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# Soft spaces, fuzzy boundaries, and metagovernance: the new spatial planning in the Thames Gateway

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**Abstract.** This paper examines the changing practices of spatial planning, critically engaging with state theory to argue that a new generation of ‘soft spaces’ and ‘fuzzy boundaries’ occupies a key position in the emergent planning system. In the process we question whether privileged scales and sectors can meaningfully be identified in current state-restructuring processes. We use interviews with key national policy makers and a case study of the Thames Gateway to test our ideas.

## 1 Introduction

The Thames Gateway area is currently the largest and most ambitious regeneration project in the UK, with plans to provide an extra 225 000 new jobs and 160 000 new homes by 2016, accommodating around 350 000 extra residents, plus all the infrastructure required for the resulting massive increase in residential and working population (DCLG, 2007; HoC, 2007). As well as the country’s largest regeneration challenge, it is also arguably its most demanding contemporary governance challenge. Thames Gateway lies to the east of London, on both banks of the river Thames, and as yet shares its boundaries with no other statutory body. There is, however, a Thames Gateway Strategy team within the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG),<sup>(1)</sup> charged with providing leadership, integrating the work of various central government departments, and direct intervention with partners when necessary (NAO, 2007, page 14). The Thames Gateway Strategic Partnership involves stakeholders from across the area and certain government agencies, and is chaired by the Minister of Housing and Planning. The Gateway also has within it a range of new subareas, few if any conterminous with existing political or functional boundaries. To begin to hint at the scale of the resulting complexity, consider first that the area takes in parts of three different standard government regions, involving three sets of Regional Spatial Strategies (RSSs) and Regional Economic Strategies, transport, housing strategies, and more. Consider then that within the Thames Gateway itself there are three subregional partnerships: Thames Gateway London, Thames Gateway South Essex, and Thames Gateway Kent Partnership. Then there is the network of local delivery partners, with varying governance styles, including two urban development corporations (UDCs), one urban regeneration company, and six other local partnerships. There is also the Olympic Delivery Authority, responsible for the Olympic Park. Consider next the sixteen local authorities which are wholly or in part within the Gateway, each with its own planning,

<sup>(1)</sup>The government planning ministry at the start of this work was the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), changing to the Department of Communities and Local Government in 2006.

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housing, regeneration, recreation, education, and transport plans. Then there are the essential services to consider: police, health, and fire authorities, plus water, gas, electricity, telecommunications, environmental protection, flood management, sewerage, and so forth. Consider further the vast scale of the plans and their importance to the health of the economy of both London and the country more generally. Add to this pot the legacy of the former London Docklands Development Corporation, which whilst it achieved much in regeneration terms, left a legacy of ill feeling over its governance arrangements.

It is in this context that we focus here on the emerging governance arrangements for the Thames Gateway, which are interesting as an example of what we might refer to as ‘metagovernance’, or the ‘governance of governance’ (Jessop, 2004). As we have already intimated, this is not so much a subregion, as is implied by the formal planning guidance for the Thames Gateway published in 1995, but a metaregion which is of vital interest to the national economy (ODPM, 2004). In this paper we discuss how these governance arrangements are unfolding, with a particular emphasis on the role of spatial strategies. In particular, we want to argue that there is an intriguing usage of strategic and delivery interventions at scales other than those of the statutory planning system (local and regional), as planning activities necessarily learn to work within complex multilayered, fluid, and sometimes fuzzy scales of policy and governance arrangements. Added to this, planners are also having to rethink how they can most productively work with actors from various sectors at all scales. The clear geographical and professional boundaries of planning, plus the hierarchical and silo ways of behaving are already planning history. We do not have a single new model which has replaced this; rather a series of experiments about how planning operates within constantly evolving governance systems for place making at all scales.<sup>(2)</sup>

## 2 The changing nature of planning and governance

Land-use planning has been undergoing significant change over the past decade or so, not least to make the system more strategic, faster, and with more effective ways of engaging with all sections of society (Allmendinger, 2006; Allmendinger and Tewdwr-Jones, 2006). In particular, much has been made of the rescaling of planning functions through the reintroduction of a regional level planning in the form of RSSs (Haughton and Counsell, 2004; Keating, 1997; Vigar et al, 2000). One way of seeking to understand this is through the insights generated from state theory, particularly recent debates on the rollout of neoliberal policy and the role of state rescaling as part of this. In some accounts this involves a ‘hollowing-out’ of certain functions of the nation-state and as part of this a reshaping of local, regional, and international governance arrangements has been taking place. Following from this, it has been argued persuasively that we are experiencing an era of newly emergent ‘spatiotemporal fixes’ (Jessop, 2000, pages 334–335), driven by evolving forms of neoliberal governance which seek to privilege competitiveness through the subordination of social policy to economic policy, new forms of partnership and networks, and the promotion of the regional level as the most appropriate level of intervention.

These processes have led to debates concerning scalar and territorial relativisation and the disruption and undermining of existing nested relations of scale at national and local levels (Jessop, 2000, page 343; see also Brenner, 1999). Such work has been

<sup>(2)</sup>This paper draws on 133 interviews as part of a 2.5 year project, involving interviews with 45 national policy figures, 18 people with specific mandates for strategy and policy delivery in the Thames Gateway areas, plus a workshop in 2007 involving 11 people. All quotes are from interviews undertaken in 2006 unless otherwise stated.

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influential in critically examining processes of multiscalar governance, with interesting debates about the meaning of terms such as the ‘hollowing-out’ of the nation-state. As Jessop and others have been at pains to point out, the shifting of powers and responsibilities across scales does not of itself imply any diminution of state power. Rather, the privileging of new scales of governance can be seen as part of a strategic process orchestrated by the state. It is in this context that Goodwin et al (2005) talk about devolution as part of the ‘filling-in’ of the state as new scales of governance are either created or privileged in some particular way.

Contemporary rescaling processes can also be seen as part of a wider reworking of the existence and intensity of networked relations between scales and places:

“Places now can be seen as the embodiment of virtual or immanent forces, and as the temporary spatiotemporalisation of associational networks of different length and duration” (Amin, 2002, page 391).

Such a view highlights the need to explore the ways in which policy processes develop and how policy actors seek to communicate, debate, and work together more effectively not simply within a given policy sector but across sectors and across scales.

Spatial rescaling has not been accepted uncritically either theoretically or in the light of empirical evidence, with Raco (2005a) in particular highlighting the tendency to create a ‘straw man’ of rolled out neoliberalism within much regulationist work. Nevertheless, there are important rescaling processes at work, most evident in the way state rescaling is evolving differently in different parts of the UK as part of the post-1997 devolution reforms. For planning, the result is some major asymmetries emerging across the UK, involving different mixtures of ‘national’, ‘regional’ and ‘subregional’, and local planning processes. But we want to argue here that a large part of this rescaling process involves not simply a shifting of emphasis across the existing scales of the statutory planning system, but the insertion of new scales for planning intervention, plus an apparent predilection for promoting new policy scales, initially at least through the device of fuzzy boundaries. Examples of such fuzzy boundaries include those used for ‘regions’ in the Wales Spatial Strategy and also the city-regions proposed in the Northern Way, itself a new form of metaregional governance arrangement covering three standard regions (Counsell and Haughton, 2006). There is also an emergent resort to new multiarea subregions for strategy making and policy delivery, evident at various scales of regeneration, planning, and other domains, breaking away from the rigidities associated with the formal scales of statutory plan-making. The emergence of these ‘soft spaces’ is an important trend, which alongside the tactical use of ‘fuzzy boundaries’ is related to a policy impetus to break away from the shackles of preexisting working patterns which might be variously held to be slow, bureaucratic, or not reflecting the real geographies of problems and opportunities.

So whilst planning still needs its clear legal ‘fix’ around set boundaries for formal plans, if it is to reflect the more complex relational world of associational relationships which stretch across a range of geographies, planning also needs to operate through other spaces, and it is these we think of as ‘soft spaces’. The argument here is not that planners are shifting from one set of spaces to another, but rather that they are learning to acknowledge that they must work within multiple spaces, and as part of this adapting to and even adopting the tactics of soft spaces and fuzzy boundaries where these help deliver the objectives of planning. There is a strong element of pragmatism involved in the emergence of soft spaces and use of fuzzy boundaries, echoing the New Labour emphasis on getting things done and not worrying too much about tidiness around the edges or administrative clutter. The resulting relational geography of planning requires attention to a variety of associational networks working across a wide mix of administrative/political spaces, ‘soft’ spaces, and other scales.

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A further significant and related change to planning is the shift from, broadly, regulatory planning to 'spatial planning'. While definitions of what constitutes spatial planning are diverse and not always illuminating (echoing the multiple interpretations of similar notions of sustainable development and sustainable communities) there is a broad agreement that it involves a focus upon the qualities and management of space and place (RTPI, 2001). With their clear focus on localities, planners arguably have a key role to play in bringing a clearer spatial dimension to the integration of a wide variety of policy sectors, such as economic development, health and education, and transport, and the way they interact and play out differently in different places (Kidd, 2007). Part of the focus of spatial planning involves better vertical and horizontal policy integration of processes that are diffuse, fluid, and multidirectional, rather than rigid, hierarchical, and unilinear. Consequently, spatial planning is a contributor to and a reflection of a more fundamental reform of territorial management that aims to improve integration of different forms of spatial development activity (Allmendinger and Tewdwr-Jones, 2006). More than this, however, the way in which spatial planning has been adopted in the UK reflects the wider context of the ascendancy of neoliberalist politics, being shaped and deployed in pursuit of a particular approach to bolstering growth in the southeast of the country, to ensure the national growth project is not harmed. Multiscalar, multiagency, and cross-sectoral integration opens up alternative routes to pursuing a prodevelopment agenda where local forces coalesce to seek to resist development.

This begins to hint at the importance of planning's role in 'joining up' other strategies as a part of the process of metagovernance: that is, the process by which the rules of subnational governance are centrally steered. Adding further complexity to such tensions, central government planners have also had to have regard to various European initiatives and directives, from the European Spatial Development Perspective to Strategic Environmental Assessment. And given the commitment to empower subnational and regional planning bodies, there is now a widening base of planning practice at lower levels within the system which have to be variously nurtured, reined in, and learnt from. So for instance, there is no national spatial plan for the UK nor for England, though there are statutory Regional Spatial Strategies (RSSs), currently going through the process of approval. Each RSS is issued in formal terms by central government, except the London Plan which is published by the mayor.

Unlike the previous system of Regional Planning Guidance, RSSs have a statutory role, and are expected to be more 'spatial' in their content, have much improved consultative processes, and have adopted a wider focus than simply 'land-use' issues, as part of the government's commitment to the new spatial planning. The result is an interesting position for agreed spatial strategies, full of tensions and potential contradictions. They have gone through various forms of consultation and a formal examination in public and report by an independent panel. So they bear a resemblance to governance in the wide-ranging processes of consultation involved, but ultimately they become adopted as part of the formal regulatory apparatus of the state, which other bodies must have regard to. The full consequences of this are yet to emerge. But what we are seeing here is planning being used to develop conjointly with other sectoral actors a form of 'spatial strategy', through which the government is forcing through an integrated policy-making process. The result is that, at all levels, an increasingly wide range of bodies and institutions are being drawn into the planning apparatus to varying degrees: substantially in the case of economic development, transport, and environmental regulators, increasingly so in the case of energy and water providers, and very unevenly in the case of social infrastructure, such as education and health sectors.

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It is important not to overread this process. Large aspects of planning remain at heart a land-use regulatory function, but its boundaries are increasingly open, as it necessarily learns how to work with others, who bring new expertise, resources, priorities, and insights. In other sectors too, not least economic development, widespread stakeholder consultation is being required for the new strategies. Central government is creating the new rules requiring organisations to work together in new ways, and it is also seeking to influence their content. The government appears to be creating a range of coordinating mechanisms at various spatial scales, within which planning is centrally embedded. More than this, however, we are seeing the rescaling of metagovernance, a process which locks in actors at and across a range of scales. This is evident not only at the level of the nation-state, but through the work of various international agreements and also, we would argue, in how regional networks of actors are now expected to work. We are not suggesting here that these metagovernance arrangements necessarily work in a unified, unidirectional, coherent, or functional way in support of capital or a specific state project. There is an important element of struggle, negotiation, and contingency about how such arrangements operate which must be explored historically – empirically<sup>(3)</sup>

There is something profound going on here. At one level, planning remains a part of the formal regulatory apparatus of the state and could be seen as rigidly hierarchical, a classic case of ‘government’, where we can see continuing centralisation, and the continued dominance of experts, professions, and professionals in policy development and decision making (Allmendinger, 2006). But when we look beyond this, we can see how spatial planning is also being reconstituted so that it can and must operate within new associational networks, becoming deeply embedded in governance systems at all levels. So planning is somehow both an expression of old-style ‘government’ and new-style ‘governance’, an intriguing hybrid.

These three components of the new planning (the rescaling of its functions, its spatial nature, and the focus upon coordination, integration, and inclusion) all raise significant issues and possibilities. First, the ‘horizontal reworking’ of the state has been largely overlooked in the literature which has focused, instead, on more vertical relations (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2007). Castells (1977) and Harvey (1989) both argue for the importance of recognising and distinguishing between the *scope* of a territorial structure (that is, the range of different sectors and interests involved) and the *scale*, that is the geographical coverage, of a territorial structure. In particular, we would argue that it is important to consider how state rescaling processes intersect with state-inspired initiatives to disrupt the processes of setting up professional/technical or scientific boundaries and ways of engaging with each other and the state. So moving away from hierarchical systems which work within narrow policy silos, we can see a more relational form of governance emerging, where governments seek to diffuse power in various ways, horizontally and vertically.

Second, the notion of spatial planning is a broad discourse that has a variety of meanings and possibilities for actors, processes, and outcomes. We see this as requiring not so much a fundamental restructuring of the planning profession as a reworking of the boundaries of the planning profession. At one level, this is nothing new (Wildavsky, 1973). So, rather than see a unilinear path from rigidly policed professional boundaries to more porous boundaries, we see the reshaping of planning as an on-going process rooted in the broader political economy of territorial management practices. The contemporary challenge is not for planners to be able to claim expertise in each thematic area a plan might need to engage with, but rather to work productively

<sup>(3)</sup> We are grateful for a referee’s comments on this.

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with other professionals and equally importantly, with various bodies representing different aspects of the general public, lobby groups, interest groups, and so forth. And this is a two-way process—increasingly other professional disciplines are having to work more closely with planners, adding in a stronger spatial dimension to their own strategic processes.

Third, the normative and analytical use of governance and policy integration mask new, contested landscapes of whom and what are being integrated (Healey, 2006). Integration inevitably opens up new networks and opportunities but is not infinite: it has to be created and established as a political process. The very process itself will inevitably privilege some relationships over others, opening up new avenues and closing off others.

In the remainder of this paper we seek to analyse these issues using the Thames Gateway as a case study.

### 3 The Thames Gateway

The evolving nature of governance, planning, and regeneration in the Thames Gateway provides a rich environment for study from a variety of perspectives (see John et al, 2005; Raco, 2005a; 2005b). Here we explore three issues that arise from the debates and discussion around the ‘new planning’: rescaling, spatial planning and integration, and spatial planning and delivery.

To say that the institutional and policy context of the Thames Gateway is complicated would be an understatement. The Thames Gateway idea has been around since the 1980s, recognising the potential to provide much needed new housing for the southeast of England in an area with considerable industrial dereliction and relative urban deprivation. However, the current stimulus for greater action comes from the area’s designation as one of four national growth areas in 2003, with further impetus added by the successful London Olympics bid for 2012, with the Olympic Village located in the Gateway area.

While the principles of spatial planning in the Gateway were first set out in *Regional Planning Guidance 9a* (DoE, 1995) it was not until the publication of the Government’s Sustainable Communities Action Plan in 2003 and regional commentaries (ODPM, 2003a), establishing Thames Gateway as the largest of four new national growth areas, that momentum really began to build. At this stage the government set a target for 120 000 new homes to be built in the area by 2016 along with the creation of 180 000 new jobs.

In 2005 the government announced its intention to produce a Strategic Framework for the Thames Gateway by November 2006 which would be linked to the Comprehensive Spending Review in 2007. In the meantime it published *Creating Sustainable Communities: Delivering in the Thames Gateway* in March 2005 (ODPM, 2005). This document reported progress on the Sustainable Communities Plan and updated information on priorities and objectives. Recognising the national strategic importance of the Thames Gateway in particular, there was considerable fanfare for the fact that the prime minister would chair a committee of cabinet ministers to ensure it achieved high priority. It is not entirely clear if it ever met more than once or if it is still functioning. Reflecting in part a high turnover of ministers in office, in various documents different government ministers are said to be chairing a committee to oversee the Thames Gateway, and in 2006 the appointment of a Thames Gateway ‘Czar’ attracted further media coverage. There has also been a team of central government civil servants overseeing the Gateway for some time.

One of the intriguing announcements in the Sustainable Communities Action Plan was the decision to use UDCs to help in its delivery. As Labour had tended to revile

UDCs when in opposition this seemed to be an about-face. However, ministers and civil servants argued that they would adapt rather than adopt the powers and structures of the old UDCs, attracted by the expediency of not having to introduce new legislation to do this. Rather than create a single UDC for the whole Thames Gateway, the decision early on was to use a variety of institutional forms (Raco, 2005b).

The London Thames Gateway Development Corporation (LTGDC) published its *Engines for Growth: Our Vision for the Lower Lea Valley and London Riverside* in 2005 (LTGDC, 2005) while the Olympic Delivery Authority (ODA) has its own plans and Delivery Programme (ODA, 2006). Such plans and strategies exist alongside a host of other plans and strategies from a variety of delivery agencies.

Partly in response to the changes to the Thames Gateway scheme brought about by the decision to hold the 2012 Olympics in London and partly in response to criticisms of complexity and a lack of delivery the DCLG published a policy framework and interim plan for the area in November 2006 (DCLG, 2006a). At this stage, projections for new housing were raised from 120 000 to 160 000. Despite the additional clarity which the interim plan introduced, criticism over the complexity of the project and institutional landscape has continued (HoC, 2007; NAO, 2007). Concern has been expressed that actors and institutions at a subregional level tend not to look beyond the immediate concerns of their areas (Deloitte, 2006; NAO, 2007) and that phasing of development both spatially and sectorally will provide particular challenges for links between strategic thinking and delivery (DCLG, 2006b). In November 2007 the Committee of Public Accounts (HoC, 2007) claimed the government lacked leadership over the project still and had yet to provide a clearly costed implementation plan. Later the same month the government announced plans to support the Gateway with public investment of £9 billion, involving the building of eight new hospitals and the building or refurbishment of twenty-seven schools and three new university campuses (DCLG, 2007), simultaneously increasing the jobs target to 225 000.

### 3.1 Rescaling and spatial planning in Thames Gateway

Theories of state restructuring and rescaling highlight complexity, evolution, and political struggle (Brenner, 2004). As such, there are identifiable broad tendencies in how state restructuring is taking place, but there is no predetermined outcome:

“Particular forms of economic and political system privilege some strategies over others, access by some forces of others, some interests over others, some spatial scales of action over others, some time horizons over others, some coalition possibilities over others” (Jessop, 1997, page 63).

Political forces act in and through the state to pursue particular ends (Goodwin et al, 2005). However, according to this strategic relational approach (SRA), the state apparatus itself is neutral and only acts as a conduit for struggles over the “economic and extra-economic regularisation of capitalist economies involved in securing the hegemony of a specific accumulation strategy” (Jessop, 1997, page 63). The incessant nature of state restructuring could help explain the constantly changing nature of governance and partnerships in areas such as the Thames Gateway including the existence of “territorial mismatches and policy overlaps”, the ways in which some practices and strategies are privileged over others and how differential access emerges and is inscribed in processes and outcomes (Goodwin et al, 2005).

A further dimension of SRA discussed above concerns the strategic nature of state activity: certain scales and strategies will be privileged over others. Some social forces will be able to prevail and encourage the state to support various strategies over others. Again, such an understanding could help explain the incessant restructuring of institutions and policies in the Thames Gateway as different social forces attempt to secure

strategies optimal to themselves. The corollary of this is that some strategies and practices will be made more difficult to realise.

Evidence from the research highlights that this is the case, to a point. In the Thames Gateway different scales are privileged for different functions and by different interests. Two sets of distinctions exist. The first concerns *strategy making*. At the national scale there is now considerable formal and informal consultation around changes to the planning system involving the major stakeholders in the planning process, the professions, developers, and a range of lobby groups. But less immediately apparent is the considerable interdepartmental lobbying taking place, a process which runs alongside the formal processes of external consultation through issuing green papers, white papers, and draft Planning Policy Statements. What our interviews revealed was that for planning in particular, when thinking about the privileging of particular scales, it is important not to underestimate the continuing role of the centre in shaping planning both nationally and subnationally. In particular, our interviews with central government civil servants revealed how key government planning policies emerged through negotiations with other national government departments, as we will return to below.

Because of its national importance, there exists an unparalleled degree of interest in the Thames Gateway among government departments, with a special unit in DCLG responsible for providing overall coordination. Over and above this, however, our interviews revealed the importance to the more economic departments of government of the contribution the area could make to the national growth agenda.

The other strategic scale of interest is for the whole Thames Gateway and its main subregions. Notwithstanding the views of civil servants, there was broad agreement among others that Thames Gateway was ‘overplanned’ in the sense that there are too many strategies, plans, partnerships, and agencies involved. For instance, we were told that:

“I’m firmly of the view that the government needs to take an axe to the whole of this and create a single body for the Gateway ... which is a UDC in the true sense of the word ... whose sole objective is delivery of the government’s objectives for the Gateway” (housing developer).

“There is no-one in overall control ... Different actors are doing different destructive things ... It’s going to be guerrilla war again ... Just because it’s screwed up ... there’s so many loose ends ... nobody’s coordinating it” (partnership agency).

In stark contrast, the government’s perspective is that coordination is already in place, providing a multilevel approach which largely builds on the existing institutional infrastructure whilst adding new bodies where specific problems or potential existed:

“It’s not so complex if you’re working in an individual area ... . It’s only when you look at the whole picture ... which none of the deliverers are actually doing. It’s only when you look at the whole picture when you start to get worried about the complexity” (civil servant B).

This experience is not unique to the Thames Gateway: other regional planning bodies are in the process of preparing RSSs which break up regions into smaller subareas based around ‘functional’ planning (eg travel-to-work or housing-market areas). The preferred scale for strategy making in Thames Gateway is currently sub-regional, though different agencies and bodies have different subregions. The revised London Plan, for example, identifies the Sub-Regional Development Framework for East London while the London Development Agency is preparing subregional economic development implementation plans. Which particular subregions will become the basis for strategic planning purposes is still unclear.



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The second distinct scale concerns *delivery*. Here, the privileged scale could be termed ‘sub-subregional’. Developers and housebuilders focus upon delivery, and privilege a scale below the subregion though above specific sites—only rarely do these coincide with preexisting administrative boundaries such as those of local government. Indeed, this is very much part of the rationale of the emergent new scales (and boundaries) of governance, that they are selected to reflect real-world problems or development potential rather than administrative convenience. In the case of these smaller scales of intervention, the driving issue may be that infrastructure provision, decontamination of sites and investment in services require a more holistic view than a site standpoint as well as a proactive, spatial planning perspective that seeks to coordinate and integrate a range of sectors. For those involved in creating the new institutional geographies, or making decisions to empower existing institutional arrangements, the decisions were seen to be apolitical, technical decisions about what works best in different circumstances:

“You’ve got to realise why the boundary was drawn where it was ... It’s not to fit where the bodies are ... it’s to fit where the complex opportunities are ... So no ... the boundaries don’t map with anything” (interview, civil servant B).

What is significant to note is that such privileged scales for strategy/coordination and delivery exist as both informal and nonstatutory scales. Both subregional strategy making and sub-subregional delivery fit between statutory scales of spatial and regulatory planning. In effect, we are seeing the emergence of new scales for strategy making which run alongside the formal scales of statutory planning, the regional and local, as government experiments with new forms of strategic and delivery bodies. What we begin to see in the case of the Thames Gateway is how some of the soft spaces and fuzzy boundaries we identified earlier are being inserted at the local level, attempting not so much to depoliticise the governance of development as to allow the possibility for a repoliticisation by drawing actors together in ways which, for the government at least, reflect the real geographies of development, alongside the administrative geographies of democratically elected local bodies. Whilst presented as technical, or neutral decisions, it is hard not to reflect that these soft spaces and fuzzy boundaries also provide a tactic for destabilising oppositional tendencies embedded within existing institutional geographies. In the process, their creation opens up new possibilities for thinking about regeneration, which allow for a degree of separation from the formal scales of planning and democratic representation, with all the history and slowness with which they are, rhetorically at least, associated. The important thing here is that formal planning systems are not being dismantled; indeed, they provide a critical dimension of political legitimacy. Instead, new relationships between formal and other scales of planning are being built. Not surprisingly then, for some at least:

“Fuzziness is probably a good thing ... We have legal processes and structures ... the statutory planning system ... but it’s good that within that statutory system ... those constraints ... you have enough room for manoeuvrability to come up with plans that cover functional areas ... that are actually fuzzy ... that are flexible ... that are actually responsive to the real geography of place” (civil servant C, project workshop, 2007).

What do the experiences of the Thames Gateway tell us about scalar privilege? We know little about *why* some scales will be privileged over others only that we should expect privileging to occur. As Jessop (1997) points out (see above), the privileging of a scale can be interpreted as securing the hegemony of a specific accumulation strategy. The experience of the Thames Gateway hints at a range of other (possibly related) reasons including, we believe, the nonstatutory and therefore much more fluid and informal nature of strategy making at this scale. As the Greater London Authority (GLA) put it, the subregional plan for the east of London:

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“provide(s) non-statutory guidance on implementation of London Plan policies in light of sub-regional circumstances. The [subregional plan] is not a ‘mini London Plan’ and does not usurp, supersede or otherwise change the Plan’s policies ... The [subregional plan] is not considered to be Supplementary Planning Guidance or a Supplementary Planning Document or to have equivalent status in the terms of Planning Policy Statement 12” (GLA, 2006, paragraphs 7–8).

Formal and statutory strategy making is linked to a range of procedures and processes that bind decision makers in ways that more informal approaches do not. However, such informal approaches are given legitimacy, as in the case of the London Plan above, through linking them to statutory approaches.

Second, it is clear that regions per se are not being privileged. Institutional and formal strategy making and implementation are increasingly, but not exclusively, being focused upon this scale. Indeed, from certain perspectives formal regions might actually ‘get in the way’ of strategy making and delivery. Instead, the scales most appropriate for strategy making and delivery are to be found cutting across existing administrative boundaries, focused around ‘functional’ planning areas and linked to issues such as transport and infrastructure. The rescaling of spatial planning in Thames Gateway appears to be ‘filling in’ the gaps between formal structures and processes. We would argue, then, that it is important to examine how rescaling works across multiple scales, including emergent ‘soft spaces’ of governances, rather than simply privileging specific scales of governance. It is how the many scales of governance intersect and interact which matters, not simply the scales which are perceived to be the primary ‘beneficiaries’ or ‘losers’ in rescaling.

Finally, and related, there is more than one privileged scale. We might term this ‘functional scalar privilege’. There is a clear mismatch between some institutional boundaries that could be termed subregional and more ‘functional’ subregional areas based on housing-market or travel-to-work areas. One consequence of this is that where such areas coincide there can be a reinforcement of activity through focused resources and consensus. Where such areas do not coincide (for example, where there is no overlap between functional planning areas and institutionally defined subregions) then there can be the loss of development momentum and a deficit of resources and consensus. One implication is the creation of greater disparities in activity and output between areas. The experiences of the first London Docklands Development Corporation were that such boundaries provided clear demarcations of growth and decline (Brownhill, 1990). By contrast, the current round of UDCs has been mandated not to leave such ‘cliff edges’ at their boundaries; instead working with somewhat ‘fuzzy boundaries’ at their margins, while central government refers to vague ‘zones of change’ to help overcome this problem or, at least, mask it:

“The legislation was quite clear when we were set up .... It refers to not creating a cliff edge on our boundary .... And we’ve already started a series of projects with the residential populations which adjoin the areas” (Gateway delivery agency A).

### 3.2 Spatial planning and sectoral integration

The notion of spatial planning echoes many of the concerns of ‘governance’ in its focus upon outcomes, integration, multilevel governance, and partnerships. Advocates of spatial planning highlight the ways in which it overcomes the separation of plan making and decision taking in the UK planning system and how mechanisms such as Community Strategies and Local Development Frameworks can act as places for sectoral integration and well as spatial coordination (Upton, 2006).

We were particularly interested in how central steering of planning took place, not simply within the main planning ministry, but across all the eight or so government

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departments regularly consulted on planning issues. In our interviews with key civil servants during 2005, when the ODPM was formally responsible for planning, it quickly became clear how much effort was going in across government departments to shape planning policy. As a civil servant from outside the ODPM/DCLG put it:

“The sorts of reforms that are now underway, including the Planning Act 2004 ... a big influence on that came from the Treasury through the productivity team ... and the Chancellor was certainly keen to have in place a simpler, more flexible and faster planning system. I think our key objective of these reforms as they roll out is that they do deliver that” (civil servant A).

What we begin to see from such sentiments is the way in which the emergent rules of spatial planning are being shaped by diverse sources within government. More than this, we can begin to see how the rules of planning are being drawn up in ways which build not simply on the expertise and interests of planners, but of a much wider range of professional interests, reflected both in intragovernmental lobbying and the range of outside bodies willing to invest time in seeking to influence the shape of future planning legislation and guidance. From the very top, then, the boundaries of ‘planning’ have been opened up—and this has been to an extent a three-way process, as nonplanners have an increased role in shaping the planning system, as planners have sought to open themselves up to wider influences, and as professional planners are drawn into working with various delivery agencies. The fuzzy geographical boundaries of planning thus have a counterpart in the fuzzy professional boundaries of spatial planning.

More than this, perhaps, we see that there is no ‘sectoral’ privileging at work. Where planners were perhaps demonised and marginalised during the earlier experiments in, for instance London Docklands, the current governance arrangements for the Thames Gateway see planning not as a necessary formality or a standalone statutory enforcement mechanism. Rather, we found planning a pervasive professional influence in many different bodies, but certainly not a lead or dominant influence.

The experience of Thames Gateway highlights the challenges of delivering integrated spatial planning. Vertical integration has proved to be difficult because different parts of Thames Gateway—while functionally related—fall with different RSSs, Regional Economic Strategies, and Regional Housing Strategies. The upshot of this has been that the RSSs themselves have ‘stood back’ to some degree on the question of strategic planning in the Gateway. One consequence has been the emergence of strategies and plans to fill this gap.

In ways akin to how many local authorities informally coordinated strategic and cross-boundary issues during the 1980s similar ‘shadow initiatives’ have emerged in Thames Gateway. The three regional planning bodies with the support of the ODPM published an interregional planning statement in 2004 drawn up by an interregional forum. The statement seeks to coordinate strategic planning until the East of England and South East Regional Spatial Strategies are adopted and the London Plan has been reviewed (ODPM, 2004). This statement builds upon the earlier 2003 coordinating statement (ODPM, 2003a).

In terms of sectoral integration, the health sector was particularly interesting. Good working relationships were established early on with planning and regeneration agencies for the Thames Gateway, leading to the publication in 2003 of a joint report by the (then) three London Strategic Health Authorities, *London Thames Gateway Health Services Assessment 2003–2016* (NE London NHS, 2003). Known as the ‘Blue Book’ this represented a considerable step forward for the UK health sector in how it addressed future investment in a more spatially informed way, and as such it generated considerable comment as an exemplar for others to follow during our interviews.

One of the key breakthroughs was moving away from trend-based official census-based population projections to working with the government's aspirational population targets for the Thames Gateway.

In many ways, the Thames Gateway health sector provides an example of how successful cross-sectoral and multiscalar coordination might work, as other actors respond to the government's plans for the area:

"The strategic framework that we're publishing feeds into the other departments as well so they're starting aligning their plans ... We work with the Department of Health for example ... they've aligned their spending to Thames Gateway and they're giving extra spending to the growth areas now ... But we also work with the PCTs [primary care trusts] and strategic health authorities ... so that they know what's going on in the area ... and they can respond to where the need is going to be ... so again it does tailor ... although there are quite a few different layers" (civil servant B).

In practice, however, this example of successful coordination was the exception rather than the rule, whilst its success may have been undermined by a decision to close the dedicated Thames Gateway health sector coordination unit in early 2007 as part of a national chain of cutbacks in the face of possible overspending.

### 3.3 Spatial planning and the delivery of major infrastructure

"Unlocking the delivery of infrastructure is the key to unlocking whichever part of the region that you are in."

Housing developer

One of the main concerns of those we spoke to was getting the providers of infrastructure to increase the local capacity in line with, or in anticipation of, the stated plans for increases in population and workforce. Part of this reflected the particular timing of our main interviews in the Thames Gateway, in 2006 when national negotiations were underway for the next Comprehensive Spending Review, with government departments all preparing their bids. But there was a more specific concern with the ways in which different agencies were prepared to engage with the development agenda for the Thames Gateway. We look here at how stakeholders within planning and beyond were focusing on ensuring appropriate infrastructure investment took place.

Firstly, there were concerns about the hard infrastructure necessary for development, including transport, water, flood defences, and land preparation. Secondly, and relatedly, there were serious concerns about the 'soft infrastructure', covering education, health, open space, and other aspects of what might once have been thought of as social planning. We focus here on the twin issues of ensuring responsible agencies delivered new capacity and the related question of who would pay. In other words, we are interested here in how spatial planning in the Thames Gateway fits into a complex landscape of different sectoral plans and strategies, each with their own institutional geographies, visions, and stakeholders, some covering just small parts of the Gateway area and others stretching well beyond it.

What we found was a quite surprising level of comment that the planning system generally was largely passive and reactive, dealing with the consequences of growth but ill prepared to 'plan' for large-scale growth. To a degree this seems to reflect the narrowing remit of the planning system during the Thatcher era in particular to a land-use, developer-friendly role, with this fairly blinkered role continuing even during the Major years of so-called plan-led growth (Allmendinger, 2003). Such beliefs were an integral part of the collective and indeed self-interested rationale of key stakeholder bodies that they were needed to 'make things' happen which otherwise would not.

The fragmented institutional landscape of the Thames Gateway, then, may take shape around particular understandings of local issues and local institutional histories (see above), but it is rationalised by a more fundamental belief that leaving things to developers and planners alone was not going to produce the scale of change needed. As one civil servant confided:

“The planning system has always struggled to try to do things ... Outside of the motorway network ... which has had this miraculous secret life really ... aside from that planning has always struggled with this problem of large scale ... expensive ... infrastructure planning” (civil servant B).

From this perspective, one of the greatest challenges facing spatial planning is not so much agreement around strategy as agreement around collective delivery of the necessary levels and range of infrastructure to ensure new developments were successful. And to a surprising degree there was a feeling that hitherto planning had not been centrally involved in achieving this. For most of the past thirty years governments have dealt with this apparent failure not by reempowering planning to widen its horizons, but by continued reference to the apparent failures of planning and the need to put in place alternative delivery mechanisms to deal with this, such as Special Planning Zones, UDCs, Enterprise Zones, and various other area-based initiatives. Based on the twin rhetorics of ‘market failure’ in the land market, and planning failure as a form of effective governance, the approach was to keep planning to a tight land-use remit. Spatial planning has become associated with an attempt to allow planning to break out of this circumscribed role to something more central to the development process, working with others to coordinate the various actions necessary to bring about high-quality development.

In this process, planners are not solely responsible for coordination, nor do they provide a uniquely ‘spatial’ perspective, as was sometimes claimed in our interviews. Instead, our interviews revealed how almost everyone is busily coordinating with others, across scales and across sectoral boundaries. Just as there is no clear ‘scalar privilege’ evident in the Thames Gateway, so there is no clear privileging of a particular lead ‘sector’, such as business, economic development agencies, or planners. Indeed, it could be argued that planners are not central to the governance processes of the Thames Gateway: but nor are they marginalised. In essence, they are part of a fragmented landscape of governance, whose complexity seems to require coordination not at one particular privileged scale or through one privileged sector, but instead through some complex, tangled networks operating across scales and sectors.

More than this, the fragmentary system of governance also requires coordination across a range of timescales, given the different time horizons of the strategies and investment plans of the multiplicity of organisations necessarily involved in large-scale development initiatives. Even within planning, we were frequently told of the need to balance the relative importance of local and regional plans issues at different times, to work out which should have precedence. Nonetheless, one thing that the planning system brings, with its roots in local government, is a sense of continuity and longevity, allowing it to deal both with short-term plans and with the much longer time horizons necessary for regenerating parts of the Thames Gateway:

“The type of challenges here are not going to be resolved within a four year cycle ... some of these individual sites are taking fifteen years to develop ... so they are massively complex and massively long-term and in our mind ... it’s going to take twenty or thirty years” (civil servant B).

So planners, and others involved in the development process, are not only coordinating across different spaces and sectors, but also negotiating the resultant different time scales.

The other aspect of delivery which planners are starting to have to deal with more thoroughly than in the past is the complexity of funding streams involved in large-scale regeneration. Very few large-scale schemes for urban regeneration now are purely reliant on public or private investment. Arguably, they never were. But certainly the range of actors and agencies involved in the contemporary development process is incredibly complex. For instance, English water companies are now largely privately owned, they vary hugely in their size and ownership, they are subject to regular intense media scrutiny of their behaviour, and are responsible to at least three sets of public regulators in the UK, and subject to EU legislation. Getting water companies to invest in major new infrastructure capacity involves a negotiation between the aspirations of planners, developers, local authority departments, company shareholders, numerous lobbying ‘stakeholders’, and various regulators. Then there are the various other utility companies, responsible for waste, energy, flood control, land decontamination, transport infrastructure, and so forth.

With this complex system of governance comes an increasing complexity of how funding sources are creatively stitched together, something which in essence everyone is involved in, as public, private, and quasi-governmental bodies all seek to satisfy their masters that they are making their money stretch further by ‘drawing down’ funds from elsewhere. Planners largely use ‘Section 106 agreements’ which secure funding for infrastructure based upon negotiations with landowners over each development. However, it is worth emphasising that the Thames Gateway is not an infrastructureless desert, a popular misperception according to one of our interviewees. Indeed deindustrialisation has left some underutilisation of infrastructure capacity, though the bigger problem is outdated poor-quality services, not least school buildings. This said, there will be new communities developed in parts of the Thames Gateway, notably Barking Reach, Ebbsfleet, and the area around the Channel Tunnel Rail Link. It is these that present some of the most severe problems, ones where Section 106 agreements are never likely to be sufficient to make up for the infrastructure gap:

“land value in theory is high here ... The market’s stronger here ... but often the costs are so enormous ... Barking Reach ... you’ve got transport costs ... decontamination costs on a massive scale ... how do you turn this area into an attractive residential area ... which more than swamps Section 106 ... What we’re finding in Barking Reach is that someone is going to have to fund the transport infrastructure because the Section 106 ... will only go so far” (civil servant E).

Given the scale of the problems in parts of the Thames Gateway, it is widely recognised that the key to unblocking infrastructure barriers is accessing mainstream infrastructure investment sources, requiring negotiations with the major funding departments of central and local government or other responsible agencies. In addition, there are the inevitable regeneration competitions for area-based funding from central government or regional development agencies, as areas set out to present their particular mix of ‘need’ and ‘potential’ as meriting government funding. Whilst its constituent local areas could bid for regeneration funding, the Thames Gateway itself for much of its earlier lifetime did not carry sufficient institutional weight or capacity to bid for such funds—indeed, it was the wrong scale to fit in with most government initiatives of the 1990s. But, as part of the revitalised national interest in pushing forward development in the area, a dedicated funding package of £673 million over three years was put in place to assist in site assembly, land remediation, affordable housing, and providing local infrastructure (DCLG, 2006b). So in attempting to put together a development, there is a need to negotiate the balance between the mainstream funding programmes of government, themselves subject to intense bidding pressure through the Comprehensive Spending Review, competing for area-based funding,

negotiations over developer contributions, and of course developers need internally to argue the case for their investment.

But rather than shrink from such complexity, the challenge has been for all involved to get on with absorbing it into their processes, such that working in partnership, and working out deals are now the norm, for planners, developers and others:

“Locally ... in these days of LSPs [local strategic partnerships] ... perhaps it’s second nature ... working with the health authority ... water suppliers ... power suppliers ...” (civil servant E).

#### 4 Conclusions

Both state rescaling and spatial planning are strongly underpinned by themes of partnership, coordination, and integration bound up under the notion of ‘governance’. In this view, spatial planning is part of the state’s ‘restless search’ for governance. In this paper we have engaged critically with the governance and metagovernance of the Thames Gateway.

Metagovernance is the difficult to discern set of processes by which the rules of the game are imposed and reworked by those who work to shape the planning system, not simply within the planning ministry, but, as this paper clearly demonstrates, involving other government departments and the various lobby groups which seek to influence proposed changes to the planning system. In every sense, the remaking of planning is shaped by wider processes of metagovernance, involving a reworking of privileged scales and sectors of policy making, and with this a reworking of who the planning system must ‘join up’ with, and how. The Thames Gateway is interesting in this respect because of its national prominence as a regeneration initiative. Our findings begin to reveal how, in Jessop’s terms, governance and metagovernance arrangements do not operate in some functionalist, unidirectional way which ‘imposes’ a governmental agenda. Instead, the hybrid governance and government arrangements, with their multiscale, multisectoral mixes, reveals the multiplicity of ways in which actors at all scales seek to address market, state, and governance failures. The research also highlights the importance and risks of metagovernance as a means of securing a coherent economic and state project in a complex economic and political situation, the functionality of fuzzy boundaries and soft spaces in providing room for strategic and tactical manoeuvre in this regard, and the complexities of how scale and scope are continuously reconstituted.<sup>(4)</sup>

One aspect of delivery in the Thames Gateway that is clear is the extent to which objectives, including sustainable communities, are being delivered in the spaces between formal agencies and plans and strategies. Strategy making and delivery in the Thames Gateway privilege different, informal scales and spaces. This is not to say the formal scales of planning are now irrelevant—far from it. But instead it suggests that planning purely at the formal scales of planning is not sufficient, nor is it necessarily the case that the delivery of planning objectives is best delivered and monitored at the level of, say, the Local Development Framework, or the RSS. As one senior GLA politician told us:

“you need a framework which is sufficiently loose that it allows unexpected things to happen.”

More than this, you need frameworks that reflect the reality of how complex associational networks do not work to set boundaries, whether formal, soft, fuzzy, or otherwise. They can work with and through the boundaries of different institutional geographies, but the real work which goes on is a reflection of how they stretch

<sup>(4)</sup> We are particularly grateful to one of the referees for pointing to these connections.

across time and place, and come together in particular local places at particular moments. Rethinking space, then, is a fundamental part of rethinking regeneration and planning, not just in terms of academic theory but also in terms of development practices, protocols, and place strategies. This approach opens up possibilities for further research on whether similar or similar but different approaches exist elsewhere, such as low-growth areas, and whether the local political complexion of planning authorities affects the emergence of formal and informal approaches.

Parallel networks, strategies, and delivery mechanisms of varying degrees of formality and linkage to the statutory planning system emerge from this analysis as central to the regeneration of the Thames Gateway. Recognising this adds a new dimension to the notion of spatial planning, as it makes clear how much of the real work of planning takes place outside the formal system for planning, but necessarily with strong linkages to it. More than this, much of the infrastructure planning to support land-use planning has surprisingly tenuous links to the formal system of plans, something which is now being recognised and in a sense formalised through creating new partnership bodies in which the infrastructure providers are expected to participate. And these bodies, which look confusing from the outside, have their own internal logic, a recognition that a perfect institutional landscape does not, indeed cannot, exist for a development project as complex, as multinodal, and as multiscalar in nature as the Thames Gateway.

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