

European Union spatial planning and development policy: implications for strategic planning in the UK

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This paper outlines the origins and evolution of European Union (EU) spatial and other policies that are of relevance to the design and operation of the strategic planning system in the UK. The paper also presents a brief evaluation of the influence of EU policies upon UK planning practice, and it offers some speculations about the likely future development of policy and practice at both EU and UK levels. In offering these various assessments and commentaries, it is evident that the potential field of investigation is vast. As a consequence, and in order to limit the scope of the investigation and to focus attention on matters which are of particular relevance to the theory and practice of planning in the UK, the paper is chiefly concerned with a discussion of strategic spatial planning at the national–regional–sub-regional level. However, given the considerable state of flux which currently exists in all four countries of the UK with regard to the structure, organisation and purpose of strategic spatial planning, it is difficult to confine this discussion to a consideration of policy and practice at national, regional and sub-regional levels. In England, for example, it is currently proposed that a strategic local development framework (LDF) will be prepared by each local planning authority and that an LDF will offer a strategic planning framework that will guide the future development of a locality. Therefore, although the paper is chiefly concerned with the national–regional–sub-regional level of policy and practice, there is also a brief consideration of some of the wider implications of EU policy for local planning.

Equally, the EU itself is going through a period of considerable change in terms of both the overall organisation of the powers and responsibilities of its various institutions and, in particular, the content and structure of a number of key policy fields. In addition to the well-known debate on the reform of the structure and competences of the institutions of the EU, a number of other significant changes are taking place, such as enlargement, the introduction of the Sixth Environment Action Programme and other environmental policy measures, the elaboration of the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) and the further reform of the Structural Funds for the period after 2006. These changes to the EU institutional and policy framework are relevant considerations in any discussion of EU spatial planning and development policy and it is clear that they will also influence the way in which strategic spatial planning evolves in the UK.

A central theme in the recent history of the relationship between the strategic planning system (or, more correctly, systems) of the UK and the context for strategic spatial planning which is provided by the relevant EU policies, is the tension which exists between the essentially adversarial and responsive nature of the UK (and especially the English) planning system and the more strategic and proactive approach which is the hallmark of the ESDP and some (but not all) of the planning systems in continental European member states. As Cullingworth has noted “planning should not be resistant to change: it should be designed to cope with it”.² As is demonstrated in this paper, one of the by-products of the EU’s growing interest in strategic spatial policy has been a resurgence of interest in such matters in

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² Cullingworth J.B., “British Land-Use Planning: A Failure to Cope with Change?” (1997) 34 *Urban Studies* 945–960 at p.957.

the UK. Indeed, it has been argued elsewhere that the need in the late 1980s to establish some form of rudimentary regional plan as a precondition for obtaining financial support from the Structural Funds has proved to be one of the most important building blocks in the reconstruction of regional strategic planning in the UK.³

The following sections of this paper deal with three topics. First, a brief account is presented of some of the major elements of the EU's strategic spatial planning and development portfolio and of the ways in which the evolving portfolio has influenced policy-making in member states. Following this, the paper provides a summary of some of the key events and features in the revival of interest in strategic spatial planning in the UK, and it discusses and illustrates the extent to which the current and proposed strategic spatial planning systems have been influenced by EU policy. Finally, the paper looks forward and suggests a possible pathway for the medium-term development of the strategic spatial planning systems in the four countries of the UK; this final section of the paper also suggests that the future development of the strategic spatial planning system in England is likely to follow a somewhat different pathway to the evolution of the systems in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

EU strategic spatial policy

Three major aspects of EU strategic spatial planning and development policy are discussed in this section of the paper: the making of the ESDP, the evolution of the EU Structural Funds, and the development and growing influence of the planning elements of EU environment policy. Although a number of other EU policies also influence strategic spatial planning, including matters related to transport, agriculture, trade, industrial development, research and development, social inclusion, competition, and energy policies, it is not intended to deal directly with the content of these policies. However, because in recent years the EU has increasingly attempted to establish a more corporate approach to its policy-making and to its implementation processes and procedures, a number of what are described as “horizontally-supporting”, or indirect, policy influences are evident in the ESDP, Structural Funds and environment policies. This emphasis on the greater coordination of policies and actions is, in itself, one of the areas of influence exerted by the EU on the design and operation of UK strategic spatial planning systems.

The origins of the ESDP can be traced back to early work undertaken by the Council of Europe during the 1960s on problems of regional planning and development⁴ and to various national and regional studies prepared by central and local government staff and by independent researchers from the 1960s onwards. However, the first explicit European-level discussion of spatial planning took place at a meeting of the European Conference of Ministers Responsible for Regional Planning in 1984, when the concept of spatial planning and some common principles for spatial and regional management were outlined.⁵ A particular point of importance was the definition of spatial planning as a method for giving geographical expression to the various policies of a society, or what could be described as “joined up” thinking for places.

Even though the original Treaty of Rome did not include specific reference to spatial policy—although transport priorities were mentioned—the creation of the Single European Market in the mid 1980s (the Single European Act was negotiated at the Luxembourg Inter-Governmental Conference in 1985, was signed in 1986 and came into force in July 1987) established an “area without internal frontiers in which the free movement of goods, persons, services and capital, are ensured”.⁶ These “four freedoms”

³ Roberts, P. “Partnerships, Programmes and the Promotion of Regional Development” (2003) 59 *Progress in Planning*, 1–69.

⁴ Council of Europe, *Regional Planning: A European Problem* (Council of Europe, Strasbourg, 1968).

⁵ Council of Europe, *European Regional and Spatial Planning Charter* (Council of Europe, Strasbourg, 1984).

⁶ Rosamond, B., *Theories of European Integration* (Macmillan, Houndmills, 2000), p.99.

established a common EU space with greater mobility, but this enhanced openness and mobility implied the need to introduce a limited system of spatial management, not least to ensure the effective functioning of transport systems and to prevent the unplanned sprawl of urbanisation. This requirement to introduce some form of spatial management can be considered to be a consequence of the greater distances and territorial differences that are the accompanying characteristics of a single market. These greater distances and spatial differences served “to exacerbate social, economic, cultural and linguistic diversity”,⁷ and generated concerns that any gains obtained from trading in the single market would be unevenly distributed. This fear of uneven distribution was seen as a possible threat to the cohesion of the EU and, as a consequence, measures were put in place to prevent the exacerbation of spatial or socio-economic divergence.

Gradually the EU moved towards the preparation of an overarching spatial plan. Following a line of studies prepared during the late 1980s, which initially introduced and later elaborated the idea of producing a spatial scheme for Europe,⁸ an informal meeting of ministers responsible for spatial planning, held in Nantes in 1989, agreed that they should proceed to work together on European spatial planning studies.⁹ Given that the final version of the ESDP was approved at a meeting of ministers held in Potsdam in 1999, it can be seen that this initial agreement in 1989 represented the start of a long and often complex process.

The Nantes agreement established the initial baseline for what was to be an informal, but highly influential, process of analysis, debate and policy-making. A series of research studies and a number of meetings of ministers moved the process forward, initially through ad hoc arrangements and later under the supervision of the Committee on Spatial Development (CSD). The CSD, which consisted of senior national officials responsible for spatial planning, played a central role in the preparation of the ESDP; initially establishing the necessary institutional structures, and later undertaking research, consultations, policy-making and a wide range of political negotiations.

Following what Williams calls the 1989 to 1993 “preparation phase”,¹⁰ an informal council of ministers of spatial planning, held in Liege in 1993, agreed to prepare a document on European spatial planning that could be used as a common reference point for spatial policy coordination and as a means of supporting the work of national and regional spatial policy-making bodies. The Liege agreement was developed further at subsequent meetings held under the various national presidencies. A First Official Draft of the ESDP was considered at the meeting in Noordwijk in 1997, the First Complete Draft at Glasgow in 1998 and the final ESDP at Potsdam in 1999. Following Potsdam, a number of meetings have been held to develop and approve an action programme designed to implement and apply the ESDP. Under the Finnish presidency an initial action programme was agreed at Tampere in 1999. This action programme discussed a number of issues, including the ways in which ESDP policy relates to the Structural Funds, the links between the ESDP and national and sub-national planning policy and actions, the implications for a range of other EU and member state policies, the spatial impacts of enlargement and the establishment of a framework for the consideration of future issues in spatial development.

Returning to the ESDP itself, it is important to emphasise that the ESDP, despite much inaccurate description and discussion in some quarters and journals, is not a “masterplan”, nor is it a “big structure

⁷ Faludi, A. and Waterhout, B., *The Making of the European Spatial Development Perspective* (Routledge, London, 2002), p.4.

⁸ Commission of the European Communities, *Europe 2000*, (Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, Luxembourg, 1991); Commission of the European Communities, *Europe 2000+* (Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, Luxembourg, 1994).

⁹ Williams, R.H., “Constructing the ESDP—For Whom?” (2000) 8 *European Planning Studies*, 357–365.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

plan” that attempts to define or develop the future settlement pattern and spatial shape of the EU as a whole. The objectives of the ESDP are much more modest and consist of the three fundamental goals of European policy:

- economic and social cohesion;
- conservation of natural resources and cultural heritage; and
- more balanced competitiveness of the European territory.

In the words of the ESDP, in order to “achieve more spatially balanced development, these goals must be pursued simultaneously in all regions of the EU, and their interactions taken into account”.¹¹ These three general goals have influenced the form and content of three policy guidelines for the spatial development of the EU:

- development of a balanced and polycentric urban system and a new urban–rural relationship;
- securing parity of access to infrastructure and knowledge; and
- sustainable development, prudent management and protection of nature and cultural heritage.

Whilst the terminology used can sometimes present a challenge to the reader (terms such as “polycentric urban system”—which basically implies the need to maintain urban distinctiveness and separation), the goals and objectives of the ESDP are familiar to UK professionals. In essence, the ESDP is about providing a framework for making allocation and other decisions, especially decisions that are complex, spread across frontiers or have extensive implications for the long-term development of both an individual territory and the EU as a whole. In a globalising world of business, governments need to follow and think at trans-national scale. As can be seen from recent attempts to consider the future shape and operation of the UK’s transport infrastructure, trans-national factors are frequently the primary driver of the debate; this is especially so in the cases of national air transport policy and the Channel Tunnel high speed link.

A linking point between the ESDP and the Structural Funds is the fact that over a third of the EU annual budget is spent on social and economic cohesion, especially through the Structural and Cohesion Funds. As a consequence, and reflecting the desire of the European Commission to promote enhanced value for money by ensuring that the key policy systems act as “common carriers” for the general goals of the EU, the ESDP is a politically sensitive issue because of its potential to influence decisions on the allocation of regional budgets.¹² Equally, the Structural Funds provide much-valued support for a wide range of regional development programmes, and these programmes act as a means of ensuring that investment is planned and managed in an effective manner. Indeed, it has been argued that the Structural Funds regional programmes have provided an important source both of “occupational therapy” for those involved in the partnerships that oversee the programmes, and of learning and experience in the field of regional planning and development, especially during the late 1980s when strategic planning in the UK was only just beginning to emerge from a long period of neglect.¹³

Three other aspects of the operation of the Structural Funds are of particular interest in relation to strategic spatial planning in the UK. First, there is a high level of coincidence between the distribution and utilisation of the Structural Funds budget and the ways in which domestic regional policies are elaborated and implemented. This can be seen chiefly in the close relationship which exists between

¹¹ Commission of the *European Communities, European Spatial Development Perspective* (Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, Luxembourg, 1999), p.11.

¹² Faludi, A. and Zonneveld, “Shaping Europe: The European Spatial Development Perspective: Introduction” (1998) 23 *Built Environment*, 257–266.

¹³ Roberts, 2003, *op.cit.*

Structural Funds programmes and the plans and strategies of the Regional Development Agencies, but a degree of coincidence is also observable in relation to the structure and content of other strategic documents such as Regional Planning Guidance (RPG).¹⁴ Secondly, the Structural Funds regional programmes can also be seen to influence the ways in which domestic infrastructure policy has emerged, and this, in turn, is reflected in RPG and other aspects of strategic planning policy. Thirdly, as mentioned above, the preparation of Structural Funds regional programmes was the first experience in many regions of partnership working at a regional level. Moving beyond the old, more restricted collaborative institutional structures associated with previous eras of regional planning, the post-1988 partnership and stakeholder engagement mechanisms, which were introduced as an integral part of the Structural Funds, have proved to be important reforms in their own right. The new territorial governance models which have emerged in the UK in recent years reflect many of the lessons from the Structural Funds learning experience.¹⁵

Environmental policy is the third EU policy field which has influenced the development and practice of strategic spatial planning in the UK. Here again, whilst it is evident that EU environment policy has developed considerably in recent years, it is also important to note that planning-related matters were discussed at the meeting of ministers which established EU environment policy (held at the Paris Summit in 1972), and that such matters were also included as important elements of the First Environmental Action Programme (1973–76). Subsequent programmes have seen the introduction of many new policies and legislation, including a series of measures that have a number of direct implications for strategic spatial planning.¹⁶ Examples of the influence exerted by EU environment policy include the introduction of measures concerned with environmental assessment (EA), strategic environmental assessment (SEA), waste management, pollution control, water management, transport and land use. As a result of these initiatives, and alongside the incorporation in the Treaty of Amsterdam in 1999 of a duty of sustainable development as a central task of the EU, it is now reasonable to conclude that EU policy and action has “become the single most significant factor affecting the development of the national environmental legislation of the member states”.¹⁷

Many of the planning and planning-related aspects of EU environment policy can also be seen to interact with a number of other EU policy fields, including those related to the Structural Funds, transport, agriculture, energy, research and development, competition, and development assistance.¹⁸ What has happened during the past decade is that environmental objectives have been embedded in a range of other EU and member state policies, and, in turn, these policies have influenced the structure, content and practice of planning. In some situations this influence has been direct, as in the case of the introduction of SEA as a fundamental screening mechanism which is used to ensure the conformity of plans with sustainable development criteria, whilst in other cases the pattern of influence has been indirect. A good example of an indirect influence over strategic spatial planning is provided by the requirement under the Water Framework Directive to prepare and implement River Basin Management Plans. These plans will exert a considerable influence on the preparation of future regional, sub-regional and local plans.

A final aspect of EU activity that will increasingly exert a considerable influence over strategic spatial planning in the UK is now rapidly emerging. The planned enlargement of the EU to 25 Member

¹⁴ Healey, A. and Roberts, P., *The Relationship Between Planning and the EU Structural Funds* (ECOTEC, Birmingham, 1999).

¹⁵ Roberts, P. et al., *Towards a National Planning Framework for Scotland* (Royal Town Planning Institute, Edinburgh, 2000).

¹⁶ Barnes, P.M. and Barnes, I.G., *Environmental Policy in the EU* (Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, 1999).

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p.1.

¹⁸ Roberts, P. and Colwell, A., “Moving the Environment to Centre Stage”, (2001) 6 *Local Environment* 421–437.

States, together with further suggested enlargements that will include other nations from the former Soviet bloc, represents a major challenge to UK policy-makers and planners. This challenge is twofold. First, as the centre of gravity of the EU shifts further eastward, there is a need to reconsider the relative physical and competitive position of the UK; this is as much a test of the ability of strategic planners to think about ways of reducing the effects of increased peripherality, as it is a test of the infrastructure providers to invest in new means of transport and non-physical communication. Secondly, with the accession of new member states who have average levels of national wealth and income per capita that are considerably below the EU average, there is an explicit challenge to the current pattern of allocation of the Structural Funds. Whilst the current position of the assisted regions in the UK was secured by the accession of relatively wealthy member states at the last enlargement, it is likely that the next enlargement will be accompanied by the displacement of some UK regions. This will challenge UK strategic spatial planners to develop new ways of achieving more with less; the current evidence suggests that this is best done through the introduction of integrated strategic spatial plans and programmes.

Although, as noted earlier, there are many other aspects of EU policy that influence strategic spatial planning in the UK, it is argued that the ESDP, the Structural Funds (including the Guidance element of the European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund), EU Environment Policy and the consequences of enlargement represent the major sources of influence. In addition, as has been illustrated in this section of the paper, these various sources of influence increasingly interact with each other, sometimes in an almost seamless manner. Furthermore, as is evident from the foregoing discussion, the development of EU policy relevant to the theory and practice of strategic spatial planning would appear to be part of an established and inexorable process. The third section of the paper now turns to an examination of some of the ways in which these policies have influenced, and are influencing, the structure, content and practice of strategic spatial planning in the UK.

Strategic spatial planning in the UK

This section of the paper consists of two elements. First, a brief summary is presented of some of the key features of the recent evolution and the proposed restructuring of strategic spatial planning policy in the UK. Secondly, an illustrative assessment is provided of the various ways in which EU policy, and especially the ESDP, have influenced the structure and content of strategic spatial planning.

From the late 1980s to the present day, it is possible to identify three phases in the development of strategic spatial planning capability in the UK:

- From the late 1980s to the early 1990s there was a phase of experimentation and modest advance—this included the first round of RPG and the initial Structural Funds regional programmes.
- From the early 1990s to the late 1990s there were a number of improvements to the scope and competence of RPG, Structural Funds regional programmes, the administration of regional planning and development, and a number of associated policy fields (such as transport, housing and environment).
- From the late 1990s to the present day there have been a number of further advances in RPG, economic development policy and strategy-making, infrastructure and social welfare planning, and the implementation of sustainable development. In addition, the devolution of substantial powers and resources to the Celtic nations and, to a lesser extent, to the English regions has reinforced the emphasis placed upon strategic thinking and implementation.

This decade of improvement and innovation in strategic spatial planning in the UK has coincided with

the process of constructing the ESDP. This is an important point to note for two reasons. First, it demonstrates the many ways in which the interchange of ideas at European level can help to improve the performance of policy-making and planning in individual member states. Whilst there were a number of important contributions from British planners to the ESDP process, it should be acknowledged that most of these contributions reflected “past glories” rather than the policies and practices of the 1980s. Secondly, it should be noted that the UK can be considered to have been a net beneficiary of the ESDP process; this is evident from the way in which the ESDP was developed, with much of the initial impetus coming from the countries of mainland North West Europe, such as France, The Netherlands and Germany. Even though the UK made a number of important inputs to the ESDP, including a major effort during the UK presidency to prepare the First Complete Draft, much of the pioneering work on spatial and strategic thinking took place during the mid and late 1980s; a period when such ideas were almost regarded as constituting an “anti-state activity” in the UK.¹⁹

The influence of the ESDP and other associated innovations in EU strategic spatial policy can be seen in the evolution of UK policy and practice. Relating some examples of EU influence to the three phases of the development of UK strategic spatial planning capability that were outlined earlier, it can be seen that:

- During the first phase of development, the introduction of the Structural Funds regional programmes required the UK to introduce a basic system of regional economic planning; the plans produced inevitably contained policies and proposals that influenced land use and transport planning.²⁰
- During the second phase of development, one of the reasons given for the establishment of the Government Offices (for the regions) was the need to ensure greater coordination between a range of associated policy fields, including RPG, the Structural Funds regional programmes, transport planning and domestic regional investment policy.²¹ Such an approach reflected both the embryonic views emanating from the work of the ESDP preparation team regarding the desirability of ensuring greater policy coordination at an appropriate spatial (region or small nation) level, and the need to demonstrate to the European Commission that the bids made for funding from the second round of the Structural Funds were consistent with other plans and actions at regional level.
- During the third phase of development, a number of direct links can be seen, including the introduction of ESDP-style strategic spatial planning exercises in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, the preparation of a Spatial Development Strategy for Greater London, the recent announcement that RPG is to be replaced by a more powerful and comprehensive form of regional strategic planning to be known as Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS), and the introduction of a series of reforms related to economic development, transport, environment, social and other policies that have sought to promote greater spatial coordination in terms of both the planning and delivery of activities and services.²²

What has emerged in the UK in recent years represents little short of a revolution in terms of the way in

¹⁹ Breheny, M. and Hall, P., “The Strange Death of Strategic Planning and the Victory of the Know-Nothing School” (1984) 10 *Built Environment* 95–99.

²⁰ Roberts, P., Hart, T. and Thomas K., *Europe: A Handbook for Local Authorities* (Centre for Local Environmental Strategies, Manchester, 1993).

²¹ Davies, H.W.E., Gosling J.A. and Hsia M.T., *The Impact of the European Community on Land Use Planning in the United Kingdom*, (Royal Town Planning Institute, London, 1994).

²² Benneworth, P., Conroy, L. and Roberts, P., “Strategic Connectivity, Sustainable Development and the New English Regional Governance” (2002) 45 *Journal of Environmental Planning and Management* 199–217.

which strategic spatial matters are considered and handled. From a situation of almost no activity in the late 1980s, a situation which was described by one author as one in which “regional planning and governance in Britain were commonly regarded as lost causes”,²³ the problem which now confronts many areas is that of “strategy fatigue”. Although there have been a number of previous periods of intense strategy planning activity, in the past in most cases the standard response to the need to roll forward or reinvigorate a regional or sub-regional strategy was the preparation of a revised version of the previous plan, often in the form of a fixed period or “end state” strategy. As has been observed, such exercises ran the risk of straying into an attempt to over-elaborate the content of a strategy together with the associated danger of taking too long to prepare and agree the plan.²⁴ The “new” strategic spatial planning is very different, especially in relation to the question of how to balance the need for detail against the desirability of preparing a plan quickly. In addition, given the central role played by the objectives of sustainable development in determining the overall content and form of plans prepared at all spatial levels, it is now evident that the environmental, social and economic components of planning are better co-ordinated than in the past; this is a further reflection of the influence exerted by EU-level strategic spatial policy. It is almost as though, some 60 years late, the UK has finally realised the desirability of ensuring the greater spatial coordination of policy and implementation that was advocated by the Barlow Report.²⁵

Two illustrations are provided here of the “new” strategic spatial planning that has been encouraged by the ESDP and associated EU policy initiatives. The term “encouraged” is used here to indicate the need to consider both the influence exerted by the model of spatial development and management that was pioneered during the ESDP production process, and the influence of the method of spatial thinking that has emerged as a consequence of this process. This distinction between the two forms of influence is important because, as Faludi and Waterhout note,²⁶ the ESDP process has both supported the development of new skills of spatial thinking and planning, and has established an institutional capacity within which such skills can be applied. As ever, the process of plan-making is arguably more important than the final plan itself.

The first illustration which is offered of the influence exerted by the ESDP and associated EU policy initiatives, is concerned with the recent upsurge in strategic spatial thinking and planning which has occurred in the three Celtic nations of the UK. Although strictly speaking the initial analysis and the preparation of the Northern Ireland Regional Development Strategy (RDS)—or spatial development strategy as it is referred to in the document—commenced prior to the publication of the final ESDP, the influence of the work undertaken as part of the ESDP preparation process is evident in the document. The RDS is defined as an “overarching strategic planning framework” which aims to provide “long-term policy directions, from a strategic spatial perspective, for the public and private sector and the whole community”.²⁷ One important consideration that helped to stimulate the early production of the RDS, was the knowledge that the Republic of Ireland was engaged in the preparation of a National Spatial Strategy (NSS).²⁸ Even though the RDS makes few direct references to what in reality can be considered to be a cross-border exercise, there is substantial evidence of the adoption of an ESDP “Europe without frontiers” approach to both the analysis of problems and opportunities, and the formulation of strategy. Equally, the NSS makes substantial reference to the changing spatial structure

²³ Wannop, U., *The Regional Imperative* (Kingsley, London, 1995), p.185.

²⁴ Royal Town Planning Institute, *Strategic Planning for Regional Potential* (Royal Town Planning Institute, London, 1986).

²⁵ Royal Commission on the Distribution of the Industrial Population (1940) Report, HMSO, London.

²⁶ Faludi and Waterhout, *op.cit.*

²⁷ Department for Regional Development, *Shaping Our Future: Regional Development Strategy for Northern Ireland 2025* (Corporate Document Services, Belfast, 2001), p.3.

²⁸ Department of the Environment and Local Government, *The National Spatial Strategy 2002–2020* (The Stationery Office, Dublin, 2002).

of the “island of Ireland” and to the desirability of providing, in conjunction with the RDS, a framework for the “spatial dimension of an all-island economy”.²⁹ If nothing else, the ESDP has inspired the establishment of joint working and collaboration between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland on matters related to strategic spatial planning. However, far more than joint working has emerged, with the RDS, for example, providing a basis for the integrated planning and management of the regions of Northern Ireland, thus allowing for the more effective and efficient delivery of a wide range of public and private services and functions.

The search for greater economy and effectiveness in the use of resources can also be seen to be one of the primary justifications for the introduction of similar strategic spatial planning exercises in Wales and Scotland. In Wales the preparation of the Wales Spatial Plan (WSP) is now at an advanced stage, with a draft for consultation expected in the autumn of 2003. The WSP exercise commenced in 2001, with the stated aim of preparing a “new national spatial framework for planning” which will “set a clear context for the development necessary for Wales to fulfil its ambitions for economic success, social inclusion and a quality environment”.³⁰ An explicit link was made in the consultation document to the ESDP and to a number of other EU policy positions on economic and social cohesion and the Structural Funds. In short, the WSP, which will provide the context both for statutory development plans and for a wide range of other policies, plans and programmes, is seen as a spatial “corporate plan” for the future development of Wales. Equally, the Scottish National Planning Framework (NPF), which was proposed by the Scottish Executive as part of its Review of Strategic Planning,³¹ is seen as providing a spatial perspective which will help in the development of national and sub-national policy positions, and resource allocations in relation to the settlement pattern, land resources, infrastructure capacity, economic prospects, environmental challenges and strategic priorities for transport. The NFP concept, which was initially developed by a multi-agency research team commissioned by the Royal Town Planning Institute and eleven other professional bodies in Scotland, is derived from the principles which guided the construction of the ESDP and is intended to “provide a corporate spatial framework to guide the future development of all sectors’ interests and areas of activity”.³² The NFP will provide a strategic spatial context for the revision of National Planning Policy Guidelines (to be renamed National Planning Policy Statements) and for the proposed city region strategic development plans and local development plans. A draft NFP is expected in late autumn 2003.

It will be apparent to the reader that this spate of activity in the three Celtic nations has not taken place within the context of UK-wide spatial development perspective. Indeed, despite the best efforts of a number of individuals and organisations,³³ it would appear that central government is determined that it will not prepare a UK-wide spatial development perspective. Instead, it is now proposed that in the eight English regions outside London, a Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) will be prepared. In the London region a Spatial Development Strategy is currently in preparation. The critical weakness inherent in these arrangements is that even if spatial strategies are prepared for Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland, London and the other eight English regions, they will not constitute a UK spatial development perspective. This point is developed further in the final section of the paper.

The second illustration of the influence of the ESDP and associated EU policy makes reference to a number of the recent advances in strategic spatial planning in England. In particular, this section of the

²⁹ *ibid.*, p.12.

³⁰ The National Assembly for Wales, *Wales Spatial Plan: Pathway to Sustainable Development* (The National Assembly for Wales, Cardiff, 2001), p.1.

³¹ Scottish Executive, *Review of Strategic Planning* (Scottish Executive, Edinburgh, 2001).

³² Roberts, *et al.* (2000), *op.cit.*, p.7.

³³ Wong, C., (2002) “Is there a need for a Fully Integrated Spatial Planning Framework for the United Kingdom?” (2002) 3 *Planning Theory and Practice*, 277–300.

paper briefly considers the adoption of ESDP-style methodologies and models in the process of preparing Regional Planning Guidance (RPG), and in the preparation of sub-regional and development plans. The influence exerted by the ESDP and associated elements of EU policy over RPG preparation can best be considered in relation to the two factors discussed earlier in this paper: the method of spatial thinking and the nature of the process. As Shaw and Sykes note,³⁴ the ESDP has helped to inform the nature and content of the debate on the form of RPG, on the one hand, and has assisted in the production process, on the other hand. This twin-track approach can be seen, for example, in the use made of the ESDP principles to help to inform the choice of objectives for RPG in the North East, or the application of ESDP key themes as a checklist against which RPG content can be appraised. Equally, the application of the ESDP notions of polycentricity and urban-rural balance were used to help to guide RPG for the South West. As has been observed, the principles and key themes of the ESDP would appear to have provided “a new lens through which to view functional linkages within a region”.³⁵ A further, and often very important, influence of the ESDP is related to the way in which RPG has been able to handle cross-border issues. Drawing upon the ESDP’s call for effective horizontal interpretation in dealing with issues with a cross-border dimension, RPG for the East Midlands argued in favour of a policy of housing land allocation that took into account the needs of both the East Midlands and neighbouring regions. On the basis of this evidence it would appear that whilst developers may think that the ESDP is of no relevance to their activities, if this type of spatially integrated thinking starts to prevail, then it is clear that their land acquisition activities will have to be tested against an ESDP-style policy checklist. Across a wider group of regional stakeholders, Shaw and Sykes argue that other aspects of the ESDP have helped to reinforce regional analysis, policy development and implementation.³⁶

As noted in the introduction, the ESDP and associated EU policies have also influenced a wider range of planning and other activities in the UK, including a number of unitary and structure plans, such as that prepared for Kent. Examples have already been offered of the links which exist between the ESDP, the Structural Funds and the strategies prepared by the English Regional Development Agencies, and of the influence exerted by the ESDP over the design and implementation of infrastructure policies. Other examples include the relationship between EU environment policies and, for example, the preparation of river basin management plans, some of which may restrict future development on floodplains, or the application of SEA. Less direct, but nevertheless important, links include the role of the ESDP in furthering the case for an enhanced EU competence in planning and urban policy matters and, as a consequence, the promotion of greater spatial coherence in the design of urban regeneration programmes, and the influence of ESDP-style ideas related to the spatial integration of the various strands of policy relevant to regional development which would appear to have been applied in the preparation of some of the RDA regional strategies.

The future development of strategic spatial planning

The previous sections of this paper have outlined and illustrated the ways in which the ESDP and associated elements of EU policy have influenced the form and content of the “new” strategic spatial planning in the UK. As has been demonstrated, in recent years the influence of EU policy has extended in terms of both its scope and depth. The lessons from this progressive process of policy elaboration and application have now been applied to many aspects of UK strategic spatial planning policy and practice.

³⁴ Shaw, D. and Sykes, O., *Investigating the Application of the European Spatial Development Perspective in the United Kingdom*, paper presented at the Planning Research Conference, Dundee (April, 2002).

³⁵ *ibid.*, p.11.

³⁶ *ibid.*

However, the pace at which EU policy has influenced planning in the UK varies between the constituent territories of the UK, and between the different types of plan and strategy that are prepared. It would appear, for example, that ideas and models associated with the ESDP have taken root much more rapidly in the three Celtic nations than they have in England. Equally, those plans and strategies that are linked in some way to the Structural Funds have proved to be more responsive to the better ordered and more comprehensive notions of strategic planning and management that prevail elsewhere in north west Europe.

Despite the presence of these variations, and accepting that the influences exerted by the ESDP and associated aspects of EU policy are not the only drivers of change in relation to the evolving style and content of the “new” UK strategic spatial planning, it is now difficult to identify any aspect of UK strategic planning policy or practice that has not been touched by these new and innovative ways of managing the geographical dimension of public and private policy formulation and implementation. It is somewhat ironic that having offered our European neighbours a model of good practice of strategic spatial planning during the mid-twentieth century, it would appear that the recent revival of strategic thinking and action in the UK has drawn inspiration from the experience of our neighbours via the ESDP. This rediscovery of the merits of strategic spatial planning helps to address the criticism made by one observer, that spatial planning in the UK “has become a totally lost art since the time of Abercrombie”.³⁷ The changes that have taken place between 1998 and the present day, especially in the Celtic nations, reflect the efforts made to learn from the ESDP and from strategic spatial planning experience elsewhere in Europe. As a consequence, it can be argued that the UK has started the process of rejoining the European mainstream of strategic spatial planning. This important step forward, if taken to its logical conclusion, will hopefully result in the provision of the policy “glue” that is essential if the various sectoral plans (for housing, environment, economic development, transport, etc.) are to be “joined-up” and delivered as mutually-supporting elements of an integrated development package; this is the reasoning and purpose behind the spatial planning exercises undertaken in the Celtic nations.

One obvious question which emerges from all of this activity is: why is there no England or UK-wide spatial development perspective? So far central government would appear to have decided to reject calls for the introduction of such an initiative, preferring to shift the burden of providing spatial integration in England to RSS. However, unlike Scotland or Wales, a typical English region does not possess the powers of policy formulation and implementation that are necessary to give real form and substance to RSS as a means of guiding all public and private investment in a region. As a recent report from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, the Core Cities, and the Regional Development Agencies has noted, although the Sustainable Communities Action Programme and RSS represent a significant advance in the provision of spatial planning capability, they “fall short of the comprehensive national spatial framework being adopted in some other advanced countries”.³⁸ So, England and, to a lesser extent through association, the other nations of the UK will not be able to benefit from the advantages that can be obtained from the application of the type of integrated spatial framework that has been prepared in a number of other EU member states. What currently exists, and is likely to exist for at least the next five years, is a mixed pattern of provision which reflects the strengths of devolved political and administrative arrangements, rather than the outcome of a measured assessment and response to the problems that confront many localities and regions. A harsh critic might suggest that the UK has made little progress since the publication of the Barlow Report, which commented that even if regional plans provided a complete coverage of the country, they would not constitute a national plan. This was

³⁷ Williams, R.H., “A Happy End? Prospects for the ESDP under the British Presidency”, (1998) 23 *Built Environment*, 315 at 316.

³⁸ Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, The Core Cities and The Regional Development Agencies, *Cities, Regions and Competitiveness* (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, London, 2003), p.14.

because such an aggregation of plans would remain “a patchwork of schemes of varying size and varying merits, which had not been coordinated and moulded to form a coherent whole”.³⁹ However, whilst this criticism may have been accurate even a few years ago, it would appear from the evidence of documents such as that cited above,⁴⁰ that it is now recognised that the provision of an integrated spatial strategy is a necessary prerequisite for successful regional and local planning, and for cost effective investment in housing, infrastructure and many other facilities. The weakness of a fragmented approach to forward planning was recently demonstrated during the consultation exercise on national air transport policy, when it was difficult, if not impossible, for stakeholders to gain an appreciation of the system and strategy as a whole.

The previous discussion suggests that the pace and nature of innovation in strategic spatial planning policy and practice will continue to vary between the four nations of the UK. This is, in one sense, a strength and should be encouraged as a means of experimenting with different models. More importantly, the various planning and associated ministries should be encouraged to reconsider the case for preparing a UK-wide spatial development perspective. Such an exercise, rather like a company corporate strategy, offers the potential to coordinate more effectively the activities undertaken in the various policy fields associated with spatial planning, development and investment. This is a necessary reform and one which is essential if each individual element of policy is to play its part in supporting the overall objective of promoting effective national development. The ESDP may not be the perfect role model for national spatial development, but it does appear to be both accepted as a viable approach and one which is capable of translation into an operational national or regional spatial strategy. The adoption of an ESDP-style approach to national planning would allow for the belated achievement of Abercrombie’s vision in which “for the purpose of arriving at the best result the boundaries of authorities are banished from the mind”.⁴¹

³⁹ Royal Commission (1940) *op.cit.*, para.222.

⁴⁰ Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, *et al.*, *op.cit.*

⁴¹ Abercrombie, P., *Town and Country Planning* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1933) p.127.