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Deliberation, participation and learning in the development of regional strategies: transport policy-making in North East England.

Dr Geoff Vigar

School of Architecture Planning and Landscape

University of Newcastle

Newcastle upon Tyne

United Kingdom NE1 7RU

Email: g.i.vigar@ncl.ac.uk

Abstract

Two trends in contemporary governance practice are mirrored in recent UK efforts in transport policy and practice: first, a concern to develop strategies in more participative and deliberative ways; second, a reterritorialisation of the state with greater attention to regional levels. This paper discusses these issues through assessing a single regional transport strategy-making effort. The paper argues that the process has achieved some of its aims and is a useful effort at generating awareness of, and interest in, this aspect of strategic policy-making. However, the case highlighted shows how important it is to develop an appropriate collaborative process if a policy mechanism is to endure. This requires greater attention to: the purposes of participation in strategy development; the skills, practices and roles needed by the animateurs of such processes; the system of formal decision-making institutions and mechanisms arising from reterritorialisation in the UK case; and reconceptualising participatory processes in more deliberative ways. The paper concludes with an assessment of ways forward both specifically for the development of strategic transport policy and for stakeholder engagement in similar exercises in other policy areas.

Introduction: participation in policy processes

There is increasing interest to promote governance processes that can enhance the breadth and depth of stakeholder involvement, both of organised groups such as business and environmental interests, and participation from the general public. In transport planning such concerns have a long history, although participatory techniques are often less well-developed than in areas such as spatial planning, for example.

Participation can be undertaken for a number of reasons including:

- democratic purposes;
- sharing and providing knowledge of others' experience and local conditions, 'situated knowledge' (Haraway 1988);

- debating these various ‘knowledges’, developing awareness of associated policy complexity and facilitating learning associated with the problem at hand
- generating shared ownership of strategies and programmes, thus potentially reducing implementation deficits.

A typical departure point for discussing the degree of public involvement is Arnstein’s ladder (Arnstein 1969). Here, participation in governance processes is portrayed as a sequence wherein public involvement can be characterised on a scale from manipulation to citizen control. There is an implicit assumption that one should aim for the top of the ladder. However, it is perfectly legitimate to conduct a one-way information-giving exercise or a consultation exercise if appropriate, rather than full-scale devolved decision-making. The key is to decide the appropriate method for the specific process and to be clear which of the above aims participation is designed to meet.

Similar criteria apply to the involvement of organised groups, the principal focus of this paper. There may be occasions when simple information-giving exercises are appropriate and others where more extensive participation is needed at many different stages of the process. Nevertheless, recent concern in many national contexts to develop transport policy processes in more collaborative ways suggests an attempt to move participative practice up the ladder to varying degrees (Banister et al 2000; Low and Gleeson 2003). Indeed some commentators have called for a more radical change in the way transportation policy is developed toward a more collaborative form (Willson 2001), reflecting wider concerns to construct policy-making as a learning process (Friedmann 1973, Hecllo 1974, Sabatier and Jenkins Smith 1993).

Whether adopting a paradigm of collaborative planning as a model for practice or in simply considering an individual case, the literature is clear that getting stakeholders meaningfully engaged in policy-making is rarely an easy task. Interest in any exercise is often in direct proportion to the utility potential participants anticipate gaining from it. In relation to this axiom, generating public interest in strategic policy-making has historically proved more difficult than at more local scales. The further we travel from an individual or organisation’s immediate short-term interest, the less concern is

likely to be expressed in policy and decisions in a particular field of policy. Indeed, there is typically less interest in policy-making, which is usually by its nature more abstract, than in decision-making. In addition, the abstract and often complex nature of strategic policy-making raises particular difficulties in mobilising collaborative practices, an issue returned to later in the paper. Given these interlacing factors, the challenge of engaging stakeholders in regional transport strategy-making exercises is not inconsiderable.

The paper first discusses policy process forms and recent experience of participation in UK transport planning in greater depth by way of background to a detailed case study. Finally, conclusions are drawn regarding the construction of policy processes to provide more meaningful collaboration between the state and other stakeholders in future policy-making.

Participation and Deliberation, Policy Process Forms and UK transport planning

Healey (1990) identifies a number of ways that policy processes can be undertaken. Such processes can be grouped into three generic types: political; technical-rational; and collaborative (Vigar and Healey 2002). The key characteristics of each approach and their attitude to stakeholder engagement are discussed below. It should be noted that the types are often used together and can be complementary both in transport and in other policy fields and different types can be in play within the preparation of a single policy (Woltjer 2000; Stephenson 2001).

First, purely political approaches result in policy becoming merely the push and pull of the interests and perceptions of the powerful. The outcomes of such exercises are often unjust (socially and ecologically), uninformed and un-enduring in a number of ways. For these reasons attempts are often made to construct policies in two other broad ways to overcome such difficulties. We can group these approaches into two overlapping types: technocratic and collaborative/ deliberative/ interpretive.

Second, technical-rational processes are expert-led, and typically involve a narrow range of participants. UK transport planning has traditionally adopted this kind of approach with little involvement of stakeholders from beyond a small group of decision-makers and ‘insider’ groups often taken as a proxy for particular views (an organised environmental group and a business grouping for example). Techniques have often been highly quantitative, sometimes involving complex modelling procedures. Increasing criticism of such processes and their outcomes from the 1960s onward led to some change in practices. More recently, several transparent frameworks have begun to emerge for assessing road schemes¹ and a shift toward greater participation in local transport plan-making has emerged (see Bickerstaff and Walker 2001 for the UK experience).

Third, collaborative approaches to policy-making differ significantly from the two above. They emphasise the importance of the processes of making policy in their own right for the practical and moral reasons highlighted in the reasons listed in the previous section. Such approaches also typically recognise that participation needs to be differentiated from deliberation. That is, under a genuinely collaborative or deliberative approach, the policy-making process should be a *process of mutual learning* about problems, issues and the consequences of different policy alternatives for various interests. Such processes do not necessarily lead to consensus but, its proponents argue, to respect for different views and a greater understanding of why particular policy choices might be made, even if they were not those selected by particular groups of participants (Healey 1997, Willson 2001). The principles of a collaborative approach can be applied to policy-making generally or to individual situations and processes (see Willson 2001 for how collaborative principles could be applied as an overarching approach for transport planning).

Recent academic work seeks to better understand the conditions under which collaborative processes might emerge and how we might evaluate them (see Table 1).

¹ The New Approach to Transport Appraisal framework in the UK for example (DfT 2003).

Table 1: Evaluation criteria for a good consensus building process

Process Criteria	Outcome criteria
Includes representatives of all relevant and significantly different interests	Produces a high quality agreement
Is driven by a purpose and task that are real, practical and shared by the group	Ends stalemate
Is self-organising, allowing participants to decide on ground rules, objectives, tasks, working groups, and discussion topics	Compares favourably with other planning methods in terms of costs and benefits
Engages participants, keeping them at the table, interested, and learning through in-depth discussion, drama, humour, and informal interaction	Produces creative ideas
Encourages challenges to the status quo and fosters creative thinking	Results in learning and change in and beyond the group
Incorporates high quality information of many types and assures agreement on its meaning	Creates social and political capital
Seeks consensus only after discussion have fully explored the issues and interests and significant effort has been made to find creative responses to differences	Produces information that stakeholders understand and accept
	Sets in motion a cascade of changes in attitudes behaviours and actions, spin off partnerships, and new practices or institutions
	Results in institutions and practices that are flexible and networked, permitting the community to be more creatively responsive to change and conflict

Source: Innes and Booher 1999b

Following such considerations, Booher and Innes (2002) suggest that three factors are critical for participants in such processes: they must be diverse, interdependent and be prepared to engage in authentic dialogue. This suggests that contextual conditions may inhibit the emergence of effective collaborative processes. However, despite this evidence, the universality of a discourse of ‘more participation must be good’ is evident in both UK government policy and in much practitioner action (Campbell and Marshall 2002). In effect, in practice there is much aiming for the middle tiers of Arnstein’s ladder with little consideration of whether this is achievable or desirable. Given that a key point about setting up participation processes is to be realistic about the outcomes of such actions with regard to the expectations of participants (Tewdwr Jones and Thomas 1998), this seems a potential major failing of the current UK emphasis on engaging citizens and stakeholders in policy-making.

Thus, despite the theoretical and governmental interest in broadening and deepening participation in policy-making, the complexity of constructing processes to generate meaningful stakeholder representation in something as complex as a transport strategy should not be underestimated.

In transportation, participation exercises have been more successful when applied to decision-making over specific schemes rather than in policy development more generally. More recently, efforts have been made to engage stakeholders in the production of strategy, largely at the behest of central government who, in the UK, heavily frame the operation of such practices (see Table 2). Thus in a survey of participation in the production of local transport plans, practitioners were largely found to be engaging in participative practices for instrumental reasons, i.e. in response to central government requirements in relation to funding, than for any belief in the efficacy of such practices (Bickerstaff and Walker 2001). Some practitioners appear to believe that participation can usefully serve other functions, but there is deep scepticism among many and thus policy processes are often conducted in fairly traditional, expert-led, technocratic ways (Vigar 2002).

Table 2: Policy process forms and UK transport planning

Process form	Manifestation in UK transport planning practice
Political	Common
Technical Rational	Common, often driven by quantitative techniques
Collaborative	Emerging, but often performative (see discussion)

This paper thus seeks to explore the ways participation by organised groups of interest has been incorporated into the development of recent transport strategies. It derives empirical support from analysis of the development of a Regional Transport Strategy (RTS) for an English region². It does not seek to fully evaluate the process as a collaborative effort, using the criteria in Table 1 for example, as this was not the intention of the process. Rather, the paper uses such criteria as a benchmark against which to consider the finegrain of the policy-making process in this instance. The paper is deliberately descriptive. The construction of the narrative provides an understanding of the complexities of policy processes and the necessity of attending both to the broad structuring factors at play but also to the micro-politics of such processes (see Flyvbjerg 1997, 2001 for more on the justification of such an approach).

Reterritorialising English transport planning

Governance activity at the UK regional level has had a variable history. At times it has provided a focus for spatial planning and transportation policy-making. At other times interest has dwindled, particularly from central government which, in the absence of a written constitution, can make significant changes in the allocation of governmental roles and responsibilities.

² The author took part in two meetings of a Wider Reference Group; analysed documentation and undertook one semi-structured interview with a key stakeholder.

Since the early 1990s there has been a resurgence in regional activity in the UK, first developed 'bottom-up' by local authorities and latterly endorsed and driven by central government. This 'reterritorialisation', whereby powers accrue at the regional scale, has resulted from central government concern to overcome some of the problems, particularly of policy co-ordination across policy sectors, arising from a heavily centralised and sectoralised state. This re-scaling process began under John Major's second Conservative administration (1992-7) but, with the subsequent accession to power of a Labour administration has since accelerated. The main recipients of the devolution effort are Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales but more authority has also slowly been devolved to English regions. In England this devolution process has stopped short of elected regional government.

As part of the regional devolution process, spatial planning has been given a greater role. The principal mechanism here is the Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS). These strategies are developed by designated Regional Planning Bodies (RPBs), which can be associations of local authorities in each region or regional assembly³. In practice this process has relied heavily on the efforts of a small body of officers on secondment from local authorities and thus to a great extent on the goodwill of local authority officers and members prepared to divert resources to it. Central government maintains a great deal of power in the process, through providing guidelines which in effect structure the RSS process and product, and through a 'super-gatekeeper' role devolved to its regional offices. These police the process and authorise the final product. Transport issues had always been a feature of the mechanism of Regional Planning Guidance (RPG) that preceded RSS, although since 2000, they have been elevated into a discrete and explicit Regional Transport Strategy (RTS) within the RSS mechanism. This increase in attention to transport issues at regional level is bolstered through the devolution of more authority over 'trunk roads'⁴ planning to the regional level, greater levels of finance available for transport initiatives generally, and through the development of 'Multi-Modal Studies' for which regions have responsibility (see Headicar 2002 for more detail).

³ Regional Assemblies comprise representatives from public, private and voluntary sector agencies and are charged with developing various aspects of regional strategy.

⁴ Trunk roads are strategic routes of 'national importance'.

Parallel to this rescaling process, policy itself has shifted in its emphasis. During the Labour Party's first term (1997-2001), a white paper (DETR 1998) suggested a greater emphasis on demand management as a strategic frame of reference for UK transport policy. Subsequently, a politically more pragmatic policy emphasis emerged with a greater emphasis on capital investment in infrastructure (see Doherty and Shaw, eds., 2003). A later white paper (DfT 2004) consolidates this 'pragmatic multi-modal' approach. However, while a rhetorical emphasis on 'demand management'⁵ (COULD YOU PROVIDE A FOOTNOTE ON MEANING – ITS NOT A UNIVERSALLY UNDERSTOOD TERM – AND YOU REFER TO IT LATER!) is evident, considerable capital investment, not least in roads infrastructure, was likely to perpetuate trends of increasing average trip distances and consolidate the UK's position as the most car-dependent nation in Europe (CfIT 2001).

The Regional Transport Strategy preparation process in the North East of England.

The Context

The north east of England provides an interesting case study of the processes of transport policy formation⁶. It is a region with a strong identity, in part fostered by a sense of isolation from London and central government. In comparison with other English regions, it is small in population terms (2.5m. in 2001) but covers a large surface area (850,000 hectares). It consists of three major conurbations: Tyneside, centred on Newcastle; Wearside, centred on Sunderland; and Teeside, centred on the city of Middlesbrough (see Figure 1). To the north and south of Tyneside are two former coalfield areas where regeneration presents a major challenge. The remainder of the region is mostly rural, with varying degrees of remoteness, and a number of small towns. Its strong sense of regional identity, in an English context, contributes to an unusually large commitment from elite groups to regional devolution and it was the

⁵ Transportation demand management emphasises the management of existing resources to meet transport policy objectives, emphasising behavioural change rather than supply-side increases in infrastructure

⁶ It should also be noted that it is something of an outlier in relation to transport policy, perhaps along with South West England, in its orientation toward 'predict and provide' policies that emphasise the importance of infrastructure investment in overcoming 'peripherality' for the purposes of economic development (see MVA 2004)

only English region allowed to vote on the possibility of an elected regional assembly: a proposal that was overwhelmingly rejected by the public. In addition, government and citizens often maintain strong allegiances to individual settlements. There is a great deal of rivalry between these which has consequences for the making of strategy especially where local politicians (and other stakeholders) engage in essentially parochial and clientelist practices. Both the devolution vote and local rivalries contradict the external perception of the North East as a region with a great deal of political coherence.

Figure 1: The North East Region

Source: NEA 2004.

As Figure 1 demonstrates, in transport terms the region centres, and depends a great deal for surface access, on a North-South axis of both rail and road. Two principal links run east-west, one consisting of road access only and one with both road and rail access. Within the region a further north-south road axis, with some parallel rail service, connects the three main conurbations and the two coalfield areas. The region also contains a number of sea ports and two airports with passenger and freight capacity. Long-distance walking and cycle networks complete the regional transport infrastructure picture.

The North East Regional Transport Strategy-making process

A revision of Regional Planning Guidance was begun in 1995. Following the development of an issues paper in 1996 and a consultative draft, a final draft of RPG was submitted to central government in 1999. Through all the various revisions, the main aim of the RPG has been to achieve 'regeneration' within the conurbations, rural and coalfield areas.

The timing of RPG preparation was such that the requirement to prepare a Regional Transport Strategy emerged quite late in the process, although many other regions anticipated this following various central government indications (e.g. DETR 1998). In addition, the RTS was dependent on a number of studies that were underway and

had not then reported. That said, while RPG set out a number of important policy statements, concern had already been expressed over the vagueness of its transport policies, particularly as regards the lack of prioritisation of schemes. However, an absence of firm detail often arose from incomplete studies of sub-regional corridors, strategic rail services, ports and airports, much of which depended on national agencies, often themselves in a period of extensive institutional change. The transport chapter of the RPG continued into the final version of RPG as an ‘interim statement’ of strategic transport objectives (GONE 2001).

Responsibility for preparing the RTS was initially taken on by the Association of North East Councils (ANEC)⁷. Early on in the process, the regional development agency, One North East⁸, appointed consultants to develop a framework for the study and to organise a ‘visioning event’. A vision statement was subsequently produced which concluded that the region should give “*priority to improving and integrating mass transit for business and leisure trips as well as prioritising the strategic road network for public transport, freight and other strategic business uses*” (Oscar Faber, 2001: 1).

Responsibility for developing the RTS was handed to the North East Assembly (NEA)⁹ after Phase One. The Assembly appointed a different set of consultants with a brief to develop “*a broad policy approach for the development and operation of the transport system... [and] identify key transport priorities*” (NEA letter to Wider Reference Group, 2001, appendix C). This was to entail four further phases of activity (see Table 1). Consultants drew up a ‘wider reference group’ (WRG) of 180 individuals and organisations (expanded through the process to 190) to ‘*influence and comment on the progress and direction of the study*’ (NEA letter to WRG, 2001)¹⁰. This Group, equivalents of which were also set up in other English regions to develop Regional Transport Strategies, constituted a wide range of regional stakeholders and

⁷ ANEC was superseded by the North East Assembly in 1999

⁸ A quasi-public organisation charged with regional development in the North East of England.

⁹ The NEA is the regional assembly for the North East, designated by the Regional Development Agencies Act 1998 as the “voluntary regional chamber”. It has 72 members: 50 from governmental agencies (mostly local authorities), and the rest from the private / business sector, trade unions, culture / media / sport, further & higher education, skills and training, MPs and MEPs, health, rural, the environment and voluntary sectors.

their input was explicitly designed to contribute to phases 2, 3 and 4 of the process (see Table 3).

Table 3: The North East of England RTS Process

Phase	Task/ Output	Participation	Timescale
1	Inception Report and Visioning event	Small group of invitees, mostly business sector	Jan-Feb 2001
2	Opportunities and Constraints paper	Questionnaire to public via libraries etc. WRG workshop I	Jan- April 2001
3	Developing options paper	WRG Workshop II and further written public consultation	April - August 2001
4	Draft Regional Transport Strategy published	Presentation to WRG with questions	December 2001
5	Revised Regional Transport Strategy published	--	June 2002
6	Publication of deposit Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS)	Various.	November 2004
7	Examination in Public of RSS	Representations from invited respondents to draft	March/ April 2006

Phase Two attempted to move the process forward in a number of ways. First, the existing policies of the draft RPG were assessed from the point of view of the RTS brief by the consultants. Second, a consultation process was mobilised using conventional participatory techniques. The principal method used was a half-day event to which the Wider Reference Group was invited. Useful analyses of transport trends were circulated in advance of the session. This material was heavily framed by current thinking in transport planning and by central government policy, notably that demand management of existing infrastructure should principally frame policy and that building new roads in particular is a largely futile exercise in areas of congestion,

¹⁰ The author became part of the WRG from Phase Two of this process.

causes intolerable environmental damage and is unlikely in a general sense to lead to economic development. However, while much government documentation suggested that policies deriving from such assumptions are widely supported (e.g. DETR 1998), much of the discussion in the session was dominated by stakeholders questioning the applicability of such ‘general’ conclusions to the North East.

60 individuals were present at the Phase Two consultation event with a broad representation of policy concerns, although social, health and cultural interests were almost entirely absent. The half-day started with a presentation on the issues facing the North East in very general terms – relatively low but fast rising levels of car ownership and use, high but declining usage of public transport, very low levels of cycling, momentary congestion on road networks at certain hotspots, notably river crossings. The 60 participants were then split into four groups for two sessions to discuss the issues facing: main centres; freight and business; market towns, villages and rural areas; and external connections and major internal connections¹¹. In some sessions, debate appeared positive with useful exchange of information and pursuit of options. In others, little new information emerged with information flowing from participants to moderators who typically noted issues but did not intervene to question assumptions or look for evidence to support particular positions. Here, the sessions provided the opportunity for vocal participants to express their individual or organisations’, pre-determined positions. Typically this meant business concerns arguing for the widening of existing trunk roads within the region and beyond and better river crossings (implicitly by road), particularly on Tyneside. By contrast, environmental interests argued for more attention to public transport, the need for a strategic framework and consistency across the region in terms of policies for demand management, and a focus on smaller scale interventions rather than what we might term *grand projets*. Social, cultural and health concerns were poorly articulated reflecting the limited representation from interests who might advocate such issues. In Phase Two, participants were also asked to indicate their preferences in relation to certain policy measures in tick box questionnaires and also to highlight transport links they felt should be prioritised in the RTS.

¹¹ The author observed two sessions and a colleague observed two others (see Vigar and Porter 2005)

As part of Phase Three, a second half-day consultation event took place in October 2001. Prior to this event, the consultants developed four possible strategies from the findings of phase 2: 'future base' (largely a 'do-nothing' scenario), 'economic development-led', 'accessibility-led', and 'sustainability-led'. Stakeholders were asked to consider each strategy in relation to five (increased from 4 in Phase 2) categories: main town and city centres; main conurbations; former coalfield areas; market towns and rural areas; and strategic links. Each strategy was explained to 40 participants (down from 60 at the previous event) and a brief discussion followed on the components of each. Participants were drawn almost exclusively from business and local authority interests. A separate event was held with 15 business community members a week after this event. While the existence of this event was in no way hidden, the meeting itself was by invitation only. This closed process served to undermine the legitimacy of the mainstream exercise for other stakeholders. In addition, 19 stakeholders who could not be present at either of the 2 events completed questionnaires.

The analysis of the questionnaires circulated to the WRG after the consultation event produced no clear scenario that was preferred for all categories, although the economic development-led one received majority support in the case of the coalfield areas. It was also preferred as the approach to take in relation to strategic links. That said, the accessibility and sustainability scenarios were relatively similar, focusing on improvements to 'green transport modes' although in the former case with a greater emphasis on larger public transport projects. An 'accessibility-led' strategy was preferred by a small majority in three of the five group types: main towns and city centres; main conurbations; and market towns and rural areas. However, it is a big question whether it is possible to pursue different strategic scenarios in different parts of the region, given the region's scale, and in relation to strategic links, given that traffic on such links starts and ends its journey on other parts of the network. The effects of such knock-on effects were not discussed, nor indeed were the contributions of such improvements to an ever advancing culture of 'automobility' in a region with traditionally low levels of car ownership. In addition, the notion of an economic development-led strategy ignored the synergies deriving from the different elements of

a sustainable development agenda in relation to transport and the ways in which triple-wins might be achieved through certain policies, such as traffic reduction (SACTRA 1999).

Also in phase three, questionnaires were circulated to participants to explore possible measures for inclusion in the Regional Transport Strategy that were considered 'contentious'. Stakeholders were asked to look at these individual components of the RTS and consider whether they should be aimed for in the long, medium or short-term. There was some confusion about how these would be assessed and many respondents were unclear whether they should vote for all those they preferred as 'short-term'. More importantly, there was no prior discussion of the relative merits of each of these proposals. The results suggested that established groups used such opportunities to press home the core concern they arrived with. Given the absence of stakeholders representing certain agendas, such as social, cultural and health issues, the results were inevitably skewed in particular directions.

As a consequence, it is not surprising that the preferences revealed by the questionnaire process were for no demand management measures in the short-term, with parking and congestion charges particularly disliked, except in the major urban centres and even then only in the medium and longer term. There was agreement among stakeholders for improvements to public transport, particularly the East Coast Main rail line (which links the region with southern England and Scotland) and for feeder bus services to market towns. In terms of road proposals, new roads or 'offline bypasses' were not well supported. The widening of existing routes, such as improving the A1 road link in the very south of the region and into the neighbouring region of Yorkshire and the Humber, was the most popular external project to be promoted¹² again in the medium and longer-term, with other low cost improvements to the A1 north of Newcastle considered. Thus, some prioritisation did come forward: the A1 in the south of the region rather than the A1 in the north of it, although both were thought necessary; connections to ports and airports, particularly by heavy rail;

¹² In June 2002 central government announced that a 29 mile stretch of dual-carriageway in North Yorkshire would indeed be widened to 3 lanes. Earlier that year the A1 multi-modal study had

new river crossings (by road); greater efforts to drive ‘joined-up’ policy-making in rural areas, with essential services considered alongside transport¹³. The business community meetings, as one might expect given its homogeneity relative to the wider group of stakeholders, revealed a clearer set of preferences, usually for road construction but also for improvements to rail services, especially inter-regional ones. The collective voice of business remained strongly opposed to certain measures, even though these might help some sections of that community. The opposition to parking charges at a major out-of-town retail facility that causes particular congestion problems on road infrastructure was one such curious anomaly. In general terms, this resistance may in part be explained by the region’s relatively uncongested infrastructure, although such measures have been proposed in the region by business interests in the past (see NECCTI 1997) and such positive effects for certain businesses were noted in the consultants’ background documentation.

Phase 4 involved the preparation of a draft Regional Transport Strategy. This was launched in June 2002 and summaries provided for public comment. In July 2002, the Strategy was presented to the Wider Reference Group with an opportunity for questions, but it was not possible to influence the Strategy further at this stage. The main aims were detailed as:

- Reducing the overall need to travel
- Managing travel demand
- Making the best use of existing infrastructure
- Using more sustainable means of travel
- Improving regional ‘gateways’ (Highways, rail, ports, airports)
- Priority regional transport schemes

The draft indicated a partial commitment to managing demand on infrastructure networks (proposals for specific spaces, journeys and times rather than adopted as a strategic principle). However, the document also proposed a great deal of new road

concluded that dualling the A1 throughout Northumberland could not be justified, although it remains in the Regional Spatial Strategy.

¹³ Interestingly, these issues are considered less important in urban areas, perhaps reflecting the composition of the WRG, but also the structuring of the RTS process in this case. This typifies the

infrastructure that appeared to undermine this emphasis (see Vigar and Porter 2005 for more on the draft and a critique). It did this mainly to achieve economic development objectives despite the evidence presented during the process and developed along the way in the region by other bodies (Ove Arup 2002) and the strong view from the research community that no such simplistic relationship exists (see for example Banister and Berechmann 2001, Black 2001).

The subsequent discussion at the WRG meeting was dominated by conflict between the views of an ‘economy first’ camp, who saw large-scale investment in new infrastructure as a key component in the renaissance of the North East economy, and a ‘sustainable development’ camp who wanted the strategy to focus on managing the demand for transport, in part to achieve the same economic renaissance. The resultant draft Regional Transport Strategy, produced in 2004, was essentially a pragmatic outcome. The draft was amended on incorporation into the Regional Spatial Strategy and then subjected to a further round of consultation. A final RSS is expected in 2007.

Discussion

A limited deliberative process

The very existence of Regional Transport Strategies and their separation from regional planning guidance/ spatial strategy-making provides a potential opportunity for greater stakeholder engagement and deliberation in developing regional transport policy. The case illustrated shows that participative processes associated with RTS preparation can prove useful in publicising the existence and scope of the RTS and in getting a wide range of stakeholders together, generating a degree of knowledge about local conditions and the needs of some, although not all, stakeholder groups. However, there were two major failings of the consultation process that shed light on the issues associated with efforts to generate policy in a deeply contested issue area such as transport. These are compounded by some of the institutional questions surrounding the development of strategy in this particular context which are explored later.

absence of ‘accessibility’ issues in policy discussions generally, except in remoter rural areas where they are perhaps more visible but potentially no more significant than in urban areas.

First, although mechanisms such as questionnaires helped to generate a sense of priorities, something that had previously evaded the region, such mechanisms were too simplistic to encapsulate the issues involved, notably in terms of the inter-relationships between strategies, aims, individual policies and timescales. A focus on sub-regions rather than area types may have helped to generate more meaningful policy priorities, but the issues involved are too complex to be assessed in questionnaire form (Lowndes et al 2001). The emphasis in the questionnaire process was on infrastructure schemes. Some debate on schemes is inevitable but such a discussion became divorced from wider strategic objectives, such as considerations of place qualities, standards for public transport accessibility, park and ride policies, identifying regional and sub-regional strategic public transport networks and any subsequent need for new and improved transport interchanges, despite these being explicit in government guidance on RTS content. This bias tilted attention toward familiar deeply entrenched debates about road schemes at the expense of generating understanding of and commitment to other solutions.

Even in terms of the merits of individual schemes, a small vignette illustrates the weaknesses of the questionnaire method. Participants were asked to assess the value of a large number of schemes for the region, among them a new road to rail freight transfer facility. Few had any knowledge of this as an issue apart from thinking that, as it potentially seemed to encourage the transfer of freight to rail from road transport, it would seem to be a good idea. One participant intervened suspecting this view might predominate. He pointed out that there were two such facilities in the region already and one more might undermine the viability of those existing. Furthermore the existing two facilities were located at ports where three transport modes came together rather the two modes present at the proposed inland location. In one sense the open forum worked in that his response forced stakeholders to question their intuitive (but ill-informed) responses. But hardly any such proposals were challenged or open to debate, let alone deliberation.

This difficulty is related to the second point, which concerns the operation of the consultation events and to some degree the nature of the background documentation. The process was undermined by the small number of opportunities to develop greater

understanding of the complexities of the transport problems facing the region and the relative efficacy of the solutions often proposed among the participants. Many, particularly from the business sector, brought strong pre-conceptions to the process and these went largely unchallenged. While providing useful information on business needs, this information was allowed to overwhelm debates, reflecting the wider dominance of a simplistic regeneration and economic competitiveness discourse in the region. This was characterised by a 'jobs at all costs' rhetoric that advocated anything that superficially seemed to help short-term business competitiveness and was significantly oriented to attracting and retaining large inward investors in services, manufacturing, property development and agriculture despite the large scale failure of such orthodox growth policies to solve the structural problems of peripheral region economies (Chatterton 2002). Such capital is often heavily predicated on maximising efficiency through improving external linkages and using a publicly subsidised infrastructure to attain this. This has clear knock-on consequences for environmental conditions at a range of scales not least in the locales in which such capital sites itself. Translated into transport planning, this typically means diverting attention to more infrastructure, rather than managing existing infrastructure. Yet it was left to other participants to point out the narrowness of this agenda and its inherent inequities, something they did to varying degrees and with varying degrees of authority. This is not surprising, as it should be remembered that it was not necessarily their role to do this articulation, merely to contribute the views of their own respective organisations. This opposition did, however, fail to coalesce into a coherent coalition that could challenge the dominant 'jobs at all costs' rhetoric, by focusing on win-wins for example.

Thus, beyond the production of useful background documentation, which crucially relied on participants actually reading them, there were few opportunities for genuine discussion, deliberation or learning. The only presentation of any significance was a series of background facts about national and regional transport trends. Research evidence into, for example, the potential impacts of new infrastructure on economic conditions were not raised¹⁴. Few, if any, stakeholders who arrived at the event with

¹⁴ The absence of evidence in the open fora is itself interesting given the concern for 'evidence-based' policy making in UK governance in recent years.

limited knowledge of issues such as relationships between induced travel demand and new infrastructure, or the differential impacts of different transport policies on different components of society, would have left any the wiser about how these affected general principles or individual schemes. They merely turned up, contributed their pre-conceived ideas and went away again. Similarly, some interests hijacked discussion arenas. During a plenary session, one stakeholder managed to get questions added to the questionnaire during the time allowed for participants to fill them in, which showed flexibility on the part of the organisers but left others to wonder just how rigorous the whole process was and whether they then should also sneak in their own policies, ideas and schemes. Given this, it is actually to the credit of many stakeholders that the outcomes that resulted were so considered, although this reflected the technical knowledge of the organisers rather than inputs from the participation exercises. In short, understanding the potential outcomes from multiple policy choices is demanding and it is highly unlikely that a gathering of views is going to help much in such a process of determination.

The possibilities for more deliberative practice

The case above illustrates confusion as to what was required of stakeholder participation. With so many participants, genuine dialogue and learning were difficult. And yet the process was constructed so as not to be a series of one-way dialogues. A collaborative process was embarked on with little real methodological sophistication, with too limited resources and little time for such a process to work (see Innes and Gruber 2005 for a process that worked more effectively). What then are the possibilities for more deliberative practice in a complex area such as this with so many different voices?

In the case analysed above, few opportunities existed where genuine learning might take place. The complexity of the Regional Transport Strategy preparation process precludes a detailed assessment of every policy by such a wide group of stakeholders given the limited time commitment that could reasonably be expected from participants. But participants were also hemmed in by what they could consider and no space existed for spontaneity and for roles to shift through discussion (Innes and Gruber 1999a, Throgmorton 2000). Participants were left to consider issues that were

often contingent on other concerns, but also about which they had very limited knowledge. How could justice be done to such debates, even among those reasonably well informed prior to the event? Greater information on schemes, policies and likely outcomes might have helped but how far they would have been read, digested and acted upon is a moot point. Certainly commitment to and understanding of policy principles would have helped, and there were some limited but useful efforts made in this regard. A focus on the needs of sub-regions rather than trying to consider 'main centres' in the abstract might also have been more beneficial, although there are strengths in the approach taken also. Whether significant deliberation and learning is possible or not, an often mentioned point about any participative practice is that clarity over the purposes of participation in strategy development is essential. The findings above reiterate this. In RTS documentation various suggestions were made about why stakeholders were involved from 'information-giving' to fuller participation. The government guidance itself is ambiguous and talks of 'participation' and 'consultation' (DETR 2000).

According to Judith Innes' work, the availability of resources and the inter-dependency and diversity of actors are critical in driving the degree of participation and the extent to which processes can be constructed as learning environments (Booher and Innes 2002). It was clear to participants in this case that resources did not flow anything like directly from the processes they were engaged in. Thus, although the RTS has much more authority than previous transport policies in Regional Planning Guidance, the processes for involving stakeholders lacked an appreciation that, unless resources are explicitly linked to outcomes of their debates, then people's involvement and commitment to find common ground and solutions will be small. Such issues are common where direct forms of democracy meet representative forms, or indeed the bureaucratic forms which characterised the final production of the strategy in this case. While the development of policies from the participative arenas associated with RTS sent a strong signal to central government that such policies should be funded and there was a clear and quite successful attempt in the North East case to generate some priorities in terms of infrastructure schemes, there were not enough tangible resources available to drive genuine collaboration for many participants. Similarly, this contributed to a lack of dependency between the

actors (save for the fact that they have to share the same limited infrastructural resources and want to see a ‘successful region’), a necessary condition to facilitate commitment to dialogue and learning (Booher and Innes 2002, and see Rhodes 1988 for a similar conclusion and model). So, while “*collaboration is particularly well suited to dealing with multiple values and interests and operating in situations of uncertainty and complexity*” (Innes and Gruber, 1999: 18), the condition of interdependence was only partly met in RTS preparation in this case.

There thus seems to be a mismatch between the participative strategies chosen to debate Regional Transport Strategies in the North East case and what research tells us will actually work. There seem two options here for developing a more deliberative policy-making approach. One would suggest a reconsideration of what such participation could achieve, an unambitious return to lower levels of Arnstein’s ladder: be clear that participation is a small part of the process and is about finding out more about local conditions etc, but not about constructing the strategy itself. This approach would, however, fail to make the RTS legitimate in stakeholders’ minds and misses the opportunity to rethink the problem and engage in ‘double loop learning’ that might challenge the norms underlying the dominant, failing, policy orthodoxy (Argyris and Schon 1978).

Alternatively, more could have been done to construct some ‘win-wins’ around which the interdependencies that existed could have helped develop a shared vision for the region. Thus, the case supports Booher and Innes’s (2002) hypothesis that, in situations where diversity of participants is high yet interdependence is low a ‘political influence’ model is what is to be expected. To satisfy conditions of interdependence would throw attention onto who is invited to participate. This might imply a smaller number of representatives but with those that are drawn into the process sharing a genuine interdependency. This would simultaneously allow for greater depth of debate through smaller numbers, highlight the trade-offs between different policy options and eliminate the problems of weight of numbers where certain groups of stakeholders turn up *en masse*, as with the business sector in the case examined here, while other areas remain unarticulated. This may have resource implications in terms of funding participation but this would seem a small price to pay for a robust strategy.

Teleological action

One question raised by the case concerns instrumental rationality, or, what to do about organisations acting teleologically or strategically in a narrow self-interested way (Phelps and Tewdwr Jones 2000). Participation from stakeholders acting in narrow, self-interested ways has been much discussed in the literature. This work suggests that some participants will have no wish to engage with policy-making to search for consensus, use policy arenas to deliberate, to generate trust and learning or to build social and intellectual capital. In effect, it is argued that those with power in particular will prefer to exercise this in arenas where they are not exposed to challenge. Such issues go to the heart of whether collaborative processes can work (Allmendinger and Tewdwr Jones 1998) and suggests a need for wider cultural change in the policy realm if more collaborative processes are to emerge (Healey 1997). For example, business interests have a way of seeing the world that does not necessarily value social or ecological concerns. And as others have concluded, unless you change this way of seeing, wider policy change is unlikely (Fischer 2003, Hajer 1995). Even where clear evidence is presented that a particular policy may be unhelpful from a broad societal perspective, if it fits an organisation's wider interests then they may make a case for it. This parochialism may appear somewhat inevitable but this inevitability is contested by some who note that, where space is allowed for creative dialogue, such change is possible (Innes and Booher 1999b). In the case above, the absence of good facilitation and a challenging of pre-determined positions were important as ideas and pervasive myths went unchallenged.

Thus while some might suggest that the notion of such arenas providing anything more than a simple display of power and interest may seem naïve, the collaborative process model is not inevitable. How far many of the interests would be prepared to engage in more collaborative processes if they were constructed as genuine learning and deliberative opportunities, given the time consuming nature of such processes, is a moot point. But examples of successful processes, using techniques such as citizens' juries or less complex methods, do exist (e.g. Finney and Polk 1995, Innes and Booher 1999b).

Skills, practices and values

In short, in the above case, there was little process management and little sense of what consultation was for. The consultants acting as process managers themselves could have usefully performed a number of functions. On the whole, they tried to be 'neutral' facilitators, although a senior partner also fulfilled an important information giving, 'expert', role in the first consultation exercise. However, as Forester (1989, 1999) points out, purporting to act in a neutral way with little sense of socially and ecologically just ends will tend to perpetuate existing power asymmetries in society. In microcosm, such asymmetries were reflected in debates reported here. There was no question that the senior consultant's experience of mixing with similar senior figures helped him to be more than a facilitator and to respond and challenge the received wisdom he was hearing from the floor, using evidence to counter it where necessary. His absence at other meetings was to the detriment of the process, despite the undoubted skills and knowledge held by his colleagues.

How far such processes can be constructed as learning processes is thus critically dependent on the skills and practices needed to drive them. While those in charge of the Regional Transport Strategy process were technically skilled in many aspects of transportation policy-making, certain skills relating to both the design of policy processes and the operation of participative practices could have been improved upon. Either that or professional facilitators could have been employed. More use could have been made of 'experts' to facilitate learning or challenge established views. Alternatively, consultants might have adopted these roles rather than acting just as facilitators and conduits of information.

Education of practitioners needs to address theoretical questions associated with participation as well as promoting knowledge of the various forms and applications of the myriad of available participative practices. While such knowledge is definitely emergent among UK transport professionals, there is still evidence of the domination of an older techno-rationalist paradigm in certain instances (Vigar et al 2000; Bickerstaff and Walker 2001). A further skills question relates to the understanding of the issues required when thinking about demand management. If one accepts that demand management is, if not a paradigm for contemporary transport planning then at

least an essential component, then much of what is to be considered in policy-making is different not least as it necessitates a primary focus on travel behaviour. The penetration of a broad range of social science thinking alongside more traditional engineering concerns is a challenge for transport policy-making throughout the world, as this is a field where social science has traditionally not formed a strong element in transportation education and practice.

The way forward for regional transport strategies

There are peculiarities to debates over transport policy that perhaps makes strategic policy-making in this sector difficult (see also Sager and Ravlum 2005):

- The inherently multi-scalar nature of infrastructure proposals and the distribution of their impacts make deliberation of their costs and benefits complex
- Such complexity makes consensus difficult but also, given the frequent crossing of political boundaries, justifies intervention at multiple scales
- Many ‘myths’ are perpetuated in the transport field and these are hard to unpack and require technical and communicative skills (see also Vigar et al 2000)
- Perhaps due to the complexities of the impacts of changes to transport systems there is a resort to personal anecdote over other forms of ‘evidence’
- Again perhaps related to the abstract nature of aspects of strategic transport and spatial planning policy, there is a drift to discussion of schemes
- The low level of policy process management and associated facilitatory skills in the policy sector¹⁵

But, there are ‘win-wins’ to be had regionally - in general terms the modal shift of freight and passengers from private to public transport for example, but as in all policy development there will be winners and losers. Discussion could look for common ground, expose the winners and losers, and transparently pass views on issues to other

¹⁵ This may be a British peculiarity, it is certainly not inevitable. For example, in Western Australia significant numbers of transport planning staff at the Department for Planning and Infrastructure have been trained in how to conduct collaborative practices.

decision-making arenas. The RTS process in the North East did not expose issues in this way or indicate the mechanisms that would ultimately have to deal with them.

Debate in the region was also hindered by the centralised nature of UK transport policy-making. Despite the new RTS mechanism, responsibility for allocating funds rests with central government as does the devising of the policy parameters under which such funds are allocated. There are justifications for central intervention. First, the multi-scalarity issue implies that competition between regions for scarce investment could result in large construction projects that would not deliver value-for-money let alone justify the environmental damage. Second, such projects may undermine national policy commitments, for example to delivering sustainable development targets.

This need not be such a polarised question, however. The allocation of a fixed pot or pots of capital (HMT et al 2004) with only very general guidelines for the specific projects they would fund could draw people into processes in the knowledge that what they contributed could make a difference. However, currently such processes are limited in the funds they allocate and heavily structured by central government guidance.

Concerns also relate to how decisions are taken at the regional level. Regional Assemblies in England are unelected. Current strategy development relies on local authority technical and political commitment and, as Headicar notes, “can it be considered reasonable to expect a collection of members representing autonomous local authorities *ever* to approve a strategy which imposes serious policy strictures upon those authorities” (Headicar 2002: 105 emphasis in original). This dependence favours lowest common denominator solutions and particularly hinders the development of demand management policies, as it is these that typically require some form of cross-authority commitment. In England, regional governance mechanisms such as the RTS process have come into being in advance of the fully-formed technical and political institutional mechanisms that can deal with such concerns in realistic and transparent ways.

The end result in England is that regional transport policy has emerged largely as it was before recent regional devolution measures. That is, from a partial set of technological assessments of traffic flows and safety statistics, none of which were exposed to scrutiny through the Regional Transport Strategy process, combined with the push and pull of political interests conducted in closed arenas and through lobbying in arenas such as the regional media. Some interests did not participate in the open consultative process, believing that it would accomplish little and be largely irrelevant in this wider context. Many interests, particularly from the business side, were already engaged in lobbying for road widening both in closed arenas with politicians and civil servants and also in public arenas, particularly the local media. This shaped a climate of public opinion. This to some extent further emasculated the arenas created to discuss RTS. Other interests such as those that might exclusively represent the 'mobility poor' were not represented. While many such interests are often included in transport policy-making exercises, transport issues are not core concerns for them and they seemed unable to commit the resources to participate. By contrast, other interests were continually able to argue for greater consideration of issues connected with their core interests. There thus seemed little recognition of the importance of existing power relations between and among stakeholders (Healey 1997), let alone any consideration about whether it was possible to ameliorate them. The process could thus be characterised as part of a new form of sub-national corporatism reminiscent of other policy areas such as spatial planning; a feature common to other nations grappling with reterritorialisation processes (see for example Gualini 2000).

These difficulties also illustrate issues surrounding the governance culture. In the arenas of English transport policy making, it seemed enough to invite a wide range of groups to participate, but without guaranteed representation of the key issue areas many questions are left unexplored. The assumption was that conflict and challenge would create better policy-making. The real challenge here is to develop a culture and a set of mechanisms that can activate potentially opposing forces and generate a real debate on the range of options open to a specific process. This process of 'antagonistic pluralism' (Hiller and Rookby, eds., 2002), again throws attention onto the skills and practices of the agency charged with developing the strategy. It does not imply consensus but accounts for a permanence of conflict, of agonism (Hillier 2002). It also

highlights how, when the preparation of strategies are outsourced, this may become even harder to actually achieve.

Conclusions

The end consequence of well-intentioned but rather confused consultative processes, within the context of a still highly-centralised governance polity, was that the Regional Transport Strategy promoted a ‘something for everyone’ approach (see CPRE 2001). The strategy thus mirrored current UK national transport policy in being ‘double-barrelled’, with demand management policies and extensive infrastructure investment in supply-side capital projects in evidence. It was, therefore, something of a pragmatic mess: in part undermined by decades of under-funding for the transport sector, which limited its room for manoeuvre in the short-term, especially given a vocal, narrowly-defined business interest and highly visible demands from a minority of ‘motorists’. So, while the new participatory arenas created at the regional level are to be welcomed for widening the range of participants in debating policy options, what the arenas as mobilised contributed to the final strategy or to wider learning processes among participants is unclear, - either in content or in process. Simply put, this was participation without deliberation and it failed to meet most of the criteria detailed in Table 1.

In addition, key nodal points in the system remain with central government and its regional office. It is they that approve the strategy and fund it. RTS preparation processes are thus trapped within this context. This centralisation inhibits attempts to build a sense of ownership of the strategy and commitment among stakeholders to debate scenarios for the region. So, while attempts to engage a broad range of stakeholders are to be welcomed, there is a long way to go both in the creation and empowerment of regional institutions and in the construction of the arenas and practices that can make such a system work.

So what can be done? The development of a strategy is likely to require many different approaches within it: technical, deliberative and political. At some stages

there will be intense debate among a small group, at others specific points may need to be discussed among very broad constituencies. In developing sub-national transport policy a tension exists between the need to unhitch stakeholders from a widely held, but technically discredited, view about what regions need and a very limited institutional space to do this via deliberative processes. Narrow political and technical processes by themselves have a limited capacity to do this as the new approach requires commitment from regional stakeholders to engage with a skilled technical debate about what might work for the region in transport terms. The adoption of simple participative processes as an alternative to narrow techno-rationalism failed as the scope for such processes was too limited.

One way forward then is to engage in deeper deliberative processes with interdependent stakeholders debating options openly. This implies keeping the focus of participation at each stage rather limited in terms of its aims or in terms of the numbers of participants (while striving for the principle of interdependency). A key issue is to be absolutely clear about the purposes of participation at each stage, i.e. whether dialogue is about exchanging information on existing conditions or finding a solution to a specific problem. In the longer-term, if more participative practice is to emerge, arenas and practices need to be developed that can facilitate genuine dialogue and learning. This option requires a commitment from central and regional government to abide by the outcomes of such processes in allocating funds. Otherwise regional stakeholders are unlikely to devote resources to it.

However, a problem lies in the current capacity of the regional institutions responsible for developing policy. The research in this paper casts doubt on the current capacity of regional institutions to manage this allocation process in a clear and democratic fashion that might achieve its strategic transport and spatial planning objectives. One problem lies in the absence of a mandated political institution, such as an elected regional government, that can make what are in essence highly political decisions. Such a body also needs the intellectual resources as well as the powers to take difficult decisions that the policy area demands. Current regional institutions in the UK seem ill equipped with either the knowledge or the skills to achieve this. Unelected, with very small executives, they often devolve strategy-making to groups of local authority

experts or, as in the case above, consultants. This involves a fragmentation of public management functions which can run counter to developing policy as a genuinely participative voyage of 'civic discovery' (Reich 1988, see also Forester 1999). Policy developed as a process of discovery would be led by 'expert practitioners', or 'skilled-voices-in-the-flow' (Throgmorton 2000), able to facilitate a consideration of what the transport 'problem' actually was, what evidence exists as to the different approaches to these problems and the varying consequences of pursuing such approaches. However, continuing neo-liberal efforts to slim down state executives make the achievement of this a continuing problem. This process presents a challenge to researchers to uncover the consequences of such efforts. Certainly this paper demonstrates that the absence of in-house expertise makes problematic the development of deliberative practice. It is hard to see such processes emerging given the current ad hocery that characterises English regional government.

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Figure One:

