



UNIVERSITY OF
LIVERPOOL

Heseltine Institute
for Public Policy,
Practice and Place



What next for sub-national spatial planning in England?

Assessing the new Liverpool City Region Spatial Development Strategy

Tom Arnold

Series 3 Briefing 9

December 2023

What next for sub-national spatial planning in England? Assessing the new Liverpool City Region Spatial Development Strategy

Key takeaways

1. Liverpool City Region (LCR) has published the latest version of its Spatial Development Strategy (SDS), which is now out for consultation. The SDS provides high-level guidance on where housing and other development is likely to take place over the next 15 years.
2. With the planning system in a state of flux and many city-regional combined authorities still grappling with what role they should play in planning, the SDS provides a welcome strategic approach to development, and builds upon LCR's Plan for Prosperity.
3. However, the SDS is as interesting for what it does not address as what is included. Unlike the Greater Manchester Spatial Framework (now known as Places for Everyone), the SDS does not allocate land for release from the Green Belt, and so avoids the most politically sensitive of planning decisions.
4. While the future of the national planning system is uncertain with a General Election on the horizon in 2024, city-regional combined authorities will remain and should play a role in spatial planning. National government needs to provide combined authorities with the tools to engage fully in strategic planning at a city-regional level.
5. The lessons from London over the last 20 years suggest city-regional planning should be seen not just as a politically tricky hurdle to navigate, but as an opportunity by metro mayors to imprint their long-term vision on a city-region and achieve a physically tangible legacy. The LCR SDS is the first step of a longer-term process embedding strategic planning at the city-region scale.

1. Introduction

Devolution presents challenges as well as opportunities for English city-regions. Metro mayors in England's largest urban areas have, over recent years, made headway on several strategic policy objectives, in areas such as transport, skills and health. In several city-regions, buses are being brought back under public control, local policymakers are gaining more influence over post-16 education, and locally-designed policies are tackling issues such as homelessness, housing insulation and energy generation.

However, planning remains a 'wicked' problem for city-regional policymakers (Hartmann, 2012; Rittel and Webber, 1973). Only London has successfully developed

and implemented strategic spatial planning at a 'larger than local' level since the abolition of regional planning structures in 2010. In Greater Manchester, attempts to develop a comprehensive spatial framework for the city-region have been beset by political challenges, including one local authority withdrawing from the plan entirely, and senior councillors elsewhere in the conurbation losing seats due to strident anti-housebuilding campaigns by local residents. In other English city-regions, metro mayors have been reluctant to engage with the political trade-offs inherent within spatial planning at a city-regional scale.

It is in this challenging context, and amid wider debates about the future of the

English planning system (Sykes and Sturzacker, 2023), that [Liverpool City Region \(LCR\) launches the latest version of its Strategic Development Strategy \(SDS\)](#), with public consultation on the document now open following earlier engagement in 2019 and 2020. This policy briefing assesses the approach of the LCR SDS, discusses how the strategy has been shaped by broader trends in city-regional spatial planning in England, and highlights some of the ways sub-national planning policy in England might evolve over the coming years.

2. Addressing spatial challenges in Liverpool City Region

The SDS has been several years in the making, with the process set in motion in 2015 as part of the LCR devolution deal that paved the way for the election of a metro mayor. The SDS aims to provide an overarching framework for key planning decisions across LCR. Drawing from figures identified in the local plans of LCR's six constituent local authorities, the SDS identifies a need for the following between 2021 and 2040:

- 83,600 new homes – around 4,400 per year
- 27 strategic housing sites across LCR
- A minimum of 521 hectares of land for general industrial use
- A minimum of 281,000 sq metres of office and research and development space
- Between 293 and 343 hectares of storage and distribution space
- 18 strategic employment sites across LCR

Along with these specific objectives, the SDS aims to address several issues impacting the LCR economy and the well-being of its residents:

- *Air quality and the impact of climate change.* While overall carbon emissions in the city-region decreased by 42% between 2005 and 2020, air quality remains an issue, with 12 Air Quality Management Areas in place across LCR, and the percentage of LCR residents travelling to work by car or van is higher than the England average. LCR has set a target of reaching net zero carbon emissions by 2040 – ten years earlier than the date set by UK government.
- *Poor health outcomes.* Poor health is a persistent issue in LCR, with 38% of neighbourhoods ranked in the 10% most health deprived according to the Indices of Multiple Deprivation. Healthy life expectancy is three years lower than the England average.
- *A low wage economy.* Rates of economic inactivity are higher than the national average, with long-term sickness a particular issue in LCR. 17.4% of all LCR households are workless (compared to the national average of 14%). Productivity as measured by GVA per hour is lower than the North West and England average.
- *Ageing population and housing stock.* 19.2% of LCR residents are aged 65 and over compared to the England average of 18.6%. 44% of properties in LCR were built before 1939 compared to 36% nationally. As a result of this ageing housing stock, 72% of homes in LCR have an Energy Performance Certificate rating of D or below.

In addition, the SDS includes an objective to maximise the social value of development by ensuring the benefits of regeneration are captured by local communities.

3. Navigating political hurdles

What's not included in the LCR SDS is perhaps as interesting as what is. The scars of Greater Manchester's recent attempts to develop a spatial framework for the region are evident. Unlike the Greater Manchester Spatial Framework (GMSF, or Places For Everyone as it is now called), the SDS does not allocate land for removal from the Green Belt beyond what is already proposed by the Local Plans of the six constituent LCR local authorities. It was this element of the GMSF which proved so controversial, prompting 27,000 responses to its first consultation in 2016, and ultimately leading to Stockport Council withdrawing from the plan. As a result, the SDS is not as comprehensive as the more advanced spatial development strategies brought forward in London over recent years, with Local Plans retaining primacy in land use allocation.

Instead the SDS focuses on policies aimed at "growing existing urban areas and those locations where specific needs and opportunities have been identified" (LCRCA, 2023: 62). There is a strong emphasis on Liverpool City Centre, the 'Inner Urban Area' (towns such as Bootle and Birkenhead adjacent to the city centre, along with Liverpool's suburbs), and the 'Wider Urban Area' (LCR's other major conurbations such as St Helens, Widnes and Runcorn). 41.7% of new housing up to 2040 will be delivered in the city centre and Inner Urban Area, with 57.3% in the Wider Urban Area.

The focus on regenerating brownfield land reflects the fact that, despite significant development over the last 20 years, there remain many sites in and around the city centre with the potential to deliver new homes. This approach may have advantages in reducing the need for Green Belt development and creating more walkable, dense urban neighbourhoods if the right supporting infrastructure is developed. However, while a brownfield-

first strategy may result in a less fraught path to plan adoption than in Greater Manchester, some planning consultants have expressed concern that the plan is insufficiently ambitious in the number of homes proposed and will not deliver the mix of housing needed across the city-region, particularly larger family homes (McLaren, 2021).

Critics of English planning in its current form have suggested it has evolved into a system geared largely towards supporting the development of private housing rather than planning in the wider public interest (TCPA, 2018). Planning for non-residential purposes has become increasingly challenging due to the rapid pace of change in how and where we work. Consider, for example, the growth of online shopping and its impact on physical retail over the last decade, or how the COVID-19 pandemic prompted an immediate and lasting increase in homeworking.

Population growth and demographic change are, by their nature, somewhat more straightforward to model than which industries and employers will grow by 2040. To navigate this challenge, the SDS builds on the LCR Plan for Prosperity (LCRCA, 2022), which identifies several strategically important sectors for the city-region, in particular those which will contribute to the UK's transition to net zero. Despite its economic and social challenges highlighted here, LCR has genuine and unique strengths in health and life sciences, advanced manufacturing and culture, and the SDS provides a welcome focus on these sectors.

Politically, the route to approving and adopting the SDS looks smoother than Greater Manchester's travails. However, responses to the current consultation by large housebuilders and developers will provide an interesting insight into the potential for future challenges about how much Green Belt land in the city-region should be released for development.

4. Does city-regional planning have a future in England?

The future of city-regional planning in England, as with the planning system more broadly, is uncertain. In the mid-2010s, the trajectory appeared clear – the newly established combined authorities, together with elected metro mayors, would create spatial plans for their region that would ultimately fill the hole left by the abolition of regional planning structures by the Coalition government.

However, while there is broad consensus that in large city-regions it is necessary to provide some form of coordination across a single housing market area and labour market (Lichfields, 2022), the political trauma of Greater Manchester's attempts at spatial planning over the last decade – along with uncertainty about planning policy at a national level - have made other city-region leaders reluctant to engage in the issue. With a general election on the horizon, many local policymakers have understandably decided to adopt a 'wait and see' approach to planning reform.

In this context, the publication of LCR's SDS is welcome, even if it does circumnavigate many of the toughest land use allocation decisions that will nevertheless need to be made over the next decade and a half. The strategy will provide increased certainty for developers and businesses investing in the area, and builds on the strategic focus of the LCR Plan for Prosperity, moving beyond the somewhat broader approach adopted in the earlier Local Industrial Strategy. The SDS reflects the increased institutional knowledge being developed in LCR, and a greater understanding of the city-region's unique sectoral strengths and ingrained challenges.

However, as evidenced by the [unexpected recent refusal of planning permission](#) for a large apartment scheme close to Liverpool City Centre, uncertainty about the future of

the planning system continues to add political tension to the mix. While critics of the so-called Greater Manchester Model of development have suggested its technocratic and depoliticised approach to planning stifles debate and shuts out community voices (Rose, 2022), there is danger too in the grind of local politics becoming too engrained in strategic planning. City-regional leaders, assisted by national policymakers, must find a way to build long-term thinking into a planning system too often stifled by short-term concerns.

The lesson from London's experience of successfully developing three spatial development strategies over the last 20 years suggests that elected mayors should play a central role in this process. Each of the three plans, published by different mayors in 2004 (Ken Livingstone), 2011 (Boris Johnson) and 2021 (Sadiq Khan), reflect the priorities of those leading London at that time. The process of developing these plans has been refined over time, and each iteration has built on the previous version.

LCR is at the start of this journey, and this first SDS should be seen as the first stage of the process of institutional learning. Combined authorities must be given time and space to learn from experience. While there are political risks in mayors taking ownership of spatial planning strategy, particularly if decisions are required on removing land from the Green Belt, mayors should also see spatial planning as an opportunity to deliver long-lasting and tangible change for their areas. As English city-regional institutions mature over the next decade, central government will also need to decide how much space they are willing to give to local policymakers to diverge from national policy, with planning one of the main tools enabling this.

5. References

Hartman, Thomas. 2012. 'Wicked problems and clumsy solutions: planning as expectation management'. *Planning Theory*. 11(3). 242-256.

Lichfields. 2022. *Spatial awareness: the role of Spatial Development Strategies*. <https://lichfields.uk/content/insights/spatial-awareness>

Liverpool City Region Combined Authority. 2022. *Plan for Prosperity*. <https://www.liverpoolcityregion-ca.gov.uk/plan-for-prosperity>

Liverpool City Region Combined Authority. 2023. *Towards a Spatial Development Strategy for the Liverpool City Region up to 2040*. <https://www.liverpoolcityregion-ca.gov.uk/sds>

McLaren, Andy. 2021. 'The Liverpool City Region's Spatial Development Strategy: show me the numbers!'. *Planning Matters – Lichfields*. <https://lichfields.uk/blog/2021/january/22/the-liverpool-city-region-s-spatial-development-strategy-show-me-the-numbers>

Rittel, Horst and Malvin Webber. 1973. 'Dilemmas in a general theory of planning'. *Policy Sciences*. 4. 155-169.

Rose, Isaac. 2022. 'Against the Manchester Model'. *Tribune*. 25 November 2022. <https://tribunemag.co.uk/2022/11/against-the-manchester-model>

Sykes, Olivier and John Sturzaker. 2023. *Planning in a failing state*. Bristol: Bristol University Press

Town and Country Planning Association. 2018. *The Raynsford Review of Planning*. <https://www.tcpa.org.uk/resources/the-raynsford-review-of-planning/>

The Heseltine Institute for Public Policy, Practice and Place is an interdisciplinary public policy research institute which brings together academic expertise from across the University of Liverpool with policy-makers and practitioners to support the development of sustainable and inclusive cities and city regions.

Our policy briefings aim to promote and disseminate creative and innovative contributions from academics, policymakers and practitioners on a range of challenges facing the UK, particularly those which affect our cities and city regions.

About the authors

Dr Tom Arnold is a Research Associate at the Heseltine Institute. His research focuses on the planning and politics of infrastructure and its impact on regional economies.

To cite this briefing, use: Arnold, Tom. 2023. 'What next for sub-national spatial planning in England? Assessing the new Liverpool City Region Spatial Development Strategy'. *Heseltine Institute Policy Briefings*, 3(9). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17638/03172460>

Heseltine Institute for Public Policy, Practice and
Place University of Liverpool
1-7 Abercromby Square
Liverpool
L69 7WY
Follow us @livuniheseltine

The information, practices and views in this Policy Briefing are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Heseltine Institute.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic License.

Policy Briefings can be accessed at: www.liverpool.ac.uk/heseltine-institute