind open to engaging with different lines of inquiry. The exploratory nature of ethnographic research also lends itself towards the gathering of data from multiple sources using a range of complementary research methods. This process of methodological triangulation enabled cross-comparison and corroboration of the evidence found using different methods and helped to enhance the construct validity of the case study (Yin, 2014). The research took the form of a non-linear, evolutionary process in which initial data collection informed (to a certain degree) the subsequent research methodology, allowing flexibility for further investigation where new sources of interest came to light during the research.

The methods I used in this research included direct observation, document analysis and semi-structured interviews. In pursuing a qualitative ethnographic methodological approach, the aim was to choose a range of methods that would allow me to explore the practices and actions in as fine-grained detail as possible in order to provide answers to the research questions.

#### **4.3.1 Direct observation**

Direct observation was chosen as the primary means of data collection in this research, as it allowed me to witness instances of strategic spatial planning enactment first-hand and to develop an understanding of the broader socio-political contexts surrounding these practices. I sought to cast my net as wide as possible, observing different actors in a variety of situations, and become immersed in the complex environment of local government. By adopting a broadly passive, non-participant approach to observation I was able to explore a broad range of practices, without being constrained to observing particular actors or situations. However, in certain situations my position did shift more towards that of a participant observer, particularly as I became involved in some evidence-gathering work for the FAP team and Sheffield City Region Planning Officers Group (see section 4.6.1 below).

The ethnographic complexities of managing the different relationships between myself and the research participants was something that required a level of self-awareness and sensitivity, as I had to ensure that my 'participation' in certain activities, and the relationships I was developing through these, did not impede the exploratory nature of the research or have any unintended influences on the actions and practices I was observing. Throughout the fieldwork I found myself performing a balancing act between developing

relationships in order to establish trust with participants, and retaining an appropriate ‘ethnographic distance’ (Neyland, 2007) or ‘epistemological stranger-ness’ (Majoor, 2018) from the subjects being observed. At certain points the balance would tip in favour of one or other of these positions, and I found myself having to make a conscious effort to readjust this balance.

The observational period of fieldwork, during which I was based in the FAP team at SCC, took place between October 2016 and July 2017. Whilst acknowledging that it was not going to be possible to directly observe every instance or practice of strategic spatial planning that was enacted during this time, I sought to observe as broadly as possible the actions and interactions of local planning actors within SCC, the other City Region authorities, and the Combined Authority. The main purpose of the observations was to gain an understanding of how strategic spatial planning practices were discussed and enacted by local planning actors, and how local planning actors behaved and interacted with one another in certain situations, with particular attention being paid to:

- How strategic planning issues were defined, talked about, referred to, discussed and debated, and by whom;
- What outcomes and decisions resulted from these discussions and interactions;
- How local planning actors interacted and communicated with one another, how they shared information and experiences, and how they referred to one another and the organisations and structures within which they were located; and
- Which actions and behaviours were repeated, by whom, and with what purpose.

These observations were undertaken in a range of different situations and contexts, including:

- Formal, public meetings across each of the Sheffield City Region authorities, including:
  - Council, Cabinet, Planning Committee and Overview and Scrutiny Committee meetings
  - Local Plan hearings and examination sessions (where relevant);
- Formal, public meetings of the Sheffield City Region Combined Authority;
- Formal, non-public meetings involving officers, that I was given permission to attend in a researcher capacity, including:
  - Departmental progress meetings within SCC’s FAP team
  - Internal staff briefings and workshops within SCC
  - ‘Duty to Cooperate’ meetings between SCC’s FAP officers and their counterparts in other Sheffield City Region authorities
  - Meetings of the Sheffield City Region Planning Officers Group<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The SCR Planning Officers Group was a ‘semi-formal’ group of senior planning officers, comprising one representative from each of the nine Sheffield City Region authorities (plus one representative from each of the County Councils and the South Yorkshire Passenger Transport Executive). The group met on a monthly basis to discuss a range of strategic planning issues, including matters relating to the Duty to Cooperate. The Chair position rotated annually between the authorities. Further detail on the foundations and purpose of the SCR Planning Officers Group is presented in Chapter 7.

- Meetings of the Sheffield City Region Heads of Planning Group<sup>1</sup>
- Meetings of the Core Cities Group; and
- Informal conversations and interactions between officers and elected members that I observed whilst based in the FAP team office and whilst conducting other observations.

A full list of the formal (public and non-public) meetings I attended and observed during the fieldwork is contained in Appendix 1.

During the course of the fieldwork I also held a number of informal one-to-one conversations with SCC officers. These conversations were not transcribed in detail but were essential in aiding my understanding of the strategic planning practices that were taking place and the historical context that influenced some of these processes and, in some cases, offering an alternate perspective to that which I had observed in more formal meetings. The informal nature of these discussions helped to provide a more candid insight into the relationships between officers and elected members and the issues they were facing. These conversations were also used to help inform the questions that I asked during the semi-structured interviews.

#### **4.3.2 Document analysis**

Throughout my fieldwork I collated and read a series of documents, texts and other written archival records, which I then analysed using the approach outlined in section 4.4. These documents provided further evidence of how the wider strategic context and strategic spatial planning practices were interpreted and enacted by local planning actors and helped to support the findings derived from the direct observations. The documents included a combination of those that were publicly available<sup>2</sup> and others that were non-public documents for which I acquired written consent to permit their removal from the SCC offices (in electronic format) and to allow their use within this research<sup>3</sup>. Examples of the types of documents analysed in the research included:

- Minutes of, and reports tabled at, council and committee meetings;
- Formal minutes and informal notes of officer meetings;
- Historic and current planning policy documents (including final publications and draft iterations);
- Local plan consultation responses;
- Examination in Public hearing documents and records;
- Working papers and briefing notes;
- Relevant local authority and Combined Authority reports, plans, evidence and strategy documents;
- Newspaper and online press articles; and
- Other forms of correspondence between local planning actors, including letters and emails.

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<sup>1</sup> The SCR Heads of Planning Group was a ‘semi-formal’ group comprising the Heads of Planning from each of the SCR authorities. It broadly mirrored the SCR Planning Officers Group in terms of its structure, remit and Terms of Reference, albeit at a more senior level.

<sup>2</sup> This included documents that would have been publicly available subject to a relevant request being made under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 but were, for the purposes of this research, obtained via another source, such as an officer in the FAP team.

<sup>3</sup> See section 4.5.1 for further details on the process through which consent was acquired.

### 4.3.3 Interviews

Towards the end of the fieldwork I conducted a series of interviews. The purpose of these interviews was to further cement my understanding of the relationships between actors involved in practices of strategic spatial planning, the participants' own understandings of their roles in enacting these practices, and their perceptions of the wider strategic context within which these practices were taking place. A total of 44 interviews were conducted between June and November 2017, each lasting between approximately 30 and 90 minutes.

The interview process was initiated by drawing up a list of potential interview participants based upon my observations and initial document analysis. The selected participants included those individuals who had direct involvement in local plan- and strategic decision-making processes within Sheffield City Region, either at a local authority level or within the Combined Authority. Each participant was approached via email or in person with a request to participate in the research. The participation rate was, perhaps unsurprisingly, highest amongst those participants with whom I had already established a connection during the observational period of fieldwork. These participants mainly included local authority or county council planning policy officers, although I also interviewed several officers from other departments, such as those related to regeneration, economic development and housing. Other interview participants with whom I had not previously established a personal connection included officers from organisations including the Combined Authority and Joint Authorities Governance Unit, and locally elected members. Whilst the rate of success for interview requests issued to elected members was lower than that of officers, by issuing new or repeat requests I eventually acquired consent to conduct interviews with nine current or former elected members of Sheffield City Region's constituent authorities. These interviews provided valuable insight into strategic spatial planning practices from the perspective of some of the political actors involved. Table 2 summarises the interview participants, and a full anonymised list is contained in Appendix 2.

**Table 2** Summary list of interview participants

Participant position	Organisations represented	Number of participants
Elected members (current) (including Leaders, and members of Cabinet and Planning Committee)	Sheffield City Council Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council Bassetlaw District Council North East Derbyshire District Council	2 1 1 1 1
Elected members (former) (including members of Cabinet and Planning Committee)	Sheffield City Council	2
Planning policy officers	Sheffield City Council Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council Chesterfield Borough Council North East Derbyshire District Council / Bolsover District Council Bassetlaw District Council Nottinghamshire County Council Peak District National Park Authority	17 2 2 1 1 1 3 1 1
Other local authority officers (incl. housing, economic development, transport)	Sheffield City Council	5
Other SCR officers	Sheffield City Region Executive Team Joint Authorities Governance Unit	1 1
<b>Total interview participants</b>		<b>44</b>

The format of the interviews was semi-structured, with the line of questioning informed by the findings of the direct observations and ongoing document analysis, and each participant's individual role in relation to the practices observed or historically recorded. During the interviews I also found it useful to ask participants to reflect on events that I had observed myself. This allowed me to consider the extent to which their perception of events and their interactions with other individuals, aligned with my own. It was also interesting to note which details they chose to include and exclude in these narratives. An example interview schedule is contained in Appendix 3. The purpose of the schedule was to act as a prompt to guide the questioning rather than constraining the interview to only those questions listed.

Immediately following each interview I noted down some of my initial thoughts and reflections. Each interview was then transcribed using the Interview Transcription Protocol I prepared at the start of the interview process in order to ensure consistency of style and format across all transcripts (see Appendix 4).

#### 4.3.4 Fieldnotes

Throughout the fieldwork I kept a record of all relevant observations and associated documents in the form of detailed fieldnotes. In addition to helping to provide an organised written record of my observations and the documents I had read, these notes provided an essential means of recording my thoughts and initial analyses, and identifying areas requiring further investigation. This enabled me to continually reflect on my observations throughout the fieldwork, highlighting emerging themes and ensuring that my future observations remained focused around clear research objectives. In preparing the fieldnotes, the aim was to capture as much as possible of what I perceived as being relevant to the research; recording what I saw, heard and read.

The fieldnotes were initially hand written, as I was keen to avoid more intrusive methods such as audio or video recording, which would likely have been less readily accepted by participants and may have tempered their actions or responses to particular situations if they felt as though they were being watched. I then transferred the handwritten fieldnotes to electronic format by entering them into a template based on principles originally established by Schatzman & Strauss (1973), an example of which is contained in Appendix 5. This involved recording three different sets of notes:

- Observational notes, which I referred to as ‘narrative description’, that included a thick description of what was seen and heard, with little interpretation;
- Theoretical notes, which I referred to as ‘emerging themes and initial analysis’, that included some initial analysis and thoughts on what the data might mean; and
- Methodological notes, which I referred to as ‘further actions’, which included research tasks completed or planned.

I also included a further section called ‘reflections’ in which I noted any thoughts or feelings I had during or immediately following the observations. In terms of the level of interpretation, these reflections lay somewhere between the observational and theoretical notes. The fieldnotes were later supplemented with interview notes and transcripts, and analysed using the approach outlined in the following section.

#### **4.4 Analysis and interpretation**

The aim of this research is to *understand* the practices of strategic spatial planning that are being performed in Sheffield City Region. In order to provide a means of understanding these practices, the research has applied an interpretivist analytical approach, which operationalises and applies the conceptual framework introduced in Chapter 3. Whilst interpretivist approaches see *understanding* (‘*verstehen*’) as the key to explanation, it should be noted that traditional interpretivist approaches, such as those proposed by Bevir and Rhodes (2003, 2006), typically reject the concept of ‘structure’, and therefore are not considered to sit well with institutionalist theories (Leggett, 2011; Mcanulla, 2006). I would however argue that ontologically, institutionalism and interpretivism are more closely linked in terms of their view of the structure-agency relationship than may be initially perceived. In an interpretivist view of the world, ‘contexts’ or ‘traditions’ (Bever & Rhodes, 2003) might be considered to behave in a similar way to the ‘institutional context’ or ‘institutionalised practices’ as conceptualised in this research, in that they can influence (although do not causally determine) behaviour (Hall, 2014). However, unlike institutionalists, most interpretivists consider ‘contexts’ and ‘traditions’ as being broadly ideational, as opposed to ‘real’. Therefore, by adopting a ‘thinly’ constructivist form of institutionalism that sees institutional contexts as having structuring effects that are realised through the processes of actors’ ideational interpretation it is possible to bridge this ontological gap (Hay, 2011).

Interpretivist epistemology holds that actions can be understood by revealing the beliefs that underpin them. Instead of ‘beliefs’, this research has introduced ‘ideas’ as a means of understanding how actors interpret the contexts in which they are embedded and the actions they undertake. In order to draw out an understanding

of how actors interpret these structural contexts, the data has been analysed using the concept of the 'ideational frame'. The 'frame' is introduced as an analytical tool to identify how different groups of actors interpret and attribute meaning to the institutional context in which they are embedded. In this context, ideational frames can be understood as a collection of cognitive (interest-based) and normative (value-based) ideas that are shared amongst particular interpretive communities (Brandwein, 2006; Schön & Rein, 1994)<sup>1</sup>. It is through these ideational frames that actors have been understood to interpret their strategic contexts and select a course of action that either reinforces or resists the institutionalised structuring effects of these contexts. The following section outlines how this interpretive concept of the 'ideational frame' was applied in the analysis of the empirical data.

#### 4.4.1 Stages of analysis

The analysis of the research data broadly comprised the following three key stages; data familiarisation, thematic coding, and interpretation and writing-up. Each of these stages is outlined in detail below.

**Data familiarisation and initial coding:** The process of analysis began during the fieldwork through the empirical observations and writing-up of fieldnotes, which included some high-level analytical reflections. Upon exiting the field, this was followed by a further period of initial analysis during the transcription of interviews and a detailed re-reading of my fieldnotes and other documents. Through this process I was able to familiarise myself with the data and identify the 'main story' or narrative (i.e. a high-level overview of what happened) as well as a number of broad themes. Braun & Clarke (2006) provide a useful definition of a 'theme' as follows:

'A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set.' (p.82)

This stage was more a process of 'thematic data sorting' rather than 'thematic data analysis', although some of the themes reinforced those previously identified in the literature, which helped to refine the research questions identified in Chapter 2. The purpose of this initial analysis stage was to avoid confirmation bias and ensure that my findings were informed by the data I had collected and the empirical observations I had made, rather than being unduly influenced by any preconceived notions of what I thought I would find based on my prior knowledge of the literature and theory. I felt it was important to keep as open a mind as possible during this process, as I had during the fieldwork itself, and to let the empirical data speak for itself.

**Detailed coding:** The initial period of analysis was then followed by a second stage of critical reading and detailed analysis, during which the themes I had identified previously were refined and a number of sub-themes were added, including those that emerged organically from the data itself, and others drawn from the research aim and questions, and theoretical literature. These refined themes were also shaped by the

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<sup>1</sup> See section 3.3.3 for further discussion on the role of cognitive and normative ideational framing processes.



theoretical framework which itself was further refined during the detailed analysis stage. The data were then coded against these themes using NVivo to help collate the relevant sections of data.

**Interpretation and writing-up:** The final stage of analysis was the ‘writing up’ stage. The ethnographic approach taken in the research enabled what Neyland (2007) refers to as ‘analysis through writing’, as ethnography is, in itself, interpretive. It was only at this stage, when the empirical findings were developed into a series of interpretive narratives based around the main identified themes and employing the concept of the ‘ideational frame’ to interpret the actions of local planning actors, that the analysis was complete. These interpretive narratives are presented in Chapters 6 to 8. Each chapter combines both thick description and interpretive analysis, reflecting what Gaggiotti et al. (2016: 4) refers to as the ‘...dynamic dialectic relationship between practice and theorising’ that an ethnographic approach affords.

In applying this analytical framework, the research focuses on analysing and interpreting the following conceptual elements: a) the institutionalised practices and processes enacted by strategic actors, b) the strategic contexts within which the institutionalised practices and processes are taking place, and c) the processes of ‘ideational framing’ through which the strategic contexts are interpreted and given meaning by local planning actors. The process through which this conceptual framework has been operationalised within the research, including the questions that were asked of the research data during this interpretive analytical stage, is outlined in Table 3.

**Table 3** Operationalising the conceptual framework

Element of conceptual framework (see Figure 2 in Chapter 3)	Constituent elements	Empirical object(s) of interest	Analytical questions asked of research data
Actors	Strategic and interpretive agents	Local (planning) officers, elected members	Who did or said what, to whom and in what context? What actions, practices or behaviours were produced and reproduced, in what instances and by whom? How did actors interact and communicate with and refer to others, including colleagues and actors in other organisations or positions of power? What were the differences in the ways local planning actors looked at or approached particular issues or situations?
Strategic action	Strategic and contextualised actions	Conversations and verbal interactions between local planning actors, written forms of communication, documentation and texts	
Institutional / strategic context	Formal rules, informal conventions, planning and governance spaces, territorial and relational spaces	Policy and legislation, organisational and governance structures, political territories and spatial imaginaries	How were organisations and teams structured, and how have these structures changed / are they continuing to change? How was legislation interpreted and enacted, and by whom? How were different places and administrative borders referred to, discussed, represented and interpreted?
Ideational framing processes	Cognitive (interest-based) ideas, normative (value-based) ideas	Conversations and verbal interactions between local planning actors, written forms of communication, documentation and texts	Why did actors behave in a particular way? How did actors refer to or justify their own actions or the actions of others? In what instances did actors behave or act in a way that was unexpected? What were the repercussions or results of these unexpected behaviours? How did other actors respond to these? What other actors, organisations or technologies (e.g. planning policies) did actors refer to when justifying their actions?
Strategic resources	Economic, human and technological resources, power and influence, trust	Political alliances, decision-making processes, planning policy and legislation, conversations and verbal interactions between local planning actors	How was power distributed amongst the actors and organisations observed? Who had the authority to make decisions? Was this authority upheld or contested? Through what spaces did actors interact and engage with one another? Who was included / excluded from these spaces? What other tools or technologies did actors adopt or utilise?
Institutional reproduction / transformation	Formal rules, informal conventions, endogenous / exogenous pressures	Changes in policy, practice and resource availability, 'crisis talk', changing or repeated patterns of behaviour	How and in what ways did policy, legislation, governance and organisational structures and approaches to collaborative practice change? Who was responsible for initiating and agreeing to these changes? Was there any resistance? How were these changes talked about by local planning actors? How did actors respond to these changes? Following such changes, which actions, behaviours or practices continued to be repeated and by whom; and which actions, behaviours and practices changed, and in what ways?

## 4.5 Ethics and integrity

The research has been carried out in accordance with the ethical standards and guidelines required by the University of Sheffield<sup>1</sup> and the ESRC<sup>2</sup>. Prior to commencing the research, formal ethical approval was acquired through the University of Sheffield Ethics Approval Process. The following paragraphs provide some detail on the approaches taken towards consent, confidentiality and other key issues of ethics and integrity within the research.

### 4.5.1 Confidentiality and consent

One of the main ethical concerns and potential risks to participants in this research lay in the politically sensitive and confidential nature of some of the issues being discussed and practices being observed. It was therefore essential that informed consent was acquired from participants and that their anonymity was preserved as far as possible, both within this thesis and any related outputs or publications. There was also an informal, verbal agreement between myself and participants that I would not disclose any confidential information, for example discussions about the allocation of potential development sites, to anyone outside of SCC.

In order to maintain ethical integrity, I was fully open with participants about the primary aim of the research, although I chose not to divulge the detail of what exactly I was ‘looking for’. In part, this was because I wasn’t sure exactly what this was myself given the exploratory nature of the research, and also because I wanted to ensure that the responses and actions of the participants were not influenced, either consciously or unconsciously, by their perceptions of what they thought I might want to hear. In accordance with the University of Sheffield’s ethics procedures, all research participants were provided with a one-page information sheet outlining the aims, objectives and purpose of the research, the data collection methods used, details of who was undertaking and financing the study, and where the data collected during the study would be published and deposited. A copy of the research information sheet that was issued to participants is contained in Appendix 6.

Participants were asked to sign a separate consent form to confirm that they had read and understood the research information sheet, including their intended role within the research. A copy of this consent form is contained in Appendix 7. This form provided evidence of participants’ informed consent and their understanding that the data they provided may be stored and analysed as part of this research project, published within this thesis, and deposited with the UK Data Service’s open access repository and the White Rose online e-thesis repository (an ESRC funding requirement). The consent form also clarified that participation in the research was entirely voluntary and that participants were free to withdraw from the study at any time, without reason. To date, no such requests have been received.

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<sup>1</sup> As outlined in the *University of Sheffield Ethics Policy Governing Research Involving Human Participants, Personal Data and Human Tissue*

<sup>2</sup> As outlined in the *ESRC Framework for Research Ethics* and the *RCUK Policy and Guidelines on the Governance of Good Research Conduct*

The nature of ethnographic observations means that it is not always practical, or indeed possible, to gain informed consent from every participant who is being observed. In larger private meetings where it was not feasible to obtain individual written consent, verbal consent was acquired at the beginning of each meeting. In public meetings individual consent was not acquired, as these meetings form part of the public record.

In order to preserve individual anonymity as far as possible, each participant was allocated an anonymous participant identifier (the prefix 'P', followed by a unique number), which was used when referring to individuals' actions and responses in the fieldnotes and interview transcripts. In the consent form, each participant was also given the option of choosing an anonymous descriptor that would be used to reference them and their responses within this thesis. This descriptor included a non-specific description of their job role, level of seniority and organisation<sup>1</sup>, which retained the level of specificity necessary for contextual and analytical purposes whilst continuing to preserve their anonymity. Wherever possible I have sought to ensure that comments are not traceable to individual participants.

I also acquired written consent from the FAP team manager regarding which documents I was permitted to remove from SCC for research purposes, and of these, which I was able to quote freely and which I needed further approval for the use of specific quotations. Where necessary, relevant approvals were gained before including these quotations in this thesis.

#### **4.5.2 Other ethical considerations**

The more time I spent in the field, the more I became aware of the acute job-related pressures that local planning actors were facing and that appeared, in certain cases, to have negatively affected their mental well-being. As I was preparing to undertake the interviews, I became increasingly aware of some of the potential impacts this process might have on the participants. For example, whilst the interviews might enable officers to reflect on their work and become more 'reflexive practitioners', on the other hand they may instil a sense of self-judgment and lack of self-worth, particularly given the barriers to plan preparation and individual officer frustrations I had observed during the fieldwork. In order to minimise any potential negative impacts of the interviews, I sought to ensure that whilst my line of questioning was probing, it avoided making any negative assumptions or using language that might have been deemed demeaning or that might appear to have targeted the work of individuals, for example, through referencing a lack of progress with local plan preparation.

#### **4.5.3 Data storage and use**

In order to assist with the collation, management and storage of the data collected, a data management plan was prepared and updated throughout the course of the research. All data acquired during the research were scanned (where necessary and permitted) and stored securely in digital format on a password-protected laptop. Back-up copies of all digital data were stored on a password-protected external hard drive and

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<sup>1</sup> The broad job descriptions used to refer to participants within this thesis include the following: (Senior) Planning Officer, (Senior) Economic Development Officer, (Senior) Housing Officer, (Senior) Transport Officer and (Former) Elected Member.

encrypted Google Drive. All original notes and other 'hard copy' documentation were labelled, referenced and stored securely in organised folders. A spreadsheet database was prepared containing the details of all documents reviewed, interviews conducted and fieldnotes prepared, together with the contact details of all participants and their participant identification numbers. This allowed all data and participant details to be referenced and accessed quickly and easily.

## **4.6 Practicalities and methodological challenges**

The process of undertaking fieldwork is never easy, even in a context with which one is familiar.

Immediately prior to embarking on this PhD I spent a number of years working as a planner. This included the period between 2009 and 2011 during which I worked as a planning officer at Local Government Yorkshire and Humber (including a secondment to Sheffield City Region). Even though I had experience of working as a planner in the public sector, and Sheffield City Region was familiar territory for me, the transition from 'practitioner' to 'researcher' was not a straightforward one. I had to learn to look at things in a different way, and practices that would have once passed me by unnoticed became the objects of keen interest and scrutiny. I also had to find ways of gaining access, establishing trust and finding ways to work around issues as and when they arose. This section outlines some of these practicalities and challenges, and the ways and extent to which they were overcome.

### **4.6.1 Negotiating access**

Once I had identified Sheffield City Region as an appropriate case study, I approached the FAP team manager at SCC via email and arranged an initial meeting. I explained the objectives of my research and the intended nature of the fieldwork, after which it was agreed that I could spend three days per week based in the FAP team's office where I would be permitted to observe meetings, interactions between officers and be given access to relevant documents. The FAP team manager became my lead contact at the authority throughout the course of the research. I was fortunate that they were supportive of the research and its objectives, and as they were a person of relatively senior authority they were also able to provide relevant introductions and referrals to other individuals within the authority that I wished to contact, as well as being able to provide appropriate consents for accessing relevant documents and archival materials, where these were not publicly available.

The days that I was able to spend in the FAP office each week remained relatively flexible, depending on which meetings and activities were taking place, and in return for being granted permission to undertake ethnographic observations I offered to spend a portion of this time assisting the planning officers with a number of discrete pieces of work related to the development of evidence to support the local plan. Whilst undertaking this work I was still able to use this time to observe what was going on around me. This arrangement worked well, and because my presence within the team had a sense of purpose beyond that of 'researcher' I felt that I was able to assimilate relatively easily. I was given my own desk, and invited to attend and observe meetings, so to all intents and purposes I was 'part of the team'. This enabled me to

witness, first-hand, the enactment of practices of strategic spatial planning and socio-political interactions between local planning actors.

#### **4.6.2 Managing expectations**

The dual roles I had adopted of ‘passive researcher’ and ‘participant colleague’ did initially result in some minor conflict that required careful management of expectation. For example, during the first few weeks I was asked if I could help to support a series of workshop sessions that the FAP team had arranged with a local town council to help them develop their neighbourhood plan, but because I was not technically employed by SCC I felt wary of putting myself in a position where I would be seen as representing the local authority in a role that was clearly distinct from that of a researcher. I was also asked if I could help to prepare SCC’s Duty to Cooperate statement, which the local authority is required to submit alongside their Local Plan. Again, I was conscious that I did not want to pursue any form of ‘action research’ and so I was keen to ensure that I didn’t participate in any tasks that might directly influence my own data.

Given the current resource constraints within local authorities, I sensed there was a danger that I might easily have been coerced into assisting with a significant number of additional tasks, especially if I was perceived as being a full-time member of staff. In order to avoid this, I met with the FAP team manager at the end of my first week to discuss both of our expectations and my fieldwork objectives, following which we arrived at a mutually beneficial arrangement regarding the balance of my time and which specific tasks I would be able to assist with. I was especially keen to ensure that I didn’t take on too much additional work that might detract from my ability to conduct effective observations.

#### **4.6.3 Establishing trust**

At the start of my fieldwork there was an initial period of adjustment, during which I was introduced to members of the FAP team. I explained my role as researcher and gained verbal consent that I could observe and take notes of their actions. Some of the participants were intrigued by what exactly it was that I was writing down, and during some of my early observations I sensed that some of the senior members of the team were more guarded in their responses, perhaps because they felt that their actions were being critiqued. However, this did subside as time went on, and they became more at ease with my presence.

I also made a conscious effort to ‘blend in’ as much as possible with other members of the team, for example by choosing to wear clothing appropriate for a working office environment and by participating in team social events and activities. I felt that this helped officers perceive me as a legitimate member of their team and to feel more comfortable with my presence in their meetings and office.

At a practical level, I felt that I benefited from the fact that I had worked as a planner previously, as I was already familiar with the broad policy and governance context and much of the technical language used by planning actors. This prior knowledge certainly helped me to settle more quickly. Being able to involve myself in different tasks alongside conducting observations also gave me an added sense of purpose and helped to reduce some of the awkwardness I might have otherwise felt. Although participants were aware

that my primary role was that of a researcher (and so I was always, to some extent, viewed as an outsider), I did feel that they came to accept me as part of their team.

Establishing the same level of trust with other participants outside the FAP team was, in some ways, more difficult. The longer I spent building a rapport with participants, the more I sensed that they relaxed in my presence and they became less self-conscious of whether they were saying or doing the 'correct' thing. I also found that other participants to whom I was first introduced via a member of the FAP team appeared to be more trusting initially than those with whom I made the first introduction myself. On the whole, I found that willingness to engage with the research was greatest amongst officers. Elected members were in general more reluctant to consent to interviews being recorded or directly quoted, or for private meetings to be observed, which is perhaps not surprising given the sensitive political nature of many strategic planning issues. Gaining access to this particular group of participants was one of the main challenges I faced during the fieldwork, as further discussed below.

#### **4.6.4 Exiting the field**

I remained in the field until July 2017, at which point I felt that I had collected sufficient data to meet my research aim, which was signified by repetition in the patterns of behaviour I had observed and corroboration of my initial analyses of those observations. At this point I negotiated a mutually agreeable leaving date with the FAP team manager and offered to return to feedback the findings of my analysis to the groups that I had been working with, once this had been completed. I continued to conduct interviews with local planning actors from within Sheffield City Council and the wider City Region until November 2017. Again, this was the point at which I felt I had acquired data from a sufficiently representative sample of participants, and I noticed repetition in the answers being given.

#### **4.6.5 Challenges and limitations**

I was fortunate enough to be granted access to many of the formal meetings between officers within the FAP team and their counterparts in other Sheffield City Region authorities. Once I had established my position within the FAP team as a 'visiting researcher' I was allowed to observe these meetings with relatively little obstruction. However, being granted access to private meetings between elected members, was far more difficult.

One method I used to observe the role of and relationships between elected members within a particular authority was by attending the various council meetings. Although, after having observed several Full Council and Cabinet meetings, it became clear that much of the real debate and decision-making between elected members took place outside of these public meetings. I had hoped it might be possible for me to find a way to observe some of these discussions in person, such as the meetings of the SCC Labour Members Group that related to the development of the Local Plan. Unfortunately, I was not permitted to attend these meetings due to the confidential nature of the issues being discussed, notably the allocation of sites for future housing development. Instead, as a 'proxy' for directly observing these discussions I requested a de-brief from the FAP officer who did attend the meetings. In the case of other private discussions between elected

members, I asked the members themselves to recount their versions of events when I interviewed them later in the fieldwork.

Although these second-hand accounts no doubt included a selective and biased perspective of proceedings that cannot completely compensate for observing these meetings in person, they did provide some valuable insights into practices that I was otherwise unable to directly observe. The accounts also showed how individuals would perceive and describe the same situation in different ways. During the fieldwork I also struggled to find much observable evidence of the relationships between elected members in different authorities, including how they worked with one another and took decisions on strategic matters. This was partly due to the fact that there were relatively few forums in which elected members of different authorities met to discuss strategic planning issues, and therefore relatively few opportunities to observe these practices in action. The Combined Authority Board meetings represented one such forum, but as the evidence presented in subsequent chapters illustrates, it was relatively ineffectual as a conduit for inter-authority engagement on cross-boundary matters at an elected member level<sup>1</sup>.

A further challenge that presented itself during the research was that of a potential perspective bias associated with having been based solely within the FAP team at SCC for the duration of the ethnographic fieldwork. Whilst I did also undertake observations and conducted interviews with local planning actors outside of this immediate context, I felt it was essential that I attributed sufficient time to immerse myself in the FAP team so that I could fully understand the micro-practices taking place. As a result of this targeted ethnographic focus, I became conscious that the perspective I was seeing was very much that of a 'Sheffield City Council Planning Officer'. Given the ethnographic nature of the research and the limited time available in which to undertake the fieldwork, it was not however feasible, nor particularly desirable, for me to even attempt to gain a balanced view that fully reflected the different perspectives of all the local planning actors from across all SCR authorities. Instead, my chosen approach has been to acknowledge, rather than attempt to overcome this potential bias. In the analysis and writing up of this research I have therefore tried to recognise and account for this potential bias as far as possible to ensure that it doesn't unfairly skew the findings and conclusions drawn. Some further reflections on the methodology applied in this research are presented in the final conclusions in Chapter 9.

#### **4.7 Reflexivity and positionality**

As a researcher it is necessary for me to interpret situations reflexively, recognising how my own interpretation and understanding of a situation may differ to that of the actors involved. This final section outlines some of these reflections; firstly, in relation to my positionality as a 'planner-researcher in the field' and secondly, in relation to my positionality as an 'interpretive researcher'.

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<sup>1</sup> The spaces of interaction between elected members are discussed in detail in the second analysis chapter, Chapter 7.



#### 4.7.1 Reflections on experiences in the field

Having previously worked as a planner, my initial embarkation on the fieldwork was met, perhaps naively, with a sense of ease and comfort as opposed to one of trepidation or uncertainty. These initial confidences were soon suppressed, as the immediate context in which I found myself upon first entering the field felt new and unfamiliar. I was in many respects an outsider, having to learn and experience things for the first time. I also found that many of the practices or actions that I might previously have overlooked or taken for granted as the 'familiar', I had to reconsider and reinterpret from a new perspective – that of a 'researcher' as opposed to that of a 'planner'. Ybema (2009) describes this experience as that of making, 'the exotic familiar and the familiar exotic, to problematize what is taken for granted' (p.23). The fieldwork required a process of continual reflexivity in order to balance my preconceptions and expectations with what I was actually observing, and what the observations might mean from the perspective of a researcher as well as that of a practitioner.

This process of reflection has led me to consider, in greater detail, my positionality within this research. Firstly, how my own background and previous experiences may have affected the choices I made about what to observe, what details to record and how I interpreted the findings, and secondly, how my presence in the field may have directly or indirectly influenced the actions of those I was observing.

**Potential influence of my own background and experience:** My approach to ethnographic observation was informed by an epistemology in which the process of conducting ethnographic research is in itself considered to be interpretive and the knowledge acquired is constructed and given meaning by the individual researcher's prior knowledge, expectations and characteristics. Every researcher will choose to approach the same research context in different ways, by asking different questions, and recording and interpreting the same findings and situations differently. Despite these inherent subjectivities, the knowledge that is acquired is still valid no matter who the researcher, as long as their subjectivities are recognised and acknowledged.

Throughout the research, I felt that my position reflected a dualism between that of an academic researcher and that of a trained planner, in particular one who has previously worked for local government within Sheffield City Region. On the one hand, this prior experience provided me with a detailed understanding of the background and context of what I was observing, but on the other hand, I quickly became aware that my default perspective in certain situations was very much that of a 'planner'. Although I tried to minimise this potential layer of subjectivity as far as possible, particularly when conducting interviews and analysing my research data, my prior experiences still had an undeniable influence on the direction and ultimately the outcomes of this research. I do not perceive this influence as being negative, but it is one that exists and is therefore acknowledged.

**Potential influence on actions of participants:** At the start of my fieldwork, my intention was to remain a passive observer, as far as possible, by blending into the background and having no influence on situations as they played out in front of me. I quickly realised that this would not be possible. There was an initial period at the beginning of the fieldwork during which I felt that some participants' responses were being altered for

my benefit. Officers would say things like, ‘this is not for the record’, whilst looking in my direction; this being an indirect request not to note down a specific detail of the discussion, which I would obviously uphold. Instances of this nature subsided the longer I was there, and participants became more at ease with my presence, but I was continually aware that I was there as a researcher and that my role was different to that of the other officers.

As well as having a potential influence on what was *not* being said, I also became aware that my presence might be influencing what *was* being done or said. For example, on one occasion, when I was accompanying a planning officer to a meeting with a neighbouring authority they explained that they were glad I had enquired as to whether they had any other meetings scheduled, because it reminded them that they needed to arrange them. Whilst it is probably the content of the meeting that is of greater relevance for my research, I became aware that if I hadn’t been there, some of those meetings may not have taken place. I also sensed that some participants felt that I was judging them on their ability to work well with other authorities, and they would go out of their way to tell me what they had done or what they were planning to do, and how this fulfilled their Duty to Cooperate. In spite of this, it is important to note that I in no way felt that all the actions I was observing were being staged for my benefit, but that there was clearly an awareness amongst the participants of who I was and what I was there to observe.

#### **4.7.2 Reflections on process of analysis and interpretation**

One potential issue arising from the application of an interpretive analytical approach in the context of this research is that of the ‘double hermeneutic’, or in other words, the analytical interpretation of the actor’s own practical interpretation, which adds a layer of complexity to the process of analysis (Easton, 2010; Woodside et al., 2005) and means that there is an inherent lack of neutrality. I therefore found it necessary to recognise the sense- and meaning-making which is done both by the research participant (the emic perspective) and by myself as the researcher and observer (the etic perspective).

I also recognised that interpretive analysis can be a subjective, value-laden process which has the potential to reveal a number of possible interpretive outcomes. As Sayer (2000) highlights; ‘a different way of thinking about interpretive understanding is to regard it not as a matter of finding more or less true or adequate or authoritative interpretations, but as a matter of adding to the range of interpretations, thereby enriching an ongoing creative conversation’ (p.46), however it should also seek to ‘find interpretations of social action which attempt to identify what actors understood by them’ (p.46). The importance of identifying and addressing competing or rival interpretations (both between individual participants, and between the researcher and participants) is also highlighted by Yin (2014), with the challenge being to anticipate these and include data about them in the research, drawing together narratives from different perspectives where necessary. In order to uphold the validity of any claims made in this research, I have ensured that any interpretations are well-evidenced and that, where necessary, alternate evidence-based interpretations are provided. The reliability of the research findings has been affirmed through the keeping of clear notes to

ensure that the inferences and interpretations are clearly grounded in data and have been derived in a logical manner.

## **4.8 Conclusion**

This chapter has detailed and provided justification for the choice of methodology and methods that were used in this research, as well as providing some initial critical reflections on the difficulties and limitations of the approach undertaken. Further reflections on the methodology and methods used are provided in Chapter 9. The chosen methods allowed the collection, interpretation and analysis of an appropriate range and depth of data that was able to provide answers to the research questions and achieve the overarching research aim. Before presenting the outcomes of the analysis, the following chapter introduces the case study by providing some background context.

## 5 | Sheffield City Region in context

As a devolved governance administration, Sheffield City Region was first established as a Local Enterprise Partnership in 2011, later becoming a Combined Authority in 2014 and a Mayoral Combined Authority in 2018, having agreed a series of ‘deals’ with central government that devolved powers and funding to the City Region. These governance arrangements represent a voluntary drawing-together of adjoining, but in some ways quite disparate, local authorities that have subsequently been required to work with one another to make strategic decisions relating to the future planning of, and investment in, economic development, transport, housing, skills and employment. As well as being represented by ‘hard’ or ‘formal’ governance structures, Sheffield City Region is also representative of a ‘soft’, relational geography across which other collaborative practices and strategic decision-making processes are emerging, including those related to strategic spatial planning.

Section 5.1 locates the research by briefly describing the spatial and economic geography of Sheffield City Region and the structures of Sheffield City Council, which provided a base for the ethnographic fieldwork. Section 5.2 provides an overview of the history of collaborative, cross-boundary working between the local authorities that currently comprise Sheffield City Region, with a particular focus on the evolution of strategic governance and spatial planning across the Yorkshire and Humber region and South Yorkshire sub-region; these being the primary geographies that shaped the foundation of Sheffield City Region and continue to inform the present-day strategic planning and collaborative practices observed therein. Section 5.3 describes the emergence of Sheffield City Region as a space of devolving governance, including the establishment of the LEP and Combined Authority. This section also discusses some of the recent events that have taken place in the City Region including those which have resulted in heightened political tensions and which help to further contextualise the period during which the fieldwork was undertaken.

### 5.1 Locating the research

This section situates the research within the broader spatial and economic geography of Sheffield City Region and within the organisation of Sheffield City Council, which acted as the base location for the ethnographic observations and provided a point-of-access for acquiring insights into the wider City Region.

#### 5.1.1 The spatial and economic geography of Sheffield City Region

Sheffield City Region is one of thirty-eight<sup>1</sup> LEP areas that were formed throughout England in 2011<sup>2</sup> and is coterminous with the Combined Authority that was formed in 2014 following a review of the LEP’s governance arrangements. As shown in Figure 3, Sheffield City Region comprises nine local authorities, straddling parts of both the former Yorkshire and Humber region in the north and the former East Midlands

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<sup>1</sup> While there were originally 39 LEPs that received approval from central government, in 2017 the South East Midlands and Northamptonshire LEPs merged, bringing the total number down to 38.

<sup>2</sup> See Chapter 2 for a detailed discussion of the establishment of LEPs and Combined Authorities.

region in the south. The authorities include the four South Yorkshire metropolitan boroughs of Sheffield City Council, Barnsley MBC, Rotherham MBC and Doncaster MBC; the four Derbyshire district authorities of Bolsover, Derbyshire Dales, Chesterfield and North East Derbyshire; and the Nottinghamshire district authority of Bassetlaw.

Sheffield City Region is bordered to the north by Leeds City Region LEP, to the south by the D2N2 LEP, to the east by the Humber and Greater Lincolnshire LEPS, and to the west by the Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire LEP, Greater Manchester LEP, and Cheshire and Warrington LEP. However, as in many other areas, its borders are not contiguous with those of its neighbours as there is some overlap, as Barnsley MBC is also a member of Leeds City Region, and Bolsover BC, Chesterfield BC, Derbyshire Dales DC, North East Derbyshire DC and Bassetlaw DC are also members of the D2N2 LEP. Rather than perceiving this as a negative, a Sheffield City Region response to the recent government review of Local Enterprise Partnerships highlights that the LEP geography is one of a ‘functional economic area’ (p.2) and that the ‘overlaps have fostered collaborative working’ (p.7) and ‘should continue to be permitted’ (p.2) (Sheffield City Region LEP, 2018: 2).

Sheffield City Region is transected by the East Coast Main Line and Midland Main Line railways, which pass through Doncaster and Sheffield respectively, and the M1, M18 and A1 motorways, which provide primary road connections to the north and south. The westernmost parts of Sheffield City Region lie within the Peak District National Park.



**Figure 3** Map of Sheffield City Region (Source: Sheffield City Region, 2011) Image reproduced with permission from Sheffield City Region

In 2016, Sheffield City Region had an estimated population of 1.86 million (Office for National Statistics, 2019), just over half of which (51%) was located in its five main towns and cities of Sheffield, Doncaster, Rotherham, Barnsley and Chesterfield (Office for National Statistics, 2018). Outside these main settlements, there are a number of other smaller towns, including Worksop, Retford and Bolsover. The remainder of the City Region area is largely rural in nature. Described as ‘weakly monocentric’ (The Northern Way, 2009), Sheffield is recognised as the main centre of employment and driver of economic growth in the City Region, however all of the authorities are recognised as making an important economic contribution (Ekosgen, 2013).

Sheffield City Council and Rotherham MBC have the closest economic relationship of all the Sheffield City Region authorities and are considered to have an ‘interdependent’ labour market in which there are strong commuter flows in both directions. North East Derbyshire DC and Barnsley MBC have a ‘dependent’ labour market relationship with Sheffield City Council, with large proportions of their residents travelling to work in Sheffield, whilst Bolsover DC and Doncaster MBC are considered to be ‘isolated’ from Sheffield in employment terms (The Northern Way, 2009).

Sheffield City Region has a strong industrial heritage linked to coal mining and the steel industry, the progressive decline of which resulted in significant economic and social impacts that were felt across the area. Whilst the present-day economy has somewhat recovered, its economic base is now far more diverse and no longer dominated by a single sector. Since the establishment of the LEP, there has been a particular focus on developing the high-value manufacturing and service sectors, and creative and digital industries.

### **5.1.2 The context of Sheffield City Council**

During the observational part of the fieldwork I was primarily based within Sheffield City Council, which is the local authority for the borough of Sheffield and is bordered by the four authorities of Barnsley, Rotherham, North East Derbyshire and Derbyshire Dales, shown in Figure 3 and the Peak District National Park authority to the west. In 2016, the authority of Sheffield was estimated to have a population of 575,424, making it the third largest metropolitan authority in England, after Birmingham and Leeds (Office for National Statistics, 2017).

Sheffield City Council is the planning authority for the majority of the administrative borough<sup>1</sup> and, as in the other Sheffield City Region authorities, has responsibility for developing the policies that are used to shape future growth in the form of a statutory local plan, and for fulfilling the Duty to Cooperate. At the time the fieldwork was undertaken the Council’s Forward and Area Planning (FAP) team, in which I was based, were working on progressing a draft new local plan. This would replace their existing Core Strategy (adopted in 2009) and the ‘saved’ policies in their Unitary Development Plan (adopted in 1998) and would contain both

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<sup>1</sup> The western part of Sheffield’s administrative borough lies within the Peak District National Park and planning for this area is the responsibility of the Peak District National Park Authority rather than Sheffield City Council.

planning policies and site allocations. Due to significant growth pressures on the authority<sup>1</sup> and the lack of available developable land outside the Green Belt, progress on the local plan during the course of the fieldwork was limited as the Council faced difficulties in reaching political agreement upon the scale and distribution of future development sites. The ‘threat’ posed by Sheffield and its scale of future housing need influenced its relationship with its neighbouring City Region authorities (at both an officer and elected member level), as the findings in Chapters 6 to 8 will discuss.

The FAP team was one of the largest planning policy teams in Sheffield City Region, with around seventeen planning officers (a number of whom worked part-time). There was a clear hierarchy within the team which comprised the FAP Team Leader, eleven Planning Officers and five Senior Planning Officers. The FAP team formed part of a Planning Service function within the council (as illustrated in Figure 4), which also included Development Management, Urban Design, Landscape, Building Control and Archaeology teams, and was overseen by a Head of Planning. A similar hierarchical structure was in place across the other Sheffield City Region authorities, although the smaller authorities had fewer staff and often lacked officers with technical expertise, such as urban design, landscape and archaeology.



Figure 4 Sheffield City Council, Place Directorate – Organisational Structure (Source: Author)

## 5.2 Before the City Region: A history of ‘strategic thinking’

This section details the history of ‘collaborative working’ and strategic spatial planning that has taken place across the geography that is now represented by Sheffield City Region, with a particular focus on the South Yorkshire authorities that comprise the ‘constituent’ membership of the Combined Authority. This history is important because, as the analysis presented in the following chapters shows, it played a role in shaping many of the practices of cross-boundary collaboration and strategic spatial planning that have taken place in recent years and that were observed during the fieldwork. This discussion reflects and builds upon the national history of strategic spatial planning presented in Chapter 2, by providing a more detailed historic

<sup>1</sup> The Strategic Economic Plan identified a need to deliver around 160 hectares of employment land and between 40,000 and 46,000 new homes in Sheffield by 2034 (Sheffield City Council, 2015).

account set within the context of Sheffield City Region. To minimise repetition, cross-references to discussion of the national context provided in Chapter 2 have been included, where relevant.

### **5.2.1 The emergence of strategic spatial planning (1920s to 1985)**

One of the earliest regional spatial plans in the country, drawing together parts of South Yorkshire, was prepared by Sir Patrick Abercrombie in the form of the Doncaster Regional Planning Scheme, published in 1922. Abercrombie was then appointed by Sheffield Council to prepare a plan for the city and its surrounding areas. The plan was formed of a detailed civic survey, published in 1924, and then presented as the Sheffield and District Regional Planning Scheme in 1931 (Jones, 2004). In the years following, there was also a successful campaign led by the Council for the Preservation of Rural England (CPRE) to establish a provisional Green Belt around Sheffield, which was launched in 1938 and later expanded to cover parts of Rotherham (CPRE South Yorkshire, 2017). In noting the extent of the area covered in the Sheffield and District Regional Planning Scheme, Brueton (1931) commented that:

‘This region is not really a ‘region’ in the accepted sense at all; it is neither a geographic nor an economic unit, but attains to some sense of unity owing to the fact that it forms part of the Yorkshire Coalfield’

(Brueton, 1931: 270)

Some would argue that it is this vague ‘sense of unity’, rather than a more tangible ‘functional economic’ connection, that has continued to underpin the relationship between the four South Yorkshire authorities over the course of the last century. The connections between the South Yorkshire authorities were forged from a shared industrial heritage of coal and steel. This sparked the urbanisation of the county’s main settlements – Sheffield, Doncaster, Rotherham and Barnsley – in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the smaller mining towns that grew within their hinterlands. The industrial expansion of South Yorkshire was later coupled with a growth in the trade union and socialist labour movements, which during the late 1970s resulted in the area becoming informally known as the ‘Socialist Republic of South Yorkshire’ (Payling, 2014). With the exception of Sheffield City Council (that was under Liberal Democrat control during the periods 1999-2002 and 2008-2011) each of the South Yorkshire authorities has been under continuous Labour control since they became metropolitan boroughs<sup>1</sup> in 1974. Despite these apparent political and cultural commonalities there was, however, little evidence that the South Yorkshire authorities had any sense of shared identity. Indeed, there appeared to be growing distrust amongst the four authorities, particularly towards Sheffield City Council, which was perceived as a domineering power due to its ‘radical’ 1980s administration (Leach & Game, 1991) that, amongst other things, offered support to the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and introduced hugely subsidised bus fares (Payling, 2014).

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<sup>1</sup> See section 2.2.1 for further discussion of the 1970s reorganisation of local government.



It is worth noting that South Yorkshire, as a 'metropolitan area' was noticeably absent from the two-tier recommendations of the 1969 Redcliffe-Maud report<sup>1</sup>, and was not proposed as such until the publication of the 1971 Conservative White Paper (Department of the Environment, 1971). This may have been due to the fact that South Yorkshire's urban form did not reflect the same characteristics as the other metropolitan areas, being described by Leach & Game (1991) as 'polynuclear' due to the fact that Barnsley and Doncaster were quite detached from the larger Sheffield-Rotherham conurbation. South Yorkshire was also relatively sparsely populated compared with some of England's other metropolitan counties, and still contained some large rural areas (Redcliffe-Maud & Wood, 1974).

A further outcome of the process of local government restructuring was a change to the administrative boundary of Sheffield City Council, which was expanded in 1967 to include the Derbyshire village of Mosborough and the surrounding area, to the south-east of Sheffield city centre. The purpose of this expansion was to provide additional housing land to meet the needs of Sheffield's growing urban population within a series of nineteen small residential settlements that later became known as the Mosborough Townships (Jones, 2004). This was a decision that continues to be perceived by some (particularly within the Derbyshire authorities) as a further reflection of Sheffield's ongoing 'dominance' over its neighbours<sup>2</sup>.

Although the County Council was the first body with statutory responsibility for preparing a strategic plan that explicitly covered the South Yorkshire area, it was the earlier formation of the Yorkshire and Humberside REPC<sup>3</sup> in 1965, and in particular its 1966 publication, *A Review of Yorkshire and Humberside*, that is considered to mark the beginning of a strategic spatial way of thinking across the wider Yorkshire and Humber region (Counsell & Haughton, 2006). As well as identifying priorities for each of the main settlements in the region, this review also identified proposals for the expansion of Doncaster as a key urban centre – an idea that was further explored in the *Area Study for Doncaster*, published in 1969, which identified an option to develop Doncaster as a 'regional growth point'. Prior to the establishment of the Yorkshire and Humberside REPC, collaboration on issues that may be termed 'strategic planning matters' between the local authorities, and in particular between the county councils, was relatively fragmented (Haughton & Whitney, 1994).

The first formal Regional Economic Strategy for Yorkshire and Humberside was published by the REPC in 1970 and later reviewed in 1976. These strategies incorporated a spatial dimension, outlining the Council's ambitions for the development of a series of sub-areas. South Yorkshire was divided into a Sheffield and Rotherham sub-area and a 'Coalfields' sub-area, containing Barnsley and Doncaster. Unlike other regional strategies, such as those of the North West region, the Yorkshire and Humberside strategies were prepared in-house by the Economic Planning Board with little involvement from the constituent local authorities and

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<sup>1</sup> See section 2.2.1 for further details regarding the Redcliffe-Maud Report.

<sup>2</sup> This was noted by some of the participants of this research and is further discussed in Chapter 8.

<sup>3</sup> Section 2.2.1 provides further detail regarding the Regional Economic Planning Councils (REPCs).

providing no opportunity for resolving existing political differences within the region (Haughton & Whitney, 1994).

This initial foray into the realm of regional spatial planning was relatively short-lived, as the REPCs were dissolved in the late 1970s. In the absence of the REPC, the Yorkshire and Humberside County Councils Association was formed, which sought to retain some semblance of a regional structure, but in reality did little to take forward the strategic ambitions laid out by the REPC. Haughton & Whitney (1994: 221) describe Yorkshire and Humberside as, 'a diverse and often contradictory spatial system', which perhaps explains some of the difficulties experienced in maintaining intra-regional collaboration in the absence of a formalised governance structure.

At the same time as the Regional Economic Strategy for Yorkshire and Humber was being developed, the County Council and its newly established team of planners based in Barnsley, was working on preparing the first South Yorkshire Structure Plan. Initially, this plan was proposed to cover only the authorities of Sheffield, Rotherham and Barnsley, as a separate Doncaster Area Structure Plan covering Doncaster and its hinterlands was already being prepared by what was previously Doncaster County Borough Council and the West Riding County Council. However, the work on the Doncaster Area Structure Plan was eventually merged with the work that had been undertaken on the strategic planning for the three other districts, to create a single structure plan for the whole of South Yorkshire. Doncaster's growth ambitions of the early 1970s, and its early geographic and governmental distinction from the other South Yorkshire authorities, have in some respects persisted and continue to be reflected in some of the political conflicts that have taken place in recent years, particularly between Doncaster and Sheffield.

In preparing the South Yorkshire Structure Plan, the Chief County Planner published a Draft Project Report detailing the organisational structures and management process for delivering the plan (South Yorkshire County Council, 1974). This report acknowledged that the planning functions of the County Council and its constituent districts were closely linked, and it was therefore, 'essential that machinery is set up to bring about co-operation between authorities at both member and officer level' (para. 3.2). Whilst this draft report clearly stated the proposed structures for officer working, the precise arrangements for collaborative working between elected members had yet to be determined. The County Council recognised that structure planning required different agencies to be brought together through a 'regular and recurring dialogue with all the participants' (South Yorkshire County Council, 1981: 18). Despite these ambitions to work efficiently and effectively across authorities, the process was not without its flaws, and the South Yorkshire Structure Plan itself (published in 1979) highlighted some of the difficulties faced in relation to conflicting objectives and gaining access to information:

'The new metropolitan counties face particular problems, with overlapping responsibilities for services such as town and country planning and the environment, and a separation of others between the County Councils (transport planning and highways) and District Councils (education, housing and social services). This system of government in metropolitan areas means that the agency

preparing the Structure Plan has less access to information and fewer direct controls over policy-making than was assumed when the legislation was framed.’ (South Yorkshire County Council, 1981: 18)

Similar issues regarding the distribution of responsibilities across different tiers of government are still observed today in the context of Sheffield City Region, particularly in the south of the City Region where governance continues to be split between county and district level authorities<sup>1</sup>.

### **5.2.2 The fall and rise of strategic spatial planning (1985 to 2004)**

South Yorkshire County Council was dissolved in 1986, and its planning powers passed to the four district authorities; a decision that was initially met with antagonism by the representatives of the County Council<sup>2</sup>. Following its dissolution, a number of the officers that were previously employed by the County Council moved to join the newly expanded metropolitan councils. Meanwhile, joint boards were established for the police, fire and rescue, passenger transport and pensions authorities, and a South Yorkshire Joint Secretariat (later re-named the Joint Authorities Governance Unit) was set up in Barnsley to provide administrative support for these authorities. The somewhat counter-intuitive choice of Barnsley as the location for the Joint Secretariat, and Barnsley Council as the lead authority overseeing the servicing of this arrangement, is likely to have stemmed in part from the unease of the three other authorities about the potential for predominance of Sheffield (Leach & Game, 1991), and partly out of convenience and practicality, because Barnsley was the location of the main County Council offices and therefore retained many of the resources required to manage cross-authority issues<sup>3</sup>.

Prior to its dissolution, the County Council acknowledged that although conflicts existed between the four district authorities, the county level governance structures provided an effective means of developing a close working relationship through which these conflicts could be resolved, as stated in its response to the ‘Streamlining the Cities’ White Paper:

‘What the government has failed to recognise is that consultation over issues of mutual concern, which it regards as ‘conflict’, but which local authorities regard as essential to the efficient and effective operation of local government, is absolutely vital.’

(South Yorkshire County Council, 1984: para. 1.14).

The metropolitan county was seen as an essential structure for overcoming the tensions and conflicts that inevitably emerged between its district authorities. The county’s concerns that the removal of this tier of governance would fail to provide sufficient incentive for ongoing cooperation were, to some extent, realised.

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<sup>1</sup> As discussed in Chapter 8.

<sup>2</sup> Section 2.2.2 introduces the Local Government Act 1985 that led to the dissolution of the metropolitan county councils and details South Yorkshire County Council’s response to the government’s Streamlining the Cities White Paper.

<sup>3</sup> Barnsley MBC still continues to oversee the financing and employment contracts of officers within the SCR Executive Team.

Despite each of the four South Yorkshire authorities being Labour-led, this did not necessarily translate into an easy partnership, with Sheffield being to a certain extent ostracised due to its perceived dominance, as evidenced by the fact that none of the joint committee chairs were Sheffield councillors.

Although some joint structures were re-formed following the abolition of South Yorkshire County Council, these were only those statutory authorities required under the 1985 Act. Evidence of any voluntary county-wide cooperation in South Yorkshire was described as ‘almost negligible’ and as having shown ‘the strongest instinctive district-orientation in its post-abolition structures’ (Leach & Game, 1991: 150), indicating a distinct political shift from a strategic, county-level focus to a more insular, district-level focus. This behaviour was also influenced by the perception of elected members within the three other South Yorkshire districts that Sheffield was ideologically different and that its role should be constrained. This negative perception towards Sheffield’s intended role and ambition within South Yorkshire area was repeatedly invoked, including in observations made during this research and discussed in the following chapters.

Under the new arrangements, members were nominated to sit on the joint authority boards rather than being directly elected, which meant there was less local democratic accountability. Much of the power held by the county councils was also reverted to central government, which retained control of the joint boards’ resources for three years following their formation (South Yorkshire County Council, 1984). A further issue was the lack of knowledge and expertise at a district level about strategic matters, which limited their ability to effectively scrutinise the joint boards (Travers et al., 1995). In addition, the physical dispersal of the joint board members across the four authorities meant there were fewer opportunities for informal day-to-day contact than there would have been when members were based at the County Council, and relatively few former members of South Yorkshire County Council were elected to the district councils following the county’s abolition (Leach & Game, 1991). This is likely to have lessened the efficiency and success of the joint authorities by restricting the ability of elected members to communicate with one another and failing to strengthen existing relationships between members in the district authorities. There was also prevalent ‘anti-county’ sentiment within the districts, particularly in Sheffield, which may have underlined their reluctance to continue to work collaboratively once there was no statutory requirement to do so. As Leach & Game (1991) highlight:

‘...in South Yorkshire, there had long been a powerful ethos of district self-sufficiency and a scepticism of the need for a metropolitan county authority, which proved a stronger force than any personal sympathy that district members may have felt for their beleaguered county colleagues.’  
(p.162)

This poor relationship between the county and its constituent districts formed the political backdrop for the shift away from a strategic governing body with statutory responsibilities. Democratic accountability was never regained, and there is little evidence that an objective strategic focus was ever truly re-established at a member level in South Yorkshire following the demise of the county-level structures. Despite this, the

statutory joint arrangements that were put in place were relatively successful due to the strength and cohesiveness of the officer networks (Travers et al., 1995), many of whom had previously been colleagues at the County Council before being re-employed within the districts.

Despite no longer existing as a distinct unit of strategic planning governance, South Yorkshire still retained legitimacy as a 'sub-region' within the wider Yorkshire and Humber region and the four authorities called a Planning Conference in 1987 to initiate the preparation of Strategic Guidance for the area. This process was described by Senior (1998) as 'slow and painful' (p.148), in part because the authorities had limited resources to undertake this task; a matter on which they advised the Secretary of State to little avail. This process was also set within the context of the growing tensions between the South Yorkshire authorities and central government that emerged as a response to Thatcherism, the 1984-85 miners' strikes and the politics of coal. For example, when Strategic Guidance for South Yorkshire was finally published by the Department of the Environment in 1989, it did not contain a number of the suggestions made by the authorities, namely that the coal and steel industries should be supported as key employment sectors (although it did acknowledge that a key priority was the promotion of economic growth), and that additional resources should be provided to local authorities to help them overcome the growing issues of social deprivation and physical dereliction, many of which had emerged as a result of colliery closures and rising unemployment (Senior, 1998). The lack of specificity in the South Yorkshire Strategic Guidance was a criticism applied to Strategic Guidance more broadly, due to its weak framework and inability to constrain or guide local plan-making in any meaningful way (Haughton & Whitney, 1994).

Regional planning guidance for Yorkshire and Humberside (RPG12) was first published in 1996. In the same year, the region's councils joined together to establish the Yorkshire and Humber Regional Assembly, which was intended to represent the strategic needs of the region in several areas, including planning (Roberts et al., 1998). Throughout their existence, both the Regional Assembly and the Regional Development Agency continued to recognise Yorkshire and Humber as being divided into a series of sub-regions – North Yorkshire, South Yorkshire, West Yorkshire and The Humber – which were distinguished based on their 'existing economic specificities' and 'underlying actor networks' (Herrschel & Newman, 2002: 176). In the case of South Yorkshire, it was the negative economic consequences of the ongoing deindustrialisation and the closure of collieries in the early 1990s, together with the associated increased levels of deprivation, that provided the shared characteristics that were used to define and justify its existence as a 'sub-region' for economic development purposes.

The South Yorkshire Forum was established in 1997 as a voluntary partnership to prepare a shared vision and strategy for South Yorkshire. This was later expanded to include responsibility for overseeing the EU Structural Funds under the Objective 1 programme, which was awarded in 2000. Dabinett (2010) argues that it was through the designation of the Objective 1 area that 'South Yorkshire' became spatially formalised within plans and policies for the area, including the Regional Economic Strategy that was published in 2000 and the revised Regional Planning Guidance that was adopted the following year. Herrschel & Newman (2002) go one step further, arguing that, 'Objective 1 status and the prospect of drawing down funding is

thus one, if not the only, reason for these subregions' existence' (p.179). Despite this recognition of 'South Yorkshire' as a spatial entity in a regional and economic development context, there was little by way of formalised governance or institutional capacity at this sub-regional level, other than the tentative, 'bottom-up' voluntary arrangements through which the South Yorkshire Forum was established. There also continued to be an underlying competitiveness and rivalry between the four authorities as they fought for resources to help combat the social and economic issues they were facing and sought to reinterpret their role and potential influence in relation to the uncertain structures of the South Yorkshire sub-region, as Dabinett (2010) reflects:

'An area which was once certain of its economic functions, social construction and spatial context was thrown in to a paradigmatic shift and, in 2000, remained in a situation where it was still searching for a new economic role and new meanings to attach to place and notions of urbanity.'  
(p.2393)

At a political level, the notion of a shared 'South Yorkshire' identity was strongest when the four authorities were held together within the institutional structures of the County Council. This provided a statutory basis for joint working across a fixed geography, through an organisation that had sufficient power and influence to enact change, and which in turn provided further encouragement to enhance collaborative efforts at this scale. Following the demise of the metropolitan county, the incentives for joint working were eroded as statutory responsibilities and powers were removed from the local authorities, collaboration became voluntary and lacked a clearly defined purpose or required outputs, and authorities were increasingly forced to compete for access to economic resources.

As a result, the 'South Yorkshire' that remained following the demise of the County Council lacked structural integrity and was primarily employed as a tool (or 'spatial imaginary') for defining the spatial subdivision of the larger Yorkshire and Humber region. The political support required to promote meaningful collaboration at the South Yorkshire geographic scale was lacking, particularly in relation to strategic planning. Similarly, at the regional scale, Yorkshire and Humber-based collaborations were directed by central government via officers based in the Regional Assembly and Regional Development Agency, which lacked democratic accountability, political representation, and subsequently, local political support. Unlike other regions, such as the North West of England whose constituent authorities had a strong history of working together on a voluntary basis at a political level to resolve strategic matters (including, for example, the development of the Strategic Plan for the North West, published in 1975), the Yorkshire and Humber authorities had weaker political ties, which, in the absence of any coercion in the form of statutory responsibilities, failed to result in any similar voluntary collaborative working arrangements.

### 5.2.3 Strategic spatial planning and the ‘regional’ agenda (2004-2010)

The New Labour government’s ambitions of regional empowerment<sup>1</sup> are well-evidenced in the changes that took place in Yorkshire and Humber during the first decade of the twenty-first century. In 2004, the Yorkshire and Humber Assembly published ‘Advancing Together – the Vision and Strategic Framework for Yorkshire and Humber’, which provided an update on the 1998 strategy. This document sought to provide a framework for drawing together the various plans and strategies being prepared in the region, including the Regional Economic Strategy, Regional Spatial Strategy (formerly Regional Planning Guidance), Regional Cultural Strategy and Regional Housing Strategy. ‘Advancing Together’ was driven by joint cooperation between the Yorkshire and Humber Assembly, Government Office for Yorkshire and Humber, and Yorkshire Forward (the RDA) and can be seen as an expression of a ‘process of institutional collaboration which reflected the importance given to integrated policy making’ (Counsell & Haughton, 2006: 106) and the national political concern with joined-up thinking being driven by the New Labour administration.

This work, together with an earlier publication by the South Yorkshire Forum that focused on roles of places and a ‘polycentric’ approach to regeneration<sup>2</sup>, was used to give ‘spatial expression’ (Yorkshire and Humber Assembly, 2004: 24) to the new RSS that was being prepared by Local Government Yorkshire and Humber, formerly the Yorkshire and Humber Assembly. The RSS was adopted in 2008 and had a notable impact on the work of the constituent local planning authorities, in particular because it contained a housing and employment land target for each local planning authority, which they were required to carry through to inform site allocations in their Local Development Frameworks. This new RSS also retained the same four sub-regional divisions as had been used in the previous Regional Planning Guidance, one of which was South Yorkshire.

The process of developing the RSS in Yorkshire and Humber was relatively uncontentious, at least compared with the tensions caused elsewhere, particularly in the south-east of England, where growth pressures were significantly greater. Although political tensions between the authorities did exist at this time and despite its lack of democratic accountability, some advocates of regionalism (including a number of the local planning officers that were interviewed during this research) claimed that by providing a ‘top-down’ approach, the RSS took the difficult decisions out of the hands of the politicians and ensured that strategic housing targets were set with relatively little political backlash<sup>3</sup>. The Yorkshire and Humber Assembly was dissolved in March 2009 and its functions passed to a Joint Regional Board consisting of members from the RDA and the Assembly before itself being abolished by the incoming Conservative-led coalition government in 2010.

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<sup>1</sup> As detailed in section 2.2.2.

<sup>2</sup> A South Yorkshire Spatial Study was published in 2003 by the South Yorkshire Forum. This led to the development of a South Yorkshire Spatial Strategy that was approved by leaders of the South Yorkshire Partnership in 2004, which in turn was used by the Yorkshire and Humber Assembly as evidence to inform the spatial policies contained in the RSS.

<sup>3</sup> See Chapter 6 for further discussion.

Although the more formal structures for strategic spatial planning were removed along with the abolition of the RSS, planning officers across the four South Yorkshire authorities continued to meet on an informal basis as part of the South Yorkshire Planning Officers Group (SYPOG). This group had been established prior to the abolition of the RSS and whilst it had no statutory strategic planning function, continued to meet to discuss strategic issues, share best practice and prepare joint studies and evidence base documents. In later years, the group was also seen by many planning officers as a useful forum for helping to fulfil the requirements of the Duty to Cooperate<sup>1</sup>.

At a supra-regional level, the Northern Way was initiated in 2004 by central government and was followed shortly afterwards by the agreement of the three northern RDAs – Yorkshire and Humber, North West and North East – that they would work together to resolve strategic issues and reduce the gap in relative economic growth that existed between the North of England and the UK average (Arup, 2009). This initiative was considered to be very much an ‘experiment’ in institutional and territorial rescaling (Goodchild & Hickman, 2006) and was met with some initial criticism by those involved, particularly because it had not been underpinned by sufficient consultation with the three main partners and that it was very much a ‘government-driven’ agenda. Despite this, the grouping of authorities that eventually formed the Northern Way was later considered to have demonstrated ‘good collaborative working’ (Liddle & Ormston, 2015: 553) and can be credited with providing the grounding for the present-day Northern Powerhouse and Transport for the North initiatives. The Northern Way may also be credited with first acknowledging a ‘Sheffield City Region’ through the Northern Way Growth Strategy, ‘Moving Forward’, which was published in 2004 and identified eight ‘city regions’ across the north of England. The current geography of Sheffield City Region, incorporating the four South Yorkshire authorities plus a further five Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire authorities, was defined by this Strategy. The Northern Way also led to the creation, across the same geography, of a Sheffield City Region Partnership between these local authorities.

The Sheffield City Region Partnership prepared a Development Programme, a second iteration of which was submitted to The Northern Way in 2006, outlining a vision and proposals for future economic and housing growth across the City Region. The Development Programme is distinctive for its spatial emphasis and place-based focus that was notably lacking from much of the later City Region-scale strategizing that was led by the LEP and Combined Authority<sup>2</sup>. In particular, it emphasises the role of Doncaster, placing it alongside Sheffield as one of ‘two powerful growth poles’ (Sheffield City Region Partnership, 2006: 8). This Development Programme represented one of the first instances of strategic planning to transcend the border between the Yorkshire and Humber and East Midlands regions; a fact that was proudly described by the Partnership as ‘a unique feature’ and ‘an opportunity’ not available to other areas (Sheffield City Region Partnership, 2006: 8). The Sheffield City Region Partnership attempted to formalise its governance through the creation in 2007 of a Sheffield City Region Forum (to replace the Partnership), Joint Issue Boards and a

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<sup>1</sup> The role of SYPOG (and the SCR Planning Officers Group and Heads of Planning Group that superseded it) is further discussed in Chapters 6 and 7.

<sup>2</sup> As further discussed in Chapter 6.



Sheffield City Region Support Unit. While these structures were effectively abolished alongside the RDAs and The Northern Way in March 2011, the connections that had been established between the nine local authorities that comprised Sheffield City Region laid the foundations for the processes of devolution that are discussed in the following section.

### **5.3 The devolution of Sheffield City Region**

This section outlines the processes of devolution that have taken place in Sheffield City Region since 2011, including the establishment of the LEP and Combined Authority. This section also introduces the broad approach to strategic planning and cross-boundary collaboration that has been undertaken in the City Region in recent years, and situates the fieldwork in the context of a number of key events that have shaped the political landscape of Sheffield City Region.

#### **5.3.1 Sheffield City Region Local Enterprise Partnership**

LEPs were first introduced in 2011, following the abolition of the regional tier of government<sup>1</sup>. The Sheffield City Region LEP was established in 2012, based upon the same grouping of local authorities that had previously formed the Sheffield City Region Forum. The LEP was supported by a small officer-led Executive Team, based in Sheffield, with administrative support provided by the Joint Authorities Governance Unit, based in Barnsley, which later also took on the administrative functions for the Combined Authority. When it was established, the LEP agreed a City Deal with central government, which contained a number of proposals designed to drive economic growth in the City Region, including the establishment of a £700 million Sheffield City Region Investment Fund (SCRIF) (Sheffield City Region, 2018).

The Strategic Economic Plan (SEP) was published by the LEP in March 2014 and identifies a target to create 70,000 net additional jobs over the 10 years between 2015 and 2025. The SEP received widespread criticism from local planning officers for being underpinned by an ‘aspirational’ rather than ‘evidence-based’ approach, as is further discussed in Chapter 6. The SEP also identifies seven ‘priority growth areas’ as locations for future economic investment (Sheffield City Region Local Enterprise Partnership, 2014). These growth areas are distributed across each of the City Region authorities (with the exception of Bassetlaw and Derbyshire Dales District Councils), and include, for example, Sheffield City Centre, the Markham Vale Enterprise Zone, and the Advanced Manufacturing Innovation District (AMID). The latter of these, the AMID, is a large development site that straddles the border between Sheffield City Council and Rotherham MBC, previously known as the Sheffield-Rotherham Don Valley Corridor. The AMID broadly comprises; the Advanced Manufacturing Park (AMP), which lies within the boundary of Rotherham MBC and includes the University of Sheffield’s Advanced Manufacturing Research Centre (AMRC); and the adjacent Sheffield Business Park, which falls within the boundary of Sheffield City Council. The AMID is discussed in the following chapters as an example of cross-boundary working.

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<sup>1</sup> The establishment of LEPs is detailed in section 2.3.1.

The LEP also published a Sheffield City Region Integrated Infrastructure Plan (SCRIIP) in October 2016, which identified the major, strategic ‘economic infrastructure’ (differentiated from ‘social infrastructure’) required across the City Region to support the economic growth objectives outlined in the SEP, as well as identifying potential means of securing financial investment to support these proposed schemes. The SCRIP highlights the development of a ‘Spatial Framework...which identifies strategic areas for future housing delivery, aligned with the ambitions of the Growth Areas and Urban Centres’ (Arup, 2016: 39) as being a particular opportunity for the City Region. However, as subsequent chapters will discuss, such a spatial framework has yet to emerge.

### **5.3.2 Establishing the Combined Authority**

In response to a request by local authority Leaders, who were concerned about the democratic accountability and transparency of the City Region’s governance structures, a SCR Governance Review was undertaken by the SCR Executive Team. This review reported in April 2013 and recognised a long history of collaboration between the SCR authorities which had led to ‘tangible benefits for all partners’, but that it was ‘beginning to outgrow its existing governance structures and arrangements – which have always been based on informal, voluntary partnerships without any independent legal status’ (SCR Executive Team, 2013a: 5). As such, it recommended the formation of a Combined Authority amongst the City Region’s local authorities, which was intended to:

- ‘Give the whole SCR access to devolved powers and funding, now and in the future;
- Align and improve joint decision-making in relation to strategic economic development, regeneration and transport, and;
- Put in place strong, stable and accountable leadership recognised by Government.’

(Doncaster MBC, 2013)

As a result of this review, a Sheffield City Region Combined Authority was formed in 2014. Upon its formation, the Combined Authority acquired responsibility for strategic economic development, regeneration and transport within the City Region including the preparation of economic and growth strategies and the distribution of the SCRIF (SCR Executive Team, 2013b). Its establishment was also accompanied by the dissolution of the South Yorkshire Integrated Transport Authority (SYITA) and the transferral of its responsibilities to the Combined Authority. When it was established, there were no proposals for the Combined Authority to acquire any responsibilities for strategic planning, as the draft Scheme for the establishment of the Combined Authority stated:

‘The SCR Authority will not have any specific planning-related powers. However, using general economic development powers, the SCR Authority may agree a SCR spatial strategy – which may be relevant to local planning frameworks.’

(SCR Executive Team, 2013b: 14)

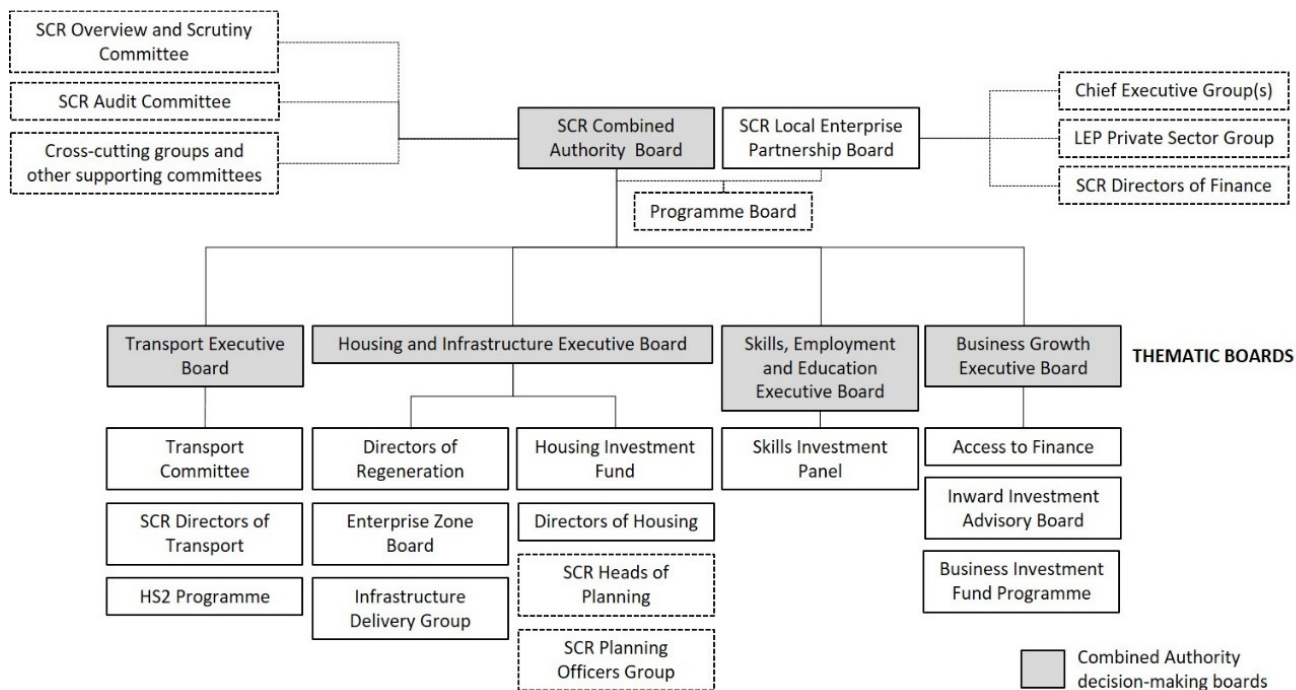
This cautiously non-committal wording is reflective of a political reticence within the Combined Authority to engage with strategic spatial planning at the scale of the City Region, as will be further discussed in the following chapters. Within the Combined Authority, the four South Yorkshire authorities were considered ‘constituent’ members, meaning they had automatic voting rights and executive powers over transport in the South Yorkshire area. The five remaining authorities were ‘non-constituent’ members, meaning they were only given voting rights on defined matters where these were conferred by members of the constituent authorities<sup>1</sup>. Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire County Councils were not members of the Combined Authority although they, along with the D2N2 LEP, were consulted on transport plans and given voting rights on issues related to Local Growth Fund schemes situated in the area of overlap between the two LEPs (Sheffield City Region Local Enterprise Partnership, 2018b).

In terms of its governance structure, when the Combined Authority was first established it comprised the Combined Authority Board and three Thematic Executive Boards that linked closely to the City Region’s economic growth objectives. In 2015, the number of Executive Boards was increased from three to five, with housing, transport and infrastructure placed in separate boards. Housing and infrastructure were later merged into a single board, and at the time the fieldwork was undertaken, the organisational structure and work of the Combined Authority and the Executive Team was divided across four thematic areas, as illustrated in Figure 5. It is notable that in some documents that outline the functions of the SCR Executive Team<sup>2</sup>, ‘planning’ is referenced as forming part of the ‘Housing and Infrastructure’ theme (SCR Executive Team, 2016); whereas in other documents, such as the SCR Constitution or Assurance Framework, ‘planning’ is not referenced at all, suggesting that it is not formally recognised as a function of the Combined Authority.

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<sup>1</sup> Proposals to change the constituent membership of the Combined Authority to include Chesterfield BC and Bassetlaw DC were introduced in 2016, which led to political contestation, as discussed in section 5.3.4.

<sup>2</sup> The stated ‘Planning’ functions of the SCR Executive Team included the ‘Duty to Cooperate’ and being Commissioner of a ‘SCR Spatial Framework’ (SCR Executive Team, 2016).



**Figure 5** Sheffield City Region Organisational Structure (Source: Author, based on Sheffield City Region Local Enterprise Partnership, 2018b)

The work undertaken within each thematic area was coordinated by the SCR Executive Team and overseen by the respective Executive Board. The membership of each Executive Board comprised two local authority Leaders, two local authority Chief Executives, two private sector representatives from the LEP Board and a SCR Executive Team officer. Each Executive Board was granted delegated powers to take decisions below a specified financial threshold, with any decisions above this threshold requiring approval by the Combined Authority, which comprised nine elected members of the City Region local authorities, and later the City Region Mayor and Deputy Mayor (Sheffield City Region Local Enterprise Partnership, 2018b).

In addition to the Executive Boards, the Combined Authority also comprised a series of sub-boards and committees that were responsible for advising and overseeing the statutory decision-making of the main boards. Only certain elected members of the City Region’s nine member authorities were eligible to actively participate in these governance structures, including the local authority Leaders that were represented on the sub-boards, and other elected members (non-Leaders) that were invited to sit on the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Transport Committee<sup>1</sup>. For the most part these rules of engagement enabled greater levels of member involvement than was previously permitted under the former regional structures, including the RDAs.

Whilst there was no formal representation from local authority planning officers, planning directors or planning portfolio holders within any of the Combined Authority’s Boards or Committees, an informal SCR Heads of Planning Group and separate Planning Officers Group did meet regularly. These groups occasionally fed into the SCR Directors of Housing meetings, when invited by the SCR Executive Team (see

<sup>1</sup> Participation by elected members in the Combined Authority and its structures of governance is further discussed in Chapter 7.1.1.

Figure 5). The role and structure of these ‘semi-formal’ planning officer groups, and their interactions with the wider Combined Authority and SCR Executive Team are discussed further in Chapter 7.

### **5.3.3 Towards a Mayoral Combined Authority**

During the period July 2014 to November 2016, three further Growth Deals were agreed with central government, through which the Combined Authority received funds from the Local Growth Fund worth a total of £365 million (Cabinet Office, 2017). In addition to this, a further Devolution Deal was agreed ‘in principle’ with central government in October 2015 (subject to final ratification by the constituent authorities). This proposed Devolution Deal required the election of a Sheffield City Region Mayor in return for access to funding worth over £900 million. It is worth highlighting however that this £900 million deal (over 30 years) was granted alongside austerity and welfare cuts estimated to have been worth £1,109 million between 2010 and 2014 (Etherington & Jones, 2018). The growing financial pressures faced by the City Region’s local authorities forms a key underlying narrative in this research<sup>1</sup>, and as Etherington & Jones (2018: 67) state; ‘the gap between devo-rhetoric and austerity-reality could not be greater’.

As well as financial benefits, through this proposed Devolution Deal the Mayor was also granted devolved powers over the Key Route Network, bus franchising and strategic spatial planning, the latter of which included the responsibility for creating a spatial framework, supplementary planning documents and a Mayoral Development Corporation for the City Region, as well as having the power to ‘call-in’ strategically important planning applications (HM Treasury, 2015b). These proposed strategic planning powers were met with particular resistance by the local authorities<sup>2</sup>. The requirement to have an elected mayor was also initially resisted by many of the authorities, including the Leader of Sheffield City Council who disagreed with the proposal that the elected mayor should have the power of veto over all Combined Authority decisions (BBC News, 2015). However, following a number of subsequent amendments to the draft Devolution Deal, including clarification from Ministers that the mayoral decision-making process could be resolved through the Combined Authority’s own constitution, the Deal was endorsed and ratified by the City Region’s nine local authorities in March 2016 and a mayoral election date was set for May 2017 (SCR Combined Authority, 2016b, 2016a). At this time, Bassetlaw DC and Chesterfield BC also expressed interest in becoming constituent members of the Combined Authority. However, both the mayoral election and proposed changes in the constituent membership faced a number of setbacks, as the following section will discuss.

### **5.3.4 Political divisions and legal challenges**

In August 2016, Derbyshire County Council launched a legal challenge against the public consultation exercise conducted by the Combined Authority regarding the proposed Devolution Deal. This challenge was grounded in the fact that residents of Chesterfield had not been properly consulted on the recommended governance changes, including the proposal that Chesterfield would become a constituent member of the

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<sup>1</sup> The effects of which are detailed in section 8.2.1, in the context of strategic spatial planning.

<sup>2</sup> As detailed in Chapter 7.

Combined Authority, as well as concerns expressed by the Leader of the County Council that; ‘if Chesterfield becomes a full member of Sheffield City Region it will undoubtedly be at a huge financial cost to Derbyshire County Council’ (BBC News, 2016).

Chesterfield BC initially continued to align itself with Sheffield City Region; an alliance they claimed to be pursuing based on the economic benefits it would deliver, in response to the rhetoric being put forward by the County Council that it would undermine the sanctity of Derbyshire (Derbyshire County Council, 2016a)<sup>1</sup>. As the Leader of Chesterfield Borough Council stated in support of their proposal to join the SCR Devolution Deal; ‘Does this mean I have become a Yorkshireman or accepted Nottingham in to my heart? Of course not. They are just examples of the ways services are provided across traditional geographical boundaries. They don’t in any way make us less patriotic about Derbyshire or threaten its existence’ (Burrows, 2016). The legal challenge was upheld by the High Court in December 2016 who ruled that the recent consultation undertaken by Chesterfield Borough Council was unlawful and required the consultation to be repeated.

Similar objections to the Devolution Deal were also voiced by the Leader of Nottinghamshire County Council in respect of the decision by Bassetlaw DC to join the Combined Authority as a constituent member, who stated that the governance changes; ‘will create confusion and uncertainty about who is responsible for what, which will be damaging for local democracy and accountability’ (Retford Times, 2016). As a result of this political intervention by the County Councils and following a further round of public consultation, Chesterfield BC and Bassetlaw DC renounced their constituent membership and withdrew from the Devolution Deal.

Further delays to the adoption of the Devolution Deal arose in August 2017 through the emergence of a rival ‘One Yorkshire’ devolution proposal that received the support of 17 of the 20 Yorkshire authorities<sup>2</sup> (Hammond, 2017). Political divisions emerged between the South Yorkshire authorities as Doncaster MBC and Barnsley MBC withdrew their support for the SCR Devolution Deal in favour of the ‘One Yorkshire’ proposal, despite this not having received any backing from central government, stating that they ‘wish to secure the best possible devolution deal for Barnsley and Doncaster’ (Jones, 2017). A referendum was held in December 2017, led by Barnsley MBC and Doncaster MBC, which asked residents to decide whether they would prefer to pursue a ‘One Yorkshire’ deal or the Sheffield City Region deal. The ‘One Yorkshire’ deal received 85% of the vote in both local authorities, although the turnout was only 20.1% in Doncaster and 22.4% in Barnsley (Perraudin, 2017). As a result, the political stalemate regarding the SCR Devolution Deal continued.

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<sup>1</sup> The political tensions between Chesterfield BC and Derbyshire County Council, in respect of the Devolution Deal, are further detailed in section 8.1.3.

<sup>2</sup> Sheffield CC, Rotherham MBC and Wakefield MDC were the only authorities not to sign up to the original ‘Coalition of the Willing’, although Wakefield did join later.

Alongside these events, political divisions between the South Yorkshire authorities were further enhanced through disagreements that emerged regarding the location of the station that would serve the proposed High Speed 2 (HS2) railway line. A Sheffield city centre location was put forward as the preferred option for the new HS2 station by Sheffield City Council (Sheffield City Council, 2017), whereas the other South Yorkshire authorities favoured the option of locating the station at Meadowhall; a site approximately 3 miles north-east of Sheffield city centre and closer to the centres of Rotherham and Barnsley. As a result of this ‘bitter row’ (Burn, 2017) central government announced in July 2017 that it would pursue the Sheffield city centre option, but that this would be via the cheaper option of a ‘spur’ from the main line (that would run to the east of Sheffield) into the existing city centre station rather than providing a new station directly on the HS2 route. This inability of elected members to agree was both fuelled by and continued to strengthen some of the political divisions within the City Region that were observed during the fieldwork and are further discussed in the following chapters<sup>1</sup>.

The political deadlock regarding the SCR Devolution Deal continued throughout 2017 and beyond the end of the fieldwork. A SCR mayoral election was eventually held in May 2018, but there was still no agreement on the Deal itself, and therefore the £900 million funding could not be fully ‘unlocked’. In March 2019, it was reported that a ‘breakthrough’ had finally been reached in which a letter was issued to central government requesting that the Devolution Deal be enacted on the proviso that the local authorities could defer to alternative devolution arrangements<sup>2</sup> from 2022, should they so wish (The Yorkshire Post, 2019; BBC News, 2019). These political tensions and disagreements formed an important backdrop for this research and, as will be discussed in the following chapters, contributed towards much of the stasis in terms of strategic decision-making that was observed within the wider City Region.

## 5.4 Conclusion

This chapter has provided a comprehensive review of the historic and contemporary political, governance and strategic planning contexts of Sheffield City Region, and has provided an opportunity to consider how the changing ambitions of central government have helped to shape the nature of the institutions and geographies across which collaboration on strategic issues has taken place.

The legacy of the old county structures and the economic and social deprivations faced by the four South Yorkshire authorities provided a strong sense of shared history and a natural basis for continued joint working at this scale, even when the institutional structures to support this no longer existed. However, Sheffield City Council began to distinguish itself from the other South Yorkshire authorities as Sheffield adopted the position of ‘core city’ and its economic ambitions grew beyond those of its neighbouring authorities. This change is summarised neatly by Herrschel & Newman (2002):

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<sup>1</sup> See, in particular, section 8.2.4 for further discussion of the political repercussions of the HS2 decision.

<sup>2</sup> It seems increasingly unlikely that these ‘alternative devolution arrangements’ would include devolution to Yorkshire, as the One Yorkshire devolution plan was rejected by central government in February 2019.

‘Sheffield has moved away from Old Labour politics towards a more entrepreneurial, business-oriented local policy, leading to a distinct contrast in political culture between its New Labour politics in the core of the city region and Old Labour values and principles in the South Yorkshire subregion outside the city’ (p.181)

In political and economic terms, Sheffield’s position became increasingly conflicted between representing a relatively equal ‘quarter’ of the traditional South Yorkshire and being the ‘core’ of the newer Sheffield City Region. The renewed national interest in the regional scale and, in particular, the emphasis on the ‘devolution’ to city regions introduced new foci for growth, new sets of collaborative partners and increased levels of competition between local authorities. These changes manifested themselves in the ongoing political tensions and disagreements that emerged between the Sheffield City Region authorities. This context of devolving governance, austerity-driven competition and local political tensions sets the scene for the period during which the fieldwork was undertaken and the approach to strategic spatial planning and cross-border collaboration that was observed, and is detailed, in the following three chapters.



## 6 | Strategic spatial planning in a changing legislative and policy context

This is the first of three chapters presenting the empirical and analytical findings of the research. The narratives presented in Chapters 6 to 8 use concepts and elements derived from the theoretical framework described in Chapter 3 to analyse the data and develop an understanding of how strategic spatial planning practices are being enacted in the evolving (and devolving) context of Sheffield City Region. The focus of each chapter is developed around a key theme drawn from the research questions outlined in section 2.5.

Chapter 6 is centred around the types of strategic spatial planning practice that were observed and actors' interpretations of the national legislative and policy context through which these practices emerged. This chapter provides answers to the first two research questions. Chapter 7 is focused upon the organisational and governance context, including the structures and spaces of collaboration and participation within Sheffield City Region, how these were formed, and how these structures (both formal and informal) constrained or enabled action from a strategic spatial planning perspective. This second analysis chapter provides answers to the third research question. The final analysis chapter, Chapter 8, focuses on the territorial and relational spatial context, by examining the role of the political territories and spatial imaginaries that permeated Sheffield City Region, and exploring how these spaces formed, evolved, and shaped spatial coalitions and cross-boundary collaborative practices. This chapter also discusses the impact of austerity, and how the availability of human and economic resources affected the territorial interests of local planning actors. Chapter 8 provides answers to the fourth research question.

Through their analyses, each of these chapters focuses on understanding the dialectical interactions between the institutional and strategic context, local planning actors, their actions, and their ideational interpretations of the contexts in which these actions take place. As outlined in Chapter 4, the analysis draws upon the role of ideas in shaping actors' interpretations of their situated contexts, the meanings that are attributed and the strategic actions that emerge from these processes of ideational framing. The analysis also considers the extent to which ideas helped to enable or resist change in the strategic context. There may be some overlap between the three analysis chapters in terms of the scope of the data, analysis and issues presented, so cross-references to other chapters have been included where necessary.

As detailed in Chapter 2, the revocation of the Yorkshire and Humber and East Midlands Regional Spatial Strategies in 2010 and the subsequent enactment of the Localism Act in 2011, meant that there was no longer a statutory requirement to prepare a strategic spatial plan, nor was there a governing body charged with overseeing strategic spatial planning matters, as had previously been the role of the Regional Planning Bodies. Instead, the responsibility for resolving strategic spatial planning issues fell to the individual local authorities who were required to comply with the Duty to Cooperate in preparing their local plans, and strategic spatial plan-making at a sub-regional level became a voluntary option. This change in the sub-regional planning policy and legislative context was representative of an 'exogenous shock' (Bell, 2017), in

which the formal rules that had previously underpinned strategic spatial planning practices were significantly changed, meaning that local planning actors found themselves having to reinterpret both what it means to ‘do’ strategic spatial planning, and their roles and responsibilities in relation to resolving what they identified as strategic planning issues.

The purpose of this current chapter is to examine how these changes in the national legislative and policy context were interpreted by local planning actors, and how (and the extent to which) these interpretations shaped the types of strategic spatial planning practices that were enacted within Sheffield City Region, including those practices aimed at fulfilment of the Duty to Cooperate. In particular, this chapter demonstrates how some institutionally inherited practices persisted and were reinforced, whereas others failed to continue in the absence of any formal rules or other institutional resources needed to support them.

Section 6.1 begins by briefly discussing the types of strategic spatial planning practices that were observed in Sheffield City Region and the actors involved. Section 6.2 focuses on the Duty to Cooperate and its fulfilment through the local plan-making process or other informal officer-driven forms of cross-boundary working. Section 6.3 focuses on the abolition of the RSS and examines the extent to which strategic spatial *plan-making* has since been embraced within the City Region, including the role of the Combined Authority and the more formalised collaborative practices overseen by the SCR Executive Team. This adds diversity to the already existing literature that considers approaches to strategic spatial plan-making in other locations across England, as previously discussed in section 2.3.3. This chapter concludes with some thoughts on what it means to ‘do’ strategic spatial planning in the context of Sheffield City Region, post-RSS, and the differential roles of local planning actors in both interpreting the changing legislative and policy context, and enacting spatial planning practices within this context.

## **6.1 Practices of strategic spatial planning in Sheffield City Region**

The research identified many different examples of practices that had been enacted (or continue to be enacted) within Sheffield City Region since the abolition of the RSS that might be termed ‘strategic spatial planning’, in that they represent collaboration or cooperation across local authority boundaries for the purpose of envisioning or managing spatial change (Healey, 1997)<sup>1</sup>. These practices can be broadly grouped into the following two types; collaborative practices to support local plan-making, and collaborative practices to support strategic spatial plan-making. Each type exemplified varying purposes or motivations, degrees of formality (in terms of engagement, decision-making, agreement and outputs) and differing spatial extents (in terms of partnership arrangements and sub-regional groupings of neighbouring Sheffield City Region authorities). This section briefly examines each of these in turn.

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<sup>1</sup> The definition of strategic spatial planning that has been applied in this research is discussed in detail in section 2.1.

### 6.1.1 Collaborative practices to support local plan-making

The first identified type of strategic spatial planning practices reflected those practices undertaken to support the delivery of individual local plans, and which, in doing so, helped to fulfil the Duty to Cooperate. The primary outputs from these practices were written documents, which whilst they did not themselves contain any particularly ‘visionary’ elements or policies, they fed into the preparation of local plans that, in turn, enabled spatial change, albeit at a local level. These practices included the preparation of joint evidence base studies, joint methodologies for evidence base production, Memoranda of Understanding and Statements of Cooperation. As well as preparing jointly agreed documents, there were also more informal, but equally significant, practices of communication, deliberation, information sharing and decision-making between local planning officers, through which they sought to inform, influence and achieve greater alignment between neighbouring local plans. Each of these types of strategic planning practice intended to support the local plan-making process is discussed briefly below.

#### *Joint evidence base studies and methodologies*

Joint evidence base studies that were commissioned or undertaken within Sheffield City Region in recent years include the following:

- South Yorkshire Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Needs Assessment (2011)
- North Derbyshire (Bolsover, Chesterfield and North East Derbyshire) and Bassetlaw Strategic Housing Market Assessment (2013)
- Sheffield and Rotherham Joint Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (2015)
- Derby, Derbyshire, Peak District National Park Authority and East Staffordshire Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Assessment (2015)
- Sheffield and Rotherham Joint Strategic Housing Market Assessment (2015)
- Sheffield and Rotherham Joint Employment Land Review (2015)
- Sheffield and Rotherham Joint Retail and Leisure Study (2017)
- North Derbyshire (Bolsover, Chesterfield and North East Derbyshire) and Bassetlaw Objectively Assessed (Housing) Need Update (2017)
- Chesterfield Borough, Bolsover District and North East Derbyshire District Retail and Centres Study (2018)

Joint studies such as these had also been undertaken prior to the abolition of the RSS, as whilst there was no specified Duty to Cooperate, the evidence was still required to support the processes of local plan adoption. The partnerships established to produce these documents were primarily instigated and coordinated by local planning officers through informal collaborative groupings, subject to relevant approvals from elected members, and largely replicated historic collaborative arrangements that reflected identified geographies such as housing market or functional economic areas, as one Senior Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council commented:

‘We do quite a bit of joint work together in terms of evidence bases, particularly where, I suppose, with Rotherham, we have almost a seamless catchment in terms of housing, so the housing market. We always do the SHMA and the housing market work together.’

(Senior Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council, INT004)

The motivations for undertaking these studies jointly, rather than individually, stemmed from local planning officers’ normative framings of the wider planning context, in which it was considered appropriate that ‘strategic’ issues (i.e. those that transcend local authority boundaries) should be examined at a supra-local level; and their cognitive framings, which suggest that preparing these studies jointly would deliver a relative cost-saving compared with each authority undertaking or commissioning the work individually; a factor that has become increasingly significant since the rise in austerity<sup>1</sup>. Despite these noted perceived benefits, greater collaborative working between the SCR authorities on local plan evidence base documents was to some extent constrained by the fact that each local authority was at a different stage in the local plan-making process.

Following the establishment of the LEP, a number of evidence gathering exercises relating to strategic planning matters were also undertaken at the scale of the City Region, including demographic forecasting work that was commissioned and overseen by officers in the SCR Executive Team and the SCR Planning Officers Group (Edge Analytics, 2015). This study was undertaken for the dual purpose of informing the Strategic Economic Plan (SEP)<sup>2</sup> and providing evidence to enable local authorities to align their local plan housing requirements with the economic growth objectives outlined in the SEP. Whilst local planning officers were closely involved with the evidence gathering stage that informed the Edge Analytics report, they had significantly less involvement in the subsequent plan-making stage of the SEP itself, which was led by officers in the SCR Executive Team and overseen by elected members of the Combined Authority Board. This resulted in tensions between local planning officers and their officer counterparts within the SCR Executive Team regarding their apparent ‘exclusion’ from discussions around what were deemed to be strategic planning matters. These tensions begin to highlight some of the issues that became apparent during the course of this research around what it means to ‘do’ strategic spatial planning and the expected role of the local authority planning officer in delivering or overseeing these types of practices<sup>3</sup>.

There was also evidence of collaboration between local planning authorities at the City Region scale, through the SCR Planning Officers Group. This collaborative work included the preparation of a common methodology for undertaking the Green Belt reviews that were needed to inform each authority’s local plan (SCR Planning Officers Group, 2014). However, despite the SCR local authorities reaching agreement on this approach, it was not then implemented consistently, with some authorities only using the ‘agreed approach’ to assess cross-boundary sites and then using a different approach to assess their remaining ‘internal’ sites. This highlights how some collaborative practices may have been undertaken purely for the

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<sup>1</sup> The motivations for cross-boundary collaboration amongst local planning officers is further discussed in section 6.2.1.

<sup>2</sup> Further background to the SEP is presented in section 5.3.1.

<sup>3</sup> These issues will be further discussed in section 7.2.3.

appearance of ‘collaboration’, whereas the outcomes of these practices had far less meaning in terms of demonstrating effective collaboration; an issue that will be further discussed in relation to the Duty to Cooperate later in this chapter. The decision to implement only a joint Green Belt review *methodology* as opposed to undertaking a joint Green Belt *review* also serves to highlight the particularly politically sensitive nature of the Green Belt as a strategic planning issue, and the authorities’ desire to retain autonomy over decisions regarding which areas of land might potentially be ‘released’ from the Green Belt for development.

The process of preparing the joint evidence base studies tended to be primarily led and overseen by local planning officers, with little input from elected members; perhaps because the evidence gathering stage was perceived as relatively ‘apolitical’. Such studies were often undertaken by independent consultants, partly to maintain a degree of ‘objectivity’, and partly due to a lack of available resource within the local authority planning teams. When this evidence was later applied through the policy-making process, it often attracted a greater level of contestation and disagreement between authorities than during the evidence-gathering stage, particularly on issues related to planning for housing.

In order to resolve these particular strategic issues and enable local plan adoption, local planning officers (and some elected members) would enter into a process of deliberation to reach agreement, either formally or informally. For example, in 2013 Sheffield City Council lodged an objection to Rotherham MBCs draft Core Strategy based on the housing need projection figure contained within Rotherham’s Strategic Housing Market Area Assessment, which planning officers at Sheffield City Council believed was too low, and did not accurately take into account the overlap between the Sheffield and Rotherham housing market areas. Following ‘high level discussions’<sup>1</sup> between local planning officers and elected members, the two authorities agreed an appropriate approach for determining the scale and distribution of future housing growth across the Sheffield and Rotherham Strategic Housing Market Area, which was set out in a formal Memorandum of Understanding.

#### *Formal agreements*

Formal agreements, such as the Memoranda of Understanding discussed above, were often drafted by local planning officers and ratified by the relevant Cabinet Members as a means of formalising the joint working arrangements between neighbouring authorities in relation to a particular strategic or ‘cross-boundary’ issue. These set out agreements on how this issue would be dealt with in policy terms by the respective local authorities, together with expectations for future consultation or collaborative arrangements. These memoranda were often framed within the context of the Duty to Cooperate and its legislative requirement outlined in Section 110 of the Localism Act 2011.

The SCR Planning Officers Group also led the preparation of a series of joint Statements of Agreement that were coordinated by local planning officers with the intention of fulfilling the Duty to Cooperate at a city region scale by reaching ‘agreement’ on specific cross-boundary issues, such as housing, transport, minerals

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<sup>1</sup> Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council, INT009

and waste. Whilst these statements were initiated and prepared by local planning officers, the intention was that they would be presented to elected members for formal ‘sign-off’, given the potentially politically contentious nature of some of the issues involved, such as those relating to need for housing. However, these statements ultimately shifted from being ‘Statements of *Agreement*’ to ‘Statements of *Cooperation*’, which begins to highlight some of the difficulties associated with consensus building in cross-boundary decision-making, as further discussed in section 6.2.4.

### *Informal agreements*

Formal agreements, such as those noted previously, were often developed alongside or preceded by informal collaborations between local planning actors for the purposes of agreeing a particular policy approach or resolving a specific strategic issue. This informal approach was often undertaken in order to enable local plan adoption by demonstrating compliance with the Duty to Cooperate. The discussions that informed these informal agreements would often take place within meetings between local planning officers or via telephone or email conversations. Local planning officers across the City Region held regular, what were often termed, ‘Duty to Cooperate’ meetings with their counterparts in neighbouring authorities during which they would share information about local plan progress and, where relevant, discuss and informally agree how cross-boundary issues would be resolved or how cross-border sites would be dealt with in a policy context. As a Senior Planning Officer at Rotherham MBC commented:

‘I mean, we have had discussions. You know, again, there have been just conversations between officers around policies, and I know we’ve shared drafts of policies with Sheffield, and we’ve sent information over.’

(Senior Planning Officer at Rotherham MBC, INT028)

This is representative of an informal institutionalised convention that officers would share draft policies (particularly those relating to cross-boundary issues or sites) prior to periods of formal consultation, in order to resolve any issues or potential disagreements in advance. There was also an informal convention that any formal consultation responses that involved raising objections to a neighbouring authority’s draft plan would be discussed with that authority’s local planning officers informally, prior to being submitted (FN036). However, these institutionalised practices did not always result in agreements being reached. For example, in developing local plan policies for the Advanced Manufacturing Innovation District (AMID)<sup>1</sup>, planning officers from both of its constituent authorities shared draft policies with one another. The officer from Sheffield City Council explained how they had tried to work with Rotherham MBC to develop a ‘boundary blind’ policy for the site, but that:

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<sup>1</sup> The AMID is introduced in section 5.3.1.

‘RMBC has gone ahead and developed its own ‘tight’ policy for the AMP site within its latest Sites Policy document (currently going through EiP), which doesn’t cover the wider AMID area’

(Extract from FN004, SCC AMID Policy Meeting, 19<sup>th</sup> October 2016)

This again highlights some of the difficulties associated with undertaking strategic planning across local authority boundaries, where authorities are at different stages of the plan-making process and they are forced to place the progression of their own local plan above any normatively-framed ideals about collaborating with their neighbouring authorities.

### **6.1.2 Collaborative practices to support strategic spatial plan-making**

As the previous section highlights, the vast majority of strategic spatial planning practices that were observed during this research were those either directly or indirectly linked to the local plan-making process, including the fulfilment of the Duty to Cooperate. This is contrasted with observations of joint strategic spatial plan-making or ‘strategising’, which were comparatively limited. Examples identified during the research included the joint waste planning exercises that were initiated by local planning officers within the South Yorkshire authorities, and the strategic planning exercises led by officers in the SCR Executive Team. Each of these is discussed below, in turn.

#### *Waste management planning*

In respect of strategic waste planning, unlike the East Midlands district authorities within Sheffield City Region, whose strategic waste planning is undertaken by the County Councils, the South Yorkshire authorities are responsible for their own waste management. A Barnsley, Doncaster and Rotherham Joint Waste Plan was published in 2012, with a revised plan, also including Sheffield, being commissioned during the fieldwork period. According to the 2012 Waste Plan, the three South Yorkshire authorities had chosen to work together because; ‘as neighbouring councils, we have a history of working together to address waste management issues’ (p.10), suggesting that the decision to collaborate across local authority borders was derived primarily from a rationale of ‘that’s the way it’s always been’. A planning officer at Sheffield City Council revealed that they had chosen not to participate in the 2012 plan because they had sufficient waste management capacity within Sheffield itself, and so it had not previously represented a ‘cross-border’ issue. In recent years Sheffield’s capacity had reduced and so their decision to collaborate with the other South Yorkshire authorities in preparing a joint plan was presented as an obvious solution, as a Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council commented:

‘I think at that officer level, again there’s agreement that the waste plan was something that, you know, we all need to do it. We’ve all got various treatment facilities in the four different districts and we’ve all got different pressures on waste and things like that. So, to be able to work together across the authorities and deal with it across that South Yorkshire level would be a good thing. It’s almost a bit of a no-brainer.’

(Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council, INT016)

This example highlights the role of historic practices and previously established coalitions in shaping the joint working arrangements that were observed in Sheffield City Region, within this example of waste management planning and the previously noted examples of joint evidence gathering, as discussed in further detail in section 8.1.1.

### *Strategic spatial planning through the Combined Authority*

A further type of strategic spatial planning that was observed in Sheffield City Region is exemplified by the various strategies developed through the LEP and Combined Authority, including the Strategic Economic Plan (SEP) and the Sheffield City Region Integrated Infrastructure Plan (SCRIIP)<sup>1</sup>. These plans were undertaken at the spatial scale of the City Region, in order to support the economic growth objectives of the LEP and Combined Authority. As such, they were coordinated by officers within the SCR Executive Team and overseen by members of the SCR LEP and Combined Authority boards, with varied levels of local planning officer engagement. The SEP that was published in 2014, for example, was prepared in consultation with Senior Planning Officers who were invited to attend a series of workshops to shape the content of the plan. However, the same officers noted that they had not been asked to contribute to the revised SEP that was being coordinated by the SCR Executive Team at the time this fieldwork was undertaken, nor were they asked to participate in the preparation of the SCRIP. This raises issues around the nature of the relationship between local planning officers and the organisation that represents the Combined Authority, notably its SCR Executive Team, including their level of engagement and role in the strategic spatial planning practices that have been emerging at the scale of the City Region, as will be further discussed in section 7.2.3.

Aside from the South Yorkshire Waste Plan, the SEP and the SCRIP, there was little evidence of other voluntary attempts at spatial strategy- or plan-making within SCR, particularly those relating to other strategic spatial planning issues besides economic growth, waste and infrastructure (such as housing), either at the scale of the City Region or across other sub-regional territories. This is in contrast to other devolved areas throughout England, which have embarked on strategic spatial plan-making either through a Combined Authority structure or through other ‘conjoint planning spaces’ (Allmendinger et al., 2016), such as formal joint strategic planning units. While such structures and practices have not, to date, arisen in Sheffield City Region, several attempts were made by local planning officers to reinstate a formalised approach to strategic spatial plan-making following the demise of the RSS, including proposals for a Local Strategy Statement (LSS), which is further discussed in section 6.3.2.

### **6.1.3 Summary**

As this section demonstrates, the nature of strategic spatial planning in Sheffield City Region is represented by a complex network of actors, interacting through a variety of formal and informal collaborative spaces, across a range of geographic scales, with a number of different intended motivations, purposes and outputs. This section has identified two broad categorisations of strategic spatial planning practice; those practices

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<sup>1</sup> As described in section 5.3.1.



that supported local plan-making, including the Duty to Cooperate; and those practices that supported strategic spatial plan-making. The key features of each of these types of strategic planning practice are summarised in Table 4.

**Table 4** Summary of strategic spatial planning practices observed within Sheffield City Region

Type of strategic planning practice	Material outputs	SCR example(s)	Degree of visioning / spatial change	Motivation	Spaces of collaboration	Spatial scale of collaboration
Practices to support local plan-making	Joint evidence base methodologies and documents, Memoranda of Understanding, local plan consultation responses, Statements of Agreement	Sheffield and Rotherham Joint Employment Land Review (2015), Chesterfield Borough, Bolsover District and North East Derbyshire District Retail and Centres Study (2018), SCR Green Belt Review Common Approach, SCR Duty to Cooperate Statement on Housing	Limited strategic (cross-boundary) visioning. Spatial change mainly contained within single local authority area.	Local plan adoption, fulfilment of Duty to Cooperate	Informal meetings/discussion between planning officers / elected members, SCR Planning Officer Group / Heads of Planning meetings	Individual neighbouring authorities, sub-regions (e.g. South Yorkshire), Sheffield City Region
Practices to support strategic spatial plan-making	Strategic plans	SEP, SCRIP, LSS (proposed)	Strong strategic visioning, but limited to a few strategic issues. Proposed changes mostly expressed aspatially.	Access to funding via Growth / Devolution Deals (SEP, SCRIP)	Formal meetings between SCR Executive Team officers / planning officers / elected members	Sheffield City Region

Whilst this section has tended to highlight the tangible ‘outputs’ of strategic spatial planning practices, such as evidence base documents or statements of agreement, it is important to note the significance of the many non-documented outcomes, informal conversations and verbal agreements that would have preceded many of these published outputs and which contributed to the establishment and strengthening of the collaborative, cross-border relationships between officers and elected members. These practices provided the institutional resources that helped shape other strategic planning practices, and in some cases, resulted in attempted institutional transformations (as will be discussed later in this chapter).

Within Sheffield City Region, many of the collaborative practices that were intended to support local plan-making, were primarily instigated by local planning actors (as opposed to locally elected members), and in many cases reflected historic cross-boundary relationships and joint working arrangements that often pre-date the revocation of the RSS. The introduction of the Duty to Cooperate appears to have provided further justification for continuing to reproduce collaborative practices that were already being undertaken, by ‘rebadging’ these as ‘Duty to Cooperate’ practices. Whilst these types of collaborative practices would have been undertaken previously, they received a greater level of significance as the onus was placed on individual local authorities to ensure that their plans strategically aligned with those of its neighbouring authorities by addressing ‘strategic matters’ (MHCLG, 2019), albeit without the requirement to reach agreement or produce a specific output, such as a strategic spatial plan. As noted by Bafarasat & Baker (2015), the Duty to Cooperate fails to provide ‘a spur to real consensus building and institutional development’ (p.690). Section 6.2 of this chapter will consider in further detail how the Duty to Cooperate has been interpreted by local planning actors and how these interpretations have contributed towards shaping the strategic spatial planning practices that have been introduced in this section.

The advent of the LEP and Combined Authority resulted in the emergence of a further series of practices that were enacted at the scale of the City Region and more closely reflected the approach to strategic spatial planning that was undertaken by the Regional Planning Bodies. However, these practices were based around a select number of strategic planning issues, such as economic growth and infrastructure, and invited increasingly little engagement from local planning officers during their preparation. Whilst there have been some attempts by local planning officers to encourage greater strategic spatial plan-making at the City Region scale, these have not, to date, been successful. Section 6.2 of this chapter begins to investigate some of the reasons why a formalised approach to strategic spatial plan-making has not been embraced in Sheffield City Region as it has in other city regions, by examining local planning actors’ interpretations of the changes that have taken place in the national legislative and policy context. This will be followed by an examination of how the structures and spaces of collaboration (Chapter 7) and political territories and spatial imaginaries (Chapter 8) that have emerged within the City Region have played a role in helping to enable or constrain the types of strategic spatial planning practices that have been outlined in this section.

Having identified the main types of strategic spatial planning practices that were observed within Sheffield City Region and the local planning actors involved in enacting these practices, this thesis will now focus its attention on unpicking some of their complexities by examining in greater detail *how* and *why* these practices

emerged. It will also consider why certain practices have *not* emerged. This will be done by examining actors and their actions in relation to their institutionally structured contexts, and the changes taking place within these contexts.

## **6.2 Cross-border collaboration and the Duty to Cooperate**

The purpose of this section is to explore in greater detail some of the practices of strategic spatial planning and cross-border collaboration that were undertaken within Sheffield City Region to support local plan-making, as introduced in section 6.1. Section 6.2.1 begins by examining the approach to cross-border collaboration prior to 2010, including the extent to which these collaborative tendencies might be considered to have been ‘institutionalised’. Section 6.2.2 then considers how the changes in the legislative and policy context that were introduced post-2010, including the abolition of the RSS and the introduction of a formalised Duty to Cooperate, were interpreted by local planning actors, and how these interpretations shaped the strategic planning practices that subsequently emerged. Sections 6.2.3 and 6.2.4 then present further analysis of the specific sets of practices that were undertaken in support of the Duty to Cooperate, with a particular focus on the preparation of ‘Statements of Agreement’ led by the SCR Planning Officers Group (as introduced in section 6.1.1). These sections also consider the extent to which these practices were representative of effective ‘collaboration’.

### **6.2.1 Cross-border collaboration as informal ‘duty’**

Across the geography of Sheffield City Region, the practice of local planning actors working together informally across local authority boundaries for the purposes of strategic spatial planning had been ongoing for many years, since well before the Duty to Cooperate was introduced. As detailed in section 5.2, these practices of voluntary cross-boundary planning may be traced back to the Regional Planning Schemes of the 1930s and later, to the preparation of Strategic Guidance of the 1980s, in which informal collaborations were enacted between the South Yorkshire authorities. This was followed, under the governance of the County Councils and Regional Assemblies, by a statutory requirement to participate in strategic spatial planning practices to inform the Structure Plans and RSSs. There is evidence to suggest that this history of joint working between neighbouring local authorities on strategic planning issues became embedded as an institutionalised form of behaviour, in which there was a tendency towards cross-boundary collaboration even in instances where there was no statutory requirement to do so. Collaboration between authorities became normatively framed, particularly by local planning officers, as the way things *should* be done. As one officer reflected, during the era of South Yorkshire County Council, collaboration between authorities had become an instinctive, habitualised practice that was done almost without thinking:

‘I do remember the County Council. And colleagues who I work with now, to a man, woman, speak with affection about the County Council. They see it as a day where cooperation was a by-word for vocation almost. Cooperation is just what you did.’

(Officer at Joint Authorities Governance Unit, INT033)

This willingness and desire to cooperate with one another continued following the demise of South Yorkshire County Council and the Regional Planning Bodies, because whilst there were no longer any formal rules requiring strategic spatial *plan-making*, the informal convention of joint working that had become institutionalised amongst local planning officers continued to be normatively framed as an appropriate form of behaviour or ‘best practice’. As a result of this ideational framing, the practice of cross-boundary collaboration continued to be promoted and led by local planning officers, and became further institutionally embedded, as this extract from the draft Statement of Cooperation that was prepared by SCRPOG illustrates:

‘There is a history of collaboration on spatial planning issues across the city region particularly since 2004 when work began on the Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) for Yorkshire and Humber; the Yorkshire and Humber Plan was adopted in 2008. Following the revocation of the RSS collaboration has continued between authorities on strategic planning in part to meet the requirements of the Duty to Cooperate, but more practically because collaboration is considered locally to be good practice and to result in better planning and planning outcomes.’

(Sheffield City Region Statement of Cooperation, Draft v.1 September 2016)

As this quotation highlights, the decision of local planning officers to continue to cooperate with one another following the demise of the RSS therefore appears to have been based, in part, on an inter-subjective normative framing of cross-boundary cooperation being representative of an appropriate behaviour that was ‘something that authorities should do anyway’<sup>1</sup> and was ‘just good strategic planning’<sup>2</sup>, and perceived as delivering improved planning practice. The institutionalised practice of cross-border cooperation between authorities was understood by local planning officers as something that they *would* and *should* be compelled to do, regardless of whether they were required to do so according to the formal rules written into planning legislation. As such, whilst the Duty to Cooperate was introduced as a ‘formal rule’ with which officers were compelled to comply (as also noted in the previous quotation), in institutional terms it represented more of a ‘weak tie’ (Lowndes, 2001) due to its lack of specificity and the lack of tools and resources required to enact it (as further discussed in section 6.2.2). The Duty to Cooperate was therefore interpreted by most local planning officers as an ‘empty’ policy that had failed to initiate any change in practice. As one Senior Planning Officer stated:

‘I mean, we’ve chosen to work together, way before the Duty to Cooperate. So, we’ve seen the benefits of joint-working. So, I don’t think the Duty has changed that at all, it’s just formalised what we were already doing.’

(Senior Planning Officer at Bolsover District Council and North East Derbyshire District Council, INT037)

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<sup>1</sup> Senior Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council, INT012

<sup>2</sup> Senior Planning Officer at Chesterfield Borough Council, INT027

This quotation interestingly portrays the practice of cross-border cooperation as a ‘choice’ rather than a means of working that was necessitated or required by the legislative context, which further illustrates the normative framing of previously embedded cross-boundary collaborative practices amongst local planning officers. This quotation also illustrates how the Duty to Cooperate, rather than initiating a *change* in practice was perceived as a means of ‘formalising’ *existing* practices. This indicates a tendency amongst local planning officers to distinguish between ‘informal’ and ‘formal’ collaborative practices, and that the practices that were now being labelled as ‘Duty to Cooperate’ were perceived to be a continuation of what would have been otherwise existing informal, collaborative practices. As reflected in the following fieldnote extract:

‘Whilst I was asking about their experiences of the Duty to Cooperate, [Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council] stated that ‘it’s difficult to know where Duty to Cooperate ends and normal cross-boundary relationships begin’.’

(Extract from FN007, Conversation with Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council, 27th October 2016)

This participant’s reference to ‘normal’ cross-boundary relationships further emphasises how joint-working between officers in neighbouring authorities had become a routinised form of behaviour, possibly stemming from the historic, ‘formalised’ requirements to collaborate across authorities that have become embedded over the years, such as those previously discussed in section 5.2. Similar perceptions of the Duty to Cooperate were recorded in the experiences of other local planning officers who explained that many of the cross-boundary collaborative practices they enacted, such as informal meetings between officers, the preparation of joint evidence base documents, or Memoranda of Understanding, were ‘put down into the box to be Duty to Cooperate when we would have done it anyway’<sup>1</sup>. And as another Senior Planning Officer commented:

‘I think it’s filling that hole that’s left when the Regional Spatial Strategy was taken away. We would have done something similar anyway, I think, to try and make sure the plan was robust and sound.’

(Senior Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council, INT015)

Therefore, whilst the nature of the practices and interactions between authorities at the officer level were not reported to have changed following the introduction of the Duty to Cooperate, the way that these interactions were formalised and recorded gained increased significance, as this Senior Planning Officer reflected:

‘...when we put out the statement of what we’ve been doing, it’ll be stuff like, ‘yes, and as a result of this meeting we agreed that we would keep each other informed if this happens here’, which is all very well and good, but we’d probably have done that anyway. And actually, it’s a lot of mechanisms that are already in place. It’s just that we’ve now got to write something formally

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<sup>1</sup> Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council, INT013

saying, ‘this happened’, and ‘oh, look. We’ve actually been doing this for years’, it’s just that now we have to say so.’

(Senior Planning Officer at Bassetlaw District Council, INT030)

This contradicts, to some degree, the work of Allmendinger et al. (2016) who found the Duty to Cooperate to be a factor in the creation of new cooperative partnerships between local authorities and the strengthening of existing ones in their study of three unnamed English regions. Whilst new partnerships *were* formed within Sheffield City Region, including between officers in the South Yorkshire authorities and those in the Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire authorities to the south (through the formation of the SCR Planning Officers Group), these partnerships appear to have been created as a result of the formation of the SCR LEP, rather than as a direct result of the Duty to Cooperate<sup>1</sup>. This research also found little evidence that the Duty to Cooperate *strengthened* existing partnerships, although it certainly did not appear to weaken them.

Although officers repeatedly claimed that the introduction of the Duty to Cooperate did not change practices, it merely formalised existing practices; it might be argued that this process of ‘formalisation’ did, in fact, change practices to a certain degree, as it introduced an additional cognitive framing of the Duty to Cooperate as a ‘formal rule’ whose compliance was a necessary pre-requisite to achieving local plan adoption. This cognitive framing led to certain practices being enacted by local planning officers in order to ‘tick’ the Duty to Cooperate box, whilst at the same time lacking the necessary tools and resources to enable effective cross-border decision-making and strategic agreement, as will be explored in the following section.

### **6.2.2 Introducing the Duty to Cooperate: Cross-border collaboration as ‘formal rule’**

The introduction of the Duty to Cooperate in planning legislation (via the Localism Act 2011) represented what may be termed an ‘exogenous shift’, imposed by central government, in the ‘formal rules’ with which local planning authorities were required to comply in conducting their statutory planning duties; namely the preparation and adoption of a local plan. The Duty to Cooperate was understood by many local planning actors to be a (not particularly successful) attempt by central government to fill the spatial planning ‘gap’ that was created when the RSS was abolished, by requiring local planning authorities to liaise with one another (and with other relevant bodies, such as LEPs and Combined Authorities) on strategic matters. However, whilst being enshrined in planning law, the effectiveness of the Duty to Cooperate as a substitute for statutory regional planning has since been called into question. For example, in a 2014 report published by Centre for Cities, the Duty to Cooperate is described as ‘too weak’, particularly in areas that lack an existing shared vision and do not have already-established relationships between authorities (Clarke et al., 2014).

The strategic spatial planning practices that were observed within Sheffield City Region were representative of a combination of both habitualised practices of cross-border collaboration derived from local planning officers’ normative framings of such forms of cooperation between authorities as ‘good practice’; and

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<sup>1</sup> The reasons behind the formation of the SCR Planning Officers Group are further discussed in section 7.3.2.

practices of cross-border collaboration derived from local planning officers' cognitive framings of compliance with the Duty to Cooperate as a means of ensuring local plan adoption and avoiding failure at examination stage on grounds of legal non-compliance. In terms of evidencing these cognitive framings of the Duty to Cooperate, a local planning officer from Bassetlaw District Council for example expressed the importance of '...having an ability to coordinate and cooperate, and to reach an understanding' between authorities, going on to state that:

'Because the threat of Duty to Cooperate is always there, and that if we can't deliver and can't be seen to be cooperating then we are still facing the opportunity for the Secretary of State to engage in the process and make a direction.'

(Senior Planning Officer at Bassetlaw District Council, INT021)

This quotation illustrates that, in this case, one of main incentives for engaging in cross-border collaboration was its ability to assist in meeting the officer's interests, particularly their objective of successful local plan adoption, by resisting the punitive 'threat' of intervention by central government. This 'threat' was felt particularly acutely in Sheffield City Region, due to the previous experiences of Bolsover DC, which had been advised by a Planning Inspector in 2014 to withdraw its local plan during examination on the grounds that it had failed to meet the legal test of compliance with the Duty to Cooperate<sup>1</sup> (Vickery, 2014). As such, the previously quoted officer's cognitive framing of their strategic context appears to have received prominence over any normative framing of cross-border cooperation as representative of a 'good' or 'proper' way to approach strategic spatial planning in and of itself. Therefore, whilst the research revealed many instances in which the opinion expressed by local planning officers supported the normative virtues of strategic spatial planning as 'best practice' and a positive 'continuation of the norm'; an alternative framing perceived strategic spatial planning as an approach necessary for the interests of successful local plan adoption. Both of these ideological framings, the normative and cognitive, had the same outcome of further embedding the informal institutionalised practices of cross-border collaborative planning that existed in the City Region.

It is worth noting that local planning actors' cognitive framings of the institutional and wider economic and political context, which supported compliance with the Duty to Cooperate, were derived from conceptualisations of their 'self-interest' that were based primarily around their own authority's need to achieve local plan adoption. As such, the collaborative practices outlined in section 6.1.1 were observed as being increasingly driven by local planning actors' awareness of their own authority's ambitions and need to achieve local plan adoption (as is further discussed in Chapter 8), as opposed to pursuing collaborative planning practices purely because it was considered to be an 'appropriate' form of behaviour. This is not to suggest that officers' aforementioned ideas about the normative value of collaborative planning did not play a role in shaping actors' interpretations of their strategic contexts, but that these collaborative practices were

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<sup>1</sup> Bolsover DC's failure to comply with the Duty to Cooperate was based on a lack of effective collaboration with its neighbouring authorities in respect of the 'Coalite' site; a large proposed development site that straddles the border between Bolsover and North East Derbyshire (Vickery, 2014).



*primarily* initiated by officers' cognitive framings of their contexts and the need to demonstrate compliance with the Duty to Cooperate. As one Senior Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council explained:

'...it was a consideration when we did the joint employment land review, for example, with Rotherham. It was a consideration there that, you know, this will address Duty to Cooperate. Nobody can argue with that unless one of us didn't agree with the report. So, it was in mind as a big advantage of doing a joint study, that it would deliver that requirement to cooperate.'

(Senior Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council, INT015)

Further cognitive framings of the 'rules' requiring compliance with the Duty to Cooperate perceived these as a means of ensuring that the legal test was met and that an authority's local plan could be successfully adopted. As this Senior Planning Officer explained when asked why they held regular meetings with officers in neighbouring authorities:

'I suppose the bottom line is, to demonstrate the Duty to Cooperate. So that by the time you get to examination you need to have that evidence base that, in terms of housing or...and all the cross-boundary matters, that you have cooperated with neighbouring authorities, where there's this cross-boundary impact.'

(Senior Planning Officer at Bolsover District Council and North East Derbyshire District Council, INT037)

The emphasis within these quotations indicates that officers' cognitive framings of cross-border collaboration as 'an essential pre-requisite of local plan adoption' played a greater role in legitimising the structuring power of the Duty to Cooperate (as a 'formal rule') in shaping the types of practices observed in section 6.1.1 than officers' normative framings of cross-border collaboration as 'best practice'. A specific example of how officers' framings of their strategic contexts shaped observed practices of cross-border collaboration is discussed in section 6.2.4.

### **6.2.3 Implementing the Duty to Cooperate**

Whilst the Duty to Cooperate has been demonstrated to have degree of structuring power in terms of its ability to initiate and shape some of the cross-boundary collaborative practices that were enacted within the City Region (particularly those aimed at supporting the local plan-making process), in terms of the outcomes that emerged from these practices, these often failed to result in agreements being reached between parties or an identified strategic issue being resolved. The reason for this was partly due to a lack of 'strategic issues' (or issues that transcended local authority boundaries), and partly due to the uncertainty and ambiguity associated with implementing the Duty to Cooperate in legislative terms. Unlike officers' other statutory plan-making duties that were accompanied by technical guidance or Statutory Instruments, the Duty to Cooperate was widely criticised for being 'vague'<sup>1</sup> and lacking clarity regarding the requirements for

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<sup>1</sup> Senior Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council, INT015

achieving legislative compliance. In particular, local planning officers expressed uncertainty about how they would know when sufficient cooperation has been achieved if there was no ‘duty to agree’. As one officer stated:

‘I’m not clear as to what the duty involves. And it’s quite easy to try and cooperate, but following on from that, what sort of agreement are you supposed to make? So, it’s not all that clear to me.’

(Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council, INT012)

Therefore, whilst the Duty to Cooperate represented a ‘formal rule’, insofar as it was enshrined in legislation, it was, in effect, a ‘rule without rules’; one with which local planning actors felt compelled to comply, but which they lacked the relevant technological resources to do so effectively. As the previous quotation illustrates, officers expressed a sense of confusion about precisely what actions were required in order to demonstrate that the Duty to Cooperate had been met. They also expressed a sense of frustration that the Duty to Cooperate failed to provide local authorities with the tools and powers necessary to fill the strategic planning ‘gap’ left following the abolition of the RSS. These comments reflect criticisms that have been levied upon other policies that were introduced under central government’s ‘localism’ agenda, including, for example, the powers devolved to local communities enabling them to prepare a neighbourhood plan, but with minimal resourcing to undertake this process. McGuinness & Mawson (2017) refer to this as a form of governance that ‘proffers responsibility without commensurate resources’ (p.294). Most local planning actors recognised that the government’s intention through the Duty to Cooperate was not to provide a mechanism for replacing the historic forms of strategic plan-making that had previously existing under regional government, but instead to provide what Boddy & Hickman (2013: 759) describe as a ‘highly restricted’ form of strategic spatial planning. As a Senior Planning Officer reflected:

‘...the Duty to Cooperate wasn’t necessarily about long-term strategic planning, it was about ticking a box to get a plan adopted. And that’s largely a function of the changes, the constant changes to the system.’

(Senior Planning Officer at Barnsley MBC, INT032)

This treatment of the Duty to Cooperate as a ‘box-ticking’ exercise was reflected in the fact that it failed to result in any significant change in cross-boundary collaborative practices, but rather a continuation and ‘formalisation’ of existing practices (as previously discussed in section 6.2.1). Joint evidence gathering exercises that would previously have been undertaken to aid local plan-making, for example, continued to be repeated in a similar manner, but with the added justification that the purpose of the exercise was to help fulfil the Duty to Cooperate. One example of where practices did change following the introduction of the Duty to Cooperate was in terms of the regularity with which local planning officers would liaise with their counterparts in adjoining authorities on a one-to-one basis, by arranging what were referred to as ‘Duty to Cooperate meetings’ to discuss strategic and cross-boundary matters. In some instances, these meetings were arranged with the intended purpose of discussing a specific issue, such as agreeing the policy approach to an identified Green Belt or development site straddling two authority areas. However, it was more often

observed that local planning officers arranged and held meetings with their counterparts in neighbouring authorities even in instances where neither party was aware of any strategic issues that needed to be discussed. As one Senior Planning Officer reflected in respect of the cross-boundary relationship between the Sheffield and Rotherham authorities:

‘...we’ve had one or two meetings where you are doing it, I think, just to show that you’ve met. And maybe there aren’t really any issues that have come out of those. So, I suppose, in practical terms there hasn’t been anything substantial arising from the meeting’.

(Senior Planning Officer, Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council, INT028)

As this quotation illustrates, there was an acknowledgment amongst local planning officers that many of the meetings<sup>1</sup> they attended were repeated performances initiated as attempts to fulfil the Duty to Cooperate, but which ultimately achieved very few meaningful strategic planning outcomes. As a Senior Planning Officer at Bassetlaw District Council went on to state:

‘It does take up a lot of time, because you set up a series of meetings in order to be able to say, ‘well, actually, it turns out we haven’t got anything to really cooperate on’, and then it does take quite a while to keep doing minutes and sending them out and making sure that everyone agrees to them and chasing up your colleagues to write up minutes for meetings they’ve been to. And it’s like...it just becomes a piece of administration. It’s not planning...So, in reality, what the Duty to Cooperate ends up meaning to me, is a lot of meetings, minutes, that actually don’t necessarily do all that much. They show you’ve discussed the issues and they’re usually interesting conversations, but you do come away from some of them thinking, ‘well, should I be worried that we haven’t really found anything we can cooperate on?’ ... It feels a bit like a box-ticking exercise, and I think it’s partially because, although they’re called strategic issues, very few of them are.’

(Senior Planning Officer at Bassetlaw District Council, INT030)

These comments support the findings of Bafarasat & Baker (2016: Table 1) whose research in Chester West and Chester, and Wirral, revealed that most of the activities identified by the Councils in their Duty to Cooperate Statement as forms of ‘cooperation’, were in fact best described as ‘liaison’, rather than ‘agreement’ or ‘consensus building’. The findings from this research reveal a similar pattern of activity, which was further reflected in the conclusions of the Planning Inspector published during the Bolsover Local Plan examination (previously introduced in section 6.2.2), in which they state:

‘I am not persuaded that the Local Plan Liaison Meetings were anything other than consultative and information sharing gatherings. The extracts of the various meeting notes are all written in that manner, and do not indicate any constructive, active or on-going work to jointly and proactively plan for the Coalite site’. (Vickery, 2014: 4)

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<sup>1</sup> This included meetings between officers in neighbouring authorities, and the wider SCR Planning Officer Group meetings that will be discussed in Chapter 7.

The fact that the Duty to Cooperate meetings held across Sheffield City Region were widely acknowledged to produce very few ‘real’ planning outcomes, instead presenting more of an ‘administrative burden’<sup>1</sup>, raises the question as to why officers continued to feel compelled to organise and participate in these meetings. Aside from the fact that they were perceived as an opportune mechanism for demonstrating an authority’s compliance with the Duty to Cooperate (regardless of whether or not any strategic issues had actually been identified), these informal officer meetings were (as the previous quotation of the Senior Planning Officer at Bassetlaw DC indicates) also perceived as having value in terms of presenting an opportunity for information-sharing and providing reassurance to officers. As this Senior Planning Officer commented:

‘It is a good opportunity to keep up-to-date with where people are and any of the emerging issues that might have an impact on Rotherham, or vice versa, for others. So, I think overall, from that point of view, in terms of contact with other authorities and bodies, I think generally it probably has had a beneficial effect.’

(Senior Planning Officer at Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council, INT028)

The decision of local planning officers to coordinate and participate in cross-boundary meetings appears therefore to have reflected more of a habitual form of behaviour that became routinised through its ability to provide a sense of familiarity and comfort to officers, coupled with its ability to meet the Duty to Cooperate; rather than reflecting an expectation that such meetings would be able to facilitate strategic planning outputs. Chapter 7 will consider in detail the role of these types of formal and informal ‘spaces of collaboration’ within and through which local planning officers in Sheffield City Region interacted with one another, and with elected members, on strategic planning matters.

The enactment of cross-boundary collaborative practices, including the fulfilment of the Duty to Cooperate, was primarily undertaken by local planning officers, as these practices were perceived as forming an essential part of the local plan-making process, for which local planning officers were responsible. Elected members tended only to be engaged in these practices where politically significant strategic issues were identified that required agreements to be reached between authorities, such as those related to planning for housing. This selective engagement of elected members highlights some of the tensions that were evident in the relationship between officers and members on matters related to strategic planning, including a perception amongst some local planning officers that elected members were lacking in a comprehensive understanding of the significance of the Duty to Cooperate in the current legislative context and their role as strategic decision-makers. As one Senior Planning Officer commented:

‘I think the Duty to Cooperate is a very difficult idea to get across to members in terms of what that duty is and understanding it, because, quite understandably, they see, for example, the possibility of Sheffield turning around and saying, ‘can you take our housing requirement?’ as, ‘not on your nelly. Of course we can’t. Why would we do that?’. And it’s very difficult communicating, at that level,

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<sup>1</sup> Senior Planning Officer at Barnsley MBC, INT032

the question of, well if you don't deal with it, well you could end up with a stalled local plan. And I think there's still that holdover to the views of the old local plan system of, well, 'it'll be fine. The government tells us what our housing number is, don't they?', and don't realise that it's actually been worked out locally...I'm not sure that all senior leaders and senior members at local authorities understand that, that it's a council role to the meet the Duty to Cooperate, not just an issue for planning to deal with.'

(Senior Planning Officer at Chesterfield Borough Council, INT027)

Whilst this may have been the case amongst some elected members, many of those that were spoken to during the research were fully aware of the requirement to comply with the Duty to Cooperate and its significance for enabling local plan adoption. For example, elected members of Bolsover District Council, which had previously failed its local plan examination due to non-compliance with the Duty to Cooperate (as discussed previously), were acutely aware of the importance of meeting the Duty to Cooperate. However, despite this, member engagement with the processes of cross-boundary collaborative planning, including practices designed to fulfil the Duty to Cooperate, was limited. This was likely to be, in part, due to a lack of what Bafarasat & Baker (2016: 697) refer to as 'meta-governance apparatus', or a lack of strategic political oversight which may have incentivised elected members to work together towards consensus on cross-boundary issues. This was coupled with a reluctance of local planning officers to engage members in practices where they themselves were unsure what was required in order to 'tick the box', as exemplified in the following section.

#### **6.2.4 Duty to Cooperate 'Statements of Agreement': An example of collaborative practice**

This section examines the processes, decisions and outputs relating to the Statements of Agreement prepared by the SCR Planning Officer Groups (as introduced in section 6.1.1). This is included here as an example of one of several practices led by local planning officers with the intention of fulfilling the Duty to Cooperate at a strategic, city region scale, and helps to highlight some of the difficulties faced by this group of actors in attempting to implement a form of strategic spatial planning in the post-RSS legislative and policy context.

In July 2016, the SCR Planning Officers Group agreed that in order to try and meet the requirements of the Duty to Cooperate it would be useful to prepare a series of 'Statements of Agreement on some key areas...which could be updated on an annual basis'<sup>1</sup>. It was agreed that each statement would relate to a different strategic issue and would be led by a different authority, as illustrated in Table 5 below. The identified statements are notable for their variety, which is broadly reflective of the range of concerns previously included in the RSS, and their focus on broad topic areas rather than specific identified cross-boundary sites or individual issues. This ambitious scope is in contrast to findings from other areas, such as those presented by Bafarasat & Baker (2016) in which officers' efforts in relation to the Duty to Cooperate were found to be focused primarily around those sectors they envisaged would be of greatest significance in

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<sup>1</sup> Minutes of SCRPOG meeting, 1 July 2016, DOC024

a local plan examination; namely, planning for housing. However, while the SCR Planning Officers intended to expand the scope of their cooperation to include this wider range of topics, the outputs ended up being particularly skewed towards housing as a primary concern, as the remainder of this section will discuss.

**Table 5** Extract from minutes of SCR Planning Officers Group meeting, 21st October 2016

Area	Local Authority Lead
Housing	Sheffield
Economic & Employment	Barnsley
Minerals	Doncaster
Greenbelt	North East Derbyshire
Gypsy & Travellers	Doncaster
Transport	SYPT
Natural Resources incorporating Green Infrastructure	Bassetlaw
Waste	Doncaster

The SCR Planning Officers Group intended that the Statements of Agreement listed in Table 5 would be accompanied by an overarching Statement of Cooperation, the purpose of which was:

- ‘To set out processes and practical steps to be followed going forward, that will strengthen the Sheffield City Region authorities’ approach to collaborative working on planning;
- To outline the current collaborative work on strategic, cross-boundary planning issues ongoing within the Sheffield City Region.’

(Sheffield City Region Statement of Cooperation, Draft v.1 September 2016)

It was suggested that having a Duty to Cooperate statement on housing, in particular, would mean that they were ‘part way to forming a cohesive framework going forwards’ (FN011, Meeting between Sheffield City Council Planning Officer and Bassetlaw District Council Planning Officer, 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2016). This rhetoric was repeated by other officers, including a Senior Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council who stated during a meeting of SCR Housing and Planning Directors that the statement represented an ‘important building block’ for any future spatial framework (FN115, SCR Housing and Planning Directors meeting, 4<sup>th</sup> August 2017). These actions demonstrate officers’ attempts to overcome some of the institutional uncertainties associated with the recent legislative changes by introducing a more formalised, structured approach to cross-boundary collaborative practice at the scale of the City Region. The justification for these actions illustrates a desire by local planning officers not only to satisfy the Duty to Cooperate and support their own local plan-making processes, but also to support some form of future strategic spatial plan-making activity. Section 6.3 will discuss further how these actors’ ideas were used to shape their institutional contexts by promoting a formalised approach to strategic spatial plan-making within the City Region.

In terms of the strategic spatial planning ‘outputs’ of the Statement of Cooperation and Statements of Agreement (as a function of their ability to ‘manage spatial change’ or enable ‘strategic visioning’), there was significant emphasis within the Draft Statement of Cooperation on principles of ‘cooperation’, ‘collaboration’ and ‘agreement’, however, there was relatively little evidence of this in practice as the preparation of the Statements of Agreement stalled. Despite appearing as an agenda item at every SCR

Planning Officers Group meeting during the fieldwork period, the only statement to be shared with the group during this time was the draft statement on housing that had been prepared by officers at Sheffield City Council, with very little progress having been made on the other statements. Even the draft housing statement, whilst described by one officer as a ‘stepping stone’, actually achieved very little, with a Senior Planning Officer from Rotherham MBC stating that; ‘the draft didn’t say much. It was just a marketing brochure that says, ‘everything’s lovely here’. Do we want it to be saying more than this? That’s a bit more difficult’ (FN115, SCR Housing and Planning Directors meeting, 4<sup>th</sup> August 2017). This lack of meaningful progress on the Statements of Agreement and their inability to ‘say more’ appeared to stem from both a lack of officer capacity that resulted in little apparent incentive or drive for officers to prioritise these practices within their increasingly busy workloads; and a lack of governance capacity and necessary powers within the officer groups to make strategic decisions and drive these statements forwards.

In respect of the availability of resources; the introduction of the Duty to Cooperate through the NPPF coincided with the commencement of austerity measures and a reduction in the fiscal and human resources available to local authorities which, rather than enabling local planning officers to take up the mantle of strategic spatial planning following the demise of the Regional Assemblies, instead resulted in an increased focusing of efforts on local plan adoption, as the following quotation illustrates:

‘...something like the Duty to Cooperate coming in when it did, at a time particularly when council resources were getting cut to the bare bone, where it very much has become about authorities doing whatever’s necessary to get their own local plans adopted, and not really going much further.’

(Senior Planning Officer at Barnsley MBC, INT032)

The lack of available officer resource to undertake strategic spatial planning was also noted in the SCRHOP Report to Sheffield City Region Chief Executives and Leaders (August 2014)<sup>1</sup>, which stated that; ‘Quite simply the duty to cooperate requires the same strategic planning issues to be addressed but without the officer support which previously supported the work’. These resource constraints impeded officers’ abilities to undertake strategic planning activities, including preparing the Statements of Agreement. For example, during a meeting between officers from Sheffield City Council and Barnsley MBC held in March 2017, the Planning Officer at Barnsley MBC acknowledged that they hadn’t yet commenced the Duty to Cooperate statement on employment due to time pressures associated with the submission of their local plan and preparation for its examination (FN062, Meeting between Sheffield City Council and Barnsley MBC Planning Officers, 13<sup>th</sup> March 2017). This illustrates how officers’ cognitive framings of their strategic contexts led to their decisions to prioritise tasks aimed at local plan adoption over those related to the Duty to Cooperate, despite the ‘formal rules’ underpinning these activities. This lack of progress led to expressions of frustration by some officers, including one Senior Planning Officer who commented during a SCR Planning Officers Group meeting that ‘joint things always get pushed back to next week, but next week

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<sup>1</sup> This report was ultimately never presented to the SCR Chief Executives and Leaders, for reasons discussed in section 7.2.4.

never comes....It's a struggle doing joint work' (FN072, 28<sup>th</sup> April 2017). During this meeting there was consensus that a programme was needed to drive these Statements of Agreement forwards, however no such programme was subsequently drawn up and progress continued to stall.

In addition to a lack of officer resource, the lack of strategic governance and decision-making power amongst the officer groups also meant that the statements that were prepared by officers had little by way of substantive content and any meaningful decisions were deferred. Whilst the work to develop the Duty to Cooperate statements began with the ambition of achieving something more than just gathering and presenting data, not least by virtue of their originally being entitled 'Statements of Agreement', this desire for 'agreement' was increasingly countered by the reticence of officers to commit their authority to delivering something that might compromise their own local plan's progress and which they, as officers, did not feel they had the necessary powers to decide. This inability to reach consensus was reflected in the fact that references to the statements changed over time from 'Statements of Agreement' to 'Statements of Cooperation'. During a meeting of the SCR Planning Officers Group held on 21<sup>st</sup> October 2016, for example, the officer from Barnsley MBC who had prepared a draft of the overarching Statement of Cooperation explained that their intention was that the document would set out *how* the SCR authorities would gather evidence and prepare their local plans, rather than making any firm statements about what this evidence meant for overcoming strategic planning issues (FN005).

At a later meeting in April 2017, some concerns were raised by officers about what the draft statement on housing would say. The Sheffield City Council officer who was preparing the statement explained that its focus would be on how each of the City Region authorities was faring against the SEP target for housing delivery and would only include 'facts which an examiner needs to see', rather than discussing *how* their individual housing targets would be delivered, 'which is probably the more contentious bit' (FN072, SCR Planning Officers Group meeting, 28<sup>th</sup> April 2017). The officer also explained that the statement would give comfort to a Planning Inspector that the SCR Planning Officers are '*with* Sheffield City Region', reflecting officers' belief that their work was fully aligned with that of the Combined Authority<sup>1</sup>. The way that these responses were delivered by the Sheffield City Council officer indicated an attempt to provide reassurance to fellow officers that the statement would not force their authorities into agreeing something more in terms of planning for housing than their elected members would be willing to accept, and that the statement would provide only the minimum information deemed necessary to fulfil the Duty to Cooperate.

These 'Statements of Agreement' illustrate an attempt by planning officers to reduce some of the uncertainties currently present in the 'formal rules' surrounding the Duty to Cooperate and the wider context of strategic spatial planning, by initiating their own collaborative practices at the scale of the City Region. However, as this example demonstrates, by embarking upon voluntary practices in which their actions were unsupported by necessary statutory powers or guidance, officers were faced with a host of new uncertainties, including how agreements should be reached and by whom, and how and to what extent these agreements (if

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<sup>1</sup> The interrelationship between local planning officer groups and the Combined Authority will be further discussed in section 7.2.3.



reached) needed to be formalised. In terms of the procedures for reaching agreement on the housing statement, for example, it was decided by members of the SCR Planning Officers Group that the draft report should firstly be presented to the SCR Heads of Planning Group to ‘check we’re fully agreed on it’, followed by the SCR Directors of Housing (FN054, SCR Planning Officers Group meeting, 17<sup>th</sup> February 2017). There was initially no suggestion that it should be ‘signed-off’ by elected members at any stage. However, during a meeting of the SCR Housing and Planning Directors, coordinated and hosted by the SCR Executive Team, the SCR Executive Team officer present expressed concern that the statement was being ‘signed-off’ by the SCR Heads of Planning Group, and that it needed to be reviewed by Chief Executives via the Combined Authority boards first (SCR Housing and Planning Directors meeting, 4<sup>th</sup> August 2017, FN115). This reflects some further uncertainties regarding which individuals and groups were deemed responsible for leading on strategic planning-related activities under the new City Region structures; an issue that will be returned to in section 6.3.3, and later in section 7.2.3.

### **6.2.5 Summary**

The act of cross-border collaboration, particularly for the purposes of aiding local plan adoption, had become an institutionalised form of behaviour across Sheffield City Region, having been historically embedded and normatively framed by local planning actors as ‘best practice’ and something that *should* be undertaken. The introduction of the Duty to Cooperate represented an exogenous shift in the ‘formal rules’ underpinning these types of strategic planning practice. Although officers argued that the Duty to Cooperate did not result in significant changes in existing collaborative practices, it did require these existing, often informal, practices to be ‘formalised’, which resulted in the emergence of subtle yet meaningful changes in how cross-boundary collaborative practices and outcomes were undertaken and recorded. The focus of local planning officers on the need to have regular meetings with their counterparts in neighbouring authorities to discuss ‘strategic issues’, for example, meant that the Duty to Cooperate was increasingly framed as only a ‘Duty to Meet’, which resulted in meetings that often had an unclear focus or objective.

The ‘rules’ underpinning the Duty to Cooperate, whilst cognitively framed as something with which local planning actors should comply as a necessary means of achieving local plan adoption, also failed to explicitly define clear roles and responsibilities, how compliance might be achieved, and how decisions should be made. As such, the Duty to Cooperate represented a ‘weak tie’ (Lowndes, 2001) that was open to interpretation. Therefore, whilst officers’ normative ideologies continued to support the ‘idea’ of cross-boundary collaborative practice, some of the voluntary activities that emerged following the introduction of the Duty to Cooperate, such as the ‘Statements of Agreement’, tended to be weak on agreement because they lacked the legislative support and resources required to support them. Some of these resources included, for example, the necessary strategic governance and organisational structures (as will be discussed in Chapter 7), and the political support of elected members (as will be discussed in the following section).

## 6.3 Strategic spatial plan-making

The previous section focused its discussion on the first type of strategic spatial planning practice identified in section 6.1.1; namely, the cross-boundary collaborative practices that were enacted primarily in support of local plan-making, including how these practices were shaped by the introduction of the Duty to Cooperate. This section examines the second identified type of strategic spatial planning practice; joint strategic spatial plan-making or ‘visioning’. This section discusses the approach to strategic spatial plan-making that was observed within the City Region and how the abolition of the RSS was understood by local planning actors. It also considers how this, together with actors’ previous experiences of statutory strategic spatial plan-making, helped to shape the strategic planning practices that were enacted. Section 6.3.1 begins by considering how strategic spatial plan-making has been framed by local planning actors since the abolition of the RSS, and the extent to which these understandings were shaped by actors’ prior experiences. Section 6.3.2 then discusses how these different framings of what *is* or *should be* ‘strategic spatial planning’ were utilised by local planning actors in an attempt to change strategic plan-making practices in Sheffield City Region, including through the promotion of a formalised approach to strategic spatial planning. Finally, section 6.3.3 discusses the role of the Strategic Economic Plan as a form of strategic spatial plan-making.

### 6.3.1 Local planning officers and the promotion of a strategic spatial planning ‘ideal’

The introduction of the Localism Act 2011 resulted not only in the removal of the statutory requirement to prepare a strategic spatial plan, but also resulted in the abolition of the regional tier of governance that had previously overseen these strategic plan-making processes. This section will consider the implications of both of these exogenous shifts in the ‘formal rules’ underpinning strategic spatial plan-making from the perspective of local planning officers, and how this led to the promotion, by some officers, of an idealised version of strategic spatial planning.

As previously discussed in section 6.2, the cross-boundary collaborative practices that were enacted as a means of meeting the Duty to Cooperate were normatively framed by local planning actors as an ‘appropriate’ form of behaviour. However, many of the local planning officers spoken to during the research expressed the view that whilst these collaborative practices were valued as a form of ‘best practice’, they were not representative of ‘*proper* strategic planning’ because they did not involve the preparation of a spatial plan. As this Senior Planning Officer commented:

‘Good strategic planning can meet the Duty to Cooperate, but it’s not the same as actually having a proper plan at that level that puts together where the growth will be, where the strategic interventions are needed.’

(Senior Planning Officer at Chesterfield Borough Council, INT027)

Officers’ apparent reverence of the ‘strategic spatial plan’ is thought to have derived in part from their previous experiences under both the RSS and the county structure plan arrangements, through which the practice of strategic spatial plan-making was both normatively framed as ‘the way things should be done’

and cognitively framed as an approach that might assist them with their local plan-making objectives. As one Senior Planning Officer reminisced:

‘It would be nice if we had a regional plan that did things like housing numbers, employment targets, and worried about the transport network. Because then I wouldn’t have to, and I could get on with doing the actual hard job of finding where the houses go, deciding where the employment land should go, when I spend a lot of my time worrying about what the numbers are. You know, the last local plan we did was back still under the regional plan structure, so I didn’t have to worry about any of that. I knew what my employment target was, I knew what my housing target was, the roads weren’t particularly an issue to worry about, and we didn’t have to worry about a massive infrastructure issue because the county was covering the education stuff for us, and that was done at a regional level. Now, our focus has shifted to justifying numbers, not locations.’

(Senior Planning Officer at Bassetlaw Borough Council, INT029)

Similar responses regarding the ‘practical convenience’ of the RSS in terms of its allocation of individual authority housing targets were expressed by most officers that were spoken to during the research, but were particularly prominent amongst the Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire district authorities, which had smaller planning teams than the larger metropolitan authorities, and so tended to struggle with the additional workload created by the sudden need to calculate their own housing and employment land targets, and negotiate these with elected members. As such, the RSS revocation embodied a shift in the strategic context and the ‘formal rules’ that were shaping the role of local planning officers in respect of strategic spatial planning practices. The expected role of local planning officers moved away from their interpretation of a set of figures ‘handed down’ to them from above, towards their direct involvement in the mediation of these politically contentious strategic planning matters, including the identification of housing targets and the allocation of strategic development sites. This change in role was acknowledged by one officer as they reflected on their efforts to resolve a particular cross-boundary issue:

‘...we are clear that it’s our call to get this sorted, whereas before one could potentially have relied upon an independent forum and the Regional Assembly to decide’

(Senior Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council, INT004)

It was this loss of the Regional Assembly as a strategic decision-making body and independent ‘arbiter’<sup>1</sup>; one that was able to oversee the more difficult decisions; that was most keenly felt by the majority of the local planning officers involved in this research. This was because despite there being an acceptance by these officers that it was now their responsibility to liaise with elected members to ensure that strategic decisions were made, this had been made increasingly difficult by the fact that there were no formal structures in place through which officers and elected members could liaise (discussed in section 7.3.3), and officers were being increasingly side-lined from those Combined Authority structures that did exist (discussed in section 7.2.3).

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<sup>1</sup> Senior Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council, INT004

The revocation of the RSS and the abolition of the Regional Planning Bodies ultimately created a context of structural uncertainty in which officers lacked a clear understanding of their own roles in relation to the strategic planning process, including who the decision-makers were, and what their relationship to them was. In contrast, the Regional Assembly continued to be idealised by most<sup>1</sup> officers as an organisation whose formal structures and clear procedures and rules of engagement provided a level of certainty and stability for local planning officers in their quest for local plan adoption, particularly in terms of assisting with the processes of strategic decision-making. As one officer explained:

‘You know, it was difficult under the RSS. There was a lot of horse-trading. But at the end of the day, it came out with a result that everyone could accept, because it had been through a formal process, rather than this kind of very informal, everyone scatter-gunning, everyone writing to all your neighbouring authorities going, ‘can you take some of our housing need?’. And the answer to which might be, you know, ‘yes, we can, but we don’t want’. So, I think the formality of having a structure to it would help members to be able to say, ‘well, we may not like it, but the decision’s been made’, because there would have to be an end point to it.’

(Senior Planning Officer at Chesterfield Borough Council, INT027)

As well as providing a clearly structured process for strategic decision-making, the Regional Planning Body also established formal rules of engagement, which drew together all authorities and encouraged them to participate. One Senior Planning Officer reflected on these prior experiences of dealing with the development of the RSS and the choice that authorities made to engage with strategic spatial planning:

‘The strength of the RSS wasn’t so much in the fact it came out with tangible policies and spatial planning, it was the fact that because it was statutory, everyone had to be involved in it. So, therefore then people couldn’t claim that they weren’t involved, because if they did, they’d just have the RSS imposed on them. So, the Duty to Cooperate and the RSS share that attribute of, you are compelled to do it, which is a strength, not so much for the big cities because they do it anyway, and naturally would do it anyway because there is a better understanding of economics, but in some of the smaller districts, without those two legislative provisions, there’s a temptation to just to want to plan inwardly. And that’s a real characteristic of smaller authorities. It’s only the forward-thinking smaller authorities who engage properly with this.’

(Senior Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council, INT019)

As well as encouraging authorities to engage with one another strategically, the Regional Assembly also represented a mode of strategic governance; establishing a shared vision and expectation which, whilst not all authorities might necessarily have agreed with this, it provided a common objective and strategic

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<sup>1</sup> Although the vast majority of local planning officers spoken to during this research felt that regional governance and the RSS had been largely of benefit to them, one senior officer from a smaller district authority, presented their experiences of the RSS as more of a hindrance than a help because of the spatial constraints it placed upon their local plan-making processes.

direction around which local planning officers from the respective regional authorities were able to unite. This sense of common purpose appears to have diminished following the demise of the RSS, as one Senior Planning Officer commented:

‘I suppose if you’ve got an RSS level, you’ve got that cooperation, haven’t you? You’ve got that Duty to Cooperate as part of the plan-making for the Regional Spatial Strategy, although at a higher level. And I think that makes it difficult to look at it as a whole, because then everybody went away and did their own thing. And now we’ve got the Duty to Cooperate which means you’ve got to do it, but you’re doing it at a lower level than you were doing it before. Does that make sense? And I think that’s harder, because then you’ve got no higher level to refer it back to. So, if you had a regional plan, I think the Duty to Cooperate would be much easier, because everybody would know what the common goals are at a regional level. But I still think everybody’s still very much focused on their area, and not further than that.’

(Senior Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council, INT011)

This quotation illustrates how a regional governance structure provided a level of strategic oversight such that ‘playing by its rules’ was cognitively framed by local planning officers as being in their own authority’s interests. When the regional governance structures were removed, these rules of engagement and the formal structures of cross-boundary collaboration disappeared, and there was no longer a sense of ‘common purpose’ shaping officers’ desires to plan strategically. It should be noted however that not all local planning officers reflected positively on the RSS approach, as some felt it had failed to represent the views of the individual authorities and that they had little influence over its strategic direction and content. As one Senior Planning Officer stated:

‘I had real problems with Regional Spatial Strategies in terms of...they were far too theoretical and far too high level, and didn’t really take account of local strategic decision-making processes. And having seen them abolished, I thought that was a really significant step forward. So, to go backwards and to reinvent something which would have a similar sort of style, would probably be a backwards step. Having said that, having an ability to coordinate and cooperate, and to reach an understanding...so, I suppose, a strategy or a strategic approach that was non-statutory, would have been my preference.’

(Senior Planning Officer at Bassetlaw District Council, INT021)

This quotation helps to highlight some of the oft-cited criticisms of strategic spatial plan-making as being non-democratic, by failing to fully represent the interests of the individual authorities and taking decision-making power away from the local level. This appeared to be a particular concern amongst the East Midlands district authorities (especially amongst elected members), which highlights some of the political tensions that emerged between these and the metropolitan authorities in the north that were perceived as being the more dominant political powers; an issue that will be explored further in Chapter 8. What this

quotation also highlights is the fact that a strategic spatial plan, albeit non-statutory, was considered the preferred option for the future of collaborative planning in Sheffield City Region.

The evidence presented here indicates that officers' previous experiences of regional planning left a strong institutional legacy, which as the following section demonstrates, played a role in shaping contemporary practices of strategic spatial planning. Despite its recognised flaws (not least its lack of democratic accountability), for many local planning officers the regional planning approach came to represent an idealised vision of how 'proper' strategic spatial planning should be undertaken and governed. It was framed by these officers as a positive mode of strategic planning governance which, through its clearly defined rules, roles and formalised structures, enabled effective strategic decision-making and engagement at a supra-local level. These framings were positioned alongside officers' ideational interpretations of their current strategic context, whose 'opaque' governance arrangements and lack of effective collaborative spaces through which both local planning officers and elected members could properly engage, failed to provide the same level of certainty and structuring power as had previously helped to shape the more coordinated strategic spatial planning practices that emerged under the RSS<sup>1</sup>.

Interestingly, the findings from this research appear to contradict, to some extent, those of McGuinness & Mawson (2017) whose interviews with local planning officers regarding their views on the revocation of the RSSs, revealed that respondents from the Yorkshire and Humber authorities were prominently represented amongst those that identified the RSSs as being 'not fit for purpose' (p.289). The differences between the findings of this research and those of McGuinness & Mawson may stem from the range of individual authorities that were included in the studies, because as discussed in Chapter 8, local politics and political territories play a significant role in shaping differential responses to strategic contexts. It may also be explained by the day-to-day roles of the individual officers that were interviewed. As discussed previously, officers' whose role now included the additional responsibility of calculating and negotiating their authority's housing and employment land targets, were more likely to reflect on the RSS in a positive, perhaps slightly 'rose-tinted' light.

The evidence presented in this section has illustrated the role of a form of 'path dependency' or 'contextual memory' in shaping ideational interpretations of current strategic contexts that have been subject to rapid exogenous institutional change. In other words, it has shown how local planning actors' experiences and recollections of planning within different legislative or structural contexts continue to shape their interpretations of contexts that have since undergone substantive change. This demonstrates the role of history in shaping actors' ideational interpretations of their current institutional contexts. The actions that resulted from local planning officers' interpretations of their changed strategic contexts following the abolition of regional planning, including those enacted by Sheffield City Region Planning Officers Group (SCRPOG) and the Sheffield City Region Heads of Planning (SCRHOP) group, are discussed in the

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<sup>1</sup> The role of these spaces of governance in shaping strategic spatial planning practices is further discussed in section 7.2.

following section. This section considers how officers' interpretations of their previously embedded contexts helped to shape their opinions and approaches with respect of current strategic planning practices.

### **6.3.2 The foundations of a strategic spatial plan for Sheffield City Region**

In order to 'fill' the strategic spatial planning void and to reduce the uncertainty around strategic planning governance and decision-making formed by the then recent abolition of the RSS, in 2011, senior planning officers tried to implement their own version of a strategic spatial plan for Sheffield City Region. These actions are thought to have been primarily informed by local planning officers' framings of an idealised form of strategic spatial planning practice derived from the legacy of regional planning, as discussed in the previous section. This may also be interpreted as an attempt by officers to challenge and transform the existing institutional context by inciting change in the 'formal rules' that were then shaping strategic spatial planning practices and reducing some of the uncertainties that surrounded the newly introduced Duty to Cooperate. A note was developed by the then South Yorkshire Heads of Planning (SYHOP) outlining a proposal for a SCR Local Strategy Statement (LSS), the objectives of which would be:

'To provide an agreed spatial vision to guide Local Development Frameworks and Local Plans across SCR; [and]

To demonstrate successful co-operation and an agreed position on issues with cross-boundary impacts when Local Plans are submitted for public examination (as required by the Localism Bill and draft NPPF)'

(Proposal for a SCR Local Strategy Statement, South Yorkshire Heads of Planning, September 2011, DOC355)

Promoted as a strategic 'vision' for the City Region, the note also stated that '...the weight given to the LSS would be increased by achieving endorsement by all local authorities in the City Region and the LEP Board'. As such, the document was presented to the LEP Housing and Regeneration Board and the LSS was completed in October 2012 entitled the 'Sheffield City Region Framework'. However, in addition to this change in title (which shifted from 'strategy' to 'framework'), the final document reflected more of an evidence-gathering exercise as opposed to the visioning exercise originally proposed, stating; 'The Framework does not create new policy or priorities but serves as an overarching document which summarises sub-regional and local activities' from existing sources, including existing local plans and the Yorkshire and Humber and East Midlands RSSs (SCR Heads of Planning, 2012: 4). This process of 'downgrading' or 'back-tracking' from a plan or vision (something that would have effected or managed spatial change) to a framework of collated evidence (something that portrayed a somewhat static image of the current situation) was similarly experienced in the preparation of the Duty to Cooperate 'Statements of Agreement' that eventually became 'Statements of Cooperation', and as a result of which no real strategic decisions were made<sup>1</sup>. In respect of the LSS, this change in emphasis and its 'downgrading' in spatial

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<sup>1</sup> See section 6.2.4 for further discussion on the Duty to Cooperate Statements of Agreement.

planning terms is indicative of the local planning officers' ideas that informed the LSS being insufficiently powerful to usurp the dominant ideals and political struggles that persisted amongst elected members against a resurgence of any form of strategic spatial plan.

Reflections from officers that were present at the time the Combined Authority was established, for example, note that there was a reluctance by these senior elected members to undertake what they perceived as a 'handing over' of their statutory planning controls to the Combined Authority. This was discussed by officers during a meeting of the SCR Planning Officers group and recorded in the following fieldnote extract:

'There was some discussion about the 'dearth' of planning within the SCR Executive. [Officer at the Joint Authorities Governance Unit] said that five or six years ago, when setting up the LEP, the leaders were asked to 'throw certain keys into the middle of the table' to determine what responsibilities would be given to the City Region, but that 'no-one was willing to relinquish planning'.'

(Extract from FN099, SCR Planning Officers Group meeting, 30<sup>th</sup> June 2017)

This resistance by local authority leaders to establishing a formalised strategic planning function within the Combined Authority was likely a response to their cognitive framings of strategic spatial planning as a 'threat' to their authority's autonomy; ideas that were also exacerbated by their (primarily) negative recollections of 'statutory strategic spatial planning' under regional governance. As well as contributing to the resistance of a strategic planning agenda within the Combined Authority when it was first established, similar ideational framings were also applied when the proposition was made to form a Mayoral Combined Authority, in which the Mayor would have statutory strategic spatial planning powers<sup>1</sup>. In Bassetlaw, for example, an elected member stated during a council meeting; '...in relation to spatial planning, it is for Bassetlaw Council to have primacy in this area, and no other authority'<sup>2</sup>. This member's concerns, in particular, revolved around a fear that under a Mayoral Combined Authority there would be a requirement for a statutory spatial plan, and this might involve them having a housing target imposed upon them. Similarly, an Elected Member of Bassetlaw District Council stated during an interview:

'We're doing a hell of a lot of work at the minute working out our own local plan, and I would see a statutory spatial framework as doing nothing more than regionalising housing figures.'

(Elected Member of Bassetlaw District Council, INT034)

This idea that a mayor would have the ultimate power to decide where housing should be allocated was viewed as a particular threat by elected members, not least because it mirrored the experiences that local authorities had faced under the RSS, as it represented a more technocratic approach to strategic planning governance. As well as being shaped by historic experiences, elected members' ideationally-framed

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<sup>1</sup> Further detail relating to the proposed Mayoral Devolution Deal is presented in section 5.3.3.

<sup>2</sup> FN098, Elected Member of Bassetlaw District Council, Bassetlaw District Council meeting, 29<sup>th</sup> June 2017



responses to their strategic contexts were, in part, derived from issues of ‘trust’ and the nature of the political and territorial relationships that had become established between particular authorities (as will be further discussed in Chapter 8) and, in part, derived from the structures within and through which strategic decision-making took place; the ‘spaces of collaboration’ (as will be discussed in Chapter 7).

Whilst the formation of a statutory strategic spatial plan or the foundation of an autonomous decision-making power at the Combined Authority level was cognitively framed as a ‘threat’ to elected members’ interests, there was also evidence to suggest that ‘strategic spatial planning’ was normatively framed as an appropriate approach for resolving cross-boundary issues, as long as it was based on a model of collaborative decision-making. An Elected Member of a Sheffield City Region district authority, for example, stated during an interview that they felt there was a need for strategic spatial planning ‘at a greater than local level’ particularly on issues such as infrastructure and planning for housing, which they said they felt ‘works best over a large area’, and that they got a ‘more balanced view’ under the RSS (INT043). Similarly, an Elected Member of Barnsley MBC said that they would welcome some form of strategic planning at the mayoral level, subject to it being a collaborative approach and as long as the Mayor did not have absolute control over decision-making:

‘If those powers are what they want to develop strategic planning, as long as it’s done in cooperation and they listen to the district councils and so on, like that, and they all work it out together. But to give one person those absolute powers, no, it would be a disaster...No, so you’ve got to have that cross-border working. The same with transport and that, you’d be no good building a dual carriageway, would you, going somewhere and then suddenly stopping because they didn’t want it. Yes, there has got to be cooperation.’

(Elected Member of North East Derbyshire District Council, INT038)

Therefore, whilst there was some rhetorical support for strategic spatial planning amongst elected members, an approach that was deemed sufficiently acceptable to overcome the perceived threats to autonomy failed to emerge. As noted above, some of the reasons for this relate to other structural factors that also played a role in informing actors’ ideational framings of their strategic contexts, including the governance structures and spaces of collaboration that emerged within the Combined Authority, and the political territories that shaped trust and collaborative relationships between the authorities, as will be discussed in Chapters 7 and 8 respectively.

Returning to the example of the Sheffield City Region Framework (formerly the LSS), this was published in 2012, having been endorsed by the City Region’s local authorities and the LEP Board, and was later used to inform the spatial investment priorities targeted by the Regional Growth Fund. This framework and the maps that accompanied it, represent the first and only (what might be termed) ‘strategic spatial plan’ that was ever prepared at the Sheffield City Region scale, as it was accompanied by a Spatial Priorities and Investment Framework Map identifying ‘the main places that have the greatest potential to drive economic growth in the future’ and highlighting the ‘roles of places’ (SCR Heads of Planning, 2012: 21). Indeed, any form of

‘spatial approach’ was noticeably lacking in much of the later strategising that was led by the SCR Executive Team on behalf of the Combined Authority, such as the SEP; the first iteration of which included a single-page map highlighting seven ‘priority growth areas’<sup>1</sup>, but nothing at the same detailed level of individual employment and housing sites that had been included in the maps that accompanied the Sheffield City Region Framework. It became increasingly evident that the priorities of the LEP and Combined Authority were shifting away from spatial planning and towards economic growth, business and skills, as section 7.2 will discuss.

### 6.3.3 The Sheffield City Region Strategic Economic Plan

Whilst a formalised approach to strategic spatial planning (and in particular, strategic spatial plan-making) continued to be resisted by the Leaders of the Combined Authority, the Combined Authority did enact a form of strategic plan-making in the form of SEP<sup>2</sup>. The SEP was prepared by officers in the SCR Executive Team in 2014, and although it was ‘strategic’, in that it identified long-term objectives for economic growth across the City Region, it lacked the place-based specificity of a ‘strategic *spatial* plan’. Also, unlike the statutory spatial plans that local planning officers were used to preparing, it represented more of an aspirational, non-evidence-based approach. Many officers therefore expressed resistance to the targets outlined in the SEP, commenting that they were too high and raising concerns that such aspirational targets would not stand up to the scrutiny of a Planning Inspector during a local plan examination. As the following quotation illustrates:

‘...when the SEP came out, it announced a housing target that had no evidence behind it. And then there was a rush afterwards, as people finally got the hint from the planning group to say, ‘you might want to have a bit of evidence about what this means’. And I think that’s been a weakness of LEPs generally, is their tendency to come out with targets that aren’t evidence based’.

(Senior Planning Officer at Chesterfield Borough Council, INT027)

A further example comes from the comments of a Planning Officer from Bassetlaw District Council who said that they didn’t see any evidence that the SEP target for Bassetlaw was realistic, and they were concerned that they may be forced to meet this aspirational figure. They went on to say that there ‘may be a question back to the City Region, to ask how they are going to support LPAs to meet these figures’<sup>3</sup>. These comments highlight some of the antagonisms that were observed to have been building between local planning officers and their counterparts in the SCR Executive Team, set in the context of growing physical divisions between both sets of actors<sup>4</sup>. The SCR Executive Team officers were perceived by local planning officers to be taking on roles that should have been done by ‘professional planners’ and that were

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<sup>1</sup> As discussed in section 5.3.1.

<sup>2</sup> Further background context to the SEP is presented in section 5.3.1, and the extent to which local planning officers were engaged in preparing the SEP is discussed in section 7.2.3.

<sup>3</sup> FN011, Meeting between SCC Planning Officer and Bassetlaw District Council Planning Officer, 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2016

<sup>4</sup> The spaces of interaction between local planning officers and officers in the SCR Executive Team is discussed in section 7.2.3.

subsequently not being undertaken in the ‘proper’ way. These conflicts are illustrated in the following fieldnote extract:

‘[Senior Planning Officer] from Sheffield City Council commented that members are agreeing the aspirational jobs growth targets used by SCR (in the SEP), but that these are ‘disconnected from planning’. They said they need to find a way to link these figures back to planning through an evidence-based approach.’

(Extract from FN038, SCR Heads of Planning meeting, 6<sup>th</sup> January 2017)

Local planning officers’ framings of ‘strategic spatial planning practice’ were quite clearly different from the work being done by officers within the SCR Executive Team, although as the following quotation illustrates, there was some acknowledgment, at least amongst officers within the SCR Executive Team, that each actor group was working towards similar objectives and it was the way each group chose to express these objectives that was different:

‘That was the difficult thing when we wrote the SEP originally. Because government were saying, ‘be aspirational’, and local authorities were saying, ‘but we’ve only got the land for X number of houses and X number of jobs’...If we want to be aspirational and we want the numbers to be bigger, that’s fine. But let’s be clear how that interrelates with what’s in local plans, and let’s not trip each other up. Because we all want the same thing, it’s just how we express that, and how we have to express that in a planning document is often different to how we might express that in a forward-looking, twenty-five-year strategy to government.’

(Officer at SCR Executive Team, INT025)

The above quotation and the example of the SEP highlight the differences in the ‘rules’ underpinning the approaches to strategic planning as understood by both local planning officers and those officers within the SCR Executive Team. The local plans prepared by planning officers were required to be robustly evidence-based and able to meet the stringent ‘tests of soundness’<sup>1</sup>, defined in the national policy and against which they are publicly examined. The strategies prepared on behalf of the Combined Authority, however, faced a far less rigorous process of assessment. The SEPs, for example, were assessed by central government against a series of broad criteria in order to form the basis for the agreement of Growth Deals<sup>2</sup>, but there were few requirements on how they should be prepared or what exactly they needed to contain. In some cases, the strategies prepared by the Combined Authority were not assessed at all, such as the SCRIIP, which was a voluntarily prepared plan. These institutionalised differences in approach to ‘strategy-making’ between the Combined Authority and the local planning authorities resulted in conflicts emerging between both groups of actors. As well as being informed by different ‘rules’ and processes, their actions were also underpinned by

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<sup>1</sup> The four tests of soundness used in Local Plan examinations assess whether the plan is a) positively prepared, b) justified, c) effective, and d) consistent with national policy. Details of these tests are currently outlined in Paragraph 35 of the NPPF (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> The broad criteria against which the SEPs were assessed included; ambition and rationale for intervention in the local area; value for money; and delivery and risk (HM Government, 2013).

differing objectives; an issue that will be discussed further in section 7.2. Local planning officers' responses to the SEP further illustrate how the lack of 'formal rules' directing the strategic plan-making practices of the Combined Authority conflicted with officers' cognitive framings of strategic spatial planning as a practice that should be rule-bound and strategically governed in order to provide a level of certainty to the local plan-making process and officers' abilities to resolve strategic planning issues.

#### **6.3.4 Summary**

The regional planning approach that was abolished in 2011 left an ideational legacy that continued to shape local planning actors' attitudes towards strategic spatial plan-making and their subsequent actions with respect to these practices. Local planning officers exhibited a tendency to cognitively frame the formalised approach to strategic spatial plan-making and strategic planning governance, such as existed under the Regional Planning Bodies, as a potential means of reducing the uncertainties surrounding cross-boundary collaboration and strategic decision-making that existed within the current legislative and governance context. In contrast, locally elected members exhibited a tendency towards cognitively framing a formalised, statutory approach to strategic spatial plan-making with a supra-local decision-making authority (reminiscent of that present under the regional planning approach) as a 'threat' to their autonomy.

Therefore, whilst both elected members and local planning officers recognised the value in undertaking a cross-boundary collaborative approach to resolving strategic planning issues, they differed in terms of their ideas of how this should be delivered, including the degree of 'formalisation' that should be applied to any future voluntary strategic spatial planning practices. These ideational disparities were exemplified in officers' resistance to the SEP and their attempts to initiate an idealised form of strategic spatial planning by developing a spatial strategy for the City Region. However, whilst being actively promoted by local planning officers, through the Heads of Planning Group, these actions failed to inspire a collective reframing of strategic spatial plan-making amongst elected members as an approach that would be in their own self-interests. The ideas of local planning officers failed to become influential and were unable to deliver institutional transformation within the strategic context of the LEP, in part, because officers lacked the necessary political power or 'institutional resource' (Bell, 2012b) to incite ideational change amongst elected members, and in part, because the ideas of elected members were strongly institutionally embedded and, as such, resistant to change. The changes in the national legislative and policy context that removed the statutory requirement for strategic spatial plan-making, in essence making this a voluntary practice, was perceived by local planning officers as raising levels of uncertainty in terms of how strategic planning issues might be resolved. In contrast, rather than raising levels of uncertainty, elected members tended to perceive these changes as a liberation from the formal rules that had previously constrained autonomous and democratic strategic decision-making.

## 6.4 Conclusion

This chapter has provided answers to the first two research questions<sup>1</sup>, by discussing how local planning officers engaged with, interpreted and responded to changes in the national legislative and policy context within Sheffield City Region, and how these interpretations helped to shape their actions in respect of strategic spatial planning practices. The practices of strategic spatial planning that were enacted within Sheffield City Region since the abolition of the RSS primarily consisted of practices of cross-border cooperation between individual or sub-regional groupings of local authorities whose aim was to support local plan-making and the Duty to Cooperate. These practices were led by local planning officers, with elected members being mostly engaged only in the resolution of issues that were particularly politically contentious or to ‘sign off’ on final decisions.

These mostly informal, cross-boundary collaborative practices are contrasted with those practices of more formalised strategic spatial plan-making, or what several local planning officers described as ‘proper’ strategic planning. Despite these types of plan-making practices being actively promoted by local planning officers (for example, through their initial work on the LSS), these efforts were met with institutional resistance from elected members who perceived that a formalised approach to strategic spatial plan-making, particularly a statutory approach under Mayoral governance, would be a significant threat to their autonomy. The review of observed practices presented in section 6.1 of this chapter serves to highlight how strategic spatial planning is increasingly characterised by cross-boundary collaborative practices enacted and coordinated at the local authority level, rather than more traditional forms of ‘strategic’ planning that involve an exercise in long-term visioning; one that is often overseen and coordinated by a strategic governing body. Indeed, this chapter shows how the terms ‘cross-boundary’ and ‘strategic’ are often conflated when used by local planning actors to refer to collaborative spatial planning practices.

This chapter highlights the role of history in shaping these practices through actors’ responses to exogenous changes in the legislative and policy context. In particular, the evidence demonstrates how informally institutionalised practices of cross-boundary collaboration, which were perceived as ‘appropriate’ forms of behaviour, helped to shape local planning officers’ responses to the Duty to Cooperate. Whilst cross-boundary collaboration was also normatively framed as ‘appropriate’ behaviour by elected members, the idea of transforming the existing institutional context by re-introducing a formalised approach to strategic spatial plan-making however was vociferously resisted. This research indicates that these ideas were derived from an institutionalised ‘contextual memory’ of experiences of strategic spatial planning under the RSS, which shaped both local planning officer and elected member interpretations of how strategic spatial planning should be undertaken and governed. For most local planning officers, the regional planning approach was cognitively framed as providing certainty and reassurance in relation to the local plan-making process, and as a means of resolving cross-boundary planning issues. Therefore, officers’ responses to the changes in the legislative context involved actions that sought to regain the certainties that were lost when

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<sup>1</sup> The research questions are outlined in Chapter 2 (section 2.5).

the 'formal rules' directing strategic spatial planning were abolished. For most elected members, regional planning was cognitively framed as an approach that removed their power to make planning decisions pertaining to their own authority area. This ideational framing was reflected in their resistance to any suggestion (such as those introduced by local planning officers) that a formalised approach to strategic spatial plan-making might be reinstated, as they sought to retain liberation from the 'formal rules' which they perceived as a constraint and threat to their autonomy.

Elected members' responses to the abolition of the regional planning approach appear to have strengthened the resolve within the City Region against adopting a formalised approach to strategic spatial plan-making (either statutory or non-statutory). However, similar reactions to the abolition of the RSSs were also experienced in other areas of the country in which strategic spatial plan-making has subsequently re-emerged, for example, in the West of England sub-region, as recorded by Boddy & Hickman (2013). Therefore, it is unlikely that the lack of strategic spatial plan-making in Sheffield City Region that has been observed to-date can be fully explained by elected members' responses to the changes in the national legislative and policy context (notably, the abolition of the RSSs). Indeed, as described in Chapter 3, the actions of actors can be understood through their ideational interpretations of their strategic contexts, and these contexts comprise not only the 'formal rules' outlined in planning legislation and policy, as discussed in this chapter, but a range of other factors that help to constrain or enable action. Other factors that the research has identified as playing an important role in shaping actors' responses to their strategic contexts and their approach to strategic spatial planning include the role of the organisational and governance structures of the Combined Authority, which will be examined in Chapter 7, and the role of political territories and spatial imaginaries, which will be examined in Chapter 8.

## **7 | Spaces of strategic planning governance in Sheffield City Region**

As the previous chapter highlights, the changes in the national legislative and policy context that led to the abolition of the RSS and the introduction of the Duty to Cooperate resulted in uncertainties regarding how strategic planning issues could or should be managed and resolved. These legislative changes were also accompanied by the introduction of new strategic governance arrangements, including the formation of the Combined Authority followed by the appointment of an elected mayor. These new structures and spaces of governance were established alongside other existing formal and informal spaces of collaboration, such as the SCR Planning Officers Group, which as discussed in Chapter 6, played an important role in helping local planning actors to manage some of the uncertainties that had arisen as a result of changes that emerged in the legislative context, including the introduction of the Duty to Cooperate.

The purpose of this chapter is to consider in greater detail how the spaces and structures of governance that were present within the City Region have evolved through the processes of devolution, and the extent to which these spaces have enabled practices of cross-boundary collaboration and helped to shape the actions of local planning actors in respect of their approach to strategic spatial planning. Section 7.1 considers how the formal governance and organisational structures of the Combined Authority were formed and how these structures were interpreted by and shaped practices of strategic decision-making and cross-boundary collaboration, particularly amongst elected members. Section 7.2 then considers the extent to which these spaces of governance and interaction constrained or enabled practices of strategic spatial planning across SCR, focusing in particular on the role of local planning officers in promoting the establishment of more formalised spaces of strategic spatial planning practice and governance within the City Region, and why these efforts were broadly resisted by elected members. Section 7.3 examines the informal spaces of collaboration that were observed within Sheffield City Region, such as local planning officer groups and the informal ‘deal-making’ spaces of elected members, and their role in strategic spatial planning and decision-making. This section also considers how actors interacted within these spaces and with the formal structured spaces of governance that were discussed in section 7.1. This discussion will be followed, in Chapter 8, by a more detailed analysis of actors’ interpretations of the broader territorial and relational spaces that also played a critical role in shaping the approach to strategic spatial planning in Sheffield City Region, elements of which will be briefly considered in this chapter.

### **7.1 Strategic decision-making and formal governance spaces in the Combined Authority**

The Sheffield City Region Combined Authority was established as a voluntary grouping of authorities, which joined together to work on a series of prescribed policy areas for which central government had agreed

to devolve a select array of powers<sup>1</sup>. This resulted in the creation of newly formalised structures of governance, strategic decision-making and political powers that were representative of a territorial re-scaling of government at the sub-regional level. The Combined Authority comprised a series of Executive Boards and committees through which local authority Leaders were invited to interact and participate in formalised processes of strategic governance and decision-making; primarily on matters related to economic development. The administrative functions of the Combined Authority were overseen by the SCR Executive Team, which comprised a number of officers with responsibility for undertaking technical work and making recommendations on strategic decisions.

This section examines the formal spaces and structures of governance and strategic decision-making that emerged within the Combined Authority, focusing in particular on the engagement of elected members and the extent to which the governance structures that emerged within the Combined Authority constrained or enabled cross-boundary collaboration at the City Region scale.

### **7.1.1 Formal rules of elected member engagement in the Combined Authority**

As discussed in the previous chapter, elected members within the City Region had a history of working together on strategic matters in a formal governance setting, whether under the County Councils, Associations of Metropolitan or District Authorities and, more recently, the Regional Assemblies. The formal rules of engagement of the Regional Assemblies allowed participation by non-Leaders of local authorities, including Cabinet members, through a series of topic specific working groups or technical committees. Although they did not have the same decision-making powers as members of the Executive Boards, these non-Leader elected members were involved in making recommendations and helping to shape the strategic agenda of the Assembly. However, it is worth noting that the extent to which members were engaged in the ‘day-to-day’ activities of the Assemblies, particularly the Assemblies in the North of England, was highlighted in a report by DCLG (2006) as being ‘insufficient’ compared with other regions where elected members were more closely engaged in the activities of the Executive Team. Despite these noted failings, the structures of the Regional Assemblies still appeared to offer greater formalised opportunities for elected member engagement than this research observed within the SCR Combined Authority.

When it was first established, opportunities for non-Leader elected members to actively participate in the formal governance structures of the Combined Authority were more widespread. However, over time, the decision-making powers of the Combined Authority became increasingly centralised within the Executive Boards with fewer opportunities for elected members to make recommendations or participate in the review of technical details and reports commissioned in respect of particular strategic issues. This reduction in elected member engagement in the Combined Authority structures, particularly amongst non-Leaders, has also been recognised by other commentators, such as Deas (2014), who reported similar findings in the Greater Manchester Combined Authority and identified these as being reflective of an institutional shift towards a more ‘post-political’ form of governance. This tendency towards a form of ‘post-political’

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<sup>1</sup> As described in section 5.3.2



governance across Combined Authorities more broadly was also exemplified in some of the accusations that these bodies lacked transparency, democratic accountability or clear governance structures<sup>1</sup>. Evidence of such an endogenous institutional shift having taken place within Sheffield City Region, one that sought to restrict the inclusion of non-Leader elected members in decision-making processes, is illustrated by the Sheffield City Region Governance Review that was undertaken by the SCR Executive Team (2013) and preceded the formation of the Combined Authority. This review identified that ‘the SCR Authority should be **lean, streamlined and focussed**’ (Ibid.: 6) and that:

‘...the CA will be a mechanism by which the SCR is able to formalise areas where there is already effective collaboration (e.g. skills and inward investment). **Decisions on these matters will be made in one place, by elected Leaders** who are responsible for strategic direction and underwriting any risks’ (Ibid.: 7, emphasis in original)

These quotations illustrate the promotion of a form of governance within the Combined Authority that was resistant to engagement by non-Leader elected members, encouraged centralised decision-making and promoted fewer technical or sub-committees by, in effect, framing Sheffield City Region’s previous structural and governance arrangements as clunky, inefficient and a threat to the economic growth potential of the City Region. Deas (2014) highlights the role of ‘local political elites’ in promoting this post-political ideological shift. However, the evidence from this research indicates that rather than ‘elite actors’, much of the work in shifting ideas and reshaping the structures of the Combined Authority was being done, to some extent, from ‘within’, including by officers in the SCR Executive Team. The role of the SCR Executive Team and its officers in promoting this institutional shift is discussed in the following section.

A notable example within Sheffield City Region of a ‘post-political’ shift and decline in elected member engagement is that of the SCR Transport Committee, previously the South Yorkshire Integrated Transport Authority (ITA), which received formally delegated powers to make recommendations to, and certain decisions on behalf of, the Combined Authority, as defined in its Constitution (Sheffield City Region, 2014). The SCR Transport Committee comprised 12 elected member representatives from across the four South Yorkshire authorities, plus five non-voting elected members from the other non-constituent authorities. The Committee was responsible for discharging a series of specific transport functions, which included ‘advising the Combined Authority on strategic transport matters’ and ‘preparing the Local Transport Plan and other transport related strategies and action plans as requested by the Combined Authority’ (SCR Combined Authority, 2014). However, the Transport Committee’s meetings were ‘paused’ in May 2017 following a significant reduction in attendance due to elected members’ concerns that the committee was lacking in purpose and influence, and that ‘there has been nothing relevant to the wider SCR’ (Email from Elected Member of Derbyshire Dales District Council to JAGU officer, May 2017, DOC399), as this elected member went on to comment:

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<sup>1</sup> This issue of lack of transparency is something facing many Combined Authorities as highlighted in the Raynsford Review, which identified a need for ‘common and transparent governance arrangements’ at the sub-regional scale (Raynsford Review Task Force, 2018: 82).

‘I don't actually know the Committee's specific function. However, I had assumed that we would be examining possible future structural endeavours rather than the rather narrow geographic ones at present. I had hoped that the region would take a wider, 'joined up' approach rather than local ones.’

(Email from Elected Member of Derbyshire Dales District Council to JAGU officer, May 2017, DOC399)

Another elected member reiterated this disappointment at the lack of a strategic focus within the work of the Transport Committee, stating:

‘There is not much of a Sheffield City Region dimension to our work nowadays (arguably there was more when we were ‘just’ the South Yorkshire Integrated Transport Authority).’

(Email from Elected Member of Sheffield City Council to JAGU officer, May 2017, DOC399)

These quotations are indicative of a centralisation of decision-making power within the Combined Authority, away from the SCR Transport Committee (that previously had significantly more decision-making responsibility as the South Yorkshire ITA), towards the SCR Executive Boards. They also indicate a desire amongst elected members to participate in cross-boundary collaborative and decision-making practices at the scale of the City Region. The technical capacity of the elected member committees was being downgraded and shifted to officers within the SCR Executive Team (as further discussed in section 7.1.2). However, as a result of this shift in focus, greater decision-making responsibility was placed in the hands of a relatively small group of Leaders and other senior elected members who were directly engaged in the Combined Authority Board and Executive Boards<sup>1</sup>, whilst there remained relatively few other opportunities for member engagement within the formal structures of the Combined Authority.

### **7.1.2 The role of the SCR Executive Team**

At the time the LEP was established, the SCR Executive Team comprised a handful of economic development and project officers that had been placed on temporary secondment to Sheffield City Region from the other SCR authorities (primarily from the South Yorkshire authorities), as well as two planning officers that were briefly placed within the SCR Executive Team on secondment from the Yorkshire and Humber Regional Assembly in the months before it was formally abolished. When the Regional Assembly was abolished the planning officers that had been placed on temporary secondment left and were not replaced. The remaining officers’ roles were mainly focused upon the delivery of specific economic development projects, such as the Enterprise Zones<sup>2</sup>. As the LEP became further established and the Combined Authority was initiated, the SCR Executive Team grew substantially; totalling around seventy officers at the time the fieldwork was undertaken, with plans to expand further subject to the Mayoral Devolution Deal being formally agreed. As well as its increased size, the Team had also expanded in terms of its role and remit; taking on additional responsibilities in areas of policy and strategy development, and

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<sup>1</sup> The structure of the Combined Authority and its Boards is illustrated in Figure 5 (Chapter 5).

<sup>2</sup> Officer at SCR Executive Team, INT025.

project delivery<sup>1</sup>. Whilst they had no official decision-making powers (with the exception of some minor delegated administrative, contracting, assurance and monitoring duties), the SCR Executive Team officers, over time, assumed a significant role in influencing, and to a certain extent leading, the strategic agenda and direction of the Combined Authority. The SCR Annual Governance Statement 2016-2017, for example, describes the role of the SCR Executive Team as follows; ‘Through close co-ordination with member authorities, Leaders and Chief Executives, the team *pro-actively advances decision-making processes for SCR*’ (SCR Combined Authority, 2017: 4, emphasis added). This role of the SCR Executive Team in driving strategic decision-making was echoed in the comments of a Senior Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council, who stated:

‘The strategic process is very officer driven, if feels, rather than politician driven, and the politicians sit above the technical approaches rather than actually shaping them, and at the same time, the non-city region parts of the public sector feel excluded. At the same time all the private sector conversation I’ve had, including with some of the Chairs of the boards of the SCR, feel that they aren’t instrumental in shaping its direction. They think that they are presented with fait accompli in terms of decisions. That was always going to be a recipe for difficulties, and we are seeing that now. But on the face of it, to take another view, the Sheffield City Region is a remarkably efficient organisation in generating ‘stuff’. In that, if you see an agenda for a meeting it’s probably an inch thick. But if I was a politician, I’d be saying, ‘what are the actual decisions in there?’. They’re often asked to agree, basically, this is the approach we are taking. Rather than saying, ‘what are the options? What could we choose to do here?’.’

(Senior Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council, INT019)

This is to some extent reflective of what Deas (2014) identified in Greater Manchester, where efforts were made to establish a ‘non bureaucratic administration’ which operated ‘in a manner more akin to a specialist government agency or quango than a formal elected local authority’ (p.2306). Observations that were made during the fieldwork support the suggestion that the SCR Combined Authority was not operating in a conventional ‘political’ manner. Instead it operated under different informal rules compared with other institutions of supra-local governance, such as a County Council, in which there would likely have been greater evidence of bartering and negotiation in the decision-making process. That is not to suggest that these types of deliberative activities did not take place during the informal, closed meetings that occurred prior to the public Combined Authority Board meetings (which I was unable to observe), but even the public meetings that followed these informal discussions took on a forced sense of brevity that appeared to be at odds with the financial and strategic significance (and therefore potentially ‘politicised’ nature) of many of the decisions being made by the Board.

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<sup>1</sup> Officer at SCR Executive Team, INT025.

For example, during Combined Authority Board meetings elected members were asked to make significant strategic decisions, such as approving large investments in infrastructure. These decision-making processes were observed as being accompanied by very little deliberation or contestation. On one such occasion, 26 agenda items, accompanied by 232-pages of reports, were covered during a Combined Authority Board meeting lasting just 50 minutes<sup>1</sup> (FN045, SCR Combined Authority meeting, 30<sup>th</sup> January 2017). This ‘rapid fire’ approach to Combined Authority meetings was in stark contrast to the conduct of the local council meetings that were observed during the fieldwork, as highlighted in the following fieldnote extract from an observation of a SCR Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting:

‘It was interesting to note the difference in the way the O&S committee of the Combined Authority operates, where the SCR Executive officers seem to very much lead the meetings and the agenda items being presented, compared with similar committees in individual authorities, where the meetings and agendas are mainly councillor-driven. I feel that there was also a lack of awareness amongst councillors of certain aspects of the Combined Authority’s objectives and procedures. It’s unclear whether this lack of awareness is due to a lack of engagement/interest in the work of the Combined Authority (perhaps reflected in the poor attendance at the meeting itself) or because they are not being actively engaged by the officers in the SCR Executive team.’

(Extract from FN112, SCR Overview and Scrutiny Committee Meeting, 27<sup>th</sup> July 2017)

As this fieldnote extract suggests, whilst some of the observed lack of active participation by elected members within the formal structures of the Combined Authority was due to the growing political and territorial divisions between the authorities (as further discussed in Chapter 8), there was also evidence of SCR Executive Team officers taking a greater role in the practices that formed part of the decision-making process, to the exclusion of elected members.

An example of these exclusionary practices is presented in the distinct contrast in the dynamic between the Combined Authority’s elected members and the SCR Executive Team officers, and the same members’ interactions with their own local authority officers. For example, where local authority Overview and Scrutiny Committee meetings would be chaired by an elected member, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee of the Combined Authority was chaired by the Chief Executive of the SCR Executive Team; bestowing a greater level of power and responsibility to this officer. And where in local authority meetings questions from the public would be answered by elected members, in the Combined Authority Board meetings, officers of the SCR Executive Team were tasked with providing written responses to the public’s questions. This is perhaps reflective of the difficulties that members might have had in answering such questions, due to their comparative lack of detailed technical knowledge. During one such meeting of the SCR Overview and Scrutiny Committee in July 2017, an elected member sought clarification regarding the

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<sup>1</sup> It is acknowledged that whilst greater discussion and decision-making is likely to have taken place during the non-public ‘pre-meeting’ that immediately preceded the public meeting, there was still notably little engagement by elected members during the public meeting, with only three members of the Board contributing anything to the discussion that would later form part of the public record.

role of the future Mayor, asking; ‘how long can this deliberation possibly go on for?’ (FN112). The fact that this question was directed to the Chief Executive of the SCR Executive Team, indicates that the officers of the SCR Executive Team played a greater role in shaping the governance of the Combined Authority than officers did at the local authority level.

Whilst elected members still held significant power in terms of decision-making, the informal rules that shaped these decision-making processes and the interactions that emerged through the spaces of governance within the City Region appeared to be increasingly driven by a ‘post-political’ ideology, in which members’ participation was being limited due to an increased focus on efficiency and speed of decision-making, and restricted opportunities for deliberation and debate. These informal rules led to a growing detachment of elected members from the Combined Authority governance structures and strategic decision-making processes, which resulted in a progressive feedback loop of increasing officer control, that in turn led to further detachment of elected members from the Combined Authority. This observed form of decision-making and governance was repeated such that, over time, it became an institutionally legitimised form of behaviour.

### **7.1.3 Strategic leadership and decision-making in the Combined Authority**

The context of City Region governance that had become established within the Combined Authority was not positively framed by all elected members. Whilst some elected members chose to actively participate in the structures of Combined Authority governance, a number of members expressed a significant level of resistance to these formal rules of engagement, choosing instead to distance themselves from City Region proceedings. Such elected members included those who had been invited to sit on the Combined Authority Boards and Committees but had become increasingly disengaged and less willing to actively participate in City Region-level activities. This was observed through a decline in attendance at meetings. As one elected member noted:

‘There are a few people that don’t seem to contribute much around the table at times. That’s at Combined Authority and LEP Board. But it’s down to what you’re prepared to put in. And I suppose it’s the investment of time and effort, in order to try and steer things in a sensible direction.’

(Elected Member of Bassetlaw District Council, INT034)

As the final sentence of this quotation suggests, part of the reason for this decline in participation was due to elected members’ cognitive framings of their engagement in the Combined Authority as something that was not in their own interests to expend significant amounts of their own energy upon, particularly given their potential lack of influence over the decision-making process if they did choose to engage (as discussed in the previous section). A further reason for the decline in participation amongst elected members is likely due to

the widening political divisions that were emerging between the Sheffield City Region authorities<sup>1</sup>. This lack of participation was, for example, particularly prevalent amongst elected members of the County Councils for whom there were political tensions regarding their involvement in Sheffield City Region; and the non-constituent district authorities for whom there was a perceived lack of relevance of City Region activities, particularly on certain matters, such as strategic transport or waste planning, over which they had no authority at a local level<sup>2</sup>. The Elected Member of Bassetlaw District Council quoted above, who themselves claimed to have actively participated in the City Region, also commented; ‘Sadly I don’t think both counties have engaged at a level they probably should have done, in a way that they could have done, because I think they did not want to, and now will find excuses not to’ (Elected Member of Bassetlaw District Council, INT034).

In order to try and resolve some of these issues around the lack of member participation and the growing accusations of lack of transparency and democratic accountability within the Combined Authority structures, a SCR governance review was undertaken in 2017. As part of this review a suggestion was made to reconfigure the Executive Boards to create ‘new delivery boards, with different memberships, with people who are actually going to get more involved and actually lead the agenda’ (Officer at Joint Authorities Governance Unit, INT033), as an officer at the SCR Executive Team explained:

‘...there is a plan, I think, for our thematic boards, which are essentially strategic boards really, to become more delivery focused. And another issue that Leaders need to get their heads round really is how we get proper political representation on those boards, and one model that’s being considered is that Cabinet members could sit on those boards, or at least some Cabinet members could.’

(Officer at SCR Executive Team, INT025)

The SCR governance review culminated in the publication of the Sheffield City Region Assurance Framework in February 2018 and a revised Constitution in September 2018, neither of which proposed increased member engagement. In fact, membership of the Combined Authority and its Executive Boards remained exactly as they had been prior to the review. As these reports were published following the end of the fieldwork period, the reasons behind the failed attempts at institutional change cannot be confirmed, however these are most likely due to the widening political divisions, instabilities and uncertainties that were present within the City Region at the time, as will be further discussed in Chapter 8. The observations noted in this section have significance in the context of strategic spatial planning as they demonstrate how the formal spaces and informal rules of governance that emerged within the Combined Authority were interpreted by local planning actors, and how, by minimising opportunities for participation, deliberation and

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<sup>1</sup> The period during which the fieldwork was undertaken coincided with a period of intense political upheaval surrounding the Mayoral election and debates about constituent membership of the Combined Authority, including the increased political distancing of the Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire authorities from the City Region, and Doncaster MBC and Barnsley MBC’s ‘splintering off’ from the well-established South Yorkshire alliance, as will be further discussed in Chapter 8.

<sup>2</sup> Unlike the four South Yorkshire authorities, the district authorities are not required to oversee strategic transport matters at a local level, as these powers are instead held by Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire County Councils.

debate between elected members, they failed to provide the type of collaborative governance spaces that might have helped to support the emergence of a strategic spatial planning agenda in the City Region. As one Senior Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council noted during an interview when asked about the lack of strategic spatial planning in Sheffield City Region; ‘having the city region approach is the right geography, it just doesn’t have the governance to go with it’ (Senior Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council, INT014).

#### **7.1.4 Summary**

This section has demonstrated how the formal governance structures and rules of engagement that emerged within the Combined Authority led to the exclusion of non-leader elected members and an approach to strategic decision-making that was characterised by a lack of deliberation and debate. This led to a further distancing by even those elected members that the formal rules permitted to access the spaces of governance that formed the Combined Authority. These practices of governance and strategic decision-making that appear to have become increasingly habitualised within the Combined Authority, reflect the institutional embedding of a ‘post-political’ ideology and a lack of democratic accountability, similar to that identified by Deas (2014) as having emerged in other Combined Authorities. However, whilst Deas identified these tendencies as being driven by ‘local political elites’, the evidence from this research reveals a greater role for the supporting and technical officers (including those within the SCR Executive Team) in driving these ideas, and an unwillingness or inability of elected members to resist. Their unwillingness to resist is thought to stem from the widening political and territorial divisions between elected members (as will be further discussed in Chapter 8), and from the informal and formal rules of engagement and decision-making that became legitimised and further institutionally embedded through the actions of elected members. Elected members’ increasing delegation of decisions to officers led to members becoming increasingly distanced from the decision-making process and less able to understand or engage within it, which in turn led to more decisions being delegated to officers.

This section has also demonstrated how the governance and organisational structures that formed the Combined Authority, and the formal and informal rules that shaped elected member participation and approaches to strategic decision-making within these structures, are understood to have played a role in preventing the emergence of the spaces of collaboration and strategic leadership that would have been needed to support a formalised strategic spatial planning agenda within the City Region. The reasons why a formalised strategic spatial planning agenda failed to emerge within Sheffield City Region are considered in greater detail in the following section.

## **7.2 Strategic spatial planning within the Combined Authority**

This section examines how the formal structures, spaces and rules of governance within the Combined Authority, as discussed in section 7.1, helped to shape the approach to strategic spatial planning that emerged within the City Region. This section begins by exploring some of the broader contextual reasons why strategic spatial planning failed to develop as a thematic objective of the Combined Authority. This is followed by a discussion of how the Combined Authority’s governance structures increasingly resisted the

engagement of local planning officers within the City Region, and how these officers attempted to increase their opportunities for engagement by promoting a formalised approach to strategic spatial plan-making and the establishment of a Spatial Planning Unit within the Combined Authority.

### **7.2.1 Strategic spatial planning under the Combined Authority**

By 2014, the thematic priorities of the (then newly formed) Combined Authority had been established for some time, having previously formed the basis of the structure of the LEP. It is notable that while housing was represented within these five priority areas, planning was not. Nor was it represented in any of the Combined Authority's Executive Boards<sup>1</sup>. This served as a particular source of frustration for local planning officers, especially in light of their previous efforts to raise the status of planning on the SCR agenda, including their attempts to promote a formalised strategic spatial plan or 'Local Strategy Statement' (as discussed in section 6.3.2). During a meeting, one Senior Planning Officer described how they had noticed a shift in focus following the formation of the Combined Authority, away from planning, towards housing and infrastructure<sup>2</sup>, and an increased detachment of officers from formal engagement in the Combined Authority structures (as will be further discussed in section 7.2.3). Another Senior Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council also made the following comments during an interview; 'I think a lot of the emphasis, both amongst elected members and officers, I think, in Sheffield City Region was around jobs growth and skills, or it was around housing delivery, but it wasn't around planning specifically' (INT014). This change in emphasis within the City Region from strategic spatial planning to economic development was also accompanied by a change in personnel within the SCR Executive Team that included the replacement of its few strategic planning officers with officers whose main area of expertise was business growth and economic development<sup>3</sup>.

The reasons why 'strategic planning' was not introduced as a formal objective of the Combined Authority are thought to be, in part, linked to the dominant emphasis upon the organisation's economic and investment priorities. The structures of city region-based LEPs and Combined Authorities were proposed by central government as something that should be driven forward 'internally' by their respective constituent authorities, as opposed to the more 'top-down' model that had previously been reflected in the establishment and operation of the Regional Assemblies. As such, the thematic and programme priorities of the Combined Authority were subject to regular change in order to ensure they continued to reflect the funding opportunities presented by central government, as one officer at the Joint Authorities Governance Unit stated:

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<sup>1</sup> A detailed description of the SCR Combined Authority structure is presented in section 5.3.2.

<sup>2</sup> FN087, FAP Team work programming meeting, 7<sup>th</sup> June 2017

<sup>3</sup> Many of the strategic planning officers initially employed by the SCR LEP had previously been employed by the Regional Assembly and were seconded to SCR, as noted in section 7.1.2. When the Regional Assembly was abolished these officers were not replaced within the SCR Executive Team.



‘...we are perpetually chasing the next big cheque that the government want to put in front of us...The Department for Transport, so we’ve got a transport board that say, ‘money, please’. We’ve got the skills who are chasing DfES [Department for Education and Skills] money, and then, you know, we’re chasing DCLG [Department for Communities and Local Government] money as well. If DEFRA [Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs] next week said, ‘we’ve been allocated by the Treasury £10 billion to fix the air quality problem in this country. We are going to give this money to...’spin the wheel’ ...Combined Authorities’, we will have an air quality executive board within about five minutes of that decision being made.’

(Officer at Joint Authorities Governance Unit, INT033)

These comments are indicative of Leaders’ cognitive framings of the wider context of external investment opportunities that appear to have strategically selected for actions and decisions that would maximise the economic benefit to the City Region and their own individual authorities. The political antipathy towards strategic planning within the organisational structures of the Combined Authority was also likely to have been informed by the organisation’s broader economic growth objectives and private sector focus, which, as these became further institutionally embedded, constrained the willingness, or indeed ability, of local planning actors to embrace strategic spatial planning within the City Region, as the following quotation illustrates:

‘I think the fact that the LEP is driving the City Region, and the LEP is private sector, generally, focused, there’s not been an interest in strategic planning at the board level. So, although there’s been talk about having a resource for strategic planning, it’s never happened.’

(Senior Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council, INT015)

This tendency towards the subordination of non-economic development-driven growth within the Combined Authority’s strategic agenda and its thematic priorities is reflective of a ‘post-political’ ideology that has become synonymous with city region-based forms of governance (as discussed by Etherington & Jones, 2018). Within Sheffield City Region, planning was often framed by elected members as being incongruent with the ambitions of the private sector and a barrier to economic growth; a perception that has been enforced throughout the years by the rhetoric of central government. As one Senior Planning Officer commented:

‘[Planning] is a discipline, and it’s a discipline that I think has struggled ever since David Cameron was quite forthright in his view of the planners and red tape and whatnot. And I do think it’s suffered as a discipline since then, and it’s still struggling to recover now.’

(Senior Planning Officer at Barnsley Metropolitan District Council, INT032)

In light of the negative press afforded to ‘planning’, as both a profession and practice, and the prioritisation of economic growth concerns, it is perhaps therefore somewhat unsurprising that members of the Combined Authority would conclude that, as one officer at the Joint Authorities Governance Unit stated; planning was

‘out of kilter with the City Region ethos’, which led to a decision being made in early 2014 to ‘take planning off the menu’<sup>1</sup>.

### **7.2.2 Structural uncertainty and ambiguity in the Combined Authority**

Despite being ‘formalised’ as a legal structure under the Barnsley, Doncaster, Rotherham and Sheffield Combined Authority Order 2014, the SCR Combined Authority was observed as being characterised by an ambiguity and ‘fuzziness’ in terms of; its spatial geography, with some authorities, such as Barnsley MBC, being represented in more than one Combined Authority area (an issue that will be further discussed in Chapter 8); its governance arrangements, with authorities having either ‘constituent’ or ‘non-constituent’ membership; and its organisational structures, which appeared to be less well-defined and more difficult for local planning actors to navigate than other centrally-defined sub-regional forms of government that had preceded the Combined Authorities, notably the Regional Assemblies. These ambiguities reflect what Pemberton & Morphet (2014) describe as the ‘transitional’ nature of these sub-regional governance structures; as their role, remit and powers are continually being redefined as new funding opportunities<sup>2</sup> and Devolution Deals are announced and central government makes changes to the ‘rules of the game’.

The governance structures that comprised Sheffield City Region were generally perceived by local planning officers as being far more ‘nebulous’<sup>3</sup>, ‘opaque’<sup>4</sup> and less ‘well-organised’<sup>5</sup>; and lacking in the clearly defined supra-local governance arrangements, practices and procedures that these officers had become accustomed to under the former regional governance structures. As one Senior Planning Officer stated:

‘I think the problem with the term Sheffield City Region is...yes, it’s a geography, you can picture it, you know where it is. I know instantly which authorities you’re talking about. But, is it a combined authority, is it the LEP, is it both, is it one and the same, who is running it, who has oversight of it, which members are involved, which officers? It’s never been very clear...No-one’s ever laid out a clear structure...this is the operating and management and responsibility structure of the Sheffield City Region. You see bits, but I’ve never seen a comprehensive one that really explains who’s sat where, when, why and how.’

(Senior Planning Officer at Bassetlaw District Council, INT029)

This lack of clarity was reflected in the repeated, interchangeable use of the term ‘Sheffield City Region’ in conversations between local planning officers to refer to either the Combined Authority, the LEP or the Executive Team, or sometimes all three. During one SCR Planning Officers Group meeting, for example, an officer suggested that the draft Duty to Cooperate Statement on Housing be ‘shared with the City Region’. When another officer responded by asking, ‘What do you mean by ‘City Region’?’, it transpired that they

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<sup>1</sup> Comments made by officer at Joint Authorities Governance Unit during SCR Heads of Planning meeting, 5<sup>th</sup> May 2017, FN075

<sup>2</sup> As previously discussed in section 7.2.1

<sup>3</sup> Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council, INT002

<sup>4</sup> Senior Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council, INT019

<sup>5</sup> Senior Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council, INT012

were in fact referring to the Housing Executive Board of the Combined Authority (FN054, SCR Planning Officers Group meeting, 17<sup>th</sup> February 2017). This ambiguity was also exemplified in various documents, including the printed minutes of the SCR Heads of Planning meeting where the header logo fluctuated between that of the ‘Sheffield City Region’ and that of the ‘Sheffield City Region Combined Authority’; an inconsistency that reflected not only local planning officers’ uncertainties regarding the difference between the various city region organisational structures and terminologies but, perhaps more significantly, uncertainties regarding their own role in relation to these.

These instabilities and ambiguities identified by local planning officers conflicted with their institutionally-inherited, cognitive desire for certainty in the rules and structures of strategic governance, as well as their desire to engage with a ‘proper’ form of strategic spatial planning that was more than just resolving local cross-boundary issues or ‘ticking the Duty to Cooperate box’ (as discussed in Chapter 6). Local planning officers’ perceptions of the Combined Authority as an enigmatic governance structure were further compounded by the rules of engagement, which increasingly resisted active participation by local planning officers, as the following section will discuss.

In comparison to what appeared to be the dominant perspective amongst local planning officers discussed previously, some of the elected members that were spoken to during the research appeared to have a clearer understanding of the Combined Authority’s composition, structure and decision-making processes, particularly (and perhaps not surprisingly) where they were directly engaged with the Combined Authority’s Boards. As one elected member of Bassetlaw District Council stated; ‘In SCR you have a Combined Authority position on it. It’s been worked through in the background over a period of time, whether it’s been at Board and then at Combined Authority, and then supported by the LEP for instance’ (INT034). This process of decision-making in Sheffield City Region was contrasted with the more ambiguous situation in D2N2, which the same elected member described as; ‘still struggling in terms of governance arrangements and accountability’ (INT034).

However, not all elected members felt that the structures and processes of the SCR Combined Authority were clear and transparent. Indeed, some expressed views that were more aligned to those of the local planning officers, in which they suggested that the governance and decision-making structures of the SCR Combined Authority were particularly opaque. For example, an Elected Member of a Sheffield City Region district authority stated during an interview that they had noted that a significant amount of funding had recently been invested by the Combined Authority in the Advanced Manufacturing Park<sup>1</sup>, but that neither they nor their colleagues were sure where the decisions to allocate this funding had been made (INT043). This lack of transparency led to uncertainties in the institutional context as the Combined Authority structures were perceived by many local planning actors, particularly those that were excluded from directly participating within these formal structures, as somewhat of a ‘black box’.

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<sup>1</sup> The context of the AMP is introduced in section 5.3.1.

### 7.2.3 Rules of local planning officer engagement in the Combined Authority

Whilst local planning officers were aware that there were ‘inroads’ and ‘connections’ (Senior Planning Officer at Bassetlaw District Council, INT029) into the decision-making structures of the Combined Authority, the ongoing institutional shift towards economically-driven strategic development objectives meant that many of these routes of entry were being increasingly closed-off to local planning officers. Under the Regional Assembly and during the early days of the LEP, for example, local planning officers were regularly invited to meet and discuss issues at the strategic level; opportunities that had diminished following the establishment of the Combined Authority, as this record of a conversation with a Senior Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council illustrates:

‘When the Regional Planning body was in existence, cross-boundary working occurred more frequently, because it was driven from a higher level. When the SCR LEP formed in around 2010 there was an initial push for cross-boundary collaboration on a number of specific projects e.g. FLUTE and Ekosgen modelling<sup>1</sup>. However, since these projects ended, the emphasis on cross-boundary working has been markedly less. [Senior Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council] said that they had noticed that they were now attending far fewer meetings at a City Region level than they had been previously. There is a far greater focus on transport and infrastructure at a City Region level, than there is on strategic planning.’

(Extract from FN036, Note of conversation with Senior Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council, 4<sup>th</sup> January 2017)

Whilst officers continued to meet through the semi-formal officer groups<sup>2</sup>, their lack of direct engagement with officers of the SCR Executive Team and elected members at a City Region level was described by one Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council as a ‘bit of a vacuum in terms of authorities being able to get together, certainly on a regional basis’ (INT003). This effective ‘side-lining’ of local planning officers from City Region-level activities also included a reduction in the formal engagement opportunities of the local authority Heads of Planning within the formal Combined Authority structures. Whilst the Heads of Planning attended occasional joint Housing, Planning and Economic Development Directors meetings coordinated by the SCR Executive Team, these were only introduced in 2016 at the request of officers<sup>3</sup> and, unlike the more established Directors of Housing and Economic Development meetings, they had no direct connection to the Housing Executive Board. This disconnect resulted in the Heads of Planning being often unaware of the decisions made by the Housing Executive Board, which in turn led to instances where their agendas overlapped and conflicted, particularly as the Housing Executive Board began straying into practices that

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<sup>1</sup> These projects related to strategic land use, transport and economic growth modelling.

<sup>2</sup> The role of these officer groups is further discussed in section 7.3.2.

<sup>3</sup> Minutes of SCR Heads of Planning meeting, 6<sup>th</sup> July 2016, DOC309

might otherwise be construed as ‘strategic planning’<sup>1</sup> (despite not being formally advertised as such for political reasons).

These changes in the informal rules of engagement also resulted in the increasing exclusion of local planning officers from the strategic policy development work of the Combined Authority, as was exemplified in officers’ lack of involvement in the Strategic Economic Plan (SEP) Review. This lack of invitation to engage in the SEP Review process came as a particular surprise to local planning officers because they had been so heavily involved in the preparation of the original SEP<sup>2</sup>, as one Senior Planning Officer reflected:

‘That first production of the SEP, not this review, I’m going to say, which has been thin on involvement, but the first...the document if you like. We had lots of different workshops that we were attending. We were part of the audience, all of the Heads of Planning and Heads of Policy, up at the AMID, with the consultants that were doing the pieces of work. So, they were talking to us about that, and trying to get a bit of sense checking about stuff. So, we were very much involved in the production of that SEP. We haven’t really been so with the review. And, you know, why is that? That came up, I think, in that last meeting. Nobody around the table, apart from [Senior Planning Officer at Barnsley MBC]...Whereas, [the Senior Economic Development Officer at Sheffield City Council], who probably went for us, is taking on this new role, and wouldn’t necessarily be saying, ‘oh, I think planning should be here’.’

(Senior Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council, INT004)

As the final sentence of this quotation indicates, it was only the Economic Development Directors that were invited by the SCR Executive Team to engage in the SEP Review. This shift in the informal rules regarding the engagement of local planning officers in the technical processes that informed strategic decision-making in the Combined Authority is reflective of the broader contextual shift away from matters pertaining to strategic spatial planning towards aspatial economic growth objectives.

The rejection of strategic spatial planning by the Combined Authority’s ‘political elites’ (including their rejection of any formalised engagement with local planning actors through the Combined Authority’s governance structures) was framed by local planning actors as an ‘institutional crisis’ (Fuller, 2010) due to its conflict with their inherited, path dependent ideational framings, which understood strategic spatial planning to be an essential practice that should be coordinated at the supra-local level and in which local planning officers should be involved. Officers’ lack of engagement in the SEP Review, in particular, was cognitively framed as a ‘crisis’ because it could have potentially significant implications for the local plan-

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<sup>1</sup> An example includes work commissioned by the Housing Executive Board to collect data relating to housing land allocations and dwelling completions for each of the SCR authorities. This data turned out to be a duplication of that being collected by the SCR Planning Officers Group to feed into the Duty to Cooperate Statement on Housing.

<sup>2</sup> Discussed in section 6.1.1.

making process<sup>1</sup>. As a Senior Planning Officer stated in respect of their lack of engagement in the SEP Review; ‘If there were consultants on board they’d ask, ‘where are the planners?’ (FN075, SCR Heads of Planning meeting, 5<sup>th</sup> May 2017). Officers’ cognitive framings were manifested through what Fuller (2010) refers to as ‘crisis talk’, in which local planning officers sought to expose the lack of ‘proper’ strategic spatial planning within the City Region as an ‘institutional crisis’ in order to incite a need for institutional change. This creative process of promoting institutional change as initiated by local planning officers, and the extent to which it was successful, is discussed in the following section.

#### **7.2.4 Promoting a strategic spatial planning agenda in the Combined Authority**

The research revealed several attempts by local planning officers to transform their institutional contexts in order to enable a more formalised approach to strategic spatial planning to be established within the Combined Authority. These actions stemmed from local planning officers’ cognitive ideational framings of the strategic context as being in an ‘institutional crisis’, as evidenced, for example, in their frequent exclamations that the ‘wrong’ people were being engaged on matters which they believed fell within their remit of ‘strategic spatial planning’, as the following quotation illustrates:

‘...regeneration and housing issues at board level in SCR are being decided by housing officers, not by planners or economic development officers. So, that’s something that I think has been a bit of a failing and does need to be addressed.’

(Senior Planning Officer at Chesterfield Borough Council, INT027)

This ‘crisis talk’ was further exemplified in comments by local planning officers that there was a need to enhance levels of engagement between themselves and officers of the SCR Executive Team, as illustrated in this record of a discussion during a SCR Planning Officers Group meeting:

[Senior Planning Officer at Doncaster MBC] said that a conversation was needed regarding how the SCR Executive Team fits in with the wider Combined Authority. [Senior Officer from SYPTE] identified ‘two schools of thought’ – one, that the SCR Executive Team should be more involved in spatial planning, or two, that they should stay as they are now, by stepping back and just providing housing numbers etc. [Senior Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council] mentioned that the SCR Executive Team ‘need to be here’ and that they ‘couldn’t step back much further’. [Planning Officer at Bassetlaw District Council] agreed that there is definitely a ‘disconnect’ between the SCR Planning Officers Group and the SCR Executive Team. [Senior Planning Officer at Doncaster MBC]

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<sup>1</sup> The economic projections and job growth figures contained within the revised SEP would have likely impacted the employment land target and the ‘objectively assessed need’ for housing contained within the local plan. It should, however, be noted that a local authority’s housing need is now required to be calculated using the ‘standard method’ that was introduced by central government in July 2018. As a result, the SEP would no longer have potential implications for a local authority’s calculation of housing need, although it may still affect their employment land calculation, which is not subject to the same ‘standard method’.

also agreed, complaining that the SCR Executive Team don't respond when they are consulted on plans, and that 'they need to be more involved'.

(Extract from FN005, SCR Planning Officers Group meeting, 21<sup>st</sup> October 2016)

This section will discuss two examples in which local planning officers' framings of an 'institutional crisis' underpinned attempts to promote institutional transformation. The first example discusses local planning officers' promotion of a formalised structure for overseeing strategic spatial planning within the Combined Authority (a 'Strategic Planning Unit'), and the second discusses officers' attempts to increase the levels of engagement between SCR Executive Team officers and the local planning officer groups.

#### *A 'Strategic Planning Unit' for Sheffield City Region*

This example recounts proposals that were put forward by the SCR Planning Officers Group to establish a more formalised approach to strategic planning governance in the City Region through the creation of a Strategic Planning Unit. These actions are understood to have been initiated by officers' ideational interpretations of their strategic context (including the governance and organisational structures of the Combined Authority), which was cognitively framed as representing an 'institutional crisis' due to its inherent structural ambiguities and rejection of formalised engagement opportunities for local planning officers. This presented a context of uncertainty that was perceived as a threat to officers' abilities to perform their roles effectively.

Officers' envisaged roles in respect of the Combined Authority were, for example, defined in the Terms of Reference of the SCR Planning Officers Group. In this document, one of the primary stated functions of the Group was; 'to co-ordinate and develop Sheffield City Region planning responses, and input into SCR groups, in terms of cross boundary strategies, plans and programmes' (SCR Planning Officers Group Terms of Reference, 2015). This stated ambition reflected a normatively framed ideational concern that local planning officers should play a central role in shaping strategic spatial planning agendas. However, opportunities to input into the committees and boards of the Combined Authority were not forthcoming, and as such, the SCR planning officers framed their role as being increasingly threatened by the influence of the SCR Executive Team officers, with whom local planning officers found themselves vying for power over strategic spatial planning.

The suggestion of a Spatial Planning Unit was based on ideas derived from what may be described as the 'policy paradigm' of regional planning governance<sup>1</sup>, and was presented by local planning officers as a creative solution to the perceived 'problem' of a lack of strategic planning support and governance within the Combined Authority. The Spatial Planning Unit was intended to benefit local planning officers' local planning activities, including their pursuit of the Duty to Cooperate, and to help partially fill the strategic planning 'void' that had been created when regional planning was abolished. As such, the SCR Heads of

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of the 'policy paradigm' (Hall, 1993) was introduced in section 3.3.3 as a means of describing the interpretive frameworks of ideas and standards that shape public policy. The 'Spatial Planning Unit' concept is thought to have been based upon ideas derived from the structures that previously existed within the Regional Planning Bodies.

Planning Group prepared a report in August 2014, which they intended would be presented to Chief Executives and Leaders of Sheffield City Region setting out the need for ‘...proper strategic planning at above local planning authority level [...] to ensure that the ‘Duty to Cooperate’ within SCR is met’ (DOC237). This report sought commitment in principle for the production of a SCR spatial planning statement and the establishment of a small Spatial Planning Unit within the SCR Executive Team to provide dedicated officer support. The primary justification being that the ‘establishment of the Strategic Planning Unit will help to achieve faster adoption of new Local Plans across SCR’ and that:

‘...working at the SCR level will demonstrably add value on to local work, without undermining discretion over [Local Authority] decision-making...[and]...it is highly desirable to minimise the instances where objections are made by an authority to Plans being drawn up by other authorities in the City Region’.

(SCR Heads of Planning Report to Sheffield City Region Chief Executives and Leaders, August 2014, DOC237)

The report represented an orchestrated attempt by local planning officers to question the lack of attention that was being paid by elected members to strategic spatial planning, by promoting an ideational shift that framed a more formalised and better resourced structure overseeing strategic planning practices on behalf of all SCR authorities as being in the best interest of those authorities. This ideational shift was promoted with the intention of informing a process of institutional transformation within the City Region towards a context that embraced strategic spatial planning as part of its strategic agenda, and which recognised planners as having the necessary skills to effectively implement such an agenda. As one planning officer stated:

‘I don’t know what it is, whether it’s the funding, or whether it’s just that people have not thought about what the structures would be, but actually if planning is going to be at the heart of the City Region, strategic planning needs to be a proper dedicated and resourced planning team at the heart of that. I know we’ve got the LEP, but not sure whether that to me is perhaps more economic based. People with economic qualifications. Which is great, that’s what we need as well. But I’m not sure at the moment whether we have planners that have that kind of spatial planning experience to coordinate different views, which the constituent authorities have. So that is a concern.’

(Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council, INT003)

In addition to its proposals for a dedicated Spatial Planning Unit, the report that was collated by local planning officers also proposed the preparation of what it referred to as a Strategic Spatial Planning Statement. The report’s authors pre-empted some of the concerns that they thought its intended recipients would be likely to raise, and as such the report was carefully worded in its proposition. Officers were keen to ensure that elected members knew that the Strategic Spatial Planning Statement would have no formal status and would not be an attempt to replicate the regional planning format, stating:



‘There is now a strong case for establishing an agreed SCR Spatial Planning Statement or Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) – it might be better to avoid the term ‘strategy’ to avoid accusations that it’s a new RSS. This could be an *informal* document to *inform (not dictate)* plan-making at the SCR and district level – this would inform the next round of Local Plans and would be the main *output* of the DtC on housing and employment. This approach has been taken by the Greater Birmingham and Solihull LEP in their informal Spatial Plan for Growth.’

(SCR Heads of Planning Report to Sheffield City Region Chief Executives and Leaders, August 2014, DOC237, emphasis in original)

Officers’ decision to promote a ‘non-statutory’ statement pre-empted the consensus of opinion amongst elected members that they were not willing to accept a ‘statutory’ spatial plan, for reasons that it would too closely mirror the top-down imposition of policies that previously existed under the RSS and would undermine the autonomy of the individual authorities. As one elected member stated;

‘I had absolutely no mandate to agree to a spatial framework that has statutory powers, statutory level, and for a mayor to lay out a statutory spatial plan that would overlap what we’re currently on with, and to be honest, changed the goal posts entirely and take power, in my view, away from this authority, and place it in the hand of the mayor and a combined authority.’

(Elected Member of Bassetlaw District Council, INT034)

It is questionable the extent to which such an ‘informal’ statement would have been enforceable and capable of possessing the necessary power to enact and manage spatial change. However, this was perceived by officers as the only viable option, and the one that was most likely to have received elected member support. In addition to its emphasis on the intended informal, non-statutory nature of the proposed statement, it is interesting to note the comparative references made to other city regions, ostensibly as a tool to persuade elected members that Sheffield City Region was in danger of being ‘left behind’. The document also recommended the establishment of an elected member group for Sheffield City Region, focusing on the agreement of a spatial planning statement and noting that, ‘a number of other City Regions / strategic planning areas have already established Strategic Planning Boards. Leeds City Region, for example, now has a group comprising planning portfolio holders’ (SCRHOP Report to Sheffield City Region Chief Executives and Leaders, August 2014). This appears to have been a further attempt to instigate a more formalised approach to strategic planning governance.

However, officers’ framings of a ‘crisis’ around the lack of strategic planning governance and the proposed ideational shifts that stemmed from this were never legitimised or institutionally embedded. The reasons behind this are thought to stem from local planning officers’ comparative lack of power and influence within the Combined Authority, and in particular, their inability to engage in processes of ‘agenda-setting’ (Capoccia, 2016b). The report was ultimately never presented to the Chief Executives and Leaders within the Combined Authority, as a Senior Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council who was involved in the preparation of the report explained:

‘...for whatever reason [the officer at the SCR Executive Team] never pushed that paper through to members, so I’m not sure that it ever got in front of members. [They] took elements of the paper and used them in other reports, but [they] never put the report through in its entirety that made the case for a combined planning approach. So, I think, probably, it depends on, probably having a senior officer who’s willing to drive it and sees the benefit, and also probably a member who understands planning and wants to drive a joined-up, strategic planning approach.’

(Senior Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council, INT014)

This suggests that officers within the SCR Executive Team played a key role in resisting these bottom-up attempts at institutional reform. The precise reasons for their resistance is unknown, but it was likely informed by their ideational framing of the informal rules that were already embedded within the Combined Authority and which led them to select a course of action that reaffirmed the organisation’s economic growth and development objectives. This would have represented the path of least resistance, by avoiding the necessity to raise an issue with elected members that would have likely been a source of political conflict. The SCR Executive Team officers therefore demonstrated their power and ability to resist attempts to promote endogenous institutional transformation, which in this case resulted in a rejection of local planning officers’ proposed shift towards a formalisation of strategic planning governance within the Combined Authority.

#### *Local planning officer and SCR Executive Team officer interactions*

The research revealed evidence of tensions forming between local planning officers and those in the SCR Executive Team. Some of these conflicts appeared to stem from the groups’ different normative framings of what constituted the appropriate function and strategic purpose of the Combined Authority and its governance structures, as well as what were deemed to be suitable ways of working within these structures. As previously discussed, officers within the SCR Executive Team appeared to prioritise economic growth concerns and streamlined forms of decision-making, whilst local planning officers’ concerns were (perhaps unsurprisingly) prioritised around local plan-making and evidence-based forms of decision-making. These differences led to the emergence of certain underlying tensions between the groups, as local planning officers perceived the SCR Executive Team to be primarily driven by matters relating to economic development, and as such ‘quite divorced from the work that we do’<sup>1</sup>.

For example, officers within the SCR Executive Team made attempts to ‘grab hold’<sup>2</sup> of some of the cross-boundary work being led by the SCR Planning Officers and Heads of Planning Groups, including the Duty to Cooperate Statement on Housing, which they requested be issued to the Housing Executive Board (HEB) ‘for discussion’<sup>3</sup>. There was no representation from planners or planning portfolio holders on the HEB, and as such, this was perceived by local planning officers as an unwelcome attempt by the SCR Executive Team

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<sup>1</sup> Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council, INT009.

<sup>2</sup> Officer at SCR Executive Team, INT025.

<sup>3</sup> Officer at SCR Executive Team, INT025.

to challenge or destabilise the informal rule that the Duty to Cooperate and other strategic spatial planning work should be overseen by professional planners. This perceived institutional destabilisation was further exacerbated by local planning officers' increased exclusion from the formal spaces of collaboration and decision-making within the Combined Authority (as discussed previously) and served to further distance local planning officers from officers within the SCR Executive Team.

In issuing the request for the Duty to Cooperate Statement to be presented to the HEB, it is unlikely that the SCR Executive Team officers' intentions were to purposefully 'take over' the role and responsibilities of local planning officers. Indeed, the SCR Executive Team officers appeared to recognise the value in the collaborative work being undertaken by the SCR Planning Officer Groups for furthering some of the economic development objectives of the Combined Authority, as one SCR Executive Team officer stated in respect of the Duty to Cooperate Statement on Housing; 'It's welcomed that work, really. It's a really good piece of work' (INT025). However, the officers within the SCR Executive Team were equally conscious of the political difficulties associated with enabling closer involvement of planning officers within the structures of the Combined Authority, particularly because the inclusion of 'planning' as a thematic priority of the Combined Authority continued to be strongly resisted by elected members.

The apparent resistance by the SCR Executive Team to further involve local planning officers, particularly in matters related to planning for housing, conflicted with local planning officers' normative framings of what constituted an 'appropriate' approach to strategic spatial planning, and this resulted in a series of attempts by local planning officers to challenge these shifts in the institutional context. Local planning officers (led by senior officers in Sheffield City Council) instigated a series of actions that sought to minimise their metaphorical 'distance' from the SCR Executive Team (and in doing so, from the decision-making structures of the Combined Authority) by promoting improved communication between the two actor groups and encouraging greater SCR Executive Team officer engagement in local planning officer group meetings. In particular, these efforts sought to change how local planning officers' roles were perceived by SCR Executive Team officers and elected members within the City Region, so that they were in a position to influence strategic planning agendas at the City Region level. This is reflective of the type of 'micro-foundational' institutional change, identified by Capoccia (2016b), in which actors implement deliberate political strategies aimed at shifting social coalitions in order to drive endogenous change, as the following paragraph explains.

In an internal email issued to the FAP team, a Senior Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council stated that there was a need for a 'subtle change' in the tone of officers' reporting to one 'that clearly articulates how a decision contributes to wider SEP objectives and delivers benefits'<sup>1</sup>, thus illustrating this officer's desire to promote the role of local planning officers within the Combined Authority by re-framing the outcomes of their day-to-day work as something that better fitted with the 'ethos' of the City Region, including its contribution to economic growth. The same officer also sought to forge closer links between the FAP team

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<sup>1</sup> Email from Senior Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council, 26<sup>th</sup> May 2017, DOC350

and the Sheffield City Region Combined Authority. In a later email, they included a section entitled ‘A manifesto for collaborative working with the Sheffield City Region?’, in which they proposed preparing a paper that would articulate Sheffield City Council’s ‘role in sustainable strategic economic growth and try to capture all the elements how this supports the work of the SCR’<sup>1</sup>. The email continued by stating that ‘over the last couple of years there has been perhaps a little bit of disconnect with us and the SCR team, and I want this paper to set out how we can fix this...Therefore, our challenge is to work towards closing the disconnect between parties in the SCR area’.

This Sheffield City Council officer’s actions demonstrate a cognitive framing of closer collaborations between local planning officers and the SCR Executive Team as being of benefit to local planning officers and to Sheffield City Council more broadly, particularly as the SCR Executive Team officers were seen as the ‘gate-keepers’ of strategic decision-making within the Combined Authority. It is possible that these actions also stemmed from a desire to reassert Sheffield’s position and influence within the wider City Region (an issue that is further discussed in Chapter 8). However, it was not just Sheffield City Council’s planning officers that sought to enhance interactions with the SCR Executive Team officers. During a SCR Planning Officers group meeting, for example, a Senior Planning Officer from Barnsley MBC questioned whether someone from the SCR Executive Team should attend future SCRPOG meetings so ‘there is better coordination between the SCR Executive and Planning Officers Groups’ (FN005, 21<sup>st</sup> October 2016). It was reported in a later SCRPOG meeting, that:

‘...discussions had taken place with the SCR Executive Team, who had advised that they were currently in the process of appointing new staff. There was a post in the structure for a Planning Officer whose responsibility would be to attend SCRPOG meetings on behalf of the SCR Executive Team.’

(Minutes of SCRPOG meeting, 9<sup>th</sup> December 2016, DOC307)

Informal conversations subsequently held with research participants following the end of the fieldwork period indicated that resourcing in the SCR Executive Team had indeed increased and that there was a new Assistant Director of Housing, Infrastructure and Planning in post who had taken over chairing and coordinating the SCR Heads of Planning meetings. This indicates that some of these attempts by local planning officers to promote institutional transformation had been successful and that the communicative ‘gap’ between these officers and those in the SCR Executive Team was beginning to narrow. However, it was still unclear the extent to which this increased engagement between the groups of officers would enable local planning officers to influence the strategic agenda of the Combined Authority, which appeared to have remained very much focused upon economic, rather than strategic spatial planning, concerns.

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<sup>1</sup> Email from Senior Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council, 6<sup>th</sup> June 2017, DOC353

### 7.2.5 Summary

This section has revealed how spatial planning was not identified as a strategic priority within the Combined Authority because it failed to fit in with the economically-driven ‘ethos’ of the City Region; an ethos that appeared to emerge from both the underlying ‘post-political’ ideology that was shaping the strategic agenda of city regions and what a number of commentators, including Allmendinger & Haughton (2012), have referred to as the ‘neoliberalisation’ of spatial governance. This, together with the identified ambiguities and opacities that were inherent in the Combined Authority and its exclusionary rules of engagement, meant that local planning officers became increasingly disconnected from the formal structures and spaces of collaboration that existed at the City Region level.

This lack of engagement of local planning officers within the Combined Authority was framed by officers within the SCR Planning Officer Groups as an ‘institutional crisis’ because it conflicted with their ideas of what constituted an appropriate approach to strategic governance and who they believed were the ‘right people’ to be involved in the deliberative practices of strategic spatial decision-making. These ideas are thought to have been institutionally inherited and derived from these local planning officers’ experiences of collaborating under regional planning governance. As such, these ideas retained a path dependence that inspired a series of actions through which these officers embarked upon a ‘bottom-up’ resistance to the formal rules of engagement with which they were expected to comply by seeking to promote a formalised strategic spatial planning agenda and enhancing engagement with the SCR Executive Team. The SCR Executive Team officers were perceived by local planning officers as being the ‘gatekeepers’ of strategic decision-making and agenda-setting within the Combined Authority.

However, these attempts by local planning officers to adapt the institutional context to suit their own agendas and meet their own needs through ‘micro-foundational’ processes (Capoccia, 2016a) achieved varying degrees of success. Whilst formal opportunities for engagement and collaboration between local planning officers and the SCR Executive Team were eventually established, local planning officers’ attempts to forge a strategic spatial planning agenda at the Combined Authority level continued to be resisted. This resistance most likely occurred because strategic spatial planning was perceived by SCR Executive Team officers as being in conflict with the ‘post-political’ ideology that had become institutionally entrenched within the Combined Authority, and because the local planning officers that were pursuing this change in agenda lacked the relative power and influence necessary to enact such an institutional shift. Therefore, whilst strategic spatial planning remained notably absent from the formal spaces of Combined Authority governance, cross-boundary collaboration on strategic planning matters did still take place (as discussed in Chapter 6), however it was primarily confined to more informal spaces of collaboration beyond the formal structures of the Combined Authority, as the following section will discuss.

## **7.3 The role of informal ‘spaces of collaboration’ in strategic decision-making**

As previous sections have noted, the ability of local planning officers and elected members to participate in the formal structures and spaces of governance that were emerging within the Combined Authority was constrained by the established rules of engagement, which limited participation to a select number of individuals; namely local authority Leaders. Even within these formal governance spaces, practices of cross-boundary collaboration and decision-making amongst the invited participants were restricted due to the format of meetings which seemed designed to minimise opportunities for deliberation and debate. In respect of strategic spatial planning, this was not adopted as a thematic priority of the Combined Authority, and therefore the strategic planning practices that were undertaken in order to resolve particular cross-boundary issues or to inform the Duty to Cooperate were mostly enacted through the informal or semi-formal spaces of collaboration that remained institutionally embedded within the City Region, as this section will discuss.

As introduced in section 2.4.2, these ‘informal’ spaces may be understood as non-statutory, relational spaces of planning that are not governed by formal rules but are instead shaped through informal conventions. These are often referred to as ‘soft’ spaces of planning (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2010). The ‘semi-formal’ spaces also discussed here refer to the local planning officer groups. Despite not being statutorily required nor subject to any formal legislative oversight, these spaces were observed as retaining some of the characteristics of ‘informal’ planning spaces, alongside acquiring a certain degree of self-imposed formalisation through being subject to their own formal governance arrangements, including, for example, formally minuted meetings and their own Terms of Reference (as will be discussed in section 7.3.2). The purpose and characteristics of these ‘informal’ and ‘semi-formal’ spaces are further detailed in the following sections.

### **7.3.1 The role of informal spaces of collaboration between elected members in strategic decision-making**

The empirical evidence indicates that alongside the formal, more rigidly-structured spaces of Combined Authority governance, there was an institutionalised preference amongst elected members for communicating with their counterparts in other authorities within private meetings or conversations that were not bound by the same formal rules and procedures that were observed within the formal Combined Authority structures, and that took place out of the eye of public scrutiny. It was through the practices and interactions that took place within these informal spaces that many strategic decisions appeared to emerge. These spaces provided an opportunity for negotiation and deliberation, in which elected members made informal agreements or ‘deals’ that were later formalised, for example through confirmation in writing or through decisions taken in public meetings. In the cases where elected members were actively engaged in activities pertaining to the Duty to Cooperate, for example, the preference of elected members was to firstly pursue informal, individual level discussions with their counterparts in other authorities, before undertaking more formalised interventions, as illustrated in the following fieldnote extract:

‘[Senior Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council] explained that the Planning Portfolio Holder was keen to do work with their counterparts in other authorities. They would be speaking to them by telephone initially, followed by a SCR-wide meeting and then a more formal letter. [Senior Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council] explained that they were aiming for an informal approach first, followed by something more formal.’

(Extract from FN049, FAP team meeting, 9<sup>th</sup> February 2017)

These informal networking activities or ‘sub-surface interactions’ (Hillier, 2000: 34) are thought to represent an institutionalised form of behaviour; one whose informal rules of bartering and deal-making have become embedded through elected members’ historic experiences of working across local authority boundaries in a variety of governance contexts. These informal spaces of communication appeared to develop primarily between individual elected members, including Planning Portfolio Holders and those engaged on the Combined Authority Boards. These spaces developed around existing personal connections between individual members or political alliances between authorities, and transitioned over time to include different actors interacting across a new network of spaces, as territorial allegiances were strengthened, broken down and reformed across the City Region<sup>1</sup>. The significance of these informal spaces of collaboration for strategic decision-making within the City Region is reflected in the following comments of an Elected Member of North East Derbyshire District Council as they discussed the process of agreeing the allocation of SCRIF funding within the Combined Authority:

‘And at the moment, neither Bolsover nor North East Derbyshire had anything ready, so we said to [Elected Member of Chesterfield Borough Council], ‘look, you go for Waterside. We’ll support you on that. And *then...*’...you know, the idea of SCRIF funding, when the rates start coming in, that comes back to a fund and then it went back out, pot it and pay it to your council. And we said, ‘then by that time, we might have a shovel-ready scheme. And you support us.’. But you’d never hear that said in the meeting, you know. The officers would go, ‘shouldn’t you be declaring that, [Councillor]?’. So, what I’m trying to get to here, we do work on two levels, you know. We work on the level where we all sit in a meeting, ‘oh yes, yes’, but behind the scenes it’s, you know...’

(Elected Member of North East Derbyshire District Council, INT038)

This quotation illustrates how, through informal discussions, elected members agreed to make short-term concessions for a member of another authority in return for that member’s assurance that they would return the favour at a later date. This demonstrates the role of these informal spaces in facilitating the establishment of trust and embedding of political allegiances between elected members in different authorities. This convention of informal, non-public discussion and agreement followed by formalised action and decision-making was repeatedly described by elected members that were interviewed during the fieldwork. It became apparent that this informal convention was representative of the ‘way things have always been done’ in terms

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<sup>1</sup> The issue of territorial politics in Sheffield City Region is further discussed in Chapter 8.

of elected members working together on cross-boundary issues, and as such reflected a form of inherited institutionalised behaviour. These behaviours and the informal or 'soft' spaces of collaboration continued to be reproduced alongside the emerging formal structures and 'hard' governance spaces of the Combined Authority.

These two types of institutionalised space, the formal and the informal, appeared to complement each other, as each was shown to contribute to the process of cross-boundary, strategic decision-making within the City Region. However, unlike the more rigid rules that shaped action within the formal governance structures of the Combined Authority, the activities that took place within the informal spaces appeared to operate under a more flexible series of rules of engagement and deliberation that could be readily adapted by local actors to suit their own needs and objectives. The ideas that emerged from the deliberative processes of bargaining, negotiating and influencing within these informal spaces, acquired a structuring power that, in some cases, was able to undermine the rules and logics of decision-making that took place within the Combined Authority's formal spaces of governance, resulting in sometimes unexpected actions that appeared, on the surface, to contradict actors' own self-interests.

As the previous quotation illustrated, the decision by the Elected Member of North East Derbyshire District Council to support the allocation of SCRIF funding within a neighbouring authority would appear to go against that particular Member's (and their authority's) interests, although the outcome of the 'deal' that was made would benefit their authority in the long-term. Therefore, the flexibility of these informal spaces enabled actors to embark on collaborative practices that were cognitively framed as being in their self-interests, and which in turn led to the creation and legitimisation of ideas that helped to shape the formal decisions that were made within the formal spaces of governance, such as the Combined Authority Board meetings.

In contrast, the formal governance spaces were premised upon a rigid series of rules, which by themselves lacked the flexibility to enable the debates and deliberations that were needed to feed the processes of ideational innovation through which effective cross-boundary collaborative practices were more likely to emerge. One officer reflected on why collaborative practices had failed to emerge within these formalised, 'hard' structures of the Combined Authority:

'I have a bit of a hypothesis really though that the more formal things become, the more difficult they become, and I think it's quite needless. So, I meet informally with my equivalents, and I like them all, and we have a responsibility to deal with things before they become bigger problems. To not wind our leaders and chief executives up with negative briefings, but to actually pick up the phone and sort stuff out. And nine times out of ten, we do. If you put the local authority leaders in a room together, or they went down the pub together, they'd realise they're all old Labour politicians, they've all got far more in common than they would think, or than apart. But the minute you make it formal, with agenda items and briefings and you know, somehow the behaviour falls. So, there's



something about a formal-informal paradigm for me, that when things are informal, they're sound, they're fine. But the more formal we make it, the more hard [sic] it becomes.'

(Senior Economic Development Officer at Sheffield City Council, INT039)

This quotation highlights some of the challenges of enabling cooperation between local authorities at the scale of the City Region. In particular, the formal governance structures within the Combined Authority had evolved in such a way that they represented spaces of formality and rigidity of process, rather than arenas of debate and deliberation. Whilst informal spaces that better enabled collaborative practices were evident, these spaces were self-selecting and based around small, often well-established coalitions of authorities and individual actors, rather than including actors from all authorities across the City Region. This highlights some of the additional challenges facing cross-boundary collaboration within Sheffield City Region, including the deep-seated political and territorial divisions that existed between constituent authorities, and the inherently competitive, economic growth-driven environment that promoted contestation over collaboration<sup>1</sup>.

The informal spaces of collaboration that existed within the City Region played an important role in shaping informal agreements that were later formalised through strategic decisions taken within the formal spaces of the Combined Authority. These informal spaces formed a complex network, involving multiple combinations of actors liaising across different geographies, which presented a particular challenge when trying to formalise any informally made agreements within the formal spaces of decision-making within the Combined Authority. The lack of an informal space that enabled collaboration between elected members at the geographic scale of the City Region, may have been a contributory factor in the reluctance, or inability, of elected members of the Combined Authority to embrace a formalised strategic spatial planning agenda.

### **7.3.2 The role of semi-formal local planning officer groups in strategic decision-making**

As previously discussed, the SCR Planning Officer Groups played a lead role in coordinating Duty to Cooperate (and other strategic planning) activities between the authorities that comprised Sheffield City Region, including instigating attempts at institutional transformation within the formal governance structures of the Combined Authority. Despite their efforts to become further embedded within these formal structures, these officer groups remained distinctly separate. However, these groups continued to play an important role in shaping some of the more informal collaborative and strategic decision-making practices that emerged between local planning officers.

These officer groups had a long history, being originally established under the County Councils and, in the case of the South Yorkshire authorities, officers continued to meet informally as the South Yorkshire Planning Officers Group (SYPOG) after the County Council was abolished and throughout the time of the Regional Assembly. When the Sheffield City Region LEP was established, the South Yorkshire Planning

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<sup>1</sup> The influential power of these other structuring factors in shaping strategic planning practises will be further discussed in the following chapter.

Officers Group was expanded to incorporate officers from the nine SCR authorities to create the SCR Planning Officers Group, together with an equivalent group for the SCR Heads of Planning. This expansion was framed by officers as a logical decision, reflecting the ease with which officers appeared to accept this new geography of collaborative working, as one Senior Planning Officer reflected:

‘And it was whilst I was chairing SYPOG that the Sheffield City Region came in...The following year I then chaired that group...And, so one of the first things I did actually, was to say ‘we need to reconfigure ourselves, because now we’re Sheffield City Region, we need to invite all the other districts to that’. So, we changed the terms of references, we changed the membership.’

(Senior Planning Officer at Sheffield City Region, INT004)

These officer groups represented an institutionally inherited or ‘path dependent’ form of behaviour that officers continued to reproduce, even in the context of wider structural changes when there was no statutory requirement to do so. These groups most likely persisted, despite these changes in strategic governance arrangements, because they were cognitively framed by officers as being in their own interests. The SCR officer groups were, for example, primarily established to provide spaces for officers to share information and best practice, discuss and respond to strategic planning matters at a city region scale, and to comply with the Duty to Cooperate. One of the primary stated functions of the SCR Planning Officers Group, for example, was; ‘to champion the sharing of information and approaches on spatial planning issues and to work collaboratively to help ensure consistency of planning related strategies and policies across the Sheffield City Region (including sub-regional strategy, local authority development plans and supplementary guidance)’ (SCRPOG, 2015: 1). However, in addition to their design as ‘spaces of collaboration’, they also represented spaces of moral support in which officers helped to guide one other through the maze of legislative change and uncertainty. One Senior Planning Officer at Doncaster MBC explained the added value of these collaborative spaces, beyond just their pragmatic function:

‘...it’s a good group for keeping each other up to speed on what the current issues are, where local plans are, and where there’s scope to do joint work. And also, to keep under review the need for a City Region planning statement. So, that’s the main kind of forum. And obviously, that then gives confidence to speak candidly with peers and, you know, other authorities, either over the phone or through email...I think we’ve always recognised the need for regional planning or higher level planning of some sort, and that has needed us to organise ourselves in terms of what our strategic position is and provide a context for working with our neighbours and so on, and doing different things. But also, that kind of peer support and understanding, which I think is quite important, particularly in present day planning where there’s so much change and uncertainty going on.’

(Senior Planning Officer at Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council, INT035)

This quotation demonstrates how the planning officer groups were normatively framed by officers as valued spaces of support and collaboration, and as such, these institutionalised spaces continued to be reproduced and maintained throughout periods of exogenous governance and organisational change. Through these

processes of reproduction, the officer groups came to represent organised spaces through which officers were able to regain a sense of control and structural stability within a system of sub-regional governance that was otherwise characterised by change and, to a certain extent, uncertainty. These groups contributed to this control and stability by providing semi-formal structures<sup>1</sup> within and through which officers could act and that enabled officers to retain their sense of duty towards engaging in collaborative and strategic planning practices. For example, the SCR Planning Officers Group was described by one Planning Officer as ‘a very good thing because it formalises the relationship between the authorities and does allow those things to be understood at a level that isn’t too remote from officers’ (Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council, INT009). Another Senior Planning Officer stated; ‘I think any forum which enables development and discussion to take place in a coordinated way is a good thing’ (Senior Planning Officer at Bassetlaw District Council, INT021). These groups therefore appeared to reflect a similar ‘formalised informality’ to that which Copus & Erlingsson (2013: 53) identified within party group meetings of elected members, in which the interactions between actors were shaped by formal rules, regulations and processes within an otherwise informal setting. These informal settings may be contrasted with the formal settings of the more structured Council and Combined Authority Board meetings.

The replication of elements of formal decision-making structures within the semi-formal officer groups may be interpreted as an attempt by officers to legitimise their roles as strategic actors and to establish their position as being critical to the effective operation of the wider Combined Authority. However, despite these groups’ adoption of formal rules and procedures (such as agendas, terms of reference and minuted meetings), these attempts to emulate the formality of other Combined Authority structures did not result in any increased ability of these local planning officers to influence the strategic agenda and decision-making processes of the Combined Authority. Instead, these officer groups remained very much at the periphery of the formal spaces of Combined Authority governance. Despite their normatively framed benefits (including their role as spaces that enabled communication and reassurance between officers), the lack of power and influence that these semi-formal officer groups exhibited at a strategic level was acknowledged as an increasing source of frustration for many local planning officers. As a Senior Planning Officer at Barnsley MBC reflected in relation to the SCR Heads of Planning meetings:

‘If you look at the agendas, there’s not particularly a compelling reason to be there. I mean, I tend to go along really...a lot of the time, it’s just sharing best practice and that type of thing, rather than...we’re not working towards anything, we’re not producing a document, we’re basically rocking up, principally to make sure we’re going to meet the Duty to Cooperate to get our own plans adopted, rather than working towards anything. And what you find is that you’ll get a new chair of the group...I chaired it eighteen months ago and I’d only been in my current role about a year, so I was quite enthusiastic, I’d got some ideas...and so you propose an agenda item, and they say, ‘oh

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<sup>1</sup> The officer groups are described here as ‘semi-formal’ in the sense that they do not form part of the formal structural arrangements of the Combined Authority and they have no statutory powers. Although to the officers themselves they were often perceived as having a sense of ‘formality’, as demonstrated by the fact that they were structured around formally chaired and minuted meetings.

well, we had a discussion about that three years ago, and we decided not to pursue it for these reasons' and what have you. And so, it's hard in that context to stay particularly enthused about it.'

(Senior Planning Officer at Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council, INT032)

These comments further exemplify how officers' decisions to attend these group meetings stemmed from an institutionalised sense of duty and routine, rather than because there was any expectation that meaningful decisions or outcomes would be achieved. Indeed, throughout the officer meetings that were observed during this research there was significant repetition in terms of agenda items, with very few strategic decisions actually made. This observation was also reflected in the above officer's comments that ideas and suggested actions were repeated year-on-year but never implemented. Despite emergent signs of discontent amongst officers regarding these groups' apparent lack of progress, including, for example, in relation to the Duty to Cooperate statements<sup>1</sup> and their lack of influence upon strategic decision-making within the formal governance structures of the Combined Authority, there was no obvious drop in attendance at these officer meetings. This is demonstrative of the institutional, structuring power of these semi-formal groups and their role in reinforcing a sense of purpose amongst local planning officers, particularly in relation to their continued pursuit of a formalised strategic spatial planning agenda within the Combined Authority.

### **7.3.3 Spaces of officer-member engagement**

Whilst local planning officers took the lead in enacting practices to inform the Duty to Cooperate, there was a recognition that the power to make strategic decisions ultimately rested with elected members. As one Senior Planning Officer noted during a SCR Heads of Planning meeting; 'the Duty to Cooperate is not just a Heads of Planning thing, it's a political thing' (FN115, SCR Heads of Planning meeting, 4<sup>th</sup> August 2017). However, despite this recognition, elected members' only direct engagement with local planning officers on Duty to Cooperate matters was limited to informal discussions on issues that were deemed by officers to be particularly critical or contentious (Elected Member of Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council, INT041).

Officers' institutionalised preference for collaborating within formal, structured spaces of strategic planning governance was reflected in their ideational framing of such spaces as necessary to enhance engagement with members (and between members) on issues relating to the Duty to Cooperate. Officers therefore regularly mooted proposals for more formal Duty to Cooperate meetings that would help to engage elected members throughout the process, not just at the point of decision-making. As one Senior Planning Officer commented:

'I think it would be useful to have a...maybe the Cabinet members, Chairs of Planning, something like that, having a regular meeting that wasn't always about, 'you've got to agree this, we need to do that, we need you to agree this', but it's more about upskilling and increasing the capacity, so people have a greater understanding of planning and its role in economic development and housing and the economy, and how that's going to lead to growth, prosperity, reduce inequality across the City Region, within certain lead time. And not for it all to be hinged around, 'we've got an examination,

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<sup>1</sup> Previously discussed in section 6.2.4.

we need to know that you're on with this or you're not', because it's not a working relationship. And people are thrown into something which perhaps they haven't really had an awful lot of involvement in.'

(Senior Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council, INT004)

This quotation highlights a distinction between local planning actors' 'need to understand' and their 'need to decide'. As discussed in section 7.1.2, the formal structures of the Combined Authority promoted a distinct form of decision-making based around speed and efficiency of process, rather than enabling opportunities for deliberation and enhanced understanding. Therefore, when the SCR Planning Officers Group discussed the merits of holding a Duty to Cooperate elected members' workshop or the establishment of a SCR Planning Board where 'issues like Duty to Cooperate...could be considered and discussed in further detail'<sup>1</sup>, it is perhaps not surprising that the SCR Executive Team chose not present these proposals to elected members. The reasons for this decision were recorded as follows; 'members felt there were already a large number of SCR Boards in place and therefore, any Board would need a clear role and purpose'<sup>2</sup>. However, it is also likely that the SCR Executive Team chose not to present this suggestion to elected members because its focus on collaboration and understanding conflicted with the institutionalised forms of decision-making that existed within the Combined Authority. In addition, 'strategic spatial planning' was cognitively framed by the SCR Executive Team officers as conflicting with the Combined Authority's chosen thematic priorities that were shaped around economic growth objectives and available sources of funding.

A further reason why formal Duty to Cooperate meetings between officers and elected members, or a SCR Planning Board, were never established was due to members' institutionalised preference for engaging with one another through informal spaces of collaboration<sup>3</sup>, as one Senior Planning Officer stated:

'...there is not a great deal of appetite to have formal meetings around Duty to Cooperate. I think they're happy to deal with it informally and rely on officers to bring them issues of concern... So, I think there's no great appetite for any kind of formal Duty to Cooperate meetings, and I think it makes us, as officers, a bit nervous, because we know how important the Duty to Cooperate is. But I think what we've seen is that members are quite happy to deal with it on an ad hoc, informal basis.'

(Senior Planning Officer at Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council, INT035)

These comments highlight how the institutionalised preferences that shaped how different groups of local planning actors chose to work towards resolving cross-boundary, strategic issues led to difficulties in identifying or creating spaces in which both officers and elected members were able to collaborate effectively. These conflicts and the continued resistance by elected members to engage with one another in formal spaces of collaboration resulted in local planning officers' reticence to continue promoting formalised Duty to Cooperate meetings amongst elected members. Elected members' resistance to formally engage in

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<sup>1</sup> Extract from SCRPOG meeting minutes, 6<sup>th</sup> May 2016, DOC023

<sup>2</sup> Extract from SCRPOG meeting minutes, 6<sup>th</sup> May 2016, DOC023

<sup>3</sup> As discussed in section 7.3.1

strategic planning matters was also noted by local planning officers at Sheffield City Council and Barnsley MBC who explained that, unlike the two other South Yorkshire authorities, they did not have formal elected member sign-off procedures in place for the approval of the Joint Waste Plan work because members sometimes say ‘why are we being asked to look at this?’ and complain of ‘agenda fatigue’ (SCR Planning Officers Group meeting, 28<sup>th</sup> April 2017, FN072). Elected members’ resistance to more formal engagement in the resolution of particular strategic planning matters may have also stemmed from the structuring influence of political territorialities, as will be discussed in Chapter 8.

#### **7.3.4 Summary**

This section has demonstrated how, alongside the formal spaces of Combined Authority governance, informal and semi-formal spaces played an equally important role in shaping the actions and interactions between different groups of local planning actors, including their enactment of strategic decision-making and spatial planning practices. Elected members, in particular, showed an institutionalised preference for collaborating on strategic issues through informal spaces that enabled debate and deliberation, rather than through the formal governance spaces of the Combined Authority. These informal spaces reflected what Fox-Rogers & Murphy (2014) have termed a ‘shadow planning system’, which is only accessible to individuals in positions of power, including senior elected members. Participation within these informal spaces also reflected territorial allegiances between particular groupings of authorities, rather than allowing representation from all authorities within the City Region. While these informal spaces operated alongside and helped to inform the Combined Authority’s formal spaces of strategic decision-making, their exclusivity means that they failed to enable effective collaboration between elected members at the scale of the City Region.

The actions of local planning officers demonstrated an institutionalised preference for working within formal spaces of collaboration. Their continued reproduction of semi-formal officer groups, in particular, reflected a tendency towards a ‘formalised informality’ that was utilised by officers as a tool to help legitimise and promote their role as strategic actors within the formal structures of the Combined Authority. However, the conflicting preferences for informal versus formal spaces of collaboration amongst elected members and local planning officers respectively, meant that officers’ attempts to influence the strategic agenda of the Combined Authority by promoting formal spaces of interaction between themselves and elected member groups, were unsuccessful.

### **7.4 Conclusion**

This chapter has examined the role of formal and informal governance spaces in shaping strategic spatial planning practices in a devolving governance context, as well as considering the extent to which these spaces constrain or enable cross-boundary collaboration and strategic decision-making between different groups of local planning actors. In doing so, this chapter has provided answers to the third research question<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The research questions are outlined in Chapter 2 (section 2.5).

In particular, this chapter highlights how Combined Authority governance was configured around a series of formal spaces of decision-making that had strict and exclusionary rules of engagement. These spaces represented a ‘post-political’ and ‘neoliberal’ ideology that appears to have become institutionally embedded and infiltrated City Region governance across England more broadly (as observed by Deas, 2014). In the case of Sheffield City Region, these ‘post-political’ and ‘neoliberal’ ideational framings have been particularly promoted by officers of the SCR Executive Team and have been used to re-shape and transform the formal structures of Combined Authority governance. This was reflected in the increasing exclusion of non-Leaders from participation in these structures, the increasing lack of opportunity within these formal spaces for deliberation and debate, and the prioritisation of economic growth over other strategic objectives, such as spatial planning. As a result, these formal structures of Combined Authority governance failed to provide the type of collaborative governance spaces that might have enabled the emergence of a strategic spatial planning agenda in the City Region.

Another key finding of this chapter is how the observed actions of elected members demonstrated an inherited institutionalised preference for cross-boundary collaboration through informal or ‘shadow’ spaces. These informal spaces enabled practices of bartering and deal-making, which then informed the strategic decisions that were subsequently made within the formal spaces of Combined Authority governance. However, while these informal spaces played an important role in shaping strategic decision-making, they were exclusive and based around existing territorial and political groupings of authorities. These spaces therefore failed to enable effective cross-boundary collaborative practices to develop at the scale of the City Region. Elected members also lacked sufficient power, even when acting through these informal spaces, to transform the rigid institutions and strategic agenda of the Combined Authority, which remained relatively fixed.

This chapter also revealed how the spaces of governance within the Combined Authority were contested, as different groups of actors struggled to promote their own strategic agendas. In particular, the local planning officers, who found themselves increasingly excluded from the formal spaces of Combined Authority governance and decision-making, sought to overcome what they had framed as an ‘institutional crisis’ by initiating a form of institutional change through promoting a formalised strategic spatial planning agenda and the establishment of a Strategic Planning Unit within the Combined Authority. Local planning officers also sought to promote formalised spaces of collaboration between themselves, elected members and officers of the SCR Executive Team, through which they might discuss strategic spatial planning issues and influence the strategic agenda of the Combined Authority. However, these attempts at institutional reform or ‘micro-foundational’ change were, for the most part, resisted due to the strongly embedded nature of the existing institutions that were shaping the strategic agenda and decision-making processes within the Combined Authority, and the comparative lack of ideational power within the local planning officer group to incite institutional change.

In conclusion, the formal, informal and semi-formal governance spaces that were observed within the Combined Authority enabled rapid forms of strategic decision-making, but constrained effective cross-boundary collaboration, especially at the scale of the City Region. This lack of effective cross-boundary collaboration meant that the ability of local authorities to make strategic spatial planning decisions, such as those needed to inform the Duty to Cooperate, was severely restricted. In terms of the prospect of adopting a more formalised approach to strategic spatial planning within Sheffield City Region, this was equally constrained by the ideas that had become institutionally embedded within the structures of the Combined Authority and the actions of particular hegemonic groups of individuals acting within these structures. The decisions of officers of the SCR Executive Team and local authority Leaders that were represented on the Combined Authority Boards, for example, privileged strategies that promoted economic growth and resisted those that promoted strategic spatial planning. This is an example of the ‘strategic selectivity’ discussed by Jessop (2007).

Other factors that the research has identified as playing an important role in shaping actors’ responses to their strategic contexts and the approach to strategic spatial planning within Sheffield City Region include the broader political and spatial context in which local planning actors were embedded, and the role of territorial politics. These factors will be examined in Chapter 8, the final analysis chapter.



## 8 | The political and territorial context of Sheffield City Region and its role in shaping the approach to strategic spatial planning

The purpose of this final analysis chapter is to explore the evolving political, territorial and spatial context of Sheffield City Region, including how this context was interpreted and shaped by local planning actors. In particular, this chapter considers how actors' interpretations of the political territories and 'soft' spatial imaginaries of Sheffield City Region helped to shape actors' abilities to think and work strategically at the scale of the City Region, particularly on issues of strategic spatial planning.

It is important to recognise that Sheffield City Region is not a single geography, but a series of overlapping territorial and relational spaces within and through which actors come together on certain issues, by forming 'spatial coalitions' (Pugalis & Townsend, 2014); and compete with one another on other issues. This chapter examines the nature of these competing spatial geographies and identifies where within the City Region actors come together, and where there is contestation. In order to aid this analysis, this chapter considers the extent to which the geographies of Sheffield City Region might be understood to have become 'institutionalised', such that they are observed as playing a role in structuring practices of cross-boundary collaboration and strategic spatial planning within the City Region. In doing so, it will draw on the interlinked concepts of political territories (see, for example, Branch, 2015) and 'soft' spatial imaginaries (see, for example, Hincks et al., 2017).

In contrast to the previous two chapters, which have focused primarily on differences *between* actor groups, this chapter will examine spatialised differences *within* these groups; differences that may transcend local authority boundaries but align with other political territories or sub-regional geographies. Given the particularly spatial focus of this chapter, it is also worth highlighting that because the fieldwork was primarily based within Sheffield City Council, some of the evidence presented in this chapter may reflect a more nuanced, Sheffield-centred perspective of the political and territorial spatialities that were observed within the City Region. This will be reflected on further in the concluding chapter.

The first part of this chapter, section 8.1, examines the shifting political geographies of Sheffield City Region; commenting on the reasons why some sub-regional spatial coalitions and political allegiances have endured and become institutionally embedded as territories, while other previously embedded territories have 'weakened' as political divisions have formed and widened. Section 8.2 explores how these political territories and the wider economic context created an environment in which competition between authorities was promoted over collaboration, and how practices of cross-border collaboration and strategic spatial planning were increasingly influenced by local planning actors' prioritisation of their own authorities' interests over what might have been construed as the interests of the wider City Region. Finally, section 8.3 discusses how the increasing tendency towards the 'localisation' (rather than 'regionalisation') of interests and practices influenced how the multiple, overlapping geographies that form Sheffield City Region were

framed by local planning actors as spatial imaginaries. This section then examines the extent to which these spaces became institutionalised as ‘territory’, and as such played a role in shaping the approach to cross-boundary collaboration and strategic spatial planning that was observed.

## **8.1 The political territories of Sheffield City Region**

As described in Chapter 5, this research was undertaken during a period of heightened political tension across the City Region. The impact of various exogenous economic and political shifts, including propositions by central government to introduce a HS2 station in the region, and the requirement within Sheffield City Region to elect a City Region Mayor, led to the emergence of new and enhanced political fractions both within and between authorities. These widening divisions were accompanied by the strengthening of other political allegiances and coalitions that had historically formed across other spatial geographies. This section considers how these territorial ‘durabilities’ and weaknesses emerged, and how this evolving political and territorial context played a role in informing cross-boundary collaborative practices and strategic decision-making in the City Region.

### **8.1.1 Sub-regional political allegiances and territories**

The evidence gathered during the fieldwork revealed strong ties at both an officer and elected member level between particular groupings of Sheffield City Region authorities. These groupings tended to respect the historic administrative geographies that formed the counties and ‘old’ regions, across which there had been a relatively long history of collaboration and joint working between local authorities. Whilst it was noted by several local planning actors that these historic spatial coalitions were based upon a series of relatively arbitrary administrative geographies rather than an arguably more sensible ‘functional’ geography<sup>1</sup>, these spaces continued to persist and were reproduced over time. As one Senior Planning Officer commented:

‘I suppose, historically we’ve always worked more closely with the three South Yorkshire authorities than anyone else. Even though, geographically, not necessarily the closest. Like Doncaster obviously isn’t an adjoining authority... Obviously North East Derbyshire, for example, as an adjoining authority, should be working very closely with them. I think maybe it’s just a very long-standing historical thing, because we had South Yorkshire, a long time ago, but it existed. And I think then, when we had the regional work, it excluded a lot of the City Region because it was just Yorkshire and Humber, so only...well, generally speaking only Barnsley, Doncaster, Rotherham of the City Region authorities were within the region. So, it’s probably a combination of those. Historically we’ve worked with them. The City Region, although it has been around for quite some time, is still...when you compare it to the region and South Yorkshire, is relatively new.’

(Senior Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council, INT015)

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<sup>1</sup> A ‘functional’ geography may, for example, include a ‘travel-to-work’ or housing market area.

This quotation is illustrative of an institutionally inherited pattern of cross-boundary collaborative practice, in which the geographies of working and spatial coalitions that were previously enacted through South Yorkshire County Council and the Regional Assembly, continued to be reproduced even following the abolition of these organisational and governance structures. These institutionalised spatial coalitions, which were primarily distinguished along county lines, appeared to promote a path dependent form of behaviour amongst local planning actors as they were cognitively framed as a straight-forward approach to achieving the benefits of cross-boundary collaboration, due to the relative ease with which these actors were able to draw upon and reaffirm previously established personal networks and connections. As such, these spatial coalitions continued to be reproduced even following the establishment of the Sheffield City Region LEP and Combined Authority, such as through the preparation of joint evidence base documents, including the South Yorkshire Joint Waste Plan.

These historic spatial coalitions also persisted due to the structural similarities inherent within the two-tier district authorities in the south and the single-tier unitary authorities in the north. Each of these two groups of authorities shared comparable statutory duties, organisational configurations and governance arrangements, which was reflected in the sense of commonality and comradery that was exhibited between the authorities of each type (unitary and district), particularly at an officer level. Additionally, because the Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire County Councils were still in existence (unlike South Yorkshire County Council, that continued to exert a structuring influence only as a 'spatial imaginary', as further discussed below), they were also able to play a greater structuring role in the interactions and collaborative practices that were enacted between officers in the district authorities, as the following quotation illustrates:

'The authorities in Derbyshire that were part of the SCR had a fairly light-touch on the SCR agenda but were keen to put their hat in to getting money out of it, but from the day-to-day work, in terms of joint studies, joint working, collaborative working, actual delivery of schemes, they work much more on a Derbyshire-Nottinghamshire basis. I don't know to what extent though that was a product of them being two-tier areas, because obviously lots of strategic issues that aren't in the currency of devolved areas, are provided by the county, so they have to have a relationship with the county.'

(Senior Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council, INT019)

Whilst many LEP geographies appeared to simply replicate the legacy of historic spatial coalitions, the geography of Sheffield City Region was one of a small number of LEPs representing what Pugalis & Townsend (2014: 59) described as 'potential spatial coalitions that were more attuned to functional areas in theory'. The key word here however is 'potential'. Although Sheffield City Region was formed as an organisational and governance structure that was broadly based around a 'functional economic geography'<sup>1</sup>, some of its authorities were also part of adjacent LEPs<sup>2</sup>, and therefore in order to become established as a spatial coalition it needed to compete with these and other existing spatial coalitions that were already

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<sup>1</sup> See sections 5.1.1 for a discussion of the formation of Sheffield City Region and its economic and spatial geography.

<sup>2</sup> As noted in section 5.1.1, the Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire authorities were also part of the D2N2 LEP, and Barnsley MBC was also part of the Leeds City Region LEP.

institutionally embedded. The final sentence of the above Senior Planning Officer's quotation, for example, describes the City Region as 'relatively new' compared with the Yorkshire and Humber, East Midlands and South Yorkshire regions; suggesting that these 'old' territories were perceived by local planning actors as still continuing to exist.

Therefore, although the formal governance and organisational structures that had previously underpinned these former political territories no longer existed, as 'spatial imaginaries' they were not erased, but held a permanence that continued to be reproduced in many of the collaborative practices that were observed within the City Region. The inter-subjective ideational framing of the 'South Yorkshire region', for example, allowed this space to maintain its institutional form as a 'spatial imaginary'<sup>1</sup> by eliciting an informal structuring force upon the collaborative actions of local planning actors in the northern part of Sheffield City Region. This institutionalised 'South Yorkshire' imaginary continued to shape an apparent closer working relationship at an officer level between the authorities of Sheffield, Barnsley, Doncaster and Rotherham, including their decisions to prepare joint evidence-base documents and methodologies. As a Senior Planning Officer commented:

'You've got that familiarity, and you're used to working more with them. But obviously, we got rid of the county years ago, so there was the county council arrangement tying us all together. And we've worked...we've got a Barnsley, Doncaster, Rotherham waste plan, and there's been other joint working in the past on evidence bases, things like that. So, I think the relationship with the East Midlands authorities isn't as strong as the moment, but it could be. It could be worked up more.'

(Senior Planning Officer at Rotherham MBC, INT026)

O'Brien (2019) highlights the difficulty of dislodging existing spatial imaginaries that are already firmly embedded, but also notes that the introduction of new spatial imaginaries, if done correctly, can result in 'disruptive transformation' (p.17). The final sentence of the above quotation illustrates how the comparatively new spatial imaginary of 'Sheffield City Region' represented a potentially disruptive force; promoting an ideational shift amongst local planning officers that collaborative working should now be undertaken at the scalar geography known as 'Sheffield City Region'. However, the potential for these ideas to initiate an institutional transformation was constrained by the existing landscape of historically embedded spatial imaginaries, and as such, the legitimisation of the 'Sheffield City Region' spatial imaginary as an institutionalised political territory or spatial coalition that was able to shape collaborative practice at the city region scale faced significant resistance, particularly amongst elected members, as will be further discussed in section 8.3.

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of the 'spatial imaginary' is introduced in section 2.4.3.

Whilst connections between the South Yorkshire, Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire authorities were, on the whole, less well-established, there were some examples of collaborative working, particularly at an officer level, between pairs of neighbouring authorities that straddled these county boundaries, as the following comments by a Senior Planning Officer at Chesterfield Borough Council illustrate:

‘Now obviously, our most direct issues tend to be with North East Derbyshire and Bolsover and Derbyshire County Council. We’re part of a housing market area which also includes Bassetlaw, so we work jointly with Bassetlaw as an HMA on things like our housing evidence, and so on. But we’ve obviously also then got quite a big overlap with Sheffield City Region, given our now agreed current status as a non-constituent member of Sheffield City Region and the Combined Authority. But we’ve always had that relationship, before the LEP, before the Combined Authority anyway. We’ve always had that relationship with Sheffield and with the South Yorkshire areas, even back in the days of regional planning when technically we were part of the East Midlands. We had regular meetings as a city region to make sure we were getting the issues that covered cross-boundary.’

(Senior Planning Officer at Chesterfield Borough Council, INT027)

This quotation illustrates the role of other spatial imaginaries, including housing market areas, in shaping patterns of cross-boundary collaboration. It is also notable that these examples of cross-(county) boundary working between officers were primarily of an informal nature, and there was less engagement in the more formalised type of joint evidence-base gathering exercises that took place between the South Yorkshire and East Midlands authorities respectively. This is likely due to the greater strength of political resistance that existed amongst elected members towards increased cross-boundary working with authorities that lay outside the established territorial geography of the county, and of which officers were perceptive.

As with the spatial coalitions that were established amongst local planning officers, some of these county-based allegiances amongst elected members were the result of historic working relationships that had originally developed under ‘old’ governance structures, and which had remained and, over time, became further embedded. The structuring power of these spatial territories was also strengthened by the influence of party politics, with the four South Yorkshire authorities all being Labour-led; and whilst the former East Midlands district authorities were also primarily under control of Labour (with the exception of Derbyshire Dales, which was Conservative-led), the two-tier system meant that at the time the fieldwork was undertaken these authorities were presided over by Conservative-controlled County Councils. These political allegiances informed a resistance to the formation of stronger collaborative bonds between the South Yorkshire authorities in the north and the district authorities in the south, as the spatial imaginaries that had developed along county lines became further institutionally embedded as political territories (an example of this is detailed in section 8.1.3). The strengthening of existing political territories also contributed to a resistance to the establishment of new geographies of collaboration at the scale of the City Region. As Hincks et al. (2017: 646) concluded; ‘For any soft space imaginary to gain traction, then, it will need to compete with previous and parallel imaginaries, including those of territorial government or other soft spaces’. The extent to which

‘Sheffield City Region’ was able to gain this traction and become institutionalised as a political territory is further discussed in section 8.3.

### **8.1.2 Widening political divisions within Sheffield City Region**

Whilst some of the spatial coalitions that were forged within and between the South Yorkshire and former East Midlands authorities endured and strengthened, other allegiances deteriorated. The fieldwork was conducted at a time during which there was growing political conflict between the Sheffield City Region authorities, with lines of fracture gradually expanding along the border between the South Yorkshire authorities in the north, and the Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire authorities in the south. This contention mainly derived from the County Council members’ concerns regarding the Combined Authority’s proposed Mayoral Devolution Deal, and ultimately resulted in the district authorities deciding to retain their non-constituent membership rather than pursuing ‘full’ membership of the Combined Authority<sup>1</sup>. These divisions were reflective of a concern emerging nationwide that ‘devolution will become too urban focused and that districts may be excluded or marginalised in any devolution initiatives’, as was reported by the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for District Councils (APPG, 2017: 26). The ambivalence amongst the County Council members towards engagement in Sheffield City Region’s governance structures is further illustrated in the comments of this Senior Planning Officer:

‘Our members, like any members elsewhere, have been elected to serve the people of Nottinghamshire, and members, to the best of their ability, will deliver that. And that may mean different things at different times, so it may mean at member level they have to work with colleagues in adjacent areas, and other times they may want to take a step back.’

(Senior Planning Officer at Nottinghamshire County Council, INT024)

This quotation illustrates how elected members’ decisions to engage in collaborative practices were primarily determined by the perceived impact of these practices upon their own authority. In this case, the county of Nottinghamshire was cognitively framed as the territory in whose residents’ interests decisions should be made, and as such, the county formed the political territory which exerted a dominant structuring force upon the actions of its officers and elected members.

Meanwhile, in the northernmost part of the City Region, the structuring power of the ‘South Yorkshire’ spatial imaginary began to show evidence of weakening as the territories of the individual local authorities were strengthened and old spatial imaginaries were revived. For example, further political lines of fracture developed within South Yorkshire, as Sheffield City Council and Rotherham MBC began to splinter away from Barnsley MBC and Doncaster MBC. These growing divisions between the South Yorkshire authorities were built upon long-held animosities between individual elected members that were exacerbated by the

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter 5 provides a detailed explanation of the political conflicts that formed the backdrop to the fieldwork, including Derbyshire County Council’s objection to Chesterfield Borough Council’s pursuit of constituent membership through the SCR Devolution Deal. This is also further discussed in section 8.1.3.

emergent proposals for a ‘One Yorkshire’ Devolution Deal <sup>1</sup>, which was cognitively framed by some elected members as providing ‘better pickings’<sup>2</sup> than a SCR Devolution Deal.

The introduction of the ‘One Yorkshire’ proposal is evidence of an attempt by several members of the political elite to incite institutional transformation by undermining the governance structures that had been established around the spatial imaginary of ‘Sheffield City Region’ and promoting ‘Yorkshire’ as a revived spatial imaginary around which newly-devolved governance structures might be formed. However, to date, these attempts at institutional transformation have been unsuccessful; primarily because they have been strongly resisted by central government. The decision of Barnsley MBC and Doncaster MBC to pursue an alternate deal unsurprisingly received a negative reaction from elected members within Rotherham MBC and Sheffield City Council due to the fact that it posed a threat to the success of the existing proposed SCR Devolution Deal and their opportunity of accessing the additional funding associated with this Deal, as one Elected Member of Sheffield City Council stated:

‘I think the other two authorities that have decided they don’t want to be part of it, or they want to explore other options, have done so because they think that’s in the best interest of their area. We would say otherwise. We think that this is the only deal on the table, and it’s one we should take because we all have tight budgets at the moment.’

(Elected Member of Sheffield City Council, INT044)

In addition to the ‘One Yorkshire’ proposals, the political and territorial divisions between the South Yorkshire authorities were further exacerbated by disagreements regarding the location of the proposed HS2 railway station<sup>3</sup>, as one officer at Sheffield City Council reflected:

‘Some of the behaviour, some of the level of debate and dialogue around things like devolution, things like HS2, is appalling, really appalling. You know, the idea that there was evidenced discussion and horse-trading, and I don’t mean horse-trading in a negative sense, but that’s what politicians are there to do, to come to an agreement and to do deals, to get things done. There’s been no appetite to do that. We had, I won’t name them, but there was a local authority chief executive that said in a public meeting, ‘I don’t care what the evidence says, our mind’s made up’. You know, the level of rigour and debate around economic issues is appalling.’

(Senior Economic Development Officer at Sheffield City Council, INT039)

These reported behaviours were evidence of elite local actors’ cognitive framings of the South Yorkshire spatial coalition as a threat to their authorities’ individual interests. This led to accusations of ‘tribalism’<sup>4</sup> emerging within the South Yorkshire authorities, which ultimately resulted in a ‘weakening’ of the South

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<sup>1</sup> As further discussed in section 5.3.4.

<sup>2</sup> Elected member of Rotherham MBC, INT040

<sup>3</sup> Chapter 5 provides further background to the political contestation that emerged regarding the proposed location of the HS2 station.

<sup>4</sup> Senior Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council, INT012

Yorkshire territory and its institutional effects, as certain elected members of Doncaster and Barnsley Councils increasingly resisted aligning themselves with the other two South Yorkshire authorities. This in turn led to a reduction in cross-boundary collaborative working and agreement between these authorities within the context of the Combined Authority. As a Senior Planning Officer Rotherham MBC commented during a meeting of SCR Housing and Planning Officers; ‘In terms of proper joint working, we’re not going to be there in the next six months unless something changes politically’ (FN115, SCR Housing and Planning Directors meeting, 4<sup>th</sup> August 2017). These widening political divisions therefore resulted in a growing sense of distrust between the authorities, which was manifested in a resistance by elected members to formalised strategic spatial planning practices, such as those that were proposed under a Mayoral Combined Authority, as discussed in the following section.

### **8.1.3 The City Region ‘versus’ the Counties**

As previously discussed in section 6.3.2, the introduction of an elected mayor and statutory spatial plan was framed by many elected members as a potential threat to their authority’s autonomy, particularly amongst members of the district authorities who feared that a Mayoral Combined Authority would become a form of ‘top-down’ dictatorial governance. In the case of Bassetlaw, for example, the ‘threat’ posed by the potential imposition of spatial policies (particularly those relating to the allocation of housing land) was presented by senior elected members as one of several reasons justifying their decision to withdraw Bassetlaw District Council from the SCR Devolution Deal<sup>1</sup>. However, there was evidence to suggest that this ideational framing of the Mayor’s strategic spatial planning powers as a ‘threat’ had been introduced by elected members as somewhat of a ‘political scapegoat’ to mask the real reasons behind their and Chesterfield Borough Council’s resistance to joining the Combined Authority as full constituent members. For example, when discussing this matter during an interview, a former Elected Member of Sheffield City Council stated, ‘I don’t think it’s particularly anything to do with planning, to be honest with you’ (INT042). Another interviewee also commented that Bassetlaw District Council’s justification for not wanting to proceed with the Devolution Deal on strategic planning grounds

‘...is very different to the actual internal message that Bassetlaw were always up for being part of an economically growing Sheffield City Region, and for taking increased housing numbers via a spatial framework, if there was a proper deal to be had that they would receive the proper infrastructure investment. It does sound like the issue of planning was used as political justification. And, that’s probably an echo, I would suggest, back to the messages that resonated round England, that were propagated in the Open Source Planning, planning green paper the Conservatives brought out in 2008-9, which basically said, ‘we need to get rid of RSS’.’

(Senior Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council, INT019)

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<sup>1</sup> Further contextual detail of Bassetlaw District and Chesterfield Borough Councils’ decisions to withdraw from the SCR Mayoral Devolution Deal is provided in section 5.3.4.



The suggestion that the district councils' objections to the Mayoral Devolution Deal were based primarily on the potential introduction of a statutory strategic spatial planning framework was further refuted by the comments of an Elected Member of North East Derbyshire District Council. This elected member explained during an interview that they did not have a problem with the principle of a Sheffield City Region Mayor, even one that had statutory spatial planning powers, stating:

'If those powers are what they want to develop strategic planning, as long as it's done in cooperation and they listen to the district councils and so on, like that, and they all work it out together...'

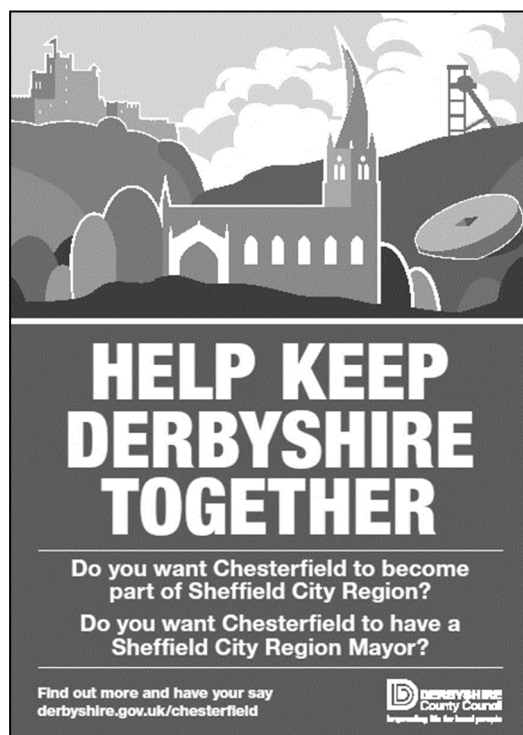
(Elected Member of North East Derbyshire District Council, INT038)

It is considered likely, therefore, that Bassetlaw District and Chesterfield Borough Councils' decisions to withdraw from the SCR Mayoral Devolution Deal were driven, not by a resistance to the concept of strategic spatial planning *per se*, but by the objections of Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire County Councils, respectively. This highlights the significant structuring influence that the County Councils continued to exert over the lower tier district authorities, as elected members of the district authorities were compelled to comply with the political demands of the counties, even where these demands were not perceived to be in the best interests of their own authority<sup>1</sup>. Subsequently, the counties continued to remain strongly institutionally embedded as territories around which strategic decisions were shaped.

The territorial embeddedness of the counties was further reinforced through the campaign materials that were published by Derbyshire County Council during the public consultation exercise that was held regarding the proposed SCR Devolution Deal, which would have seen Chesterfield Borough Council and Bassetlaw District Council join the Combined Authority as full constituent members. These campaigns framed Sheffield City Region as a territory that was in direct competition with, or was trying to undermine and divide, the traditional county geographies. As such, the political rhetoric that underpinned Derbyshire County Council's campaign focused on 'keeping Derbyshire together', as illustrated in Figure 6.

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that the division of power and responsibilities between two-tier authorities means that the district councils are beholden to the decisions of the county councils on a range of matters, including education, transport, planning, social care and waste management.



**Figure 6** 'Help Keep Derbyshire Together' poster (Source: Derbyshire County Council, 2016b) Image reproduced with permission from Derbyshire County Council

An accompanying website produced by Derbyshire County Council and aimed at Chesterfield residents outlined 'What Chesterfield's council services could look like under a Sheffield Mayor'. Under the heading 'Housing', the website stated:

'If Chesterfield's plans go ahead, the mayor of Sheffield City Region and the Combined Authority would produce a 'spatial planning framework' which would include Chesterfield. Local councils would have to consider Sheffield City Region's planning framework when deciding where new housing estates are built in Chesterfield.'

(Derbyshire County Council, 2016a)

Here, the Combined Authority was framed as an entity that was distinct from, rather than being inclusive of, Chesterfield Borough Council; as well as being an outside, top-down, influential power. These actions may be interpreted as an attempt by elected members of Derbyshire County Council to frame the potential introduction of the SCR Mayoral Devolution Deal as an institutional crisis in which the future cohesivity and structuring power of the Derbyshire political territory was 'under threat' from the emergent Sheffield City Region. The ideational spatial imaginary of 'Derbyshire' was therefore employed by elected members of Derbyshire County Council as a tool or strategic resource to undermine the legitimisation of Sheffield City Region as a political territory. These attempts to prevent the institutionalisation of Sheffield City Region as a political territory did face some resistance from elected members of Chesterfield Borough and Bassetlaw District Councils. For example, as the Leader of Chesterfield Borough Council stated in a press release in August 2016:

‘I’ve said it before and I want to say it again – this is an economic deal. We are not moving in to Yorkshire or merging with it. I’m Chesterfield and Derbyshire born and bred and this is where I will lay my head. I’m not interested in anything that isn’t for the best of Chesterfield and Derbyshire people because I’m proud to be in Chesterfield and Derbyshire. For years my local BBC radio station service has been provided by BBC Radio Sheffield, my postcode has been a Sheffield one and the sewers in my street have been maintained by Yorkshire Water. At the same time my ambulance services are provided by East Midlands Ambulance Service based in Nottingham. Does this mean I have become a Yorkshireman or accepted Nottingham in to my heart? Of course not. They are just examples of the ways services are provided across traditional geographical boundaries. They don’t in any way make us less patriotic about Derbyshire or threaten its existence.’

(Burrows, 2016)

This quotation demonstrates this Leader’s attempt to present the imaginaries of ‘Derbyshire’ and ‘Chesterfield’ as deeply-rooted territories in whose residents’ interests their actions are shaped in favour of. Sheffield City Region was presented merely as a source of economic benefit, rather than as a territorial and spatial identity in itself. This observation supports the findings of O’Brien (2019) who found that new city region spatial imaginaries were having to contend with other existing spatial imaginaries that had an ‘enduring presence’ in the collective imagination and became difficult to dislodge. Ultimately, however, the power of ‘Derbyshire’ as an institutionalised territory embedded in the regional imagination, combined with the political power of the County Council’s senior elected members to further reify this territory, proved to be the stronger force and the elected members of Bassetlaw District and Chesterfield Borough Councils eventually had to yield by withdrawing from the Deal.

#### **8.1.4 Summary**

This section has revealed how the political territories that were historically institutionalised along county lines exhibited a form of path dependency as they continued to be reproduced in the ‘spatial imagination’ of local planning actors following the establishment of the City Region, and as such led to a resistance amongst both officers and elected members to fully engage beyond these boundaries, particularly in a formalised way on matters related to strategic spatial planning. Whilst these institutionalised territories continued to endure, their structuring effects were to a certain extent ‘weakened’ by growing political divisions that emerged between the individual authorities, particularly those in South Yorkshire, and by the reinvigoration of the ‘Yorkshire’ spatial imaginary. This led to a ‘strengthening’ of individual local authority territories, as an increasing ‘localisation’ of activity and decision-making was cognitively framed by local political actors as being in their authority’s best interests, as will be further discussed in the following section. In the south of Sheffield City Region, the county territories continued to be reinforced, which resulted in the decision by Bassetlaw District and Chesterfield Borough Councils to withdraw from the Mayoral Devolution Deal. The institutionally embedded nature of the county-based territories and spatial coalitions, combined with a competing rise in the structuring influence of the ‘local’ political territory, left little political inclination to

invest in or legitimise ‘Sheffield City Region’ as a spatial imaginary; an issue that will be returned to in section 8.3.

## 8.2 A ‘localising’ agenda

Drawing on the observed political shift away from ‘regional’ towards ‘local’ interests, this section discusses in greater detail why this shift occurred, including the role of austerity and the rise in economic competition between authorities. It also considers how actors’ perceptions of their own authority’s interests in respect of the wider economic and political context contributed towards an embedding of the ‘local’ as an institutionalised territory that shaped their actions in respect of strategic decision-making and cross-boundary planning practices. Local actors’ ideational framings of this strategic context resulted in a tendency towards competition over collaboration. This tendency is then explored by examining the role of Sheffield City Council within the wider City Region, including how its role as a ‘core’ city and ‘lead’ authority was perceived, understood and contested by actors in the other authorities.

### 8.2.1 The context of austerity

During this research it was observed that the growing political divisions discussed previously had been exacerbated by the wider context of austerity, in which the increasing financial constraints faced by local authorities meant that local planning actors’ decisions to actively participate in the governance structures of the Combined Authority were increasingly motivated by the perceived financial benefit of participating (or the perceived potential detriment of *not* participating), rather than because they were necessarily supportive of the City Region concept and the opportunity for greater collaboration at a strategic scale. As one Senior Planning Officer from Bassetlaw District Council commented:

‘We were never going to give up on Nottinghamshire or give up on D2N2, because we would be looking a gift horse in the mouth if we did that. There was money there and there’s opportunity to engage there. So, we were never going to fully back away from that.’

(Senior Planning Officer at Bassetlaw District Council, INT021)

This quotation illustrates how the rules that shaped local authority engagement in the formal structures of the LEP were, in part, cognitively framed by local planning actors as being in their local authority’s financial interests. However, authorities’ decisions to participate were also, in the case of the East Midlands district authorities, constrained by the wider politics of devolution, including resistance by the County Councils to the devolution of powers which they currently held, to the SCR Combined Authority<sup>1</sup>. In Chesterfield Borough Council, for example, the main concern expressed by its elected members following their decision to withdraw from the Devolution Deal related to the loss of potential future investment for their authority. During a meeting of Chesterfield Borough Council, the Council Leader stated that ‘with no deal on the table, we need to try even harder to get those homes and jobs’ (FN108, Chesterfield Borough Council meeting, 19<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The territorial politics of devolution in Sheffield City Region are further discussed in sections 5.3.4 and 8.1.3.

July 2017). This again illustrates how participation in the Combined Authority was cognitively framed as bringing positive financial benefits; funding that authorities would be unable to acquire from other means. During this meeting, the report that was presented to the Council recommended that its members support continuing active ‘non-constituent’ membership of the SCR Combined Authority, stating:

‘Whilst the strong economic and strategic cases for full membership are largely unchanged from those informing the council decision in 2016, it is clear that the political landscape has changed in recent weeks and that the prospect of achieving full membership has significantly reduced... If Chesterfield Borough Council does not become a full member of the SCR Combined Authority, it will not have access to the full benefits of the devolution deal agreed with government in October 2015. A recent analysis by officers estimated this could be in the region of £35m over the next five years.’

(Membership of the Sheffield City Region Combined Authority, Report to Chesterfield Borough Council meeting, 19<sup>th</sup> July 2017, p.61-62, DOC245)

The evidence presented here suggests that the decisions by local authorities to join the Combined Authority and participate in the City Region were in large part driven by the perceived opportunities it provided for accessing sources of funding, although in some instances, these were superseded by the more powerful influence of the county councils, to whom the district authorities were still subservient (as discussed in section 8.1.3). These perceived benefits acquired greater meaning in the wider context of the austerity measures being introduced by central government, as these opportunities were perceived as being ‘the only game in town’<sup>1</sup> and that participating in the Combined Authority ‘is what you’ve got to do if you want some money’<sup>2</sup>. These perceived benefits explain why Bassetlaw District and Chesterfield Borough Councils chose to continue as ‘non-constituent’ members of the Combined Authority, rather than cutting ties completely.

### **8.2.2 Contestation over collaboration: Putting local interests first**

Rather than being perceived as a ‘space of collaboration’, the wider context of austerity meant that the Combined Authority was increasingly framed by local planning actors as a ‘space of contestation’ through which local authorities had to compete in order to gain access to much-needed funding. This resulted in strategic decisions being, in part, driven by a prioritisation of local interests rather than what might have been understood as the ‘wider interests’ of the City Region. This perhaps entirely expected rational concern of elected members to preserve the interests of their own authority when making strategic decisions is further evidenced in these comments of a Senior Planning Officer:

‘They’re elected by people within their area, so their job really, even if they’re on the City Region board, is to look after the interests of their area. So, I guess that’s it. There’s probably a need for better education and understanding of what the benefits are, but I think there is the sort of parochial,

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<sup>1</sup> Senior Planning Officer at Nottinghamshire County Council, INT024

<sup>2</sup> Senior Planning Officer at Nottinghamshire County Council, INT024

‘this is my patch, I’m looking after my patch’, and not seeing the City Region as beneficial, but as a bit of a threat.’

(Senior Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council, INT015)

Elected members’ cognitive framings of the City Region as a ‘threat’ from which they needed to protect the interests of their own authorities is perhaps a reflection of a perception that the Combined Authority was taking decision-making powers away from individual authorities, coupled with a rising sense of distrust amongst authorities that was exacerbated by the wider context of growing political divisions. These framing processes resulted in the already institutionalised territory of the ‘local authority’ acquiring greater structuring power throughout Sheffield City Region, as adherence to the formal rules of participation by local planning actors in collaborative practices at the City Region scale was increasingly resisted. In particular, there was an increased resistance amongst elected members to engage in formalised strategic plan-making<sup>1</sup> and even, in some cases, to embark on joint evidence base studies. As one Senior Planning Officer reflected:

‘It’s all been very up in the air since the City Region’s been set up. Because of the uncertainty, a lot of the areas have decided to go down their own track, I think. I’m thinking of things like how do they deal with gypsies and travellers, for example. So, they all know what their individual needs are. Whereas before, when it was South Yorkshire, there was a South Yorkshire Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Assessment that was done, that covered all four. But now they’re all dealing with what they’ve identified as being their own need, and we’re in the same boat. So, until it all settles out with the City Region, I can’t see it getting any better...I think it’s a wider political thing. I think it’s more about the interests of the different local authorities that are around...Those sorts of issues are quite difficult to reconcile when it comes to keeping together what is a defunct authority, as South Yorkshire is.’

(Senior Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council, INT005)

The significant structuring force of the local authority as an institutionalised territory was further exemplified in the shift in the overall spatial planning focus away from an objective consideration of the ‘roles of places’ at a strategic scale, towards a localised prioritisation of each individual authority. As one Senior Planning Officer recollected, following the abolition of the Region Spatial Strategies the spatial planning decisions that were made within South Yorkshire began to favour the needs of the individual authorities rather than adopting a more strategic focus that considered how different places related to one another and therefore what decisions might be in the best interests of the area as a whole:

‘We were about to produce a table of ideal sizes for the centres, Sheffield, Rotherham, Barnsley and Doncaster. But, of course, when abolition came along, there was no compromise between the different councils, because everybody’s in it for themselves. And that’s also partly due to the sort of

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<sup>1</sup> As detailed in section 7.2.

ethos changing at the time, where regeneration and competitive bids for funding and that sort of thing, meant that we got all local authorities trying to get as much as possible. There's more emphasis on competition for funding rather than the balanced planning, according to the needs of the various towns and their role.'

(Senior Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council, INT012)

The local authority territory was further institutionally embedded through elected members' framings of their local territorial interests as something that should be prioritised above those of other authorities and the wider City Region. As a result of this institutional embedding, the approach taken by officers to strategic planning shifted from one that was focused around spatial plan-making to a more aspatial form of strategizing. This was demonstrated, for example, in the strategies prepared by the SCR Executive Team, including the Strategic Economic Plan, which identified a number of key 'priority growth areas' that were geographically located<sup>1</sup>, but was otherwise decidedly aspatial. The SCRIP also identified a series of 'priority projects', but these were projects, focused within the individual growth areas, that in many cases had already been identified by the respective local authorities in their Infrastructure Delivery Plans. As such, the SCRIP failed to provide a strategic spatial perspective that considered what infrastructure was required across the City Region as a whole; instead remaining very much focused at the 'local authority' level.

This institutional shift away from strategic spatial plan-making conflicted with local planning officers' normative ideational framings of how things 'should' be done, as discussed in section 6.3.1. However, as has also been previously discussed, officers' attempts to resist these institutional shifts away from a formalised approach to strategic spatial plan-making were largely unsuccessful, and their actions increasingly reflected those that served to reproduce the territorial interests of their respective local authorities. For example, a Planning Officer from Bassetlaw District Council commented during a meeting that they thought the data gathering exercise that was being led by the SCR Planning Officers Group to inform the Duty to Cooperate statements was a good idea, but that 'with a local authority cap on, we feel a need to protect our patch'<sup>2</sup>. They also explained that this was a way of thinking that they 'didn't like' but they knew there was a lot of political pressure on them to behave in this way. It was also observed that the institutionalisation of local territories tended to be more deeply embedded in the smaller, district authorities. For example, as one Senior Planning Officer noted, the district authorities tended to prioritise planning within their own authority boundaries, rather than choosing to adopt a more 'strategic' outlook:

'Lots of small districts without strategic capacity tend to try and plan as islands, rather than planning for being part of greater entities. Where they do that successfully, tends to be where they are drawn in.'

(Senior Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council, INT019)

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<sup>1</sup> See section 5.3.1 for further detail of the 'priority growth areas' identified in the SEP.

<sup>2</sup> FN011, Meeting between Sheffield City Council Planning Officer and Bassetlaw District Council Planning Officer, 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2016

This quotation reflects a view that was commonly expressed by officers in the larger unitary authorities (and which was supported by the evidence gathered during this research) that local planning actors within the smaller, district authorities would adopt a ‘parochial’, inward-looking approach. This unwillingness or inability of the district authorities to engage in strategic spatial planning is thought to have been, as this quotation suggests, partly the result of these authorities having fewer resources or ‘strategic capacity’ to undertake these types of activities. It is also likely to have been influenced by the comparative lack of development pressure faced by these primarily rural authorities compared with the more densely populated, or ‘under-bounded’ urban authorities (Hamiduddin & Gallent, 2012). As a result, it is likely that the actions of the district authority local planning actors were to some extent shaped by their cognitive framings of participation in strategic spatial planning activity as a ‘threat’ to their own authority’s territorial interests<sup>1</sup>. The previous quotation also suggests that it was only when these authorities were ‘drawn in’ to the City Region apparatus that they began to see beyond their borders. This process of ‘drawing in’ was observed as more likely to occur when local planning actors’ cognitive framings of the perceived (often financial) benefits of participating in the Combined Authority outweighed the perceived threat to their own authority’s interests or the political pressure being levied by a more powerful governing body, such as the County Council.

### **8.2.3 The role of Sheffield in the City Region**

Whilst it was generally accepted that the actions of local planning actors would be primarily driven by an obligation to preserve the interests of their own local authority, when it came to explaining the actions of Sheffield City Council, this reasoning was treated rather more negatively by actors within other authorities, as the following quotation illustrates:

‘I think there’s a perception that actually they [Sheffield City Council] don’t necessarily operate for the benefit of the City Region. And that some of the issues are obviously driven more by what’s best for the city. I think you could probably say that of any local authority though. I think it’s quite difficult when there’s a big city like that, because obviously I think it does drive a lot of what goes on around it. So, I think the relationships can be a bit tricky, and I think trying to get a balance...I think maybe if, in due course, there were some definite perceived benefits of things that came out of the City Region and maybe particularly from Sheffield themselves that had benefits for elsewhere. But I think there’s a lot of things still ongoing that are just driven by the local interests.’

(Senior Planning Officer at Rotherham MBC, INT028)

Part of this antagonism towards Sheffield City Council and its elected members is thought to stem from a lack of clear consensus regarding what role they should play within the City Region; whether Sheffield should be recognised as the ‘core’ city or ‘lead’ authority that is prioritised for receiving investment and

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<sup>1</sup> See also section 6.3.2



from whose success the other ‘peripheral’ authorities derive secondary benefits, or whether each of the City Region’s authorities should be treated equally and receive an equivalent share of available funding.

Local planning officers, including those outside Sheffield City Council, seemed to acknowledge that, from a functional perspective, Sheffield was the core city and as such it did have some role to play in ‘leading’ the City Region, not least because it had the greatest resources and capacity to deliver, particularly on strategic planning issues. However, there was a sensitivity amongst Sheffield City Council officers that Sheffield was often perceived externally as the ‘big bad brother’<sup>1</sup> and it should not therefore forcibly exert a leadership role over the other authorities, nor should it be seen to be doing things purely for its own benefit, as the following quotation illustrates:

‘If there were some that go more down the ‘oh we’re the city, we’re important’ route, then obviously that’s going to rub everybody else up the wrong way. That’s not what it’s supposed to be about. But it might be purely from the size of us, that it doesn’t feel like it always, but we might have capacity to lead on particular things, where other authorities, they just don’t have a very big...I’m thinking specifically about planning, but they don’t have very big planning teams. So, you would think maybe Sheffield would lead, but it has to be not just what *we* think should happen.’

(Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council, INT002)

As this quotation illustrates, local planning actors within Sheffield City Council were concerned that, for political reasons, Sheffield should not be perceived to be outwardly forcing decisions that would be primarily viewed as being in its own interests, whilst also internally acknowledging that Sheffield is the primary settlement in the City Region and that ‘[its] failure will mean the failure of the City Region, and [its] success will mean the success for the region’<sup>2</sup>. This appeared to present somewhat of a dilemma for the local planning actors within Sheffield City Council; whether to act in the best interests of Sheffield, or in the best interests of the wider City Region. This dilemma was further complicated by the fact that what a representative of Sheffield City Council perceived as being in the best interests of the City Region was not necessarily the same as that understood by a member of another authority (as exemplified in the debates around the location of the HS2 station, which is discussed further in section 8.2.4).

Ultimately, the institutionalised territory of ‘Sheffield’, and actors’ cognitive framings of their strategic interests in respect of this political territory, proved to be the more powerful structuring force, and as such, the actions of local planning actors within Sheffield City Council were frequently acknowledged as being pursued to further Sheffield’s interests (and thereby further embedding ‘Sheffield’ as a local political territory) rather than seeking to pursue horizontal collaboration across its borders. This is exemplified in the following comments issued internally by a Senior Officer at Sheffield City Council in relation to the draft Local Plan. Here, the officer suggests that the focus of the Local Plan should be to promote the interests of

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<sup>1</sup> Senior Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council, INT008

<sup>2</sup> Senior Economic Development Officer at Sheffield City Council, INT017

Sheffield, even where these would conflict with what might be perceived as the ‘best interests’ of the wider City Region:

‘In [the draft Local Plan], there are statements that ‘focus major growth where it would be in the best interests of **Sheffield City Region** as a whole’. This felt a bit odd – do we mean SCR really, not Sheffield? Does this plan have any remit to go beyond Sheffield and won’t there be some instances where one could argue we actually pursue [something] that is arguably not in the best interests of the City Region as a whole but we want it in Sheffield?’

(Extract from email from Senior Officer at Sheffield City Council to Senior Planning Officer in response to working draft of Local Plan, 19<sup>th</sup> October 2016, DOC035, emphasis in original)

This demonstrates that although there was a normative expectation that Sheffield, as the eponymous authority within the City Region, would not place its own interests above those of the other City Region authorities, it was, on occasion, perceived to have done precisely that. Indeed, some of the actions taken by local planning actors within Sheffield City Council were understood as an attempt to ‘dominate’ the City Region, which led to a growing sense of antagonism and distrust; or what Walsh (2014: 318) describes as a ‘them and us politics’; which this research observed between Sheffield and the other City Region authorities. One particular example concerned a controversial report that outlined options for planning for Sheffield’s long-term urban growth. This report was commissioned by the City Council and prepared by the external design consultancy URBED (2015) to provide an independent view of how the city might look to accommodate its future housing growth. As this Senior Planning Officer at Bassetlaw District Council explained:

‘OK, the image might be about Sheffield, but the City Region isn’t Sheffield, it is this wider area, and how do we play our part in that and be responsible for it? Not be the ones that run off and go, ‘it’s *Sheffield* City Region, so we’re first and everybody else follows’. Occasionally it can feel a bit like that, when they do certain things. I don’t think they do it maliciously...I think sometimes they just forget. They had that concept plan done by that award-winning consultancy [URBED]. If you looked at that fancy plan, it planned new towns in parts of North East Derbyshire, but they didn’t ask or tell North East Derbyshire that was happening. And that’s a little bit bad. I know it has no material weight and they did start to distance themselves from it when it started talking about urban intensification of Sheffield and the loss of Green Belts. But you commission someone to do a fancy plan, or at least a concept consultation paper and it’s going beyond your borders, you need to involve those people a little bit more.’

(Senior Planning Officer at Bassetlaw District Council, INT029)

Even though the URBED report was not a statutory plan, Sheffield City Council’s lack of consultation added to the growing sense of distrust and perceived ‘threat’ that Sheffield posed to its neighbouring authorities, not least because of concerns about where Sheffield might need to place some of its future housing need, if not within its own authority boundary. The perception that Sheffield was ‘over-asserting’ its position within

the City Region was also derived from the closer affiliation and influence that Sheffield City Council appeared to have within the Combined Authority, as the following quotation illustrates:

‘In the past, when they’ve actually put representations in to the North East [Derbyshire] plan, they use the term ‘Sheffield City Council’ and ‘Sheffield City Region’ almost interchangeably, which we found like, ‘well, what do you mean? And actually, you’re commenting on behalf of the council, not from the SCR’. But I think they’ve obviously got more linkages into the City Region, because it kind of stems from Sheffield, doesn’t it, talking to its wider neighbours. So, I think they have a very strong influence. Certainly stronger than the likes of North East Derbyshire or Bolsover.’

(Senior Planning Officer at North East Derbyshire District Council and Bolsover District Council, INT037)

This quotation illustrates how Sheffield’s local planning actors framed spatial planning issues, not just in local territorial terms, but as a wider strategic concern; possibly spurred on by an acknowledgment that these were not issues which they alone were capable of resolving. The spatial imaginary of the ‘City Region’ was therefore repeatedly invoked and reproduced in discussions led by the City Council, particularly when framing strategic planning issues. It is likely that the ‘City Region’ was perceived by actors within the City Council as more than just a source of economic funding, but as a valuable institutional tool which, if properly embedded, might incentivise the cross-boundary, collaborative working needed to help resolve Sheffield’s growth pressures. Therefore, because of the actions of its officers and elected members, Sheffield City Council emerged as one of the main authorities driving the City Region agenda. This resulted in a growing sense of distrust amongst the other City Region authorities, which was heightened by the widening political and territorial divisions discussed in section 8.1.2, and in turn led to an increased resistance to the institutional embedding of the ‘Sheffield City Region’ spatial imaginary. This resistance emerged in the form of the promotion, by elected members of non-Sheffield authorities, of an ideational agenda based upon equal and democratic decision-making, rather than the perceived undemocratic form of decision-making in which Sheffield City Council was positioning itself as the unelected ‘lead’ or ‘core’ authority. This approach to strategic decision-making is discussed in the following section.

#### **8.2.4 Implications for strategic decision-making**

The effect of the institutionally embedded local political territories, combined with the broader atmosphere of competition and distrust (particularly that directed towards Sheffield City Council) that had developed within the City Region, led to the emergence of a particular form of strategic decision-making within the Combined Authority. This approach was based on an equal distribution of resources and benefits between the individual City Region authorities, which was normatively framed as an ‘appropriate’ way of making strategic decisions; rather than one based on an objective assessment of ‘best value’ and a rationalisation of the economic advantages of a particular investment. Elected members in particular were determined to ensure that each local authority remained on an equal footing both in terms of the process of decision-making

and the subsequent benefits they received, as one Member of North East Derbyshire District Council reflected:

‘Sheffield’s a ninth. It’s a ninth of the Sheffield City Region. They’re an equal member. We have the same vote as a district council as Barnsley, Doncaster, Rotherham, Sheffield. Oh, it might be easier for them to flex their muscle, their financial might at times. You play on that, you know. But it isn’t big brother, ‘you’re going to do as I say’. No. And you never hear this in meetings, but outside meetings if [Elected Member of Sheffield City Council]’s on at Rotherham and starts ‘flexing’, I’ll say, ‘hold on, come back. We’re sat around this table as well.’

(Elected Member of North East Derbyshire District Council, INT038)

This Elected Member’s emphasis upon Sheffield being an equal member of the City Region was a reaction to Sheffield City Council’s relative political and economic power and its ability to shape the agenda and the outcome of decisions towards what were perceived as being its own interests. Non-Sheffield elected members of the Combined Authority resisted the institutionalisation of Sheffield City Council as the ‘lead’ or ‘core’ authority through their ideational framing of ‘equality’ and ‘proportionality’ as an appropriate model of strategic decision-making, and openly resisted any decisions that did not conform to this approach, as the following fieldnote extract from a meeting of the SCR Combined Authority illustrates:

‘The leader of Chesterfield Council raised the issue of a lack of proportionality in the distribution of funding (see Agenda Item 15 – only 14% of funds have been allocated to Chesterfield Council). They described Chesterfield as the ‘poor relation’ on many of the budget agenda items.’

(Extract from FN045, Sheffield City Region Combined Authority Meeting, 30<sup>th</sup> January 2017)

Whilst this approach to decision-making was challenged by some elected members, notably members of Sheffield City Council, the convention of ‘proportional’ or ‘equal distribution of resources’, rather than ‘equal distribution of anticipated benefits’, eventually became embedded as an informal rule that guided much of the strategic decision-making within the Combined Authority. For example, as an Officer at the Joint Authorities Governance Unit explained, when the SCR Infrastructure Funding (SCRIF) was being allocated to projects, they were initially ranked by the amount of GVA uplift they were expected to provide, until the following occurred:

‘...one district says, ‘oh, hang on a second, my scheme’s number eight. I haven’t got a prayer here, have I? We’re never going to get anything, in this’. So, then we got into compromise, and arbitration, and the politics get involved that everybody wants a bit. And so, we had the scenario where...all of the nine districts had to have one scheme each in the top nine. Politics. Which was, unfortunately, that’s not cooperation. Cooperation is saying, ‘yes, OK, I appreciate that my district won’t necessarily get any more employers, but we might get more employment’. Next door you might not get any more employment, but you might get more employers. Collectively, we’re all winning, so let’s not worry about it. So, with the situation with SCRIF, where schemes that should

have been up at the top suddenly had to go down. Sheffield...people can't argue, Sheffield's the city, it's the magnet for investment. But, you know, we'll never get around that one. I think, is it, four of the five top schemes in the SCRIF list were in Sheffield? So, suddenly four of those schemes had to drop to below number nine, because only one of Sheffield's could technically be in the top nine. And I thought, 'here we go'. So, it's...yes, politics again.'

(Officer at Joint Authorities Governance Unit, INT033)

It therefore appeared that where political consensus could not be reached, the strategic decisions that were made by the elected members were primarily shaped by the informal rule of 'equal resource distribution', rather than being based on an objective assessment of the impact these decisions might have at a local or City Region scale. In some cases, it was observed that this over-reliance on the easy fallback option of 'sharing things equally' has meant that elected members have been prevented from developing the collaborative connections and skills necessary to reach a majority consensus when presented with a series of options. This has meant that, in some cases, the City Region's authorities ended up with a compromised position that was arguably worse than any of the original proposed options. This was particularly apparent in instances where 'sharing things equally' was not a viable option, as one elected member reflected in relation to the process for deciding where the new HS2 station should be located within the City Region:

'I mean, it snookered HS2 for us. I mean, we've ended up with a worse situation, because of Sheffield's intransigent...if we'd have stuck with Meadowhall, I'm sure it would've been a lot better for everybody. Sheffield wanted their cake, and they've ended up with custard pie, because they're going to get a slower train for the last ten miles or so. And I think that's a lot of the problems behind what's happening now at the City Region, because Barnsley and Doncaster have taken umbrage.'

(Elected member of Rotherham MBC, INT040)

There was a recognition amongst some officers that the inability of elected members to make strategic decisions was also due to a lack of strategic leadership, and that the introduction of an independent arbiter (such as an elected mayor) might lead to more instances of 'meaningful' collaboration, as one Senior Economic Development Officer commented:

'Fundamentally the other local authorities would, on occasion, prefer things to be split pro rata to population, this 'fair share', you know, equality of funding, rather than real consensus around priorities. But we've never truly resolved this issue. And some of it, I'm afraid, is quite base, jealousy, parochialism, some fairly base human reactions to stuff. But, having said all of that, it's bloody hard, because...for a democratically elected leader of Rotherham to say, 'no, no. Put the investment in Sheffield'. That's really, really hard. So, that's where the governance side of things and a metro-mayor, for me, was so important. To actually have somebody that was accountable at that big a scale, with the length of tenure to be able to hopefully make big, courageous decisions, and be able to demonstrate the benefits of it. But to expect democratically elected leaders of 'X', to not be fighting for 'X', and to see investment in 'Y', is fundamentally going to be a difficult place to be.

But some of the behaviour and the culture in South Yorkshire, I'm afraid, just goes back to some fairly deep-seated and fairly basic level emotional reactions to stuff.'

(Senior Economic Development Officer at Sheffield City Council, INT039)

Whilst this officer perceived the election of a City Region Mayor as a potential solution to the issues that surrounded the Combined Authority's ability to make 'good', consensus-based strategic decisions, there was equally a recognition that the political and territorial divisions that were institutionally embedded within the City Region would continue to exist, and even an elected mayor<sup>1</sup> might struggle to overcome these.

### **8.2.5 Summary**

The section has examined how the environment of austerity and competition through which the Combined Authority was established, led to a further embedding of the local authority as an institutionalised territory. The structuring power of these local territories was further evidenced in the response by other authorities to the perceived 'threat' posed by Sheffield City Council, including elected members' resistance to accepting the role of Sheffield as 'core' city or 'lead' authority. The evidence presented in this section also illustrates how actors' framings of a localised territory became further institutionally embedded and subsequently shaped the approach to strategic decision-making that was pursued in the City Region context. This approach to strategic decision-making that was enacted through the Combined Authority Boards, and the compromised positions and widening political divisions that stemmed from it, also had implications for the institutionalisation of Sheffield City Region as a spatial imaginary and the approach to strategic spatial planning that was ultimately adopted within the City Region, as will be discussed in the following section.

## **8.3 Sheffield City Region as a 'hardened territory' or 'soft spatial imaginary'?**

This section draws on the concepts of the 'spatial imaginary' (see, for example, O'Brien, 2019; Varro, 2014) to examine how Sheffield City Region has been framed through the ideas of local planning actors, and the extent to which (if at all) Sheffield City Region has been institutionalised as a 'territory'. Building on the discussion of 'political territory' introduced in section 8.1, this section begins by examining in greater detail the multiple, overlapping geographies that are contained within and represented by Sheffield City Region (section 8.3.1) and how the boundaries between these territorial spaces were represented in spatial planning terms (section 8.3.2). This is followed by an evaluation of the extent to which the 'spatial imaginary' of Sheffield City Region has become institutionally embedded as a 'territory' and invoked by local planning actors in shaping their approach to strategic spatial planning in the City Region (section 8.3.3).

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<sup>1</sup> The first Mayor of Sheffield City Region was elected in May 2018, following the period of fieldwork that informed this research.

### 8.3.1 The multiple spatial geographies of Sheffield City Region

At first glance Sheffield City Region appears to fit the definition of an ‘informal’ or ‘soft’ planning space as outlined by Allmendinger & Haughton (2010), which describes city regions as ‘a hybrid of top-down and bottom-up functional space...driven by an explicit economic development and competitiveness agenda’ (p.812). However, some of the evidence gathered during the fieldwork questions the extent to which Sheffield City Region is truly representative of a ‘functional space’. Firstly, there was a clearly expressed understanding amongst all local planning actors that Sheffield City Region, as well as being represented by the formal governance structures of the Combined Authority, also represented a geographic area; but what exactly was represented by this geography was framed in multiple ways by different actors. Some actors, for example, framed the City Region as Sheffield and its ‘hinterland’ or ‘area of influence’<sup>1</sup>, whilst others framed it as a hierarchical arrangement of authorities forming a ‘functional’ geography, and others as a grouping of disparate authorities that had been joined together for arbitrary or political purposes.

Part of the reason for this lack of consistency in how the City Region was framed as a spatial imaginary was due to the uncertainties regarding the constituent and non-constituent membership of the Combined Authority. As a result, the ‘Sheffield City Region’ nomenclature was employed to describe several different political institutions and geographic areas, including the nine constituent and non-constituent authorities, or the four constituent South Yorkshire authorities. Another reason was the fact that the City Region was artificially constructed, both in terms of its geography and functionality, which meant that it did not possess the historical embeddedness of other spatial geographies, such as the local authorities, that had become firmly institutionalised political territories. As one elected member stated:

‘I think you can look at Combined Authorities as slightly more local government-dominated regional development agencies, in many respects. I think secondly, that what that meant is they’re slightly false constructs, so they’ve had to find and develop their purpose over time. They’ve done that at different paces and in different ways. But I don’t think that, because they were...not forced, but hoisted upon local authority structures, I think that they sort of missed a bit of trick at the start in terms of taking that a step back and saying, ‘well, what are we going to do?’, and they’ve sort of had things added into them, like transport, like the PTE. Whereas, actually, there’s not much of a chance to step back and design from scratch and say, ‘well, what powers should a combined authority have, or a city region have? How should that work?’. That hasn’t really happened to any significant extent. So, I think that there’s a recognition that they’re artificial constructs.’

(Elected member of Sheffield City Council, INT036)

This quotation illustrates how Sheffield City Region was formed of a ‘bottom-up’ response by a group of local authorities to a ‘top-down’ opportunity for devolution introduced by central government. Sheffield City Region was arguably more of a ‘manufactured’ rather than a ‘naturally occurring’ spatial geography; one

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<sup>1</sup> Senior Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council, INT004

whose borders are coterminous with a somewhat arbitrary grouping of local authority spaces. This lack of cohesion or sense of common purpose across the authorities contributed towards the failure of Sheffield City Region to establish a consistent or shared spatial imaginary (as further discussed in section 8.3.3).

Secondly, the geography of Sheffield City Region was also complicated by the fact that its boundaries overlapped with those of the adjacent Leeds City Region and D2N2 LEPs. These so-called ‘over-LEPs’<sup>1</sup> were permitted as a means of better reflecting the multiple economic and functional geographies that transcended city regions, which Pugalis & Townsend (2014) perceived as an acceptance, at least in policy terms, of the complex and relational nature of urban planning spaces. Many local planning actors recognised that it was not possible for the City Region to represent a single functional economic area, because, as one Senior Planning Officer stated; ‘there are no single functional economic areas. The entire country, and in fact Europe, is a mosaic of them’<sup>2</sup>. As such, there did appear to be a consensus amongst local planning officers that Sheffield City Region represented a more ‘sensible’ geography than was previously represented by the Yorkshire and Humber and East Midlands regions, whose geographies were perceived as being more ‘arbitrarily administrative’ than they were ‘functional economic’. As a Senior Planning Officer at Chesterfield Borough Council described it, Sheffield City Region was ‘derived from the way things work, rather than just something that sits there and has some boundaries around it’ (INT027).

Indeed, many of the officers and elected members spoken to during the research recognised that there were multiple geographies represented even within a single local authority area, as these comments of a Senior Planning Officer at Bassetlaw District Council illustrate:

‘As a district, we’re a very odd entity. We probably refer to at least four areas, if not more. Mainly so because Worksop is closer to Rotherham than it is to Nottingham, but it’s also close to Derbyshire. Tuxford is more closely linked with Lincolnshire. Harworth is definitely closely linked to Doncaster, but doesn’t want to be part of Doncaster. And then other parts of the rural areas are part of Nottinghamshire. So, finding a clear, distinct identity for ourselves is difficult. So, sitting within the City Region but also slightly aside from it has never been a massive issue for us, it’s just looking at what it can bring and how that then we can feed into those benefits. And we’ve had a lot of investment out of it, because spending money in our area has just as easily benefitted Doncaster, and certainly the investments in Harworth have brought a lot of jobs to people that currently live in Doncaster, so that collective thinking, I think, has been really quite beneficial.’

(Senior Planning Officer at Bassetlaw District Council, INT021)

Similar expressions of multiple (and sometimes conflicting) spatial identities were also exhibited by other authorities within the City Region, such as North East Derbyshire, which due to its elongated geography ‘looks’ to Sheffield, Chesterfield, Nottingham and Derby in terms of its economic geography and travel to

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<sup>1</sup> Senior Planning Officer at Chesterfield Borough Council, INT027

<sup>2</sup> Senior Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council, INT019



work areas; parts of Bolsover ‘look’ to Mansfield<sup>1</sup>; parts of Bassetlaw ‘look’ to Lincoln<sup>2</sup>; and Barnsley ‘looks’ to both Sheffield and Leeds. These examples illustrate how the overlapping boundaries of SCR and its neighbouring City Regions were perceived in a positive light as they provided a boundary that was flexible to a certain degree and could be adapted by local planning actors to allow the formation of different spatial coalitions to meet actors’ particular needs. These multiple relational geographies were therefore reflected in some of the various approaches to collaborative working that were observed across the City Region.

However, the spatial geography of Sheffield City Region appeared to more closely reflect what Heley (2013: 1340) describes as a ‘useful uncertainty’, in that in some instances it helped foster increased collaboration between adjoining local authorities through the formation of spatial coalitions, while in other instances it created an additional level of complexity that constrained collaborative practice. For example, the acceptance that Sheffield City Region comprised multiple, relational geographies, resulted in greater technical complexities when it came to strategic spatial planning and decision-making, such as balancing the implications of multiple, overlapping housing market areas<sup>3</sup>. As the following quotation illustrates, the complex nature of these spatial geographies and the working relationships that developed within and between them inhibited the ability of the multiple authorities that were represented within the City Region to ‘come together’ and present themselves as a single cohesive spatial coalition or territorial entity:

‘The Local Plan Liaison Group<sup>4</sup> has been our main route for doing things like the SHMA, but then, of course, at SCRPOG we’re then talking about the City Region-wide work of interpreting the LEP’s housing target, and then at DPOG, the Derbyshire one, we’re covering things like the gypsy and traveller accommodation assessment, which is done Derbyshire County-wide, with a little bit of Staffordshire thrown in as well. So, the cooperation, it’s a bit like a Venn diagram. There are all these overlapping bits of geography, and then also these overlapping layers of the strategic level, that you’re having those discussions, that all sort of fit together. And one of the difficult bits is, I think, is finding a good way of describing what those relationships are. Because they are then different, of course, for every authority... It’s almost like you’re trying to put a jigsaw together, but you’ve got multiple layers at the same time.’

(Senior Planning Officer at Chesterfield Borough Council, INT027)

Sheffield City Region therefore exhibited a degree of ‘fuzziness’ (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2010), both in terms of the ‘over-LEP’ local authorities and also in terms of the complex nature of the other overlapping, multi-layered, inter-linked spatial geographies, coalitions and territories that continued to be enacted both within and beyond its boundaries. Rather than enhancing cohesion between local authorities at the City

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<sup>1</sup> Senior Planning Officer at Chesterfield Borough Council, INT027

<sup>2</sup> Senior Planning Officer at Bassetlaw District Council, INT029

<sup>3</sup> Senior Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council, INT019

<sup>4</sup> A Planning Officer group that meets regularly and includes representatives from Chesterfield, North East Derbyshire, Bolsover and Bassetlaw District Councils, and Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire County Councils.

Region scale, the ‘over-LEPs’ appear to have contributed towards increased competition as individual authorities vied for resources and investment opportunities from each city region, in order to ‘get the best of both worlds’<sup>1</sup>. However, rather than having the ‘best of both’, the ‘over-LEP’ authorities often ended up suffering from a lack of clear identity and allegiance, being neither fully one thing nor the other, as the following quotation by a Senior Planning Officer at Bassetlaw District Council illustrates:

‘There’s lots of little splits inside the City Region. It depends how you decide to slice the pie. And every time you come across a border issue like constituent and non-constituent members, the ability of them to agree hard changes and then it trickle through into our plans, is lessened. So, now we’ve made the clear statement that we’re not going to go that far down the route, and the Devolution Deal was slowed down, for want of a better term...It’s made it harder to do that stuff. But it never was the main driver for us. We’re conscious of what they’re doing and trying to connect into it, but Bassetlaw’s interested in other things. We’ve got other neighbours. And I think it’s always been difficult for the southern, peripheral members of the City Region, because...we’re in two LEPs, still, that makes it difficult for us. We are two tier authorities, we’re county authorities...We aren’t wholly part of the Sheffield City Region. We are Nottinghamshire. We’re East Midlands.’

(Senior Planning Officer at Bassetlaw District Council, INT029)

This quotation illustrates how the ‘over-LEP’ authorities’ allegiances were torn between the city regions, as their actions towards each were cognitively framed through a perceived need to maximise the benefits of being a member of each. This meant that neither became fully embedded as a political territory, as actors’ allegiances to each were continually being undermined by their attention towards the other City Region. In the case of the authorities in the south of Sheffield City Region, the resistance to the territorial embedding of Sheffield City Region was exacerbated by the fact that the ‘competing’ city region (D2N2) was formed around the counties, which continued to remain strongly institutionalised as political territories<sup>2</sup>.

### **8.3.2 The role of borders in Sheffield City Region**

The way that borders within and around Sheffield City Region were talked about and represented in policy and other documents was indicative of a further embedding of local authority territories and a political resistance to the formation of a supra-local territory at the scale of the City Region. As a historic example, during the production of the RSSs when four new ‘sub-regions’ were introduced, these were visually represented in the RSS using fuzzy, overlapping areas of shading to delineate the areas, as illustrated in Figure 7. The significance of this process for the elected members involved was recollected by one Senior Planning Officer:

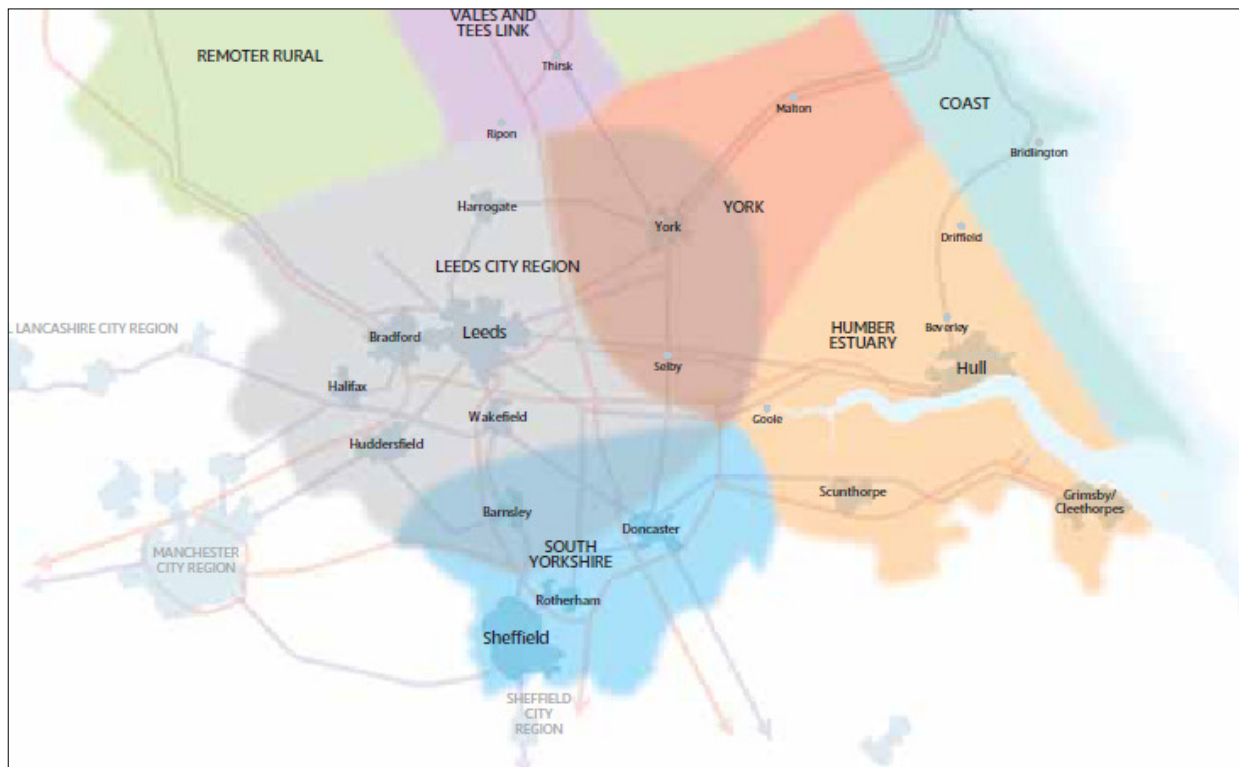
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<sup>1</sup> Elected member of Bolsover District Council, INT043

<sup>2</sup> The structuring power of the County Council territories have been previously discussed in section 8.1.3 in relation to the debates that encircled Bassetlaw District and Chesterfield Borough Councils’ proposed membership of the SCR Combined Authority.

‘What was interesting was, in regional days, the boundaries and how they were articulated became really important in politicians’ minds... Time was spent on whether we used hashed lines, unbroken lines or just fuzzy shading, and bevelled shading, to talk about sub-regions within Yorkshire and the Humber.’

(Senior Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council, INT019)



**Figure 7** The region's sub-areas, extract from The Yorkshire and Humber Plan: Regional Spatial Strategy to 2026 (Government Office for Yorkshire and the Humber, 2008: 45)

Whilst the blurring of boundaries between the sub-regions may have been implemented as a means of better representing and acknowledging the relational nature of the geographies of the Yorkshire and Humber region, the previous quotation indicates that this decision was more likely a political one. Paasi & Zimmerbauer (2016) discuss how borders are often blurred as a means of avoiding conflict and over-prescription, which in the case of the RSS was most likely informed by the ‘peripheral’ authorities’ desires to maximise their opportunities relative to the ‘core’ cities. Barnsley MBC, for example, chose to align itself with both Leeds City Region and South Yorkshire, or what would later become Sheffield City Region, in order to draw on the benefits of its proximity to each city. In spatial terms, local planning actors within Barnsley MBC chose to frame their authority as a valuable asset by virtue of the fact that they are an ‘overlapping’ or ‘peripheral’ authority, as one Senior Planning Officer commented:

‘...for somewhere like Barnsley that sits in a corridor half-way between two core cities, what we argue is that you should look at it as a corridor, and we can play a fundamental role in that corridor’

(Senior Planning Officer at Barnsley MBC, INT032).

Therefore the ‘blurring’ of the boundary between the two city regions was employed by Barnsley’s local planning actors as a strategic tool to assert their position and strategic role relative to both Leeds City Region and Sheffield City Region. However, whilst this involved acknowledging and framing both Leeds and Sheffield City Region as spatial imaginaries, Barnsley’s actions continued to be shaped by the preservation and promotion of its own territorial interests, which remained firmly institutionally embedded.

In terms of how boundaries have been represented within the current Sheffield City Region, there was evidence to suggest that local authority territorial boundaries had a less significant structuring influence in shaping the actions of local planning officers. This is perhaps due to the fact that amongst planning officers, although they were aware of political tensions and local territorial boundaries, their normative framings of cross-boundary collaborative exercises as an appropriate way of working and an opportunity to achieve better planning outcomes (as previously discussed in section 6.2.1) had a greater structuring power over their actions. As a result, there were instances in which local planning officers sought to effectively ‘dissolve’ the boundaries between their authorities and work within a different spatial imaginary. For example, one Economic Development Officer discussed how they had chosen to represent local authority boundaries in the plan that was being prepared for the Advanced Manufacturing and Innovation District (AMID), which straddled the border of Sheffield City Council and Rotherham MBC:

‘And that does involve us working at both that sort of central point, really, of the nucleus as we call it, which is the AMP [Advanced Manufacturing Park] and the AMRC [Advanced Manufacturing Research Centre] too, either side of the Parkway there. But again, the whole concept of the AMID is that it involves...it’s more about a way of life. So, it’s about where people live, how they commute to work, where they spend their leisure time, what the leisure offer is. So, from that nucleus then, the area then spreads out to take in housing estates on both sides of the border, leisure facilities as far as Parkgate in Rotherham, and the city centre, the town centre. So, it’s totally knitted together, so that it’s one wide boundary, which crosses the border between the two councils, but that border almost doesn’t even appear on the drawings that we show. It’s not really relevant, if you see what I mean.’

(Economic Development Officer at Sheffield City Council, INT018)

This example illustrates that a sub-regional spatial coalition between Sheffield City Council and Rotherham MBC had historically formed and continued to be reproduced; and whilst there were other examples of collaborative practices in which local planning officers were able to ‘erase’ or ‘minimise’ borders between local authorities, these were also often constrained to local coalitions or small sub-regional groupings of authorities. In contrast, there were few, if any, observed attempts to ‘minimise’ the borders between all the local authorities within the City Region in order that Sheffield City Region was framed as a cohesive whole. Even within the SEP, for example, the diagram illustrating the ‘roles of places’ still included the local authority boundaries (see Figure 8).



**Figure 8** Roles of Places in Sheffield City Region, extract from SCR Strategic Economic Plan (Sheffield City Region Local Enterprise Partnership, 2014: 16) Image reproduced with permission from Sheffield City Region

Within the strategy documents prepared by the Combined Authority, including the SEP, Sheffield City Region was visually illustrated as a collection of local authority territories with fixed borders, rather than a holistic entity with fluid and flexible boundaries. This is reflective of the extent to which local territories remained firmly institutionally embedded, and in some cases ‘strengthened’ as a result of growing competition amongst the authorities for resources and increasing political tensions (as discussed in section 8.2). These competing local authority territories therefore continued to exert a structuring force on the strategic decisions that were taken by the Combined Authority, which in turn led to an increased resistance to the institutionalisation of Sheffield City Region as a ‘territory’; an issue that will be further discussed in the following section.

### **8.3.3 The institutionalisation of Sheffield City Region as a ‘territory’**

The complex nature of the multiple administrative geographies and political territories that were being simultaneously enacted within and across the borders of Sheffield City Region meant that ‘Sheffield City Region’ was having to compete with a host of historically embedded spatial imaginaries and territories. As such, the situation in Sheffield City Region reflected that which Walsh (2014: 317) identified in Dublin City Region, where the development of a truly integrated spatial development plan was ‘significantly undermined by the predominance of competing territorial spatial imaginaries’. The key difference being that in Sheffield City Region any form of spatial planning strategy was far from emerging. This was in part because despite its existence in organisational and administrative terms, and despite actors’ recognition that a collection of

local authority territories could be gathered together to form a spatially-defined geography known as ‘Sheffield City Region’; it had thus far failed to become institutionalised as a territory, to the extent that observed practices and decisions were not structured around a need to enhance or preserve the interests of the ‘City Region’ over those of the individual local authority. Therefore, although the ‘soft’ spatial imaginary of Sheffield City Region was readily invoked in the discourse of local planning actors, it was not framed in the same way by all actors, and as such struggled to become normalised and embedded in the routine practices of local planning actors; at least not to the extent that it was able to compete with the firmly embedded local authority territories.

The inability of Sheffield City Region to become institutionalised as a territory is thought to have been in part due to the perceived arbitrary nature of its geography (as discussed in section 8.3.1). Therefore, in terms of how the residents of Sheffield City Region related to its spatial geography, they did not share the same sense of identity or cohesion as they did with other more firmly embedded territorial spatial imaginaries, such as those of ‘Derbyshire’ or ‘Yorkshire’. Some local planning actors indicated that this perceived lack of cohesion derived from their inability to identify a shared or common objective; in other words, the thing that Sheffield City Region ‘stood for’ or its ‘raison d’être’. A Senior Planning Officer commented on this lack of a common objective in respect of the deliberations that took place around the location of the proposed High Speed 2 railway station<sup>1</sup>:

‘You get the sense that we’re not...there isn’t perhaps that sense of common purpose that, for instance, Greater Manchester, perhaps have. And obviously I know they all have their fall outs and disagreements, but you do get the sense that they’re more gelling as a set of authorities and working to a common purpose, perhaps. I think we’re still a little bit...you know, it’s ‘Sheffield and everybody else’, can be a perception. And things like the HS2, for instance, you know, the fall out about that doesn’t help. Doesn’t help us all gel and actually plan strategically for the future. We really ought to have got behind one option or the other and you know, that’s the City Region’s preferred option.’

(Senior Planning Officer at Rotherham MBC, INT026)

The concept of ‘common purpose’ might be understood as actors’ discursive framing of an institutionalised territory, in that these references to a perceived ‘lack of common purpose’ reflected actors’ unwillingness or inability to legitimise Sheffield City Region as a spatial territory; at least not one that was sufficiently institutionally embedded or had the structuring power necessary to compete with the strongly embedded local authority territories and draw actors together in a collaborative sense across the City Region. This perceived lack of ‘common purpose’ therefore meant that the spatial imaginary of Sheffield City Region was not framed in territorial terms, and as such there was little incentive for elected members to work together to preserve the wider interests of the City Region<sup>2</sup>. As a Senior Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter 5 provides further detail on the politics surrounding the proposed HS2 station.

<sup>2</sup> This may be contrasted with local planning actors’ tendency to prioritise the interests of their own local authority, as discussed in section 8.2.2.

commented in relation to cross-boundary collaborative working; ‘...it requires both a duty to cooperate and a willingness, but I don’t know how that’s achieved other than by individuals seeing the greater good of the group as a whole’ (INT012).

A further reason why the authorities of Sheffield City Region failed to unite around a common purpose, and why its legitimisation as an institutionally embedded territory was resisted, is thought to have been due to the fact that the exogenous forces that were driving the City Region; notably the policy agendas and Devolution Deals that were introduced by central government, overlooked the fact that there were existing political territories and spatial coalitions in place and inherent differences between the constituent authorities (notably those between the district authorities and metropolitan boroughs). As such, the local actors tasked with implementing the government’s strategic agenda failed to effectively consider how these existing competing territories should or could be managed in the process of attempting to superimpose a new spatial imaginary ‘on top’ of these, as a Senior Planning Officer commented:

‘A proper functioning Sheffield City Region should unlock spatial planning to deliver a synergy, which means that we deliver more than the collective sum of its parts. Particularly talking about Sheffield City Region, I would say there has been a twin set of priorities. One priority is the economic growth imperative and all the things that you would call spatial regeneration. But actually, and equally and damagingly now, more important parallel workstream was actually to justify and promote the existence of the Sheffield City Region as an entity, and to secure a directly elected mayoral Devolution Deal. To do that, certain principles were put to one side... it was clear that the differences between Barnsley and Doncaster, and Rotherham and Sheffield...perhaps those four authorities ought to have spent more time getting their political differences resolved, rather than trying to go on an expansionist agenda, when actually, what did the damage to the Sheffield City Region was, I think it crumbled from within slightly.’

(Senior Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council, INT019)

Therefore, Sheffield City Region emerged as a disruptive spatial imaginary, which as a means of accessing economic benefits through its organisational structures it was widely embraced; however, in territorial terms it was cognitively framed by many local planning actors as an ambiguous, shifting force with the potential to destabilise locally embedded political territories; and as such, the institutionalisation of Sheffield City Region as a territory faced widespread resistance. A slight exception to this was Sheffield City Council, whose officers and elected members cognitively framed Sheffield City Region as less of a threat and more of a benefit, and their actions therefore appear to a greater extent to have legitimised Sheffield City Region as a territory. This process of institutional embedding, even at a local level, appears to have shaped the actions of local planning actors as they looked to increasingly work across the City Region to resolve strategic issues, rather than focusing on primarily at the local level, as illustrated in the following quotation:

‘What we were doing was increasingly through the lens of the city region. So, for example, one of the reasons I’ve not pushed for a Sheffield Growth Plan is because we had the SEP, and there’s a sense of, ‘we’re either in it, or we’re not’. And we are. So, I always thought our default position should be, we should start at the level of the city region, and only work back from there if it made sense to do so. Whereas, I think, increasingly the view has always been elsewhere, and I think unfortunately is winning the day now, that we start at the level of assuming it’s the local authority, and you may scale up. I think we should presume ‘city region’ and come down by exception. Everyone else seems to want to assume ‘local authority boundary’ and work up by exception.’

(Senior Economic Development Officer at Sheffield City Council, INT039)

The reason why actors within Sheffield City Council felt themselves more able to support the legitimisation of Sheffield City Region spatial imaginary in territorial terms is likely due to a perception that Sheffield is at the ‘core’ of the City Region, and therefore as the largest authority with the greatest level of resource, its elected members perceived themselves as having a significant amount to gain from playing an active and lead role within the City Region (as discussed in section 8.2.3). They were also therefore less resistant to embracing an ideology that was perceived by elected members of the other, arguably more ‘peripheral’, City Region authorities as a ‘threat’ to their own territorial interests.

Ultimately, the perceived lack of cohesion that emerged amongst the City Region authorities as a result of the complex and arbitrary nature of the Sheffield City Region geography and the multiple, relational and competing territories that were already embedded within it, meant that Sheffield City Region did not assume a ‘stable frame of meaning’ (O’Brien, 2019: 17) and there was an inherent resistance to the institutionalisation of Sheffield City Region as a territory. Consequently, this failure of Sheffield City Region to become institutionalised as a territory restricted the ability or willingness of its constituent local authorities to collaborate at the scale of the City Region in order resolve strategic planning issues or contemplate embarking on a more formalised strategic spatial planning agenda.

#### **8.3.4 Summary**

The evidence presented in this section demonstrates how the Sheffield City Region geography was effectively an arbitrary construct; one that struggled to reflect the complex and nuanced ways in which the City Region’s residents, businesses, governance organisations and public sector actors behaved and interacted across multiple, relational spatial coalitions and political territories. These complex functionalities were further exacerbated by ongoing uncertainties in the formal composition of the City Region (who was ‘in’, and who was ‘out’) and the ‘overlapping’ memberships of some local authorities that belonged to multiple LEP areas. This arrangement provided some of Sheffield City Region’s more peripheral authorities with the flexibility to pursue the economic and other opportunities offered by more than one LEP or Combined Authority.



However, in doing so, the perceived potential for enhanced benefits that emerged, contributed towards these same actors' reluctance to fully commit their allegiance to one spatial imaginary over the other, which in turn resulted in an unwillingness and inability to forge a sense of cohesion or 'common purpose' with their fellow Sheffield City Region authorities. The 'soft' spatial imaginary of Sheffield City Region was therefore not sufficiently 'hardened' or institutionalised as a political territory, and as such, lacked the necessary structuring power to draw the local planning actors from across the City Region together and successfully compete with the other existing, embedded local authority territories. The failure of Sheffield City Region to become territorially embedded is therefore thought to have contributed to the observed lack of a formalised approach to strategic spatial planning becoming established within the City Region.

## 8.4 Conclusion

This chapter has provided answers to the fourth research question<sup>1</sup> by discussing how the multiple political territories and spatial imaginaries that overlay the geography of Sheffield City Region have been formed and transformed, and how these territorial and relational spaces have been interpreted by local planning actors and contributed towards shaping the approach to strategic spatial planning and other cross-boundary collaborative practices within the City Region. The evidence presented in this chapter, in particular, demonstrates how the spatial context of Sheffield City Region is formed of a complex web of interconnected, overlapping and continually evolving political territories and spatial imaginaries. It is argued that it is possible for particular spatial imaginaries to become institutionalised as 'territory', to the extent that they are observed as playing a structuring role in shaping the actions of local planning actors; for example, when actors cognitively frame their actions around preserving or furthering the interests of the residents of a particular defined spatial territory.

In particular, this chapter demonstrates how the political territories that were historically institutionally embedded around the South Yorkshire county boundary represented a form of path dependency, as they continued to be reproduced within the spatial imaginations of local planning actors, even following the demise of the organisational and governance structures that originally underpinned them. As a political territory, 'South Yorkshire' retained a structuring power that continued to shape the spatial coalitions, decision-making and collaborative practices that formed within the City Region; albeit weakening following the political divisions that emerged as a result of the 'One Yorkshire' proposals. Alongside this territorial 'weakening', the research revealed a noticeable 'strengthening' of the political territories that formed along the county boundaries of Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire, as the county 'spatial imaginaries' were employed by the County Councils as a political tool to reinforce the ideas of county allegiance and identity, which ultimately influenced the decision of Bassetlaw District and Chesterfield Borough Councils to withdraw from the SCR Devolution Deal.

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<sup>1</sup> The research questions are outlined in Chapter 2 (section 2.5).

This chapter has shown how embedded local political territories were further reinforced by the effects of austerity, which promoted increased ‘localisation’ and competition between individual local authorities. The institutional effect of these strengthened local territories was reflected in the observed approach to strategic decision-making within the Combined Authority that focused on achieving equality amongst the local authorities, including an equal distribution of resources. This chapter also revealed a growing tension between Sheffield as the spatial and economic ‘core’ of the City Region and the other more ‘peripheral’ authorities. These spatialities of ‘core’ and ‘periphery’ served to further strengthen the structuring power of the local political territories, particularly amongst the ‘peripheral’ authorities, which perceived Sheffield as a ‘threat’ to their own authority’s interests, and whose influence and perceived dominance they therefore sought to resist.

Whilst the research revealed evidence of a Sheffield City Region ‘spatial imaginary’, this imaginary did not present a cohesive spatial image of ‘Sheffield City Region’. This was partly a result of its complex geography and overlapping boundaries, and partly due to a perceived lack of ‘common purpose’ amongst its local planning actors. This lack of a clearly defined spatial imaginary, combined with the structuring power of the institutionally embedded sub-regional and local political territories, meant that despite being underpinned by the formal governance structures of the Combined Authority, ‘Sheffield City Region’ failed to become institutionalised as a political territory. This lack of territorial cohesion within Sheffield City Region had implications for strategic spatial planning practices, as strategic decisions continued to be primarily driven by local territorial interests and a ‘within boundary’ mentality, rather than being determined by a united coalition of local planning actors that were willing to collaborate, for example, through establishing a formalised approach to strategic spatial plan-making, at the scale of the City Region.

The following chapter concludes this thesis by discussing the key findings from the three analysis chapters in further detail, identifying the main contributions to knowledge of this research and providing some final reflections.

## 9 | Conclusions

The purpose of this concluding chapter is to draw together the key findings from the research, to explain how these findings represent a contribution to knowledge and to consider what these findings tell us about the circumstances in which strategic spatial planning does or does not take place. These conclusions also present some final reflections on the research in terms of its design, implementation and outcomes.

The overarching aim of this research was, in broad terms, to develop an understanding of the nature of strategic spatial planning in the devolving governance context of the English planning system. By using a methodology that focused on observing practices ‘in action’, in contrast to most other studies of contemporary strategic spatial planning that derive their data primarily from interviews or secondary sources, this research has been able to provide a richer understanding of precisely *how* approaches to strategic spatial planning are being deliberated, contested, developed and enacted in a devolving governance context.

Using a conceptual framework derived from institutionalist theory, this understanding was acquired by examining the dialectical interactions between the wider strategic (institutional) context, including its ongoing structural changes and uncertainties, and contextually-situated, strategic actors, including their role in interpreting, transforming and responding to this wider strategic context. By examining these interactions between ‘context’ and ‘conduct’, this research was able to develop an understanding of the practices of strategic spatial planning that are being enacted by local planning actors within a devolving governance setting. These conclusions draw together key findings discussed in previous chapters by reflecting on the ways in which different ‘contextual’ or ‘structural’ factors have been found to shape strategic spatial planning practices and outcomes in the context of Sheffield City Region, and what this might tell us about the implementation of (or resistance to) strategic spatial planning practices more broadly.

In doing so, this concluding chapter demonstrates the significance of the findings of this research for progressing academic discussions and theoretical debates regarding the changing nature of strategic spatial planning in a UK and European context, as well as enhancing our broader understandings of structure-agency interactions, including the role of institutional structures and local planning actors in shaping strategic planning practices. In a practical sense, this research has contributed to existing literature by providing a better understanding of the complex array of factors that affect how, whether, and what type of cross-boundary spatial planning practices are likely to emerge within a particular context. Such an understanding may help to reduce uncertainties and ambiguities in future strategic spatial decision-making. The findings of this research may also have positive implications for sub-regional governance and spatial plan-making, for instance through enabling the reshaping of governance spaces and by helping to inform future planning policies related to the promotion or formalisation of strategic spatial plan-making and other cross-boundary collaborative initiatives, as will be further elaborated later in this chapter.

The first two sections of this chapter discuss the key empirical findings of the research as derived from the research questions introduced in section 2.5.1, focusing on the main contributions to knowledge that this research provides and how it builds upon the findings of other existing literature. In doing so, section 9.1 presents a discussion of the nature of strategic spatial planning in Sheffield City Region including what the findings in earlier chapters reveal about the contextual and agential factors that shape practices of strategic spatial planning and how such practices are brought into being or resisted. Section 9.2 discusses the broader implications of this research for the future of strategic spatial planning practice within Sheffield City Region and further afield, and how the findings of this research might usefully be taken forwards to inform future academic study. The thesis concludes in Section 9.3 by providing some reflections on the utility of the theoretical framework and the contribution made by this research to our understanding of the interplay between ideas, institutions and agency, and the ethnographic methodology that was applied.

## **9.1 The nature of strategic spatial planning in Sheffield City Region**

This research set out to understand how practices of strategic spatial planning have emerged and are being undertaken within the post-2010 context of devolving city region governance in England; a period that has been characterised by ongoing structural ambiguities and changes in supra-local governance, including the formation of LEPs and (mayoral) Combined Authorities, and the effective replacement of the statutory requirement to prepare strategic spatial plans with an arguably weaker and ‘poorly defined’ Duty to Cooperate (Gallent et al., 2013: 574). These exogenous changes have resulted in a fluid and disparate approach to strategic spatial planning across England, in which practices are enacted across a variety of scales of governance; multiple, often overlapping geographies; and with varying degrees of formalisation. Reflecting what Allmendinger et al. (2016: 48) describe as a ‘‘primordial soup’ of spatial opportunities and possibilities’, this landscape of contemporary strategic spatial planning practice has posed particular challenges for academic study due to its dynamism, complexity and lack of uniformity. This research emerged out of an identified need to better understand some of these inherent and evolving complexities.

What this research therefore sought to achieve was a more detailed insight into the actor-level ‘micro-practices’ (Healey, 2010) through which strategic planning practices are enacted, in order to develop an understanding of how local planning actors interact within and between new and evolving governance spaces in the context of strategic spatial planning. In doing so, this research was intended to complement and add depth of understanding to the relatively high-level accounts of the ‘state’ of strategic spatial planning in a devolving governance context that currently exist. It was decided that this would be done by investigating, in detail, the localised practices of strategic spatial planning within one particular spatial context.

In selecting a geographic focus for this research, it was noted that the more detailed case studies that have been published to date are mainly confined to England’s growth areas, where development pressures are highest (such as around Oxford, Cambridge, London and Bristol) or where coordinated approaches to strategic spatial planning are already well-established (such as within Greater Manchester). It was considered that these areas would offer what Bafarasat & Baker (2016) describe as ‘high potential’ case studies, in

which the observation of a coordinated approach to strategic spatial planning and its associated outcomes was more likely. However, it was also determined that by focusing this research on these ‘vanguards’ of city region level strategic planning, it would risk providing a skewed perspective on the nature of current strategic planning practice in England by failing to wholly acknowledge its disparities; particularly by continuing to ignore those areas in which a coordinated approach to strategic spatial planning had not yet been fully embraced. As such, this research recognised a need to broaden the geographic focus of strategic spatial planning research by studying an area of England that had not previously been studied in this context. This identified research gap therefore informed the selection of Sheffield City Region as the case study for this research. Through the identification and application of relevant thematic and theoretical concepts that have previously been developed in academic literature, the research also presented an opportunity to further refine these concepts in the context of a ‘micro’ level, institutionalist study of strategic spatial planning.

The following paragraphs discuss the main empirical findings of this research as previously detailed in Chapters 6 to 8. Rather than simply repeating the content of these analysis chapters, this section seeks to draw together what this research has revealed about the nature of strategic spatial planning in Sheffield City Region, how various contextual factors have been interpreted by and played a role in shaping the practices of local planning actors, and the ways in which these structure-agency interactions have, to varying degrees, constrained or enabled the emergence of strategic spatial planning practices in the devolving governance context of Sheffield City Region. Each of the following sections, 9.1.1 to 9.1.6, describe the key strategic contextual factors and resources, the presence or absence of which this research has revealed play a role in shaping practices of strategic spatial planning.

### **9.1.1 The role of strategic contextual factors in shaping strategic spatial planning practices**

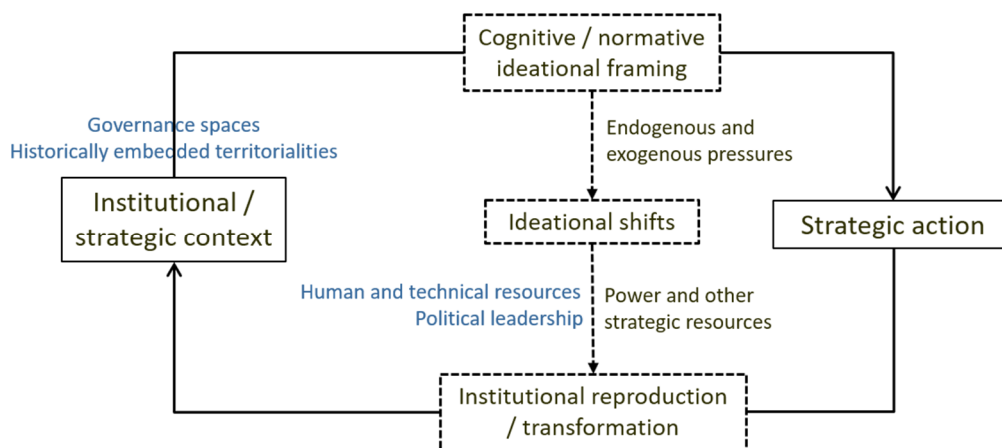
Returning to the conceptual framework (introduced in Chapter 3) that formed the theoretical foundation of this research, actions are understood to derive from strategic actors’ ideational interpretations of their strategic contexts. These strategic contexts are themselves understood to comprise institutions (including formally prescribed rules and informal conventions) and other structuring forces (including wider political or economic factors and resources) that are both spatially and temporally situated, and have the potential to be reshaped through processes of dialectical interaction between actors, their ideas and the contexts in which they are situated. In the case of this research, the strategic planning practices observed were primarily characterised by a repetition of historically embedded collaborative forms of working and an overwhelming political resistance to the introduction of a formalised approach to strategic spatial planning at the City Region scale. This was in contrast to the reported experiences in other Combined Authorities across England, such as Greater Manchester (see Colomb & Tomaney, 2018), Liverpool City Region (see Dewar, 2018) and the West of England (see Boddy & Hickman, 2012, 2013), where a formalised approach to strategic spatial planning is being progressed (albeit with varying degrees of success to-date).

Through its detailed examination of the case of Sheffield City Region, this research has provided a unique insight into why such a disparity in approaches to strategic spatial planning has emerged across England in a

post-RSS context by revealing the significance of strategic contextual factors in shaping practices of strategic spatial planning. A core finding of this research is its identification of a series of contextual, contingent and relational factors at play within Sheffield City Region that were shown to demonstrate a form of structuring power, the presence or absence of which ultimately contributed towards a resistance by local elected members of strategic spatial planning. This ‘structuring power’ was shown to emerge through actors’ interpretations of their strategic contexts (and the contextual, contingent and relational factors contained therein), and it was these ideational interpretations that subsequently shaped the practices of strategic spatial planning that were enacted and observed. The specific contextual factors of particular significance were:

- The hard, soft and ‘in between’ spaces of governance within which strategic actors interacted and through which practices of strategic spatial planning were deliberated, contested and resisted;
- The historically embedded territorialities and territorial narratives that shaped the nature of collaborative coalitions and multi-scalar interactions across the City Region;
- The availability of human and technical resources required to implement strategic spatial planning practices; and
- The strength of political leadership required to enact institutional shifts and promote a strategic spatial planning agenda.

Figure 9 illustrates how the strategic contextual factors identified above may be incorporated into the conceptual framework introduced in Chapter 3. As this diagram shows, spaces of governance and historically embedded territories, may be understood as forming part of the institutional or strategic context that is ideationally interpreted by strategic actors and through which their actions are shaped. The implications of such factors for shaping strategic spatial planning practices are discussed in detail in Chapters 7 and 8. Alongside these strategic contextual factors, the political power and human and technical resources that were available to local planning actors, as introduced in section 3.3.5, were also found to play a key role in shaping action by helping to reinforce or resist ideational shifts or transformations, such as those that might be required to promote the adoption of a formalised approach to strategic spatial planning.



**Figure 9** Conceptual framework including identified significant strategic contextual factors (shown in blue)

The findings of this research reveal how each of these strategic contextual factors played a role in shaping the approach to strategic spatial planning and the practices observed in Sheffield City Region. In particular it was found to be the result of a lack of human and technical resources and political leadership, combined with a strongly embedded territorial and governance context, which led to a resistance of the necessary ideational and institutional shifts that would have been required to enable the adoption of a formalised approach to strategic spatial planning within the City Region. This is not to suggest that these are the only structural factors that shape strategic spatial planning practices, but that these were the key factors identified as exerting a significant structuring force during the course of this research. Each of the strategic contextual factors identified above and its influence on the strategic spatial planning practices observed is discussed in further detail in the following sections.

### **9.1.2 Hard, soft and ‘in between’ governance spaces**

This research revealed not only the important role that the spaces of governance and organisational structures of devolving city regions play in enabling or constraining strategic spatial planning practices, but the differential role played by different *types* of governance spaces, be they hard, soft or ‘in between’. This builds upon existing academic commentary (for example, Shutt & Liddle, 2019b) by providing more detailed insight into how the organisational and governance spaces of Combined Authorities are interpreted, and how they play a role in shaping the development of cross-boundary collaborative and spatial planning practices between different groups of local planning actors.

In the case of Sheffield City Region, the Combined Authority’s governance structures failed to effectively enable cross-boundary collaborative practices because, as revealed by this research, elected members showed an institutionalised preference for interacting through ‘informal’ or ‘soft’ spaces of collaboration, and the spaces through which elected members were authorised to act within the Combined Authority were primarily ‘hard’ and ‘formalised’. For example, the Sheffield City Region Combined Authority was found to embody a strict rigidity in terms of its membership and its formal ‘rules of engagement’, which meant that of all elected members, only local authority leaders were allowed to formally participate within its structures (as discussed in section 7.1.1). This exclusion of a wider body of elected members (as evidenced, for example, through the removal of the member-led Transport Committee, whose technical capacity was shifted to officers within the SCR Executive Team) and the increasing ‘centralisation’ of decision-making within the Combined Authority’s Executive Boards led to what this research describes as a ‘hardening’ of the Combined Authority’s governance structures; in which the organisational borders became increasingly difficult to permeate by non-approved individuals (as evidenced by local planning officers’ failed attempts to forge closer links with the formal Combined Authority governance structures, discussed in section 7.2.4), and its decision-making processes became increasingly opaque and provided little opportunity for debate. This research therefore supports the assertion that devolving city regions are demonstrating characteristics of an increasingly ‘post-political’ form of governance (as discussed in Etherington & Jones, 2018; Deas, 2013, 2014).

In contrast to these ‘hardened’, ‘post-political’ governance spaces, this research found that ‘informal’ or ‘soft’ spaces continued to emerge beyond formal governance structures (whether of the Combined Authority or local authority) and outside of public scrutiny. These ‘informal’ spaces offered greater flexibility in terms of how members were expected to act and the practices that were expected to be performed within them, and as such provided a space in which members could hold informal discussions, establish a rapport, negotiate, and make concessions or ‘deals’. Such ‘deals’ were often then ratified through formal spaces of governance, such as the Combined Authority Board meetings. This was exemplified by the ‘back-room’ agreements that were made between the elected members of North East Derbyshire District Council and Chesterfield Borough Council regarding the allocation of SCRIF spending (discussed in section 7.3.1). These findings resonate with research undertaken by Hillier (2000) who recognised the significance of ‘sub-surface interactions’ in shaping collaborative practices between elected members.

This observational evidence demonstrates an important symbiosis between both ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ spaces in processes of strategic decision-making. It was this combination of formal and informal spaces of member interaction that shaped some of the strategic decisions in Sheffield City Region. These observations accord with the findings of Haughton & Allmendinger (2008) who argue that formal or ‘hard’, and informal or ‘soft’ governance spaces are ‘mutually constitutive’ and that ‘one cannot work without the other’ (p.143). However, many of the ‘soft’ spaces that were evident within Sheffield City Region existed between small coalitions of authorities, rather than being at the scale of the City Region (as discussed in section 7.3.1). This research therefore revealed how the lack of ‘soft’ spaces within and through which elected members were able to collaborate at the scale of the City Region is likely to have contributed to the observed lack of effective strategic decision-making within the Combined Authority and the failure of more collaborative city region-scale practices (such as a formalised approach to strategic spatial planning) to emerge. This is because the ‘hardened’ and ‘formal’ structures of the Combined Authority did not represent the ‘flexible and fluid arenas for negotiation’ traditionally associated with ‘soft space’ forms of governance (see Haughton & Allmendinger, 2008: 147), and as such, these spaces lacked the characteristics necessary to enable processes of debate, mediation, deliberation and ideational innovation through which effective cross-boundary collaborative and strategic spatial planning practices might have otherwise emerged.

Despite the spaces of Combined Authority governance demonstrating the characteristically institutionalised forms of ‘hard’ or ‘formal’ spaces, they were also observed to be significantly less rigid in certain other respects. For example, they displayed an ability to undergo rapid institutional transformation in response to exogenous changes imposed by central government, such as changes in funding regimes (as discussed in section 7.2.1) or the introduction of an elected mayor, in which the Boards and decision-making processes of the Combined Authority were regularly reformed and restructured, as these comments of an Officer at the Joint Authorities Governance Unit illustrated: ‘If DEFRA next week said, ‘we’ve been allocated by the Treasury £10 billion to fix the air quality problem in this country. We are going to give this money to [...] Combined Authorities’, we will have an air quality executive board within about five minutes of that decision being made’ (INT033).



This suggests that if ‘soft’ space forms of governance display a characteristic ‘fluidity’ that can be readily shaped from within, and ‘hard’ governance spaces display a characteristic ‘rigidity’ that is institutionally resistant to change, it might therefore be argued that the formal governance structures of Sheffield City Region Combined Authority are neither ‘hard’ nor ‘soft’, but instead display a characteristic ‘malleability’ in that they retain a ‘hardness’ until an external source of pressure is applied (such as the announcement by central government of a new revenue opportunity for Combined Authorities, or the requirement to elect a mayor), at which point they are capable of being rapidly reformed and adapted. This reflects a ‘punctuated equilibrium’ account of institutional change, as described by Sorensen (2014), in which changes are triggered by exogenous political or economic shifts. In such instances, the structures of the Combined Authority are ‘softened’ as they are reworked, reconfigured and reorganised in response to these external pressures, but are then ‘re-hardened’ as the new arrangements are embedded in a new set of rules and regulations. This characteristic looseness and rigidity was, for example, evidenced in the Sheffield City Region Governance Review that led to the reshaping of the City Region’s governance structures prior to the formation of the Combined Authority (SCR Executive Team, 2013), as discussed in section 7.1.1.

From a conceptual perspective, it is therefore argued that whilst the discussion of ‘hard’ and ‘formal’, or ‘soft’ and ‘informal’ spaces of governance has been useful in demonstrating how certain strategic, voluntary collaborative arrangements have developed, this introduces a binary dualism between formal/informal and hard/soft spaces of governance which, as this research has shown, is not reflective of how Combined Authority governance structures (including those within Sheffield City Region) are enacted. Such spaces of governance might be better described as having ‘degrees of elasticity’ or ‘malleability’, in which the characteristic forms of ‘hardness’ and ‘softness’ can be represented on a sliding scale. Such a conceptualisation would help to better reflect the transitional nature of Combined Authority governance, as well as supporting other observations made during this research, for example the ‘semi-formal’ spaces created by the local planning officer groups (as discussed in section 7.3.2), which retained a degree of informality yet also sought to retain certain formal characteristics in order that they might better engage with other formal Combined Authority governance structures. Such spaces may be described as ‘in between’ the traditionally characterised ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ spaces that have previously been discussed in the literature. The findings of this research therefore open the door for further debates and empirical research around the interrelationship between ‘hard’, ‘soft’ and ‘in between’ spaces and forms of governance.

In terms of developing our understanding of strategic spatial planning more broadly, these findings are significant because they highlight the importance of different forms of governance structures in shaping planning practices. In the case of Sheffield City Region, the structures that were in place informed a resistance to a formalised approach to strategic spatial planning and the ideational transformations that were being promoted by local planning officers towards such an approach. As one Senior Planning Officer commented; ‘having the city region approach is the right geography, it just doesn’t have the governance to go with it’ (INT014). In Sheffield City Region, it appeared to be the rigidity and formality of the Combined Authority’s spaces of governance and decision-making that promoted a resistance to collaborative working

between elected members across the authorities and that prevented a strategic spatial planning agenda being embraced at the scale of the City Region.

However, it was not just the constraints presented by the City Region's governance structures that informed the resistance to strategic spatial planning. This research identified a number of other strategic contextual factors that played a key role in shaping these practices, as the following sections will elaborate.

### **9.1.3 Historically embedded territorial narratives**

The second strategic contextual factor that was shown to play a role in shaping local planning actors' approaches to strategic spatial planning was the historically embedded political territories and soft spatial imaginaries that emerged through and alongside the City Region's more formal spaces of governance. The research revealed a complex web of overlapping and evolving spatial geographies within the City Region context. These geographies are represented by networks of interactions and relational connections between political and local planning actors, ranging from the scale of the local authority through to a variety of sub-regional spaces, the City Region and beyond.

Resonating with earlier findings of Pugalis & Townsend (2014) that revealed 'the importance of the legacy of past sub-national forms of governance maintained by some enduring spatial coalitions' (p.52), the spatial geographies that comprise Sheffield City Region also demonstrate strong path dependencies, with many of the spatial coalitions that developed around these geographies reflecting the reproduction of former administrative groupings of authorities and historic patterns of working (such as those that were enacted through South Yorkshire County Council and the Regional Assembly) or party political allegiances. These historic spatial coalitions remained institutionally embedded and continued to be reproduced, at least initially, following the establishment of the LEPs (as discussed in section 8.1.1).

The evidence presented in this thesis illustrates how some spatial geographies have a tendency to become institutionally reinforced and embedded as 'territory', whereas other previously embedded territories revealed a tendency to weaken as political divisions formed and widened. These differential and often simultaneous processes of 'strengthening' and 'weakening' of political territories, combined with changes in the wider economic context, led to an increasingly competitive environment and a shift in patterns of cross-border collaboration within the City Region. This in turn contributed to the shaping of strategic planning practices, including those that were being enacted through the Duty to Cooperate, and the wider resistance to a formalised approach to strategic spatial planning at the scale of the City Region.

For example, despite its continuing existence as an institutionalised spatial imaginary, as a political territory 'South Yorkshire' was institutionally weakened because whilst some political alliances and spatial coalitions continued to be formed and enacted within it, the polycentric nature of South Yorkshire, with four settlements each competing for a piece of an ever-shrinking pie meant that conflicts emerged between these authorities. Therefore, whilst cross-boundary collaborative and strategic decision-making practices were to a certain extent shaped by the structuring power of historically embedded sub-regional territories, these practices were also shaped to an increasing degree by the territories that formed and remained institutionally

embedded around local authority boundaries. As discussed in section 8.2, the research identified an increased trend towards ‘localisation’ in which the actions of local planning actors appear to have been structured around their ideational interpretations of the perceived ‘best interests’ of their own authority, and the preservation and promotion of these interests. This research reveals how the ‘local authority’ as territory, and in particular the territorial conflicts between the ‘core’ City Region authority (Sheffield City Council) and the other ‘peripheral’ authorities, became further institutionally embedded as a result of the ongoing austerity and growing financial pressures on local authorities, which produced an environment of increasing contestation as authorities were placed in opposition to one another and had to compete for the limited amount of funding that was available through the Combined Authority. This research has also demonstrated the significance of local authorities and local level interactions in shaping city regions and supra-local governance spaces. The role of the local authority is an important component that is often missed in other ‘macro level’ studies of devolving governance.

As well as territorial interests being promoted at the local level, the research also illustrated the structuring force of the county councils and their prolonged institutional embeddedness as political territories whose influence continued to be further strengthened and legitimised by these actions. These findings contribute to existing literature that discusses the inherently arbitrary nature of city region spatial geographies and their ‘fuzzy’ boundaries (for example, Beel et al., 2018; Shaw & Tewdwr-Jones, 2016), by revealing the added level of complexity and political tensions that can emerge within city regions that comprise authorities that are represented by both unitary and ‘two-tier’ systems of governance.

This research also revealed how the lack of spatial and political cohesion within the Sheffield City Region authorities, as reflected in the arbitrary nature of the Sheffield City Region geography and its overlapping boundaries (discussed in section 8.3.1), further contributed to the resistance to the institutional legitimisation of Sheffield City Region as a political territory. Whilst Sheffield City Region existed as a formal governance structure (represented by the Combined Authority), as a political territory it did not exert a significant structuring influence upon processes of cross-boundary collaboration. This was evidenced by the fact that strategic decision-making processes within the Combined Authority continued to be shaped by actors’ ideational framings of the wider strategic and institutional context, which promoted competition between authorities and a need for local planning actors to preserve their individual authority’s interests, rather than pursuing a process of collaborative decision-making. This builds on the work of, amongst others, Heley (2013) and Allmendinger & Haughton (2010, 2012), by demonstrating how the relational complexities and ‘fuzziness’ of the spatial geographies around which Combined Authorities are formed can contribute towards undermining the ability of these organisations to successfully establish and oversee a collaborative form of governance.

The findings of this research therefore demonstrate how the political territories that had the greatest structuring influence over strategic decision-making were those that were embedded at the local authority level. The scalar mis-alignment between the ‘soft’ spatial imaginary of the wider ‘Sheffield City Region’ that was being supported and reproduced through formal sub-regional governance arrangements and around

which a strategic planning ‘ideal’ was being promoted by local planning officers, and the local and county-level political territories that were shaping strategic decision-making by elected members within Sheffield City Region meant that, ultimately, a formalised approach to strategic spatial planning at the scale of the City Region continued to be resisted.

#### **9.1.4 Human and technical resources**

A further strategic contextual factor that was shown to inform the approach taken to strategic spatial planning was the role played by human and technical resources in constraining or enabling the ideational shifts that would subsequently inform processes of institutional reproduction and transformation. In this context, human resources are understood to comprise the individual local planning actors that have the necessary capacity and capability to engage in strategic spatial planning practices. In Sheffield City Region the austerity measures that have been imposed upon local authorities, for example, resulted in a reduction in available human resources, particularly at a planning officer level. As a result, officers were increasingly forced to prioritise local plan-making over strategic, cross-boundary working. Whilst these same officers were often the ones who sought to promote an institutional shift towards a formalised approach to strategic spatial planning at the scale of the City Region, they lacked the capacity and decision-making power to implement such an approach themselves.

In addition to the lack of human resources (particularly amongst planning officers) there was also found to be a lack of technical resources and policy tools required by both local planning officers and elected members to enable them to implement a strategic spatial planning agenda. Whilst the Duty to Cooperate presented an opportunity for neighbouring local authorities to collaborate on strategic planning issues, its relatively weak policy wording and lack of duty to ‘agree’ provided little incentive for local planning actors to go much further in strategic planning terms than the basic ‘tick box’ exercise required to demonstrate to a Planning Inspector that a sufficient level of ‘cooperation’ had taken place when examining each individual authority’s local plan. Beyond the Duty to Cooperate, some more ambitious cross-boundary collaborative work was led and promoted by local planning officers through their informal officer groupings, however due to a lack of resources many of these ambitions failed to come to fruition, including the proposals for establishing a Strategic Spatial Planning Unit within the City Region, as discussed in section 7.2.4.

Existing national planning policy and guidance does not in itself have sufficient legislative force to promote the ideational shift needed to enable strategic spatial plan-making between neighbouring authorities. Likewise, a number of the Devolution Deals that have been agreed between central government and combined authorities give elected mayors the power to prepare strategic spatial plans for their area of governance. However, such Devolution Deals represent a technological resource that does not enforce the adoption of a formalised approach to strategic spatial planning but instead provides an option of such an approach that may be taken up voluntarily. Therefore, even where a Devolution Deal grants strategic spatial planning powers to an elected mayor, these powers alone may not be sufficient to promote an ideational shift

towards strategic spatial plan-making. There needs to be appropriate political leadership in place to enact these powers.

#### **9.1.5 Political leadership**

The final key strategic contextual factor that was identified in this research as playing a role in shaping practices of strategic spatial planning is that of political leadership. The evidence gathered from the case of Sheffield City Region suggests that in a spatial planning system where strategic plan-making is voluntary, strategic spatial planning requires an individual or like-minded individuals with the requisite power and influence to advocate for the benefits of strategic spatial planning and to drive forward a strategic spatial planning agenda. Such a leadership role was noticeably absent in Sheffield City Region at the time the research was undertaken (as discussed in section 7.1.3), and as such there was no active promotion of the strategic spatial planning ‘ideal’ at the elected member level. Whilst this ‘ideal’ was being promoted by local planning officers, they lacked the power and resources to transform the institutional context by enabling an ideational shift amongst elected members. No local authority leader (or coalition of leaders) was willing to take up the mantle of strategic spatial planning and drive this forward at the City Region level. This was likely to be due, at least in part, to the combined influence of other strategic contextual factors, including the historically embedded territorialities and spaces of governance that constrained members’ ability and willingness to work together at the scale of the City Region.

It is possible that an elected mayor may be better placed take on this strategic spatial planning advocacy role due to their more clearly defined leadership position and enhanced decision-making power, as they have done in Greater Manchester for example. However, in order for this to happen it would be contingent upon the other strategic contextual factors previously discussed aligning in such a way as to enable an institutional shift to occur.

#### **9.1.6 The significance of structure-agency interactions in shaping strategic spatial planning practices**

Through identifying a series of key strategic contextual factors, the presence or absence of which play a role in shaping practices of strategic spatial planning, this research has developed our understanding of how strategic spatial planning practices might emerge or fail to emerge in particular strategic contexts. The conceptual framework that was developed for this research has played a significant role in enhancing our understanding of how formalised strategic spatial planning agendas are enacted or resisted through its focus on structure-agency interactions, in particular the ways in which local planning actors choose to interpret their strategic contexts and the power and resources available to them, and how these interpretations variously lead to the reproduction or transformation of institutionalised practices. In this research, planning was understood as a structured yet creative process – structured in the sense that the actions being performed by local planning actors were to a certain extent constrained by the strategic contexts in which they are situated and the availability of political power and resources, and creative in the sense that actors’ ideational interpretations of their strategic contexts provide an opportunity for the transformation of existing practices.

Such institutional transformations do not occur in all instances, however. As this research has shown, spatial planning systems comprise an array of contingent and inter-connected strategic contextual factors that are ideationally interpreted by local planning actors, and it is through these interpretations that strategic spatial planning practices have been found to be constrained or enabled. In some instances, as in the case of Sheffield City Region, the alignment of strategic contextual factors was such that actors' ideational interpretations of their strategic contexts promoted a resistance to the enactment of a formalised approach to strategic spatial planning. In other city regions and combined authority areas, strategic spatial planning has been more fully embraced. The findings of this research suggest that in these cases the alignment of strategic contextual factors are more likely to be tilted towards those that promote an ideational enabling of strategic spatial planning.

Ultimately, this research has demonstrated how a rebalancing of strategic contextual factors towards those that enable rather than constrain ideational and institutional transformations (such as the presence of a strong political leader willing to drive forward a strategic spatial planning agenda, or a more strongly embedded political territory at the scale of the city region) may enable more effective cross-boundary collaboration and encourage more widespread take-up of strategic spatial plan-making across areas of devolved sub-regional governance. The balance of constraining and enabling structuring influences for each of the key strategic contextual factors observed during this research is summarised in Table 6 below.

The top header row of Table 6 identifies the key strategic contextual factors and strategic resources discussed in the preceding sections. The characteristics of those identified strategic contextual factors that demonstrate a tendency towards *constraining* strategic spatial planning practices are discussed in the top section of the table. The middle section of the table describes the characteristics of strategic contextual factors that are considered more likely to *enable* (than constrain) strategic spatial planning practices. Within each of these two sections ('constraining' and 'enabling') the three rows illustrate (a) how the different types of strategic contextual factors and resources are framed and interpreted by local planning actors, (b) the action outcomes that are likely to result from these ideational framing processes, in relation to the enactment of strategic spatial planning practices, and (c) any institutional shifts (towards the initiation of a formalised strategic spatial planning agenda) that are considered likely to occur as a result of the dialectical interaction between the preceding ideational framing and action processes. The bottom section of the table identifies inter-connections between each of the strategic factors, illustrating how these factors do not act in isolation but are contingent and have the capacity to influence, shape and re-shape one another through the interpretive ability of strategic planning actors.

**Table 6** The role of structure-agency interactions in shaping strategic spatial planning practices

		Strategic contextual factors		Strategic resources	
		Spaces of governance	Territorial narratives	Human and technical resources	Political leadership
Constraining	a) Ideational framing	Formal or 'hard' spaces of governance, strict rules of engagement, opaque decision-making processes	Embedded spatial coalitions based upon historic sub-regional patterns of working	Lack of financial resources to employ planning policy officers, lack of policy tools incl. guidance and legislative rules	Weak political leadership at supra-local level
	b) Action outcomes	Lack of collaborative working, deliberation, negotiation and 'deal-making'	Enhanced political divisions and competition between authorities, emphasis on territorial 'localisation'	Prioritisation of local plan-making over strategic, cross-boundary working	Lack of promotion of/advocacy for strategic, cross-boundary working
	c) Institutional shifts	Tendency towards institutional reproduction and resistance of strategic spatial planning agenda			
Enabling	a) Ideational framing	Informal or 'soft' spaces of governance, flexible rules of engagement, transparent decision-making processes	Spatial coalitions established at strategic scale (e.g. city region)	Available financial resources to employ sufficient number of planning policy officers, appropriate policy tools in place incl. guidance and legislative rules	Strong political leadership at supra-local level
	b) Action outcomes	Enhanced opportunities for collaborative working, deliberation, negotiation and 'deal-making'	Cross-boundary collaboration at greater-than-local scale, territorialisation of 'city region' spatial imaginary	Ability to prioritise strategic, cross-boundary working alongside local plan-making	Promotion of strategic spatial planning 'ideal' at elected member level
	c) Institutional shifts	Tendency towards institutional transformation and initiation of strategic spatial planning agenda			

<p><b>Other contingent factors (cross-linkages between contextual factors)</b></p>	<p>Informal governance spaces informed by historically embedded territorialities.</p> <p>Prospect of financial resources shape transformation and reconfiguration of formal governance spaces.</p> <p>Strong political leadership informs processes of decision-making and engagement in formal governance spaces.</p>	<p>Historically embedded territorialities shape informal governance spaces.</p> <p>Lack of financial resources promotes inter-authority competition and territorialisation of the local authority.</p> <p>Strategic political leadership can promote establishment of spatial coalitions at new, greater-than-local scales.</p>	<p>Financial resources shape transformation and reconfiguration of formal governance spaces.</p> <p>Inter-authority competition and territorialisation of the local authority enhanced through lack of resources.</p> <p>Political leadership can inform distribution and prioritisation of resources, and shape interpretation and implementation of policy/legislation.</p>	<p>Strong political leadership informs processes of decision-making and engagement in formal governance spaces.</p> <p>Strategic political leadership can promote establishment of spatial coalitions at new, greater-than-local scales.</p> <p>Political leadership can inform distribution and prioritisation of resources, and shape interpretation and implementation of policy/legislation.</p>
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## **9.2 A future for strategic spatial planning?**

In shaping future planning practices, the findings of this research allow us to question whether it is possible, or desirable, to promote strategic spatial planning as a ‘solution’ or idealised approach to managing some of the wide-ranging issues and challenges that manifest at the ‘greater than local’ level. The findings of this research indicate that if such an approach were indeed desired, it may be possible to engineer changes in the strategic context in order to promote the presence of factors that are more likely to enable rather than constrain a formalised approach to strategic spatial planning in a devolving governance setting. Focusing on the ‘enabling’ rows of Table 6 above, for example, would suggest that by creating opportunities for the establishment of more flexible or ‘soft’ spaces of governance within the ‘hard’ structures of combined authorities, together with providing the additional human and technical resources required to support the delivery of strategic spatial planning, in a devolved governance setting may encourage the establishment of a formalised approach to strategic spatial planning. Such interventions are likely to be needed in locations such as Sheffield City Region, where the political and territorial resistance to formalised cross-boundary planning and plan-making is so strongly embedded that such practices are unlikely to emerge organically at the present time. However, the implementation of these interventions would still require strong political leadership, at both the national and sub-regional level, to stand behind and advocate for strategic spatial planning. Without this, the sporadic distribution of strategic spatial planning across England is likely to continue.

The following sections discuss the implications of the findings of this research by firstly considering whether there is an identified need for strategic spatial planning in Sheffield City Region, secondly what the future of strategic spatial planning might look like in the wider UK context, and thirdly what the potential opportunities are for future research in this field.

### **9.2.1 Does Sheffield City Region need strategic spatial planning?**

The political rhetoric around ‘strategic spatial planning’ as a policy tool capable of resolving cross-boundary planning issues has over the years repeatedly fallen in and out of favour with politicians in central government, as detailed in Chapter 2. Equally, at the local authority level and within the devolved sub-regions, the local political consensus around strategic spatial planning as a force for good is decidedly mixed, as evidenced by the disparate take-up of strategic spatial plan-making as a policy approach at the sub-national level across England, as detailed in section 2.3.3. The political resistance to strategic spatial planning has been discussed in detail throughout this thesis, along with other constraining factors and identified barriers to strategic spatial planning. However, there is a need to reflect on whether, despite this resistance and barriers, strategic spatial planning is something that should continue to be promoted and whether it is something worth fighting for.

This research identified a number of key cross-boundary planning issues within Sheffield City Region, which in the absence of a strategic spatial plan, are primarily being dealt with by the individual authorities through their local plan-making processes. Whilst in some cases there is evidence of joint working between the City

Region's constituent authorities, for example through discussions held in order to fulfil the requirements of the Duty to Cooperate or collaborative evidence gathering exercises (as detailed in Chapter 6), these examples have failed to resolve some of the more critical, longer-term planning challenges facing the City Region.

Housing delivery and the allocation of land for residential development is one such key issue, which since the abolition of the RSSs has been dealt with solely at the local authority level. This issue is particularly critical in authorities which are 'under-bounded' and constrained by a lack of a suitable, available and deliverable housing land supply, such as the City of Sheffield, which is tightly constrained by the Green Belt yet will need to deliver upwards of 2,000 new homes each year to meet its identified housing need (Sheffield City Council, 2015). Having asked its neighbouring authorities whether they would be willing to take on some of their housing requirement, the discussions held by Sheffield City Council's planning officers and elected members and their counterparts in other authorities have thus far yielded very little. These limited outcomes were partly due to the fact that some of Sheffield's neighbouring authorities had progressed so much further in the plan-making process that they were no longer in a position to assist.

Dealing with the issue of planning for housing through a strategic rather than local spatial plan would instead provide an opportunity to consider at a broader scale what the spatial distribution of housing growth should be and how this might best align with the LEP's economic growth objectives and its 'priority growth areas' (see section 5.3.1). It would also provide an opportunity for examining where housing growth is best located in relation to protected and designated land such as the South Yorkshire Green Belt. A strategic Green Belt review undertaken at the scale of the City Region may well identify different parcels of land as making the least contribution to the wider 'purposes' of the Green Belt (as defined in the NPPF) at this strategic scale, and therefore being suitable options for Green Belt 'release', than a Green Belt review carried out at a local authority level. A strategic spatial plan would also provide opportunities to meet the City Region's future transport, energy and waste management infrastructure requirements in a way that better aligns with housing, economic growth and environmental objectives, through developing a plan in which these issues are dealt with alongside one another, as opposed to within a series of separate, temporally mis-aligned plans.

It is therefore considered that a formalised approach to strategic spatial planning in Sheffield City Region would provide opportunities to resolve cross-boundary planning issues in a way that is not currently being delivered through the Duty to Cooperate and the local plan-making process. As this research has shown however, such an approach has not been forthcoming and in some cases is being actively resisted. The following section considers what the future of strategic spatial planning might look like in a wider UK planning context and how the findings of this research might be used to help encourage greater experimentation in strategic spatial plan-making at the sub-regional scale.

### 9.2.2 The future of strategic spatial planning in the wider UK context

‘It appears that in some areas (e.g. Greater Manchester and Sheffield) the new ‘soft spaces’ of governance will offer an opportunity for innovative forms of spatial planning to return to the policy agenda.’

(McGuinness & Mawson, 2017: 300)

In the years since the abolition of the RSSs, a number of academic studies have emerged that consider how strategic spatial planning approaches and practices have evolved, and what practical challenges have been faced by local planning actors in this devolving governance context. Many of these studies have been focused on locations where a more formalised, voluntary approach to strategic spatial planning has emerged, such as in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, Greater Manchester and the wider North West of England (see, for example, Hincks et al., 2017; Boddy & Hickman, 2016; Bafarasat & Baker, 2015; Haughton & Allmendinger, 2015). My research has contributed to a broader understanding of the state of strategic spatial planning in England by considering a region that has not previously been studied in this context, primarily because it is an area where strategic spatial planning has not yet been embraced at the city region scale. However, as the above findings have demonstrated, it is precisely this lack of formalised strategic spatial planning that make this research particularly valuable, as it has helped to reveal some of the key factors that have prevented or resisted the emergence of strategic spatial planning; in contrast to those geographies where a formalised strategic planning agenda has already been more fully embraced.

The innovation, flexibility and experimentation that some predicted would arise in strategic spatial planning following the removal of the regional tier of governance (Baker & Wong, 2013), including the prospect of localism becoming the ‘saviour’ of spatial planning (Haughton & Allmendinger, 2013: 4), has not emerged in some areas (including Sheffield City Region). This research suggests that the opportunities for strategic spatial planning in such cases are increasingly constrained as a result of the governance and territorial structures that have become institutionally embedded and act as a barrier to joint working and cross-border collaborative practice, including at the scale of the city region. The form of strategic spatial planning that is undertaken and promoted by local planning officers within the ‘semi-formal’ planning spaces that have become established at the scale of the city region are less characterised by ‘innovation’ and ‘experimentation’, and more by an attempt to replicate the historic structures, spaces and practices of strategic spatial planning that had previously existed under the RSS. These attempts often prove unsuccessful for a variety of reasons, including the fact that at a political level there often remains significant resistance to reinvigorating a formalised approach to strategic spatial planning similar to that which existed under the RSS.

When compared with other studies of strategic spatial planning in a devolving governance context, the findings from this research serve to further highlight the disparate nature of the approaches that have been undertaken across England and the importance of place-based, contextual factors in shaping approaches to strategic spatial planning at a sub-regional level, including the significant structuring power of historically-

embedded local and sub-regional political territories. This recognition of the role of strategic contextual factors highlights the dangers of trying to generalise from a single case, as approaches to strategic spatial planning across England exhibit characteristics, practices and outcomes that vary significantly between locales. Therefore, whilst this study of Sheffield City Region cannot be claimed to represent a 'typical' example of how strategic spatial planning is undertaken in England (because no such 'typical' example exists), it has contributed to our understanding of the types of contextual factors that exist, and the different ways in which these factors play a role in shaping approaches to sub-regional strategic spatial planning and cross-boundary collaborative practices.

In terms of its potential implications for future planning practice, this research suggests there is a need to reconceptualise what it means to 'do' strategic spatial planning in a devolving governance context, including what is represented by 'practices' of strategic spatial planning, and the roles and ambitions of different groups of local planning actors in enacting these practices. Newman (2008) criticises planning theorists for reifying an idealised version of strategic spatial planning (as is reflected in the tendency of academic literature to focus on those locations whose approach to strategic spatial planning involves the preparation of a formal spatial plan or strategy) and for criticising planners who fail to live up to this normative conception. However, as this research has found, this notion of an idealised form of strategic spatial planning was also promoted by local planning officers themselves. As such, it is perhaps not just planning theorists that need to be wary of fixating on promoting one or a series of 'correct' ways of approaching strategic spatial planning; particularly ones that are so strongly rooted in the historic context of what has been implemented previously.

This research therefore suggests there is a need to encourage practitioners and other local planning actors to see strategic spatial planning as something more flexible, that is capable of embracing rather than resisting the complex and relational geographies and 'fuzzy' boundaries of city regions, and the array of territories embedded within them, and that allows practices to reflect more 'limited expectations and short-term collaborative ambitions' (Newman, 2008: 1373) rather than being framed as a fixed, long-term strategy that must be prepared in a certain way. Such an approach may help to overcome some of the negative connotations associated with the concept of strategic spatial planning, such as those derived from the era of Regional Planning, in which strategic spatial plans were perceived as restrictive 'burdens' that were imposed in a top down manner by undemocratically elected bodies, rather than being embraced as an opportunity to resolve cross-boundary planning issues in a collaborative manner, from the bottom up.

The findings from this research, for example, indicate that a 'softening' of the Combined Authority governance structures might help enable a flexible approach to strategic spatial planning by providing more informal spaces in which elected members can engage with one another and establish their own form of collaborative practice and approach to resolving strategic issues that takes account of the multiple, overlapping territories that exist within the Combined Authority, rather than a more rigid approach that attempts to impose a single territory ('the city region') by effectively erasing all the boundaries within it. There may therefore be an opportunity to consider a different form of cross-border governance, such as that which Varro (2014) identifies has emerged in other areas of Europe; one which is characterised by 'looser

forms of coordination through problem-focused partnerships’ (p.2250) as opposed to one that is primarily driven by external funding opportunities. This may enable a city region’s constituent authorities and their elected members to work *with* some of the more firmly embedded political divisions that exist by acknowledging these, rather than by trying to overcome them. As Healey (2015: 268) states, it is better to ‘adopt a pragmatic approach’, rather than ‘follow abstract utopian imageries’.

Encouraging local planning actors to see strategic spatial planning in a devolving governance context as something that can represent ‘flexibility’ (or ‘malleability’) rather than ‘rigidity’, might also help to encourage a wider adoption of the innovative and experimental forms of practice that were initially envisaged for the era of post-RSS devolution, as referenced in the quotation by McGuinness & Mawson (2017) at the beginning of this section, but which have, as yet, failed to emerge.

### **9.2.3 Opportunities for future research**

It is clear from anecdotal evidence, as well as other academic studies, that there is significant variation in approaches to, and governance of, strategic spatial planning across England and between different city regions. Greater Manchester and the West of England, for example, are areas that have both pursued a formalised approach to strategic spatial planning through the preparation of a strategic spatial plan, although they have each adopted different approaches to the governance of these planning practices; the former being undertaken and coordinated through the structures of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority<sup>1</sup>, and the latter being prepared and led by the four local authorities that comprise the West of England Combined Authority<sup>2</sup>, rather than by the Combined Authority itself. In order to further develop the findings from this research, it would be interesting to undertake a comparative study (using the same methods as applied in this research) in a ‘high achieving’ area such as these, where a formalised approach to strategic spatial planning has been embraced, to examine the extent to which the practices and patterns of behaviour observed in Sheffield City Region are also present in these other contexts. A study such as this might, for example, consider; the extent to which political territories were able to ‘harden’ at the scale of these other city regions; what factors informed this process of territorial embedding; and how this was different to the processes that were observed in Sheffield City Region, in which the institutionalisation of Sheffield City Region as a political territory faced widespread resistance.

Whilst cases of strategic spatial planning and governance in other devolved administrations have formed the basis of previous academic study, further investigation of these cases using a detailed ethnographic approach, such as that adopted in this research, would help to provide a more nuanced, actor-focused understanding of, for example, how ‘strategic spatial planning’ is interpreted in a context where it is being actively pursued, and what significance do ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ spaces and structures of collaboration have in shaping

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<sup>1</sup> A first round of consultation on the Draft Greater Manchester Spatial Framework was held between January and March 2019. A second round of consultation is scheduled to take place in Autumn 2019 (GMCA, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> The West of England Joint Spatial Plan was submitted for Examination in April 2019. In early August 2019, Planning Inspectors recommended that the plan be withdrawn from Examination due to concerns raised regarding the plan’s soundness and lack of evidence supporting the proposed spatial strategy and Strategic Development Locations (Helen Wilson Consultancy Ltd., 2019).

strategic spatial planning and strategic decision-making in these contexts. Further study based around questions such as these might help provide insights into why disagreements arise or collaborative practices appear to become ‘unstuck’, and how these issues might be resolved in order to keep these strategic planning practices ‘on track’. It would also help to develop a more comprehensive picture of the nature of strategic spatial planning in the context of devolved governance in England, including what it means to ‘do’ strategic spatial planning and what the factors are that influence whether or not an area chooses to voluntarily implement a strategic spatial planning agenda.

In terms of further knowledge that might be gained from the Sheffield City Region context, there is an opportunity to continue to follow the evolution of Sheffield City Region Combined Authority and the ‘story’ of strategic spatial planning in this context as it unfolds, and in particular to investigate the impact that the recently-elected Mayor has on shaping the strategic direction of the Combined Authority, including the potential for embracing spatial planning as part of his remit. A study such as this would also have relevance for understanding the role of mayors in city region governance and decision-making more broadly, including considering the extent to which they provide a level of oversight and strategic leadership, and the implications for enhancing (or reducing) political, territorial and spatial cohesion within city region governance spaces.

### **9.3 Reflections on the research design and approach**

In order to gather the necessary detail and depth of evidence required to meet the objectives of this research, it was determined that this would be best achieved using a contextually-grounded, ethnographic methodological approach, which employed a variety of methods including direct observation, semi-structured interviews and document analysis to support the detailed examination of a single devolving sub-region; that of Sheffield City Region. This methodological approach (and the subsequent analysis of data obtained using this approach) was supported by a conceptual framework derived from New Institutional theory. This framework enabled the research to provide insights into the interrelationship between local planning actors; the legislative, governance and territorial contexts in which they were embedded; and the strategic spatial planning and cross-boundary collaborative practices that emerged from these contexts, by enabling a better conceptual understanding of structure-agency interactions. More specifically, this framework allowed insights into; how actors interpreted their strategic contexts and the changes taking place within them; and how the institutional structures that were embedded within these contexts dialectically shaped the actions of actors, and how these structures were in turn shaped by actors and their contextualised ideational interpretations. This section provides some further reflections on this theoretical framework and the research methodology and methods that were applied.

#### **9.3.1 Reflections on the application of an institutionalist conceptual framework**

The New Institutional approach adopted in this research provided a useful theoretical tool for helping to answer the questions posed by this research, which required an examination of strategic planning practices in relation to the contexts through which they were enacted. As such, the theoretical framework developed in

this research provided a means of interpreting structure-agency interactions through its ability to conceptualise the structuring power of the institutional and strategic contexts within which local planning actors were embedded, and the role of these structuring forces in shaping the practices of strategic spatial planning that were subsequently observed. By adopting an institutionalist approach, which inherently draws focus towards the role of institutions, there was a risk that this research might fall into the trap of ‘institutional determinism’ in which institutions are perceived to be the prime causal factor in determining social action. It was therefore important within the research to acknowledge that whilst institutions can be seen to structure action, they do not completely determine it.

The conceptual framework that was developed for this research sought to avoid this potential trap by introducing the concept of ‘ideas’. Drawn from a constructivist form of institutionalism, ‘ideas’ were understood as the ‘frames of meaning’ (Schmidt, 2010) or ‘filters’ (Hay & Wincott, 1998) through which actors interpret and give meaning to the institutional context within which they are situated (as detailed in Chapter 3). The concept of ‘ideas’ therefore provided a means of analysing and understanding the dialectical relationship between structure and agency, including how actors identified the opportunities and constraints that shaped (but did not fully determine) their choices of action, and how through ideational processes they were able to promote or resist change in the institutional context. For example, the informal planning spaces that local planning officers continued to replicate even following the demise of the Regional Planning Body represented an institutionalised form of practice that may be construed as constraining (to a certain degree) the actions of local planning actors; and as the analysis presented in this research shows, these institutional structures were ideationally framed as being of benefit to the individual actors and the interests of their authorities. Therefore, these institutional structures continued to be reproduced.

The introduction of the ideational concept also enabled the use of an interpretive analytical approach through which I was able to draw out and interpret the ideas of actors and the role of these ideas in shaping the actions that were observed. It is acknowledged that this process inevitably results in a degree of ‘double hermeneutic’<sup>1</sup>, which is also particularly the case in ethnographic work (as discussed in section 4.7.2). Therefore, whilst it may be argued that this form of interpretation contributes towards a richness of understanding, throughout the analysis of the data I tried to distinguish between the sense- and meaning-making that was being done by the research participants and by myself as the researcher; acknowledging that they are not mutually exclusive and that there is inevitably an overlap between the two.

The conceptual framework was also able to demonstrate how institutionalised planning practices were transformed, including how such transformations were both enabled and resisted by different groups of local planning actors, particularly in response to events that were ideationally framed by some actors as ‘crises’, such as the abolition of Regional Spatial Strategies. For example, the research showed how the changes in the formal rules of planning that emerged following the introduction of the Localism Act were framed as a ‘crisis’ by members of the SCR Planning Officers Group, who subsequently attempted to promote further

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<sup>1</sup> The ‘double hermeneutic’ may be described as the researcher’s interpretation of actors’ own interpretations.

institutional change in the structures of planning governance within the City Region by promoting the introduction of a Spatial Planning Unit (as discussed in section 7.2.4). These attempts at institutional transformation were subsequently resisted by officers within the SCR Executive Team; further demonstrating the role of power and influence in enabling and resisting institutional change.

In terms of the theoretical contribution of this research, while most institutionalist studies are set at the macro-level; considering shifts in national level policies and change over significant periods of time, few consider the effect of institutions upon actions at the micro-level. This research has therefore demonstrated the benefits of applying institutionalist theory to ethnographic studies, and the contribution it can make to our understanding of how practices are enacted at the actor-level within an institutionalised context. For example, the conceptual framework applied in this research helped to enhance our understanding of the role played by political territories in shaping strategic spatial planning. In particular, by identifying the ideational processes that reinforced certain spatial imaginaries and resisted others it was possible to see how some political territories (including the territories formed around local authority boundaries) could become further institutionally embedded and gain greater structuring power, whilst other spatial imaginaries would fail to gain the ideational support or traction needed to become institutionalised as a territory (including that of 'Sheffield City Region'), and as a result had a weaker structuring influence over the strategic spatial planning practices and decisions that were enacted.

The conceptual framework also assisted with developing understandings of how formal and informal governance spaces informed the approach to strategic spatial planning, including how local planning officers attempted to reshape formal spaces of Combined Authority governance through the use of ideational processes to transform the formal rules of engagement; and how informal or 'soft' spaces of collaboration between elected members were so institutionally embedded that they played a significant role in shaping a series of path-dependent interactions, coalitions, deliberative processes and decision-making practices within the City Region, which sometimes undermined or displaced the formal rules that existed within the formal governance structures of the Combined Authority. By considering spatial planning practices through an institutional lens, this research was also able to examine how the establishment and evolution of formal governance spaces and rules of engagement within the Combined Authority, as shaped through elected members' ideational framings and practical responses to these institutional structures, has influenced the development of an increasingly 'post-political' form of governance within the City Region.

As with any conceptual framework, the one applied to this research is not without its drawbacks and limitations. For example, its focus on the role of ideas may be regarded by some as 'anti-institutionalist'. However, I along with many others (including, for example, Bell, 2012a and Hay, 2002), argue that 'ideas' provide a valuable interpretive tool for enabling the identification of institutional effects that might otherwise remain undetected, particularly at the micro-level. Therefore, although 'institutions' themselves may not have been explicitly identified in this research, by examining these concepts through the role of 'ideas' and processes of 'ideational framing' I have been alert to their presence, and their structuring effects have formed a recognised feature in my analysis. In reflecting on the ability of this framework to identify the constraining



or enabling power of institutional structures, and the extent to which these are responsible for shaping the actions observed, I would hope that I have been successful in providing appropriate evidence to support my conclusions, caveating these where necessary, such that the findings of this research hold weight and are sufficiently valid in the context of this study. Whilst this study has demonstrated how this conceptual framework may be usefully empirically applied, it is recognised that there is further potential to refine this framework in order to enable a better understanding some of the processes that are defined within it, including for example, precisely how the process of 'institutionalisation' takes place, particularly in a spatial context.

Overall therefore, it is considered that the conceptual framework applied in this research has been successful in contributing towards the development of an empirically-grounded theorisation of the dialectical, mutually constitutive relationships that exist within a spatial planning system, including how the actions and ideational framing processes of local planning actors are shaped by institutionalised contexts, and how these contexts are simultaneously transformed, reinforced or resisted by these actions and processes of ideational framing. It also progresses a theorisation of socio-political systems that makes allowance for the structuring role of ideas alongside wider strategic factors, thus enabling endogenous change to occur in the same conceptual space as path-dependent behaviours. Finally, this research demonstrates how a framework based around concepts drawn from New Institutional theory, in particular, the role of ideas and processes of ideational framing, might be usefully and effectively applied to an ethnographic study.

### **9.3.2 Reflections on the application of an ethnographic approach**

As discussed previously, a number of the academic studies of sub-regional strategic spatial planning undertaken in the post-2010 context of devolving governance, adopted a case study-based approach. The empirical data in these studies was often drawn primarily from interviews with local planning actors, which although providing interesting reflections on historic actions and events, failed to yield the depth of insight into *how* certain practices emerged that was called for by the overarching objective of this research. In designing the methodological approach for this research, I therefore chose to adopt an ethnographic approach that involved immersing myself in the planning policy and governance context of Sheffield City Region and directly observing local planning actors acting within this context. This was supported by detailed document analysis and interviews with key actors to corroborate and reflect on the observational evidence. These methods enabled me to develop a more comprehensive, emic understanding of strategic spatial planning practices, and cross-boundary collaborative and decision-making processes taking place within a devolving governance context than has previously been achieved in other research within this specific field of study.

Whilst there has historically been a distinct ethnographic tradition in spatial planning research (most notably in the communicative planning work of Hillier, 2000; Forester, 1999; Healey & Hillier, 1996; Healey, 1992), such methods have been applied increasingly infrequently, particularly in recent studies of strategic spatial planning. This is most likely due to the time-intensive demands for richness and reflexivity that often accompany ethnographic studies, coupled with the diffuse and transient nature of contemporary strategic

spatial planning that lends itself towards more macro-level studies that seek to provide an overarching narrative of transitions and trends in practice. This PhD has therefore presented a rare opportunity to apply ethnographic research methods to strategic spatial planning, and as such, makes an important empirical contribution to the contemporary study of strategic spatial planning in a devolving sub-regional and local governance context by revealing some of the complex actor-context relations that a reliance on other research methods might have overlooked.

In addition, this ethnographic methodological approach complemented the institutionalist conceptual framework that underpinned this research by enabling a more rounded analysis of actors' ideational framings and perceived interests. This was achieved by allowing a comparison of observed practices and actors' reflections of these same practices. For example, during interviews many local planning officers explained how they engaged with cross-boundary collaborative practices because it served their normative interests and was framed as 'good practice', whereas direct observations revealed how collaborative actions were, in practice, driven by officers' cognitive concerns with ensuring they met the minimum requirements of the Duty to Cooperate needed to achieve local plan adoption.

The design of this research also provided a unique insight into planning practice and governance in Sheffield City Region; a spatial location that has, to my knowledge, not been studied in recent years in the context of strategic spatial planning. As well as adding diversity to the existing body of strategic spatial planning literature by shifting the geographic focus away from the traditional research 'hotspots', this study was also able to demonstrate the value in studying what might be described as a more 'ordinary' case, in which a formalised approach to strategic spatial planning has not yet become established. For example, the choice of Sheffield City Region as a case study was able to provide insights into why progress is not made, why decisions are deferred, and why sometimes 'nothing' happens. This teaches us the importance of not overlooking cases simply because they do not appear to be an overly successful or interesting example of a particular phenomenon. As this research has shown, even the most ordinary of cases can contribute interesting and valuable insights.

Alongside these successes, some identified limitations of the methodological approach taken in this research are represented by the fact that it was a study of a single case, which has meant that the findings presented in this thesis have been unable to draw direct comparisons between different city regions or other spatial contexts. An ability to identify commonalities or differences in approach between locations may have been useful for defining the extent to which the practices and interpretations of local planning actors were context-specific, or whether similar patterns of behaviour or interpretations might have been observed elsewhere. On balance, however, the detailed level of data that this research was able to acquire through focusing all available resources on investigating a single case in significant detail resulted in novel ethnographic findings that would not have been achievable in a comparative study. Despite presenting a study of a single case from which it is widely accepted that broad generalisations cannot be made, there is still the potential for the findings of this research to elicit some degree of 'plausible conjecture' (Rhodes, 2014: 321) in relation to the broader issues surrounding strategic planning practice. For example, the detailed observations made during

the fieldwork have provided conceptual insights into the interaction, shaping and reshaping of ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ governance structures, political territories and planning spaces, which will have relevance to other geographic contexts; although the practical responses in these other locations may be different to those observed in Sheffield City Region.

A further methodological reflection relates to the fact that by situating the fieldwork within the Forward and Area Planning Team of Sheffield City Council there was, to some extent, an inherent perspective bias in the data towards that of a ‘Sheffield City Council Planning Officer’. Although this was countered, as far as possible, through the design of the research, which included interviews and observations of meetings involving a range of actors from across the City Region’s authorities. Many of the interviews that were conducted (particularly with local planning officers) would only have been possible through the contacts made as a result of being situated within Sheffield City Council and establishing the trust of the participants within that authority who then introduced me to their contacts outside their own organisation. By positioning myself within Sheffield City Council I was also able to gain insights into the cross-border interactions between the local planning actors in Sheffield City Council and those in its neighbouring authorities; insights that it would not have been possible to obtain were I not situated in one or other of the authorities.

A methodological challenge presented by this research that I was unable to overcome was the difficulty in gaining access to elected members, particularly in terms of conducting interviews and observing non-public meetings and interactions involving this group of local planning actors. As a result, it is recognised that the evidence presented within this thesis in relation to elected members, their understandings of and responses to their strategic contexts, and their enactment of strategic and collaborative planning practices, is perhaps slightly less pronounced than that presented in relation to local planning officers. This may be construed as a weakness in this research, albeit not so significant a weakness that it prevented the research from gathering any findings or drawing any conclusions regarding the role of elected members in the governance and practice of strategic spatial planning in Sheffield City Region. Indeed, nine interviews were conducted with current or former elected members, which provided a valuable source of evidence, as discussed in chapters 6 to 8.

### **9.3.3 Final thoughts**

In conclusion, this research has provided a new lens for examining in detail the interactions between local planning actors and their strategic contexts in a devolving governance setting. This research has helped to identify some of the key contextual factors that are shaping contemporary practices of strategic spatial planning and has demonstrated how, despite being promoted as an ‘opportunity for innovation’, strategic spatial planning still faces an uncertain future in the devolving governance context of the English planning system.

Beyond the Duty to Cooperate (which delivered little in terms of meaningful collaborative outcomes) the opportunity for adopting a formalised approach to strategic spatial planning at the city region scale still faces a considerable challenge, as presented by a combination of constraining contextual factors, some of which

are unlikely to be unique to the Sheffield City Region case. These factors include the role of local political tensions and territorial divisions, actors' historic experiences of strategic spatial planning, the context of austerity and neoliberalism that is promoting increased competition between authorities, a lack of strategic political leadership, and the 'hardened', post-political governance structures of the Combined Authority. Despite these challenges, city regions and Combined Authorities are likely to continue to form a significant chapter in the story of devolved sub-regional governance and strategic spatial planning in England, one which will further evolve. Therefore, we should continue to pay attention to the role of these governance structures, and their interactions with local authorities and local planning actors, in shaping the future landscape of strategic spatial planning.

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## Appendix 1 | List of formal (public and non-public) meetings observed

Meeting type	Date
FAP Team Meeting	13-Oct-16
SCR Planning Officers Group Meeting	21-Oct-16
Sheffield City Council Meeting	02-Nov-16
Neighbouring Authority 1-to-1 (SCC and Bassetlaw DC)	03-Nov-16
FAP Team Meeting	08-Nov-16
SCC Internal Staff Meeting	16-Nov-16
Rotherham MBC Local Plan Examination in Public Hearings	17-Nov-16
Core Cities Student Housing Group Meeting	23-Nov-16
Neighbouring Authority 1-to-1 (SCC and North East Derbyshire DC)	29-Nov-16
FAP Team Meeting	08-Dec-16
SCR Planning Officers Group Meeting	09-Dec-16
SCR Heads of Planning Meeting	06-Jan-17
Neighbouring Authority 1-to-1 (SCC and Peak District National Park Authority)	12-Jan-17
SCR Combined Authority Board Meeting	30-Jan-17
FAP Team Meeting	09-Feb-17
SCR Planning Officers Group Meeting	17-Feb-17
SCR Heads of Planning Meeting	03-Mar-17
Sheffield City Council Planning Committee Meeting	07-Mar-17
Neighbouring Authority 1-to-1 (SCC and Barnsley MBC)	13-Mar-17
FAP Team Meeting	06-Apr-17
Discussion with Officer from Greater Manchester Combined Authority	10-Apr-17
Meeting with Officer from Department for Communities and Local Government	13-Apr-17
Sheffield City Council Cabinet Meeting	19-Apr-17
FAP Local Plan Case Officers Meeting	27-Apr-17
SCR Planning Officers Group Meeting	28-Apr-17
SCR Heads of Planning Meeting	05-May-17
Barnsley MBC Local Plan Examination in Public Hearings	16-May-17
FAP Officer Briefing	17-May-17
Barnsley MBC Local Plan Examination in Public Hearings	23-May-17
PhD Research Review Meeting	30-May-17
SCC Internal Staff Meeting - 'More Business-Like Place' Briefing	31-May-17
FAP Local Plan Case Officers Meeting	13-Jun-17
Meeting with SCC Head of Planning to discuss PhD research	14-Jun-17
Neighbouring Authority 1-to-1 (SCC and North East Derbyshire DC)	19-Jun-17
FAP Local Plan Case Officers Meeting	29-Jun-17
Bassetlaw District Council Meeting	29-Jun-17
SCR Planning Officers Group Meeting	30-Jun-17
Barnsley MBC Cabinet Meeting	12-Jul-17
Doncaster MBC Council Meeting	13-Jul-17
SCR Combined Authority Board Meeting	17-Jul-17

Chesterfield Borough Council Meeting	19-Jul-17
Doncaster MBC Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee Meeting	20-Jul-17
Sheffield City Council Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee Meeting	20-Jul-17
Barnsley MBC Council Meeting	27-Jul-17
SCR Combined Authority Overview and Scrutiny Committee Meeting	27-Jul-17
North East Derbyshire District Council Meeting	31-Jul-17
Rotherham MBC Overview and Scrutiny Management Board Meeting	02-Aug-17
SCR Housing and Planning Directors Meeting	04-Aug-17

## Appendix 2 | List of interview participants

Reference	Agreed title / descriptor for referencing responses
<b>Sheffield City Council – Officers</b>	
INT001	Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council
INT002	Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council
INT003	Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council
INT004	Senior Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council
INT005	Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council
INT006	Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council
INT007	Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council
INT008	Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council
INT009	Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council
INT010	Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council
INT011	Senior Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council
INT012	Senior Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council
INT013	Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council
INT014	Senior Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council
INT015	Senior Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council
INT016	Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council
INT017	Senior Economic Development Officer at Sheffield City Council
INT018	Economic Development Officer at Sheffield City Council
INT019	Senior Planning Officer at Sheffield City Council
INT020	Senior Housing Officer at Sheffield City Council
INT023	Senior Transport Officer at Sheffield City Council
INT039	Senior Economic Development Officer at Sheffield City Council
<b>Sheffield City Council – Members</b>	
INT031	Former Elected Member of Sheffield City Council
INT036	Elected Member of Sheffield City Council
INT042	Former Elected Member of Sheffield City Council
INT044	Elected Member of Sheffield City Council
<b>Other SCR Local Authorities – Officers</b>	
INT021	Senior Planning Officer at Bassetlaw District Council
INT022	Senior Planning Officer at the Peak District National Park Authority
INT024	Senior Planning Officer at Nottinghamshire County Council
INT026	Senior Planning Officer at Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council
INT027	Senior Planning Officer at Chesterfield Borough Council
INT028	Senior Planning Officer at Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council
INT029	Senior Planning Officer at Bassetlaw District Council
INT030	Senior Planning Officer at Bassetlaw District Council
INT032	Senior Planning Officer at Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council
INT035	Planning Officer at Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council
	Senior Planning Officer at Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council
INT037	Senior Planning Officer at North East Derbyshire District Council and Bolsover District Council

<b>Other SCR Local Authorities – Members</b>	
INT034	Elected Member of Bassetlaw District Council
INT038	Elected Member of North East Derbyshire District Council
INT040	Elected Member of Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council
INT041	Elected Member of Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council
INT043	Elected Member of a Sheffield City Region district authority
<b>Sheffield City Region – Officers</b>	
INT025	Officer at Sheffield City Region Executive Team
INT033	Officer at Joint Authorities Governance Unit

## Appendix 3 | Example interview schedule

### Officer in Neighbouring Authority [Questions refined and adapted for individual participants]

#### Introduction

- Briefly explain research aims and objectives, and purpose of interview
- Ask participant to sign consent form
- Confirm whether they agree to interview being recorded

*\*Start recording\**

- Confirm participant name, date and time of interview.
- Confirm that the interview will be recorded, and the information provided will only be used in anonymised form in PhD thesis and related articles. Information won't be used for any other purpose without first acquiring consent.
- Confirm agreed descriptor to be used when referencing participant and their responses
- Check that participant agrees with the above.

#### Key questions

##### *Perceptions of your authority's role in relation to Duty to Cooperate / cross-boundary planning*

1. Can you tell me a bit about your role, and how this relates to the local plan-making process?
2. What does the 'Duty to Cooperate' mean from your perspective?
3. What do you see is the role of your authority's planning officers in resolving cross-boundary planning issues and fulfilling the Duty to Cooperate?
4. To what extent are your Members involved in cross-boundary planning and issues relating to the Duty to Cooperate?
5. How would you describe the relationship between planning officers and Members within your authority?
6. How well do you feel that your authority currently performs in relation to the Duty to Cooperate and its ability to effectively resolve cross-boundary planning issues?
7. What do you feel are the main barriers or factors contributing to successful cross-boundary planning?

##### *Perceptions of your authority's relationship to neighbouring authorities*

8. How would you describe your relationship with officers in neighbouring authorities?
9. How do you perceive the relationship between your Members and Members in neighbouring authorities?
10. What factors do you feel influence the relative 'success' of these relationships?
11. Examples of cross-boundary working?

##### *Perceptions of relationships to and within Sheffield City Region*

12. What does the phrase 'Sheffield City Region' mean to you? Who or what does it represent?
13. How do you feel that you personally, and the work that you do as an individual, relates to the wider City Region?
14. Now thinking more broadly, what do you see is the role of your authority within the wider City Region?
15. What do you see is the role of Sheffield City Council within the City Region?

16. How would you describe the relationship between the authorities that comprise Sheffield City Region? To what extent do you think this relationship is a success? What factors do you feel have influenced this?
17. How successful do you feel that SCRPOG / SCRHOP are in influencing strategic planning practice and dealing with cross-boundary planning issues within the City Region? How do you feel that these groups relate to the City Region Executive Team?
18. What do you see is the role of the City Region in facilitating cross-boundary working or resolving cross-boundary planning issues? How successful do you feel this has been?
19. What do you feel are the differences between your authority's relationship to or involvement in Sheffield City Region compared with its relationship to / involvement in [D2N2]?

*Perceptions of change over time*

20. How do you feel that your authority's relationship to its neighbouring authorities has changed over time? Why is this? Who or what is responsible for this change?
21. How do you feel this relationship is likely to change in the future? Why is this? Who or what is responsible for this change?
22. How do you feel that devolution and the possibility of a directly elected mayor might influence cross-boundary planning practices within the City Region?

**Closing**

- Thank you for participating. Reconfirm what will happen with the research going forwards.



## Appendix 4 | Interview transcription protocol

These are the general rules and procedures through which the transcription of interviews and other recordings will be undertaken:

- I will transcribe each of the interviews myself.
- All interview transcripts will begin with the following information: participant ID code; date, place and time of interview; and interview duration.
- Each transcription also includes a 'reflections' section which includes my initial thoughts and key points noted immediately after each interview.
- Transcriptions will be word processed with minimum 1.5 line spacing to allow for annotation.
- Any speech by the interviewer will be marked 'I' and by the participant will be marked 'P'.
- The end of interview will be clearly marked on the transcript with 'END OF INTERVIEW'.
- As a general rule, all speech will be transcribed verbatim from the recording, **unless** it is clearly off-topic (e.g. they start talking about their last holiday). Any segments of speech removed will be referenced as [speech not transcribed due to irrelevance]. This will enable me to easily identify later any sections which haven't been transcribed, in case for any reason these need to be returned to later.
- I have taken care to include punctuation, where necessary, to ensure that the original meaning of the responses is retained.
- I have chosen to transcribe any elisions (e.g. let's, we're) but have omitted any pauses, um's, er's etc, unless these are relevant to the context, as it is unlikely these will be used or referred to directly in my analysis. It is the content of the spoken word that is most relevant to my research, rather than how it is said.
- I will not transcribe any background noises, unless they interrupt the flow of the interview.
- Any sections that are inaudible will be marked as such using square brackets. Where I am unsure of the accuracy of the transcription, I will mark this text in brackets with question marks either side.
- I have chosen to transcribe into correct English, rather than retaining any linguistic details e.g. dialects or grammatical errors.
- Names and other forms of identification of specific individuals will be removed from the transcription, in order to ensure that participants and others remain anonymous. Individuals will be referred to by their job title or other suitable, non-identifiable reference, such as their Participant Identification Number. Names and other forms of identification that have been removed are denoted by square brackets.
- Each participant will be assigned a unique ID code (Participant Identification Number) to ensure that their anonymity is retained. A list of the interviewees to whom these codes belong will be kept in a separate spreadsheet for reference, if required. This list will not be published within the thesis.
- The transcription will be proof-read for accuracy once completed.
- It is not my intention to allow the interview participants to review the interview transcripts.
- Any sections of the transcribed text that need to be removed prior to publication for issues of confidentiality, or because the participant requested during the interview that they remain confidential, have been highlighted in yellow. Quotations from these sections of transcript will not be included in my thesis.

## Appendix 5 | Example fieldnote

<b>Reference</b>	FN004
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<b>Event</b>	-				
<b>Scope / purpose</b>	General observations and internal AMID policy meeting				
<b>Date</b>	19 <sup>th</sup> Oct 2016	<b>Time</b>	-	<b>Duration</b>	All day
<b>Location</b>	Planning team office, Howden House				
<b>Participants</b>	Planning team				

<b>Narrative description (who, what, why, how)</b>
<p>When discussing the forthcoming SCRPOG meeting with P001, they explained that they (not sure if they were actually the ones who authored it) have produced an initial draft of the Duty to Cooperate statement for housing, which SCC are leading on (see DOC026). An initial review of this document suggests that its main purpose is to consolidate housing data from SCR authorities, rather than being evidence of any 'active' collaboration on issues relating to housing – on the surface, and from reading this draft document, it appears that there are no cross-boundary issues(!).</p> <p>A brief look at the previous SCRPOG minutes revealed that the meetings are scheduled to take place bi-monthly, and are always held in the SCC offices at Howden House. There is also a SCR Heads of Planning (SCRHOP) meeting, which was last held on 9<sup>th</sup> September. To assist with my research going forwards I've prepared a table outlining the various groups that meet within SCC / SCR and the constituent members of each of these (see DOC030).</p> <p>I received an email from P001, circulated to the whole FAP team (see DOC029), which requested staff to send P001 their latest monthly work programmes. The email explained that they were discussing with P020 the work that still needed to be done on the Local Plan, which may result in a slip in the programme. This email demonstrates the levels of responsibility within the team.</p> <p>A further email was sent by P014 to notify members of the FAP team that draft Strategic Framework and Concept Statements were available to view on the Sharepoint site – I need to review these.</p> <p>Later in the morning I was chatting with P012 and asking what the acronym 'PMT' stood for, as I'd heard it mentioned in the team meeting. They explained that it was the Place Management Team. This led onto a useful explanation of the structure of the wider SCC and the process through which delegated decisions are made.</p> <p>The Place Management Team includes the Team Leaders, such as P001. The PMT reports to the Place Leadership Team (PLT), which is overseen by P024, Executive Director. 'Place' is divided into several service areas – one of which is Development Services. Development Services is divided into Development Management, Urban Design and Forward &amp; Area Planning.</p> <p>The PLT in turn reports to the Executive Management Team (EMT), which includes the Chief Executive (P025), which in turn reports to the Cabinet to acquire final approval. This is the process through which papers are approved and decisions are made (see DOC031). Further detail on the structure of the organisation, including senior management roles and responsibilities is in DOC034.</p>

I also reviewed the process for Freedom of Information requests, including what information may or may not be released – this may be useful for negotiating access to SCC internal documents during my research period (see DOC032). The main restrictions which may apply to some of the information I'm interested in, is that which prejudices commercial interests or that which may be intended for later publication. I'm hoping that, given my PhD research will not be published for a while, information relating to the local plan should hopefully have been published by then. I will need to discuss the potential for using internal documentation with P001 / P020.

During the morning I also reviewed the SCC Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) prepared by the Chief Executive (see DOC033). This explained that the budget gap for 2017-18 within the Council is likely to be around £40m. In order to bridge this gap, the focus is on big strategic changes in portfolios, rather than a percentage reduction across the board. The gap is expected to increase to £116 million by 2021-22.

DOC033 also describes the SCR Devolution Deal which exists between SCC and other authorities. This deal gives the Combined Authority control of an addition £30m/year funding allocation over 30 years, to be used to boost growth. The deal also enables SCR to keep 100% of business rates from 2016/17.

### **AMID Internal Meeting**

I was invited to observe an internal meeting between P001, P009 and P010. This was a discussion which I believe had been requested by P009 to discuss the team's approach to developing the draft policy relating to the Advanced Manufacturing and Innovation District (AMID). The AMID is a site which straddles the Rotherham – Sheffield border, and therefore this 'cross-boundary' issue has potential relevance for my research.

P009 and P001 explained some of the background to the AMID and the policies relating to it, for my benefit. The Advanced Manufacturing Park (AMP) lies within the RMBC boundary and P009 explained that RMBC has aspirations to expand this. 'Sheffield' (presumably the Members) has aspirations to develop the old airport site (which now forms part of Sheffield Business Park), and they want to share in the benefits of the AMP development. Sheffield has the universities, which are critical to the development of this site [the assumption being that this is a benefit which Sheffield has, and which Rotherham does not]. Sheffield has also had a role in developing Factory 2050, which is a key innovation project.

P001 explained that there is available land on the 'SCC side', and they are looking for a practical solution for developing the site. An AMID Steering Group, led by SCC Chief Executive, has been established to lead on masterplanning for the site (which SCC wants to include an element of housing). The AMID Steering Group is working jointly with the Planning Group [need to identify the constituent members and remits of these two groups, and how they relate to one another].

P009 explained that SCC tried to develop a 'boundary blind' policy for the AMID site, developed in conjunction with planners at RMBC. However, RMBC has gone ahead and developed its own 'tight' policy for the AMP site within its latest Sites Policy document (currently going through EiP), which doesn't cover the wider AMID area. P001 suggested that RMBC are most likely 'too far down the road' for SCC planners to influence this policy, which they consider could be viewed as a negative policy, as it is too restrictive. They explained that the work that SCC planners had been doing could be useful for RMBC, but it appears that they are not keen to take this work on board, or amend their policy to reflect it. P009 had emailed a copy of the SCC draft policy wording to their equivalent level planner at RMBC, as they hoped it might still be possible to influence RMBC policy and establish something which is 'boundary blind'. I was copied in on this email from P009 to P022– dated 19<sup>th</sup> Oct (see DOC036). This email was sent with the purpose of sharing SCC's

draft AMID policy with P022 to 'assist with RMBC's policies and hearings' and to 'help with the duty to cooperate'. Although I'm not sure any clear idea of exactly how this might help influence RMBC's AMP policy was provided – will need to follow up on any response to this email.

Officers said that they thought SCC's policy could support Rotherham's, and that RMBC's current policy is not flexible enough. P001 expressed concern that the RMBC draft policy wasn't tabled at the AMID Steering Group meeting.

In order to help develop the AMID policy in the SCC Local Plan, officers have asked Creative Sheffield to identify a specific boundary / area which represents AMID, as this currently does not exist. Officers said, 'we will struggle to have a policy for the site without showing an area on a map'. They also explained that the site may not always be called 'AMID', as consultants (IBI) have been brought in (by Creative Sheffield) to develop a brand and a masterplan for the area.

SCC planning officers said they needed the boundary from Creative Sheffield as a priority, as they 'can't have a policy about an area if it's not defined'. Creative Sheffield used to be in same office as the planners but are now based in a different building – they appear to have allied themselves more closely with external businesses and are generally more 'outward facing'.

Officers raised a query over how they should define the AMID area on the policy map, given that a precise boundary has not yet been identified. P010 suggested showing a non-defined boundary using triangles 'like a cold front' (or as P001 jokingly described it, 'the cold front of the Lower Don Valley').

A key action from the meeting was for P009/P010 to ask P027 at Creative Sheffield to send the latest draft version of the consultants' masterplan as they 'need to understand the boundary'. There was some discussion over who should send the email, as P010 said they hadn't spoken to P027 before, so seemed reluctant to send it. P009 said they hadn't conversed with P027 much previously either, but that they didn't mind sending it if P010 would prefer. In the end, I think it was agreed that P009 would send the email.

During this meeting mention was also made of a Corporate Steering Group that exists for the Sheffield Plan – need to speak with P002 to identify who constitutes this group and their remit.

P002 forwarded me a copy of the comments received from Creative Sheffield (via P027) on the latest internal draft of the Local Plan (see DOC035).

The comments from P027 are perhaps emblematic of Creative Sheffield's remit to encourage growth within Sheffield, potentially even where it doesn't necessarily suit the needs of the wider City Region. An example that springs to mind is the controversy surrounding the location of the proposed HS2 station, which SCC promoted within Sheffield City Centre (need to check this is correct?), rather than at Meadowhall, which would have been a better suited location for serving neighbouring Rotherham and Barnsley).

The response from P002 is also interesting, given that they begin by identifying clear reasoning for why SCR is mentioned, as opposed to just Sheffield (e.g. compliance with DtC), but then agree to change the wording from SCR to Sheffield anyway. Perhaps this is evidence of the level of influence P027 (or Creative Sheffield as a whole?) has over the Local Plan-making process? Or is it instead the case that P002 actually agrees with P027's comments, and is merely reciting the rhetoric of 'Duty to Cooperate' without truly believing in what it stands for.

In relation to the RMBC hearings which are currently ongoing – it would be useful for me to attend those relevant to the AMP – need to look into this.

### Reflection (feelings, thoughts)

There appears to be some (underlying) tensions between RMBC and SCC, although it is unclear at what level these tensions exist – my instincts suggest it is at higher than officer level, and perhaps lies with the Members.

There also appears to be an element of ‘distancing’ between Creative Sheffield and the FAP team. The FAP team appear to consider Creative Sheffield to be a different organisation where there is little comfort and familiarity between them, as evidenced by the poor communication channels.

It will be interesting to investigate further the role of Creative Sheffield and how its ambitions align or conflict with those of both the planning team and the wider SCC authority. Based on my (very) initial observations, my feelings are that Creative Sheffield is very much focused upon pursuing growth and development within Sheffield (in an economic sense), in a fairly ruthless manner, which may (at times) be at the expense of other surrounding authorities – as acknowledged in the comments in DOC035. The influence which Creative Sheffield has over the FAP team and the local plan-making process is something that I want to investigate further.

### Emerging themes and initial analysis

- Financial / budgetary constraints within the authority appear to exert significant influence upon the work which can/cannot be undertaken, and requires staff and departments to justify their worth in monetary / economic terms – what influence does this have upon the actions which are undertaken and the specific outcomes.
- Tensions between RMBC and SCC, particularly in relation to the development of the Advanced Manufacturing Park / AMID site. Despite efforts to encourage cross-boundary working (e.g. through the AMID Steering Group) this doesn’t appear to have translated into true collaboration in planning policy terms at least – need to investigate further the reasons for this.
- Appears to be disjointed working between SCC planning officers and Creative Sheffield, even though they are technically part of the same organisation – possibly due to competing objectives. Creative Sheffield appears to have distanced itself from rest of SCC, both in terms of its approach and its physical separation – it is now based in different building and allies itself more closely with external businesses rather than the rest of the authority.
- Creative Sheffield appears to have a certain level of authority, which may be influencing the plan-making process – whether this authority begins within Creative Sheffield or is exerted from higher up within SCC is something that I want to investigate further.

### Future action (follow-up questions, areas for further investigation)

- Undertake more detailed analysis of the draft ‘Duty to Cooperate Statement’ prepared by SCC on the issue of housing – need to identify the aim and purpose of this, and whether there are any cross-boundary issues relating to housing which need to be resolved.
- Review draft Strategic Framework and Concept Statements.
- Try to get hold of minutes of previous SCRHOs meetings – speak with P020 to see if I can attend and observe these.
- Complete DOC030 – identify any other groups which meet, and try to find out their constituent members and see if I can attend and observe these meetings where relevant.
- Discuss potential for using SCC internal documentation / email correspondence within my research.
- Who are the constituent members and remits of the AMID Steering Group and Planning Group – how do these two groups relate to one another?

- Review RMBC AMP policy vs. SCC draft AMID policy.
- Try to get hold of copy of SCC representations to RMBC draft policies document, specifically in relation to AMID site.
- Check with P009 whether draft version of the AMID masterplan has been received from Creative Sheffield.
- Speak with P002 to understand remit and membership of Corporate Steering Group for the Sheffield Plan.
- Check dates of RMBC hearings relevant to AMP/AMID, and look into attending these.
- Check with P009 whether response was received from P022 regarding email containing SCC draft AMID policy (DOC036).
- Review DtC statements prepared by other authorities and check for Inspector decisions relating to DtC.

#### Related documents

Ref	Title
DOC026	SCR POG meeting agenda (21 <sup>st</sup> Oct 2016)
DOC029	FAP work programme email (sent 18 <sup>th</sup> Oct 2016) – FILE NOT AVAILABLE
DOC030	Table of groups and their representatives
DOC031	SCC delegated key decisions process
DOC032	SCC FoI requests procedure
DOC033	SCC Medium Term Financial Strategy 2016-2021
DOC034	Senior management roles and responsibilities
DOC035	16.10.19 FW Sheffield Plan - Working Draft for Internal Consultation
DOC036	16.10.19 RE advanced manufacturing policy

# Appendix 6 | Research information sheet

## RESEARCH INFORMATION SHEET August 2017

### **Title of research project**

Understanding the practices of cross-boundary strategic planning in England

### **Introduction**

You are being invited to take part in a PhD research project. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

### **What is the purpose of the project?**

The overall aim of the project is to understand how the practices of strategic planning work within a local authority context and how neighbouring local authorities and other organisations work with one-another on cross-boundary planning issues e.g. housing and economic development. This research will particularly focus on examining the relations between the people and organisations who are either directly involved in the plan-making process or have decision-making responsibility in relation to strategic planning issues. It is anticipated that this research will take place between October 2016 and September 2017.

### **What will the research involve?**

The approach I have chosen to use is broadly ethnographic, meaning I will use observational research methods and analysis of documents as the main ways of gathering data. These methods will be supplemented by interviews with selected individuals towards the end of the research period to help corroborate and reflect on my findings.

As my research interests lie in practices of cross-boundary working and planning, where possible I would seek to attend and observe relevant internal and external meetings that relate to these areas, including meetings with Sheffield's neighbouring authorities and the City Region. This will help me to understand how the practices of cross-boundary planning are currently being implemented. I will also look to review relevant documents that provide insight into how these practices have been undertaken historically e.g. minutes of meetings, relevant reports and briefing notes.

### **How will the data be collected and used?**

I will ensure that I gain relevant consent from those involved before observing meetings etc. During observations I will not quote individuals directly, but may make notes on how the proceedings take place and how decisions are taken. Individual identities will be anonymised in any reports or publications.

Any audio recordings (e.g. of interviews) will not be made without consent of the individuals involved, and these recordings will be used only for analysis. No other use will be made of them without written permission, and no one outside the project will be allowed access to the original recordings. Again, individual identities will be anonymised and participants will be free to withdraw from the research at any time. All the information that is collected during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential.

### **What will happen to the results of the research project?**

The results of the research will be published in the final PhD thesis and may also be presented in other publications related to this research, such as academic journal articles, conference presentations and seminars.

Due to the nature of this research it is possible that other researchers may find the data collected to be useful in answering future research questions. Your explicit consent will be requested before any of your data is shared with other researchers via the UK Data Service. If you agree, it will be ensured that the data collected about you is untraceable back to you. Any data deposited with the UK Data Service will not include original audio recordings, but anonymised transcripts only.

### **Do I have to take part?**

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. You can still withdraw at any time. You do not have to give a reason.

### **What do I have to do as part of the research?**

If a request has been made to observe your activities (e.g. in a meeting), you will not be required to do anything, but some hand written notes may be taken during the observation.

If you've been asked to take part in an interview, this will be arranged at a time and location that is convenient for you. You will be asked a series of open questions about your experiences of cross-boundary working and (if relevant) your role in the plan-making process. A request may be made to audio record the interview but this will only proceed if your consent has been given.

### **Who has ethically reviewed the project?**

The research has received ethical approval via the Urban Studies and Planning Department's Ethics Review Procedure which is overseen by the University's Research Ethics Committee.

### **Who is funding the research?**

This research is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) through a University of Sheffield White Rose ESRC DTC Discipline Scholarship Award.

### **Contacts for further information**

If you have any questions or issues at any time during or after the research period, please contact the lead researcher using the contact details below. Should you wish to raise any complaint regarding the researcher or the research itself please contact the researcher's supervisor, Professor Malcolm Tait.

#### **Lead researcher**

Kirsten Ward

Email: [REDACTED]

Tel: [REDACTED]

Department of Urban Studies & Planning  
University of Sheffield  
S10 2TN

#### **Primary supervisor**

Professor Malcolm Tait

Email: [REDACTED]

Tel: [REDACTED]

Department of Urban Studies & Planning  
University of Sheffield  
S10 2TN

If you agree to participate in this research you will be given a copy of this information sheet and a signed copy of the consent form (if relevant) to keep.



