

# Reforming England's Infrastructure Planning System from a Neoliberal Perspective

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**Abstract:** Since the establishment of the local amplitude planning marker rights system in 1947, the UK has continued to maintain economic growth through reforms to the planning system, institutional innovation and democratic reform experiments have accelerated since 2000, and the National Planning Policy Framework released in 2012 has guided the national planning system more streamlined and further decentralized. The UK's evolution as a practitioner and innovator in the field of planning systems reform, from land-use planning to spatial planning, and then from centralization to decentralization and devolution, reflects the UK government's institutional innovation in sustainable spatial development, but this democratic reform experiment has also generated a great deal of debate. Compared to other countries, this bottom-up The neo-liberal reforms in the field of planning triggered by this bottom-up planning system have raised concerns about the issue of urban synergy and national strategic ambiguity, but also affirm the loose economic dynamism that this approach to planning brings. This article will sort out and offer an overview of the England infrastructure planning system, analyze and discuss the challenges faced by the UK's current spatial planning system due to the neoliberal transformation, and how the various sectors collaborate, with a focus on the National Road Network.

**Keywords:** Neoliberal Reforms, England's Infrastructure, Road Infrastructure, Government Decentralization Reforms

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## 1. Introduction

The design and building process of the layout and constructed form of human settlements was coordinated by a cohesive leadership dating back to the Egyptian, Roman, and Greek civilizations, and this unified organization gave rise to what we now call planning activities [1]. While conventional planning efforts such as 'land use planning' and 'town planning' tried to develop society, they were procedural, technically sound, politically neutral activities that included just one public interest and were undemocratic [4]. The UK's evolution as a practitioner and innovator in the field of planning systems reform, from land-use planning to spatial planning, and then from centralization to decentralization and

devolution, reflects the UK government's institutional innovation in sustainable spatial development, but this democratic reform experiment has also generated a great deal of debate. This essay will offer an overview of the England infrastructure planning system, the challenges that the current spatial planning system faces because of neoliberal transformation, and how the various sectors collaborate, with a focus on the National Road Network.

The Town and Country Planning Act (1947), which established the statutory right of local governments to prepare plans [8], while laying the foundation of the UK planning system [19], clarified the government's right to develop the land. The Act defined the government's ability to develop land and provided the government with an absolute

edge in the market-society game [7], removing some of the barriers to post-war rebuilding. The Department for Transport began to work on plans to improve the national road network, and by the 1950s, the M1 began to be built as the first motorway project, but this national-level road planning was seen as an adjustment forced on the central government by local authorities not providing plans for the national road network [18]. By 1990, this traditional, somewhat unchanging approach, led by the public sector and ultimately decided by ministers after a public inquiry, often with wider strategic thinking, had resulted in project certainty [9], and Bruton and Nicholson in 1986 argued for the need for a coherent planning framework and widely criticized the weakness of policy direction at the national level, with transport being particularly prominent. Simultaneously, the CBI (Confederation of British industry) recognized in 2000 that the planning system had become a serious impediment to national competitiveness and advocated in 2003 that a national policy declaration was required. Since then, a series of reform initiatives have been launched with the aim of revitalizing the country's economy through infrastructure planning.

## 2. Deepening Neoliberal Reforms

### 2.1. A Constantly Adapting Planning System

The government began implementing PPGs (Planning Policy Guidance Notes) in 1988, a strategy that, while not related to infrastructure, provides clear guidance to various parties as a national planning policy and is an important practice for integrated planning at the national level, but this strategic policy has been echoed by several institutions, which have recommended the implementation of spatial planning. The PPG is simply an extension of standard land use planning theory, with each public sector aspect being more individual. Following that, in 1997, the government incorporated in its memorandum 'clear national planning policy direction', which included the publication of national pronouncements for significant projects.

With the enactment of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004, the more integrated Planning Policy Statement, with sustainability as a core objective, replaced the PPG into a national planning document and the Regional Spatial Strategy became legislation. The Labor Government enacted the Planning Act in 2008, introducing fundamental changes to planning policy and legislation, including the introduction of the Development Consent Order (DCO) and the establishment of infrastructure planning thresholds for Nationally Significant Infrastructure, which will support Nationally Significant Infrastructure Planning (NSIP) at the national level to accelerate delivery. The speed of review will be accelerated by establishing a separate Infrastructure Planning Committee (IPC) to independently progress NSIP decisions, but the change in questioning format by this body to speed up progress [5] may be intended to break the tension between the speed of infrastructure delivery and public

participation [6] and has been criticized. At the same time, this 'decentralized' and 'distributed' reform of the Labor Party could lead to politicization spread across other infrastructure sectors [15], and it was finally replaced by the Planning Inspectorate. Now, after a six-stage review, the agency will suggest a final decision to the ministers, ensuring that the minister for each infrastructure sector retains broad discretion. The current average time for applications is two years (Development Consent Order Fact Sheet, 2014), and in 2021, the Minister of Housing, Communities & Local Government, Christopher Pincher MP, launched a review of the NSIP with the expectation that several changes would be made by 2023 to speed up infrastructure delivery and improve the competitiveness of the UK economy.

For the transport aspects of energy, transport, water, and waste in the NSIP, Part III, Article 14 provides that developments related to motorways and main roads (above the threshold) are NSIP. It is worth noting that the LPA still has an important role to play in this process but is often an advisor rather than a decision-maker. Just recently, on 21 April 2022 the minister of the Department for Transport granted permission for the development of the M54 to M6 link road to relieve regional traffic congestion and, according to interviews with the Planning Inspectorate: they took full account of local views at the local level and the evidence gathered during the review process. Also for those roads that do not meet the criteria for NSIP, they will be accepted by the relevant local planning authority in accordance with the Town and Country Planning Act process and its national policy statement (NPS), and such planning often becomes a material consideration for regional level and local level needs [11].

The National Policy Statement (NPS) sets out the need for the development of the Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project (NSIP) and the government's policy for its implementation, of which the National Network Policy Statement, one of twelve, provides planning guidance to the promoters of the NSIP for the road and rail networks and provides the basis for decisions by the review bodies and the minister [13]. Essentially, the NPS is the development policy for the different national infrastructure sectors and the overall objectives of the government [9], and as a policy statement for the different sectors, its elements of strategic space are clearly explained in terms of the integration of the different sectors, their investment frameworks, and their decisions. For transport, the Department of Transport has introduced the ports and national network statements (both rail and road). The cross-sectoral cooperation is noteworthy, in the National Network Policy Statement, it is clearly stated that for the national road network there is a need to improve the integration between transport modes, including the consideration of docking links between ports and airports to provide better-integrated connections, which is also understood to some extent as multimodal transport. On 14 July 2021, the Government published its Transport Decarbonization Plan, committing to a review of this NPS covering road, rail and rail freight projects, with Grant

Shapps MP submitting a review in 2021 to ensure it remains fit for purpose.

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) was subsequently published in 2012, streamlining the previous Planning Policy Statements (PPS) and Planning Policy Guidance Notes (PPG). The NPPF guides local authorities on the guidelines they need to follow at both the plan-making and decision-making stages. The NPPF policy introduces the concept of sustainable development into the England planning system while supporting devolution and placing a strong emphasis on the duty to cooperate effectively, with Section 106e specifies that 'large scale infrastructure, including ports, airports, railways etc., will need to be developed in partnership with other relevant bodies where necessary', sets out guidance on cross-sectoral cooperation [10] and Chapters 9 and 16 of the revised NPPF provide local plan makers with provided guidance on how and when to integrate transport into plan-making, but failed to ensure that such integration was actually achieved at the local level, because the responsibility for interpreting and deciding on national policy falling on local authorities, which apparently led to different interpretations across England [20]. The NPPF was accompanied by the Localism Act 2011, which abolished regional spatial planning and shifted the focus to 'strategic priorities' in urban development, with the Local Development Framework (LDF) being a strategic priority for housing and employment, business development, transport facilities, health, policing and tackling climate change while dovetailing with the national policy framework, strategic priorities as mandatory elements to guide the preparation of Neighborhood Development Plans (NDPs).

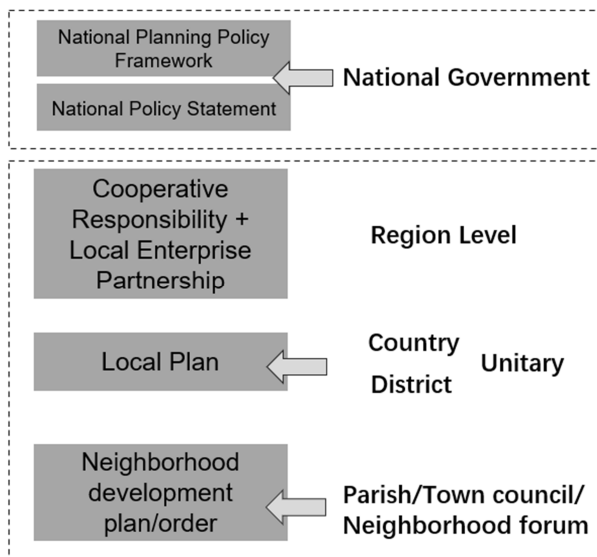


Figure 1. National Infrastructure Planning System.

In 2011, the coalition government, in an attempt to fill the national gap and improve the competitiveness of the UK economy, the Treasury published the first National Infrastructure Plan (NIP) to accelerate the delivery of some of the major projects in the NSIP, but the enactment received

multiple opinions that the focus of the NIP tended to be on coordinated public and private strategies and their focus on delivery, without too much focus on the delivery of local scale infrastructure used to support national infrastructure, resulting in a disconnect in infrastructure delivery, too much independent focus on individual infrastructure without consideration of this spatial interface and its coordination relationships was unsustainable [9] and was even considered by some to be merely a list of projects. As a result, the coalition government released the NIDP in 2013 and updated it in 2016 with a policy that clearly explains the key projects and plans until 2021. To support the development of the NIDP, the National Infrastructure Commission (NIC) and the Infrastructure and Projects Authority (IPA) were established in 2016, with the IPA focusing on project deliverability and assurance of funding sources [12] and the NIC serving as the long-term assessment body that will submit long-term assessment reports to the government to ensure long-cycle deliverability, thus the NIC's assessment has an important role in the NIDP. In 2021, the Treasury publishes the NIS, a policy that responds to the 2018 NIC assessment of infrastructure needs [14], which makes clear that the road network is ancient and in need of renewal, and makes clear the need to focus on the road system at the local spatial level and provide an additional £5 billion of funding to improve local roads, and makes clear the need to reduce policy uncertainty and use it to secure nearly half of the infrastructure. The development of strategic plans should be linked to their implementation [3], and transport operations should be integrated into the planning of road network infrastructure.

## 2.2. Problems Faced

Under the current rules of the planning system, roads for effective strategic planning are paved by voluntary partnerships between different local government bodies and between local government bodies and transport agencies, but are hampered by local rivalries, personal differences, and other tensions [16]. In the Greater Manchester area, in 2013 The A6 to Manchester Airport Relief Road project was submitted to Stockport Council (Planning and Highways committee), Cheshire East Council (Planning committee), Manchester City Council (Planning and Highways committee) and the three local planning authorities referred the planning application for this project to the minister of State for Communities and Local Government after careful consideration. After careful consideration, the minister decided not to hold a public inquiry into the scheme and confirmed the decision of the three local planning authorities to grant the scheme. The decision to grant planning permission was followed by the publication of notices of the decisions of the three local planning authorities. While this multi-layered spatial articulation can be seen in the planning process for the National road network, there are still many issues and the main current consensus on road infrastructure is that it is not sufficient to cope with the UK government in clean growth, future mobility and ageing communities [20].

Currently, the government still lacks a clear sustainability policy on the national road network and the latest plan published by the GMC will address the Trans-Pennine Tunnel Study with the Department for Transport, Highways England and Transport for the North (TFN, Sub-national institutions) partnership, which is exploring options to improve highway connectivity between the Greater Manchester and Sheffield City Regions [17], but the letter from TFN to Grant Shapps (Secretary of State for Transport) makes it clear that significant challenges have been faced and that ambitious plans for a twin bore road tunnel between Sheffield and Manchester should be abandoned, or a single bore tunnel (road or rail) should be studied. But the Mayor of Sheffield, Dan Jarvis, has said that "the government should take this seriously and work with us to do it, and there has to be a sustainable solution, there should never be a choice between road and rail, it should be all about necessity" [2], the conflict often caused by ambiguity in policy interpretation. Subsequently, the DFT's announcement to invest 1 billion in improving the existing road links between Sheffield and Manchester is a 'compromise'. Current strategic national ambiguities will continue to cause such challenges in the future.

### 3. Conclusion

In the future, with the advent of the digital infrastructure era, we could see the integration of infrastructure in smart cities, which are "Internet of Things" based city brains, often with a single platform that can fit multiple cross-sector infrastructures. infrastructure planning, the current planning system still faces a great deal of uncertainty. The UK planning reform process can be seen as an institutional arrangement for needs in a particular social context, reflecting the UK government's institutional innovation in response to a globalized economy and sustainable development, but it still needs to continue to be revised. But it is undeniable that the results of this "revolution in planning system reform" will take decades to evaluate.

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