

INTERNATIONAL REFLECTIONS ON MANAGING GROWTH

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The Housing and the Regions Working Group was established in January 2006, to explore the English regional housing debate, notably government's attempt to create 'sustainable communities', drawing on wider Europe experience in managing growth and dealing with housing market change, stability or instability.

Our first event at UCL (31st May 2006) was the first of two initial events bringing together academics and practitioners from across Europe, to catalyse a wider debate on regional growth: its theme was 'government's Communities Plan and beyond'. Our next event will take place on the 11th October 2006 at the School of Environment and Development, University of Manchester, considering the Communities Plan in the context of the North of England, using an international perspective to discuss how community stability built on new 'market equilibriums' might be achieved in areas blighted by low demand.

The growth agenda in southern England

Professor Sir Peter Hall (UCL) began by asking whether the government's sustainable communities' agenda is deliverable. He outlined its scope: massive housing and associated growth along three corridors radiating for up to 130km from London, now coupled with a 'city-region' agenda designed to spread urban growth in core cities to neighbouring towns. Whilst focusing on growth in the south, Sir Peter outlined a strategy of bringing the regions closer to one another in terms of travel times, to distribute more evenly the opportunities enjoyed by the south.

He also focused on the question of infrastructure provision, suggesting that the shortfall in funding for infrastructure provision in the south of England might not be as great as hitherto believed. He was particularly critical of the 'land fetish' – saving farmland for no good reason – which polarises housing debate between apparently developmental and environmental interests. Asked about the future of the Green Belt, he argued that containment policies will adapt and will survive beyond the current round of housing growth.

Many of these issues were also picked

up by Professor David Banister (UCL). David's focus was on transport and infrastructure, and how investment in growth might, in part, be turned into investment in infrastructure. He argued that 'much political capital is made out of the belief that infrastructure investment leads to economic growth and that it is essential for maintaining regional competitiveness'.

This view was challenged in the context of the housing and economic growth expected to occur in southern England over the next 25 years. David addressed two basic questions: how much investment in infrastructure is socially justified, and how might this investment be 'unlocked', focused on the public sector's strategic thinking, planning and finance role. David argued that a range of tax and non-tax options for levering investment into infrastructure provision existed, in two broad categories: 'one-off' payments – perhaps in the form of Strategic Land and Infrastructure contracts (SLICs or Strategic Section 106 agreements), or the proposed Planning Gain Supplement (PGS) – or 'metered' payments which allow efficiency objectives to be combined with social and environmental criteria to provide the kinds of infrastructure that support sustainable development. He argued for 'road charging', with fees levied to vehicle pollution profiles, hence unlocking long-term investment for infrastructure whilst also encouraging more sustainable levels of energy use.

Professor Glen Bramley (Heriot Watt) returned to the central issue of housing supply, notably on the challenge for planning posed by the Barker reports on housing supply. He suggested that these reports 'present a persuasive economic argument, not just for a quantitative change in the amount of land provided for housing but equally for a 'paradigm shift' in the way we do planning for housing. In essence, Barker argues for replacing the demographic 'predict and provide', not to mention the nebulous 'plan-monitor-manage' approaches, with a clear target in terms of affordability.

This apparently radical but simple idea appears to make a lot of sense. But Glen's central question was whether we are being confronted with a Trojan horse? The introduction of affordability

triggers in planning for housing seems to represent an uneasy compromise between the old and the new. Household projections could be sidelined by a new emphasis on affordability *and* that insufficient thought has been given to the relationship between demographic and market signals.

This is, in part, because Barker's underlying economic model has been questioned, particularly in terms of how prices are influenced by demography and how they work through the housing stock. There is no agreement over how much housing would be needed to bring current levels of UK price inflation in line with lower European levels.

The Barker reports have re-ignited more dormant debates and pushed others to fever-pitch: investment in affordable housing by the public sector, the need for a rejuvenated regional policy aimed at diverting demand to the north, and the sustainability of housing growth in terms of water and energy usage. Glen argued in favour of Barker, but that a bigger current challenge is building consensus around the need for housing. If this consensus can be achieved, then future debate may become more pragmatic and less alarmist.

Professor Matthew Carmona (UCL) rounded off the morning session with the issue of housing development, particularly the quality of future building in government's growth areas, and the role of 'design codes'. Matthew argued that development quality in government's Growth Areas is of critical concern. Past volume house building has too often been associated with bland, sterile environments, the 'manufacture' of housing estates mixing a small number of housing styles and pattern-book designs arranged around a standardised, one-size-fits-all, layout.

In the Thames Gateway, and in other Growth Areas, government is seeking a radical departure from this, promoting 'quality' in the built environment at the level of individual housing units and across entire 'communities'. Drawing on the results of his own research into design codes, he argued that codes could sit as a condition within outline planning permissions to take forward visions for sustainable communities established in master plans.

Matthew also noted that design codes are not a quick fix, do not replace master-planning and do not negate the need for a critical mass of design literate staff within planning departments. Some commentators – Richard Rogers was mentioned by name – have derided the role of codes in promoting higher design standards, but there is a growing acceptance of their value in delivering more varied and less monotonous, built environments. He concluded that some ‘coding for growth’ is likely to be part of the delivery of government’s sustainable communities plan.

All four contributions sparked lively debate, highlighting their immediate linkages. David Banister’s discussion of paying for infrastructure was at odds with Peter Hall’s figures concerned with the funding gap in the south of England. There is too much uncertainty in government’s calculations, and many other unresolved issues (regarding loading on existing infrastructure, water usage and energy production).

Glen Bramley pointed to other uncertainties regarding housing supply. There is a shortage of developable land, though the issue is more complex than it is often portrayed. However, how much additional housing is needed is not known. But mathematics aside, Matthew Carmona reminded the seminar that quality cannot be relegated behind issues of quantity.

European lessons for England’s sustainable communities

Professor Hugo Priemus (Delft University of Technology) focused on the Netherlands outlining the changing Dutch planning framework for housing and growth management. He highlighted shifting policy emphases between Spatial Memoranda (the so-called *Nota Ruimte*), from decentralisation (Second; 1966–1975), growth poles (Third; 1975–1988), spatial and environmental policy synergies (Fourth; 1988–2000), and then finally the compact cities (so-called VINEX locations), urban networks and network cities advocated by recent policy amendments, especially the 2004 Memorandum.

Whilst earlier memorandums created ‘green contours’ (zones of development restriction) to counter compact development in the VINEX locations, this simple town/country division became untenable as growth pressures escalated. Hence, modifications to the planning framework in 2001 brought about a new polycentri-

cism, extended in 2004 to break down the rural-urban division. Essentially, the past spatial strategy was seen as two-dimensional, dividing space into opposing rural (environmental) and urban (developmental) areas. This placed huge pressure on some locations, and denied other areas the development that they required.

Recent policy sets out a ‘layers approach’ marrying town and country. At the bottom layer, there is a sub-stratum of natural assets (rock, soil, water and so forth); above the sub-stratum are the networks (the roads and the infrastructure); and sitting above these two initial layers is the occupational structure (houses, schools, etc). Seeing places as ‘multi-functional’, with a co-existence of natural and man-made functionality, suggests important lessons for England. This perhaps suggests that the traditional emphasis on containment can be loosened and that town and country can be managed symbiotically, rather than in a state of perpetual conflict.

Professor Dr Alain Thierstein (Technical University of Munich) carried forward the polycentric theme. Drawing on his experiences in the POLYNET project (*cf. Regions 254*), Alain outlined different theories of future urban growth across Europe. One theory posits that economic globalisation (new connectivity and information flows) will have a leveling effect on urban structures, causing a flattening and redistribution of growth away from major cores. A second theory suggests that these cores will retain their importance as nodes and gateways within a globalising economy.

POLYNET has used Mega-City Region (MCR) case studies across Europe to show that the reality lies somewhere between these two positions. At a European level, there are new functional linkages between MCRs. But at a regional level (for example, in South East England, Île-de-France or Greater Dublin) there is a new functional polycentricity eroding the historical dominance of core centres.

New MCR scale interactions point to a need to think about growth, urban structures, information flows and physical connectivity in new ways, providing a framework for understanding the new economic landscape of regions and of Europe as a whole. This suggests that existing frameworks for economic growth, competitiveness, cohesion and sustainable development are not always

mutually reinforcing. Sometimes, they pull against a polycentric reality: hence a pressing need to more fully appreciate the new dynamics of city-regions.

Simone Marchesi (University of Rome 3) concluded proceedings with an overview of Italian efforts to promote poly-centricity at a national scale as an antidote to three decades of Italian urban sprawl. The need for such a strategy might be considered strange in the light of the relatively balanced urban hierarchy which has for many centuries been a feature of Italy’s development.

But this balance has been placed under enormous strain, making the most economically vibrant city-regions difficult to govern and to service. Clearly, this problem has a parallel in England, and Simone focused attention on the regional policy focussed solution highlighted by Glen Bramley in the morning’s session.

Attempts are being made to re-structure urban regions and promote a new connectivity between different centres within the framework of the ESDP. This initiative is being led by the Ministry of Infrastructure and Transport which has begun earmarking new connection corridors up and down the country. The promotion of new corridors and the exportation of growth – as a prime management strategy – returned the seminar full circle to the points raised by Peter Hall and David Banister earlier in the day.

Clear lessons emerged from the afternoon contributions: key amongst these was the Dutch environmental/developmental functional framework for thinking about space. Alain Thierstein reminded the audience that new ways of thinking about city regions have emerged and that this thinking needs to be reflected in future growth management strategies. The Italian case study suggested some return to ‘traditional’ regional policy responses, but in the context of an emergent European spatial development framework.

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