AN EXAMINATION OF THE ROLE AND VIEWS OF ELECTED COUNCILLORS IN THE GOVERNANCE OF GROWTH AREAS AND WHETHER POLITICAL DIFFERENCES PLAY A PART IN DECISION MAKING

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Abstract

The aim of the research is to explore and understand the role of local councillors in local government. There are three dimensions that influence this role. The first is the tension between central and local government and the highly centralised party political system which constrains local autonomy. The second is the role of the political party in local government, and its dominance in policy making. The third is the evolving spatial planning system and the new emphasis on localism and collaborative planning. These themes are explored through an examination of the spatial planning system, and in particular a case study of plan making in a growth sub – region. My reading and reflection have helped me formulate three research questions: *a) Has the lack of local government autonomy inhibited the adoption of innovative forms of collaborative planning; b) Have councillors understood the central tenets of collaborative planning and acted upon them and c) Can local politicians who are not members of the council's executive play a more effective community leadership role by becoming more involved in the scrutiny of policies for space and place- making.*

The study has contributed to knowledge in a number of ways. It provides confirmatory evidence for other research exploring the role of the councillor in local government. This study has shown how the politicisation that has affected local government has also had an influence on the role of spatial planning in local government and that the dominant role of the political party in local government also involves spatial planning.

66,000 words (excluding bibliography).

Executive Summary

The aim of the research is to explore and understand the role of local councillors in local government. There are three dimensions that influence this role. The first dimension is the tension between central and local government and the highly centralised party political system which constrains local autonomy. The second dimension is the role of the political party in local government, and its dominance in policy making. The third dimension is the evolving spatial planning system and the new emphasis on localism and collaborative planning. These themes are explored through an examination of the spatial planning system, and in particular a case study of plan making in a growth sub – region where these inter-relationships can be observed and explored. A major factor influencing the role of councillors is the autonomy they experience, whether this be from local political, economic and social pressures or from central government.

My reading and reflection have helped me formulate three research questions: *a) Has the lack of local government autonomy inhibited the adoption of innovative forms of collaborative planning; b) Have councillors understood the central tenets of collaborative planning and acted upon them and c) Can local politicians who are not members of the council's executive play a more effective community leadership role by becoming more involved in the scrutiny of policies for space and place-making.*

The subject is of interest because of the changing styles of governance within local government and the role that councillors will have in these new forms. The requirement of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 that local planning authorities prepare a Core Strategy (CS) for their area, and that the CS should comprise a spatial vision and strategic objectives for the area, poses enormous challenges for both councillors and officers within local government.

This study provides an opportunity to consider the role of representative democracy in spatial planning, which has evolved through a state – centred model focussed on welfare delivery and support for a mixed economy to what some academics see as a new mode of governance, which recognises the multiplicity of ways which link citizens, business and state. Representative democracy is recognised as absolutely necessary but not sufficient in itself to respond to the complexity of the issues facing contemporary political communities.

The major recommendation emerging from this thesis is the need for a greater role for the scrutiny and overview committee in the evolution of the Core Strategy within councils. When the cabinet or executive structure was introduced into local government with its concentration of power in the executive, as compared with the earlier committee structure, emphasis was placed on the important role of scrutiny as a counter balance to this concentration. The case study has demonstrated that scrutiny is poorly developed in both Oxford City Council and South Oxfordshire District Council. Both councils exhibit the low scrutiny/high leadership form described by Gains et al (2005). The Centre for Public Scrutiny (2013) points out that public scrutiny is an essential part of ensuring that government remains effective and accountable and is now moving into another era with community –led scrutiny of local decisions.

During the time that I have spent researching this subject and realizing the importance of my conclusion that public scrutiny should play a greater role in the spatial planning system, I decided to engage again with local politics. In May 2013 I was elected a Gloucestershire County Councillor for the Stow Division in the North Cotswolds and I am a member of the Planning Committee and the Environment and Communities Scrutiny Committee as well as the Local Enterprise Partnership Scrutiny Committee. Public scrutiny plays a significant role in the work of Gloucestershire County Council and in 2012 the county won an award from The Centre for Public Scrutiny for the scrutiny by the committee of

the Severn Estuary Flood Risk Management Action Plan prepared by the Environment Agency. The reflections on scrutiny that I have gained whilst researching this subject I will take with me for my work on the council and its committees.

The study has contributed to knowledge in a number of ways. It provides confirmatory evidence for other research exploring the role of the councillor in local government. There has however been little work on attempting to place in context how the councillor behaves in the specialised area of spatial planning, notwithstanding its important role in local government. This study has shown how the politicisation that has affected local government has also had an influence on the role of spatial planning in local government and that the dominant role of the political party in local government also involves spatial planning.

A central question concerning the current enthusiasm for a localist agenda in spatial planning and local government is to what extent local authorities will choose to exercise their residual autonomy so as to encourage locally specific policy making. The study has demonstrated that the political parties are determined to ensure that the politics of the councils are conducted within the political groups before reaching the public domain. This pattern of political activity within the councils is perhaps inimical to the autonomy that localism or locally specific policy making requires, but could be counter-balanced by more effective public scrutiny.

The policy importance of this research is three - fold. Firstly,on democratic grounds it is important for researchers, policy-makers and decision – makers to understand the role of the councillor and the factors that influence this role. Secondly, by understanding how and why councillors hold the views that they do, there is an opportunity to develop approaches to bridge gaps in trust, communication, values and democratic accountability. Thirdly, it could lead to more effective policies and programmes that could work in partnership with local communities

and have a greater positive impact locally and nationally. This is particularly true of public scrutiny and the opportunity to introduce community – led scrutiny into the policy area of spatial planning. There is a very large literature on collaborative planning but I believe that the role of the councilor is neglected in much of the writing and research. In my conclusions I set out some thoughts on further research in this area.

Acknowledgements

Contents

Abstract

Acknowledgements

Executive Summary

Appendix 1: Minutes of the Interviews.

Appendix 2: Questionnaires.

Appendix 3: Minutes of the South Oxfordshire District Council Meeting 30th June 2011.

Appendix 4: South Oxfordshire District Core Strategy EiP Inspector's

draft conclusions for testing through SA ID/34 30th November 2011

Appendix 5: Minutes of the South Oxfordshire District Council Meeting 18th November 2010.

Appendix 6: Notes for Councillor Workshops Spring 2008.

Appendix 7: Minutes of a meeting of South Oxfordshire District Council Scrutiny Committee 9th November 2010 and recommendations and comments from the Scrutiny Committee.

Appendix 8: Minutes of a Full Council Meeting of Oxford City Council 14th March 2011 and report of Head of City Development.

Appendix 9: Oxford Punch Cartoon 8th August 1928.

Appendix 10: Figure 1 The Role of the Councillor from Gayford ,J. (1984) *Local Politics In Britain* Croom Helm London.

Appendix 11: Minutes of the South Oxfordshire District Council Meeting 13th December 2012.

Appendix 12: Results of the questionnaire survey.

Plan 1: The City of Oxford and South Oxfordshire
Plan 2: The Central Oxfordshire Sub - region
Plan 3: The South of Oxford SDA
Plan 4:   South Oxfordshire in Context

Table 1 (at page 105) The aim of the research is to explore and understand the role of local councillors in local government

Chapter 1 The aims, objectives and structure of the thesis

Research Aims and Objectives

The aim of the research is to explore and understand the role of local councillors in local government. There are three dimensions that influence this role. The first dimension is the tension between central and local government and this has two aspects. Firstly, the British polity expressed as the relationship between central government at Westminster and local government in the Town Hall and the changing form of governance that has emerged from this relationship. Secondly, the highly centralised party political system which constrains local autonomy. The second dimension is the role of the political party in local government, and its dominance in policy making.

The third dimension is the evolving spatial planning system and the new emphasis on localism and collaborative planning. These themes are explored through an examination of the spatial planning system, and in particular a case study of plan making in a growth sub – region where these inter-relationships can be observed and explored. The new spatial planning system appears to offer councillors an increased role in place making, and the thesis examines to what extent this is taking place. Councillors in local government find themselves subject to a whole range of forces, which can pull in different directions, and which are underpinned by a significant amount of both policy advice and academic research.

Influencing the role of councillors is the autonomy they experience whether this be from local political, economic and social pressures or from central government. My reading and reflection have helped me formulate three research questions: *a) Has the lack of local government autonomy inhibited the adoption of innovative forms of collaborative planning; b) Have councillors understood the central tenets of collaborative planning and acted upon them and c) Can local politicians*

who are not members of the council's executive play a more effective community leadership role by becoming more involved in the scrutiny of policies for space and place -making.

Research Context and Importance

The author, who has both a professional and political background, believes that despite a strong and well nuanced body of academic research and literature that promotes a more progressive approach to place governance in complex, pluralistic and conflicted western democracy (Healey 2011), the "modernising" agenda in local government of all recent national governments is bringing about a more centralised, less collaborative approach to decision making by local councillors.

In this introductory chapter I aim to provide a context for my research and to set out the contemporary relevance of my key findings, claims and conclusions. To do this within the areas that I identified at the outset I briefly summarise the debates taking place in these areas and their implications for the research. My own motive in this area is that for many years I have practised as an independent planning consultant providing professional advice to a wide range of clients and I have also been a local government councillor in South Oxfordshire, although consciously not a member of the planning committee to avoid any conflicts of interest. I retired as a councillor in 2007 but have retained personal and professional links in the area During that time I observed the difficulties that accommodating physical growth within local communities can pose for local councillors trying to balance the local concerns of their residents against strong development pressures from central government and the development industry. I hold a significant normative position in that I believe in the importance of strong civic and community leadership, for example, having been Mayor of Wallingford for two years, but I do intend to look at other perspectives as part of my research.

My reason for wishing to become a local government councillor after more than thirty years of private practice as a chartered town planner was

my belief that local councillors could play a larger role in spatial planning and place making. Initially I was elected onto the Wallingford Town Council where as Chairman of the Town Plan working party I was instrumental in drawing up a plan for the town adopted by the town council after extensive public consultation. My first year as Mayor increased my public profile in the town and I was elected onto the district council. There I was a member of the cabinet responsible for the arts and sports /leisure portfolio, and the council embarked on a major investment programme of refurbishing the council's leisure centres and building a new cinema and arts centre in the growth town of Didcot. All of these projects required a great deal of pre-planning and design time. This entailed on my part extensive consultations with stakeholders, presentations at scrutiny committee, cabinet and full Council meetings. I was in the fortunate position that I had wound down my private practice for that period, and was able to devote myself to council activities on almost a full time basis, and I rented an office in the town hall. I retired from local government to work on this thesis and also to resume private practice, as I have found this the most practical way of keeping in touch with current legislation.

My experience strengthened my normative position that local councillors can play a more pronounced role in both place making and civic leadership. I had the advantage over some others councillors, particularly those who had not spent many years as a councillor, that my experience as a planning consultant had given me a familiarity with local government practice and planning law as well as presenting proposals in a public arena. Subsequently after completing the first draft of this thesis I stood for election for Gloucestershire County Council in May 2013 and was elected as a County Councillor for the Stow division that includes a large area of the North Cotswolds. I am a member of the Environment and Communities Scrutiny Committee. During the course of working on the thesis I became convinced of the greater role that scrutiny could play in the development of spatial planning policy in local government. Scrutiny plays a large role in the governance of the county council at Gloucester. There are five scrutiny committees that cover all of the services provided

by the council as well as health and care which also involve other agencies. Although the council is led by the largest party, the Conservatives, they do not have a voting majority and the chairmanship of scrutiny and planning committees include the opposition parties. This enables scrutiny to hold the council's executive to account and to assist in the improvement and development of council policies. In 2012 the council won the Centre for Public Scrutiny's prize for the review that was carried out of the Environment Agency's proposed strategy for managing flood risk on the Severn Estuary and ensured a redesigned approach that engaged the community. Gloucestershire conforms to the separation of powers model of leadership and scrutiny that has both well – defined leadership structures and strong forms of scrutiny and review identified by Gains et al (2005).

The scope of planning has broadened in recent years and the concept of spatial planning has been introduced to reflect an approach that embraces a wider social and cultural environment than land use control. However land use planning in England has had a legislative basis for more than one hundred years. Throughout that period politics has been part of planning, which is distinguished from other professional and technical services provided through local government by displaying a political – professional spectrum that continually exhibits a tension between these two traits. Throughout the period since 1909 the management of growth has been an area of competing political approaches, and both central and local government have adopted different forms of legislation to try to regulate and direct development. From the end of the Second World War local authorities had responsibilities for a very wide range of services including planning and at the end of the 1970's a number of reports appeared which stressed the need for improved managerial efficiency and effectiveness within larger authorities, such as the Redcliffe – Maud (1969) and Bains (1972) reports. These proposals were part of a wider programme of state – backed social and economic modernisation, shared by governments of both parties.

Towards the end of that decade recession and the slowdown of economic growth weakened the post war consensus and opened the way for new political and economic ideas to take place. The 1980`s was characterised by the internal reorganisation of the public sector along quasi – market lines in line with the Thatcherite political agenda and the emergence of new rules for private business as a supplier of public services. The 1990`s and continuing through to the 2010 General Election were characterised by a continuation of these themes but modes of governance were extended and widened to link public, private, community and voluntary sectors .The new Coalition Government ,however, has repudiated much of the ideological basis that underpinned this governance and the Conservative leader David Cameron promises (Cameron 2009) a new "localism" which will promote modes of governance more grounded in local communities. In Chapter 2 I describe the literature review that I have conducted in order to examine the debates that have take place around the research topic that I have identified. These debates can be brought together within five broad themes that help to illuminate the overarching subject of the role of the councillor in local government. In this introductory chapter I briefly summarise these debates.

The changing relationship between government and governance in local government

Parallel with these changes has been an upsurge of academic interest in governance. Cowell & Murdoch (1997) describe the concept as indicating a move away from the bureaucratic hierarchies towards looser, more interactive administrative arrangements, such as coalitions, partnerships or networks. Rhodes (1997) has described the emergence of a "differentiated polity ", the notion of which is a recognition that in order to achieve any substantive outcome, political agencies and actors need to pool their resources. Governance implies (Goodwin and Painter 1996) a focus on a wide range of institutions, encompassing not just the formal

agencies of the state but the whole raft of actors that can influence policy and its implementation at a variety of spatial scales

The role of political parties in local government

Gyford (1989) summarised the long-term process of what is known as the party politicisation of local government, identifying five distinct changes, the fifth of which, entitled "reappraisal", took place in 1974. Contributions made by Gyford (1989), Bulpitt (1967) and Jones (1983) throw light on the development of the party group as generating a loyalty- demanding pull on the councillor's representative activities. Cochrane (1991) argued that changes within local government have to be understood in the context of wider restructuring in the UK state. Chandler (2001) thought that the Local Government Bill (2000) might institutionalise new links between government and community groups and individuals, but would provide little local control over policy making. Coulson (2004) suggests that the government has a choice: it could either accept that the era of multi-skilled councillors responsible for the multi-purpose local authorities is ending, or it could radically rationalise the present quangos, partnerships and other local government structures to re-create it.

Leach and Copus (2004) saw the introduction via the Local Government Act 2000 of political executives held to account by influential overview and scrutiny committees as challenging fundamentally the traditional operations of the party political system. Fenwick, McMillan & Elcock (2009) thought that the various proposed formal and "institutional" solutions to English governance would be bound to fail, and that the fragmentation of local governance in England might be resolved through the building of effective patterns of governance from the bottom up. In his examination of democratic theory and its relevance to local politics, Copus (2004) had earlier come to a similar conclusion.

Taylor and Wheeler (2001) emphasised the importance of political parties in organising choices in local elections. Bochel.C & Bochel H.M. (2000) in reviewing the literature on local government councillors comment that

political groupings are now important on most councils. They were recognised in England and Wales by the Local Government and Housing Act 1989 which gave them specific rights, such as committee representation and the right to appoint political assistants. The authors summarise the roles and responsibilities of councillors. Councils fulfil an executive function in that they implement legislation and policies made by central government, although they also make policies that may be contrary to those of central government. Where a party has an overall majority the decision of the ruling group will generally effectively decide the position of the council. Party discipline is therefore an important factor in the effectiveness of party groupings. Where no party is in overall control, coalitions are required which may shift according to the issues.

Since the introduction of cabinet government and the abolition of committees other than for licensing and planning, power in local government has been concentrated in a small group of councillors. The need to prepare a Core Strategy under the new planning system provides this small group with an opportunity to articulate and progress a clear vision for their district based on their own values and ideology. In particular I want to explore the tensions between on the one hand representing local interests, which other than the local business community, are rarely in favour of growth, and on the other responding to central government initiatives which reward efficient councils who respond positively to the growth agenda. As the system of governance changes after the 2010 election, local councillors will be faced by the need to formulate new forms of governance, and this provides a cut off point to examine how the system has functioned since the 1997 election. I also want to explore whether there are political differences in whether to accept growth, particularly as there appears little discretion at an overall national level to significantly alter the predicted scale of growth, or whether the political differences are in the forms of governance, for example the need for local accountability and local acceptance of growth.

The differing role of councillors in local government

Decision - making ultimately lies with the planning councillors, who directly face the whole range of conflicting demands. More recently there has been parliamentary support for the role of councillors. A recent report of the House Of Commons Committee on Communities & Local Government (2008) supports the role of councillors on the basis that the technical specialist can be challenged by a non-specialist, so that there are checks and balances and that the decisions being made reflect the needs and desires of the wider community. The determination of planning applications made to the Council has survived as a committee activity although a much larger number of decisions are now delegated to officers Despite the increased politicisation within local government, the regulatory activities of the planning committee are regarded as being quasi - judicial and are not " whipped." In my experience where local opposition to applications is severe, political influences can play a part in decisions on applications.

The planning committee system is criticised, particularly by business interests, as being unpredictable and slow. Councillors are criticised as being ill informed and requiring more training. Planning policy is no longer largely determined by committee but by the cabinet taking decisions on recommendations made by the senior management team. The Core Strategies being produced under the new Local Development Framework system are more over – arching than the local plans, previously published, which were more concerned with land use allocation, and are seen as being a key part of the community leadership role of local government. However these documents may be officer – led, thus reducing their local legitimacy.

Moves towards more locally focussed decision - making were apparent under the previous government with its advocacy of local area decision-making,but are likely to become more pronounced given the declared

policies of the new Coalition Government. Concerns about a conflict between " localism " and a growth agenda requiring increased delivery of housing and employment land and infrastructure are now regularly expressed by business and development lobbies in the national and professional press. Lastly the growth of "managerialism" in local government has meant that not only have more and more planning applications been determined by officers acting under delegated powers but the role of the senior management team in the preparation of the various documents: The Community Strategy, The Core Spatial Strategy and Local Economic Partnership Strategies has become very pronounced, raising concerns about political legitimacy.

Lepine and Sullivan (2010) assert that if councillors are to contribute to the good governance of communities, then the restoration of the political function to councillors is needed, and this will have implications for the role of councillors in both preparing spatial plans and making decisions on planning applications. The shift from local government to local governance has conflicting implications for the role of councillors, particularly their role in the spatial planning system. One implication is that it reinforces the role of councillors as community leaders, and their responsibility to represent the interests of constituents within the broader networks of governance.

However governance and the associated inter-dependence with other organisations working through local partnerships can lead to a de-politicisation of local government as representatives from other public organisations can be intolerant of party politicking in these partnerships. This de-politicisation may be encouraged by officers who may take the lead in these partnerships. The planning system has a critical role to play in mediating between different interests, often between groups opposed to, and groups supporting, new development proposals. Because of their political legitimacy, having been elected to their role, councillors may have an important contribution to make in this task of mediation.

The administrative reform sought in local government by national government usually referred to as known as " Modernising "

Alongside these legislative changes, the New Labour government introduced what it termed a "modernising"agenda (2001) for spatial planning. The Green Paper "Planning: delivering a fundamental change"(2001) comprised a critique of the whole spatial planning system. Central to these administrative changes is the autonomy of local government. Hall (1993) has explored these debates and suggested a basic duality in the development of local government autonomy that is expressed in a twofold typology that is typified by autonomy from local political, economic and social pressures alongside autonomy from central government.

The move towards a more collaborative approach to place- making

Healey (2007) demonstrated in her examination of the Cambridge Sub – region how, although there is no formal organisation to represent it, it has evolved a substantial local capacity to manage development processes in a situation where there are always conflicting values and claims about development options and trajectories. This capacity uses formal government arenas, but activates these through the informal networks that connect different groups to politicians and officials, and link local actors to national politicians and civil servants Gallent (2008) demonstrates that legislative changes to the administration of local government and planning introduced since 1997 by the New Labour Government have led to a continuing tension between strategic decision making on the one hand, and participative approaches that aim to build consensus, reduce conflict and empower communities. I have been working on a historical review of the politics of planning (Moor 2010). This

together with my literature search has provided a background to the research and helped identify three research questions.

Three Research Questions

- *Has the lack of local government autonomy inhibited the adoption of innovative forms of collaborative planning?*

I explore why the strategic/local tension between central government and local government persists and how this reflects on local politicians, and why this continues. Planning policy is still very strongly grounded in the national government and its priorities. Local discretion is limited and this has probably always been the case since the inception of the 1947 Act.

- *Have councillors understood the central tenets of collaborative planning and acted upon them?*

I record the evolution of spatial planning from a regulatory function controlling land use to the concept of mediating space and place making, and ask to what extent local politicians understand this change and empathise with it.

- *Can local politicians who are not members of the council's executive play a more effective community leadership role by becoming more involved in the scrutiny of policies for space and place- making?*

I consider the nature of the political constituency for local politicians. To what extent are they embedded in a party political hierarchy that may prove inimical to community leadership.

The dependent variable is the influence of political affiliation on decision making in the governance of spatial planning, and the independent variables are membership of a political party, the length of service of the councillor, the role of the councillor in local government and the

relationship between the councillor and the ward that he or she represents. Everything else that makes up the social, economic and political context and backdrop of the dependent and independent variables fits into a third category, known as intervening variables.

Research Strategy

Blaikie (2000) discusses four research strategies each linked with different philosophical and theoretical traditions. Based on my literature review I propose to use an abductive research strategy which is to examine within a growth area the approaches that local planning authorities devise in their response to growth pressures and to what extent these approaches reflect the roles and views of councillors. The starting point is the political world of the councillors, their construction of reality, their way of conceptualising and giving meaning to their social world. This can only be discovered from the accounts that they provide. Individual motives and activities have to be abstracted into typical motives for typical actions in typical situations and these typifications provide an understanding of the activities and provide a basis for a more systematic explanatory account. The final stage is to bring together these strands and analyses the role of councillors in the planning decision making process and the ideological, other ideas and values that influence them. The use of a case study requires explanation and justification. Comparative studies often do not include enough cases to allow the research question to be generically formulated. Sampling is introduced when a researcher selects a number of cases for study, rather than including the whole universe of possible cases in a study. Quantitative research often deals very explicitly with sampling, but in qualitative research this is less common. Earlier I identified three research questions concerning spatial planning and councillors. To investigate and pursue these questions I need to identify a situation or case, where councillors are confronted with these issues, which can be observed and which is progressing towards resolution of these issues, and where analysis of this process can be carried out. I earlier drew attention to the tension between networked forms of governance and the continuing importance

of hierarchical relations in the governance of planning, which is the central theme of my research.

By reference to a case study of the Central Oxfordshire Sub – region which is proving to be one of the fastest growing localities in the country, where the case for and against further growth is now strongly contested, I conducted a series of structured interviews with councillors, officers and other stake holders so as to identify the role of councillors, and their interpretation of their role in decision making and to assess the extent to which ideological, other ideas and values influence their decision making.

Resources, timing and familiarity with the area have led me to choose the Central Oxfordshire Sub- region as a case study, and I will elaborate on this further in this chapter and more substantially in my research method chapter. At this stage, I would refer to Skocpol (1984) who justified such an approach in the following way: "In contrast to the probabilistic techniques of statistical analysis – techniques that are used when there are very large numbers of cases and continuously quantified variables to analyse – comparative historical analyses proceed through logical juxtapositions of aspects of small numbers of cases. They attempt to identify invariant causal configurations that necessarily (rather than probably) combine to account for outcomes of interest." This has been my approach to this research.

The subject is of interest because of the changing styles of governance within local government and the role that councillors will have in these new forms. The requirement of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 that local planning authorities prepare a Core Strategy (CS) for their area, and that the CS must have regard to the Regional Spatial Strategy prepared for that area, and that the CS should comprise a spatial vision and strategic objectives for the area, a spatial strategy, core policies, and a monitoring and implementation framework with clear objectives for achieving delivery (para. 2.9) poses enormous challenges for both councillors and officers within local government. My research by means of a case study seeks to examine the manner in which the CS is

prepared and advanced, the extent to which councillors are involved in the process, the relationships with officers and the local community, and the political tensions that are generated by the mediation required to adopt a CS, prior to its examination by an independent Inspector. I explore the three research questions that I have identified, and I examine decision-making in depth in the Central Oxfordshire Sub- region.

A clearer understanding of the role of ideological and other ideas and values that influence spatial planning will help all those involved to understand better the evolution of policy and practice and the changing direction that is now taking place This examination provides an opportunity to consider the role of representative democracy in spatial planning, which has evolved through a state – centred model focussed on welfare delivery and support for a mixed economy to what some academics see as a new mode of governance, which recognises the multiplicity of ways which link citizens, business and state, and that representative democracy is recognised as absolutely necessary but not sufficient in itself to respond to the complexity of the issues facing contemporary political communities (Healey 2011). Inevitably in a subject of a political nature there are ethical issues involved. Full consideration is given to the six key principles of ethical research that the ESRC expects to be addressed, and in devising the questionnaire and the interviews to be conducted, the confidentiality and anonymity of respondents is respected.

Research Questions and conceptual framework

The planning system has a critical role to play in mediating between different interests. The over – arching research question is how and to what extent do local elected members exercise political leadership where spatial strategies are contested. The secondary questions or independent variables are:

In formulating this role are councillors influenced by any of the following factors: a) their membership (or not) of a political party and its manifesto and objectives.

b) their length of time as a member of the Council and their responsibilities within the Council.

c) their involvement in the issues and events associated with : i) their electoral ward and ii) the wider community.

An associated issue is their relationship with officers and to what extent councillors depend on officers` advice.

The Central Oxfordshire Growth Sub – region

This area was first identified in the draft South East Regional Spatial Strategy published in 2004 and stretches from Bicester in the north with Oxford City at its centre to Wallingford and Didcot in the south and west (Plan 1). Hitherto for more than forty years Oxford ringed by a Green Belt and its hinterland had been categorised as a area of restraint in a succession of regional plans. I have experience of the sub – region both professionally as a consultant town planner based in the area and as a local politician 1997 – 2007. In Central Oxfordshire there are pressures for additional housing and employment development around Oxford that have been supported by an independent panel (2007). The riparian councils, which were then governed either by the Conservatives or the Liberal Democrats, opposed expansion of the city, which is Labour controlled. The city is surrounded by a Green Belt, the majority of which is located in the riparian council areas. For thirty years the urban containment of Oxford has been an approved objective of national, regional and local planning, and the recommendations of the panel represented a significant shift in planning policy that was opposed by many councillors in the area.

Key findings, claims and conclusions

I would summarise these as follows:

a) De-politicisation in local government
Although councillors welcomed greater collaboration with stakeholders,

there was nonetheless, particularly amongst junior councillors, a desire to ensure that their political role was not minimised. The need to prepare and adopt a Core Strategy for a district council had, on the one hand, encouraged the collaborative approach, but on the other had politicised policy and plan making to a significantly new degree. My main finding is that the Core Strategy is a clear expression of the aims of the Council and its ruling group.

b) <u>Core Strategies as expressions of political aspirations for the district</u>
The Leader of South Oxfordshire District Council, who was also a member of the Local Enterprise Partnership and the County Spatial Planning and Infrastructure Planning Liaison Group (SPIP) had a clear idea of the Core Strategy as a document setting out the political vision for the future development of the district. This, together with collaboration with other councils and agencies, involved senior officers and members, and it was difficult to engage backbenchers in policy formulation. There was likely to be an increased emphasis on economic development, and within the council senior management was trying to re-focus professional planners to become more aware of the overall activities of the council, and not just development control.

c) <u>Do councillors welcome the opportunities afforded by the Localism Act to determine their own requirements for housing and employment within the district?</u>
From the questionnaire results we have seen the support for this approach, and a number of interviews (Appendix 1) revealed support and evidenced concern that Sub-regional targets had been too prominent in the production of the Core Strategy. Evidently localism in Oxford had proved uncomfortable for the political leadership of the Council: "They are over-influenced by local people". The new approach was welcomed by a local developer who thought the "area committees were very parochial and inexperienced, and lost a lot of appeals".

d) <u>In addition to membership of the planning committee, are there opportunities for councillors to become involved in "place- making" ?</u>
Senior councillors had more confidence in the opportunities to be

involved in place making, but overall nearly all councillors were positive about these opportunities. Junior councillors were slightly more emphatic that councillors should still be those who should make the major planning decisions, but were also more positive about playing a collaborative role in bringing stakeholders together. For the Leaders it could hopefully empower councillors who otherwise might either not become engaged in policy formulation, or alternatively challenge it.

e) <u>Councillors are the people who should make the major decisions, and collaboration with stakeholders</u>

Councillors are supportive of a more collaborative role, but the junior councillors particularly are also concerned to ensure that their traditional role as decision makers in planning is not diminished. Senior members, through their involvement in external organisations and consortia, already play a collaborative, role and it is in this way that these agencies exert their influence on the councils.

f) <u>Community Leadership</u>

The most pronounced difference in attitudes between senior and junior councillors was evident in their responses to this issue. Junior councillors indicated both their willingness to go against their party's policies and their wish for a more flexible approach to Local Plan policies. This follows a familiar pattern noted by Gyford (1984)) who cites Newton (1974) who found that the delegate role appealed particularly to the member for a marginal ward, whilst trustees were more likely to come from safe wards.

g) <u>The value of the preparation of Core Strategies within the planning system</u>

There were significant differences between junior and senior councillors in their perception of the helpfulness or otherwise of the Core Strategy system and the opportunity to contribute. For a number of ward councillors the process had been particularly difficult. Chairmanship of the Council meetings had also been difficult. For both Oxford City Council and the South Oxfordshire District Council, the preparation and adoption of their Core Strategy had pre-occupied them for more than five years.

Such a protracted process invites all sorts of dangers, particularly that of being overtaken by events.

h)   <u>Institutional mechanisms for local authority and public agency collaboration</u>

The Leader of the South Oxfordshire District Council referred to a number of cross-boundary issues affecting the District and, given the geographical context of the District, this is hardly surprising. For the South Oxfordshire Sub-region there are now institutional mechanisms in place. For their effectiveness these rely heavily on collaboration between the political leaders and, other than Oxford City, these all now come from the same political party.

The Organisation of the Thesis

Following this introduction the chapters are organised as follows:

<u>Chapter 2 The Literature Review</u>

Reviews the literature on the role of the councillor in local government and the three dimensions that influence this role. This is to be explored through an examination of the spatial planning system.

<u>Chapter 3 Research Methodology and Design</u>

Details the design of the study, the qualitative methods used, the analytical approach, the measures taken to ensure rigour and the ethical issues faced.

<u>Chapter 4 The emergence of a growth agenda in the Central Oxfordshire Sub-region</u>

Provides a profile of the study area using census and demographic information as well as social, historical and cultural information, together with a review of the local party political structure.

Chapter 5 The evolution of the South Oxfordshire Core Strategy and the associated political and governance issues

Describes the evolution of the strategy through a series of iterations including initial officer involvement, public consultation, responses of stakeholders and progression through scrutiny committee, cabinet and full council and the political and governance issues associated with this. The interviews and questionnaire analysis of councillors are summarised and some reflections on this material are presented.

Chapter 6 Reflections on the three research questions

Draws out and synthesises the key themes emerging from the case study and sets out what the case study of the Central Oxfordshire Sub – region tells us about the key research questions set out in the literature review.

Chapter 7 Conclusions

Discusses the key conclusions, develops some practical and policy recommendations from this study, looks at the limitations of this study, its contribution to knowledge and the body of academic literature and future areas for research.

Chapter 2 The Literature Review

Introduction

Three dimensions were identified in Chapter 1 that influenced the role of local councillors in local government, and these are to be explored through an examination of the spatial planning system. There has been considerable debate about this research subject and five broad themes were identified that help to illuminate the overarching subject of the role of the councillor in local government. These are: *a) the changing relationship between government and governance in local government, b) the role of political parties in local government, c) the differing roles of councillors in local government, d) the administrative reform sought in local government by national government, usually referred to as " modernising " and e) the move towards a more collaborative approach to place- making.*

The purpose of this literature review is to explore the significant amount of academic literature and research that exists so as to present a contemporary assessment of the understanding of the role of the councillor in spatial planning, and to what extent the existing research and literature fully explains the range of forces, that can pull in different directions, and which influence the councillor's role in the specific field of spatial planning. Furthermore to what extent academic literature has examined the role of the political party in local government and its influence on the role of the councillor. At the outset some reflections are required on the relationship between government and governance in local government.

a) The changing relationship between government and governance in local government

Changing views towards local government

As Walker (2008) has pointed out, local government in England traditionally undertakes activities on behalf of central government; it does not possess power over its own affairs and this situation contrasts with the majority of European systems where local government has power under the doctrine of general competence and is less subject to interference from the centre, provided that they are able to undertake their functions. In England local government is an agent of central government and its roles and responsibilities change over time reflecting political changes and the political objectives of the central government. Chandler (2010) submits that current justifications for local government in the country are expediential in that they consider the value of local government largely in the context of how the institution can contribute to the better governance of the nation as a whole, rather than providing a rationale for the presence of local government per se.

There has been a wide- ranging academic debate about the factors that have contributed to this particular framework for local government in England. Finch (2007) suggests that during its years in power New Labour remained undecided on the future shape of local government reform in England. Decentralised government had been realised in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland but in England, other than London, progress on devolution had been very limited. The emphatic "no vote" in the 2004 North East elected assembly referendum ended any realistic early prospect of elected regional government in England, and Finch identifies a number of barriers to devolution. The first has been the centrist tendencies of governing parties and those of the civil service, as well as concerns about the capacity of local government. The second relates to political ideologies. Within New Labour there has been the view that the pursuit of equality requires a strong centre and equality cannot be delivered by local government, whilst Goss (2001) suggests that

during the 1980s local government was perceived by the Conservatives as being nothing more than an "executive" or administrative arm of central government. The third issue is the amount of disconnection with the public. Despite wanting a greater voice in how services and local councils are run, the public appear switched off by the local government debate. Fourthly, the opposition of the Treasury, which is concerned that local revenue – raising powers would compromise the overall fiscal picture.

This paradox has been resolved, Skelcher asserts (2004), through the empirical and normative stance that there has been (and should be) a move from local government to local governance. Local government is conceptualised in terms of a politico – bureaucratic apparatus that dominates the public policy space and service delivery experience of citizens. Local governance in contrast, expresses the notion that councils should "steer" rather than " row ". Finch (2007) describes how under New Labour power has been transferred to local institutions such as schools, hospital trusts, housing bodies and community regeneration partnerships, outside the traditional channels of local government, but has not delivered a radical shift of power from the centre to localities, especially for key functions such as economic development, transport and skill training.

Therefore a key concern in the study of local politics has become governance, which Stoker (2000) suggests can be broadly defined as a concern with governing, achieving collective action in the realm of public affairs, in conditions where it is not possible to rest on recourse to the authority of the state. Governance involves working across boundaries within the public sector or between the public sector and private or voluntary sectors.

The system of local governance that has emerged in the last decades is very important as part of the context within which the role of councillors needs to be understood, and therefore in this chapter the debates concerning local governance are reviewed so as to understand better the

role of elected councillors in local government. Local governance as a process through which a range of organisations are involved in the running of local areas has attracted considerable attention in recent years as part of an overall discussion of governance in a context where the capacity of state government to plan, fund and manage social, economic and environmental change has diminished, and the role and function of local government to plan locally and deliver local services has been eroded (Sweeting 2005). Stoker (1998) has argued that the use of the term governance signifies a change in the meaning of government, referring to a new process of governing; or a changed condition of ordered rule.

With this interest in governance has come in tandem a concern for public scrutiny. The Centre for Public Scrutiny asserts (2013) that this is an essential part of ensuring that government remains effective and accountable. Public scrutiny can be defined as the activity by one elected or appointed organisation examining and monitoring all or part of the activity of a public sector body with the aim of improving the quality of public services. Scrutiny ensures that executives are held accountable for their decisions, that their decision – making process is clear and accessible to the public and that there are opportunities for the public and their representatives to influence and improve public policy.

The shift from local government to local governance

This shift has specific implications for the role of local councillors. One implication is that it reinforces the role of councillors as community leaders, discussed later, and their responsibility to represent the interests of constituents within the broader networks of governance. There is also a view (Goss 2005) that governance and the associated institutionalisation of partnership working through Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) leads to de-politicisation of local government in that representatives from other public organisations or the voluntary or business sectors are intolerant of party politicking in partnerships. This

point overlaps with the growing phenomenon of managerialism that is also discussed later. Murdoch & Abram (2002) provide a wide ranging discussion of governance and its implications for spatial planning. They characterise the debate that follows from the participation of various interests in planning processes as a contest between discourses of "development" and "environment". In the context of planning for housing, there is a wide range of interests, programmes, policies and proposals that seek to assert a developmental agenda, whilst on the other hand there are a number of actors and interests that push an environmentalist or protectionist agenda.

In making an assessment, planning is not neutral: it has its own goals, policies and modes of operation. The authors examine how the two discourses have been framed by government. During the 1980s the system was streamlined by the Thatcher Conservative governments in the hope that it could become more responsive to the market, thereby emphasising the system's inherent "developmentalism". However in response to a groundswell of opposition that emerged against this more market-led approach, a gradual strengthening of planning took place, so that by the end of the 1990s environmental protection was once again a key concern. At the present time, the balance between developmental and environmental considerations is to be achieved through the pursuit of "sustainable" development.

Some theoretical guidelines

This concept of governance has emerged in political science in order to account for a move away from the top-down, bureaucratic styles of policy making associated with "government". Recent studies of the policy process have recognised that, in the formulation and implementation of policy, the state's various agencies may be loosely co-ordinated so that policy emerges from a variety of governmental sites. Analysts of the policy process have thus begun to adopt a multi-agency perspective in order to uncover how the various policy actors both co-ordinate their actions and compete with one another. This has led to an interest in both

"policy networks" – that is, the coalitions between actors (Rhodes, 1997) – and "multi-level governance" – that is, the way policy ties together the different tiers of the state (Marks, 1996). In short, the "governance" perspective sees political action emerging from a host of governmental and non-governmental agencies (Goodwin, 1998; Stoker, 1998).

According to Goodwin (1998) "governance" now refers to the complex set of institutions and actors that are drawn from within, but also beyond, government in the process of policy formulation and implementation. The term thus suggests a blurring of boundaries and responsibilities between state and non-state actors, and a recognition that the capacity to get things done does not rest solely on the power of government authority (see also Stoker, 2000). Thus, old-style government - that is top-down, hierarchical decision-making in the context of the policy process – is thought to be much less effective in carrying through state programmes and policies, and it gives way to a form of policy making that works through networks and partnerships.

The governance literature stems from a number of (not always commensurate) theoretical positions (see Vigor et. al. 2000 for an alternative review to that provided below). Smith (2000) mentions two as being of particular interest: policy network analysis and the advocacy coalition framework. As Smith shows, both of these theoretical perspectives emphasise the importance of inter-organisational relationships within policy sectors.

Policy network analysis

This assumes that "policy making" is sectoralized and takes place within networks of public and private actors (Smith, 2000, p 76). This approach places these networks on a continuum, one that extends from tightly-knit "policy communities" - which contain a limited number of well-resourced members enjoying a common appreciative system and exhibiting regular interaction and exchange between members (Smith, 2000, p 97) – to loosely aligned "issue networks" - where "membership encompasses a

wide range of interests even though members may have limited resources" (Ibid). The differing network types impact upon policy in different ways and ensure that quite different policy formulation and implementation processes exist within any given political formulation (John, 1998).

Advocacy Coalition

This approach also examines the structure of governance systems, but points to shared beliefs and policy- orientated learning processes as the salient features of political coalitions. Smith (2000, p98) summarises the position where policy making occurs in a policy sub-system inhabited by several multi-actor advocacy coalitions which compete to influence policy in line with the policy beliefs which bind each coalition together, and which is a relatively open and competitive process between belief systems. Theories of "governance" hold that the state has shifted from being both the formulator and deliverer of policy; it is now an "orchestrator" (or "conductor") of networks. While state agencies may arbitrate over policy, they can only act in relations with others.

Governmentality

Foucault (1991) used the term to refer to the collective ways of thinking that underpin particular governmental strategies and the means by which such strategies are implemented. Foucault believed that the state can only govern in and through networks and coalitions.

Miller and Rose (1990, p 6) argue that the governmentality approach allows government to be analysed as the composite of differing practices and discourses. Firstly political rationalities are the field of statements, claims and prescriptions that set out the objects and objectives of government. These are accompanied by the production of discursive matrices that define a common vocabulary and thus specify the appropriate bases for the organisation and mobilisation of social and political actors. What distinguishes governmentality from the policy

network and advocacy coalition frameworks is the emphasis it places on a second aspect of political network building- the mechanisms or technologies which permit discourses to be stabilised in particular sets of political relations (Dean, 1999; Rose, 1999). In sum, governmentality describes the means by which government both "represents" and "intervenes" in the world (Hacking, 1981).

Murdoch and Abram are drawn to this approach because it seems that key modes of governmentality are instrumental in linking together the various tiers of the planning hierarchy. Policy can be characterised as subject to a constant struggle between, on the one hand, the construction of tightly regulated networks that permit central agencies to determine the actions of all network members, and, on the other, loosely connected agencies that reshape policy in line with their own locally constructed preferences. And in planning this struggle emerges not just around the powers to be attributed to the various governmental tiers, but also around the amount of spatial sensitivity to be permitted in the system.

If there is now a baseline agreement that governance refers to the development of governing styles in which boundaries between and within public and private sectors have become blurred and that the value of the governance perspective rests in its capacity to provide a framework for understanding changing processes of governing, then this trajectory contrasts strongly with the system of local government that emerged after the end of the Second World War and within which the town and country planning system introduced by the Labour Government in 1947 has been so firmly embedded. Therefore it is appropriate to review these developments so as to gain a perspective on the degree of change now envisaged.

Central – Local relations and Changes to local government in the last decades

In England from the end of the Second World War to the 1970`s education and housing dominated local authority budgets but in addition local authorities had responsibilities for refuse collection, environmental

health , county and local planning, transport, personal social services, and leisure as well as fire and police services. These services were administered by committees, and the committee system was the dominant organising principle for local government from the mid – nineteenth century until the reforms of New Labour from 2000 onwards. It ensured that all members were formally involved in decision- making through their membership of committees. From at least the 1930`s until the mid 1970`s this decentralised form of political management Snape (2004) suggests was shaped by the forces of functionalism, professionalism of officers and departmentalism. In this way committee structures usually reflected the major services delivered by authorities and the dominance of key professionals in shaping the boundaries of their functions and departments. In town and country planning well resourced and powerful, professional, planning departments emerged that survived relatively unscathed until 2000, and which have had a major impact on the growth and shape of development across England. Murie (2004), Bulpitt (1983) and Rhodes (1988) suggest that in the 1960`s a " dual policy " emerged whereby central government concentrated on managing the economy and foreign affairs and set broad parameters for local administration leaving the detail to be worked out and delivered by local authorities. However the publication of the Maud Report in 1969 and the Bains Report in 1972, and the catalyst of reorganisation in 1974, produced a trend towards streamlining committees at the same time as strengthening the corporate centre through the creation of policy and resource committees.

The Layfield Report on Local Government Finance published in 1976 argued that a choice had to be made between a system of local government finance based on local responsibility, and hence local accountability, for local government expenditure, and one based on central responsibility. If the choice were for local accountability, then it was necessary for local authorities to be responsible to their electorate for local taxation to fund the greater part of local government expenditure. The report suggested that to sustain local democracy there was a need to enlarge the share of local taxation in total local revenue and make

councillors more directly accountable to local electorates for their expenditure and taxation decisions, and this could be achieved by a local income tax. Jones & Stewart (2002) suggest that despite the relentless flow of consultation papers, the nature of the Central – Local relations has still not been tackled and the main recommendations of the Layfield Report and its analysis have been ignored by all governments.

Although there has been criticism that the changes to local governance expressed as a series of epochs risks oversimplification, there is a general agreement in the relevant literature that the 1970's was characterised by a hierarchical mode of governance based on large monopolistic public agencies, local authorities and government departments. As we have seen a number of reports appeared at this time that stressed the need for improved managerial efficiency and effectiveness within larger authorities. These proposals were part of a wider programme of state - backed social and economic modernisation, shared by governments of both parties.

Towards the end of the decade recession and the slowdown of economic growth weakened the post-war consensus and opened the way for new political and economic ideas to emerge. The 1980's were characterised by the internal reorganisation of the public sector along quasi - market lines in tune with the Thatcherite political agenda and the emergence of new rules for private business as a supplier of public services. The emphasis in local government shifted away from the provision of services towards a new role of service enablers. This function involved encouraging outside organisations normally from the private and voluntary sectors to become involved in service delivery, with a consequent reduction in local authority operations. Changes such as thus shifted the emphasis away from day- to- day involvement in the delivery of services towards a role in overseeing service provision. Town and Country planning was still represented in local government by large professionally led departments, responsible to a regulatory committee, but reflecting these changes, there was increased use of consultants.

The 1990's and continuing through to the present day are characterised by modes of governance that link public, private, community and voluntary sectors, which Tony Blair when leader of New Labour, using a phrase originally employed by Anthony Giddons (1998), called a "third way". From 1997 until its electoral defeat in 2010, the New Labour administration in England had been enthusiastically committed to what Blair called "joined up government.

In conclusion, over this period since the 1970`s there was a movement towards centralisation marked by the growth of control over local government expenditure, the intensification of intervention in the internal working of local authorities and the removal of functions from local authorities to bodies responsible to central government.

What were the objectives behind these changes and what were the outcomes? Leat, Seltzer & Stoker (1999) concluded that the 1990's did see a real improvement in the quality of management, important advances in the measurement of costs and outputs and some efficiency savings, but that these gains were bought at a high price. The authors point out that the first job of government is not to administer transactions but to solve problems. The problems that people care about are not defined or shaped in the same way in which departments and agencies are. Real problems fall between the gaps and people get shunted between agencies that are trying to manage budgets rather than tackle problems. The authors conclude that the reforms of this Thatcherite era exacerbated the scale of poor co-ordination and the dumping of costs and problems.

Other researchers have pointed to the need for changes to be monitored over a longer period of time. Pollitt and Bouckaert (2004) point out that the full benefits of major changes in the processes and structures of public agencies normally cannot be obtained until several years after a reform programme has been launched. They point to the discrepancy between the politician's need for "something to show now"and the organisation reformer's need for time, commitment and continuity. This

interest in participatory governance recognises that community can make valuable contributions to governance, but attempts to strengthen community participation encounter obstacles theorised as failures or incompleteness of participatory governance. The research suggests a need to rethink participatory governance, not as a single process with multiple participants, but as the juxtaposition of different ways of governing.

The governance literature stems from a number of not always commensurate theoretical positions. We have considered two as being of particular interest: policy network analysis and the advocacy coalition framework. As Smith has (2000) shown, both these theoretical perspectives emphasise the importance of inter - organisational relationships within policy sectors. In assessing the significance of the governance approach for planning theory, Vigor et. al. (2000) propose that it has led to the development of an "institutionalist" perspective where stakeholders come together to discuss the meaning and shape of policy, and that planning strategies can be developed which reflect their aspirations. Vigor et al (2000) explicitly link this "institutionalist" perspective to a more territorially - sensitive form of planning. The objective is to enable disparate actors in dispersed governance contexts to come together to build consensus around difficult local and development issues. However Vigor suggests the current structure of the planning system, until legislative changes are approved, works against such a shift, because of the continuing power of vertical relations. A significant influence on these are the political parties in local government.

b) The role of political parties in local government

Until the 1970`s much of local politics was non - partisan in the sense that many councillors did not represent political parties (Bochel 2000), and in addition there were substantial numbers of uncontested divisions. However reorganisation in 1974 prompted a step change in the party politicisation of local government (Holliday 2000). Gyford (1989) summarises the long-term process of what is known as the party

politicisation of local government, identifying five distinct changes, and the fifth "reappraisal" from 1974 onwards. Jones (1983) identified four "broad types" of local political systems:"non- party", "partially party", "emergent party" and "wholly party" systems. He highlights the importance of the political party to the process of bonding councillors together and for focusing their loyalty in a specific direction – that of the group itself. In addition, the financial squeeze imposed on local councils by national governments from the mid 1970s onwards meant that hard choices had to be made about service cuts, rather than service growth which had hitherto been the post - war norm.

One of the few recommendations from the 1986 Widdicombe Report on local government councillors that the Thatcher government chose to legislate on was for the formation of political groups and their proportionate representation on committees in local government. The relationship between national and local political parties also has a bearing on the role of councillors. National parties may wish to influence-or, in extremis, control – the activities of a local council party group (Hall & Leach 2000) for two primary reasons: policy and procedure. In relation to the former, the national party will be concerned about party groups that are clearly flouting national party priorities, through omission as wall as commission. In understanding intra- party relationships it is helpful to bear in mind the distinction between three concepts of democracy (and accountability) .At the local level there is the familiar tension between representative democracy, which underpins the legitimacy of the party group on council, and delegate democracy that underpins the legitimacy of the local party to mandate the party group. Both these concepts have been challenged by a growing interest in and commitment to participatory democracy, which is manifest in a concern to develop a wide range of ways of involving local stakeholders, through greater use of public – private sector partnerships, decentralised decision – making committees and similar devices.

Contributions made by Gyford (1989), Bulpitt (1967) and Jones (1983) throw light on the development of the party group as generating a loyalty-

demanding pull on the councillor's representative activities. Jones noted that the party group filled the vacuum left by the absence of a political executive in British local government and came to be seen as "the place where council decisions were taken". With political executives now a reality in local government, the party group fills the vacuum between that executive and the rest of the majority party, and remains the place where council decisions are made. When it comes to acting as a representative, the councillor is confronted by at least three separate and distinct demands on his or her focus and loyalty: the party group, the wider party and the citizens of the electoral area.

Whilst political parties do rest on networks of influence and communication, they are also the setting within which a number of what may be termed kindreds exist and operate; these consist of groups or closely associated party people drawn together by some shared political agenda or beliefs. They serve to disrupt the working of local political parties.

Each political party displays a distinctive approach to local government. As at Westminster the party manifesto provides a legitimisation for subsequent action and the expectation in public arenas of group loyalty to party policy. However it is only in the Labour Party`s constitution (Leach 2004) that the right of the local party (as opposed to the party groups on council) to draw up the manifesto has been established. There is no parallel right in the Conservative Party constitution, nor in that of the Liberal Democrats, who however are much more likely to consult widely with local party members in drawing up a manifesto. Holliday (2004) has examined the record of the Conservative Party in local government 1979 – 1997 and identified three doctrines that have characterised their approach. These are "apoliticism" in that politics should not be allowed to intrude in local matters and that councils should focus on prudent administration rather than on political conflict. This tradition is most observed in suburban and rural areas where memories of social leadership by a local elite have not been entirely forgotten. "Mainstream Conservatism "espouses the party loyalty which is such an important part

of the parliamentary party. " Radicalism"is explicitly political in that it holds political change to be essential to the realisation of vision, but is not Mainstream Conservatism because it is not incremental, consensual or reliably loyal. Holliday comments that by the mid 1990`s many Conservative councillors were only too ready to pin responsibility for the collapse of party representation at local level on a party hierarchy which was not interested in local government even, in some cases, when it had direct experience of it.

Local elections determine who controls local authorities and this remains important despite the erosion of the powers of local government over the past two decades or so. Political control of councils can affect how well services are delivered and the policies pursued at local level. Local elections are central to the health of local democracy and are the mechanism by which the electorate can hold local representatives accountable and provide a channel for political participation in local affairs on the part of ordinary voters. They also often reflect wider trends in politics such as the pattern of contestation and competition and the comparative performance of the political parties. Rallings,Thrasher and Denver (2005) have examined trends in local elections in Britain and concluded that in urban areas party politics had evolved long before reorganisation in 1974 but elsewhere , particularly in the English shires, Scotland and Wales, changes to the local government structure appeared to offer opportunities for national parties to extend their influence at the local level, which has increased competition and challenge and promoted electoral choice.

Vecchio (2000) draws attention to the characteristics of political leaders who are elected, not selected, and their authority is as a representative who governs with consent. Their authority is also frequently under threat, whether from within their own party (if elected on that basis), from opposition members, from the electorate, or from other agencies (eg: the media). Challenges from one or more of these bodies can mean that political leaders lose their authority overnight; consequently they are continuously engaged in having to win and maintain support through

mobilising coalitions. This is a far cry from leaders in the private sector who are appointed, rather than elected, often with a clear command structure. Moore (1995) points out that leadership by local politicians involves both a service role, and a regulatory role that further complicates leadership roles.

From 1979 to 1997 the Conservative Government, determined to ensure that local politicians were kept within a tightly controlled financial framework, reformed the funding system to provide central government with a considerable, which Coulson (2004) maintains is unprecedented, level of control over spending. Local authorities were required to work in partnership with other public and private agencies in carrying out their functions. The Labour Government 1997 - 2010 took more interest in the performance of local councils in the delivery of their core services than any previous government (Coulson 2004), and the Audit Commission was required to grade councils on their performance, which provided powerful incentives for councils to improve the performance of any poor or weak services, which in many councils included the planning service. The Labour Government introduced the cabinet or executive system to local government which meant that other councillors would serve on Overview and Scrutiny Committees (intended both to hold the executives to account and to review and develop policy), Regulatory Committees (taking quasi-judicial decisions with regard to planning proposals, licence applications, or environmental health) or Area Committees which would be given delegated powers to take decisions appertaining to specific local areas. We will review these roles subsequently but the Labour Government, despite its apparent support for local government councillors, also invested heavily in quangos and government agencies. Sullivan and Skelcher (2002) estimate that there were at least 5,500 quangos in 2001, with more board members in total than there are elected councillors, and pointed out that this raised profound issues about how they were accountable, and how open to the public and to scrutiny.

Leach (2010) examined the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) process introduced in the wake of the Local Government Act 2000,

which was in essence a managerial tool applied to a political environment. This analysis reveals a degree of political naivety and a failure to recognise the differences between political and managerial logic. The role of the CPA process in contributing to the government-led pressures for de-politicisation of local decision-making is examined, with a particular concern about the substitution of "the good of the area" for the different priorities and visions of different parties.

Bochel (H) and Bochel (C) point out (2010) that political leadership has been a key element of central government's attempts to "modernise" local government over the past decade, within a discourse that emphasised "strong" and "visible" leadership, and the role of leaders and leadership in driving change within local authorities. The research suggests that whilst there is a broad convergence between the aspirations of government and the narratives that emerge from these leaders on some aspects of local political leadership, there are also differences, perhaps most notably over the relationship between changes to decision-making structures and the loci of political power. Research by Rallings et al (2010) suggests that the recruitment networks used by parties are relatively closed, with many candidates reporting prior experience as local party office holders or as members of charitable organisations and local public bodies.

Leach and Copus (2004) examine the introduction, via the Local Government Act 2000, of political executives held to account by influential overview and scrutiny committees, which challenges fundamentally the traditional operations of the party political group system. The researchers concluded that the success of the overview and scrutiny experiment is by no means assured, and faced with the intransigent nature of most party group behaviour, the future of effective scrutiny hangs in the balance. However the increasing number of councils where no party has an overall majority could point to an increased role for scrutiny as chairmanship of the committees cannot be reserved for a single party.

Gyford (1984) had stressed the positive aspects of political parties in local government as representing genuine divergences of view, and giving coherence to the work of local authorities. They function as a means of political recruitment and election organisation, and they represent the demands and interests of differing social groups both organised and unorganised. Twenty years later Copus (2004) concluded that although the presence of parties had long been recognised as introducing new elements to local authority decision – making, what political parties do to local representation and wider local politics is less well understood .Moreover the role of the party group – the cohesive organisation of councillors from a single party – has received scant attention by comparison with that given to the political party generally. His research, which we will discuss later, strove to show that both party and the party group play an important and discrete part in the representative processes, interposing themselves between the electors and their representatives and generating their own distinctive claims to commitment. Vital to the interplay of politics locally is the fact that party members and councillors interpret representation and democracy differently from those they are elected to represent. They also have very distinct ideas about the role of the citizen and the party in local political activity and decision -making.

Copus concluded that political parties have little or no loyalty to recognisable local communities as such. Rather they are concerned with capturing control of a council – a specific local government unit – the boundaries of which are more likely to be drawn for administrative convenience and to meet technocratic and managerial needs rather than reflect communities of place. The focus political parties have on capturing control of, or securing representation in any council chamber, results in the loosening of the bond between the councillor and the community and a strengthening of the ties between the councillor and his or her political party, for it is the party that can guarantee or withhold election to the council. This contrasts with Ostrogorski`s view that political parties should be replaced by single issue or multiple objective temporary bodies that seek to deal with a particular problem and then remove themselves from

the political arena. It introduces the notion of "event – driven democracy " recognising that local issues and events may energise the community, or sections of it, to seek an enhanced input into local political decision – making only episodically.

Copus also touches on the question of autonomy. If political parties do have any meaningful role in the process of political decision – making, it is essential that the elected representative has some considerable autonomy from the electorate within his or her constituency. In Chapter 1 a twofold typology of local government (Gurr and King 1987) was described: Type 1 Autonomy :Autonomy from local political, economic and social pressures and Type 2 Autonomy : Autonomy from central government. Hall (1993) suggests a definition of autonomy – the ability of local government to maximise its policy making powers and implementation capacities. It is important he continues to distinguish between local government autonomy and "localism". Localism, which we will be reviewing subsequently in the context of new approaches to spatial planning, represents the means by which and the extent to which local authorities choose to exercise their residual autonomy. There is therefore, Hall suggests, a clear distinction between the two concepts, and that the autonomy of local government develops along two axes of influence: local and national factors but these are inter– related. As Gurr and King argue (1987) "The two dimensions of local state autonomy are, thus, closely related and it falls to the local state to formulate an effective set of public policies within the constraints each imposes." This provides a useful model by which to evaluate the role of councillors and there is a cross reference to the earlier work of Gyford (1984) which is discussed in the next section where he found that the increasing seniority of local councillors allowed them a degree of autonomy from local ward influences.

The concluding reflections of Copus (2004) on his research, after a long career as an academic, party member and local government councillor, are that local politics and local democracy are too valuable to be left to parties alone, and that party domination locally will not change without

parties being prepared to share political space, influence and power with those outside the world of party and with those who view politics with different perspectives and interpretations. These conclusions will find a resonance with those looking for a more collaborative approach to decision taking in place making, which we discuss later.

c) The Differing Role of Councillors

There is a large academic literature on the roles of local councillors (see, for example, Helco,1969; Dearlove,1973; and Newton 1976). In exercising his role the councillor has a number of options available to him in terms of how he performs in relation not merely towards his constituents, or towards the workload of the local authority, but also towards his party (if any), the local pressure groups, the officers and the community outside his particular ward (Gyford 1984). A number of attempts have been made to investigate and to summarise the wide variety of role orientations that a councillor may assume.

Gyford (1984) attempted to draw these together and identified one general conclusion that did emerge from the various studies: that the choice of role orientation by councillors is not particularly associated with age, sex or social class, but rather with such factors as seniority and length of service on the council, the character of the councillor's ward and party political allegiance.These orientations link with each other, forming "clusters" which provide differing emphases to the varying aspects of a councillor's role. Gyford concluded that the available evidence supported the hypothesis that two internally consistent clusters of role orientations characterising junior and senior councillors could be identified, and he described these as the "tribune" and the "statesman". Like other classifications, this is not wholly watertight, and individual councillors will not always fall into place within it, but my empirical research explores whether in terms of the preparation and adoption of the Core Strategy, this is a particularly helpful classification. Gyford set out a graphical presentation of these orientations, which is reproduced at Appendix 10.

The columns show:

Column 1: Status, Senior or Junior, refers to the councillor's length of service and also to the nature of that service, e.g. as back-bencher or chairman of a committee or officer of a party group.

Column 2: Ward Type distinguishes between wards where the incumbent may anticipate re-election and those where the contest is highly competitive.

Column 3: Style refers to the manner in which the councillor relates his own views to those he represents. The trustee is one who relies on his own sense of what is correct and just, the delegate accepts a mandate from his constituents regardless of his own views, whilst the politico may either adopt a combination of the other two styles or alternate between them (Eulau et. al., 1959, pp. 749- 51).

Column 4: 'Focus' distinguishes between the two communities to which the councillor owes his loyalties, the smaller unit of the ward or the larger local community as a whole.

Column 5: Distinguishes between three ways of serving constituents – the 'welfare officer' helping out with their problems; the communicator keeping them informed about official plans and proposals; and the mentor giving a lead on the issues of the day (Wahlke et al., 1962, pp. 304-8).

Column 6: In terms of dealing with local pressure groups, the councillor may befriend them, facilitate their access to authority, and even act as their spokesman, or conversely resist them, keep them at arms length, and adjudicate between their demands on the basis of his own perceptions of the public good.

Columns 7, 8 & 9: These have to do with the distinction between checking decisions and making decisions: some councillors will act as watchdogs over the officers, taking up individual problems, over a wide

range of policy areas: others, after perhaps a period of single-service policy making, will be working with the officers on across-the-board policy issues in the role Lee (1963) calls the public person.

Columns 10 & 11: These refer to how the councillor goes about acquiring his information, some of them searching it out often from external sources, others waiting for information from the official machine (Dearlove, 1973, ch. 9; Pate and Stephenson, 1979, pp.69-70).

Finally, Columns 12 & 13 refer to the ideological zeal of the councillor and his degree of loyalty to party decisions.

A more contemporary view, but developing this earlier analysis, is that provided by Cole (2002) who examined the role of county councillors in Devon within the context of new structures of political management including executive and scrutiny committees introduced in the county in 1999.Two areas of his work are relevant here. The first concerns ward representation and the second the role of party groups. A key role for councillors is the representation of their electoral division. Newton (1976) distinguished between trustees, delegates and politicos. Trustees regarded themselves as a "relatively free and independent agent who is elected to follow his or her own conscience". In contrast delegates give "greater weight to the wishes and views of the electorate" (Newton 1976: 118). Politicos tried to balance delegate and trustee orientations. First - time councillors tended to endorse ward commitments more heavily than other councillors. Turning to party groups Cole (2002) points out that most local councillors in the country are elected under a party label and serve a local authority in which party groups have a major role in determining policy and the allocation of portfolios. The tensions between the roles of councillors as ward representatives and party politicians have been an important theme for much academic commentary. Clarke and Stewart (1998) commenting on the "Modernising Agenda " in local government of New Labour suggest that community governance required councillors to focus attention on the " communities of interest, background and concern" and to assume " an important role in

developing contacts and establishing forums with and for such communities."

Cole (2002) found public dissention from the party group position rare and often a reflection of the electoral realities of specific wards. Two councillors had been allowed by the group to oppose publicly the building of new settlements in their electoral divisions. One member admitted that the planned development was so unpopular that acquiescing to the party group position (which supported the developments) would have risked electoral defeat in both seats and jeopardised control of the authority. Such public opposition was dependant on the agreement of the whips and forbidden unless the leadership was sure that they retained majority support on the relevant issue. Opposition to the leadership's policies was normally restricted to private meetings of the group. However the Cabinet or Executive structure of local government management, as opposed to a directly elected mayor, which allocates different portfolios to councillors can pose strains within the leadership. Subsequently we shall see how a portfolio holder responsible for the growth town in a district, with different views from those councillors who represent wards within the town, is forced to resign from the cabinet. Trying to reconcile the electoral realities of specific wards becomes a major challenge for the political party in control, and involves councillors from unaffected wards who may have to decide where their allegiance lies.

Gains et al (2009) point out that the idea that leadership makes a difference is a truism in the study of urban politics, and the idea that leadership matters is well established as part of the legends of successful cities. What is less explored is how an institutional form may influence the style of leadership an organisation receives, and whether this in turn has an impact on organisational performance and on policy outcomes. Using evidence from English urban government they show in terms of organisational performance and citizen satisfaction stronger forms of leadership appear to deliver more than weaker forms. They also refer to the changes introduced in the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 that permitted council leaders to make decisions,

appoint their cabinet and choose the portfolios of their colleagues. These reforms however have not yet succeeded in transforming   political leadership from a concentration on internal structures of the council and drawing in citizens and stakeholders to the decision-making process.

Local government has provided a recruiting ground for MPs for whom valuable experience in leadership and decision-making can develop. Around 40% of MPs in the 1997 - 2001 Parliament had had relatively recent experience as local councillors. (Leach 2004). Two years after its election victory, the Labour government published in March 1999 a paper on modernising local government. There was a generally held view at that time that local government was demoralised and lacking in ambition, and this was well articulated by commentators such as Jenkins subsequently (2006). Wide ranging change was proposed to the structure of local government including directly elected mayors, and a cabinet structure to replace traditional committees.

Lee (1963) suggested that for a committed few at least, the attraction of local government lay in becoming part of an "inner ring "with chief officers enjoying their confidence in a complicated network of formal officer and member relationships. This tradition it has been argued has shaped a view of local authorities as responsible for spending local money rather than developing their own unique political and public policy solutions to local needs and issues (Copus 2004).

Following a major review of the planning system by the government (2001) which led to the publication of a Green Paper on Planning, followed by the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004, a new approach to spatial planning was introduced in the form of a local development framework (LDF). The new spatial planning system is intended to go beyond traditional land use planning so as to bring together and integrate policies for the development and use of land with other policies and programmes which influence the nature of places and how they function. Advice to local planning authorities (2004) was that they should take account of the principles and characteristics of other

relevant strategies and programmes when preparing local development documents, and in particular the Core Strategy introduced within the LDF.

However within this new governance, the role of councillors was questioned, and to speed up decision-making, the government encouraged authorities to delegate planning decisions to officers as far as practicable. This is only one example of the changes in governance taking place, but Manns and Wood (2002), who had carried out a survey of local authorities that had allowed the public to address the development control committees, described the critical role that these committees play in the British town and country planning system, by providing the opportunity for democratically elected councillors to scrutinise development proposals, balance a wide range of material factors and reach a decision. These committees provide a degree of local accountability and are the only point at which members of the public can physically witness and in some cases contribute their views in person to these decisions. Manns and Wood pointed to a tension in the planning process. On the one hand the government was keen to speed up the determination of planning applications to assist business interests and encourage investment. On the other, it wished to open up local government and make decision making more open, transparent and democratic. The authors thought these forces were pulling in opposite directions and they concluded in 2002 that indications then were that speed and efficiency may triumph over openness and accountability.

In 2002 all local authorities in England and Wales had delegated decision - making powers from full council to some form of development control committee, and most delegated further powers to officers. At that time the "Best Value" target of 70 per cent of decisions on planning applications to be dealt with under delegated powers to chief planning officers was the guide line, but some 90 percent of planning decisions was proposed for delegation in the 2001 Green Paper. The government indicated that local planning authorities that met these targets would receive a substantial amount of Planning Delivery Grant, and avoid intervention by the government. The cost of not meeting the targets was that the council was

considered to be an under -performer, and that the government had powers to intervene with measures for improvement. Consequently since 2003 some 90 per cent of planning decisions are now mainly taken by officers in many councils.

In addition there are other pressures that limit the discretion of councillors in the planning process. In recent years, a discourse has emerged amongst professional and business interests,that the spatial planning system, and particularly the local councillors who sit on the planning committees, are a brake on Britain improving its competitive position in the global economy, and that councillors take decisions in a negative and obstructive manner. The Barker (2006) Review of Planning commissioned by the Chancellor of the Exchequer was critical of the role of councillors, and advocated that training be made compulsory for councillors on planning committees. A further report (2007) from the Department of Communities and Local Government saw divergence between officers and elected members in their decisions on planning applications as a threat to the integrity of the planning system.

Alternative views, particularly from the legal and political perspectives, are also expressed. The Committee on Standards In Public Life (1997) led by Lord Nolan, whilst looking at the whole spectrum of local government, specifically offered positive support to the role of councillors in planning decision- making, whilst a recent report of the House of Commons Committee on Communities and Local Government (2008) supported the role of councillors on the basis that the technical specialist can be challenged by a non - specialist, so that there are checks and balances and that the decisions being made reflect the needs and desires of the wider community. It was well summed up by the Committee in their report. "The system rests on the basis that the technical specialist can be challenged by a non – specialist, so that there are checks and balances and that the decisions being made reflect the needs and desires of the wider community."

The Nolan Report stimulated a strong debate on the role of councillors following its publication, and in 2001 Matthew Taylor (formerly a senior adviser to Tony Blair, and then Director of the Institute For Public Policy and now Chief Executive of the Royal Society of Arts), and Paul Wheeler, Head of Member Development at the Improvement and Development Agency, published a pamphlet, echoing Bernard Cricks` " In Defence Of Politics", published forty years earlier, and entitled "In Defence of Councillors". Taylor and Wheeler asserted that successive governments have minimised the capacity of councillors to make decisions or wield power. As well as the executive reforms in the 2000 Local Government Act, the government has on the one hand tied up local authorities in a web of central regulations, targets and inspections, whilst on the other hand it has removed local authority functions and set up new bodies to drive priorities such as neighbourhood renewal, and a variety of action zones. In addition there is the emergence of the quango state in which local decisions are made by executives and non – executives appointed by central government. The critique of councillors tends to focus on two managerial attributes said to be lacking in councillors, namely impartiality and expertise. It is argued that while the decisions made by councillors would be clouded by political ambition, inflexible beliefs, and internecine conflicts, the judgement of managers is evidence based, objective and disinterested. Councillors are seen as part-time amateurs, while managers are seen as full - time professionals.

Taylor and Wheeler maintain that there are two main expressions of the rise of managerialism. These are a consumerist approach to service delivery, and the requirements of Best Value targets together with the greater use of external management consultants. There is clearly a case for managerialism, for councillors not to be taking detailed operational decisions or using irrelevant or inappropriate political criteria to determine the allocation of local resources. However, much of the business of local government is about the political reconciliation of competing interests, and hence political parties have a vital function in organising choices in elections, and in ensuring that political accountability relates to the pursuit of broad values.

Central to the role of councillors in spatial planning is the notion that planning is a "quasi - judicial " process in which councillors are akin to judges handling a court case, and must therefore avoid expressing opinions about planning generally or particular applications in case they are seen to be pre - judging an issue. Lord Nolan (1997) robustly dismissed these concerns. The process of arriving at a planning decision has similarities to a legal process but the differences between judges and councillors is that councillors are leading local political figures who have strong views on development proposals affecting their council, and may have been elected for that reason. Provided elected members are fully, and properly briefed, they are particularly well – equipped to make planning decisions because of their representative role, and not despite it. He concluded that attempting to divorce the political role of councillors from their planning function is unlikely to succeed. It is also undemocratic and impractical to try to prevent councillors from discussing applications with whomever they want. Local democracy depends on councillors becoming available to people who want to speak to them. He thought that the likely outcome of a prohibition would be that lobbying would continue but in an underhand and covert way. (The Localism Act 2011 has relaxed considerably the previous inhibitions on councillors discussing controversial local development schemes).

A valuable attempt to synthesise these contrasting themes was attempted by Gains et al (2005). The Labour government elected in the UK in 1997 chose to introduce a major change in the way that English local authorities carried out their decision-making, establishing a formal separate executive and giving it limited authority. A system in which formal decision-making power rested with the whole council gave way to one where, within a broad policy and budget framework agreed by all councillors, the executive of the council may make decisions, although these are subject to challenge and scrutiny by non-executive councillors. In western democracies, systems that allow for a separate executive are commonplace in local government systems (Norton 1994), but the policy of establishing a separate formal executive was long resisted by the local

government policy community in England, and so the legislation, the Local Government Act 2000, makes a radical break from previous policy.

As we have seen the period from the post-war period onwards saw the accommodation of the system to the rise of party politics. If a party was in the majority it took the leadership of all the committees of the council, and the majority of its members and party members were expected and generally did vote en bloc (Gyford et al 1989 p 37 Table 7). In many authorities an informal executive of senior councillors did operate, but they were held in check to varying degrees by the wider party group or groups of which they were part.

The Widdicombe Committee (1986 pp 78- 82) concluded that adaptation of the system to the role of party politics in decision-making was entirely legitimate. The Conservative government of the period accepted the broad thrust of Widdicombe that was against national interventions in local decision-making structures, and instead simply installed a requirement in legislation passed in 1989 that representation on all committees should be proportionate to share of seats held by different political groups. When Michael Heseltine returned to take charge of local government in John Major's cabinet in late 1990, he floated the idea of strengthening local leadership through the introduction of elected mayors (Stoker and Wolman 1992).

Gains, John and Stoker (2005) point out that the new system introduced by the Blair government could alter the power and accountability relationships within local councils in two ways. First there are different possibilities for the leaders in the new system. The second is through overview and scrutiny. Local councils could decide to implement this element to their constitutions in different ways either strongly or weakly. Some may endorse independent scrutiny; others ensure that parties that run the executive also control the scrutiny committees through whipping procedures and that a member of the ruling party chairs the committees. The operation of scrutiny committees may also be limited by considering a narrow range of issues. The potential exists for local authorities to be

independently strong and weak on the two dimensions of leadership and scrutiny. This in turn leads to the identification of four broad paths for implementation:

Low scrutiny/ low leadership: collectivist patterns of leadership and decision-making, fusion model in which neither leadership nor scrutiny is given a clear role.

Low leadership/ high scrutiny: maintains collectivist patterns of leadership but introduces patterns of control and review, collective accountability model.

Low scrutiny/ high leadership: have either transferred existing patterns of new leadership without introducing strong patterns of review, or have moved from collectivist patterns of leadership to a focussed executive without adopting the other parts of the reforms, executive autonomy model.

The separation of powers model is the fourth model, which has both well-defined leadership structures and strong forms of scrutiny and review.

As identified by Gyford et al (1989) and Leach and Wilson (2000), party is often the main driver of leadership style, though it is less clear that it drives the extent of scrutiny activities. About 60% of majority party Conservative authorities have adopted a high leadership model, with both strong and weak forms of scrutiny, compared with about 30% Labour and No Overall Control, and 40% Liberal Democrat. Labour tends to have more authorities with a collectivist style, which have high levels of scrutiny and weaker leadership, although it does not have more fusion authorities than the Conservatives. Labour authorities are, it appears, least likely to provide the kind of strong leadership/ strong scrutiny approach favoured by the then Labour government.

Copus (2004) examined five case studies taken from councils across the country, which explored the patterns of political activity within these

councils and the way in which the organisation and activities of the political party group influence councillor activity. The research was designed to ensure that all the three main parties were represented. In each case the council had adopted the leader and cabinet executive arrangements. The common theme was that the politics of the councils are conducted within the political party groups before it reaches the public domain. Whilst the groups in each council cohere publicly with varying degrees of rigidity, they do cohere and are identifiable as distinct *blocs* of councillors with a clear political identity and sets of objectives.

Political affiliation makes little difference to the way councillors approach council politics and how they interact with councillors from the same party or from the other party groups. Internal dissent finds little outlet and where it does occur it falls broadly into two categories: that concerned with ideology or policy and that related to issues stemming from the ward or division the councillor represents. Labour members were least likely to allow these internal disputes to spill over into the public arena and Liberal Democrats most likely, whilst Conservative groups shared Labour's approach to public discipline and loyalty but were less inclined to admit how this cohesion was achieved.

d) Administrative reform of local government sought by national government, usually referred to as "modernising. "

Cochrane (1991) examined the changing state of local government restructuring anticipated in the 1990s. In the recent past, he commented that local government had largely been analysed as if its very existence were in danger from centrally inspired legislative reforms and financial controls. Such a starting point might make it difficult to assess the changes which were taking place and which were likely to dominate in the 1990s. He considered three other possibilities. The first is the notion of an "enabling" authority; the second, the possibility of a shift towards post- Fordist local government; and the third, the possibility of more corporative or neo- corporative forms of politics at local level. He suggested that the third is the most helpful approach for understanding

the likely duration of change in the 1990s, and argued that changes within local government have to be understood in the context of wider restructuring of the UK state.

A decade later Leach (2010) observed that in looking over the Labour government's agenda for local government (1997- 2009) six key themes could be identified. These were: the move to local executive government; the emphasis on strong individual local leadership; the cumulative enhancement of the focus on partnership working; the strengthening of the performance/ inspection culture; a concern with public engagement and community cohesion (particularly at neighbourhood level); and a further move towards a unitary structure of local government in England.

Leach concluded that although the first raft of measures did have a degree of coherence, over time the coherence of the government's vision disintegrated. The overall effect of this pattern of central initiative and intervention on member- officer relations is examined. It is argued that whereas the impact of the enhancement of the performance / inspection culture has been to strengthen the position of Chief Executive (vis-à-vis council leaders), the move to local executive government has not resulted in the shift of power from leading officers to leading members that might have been anticipated. In addition, the challenge to the unified officer structure implicit in the division between the executive and scrutiny roles has remained latent.

Chandler (2001) had earlier examined the Local Government Bill and the White and Green Papers informing it which claim to deliver an agenda of democratic renewal. The reforms promised to reconnect local councils with local communities through a process of political renewal, a new statutory duty of community-wide consultation, and the encouragement of active citizenship. Chandler assesses whether the plans for increased popular engagement in consultation processes actually develop democratic accountability, and suggests that, although the then current proposals may institutionalise new links between government and

community groups and individuals, they will provide little local control over policy making.

But by 2004 (Coulson 2004) when Labour's modernising agenda had begun to have effect, a complex geography of partnerships and networks had developed which required small numbers of executives and salaried councillors, far fewer than the large numbers needed by the committee system. But turnout in local elections remained low, and membership of both Labour and Conservative parties declined. Councillors and local activists were marginalised. This suggests that the government had a choice: it could either accept that the era of multi-skilled councillors responsible for the multi-purpose local authorities is ending, or it could radically rationalise the present quangos, partnerships and other local government structures to re-create it.

Leach (2009) suggests there has been a common theme which links the reorganisation initiatives of successive Conservative (1979 - 1997) and Labour (1997-2010) governments which is that a unitary system of local government (town and parish councils excluded) is to be preferred to a two (or multi) tiered system. Despite the anomalies in the current patchwork structure the new Coalition Government has indicated that it does not wish to encourage further reorganisation (Pickles 2010). Fenwick et al (2009) conclude that currently there is no prospect of regional governance in England being subject to direct or indirect public accountability and regional governance is no longer politically attractive to mainstream politicians of any party: it holds few political rewards and there is no longer any grassroots pressure to place it on the agenda. The most likely development is the further growth of regional business - led development directly sanctioned from central government, with funds provided from central government with a strong regeneration emphasis.

New Labour were determined to deal with what they perceived as the damage done to local government during the Conservative administration 1979 – 1997, and moved quickly so that in July 2000, the Local Government Act 2000 reached the statute books giving councils some

real space to develop entirely new approaches to community leadership and management innovation. The duty to produce a Community Strategy, combined with the establishment of local strategic partnerships, provided a vehicle for establishing and delivering a shared vision for local areas (Moor 2004). Sullivan et al (2006) conclude that it is hard to overstate the importance of community leadership in the Labour Government`s programme of local government reform. The 1998 White Paper, Modern Local Government: In Touch with the People (DETR, 1998) presented the idea of community leadership as symbolising the transformation from an old fashioned institution to a "modern "one. The White Paper explained the rationale for giving the community leadership brief to local government because amongst all the public institutions councils have a special status and authority as local, directly - elected bodies.

The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM)`s evaluation of Local Strategic Partnerships (LSP's) and the ongoing evaluation of community strategies (DPM 2005, ODPM/ Dft 2006) highlighted the involvement of officers and senior or executive councillors and the relative disconnection from both initiatives of non - executive councillors and of political parties outside the ruling group(s). This marginalisation of councillors is compounded where the LSP has its own links with communities eg: through area arrangements and where the councils` scrutiny arrangements are poor. (Goss, 2005; Sullivan & Howard, 2005, ODPM/DfT, 2006). Sullivan et al concluded that their results from an empirical survey of a number of councils support a relatively positive account of local authority leadership; they confirm the findings of other research by describing leadership as coming more from officers than elected members. This gives cause for concern as it devalues the democratic legitimacy for local authority. Their work also points to the marginalisation of non - executive members, but they optimistically point out that the introduction of new area or neighbourhood based arrangements may provide new fields for the exercise of community leadership by members outside the councils` ruling executive.

The 2007 Councillors Commission, driven by persistent issues about the representativeness of councillors and their public standing, described a climate in which people are disengaged from politics, do not trust politicians, and yet have higher expectations of service delivery. Lepine and Sullivan (2010) following a wide ranging debate about the effectiveness and accountability of local government in England suggest that if councillors are to contribute to the good governance of communities, this does require the restoration of the political function of the councillor, which involves the management and resolution of conflict, the exercise of judgement and, in all this, engagement with citizens.

Researchers have shown that the emerging system in which responsibilities are shared between local authorities and a range of other public and private providers lacks strong normative underpinning in public opinion (Miller and Dickson 1996). The public demonstrated a strong preference for organisation and control of local services to be in the hands of an elected council as against appointed bodies or private sectors providers. A more positive view of the benefits of changing systems of local governance emerges from Sullivan and Skelcher (2003). Building on their earlier work examining City Challenge succession strategies, which showed that network - style relationships often associated with partnership working, were threatened or undermined by the imperative to compete, the authors contend that there exists a continued potential for collaboration in pursuit of public purposes, which also expands the stock of social capital.

Nick Raynsford, a Labour MP who had been a planning and housing minister, in a paper (2008) to The Centre for Public Scrutiny advocates that scrutiny is fundamental to the rebuilding of public trust and confidence in government, and that scrutiny and democracy are mutually reinforcing. Furthermore the public must have full access to all relevant information if they are to make informed decisions either on whom to elect to represent them or which option to support. Reflecting on the introduction of Cabinet or Executive styles of leadership to local government, he suggested that within local government the key challenge

for council leaders and cabinet members is to identify areas of work where there is scope for constructive engagement by back - benchers, rather than seeing the overview and scrutiny function as an irritant. My own recent involvement in Gloucestershire County Council emphatically endorses these conclusions and also provides a working example of a council that has enthusiastically embraced scrutiny.

During their time in opposition the Conservatives had reflected on the changes to local government introduced by New Labour, and in February 2009 David Cameron launched a major review of planning and local government as part of the Conservative Party's policy debate for the forthcoming election in 2010. The document entitled "Control Shift: Returning Power To Local Communities" was a wide ranging commentary on New Labour's modernising programme for local government and planning, and promised a radical decentralisation. Pointing out that over the last century Britain had become one of the most centralised countries in the developed world, and that this trend had accelerated under New Labour, the document contrasted this top down, central control with the technological advances of the "post – bureaucratic age"that had placed greater power with the citizen who could now share information and knowledge freely without constraint.

 The changes would involve abolishing regional planning, revoking all regional spatial strategies, including regional building targets, and repealing the national planning guidance that relates to regional planning. Except in London, the Tories would abolish regional development agencies and transfer all regional, housing, and planning powers back to local authorities. Councils would be encouraged to form their own "local enterprise partnerships". The Conservatives committed themselves to scrapping the housing and planning delivery grant, and replacing this by matching the council tax raised by each council for each new house built for each of the six years after that house was built in order to incentivise councils to meet housing needs. A major change would be to scrap the power of central government to cap rates that had been introduced by

Chris Patten in the last Conservative government, and give local people the power to veto large Council tax rises through local referenda.

The paper also confirmed the Conservatives` plan to abolish the Infrastructure Planning Commission (IPC) introduced by the Labour Government and instead speed up planning inquiries. These would focus on material planning considerations instead of questioning the project in principle. National policy statements would remain for major infrastructure. One of the key features was to hold a referendum on the introduction of a mayoral system in twelve of the largest English cities. The London Development Agency already run by the Mayor of London would be kept, but the Government Office for London would be abolished, and its powers transferred to the mayor or boroughs. The review provided a platform for the Conservatives manifesto for the next general election that took place in May 2010, but was also well timed for the English county elections in June 2009.

e) Emerging theory about the purpose of spatial planning and the opportunity for a more collaborative approach to place making

Introduction

The spatial planning system has a critical role to play in mediating between different interests, often between groups opposed to, and groups supporting, new development proposals, and this role Elson (1986) suggests has been scrutinised since the creation of the land use planning system in 1947. In recent times these conflicts have centred on proposals for new housing, particularly in areas of the urban fringe (Gallent 2008), but in earlier years Healey and colleagues (1988) in a research project sponsored by the Department of the Environment, examined the way the British planning system had been put to work during the period from the mid 1970`s to the mid 1980`s in a variety of locations and involving a range of proposed land uses, at a time when the Thatcher administration was challenging areas of public policy. This

research reflected the policy and legislative changes that have characterised the planning system during the last thirty years.

The changing rationalities of planning policy

During the 1980's there was an emphasis in planning policy on market led development whilst during the 1990's under the governments of John Major there was the emergence of a plan led system. From 1997 under New Labour,sustainability became an issue and planning became more attuned to environmental and spatial complexity. Since May 2010 and the emergence of the Coalition Government, a new trajectory is emerging which will remove the regional planning strategies and promote a more locally focused approach to development. These changes have had implications for local governance, both in the way in which the spatial planning system has responded to growth pressures, and the role of councillors. Many senior councillors have served in local government throughout these periods of change, and have witnessed these fluctuations of direction and emphasis, which are likely to have influenced their own attitudes to the governance of spatial planning, and their expectations of the results of yet further changes.

Planning in the 1980s: Thatcherite Planning

Murdoch and Abram (2002) assert that essentially the Thatcher governments were of the view that competitive markets guarantee the best outcomes and therefore these markets should, wherever possible, be substituted for state activity. Thus planning, which was viewed as both a local government activity and a potential hindrance to market operations, required fundamental change. Planning should play a role in the regulation of development, but it should act as an interpreter of market signals rather than as a prescriptive regulator, and it should ensure the smooth functioning of markets. The Local Government, Planning and Land Act of 1980 outlined early Thatcherite changes to the system and the expected direction of policy development. There were three main themes:

1) The position of County Councils and the status of structure plans would be reduced so that, other than for minerals and waste disposal, development control powers would be consolidated at the district level.

2) Plans should be prepared more quickly and simplified, and participation pruned to assist this.

3) Procedures would be introduced that by-passed the statutory system altogether. The Secretary of State was given the power to designate certain inner city areas as "urban development zones", with their own Urban Development Corporations (UDCs), which would have full development control powers in these areas so that local authorities lost jurisdiction over planning.

In 1985 the White Paper "Lifting the Burden" was published by Lord David Young, a business minister (Moor 2010). Planning was viewed as a constraint on market operations and should be simplified. Development Plans were useful to guide development, but were one, but only one, of the material considerations that must be taken into account in determining planning applications. Thornley (1993) argues that Thatcherite changes to planning can be summarized as a re-orientation of the purpose of planning towards greater acceptance of market forces, selective application of environmental criteria and the removal of social concerns from planning policy. However these changes encountered opposition within the Conservative party from back-benchers whose constituents were alarmed at the pace of development (Moor 2010), and at the end of the Thatcherite era, the introduction of neo-liberal philosophy into central government and planning came up against a maturing popular understanding of, and concern about, environmental issues (Murdoch & Abram 2002) which led subsequently to a movement for sustainable development.

These significant changes stimulated research into these issues. Examining this re-orientation of the purpose of planning during the Thatcherite era, Healey and her colleagues (1988) posed their research question in the following way: Land use planning has always had to balance the often conflicting demands of urban growth and those

concerned with the quality of the environment. An important issue is whether the system has the flexibility to adapt to new circumstances and the demands those bring, or whether it acts as a constraint on the spatial transformations demanded by economic and political change. This question continues to be relevant notwithstanding the series of administrative changes to the planning system that have taken place since the 1970`s and has attracted a considerable amount of research attention.

Healey et al (1988), at the outset of their research, point to the original conception of the post war planning system as embodied in the 1947 Act which assumed that the public sector would be the major initiator and funder of development. Despite the shift towards reliance on private initiative from the 1950`s, the case studies show that the public sector continued to play an active role in the development process, as landowner, land assembler, developer, builder, financier and service – provider. However despite this wide range of tools, their use is constrained by procedures that tend to reinforce the position of landownership, investment and development interests, and by central governments` policies towards local authority finance and urban regeneration initiatives. The researchers perceived a tension between the public sector`s role as developer, where it is often promoting a very particular interpretation of "community interest", and its function as regulator where a major consideration should in theory be assessing the implications of a project in relation to the varied "communities of interest" present in a locality.

Development control was examined by the researchers. The principle behind the development control process is that local authority politicians and officers should make discretionary judgements on development proposals. These are made on the basis of considerations formulated in plans and other supporting material, both in the light of precedent and in relation to the specific circumstances of a case. Accountability is provided for by the plans and the formal authority of local politicians in decision –

making. Central government, via plan approval, call - in procedure and the appeal machinery, keeps a watchful eye on the process.

The researchers concluded that even at the local level politicians in the case studies rarely played a decisive role in development control. Planning officers structured the agenda of issues raised by a case and organised the various consultations. Where cases were controversial, or where councillors or local interests had strong views, this agenda might be substantially revised, or overthrown by councillors. More usually, planners` judgements about the range of issues involved and their relative significance went unchallenged. Planners thus had considerable power to filter issues and interests, although they did this in the knowledge of their politicians` priorities. This emphasis on officers at the local level is largely they concluded a function of the case – load involved and the traditions of local government organisation. The power of central government, however, has its authority in the procedures it is able to use to influence local decisions.

Notwithstanding these conclusions the researchers make an important point that those without a legally defined interest in a site are generally disadvantaged in that they have no formal rights to object to a planning decision. There is no machinery with which to challenge planning permissions other than the process of local politics, and in a few cases, the possibility of persuading central government to call - in an application. Thus a fundamental structuring role of the planning system is that landowners and developers have legal and political rights in the development control process. Everyone else has only political rights. The researchers do not mention the possibility of judicial challenge by third parties to a planning decision but this procedure is so costly and so uncertain in its outcome, that it serves only to add emphasis to their point about political rights and the importance of objectors lobbying their ward member.

The concept of the development plan in the planning system is in part a vehicle for providing the rationale for specific decisions. Healey et al

(1988) point out that to do this effectively, a plan should state the principles or strategies which are to guide a local authority`s decision - making on land use changes in an area, provide some indication of the way these will be combined and traded - off in particular instances, and ensure that conflicts are addressed and positions arrived at which can be sustained. However central government has sought to constrain local discretion by limiting both the scope and content of plans, and has sought both to simplify preparation procedures and to ensure that local authorities prepare all their planning policy statements according to these procedures. The researchers conclude that the selective use of statutory plans and the proliferation of other forms of policy framework, are an appropriate response to the variability of localities.

In assessing the role of politicians in both plan making and decisions on applications the researchers saw councillor involvement as a pro - active stance, politicians considering the promotion of the city centre or the renewal of inner city environments as key tasks in their programme. But in many instances, local councillors reacted to demands from constituents, for they were often the first points of reference for local people concerned about environmental issues. In this way, their interests might be carried through into the consideration of policies and projects. However, Healey et al (1988) concluded that it may require a sustained and widespread critical opposition to change the priorities of politicians, for whom ideology and party may in practice take precedence over the specific demands of constituents. The machinery of representative democracy and the party apparatus that serviced it were evolving in response to new interest groupings and political demands. Concern with the quality of the residential environment in particular they thought had tended to foster a more overtly pluralist politics with diverse pressure groups focusing their campaigns around issues and places.

Further research on the role of local planning authorities and councillors in mediating the impacts of urban change was carried out by Short (1996). He examined the competing pressures and different actors in the growth area of Central Berkshire in the late 1980`s. Stimulated by the

growth of Reading as an office centre and the inward movement of high – tech industry, the area had become the focus of attention by the volume house builders to build large housing estates on the outskirts of Reading at areas such as Woodley – Earley. In the introduction to his work Short points out that in mixed economies the production of the built environment is rarely either the simple unfolding of market forces or the pure outcome of state actions. Rather, there is conflict, negotiation, and tension between sets of agents working with different principles, goals and strategies. The state represents the arena for the competition between these sets of agents and between the accumulation and consumption demands that they represent. The state itself, however is neither neutral nor a single body, and the conflict between house builders and community groups through the planning system produces conflict between central and local government. Short`s overarching theme was that the planning system introduced in 1947 had primarily been intended to regulate and direct development but had since been transformed into a system of negotiation.

Planning authorities responded to the conflicting pressures in a number of ways, and Short evolved a typology of responses by planning authorities to growth management and this typology provided a conceptual framework within which the various approaches of councillors could be analysed. As a basis for this approach he identified three elements that were important. The first was the increasing use of planning gain, by which local planning authorities secured some public advantage from the granting of planning permission. The second was public participation both in plan making and development control and the third was developer participation in the identification of developable land and policies for delivery and implementation.

Dealing with the role of local planning authorities Short pointed out that the authorities consist of two sets of agents: elected councillors and salaried officers. These two groups work together but have different organisational structures, perspectives, priorities, and roles. While the salaried officials have to serve the elected representatives, they also have

reference to an ideology of professional planning practice. Decision - making ultimately lies with the planning councillors, who directly face the whole range of conflicting demands. The competing pressures of accumulation and legitimation noted earlier are crystallised in and through the actions and roles of planning councillors.

Planning authorities respond to the conflicting pressures in a number of ways, and Short identified five distinct approaches, although these would usually occur in combination rather than isolation. These approaches were:

a) Outright rejection of growth pressures provides a delaying tactic before central government intervenes, as ultimately the Secretary of State has the power to overturn refusal decisions.

b) Deflection of development in that development can often take the line of least resistance, and the intensity of local opposition can influence the location of new development.

c) Deflection of blame. A choice between principle and the realities of central government power must be explained via speeches reported by the local press to affected residents and the local electorates alike. The blame is transferred totally to "Whitehall ". Ultimately a public relations exercise to disguise local political impotence.

d) Control over development. If it cannot be refused it must be planned. Negotiation with applicants over details is a standard feature of the modern planning system. The key factor is the extent of committee involvement and the accompanying publicity. Planning gain involves a legal agreement between an applicant and the local authority to provide certain benefits or financial contributions as part of the planning consent.

Short identified planning gain as the means by which councillors could on the one hand support a scheme, despite local opposition, whilst on the other legitimize their position by drawing attention to the benefits that would accrue to the local community. This is effectively a strengthening of the pro – active role noted by Healey at al (1988) but transferred to the development control arm of the local planning authority as opposed to its role as a developer. Short concluded that the pursuit of planning gain has

a number of consequences. These are: a) In seeking to maximise it, local planning authorities tended to look favourably upon large sites including a few major developers where planning gain can be more easily achieved and implemented. b) The extent of a planning gain and the conviction with which it is pursued by a planning authority often depends upon the influence of the local lobby by elected representatives, community groups and parish councils. c) Successful pursuit of planning gain to some extent legitimizes the position of the local authorities, especially the councillors. And d) Such gains neatly mesh local political interests with central government macroeconomic policies.

Post-Thatcherite Planning

Economic growth in the south east region in the middle years of the decade had brought a growth in the demand for housing and other forms of development, which was focused on the outer suburban and rural areas of the region. As Ward (1994) suggested, the problem, especially severe for a Conservative government whose main support came from those very areas, was how to accommodate all this growth. Some concentration of growth became necessary because gradual, unplanned incremental growth spread the misery and political damage.

Reflecting these changes, Chris Patten, later to become Chairman of the Conservative Party and responsible for the unexpected Conservative general election success in 1992, replaced the Thatcherite Nicholas Ridley as Environment Secretary (Moor 2010), and piloted the 1991 Planning and Compensation Act through parliament. This stipulated that all development control decisions were now to be made in accordance with the development plan. The plan was no longer just one material consideration, but became the prime consideration. There was also a strengthening of central government direction as an increasing number of Planning Policy Guidance documents were published by central government, which sought not only to introduce national strategic direction, but also to ensure uniformity in planning practice. As Vigor (2000) put it, the PPG approach works through the specification of largely

decontextualised planning principles. These detach sites and projects from their local situations. They situate them in an institutional environment, often at odds with the perspectives of stakeholders in the local conflicts.

During the latter part of the second Major government, there was an important debate about the scale and location of new housing, when it was forecast in 1995 that 4.4 million new households would emerge in the years 1991- 2016. The new Labour government inherited this debate and in 1998 published "Planning for Sustainable Development: Towards Better Practice", which demonstrated that both Conservative and Labour governments had moved to a consensus on the meaning of "sustainable planning", with both placing considerable emphasis on urban regeneration and the concentration of development. The next decade would show whether the new sustainable development agenda provided a new rationality for planning, or simply an excuse for the continuation of old, well established policies.

As we have seen, Short`s research was conducted before the New Labour Government came into power in 1997 and when the neo - liberal, "anti-statist "stance of the early Thatcher governments noted by Taylor (2009) was at its peak. Since that time on the one hand under John Major the Conservatives re - installed the "plan led" system of controlling development in the Planning and Compensation Act of 1991, and on the other under New Labour there has been a double process of reform – the devolution and regional agenda and the continuing revisions to the planning system in search of efficiency and effectiveness. Research since then by Healey (2007) and others including Allmendinger (2007) argues that collaborative spatial planning practices can facilitate collective action with progressive purpose, contrasting with more established public jurisdictional authorities, such as those observed so far where planning is understood as mediation in the public interest. However before reviewing this more recent research literature, it is appropriate to review some specific research on the role of elected members in plan making and development control published in 1997 just prior to the election of the

New Labour Government. This research had been prompted by the new focus of central government that there should be much more consistency in planning decision making, based on up to date, adopted development plans.

<u>The Role Of Elected Members In Plan Making And Development Control</u>

This research published by the RTPI in March 1997 was commissioned from the School of Planning Oxford Brookes University and the study team comprised Professor Roger Zetter MRTPI, Dr Roy Darkes MRTPI and Roger Mason MRTPI Barrister. The reasons behind the commission were the concerns of the RTPI that the well- publicised reports into the planning decisions of a number of local authorities had reduced public confidence in the planning system, and the Institute wished to report best practice to its members. The final report was submitted by the RTPI to Lord Nolan`s Committee on standards in public life which reported later that year. The terms of reference for the study were: a) The role of elected members in formulating planning policy and translating that policy into development plans and the methods of reaching decisions on these matters. b) The extent to which elected members` discretion is limited by legislation and central government policy and advice. c) The role of elected members in development control matters. d) The different perspectives of elected members as members of planning committees and as ward members. e) The degree of involvement by elected members in negotiations on planning applications including such matters as any associated planning agreements. f) The time taken to determine planning applications. g) The role of elected members relating to appeals, with specific reference to decisions taken against officer advice. h) The relationship with officers and the weight given to professional advice in evolving policy and decision- making; and i) The need for further practice advice on these matters.

The study was conducted in two main phases and comprised a postal questionnaire survey of a 10% stratified sample of chief planning officers and elected members serving on planning committees in English and

Welsh local authorities and follow up interviews with a small sample drawn from the first phase.

Officers in 24 councils (59%) noted that councillor working parties were used in their authorities in order to develop debate and guidance on major planning policy. Most councils set up officer working groups as a preliminary to developing major policies or initiating policy changes. All of these arrangements drew elected members into a close working relationship with officers for policy review and development. Another question asked of officers was about the origins of policy debate on planning (seeking to find where the initiative for policy development and review came from). The results showed that in 22 authorities (50%) policy debate originated from joint officer/member discussions. In 19 councils (46%), officers said they took the lead in bringing forward major policy items, but in 3 other councils (7%) chief officers said that members were pro - active in raising key issues and initiating policy review. The main forum for policy development and review was planning committee according to 18 chief officers (44% of councils in the sample).

Another area of research concerned the impact of Section 54a of the 1990 Town and Country Planning Act and the role of the development plan in development control decisions. Over two thirds of councillors considered that S.54a of the 1990 Act, which strengthened the place of the development plan as the basis for making decisions on applications for development, had been a change for the better. There was a tendency for backbenchers to be less likely to agree this than senior members. On the other hand, over half of the councillors mentioned that there had been occasions since 1991 when members` views had prevailed over the policies found in the development plan.

Specifically pressed on whether they felt that party political considerations influenced members` decision - making on planning matters, 23 chief officers (52%) thought that sometimes this was the case, 17 (39%) felt this was never the case and only 2 respondents felt that party politics were regularly invoked. At a more specific level, 13

officers (30%) said that there were some issues where party politics did come into play. These included travellers/gypsies, football fields and sports facilities in general, nursery schools, council - owned land, dwellings in the countryside, applications involving job creation, infill development in " better" areas, conservation issues, social housing, inner city house extensions and takeaways. Party politics also came into play in the run–up to local elections and in marginal wards. Member involvement in s106 negotiations was also canvassed Most chief planning officers (68%) felt that member involvement in s106 negotiations was unhelpful and only 7 officers (16%) were positive about direct councillor involvement in the detail of s106 matters.

The researchers made no recommendations to the RTPI regarding policy formulation and concluded that this was not regarded as a problematic issue. They endorsed best practice identified in the study: that is where a good working relationship is developed between members and officers, especially chief officers. This they thought ensured consistency in policy development and implementation, helps to move the policy making process forward effectively, and assists member and officials in dealing with contentious planning applications.

This report was commissioned prior to the changes introduced by New Labour that introduced the cabinet or executive structure to policy formulation, and the period covered by the report may have represented the apogee of the chief officer and planning committee structure for planning policy in local government. In that structure the chief planning officer had a pre-eminent role in policy formulation amongst officers, but the new cabinet structure introduced a senior management team led by the chief executive reporting to cabinet, where a head of planning services was not necessarily included.

One of the first academics to comment on the implications of the new political management arrangements for local government was Fox (2004) who identified the main issues on which divisions were apparent as being those of the politicisation of chief executives and their role in respect of

community leadership activities. Some predict that they will in future play more of an internal co-ordinating role and spend less time externally promoting community. Others believe that they will need to devote even more time to partnerships and networking because of the weight of executive business for leading members. We have noted the concern of Sullivan et al (2006) that leadership was coming more from officers than elected members.

The Modernisation Agenda

Concerns that the modernisation agenda introduced to the planning system by the New Labour Government would reduce its political accountability were voiced by Cowell and Owens (2006). They observed that the model for the new planning system is the technical - rational one in which sustainability is to be pursued through new objectives such as higher densities and mixed - use development, new tools such as sustainability appraisals and the involvement of local communities, primarily within local contexts. The more overtly political process through which planning has actually served the agenda of environmental sustainability is effectively ignored. Indeed, they conclude that the subversive functions of planning – particularly its capacity to obstruct "essential projects" and raise awkward questions about social purpose – are seen by government as part of the problem and as a key target for modernisation. The authors argue that rescaling planning will disrupt established lines of communication between planning and wider public policy, and that the deliberative function of planning continues to be unevenly developed at the regional level.

At the local level the modernisation agenda aspires that " front - loading" public involvement could simultaneously achieve better outcomes (ODPM 2005 para 11, 2004 page 110), but critics think government too optimistic in assuming that these innovations would significantly ameliorate the real conflicts of interest that arise from planning issues. Leach, S et al (2003) had suggested that the danger of an over - emphasis on public involvement is that it may slow down the decision -

making process, and the effectiveness of decisions may be compromised (especially coherence and inter - relationships). Cowell and Owens (2006) conclude that the importance of planning lies not simply in its instrumental capacity to deliver environmental sustainability, but in its relative openness to influence by environmental interests and concerned communities, which enable connections to be drawn between projects, plans and wider policies, and these structures are threatened by the proposals for planning reform. Nonetheless they note the work of Murdoch and Norton (2001) who had shown how environmental organisations vary in their abilities to access regional and local planning avenues, and to drive forward their favoured conceptions of sustainable development. Peel and Lloyd (2007) suggest that a new approach to land use planning is being constructed which although neo -traditional in its policy design (a reassertion of the underlying rationale for the traditional land – use planning system) aims to be more pluralistic and diverse in its objectives, reflecting the agenda and context of modernisation.

A more positive view of these planning reforms is offered by Allmendinger and Haughton (2007), and Allmendinger again with Tewdwr-Jones (2009). A particular attraction of these papers is that they set these changes against the evolution of the planning system since the 1970`s. Since the election of a New Labour Government in 1997 Allmendinger and Haughton point out there has been a fundamental reassessment and rearrangement of the UK regulatory planning system and, in particular, the approach to spatial planning. This involved two significant and integrally related shifts. Firstly there has been an insertion of stronger regional planning systems, clearer European Union objectives and practices for planning, and a reworking of post devolutionary relationships between central government and sub national governance structures. Secondly, there has been a broadening of the concept and practice of planning away from the " land use " or physically dominated approach of the 1980`s and early 1990`s to a broader scope of planning involving land development, environmental concerns, resource use, transport, economic development, social infrastructure etc. The Planning & Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 replaced Regional Planning Guidance

(RPG) and county structure plans with a single tier of strategy called Regional Spatial Strategies (RSSs).

Summarising recent changes the authors describe how the " top - down " blueprint nature of post - war planning driven by the need for massive redevelopment gave way to demands for more public–sector–led approaches during the 1970`s, whereas the market - led orthodoxy of the 1980`s dominated until the " plan led " era of the 1990`s. The current doctrine is focused on "place making "which emphasises an uneasy tension between economic development, policy integration, design quality, and the notion of sustainable places. Allmendinger and Tewdwr - Jones (2009) conclude that a uniform planning process nationally, originally developed in the aftermath of the 1939 – 1945 war years is incompatible with current government policies intended to foster regional economic competitiveness, sustainable communities and local distinctiveness. They suggest that spatial planning is not a delivery process *per se* in the style of planning under the welfare state or in the Thatcher years, but rather as a strategic capacity and political integration mechanism intended to cement the increasingly fragmented agencies of the state working within often inappropriate institutional and government silos. Planning is being expected to ensure compatible working and strategic coordination within government, between government and citizens, and government and the market, alongside its more traditional role of land - use planning within the town and country planning system. The objective of this transformation is to widen the trajectory of planning, or spatial strategy making, in the modernisation and governance agenda at both the regional level and the local level within the UK.

In her further writing Healey (2009), a leading exponent of this approach, suggests that spatial strategy-making demands a capacity for judgement which is situated within and sensitive to, the contingencies of particular times and places, rather than drawing on generalised theories of urban change or accepted methodological protocols. Strategic initiatives also have to face the political challenge of mobilising attention to, and creating a "public"around, such an activity. In the public sphere, they are thus

political acts, challenging established power dynamics and mobilising energy to move in different directions. In her book Urban Complexity and Spatial Strategies published in 2007 Healey used as one of her case studies the Cambridge Sub - Region in Southern England which had experienced dynamic growth in recent years driven by the expansion of both new - technology industries and the London metropolitan region. In the case study Healey illustrates the practices of a regulatory approach to managing urban development and the difficulties these have faced in switching from a growth – restraint strategy to a growth - orientated strategy. It exemplifies the wider struggle in southern England to develop an integrated approach to urban development in a highly centralised state with a strong cultural resistance to development in rural areas and a perception of urban areas as "problem places" in need of regeneration rather than growth management.

Healey draws a wide canvas when describing the actors and agents in the Sub – Region but has little to say about the activities of elected members other than that they struggled to fund a full range of sustainability arguments (from reducing resource use and the impact of climate change to provision for walking and cycling, and an emphasis on high quality design) to support growth management. However as Short (1996) had observed in Central Berkshire elected members sought to ensure a strong connection between the allocation of sites for development and the provision of physical and community infrastructure.

Healey draws some important conclusions from her case study about the difficulties of managing growth in such a large urban agglomeration, and because this complex is so important and near to national government, any conflicts are played out up and down all the levels of government, and encounter the contradictions over planning, development and infrastructure policy at inter - regional and national levels. The result is an unstable wider governance context, with the potential to undermine the stability and local support that the growth coalition in the Cambridge area has sought in order to achieve a new development trajectory. The researcher concludes that much depends on the capacity of national

government both to encourage integration between land - allocation strategies through the planning system and investment in infrastructure and services in areas of substantial change, and to decentralise itself, to give institutional space for the development of local capacity for the governance of place.

Councillor Involvement In Planning Decisions

Continuing the theme explored by the RTPI Study Team in 1997, of the role of elected members in formulating planning policy, a contemporary assessment of elected member involvement in planning decisions is contained in a report published by Arup consultants and commissioned by the Communities and Local Government Department in 2007.The research sought to obtain a better understanding of the relationships between planning committees, officers and cabinet members in local authority planning decision making and also to consider whether current arrangements and procedures are leading to the most effective governance of planning within local authorities. The findings can be summarised under four headings:

a) early Member involvement

b) democratic decision – making

c) decisions contrary to officer recommendation; and

d) links between policy and decision – making

Early Member Involvement

It was hypothesised that early member involvement (formal or informal) maximises the value of member input to the decision – making process. There are a wide variety of approaches to member involvement and a considerable volume of good practice guidance available but much of it encourages caution and this has been heeded to such an extent that some authorities and /or individual members are now reluctant to get involved in discussions prior to the planning committee meeting.

<u>Democratic Decision – Making</u>

It was hypothesised that:

- the application of a democratic decision – making process produces a predictable planning decision; and
- "good" democracy creates more predictable decisions , by allowing a better understanding of the process and providing opportunities to influence it.

The influence of party politics was found to be less significant than the individual committee members` skills, knowledge and experience and the research findings did not support the hypothesis that a democratic decision making process produces a predictable planning decision. The fine balance between the relevant planning issues simply makes it difficult to predict the outcome of some applications.

<u>Decisions Contrary To Officer Recommendations</u>

It was hypothesised that decisions contrary to officer recommendation arise due to:

- members and officers not communicating during the application and determination process,
- absent or ineffective stakeholder meditation during the application and determination process,
- change in the decision – making structure during the application and determination process,
- an unpredictable political balance,
- planning issues which are finely balanced,
- members lacking ownership of plan policies,
- members lacking training, and
- authorities which encourage early member involvement experience fewer decisions contrary to officer recommendation.

The researchers found that decisions contrary to officer recommendation account for a very small proportion of the overall determinations each

year and concluded that there should always be scope for members to express a different view from their officers.

<u>Links Between Policy And Decision – Making</u>

It was hypothesised that closer linkages between policy and development control result in better (more predictable) planning decisions. It was found that although around 45% of elected members are actively involved in development control decisions, few members of the planning committee are involved in forward planning to any meaningful extent. This has a potentially negative impact on the extent to which members feel they have "ownership" of the policies that they are expected to implement through the granting or refusal of planning permission. The researchers conclude that the promotion of closer links between policy and development control would help to foster more consistent, plan - led, decision - making and potentially increase the scope for elected members to get involved in planning.

<u>Strategic – Local Tensions and The Spatial Planning Approach</u>

Throughout this review strategic – local tensions have emerged as a recurrent problem area in the spatial planning process. Gallent (2008) in a wide- ranging paper attempts to summarise the basis for these tensions and the implications for the future of the planning system. Since the election of New Labour in 1997 he perceives a division between a local approach based on the idea of " holistic planning and governance " and a regional and national approach emphasising the importance of faster and leaner decision making. Government in England struggles to balance a devolution of power to communities with a need to retain strategic oversight, and to exercise central authority where necessary. Expanding on this theme Gallent (2008) points out that the land – use planning system that emerged after the second world war was predicated on the basis that effective policy controls had to be guided by strategic principles, and that local communities needed to be convinced of the appropriateness of particular courses of action by mandated politicians

and professional planning officers. Participation in the planning system often involved the presentation of different development options, followed up by consultation exercises, and the subsequent receipt of feedback. If the feedback was particularly negative a planning authority (and its partners) could either re- think the proposal, or defend it with "strategic necessity"arguments.

Since the Labour Government in 1977 a programme of local government modernisation has revisited the division between local choice and strategic necessity. This is an attempt to renew local democracy and give communities greater power in decision making through a process of governance that seeks a transfer of responsibility for decision making from the public to the personal domain. (Newman 2007) through collaboration and participation, emphasising very local actions and interactions, and generating a " network power " shared by participants across a wide process in which planners retain a critical role.

Booher & Innes (2002) argue that this local empowerment ultimately generates greater ownership of the process, avoiding a situation where communities simply react – often negatively – to intervention and projects that are imposed upon them by higher level bodies.

Gallent points out that direct reform of the statutory planning system has focused largely on strategic priority. The 2001 Planning Green Paper promoted the need for a system that would work for communities and business (DTLR 2001) but concerns about the speed and efficiency of the process resulted in reforms that emphasised a strategic perspective that sits uneasily with the community ambition of Labour`s reform of local democracy. These ambitions had been set out in the Local Government White Paper 2006 and the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007, whilst the Planning & Compensation Act 2004 introduced the strategic element.

We have already referred to collaborative planning, and Gallent refers to the work of Wates (2000) who perceived the concept as diffusing conflict

between professionals and communities by opening up decisions and by easing tensions between different community members or groups by bringing planning into a community domain and by trying to ease the tension between different representations and rationales. However for much of the 1990`s these tools did not deal with the fundamental problem of planning remaining fixed within the public domain, with real power remaining firmly in the hands of professionals, politicians and local government.

An alternative view is provided by Taylor (2009) who describes the initiatives within both the 2004 Planning & Compulsory Purchase Act and the government guidance note PPS12 to replace old – style "town and country "or "land use " planning by spatial planning described in PPS12 as going beyond these traditional plans so as to take account of the strategies and plans of other agencies not traditionally involved in land use planning but who also have an impact on spatial development. Taylor comments that what was missing in the 2004 Act were any new powers to enable state planning authorities to realise these aspirations, and the power of implementation lies with developers and the market.

Gallent (2008) had observed this dichotomy. Spatial planning had emerged from two parallel but distinctly different policy streams. It must operate at two different levels: at the community level and at a strategic level defined, most recently in the Barker Review of Land – Use Planning (Barker 2006) which described parochialism as a constraint on development and advised that the planning system become more attuned to market signals, allocating more land for housing, more space for growth and becoming more strategic in its outlook.

Barker`s recommendations were incorporated into government advice (PPS3 Housing 2006) which advocated a Housing Market Assessment approach to housing land allocation and the 2008 Planning Act, which established the Infrastructure Planning Commission. Gallent noted that some elements of the planning process are being transformed into the community domain whilst others are being clawed back. He concludes,

"Communities are empowered to express aspirations, and local planning is conceived as part of a holistic planning and governance model in which local planning decisions can be subservient to a broader better – coordinated local policy agenda. But when it comes to the big issues – economic growth, international competitiveness, tackling climate change, energy security and improving quality of life (DCLG 2007) or indeed, strategic housing development – the clear message is that planning should remain firmly within the public domain" His conclusion is that from the early 2000`s the Labour Government allowed the process of holistic planning and governance and strategic planning linked to distinct policy streams to drift apart and ultimately form distinct systems.

Some confirmation of this view emerged in a MA thesis by Richard Walker (2008) who examined whether the new system of plan – making strengthens or weakens the position of local planning authorities in relation to regional bodies and central government in Bristol and the South West. His broad conclusion is that because sub–regional strategies are no longer constructed, tested, consulted on and examined sub–regionally, local planning authorities are experiencing reduced scope to formulate and take ownership of locally distinctive strategies for the distribution of housing growth. Whilst there remain concerns about the level of growth to be accommodated, this has always been an issue. What is new is the tightening of the room for manoeuvre in terms of deciding where growth will go. He concludes that the role of local planning authorities has shifted towards the co – ordination and delivery of strategies made at a higher level than the role of local authority members, particularly those elected to represent wards that are directly affected by the growth agenda. The aim of the study was to gather empirical evidence on the experiences and perceptions of institutional actors involved closely with planning reform. Unfortunately only one councillor was contacted and in the main the participants were sourced largely from local government officers and central government officials. A failure to properly evaluate the role of councillors in the planning system has been a common thread of the research literature reviewed in this working paper.

Thames Gateway as a test bed for the emergence of flexible multilevel networks of government agencies

The largest of the growth areas, this extensive area extending from the eastern borders of Greater London on both sides of the Thames estuary to the North Sea has been identified as a growth area by successive governments and has proved a test bed for the emergence of flexible multilevel networks of governance agencies involved in functions previously the domain of central and local government. It has also been subject to a number of research inquiries by academics interested in the relationship between evolving forms of governance and particular approaches to the planning and creation of places. Brownill and Carpenter (2009) conclude that the experience of the Thames Gateway provides compelling evidence of the emerging complexity in the governance of planning, particularly the tension between networked forms of governance and the continuing importance of hierarchical relations.

This theme was examined by Greenwood and Newman (2010), who considered traditional and new planning practices in the Thames Gateway and their case study suggests that the emphasis on the move to new, collaborative practices underestimates the influence of traditional government structures. This provides cause for questioning the capacity of the current planning system to address the challenge of sustainable development, a central concern of the new planning. The double process of reform – the devolution and regional agenda of the Labour administration since 1997, and the continuing reform of the planning system in search of efficiency, effectiveness and the community focus of spatial planning – has created a framework for planning that is increasingly complex. The policy making process was criticised by the Conservative opposition (2006) as confused and lacking in accountability, and Greenwood and Newman conclude that this complexity is very evident in the regeneration of Thames Gateway. They point out that the new planning system draws its legitimacy from the effectiveness of such

multi - scale and cross – sector co -ordination, from engaging local communities and achieving sustainable development objectives written into recent reforms. Their conclusions are that there are two, potentially conflicting planning processes deploying old and new ideologies in search of legitimacy for the Thames Gateway project as a whole. We might see traditional planning as slowly being replaced by new practices, but the continuation of a separate decision process for large projects suggests that definitions of sustainable development, participation and good planning are unlikely to become stabilised.

Further reflections on the impact of growth on specific areas and implications for local governance are contained in the book by Boddy, Lambert and Snape (1997), "City for the 21st Century: Globalisation, planning and urban change in contemporary Britain", which examined the growth town of Swindon. The authors suggested that Swindon might illustrate something of the changing nature of city and urban living as we move into the next millennium. Economic success and physical expansion have been accompanied by major shifts in terms of community, identity and ways of life. Corporate structures, economic progress and labour markets locally are increasingly tied in with wider processes operating at regional, national and international levels. Places such as Swindon on the fringes of the South East growth region are increasingly satellites of London as national capital and of the broader, global economy. Images of economic excellence are challenged by significant and possibly increasing polarisation in terms of the economic and social benefits of success. Both the social and physical structure of the urban area are quite strongly characterized by the fragmentation and lack of focus which seems increasingly to characterize urban life.

The growth of Swindon was planned from the nineteen sixties onwards, and during this time, the Central Oxfordshire Sub-Region was characterized by a strategy of restraint and containment. We shall see in the case study how this policy was challenged towards the end of the millennium and the Sub-Region began to display some of the growth characteristics noted by the authors in their Swindon study.

Reform Proposals of the Coalition Government

The conclusion of Greenwood and Newman that the reform of the planning system was not yet settled was particularly apt. The policy paper published in 2009 in advance of the general election by the Conservative Party: Control Shift: Returning Power to Local Communities and which summarised their approach to the planning system has been examined. Subsequently a pre-election green paper was published, "Open Source Planning", written by John Howell MP who was to become PPS to the Decentralisation Minister Greg Clark MP, and this provided the basis for Conservative planning policy. What was noticeable about the Conservative and Liberal Democrat political parties during the election campaign was a broad agreement on the objectives and purposes for the planning system. The Coalition Government has published (July 2010) A Draft Structural Reform Plan for the Department for Communities and Local Government. The aims of which were to devolve power closer to neighbourhoods, increase citizen participation, promote community ownership, lift inspection burdens on councils and remove regional government. As far as the planning system is concerned the draft plan indicated that the Coalition would introduce a new Bill in November 2010 and this would be predicated on the policy paper referred to above.

The Localism Act 2011

The scope of the Act is hugely ambitious and represents arguably the greatest change to the planning system since its inception in Attlee's post war government in 1947. It ranges over a wide range of local government and housing issues in addition to planning. The innovation that will have the biggest impact is the first clause of the Act that introduces a new general power of competence that will give local authorities an explicit freedom to act in the best interests of their voters, unhindered by the absence of specific legislation supporting their actions. No action- except raising taxes, which requires specific parliamentary approval- will any

longer be beyond the powers of local government in England unless the local authority is prevented from taking that action by the common law, specific legislation or statutory guidance.

Councillors will be given more freedom to become involved in local issues as predetermination rules introduced by new Labour, which prevented councillors voting on issues where they had previously expressed a view, are relaxed, but criminal sanctions are introduced to ensure that councillors do not deliberately withhold a personal interest. Councils, whatever their size, will be given the opportunity, if they prefer, to have a committee structure of governance rather than the cabinet model introduced by New Labour. Referenda were to be held in May 2012 on the principle of directly elected mayors in areas that request them and, if approved, elections would be held a year later. The abolition of regional strategies, as long expected, was proposed in the Act, but alongside this abolition there is now a statutory duty to co-operate on planning matters that will apply to local authorities and other public bodies.

Prime Minister David Cameron and his policy advisor Oliver Letwin see the "Howell" reforms as an important first step in the move towards the "Big Society". A key innovation is the opportunity for neighbourhoods and parish councils to become involved in the planning of their own localities. Until now these bodies have been consulted by local planning authorities, but not always listened to. The new legislation enables them – provided they have more than 50 per cent local support for a development proposal – to press the local planning authority to issue a "Neighbourhood Development Order" which will effectively grant planning permission. The threshold has been substantially reduced from the 75 per cent originally set.

The Coalition Government had already announced that it intended to keep the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) introduced by the last government, and the Act indicates that some receipts from the levy will be transferred to neighbourhoods. Detailed regulations will be published

but the mechanism will allow community groups to specify how they want their share of the proceeds to be spent, and that these can be spent on the costs of running services as well as the initial costs of provision.

The Act confirms that the Infrastructure Planning Commission (IPC) will be merged into a major infrastructure planning unit at the Planning Inspectorate and the statutory framework to reach decisions will be the same as the current regime, but with Ministers taking the final decisions. The Coalition has faced significant opposition to its proposals from the development and construction industry and its professional advisors, who fear that localism will usher in even more local objection to development. These critics point to those local authorities which cancelled 189,000 new homes from their local plans following the letter to local authorities written on 27th May 2010 by Eric Pickles, Secretary of State for Communities, advising them that the Coalition Government would go ahead and abolish the Regional Strategies, which was subsequently done on 6th July 2010. That decision was successfully challenged by Cala Homes (South) in the High Court. The Judge decided that the Secretary of State acted unlawfully by purporting to revoke the strategies without at least conducting an environmental assessment as required by regulation. On the same day, 10th November 2010, as the judge's decision was announced, the Government's Chief Planner wrote to local authorities pointing out that the regional strategies would nonetheless be abolished in the forthcoming Localism Bill, and that the new homes bonus, which rewards councils for approving new homes in their areas, would come into effect in April 2011, but would act retrospectively and cover homes permitted from the date of the letter. Subsequently this was successfully challenged and a compromise agreed with the Planning Inspectorate for Inspectors determining planning appeals and conducting public examinations of Core Strategies, which had the effect of staying the government's statement and letter, and regional strategies continuing to be part of the statutory development plan.

<u>Sustainability and Development</u>

The notion of sustainable development was popularized by the Bruntland Report in 1987. During this first phase there was a move away from the more traditional reactive methods of solving environmental problems towards the prevention of harm. By the middle of this decade there was a realization of the need for a more holistic approach, but this has only taken place on a wide-ranging group of policies since 2005. We can therefore distinguish two stages. There was an initial stage which drew extensively on the 1987 Bruntland Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development and culminated in the 1995 Environment Act going on to the statute book and the setting up of the Environment Agency. There then followed increasing pressure from environmental groups for a more over-arching policy across all arms of government.

Government saw the planning system as an effective way of implementing sustainable policies, and published in 2005 a paper that set a framework for incorporating sustainable development within the planning system. Further advice followed on climate change, and since then there has been considerable legislative activity to ensure that a sustainable approach is taken across all sectors of planning, construction and development. Environmental groups have been instrumental in pressing for legislative changes and once all-party political support was broadly obtained, the legislative pressure has increased. The second phase has been marked by an acceleration of legislative changes so as to achieve an integrated approach to sustainable development. Over the period 2005- 07 there was a wealth of policy advice that is now consolidated in a series of documents.

In February 2005, PPS1 "Delivering Sustainable Development" set out the government's objectives for the planning system, whilst in March the policy document "Securing the Future" was published, aimed at an integrated approach to protect and enhance the physical and natural environment, and to use resources and energy as efficiently as possible.

These documents were accompanied by planning policy statements on key issues such as the protection of biodiversity and geological conservation, sustainable development in rural areas, waste management, renewable energy and flood risk. The May 2007 White Paper, "Planning for a Sustainable Future", was followed in December of that year by the Supplement to Planning Policy Statement 1 entitled "Planning and Climate Change", and sets out how planning should contribute to reducing emissions and stabilizing climate change, taking into account the unavoidable consequences. Tackling climate change is a key government priority for the spatial planning system, and there is now a firm basis of planning policy to guide local planning authorities and developers. The new Coalition Government committed itself to these policies in the Coalition Programme published on 20th May 2010.

Conclusions

This review of emerging theory about the purpose of spatial planning and the opportunity for a more collaborative approach to place making has indicated a number of themes, which together with earlier debates, I would identify as follows.

The role of planning committee

The role of the planning committee in local government has been endorsed, principally because of its importance to the public accountability of the planning system, but its role in both policy making and development control decisions has been heavily constrained by officers. Decisions where planning committee members reject the advice of officers are not regarded nationally as significant and implicitly are perceived as a safety valve, and a further demonstration of the public accountability of the planning system. Within the new local government governance structure the role of the committee is regarded as regulatory rather than policy making. Being regarded as "quasi – judicial", it is thought to be exempt from politicisation.

The making of planning policy

The majority of the literature supports the role of the planning system, and that of planning policy as mediating between different interests involved in development and urban growth. Notwithstanding the considerable changes in the planning system since the 1970`s that role has not been challenged, but the extent to which the planning system is able to adapt to new circumstances or alternatively acts as a constraint on spatial transformations required by economic and political change has been a recurring question. Plan making continues to play a role as a vehicle for providing the rationale for specific planning decisions, but there has been wide debate on the scope of these plans and the manner in which they are prepared. Healey (2007) and others argue that spatial planning practices can facilitate collective action with progressive purpose, contrasting with the more established public jurisdictional approach, but experience in Thames Gateway suggests that the emphasis upon the move to new, collaborative practices under estimates the influence of traditional government structures, and that the tension between these two systems of governance has hindered the development of local capacity to manage development processes.

Moves towards more locally focused decision- making

Since 1997 when the New Labour Government was elected there have been moves towards more locally focused decision making, but Gallent (2008) has observed that from the early 2000`s the Labour Government allowed the process of holistic planning and governance and strategic planning to drift apart and ultimately form distinct systems. The new Coalition Government has already taken steps to abolish regional spatial strategies but the dichotomy between "localism " and the need for a strategic perspective remains.

The role of officers

Hall (1993) draws attention to the influence of professionalism in the development of policy within the traditional welfare domain of local government, for example in social services and land use planning. These services epitomised the service administration nature of post war local

government and consequently were conducive to the application of uniform best practice. Both in the committee system that existed in local government prior to 2000, where the head of planning had an important role in both policy making and decisions on applications, and in the new cabinet system, the role of officers has been dominant and is probably increasing as officers play a role in the community leadership role required by the new governance. This has given rise to concerns about democratic legitimacy.

Local party politics in local government

Both as a developer and as a regulator, local government has been heavily constrained by central government policies whether in respect of the planning system or local authority finance. Governance changes, particularly the move towards a more collaborative approach could suggest an even more diminished role for local party politics. Some researchers (Lepine and Sullivan 2010) suggest that if councillors are to contribute to the good governance of communities, this does require the restoration of the political function of the councillor, which involves the management and resolution of conflict, the exercise of judgement and, in all this, engagement with citizens.

Reflections for the research project

There is no dispute that the councillor is an institutional actor in the management of urban growth and the conflicts between participants that arise in these territories. However the extent to which councillors pay a role in the mediation provided by the planning system in these conflicts is by no means certain, and regarded by some researchers as negligible or of no significance. Others without challenging this conclusion, suggest this is worrying and there are implications for democratic legitimacy and the good governance of communities. Councillors can play a role in the spatial planning system within local government in a number of ways. Firstly, as a portfolio holder for planning in the Cabinet or Executive; secondly, as a member of the Scrutiny Committee examining planning documents intended for Cabinet approval; thirdly as a member of the regulatory planning committee which determines planning applications

submitted to the Council, and finally as a ward member representing local constituents at the planning committee. Clearly based on the literature review, this under- estimates the many and varied roles that councillors do, can or could play in the management of urban growth. Some researchers have noted a pro – active role played by councillors but others are concerned that councillors may be over shadowed in community leadership roles by officers. These are worrying issues and contemporary research is only now beginning to reflect on these problem areas.

The implications of the new governance in local government for the spatial planning system

This review has identified a number of important changes to local government since the major reorganisation in 1974. These include the increased role of political parties and their importance in forming a governing administration within councils, the diminished role for the committee structure and that a number of services are now delivered outside the local government system, a concentration of power within the cabinet or executive and a diminished role for non - executive members, the importance of community leadership and the principal role accorded to local government in this.

There have also been changes in the system of town and country planning with the move towards the more over - arching concept of spatial planning, but against the background of changes in local government and governance, the following three basic questions form a context for the research:

a)   *Has the lack of local government autonomy inhibited the adoption of innovative forms of collaborative planning;*

b)   *Have councillors understood the central tenets of collaborative planning and acted upon them and*

c)   *Can local politicians who are not members of the council's executive play a more effective community leadership role by*

becoming more involved in the scrutiny of policies for space and place making.

Reflecting on these three questions the following observations are offered:

a) Planning as a regulatory activity i.e: the determination of planning applications made to the Council has survived as a committee activity although a much larger number of decisions are now delegated to officers.

b) Despite the increased politicisation within local government, the regulatory activities of the planning committee which are regarded as being "quasi – judicial" are not "whipped" and decisions are made by members based on planning law and officers` recommendations. However, where local opposition to applications is severe, political influences can play a part in decisions on applications.

c) The planning committee system is criticised, particularly by business interests, as being unpredictable and slow. Councillors are criticised as being ill informed and requiring more training. The CPA system has been used to improve the efficiency of planning committees and the planning service generally.

d) Planning policy is no longer largely determined by committee but by the cabinet taking decisions on recommendations made by the senior management team. The Core Strategies being produced under the new LDF system are more over - arching than the local plans, previously published, which were more concerned with land use allocation, and are seen as being a key part of the community leadership role of local government. However these documents may be officer- led, thereby reducing their local legitimacy.

e) Moves towards more locally focussed decision- making were apparent under the previous government with its advocacy of local area decision-

making but are likely to become more pronounced given the declared policies of the new Coalition Government. Concerns about a conflict between "localism" and a growth agenda requiring increased delivery of housing and employment land and infrastructure are now regularly expressed by business and development lobbies in the national and professional press.

f) The growth of "managerialism" in local government has meant that not only are more and more planning applications being determined by officers acting under delegated powers but the role of the senior management team in the preparation of the various documents: The Community Strategy, The Core Strategy and Economic Partnership strategies has become very pronounced, raising concerns about political legitimacy.

g) The restoration of the political function to councillors as advocated by Lepine and Sullivan (2010) in order to make local governance more accountable will have implications for the role of councillors in both preparing spatial plans and making decisions on planning applications.

Given what has been discussed in this chapter about the position or role of councillors in local government, what are the secondary or subsidiary questions that help to elaborate the major questions that can be tested through the research? The following is an attempt to summarise these:

1) Does the move from government to governance signify a de-politicisation in local government, and a reduced role for councillors, particularly those neither in cabinet nor having committee leadership roles? To what extent do councillors conform to the typology of roles ascribed to them by academic research?

2) Are Core Strategies that are intended to be over-arching in terms of the governance of the district, and not just land-use allocation documents, essentially expressions of political aspirations for the district? In these circumstances, should the strategies be politically "whipped", and what

scope is there for councillors to dissent whose wards may be critically affected? Can the Core Strategies be used to share political space, influence and power with those outside the world of the party?

3) Do councillors welcome the opportunity afforded by the Localism Bill to determine their own requirements for housing and employment within the district and to what extent are they influenced by considerations of ward and re-election?

4) In addition to membership of the planning committee, are there opportunities for councillors to become involved in place making and does party membership impede this?

5) Does the traditional argument that views councillors as the people who should make the major decisions within the planning system still hold, or should the councillor play a more collaborative role in bringing stakeholders together and broaden the area for decision taking in place making?

6) In order to exercise community leadership within their wards, will there be occasions when councillors may have to go against the policies of the party of which they are a member, and will there be occasions when there may be the need for a more flexible approach to the application of adopted Local Plan policies? To what extent does party leadership tolerate divergent views at the ward level?

7) How do councillors rate the value of the preparation of Core Strategies within the planning system, and do they feel that they have had an opportunity to contribute to the evolution of the Core Strategy? To what extent are policies proposed by senior councillors and officers and what is the scope for back- bench involvement?

8) Given that a whole range of issues, eg: employment and the journey to work area, affordable housing needs, waste, transport and infrastructure needs etc, transcend district-wide boundaries, what institutional

mechanisms are there for local authority and public agency collaboration, now that regional spatial strategies are being revoked by the Coalition Government? To what extent is such collaboration hampered by party political differences?

In my next chapter I set out my methodological approach as to how I pursue my three research questions.

Chapter 3 Research Methodology and Design

An Introduction to the Research Strategy and Research Questions

An abductive research strategy has been adopted, concentrating on a case study of the Central Oxfordshire Sub – region, in which to pursue the three major research questions that were identified from the literature review. The secondary or subsidiary questions that were also identified help to elaborate the major questions and provide a context for the research. In drafting this chapter which aims to deploy a theoretical framework for the research, the author has found helpful Blaikie (2000) *Designing Social Research Policy,* particularly Chapter 1 which deals with preparing research proposals and research design, and Peter Burnham, el al (2008) *Research Methods in Politics.* Blaikie stresses that the preparation of a research design is likely to involve many iterations, and is a cyclical rather than a linear process. Burnham et al make a similar point but emphasise that nonetheless the linear model has the great advantage of clarity. It specifies the various stages in the research process in a logical and coherent way even if there are setbacks as mistakes are discovered or the hypotheses refuted by the evidence. The main stages of this research process that have been followed are:

1. *Theory Specification*
2. *Development of hypotheses and model*
3. *Data specification*
4. *a) Design of data collection instrument*
   b) Sample design
5. *Pilot Study*
6. *a) Design of final data collection instrument*
   b) Design of final sample
7. *Data collection*
8. *Coding and checking*
9. *Data analysis*

Blaikie also emphasises the importance of stating what the research is designed to achieve, and that most social research projects will contribute to one or more of the following:

- the development of a particular area of theory or methodology;
- the collection or accumulation of a new body of information or data;
- the development of research methods or techniques;
- knowledge about or understanding of an issue or problem; and /or
- policy and practice in a particular area

The author hopes from the particular perspective of spatial planning to contribute to all of these objectives .In Chapter 1 the aims, objectives and structure of the thesis were set out, whilst from the literature review conducted in Chapter 2 three major research questions were identified. Blaikie suggests that it is useful to separate major research questions from secondary or subsidiary questions. The latter are either related to the background and context of the research, or help to elaborate the major questions. Major research questions presuppose other questions; they can sometimes also be broken down into a series of questions. The major questions are:

a)   *Has the lack of local government autonomy inhibited the adoption of innovative forms of collaborative planning;*

b)   *Have councillors understood the central tenets of collaborative planning and acted upon them and*

c)   *Can local politicians who are not members of the council`s executive play a more effective community leadership role by becoming more involved in the scrutiny of policies for space and place -making.*

The dependent variable is the influence of political affiliation on decision - making in the governance of spatial planning, and the independent variables are membership of a political party, the length of service of the councillor, the role of the councillor in local government and the relationship between the councillor and the ward that he or she

represents. Everything else that makes up the social, economic and political context and backdrop of the dependent and independent variables fits into a third category, known as intervening variables. The literature review identified the attempts of academics over a thirty - year time span to produce typifications that would help to explain the actions of local politicians and the decisions that they took, and to conceptualise the particular world of local government politics. Although this research is looking at a specific area of local government, namely spatial planning, as demonstrated in the literature review, it is subject to the same factors of governance, the politicisation of local government, the differing roles of councillors and the " modernising " ambitions of national government.

The secondary or subsidiary questions that help to elaborate the major questions were identified as follows:

1) Does the move from government to governance signify a de-politicisation in local government, and a reduced role for councillors, particularly those neither in cabinet nor having committee leadership roles? To what extent do councillors conform to the typology of roles ascribed to them by academic research?

2) Are Core Strategies that are intended to be over-arching in terms of the governance of the district, and not just land-use allocation documents, essentially expressions of political aspirations for the district? In these circumstances, should the strategies be politically "whipped", and what scope is there for councillors to dissent whose wards may be critically affected? Can the Core Strategies be used to share political space, influence and power with those outside the world of the party?

3) Do councillors welcome the opportunity afforded by the Localism Act to determine their own requirements for housing and employment within the district, and to what extent are they influenced by considerations of ward and re-election?

4) In addition to membership of the planning committee, are there opportunities for councillors to become involved in place making and does party membership impede this?

5) Does the traditional argument that views councillors as the people who should make the major decisions within the planning system still hold, or should the councillor play a more collaborative role in bringing stakeholders together and broaden the area for decision taking in place - making?

6) In order to exercise community leadership within their wards, will there be occasions when councillors may have to go against the policies of the party of which they are a member, and will there be occasions when there may be the need for a more flexible approach to the application of adopted Local Plan policies? To what extent does party leadership tolerate divergent views at the ward level?

7) How do councillors rate the value of the preparation of Core Strategies within the planning system, and do they feel that they have had an opportunity to contribute to the evolution of the Core Strategy? To what extent are policies proposed by senior councillors and officers and what is the scope for back bench involvement?

8) A whole range of issues including employment and the journey to work area, housing needs, waste, transport and infrastructure needs, transcend district-wide boundaries and what institutional mechanisms are there for local authority and public agency collaboration, now that regional spatial strategies are being revoked by the Coalition Government? To what extent is such collaboration hampered by party political differences?

The aim of the research, the objectives, the primary research questions and the subsidiary research questions are set out in tabular form at Table 1 so as to assist the reader better link the research questions with the methods and to indicate within the structure of the thesis where the research questions are discussed and explored.

Insert Table 1

An Abductive Research Strategy

Blaikie (2000) discusses four research strategies, each linked with different philosophical and theoretical traditions. These are the *inductive, deductive, retroductive and abductive,* and each provides distinctly different ways of answering research questions*.* The *inductive* approach tries to derive from collected data generalisations using inductive logic and once established they can be used to explain the occurrence of specific events. This strategy is useful for answering "what "questions but rather limited in its capacity to answer "why "questions. The *deductive* approach begins with some regularity that has been discovered and begs an explanation. The task is then to test that theory by deducting one or more hypotheses from it, and then to collect appropriate data. By this method knowledge of the social worlds is advanced by means of a trial and error process. The *retroductive* research strategy also starts with an observed regularity but seeks a different type of explanation and uses creative imagination and analogy to work back from data to an explanation. The *abductive* research strategy has a very different logic from the other three. The starting point is the social world of the social actors being investigated: their construction of reality, their way of conceptualising and giving meaning to their social world, and their tacit knowledge. We have seen how Gyford (1984), Copus (2004), Gains (2005) and others have used this approach so as to provide a systematic explanatory account of local politics.

It was decided to use an *abductive* research strategy which is to examine within a growth area the approaches that local planning authorities devise in their response to growth pressures and to what extent these approaches reflect the roles and views of councillors and the political parties of which they are members. The starting point is the political world of the councillors, their construction of reality, their way of conceptualising and giving meaning to their social world. This can only be discovered from the accounts that they provide. Individual motives and activities have to be abstracted into typical motives for typical actions in typical situations and these typifications provide an understanding of the activities and

106

provide a basis for a more systematic explanatory account. In this research the author also reflected on his own party political activity as a party member and party worker, councillor and council executive and the insights this has provided to the world of local government.

By reference to a case study of the Central Oxfordshire Sub – region which is proving to be one of the fastest growing localities in the country, where the case for and against further growth is now strongly contested, the author conducted a series of structured interviews with councillors, officers and other stake holders so as to identify the role of councillors, and their interpretation of their role in decision making, and to assess the extent to which ideological, other ideas and values influence their decision making. The final stage is to bring together these strands and analyses the role of councillors in the planning decision making process and the ideological, other ideas and values that influence them.

Research Questions and Conceptual Framework

The planning system has a critical role to play in mediating between different interests. The over – arching research question is how and to what extent do local elected members exercise political leadership where spatial strategies are contested. The secondary or subsidiary questions (or independent variables) are: In formulating this role are councillors influenced by any of the following factors:

a) their membership (or not) of a political party and its manifesto and objectives.

b) their length of time as a member of the Council and their responsibilities within the Council.

c) their involvement in the issues and events associated with : i) their electoral ward and ii) the wider community.

Conceptualising the role of councillor and the role of party politics in local government

In exercising his or her role the councillor has a number of options available in terms of how he or she performs in relation not merely towards constituents, or towards the workload of the local authority, but also towards party (if any), the local pressure groups, the officers and the community outside the particular ward. A number of attempts have been made to investigate and to summarise the wide variety of role orientations that a councillor may assume. Gyford (1984) attempted to draw these together and identified one general conclusion that did emerge from the various studies: that the choice of role orientation by councillors is not particularly associated with age, sex or social class, but rather with such factors as seniority and length of service on the council, the character of the councillor's ward and party political allegiance.

As already cautioned, like other classifications, it is not wholly watertight and individual councillors will not always fall into place within it. Gyford (1984) further added that the distinction is, at least theoretically, one that exists at a

given point in time, and is one that an individual councillor can transcend during the course of a political career. The increasing complexity of policy making may, however, make that process more difficult. Cartwright (1974) found that the effect of the introduction of corporate planning in one London Borough had been to strengthen the split between those councillors who were interested in policy and others who were interested in casework,whilst other academic research, as we saw in the literature review, has attempted to provide typifications for the governance of local government.

Gains et al (2005) suggest that the potential exists for local authorities to be independently strong and weak on the two dimensions of leadership and scrutiny. This in turn leads to the identification of four broad paths for implementation:

Low scrutiny/ low leadership: collectivist patterns of leadership and decision-making, fusion model in which neither leadership nor scrutiny is given a clear role.

Low leadership/ high scrutiny: maintains collectivist patterns of leadership but introduces patterns of control and review, collective accountability model.

Low scrutiny/ high leadership: have either transferred existing patterns of new leadership without introducing strong patterns of review, or have moved from collectivist patterns of leadership to a focussed executive without adopting the other parts of the reforms, executive autonomy model.

The separation of powers model is the fourth model, which has both well-defined leadership structures and strong forms of scrutiny and review.

This research examined whether the councils conform to any of these leadership models. Other research has examined the politicisation of local government. The case studies conducted by Copus explored the patterns of political behaviour existing within the five councils which represent all three main political parties, and where the council has adopted the leader and cabinet executive arrangements. Copus concluded that the patterns of political behaviour display the resilience of the party group when faced with changing political structures, as well as the intensity of the relationships councillors have with the group. It is that relationship which places the group at the centre of political decision – making and policy development within local government. The common theme that runs throughout each of the case studies is that the politics of the councils are conducted within the political party group before it reaches the public domain.

This politicisation of local government confirmed by Copus contrasts remarkably with the situation thirty years previously when Gyford (1984)

noted that party groups found it difficult to operate as co-ordinating devices and as policy initiators. To some extent he thought the then current development of policy committees reflected an attempt to fill this vacuum where groups have failed to do this. A key question he posed for the future of local government party politics is whether an effective policy -making role for the groups and the parties they represent, can be developed. The work of Copus suggests that the party group within local government has embraced this role, and this research examines to what extent this is reflective of the party groups within the Central Oxfordshire Sub – region.

Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences

The use of a case study requires explanation and justification. Comparative studies often do not include enough cases to allow the research question to be generically formulated. Sampling is introduced when a researcher selects a number of cases for study, rather than including the whole universe of possible cases in a study. Quantitative research often deals very explicitly with sampling, but in qualitative research this is less common. Earlier three research questions concerning spatial planning and councillors were identified. To investigate and pursue these questions a situation or case needed to be identified, where councillors are confronted with these issues, which can be observed and which is progressing towards resolution of these issues, and where analysis of this process can be carried out. Attention was drawn to the tension between networked forms of governance and the continuing importance of hierarchical relations in the governance of planning, which is one of the central themes of the research and which is explored.

Case studies are an extremely popular form of research design and are widely used throughout the social sciences. They enable the researcher to focus on a group, policy area or institution, and study it in depth over an extended period of time. While both quantitative and qualitative data

can be generated by case study design, the approach has more of a qualitative character as it can generate a wealth of data relating to one specific case. The data cannot be used to generalise about the population as a whole as the case study is not a representative sample. However the attractiveness of case studies is that data on a wide range of variables can be collected on a single group, institution or policy area. A relatively complete account of the phenomenon can be achieved. This enables the researcher to argue convincingly about the relationships between the variables and present causal explanations for events and processes. These explanations and generalisations are limited to the particular case study. It may be possible to replicate the research at a later date but it may be impossible to know whether changes in an institution, for example, are due to changes in personnel or external developments such as new government policies.

The case study approach – the detailed examination of an aspect of a historical episode to develop or test historical explanations that may be generalizable to other events – has come in and out of favour over the past five decades as researchers have explored the possibilities of statistical methods and formal models (George & Bennett 2004). Methodologically, these three methods use very different kinds of reasoning regarding fundamental issues such as case selection, operationalization of variables, and the use of inductive and deductive logic. These differences give the three methods complementary comparative advantages. Researchers should use each method for the research tasks for which it is best suited and use alternative methods to compensate for the limitations of each method.

George and Bennett (2004) pay special attention to the method of process- tracing which attempts to trace the links between possible causes and observed outcomes. In process-tracing the researcher examines histories, archival documents , interview transcripts, and other sources to see whether the causal process a theory hypothesizes or implies in a case is in fact evident in the sequence and values of the intervening variables in that case. Process- tracing might be used to test

or to explain outcomes. Later in this chapter the multi-method approach to the research is described when reviewing the purpose of the questionnaire used together with the other sources identified in process-tracing.

A case study design can be based on single or multiple cases. Carefully selected multiple cases will provide a much more robust test of a theory and can specify the conditions under which hypotheses and theories may or may not hold (Burnham et al 2008). Copus (2004) undertook five case studies taken from councils across the country that explored the patterns of political behaviour existing within these councils and the way in which the organisation and activities of the political party grouping influenced councillor activity. The research was designed to ensure that all the three main parties were represented. The number of cases appropriate in a particular research project depends on the research questions, the data available to answer these questions, the methodology appropriate to that data, as well as the general objectives. Eckstein, H. (1992) suggests that the argument for case studies as a means for building theories seems strongest in regard to precisely those phenomena with which the subfield of comparative politics is most associated: macropolitical phenomena, that is, units of political study of considerable magnitude or complexity such as nation – states and subjects virtually coterminous with them (party systems or political cultures).

In this research project a qualitative methodological approach to understanding the research objectives was taken. Guidance has been provided by the definition of qualitative research proposed by Denzin and Lincoln (1994):
"Qualitative research is an interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary and sometimes counterdisciplinary field…It is multiparadigmatic in focus. Its practitioners are sensitive to the value of the multimethod approach. They are committed to the naturalistic perspective and to the interpretive understanding of human experience. At the same time, the field is inherently political and shaped by multiple ethical and political positions."

Resources, timing and familiarity with the area have led to the choice of the Central Oxfordshire Sub- region as a case study. The intention was to examine three councils, each of them led by one of the main three parties: Oxford City Council, South Oxfordshire District Council and the Vale of White Horse District Council, but in the event concentration was on the first two as in the Vale progress on the Core Strategy was effectively shelved during the period of the research. At this stage reference is made to Skocpol (1984) who justified such an approach in the following way: "In contrast to the probabilistic techniques of statistical analysis – techniques that are used when there are very large numbers of cases and continuously quantified variables to analyse – comparative historical analyses proceed through logical juxtapositions of aspects of small numbers of cases. They attempt to identify invariant causal configurations that necessarily (rather than probably) combine to account for outcomes of interest." This has been the approach to this research.

An early advocate of the benefit of the case study method in social inquiry was Robert E Stake. His essay published in 1978 provides a vivid description of the distinctiveness of the case study.

"It is distinctive in the first place by giving great prominence to what is and what is not "the case" – the boundaries are kept in focus. What is happening and deemed important within these boundaries (the emic) is considered vital and usually determines what the study is about, as contrasted with other kinds of studies where hypotheses or issues previously targeted by the investigators (the etic) usually determines the content of the study.

But in the social science literature, most case studies feature : descriptions that are complex, holistic, and involving a myriad of not highly isolated variables; data that are likely to be gathered at least partly by personalistic observation; and a writing style that is informal, perhaps narrative, possibly with verbatim quotation, illustration, and even allusion and metaphor."

That is the approach and style attempted in the case study as set out in Chapters 4 and 5 of this thesis and in doing so, the context in which to draw generalisations has been provided but the researcher is aware that human beings are complex and their behaviour highly- context dependent so that lasting generalisations become difficult. (House, E.R. 2002).

Professor Bent Flyvbjerg (2006) has attempted to deal with five misunderstandings about case – study research that he has identified as part of an ambitious (House, E.R.2002) goal to reformulate the social sciences so that they are relevant, moral and concerned about power and conflict. He does this from an essentially hermeneutic perspective (House, E.R. 2002) and that the complex subject matter of human beings does not lend itself to the type of universal generalisations common in the natural sciences, and that instead the focus should be on narration and case study research because so much depends on context, and furthermore social science studies should include power and conflict concerns because these are at the centre of human affairs.

The five misunderstandings he identified are : (a) theoretical knowledge is more valuable than practical knowledge; (b) one cannot generalise from a single case, therefore,the single – case study cannot contribute to scientific development; (c) the case study is most useful for generating hypotheses, whereas other methods are more suitable for hypotheses testing and theory building; (d) the case study contains a bias towards verification; and (e) it is often difficult to summarise specific case studies.

His article explains and in his view corrects these misunderstandings and he concludes with the Kuhnian insight that a scientific discipline without a large number of thoroughly executed exemplar case studies is a discipline without systematic production of exemplars, and a discipline without exemplars is an ineffective one. Social science may be strengthened by the execution of a greater number of good case studies.

He also suggests a typology of strategies for the selection of samples and cases which distinguishes between A. Random selection and B. Information – orientated selection. This latter selection is separated into

four categories including as a fourth Paradigmatic cases which are defined as those where a metaphor can be developed or to establish a school for the domain which the case concerns. The researcher suggests that this case study falls within this latter category for it examines the problems for governance and collaboration in an area – the Central Oxfordshire sub – region – where a discourse of further growth needs to be stabilised in the local government system and allied agencies responsible for infrastructure. In the literature review other areas where such a discourse has begun were examined and there is some commonality but the strength of the approach is that the discourse described in the Central Oxfordshire Sub-region can be read as a narrative in its entirety, and it is from this that hypotheses can be generated which can be examined elsewhere.

Flyvbjerg reformulates the five misunderstandings to demonstrate the utility of case – studies, and they are a productive means of examining the case study and its importance and relevance to the research.

(1) Predictive theories and universals cannot be found in the study of human affairs. Concrete, context – dependant knowledge is therefore more valuable than the vein search for predictive theories and universals.

(2) One can generalise on the basis of a single case and the case study may be central to scientific development via generalisation as supplement or alternative to other methods. But formal generalisation is overvalued as a source of scientific development, whereas "the force of example"is underestimated.

(3) The case study is useful for both generating and testing of hypotheses but is not limited to these research activities alone.

(4) The case study contains no greater bias towards verification of the researcher`s preconceived notions than other methods of inquiry. On the contrary, experience indicates that the case study contains a

greater bias toward falsification of preconceived notions than verification.

(5) It is correct that summarising case studies is often difficult, especially as concerns case process. It is less correct as regards case outcomes. The problems in summarising case studies, however, are due more often to the properties of the reality studied than to the case study as a research method. Often it is not desirable to summarise and generalise case studies. Good studies should be read as narratives in their entirety.

The Multi-Method Approach to the Research and the Purpose of the Questionnaire

As explained above the qualitative approach is part of a multi-method approach which includes a quantitative questionnaire element, semi-structured in – depth interviews, some local media analysis and the analysis of planning documents. The rationale for potentially including a quantitative element in the research was to see how similar or different the councillors approached were in terms of their quantifiable opinions on the subjects included in the questionnaire. Participant observation during the public meetings also provided data on the interactions of different councillors and their perception of the issues. The data from the questionnaire analysis have been used cautiously and the advantage of the multiple methods approach has been to add rigour to the overall methodology which has not been over reliant on the questionnaire data.

Reflecting on these propositions, the description of the sub-region includes the context in which local politicians have tried to develop the local capacity to manage the development options instigated by national government. This narrative provides background to the data obtained from the questionnaire survey and interviews. The surveys took place at a critical time in the development of local capacity for the governance of the sub – region as Core Strategies were prepared, consulted on and adopted by the local planning authorities. The questionnaires enabled an analysis of the three research questions, and the interviews permitted a

deeper exploration of a number of the themes as well as contacting a number of local actors important to the narrative. The case study represents a context in which the attitudes and actions of local politicians can be examined and generalisations attempted.

The questionnaires sent to local politicians by e mail presented a discreet and courteous means of contacting them and allowed them to complete in their own time. They also presented an opportunity– and a number did – to indicate that they were prepared to be interviewed. They were extremely useful and it is hard to think of an alternative method of both contacting them and persuading them to complete the questionnaire within the resources of the thesis. In passing the researcher would mention that since being elected again a year ago, he has completed (by e mail) at least three surveys exploring political attitudes and views from research students.

As is referenced later in this chapter the finalisation of the questionnaire design and content was an iterative process. By forwarding the first draft to the three council leaders the author was able to engage with them – either by interview or by telephone – not only to revise the draft but also to discuss the governance issues that were the primary interest. The challenges facing this approach as referenced in the conclusions is that the survey will only appeal to a minority of councillors because many are not interested in spatial planning. However from his knowledge of both South Oxfordshire District Council and Oxford City Council, the researcher believes that replies from nearly all of those councillors interested in the subject were received.

The questionnaires were sent to each of the councillors during the summer of 2011 in the Oxford City, South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District councils. The questionnaire (Appendix 2) was initially discussed with the original tutor Christine Lambert and then circulated to each of the party leaders of the three councils, each of whom commented on the draft and made suggestions for improvement. These comments are recorded in the interviews included at Appendix 1. The questionnaire

then went through several further iterations (Appendix 2) before being finally forwarded to each of the councillors by email. Interviews were also conducted with those councillors who expressed an interest following the initial questionnaire contact. During the summer and autumn of 2011 the researcher attended the public sessions of the examination in public to hear at first hand the debates between parish councils, members of the public, landowners and developers about the Core Strategy. In the main, few district councillors attended these debates; apparently leaving it to the officers and instructed legal counsel to explain the stance of the council.

Interviews were conducted with a range of stakeholders identified from the published responses to the draft Core Strategies and those councillors who when responding to the questionnaire indicated that they would be willing to be interviewed. Initial contact was made by a variety of means, written letter, e mail and telephone and the interviews were conducted at a location chosen by the interviewee. The interview involved a semi- structured conversation about growth and capacity issues in the Sub-region and the individual`s perceptions and concerns about these issues.

The interview themes included:

- Background information and personal and political concerns.
- Experiences and views on statutory, voluntary and private sector organisations.
- Views on how they felt about effecting change in their ward and district council area.
- The key sources of information at neighbourhood, ward, district, sub-region and national levels.
- Their views about how the capacity issues at the Sub-regional level were being addressed.
- Their views on the planning and consultation process.

In addition to the questionnaires and interviews other sources were included. All English councils are currently engaged in producing Core Strategies for their areas, which are subject to public consultation and

scrutiny. The strategies proceed through a series of iterations that are subject to public consultation and comment by stakeholders. These are analysed by officers and the revised strategy is again subject to review by scrutiny committee, cabinet and full council. The Core Strategy as finally approved by Council is submitted to the Secretary of State and then subject to examination by an independent inspector who holds a public inquiry and makes recommendations for the final adoption of the Core Strategy. All of this material and debates are now available on the respective web sites of the individual councils.

The approach in Oxford City Council and South Oxfordshire District Council towards the growth agenda was identified by examining cabinet reports and planning documents. Then preliminary interviews were conducted with the respective leaders to explain the research project and enlist their help. This included showing them the draft questionnaire and inviting their comments. There proved helpful in revising the questionnaire. This took place in spring 2011 and the researcher attended and observed cabinet meetings that are open to the public. Councillors were interviewed individually during summer 2011 about their attitudes and values on the semi – structured basis described above, and the selection of both Oxfordshire and of councillors to interview is best described as purposive rather than random. By reference to the case study of the Central Oxfordshire Sub - region the approach to policy making and decision- making at Cabinet for both councils was examined. The debate has essentially been conducted through the cabinet meetings of the two councils since 2004 and these were examined together with specific interviews. There is a broad range of opportunities by which councillors participate. These include council, cabinet meetings, and scrutiny committee, working groups, informal contacts between officers and councillors, attendance at parish and town council meetings and in city council areas, attendance at local area meetings.

Problems and Limitations

Inevitably in a subject of a political nature there are ethical issues involved. Full consideration was given to the six key principles of ethical research that the ESRC expects to be addressed, and in devising the interviews to be conducted, the confidentiality and anonymity of respondents was respected. The six key principles of ethical research that the ESRC expects to be addressed are:

1. *Research should be designed, reviewed and undertaken to ensure integrity, quality and transparency.*
2. *Research staff and participants must normally be informed fully about the purpose, methods and intended possible uses of the research, what their participation in the research entails and what risks, if any, are involved.*
3. *The confidentiality of information supplied by research participants and the anonymity of respondents must be respected.*
4. *Research participants must take part voluntarily, free from any coercion.*
5. *Harm to research participants and researchers must be avoided in all instances.*
6. *The independence of research must be clear, and any conflicts of interest or partiality must be explicit.*

Some of those contacted did not wish to be interviewed and there was no attempt to coerce if the initial response was negative but those who did consent to interview did so enthusiastically. Given the amount of data publicly available, and that the interviews were intended to research some aspects in more depth in order to supplement the questionnaire responses, the broad canvas of the research was not adversely affected by non – respondents. Since the passing of the 2004 Planning Act there has been a dramatic improvement in the quality of planning data available from local government web sites, which has lessened the practical problems of data gathering which would have been evident in a research project of this nature even five years ago.

The Value of the Central Oxfordshire Sub-region as a Case Study

The case study affords the opportunity to explore the three dimensions identified in Chapter 1 that influence the role of local councillors in local government through the prism of spatial planning. The first of these was the British polity expressed as the relationship between central government at Westminster and local government in the Town Hall. For more than four decades national policy towards the Sub- region was expressed as one of restraint. The special character of Oxford was to be preserved by its Green Belt and limited development in the wider county area beyond. Growth was to be directed to areas such as Milton Keynes and Reading. A fundamental change of national policy took place in the 1990's when with a sideways glance at Cambridge, central government realised that the Oxford area had the propensity to nature the new high – tech firms that were needed to stimulate the British economy in an era of globalisation. Local political acceptance of this change was initially grudging and these tensions have continued to the present time.

The second dimension is the role of the political party in local government and its dominance in policy making. The Sub-region is characterised by the Labour party being the dominant political force in Oxford city, and the Conservative party in the surrounding rural districts, with the Lib Dems at times taking control during the electoral cycle. This has meant that councils have been subject to long periods of one party rule and the implications and difficulties this has created for effective scrutiny of policy.

The third dimension is the evolving spatial planning system and the new emphasis on localism and collaborative planning. Because of the strong control exercised by central government, as demonstrated by the adoption of the South East Plan by the former Labour government and which at the time of the research had not yet been repealed by its successor Coalition government, localism in policy making has been little demonstrated, much to the frustration of some local councillors. Similarly

collaboration has proved elusive as the failure of Oxford City Council and South Oxfordshire Council to agree a way forward that would deliver the proposed urban expansion of Oxford demonstrated. However the planned growth of Didcot in the southern part of the Sub-region has seen the Conservative- and Lib Dem- led riparian councils working together on an agreed strategy and policies.

The Central Oxfordshire Sub-region does provide a revealing contemporary case study of the conflicting claims of economic growth and environmental protection taking place in many parts of Britain, and the role of the local councillor in these debates.

Reflections on the Research Questions

The advent of council executives and overview and scrutiny committees has introduced a new element to the internal and external cohesion of party groups. The executive acts as focus for party loyalty for the ruling group and, whilst willing to question the executive and to challenge its decisions, ruling groups do this at a group meeting not in overview and scrutiny. This new forum does open up a potential for party groups to engage in more cross-party deliberation than the old committee system but some opposition groups see it as an arena to criticise and challenge the ruling group from a purely party political perspective. The role of overview and scrutiny in the formation of spatial planning policy in the Central Oxfordshire Sub – region has been examined. Copus concludes that political decision – making at the local level is party – based political decision -making and party politics cannot be divorced from the activities of the council as a representative institution. It is the domination of local politics and council chamber politics by national parties that prevents any distinct carving out of a specifically local dimension to governance in Britain.

The subject is of interest because of the changing styles of governance within local government and the role that councillors will have in these new forms. There has been research commissioned by the Department of

Communities and Local Government (2007) on the role of councillors in planning decision taking, but the research concentrated on what improvements could be made to the predictability and quality of local planning decisions, and did not consider to any great extent the political influence on councillors. Earlier research (1997) carried out on behalf of the Royal Town Planning Institute on "The Role Of Elected Members In Plan Making And Development Control "concentrated on good practice and the relationship between councillors and officers and was presented to the Committee on Standards In Public Life led by Lord Nolan who reported in July 1997, and who offered positive support to the role of councillors in planning decision making.

Research by Short (1996) in a case study of Central Berkshire introduced a preliminary typology of responses by councils and councillors to the management of urban growth, Healey (2003) examining the Cambridge shire area and Walker (2008) studying the Bristol sub – region, and others have offered their reflections. There is no dispute that the councillor is an institutional actor in the management of urban growth and the conflicts between participants that arise in these territories. However some regard the extent to which councillors play a role in the mediation provided by the planning system in these conflicts as negligible or of no significance. Others, without challenging this conclusion, suggest that this is worrying and there are implications for democratic legitimacy and the good governance of communities.

The Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 requires that local planning authorities prepare a Core Strategy (CS) for their area. The CS must have regard to the Regional Spatial Strategy prepared for that area, and the CS should comprise a spatial vision and strategic objectives for the area; a spatial strategy; core policies; and a monitoring and implementation framework with clear objectives for achieving delivery (para. 2.9). These requirements pose enormous challenges for both councillors and officers within local government. The research by means of a case study has sought to examine the manner in which the CS is prepared and advanced, the extent to which councillors are involved in

the process, the relationships with officers and the local community, and the political tensions that are generated by the mediation required to adopt a CS, prior to its examination by an independent Inspector.

A clearer understanding of the role of ideological and other ideas and values that influence spatial planning will help all those involved better to understand the evolution of policy and practice and the changing direction that it is now taking place This examination provides an opportunity to consider the role of representative democracy in spatial planning, which has evolved through a state – centred model focussed on welfare delivery and support for a mixed economy to what some academics see as a new mode of governance, which recognises the multiplicity of ways which link citizens, business and state, and that representative democracy is recognised as absolutely necessary but not sufficient in itself to respond to the complexity of the issues facing contemporary political communities (Healey 2011).

Chapter 4 The emergence of a growth agenda in The Central Oxfordshire Sub – region and the problems for governance and collaboration.

In Chapter 1 dealing with the Research Design, the background and aims of the research were described. Chapter 2 reviewed debates about governance, particularly with regard to local government ,and the move to new collaborative practices in spatial planning was discussed in comparison with traditional government structures. Chapter 3 dealing with methodology provided the justification for a case study. In this chapter the case of the Central Oxfordshire Sub – region is examined as a basis for exploring questions of governance and collaboration in a growth area. The chapter traces how the spatial planning objects and objectives of government for the Sub-region have significantly changed, and the difficulties that these changes have met as government attempted to create a political network which would permit the discourse of further growth to be stabilised in the local government system and allied agencies responsible for infrastructure. Allied to this is what institutional framework exists, within which local politicians can exercise leadership where there are conflicts about planning strategy, to promote collaboration and consensus.

The problems of decision-making in the sphere of spatial planning for any particular generation of politicians were eloquently summarised by the experienced administrator Sir Geoffrey Vickers in 1965 :

"The extent to which competing claims for land use frustrate each other and limit our initiative in our ever more crowded island today reflects a century of past decisions; and our initiative or inertia today will help to determine the degree and kind of choice which will be open to the next generation. We are the architects of our children's opportunities, if not of our own."

Introduction

Healey (2006) argues that spatial planning practices can facilitate collective action with progressive purpose, contrasting with more established public jurisdictional authorities where planning is understood as neutral mediation of the public interest. In a study of the Cambridge Sub- region that had become a major growth area in London's outer metropolitan area, she illustrates a situation with a substantial local capacity to manage development processes in a situation where there are always conflicting values and claims about development options and trajectories. This local capacity has been brought into existence, even though there is no formal organisation to represent it, and even though it extends across several administrative jurisdictions.

Oxford, which is almost equi-distant from London and Cambridge, experienced these growth pressures much later. The Cambridge Science Park was founded by Trinity College in 1970, whereas the Oxford Science Park was not founded until 1990, and did not become a significant employer until 2000. Even in the mid 1990s, the common perception of Oxford was of a university city surrounded by a Green Belt with growth pressures being directed eastwards to Aylesbury and Milton Keynes, southwards to Reading and westwards to Swindon. However during this period, successive county structure plans had confirmed Didcot, straddling the London to Bristol railway, and equi-distant between Oxford and Reading, as a growth point (Plan 1). Decisions about the direction of growth that the town should take, which were the responsibility of Oxfordshire County Council, the structure planning authority, had caused major controversy both in the town and among the villages that bordered the town, and this culminated in a House of Commons debate initiated by Robert Jackson, the then Conservative MP for the Wantage parliamentary constituency in which Didcot was located. The debate proved remarkably prescient, both about the forces that would confront Oxfordshire and the contrasting approaches to the

governance of growth that would be adopted by the two main national political parties.

The debate on planning in Oxfordshire took place on the evening of 11th March 2001 and was initiated by Robert Jackson. He began the debate by outlining the scale of growth that had been experienced in the county: "Oxfordshire has been the construction site for some 23,000 new houses, and over the period immediately ahead, until 2006, it will be required to accommodate a further 14,000, with another 11,700 to come by 2011. The two decades between 1990 and 2010, in other words, have seen the equivalent of the construction in Oxfordshire of a new city the size of Corby, with some 50,000 new inhabitants."

The MP pointed to one piece of evidence that he suggested showed that Oxfordshire was being overdeveloped. Between 1991 and 1999, the county's population increased by 45,000. Some 41% of that increase can be attributed to natural change, or the normal demographic development of the local population. However, a striking 59% of that additional population represented net civilian migration. The MP criticised what he called the half-century-long tradition of centralised planning, which went back to the Town and Country Planning Act 1947, and pointed to an alternative approach that was being developed by the Conservative Party in opposition. This would give discretion to local authorities on how much housing should be built; they would be required to secure sufficient new accommodation for forecasted local population growth, but incremental building to support economic development will be a matter for local people to decide. The district councils will be in the lead, while the county councils will have a strategic co-ordinating role. At the same time, the views of town and parish councils will be given greater weight, and local residents will be given a right of counter-appeal when a proposed development breaches due process or a duly adopted comprehensive local plan.

The then Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Beverley Hughes) responded and, having

reviewed the difficulties that had been experienced in Oxfordshire in agreeing both the scale and the direction of growth, concluded that it was vital that a system was retained that required each local authority to accept in a corporate and shared manner some of the responsibility for the needs and future requirements of the region as a whole. "That is the type of system that we have tried to institute and on which we are making progress."In this debate the opposing views of the two principal political parties towards the governance of growth were starkly set out, and the debate provides a useful context for the planning issues that would dominate in Oxfordshire over the next decade. During the debate on the Planning & Compulsory Purchase Bill in the House of Lords, Lord Bradshaw, (2004) also an Oxfordshire County Councillor, referred to the loss of local accountability involved in the south east region, citing the example of decisions in Oxfordshire being "sucked away and placed in Guildford". [Hansard, HL, 6 January 2004, col. 119].

The Central Oxfordshire Sub - region was a relatively new spatial concept adopted for the purposes of spatial planning at the sub – regional level and incorporated in the South East Plan (SEP) adopted in 2009. At its core is the city of Oxford and its suburbs, bisecting it from north to south are the rivers Cherwell and Thames, and the A34 trunk road from the Midlands to the south coast ports. Threading through the north eastern quadrant is the M40 London to Birmingham motorway. A location plan showing this area is attached at Plan 1. The area extends to market towns in the north at Bicester, to the west at Witney, to the south at Abingdon and east at Wallingford. The railway town of Didcot is on the southern edge whilst Newbury which is outside the Sub – region lies to the south.

A central theme of the South East Plan is a need to capitalise on the unique economic potential of Oxford as a world class university city at the centre of this Sub-region, and to improve housing availability and affordability. To achieve these aims a review of the Oxford Green Belt would be required. The Central Oxfordshire Sub-region had a relatively short life in that by announcing a commitment to abolish Regional Spatial

Strategies on 27th May 2010, the Communities Secretary of State Eric Pickles effectively abolished the concept. However the loss of the title does not change the circumstances on the ground, and the area still demonstrates a strong momentum for economic growth. This study focuses on part of the Sub – region, that of Oxford city and its hinterland to the south, extending as far as Didcot, and includes Oxford City and South Oxfordshire District Council. The area is shown on Plan 2.

Healey, P. (2007) describes the power of spatial strategy to shape attention and maintain a degree of local control over the scale and form of urban development in the face of external pressures. In her case study of the Cambridge Sub-region, the first guiding strategy drawn up in mid century sought to "cap " the growth of the city and disperse growth pressures elsewhere in the region is described . Similarly in the Central Oxfordshire Sub – region, this "cap" had been sought in mid century, but unlike the Cambridge Sub- Region survived for more than fifty years from 1947 to 1999. This policy of containment of the city had the support of government and the majority of local authorities in the Sub – region. In this chapter the background to this consensus is described as well as the changes which have occurred in the last decade that have questioned the policy of containment on the basis of economic performance and comparisons with more successful European economic sub – regions.

The geography of the Sub – region

The area between Oxford and Newbury is representative of the finest scarp and vale country in southern England, with regular and abrupt scarps and well – developed vales. Southwards from the Oxford Clay Vale are the Upper Jurassic scarps, the Vales of White Horse and the Lower Thame, the Berkshire Downs and the Chilterns. The area is also representative of the agricultural landscapes of southern England. Oxford is the single large urban area and its location on the A34 trunk road has been in contemporary times the greatest single factor in urban development. With a population of more than 150,000 including its suburban areas, its growth from about 50,000 in 1901 reflects the

dependence of urban development on road transport. To the east of the ancient university city and physically separated from it by the Cherwell /Thames has arisen an industrial complex based on motor – vehicle assembly and a host of related and subsidiary enterprises.

Concerns about the industrialisation of Oxford are almost as old as the modern city itself. Brunel, it is alleged, was dissuaded from siting his railway works at Oxford, which instead were located at Swindon, by the opposition of the Oxford colleges. On the 8th August 1928 a cartoon was published in the popular magazine Punch, which showed Mr Punch sitting on a bench on a hillside, a newspaper in his hands, whilst below him, the towers and spires of a historic city were being engulfed by the smoking chimneys of innumerable factories. Standing besides him, his walking stick pointing to the panorama below, is a severe, broad shouldered man, an American tourist. He asks, "Pardon me, sir, but can you put me wise to the name of this thriving burg?" Mr Punch replies "I regret to say, sir, this is Oxford" (Appendix 9). The publication of the cartoon had been prompted by the news that a trust had been formed to protect the beauties of Oxford and its environs, and had appealed for a sum of £250,000 to purchase the land required for this purpose. The formation of the trust reflected the anguish at the time, that nothing other than land ownership could control the urban expansion then occurring. Between 1921 and 1941 the population of Oxford almost doubled, nearly entirely predicated on the growth of the car industry. The development of the car industry was almost an accident beginning with William Morris working out of a former barracks building off the High Street, and then at Cowley, introducing the mass production techniques brought from the American automotive capital of Detroit.

Beyond and south of Oxford the pace of development was much less, and even in 1968 it could be remarked, "This is the first area of real countryside to be encountered west of London, where the rural character does not as yet have to be consciously fostered by careful preservation in Green Belts and the like". Around Oxford, however there were concerns that its character had to be preserved by the application of Green Belt

policy. This will be reviewed shortly but at this point it is helpful to review how planning in the sub – region has evolved and the justification for this broader approach to resolving the problem of urban growth.

Sub – regional planning

In 1964 a new ministry was created by the then Prime Minister Harold Wilson: the Department of Economic Affairs with George Brown MP at its helm, charged with preparing the National Plan and providing regional co – ordination. Early in 1965 a series of economic planning councils were set up, based on the old standard regions that had been used for statistical purposes. Members were appointed representing different groups in each region and there were the counterpart, the economic planning boards comprising civil servants seconded from London. The South East Economic Planning Council published its report in August 1967: "A Strategy for the South East". The strategy was based on four pairs of sectors for future growth, all radiating outwards from London along major lines of communication. Oxford was not included in a growth sector but a series of policies was outlined.Oxford's position as a university and cultural town should be enhanced, if possible, but the dependence on a single industry - the motorcar industry - caused concern. Further industrial development in the city should be prevented and a Green Belt approved around Oxford. Employment needs could be catered for by directing light industry – unconnected with the motor industry - to Bicester and Didcot and possibly, in the future, to Banbury to the north.

From the 1970`s development in Oxfordshire was guided by this approach, and Witney and Wantage (but not Banbury) were added to the "country towns" of Bicester and Didcot as the preferred locations for new development. Overall the level of development was to be restrained and the Oxford Green Belt was a key element of this strategy which was adopted in successive structure plans for the county through to the late 1990`s. In March 1993 shortly after the opening of the M40 motorway to Birmingham, the Department of the Environment in its consultative

regional planning guidance for the South East affirmed that the M40 passed through an area of environmental restraint and should be regarded as a corridor of movement rather than development. In December 1998 the new regional agency SERPLAN published its sustainable development strategy for the South East that was to provide advice on updating the strategy for the region, but Oxford featured neither in the Areas of Expansion Pressure nor the priority areas for economic development. The Oxfordshire Structure Plan 2011 adopted in August 1998 reiterated the "country towns" strategy of diverting growth from Oxford City, and that the Oxford Green Belt had been successful in preventing major development that would have been detrimental to the character and landscape setting of Oxford.

It was not until 1999, when the late Professor Stephen Crow chaired the Public Examination Panel into the Regional Planning Guidance for the South East, and whose report was published in September 1999, that the strategy for Oxford that had been extant for some fifty years was questioned. The panel recommended that the Thames Valley districts of Oxfordshire, including the City of Oxford, be included within the Western Wedge sub region, lying in the angle between the M3 and M40 "to some extent to complete a tidy picture, although there was in fact scarce reference to them at the examination " and to be named the " Middle Thames Area". The panel noted that during the 1990`s the area's economic profile had altered significantly with a large increase in business services employment and hi – tech, knowledge based industries. In the context of the UK, the performance of the "Western Wedge " was impressive, but appeared less so in comparison with other EU regions, and that if the UK were to improve on its relative under – performance, measures would be needed to ensure the continued growth of its most economically buoyant region. Central to this is the economic performance of the "Western Wedge."

This theme was emphasised by the South East Development Agency, one of the agencies set up by the Labour government elected in 1997, which reported in December 2002 and identified the "Western Wedge" as

one of the most important drivers of growth in both London and the South East.They recommended that the future of the area should be actively pursued through planning policies to secure economic growth and regeneration. The Deposit Draft of the Oxfordshire Structure Plan 2016 published in September 2003, and the last structure plan to be published for the county, emphasised that the economic development strategy for Oxfordshire recognised the area's economic growth.

Nationally changes were taking place in the governance of planning, and in December 2001 the Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions published the planning green paper "Planning: Delivering a Fundamental Change". County structure plans were to be abolished and strategic policy would be set at the regional level through regional strategies. The Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act passed by Parliament in May 2004 provided the legislative basis for these changes. Two years later in March 2006 the South East England Regional Assembly submitted a draft plan to the government. Central Oxfordshire was identified as one of the sub regional strategy areas and the aim was to capitalise on Oxford's unique potential as a world class university city.

Earlier in 2003 in a presentation to stakeholders SEEDA representatives posed the question "How best to exploit the dynamic and innovative economy of the area? "Three suggestions were put forward. The first was to continue building steadily on the Sub – region's strengths; the second was to adopt a more expansionist approach and the third was to focus more on the environment and export growth out of the Sub – region. Over the next two years the second, expansionist option gathered more momentum.

Support for this questioning of the policy of containment came in the Interim Report of the Barker Review of Land Use Planning published by the Treasury in July 2006 . Oxford was chosen as one of the case studies for the analysis of the impact of planning control on the country's economic performance. The authors noted how many of the same issues

that affect cluster development around Cambridge were to be found in the developments around Oxford. It was estimated that more than 100 technology – based companies had originated in Oxford's two universities and seven research laboratories employing 9000 people and with a business turnover of more than one billion pounds. Like Cambridge, Oxford had also been subject to a strategy of containment in recent decades, centred around a city with tightly defined borders circled by a large stretch of Green Belt. The population had risen from 108,000 in 1981 to around 140,000 in 2001.Unlike in Cambridge, the extensive Green Belt had precluded any significant relaxation in containment in the county, despite the worsening of congestion in the city centre and the difficulty in securing land for housing in an area with some of the highest house prices in the South East. This had resulted in a tightening of local labour markets to the detriment of the local economy.

Although 40% of high – technology firms in Oxfordshire were established before 1993, it was only comparatively recently that local authorities had taken this apparent clustering into account. In 1987 the Structure Plan was amended to permit exceptions for science based industries which could show a special need to be located close to Oxford University or to other research facilities in Central Oxfordshire, but Baker concluded that these policies had not solved many of the remaining issues, with land restrictions likely to impede further development. However Oxford had benefited from some planning flexibility (compared with Cambridge), when in 1988 the General Development order was modified to allow change of class from B2 (general industry) to B1 (business offices) without further planning permission being necessary. This facilitated the rapid growth of the Milton Park Business Park near Didcot on the A34 in the 1990s. By 1999 employment had increased to over 5000 on an extensively landscaped park covering more than 100 hectares.

The Barker Review noted the criticism from some commentators that the growth of Didcot from 16,000 to 23,500 in 2001 had resulted in many people commuting into Oxford City from the town (although there is a good train service between the two centres) on a daily basis and that

Oxford by 2001 had 27,000 more jobs than residents. As noted later in this chapter, Didcot has been included in the Government's New Growth Points programme and current planning proposals for the Didcot area would double the number of jobs at Milton Park. The ability of the Didcot area to be a counter – magnet to Oxford as part of a continuing policy of containment was a major issue of debate at the South East Plan EiP.

Green Belt Policy

The first Green Belt scheme was launched in England by the London County Council in 1935, adopted by Abercrombie in his Greater London Plan (1944), and subsequently given statutory protection by the 1947 Act. In August 1955 the Local Government Minister Duncan Sandys issued his circular (Circular 42 / 55) giving firm government backing to Green Belts. It was regarded as a milestone in English planning history and at the time was seen as a great victory for the Council for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE). He listed three reasons for the establishment of a Green Belt when he published the circular. These were: firstly, to check the growth of a large built up area; secondly, to prevent neighbouring towns from merging into one another; and thirdly, to preserve the special character of a town. A Green Belt was to be an area of land, near to and sometimes surrounding a town, which was to be kept open by permanent and severe restriction on building. The last principal government advice was in January 1995 during the premiership of John Major, when a revised version of "PPG2 Green Belts" was published, and has proved to be one of the longest serving planning policy documents. (These principles have been reiterated in the National Planning Policy framework [NPPF] published in 2012).

Even during the deregulatory policy environment of the Thatcher era, Green Belt policy was not seriously challenged, although some Labour ministers gave the impression that building homes in the Green Belt was a test of their political muscularity. Richard Crossman, when appointed Minister of Housing in Harold Wilson`s first cabinet in 1964, permitted Birmingham City Council to build a large housing state at Chelmsey Wood in the Warwickshire Green Belt, and boasted in his diaries of the

tough decision he was prepared to take, whilst Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott at the beginning of his time in office in 1997 allowed a major housing scheme in the Newcastle Green Belt. The journalist Lynsey Hanley in her wryly sardonic book "Estates" writes about Chelmsey Wood where she grew up with her parents, and the decision by Richard Crossman. "He never quite went as far as to say that the green belt was a bourgeois luxury, but the eagerness with which he signed off great tracts of virgin land to local authorities which only a few years earlier had had their planning applications refused by the Conservative government ,suggested that he felt as much" .

Green belt policy seems to have two faces. Local politicians and local residents see the restrictions on development in green belts as permanent. Councillor Jerry Patterson, a former Leader and Planning Committee Chairman of the Vale of White Horse District Council, Oxfordshire writing to the Oxford Times in July 2006 about the prospect of a review of the green belt boundaries around Oxford opined: "That is a dangerous suggestion as the whole point of a Green Belt is that it should be as good as permanent to ensure that it safeguards the individuality of communities and avoids urban sprawl." He concludes, "Once you start to review it, where do you end?" But professional planners see it differently. Paul Hudson, who at the time was chief planner at the Department for Communities and Local Government, in an interview in 2006 observed, "The functions of Green Belts is principally to prevent sprawl and coalescence of urban settlements. It's not for countryside protection though these two coincide. Greenbelt policy provides for exceptions in tightly defined circumstances. Once housing takes place, it risks undermining the original policy. But reviewing green– belt boundaries, particularly inner boundaries must be a function of the forward planning process".

The Oxford Green Belt

The review of the Oxford Green Belt is a contemporary struggle which says much about the attitudes to the Green Belt of all three major parties and is being fought out to the south of Oxford. The planning history of the

136

evolution of the Oxford Green Belt merits a brief examination because it demonstrates the conflicts and political differences that New Labour's planning governance, based on the regional spatial strategies, has brought to a Conservative - run shire county that at its centre has Oxford and its dreaming spires where the city council has traditionally been run by the Labour party.

The genesis for Oxford's Green Belt lay in Thomas Sharp's 1948 report to the Oxford City Council, "Oxford Replanned" which recommended the relocation of the motor industry out of the city, that its population be kept below 100,000, and no further development other than for rural purposes be allowed in a belt of countryside around the city some 16 kilometres wide. Thomas Sharp was a well- known planning consultant at that time and had prepared plans for Exeter, Durham and Chichester amongst others. He was appointed by the City Council in 1945 and was well aware of the difficulties that his recommendations posed to the City Council and others. In the prefatory note to his report he recorded, "With a full sense of the responsibility that has been placed on me, I have suggested whatever measures seem to me to be necessary, without regard to the power of those who may be affected by them. I hope that the City Council may take a similar course".

It was not until 1958 that formal proposals for an Oxford Green Belt were submitted to the Minister following the publication of Circular 42/55. The process was torturous; in 1961 an inquiry was held, and in 1975 the concept of a Green Belt for Oxford was approved as an amendment to the approved County Development Plan. The belt was narrower than Sharp had recommended, and was only 10 kilometres at its widest. The inner boundaries had still to be finalised, and this would take many years. In 1988 the Department of the Environment published a document, "The Green Belts "and described Oxford as a city with a dual personality: famous as a university town and as a prosperous centre. The Green Belt was described as seeking to protect it from growing any bigger and to protect its character and setting. There was therefore for nearly thirty years widespread support for the Oxford Green Belt.

During that time there was major employment growth in the south of the county, in an area bisected by the A34 trunk road from the West Midlands to Portsmouth and Southampton, which now boasts the strap line 'Science Vale UK', and includes the Culham Science Centre, Milton Park, and the Harwell Science and Innovation Centre. The vale is the home to thousands of jobs, many in high – tech and research. In March 2006 the local authorities that made up the South East Assembly submitted the South East Plan to the Secretary of State. A central feature of the plan was a Central Oxfordshire Sub – region centred on the city but including a large area to the north and south, which was to accommodate the employment and housing growth. In drawing up the plan two alternatives were considered for growth in Central Oxfordshire: (a) growth at Didcot, Wantage/ Grove, Bicester and within the built-up area of Oxford; and (b) an urban extension to Oxford with a review of the Green Belt. The draft plan proposed keeping the Oxford Green Belt unchanged, and rejected the urban expansion option.

An independent panel of experts examined the plan and were impressed by the case put forward by the Oxford City Council, the Oxford colleges who owned land to the south of the city, and business interests, that land had to be released from the Oxford Green Belt to accommodate the housing needs of what had become one of the strongest growth areas in the country. The Oxfordshire Branch of the CPRE put forward a strong contrary view. The Panel reported in August 2007 and recommended an urban extension of Oxford, which would require a selective review of the Green Belt, and joint working between the Oxford City Council and South Oxfordshire District Council within which the proposed development area was situated. A number of exceptional circumstances were identified by the Panel to justify what they emphasised was a selective and not a strategic review. These included a significant potential within nationally important science, technology and education sectors; a significant excess of jobs already over working population; staff recruitment and retention problems reported by key business and public services; housing affordability ratios in excess of the regional average and some of the

highest house prices in the region.

The Panel also recommended that the implications of the urban extension should be tested through a Sustainability Appraisal and an Appropriate Assessment, but this work was not done. Significantly the Panel did not accept that even larger growth in the Didcot area could meet the housing needs of Oxford. Some firms such as RM plc (computer manufacturers and IT) and the publisher Francis Taylor had relocated to the Milton Park near Didcot from Oxford, but employment dispersal from Oxford featured little in the EiP Panel's consideration and Oxford's significance as an employment growth centre was firmly emphasised.

At the end of July 2008 the then Communities Secretary Hazel Blears supported the plans outlined in the EiP Panel's report for 4000 dwellings south of Grenoble Road, on Green Belt land near the Kassam stadium, the home of Oxford United Football Club and once owned by the newspaper magnate the late Captain Robert Maxwell MC. The Secretary of State charged Oxford City Council and SODC to identify land to be removed from the green belt to facilitate an urban expansion of Oxford. The announcement was couched in contemporary terms that extolled the regenerative benefits for Oxford, but to many such as the CPRE it looked like an old fashioned *land grab* by a Labour council into the shire county, reminiscent of those by Birmingham and Manchester in the nineteen fifties and sixties. (28) The South East Plan housing figures 2006- 2026 for South Oxfordshire included 4,000 south of Oxford, 6,000 at Didcot, 2,240 in the rest of the Central Oxfordshire Sub- Region and 2,700 for the rest of the district, making a total of 14,940 dwellings.

In September 2008 Oxford City Council asked the Boundary Committee for England to move its boundaries so that it would include the proposed development south of Grenoble Road, near the Kassam Stadium. The last change had been in 1986, when Rose Hill and Littlemore moved from South Oxfordshire to City Council control. In a letter to the Boundary Committee the City Council chief executive Peter Slomain said that he was concerned that South Oxfordshire was not approaching the plan in a

"collaborative way" .

Plan making and problems of governance

In its representations to Hazel Blears in October 2008 (30) on the proposed alterations, Oxford City Council expressed its concern that the urban extension was not being delivered through a joint Development Plan Document, which would have been possible under the new planning regime introduced by the Planning & Compulsory Purchase Act. 2004 The city council felt that the approach proposed by the Secretary of State weakened its position and would allow South Oxfordshire District Council, the shire district to the south of the city, within which all of the proposed Urban Expansion would be accommodated, to continue without the full involvement of the city council, even though there would be a need to integrate the Urban Extension into Oxford city. The city council had discussed with the other land- owners, Thames Water and Magdalen College, the need to work together.

On 21st November 2008 Oxford City Council submitted its Core Strategy to the Secretary of State. The other Oxfordshire Councils were later than this. South Oxfordshire District Council considered its draft Core Strategy in March 2009, whilst the Vale of White Horse District Council, although having published its Preferred Options document in January 2009, was not at that time due to publish its Core Strategy until the summer of 2011.

In May 2009 the final draft of the South East Plan was published by the Government Office for the South East (GOSE). A selective review of Green Belt boundaries was to take place on the southern edge of Oxford through one or more coordinated development plan documents. SODC and Oxford City Council would carry out collaboratively a review and the subsequent plan – making to a timetable and in a form to be agreed by GOSE. The lead Councils would involve other relevant parties in the process as appropriate. Earlier that year in March 2009 SODC had published its first draft of the Core Strategy that examined options to accommodate the SE Plan housing figures, and had shown an area of

search for the Urban Expansion (shown at Plan 3). The SODC's cabinet member for planning, pledged that her council would continue to fight the scheme, but that if the final version of the South East Plan retained the Government requirement, her Council had no choice but to make provision for it. However the version of the South East Plan published in May 2009 included a caution that if overwhelming evidence demonstrated the unsuitability of the initial area of search, the Central Oxfordshire authorities would ensure that a wider review (the form and extent of which would be agreed with GOSE) took place in order to identify and deliver one or more alternative suitable locations by 2026.

In July 2009 South Oxfordshire District Council together with the CPRE, the University of Oxford and J A Pye (the latter two claimants were promoting alternative development sites) made a legal challenge to the inclusion of the Oxford urban extension in the SEP. The council's complaint was that in seeking to allocate the urban extension there was a failure by the Secretary of State to assess properly the impacts of the urban extension to the south of Oxford and reasonable alternatives to it as required by law (the Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations 2004) and as anticipated by the Panel.

The error was accepted by the Secretary of State, in particular, that there was a failure to comply with the procedural requirement of assessing reasonable alternatives to the SDA to the south of Oxford and the consequent selective Green Belt review. The Treasury Solicitor agreed that all references to the south of Oxford SDA should be removed from the SEP. However the proposed wording in the Consent Order retained reference to the 4,000 homes in Central Oxfordshire. The council challenged the Treasury Solicitor about the retention of the additional 4,000 homes in the Central Oxfordshire sub-total. Exchanges between the two continued through the summer of 2010, but in July 2010 the Treasury Solicitor indicated that as Regional Strategies had been revoked, there was nothing for the challenges to quash or remit, and the council and other parties were invited to withdraw the challenges. This did not occur and the Consent Order has not been published.

Oxford City Council had submitted its Core Strategy, predicated on the Urban Expansion taking place to the south of but outside the City boundary, as already indicated, to the Secretary of State on 21st November 2008, but consideration of this by an Inspector was later suspended until the outcome of the legal challenges that had been made to the Central Oxfordshire Sub – regional policy of the South East Plan by a number of parties including SODC and CPRE (Oxfordshire). The panel report had suggested that the urban extension to the south of Oxford should be delivered through a Development Plan Document (DPD) produced jointly by Oxford City Council and SODC, but the proposed changes put forward by Communities Secretary Hazel Blears did not specifically endorse the use of a joint DPD but referred to the local authorities " working collaboratively ".

SODC no doubt when the draft core strategy was published early in 2009 took the pragmatic view that it would not get its core strategy endorsed by an independent Inspector following an EiP without the inclusion of the Urban Extension of Oxford. In September 2009 CPRE (Oxfordshire) announced that it had been advised that the Secretary of State, in response to the legal challenge to the South East Plan, submitted by them, had conceded that insufficient consideration had been given to alternative sites, and that the strategy for 4,000 new houses south of Grenoble Road would have to be reconsidered. The success of this challenge and subsequent changes introduced by the new Coalition Government in its Localism Bill persuaded SODC to drop the Grenoble Road proposals from the final consultative draft of its core strategy published in December 2010. The South East Plan housing figures for the rest of the district had been accepted, but the 4,000 dwellings south of Oxford had been dropped.

In the same month the Inspector's Report dealing with the Oxford City Council Core Strategy was published. The examination of the Oxford Core Strategy had been one of the longest running examinations in the country, because of a number of legal challenges and the changes of

policy resulting from the election in May 2010 of the Coalition Government. The Core Strategy had been submitted to the Secretary of State on 21st November 2008, and was subject to examination by two independent Inspectors appointed by him. Examination hearing sessions were held in July and September 2009 and September 2010. The final Inspector's Report was received on 21st December 2010. The Core Strategy was found to be sound, subject to a limited number of changes. The conclusions of the report in relation to housing and employment are highly relevant and can be summarised as follows:

a) South Oxfordshire Council has commenced work on the South of Oxford SDA, and the Inspector said that he had no evidence before him to suggest that provision for the 4,000 extra dwellings from this urban extension cannot be made before the end of the plan period. It is unclear as to how much employment provision should be made within the SOSDA. It is too early for any firm decisions on that matter. That will be for the future master - planning of the area.

b) The Inspector concluded on housing land supply that the Core Strategy was soundly based, fully justified and would be effective in delivering the required levels of housing. Oxford City Council had indicated that the number of homes likely to be built in the city over the plan period was more than 1,000 homes higher than the original 8,000 proposed.

c) How much employment land? Similar specific requirements to the housing numbers are not provided in any direct form for employment growth in the city itself. Rather, the emphasis in guidance reflects Oxford's evident strengths. The RSS is supportive of Central Oxfordshire striving to be a world leader in education, science and technology by building upon the Sub-region's economic strengths (Policy CO1). Policies CO1 and CO2 and the supporting paragraphs, 22.1 to 22.11, highlight the sub-region's world class economy and establish the role of the city and its importance to the sub-region and to the wider south east. Paragraph 22.5 of the RSS indicates that "Oxford itself will be allowed to grow physically

and *economically* (the Inspector's emphasis) in order to accommodate its own needs, contribute to those in the wider region and help maintain its world class status".

d) This reflects SEEDA's Regional Economic Strategy and the city's position in the Oxford to Cambridge arc, the sub-region's designation as a Regional Economic Strategy Diamond for Investment and Growth and the identification of the city as a Regional Hub. Whilst recognising the need to protect and enhance Oxford's historic character and environment, guidance clearly envisages continued employment development to enhance the city's economic role. Understandably, RSS Policy CO2 expects new employment in Oxford to take place primarily on previously developed land and former safeguarded land and/ or in conjunction with mixed-use schemes.

e) The RSS identifies a guidance figure of a minimum of 18,000 additional new jobs being created within the sub-region to 2016. No figure is given for the city itself, though the County Council suggests that this would equate to about 7,000 –7,500. Undoubtedly, for national and strategic reasons, Oxford has an important role to play in the future prosperity of the area and further economic growth is envisaged to reflect its position. There is no convincing evidence that a policy of restraint within the city would be appropriate. There can be no doubt that the Core Strategy is right to provide for a degree of continued growth.

Two observations can be made on these conclusions:
a) The Inspector's assumption that South Oxfordshire Council was making progress on the South of Oxford SDA was incorrect. The South of Oxford SDA was dropped from the South Oxfordshire Core Strategy published in the same month that the Inspector reported.
b) The housing implications of Oxford's continued economic growth, which had already created the need for 4,000 extra dwellings to be provided outside the city and which are not being met, are not convincingly explored in the Inspector's report.

The South Oxfordshire District Council Proposed Submission Core Strategy published in December 2010 makes it clear that following the revocation of Regional Core Strategies in July 2010, different approaches to the level of new housing in the district were assessed, but the Council had decided to continue with the housing delivery targets that were set out in the South East Plan, other than the proposed South of Oxford SDA.

This complex situation had been made even more difficult by the series of legal challenges that had been made by Cala Homes to the letter of the 27th May 2010 from the Communities Secretary Mr Eric Pickles informing local planning authorities of the Government's intention to abolish the regional spatial strategies and expecting them to have regard to this as a material consideration. The Court of Appeal handed down its judgement on the 27th May 2011. The Court declared that the proposed abolition of the strategies was not a material consideration in plan – making. It said the intention must be viewed in the context of both the Localism Bill's early stage in the legislative process and the need to undertake strategic environmental assessment of the effects of revoking the strategies. It held that significant weight could only be attached to the intention in exceptional cases and even then, very clear and cogent reasons for doing so should be given .

South Oxfordshire District Council

Before describing the preparation of the South Oxfordshire Core Strategy (SOCS), it is helpful to summarise briefly the area and its characteristics. It is a mainly rural area covering an area of 655 sq km (253 square miles) lying between Oxford and Reading, bisected by the River Thames and with the M40 running along its north eastern border, and the M4 along the southern border. The Oxford railway line runs through the district. More than half of the area is included within the Oxford Green Belt and AONBs (Plan 4). The district had an estimated population of 128,000 in 2006. The population has increased at a greater rate than England as a whole, with a 7.28% increase between 1991 and 2001 compared with England's

2.57%. Forecasts for 2026 range from 141,420 to 142,500.

Employment is concentrated around the four towns, particularly Wallingford and Didcot. In the rural areas there are some significant campus style developments including Culham Science Centre and Oxford Brookes University's Wheatley Campus. There are also many small enterprises in converted agricultural buildings. There are several major employment areas close to the district (e.g. Harwell Science & Innovation Campus) and almost half of the working population works outside the district, while people commuting in take up 40% of the jobs in the district. Science Vale UK is an area of economic growth that is defined by four points: Didcot (in South Oxfordshire), Harwell Campus, Milton Park and Grove (all in the Vale of White Horse District). It is estimated that together with Culham Science Centre in the district, these first three areas have a combined employment potential of 12,500 existing jobs with a future potential of a further 13,000 jobs.

South Oxfordshire District Council is already heavily involved with a large area of growth at Didcot, in the south of the county where the A34 trunk road meets the Paddington: Bristol rail line, together with a major town centre redevelopment scheme. Originally earmarked in 1944 for growth In Abercrombie's plan for Greater London and its region, Didcot's time has come. The population was now about 23,000 and had grown rapidly in the past 30 years, increasing by 8,000 since 1981, and was predicted to grow by a further 12,000 to reach 35,000 by 2026. However in the case of Didcot there has been a shared vision for growth between the Conservative - controlled SODC and the Vale of White Horse District Council (VWHDC) which was led by the Lib Dems with the Conservatives as the minority party. Interestingly, following the initial planning negotiations in the late 1990s between the two councils which led to the shared vision, the councils have latterly (2008) appointed a joint chief executive, senior management team and common service teams (eg: planning policy, environmental management) across both councils. Senior management continues to advise politically controlled cabinets in each council.

The example of Didcot does demonstrate that where there is a shared vision and core strategy, politically different councils can collaborate. In the case of Didcot however the growth strategy as we have seen developed as part of the "country towns" strategy evolved by Oxfordshire County Council rather than devolved downwards from the regional assembly. However Didcot is not without its problems in terms of governance. South Oxfordshire District Council, which has invested some £54m in the town, is the lead authority, working with the Oxfordshire County Council, the riparian council the Vale of White Horse District Council, the Didcot Town Council and other agencies, and there is a Didcot Community Forum, which meets at six monthly intervals. But, unlike a New Town Development Corporation, there is no executive body, other than the SODC Cabinet, to co-ordinate growth. The Didcot portfolio is the responsibility of the SODC Leader, alongside a number of other significant responsibilities.

The episode raises the question of how the Government, SEEDA and the EiP Panel thought that the South of Oxford urban extension could be delivered. The politics of this seem to have been overlooked. The Panel concluded that by the time that the RSS was adopted, there should be sufficient confidence for Oxford City Council and SODC to move straight to a joint Area Action Plan (AA) if they had completed their LDF core strategy by then . This has proved to be hopelessly over-confident and ignored the political differences between the two councils. The concept of RSSs introduced by the 2004 Act was based on a governmentality approach that envisaged the various tiers of the planning hierarchy sharing the discourse stabilised through the EiP process. This has not happened but, as is explained later in the chapter, established public jurisdictional authorities have meant that the discourse initiated by the EiP Panel remains a live issue.

The Oxford experience bears out that around Bristol observed by A. Walker. He concluded that the operation of the new planning system lessened the control of local politicians over strategic planning, and that

this goes conceptually against what the government's broader local government reforms are trying to achieve, and adversely affects the ability of communities and councillors to make the most of their place shaping role, or to debate the scale of housing growth.

In 2006 the DCLG commissioned Oxford Brookes University to identify lessons from the New Towns programme that might be transferable to the Growth Areas initiative set up by the Government to deliver up to 100,000 extra new homes and many more jobs over the period 2006 – 2016. (SODC was successful in its bid that Didcot be one of the growth points). This was particularly important, as the Growth Areas would be the largest programme of state government- sponsored development since the New Towns. Part of the research examined the key lessons on governance. In respect of power and responsibility the consultants advised that clarity of responsibilities for delivery and related governance in the Growth Areas would be essential, especially so since delivery partnerships would be far looser entities with more diffused power structures than those which characterised the New Towns programme. Their further comments were particularly perceptive. They advised there might need to be a conscious trade-off between strong leadership of the delivery bodies and local democratic accountability, and that diffused partnership structures would not automatically be more democratically accountable than were the New Town Development Corporations if the real location of power and responsibility is mystified by the partnership itself. The growth of Didcot is an example of this, and is an issue discussed with local district councillors in the next chapter.

Greenwood and Newman (2010) in their studies of traditional and new planning in the Thames Gateway come to similar conclusions, in that traditional planning may be slowly being replaced by new practices, but the continuation of a separate decision making process for large scale projects suggest that definitions of sustainable development, participation and good planning are unlikely to become stabilised. Gallent, N.(2008) similarly concludes that a divergence in local government and planning reform may accentuate conflicts by creating two distinct, and sometimes

contradictory, planning systems .

Reflections

As is evident from the history of the evolution of the South East RSS and its implications for the Central Oxfordshire Sub-region, the RSS, although successful in identifying and promoting the economic importance of the Sub-region, failed to ensure that the housing implications of this growth were satisfactorily dealt with in the Core Strategies being prepared by the constituent district councils. The RSS did not create a collaborative framework within which district councils were comfortable working together. Furthermore, although the RSS vision was shared by a number of organisations such as the Oxfordshire Economic Partnership, groups such as CPRE (Oxfordshire) were strongly opposed and were successful in mounting a legal challenge to the RSS. Unlike the Cambridge Sub-Region, a local capacity to manage the development process had not effectively developed.

An embryonic organisation, The Oxfordshire Strategic Planning and Infrastructure Partnership (SPiP), a forum for liaison on spatial planning, economic development, housing, transport and infrastructure issues, has evolved. Initially this began from technical work initiated by the County Council as an input to the South East Plan, continuing through submissions to the Homes and Communities Agency concerning a single investment vehicle for the county. Now comprising the Leaders or Cabinet/ Executive members from each of the local authorities, SPiP would appear to comply with the new statutory duty to co-operate on planning matters required by the Localism Bill introduced by the Coalition Government. However, as we shall see subsequently, some councillors do not believe that SPiP can resolve the differences towards Oxford's growth that exist amongst the local authorities without a statutory spatial planning framework that would require a consensual approach.

The Planning Inspector appointed to consider the soundness of the South Oxfordshire Core Strategy, ahead of the examination in public heard in July 2011, wrote to the Council, setting out a number of issues relating to

the South Oxfordshire Strategic Development Area (SOSDA) on which he required comments. These were: firstly the SOSDA proposal in the SEP was the subject of successful legal challenge (albeit that the process was not completed with a formal Consent Order). It appears that agreement was never finally achieved about what the precise provisions of the Consent Order should be but, in any event, the adopted City of Oxford CS does not refer to SOSDA. Despite this, some believe that the City will eventually outgrow its capacity for growth within its boundaries and will therefore require some form and amount of related development to take place somewhere beyond them. Secondly, if a statutory duty to co-operate were enacted, joint working between the City and its neighbouring authorities would be required to resolve this matter. However, it is not currently clear when this issue would need to be addressed, nor by what mechanism any such work would be set in motion. Finally, it is unclear what – if anything- a sound South Oxfordshire CS would currently need to say about this matter.

The Inspector organised a pre - hearing meeting heard at the council's offices on the 17th May 2011, and invited those interested, including Oxford City Council and the CPRE, to write in advance with their comments on the issues he had raised. South Oxfordshire District Council also submitted a very substantial paper, "Response to Inspector's Initial Soundness Concerns May 2011", dealing with these issues. At the meeting which was very well attended by representatives from town and parish councils, councillors, landowners and developers together with their legal advisors, the debate centred around whether the Core Strategy was sound, in that recent court rulings had established that the South East Plan was still relevant and that the South Oxfordshire Core Strategy should conform to the SEP.

Leading counsel for a number of developers made it quite clear that in their view the strategy was not sound and should be withdrawn. The Inspector listened patiently to the points made, but made it clear that he would not be making any decisions that day and would consider all views before coming to a decision. Among many of the non - professional

representatives present in the room, there was a palatable sense of bewilderment and dismay as it appeared that the legal advisors for the developers very much had the upper hand, with the Council's advisors appearing confused and unsettled by the legal submissions being made. It was dawning on many present that despite the controversy and debate that had already surrounded the preparation of the Core Strategy (CS), more land needed to be identified for housing and other development. Subsequently on the 23rd May 2011, the Inspector published his conclusions after the exploratory meeting .

On the question of the South Oxford Strategic Area (SOSDA) the Inspector summarised the successful legal challenge, and that following the election, the Coalition Government had advised that in the light of the passage of the Localism Bill, parties should await the outcome of the legislation, and not bear any unnecessary costs. The Inspector concluded that in the light of these events, SOSDA raised no fundamental soundness issue for the CS. The only outstanding issue could be a limited one: whether or not a sound CS needs to commit South Oxfordshire to working with its Sub – regional neighbours to find ways of catering with the situation that would occur if the City eventually outgrows its own boundaries. However the recently – adopted City of Oxford CS does not refer to SOSDA and it is currently unclear when the potential future needs of the Oxford Sub- region would need to be further addressed, or by what mechanism.

Consequently the Inspector thought that this does not appear to be a current soundness concern but a potential one for the future which would need to be addressed by any then – current "duty to co-operate" (NB. one of the provisions of the Localism Bill). The Inspector further noted that there was no evidence or suggestion that South Oxfordshire's own " local needs" require 4000 houses to be located in the Green Belt on the edge of the City Council's area. The Inspector's response was perhaps a pragmatic one, given the difficult legal context that he found in relation to the SOSDA, but Oxford City Council, in their written representations to him in advance of the exploratory meeting, had made it clear that it was

seeking a reference to the SOSDA allocation, and either a policy allocation for it or a statement setting out how the Core Strategy would address the housing needs that were to be accommodated at SOSDA . Subsequently the Inspector accepted that view.

On the question of whether the CS was sound in relation to the other growth proposals within the district, the Inspector accepted that the District Council had attempted overall to adhere to the SEP level of growth, but by relying on windfalls in the later stages of the plan, and not specifically identifying sites in the towns and larger villages, the CS did not comply with national planning policy. The implications were that the District Council would need to do further technical studies and consult with the public, which could delay the start of the EiP.

Following discussions with the Council, the Inspector agreed to hold some of the examination hearings in July and the remainder, dealing with the housing issues, in November. Subsquently the Council approved changes to the Core Strategy on where the 814 additional dwellings should go, and to embark on further public consultation. The changes involved additional housing at Thame and Wallingford and in the larger villages. The Council meeting of the 30th June 2011 debated these issues but the meeting was poorly attended with only 31 of 48 councillors in attendance and the resolution to accept the changes was passed by only 21 votes with 10 abstentions – only 43.75 percent of the total number of councillors in favour of the resolution. Cllr Angie Paterson Cabinet member for planning said after the meeting "Council's decision last night to approve the changes to housing numbers means we can now move the strategy forward again – although having to revise our numbers was a disappointment for us and for local communities, it is in all our interests to work to submit a strategy that the Inspector will find to be sound." It would seem however for a significant number of councillors, that they no longer felt that they had any control over the direction of the CS, and that the Council was being forced to adopt these changes. (Appendix 3).

The first part of the examination in public was held in July, and the Inspector considered the economy, town centres and shopping, the environment, Henley and rural communities. Around the table at the various sessions sat representatives of developers and land - owners, university colleges, parish councils, CPRE, the Oxford Greenbelt Network and the Oxford Preservation Trust. Other than a small number of councillors in the audience, there were no other councillors in the council chamber. The second part of the examination in public was scheduled for November 2011 when the housing numbers and the selection of strategic sites were examined by the Inspector. The Inspector reported at the end of the month. His recommendations were a mixed blessing for the council. He supported the scale and direction of growth at Didcot and the lack, at this stage, of an expansion area south of Oxford. However he thought that there might be might be possibilities for further growth at Henley, and at Wallingford he rejected the council's preferred site, substituting a rival site put forward by objectors. At Thame he similarly rejected the council's preferred site and noting that Thame Town Council had recently been awarded front - runner status in neighbourhood planning, he recommended that the final selection of development sites should be through the mechanism of a neighbourhood plan produced under the auspices of the new Localism Act subject to an overall amount of growth determined by him (Appendix 4).

Of further relevance was the announcement on the 17th August 2011 that in response to a bid prepared by the Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership, earlier that year, the Coalition Government had confirmed that the Harwell Research Park and the Milton Business Park, located to the west of Didcot, were among the ten new Enterprise Zones, which would benefit from business rate discounts over five years, corporation tax benefits, simplified planning procedures and access to superfast broadband. The manager of Milton Park estimated that 6,500 people currently work at the business park within 180 businesses, and the number could increase by 50 % with a further 8000 jobs, resulting in a £9m a year boost to the local economy by 2016.

Following receipt of the EiP Inspector's final recommendations, South Oxfordshire District Council adopted the final draft of the Core Strategy at a council meeting on the 13th December 2012. The Cabinet discussed the draft on the 6th December 2012 but it had not been before the Scrutiny Committee. The Full Council meeting was fairly poorly attended and the debate barely lasted half an hour. The motion to adopt the Core Strategy was supported by 29 councillors with one (an independent councillor) voting against and six abstentions from opposition party councillors. Several members of the majority party expressed their frustration at the outcome, but given the length of time that preparation had taken, the resources devoted to it by the Council, and the need to have a strategy in place to avoid planning by appeal, these councillors felt unable to vote against the motion and reluctantly supported it. A copy of the minutes of the meeting is included at Appendix 11. After more than five years the overall impression was that the councillors had been worn down by the process and the imperative was now to get a strategy in place.

The evolution of the Core Strategy for South Oxfordshire had been a disconcerting experience for many councillors, particularly the realisation that through the test of "soundness " central government was able to impose a high degree of control over the content of the Core Strategy. In the next chapter I describe this evolution and discuss with councillors their experience and reactions to the process.

Chapter 5 The Evolution of the South Oxfordshire Core Strategy and the associated political and governance issues, with particular reference to the Central Oxfordshire Sub- region.

Introduction

The Core Strategy introduced by the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 is the key document in the Local Development Scheme. PPS 12 Local Spatial Planning (2008) published by the Department of Communities and Local Government advises that it should be comprised of a spatial vision and strategic objectives for the area; a spatial strategy; core policies and a monitoring and implementation framework with clear objectives for achieving delivery. The Localism Act (2011) maintains the requirement for local planning authorities to prepare a Core Strategy.

At the time of my research (September 2012) the Vale of White Horse District Council had announced that following the announcement by Government to abolish the RSSs and top down housing targets, there was to be a review of the housing targets and sites in the emerging Core Strategy, and an interim housing policy would be adopted, but the work on the Core Strategy would be delayed. The Oxford Core Strategy was adopted on 14th March 2011, having been examined in hearings sessions in July and September 2009 and September 2010. The Inspector's report was received on 21st December 2010, and the Council subsequently adopted the Core Strategy early in 2011.

South Oxfordshire District Council had begun work on the Core Strategy in 2007, and forwarded the Submitted Version to the Secretary of State in March 2011. The examination in public took place in two stages in July and November 2011. South Oxfordshire District Council had voted on the Submitted Version at two meetings on 18th November 2010 and 30th July 2011, the latter necessary because of revisions required to meet the EiP Inspector's preliminary concerns. The latter part of the evolution of the South Oxfordshire Core Strategy has proceeded in tandem with the

research questionnaire programme and allowed a discussion with councillors of the associated political and governance issues.In this chapter I concentrate initially on the South Oxfordshire Core Strategy, whilst in the final section I extend the analysis to Oxford City Council and the Vale of White Horse District Council councillors.

South Oxfordshire District Council

In May 2007 following local government elections, the Conservatives increased their number of councillors on South Oxfordshire District Council, so that they held 37 of the 48 seats. The Liberal Democrats who had controlled the Council in the period 1995- 2003 were the second largest party with 7 seats, whilst the remaining four seats comprised 1 Labour councillor, 1 Henley Residents Group (HRG) and 2 Independent members. At elections in May 2010 the Conservatives lost 4 seats, reducing their total to 33; the Lib Dems won 4 seats, as did Labour, with the balance of seats being 5 Independent and 2 HRG.

In May 2007 there was a cabinet of five members including the Leader and the Planning Portfolio holder. Subsequently in 2008 the holder of the planning portfolio gave up this responsibility because of pressure of work, but retained responsibility for the expansion of Didcot, so that the Cabinet was expanded to six councillors. In June 2010 this councillor resigned from this portfolio over a disagreement as to where further development at Didcot should be located, and the Didcot portfolio was taken on by the Leader.

The Council has been considering the emerging Core Strategy for several years. It has consulted on a range of development options and site allocations:
(a) Issues and options in November 2007
(b) Preferred options in March 2009
(c) In respect of Wallingford only, in January/ February 2010
(d) In respect of Proposed Changes to the Core Strategy in October 2010
(e) In respect of Thame only, in October 2010, and
(f) In respect of Thame, Wallingford and the larger villages in August 2011.

Essentially the approach has been an iterative process with a series of external consultations following internal consideration of various options, which included a series of councillor workshops in 2008 covering the main topic areas for the Core Strategy "Preferred Options". Subsequently in May 2010 the Proposed Submission Version of the Core Strategy, which was the successor document, following consultation on the "Preferred Options" document, was considered by Cabinet, and then by Scrutiny Committee in November, before going to Full Council that same month. The meeting of Scrutiny Committee was held in the evening at 6pm on the 9th November and lasted until 11.20 pm. Most of the members of the public who spoke were either parish councillors or agents for development interests. A number of the recommendations were voted on. The agenda for the meeting was the proposed submission version of the LDF Core Strategy together with accompanying daughter documents. Compressing scrutiny into an evening – even if a long one – did not provide the time for effective questioning of the evidence. By way of example the scrutiny at Gloucestershire that I referred to in Chapter 1 took a whole day involving a wide range of participants and agencies and that was dealing with a single topic.

Given that Cabinet and Scrutiny comprise approximately twenty members in total, for the majority of councillors other than the councillor workshops, Full Council represents their major opportunity to comment and vote on the Core Strategy. However we saw in the last chapter that the July 2010 meeting was poorly attended with only 31 out of 48 councillors present, and the changes passed by only 21 votes with 10 abstentions (Appendix 3). Did this reflect a growing disillusionment by some councillors that the Core Strategy was being pushed forward for adoption by the Council by the leadership? At the earlier meeting of Council in November 2010, which was again poorly attended with 35 councillors present, the Core Strategy was supported by a bare majority of just more than 50% (Appendix 5). A motion to refer the Core Strategy back to cabinet was lost by 11 votes to 24 against; those voting for it included independents, Lib Dems, two Wallingford ward councillors who were members of the

ruling Conservative group, and a Conservative councillor who had earlier resigned from the Didcot portfolio.

Engagement by councillors with the Core Strategy

One of the issues I have identified both in the literature search and the description of the evolution of the South Oxfordshire Core Strategy is to what extent councillors have engaged with the production of the Core Strategy and whether there is evidence of a more collaborative approach to place making. Question 5 of the questionnaire dealt with the Core Strategy and asked councillors whether they had found the preparation and adoption of the Core Strategy helpful, and whether they had had an opportunity to contribute to its evolution. I will review these responses shortly, but initially I comment on the opportunities available to councillors to participate in the evolution of the Core Strategy. The Councillor Workshops were held at an early stage when the preferred options were considered in Spring 2009, and the alternative strategies for the towns and rural areas were considered (Appendix 6). One Lib Dem councillor found these workshops helpful:

"I don't really know what has driven the Core Strategy at SODC. The previous portfolio holder encouraged member input and discussion. His successor did not continue this. Took no notice of stakeholder input, especially in relation between housing and employment. Seems to be a desire to hand over big chunks of land to developers to sort out everything to minimise SODC input"(Questionnaire 3). Once the workshops were over, the main input from councillors came via scrutiny committee. This met on 9th November 2010 (Appendix 7). The committee elects the chairman, but over a number of years, the role has been held by a councillor who is not a member of the ruling Conservative group; however of the thirteen member committee only four are not part of the ruling group. The scrutiny committee heard representations from parish councillors, local objectors, agents for landowners and developers, and also district council ward members. There was an informed debate about

the choices that the committee has to make, but the voting in the main went along party lines and the recommendations of the officers, which would have been cleared in informal meetings of the ruling group and senior management, were endorsed and would go forward to cabinet.

A Wallingford ward councillor who opposed the Core Strategy and addressed the committee, commented, "*the Core Strategy was setting the town against itself*". An independent councillor, asked if the political groups would have a whip imposed or be allowed a free vote at Council. The Liberal Democrat group leader said his group would have no whip imposed. The independent councillor commented in her interview (Interview 4 & Questionnaire 2). "The Core Strategy should not be whipped, but loyalty was put above everything. If the Core Strategy was not overtly political, there was more chance of people buying into it, and consistency. The ruling group had not been consistent; they would not budge on Didcot, but had changed their mind on Thame, citing the evidence of a landscape appraisal that had been commissioned. Localism would encourage the preparation of neighbourhood plans, but if they were to be part of the development plan, they would have to go to cabinet to be endorsed, and a problem again of political whipping."

In Chapter 3 dealing with methodology I explained the circulation of questionnaires to each of the councillors during the summer of 2011 in the Oxford City, South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District councils. There were 15 responses from South Oxfordshire District councillors, which was 42.8% of the total number of 35 Conservative councillors (there being two vacant seats). Of these responses, 6 (40%) were female and 9 (60%) male, which was broadly representative of the council as a whole that was 43.5% female and 56.5% male. Of the 15 councillors, ten (66.7%) were backbenchers and five (33.3%) were senior members of the council, namely the Chairman, the Leader, Cabinet Portfolio holder for Planning, Chairman of the Planning Committee and a further member of Cabinet, which meant that senior members were rather more represented in the questionnaire answers than the council as a whole. I set out the results of my survey in Appendix 12 and here I

summarise the responses to the specific questions.

Housing and Employment Targets

Dealing with the *first question, Do you think that the provision of housing and employment within the planning system in District Council areas should be guided by set targets,* the answers support the principle of cooperation between districts at county level, rather than reliance on regional plans. The Leader of the Council (Questionnaire 5) summed up: "*People do not understand boundaries. Infrastructure is so important when building homes, therefore we need to look strategically. If you do not have some sort of target you will never manage to get the required number. Those already in an area rarely want more.*" This goal was summarised from a different perspective: "*There needs to be some strategic planning at a high level, otherwise housing growth may only occur where developers want to build, and that would be purely finance-led*" (Questionnaire 1).

From others there was a plea for a unitary approach (Questionnaire 7) or that South Oxfordshire District Council and VWHDC should have prepared a joint Core Strategy, for South Oxfordshire was a single area for employment purposes and Didcot's growth straddled district boundaries (Questionnaire 2).

Councils determining their own requirements for housing and employment provision

The second question sought reasons why until the introduction of the Localism Bill previous governments had been opposed to councils determining their own requirements for housing and employment provision. The answers showed a very high level of support for the view that members need to be informed by locally produced Housing Needs Assessments in order to determine requirements for housing and employment. Allied to this was the view that councillors are not trusted to make these decisions: "*A combination of the above and possibly distrust*

160

in Councillors, for all sorts of reasons political and of capability" (Questionnaire 11); "*Lack of confidence by Central Government in the ability of Local Government. The 'Man in Whitehall knows best syndrome"* (Questionnaire 6).

Other views expressed were:

"*Urgent need to address affordable housing problem in the District. Mobility means that people work throughout the south east, but value the traditional market towns in the District as a place to live, but their children cannot afford to live here"* (Questionnaire 15).

"*I believe it was the need for central control in Westminster and a belief that if they left it to the local communities they would not want extra housing in the first place. This misguided view has led to massive moves to the south east of England to the detriment of the rest of the country. Instead of following policies to encourage employment in the rest of the country, a policy of concentrating jobs in the south east and then providing housing after the event has ruled"* (Questionnaire 9).

"*Governments of all flavours have had different agendas when seeking housing targets – Rarely have these agendas ever been about the market. Cllrs. will always have a tendency to be parochial so Government needs to demonstrate what local authorities can achieve in order to get past that parochialism"* (Questionnaire 4).

"*Although training is given to Cllrs, the issues are complex, and the officers tend to lead…" (Questionnaire 12).*

"*I am sceptical about the Localism Bill, I don't think Parish Councils will engage with localism as much as the Government hopes" (Questionnaire 13).*

<u>Changes in planning thought</u>

The third question asked the response of councillors to changes in planning thought which have seen the evolution of spatial planning from a mainly regulatory function controlling land use through the planning control system to a more holistic approach. The answers showed strong

support for councillors becoming involved in place making, in addition to the traditional role of serving on planning committee, and playing a more collaborative role, but at the same time still taking the major decisions within the planning system. Comments made by councillors included:

"These decisions are generally made by council officers. Not enough use is made of the detailed local knowledge of councillors. The local plan is set by the Council and so exceptions to it may sometimes be necessary, but these should always be determined by councillors and not delegated to officers" (Questionnaire 1).

The Value of Core Strategies

The fifth question sought views on the value and importance of Core Strategies and whether councillors felt that they had had the opportunity to contribute to them. There was a small majority of councillors who thought that the preparation and adoption of the Core Strategy was either very helpful or fairly helpful. A recurring theme was that the strategy had been too officer-led*: "Our core strategy was driven by the officers seeking the easiest way for them to deal with the issues and any fallout"; "Too much is delegated to officers who think they know it all"* (Questionnaire 1).

This councillor who represents a Thame ward has been instrumental in arguing that the final choice of development sites should be delegated to the town council acting in concert with the local community.

Another councillor (Questionnaire 9) expressed his concerns as follows: "*The public elect their councillors to determine which planning applications should be allowed in their district and to set the policy for future development. Unfortunately when it comes down to it we have so little control I believe the public have been misled"; "I felt it was too officer-led and councillors were very low in the decision process. It started with a general invite to all developers to pick any land they wanted to develop, followed by officers picking their preferred sites, and then only finally councillors involved, with very little strategic direction involved." "The planning system is geared to encourage development but*

give the public the feeling that their view is listened to, but in reality central control is maintained by locking councillors down to a rigid set of processes and then overriding councils by the inspectorate system. Councillors are therefore only providing a quasi-judicial process which can be challenged in the inspectorate process."

The Council Leader (Interview 1) saw it differently: *"Planning development control was not whipped politically and this should remain, but policies and the Core Strategy were political, although it was difficult to engage backbenchers in policy formulation."* The former Cabinet portfolio holder for planning commented (Questionnaire 4): "*I resigned from the Cabinet, because I was concerned that adoption of the strategy was whipped."*

A higher proportion of councillors felt that they had had an opportunity to contribute to the evolution of the Core Strategy, but again there were concerns that much was officer-led: "*My impression was that sessions offered for members' contributions were presented by the officers in 'bite sizes' rather than facilitating a strategic overview. I felt that 'consultations' tended to be a way of reinforcing decisions taken at the top, rather than encouraging a bottom-up process".* (Questionnaire 10).

The Leader was characteristically robust: "*There had been far more consultation than previous plans. Wide consultation, workshops, discussions at all stages; however, there will always be those who feel that they have not, due to the fact that they are the ones getting the growth"* (Questionnaire 5).

What emerges from this examination is that the evolution of the Core Strategy is a complex, time-consuming process that proceeds as a series of at least four iterations, the first proceeding through councillor workshops, scrutiny, cabinet and full council before consulting on the preferred options. This is Phase 1. Then on receipt of the public consultations, a pre-submission draft is taken through the same cycle of scrutiny, cabinet and full council before being published for public

consultation and then submitted to the Secretary of State. This is Phase 2. The third phase involves the examination in public by an independent Inspector who in turn makes recommendations that are again subject to the cycle of scrutiny, cabinet and full council before public consultation, and then submission again to the Inspector. The fourth and final phase comprises the binding recommendations of the Inspector and the adoption of the modified Core Strategy by the Council. Holding this together is a steering group of the cabinet portfolio holder for planning and a senior group of officers including the strategic director for planning.

Understandably this complex process can leave backbenchers feeling both perplexed and marginalized. Some of their criticisms have already been noted. The portfolio holder for planning and the Leader saw it differently. The portfolio holder introducing the strategy at full council thought that there had been a wide- ranging discussion amongst ward councillors, "*but in the end someone has to take responsibility for decisions and there is unlikely to be universal agreement.*" The Leader commented, "*We have to be guided by officers as they are the ones who have a greater understanding of policy etc; this does not mean just rubber stamping what they say, it means challenging them, hence councillors need to be better trained to also have a better understanding. I believe the new type of officers are far more flexible and pro-active. I have seen such a change since I was first involved.*" This was an interesting reflection because a common complaint amongst backbenchers was that the council was too "officer-led".

I set out in Chapter 1 my premise that the Core Strategy as finally submitted to the Secretary of State was essentially a political strategy that balanced the requirements for growth whilst ensuring that political support in the wards on which the party particularly relied for its majority was not compromised, whilst accepting that in some wards experiencing the major growth, members of the group might oppose the strategy. This had been particularly the case in Wallingford where two Conservative councillors representing Wallingford North Ward had voted against development in their ward. In Thame the Conservatives controlled only

two of the four ward seats, and one of the councillors   was the Council Chairman and effectively out of local politics for that year. The other Conservative councillor, a member of cabinet, was absent from both council meetings that had discussed the Core Strategy. Essentially, therefore, the political leadership sees wards where growth proposals are controversial as ones where councillors in the ruling group are given licence either to object or effectively to abstain. It is evidently an expedient that only a group with a large majority can entertain.

Relationship with officers

The relationship between officers and councillors is a key element of governance in local government, particularly in spatial planning where councillors rely heavily on officers for professional advice and technical help. This aspect was covered in the questionnaire and the final question (Question 6) was open-ended and gave councillors the opportunity to comment on their role as councillors within the planning system. The most significant issue was the relationship with and role of officers. All of those back benchers who responded were concerned that officers exercise too much control. Only the Leader and the Chairman of Planning Committee offered support for the officers' role, the latter commenting:
"SODC is democratic, well run, no corruption, officers work hard, and councillors on planning committee work within the agreed parameters" (Questionnaire 13). The Chairman of the Council, although agreeing that there was a problem, thought it double-edged: *"Councillors, whether at planning committee or policy making, need to be more determined and not rely on officers overly. Officers are there to offer policy and technical support."* (Questionnaire15). A member of cabinet and a leading councillor from Didcot felt that as the town had been scheduled for major growth, local members should be more involved in decision taking, and there should be a forum for discussing Didcot's growth (Questionnaire 12).

Central Oxfordshire Sub- region: aspects of governance

The questionnaire was e mailed to all the then sitting councillors for Oxford City Council and the Vale of White Horse District Council and dealt with the same issues of governance and collaboration that were discussed with councillors from South Oxfordshire District Council. Turning to the wider area, and those questionnaires that were returned by councillors from Oxford City Council and the Vale of White Horse District Council, there were only four replies from the latter council: the then Leader, the then Planning Portfolio holder and two back benchers. As we have seen, the preparation of the Core Strategy for the Vale had been delayed significantly, and this may have led either to a lack of interest or to inertia amongst councillors. Of the seven Oxford City councillor respondents, three were senior members and the remainder were back benchers. The majority of those responding from the two Councils were male (82%). Both the Leaders of the two Councils agreed to be interviewed (Interviews 2 & 3). Dealing with these first as they do provide a useful background:

The Oxford City Council Leader acknowledged that his Council and South Oxfordshire District Council had failed to agree on a plan for the Oxford Urban Expansion, and that the only way forward was through the Spatial Planning and Infrastructure Partnership (SPIP). Within Oxford ward committees were to be replaced with two area committees for planning and a call-in committee. Forums would be convened to reflect local opinion. Oxford had a strong tradition of area committees and local democracy, and that place- making had been an integral part of being a councillor in Oxford. The Vale Leader also acknowledged the importance of SPIP, of which he was a member. Policy formation often did not involve members of the planning committee. The Planning Portfolio holder of the Vale thought the consultation exercises for the Core Strategy were "*over-long, cumbersome and extremely expensive – well over half a million pounds and quite a waste of money.*" (Questionnaire 25).

The role of SPIP was endorsed by the Oxford City councillor who was a member of the committee (Interview 6) and who drew a distinction between the sub-regional level, the city, where the Core Strategy was unashamedly a political document, and neighbourhood plan level where localism could work provided local members show robust leadership and not just 'cherry pick' as with planning applications.

When the Oxford Core Strategy was adopted by Oxford City Council in March 2011, it concluded some five years of preparation. The Council was controlled by Labour with 26 of the 48 seats, with the Lib Dems having 16 seats, the Greens 5 seats and a single member representing the Independent Working Class Association. The voting at the Council meeting went along party lines with 24 Labour councillors voting to adopt the CS, 5 Green councillors voting not to adopt, and 12 Lib Dem councillors abstaining. There were apologies from seven absent councillors. Compared with the debates at South Oxfordshire, there was a higher turnout of councillors, and there were no dissenting councillors amongst the ruling group. Minutes of the council meeting are included at Appendix 8. The preparation of the CS had been a massive undertaking, with progress interrupted by changes of national government and new policy announcements, as described in the Officer's report to the Council. Despite all the consultation and debate, the CS could command only the support of the ruling group, albeit that this was unanimous. Against this background, it is instructive to gain the opinions of councillors as to the value of the preparation and adoption of the CS.

Housing and Employment Targets

The answers to the first question as to whether the provision of housing and employment within the planning system in District Council areas should be guided by set targets demonstrate a much stronger support for regionally set housing and employment targets, and greater collaboration

between district councils than was evident in the replies from South Oxfordshire District councillors:

"Co-operation important in principle, but party political differences can create deadlock, and impede agreement, if neighbouring councils have differing plans/ core strategies." (Questionnaire 18)

"…In practice, with differing objectives it will be very difficult to achieve greater collaboration". (Questionnaire 19)

"Difficulty in Oxfordshire – Labour-run Oxford City with tight boundary and wish to see growth in housing/ jobs, but surrounded by councils hostile to these policies. Targets are better made regionally; then, no opportunity for authorities to duck their responsibility to contribute to housing and employment needs in region." (Questionnaire 16)

"Reality of housing & employment patterns and needs does not conform to District Council boundaries eg. Oxford: in/ out migration for work/ housing" (Questionnaire 20)

"Districts should determine needs ref. housing and employment growth via LDFs, but then these need to be co-ordinated across the County ref. main infrastructure requirements; … also HCA & others that bring funding to the table should be there." (Questionnaire 26)

"Regional targets prevent nimbyism." (Questionnaire 24)

"Collaboration necessary when close to boundaries between District Councils." (Questionnaire 23)

<u>Councils determining their own requirements for housing and employment provision</u>

There was strong agreement, as had been the case with South Oxfordshire District councillors ,that councillors will pursue local interests, and not give sufficient weight to wider requirements, but it was not agreed that councillors do not have sufficient knowledge to make these decisions. Again a majority thought that the pursuit of political aims would tend to predominate. There was less support for locally produced Housing Needs Assessments than had been the case with South Oxfordshire District councillors.

"I think there was a recognition that some plans need to be made at a higher level than that of the district. Travel- to- work areas, for instance, don't respect district boundaries, and neither do housing markets. The case is even stronger when you look at areas like water, waste and minerals. Although regional targets (and before that, structure plans) could help overcome NIMBYism, and also gave local politicians someone else they could blame, I think the main drivers were probably those I mention above." (Questionnaire 19)

"Our Council has used Housing Needs assessments as the driver for determining numbers and partly to validate the regional statements. But there has been the tendency to blame it on centrally produced numbers, but with that gone we are having to fall back on needs assessment." (Questionnaire 26).

Changes in Planning Thought

There was very strong support for councillors' role in place- making, and a very similar level of support to that evidenced by South Oxfordshire District councillors for the importance of the councillor's role in planning. The collaborative role for councillors in bringing various stakeholders together was also very strongly endorsed.

"The probity issues that seek to ensure that members do not fetter their discretion when determining planning applications still holds, but there are opportunities to act as mediator and discuss common concerns and interests with developers, but to draw the line at discussing specific proposals if these are coming forward for determination. I have already started to do this in my patch in Oxford where health and universities dominate Headington so I have brought together a group of stakeholders who meet quarterly to discuss spatial and development issues and tensions." (Questionnaire 18)

"Clearly councillors should do more than just look at contentious development control decisions. They should also have input into

formulating planning policies, and I think there's a strategic role that they need to play. There will be a long and difficult process of adjustment to the role of elected members once the Localism Bill passes." (Questionnaire 19)

"There is tension between place-shaping (top down) and localism (bottom up). I favour the ward councillor working alongside the community in making these decisions." (Questionnaire 22).

"The Executive/ Cabinet structure does to some extent prevent members in general taking that place-making role but it is certainly desirable" (Questionnaire 23)

"This represents the single biggest challenge for councillors in articulating clearly what makes communities and places. The balance in investment benefit and new development is going to be a very difficult challenge – given the lack of available funds." (Questionnaire 26)

Questioned on whether in order to exercise community leadership within their ward, there would be occasions where councillors may have to go against the policies of the party of which they are a member there was a little less support for this view than had been the case with South Oxfordshire councillors but the over-whelming view was nonetheless that party political allegiances could not always be adhered to. *When asked if there would be occasions where there may be the need for a more flexible approach to the application of adopted Local Plan* policies flexibility was again endorsed by a strikingly similar percentage to that evidenced by South Oxfordshire District councillors:

"Your duties as a councillor are to act in the best interests of the citizens of the ward and city you represent. Party policy is a secondary consideration." (Questionnaire 16)

"If the question is – will people sometimes go against local party priorities to reflect local concerns, and will they sometimes want to deviate from

local plan policies in certain development control decisions – the answer is obviously 'yes'! The extent to which members will do this will vary (according to their principles, their majority, the strength of their local party, whether they hold a leadership position in the council, the strength of feeling in the community, amongst other factors)". (Questionnaire 19)

"I have not been aware of political pressures in planning for many years but I do feel planning has become less flexible and more policy-based, with members now less prepared to go against the plan." (Questionnaire 23).

"Strict adherence to the Local Plan is what planning policy and development officers rely on, but there is going to be much greater flexibility all round from them, but clear arguments from both members and communities that want new development. The LDF/ Local Plan will set broad outline, with neighbourhood plans allowing the community to feel that they are planning the community. But who does this – the local pressure group, parish council/ meeting, or a formally constituted community led planning group. Watch this space !." (Questionnaire 26).

The Value of Core Strategies

There was more support for the Core Strategies: 69.2% indicated that they had found the preparation and adoption either very helpful or fairly helpful. The percentage of councillors who were positive about the opportunity to contribute was also higher at 65.4%, compared with 60% of South Oxfordshire District councillors. The comments that were made tended to be either critical or anxious:

"It has taken a very long time to get ours together (the Inspector has only just ruled on it) and most of the policy contained within it was decided before I became a councillor. Parts of it are very unpopular with the community." (Questionnaire 22).

"*My fear is that the new system is poorly understood by the public.*" (Questionnaire 23).

The final question (Question 6) was open-ended and gave councillors the opportunity to comment on their role as councillors within the planning system. Unlike South Oxfordshire councillors, those in the other districts did not see the relationship with and role of officers as a significant issue. Questions over consultation and local accountability were more to the fore.

"*There are great dangers in the Localism proposals that might be reflected in the forthcoming changes to the planning system. I think it is a nimby's charter and will destroy the over-arching policy framework that has been at the centre of town and country planning since 1947. Of course I think that participation and consultation are essential, but these emerging ideas are badly thought through and will suffer the same fate as similar intentions in the 1980s which saw reaction from the development industry which led to a back down by the government and the return to a more centralised policy driven system.*" (Questionnaire 18).

"*Our City Council is centralising planning back from area committees on a party political formula which will mean that decisions on applications in eg. predominantly Green areas will be made by Labour councillors. This should not be a problem if members vote apolitically, but this does not appear to happen … As a back bencher I shall have relatively little power over planning decisions other than to represent my residents at central town hall meetings. I would like more power to work with county and other district council planners on improving traffic congestion – road planning improvements are desperately overdue and need to be done on a wide area basis.*" (Questionnaire 22).

"*There needs to be more consideration of the benefits and disadvantages on the ground of individual applications and less adherence to policy for the sake of following the plan.*" (Questionnaire 23).
and finally:

"It disappoints me that we spend so much money writing plans and policies. Somehow we have to do it faster and cheaper." (Questionnaire 26).

This comment is worth emphasising in that in the case of both South Oxfordshire and Oxford City Council, the preparation and adoption of their Core Strategies has effectively been the lifetime of a five - year term of parliament, and in the case of the Vale of White Horse District Council, will be even longer.

In exercising his role the councillor has a number of options available to him in terms of how he performs in relation not merely towards his constituents, or towards the workload of the local authority, but also towards his party (if any), the local pressure groups, the officers and the community outside his particular ward (Gyford 1984). A number of attempts have been made to investigate and to summarise the wide variety of role orientations that a councillor may assume.

These were summarised in Chapter 2. We saw that one of the early attempts was by Gyford who drew these role orientations together and identified one general conclusion that did emerge from the various studies: that the choice of role orientation by councillors is not particularly associated with age, sex or social class, but rather with such factors as seniority and length of service on the council, the character of the councillor's ward and party political allegiance. These orientations link with each other, forming "clusters" which provide differing emphases to the varying aspects of a councillor's role. Gyford concluded that the available evidence supported the hypothesis that two internally consistent clusters of role orientations characterising junior and senior councillors could be identified, and he described these as the "tribune" and the "statesman". Like other classifications, this is not wholly watertight, and individual councillors will not always fall into place within it, but my empirical research suggests that in terms of the preparation and adoption of the Core Strategy, this is a particularly helpful classification.

Gyford (1984) further added that the distinction is, at least theoretically, one that exists at a given point in time, and is one that an individual councillor can transcend during the course of a political career. The increasing complexity of policy making may, however, make that process more difficult. Cartwright (1974) found that the effect of the introduction of corporate planning in one London Borough had been to strengthen the split between those councillors who were interested in policy and others who were interested in casework. Copus (2004) described how the politics of the councils are conducted within the party political groups before it reaches the public domain.

The role orientations of councillors

Given my knowledge of the three district councils in the southern area of the Central Oxfordshire Sub- region, I was able to identify among the questionnaire respondents senior and junior councillors, based on current membership of cabinet or committee chairmanship. Senior members made up 42%, which means that they are somewhat over-represented, in that one would anticipate that at any one time about a third of the councillors in a district council could be regarded as seniors.

In terms of taking a wider perspective towards development targets, whether at regional or county level, there was a discernible distinction, with senior councillors wishing to take the wider perspective and junior councillors having a local focus, but not appreciably so. At both senior and junior level there was overwhelming support for greater collaboration between district councils.

The "statesman" approach noted by Gyford (1984) was discernible in the attitude of senior councillors towards the reasons why previous governments had been opposed to councils determining their own development targets, their identifying localism and insufficient knowledge as factors more strongly than junior councillors. The latter had more confidence in their knowledge and political aims, whilst neither placed much store in the benefits of Housing Needs Assessments. Senior

councillors had more confidence in the opportunities to be involved in place- making, but overall nearly all councillors were positive about these opportunities. Junior councillors were slightly more emphatic that councillors should still be those who should make the major planning decisions, but were also more positive about playing a collaborative role in bringing stakeholders together. The most pronounced difference in attitudes between senior and junior councillors was evident in the answers to these questions. Junior councillors indicated both their willingness to go against their party's policies and their wish for a more flexible approach to Local Plan policies, illustrating the "ward focus" of junior councillors identified by Gyford (1984).

Responses to questions 4 and 5 in particular revealed a number of differences between the perceptions of senior and junior councillors. For example, 8 out of 11 senior councillors (72.7%) thought that there were occasions when councillors might have to go against their party's policies. In the case of junior councillors the corresponding figure was 13 out of 15 (86. 6%). Similarly, 14 out of 15 junior councillors (93.3%) thought that there were occasions when there might be a need for a more flexible approach to the application of adopted Local Plan policies. This view was shared by only 7 of 11 senior councillors (63. 6%).

There were also differences in perceptions of the value of the preparation and adoption of Core Strategies: 6 out of 11 senior councillors (54. 5%) regarded this as very helpful, whereas only 4 out of 15 junior councillors (26. 6%) did so. Similarly, a further third of junior councillors (33.3%) rated the process as unhelpful, a view shared by none of their senior counterparts. Furthermore, 10 out of 11 senior councillors (90. 9%) felt that they had had an opportunity to contribute to the evolution of the Core Strategy in their District, compared with only 7 out of 15 (46. 6%) of junior councillors.

Finally, some illustrative quotations from a senior councillor:
 "If the question is – will people sometimes go against local party policies to reflect local concerns, and will they sometimes want to deviate from

local plan policies in certain development control decisions, the answer is obviously 'yes'! The extent to which members will do this will vary (according to their principles, their majority, the strength of their local party, whether they hold a leadership position in the council, the strength of feeling in their community, amongst many other factors."
(Questionnaire 19).

"*From my experience, planning has had a reputation as being complex and technical, which puts some elected members off being involved, and also (like the general public), too little attention is paid to the process of policy/ plan formulation – things then "kick off" when unpopular development control decisions have to be taken. The role of elected members is going to need a fundamental rethink after the Localism Bill; are people community advocates/ representatives or leaders? How will elected members work on strategic planning challenges? How will we handle the growing incentives to accept development?"*
(Questionnaire 19).

With this analysis as a background and context I now turn to the questions that I identified in my literature review.

a) De- politicisation in local government

Although councillors welcomed greater collaboration with stakeholders, there was nonetheless, particularly amongst junior councillors, a desire to ensure that their political role was not minimalised. The need to prepare and adopt a Core Strategy for a district council area had, on the one hand, encouraged the collaborative approach advocated by Healey (2006) and others, but on the other had politicised policy and plan making to a significantly new degree. The Leader of South Oxfordshire District Council saw a clear distinction between development control decisions that were not whipped politically and the Core Strategy that was political, although it was difficult to engage backbenchers in policy formulation (Interview 1).

Not surprisingly, this view was not supported by Independent councillors (Interview 4) and had led to conflict within the ruling group (Interview 5), but it was a view strongly endorsed by senior Oxford City councillors (Interview 6). The preparation of Core Strategies was a significant change for district councils, pursuing a more over-arching approach than the land-use plans required under the 1990 Planning Act. There also needed to be more collaboration, particularly in economic development (Interview 15), with county and sub-regional agencies, but the implications of these changes appeared to be an ever-increasing growth in the influence exerted by senior officers, and an alienation of backbenchers, who felt less engaged in the process. Backbenchers in marginal wards could feel particularly under pressure (Interview 16).

Whether the adoption of Core Strategies at Council meetings at Oxford City Council and South Oxfordshire were politically whipped is difficult to ascertain, because of its sensitivity. However what is clear is that parties voted along political affiliations at the respective Council meetings, and we have seen that within the ruling group at South Oxfordshire "opt outs" or "diplomatic absences from meetings" were agreed with the Leader. It is a reasonable assumption that voting was whipped because the ruling group either in Oxford or South Oxfordshire could not be certain of the voting arithmetic at Council meetings and would want in any event to demonstrate at least a majority of the Council in support of the adopted Core Strategy. My main finding is that the Core Strategy is a clear expression of the political aims of the Council and its ruling group and supports the conclusions of Copus (2004) that the politics of the council was conducted within the party group before it reaches the public domain and that dissenters were given some freedom by the leadership rather than risk a overly public split within the party.

b) Core Strategies as expressions of political aspirations for the district

The Leader of South Oxfordshire District Council, who was also a member of the Local Enterprise Partnership and the County Spatial Planning and Infrastructure Planning Liaison Group (SPIP), had a clear

idea of the Core Strategy as a document setting out the political vision for the future development of the district (Interview 1). This, together with collaboration with other councils and agencies, involved senior officers and members, and it was difficult to engage backbenchers in policy formulation. There was likely to be an increased emphasis on economic development, and within the council, senior management was trying to re-focus professional planners to become more aware of the overall activities of the council, and not just development control.

One casualty of this approach was that the Urban Expansion of Oxford, proposed in the South East Plan (2009), had been dropped and, despite the representations of Oxford City Council, the EiP Inspector examining the South Oxfordshire Core Strategy had not been persuaded to resurrect the policy in the Strategy, preferring that these housing requirements be further examined at the County level. Although the Oxford Urban Expansion had featured in a list of priorities prepared by SPIP, this could not of itself safeguard the policy. The Chairman of the Local Enterprise Partnership (Interview 15) had made it clear that the LEP would not interfere in the statutory decision-making of elected members of local authorities. The increased politicisation of plan making as exemplified in the Core Strategies will, I suggest, make collaboration between district councils more difficult, particularly where it involves significant housing development, despite apparent enthusiasm for this collaboration expressed by councillors. A local developer (Interview 13) thought local authorities had failed to deal with these issues and that his company would have to lobby in order that the issues are confronted.

The issue of increased politicisation in plan making raises some interesting questions about leadership and scrutiny. Gains et al (2005) demonstrated how the potential exists for local authorities to be independently strong and weak on the two dimensions of leadership and scrutiny. This led to the identification of four broad paths for implementation to move down. These included the low scrutiny/high leadership model where there has been a move from collectivist patterns of leadership to a focussed executive without adopting the other parts of

the reforms. Gains called this the "executive autonomy model " and this appears to have become the overwhelming form of governance in South Oxfordshire District Council and to some extent also in Oxford City Council which has adopted the "Strong Leadership " role for the executive offered by central government although a strong opposition of Lib Dems and Greens exercise a scrutiny role.

c) Do councillors welcome the opportunities afforded by the Localism Act to determine their own requirements for housing and employment within the district?

From the questionnaire results we have seen the support for this approach, and a number of interviews (Interviews 4, 5 and 9) revealed support and evidenced concern that Sub-regional targets had been too prominent in the production of the Core Strategy. CPRE (Interview 12) pointed out that the major influence on the policies being followed by the Oxford City Council was the Oxford Strategic Partnership on which both Oxford University and Oxford Brookes University were represented: "*A major objective of the Council was to achieve unitary status and their growth agenda was part of this campaign*" (Interview 12). Within Oxford City Council the six area planning committees that had met monthly across the city were being replaced by two larger planning committees. The justification for replacing them was that some of the committees had a poor record of decision-making (Interview 6). However, because of Oxford's political geography, the Lib Dems and Greens had been able to lead these smaller area committees, whereas the two larger area committees would be politically balanced to reflect the political make-up of the whole Council, thus giving Labour a majority on both. Evidently localism in Oxford had proved uncomfortable for the political leadership of the Council: "*They are over-influenced by local people*" (Interview 6). The new approach was welcomed by a local developer (Interview 13), who thought the" *area committees were very parochial and inexperienced, and lost a lot of appeals".* By contrast we have also seen how localism can be interpreted to include important local institutions such as the Universities with their own agendas.

<u>d) In addition to membership of the planning committee, are there opportunities for councillors to become involved in place- making?</u>

As we have seen, senior councillors had more confidence in the opportunities to be involved in place- making, but overall nearly all councillors were positive about these opportunities. Junior councillors were slightly more emphatic that councillors should still be those who should make the major planning decisions, but were also more positive about playing a collaborative role in bringing stakeholders together. The three council leaders (Interviews 1, 2 & 3) were supportive of councillors becoming involved in place making, and it does represent an opportunity for junior councillors to define a new role for themselves, in addition to membership of the regulatory planning committee. For the Leaders it could hopefully empower councillors who otherwise might either not become engaged in policy formulation, or alternatively challenge it.

<u>e) Councillors as the people who should make the major decisions, and collaboration with stakeholders</u>

We have seen that councillors are supportive of a more collaborative role, but particularly the junior councillors are also concerned to ensure that their traditional role as decision makers in planning is not diminished. Senior members, through their involvement in external organisations and consortia, already play a collaborative role and it is in this way that these agencies exert their influence on the councils

A recurring theme both from the questionnaire replies and the interviews was the need to distinguish between policy making on the one hand and the regulatory function of planning development control on the other. The Chairman of the South Oxfordshire Planning Committee (Interview 11) emphasised the importance to the public of the development control meetings, where interested parties could orally make submissions to the committee. She was happy with the delegation arrangements to officers, as the committee did receive all the big planning applications. However she had little time for those councillors who thought that they had been

marginalised in planning matters, and advised them that they should become more involved at a ward level. She emphasised that there was no political whip on planning decisions. The probity of maintaining a clear distinction between policy making and planning decisions on individual applications has been an important feature of the planning system in England since the 1947 Act. The increased politicisation of policy making renders that even more important.

It is significant that in the new organisational structures being introduced to local government, such as at Stratford- on- Avon District Council in Warwickshire, with which I am familiar, planning development control and enforcement is grouped with other regulatory activities such as environmental health, land drainage and licensing, responsible to a Head of Environment and Planning, whilst planning policy is grouped with other policy areas such as housing within a Corporate Support department.

f) Community Leadership

The most pronounced difference in attitudes between senior and junior councillors was evident in their responses to this issue. Junior councillors indicated both their willingness to go against their party's policies and their wish for a more flexible approach to Local Plan policies. This follows a familiar pattern noted by Gyford (1984) who cites Newton (1974) who found that the delegate role appealed particularly to the member for a marginal ward, whilst trustees were more likely to come from safe wards. Junior councillors, in their first term of office, were found to endorse a ward focus and adopt a watchdog role, with wider horizons developing later on (McKinsey & Co 1973). Their involvement in local ward issues may bring them into contact with pressure groups outside the council, whereas senior councillors pre-occupied with council work may have at best only honorific links with such groups, noted Gyford (1984).

g) The value of the preparation of Core Strategies within the planning system

As we have seen, there were significant differences between junior and senior councillors in their perception of the helpfulness or otherwise of the Core Strategy system and the opportunity to contribute. For a number of ward councillors the process had been particularly difficult (Interviews 4, 5, 7 & 9). Chairmanship of the Council meetings had also been difficult (Interview 8). For both Oxford City Council and the South Oxfordshire District Council, the preparation and adoption of their Core Strategy had pre-occupied them for more than five years. Such a protracted process invites all sorts of dangers, particularly that of being overtaken by events. The evidence does invite the question as to whether the process can be simplified and shortened.

In South Oxfordshire, despite the extensive consultation, significant changes to the strategy came about only because of the intervention of the EiP Inspector. That stage could have been reached much earlier by means of a simplified consultation period. In relation to economic development, questions are posed as to the effectiveness of the planning process, and the conflicting aims of the various economic agencies (Interview 14). The failure to develop local capacity to manage the development process in Oxfordshire, which, it is claimed, has the largest concentration of research and development activity in Western Europe, was noted by the Chairman of Oxfordshire LEP (Interview 15). He wanted to ensure that the LEP was "business led" and addressed the issues that were threatening the local economy, such as the mis-match between skill needs and local educational provision. The Coalition Government had announced that the LEPs would have a crucial role in determining local priorities for infrastructure spending (Interview 15). This surely raises questions in terms of the future review of Core Strategies for the Sub-region, and the need for these documents to be prepared within a much shorter time frame.

<u>h) Institutional mechanisms for local authority and public agency collaboration</u>

The Leader of the South Oxfordshire District Council referred to a number of cross-boundary issues affecting the District (Interview 1) and, given the geographical context of the District (Plan 4), this is hardly surprising. These issues include the expansion of Aylesbury to the north east and Swindon to the south west, the possible expansion of Oxford into the District, and the growth of Didcot, which was divided between the SODC and VWHDC areas. The demise of the South East Regional Agency meant that new voluntary agencies would have to be created, similar to ACTVAR (Association of Councils in the Thames Valley Region), which had been disbanded in favour of the regional agency. SPIP provided a forum for the Oxfordshire area, but in respect of its terms of reference (Interview 1) there was now a degree of overlap with the Oxfordshire LEP (Interview 15). The Chairman of the SPIP at the time of the interview (Interview 10) explained that SPIP was local authority- led looking to 2026, but business could not look so far ahead. The Oxfordshire Economic Partnership had been a disappointment, but SPIP and the new LEP would need to be partners, but having a different focus: He was "*suspicious of business leaders who spend a lot of time on such groups, probably saw it as networking*" (Interview 15).

For the South Oxfordshire Sub- region there are now institutional mechanisms in place. For their effectiveness these rely heavily on collaboration between the political leaders, and, other than Oxford City, these all now come from the same political party. Beyond the Sub-region, however, there are no collaborative arrangements and it will be devolved to EiP Inspectors to ascertain whether the new "Duty to co-operate" within the 2011 Localism Act is being discharged.

<u>i) The role of senior officers and their relationship with councillors</u>

Both in the interviews and the questionnaire replies, concerns were expressed that in both the Oxford City and South Oxfordshire District

Councils, the progression of the Core Strategy had been too officer-led, and that councillors, particularly back benchers, had not been overly involved in the process, and felt marginalized. Legally, local government officers are the servants of the council that appoints them and of the council as a whole, not of professionalism, or of a Majority Party, and in their work the officers' activities are circumscribed by the policies laid down by the council. The political affiliation of officers is a sensitive subject, but unlike Germany where senior local government officers are active members of a political party, and elected to their office, in England this is not the case. Of more interest is the "managerialist" culture of senior officers, which was discussed in Chapters 1 and 2. Gaydon (1984) suggests that local government is a stronghold of professionalism, and that to those schooled in a profession, especially one with a fairly high technical content, it is hard to admit that a proposal which is apparently right on technical grounds can be dismissed on "mere" political grounds.

However, the genesis of the Core Strategies in Oxford City and South Oxfordshire District Councils has been more complex. With both Councils having a clear political majority, officers "know where they are" (Blowers 1977) and can adapt accordingly. As a consequence the Core Strategies have evolved from a nexus of senior councillors and officers, and ultimately only effectively challenged at the EiP, where objectors have an opportunity to persuade the presiding independent Inspector of their views: "The balance between the real contribution of officers and members to policy-making will depend on the level of political direction coming from the members within a particular council" (Alexander 1982). In both Oxford City and South Oxfordshire, senior councillors had a clear idea of what they wanted to achieve.

Chapter 6 Reflections on the three research questions

Introduction

In this chapter I draw together the various findings from my interviews and surveys and explain what the case study of the Central Oxfordshire Sub – region tell us about the key research questions set out at the conclusion of the literature review. I describe a conceptual – analytical framework for understanding the role of the councillor in local government. I then move onto discuss the field - work findings in relation to this conceptual – analytical framework and how they relate to the existing literature on the role of the councillor in local government. My reading and reflection have helped me formulate three research questions: a) *Has the lack of local government autonomy inhibited the adoption of innovative forms of collaborative planning b) Have councillors understood the central tenets of collaborative planning and acted upon them and c) Can local politicians who are not members of the council`s executive play a more effective community leadership role by becoming more involved in the scrutiny of policies for space and place making.*

There were also secondary or subsidiary questions that help to elaborate he major questions that could also be tested through the research. These were:

1) Does the move from government to governance signify a de-politicisation in local government, and a reduced role for councillors, particularly those neither in cabinet nor having committee leadership roles? To what extent do councillors conform to the typology of roles ascribed to them by academic research?

2) Are Core Strategies that are intended to be over-arching in terms of the governance of the district, and not just land-use allocation documents, essentially expressions of political aspirations for the district? In these circumstances, should the strategies be politically "whipped", and what scope is there for councillors to dissent whose wards may be

critically affected? Can the Core Strategies be used to share political space, influence and power with those outside the world of the party?

3) Do councillors welcome the opportunity afforded by the Localism Act to determine their own requirements for housing and employment within the district and to what extent are they influenced by considerations of ward and re-election?

4) In addition to membership of the planning committee, are there opportunities for councillors to become involved in place making and does party membership impede this?

5) Does the traditional argument that views councillors as the people who should make the major decisions within the planning system still hold, or should the councillor play a more collaborative role in bringing stakeholders together and broaden the area for decision taking in place making?

6) In order to exercise community leadership within their wards, will there be occasions when councillors may have to go against the policies of the party of which they are a member, and will there be occasions when there may be the need for a more flexible approach to the application of adopted Local Plan policies? To what extent does party leadership tolerate divergent views at the ward level?

7) How do councillors rate the value of the preparation of Core Strategies within the planning system, and do they feel that they have had an opportunity to contribute to the evolution of the Core Strategy? To what extent are policies proposed by senior councillors and officers and what is the scope for back bench involvement?

8) Given that a whole range of issues, eg: employment and the journey to work area, housing needs, waste, transport and infrastructure needs transcend district-wide boundaries, what institutional mechanisms are there for local authority and public agency collaboration, now that

regional spatial strategies have been revoked by the Coalition Government? To what extent is such collaboration hampered by party political differences?

Turning now to the three research questions identified earlier in the thesis and also reflecting on the secondary questions identified above.

a) *Has the lack of local government autonomy inhibited the adoption of innovative forms of collaborative planning*

Walker pointed out (2008) that local government in England traditionally undertakes activities on behalf of central government and does not possess power over its own affairs. Jones and Stewart (2002) suggest that despite the relentless flow of consultation papers, the nature of the central – local relation has still not been tackled and the main recommendations of the Layfield report have been ignored by all governments. In Chapter 1 a two- fold typology of local autonomy (Gurr and King 1987) was described, one of which was autonomy from central government. Hall (1983) suggested a definition of autonomy – the ability of local government to maximise its policy making powers and implementation capacities. The evolution of a spatial strategy for the Central Oxfordshire Sub – region has shown how these strategic/local tensions have been evident during that process.

Central government through the medium of the Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) that had extensive consultation and independent examination, and was approved by the Secretary of State set overall parameters for growth in the Sub-region. The evidence at the Examination in Public of the RSS was that it was in the national interest that the growth potential of the Sub- region be encouraged. This involved a higher trajectory of growth than previously and this caused tension between central and local government. More particularly the response of the political leadership of the local authorities was to reluctantly plan for this level of growth and this created tensions within the authorities as the governing political parties exerted their authority over councillors. In the final analysis local authorities have little discretion when central government designates part

of the country as a growth area and the task of local government is essentially one of managing that growth.

The Urban Extension of Oxford into South Oxfordshire was an important requirement of the RSS but it set the two riparian district councils against each other. Although South Oxfordshire District Council, initially on pragmatic grounds, did include the concept in the first draft of the Core Strategy, so as to avoid a challenge to the competence of the plan, the successful legal challenge by the CPRE to the RSS provided South Oxfordshire District with an opportunity to change its policy ahead of district council elections and prepare a final draft of the Core Strategy (CS) without the Urban Extension. Oxford City Council objected to this omission at the Examination in Public, arguing that the CS was not compliant with the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) because South Oxfordshire District Council had not considered what contribution it should make to the City's housing needs. The Inspector who examined the CS recommended additional wording that encourages the district councils to co-operate in assessing and meeting the housing needs of Oxford.

The Localism Act 2011 places a duty on public bodies to cooperate on planning issues that cross- administrative boundaries and this is reinforced in the NPPF. The case study of Central Oxfordshire suggests that because the progress of an agreed spatial strategy is so protracted and extends beyond the life of a particular parliament and there is the possibility therefore of political changes at national government level, recalcitrant district councils can procrastinate and delay, hoping that national legislative changes may absolve them of a particular irksome responsibility. Against that background a legal duty to cooperate is likely to be fraught with difficulty because it is open to legal challenge and differing interpretation. Those academics and practitioners arguing for a more collaborative approach to spatial planning might take heart from the Central Oxfordshire Sub region case which has demonstrated the impracticality of a legalistic approach to cooperation where there are strong political differences between riparian district councils and their

strategic objectives. However Vigor et al (2000) suggest the current structure of the planning system works against a shift towards consensus around difficult local and development issues because of the continuing power of vertical relations. A significant influence on these relations are the political parties in local government.

Within councils, the attempts by the political leadership of the ruling party to comply with the strategic goals of central government creates its own tensions, particularly between the "tribune" and "statesman" councillors depicted by Gyford (1984)."Tribune" councillors want to represent their wards but if this means acting as an advocate for residents opposed to new development proposed by the majority party in the Core Strategy, sanction to do this by the leadership (the "statesman " councillors) is a fine political calculation. The case study demonstrates how the various themes identified in the literature review have been evident in the emergence of a growth agenda for the Central Oxfordshire Sub-region. Those such as Stoker (2000), Skelcher (2004) and Finch (2007) who documented a move towards governance with local government working across boundaries, to achieve a more collective action, and those such as Rhodes (1997) and Goodwin (1998) who evidenced political action emerging from a host of governmental and non – governmental bodies might see the emergence of this growth agenda as corroborating these tendencies.

However in managing this growth and given central government's determination, described by Coulson (2004) to keep local politicians within a tightly controlled financial framework, the role of the controlling political parties is to shape this growth agenda so as to reflect their political priorities and ensure political survival. This demonstrates the role of the political group and its concern   with capturing control of the council and to meet technocratic and managerial needs rather than reflect communities of place noted by Copus (2004). Despite all that has been written by Healey et al (2003, 2011) on collaborative planning, in this case study, the adoption of spatial strategies for the district council areas

is determined by the ruling parties wishing to maintain control of their councils.

In Chapter 2 the concept of Governmentality was discussed. Foucault (1991) expressing the view that the state can only govern in and through networks and coalitions and receiving support for this view from Miller and Rose (1990), Dean (1999) and Rose (1999) with Murdoch and Abram (2002) observing that this raised the question of the amount of spatial sensitivity to be permitted in the system. The case study and the interviews suggest that there is only a limited amount of spatial sensitivity that can be permitted in the system and this is under the control of the ruling political party who will pursue this in its own interests. *My conclusion is that the lack of local government autonomy has inhibited the adoption of innovative forms of collaborative planning.*

b) Have councillors understood the central tenets of collaborative planning and acted upon them.

The spatial planning system has had a crucial role to play in mediating between different interests since the creation of the land use planning system in 1947. (Elson 1986). The concept of the development plan in the planning system is in part a vehicle for providing the rationale for specific decisions, and to do this effectively, a plan should state the principles which are to guide the local authority's decision making (Healey et al 1988). Central government has however sought to constrain local discretion by limiting both the scope and content of the plans. In responding to these conflicting pressures Short (1996) opined that the planning system originally introduced to regulate and direct development had been transformed into a system of negotiation.

Encouraged by the " modernising " agenda for spatial planning introduced by the New Labour government after 1997, Healey (2007) and others including Allmendinger (2007) argued that collaborative spatial planning can facilitate collective action with progressive purpose, contrasting with more established public jurisdictional authorities where planning is

understood as mediation in the public interest. However Brownhill and Carpenter (2009) in a study of the evolving forms of governance in the Thames Gateway area ,identified the tension between networked forms of governance and the continuing importance of hierarchical relations.

The Central Oxfordshire Sub – region also provided an opportunity to observe these tensions. Both Oxford City Council and South Oxfordshire District Council were placed in the role of coming forward with development plans that reflected the higher trajectory of growth approved by central government for the sub – region. Councillors in both districts were confronted with the conflicting goals that such a trajectory inevitably introduces. On the question of the place- making role of spatial planning, senior councillors had more confidence in the opportunities to be involved in place- making, but overall nearly all councillors were positive about these opportunities. Junior councillors were slightly more emphatic that councillors should still be those who should make the major planning decisions, but were also more positive about playing a collaborative role in bringing stakeholders together. The three council leaders were supportive of councillors becoming involved in place- making, and it does represent an opportunity for junior councillors to define a new role for themselves, in addition to membership of the regulatory planning committee. For the Leaders it could hopefully empower councillors who otherwise might either not become engaged in policy formulation, or alternatively challenge it.

Councillors were supportive of a more collaborative role, but particularly the junior councillors were also concerned to ensure that their traditional role as decision makers in planning is not diminished. Senior members, through their involvement in external organisations and consortia, already play a collaborative role and it is in this way that these agencies exert their influence on the councils. A recurring theme was the need to distinguish between policy making on the one hand, and the regulatory function of planning development control on the other. The Chairman of the South Oxfordshire Planning Committee emphasised the importance to the public of the development control meetings, where interested

parties could orally make submissions to the committee. She was happy with the delegation arrangements to officers, as the committee did receive all the big planning applications. However she had little time for those councillors who thought that they had been marginalised in planning matters, and advised them that they should become more involved at a ward level. She emphasised that there was no political whip on planning decisions. The probity of maintaining a clear distinction between policy making and planning decisions on individual applications has been an important feature of the planning system in England since the 1947 Act. The increased politicisation of policy making renders that even more important.

The most pronounced difference in attitudes between senior and junior councillors was evident in their responses as whether to go against the party when formulating policy. Junior councillors indicated both their willingness to go against their party's policies and their wish for a more flexible approach to development plan policies. This follows a familiar pattern noted by Gyford (1984) who cites Newton (1974) who found that the delegate role appealed particularly to the member for a marginal ward, whilst trustees were more likely to come from safe wards. Junior councillors, in their first term of office, were found to endorse a ward focus and adopt a watchdog role, with wider horizons developing later on (McKinsey & Co 1973). Their involvement in local ward issues may bring them into active contact with pressure groups outside the council, whereas senior councillors pre-occupied with council work, may have at best only honorific links with such groups, noted Gyford (1984).

There were significant differences between junior and senior councillors in their perception of the helpfulness or otherwise of the Core Strategy system and the opportunity to contribute. For a number of ward councillors the process had been particularly difficult. Chairmanship of the Council meetings had also been difficult .For both Oxford City Council and the South Oxfordshire District Council, the preparation and adoption of their Core Strategy had pre-occupied them for more than five years.

Such a protracted process invites all sorts of dangers, particularly that of being overtaken by events. The failure to develop local capacity to manage the development process in Oxfordshire, which, it is claimed, has the largest concentration of research and development activity in Western Europe, was noted by the Chairman of Oxfordshire LEP .He wanted to ensure that the LEP was "business led" and addressed the issues that were threatening the local economy, such as the mis-match between skill needs and local educational provision. The Coalition Government has announced that the LEPs would have a crucial role in determining local priorities for infrastructure spending.

My conclusion is that councillors have understood the central tenets of collaborative planning but have not been able to act upon them as much as they would wish because of the lack of autonomy for local government and a centralised system of central and local government relationships which impedes local initiatives.

c) *Can local politicians who are not members of the council`s executive play a more effective community leadership role by becoming more involved in the scrutiny of policies for space and place- making.*

Although councillors welcomed greater collaboration with stakeholders, there was nonetheless, particularly amongst junior councillors, a desire to ensure that their political role was not minimalised. The need to prepare and adopt a Core Strategy for a district council area had, on the one hand, encouraged the collaborative approach advocated by Healey (2006) and others, but on the other had politicised policy and plan making to a significantly new degree. The Leader of South Oxfordshire District Council saw a clear distinction between development control decisions that were not whipped politically and the Core Strategy that was political, although it was difficult to engage backbenchers in policy formulation. Not surprisingly, this view was not supported by independent councillors and had led to conflict within the ruling group but it was a view strongly endorsed by senior Oxford City councillors.

The preparation of Core Strategies was a significant change for district councils, pursuing a more over-arching approach than the land-use plans required under the 1990 Planning Act. There also needed to be more collaboration, particularly in economic development , with county and sub-regional agencies, but the implications of these changes appeared to be an ever-increasing growth in the influence exerted by senior officers, and an alienation of backbenchers, who felt less engaged in the process. Backbenchers in marginal wards could feel particularly under pressure Whether the adoption of Core Strategies at Council meetings at Oxford City Council and South Oxfordshire were politically whipped is difficult to ascertain, because of its sensitivity. However what is clear is that parties voted along political affiliations at the respective Council meetings, and that within the ruling group at South Oxfordshire "opt outs" or "diplomatic absences from meetings" were agreed with the Leader. It is a reasonable assumption that voting was whipped because the ruling group either in Oxford or South Oxfordshire could not be certain of the voting arithmetic at Council meetings, and would wanted in any event to demonstrate at least a majority of the Council in support of the adopted Core Strategy. The main finding is that the Core Strategy is a clear expression of the political aims of the Council and its ruling group, and supports the conclusions of Copus (2004) that the politics of the council was conducted within the party group, before it reaches the public domain, and that dissenters were given some freedom by the leadership rather than risk a overly public split within the party.

The Leader of South Oxfordshire District Council, who was also a member of the Local Enterprise Partnership and the County Spatial Planning and Infrastructure Planning Liaison Group (SPIP), had a clear idea of the Core Strategy as a document setting out the political vision for the future development of the district This, together with collaboration with other councils and agencies, involved senior officers and members, but it was difficult to engage backbenchers in policy formulation. There was likely to be an increased emphasis on economic development, and within the council senior management was trying to re-focus professional

planners to become more aware of the overall activities of the council, and not just development control.

The Urban Expansion of Oxford, proposed in the South East Plan (2009), had been dropped and, despite the representations of Oxford City Council, the EiP Inspector examining the South Oxfordshire Core Strategy had not been persuaded to resurrect the policy in the Strategy, preferring that these housing requirements be further examined at the County level. Although the Oxford Urban Expansion had featured in a list of priorities prepared by SPIP, this could not of itself safeguard the policy. The Chairman of the Local Enterprise Partnership   made it clear that the LEP would not interfere in the statutory decision-making of elected members of local authorities. The increased politicisation of plan making as exemplified in the core strategies will make collaboration between district councils more difficult, particularly where it involves significant housing development, despite the apparent enthusiasm for this collaboration expressed by councillors. A local developer thought local authorities had failed to deal with these issues and that his company would have to lobby in order that the issues are confronted.

The issue of increased politicisation in plan making raises some interesting questions about leadership and scrutiny. Gains et al (2005) demonstrated how the potential exists for local authorities to be independently strong and weak on the two dimensions of leadership and scrutiny. This led to the identification of four broad paths for implementation to move down. These included the low scrutiny/high leadership model where there has been a move from collectivist patterns of leadership to a focussed executive without adopting the other parts of the reforms. Gains called this the "executive autonomy model " and this appears to have become the overwhelming form of governance in South Oxfordshire District Council and to some extent also in Oxford City Council which has adopted the "Strong Leadership " role for the executive offered by central government, although a strong opposition of Lib Dems and Greens exercise there a scrutiny role.

Many councillors in South Oxfordshire District Council evidenced concern that Sub-regional targets had been too prominent in the production of the Core Strategy. However, Oxford City councillors demonstrated a much stronger support for regionally set housing and employment targets, and greater collaboration between district councils than was evident in the replies from South Oxfordshire District councillors. Oxford City Councillors observed:

"Co-operation important in principle, but party political differences can create deadlock, and impede agreement, if neighbouring councils have differing plans/ core strategies."

"…In practice, with differing objectives it will be very difficult to achieve greater collaboration."

"Difficulty in Oxfordshire – Labour-run Oxford City with tight boundary and wish to see growth in housing/ jobs, but surrounded by councils hostile to these policies. Targets are better made regionally; then, no opportunity for authorities to duck their responsibility to contribute to housing and employment needs in region."

There was strong agreement, as had been the case with South Oxfordshire District councillors that councillors will pursue local interests, and not give sufficient weight to wider requirements, but it was not agreed that councillors do not have sufficient knowledge to make these decisions. Again a majority thought that the pursuit of political aims would tend to predominate. There was less support for locally produced Housing Needs Assessments than had been the case with South Oxfordshire District councillors. Oxford City Council has used Housing Needs assessments as the driver for determining numbers and partly to validate the regional statements. CPRE pointed out that the major influence on the policies being followed by the Oxford City Council was the Oxford Strategic Partnership on which both Oxford University and Oxford Brookes University were represented: "A major objective of the Council was to achieve unitary status and their growth agenda was part of this campaign" Within Oxford City Council the six area planning

committees that had met monthly across the city were being replaced by two larger planning committees. The justification for replacing them was that some of the committees had a poor record of decision-making However, because of Oxford's political geography, the Lib Dems and Greens had been able to lead these smaller area committees, whereas the two larger area committees would be politically balanced to reflect the political make-up of the whole Council, thus giving Labour a majority on both. Evidently localism in Oxford had proved uncomfortable for the political leadership of the Council: "They are over-influenced by local people."The new approach was welcomed by a local developer who thought the "area committees were very parochial and inexperienced, and lost a lot of appeals".

Leach and Copus (2004) examined the introduction, via the Local Government Act 2000, of political executives held to account by influential overview and scrutiny committees, which would challenge fundamentally the traditional operations of the party political group system. The researchers concluded that the success of the overview and scrutiny experiment was by no means assured, and faced with the intransigent nature of most party group behaviour, the future of effective scrutiny hung in the balance. Neither in Oxford City Council or South Oxfordshire District Council did overview and scrutiny exercise a significant role in the preparation of the Core Strategies. Their role was predominantly procedural and effective scrutiny came from back benchers and third party interests such as CPRE.

Gyford (1984) had stressed the positive aspects of political parties in local government as representing genuine divergences of view, and giving coherence to the work of local authorities. He saw them functioning as a means of political recruitment and election organisation, and they represented the demands and interests of differing social groups both organised and unorganised. Twenty years later Copus (2004) concluded that although the presence of parties had long been recognised as introducing new elements to local authority decision – making , what

political parties do to local representation and wider local politics is less well understood .

Moreover the role of the party group – the cohesive organisation of councillors from a single party – has received scant attention by comparison with that given to the political party generally. His research strove to show that both party and the party group play an important and discrete part in the representative processes, interposing themselves between the electors and their representatives and generating their own distinctive claims to commitment. Vital to the interplay of politics locally is the fact that party members and councillors interpret representation and democracy differently from those they are elected to represent. They also have very distinct ideas about the role of the citizen and the party in local political activity and decision –making.

Copus concluded that political parties have little or no loyalty to recognisable local communities as such. Rather they are concerned with capturing control of a council – a specific local government unit – the boundaries of which are more likely to be drawn for administrative convenience and to meet technocratic and managerial needs rather than reflect communities of place. The focus political parties have on capturing control of, or securing representation in any council chamber, results in the loosening of the bond between the councillor and the community and a strengthening of the ties between the councillor and his or her political party, for it is the party that can guarantee or withhold election to the council. The Central Oxfordshire Sub –region and the means by which both the ruling political parties of Oxford City Council and South Oxfordshire District Council strove to adopt Core Strategies that would reflect the growth agenda for the Sub – region provides illustration that the conclusions of Copus regarding political parties in local government are also applicable in the specialised area of spatial planning.

I commented on the limited role of Scrutiny Committee in both of the councils in examining and monitoring the progress of the Core Strategies. Effective scrutiny did not occur until the Examination in Public by an

independent Inspector. The participants at the EiPs consisted principally of landowners and developers and their legal representatives, members of parish councils, amenity and environmental groups and senior officers. District councillors were conspicuous by their absence and appeared to have handed responsibility to the officers. The participants were chosen by the Inspector on the basis of their written representations submitted to the EiP programme Officer so the likelihood is that other than one or two district council members concerned at the impact of the strategy on their wards, other district councillors saw no reason to become involved. The format of an EiP is similar to public scrutiny elsewhere. Topics are chosen by the Inspector and participants invited each day based on the programme of topics. The style of debate is more investigative than adversarial with no formal cross – examination of participants. The Inspector in a written report summarises the issues and makes recommendations to the council. Despite all the changes to the format of EiPs in recent years, the forum is still perceived as one where those with land interests can challenge the strategy, and its land allocations rather than a wide ranging review of the strategy from the perspective of the district and its residents.

Full and effective scrutiny earlier in the process by Scrutiny Committee over a number of days similarly inviting a wide group of participants could both better engage councillors and other stakeholders and simplify the procedure meaning that reviews of Core Strategies could be more timely and less protracted. The task of the EiP Inspector could then be essentially that of an administrative check that procedure and protocols had been adhered to. Such a change would better reflect the principles of Localism than the present quasi – judicial review and allow a community –led scrutiny of local decisions so that the public can challenge local authorities and public service providers.

Chapter 7 Conclusions

Introduction

In this final chapter the important conclusions emerging from the study and some key recommendations are made. Reflections are made on the study methodology, its limitations, and the study's contribution to knowledge and the potential directions for future research. At the outset it is helpful to set out the original research questions:

a) *Has the lack of local government autonomy inhibited the adoption of an innovative form of collaborative planning,*

b) *Have councillors understood the central tenets of collaborative planning and acted upon them, and*

c) *Can local politicians who are not members of the council`s executive play a more effective community leadership role by becoming more involved in the scrutiny of policies for space and place- making.*

Key Conclusions

To answer these questions the broad themes which provided a conceptual – analytical framework for understanding the role of the councillor in local government, and more specifically that role in spatial planning are employed.

a) De-politicisation in local government

Although councillors welcomed greater collaboration with stakeholders, there was nonetheless, particularly amongst junior councillors, a desire to ensure that their political role was not minimised. The need to prepare and adopt a Core Strategy for a district council had, on the one hand, encouraged the collaborative approach, but on the other had politicised policy and plan making to a significantly new degree. The main finding is that the Core Strategy is a clear expression of the aims of the Council and its ruling group.

It is therefore a further demonstration of the political party acting as a

consistent and permanent pull on the activities of the councillor (Copus 2004). The policies contained within the Core Strategy and the various stages of consultation leading to its eventual formal adoption are viewed by councillors as no different from other forms of political activity within the council and axiomatically party political activity. Electoral success enables a ruling group to claim a mandate to govern an area and in turn claim public support for its planning policies, even when these are seriously challenged by local residents or business groups. In tandem with the legal and procedural advances of the Core Strategy, the ruling party manages the political support for these policies within the party group and where necessary will grant an element of local autonomy to councillors at ward level but only within a strictly controlled framework agreed at the informal group meetings

The political management of the Core Strategy contrasts with the autonomous nature of the planning committee. Reflecting its regulatory purpose and quasi- judicial status, councillors who are members of the committee can display a fiercely independent character. By contrast a party approach to planning policy is as evident as in any other form of administrative activity within the council and this, in turn reduces concerns and issues to party political ones.

b) <u>Core Strategies as expressions of political aspirations for the district</u>

The Leader of South Oxfordshire District Council, who was also a member of the Local Enterprise Partnership and the County Spatial Planning and Infrastructure Planning Liaison Group (SPIP) had a clear idea of the Core Strategy as a document setting out the political vision for the future development of the district. This, together with collaboration with other councils and agencies, involved senior officers and members, but it was difficult to engage backbenchers in policy formulation. There was likely to be an increased emphasis on economic development, and within the council senior management was trying to re-focus professional planners to become more aware of the overall activities of the council, and not just development control.

c) <u>Do councillors welcome the opportunities afforded by the Localism Act to determine their own requirements for housing and employment within the district?</u>

From the questionnaire results there was support for this approach, and a number of interviews (Appendix 1) revealed support and evidenced concern that Sub-regional targets had been too prominent in the production of the Core Strategy. Evidently localism in Oxford had proved uncomfortable for the political leadership of the Council: "They are over-influenced by local people". The new approach was welcomed by a local developer who thought the "area committees were very parochial and inexperienced, and lost a lot of appeals". Conversely it can be concluded that by abandoning the area committees, the leading party had shown itself a force for inertia and the status quo (Copus 2004) when examining the ways in which the politics of the council was conducted.

d) <u>In addition to membership of the planning committee, are there opportunities for councillors to become involved in "place- making" ?</u>

Senior councillors had more confidence in the opportunities to be involved in place making, but overall nearly all councillors were positive about these opportunities. Junior councillors were slightly more emphatic that councillors should still be those who should make the major planning decisions, but were also more positive about playing a collaborative role in bringing stakeholders together. For the Leaders, it could hopefully empower councillors who otherwise might either not become engaged in policy formulation, or alternatively challenge it.

e) <u>Councillors as the people who should make the major decisions, and collaboration with stakeholders</u>

Councillors are supportive of a more collaborative role, but the junior councillors particularly, are also concerned to ensure that their traditional role as decision makers in planning is not diminished. Senior members, through their involvement in external organisations and consortia, already

play a collaborative role and it is in this way that these agencies exert their influence on the councils.

f) Community Leadership

The most pronounced difference in attitudes between senior and junior councillors was evident in their responses to this issue. Junior councillors indicated both their willingness to go against their party's policies, and their wish for a more flexible approach to Local Plan policies. This follows a familiar pattern noted by Gyford (1984)) who cites Newton (1974) who found that the delegate role appealed particularly to the member for a marginal ward, whilst trustees were more likely to come from safe wards.

g) The value of the preparation of Core Strategies within the planning system

There were significant differences between junior and senior councillors in their perception of the helpfulness or otherwise of the Core Strategy system and the opportunity to contribute. For a number of ward councillors, the process had been particularly difficult. Chairmanship of the Council meetings had also been difficult. For both Oxford City Council and the South Oxfordshire District Council, the preparation and adoption of their Core Strategy had pre-occupied them for more than five years. Such a protracted process invites all sorts of dangers, particularly that of being overtaken by events.

h) Institutional mechanisms for local authority and public agency collaboration

The Leader of the South Oxfordshire District Council referred to a number of cross-boundary issues affecting the District and, given the geographical context of the District, this is hardly surprising. For the South Oxfordshire Sub-region there are now institutional mechanisms in place. For their effectiveness these rely heavily on collaboration between the political leaders and, other than Oxford City, these all now come from the same political party.

Recommendations

The major recommendation emerging from this thesis is the need for a greater role for the Scrutiny and Overview committee in the evolution of the Core Strategy within councils. When the cabinet or executive structure was introduced into local government with its concentration of power in the executive, as compared with the earlier committee structure, emphasis was placed on the important role of scrutiny as a counter balance to this concentration.

The case study has demonstrated that scrutiny is poorly developed in both Oxford City Council and South Oxfordshire District Council. Both councils exhibit the low scrutiny/high leadership form described by Gains et al (2005) where there has been a move from a collectivist pattern of leadership to a focussed executive without adopting the other parts of the reforms. A strong scrutiny committee that also provided a role for public involvement could obviate much of the subsequent public consultation at the EiP stage, leaving the independent Inspector to concentrate on the competence of the Core Strategy, and giving scrutiny a stronger role within local government. This would not only introduce more transparency into the process but also lead to efficiencies through shortening the overall time taken for the adoption of the Core Strategy by the council.

The dominance of the majority political party in formulating the Core Strategy is a feature unremarked upon in much of the literature on collaborative planning discussed in Chapter 2, but it poses an obstacle to public engagement and interest in planning policy. A process more orientated around a central role for the scrutiny committee, which would encourage contributions from individuals and organisations outside the council, would better reflect and address a range of views on local issues. The researcher`s experience of where scrutiny is firmly embedded in the culture of the council and where the chairmanship of scrutiny and overview committees is shared amongst the political parties represented on the council, is that councillors see their scrutiny role as over-riding rather than them being foremost representatives of their parties. This

focus of itself encourages other organisations and groups to engage in the discussion of the issues, as they perceive that the debates are structured around issues and not overly party political. By sharing political space, the collaborative approach to spatial planning advocated by so many can become a reality, but there is a need amongst researchers, which is often lacking, to understand the present political culture and how it constrains the evolution of the planning process.

Limitations of the study

In terms of the data collected and analysed, though every effort was made to ensure that the fieldwork used a robust and rigorous research methodology, there are inevitably a number of limitations to the study. The comments from councillors were not a representative random sample of the councils approached. A self- selecting group of councillors, many of whom the researcher knew, responded. However the aim of the study was specifically to understand the role of the councillor in a specific context rather than to develop a representative understanding of the role of all councillors. The councillors who responded were not necessarily representative of the more than 100 councillors approached, but they were representative of those councillors who had taken part in the spatial planning process.

The in - depth interviews were small in number. It can be argued that a larger group would have increased the robustness and rigour of the interview findings and could also have allowed other insights to emerge. This criticism does not invalidate the findings from these respondents but does raise questions about the transferability of these findings to other contexts. However despite the small sample size, the interview findings are internally consistent and connect with the findings from the questionnaires, the observations at public council meetings, and the analysis of published reports. Overall, the study's findings do provide important insights in to the role of the councillor in local government.

Contributions to Knowledge

Promoting scholarship in the field of planning was discussed by Patsy Healey in her last editorial in *Planning Theory & Practice* (2008) .As with other fields of professional expertise, the focus of planning is on a field of action, of practice. Consequently if practice is the focus of attention in the planning field, then where does the cultivation of "scholarship ", of "academic inquiry" belong in the field?"

Firstly, all professional fields need to maintain a rich connection to developments in the various academic disciplines relevant to their work. They introduce new concepts and strands of inquiry that may come to have relevance in practice contexts. Secondly, to challenge the introversion that often comes over professional fields dominated by the routines and institutional arrangements of particular parties. Thirdly, to encourage authors to write well and make clear arguments. Finally, to challenge a habitat often found in planning where authors concerned about addressing " what should be done " mix statements about what is going on and what should be going on, the descriptive and the normative, not just in the same section of a paper but sometimes in adjacent sentences. The two dimensions are interlinked but one of the important skills in planning work is to know which kind of statement is being made, and when a switch is being made between the two.

The study has contributed to knowledge in a number of ways. It provides confirmatory evidence from other research exploring the role of the councillor in local government. There has however, been little work on attempting to place in context how the councillor behaves in the specialised area of spatial planning, notwithstanding its important role in local government. This study has shown how the politicisation that has affected local government, has also had an influence on the role of spatial planning in local government, and that the dominant role of the political party in local government also involves spatial planning.

In terms of the existing literature on the role of the councillor in local government and the evolving nature of spatial planning, the study links strongly with the work of Gyford (1984) who analysed the clusters of role orientations that characterise councillors, Newton (1976) who distinguished the roles of trustees, delegates and politicos amongst councillors, and Cole (2002) who drew attention to the tension between the role of councillors as ward representatives and party politicians. Clarke and Stewart (1998) identified a greater role for councillors in community governance arising from the "Modernising Agenda "in local government of New Labour. The methodological contribution of this study is to identify these differing roles for the councillor within the prism of spatial planning, and the responsibilities that decision - making in this specialist area places on councillors.

This has allowed a review of the role of the political party in local government, linking in with the work of Cole(2002) who examined dissention within the party group, and Copus (2004) who described how the party group plays a discrete part in the representative process, interposing between the electors and their representatives and generating their own distinctive claims to commitment. The study provides confirmation that these themes are as evident in the specialist area of spatial planning as they are in other areas of local government.

In terms of professional practice, attention has already been drawn to the need for a stronger role for scrutiny in the evolution of the Core Strategy. The difficulties of councils co-operating together in order to resolve issues that cross administrative boundaries has also been illustrated. In Chapter 2 there was an extensive review of the literature,that deals with the emerging theory about the purpose of spatial planning, and the opportunity for a more collaborative approach to place making. What is noticeable is that the roles of the political party and councillors are often not considered in these debates. A central question concerning the current enthusiasm for a localist agenda in spatial planning and local government, is to what extent local authorities will choose to exercise their residual autonomy so as to encourage locally specific policy making.

In terms of professional practice attention has already been drawn to the need for a stronger role for scrutiny in the evolution of the Core Strategy. Latterly the "duty to co-operate" has become an important test of the soundness of the new plans being formulated and means that local councils need to positively engage with neighbouring councils, often led by rival political parties, in order that cross – boundary issues are properly addressed and resolved, which provides a new challenge to the party dominance in the council.

During the researcher`s career as a planning consultant the main contact with local government councillors was with them in their role as members of the planning committee. Most viewed the independence of the planning committee within local government as particularly important and their own decision making as "quasi – legal". Policy- making was, however, different. During the researcher`s time as a councillor at South Oxfordshire District Council, there had been little work on the Core Strategy. The previous local plan had just been adopted, but the time spent there as a councillor, allowed an understanding of the role of the political party in all the areas of local government. Subsequently this research has shown that this over- riding control extended to the specialist area of policy making in spatial planning, but what is surprising to the researcher is the extent to which the political leadership wanted to ensure that there was no dissension amongst ward members.

Methodology

Methodology was discussed in Chapter 3. The methodological contributions of this study are the need to use a multi-theoretical approach to understand the full complexity of the role of the councillor, the need to study all the stakeholders in the spatial planning process and the value of a qualitative approach to understanding what autonomy a councillor displays in the decision making process.

Turning to the use of a case study Flyvbjerg (2006) suggests a typology of strategies for the selection of samples and cases which distinguishes

between A. Random selection and B. Information – orientated selection. This latter selection is separated into four categories including as a fourth Paradigmatic cases which are defined as those where a metaphor can be developed or to establish a school for the domain which the case concerns. The researcher suggests that this case study falls within this latter category for it examines the problems for governance and collaboration in an area – the Central Oxfordshire Sub – region – where a discourse of further growth needs to be stabilised in the local government system and allied agencies responsible for infrastructure. In the literature review, other areas where such a discourse has begun were examined and there is some commonality but the strength of the approach is that the discourse described in the Central Oxfordshire Sub-region can be read as a narrative in its entirety and it is from this that hypotheses can be generated which can be examined elsewhere.

Suggested Directions for Future Research

The policy importance of this research is three - fold. Firstly, on democratic grounds it is important for researchers, policy-makers and decision – makers to understand the role of the councillor and the factors that influence this role. Secondly, by understanding how and why councillors hold the views that they do there is an opportunity to develop approaches to bridge gaps in trust, communication, values and democratic accountability. Thirdly, it could lead to more effective policies and programmes that could work in partnership with local communities and have a greater positive impact locally and nationally.

It would be worthwhile doing a larger study that examined a broader range of councils as Copus (2004) did in order to ensure that all the major parties were represented and across a contrasting range of locations eg: metropolitan, provincial and rural. This would allow insights into the role of the councillor in local government through the prism of spatial planning that might be more representative than this case study could be.

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