



The role of planning in shaping better urban-rural relationships in Bristol City Region

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ABSTRACT

Localism Agenda adopted by Coalition Government in 2010 reflected the rejection of the regional level and the ambition to rebalance national economy, by devolving economic and social responsibilities down to cities and local communities. The introduction of the Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) as joint local authority-business bodies in charge of better coordinating public and private investments in several areas of economic development, has remodelled the governance of British city regions towards their increased autonomy from central government. Among the most relevant spatial impacts of the new institutional arrangement the reshaping of a new relationship between cities and their rural hinterlands emerges. The purpose of this paper is to analyse the planning policies at local and city-regional level dealing with and affecting rural areas in the context of Bristol City Region. It demonstrates that most of the failings of planning in supporting the development of rural areas relate to the rigidity of its policies and to the poor attitude towards the innovation of its tools. The paper argues that a more proactive and integrated approach for planning is needed to re-build stronger agri-food relations and to achieve a more sustainable land use management at city regional level.

1. Introduction: the sub-regional governance after localism in British cities

Over the last 30 years, the majority of the Western Countries have experienced a decentralization of powers from central governments to a wide range of different sub-central state entities, institutions, partnerships and agencies. In United Kingdom, the path to decentralization has followed a chaotic and unclear direction for the ambiguous impacts of the policy reforms (Williams et al., 2012) and for the continuous shifts in the perception of the government and other agencies towards the cities, the regions and city-regions (Tewdwr-Jones, 2012). The White Paper *Local Growth: realising every place's potential* published in 2010 has been interpreted as a pivotal step in the English devolution for the impacts of the changes it produced in the architecture of governance. This paper has provided a road-map for Government's ambition of rebalancing UK economy, particularly by devolving economic and social responsibilities down to cities and local communities (HM Government, 2010; Pugalís and Townsend, 2012). At the basis of the Localist reform it is rooted the idea that the social-democratic and Fabian approaches to government have failed to reduce deprivation and inequalities and that, on the contrary, they have promoted "selfish individualism and passive dependency" (Cameron, 2009). The "Big Society" flagship policy refers to the intention of Coalition government to place distinctiveness and subsidiarity at the heart of the mode of administration (Conservative

Party, 2010), by envisaging devolution of powers to enable local communities and individuals to take an active role in their communities (Williams et al., 2012; Pugalís and Townsend, 2012). Although the Big Society's ideas are by no means new (Ishkanian and Szreter, 2012; Williams et al., 2012), the main differences with the former period relate to the important political and philosophical distinctions with the former New Labour civic renewal due to the unprecedented size, speed and effects of policy cuts (Taylor-Gooby and Stoker, 2011; Tewdwr-Jones, 2012). The limits of this model have been already discussed by a number of researchers. For example, Clarke and Cochrane (2013) argued that the main deficiencies of the reform lie in its failure to recognize the highly uneven geographical impact of public sector cuts and the differential capacities within and between local communities.

Alongside the shift of powers to the local level, the emphasis on self-determining local priorities and on driving local businesses towards economic growth has led the emergence of a new sub-regional arrangement, the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP). LEPs are joint local authority-business bodies aimed at improving the coordination of public and private investments in transport, housing, skills, regeneration and other areas of economic development (Tallon, 2013). Already interpreted as an expression of the move between Managerial and Entrepreneurial mode of governance that British cities have been facing in the last two decades (Harvey, 1989; Shaw and Tewdwr-Jones, 2016; Tallon, 2013), LEPs underline local governments' shift from the

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management of public services towards the promotion of economic competitiveness. Their primary focus is now on ensuring new sources of economic development through a 'new marketing approach for cities' (Pacione, 2009; Harvey, 1989). Geography is an important dimension in the territorial focus of LEPs. This is mainly due to their adherence to functional and economic areas (Centre for Cities, 2010; Marlow, 2015; Pugalís, 2010). Hence, given their potential to steer the broad complex of spatial interactions, LEPs have been conceived as a mechanism for enabling collaboration across traditional boundaries (Pugalís and Townsend, 2012). They are part of the broader Government's *Duty-to-Cooperate* for which local authorities are required to "cooperate constructively, actively and on an ongoing basis between themselves and with other public bodies to maximize the effectiveness of policies for strategic matters in Local Plans" (DCLG, 2014).

Alongside this framework, during the last two decades in British local governments' field of action has been growingly influenced and oriented by sustainable development principles (Giradet, 2004; Pacione, 2009). In UK cities, the debate on sustainability has encountered the deep challenges of the urban regeneration agenda, often linked to a predominant trend towards brownfield redevelopment (Tallon, 2013; Couch and Dennemann, 2000). The 'green paradigm' that many local authorities have openly embraced has contributed to shape a plethora of local plans and strategies, with a crucial influence, particularly in the environmental sphere, played by the EU in shaping their contents (Cowell, 2017). Hence, principles of environmental sustainability have conveyed an overall improvement in the quality of life of many urban communities particularly by using more efficiently land and resources, protecting ecosystems and biodiversity and promoting sustainable consumption and production patterns (United Nations, 2016; Tallon, 2013).

The relevance of this for the current era of Devolution in UK is that the reorganization of sub-regional governance following 2010 has pushed cities to re-frame their relationships with the rural hinterlands and to reconnect with their nearby countryside (Gallent et al., 2006). Here it is argued that one of the main forces fostering the reframing of urban policies toward a more consistent relationship with the rural hinterland is the emerging consideration of food and urban agriculture in the agenda of a relevant number of British cities (Morgan, 2009; See also: Reed et al., 2013).

Despite these emerging trends, concerns arise when the success of local food initiatives in terms of health impacts and local civic engagement conflict with the current sectoral fragmentation that characterizes the policies dealing with food, and with the interests of developers pushing for the release of green land for new developments (Butterly and Fitzpatrick, 2017). As Sinden (2017) correctly pointed out, the 'Land Question' that many British cities are facing is related on one hand to the challenges associated with providing homes for people, and on the other hand with the production of food and the provision of other natural resources. In this sense, Green Belts are often seen as the places where the debate on land management finds its most crucial expression (Gallent et al., 2006; Helm, 2015). This is mainly due to the growing scarcity of land free from planning restrictions situated in proximity of cities to be used for new developments, and to a rooted assumption regarding the scarce overall amenity value of Green Belts (Neate, 2014; Smith, 2001).

The purpose of this paper is to analyse the planning policies at the local and city-regional level dealing with and affecting rural areas, in a context of a British city region. The paper is organized in five sections. In the first section a brief overview of the debate on Green Belt is outlined, highlighting the main arguments of the two positions. The case study is presented in the second section. The accent is put on the role of the West of England Local Enterprise Partnership (WoE LEP) as the relevant entity in charge of dealing with planning at city-regional level. In the third section the analysis of the planning policies at local and city-regional level is provided with a focus to those dealing with the preservation and development of rural areas (within and outside Green

Belt designation). A discussion of the results is offered in the fourth section. In the end it is presented an alternative paradigm for planning to overcome the issues previously identified and to proactively shape a different relationship between cities and their rural hinterlands.

2. The green belt debate: a contested policy in the face of urban growth

Initially suggested by Ebenezer Howard in the late 19th century, Green Belts extend over 1639,090 ha, around 13% of the total land area of England. Five are the purposes served by Green Belts. These are to check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas (i), to prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another (ii), to assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment (iii), to preserve the setting and special character of historic towns (iv), and to assist in urban regeneration by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land (v) (DETR, 2001).

Despite the rooted idea that farming is a marginal economic activity in Green Belt, in 2010 it was reported that the 66% of total Green Belt land is classified as farmland (CPRE, 2010). This dominant understanding is partly justified by the overall low quality of Green Belt land (just the 12% of green belt farmland is classified as grade 1 and 2 land) and by a range of additional problems that periurban farming is facing such as damages due to trespass, vandalism and fly tipping (Gallent et al., 2006).

Although regarded by many as "one of the greatest achievements of planning" (CPRE, 2012; RTPI, 2016), in the last decade a number of voices have been debating on Green Belts and on the contents of the national policy. In the academic and political debate two main approaches can be recognized. They will be named here the *pragmatic* and the *protectionist* approaches.

The *pragmatic* approach is questioning the broader value of the policy in various arguments. The main argument relates to the quality of Green Belt land. As reported by Gallent et al. (2006), currently all land within designated Green Belt areas enjoys the same protection while some of it is of little amenity value. Therefore, Green Belt policy continues to operate as a mechanism "to preserve the integrity of the built-up areas on one side of it and the countryside on the other" (Shoard, 2002), without any real concern for the land within the Green Belt itself (DETR, 2001; Gant et al., 2011). A second argument deals with the number of problems associated with the severe limits placed to the urban growth (Tallon, 2013; Neate, 2014). Since Green Belts are interpreted as key-mechanisms closely identified with the land-use planning model, this approach sees them as too rigid and permanent designations and calls for a more flexible attitude. Albrechts (2004) argues that until Green Belts will be viewed as regulatory zoning instruments, they will continue to promote separation rather than integration as part of the traditional land-use planning. To answer to the rigidity of the tool, some have suggested that Green Belt policy should be kept under review like other planning policies (Bovill, 2002; Neate, 2014). "Green belt boundaries may well need to change" argued the Royal Town Planning Institute in the recent report "Where should we build new homes?" (RTPI, 2016). Following this view, Neate (2014) suggests to address the misconception that all Green Belt land is sacrosanct and that a release of it for housing is needed in order to achieve the extensions of major urban centres. A close but more radical view is the one promoted by those calling for the complete abolition of Green Belt policy given "its rootedness in erroneous assumptions, flawed concepts and ill-defined notions" (Papworth, 2015). This position supports the idea that what is needed is a replacement of Green Belts by land-use restrictions that would better reflect environmental designations and free up land for housing while continuing to preserve the environment (OECD, 2011; Papworth, 2015).

Differently from the *pragmatic* approach, the *protectionist* approach opts for the defence of Green Belt land from being used for housing developments. The focal point is to fight the housing demand argument

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