

Strategic Planning and Housing Crisis: Fuzzy Boundaries and Fuzzy Responsibilities

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Abstract

Following the recovery from the global financial downturn, the underlying policy issues of house price inflation, a high demand for owner occupation, restricted land supply, and a relatively small social sector new build programme are resurfacing again in the UK. The boom and bust housing cycles have long been a major challenge to successive governments. The way the Coalition Government managed the economic downturn was to dismantle regional planning and strategic planning in England and replaced it with an open source, local-oriented style of neighbourhood planning. This paper examines the spatial patterns of recovery in different housing markets and provides a critical review of the policy experiments and fragmented institutional framework in house planning. It argues that strategic coordination of spatial development has to be part of the policy package to tackle the major housing crisis.

Introduction

The nature of the housing issues facing Britain has changed markedly over the last twenty years. There are now less physical problems with housing stock, but more concerns over housing affordability and the external environment that goes with housing consumption (Barker, 2004). Following the recent recovery from the global financial downturn, the underlying policy issues of house price inflation, a high demand for owner occupation, restricted land supply, and a relatively small social sector new build programme are resurfacing again. The boom and bust housing cycles have long been a major challenge to successive governments. There is thus a need of providing a comprehensive package with different policy levers and instruments that will help to make a step change to deliver the right type of housing in the right location. The way the Coalition Government managed the economic downturn was to dismantle regional planning and strategic planning in England and replaced it with an open source, local-oriented style of neighbourhood planning. This paper provides a critique of the fragmented institutional framework and lack of political leadership in house planning and argues that strategic coordination of spatial development has to be part of the policy package to tackle the major housing crisis.

Variegated spatial patterns of housing market recovery

As the UK emerges from the recession, housing market conditions are spatially varied, with some areas experiencing a dramatic oversupply of housing stock and others a lack of supply due to the reluctance of the private sector to commit to new build activities. This has had strong implications for house prices, creating affordability issues in some areas as well as negative equity concerns in others. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) commissioned study (Wong et al, 2011) suggests that

recession did bring a degree of convergence between the regions, but that this has been diminishing as the South pulls away fastest as the economy recovers. Nonetheless, rapidly growing regions such as London and the South East can be strongly segmented with considerable social and housing problems found in the inner areas of the capital.

The JFR study shows that average English neighbourhood standardised house prices decreased by 10.4% between 2007 and 2009. However, different neighbourhoods had very different patterns of change, with the greatest decrease found in a Birmingham neighbourhood (-40.3%) and the greatest increase in the London borough of Camden (+81.4%). Despite the overall drop in house price levels, house prices remain high resulting in continued housing affordability issues, particularly in Southern England where the house price to household income ratio is particularly high. In 2009, the ratio between prices to income for Great Britain was 7 times, only slightly down from 7.7 in 2008. Repossessions and mortgage arrears also increased significantly during the recession.

The recession has significantly impacted upon housing supply as private and social house building decreased, resulting in a decline in both prosperous areas such as Southern England and more industrial areas. The number of new housing starts in the UK decreased by 50.8% between 2007 and 2009. In 2009 there was a closely matched balance between housing supply and demand. There has been a 48% increase in new social housing starts in England between 2007/08 and 2009/10, though the picture was highly variable geographically.

The ratio of households to dwellings is an important indicator in the long-run models of housing supply and affordability. In 2009, the England average of 0.98 suggests that there was a reasonably close balance between housing supply and household number. The areas with the highest levels of pressure are in London where the boroughs of Camden (1.15) and Westminster (1.13) have the highest ratios. Housing supply will be further pressurised when taking into account of the potential demand from projected household growth.

The Coalition government's commitment since 2010 to reducing public spending in key areas of housing, welfare benefits, and regeneration has inevitably produced variable spatial impacts. The JRF analysis suggests that socio-economic conditions and economic growth dynamics vary considerably across different areas. Most of Greater London, South East and the East Midlands saw a rise in new enterprises despite an overall UK decline between 2007 and 2008, which mirrors the patterns of high levels of employment rate and the stronger housing market performance in these areas. The recovery period has seen areas that are more market-orientated emerge better positioned in socio-economic terms, while those areas that are more dependent on public sector support will most likely be worse off as the impacts of funding and public sector job cuts manifest themselves spatially.

The strong recovery of southern England was supported by the statistics from the National Housebuilding Council (2014). Increasing number of new home registrations was found across all regions in England. Greater London had the strongest growth through 2013, with a 60% rise on 2012. The Midlands also enjoyed strong regional growth. Figures from the second quarter of 2014 show that the average UK house price is around £186,000, but over £400,000 in London; which represents an 11.5% annual increase for the country and an even bigger leap of over 25% in London. Considering the average starting salary for graduates is around £20,000 and slightly more in London, it is not a surprise that there is a major housing affordability crisis in the UK.

Successive planning policy regimes: fuzzy responsibilities

The main cause of the poor supply responsiveness has been long recognised as an issue. The challenges associated with the land-use planning system have been widely debated and successive

governments have introduced different reforms and experiments to make the system more effective and efficient, though the outcomes tend to receive mixed reception.

The PPG/PPS and RPG/RSS regime

During the first term of the last Labour government, the allocation of additional housing land was largely the outcome of a top-down approach that began at the national/regional interface with the preparation of Regional Planning Guidance (RPG), which was then being replaced by Regional Spatial Strategies (RSS). Following the publication of Planning for the Communities of the Future White Paper (1998) and Planning Policy Guidance Note 3: Housing (2000), the Labour Government introduced a revised notion of plan, monitor and manage as a means of handling the allocation process. Further elaboration was made in the White Paper (1998) of the need to have housing provision indicators such as house and land prices, housing standards and local housing needs in RPGs. This signified a departure from the government's long-standing practice, allowing for de-standardisation and de-institutionalisation of national household projection figures from local and regional housing provision policy.

The technically-driven assumptions on household projections were usually supplied on a region-by-region basis, although the nature and extent of these appeared to vary rather more on a local authority based considerations, although the nature and extent of these appeared to vary rather more on a region-by-region basis. In broadest terms, economic factors or environmental constraints were particularly common, and the relationship between metropolitan areas and the adjacent shires in terms of urban regeneration and housing capacities was also evident. An examination of the annual housing requirement figures in the RPGs for 1996-2016 and the 1996-based DETR household projection figures covering the same time period clearly revealed the north-south division over housing land policy.

The differential between housing requirements and projected growth can be broadly classified into three groups: (1) areas which have housing allocation requirements similar to their projected growth (e.g. areas around the eastern side of England and the South West and they tend to be in more rural areas); (2) areas that had a lower housing allocation than the projected growth (e.g. areas in the South East and London and the shire counties of the North West); and areas with an above projected growth housing requirement (e.g. areas in the northern regions and many had significant amount of brownfield land). The relative differentials between policy allocation and projected growth were most remarkable in the North East (an over-supply of nearly 55%), followed by the West Midlands (39%) and Yorkshire and the Humber (20%). At the other end of the spectrum, there are potential problems of under-provision in the South East (by 15%) and London (by 11%).

The introduction of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 continued to reaffirm a plan-led approach to development control and replaced land-use planning with a spatial planning approach via RSS and Local Development Frameworks (LDFs). However, by 2011, seven years after the 2004 planning reforms, 70% of local planning authorities still had not adopted a core strategy of their LDFs. In order to encourage the release of more housing land, the Labour Government also introduced growth areas and growth points, eco towns, the establishment of the NHPAU and explicit reference to affordability criteria in PPS. However, this policy had limited success as a result of the financial crisis when the financial crisis struck.

The Government's Sustainable Communities Plan (2003) had focussed thinking on linkages and strategy-making with its identification of four major growth areas that mostly straddled regional boundaries (Milton Keynes / Northampton; Stansted / Cambridge; Thames Gateway) and nine Housing Market Renewal Pathfinders in areas with failing housing markets in the north and midlands.

The latter were incorporated into the Northern Way (2004) strategy documents that represented collaborative working between the three northern RDAs.

The Labour Government also announced a more ambitious brownfield land target in 1998, specifying that at least 60% of all new built housing in England would be on brownfield land by 2008. This target was subsequently achieved eight years ahead of schedule. While the government's target was met, the actual amount of brownfield land for residential use during 2000/06 (2,774 ha per annum) was only marginally higher than that throughout the period in 1989/98 (2,644 ha per annum). There had actually been a decline in the total amount of land used for residential development from 5,660 ha per annum in 1989/98 to 4,765 ha in 2000/06. The meeting of the brownfield target was therefore a function of a parallel decrease in the use of greenfield land (Wong and Schulze Baing, 2010). Schulze Baing and Wong (2012) found that high levels of brownfield reuse activities had successfully accomplished the objective of injecting dynamics into the housing markets in the most deprived areas, particularly the market for flats, since the mid-2000s. This shift was related to the spatially targeted activities of the National Neighbourhood Renewal Initiatives and the Housing Market Renewal Pathfinder programmes. In terms of economic impacts, the outcomes were mixed - significant change in population growth and the improvement in economic deprivation were associated with the process of social upgrading by the incoming new residents of brownfield developments.

NPPF and Localism

The Coalition Government heralded a wholesale dismantling of inherited regional strategies and institutions in 2010. The publication of the Localism and Decentralisation Bill (2010) placed the emphasis squarely at the local level. The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), introduced in 2012, has subsequently replaced all previous planning policy statements with a single planning document. Under the NPPF local planning authorities are required to have in place an evidence-based, up-to-date Local Plan, which includes a five year land supply.

In order to drive the pro-growth agenda, the NPPF introduces the presumption in favour of sustainable development, which means that when a local authority does not have an up-to-date Local Plan, then planning permission should be granted unless there would be significant adverse impacts or specific breaches of the NPPF. This has created an incentive for LPAs to complete and update their local plan core strategy. Nevertheless, only 55% (185) of local authorities had adopted local plans by May 2014, according to the figures of the Planning Inspectorate (PINS). Their proportion of local authorities with plans that fully comply with the NPPF is much lower. This system heavily relied on the judgement of the PINS to assess the soundness of the evidence base underlying core strategies in local plans.

The Localism Act stipulates that all local authorities have a Duty to Cooperate with other government bodies (e.g. Environment Agency) on issues that are beyond their sphere of responsibility. This cross-authority working is seen as important for large-scale developments. However, this bottom-up approach offers relatively weak incentives for local authorities to collaborate with each other in meeting the so called greater than local housing requirements. This can be problematic in authorities in southern England, which reflects the continuation of the entrenched culture of under-supply of housing land in the RPG era. The limitation of the Duty to Cooperate was partly evident in the overall under-provision of housing land allocation. The weakness of this cooperation approach requires further adjustments to allow effective implementation.

The abolition of the RSS has left a gap in strategic spatial planning, especially when the Duty to Cooperate is found to be problematic in some areas. While the RSS targets for house building was not always welcomed by all communities, they did drive the provision of housing by bypassing local

politics. As identified by the Building and Social Housing Foundation (2014), since the abolition of the RSS housing targets, the level of identified housing need has dropped dramatically in some areas, with only the North East of England increasing targets. This has resulted in an overall reduction in the amount of land allocated for housing through the granting of planning permission. However, others such as the Home Builders Federation and the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors suggest that the NPPF and the five year land supply are having a positive effect on the supply of land for residential development.

Issues arising: s106 agreement, CIL and affordable housing

Planning obligations under Section 106 (s106 agreement) of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 have been a mechanism which makes a development proposal acceptable in planning terms that would not otherwise be acceptable. S106 agreements are often referred to as 'developer contributions' for site specific mitigation of the impact of development. S106 agreements have been used to secure affordable housing, and to specify the type and timing of this housing; and to secure financial contributions to provide infrastructure or affordable housing. The 2008 Planning Act has introduced a new mechanism, the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL), for developers to make a contribution for local infrastructure development. Since CIL is not allowed to be used for affordable housing, s106 agreements continue to be the main mechanism for affordable housing provision.

Both s106 agreements and CIL are designed to capture some of the uplift in development values as a result of planning permission for community benefit. However, it is not easy to decide the level of payment - if such payments are too high, development can become unviable. This has been a particular problem since the depreciation of land following the global financial crisis. Payments negotiated on the basis of previous land values are still required of developers, even when current land values are significantly lower. Unrealistic s106 agreements negotiated in differing economic conditions can be an obstacle to house building.

According to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2014), about a quarter of affordable units delivered through s106 agreements with no grant are delivered in London (12%) and the South East (13.9%), whilst the West Midlands (17%), the South West (16%) and the Eastern Region (14%) show higher proportions of delivery in general (2004Q2-2013Q1). This variation can be a result of skills and political will in negotiating for affordable housing. JRF commissioned research suggests that even among some of the London case studies where neighbouring boroughs with very similar housing market conditions have wide variations in units negotiated (15-20% as opposed to 35-40%) via s106 agreements. This variation suggests that in some areas planning obligations are not as effective in delivering affordable housing.

The NPPF introduced a viability test of development that To ensure viability requirements likely to be applied to development, such as requirements for affordable housing, standards, infrastructure contributions or other requirements should, when taking account of the normal cost of development and mitigation, provide competitive returns to a willing land owner and willing developer to enable the development to be deliverable . The test aims to prevent the use of unrealistic planning obligations to thwart housing developments. However, viability assessments only capture a snapshot of assumed land value and property sales, which are su

The introduction of new permitted development rights in 2013 to allow office buildings (B1(a)) to be changed to residential use (C3) without the need for a planning application has created some side effects (London Borough of Lambeth, 2014). Local authorities are unable to control where these new homes are located, or to require compliance with minimum space standards, amenity space standards and other best practice design standards including Lifetime Homes and wheelchair accessibility. The

permitted development rights may also be used by landowners to generate a higher existing use value for a site, with residential rather than office use becoming the baseline. This means the margin between the existing use value and the proposed use value will be lower, which will have an impact on the viability considerations for the proposed scheme and will affect the author's affordable housing from these sites.

Strategic Housing Market Assessment: fuzzy boundaries

Policy monitoring often relies on the adoption of spatial boundaries including housing and labour market areas, administrative boundaries, or national territories to frame any analysis. Therefore, how spatial boundaries are drawn, and the spatial resolution that is chosen to frame any spatial analytical exercise, is crucial in the construction of an understanding of spatial structures and outcomes. Despite the change to the new localism agenda in 2010, the emphasis on the flexible use of functional geographies and the creation of the local enterprise partnerships very much echoes the spirit of spatial planning.

The former Labour government introduced sub-regional Strategic Housing Market Assessments (SHMAs) to the English planning process in 2005. The ODPM then published housing market assessment guidance (DTZ Pineda, 2004) to identify broad approaches to defining sub-regional or local housing market areas (HMAs). HMAs are seen as areas within which people are prepared to search for housing and, related to this, they will contain both the origin and destination of the great majority who move home.

A desk-based analysis (Baker, 2010) of the SHMA across all English regions in a NHPAU commissioned study highlights a number of key challenges. First of all, the methodological approaches adopted to identify sub-regional housing market areas have generally adopted a hybrid approach of house prices, commuting and migration patterns, reflecting the DCLG Advice Note. Secondly, many housing market areas cover more than one local authority, necessitating the creation of effective joint working and partnerships to adequately address shared housing market issues. However, occasionally (e.g. along parts of the south coast of England) political or other issues appear to have prevented strategic housing market assessments of areas that clearly form a single sub-regional housing market area. Thirdly, SHMAs do not generally appear to provide a fine-grained analysis of the issues faced by the more rural parts of the regions, with issues relating to the more rural parts of larger strategic housing market areas often being obscured by the issues and influence of the more urbanised parts of their shared housing market areas. Fourthly, the particular characteristics and issues relating to National Parks in planning policy terms are not generally reflected in the identification and assessment of sub-regional housing markets and different parts of individual National Parks have been split between a number of separate housing market areas.

There was a general consensus from the interviews and workshop discussions with local and regional stakeholders (Jones, Coombes and Wong, 2010) that a consistently defined set of HMAs could facilitate cross-border policy interventions as well as helping local authorities and key stakeholders to think strategically in spatial terms beyond their own administrative boundaries and better recognise the reality of local and sub-regional housing markets. One of the consequences of failing to adequately reflect functional or market areas within measures of the spatial planning system is that policy can unwittingly encourage displacement activity. Differences in local planning regimes and market outcomes can lead to housing-led migration flows between neighbouring local authorities and that these exacerbate local house price differentials (DCLG, 2007).

The Coalition Government's NPPF (DCLG, 2012, para 159) made clear that local planning authorities have to carry out a Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) to assess their full housing needs.

More importantly, it stipulates that each local authority has to work with neighbouring authorities where housing market areas cross administrative boundaries. However, there is no clear guidance of what constitutes a housing market area and the responsibility is simply placed on the local authorities concerned on the ground of duty to cooperate. On the basis of the SHMA, local authorities have to prepare a Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment to establish availability, suitability and the likely economic viability of land to meet the identified housing needs. This system has proved to be problematic to enforce.

The benefits of aligning housing market areas with grouping of local authorities include practical, political and administrative issues relating to accountability, delivery, data availability, spatial planning policy (local development framework) preparation and the ease of establishing appropriate partnership working. Nevertheless, there are also clear disadvantages in ignoring evidence that housing market areas often cut across existing local authority boundaries. The nature of sub-regional housing markets does not always easily fit to local authority boundaries and this has been exacerbated in places where recent local government re-organisation has resulted in much larger unitary authorities than the previous pattern of smaller district councils. Although there was evidence of successful collaboration and joint-working on local housing market analysis and policy development since the Labour government, but there are also examples where political or other issues appeared to have prevented the adoption of cross-boundary housing market areas in areas that clearly formed a single sub-regional housing market area from a technical perspective (Baker, 2010).

The need for a strategic spatial planning approach

The gravity and spatially diverse problems of housing delivery remain an imperative for strategic thinking even if the region is no longer seen as the optimal spatial focus for this. Spatial planning issues of commuting, migration, pollution and transport flows seldom respect lower-tier administrative boundaries and will still need addressing on a cross-boundary basis. Better understanding and analysis of functional inter-relationships via the use of coherently defined housing market areas, travel-to-work areas and environmentally derived spatial units can be used to underpin collaborative initiatives between neighbouring local authorities and key stakeholders (Hetherington, 2006; Wong et al, 2000; Wong et al, 2006).

The relationship between administrative boundaries and functional areas is highly variable and that no single set of boundaries can fully satisfy the needs of complex spatial policies. Since there is no perfect set of boundaries, rather than arguing and shifting the spatial scales that are deemed as most appropriate to carry out strategic spatial planning, what really matters is that planners and stakeholders can think *spatially* (Jones et al, 2010; Wong et al, 2008); that is, have a good understanding that different planning issues are taking place and interacting at different spatial scales and creating differential spatial impacts.

While the introduction of a duty to co-operate through the Localism Act 2011 encourages collaboration cross local authority boundaries, the response has been, so far, sporadic. Whatever happens, the need for continued spatial analysis and evidence-based policy development at a strategic scale has not gone away, even under the current drive towards localism (Baker and Wong, 2012). The most effective future collaborative arrangements will probably be a more voluntary approach to sub-regional collaboration, which may mean a greater chance of delivering innovative and visionary outcomes. City regions and newly-formed Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) can be expected to provide a focus for much of this activity, but other initiatives and spatial units may also emerge. Varied and multi-scalar approaches will be needed to best address different issues, so both collaboration and geographical coverage are likely to be fluid.

While the LEPs are clearly charged with the local growth agenda and free to work with partner planning authorities to develop strategic planning frameworks, the Local Growth White Paper did not mention any similar arrangements for the governance structures, or the delivery approaches, of sub-regional spatial planning. There is clearly a serious institutional void between the need for some forms of strategic spatial planning and the government's localised approach to plan-making. One help fill the institutional vacuum outlined above is to introduce an explicit national spatial planning framework for England; the case for which has been made analytically by the Royal Town Planning Institute, the Town and Country Planning Association and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (Collingwood Environmental Planning, 2011).

From a strategic planning perspective, it is crucial that policies are sensitive to local circumstances and able to coordinate and address the impacts and changes brought by the interaction of different policy sectors. The NPPF makes it clear that the government's key housing policy is to significantly increase the delivery of new homes, but does not articulate the spatial distribution of future housing supply and demand. Instead, it requires local planning authorities (with neighbouring authorities where housing market areas cross administrative boundaries) to prepare a SHMA and SHLAA to ascertain the spatial requirements of different types of housing within the local plan. A lack of strategic governance and accountability has led to a policy vacuum in the current planning system. The weakness in the bottom-up approach of Duty to Cooperate means that SHMA may not be carried out to reflect the functional Housing Market Areas. A set of nationally derived HMAs should be used as a reference point to identify cross-boundary issues to facilitate the process of Duty to Cooperate. There is a need to develop sub-regional working mechanisms, e.g. city-regions / LEPs to have a strategic role to ensuring that housing needs are fully met and SHMAs are conducted in a robust and holistic manner.

Research commissioned by the RTPI (Wong et al, 2012) clearly illustrates that there is a lack clear long term national overview of the inter-relationship between housing delivery, environmental constraints and other infrastructure delivery across different parts of the country. For example, the study shows that the areas with the highest projected household growth are mainly found in London and the South East, part of the South West, the eastern part of England, and part of West Yorkshire. By overlaying the major planning constraints, the areas that are assessed with high flood risk and water stress (drought risk), it is clear that strategic planning policy framework is required to plan for housing supply rather than just following the market demand. These challenging issues cannot be addressed at even sub-regional level, but the NPPF does not provide such an overarching perspective of long term strategic planning and coordination. The situation is more daunting when the household projection figures are overlapped with proposal for high speed broadband and transport infrastructure proposals – there is no major plan for the high growth areas in the eastern part of England.

The broad political interest and support in creating new settlements such as urban extensions, Garden Cities, Eco Towns, and New towns. While these major new development concepts have the potential to deliver win-win solutions by resolving housing shortage as well as injecting economic dynamics and to rebalance regional development when linked to regeneration. However, these proposals are complex, controversial and challenging to deliver. They will require high level strategic, national planning and government commitment, as the private sector has not proved adept at driving these ideas forward alone.

A strategic spatial approach is needed for meeting the challenge of housing planning and delivery:

- *to devise spatially sensitive strategies:*
There is no a 'one size fits all' solution to the house building challenges in England. The headline housing need figures tend to mask substantial mismatch between supply and demand across the country (Meen et al, 2008; Whitehead et al, 2009) in terms of location, size and dwelling type. The non-spatial housing policy guidance in PPS and NPPF often fails to address the very different housing requirements in different parts of England. Attention tends to focus on the housing pressure in the south. However, great housing pressure is found in parts of northern England such as North Yorkshire and Cheshire; major opportunities for housing-led regeneration are desired in core city-regions such as the Greater Manchester City Region and the Tyne and Wear City Region; and some northern industrial towns continue to suffer from the problem of low demand. With the very different housing markets in England, intervention that works in one location may not be feasible in another. Indeed, it is wrong to assume that there is one single housing market in London as different parts of London have different housing stress and needs.

- *to coordinate infrastructure and local facilities provision:*
Sustainable housing development has to be coordination with essential physical and social infrastructure and amenities and connected to the wider job market to be liveable. Previous research suggests house prices are highly correlated with low crime rates, good local schools and good access to employment locations (Orford, 2000). This coordination is particularly important for large scale housing development.

- *to deliver quality homes within the wider place-making agenda:*
Housing delivery is not just about quantity, but also their quality to achieve more balanced and sustainable developments. Quality is seen as critical for large scale urban extension, new settlements and garden cities and strategic coordination will be required across different policy sectors to deliver the place-making agenda.

- *to collect information and monitor policy on a consistent and frequent basis:*
There is a need to collect information in relation to household projections and housing requirements in a consistent manner rather than a compartmentalized approach. On the whole, there is a lack of an overall national framework for housing development. Initiative-driven delivery framework can be characterised as fragmented and ad hoc, rather than strategic and visionary. The economics of housing development also vary from location to location, depending upon the value base of an area or a site, the requirement of physical infrastructure to bring forward development, and the cost of the associated s106 agreements and affordable housing policies. Information in relation to land ownership and land values and other information should be frequently collected to monitor policy delivering.

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