

**Developing a sub-regional growth strategy: reflections on recent English  
experience**

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## *Introduction*

The first decade of the twenty-first century was one in which area-based urban policy initiatives seemed ubiquitous (see Cochrane 2007) and there have been various evaluations of the success of some of them (see, for example, Batty *et al* 2010; Lawless 2004, 2006; Allmendinger 2011). In this paper, we reflect on a policy approach that developed across the decade, seeking to bring together economic development, housing and the promise of sustainable communities, first articulated by the then Office of the Deputy Prime Minister as the *Sustainable Communities Plan* (SCP), before being translated into practice across England in various ways (ODPM 2003, 2005b; DEFRA 2005).

An interventionist strategy linking housing and economic development in the Greater South East of England was at the core of the plan. This was, perhaps, most obvious in the case of the Thames Gateway, where the strategy was translated into a (not always convincing) regeneration narrative (see, e.g., Allmendinger and Haughton 2009, Keith 2009, Raco 2005), but it incorporated a wider regional vision. The localised initiatives associated with the SCP explicitly brought issues of housing and economic development together, often with proposals for housing growth at the forefront, but nevertheless quite explicitly framed in terms of economic development within a regional ‘growth’ strategy.

It is tempting simply to note the more grandiose visions of the SCP, the failure to deliver on them and then to move on to discuss the new policies emerging from government (such as Local Enterprise Partnerships, localism and neighbourhood

planning). And there is no doubt that those policies deserve to be interrogated critically and carefully (see, for example Bentley et al 2010, Clarke and Cochrane 2013, Lowndes and Pratchett 2012, Pugalys and Townsend 2013). But our aim here is rather different, namely to look back, to provide a more nuanced reflection on the ways in which plans for sustainable growth were pursued and to consider what lessons might be learned from the experience. This was a time of policy innovation which deserves to be interrogated in its own right.

The empirical focus of this paper, which draws on work undertaken as part of a project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, is on the development and delivery of plans for substantial new housing (and employment) growth in South Central England, an area on the edge of the (London) city region of the Greater South East as it expands into the Midlands (which today is largely covered by the South East Midlands Local Enterprise Partnership). At the time it was identified as Milton Keynes and the South Midlands (MKSM).

### ***Making up a sub-regional growth strategy***

The policy developments with which we are concerned relate to the wider South East region, as it was itself defined through policy (see, e.g., Cochrane 2012, Gordon 2004). The Labour Government set targets for houses to be built in each English region, but emphasis was placed on London and the South East where a series of growth areas were identified within the *Sustainable Communities Plan* (SCP) (ODPM 2003).

It was argued that without more housing in this ‘super-region’ (Marvin *et al* 2006, p. 6) to underpin its continued growth, national prosperity would be threatened. From this perspective London and the South East was not just any ‘region’ but a place of national significance - the ‘engine’ of the British economy (see e.g. SEERA 2009). The MKSM sub-region was identified in the SCP as a growth area which cut across the boundaries of the administrative regions of the South East, the East of England and the East Midlands. The Thames Gateway and the Cambridge/Stansted Corridor to the North and East of London were identified as the other major growth areas. (There was a fourth more narrowly specified growth area also identified in the Ashford mainly due to its position as a node for European-focused freight and passenger traffic). Nor is this just a matter of historical interest, however. More recently there has been a renewed emphasis on the priority of enabling housing development in areas of economic growth or with the potential for such growth, because it is argued that this will help sustain or even generate further growth and increased prosperity (see, e.g., Centre for Cities 2013, Leunig and Swaffield 2008). In part this has found an expression in the National Policy Planning Framework (Department for Communities and Local Government 2012), whose purpose is to remove unnecessary restrictions on such development, but also in more active intervention reflected, for example, in the proposed City Deal for Milton Keynes and the South East Midlands, which is focused on the delivery of ‘significant, sustainable growth in housing...to attract and find homes for high skilled workers to drive economic growth’ (Deputy Prime Minister’s Office 2013).

The underlying assumptions of this approach were, first, that if housing costs escalated then there was a real danger not only that the costs of labour would rise too but also that it would be impossible to retain certain key workers (particularly some of those necessary to sustain necessary public sector infrastructure – teachers, nurses, firefighters and the like...). This infrastructural significance was explicitly recognised in the Barker Report commissioned by the Treasury (Barker 2004; see also HM Treasury *et al* 2007). The second assumption was that a major expansion of private housing was needed to provide for the higher wage managers, professionals and business people required to drive economic success in London and the South East. This policy perspective was also a response to continual pressure from the national house building sector for more land to be allocated for housing in the region (e.g. Stewart 2002).

Despite this explicit emphasis on supporting regional economic growth, the ways in which housing growth might *generate* economic development were identified only in the most general terms without any serious analysis of exactly how it might be expected to attract or support economic development. This was a plan predicated on reproducing growth in areas of already existing economic prosperity, rather than one that sought to reduce inequality or correct wider imbalances between regions (or even within the South East) (see, e.g. Burch *et al* 2009, Pike and Tomaney 2009). The overall strategy for (sustainable) growth was to be supported through a range of new plans and policies, not least by new Regional Spatial Strategies (RSS), regional plans and their local counterparts, plus through whatever local delivery agencies were viewed as necessary to help drive growth in particular localities.

The thrust of the SCP housing strategy drew on a longer history of provisions for commuting and the extended development of the suburbs as home for the workers in the central city (Clapson 1998), but it was also inflected with a wider commitment to the building of balanced or sustainable communities (see Raco 2007 for a discussion of the history of such initiatives). The approach adopted echoed previous plans for New Towns, where jobs and houses were planned together, but a key difference, in the case of the SCP, was that while there was a strong policy commitment to new housing, job creation was expected to follow the housing market with little government incentive or intervention. Such a separation of housing from business and employment development was questioned by many of the local agencies and authorities in our study area. In the Northamptonshire and Milton Keynes, locally based partnerships and business organisations, pointed to “structural weaknesses” in the local economy and promoted a series of further “transformative actions” in innovation, transport, education and skills, and other factors (see, e.g., Milton Keynes Local Strategic Partnership 2004, Northamptonshire [letyourselfgrow.com](http://letyourselfgrow.com) 2010).

The sustainable aspect to ‘sustainable’ communities meant the plan was also framed as having a strong environmental purpose, underpinned by a stated commitment to measures such as better urban design and low carbon buildings, as well as improved public transport. The expectation was that a sustainable level of proposed new housing growth could be delivered largely through a series of designated new developments (Sustainable Urban Extensions) extending out from urban settlements across the region (see, e.g., TCPA 2007). These were promoted as offering a promise both for existing residents (who might feel threatened by the arrival of new development) and for future residents (who would be able to take advantage of the

amenities being provided). Sustainability standards were to be adopted by local authorities (expressed in their Core Spatial Strategies) to make growth more ‘palatable’ as well as to deliver practical improvements to the quality of the homes being built (see Cochrane 2010).

### ***Developing a strategy for Milton Keynes and the South Midlands***

Our research has looked in some detail at what emerged in and across the northern part of the MKSM area – i.e. across the seven district authority areas in Northamptonshire and the unitary authority area of Milton Keynes. It draws on detailed documentary analysis and an extensive series of in-depth interviews conducted in Northamptonshire and Milton Keynes with officers and elected members in a range of local authority roles, with members of community organisations; and with representatives of private sector bodies, including house-builders.

A full ‘Sub-regional Strategy for MKSM’ was published in March 2005, setting out the ambition to ‘achieve a major increase in new homes paralleled by a commensurate level of economic growth’. Growth was to be focused on particular ‘Growth Towns’ across the case study area, with the largest centres being in Northampton, Milton Keynes and Corby (see Figures 1 and 2).

**Insert Figure 1 Here**

**Insert Figure 2 Here**

Between 40-60% of the housing growth across the study area was to be in Sustainable Urban Extensions (SUEs) each of more than 1000 homes, and each requiring

significant investment in roads, schools, parks, health facilities and other new amenities. These could not be easily bolted onto to existing residential or urban areas and would require extensive planning to shape extended build-out timescales. The 2005 Strategy left the final position of such SUEs open to further debate, but included the basic principles of how much development would be of that scale. Employment forecasts - described as 'reference values only not targets' – projected the ambition to match housing numbers by stimulating 125,000 new jobs by 2021. To support all this, however, only relatively modest funds were made available from central sources in a Growth Areas Fund and a Transport Infrastructure Fund, alongside a governance focus through an advisory MKSM Inter-Regional Board. While the MKSM Strategy indicated infrastructure costs of £8.3 billion over a 30 year period (MKSM, para. 66), the Growth Area Fund offered only £400m between 2004-2008 for all four designated Growth Areas.

A critical part of the SCP and MKSM strategy was to draw up, and have adopted by local planning authorities, a series of Core Spatial Strategies that would operate as the fundamental planning frameworks to denote where growth should happen and what standards would apply to that growth. All authorities in the case study area were required to establish their initial Core strategies, revising them over time. New planning collaborations have been developed between local authorities in Northamptonshire (the West Northamptonshire Joint Planning Unit and the North Northamptonshire Joint Planning Unit) while the Milton Keynes area continues to have its own Core Spatial Strategy.

The Core Strategies were intentionally optimistic and wide ranging, incorporating aspirational views of how 'high-quality growth' would produce new sustainable places. For example, North Northamptonshire was to be 'a showpiece of modern



green living’; ‘a step change in jobs and homes’; ‘high quality development, safe, healthy and attractive area for new residents, visitors and businesses to invest in’; ‘a benchmark for green living’ (North Northamptonshire 2008). The underlying assumption was of high rates of growth throughout 2001-2031: Corby and Milton Keynes were projected to double in population by 2031, and Northampton to grow from 200,000 people to around 300,000.

To underpin these shifts a series of distinctive institutional arrangements were set up, in the form of ‘local delivery vehicles’. In 2004 an Urban Development Corporation was set up in West Northamptonshire to progress developments in and around Daventry, Towcester and Northampton. This had development control powers and strategic responsibilities to progress large development schemes, although it had no land vested to it, and had limited funding to intervene in site acquisitions. In North Northamptonshire, a Development Company was formed as a joint body between the four local authorities in the sub-area, taking on the promotional and coordinating role previously undertaken by a regeneration-based company in Corby. This new body was without planning or development control powers, although it had clear links to the combined Joint Planning Committee that oversaw the work of the North Northants Joint Planning Unit. In Milton Keynes, a Partnership Committee was set up, building on the longer term legacy of the new town development corporation. It was given the responsibility of coordinating the ‘development of land and infrastructure’ and using the surplus generated from the increased value of land to help provide the infrastructure necessary for further development (MKPC, 2004, p. 27). The Partnership had development control powers for a designated Urban Development Area and was itself an agency of English Partnerships, although its board was chaired

by an independent and it included representatives of community, business, health and local government as well as ‘independents’ appointed by the Secretary of State.

### ***Setting targets...and not meeting them***

The targets were always ambitious. Although the Core Strategies for the two halves of Northamptonshire envisaged a modest start, the expectation was that the pace of development would accelerate in the later part of the plan period - between 2012-2021 - once infrastructure was in place. The planned trajectories of housing development in North Northamptonshire envisaged a rapid stepping up of completions from an average 1,638 per annum in the period 2001 – 2006 to 2,531 per annum between 2006 – 2011 and a sustained level of over 3,100 dwellings per annum from 2011-2021.

But delivery on these targets faltered quite quickly. In North Northamptonshire, by 2011 only about 32% of planned growth had been achieved half way through the initial plan period (2001 – 2021). The trajectory had already become problematic before the economic slow-down, especially as most of the large SUEs were facing difficulties over agreeing final planning permissions, completing their land assembly and securing infrastructure investment.

Similar problems hit the employment projections. The North Northamptonshire 2010-2011 Annual Monitoring Report concluded that “*North Northamptonshire is unable to meet employment growth required to balance housing targets and is significantly underperforming due to loss of manufacturing jobs*” (North Northamptonshire Joint Planning Unit 2010, p.26).

Similarly the West Northamptonshire Joint Planning Unit (2011b, pp. 29-30) noted that the ‘*The current economic situation has rendered the achievement of the RSS housing rates unattainable*’. Annual housing completion rates had fallen from approximately 2000 per annum until 2007, down to 1550 in 2007/8; 1,100 in 2008/9 and 780 in 2009/10 and 687 in 2010/11 (West Northamptonshire Joint Planning Unit 2011a, p.63). The total shortfall against the original RSS target for West Northamptonshire was already below target by 6000 units by 2011.

In Milton Keynes, completions between 2006-2010 reached 7215 against the MKSM plan target of approximately 15000 for that period– i.e. approximately 50% below target by 2010. Even making up for lost ground, officers still expected that overall completions would be 15% below target by the end of the revised (extended) plan period to 2026.

Changes to the core planning and housing strategies were becoming inevitable, driven not just by programme slippage, but also by the desire at local and national levels to reassess the overall growth agenda and its constituent parts. Reviews of the Core Strategies and reassessment instigated in 2010 by the incoming Coalition Government also included reductions of the role to be undertaken by local delivery vehicles, alongside scaled back growth and reduced housing targets. Core strategy revisions would base new projections on assessments of *locally* generated demand, rather than assessments of regional *in*-migration or national figures on the need for new housing from bodies such as the National Housing and Planning Advisory Unit (subsequently wound up by the new government). The result to date is that in Northamptonshire, proposals for revised housing targets now represent a reduction of 25% from earlier targets: in Milton Keynes revisions propose a 16% reduction. Major housing sites have been removed on the edge of Northampton from the revised Core Strategy– one

such decision followed a re-evaluated Environmental Assessment. Despite these significant revisions, the local authority personnel we interviewed still uniformly saw the new figures as immensely challenging.

### ***Looking back – learning some lessons***

We have summarised the perspectives of those we interviewed under three headings, each of which sets out a distinctive critique of delivery policy and practice.

#### ***(1) The unreliability of market forces to deliver real sustainability***

Planners and other public sector professionals, as well as community groups, identified endemic problems associated with attempts to influence housing and property markets to create ‘sustainable communities’. At the heart of the SCP policy was the assumption “*that sustainability would be delivered by rising land values*”. In other words, in the main it would be the economy and receipts that would flow from the rising property market that would provide the funds to cover the cost of the physical infrastructure and the social facilities required. As one local authority officer said: “*Where the need for infrastructure arises from development then the development industry will be expected to contribute towards its provision*”.

This optimistic view was widely held until 2008 although there was already evidence that the approach was not adequate to meet the level of infrastructure costs that would be required. As one local authority officer noted, “*We needed £38k per dwelling to service the necessary infrastructure but this was way above what could be supported and we were getting only £20k per unit before the recession*”.

The consequences of relying upon receipts from sales of new market housing were serious, particularly for the creation of affordable housing, and for ‘quality’ issues in

general. In this context, the point was forcefully made: *“Developers will always try and reduce affordable housing because it reduces land value – they don’t want to put anything in above standard. At a senior level the word was to get the best you can but don’t frighten them away. The idea was to facilitate growth not aim for quality growth”*

In fact, house-builders were increasingly seen to be reluctant to contribute to the provision of the infrastructure required to deliver the sustainable development set out in core strategic documents (aside from their own assessment of whether or not a scheme is ‘sustainable’ in terms of its economic returns). *“Since 2008,”* we were told, *“there has been a distinct increase in requests from developers for the evidence that supports all S 106 requests”* – i.e. developers were increasingly challenging the basis of legal agreements requiring them to provide local facilities as part of gaining formal planning approval for development proposals.

Both before and after the start of the recession, a particular criticism voiced from communities and local authorities alike was that growth was too readily proposed as being ‘housing-led’, rather than ‘infrastructure-led’ – i.e. that the housing targets came without any *guarantee* of schools, roads and community facilities or even locally based employment being provided to make growth really sustainable (or ‘palatable’ as one senior planning officer put it). Residents complained that: *“We were dubbed as anti-housing but we were never anti-housing. Infrastructure should be planned around the housing not after it”*.

Analogies were drawn with previous models for the development of new urban communities, but clear anxiety remained over what would happen this time around: *“When you are planning a new town you must have massive infrastructure. Planners*

*say they will get this from roof tax and section 106 but if they can't get developers to hand over their money that's it."*

One particular initiative within the MKSM area has seemed to offer a way forward, but it also relies on a continued growth in land and property values. The Milton Keynes Partnership 'Infrastructure Tariff' set obligations against proposed development to collect capital and revenue funds for expenditure on the infrastructure requirements to facilitate actual development schemes to come on-stream and be appropriately linked into wider civic and urban services. By 2006 this 'tariff' rate was £18,500 per house to be paid out by landowners and developers over the time that a site's development was approved and completed (English Partnerships 2010, Walker 2012). Different levels of charges would be applied to land with different values, with additional contributions sought as values rose from the cumulative impact of public and private sector investment and subsequent market changes. Affordable housing contributions were not included in the standard charge nor were costs attributable to sustainability measures in new homes - these would be negotiated with developers through subsequent planning agreements.

But even in the case of the 'tariff', the original ambition to complement generated revenue through a pool of other generated resources to cover all local infrastructure requirements has proved inadequate to cover all the associated infrastructural costs of development. And because it was initially funded through a Treasury loan to the Milton Keynes Partnership in the expectation of returns that are no longer so certain, the danger of accumulating debt for those inheriting the Partnership's responsibilities is apparent. The conclusion is already being drawn that seeking contributions from developers at the level sufficient to deliver significant infrastructure provision may be

a step too far: *“Ambitions for what the SUEs might support across the [local authority area] have yet to be realised. There is now an acceptance that the shopping list of funding contributions from the ‘Sustainable Urban Extensions’ has been too great.”*

***(2) Central policy demands placed on house-builders were never likely to suit their business model***

This was essentially the critique that emerged from our discussions with representatives of the house-building industry. National house building companies are the main developers and builders of housing in the case study area. Their traditional model (as elsewhere) was to acquire options on land (most of the suitable *and* potential housing land in the study area appears to be ‘optioned off’), gain planning consent for schemes, sell each unit on completion of the construction works, and take little or no further role in the management of the residential stock they had created. The growth areas were seen by them as an opportunity for increasing strategic land acquisitions and assets which would underpin development and construction activities in later times. The costs associated with such land are therefore of critical concern to their model and to their calculations about the impact of planning policy requirements upon scheme proposals.

They were increasingly lukewarm to sceptical about the SCP process, seeing ‘sustainability’ measures as good for promotional purposes but involving unnecessary extra costs to facilitate local initiatives. ‘Planning’ was noted as being *“adversarial by nature”* and local strategic appraisal described as *“fundamentally flawed; you cannot dictate private sector decision-making...[..]...value and viability drive everything but the planners do not look at this. There is nothing about the word sustainable that changes the criteria for development”*.

It was suggested therefore by those in the industry that “*the sustainability agenda is an additional cost item*’, although that is not the end of the story – it was also stressed to us that house-builders are more adaptable than such apparently intransigent statements might seem to suggest. Indeed, we were told by one developer: *‘it’s a given, the industry adapts to the regulatory burden, and it is reflected in the value of the house.....’*. The double meaning implicit in the final clause is interesting here, since ‘value’ both implies that the housing that is delivered is somehow better than might otherwise have been the case (more sustainable) but also that this can be reflected in the price charged to the purchaser, so that the additional cost to the builder can actually be covered by additional receipt.

It is in this context that one developer complained about the performance of the local delivery vehicle which had been given the task of leading plans for growth: *“It has not achieved anything: there few examples of planning permissions granted and infrastructure schemes delivered”*. From the other side of the relationship, as one local planner put it, while *“there was a real desire to improve standards [...] developers saw it as an imposition. There was never a meeting of minds. Very few of the developments we had when we started got delivered, so you did not get sustainability.”*

This kind of response made negotiations on specific schemes and proposals extremely difficult, particularly where there was little financial incentive for house-builders to initiate schemes. In the case of Northampton this was put succinctly by one local authority officer: *“There was not a great lot of developers around Northampton and it was an uphill struggle. There never was quite a meeting of minds”*. Meanwhile the pressure on the West Northamptonshire Development Corporation (WNDC) to



deliver increasing levels of new development year on year, led one officer to note that housing numbers became more important than quality: *“the idea was to facilitate growth not to aim for quality”* – with an emphasis on shortening the time taken on negotiating planning approvals.

We were told that: *“Developers were advised to have regard to [..the ...] sustainability strategy but it was not policy (it was tokenistic), and did not provide firm standards and officers did not have expert understanding. The emphasis was more physically driven e.g. sustainable construction that could be measured; the ‘social - economic - community stuff’ was down to the design team.....”*.

*“Definitions of sustainability have changed so much over time and it is easily an overused term. Local authorities have not been particularly proactive about what developers should be doing to achieve sustainable development. There has been more of an approach of a checklist held up against policies, but this becomes a minimum approach”*.

In other words, rather than the planners and policy makers shaping what the market delivered in terms of sustainable communities, in practice their approach changed to fit what the market and what the house-builders were prepared to deliver.

In practice, when asked to identify *exemplars* of sustainable communities or best practice many interview-respondents were unable to do so, and those who made reference to the English Partnerships ‘best practice’ sustainable community development at Upton in Northampton did so in less-than fulsome terms.

***(3)Local governance mechanisms were inadequate to deliver the planned extent of community growth***

A critique that emerged from among the officers and planners involved in implementing local and sub-regional policy highlights problems and confusions about suitable local governance, questioning the extent to which strategic plans and policies could ever be driven through with a sufficient confidence and clarity. The relative abundance of support agencies– WNDC, NNDC, MKSM Board, MK Partnership – still had only a limited impact on delivering the SCP’s objectives on the ground. One response reflected the views of most: *“No one was in charge of MKSM. Nobody was pushing it. It was not a brand. The growth agenda assumed that if you drew up a plan the private sector would deliver it”*.

At the same time, as a further indication of lack of administrative and policy coordination, the Regional Development Agencies and Regional Assemblies appeared remote from the initial phases of MKSM, and only began to bend their programmes towards MKSM at later dates – e.g. the first East Midlands Regional Economic Strategy to identify the MKSM area as any kind of policy priority was not published until 2006.

This sense of a lack of clarity encompassed other doubts about the commitment from central government: *“I am not sure the Government thought about how sustainable communities were going to be delivered. John Prescott thought you could put it in a plan and local authorities would just get on with it. No one looked at it as a whole. The quality of what was built was not of the quality envisaged .... Apart from a few pockets in MK, most of the developments were fairly standard.....”* The lack of development across most of the SUEs in the study area – only one SUE in Northamptonshire has any housing units built to date - meant that local authorities were forced to rethink what delivery of *sustainable* extensions might be in

contemporary market conditions: *“the term SUE was used in Northampton without really understanding it or knowing how to implement it.”*

The challenges were in turn reinforced by two distinct and possibly unrelated aspects of the wider political processes. The first relates to the effects felt locally from the inexorable change in government personnel that is a constant feature of the national political scene: *“Government was not always committed to the sustainable part of the growth agenda. [...] when you get a change of minister you get a different view [...]”*. The second relates to a growing anxiety to satisfy the elusive housing targets, regardless of other matters, so while *‘there was still a desire among senior civil servants for sustainable development [...] it began to go off the boil because housing numbers were not being met across the country.’*

A clear shift in political priority was identified towards increasing the number of new properties with little interest in quality: *“the idea was to facilitate growth not to aim for quality”*. Both these aspects of the wider political context served to weaken local certainty and the original focus on what local development could achieve. These pressures were merely exacerbated by uncertainties that stemmed from the financial crisis of 2008, and by the abandonment of Regional Strategic Spatial planning frameworks and local co-ordinating entities, following the change of Government in 2010.

### ***Conclusions***

In practice the implicit market utopianism of the Sustainable Communities Plan proved unable to deliver the promised “step change” in housing. The Growth Areas programme relied heavily on the expectation of extensive activity by the private

sector (particularly by the house building industry), but there was no clear evidence that any strategic assessment was made of the capacity or willingness of the house building industry to deliver comprehensive or sustainable growth. Instead new housing has remained an increasingly limited and squeezed resource (even as its quality has declined) and this has not only had a negative effect on the wider economy, but also left many people excluded from access to good housing. The market is dominated by market opportunists, while Government has focused on short-term measures rather than developing more fundamental strategies (see Field 2009).

Despite the issues raised in interview, and the policy critiques reflected in them, planners and other relevant officers identify the recession and subsequent economic slowdown as the main current obstacle to delivery, and take an overall positive view of their revised strategies. Basic assumptions about delivery happening principally by and through the private sector remain largely unchanged for the future period, in spite of the problems already encountered in turning strategic ambitions to create 'sustainable places' into successful development on the ground.

The housing slowdown has enabled local authorities in MKSM to lower their own projections, even if the revised targets and policies remain very aspirational. But the deepening recession has also increasingly meant that the requirements for affordable housing and other community benefits have been loosened substantially. The 'holistic' approach to sustainability (see, for example, the Egan Review, 2004) is now increasingly replaced with institutional support for the developer view that sustainability is a cost and if a development scheme is not sufficiently viable to deliver these elements, then they must be removed to minimise the risk that no development will take place at all.

Our research confirms that in spite of the extensive sustainability assessments and checklists developed to support the proposed implementation of key strategies, there has been no agreed understanding of how ‘sustainability’ would be achieved (in economic or environmental terms) or how ‘sustainable communities’ would be built in the context of the proposed substantial amounts of ‘housing growth’, nor what would finally be delivered, or by whom. In spite of extensive reports and policy statements on sustainability, there was no consistency about priorities, or clarity about who would be ultimately responsible for delivering such ambitions as a ‘fall-back’ position of last resort.

In retrospect, the *Sustainable Communities Plan* and its growth area approach may have been an inadequate response to the challenges faced by those living and working in the South East, because it was based on unsustainable assumptions about what the private house-building sector would deliver and because it failed to take account of the need to underpin substantial new development with the necessary social and economic infrastructure. It did, however, at least bring together and seek to incorporate a wider strategic vision for the sub-region around which argument was possible. It sought at a strategic level to link housing, economic development and employment, and set out (rhetorically at least) a commitment to sustainable development. Its weaknesses were ultimately rooted in the extent to which those involved in drawing up development strategies and those committed to implementing them in practice placed themselves in a secondary position dependent on the real agents of development, the national house-building companies. The evidence is that the housebuilders are prepared to be nudged in the direction of what they deem to be

in their individual best interest, but that this need not necessarily coincide or cohere with other economic development interests of the people who would be living in the future “sustainable communities” that the strategies promote.

David Lock has suggested that trying to harness market forces (particularly in managing development in the South East) is akin to “riding the tiger” (Lock 2009), but this does not mean that the attempt to do so should be abandoned. The policy initiatives – from localism to local enterprise partnerships, from the new presumption in favour of development and a renewed emphasis on viability as a planning criterion – that have emerged from the Coalition government suggest that rather different lessons have been learned. Instead of enabling more coherent strategic thinking and a more democratic framework for development, what is promised is a still greater reliance on the house building sector to identify what is needed and deliver it. Even as the evidence suggests that the market and the key players within it are unable or unwilling to deliver what is needed by those who live and work in the region, the government’s current incentives are effectively still focused on the same agents. It is like trying to befriend the tiger, rather than seeking to harness it, or considering whether and how a harness might actually help both beast and rider. If there is one clear message that comes out of any evaluation of the SCP’s attempts to re-shape housing delivery in the UK, it is that finding ways of doing so effectively is still desperately required.

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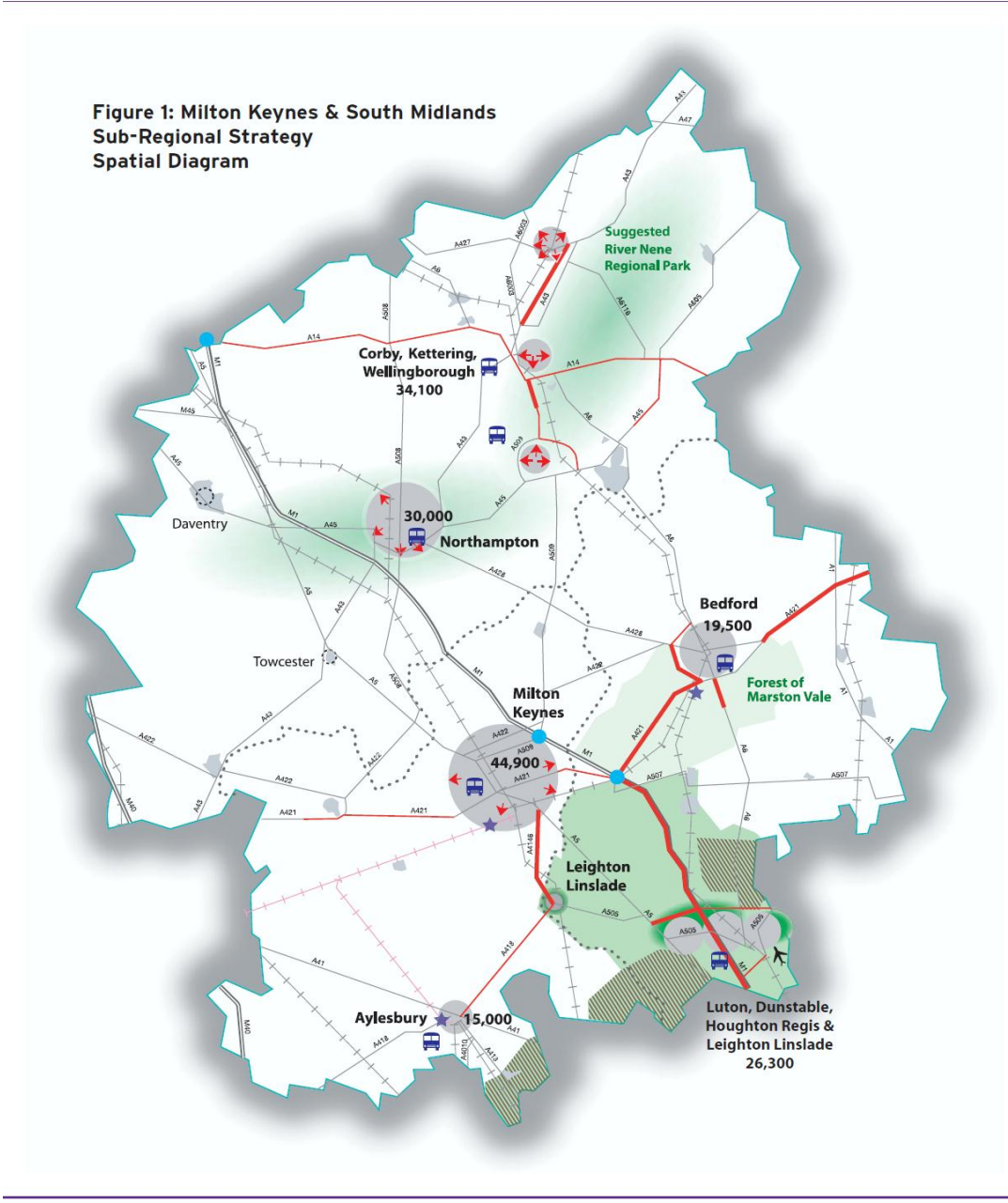
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**Figure 1: Strategic Framework and map of strategic housing development options across Milton Keynes South Midlands**

Source: Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2005a (Crown Copyright)

**North Northamptonshire :**

|                |        |
|----------------|--------|
| Corby          | 16,800 |
| Kettering      | 13,100 |
| Wellingborough | 12,800 |
| East Northants | 9,400  |

**West Northamptonshire :**

|                 |        |
|-----------------|--------|
| Northampton     | 30,000 |
| South Northants | 6,600  |
| Daventry        | 10,800 |

**Milton Keynes** 44,900

*Total* 144,400

**Figure 2 Housing targets for 2021.**

*[Source, MKSM, 2005, p34. Figures exclude smaller towns and rural settlements]*