



## **Hanging together rather than hanging separately:**

### **The story of joint strategic planning in the East Midlands**

#### **Wither strategic planning?**

There has been a lot of debate about the need to re-invent English strategic planning in the era of localism and the much derided 'duty to co-operate'. Some, including the current Government, point to the potential of Local Enterprise Partnerships. Others have highlighted the emerging city region Combined Authorities, particularly Greater Manchester, as a blueprint of the future. But in the East Midlands, a quiet revolution has been taking place which has succeeded in reintroducing an effective tier of strategic planning in a number of key localities that could be widely applied elsewhere in the country, and in particular across two-tier areas which still comprise the bulk of England.

#### **"The past is another country, they do things differently there."**

Despite its relevance to today's challenges, our story starts back at the high tide of English regionalism with the Planning & Compulsory Purchase Act 2004. As well as introducing the now defunct regional spatial strategies, the Act made a number of changes to what, for the sake of simplicity, we shall call local plans.

Firstly, by integrating the requirements of the EU Strategic Environmental Assessment Directive into the plan-making process, it significantly 'raised the bar' in terms of the quality and quantity of evidence required to develop a 'sound' plan. Secondly, it made a new provision that allowed two or more local planning authorities to pool their statutory plan-making powers into a separate but jointly controlled plan-making body – which in two tier areas would also include the relevant county council.

From an East Midlands perspective, these changes presented both a problem and a potential solution. Like in much of England, the 41 local planning authorities in the East Midlands did not have a great record in delivering statutory plans – even under the more relaxed 1991 system. Many local planning teams were small and under resourced and plan-making was rarely a high priority for council leaders and chief executives, despite the primacy of the development plan in planning decisions.

And yet councils had for a long time been managing significant levels of development, both in absolute and particularly relative terms. The East Midlands is characterised by a 'polycentric' settlement pattern - a patchwork of small and medium sized cities (typically under-bounded), towns and villages, with no single conurbation dominating. As such it has proved increasingly attractive to people and businesses in the post-industrial age – and has consistently grown faster than the English average as a result.

This mismatch between the level of development pressure and the local capacity to deliver statutory local plans was brought home forcefully by the Milton Keynes and South Midlands (MKSM) Growth Area initiative. The MKSM Alteration to the East Midlands Regional Plan proposed a massive step change increase in development across Northamptonshire over a 20 year period. In order to manage this scale of growth effectively, the Government Office and the Regional Planning Body (RPB) both came to the view that seven separate local plans would not work and that something different was needed. After a lot of debate and discussion with the relevant councils, two new statutory joint planning bodies were established under Section 29 of the 2004 Act, based on the newly introduced 'housing market area' concept.

**North Northamptonshire:** Corby, Kettering, Wellingborough, and East Northamptonshire, with Northamptonshire County Council

**West Northamptonshire:** Northampton, Daventry, and South Northamptonshire, with Northamptonshire County Council.

There were several perceived advantages to this approach:

- It provided a statutory mechanism for resolving cross boundary issues, particularly relating to under-bounded urban areas;
- It enabled a critical mass of officer and Member expertise to be established;
- It locked the county council (as transport, waste, minerals and education authority) into the local plan making process; and
- It reduced the number of appraisals, inquiries and studies required – saving both time and money.

As if to prove the last point, the North Northamptonshire Joint Plan (2008) was the first local plan of any kind to be adopted in under the 2004 Act in the East Midlands.

As the East Midlands Regional Plan moved towards a full review, the RPB began to consider if this model could be more widely applied. Analysis had identified eleven housing market areas across the East Midlands (including the two in Northamptonshire) into which local planning authorities could be grouped. So instead of 41 local plans (and 41 sets of housing numbers in the regional plan), we could have 11 joint local plans instead – which looked a much more deliverable proposition.

However from a legal perspective, although the RPB could encourage councils to go down this route, it could not force them. Ultimately it had to be a process of consent. As a result, the Regional Plan adopted in 2009 included the following very carefully worded policy.

**Policy 17 of the East Midlands Regional Plan (2009)**

Local Authorities, developers and relevant public bodies should work across administrative boundaries in all the Region's Housing Market Areas to ensure that the release of sites is managed to achieve a sustainable pattern of development...

...joint development plan documents will be expected, with the development of Joint Core Strategies across HMAs particularly encouraged...

In addition to Policy 17, the then Government used allocations of Growth Point funding and Planning Delivery Grant to support and encourage joint working. Even in the pre-austerity era, councils were pathetically grateful for small amounts of extra cash!

Joint planning was seen as a continuum - starting with joint evidence base work at one end, moving through aligned local plans and then to statutory joint plans at the other. The objective was to get all councils onto to this continuum and move them along it as far as possible.

In the short period between the adoption of the Regional Plan in 2009 and the 2010 General Election, a fair amount of progress was made. A third statutory joint planning body was established in Central Lincolnshire (Lincoln City, West Lindsey and North Kesteven with Lincolnshire County Council), and an aligned local plan process established in Greater Nottingham (Nottingham, Ashfield Broxtowe, Erewash, Gedling and Rushcliffe). Elsewhere, a number of joint studies were started.

### **2010: Planning's 'Year Zero'**

And then the balloon went up. Although delayed by a rather entertaining judicial review, the East Midlands Regional Plan was eventually revoked (as were the others outside of London), and Eric Pickles ushered in 'Year Zero' of the age of localism. And there our story should have ended.

Except that it didn't. Despite the vociferous opposition of the number of newly elected local MPs, the three statutory joint planning committees endured, and in fact a fourth was established: South East Lincolnshire (Boston and South Holland with Lincolnshire County Council). Following an initial rocky period, work resumed on the Greater Nottingham aligned core strategies, with five councils eventually adopting a common set of strategic policies into their local plans - a truly heroic achievement given the local politics and justly rewarded at this year's East Midlands RTPI Awards.

So why has statutory joint planning endured in the East Midlands? A big part of the answer is simple expediency. Establishing a statutory joint planning body is complex (requiring a statutory instrument to be made and laid before Parliament) – but it is just as complex to dissolve. The cost of establishing separate plan making processes at a time when grant funding to councils has been cut by 40% has also been a major factor. Perhaps more importantly though, such joint arrangements (whether fully integrated or aligned) are also seen as an effective way of meeting today's challenges, particularly the 'duty to co-operate'.

It has not all been plain sailing. The emerging central Lincolnshire joint plan was knocked back because of concerns about deliverability and five year land supply. Funding for joint planning units has been an increasing problem, particularly as plans move towards adoption. And the local politics remain as challenging as ever. However, the fact that a set of joint arrangements conceived in the regional era have not only survived but flourished over the last five years is significant.

### **The strange re-birth of strategic planning?**

As we approach another General Election, it is clear that there is no appetite from any of the major political parties (or indeed the RTPI) to re-establish a separate statutory tier of strategic planning. As a result we are likely to be stuck with the system we have got until well into the 2020s. In this situation, a future Government of whatever composition could do better than look to the East Midlands experience for inspiration. In particular it could:

- Amend the NPPF to along the lines of Policy 17 of the former East Midlands Regional Plan to provide greater encouragement to develop joint planning arrangements;
- Make available limited financial assistance and technical advice to councils interested in developing joint planning initiatives;

It may not be a perfect solution - but it looks better than many of the current alternatives.

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