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Local government procurement in English regions: organisations, collaborations and mechanisms

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers public procurement practices in England focusing on the interface between local government and a variety of regional and national stakeholders. The paper argues that regional public procurement stimulates connections and activities between agencies in aggregations of strategy and practice rarely theorised in procurement research. Using documentary analysis the paper identifies key themes illustrating distinctive interpretations of local government procurement in English regions, by providing a theoretical framework indicating the role of regional procurement organisations, collaborations and mechanisms. The paper concludes with some broader considerations of the relationship between local government centralisation and fragmentation, and how policymakers interested in procurement transformation could benefit from a comparative perspective to aid policy learning across different global jurisdictions.

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Introduction

The objectives of this paper are to contribute to understanding the complex landscape of local government procurement in three English regions and add to a broader theorising of public procurement. Public procurement is defined as the purchase of goods, services and works by governments and state-owned enterprises (LGA 2022b; OECD 2017). Under the UK Public Contracts Regulations 2015, it is the purchase of goods, works or services by government and other public bodies via public contracts (PCR 2015), including a broad range of procurement activity, including construction, transportation and social care.

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Existing research, including contributions to this journal (Kyriacou and Roca-Sagalés 2021; Patrucco, Luzzini, and Ronchi 2016; Dimand and Cheng 2023), illustrate the complexity involved in global public procurement. Informed by documentary sources, the paper mainly focuses on English local government 'anchor institutions', namely those organisations with sizeable assets and geographical influence within their area (LGIU 2022). An extended period of change in English local government over several decades provides a backdrop to this paper. Although not our core emphasis, this has contributed to fragmented governance arrangements, with multiple layers of public policy and administration. This includes networks of organisations without coterminous boundaries in local government delivery, which often cover different territories with vertical accountability to different central bodies and rarely to localities (Elliott et al. 2022; Liddle, Shutt, and Addidle 2020). This is additionally complicated as local governance levels and spheres can differ in different parts of England. These multiple interactions between local government purchasers, providers and local and national markets mean that it is therefore challenging to describe the English procurement landscape in simple terms.¹ By investigating this 'Byzantine' complexity of local government procurement, this paper seeks to inform future research and policy learning for local and national governments both in England and to help international scholars to understand their own country's contexts and jurisdictions.²

To assist understanding of local government procurement, the paper is informed by the theoretical framework of Broadhurst, Berkeley, and Ferreira (2023) on managing regional policy in geographical space, which encourages the inclusion of wider theoretical perspectives, including interactions between actors, organisations and collaboration. This provides a foundation for considering spatial, institutional and collaborative perspectives on local government procurement, and identifying 'procurement mechanisms' as a novel contribution to scholarship.

The key research question is 'What variations currently exist in local government procurement landscapes, platforms and priorities within and between English regions?'

The next section explains local government procurement in England within the broader public procurement landscape. Drawing on Broadhurst, Berkeley, and Ferreira (2023) the paper then provides the theoretical framing of spatial, institutional and collaboration perspectives relevant to the study. The findings provide key themes arising from the analysis of a variety of contemporary local government documentary sources. The discussion considers the findings informed by the theoretical framing above, and the paper concludes by providing some final considerations and a future research agenda.

Local government procurement

There is a growing interest in procurement in the business, public and non-profit sectors (OECD 2017; Kyriacou and Roca-Sagalés 2021; Trammell et al. 2020; LGA 2022b). Illustrating the interaction between different sectors and organisations involved in the delivery of government goods, services and works. Although our paper is about England, the cases discussed highlight issues which will be of interest to local government procurement scholars internationally.

There is increasing scholarship on public procurement at local, regional and national levels. However, UK Government procurement policy is described as an uneasy mixture of different policy legacies revealing different patterns of procurement depending on the territorial scale of government (Pickernell et al. 2011); an example being local government procurement in English City regions and the relationship with local economies and the broader regional and national level (Uyarra 2010). Investigating public procurement in the UK, Poland and Spain, Dale et al. (2015: 237) identified a plethora of multi-layered ‘policy contradictions’, involving European, national and regional regulations, interacting with suppliers, organisations and politicians. In recent years, England has been contrasted in the wider UK with the approach to public procurement taken by the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly, which work strategically with local government following the devolution of Scotland and Wales (Elliott 2020; Eckersley et al. 2023).

Public procurement strategy also highlights comparative topics on purchasing goods, services and works internationally. These include examples of the procurement of intermunicipal waste collection, both in South America (Silvestre et al. 2022) and Australian waste procurement in the circular economy (State of Victoria Department of Environment 2020), and local government contracting and outsourcing processes in Australian Local Government (O’Flynn and Alford 2008; Walsh and O’Flynn 2000). Moreover, there has been increased attention to socially responsible public procurement, for example, in Sweden (Sattari et al. 2022). Some councils in the UK and internationally have made concerted attempts to ‘buy local’ to increase social value in communities (Eckersley et al. 2023).

Furthermore, public procurement highlights ‘wicked problems’ (Head and Alford 2015). Examples include national public procurement response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Eckersley et al. 2023) and concealment of decisions on failures to procure protective equipment (Sian and Smyth 2022). Another complication is navigating the procurement world after Brexit and preparing for a new procurement regime to be implemented under the Procurement Act 2023. Commentators have also given growing attention to public procurement and migration at the national and local level, ranging from the procurement of interpreting services in the context of asylum and

international protection (Sarter 2024) to local migrant support services in the community (Manchester City Council 2023).

Although scholarship exists on public and local government procurement globally, more research is required on comparing procurement systems. Similarities can be identified in states informed by the 'Westminster model' and European Union procurement processes promoting transparent, fair and accountable practices (Cabinet Office 2020). Global approaches include a plurilateral Government Procurement Agreement, supported by the World Trade Organisation (Cernat and Kulina-Dimitrova 2015). However, it is also noted that public procurement processes will also have their own cultural, administrative, economic, legal, and social traditions, so adopting any pre-conceived procurement system may not always be effective and appropriate (Thai 2017). This picture is complicated by a gap in comparative publicly accessible country procurement information (World Bank 2020) and an overview of the extent of corruption and waste by government (OECD 2013).

Additionally, collaborative procurement has been explored in a range of contexts in the literature (Murray, Rentell, and Geere 2008; Nkunda, Kazungu, and Changalima 2023; Rutkowski et al. 2022). It is described as horizontal collaboration between two or more organisations to assist joint learning and improve efficiency (Bakker et al. 2008). Essig (2000) notes vertical procurement will require horizontal cooperation, with shared terminology and understanding to support collaboration. For Schotanus and Telgen (2007) cooperative purchasing is loosely defined, including collaborative, cooperative, joint and consortium purchasing. Their typology describes cooperative purchasing as the extent of the costs and gains for stakeholders; shared influence and activities; organisational structure of the group; member characteristics; size of the group and project life span. Similarly, stakeholder trust and relationships are important for Santos and Cabral (2022), who describe the need for shared capabilities to enable trust and align interests, requiring the setting up and managing of contractual relationships and capturing the shared knowledge which ensues.

Focusing specifically on English local government, as the main research focus of this paper, it uses a range of suppliers, including corporations, and small and medium-sized private and voluntary sector organisations. Within this landscape (Eckersley et al. 2023; Howells et al. 2020; Sian and Smyth 2022) public procurement is practiced at diverse levels (local, regional, national); by local and central government and the National Health Service; through a variety of institutions and professions (policing; education); and in collaboration (combined; shared; consortia). The provision and delivery of services are governed by legislation and policy, so procurement practitioners must be clear on requirements when drafting specifications (Crown Commercial Service 2021a). We also note the existence of specialist public/professional

buying organisations (PBOs) in some regions of England linked with local government anchor institutions.

Certainly, public procurement practice does not always fit with local and regional administrative boundaries. Within this context, practitioners are predominantly guided by contract procedure policies which do not easily 'join up' to coordinate different levels of government for optimum policy outcomes (Pickernell et al. 2011). Practitioners increasingly integrate wider perspectives, including modern slavery, sustainability (OECD 2017; LGA 2021, 2022a), and social value, as defined by the Public Services Social Value Act 2012 (Liddle 2022) leading to initiatives for measuring the achievement of social outcomes, such as the Social Value Portal.³ Within this context, social value can motivate local government anchor institutions to collaborate.

The desire to streamline public procurement has been a longstanding ambition of the UK Government (O'Carroll 2022) and leaving the European Union in 2020 provided an opportunity to reconsider public procurement policy.⁴ Although the sources considered in this paper were conceived under the previous legislation, the Procurement Act 2023 is due to be fully implemented by February 2025 and already impacting on the local government procurement landscape. However, the promise of a 'new dawn' with this revised legislation, freedoms and flexibility is yet to be tested, with some commentators remarking that it may be less ambitious than promised, as current public contracts regulations replicate the law in place when the UK left the EU.⁵

Theoretical framing

In the local English government procurement landscape, regional boundaries do not correspond with procurement boundaries and given the structures identified in this paper, the plethora of governance perspectives, purchasers and providers is confusing. Recent frameworks help to theorise procurement as either a type of governable space (Ferry et al. 2023), as a site of corruption (Sian and Smyth 2022), or as the territorial dimension of public procurement (Eckersley et al. 2023).

To progress our understanding we are guided by Broadhurst, Berkeley, and Ferreira's (2023) framework on managing regional policy in geographical space, which encourages the inclusion of wider theoretical perspectives, including interaction between actors, organisations and collaboration. In this respect, the framework is broad enough to convey the descriptive content which is an important part of our study. The framework is also helpful for considering the interactions between multiple organisations in the local government procurement landscape, many who wish to generate social capital to create value in collaboration, but also to report contradictions in the complex procurement

policy and process landscape (Pickernell et al. 2011). In particular, the framework assists our objective of examining local government procurement practice across policy and geographical space, as regional, sub-regional and national practice, alongside organisational and joint working. We define these as *spatial*, *institutional* and *collaborative* perspectives.

First, the *spatial* perspective connects regional and local governance (Elliott et al. 2022; Pike et al. 2018) to the national context. Here, public procurement is not only about purchasing goods, services and works but connecting disparate agencies and activities. Local government anchor institutions seek to purchase from regional providers, usually to increase local social value. However, anchor institutions additionally 'reach out' of locality or region for best value, demonstrating tensions between procuring locally and using wider markets. Here, terms from social capital theory like 'bridging', 'bonding' and 'linking' demonstrate the relationships required to mobilise local government regional procurement, by building on proximate local ties underpinned by trust (Aldridge, Halpern, and Fitzpatrick 2002; Lin and Erickson 2008; Putnam 2000).

For example, 'bonding and bridging' (Aldridge, Halpern, and Fitzpatrick 2002) can connect local government procurement activity with specialist providers for meeting local community need (Parker et al. 2025). Conversely, when local government uses national public procurement providers, 'reaching out' of local and regional space indicates 'bridging' and 'linking', although the links may be outward looking and weaker. Of note, within national framework agreements of local lots (an offer designed for a specific locality which may include local providers) a morphing of 'bridging', 'bonding' and 'linking' may be present.

Additionally, from a spatial perspective, local leaders cluster to shape local strategic partnerships (Broadhurst, Berkeley, and Ferreira 2023). Clustering is also identified when local authority neighbours collaborate to jointly purchase waste management and social care services, demonstrating strategic partnership working and networking (Sørensen and Torfing 2011; Huxham and Vangen 2013). One tension is choosing whether to use local or national providers (Cabras 2011), and although actors may aspire to create local social value, this may be 'trumped' by the legal requirement to purchase from wider networks to ensure best financial value and consistent supply (Eckersley et al. 2023).

Second, an *institutional* perspective articulates the motivations of anchor institutions to operate as contracting authorities, developing strategy to protect resources and undertakes statutory duties. Inhibitors to collaboration include poor relationships between neighbouring local government authorities (Eckersley et al. 2023). Furthermore, institutional layering (Streeck and Thelen 2005; Capano 2018) may ensue where policymakers add to existing

institutional arrangements to pursue change or maintain stability, but layering may not necessarily combine into rationalised governance.

When purchasing services, local government bodies are legally required to protect their resources and manage risk within a hybrid setting of public, commercial and entrepreneurial provisions (Barnett et al. 2022), including the interface with regional and national procurement organisations. Observations from multi-level governance (Liddle 2015; Bache, Bartel, and Flinders 2016) and organisational and service hybridity (Brandsen, van de Donk, and Putters 2005; Skelcher and Smith 2014) display statutory duties and tensions at the borders of institutional actors' responsibilities. In local government procurement, multi-institutional governance may be more rigorous in some service areas than others, particularly high-risk services. As with establishing any new initiative, there may be developing trust between partners as confidence is yet to be established (Huxham and Vangen 2013).

Third, a *collaborations* perspective informs regional procurement as partnership working, networking and contracting. New Public Governance (NPG) (Osborne 2010) has informed this approach to local government procurement, built on relational and networking in public administration (Broadhurst, Berkeley, and Ferreira 2023). Comprising both newly formed and mature networks (Klijn, Edelenbos, and Steijn 2010), actors aspire to improve policy problems by pursuing collaborative advantage within them (Huxham and Vangen 2013). In local public procurement practice, it is essential to encourage private sector providers to design innovative solutions alongside other sectors (Torfing and Triantafyllou 2013). However, engaging suppliers in collaboration requires observance to procurement legislation and guidance, particularly commerciality confidentially and tendering policy, whilst at the same time supporting smaller, fragile local providers (O'Flynn and Alford 2008). Furthermore, pursuing formal procurement frameworks alongside informal aggregations of relational social capital is required (Claridge 2018; Lin and Erickson 2008), especially when sourcing services from new communities. This will require advanced co-creation skills with third-sector organisations to produce services in collaboration with local government (Brandsen and Pestoff 2006).

Methodology

Our conceptual approach (Jaakkola 2020) was derived from publicly available local government procurement documents and websites (see Appendix). As the aim was to present an analysis of the current context, we mostly selected recently published documents. The authors sourced procurement strategies and websites from the three case study regions, predominantly provided by anchor institutions, as well as from a broader landscape of procurement organisations. As most documentary sources were authored by institutions

in the regions, this helped the authors to assess engagement in the local and national local government procurement landscape.

The aim was to identify and read the document as a given record to assist with theory building. We used a grounded theory approach informed by Strauss (Strauss 1987; Strauss and Corbin 1997) allowing for induction, deduction and verification of data. This approach incorporated our a priori knowledge of the field and facilitated the generation of additional themes and categories. The research strategy was not exhaustive but aimed at marshalling sufficient and useful information for an exploratory and inductive approach to identify sources and themes (Bowen 2009). However, we acknowledge that the resources reported on are predominantly authored by the procurement organisations, but the aim was to look at the formal announced relationships between these organisations and other institutions they connected to, rather than informal relationships. Consequently, we accept that caution is required especially about the reliability and limitations of using documents not specifically produced for the main purpose of this current research (Bowen 2009; Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill 2009). Nevertheless, they provided valuable supplementary information to support other findings.

The three geographical regions were chosen to provide a variety of perspectives. These were primarily guided by the authors' previous engagement with and knowledge of them but that also provided useful viewpoints as urban, rural and megacity settings. Several anchor institutions in each region were identified alongside additional local and national organisations. The sample size was limited by access to resources and time, as the research was a two-person team analysing a focused range of sources. Though creating some limitations, the analysis provided initial theoretical insights into local government procurement in the regions to provide research themes for future testing.

Case examples

North east region

The North East (NE) region includes cities and towns like Newcastle, Sunderland and Gateshead, smaller urban centres and rural areas, aggregating into an area with a high level of urbanisation. Political governance in the NE is complicated with two Combined Authorities separately led by Labour and Conservative mayors, alongside a third non-mayoral grouping of local authorities.⁶ Longstanding discussions about devolution matched with the economic prominence of Newcastle and Gateshead led to concerns they could dominate decision-making, and particularly transport planning. To overcome complexity, central government published a new NE Devolution

Deal in 2022, offering investment of £1.4bn over a 30-year period alongside a new mayoral election in 2024.

East Midlands region

The East Midlands (EM) region includes several cities and large towns including Nottingham, Derby and Leicester, and the shire counties surrounding them. They have a larger population than the NE case but provide an interesting comparison with the other regional cases, with a mix of local government organisations, unitary authorities, shire counties, district councils, and an elected city mayor in Leicester. Detailed discussions have informed a Combined Authority devolution deal between some East Midlands regional local government organisations, alongside a regional mayor elected for the first time in spring 2024.

London

London is an example of a mega-city in England, as it is significantly larger than other cities with a population of about 9 million in Greater London in 2021, compared with the metro areas of Newcastle (NE) (820,000) and Nottingham (EM) (800,000). Established in 1965, 32 boroughs in London include 12 inner boroughs, and the City of London operates as a county and government district. Each borough is governed by a council where policies on services like libraries, waste collection and social services are formulated. The Greater London Authority and Mayor's office have responsibility over other services, including transport, police and fire services.

Findings

The paper presents three themes arising from analysis of the sources: regional PBOs; regional proximity and reaching out; and regional procurement as organisations, collaborations and mechanisms. The themes are informed by Broadhurst, Berkeley, and Ferreira (2023) to assist the understanding of multiple organisational and collaborative interactions in local government procurement, across policy and geographical space. The framework also assists in reporting both benefits and contradictions in local procurement practice. The themes are expanded in the findings. Because of the complexity of information in the sources, we mostly present the themes descriptively in the findings and provide a critical analysis of them in the discussion which follows.

Determining comparable data on local government procurement expenditure is challenging, so data below solely provide contextual information on the significant amounts of money involved. In 2010 £292 billion was spent on UK public procurement activities, accounting for around a third of all public expenditure (Cabinet Office 2020). Within this figure, UK Local authorities spend around 47% of their total budget on procurement (Centre for

Partnering Group 2021). In 2023 English local councils invested £21.7bn with small and medium-sized enterprises, representing 35% of procurement spending (Tussell 2023). NE local government spends £4.2bn annually with external suppliers (Burch 2023), and it was reported that London local government spend over the three years 2021 – 2023 was £16.8bn (Finance 2024). The PBOs we discuss report increasing revenue, with ESPO reporting an increase from £90.6 m in 2021/2022 to £106.3 m in 2021/2022 (ESPO 2023). NEPO's collaborative procurement solutions saw a growth of a nominal figure of 6% to £663 m (NEPO 2022).

Local government procurement: regional professional buying organisations

There is no clear entry point to describe the diversity of practices identified in local government procurement in English regions. These include sole procurement by individual anchor organisations; procurement at higher tiers of government; local and national collaborations; and quasi-regional procurement.

English regional PBOs are the most regionally aligned model, typically governed by local government anchor institutions, but with flexibility for other public bodies to be part of governing consortia. The two PBOs discussed here are the NE Purchasing Organisation (NEPO) and the Eastern Shires Purchasing Organisation (ESPO), part of a wider group of national purchasing organisations (the 'pro-five' group⁷). In addition to a regional focus, PBOs support national supply markets, jointly agreeing who leads a specific procurement framework (for example, children's services, or provision of furniture or IT). An anchor institution in one region may procure from a PBO with a specialist framework in another, such as Newcastle in the NE purchasing from ESPO in the EM.

NEPO, created in 1976, and governed by a group of NE local authorities, aspires to deliver valuable and positive outcomes, to '... meet challenges and opportunities facing the NE [...] and help the region deliver in the short, medium, and long term' (NEPO 2022). The importance of NEPO's regional role was corroborated by other NE local government institutions, with Durham County Council and South Tyneside working with NEPO, alongside other partners, on a subregional procurement basis, and as a single marketplace for suppliers.

ESPO (1981) formed by several local government partners specialises in providing goods and services to the public sector with any surplus returned to the public purse. In contrast with NEPO, fewer references to ESPO were identified in EM documents. For example, Nottingham referred to a regional tender portal but did not refer to ESPO, and Leicestershire only referred to it once, even though part of the managing consortia.

Furthermore, a regional PBO does not always align with local procurement practice. Not all anchor organisations in a region use them and PBOs sell goods or services to other regions. For example, NEPO (2022) stated that in addition to progressing social value in the NE it aspired to be an 'exemplar of best practice through our portfolio of nationally available procurement solutions' by selling to other English regions. Similar wording from ESPO claims to support UK-based companies supplying goods and services to the education sector. ESPO also has over 20,000 public sector customers across the UK, and as a PBO has a broader reach than local social value outcomes alone. PBO consortia are becoming more entrepreneurial, with NEPO initiating a trading company, NEPRO (NE Professional Services), providing a national procurement framework neutrally managed by a private sector delivery partner called Bloom.

ESPO's website states it works in partnership with other organisations by collaborating with local agencies, the Crown Commercial Service (CCS) and other PBOs because 'collaboration brings together procurement and category expertise, resulting in better solutions for central and local government'. CCS (part of the Central Government Cabinet Office), a national purchasing body, has a primary client base of central government and its frameworks are accessible to a broad range of other public bodies including local government.

Lastly, the research showed no equivalent London PBO, raising interesting questions about rationalising local government procurement in a mega-city. London purchases from other regions, with bespoke local initiatives like a London boroughs' heads of procurement group and other groupings. Findings indicate the unique challenges facing London require more research, including the substantial number of boroughs, and boundaries caused by political leadership (Eckersley et al. 2023); deprivation and gentrification, and tensions caused by overlapping governance between the London Mayor's office and other anchor institutions.

Local government regional procurement: proximity and reaching out

In the three cases, local government anchor institutions aspire to procure from regional providers, usually to increase local social value, but each had to 'reach out' and procure within a wider context in accordance with legislation.

To reinforce this point, it is useful to note how much money is spent on procurement. Durham CC has a £500 m annual procurement spend; Sunderland almost £300 m; and Gateshead £275 m. Within these figures a focus on local procurement is shown between 2019 and 2020 by Durham CC's spend of £532 m including £422 m in the private sector with a remainder of 68% spent in the public and third sector within the NE. For the London Borough of Haringey, over 25% (£110 m) of contracts in 2018/19 were with

businesses with a Haringey postcode. Westminster spends over £500 m annually acquiring goods works and services from third parties, with a focus on local social value.

Of note, a core focus is local social value outcomes and priorities, with a 'responsibility to deliver the best possible social and financial value' (Newcastle). Gateshead states it 'understands the responsibility to use the money in a way that achieves the best possible outcomes for Gateshead people and local economy'. Newcastle notes 63% of spending is on contracts with local businesses in the NE, and Nottingham observes in the first years of the (current) strategy £288 m – 69% of total contract value – was spent on the local economy.

Although a focus on social value was identified, a legal obligation to obtain value for money was distinguished. Strategic priorities commonly focused on social themes: community wealth; environment; modern slavery; social value; and ethical procurement (Brent; Westminster; Lewisham), but value for money was sought in active procurement and contract management (Brent; Lewisham) within changes to procurement policy following Brexit (Lewisham).

Haringey stated seeking value for money could lead to conflicting priorities as 'some social value aspirations may push us outside of the available commercial envelope' leading to compromise on priorities. Nottingham City's strategy aspires to place citizens at the centre, alongside economic, social and environmental benefits, but stated commercial efficiency as a central factor. Westminster articulated 'smart business' by using supply markets and contracts to become an 'intelligent and agile client' exploiting new technologies with 'awareness of supply chain tiers'.

In addition to the proximity of purchasing locally, there is proximity associated by joint working between partners. In national guidance, the LGA (2022b) states groups of local authorities may wish to develop procurement strategies reflecting local and regional priorities. An example of a proximate arrangement between local authorities in the EM is the D2N2 (Derbyshire County, Derby City, Nottinghamshire County and Nottingham City Councils) local economy strategy with its focus on procurement and commissioning; and regional neighbours jointly procuring for specific needs groups, such as social care for vulnerable people (Leicestershire County/Leicester City).

With 32 boroughs, London is divided for procurement purposes in numerous ways: north and south; inner or outer: affluent and deprived. A PBO covering the whole of London was not identified, but various groupings require additional mapping. Rather than pan-London agreements, collaborations were mostly evident between borough neighbours, including construction and waste management consortia.

Although committed to a regional and local outlook, it was stated procurement practice was conducted within a national legislative and policy context (Nottingham). Some sources identified a vision informed by procurement legislation, the National Procurement Strategy for Local Government in England (LGA 2022b) (for example, Haringey), or the professional framework of the Chartered Institute of Procurement and Supply.⁸

Within a national perspective, the findings suggest 'reaching out' as not all procurement spending will be in region with local government frequently purchasing goods, works and services from national providers. Regional boundaries are crossed in procurement practice, as required in legislation, despite aspirations to procure locally (see Eckersley et al. 2023). For example, Durham CC stated its strategy sits within an increasing procurement collaboration locally, regionally and nationally, providing local benefits and national procurement innovation. Gateshead considers the benefits of regional or national collaboration against the potential impact on the local economy for all commissioning and procurement activity. This indicates tensions between the desire to procure locally for social value, and the need to promote competition nationally in line with procurement legislation.

Local government regional procurement as type: organisations, collaborations and mechanisms

Three overarching types of procurement activity in English regions were noted: procurement *organisations*, *collaborations* and *mechanisms*. Moreover, the types are not particular to regions, and practiced at various levels of local government procurement.

First, local government procurement *organisations* refer to regionally based institutions required to procure in fulfilment of statutory duties, by purchasing goods, works and services. Examples are anchor institutions in the regions, including Newcastle, Nottinghamshire, Durham CC, Gateshead, and London boroughs. Although a key focus is local government anchor institutions, other players in the organisational frame are regional PBOs, and national providers such as CCS, Bloom, NEPRO and SCAPE. In this respect, the organisational landscape is complex and multi-levelled.

It was noted some anchor organisations used strategies to explain the strategic importance and complexity of procurement, alongside policy and legislation, tempering the view that procurement is primarily a bureaucratic process. Some procurement strategies were professionally presented, outward-facing and colourful (Nottingham and Nottinghamshire), contrasting with Derbyshire and Haringey which looked like organisational reports.

Table 1. Types of local government procurement organisations identified in the regions.

Term	Description	Example
Contracting local government authority	Individual local authorities anchor institutions The award of contracts is governed by legislation and the council's contractual rules	Nottingham City Council states it is a contracting local government authority under UK procurement legislation
Regional public sector controlled professional buying organisations (PBOs)	Public sector organisations who work with a variety of local, and wider, sector partners	ESPO; NEPO
National procurement organisations	Nationally focused organisations providing regionally neutral procurement services in collaboration with a range of partners	CCS; BLOOM; NEPRO; SCAPE

Table 1 summarises three types of local government procurement organisations identified in the regions. The organisational types illustrate how the different types of organisation act spatially within and beyond single organisational boundaries, assisting understanding of the interplay of vertical and horizontal public procurement practices (Essig 2000).

Local government authority anchor institutions

Where the award of contracts is governed by legislation and the council's contractual rules. For local government procurement this speaks to the purpose of procuring singularly, or in collaboration with other anchor institutions, depending on local priorities, and the appetite for and cost of collaboration (Murray, Rentell, and Geere 2008; Schotanus and Telgen 2007), and political allegiances (Eckersley et al. 2023).

Regional PBOs

Although established by local anchor institutions with allegiance to region, they indicate a quasi- public-private organisational hybridity (Skelcher and Smith 2014) and a public services trading culture (Mackintosh 1999). As well as contributing to social value, their wider marketised strategy is to increase organisational revenue, which in turn sustains the PBO, but also contributes to wider collaborative procurement benefits and efficiency. Valuable for local government anchor institutions (Schotanus and Telgen 2007), this indicates an imprecise allegiance with region and nation.

Nationally focused provider organisations

This augments our observation that organisational forms in the local government procurement field are not easily defined (Schotanus and Telgen 2007), as set out in Table 1.

Second, procurement *collaboration* identifies networks between organisations in a region. Here, the word collaboration refers to consortia, combinations, and shared or combined services. The collaborations include joint procurement of differing size and complexity, contractual framework agreements between local government and providers and regional consortia (LGA 2022b).

For example, Durham CC stated it works with NEPO to ensure regional support, including joint sessions to encourage local supplier engagement with Business Durham and the Chamber of Commerce. Gateshead stated it has a good record of collaborating with health, other local authorities, NEPO (taking advantage of its capacity, coordination and governance role) and SCAPE (a national procurement organisation specialising in public sector construction frameworks).

Findings identified broader and targeted strategic procurement collaboration in the regions. Whereas D2N2's collaboration is built on a wider economic strategy, incorporating joint procurement activity such as the D2N2 Children in Care Framework, collaborations were identified where the sole focus is service rationalisation and seeking best purchasing price. An example from London is the South London Waste Partnership (SLWP), consisting of four boroughs of Croydon, Kingston, Merton and Sutton working together to 'provide improved and more cost-effective waste management services to their residents'. Working in partnership with a range of commercial suppliers, it is stated that key decisions are made by a cross-political joint committee of eight elected councillors from the four partner boroughs.

The research also identified smaller pairs of anchor institutions who collectively purchase services, for example, Leicester City and Leicestershire (EM) jointly procure some social care provision. This is for financial and operational considerations.

Lastly, a range of technical terms were identified in the sources. We call these terms *procurement mechanisms*, which include contracting local government authority, joint procurement, shared services, framework agreements and dynamic purchasing systems. Examples included joint procurement between authorities of waste provision; dynamic purchasing systems to enable local businesses to access council contracts (Haringey; Nottingham County Council); and framework agreements (D2N2 Children in Care Framework), providing a contractual framework for broader regional procurement. Although used by individual organisations to meet their priorities, the findings indicate these mechanisms play a key role in the broader regional and national procurement landscape.

Table 2 summarises four types of local government procurement mechanisms identified in the regions. The mechanisms indicate a range

Table 2. Types of local government procurement mechanisms identified in the regions.

Term	Description	Example
Sole procurement	Council purchases singly	Office equipment and furniture for local government
Joint procurement	Contractual mechanism driven by two or more contracting authorities in collaboration	A service for vulnerable people requiring a local focus on social value, for example home care A group of local authorities procuring waste collection service (e.g., London Borough waste partnerships)
Framework agreement	An agreement with one or more suppliers whereby one or more customers may 'call off' individual contracts for the duration of the framework	The service purchased may be expensive and in short supply, or may be for a standard product e.g., ICT provision (former) or the purchase of stationery (latter)
Dynamic purchasing system	Contractual mechanism of a flexible electronic system which suppliers can join at any time (unlike a framework agreement which is typically available to join just once) 'Open market' solution designed to give buyers access to a pool of pre-qualified suppliers	Example is a local government anchor institution purchasing school taxi services, with flexibility to accommodate demand at certain times of the day or year

of local government procurement methods, from independence, to sharing and accessing provision, to rapidly accessible procurement processes. In this sense, the mechanisms offer a different lens on joint working in addition to established definitions of collaborative procurement as stakeholder motivations, values and group formation (Essig 2000; Schotanus and Telgen 2007).

Sole procurement

With the call to work collaboratively, caution about engaging in joint working has always presented a choice for government (Hudson 1987). As a local government procurement mechanism, sole purchasing may ensue for a variety of reasons: because it is easier to purchase goods on a one-off occasion for a project; hesitation about entering complex negotiations with other organisations and politicians (Dale-Clough 2015; Eckersley et al. 2023); or lack of clarity about the benefits of collaboration (Bakker et al. 2008).

Joint procurement

Corresponding with Bakker et al's (2008) description of horizontal procurement collaboration as two or more organisations, in practice joint procurement is itself a contractual mechanism driven by two or more contracting authorities working in collaboration. The joint activity can be about goods, services or works based on geographical proximity (Eckersley et al. 2023). There may be an aspiration to procure a service to meet the needs of a specific community divided across two local government boundaries,

corroborating the view that public procurement may differ dependent on local culture, joint working tradition and trust (Schotanus and Telgen 2007).

Framework agreements

Designing tenders and managing procurement exercises are time consuming and resource intensive (Crown Commercial Service 2021b). A framework agreement is a procurement mechanism which can be provided by local government organisations, PBOs, or other providers and can range from being singularly managed to involving multiples of stakeholders. They may be hosted in one region, or nationally, but used by local government organisations in other regions. Initially used to purchase goods and commodities, rather than services (Bakker et al. 2008) frameworks allow stakeholders to easily access (or ‘call off’) individual contracts without having to deliver new procurement tender exercises (Crown Commercial Service 2021b). Where collaboration takes place, this may be as much about sharing a framework to access services, rather than the objective of jointly pursuing shared social value. Although not identified in the cases, some organisations may be reluctant to participate in framework processes because of lack of confidence, risk or concern about legal challenge (Dale-Clough 2015).

Dynamic purchasing systems

Whereas a framework agreement allows providers to only join at its start, the dynamic purchasing system mechanism allows for providers to join at any time (Crown Commercial Service 2022). As a local government procurement mechanism, dynamic systems can also assist public organisations to manage time and crisis events, either singularly or collaboratively, in contrast with formal procedural processes (Harland et al. 2021). Utilised in several of the cases study anchor organisations, a dynamic system adds flexibility and speed into tendering which can be accelerated. This mechanism sees the application for an accelerated and concise procurement exercise, which is under researched in local government public procurement.

Discussion

Informed by the findings, the discussion considers variations in local government procurement landscapes, platforms and priorities within and between English regions. We contribute to wider debates by analysing local government procurement in the context of disjointed governance. Whilst other papers have explored regional sourcing (e.g., Eckersley et al. 2023) our paper adds to theory by explaining that there is no single-entry point to the local government procurement puzzle. The paper builds on existing scholarship theory and contributes to theory by advancing a ‘procurement mechanisms’ perspective.

Navigating complexity in and between regional and local government procurement

The sources illustrate sole procurement by individual local government anchor organisations in regions; procurement as tiers and spheres; local and national collaborations; and quasi-regional PBOs not used by every local government organisation in a region, but which may be used by local government organisations outside. These practices are not easy to aggregate, as they do not integrate as a system governed or led from one single viewpoint.

The UK is arguably one of the most complex polities in the western world with increasingly fragmented governance arrangements. Across multiple layers new relational forms of governance are a challenge to the role of government as they raise questions about the institutions and organisational capacities required to synergise state resources, capacities and knowledge with those of the market and civic institutions (Liddle 2016).

To assist understanding, it is valuable to consider at the very start of this discussion if there might be benefits to rationalising or centralising local government procurement governance (Kyriacou and Roca-Sagalés 2021). At first sight, the spheres and tiers resemble an integrated system, which might be thought to be informed by multi-level governance (Bache, Bartel, and Flinders 2016). However, when faced with overlapping logics which do not aggregate – procurement and contracting legislation; local government anchor institutions; PBOs, and markets – the multi-level viewpoint seems less useful as a model of procurement rationalisation.

Some procurement arrangements are historical and based on existing relationships prior to political boundary changes, or because local authorities are geographically proximate to each other (Eckersley et al. 2023). As with other well-trodden discussions in public administration, the ambition to integrate – or to fragment, centralise or regionalise – can be applied to local government procurement (Elliott et al. 2022; Kyriacou and Roca-Sagalés 2021). The complex and heterogeneous systems cannot be easily navigated, even by practitioners motivated to improve them. However, the sources we analysed indicate system complexity is tempered by co-creation practiced in professional clusters, rather than pursuing whole system integration or centralisation. This is an example of the ‘relational state’ (Liddle 2016), including informal, unregulated connections, linkages and inter-relationships and spheres of influence by plural actors collaborating in co-producing and co-delivering services (Bovaird 2007). This illuminates how social value for communities and citizens relates to the complex architecture of local government procurement in the regions (Tussell 2023).

Understanding paradoxes in local government procurement and social value

Writers have examined the co-creation of value within public service delivery by focusing on the different dimensions of value; balancing individual and social/public values; and how multiple stakeholders determine value from different perspectives; and the multitude of processes involved (Osborne 2018) within inter-organisational, networked forms of governance (Klijn and Koppenjan 2015).

The social value agenda is now a central component of the local government procurement universe (Liddle 2022; LGA 2022b). The objective of increasing local purchasing is described as positive for local economies (Eckersley et al. 2023; Tussell 2023) and our findings indicate similar commitment to region and locality, as a core focus of progressing local social value outcomes and priorities to deliver social and financial value. And yet, the pursuit of local social value exposes paradoxes at the local and regional level. Procurement is by its very nature top-down and contractual, being informed by national legislation and policy. However, as we illustrate, in practice the situation is much more complex as described in the paper. The examples reveal tensions between local government procurement as a formal contractual practice, in contrast with the relational social value agenda with little authority when tender decisions are challenged or in litigation.

Local social value creation is informed by a bottom-up citizen co-production viewpoint, described as inclusive by representing the lived experience of citizens. Although social value was found to be a core priority in the findings, tension between increasing local social value outcomes alongside value for money could lead to conflicting strategic priorities. A lack of capacity in smaller organisations can be an issue in social value procurement (Troje 2023). Within top-down and contractual practices, localised and personal social value associated with front line service delivery can seem detached from the marketised discourse of procurement where the objective may be to purchase services above pursuing social goals (Barraket, Keast, and Furneaux 2015). Lastly, local government procurement and social value contribute to the aspirations of reducing perennial inequalities at the same time as enhancing localised employability and economic growth. A crucial point is how local government increases local community focused social value whilst also considering potential financial value from collaborating in national procurement markets. The desire to purchase locally illustrates the interplay between regional proximity and 'reaching out'.

Evaluating spatial, institutional, collaborations and mechanisms in local government procurement

As local government procurement is a multifaceted but disconnected set of practices, we reiterate that spatial, institutional and collaboration perspectives are required to comprehend the field. In addition, we contend that an additional *procurement mechanisms* perspective is required.

The spatial viewpoint is identified in the local social value agenda as tensions between local and national purchasing and procurement and progressing social value in communities. This interplay of regional, national and local governance is symptomatic of the power relationships embodied in local and national policy and practice (Dimand and Cheng 2023; Eckersley et al. 2023; Elliott et al. 2022; Pike et al. 2018) and the degree to which an anchor institution aligns itself with different types of purchasing markets.

Furthermore, the various procurement *institutions* we identify in the findings, including local anchor institutions and PBOs, indicate a complex procurement landscape incorporating various levels and spheres. With the *mélange* of public, private and marketised institutions it is understandable to see why they do not aggregate as multi-levelled governance (Bache, Bartel, and Flinders 2016) but remain segmented and layered. With its emphasis on relational and networks, social capital theory can help us here with its emphasis on bridging, bonding and linking (Aldridge, Halpern, and Fitzpatrick 2002; Lin and Erickson 2008; Putnam 2000) which can assist actors to navigate the local government boundaries we refer to.

We reiterate that procurement *collaborations* are required between local government neighbours, but also regionally and nationally. This includes different practices of strategic and informal groupings and varying relationships with PBOs. In some ways, these PBOs straddle the interface between established local government and entrepreneurial and business focused approaches (Barnett et al. 2022). Some regional PBOs elevate themselves from a local orientation to becoming apolitical and neutral traders selling to the whole of England and beyond.

Collaborative governance is a lynchpin of NPG, exemplified by how joint procurement practices progress multi-organisational contracts in operational service delivery (Agranoff and McGuire 2001). NPG covers a range of different institutional arrangements including inter-organisational networks and co-production (Bovaird 2007). Operationalising local government procurement requires a variety of practices, including partnership working and networking (Parker 2015; Klijn, Edelenbos, and Steijn 2010). Although the will to collaborate in procurement indicates similar themes to partnership governance, like shared objectives, clear communication and trust (Huxham and Vangen 2013), competitive and financial aspects will require formalised contracts rather than solely memorandums of understanding.

Lastly, this leads to our key contribution, as in addition to the spatial, institutional and collaboration perspectives, we identify *procurement mechanisms* which illustrate how practice is written into contractual agreements and embodied in technical procurement discourse. Local government procurement is not only about purchasing goods, works and services, but acts as a connecting agent uniting disparate agencies and activities together into regional – and national – aggregations of practice. In addition to the broader legal backdrop, *procurement mechanisms* sees joint procurement, framework agreements and dynamic purchasing systems acting as boundary objects for boundary work (Bracci, Gobbo, and Papi 2022; Sullivan and Williams 2012) between procurement actors to express, negotiate and share understanding in a fragmented system. Although contractual instruments, these mechanisms lubricate connectivity between organisational, regional and national actors.

Moreover, *procurement mechanisms* provide a type of procedural brokerage. Whereas a broker is usually described as an actor who is expert at integrating individuals within a network, as a bridge between two other actors (Agranoff and McGuire 2001; Broadhurst, Berkeley, and Ferreira 2023) we argue that joint procurement, framework agreements, and dynamic purchasing systems also act as boundary objects to provide a value proposition. These mechanisms streamline collaborative multi-level and multi-sectoral purchasing strategy within the local government procurement landscape, by providing an integrative focus for organisations to contribute resources and value to the wider procurement network.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper is to contribute to improved understanding of the confused landscape of local government public procurement activity in English regions. The paper considered the underexplored focus of regional local government procurement by examining the interaction between formal institutions and collaboration, thus illustrating that the connectivity between the strategic and local to identify local need and create social value. Returning to the research question: 'What variations currently exist in the local government procurement landscapes, platforms and priorities within and between English regions?' the paper is a starting point to illustrate that the local government procurement landscape in English regions is complex and convoluted. As we illustrate, in England this is of 'Byzantine' complexity, and by trying to unravel this puzzle we identify findings which may stimulate future research to understand the complex interplay of local government procurement, both in England and other international jurisdictions.

The paper makes two important contributions to understanding local government procurement in regions by:

- Describing and exploring the complexity of local government procurement in English regions to explain the variety of practices and the interaction with other regions and nationally.
- Providing a framework of spatial, institutional and collaboration perspectives of local government procurement, with *procurement mechanisms* as a key instrument for enabling procurement connectivity.

The contributions provide useful perspectives to aid discussions on public sector procurement, which need bringing into sharper focus. Our study indicates that local government procurement requires the operation of formal and informal relationships, and although legal and technical processes underpin practice, core public administration concepts like collaboration and public institutions ensure theoretical clarity. Discussions between scholars and procurement practitioners aid understanding of complexity by facilitating the interpretation of agency and actor interactions and relationships.

Moreover, the paper illustrates these interactions with a call to local government procurement officials to purchase locally, but within a context of nationally designed local government procurement. Although separate from current discussions, this has implications about the interaction between local government procurement within ongoing devolution policy. Globally, procurement will be a critical and essential component of future national economic growth models as public finances continue to be constrained.

This was a limited study to identify initial themes, and we acknowledge further analysis is required as the observations are based on a focused set of documentary sources. Furthermore, the conclusions might be challenged due to the reliance on published documents and viewpoints from the organisational representatives. We acknowledge the need for caution in using documents not specifically produced for the main purpose of this current research, but argue that despite limitations they do provide valuable supplementary information to support other findings

Our argument remains that the interactions identified in national, regional, and local government are complex, and worthy of analysis, and by aiming to unpack the complexities involved we hope that the paper will stimulate an examination of similar practices in local government internationally.

Future empirical research will provide a more comprehensive picture, by complementing our data through interviews with procurement officers to test out the initial observations and analysing other documentary sources. Lastly, to assist policy learning and international comparison, it may be beneficial to understand how public and local government procurement is conducted in large cities like London, as well as globally. This will provide insight into the extent that local government regional procurement is rationalised or centralised.

Notes

1. For the best and most recent authoritative study of the complexities of local government in England see Barnett and Chandler (2023).
2. In this paper we use the term local government instead of local authority or council. Additionally, we refer to England as the case context and the UK as the broader governance and legislative context.
3. <https://socialvalueportal.com/>.
4. www.ojeu.eu.
5. New procurement legislation to replace the old legislative regime has resulted in limited simplification (Pearson and Holden 2022), although at the time of writing this paper it is too early to evaluate this. Although leaving the legal parameters of the EU in December 2020, at this time the UK and England was consumed by economic and political instability resulting from the COVID-19 crisis.
6. After May 2024 the North East Mayoral Combined Authority (NEMCA) will be reformed from combining the North of Tyne Combined Authority, absorbing the non-mayoral group of local authorities into NEMCA.
7. The 'pro-five' group: Yorkshire Purchasing Organisation (YPO); Eastern Shires Purchasing Organisation (ESPO), NE Procurement Organisation (NEPO) and the Central Buying Consortium (CBC). The fifth member was West Mercia Supplies (Shropshire, Hereford, Worcestershire, Telford and Wrekin), bought out by the Consortium for Purchasing and Distribution Limited in 2012.
8. <https://www.cips.org/>.

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Appendix

List of analysed documentary sources

North East	<p>Durham Corporate Procurement Strategy (2020 - 2022)</p> <p>Gateshead Corporate Procurement Strategy (2021/22 - 2026/27)</p> <p>NEPO Website (www.NEPO.org)</p> <p>NEPO 2025 three-year strategy</p> <p>Newcastle City Council Commissioning/Procurement Plan</p> <p>South Tyneside Procurement Strategy (2021-2024)</p> <p>Sunderland City Council – Procurement Overview</p>
East	<p>D2N2 Website (https://d2n2lep.org)</p>
Midlands	<p>D2N2 Children in Care Framework (2020-2024)</p> <p>Derbyshire County Council Procurement Strategy (2021 -2026)</p> <p>ESPO Website (www.ESPO.org)</p> <p>Leicester City Council website “do business with us” (www.leicester.gov.uk/business/do-business-with-us/)</p> <p>Leicestershire County Council Commissioning/Procurement Strategy (2018)</p> <p>Nottingham City Council Procurement Strategy (2018-2023)</p> <p>Nottinghamshire County Council Dynamic Purchasing System for Short Breaks and Childcare Services for Disabled Children and Young People and their Parents/Carers (April 2018 – March 2028)</p>
London	<p>Brent Procurement Strategy (2020 - 2023)</p> <p>Haringey Procurement Strategy (2020 - 2025)</p> <p>Lewisham Sustainable Procurement Strategy (2021 - 2025)</p> <p>South London waste partnership website (slwp.org.uk)</p> <p>Westminster Responsible Procurement/Commissioning Strategy (2022)</p>
National	<p>Bloom Website (https://bloom.services.)</p> <p>Crown Commercial Service Website (www.crowncommercial.gov.uk.)</p> <p>Mayor of London – Responsible Procurement Greater London Authority Group Implementation Plan (2022–2024)</p> <p>NEPRO Website (www.nepro.org.uk.)</p> <p>SCAPE Website (www.scape.co.uk.)</p>
