

REGIONAL PLANNING FOR HOUSING AND THE ABOLITION OF
REGIONAL ASSEMBLIES: THE WEST MIDLANDS REGIONAL
ASSEMBLY: 1998-2010.

by

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Abstract

This thesis presents an original account of an important period for regional governance and strategic spatial planning in the UK from 1998 to 2010, and the reasons for its demise. The reasons and processes whereby regional assemblies, Leaders' Boards and regional spatial strategy were abolished are examined. The thesis addresses a gap in the literature through an innovative case study of the West Midlands Regional Assembly based on an insider perspective and informed by in depth interviews with managerial, professional and political actors who played different roles in regional governance and planning until its demise. The author's insider experience has allowed the distinctive methodological development of 'participant observation in retrospect'. Thirty interviews with professional and political actors from within and outside the Assembly were conducted between 2012 and 2014, allowing a high level of recall soon after abolition.

A mosaic of theory is used, based upon three new institutionalist theories anchored against principal actor groups: historical path dependency, rational choice theory and the population ecology model, together with elements of Complexity Theory. Critical Theory provides the foundational background perspective. Theory of private sector organisational demise is also developed to explore public sector demise.

The political rhetoric used to justify the abolition of assemblies and RSSs is challenged by in-depth analysis, over four periods, of the inter-relationships of the key actor groups and the Government's growing hegemony over its 'devolved' regional partnership project. At the heart of the demise lay flawed (mis)understandings and changing attitudes over the credibility of the regional project by regional and national political actors. The WMRA's foundation as a young organisation was embedded in the much older West Midlands Local Government

Association. This was seen by the WMRA as a strength but led to an increased vulnerability on both accounts as it proved to be unable to adapt to an increasingly hostile political environment. Despite the Assembly's political unanimity of support for its planning for housing policy stance against the Government, this failed to protect the organisation. Despite New Labour's regional reforms after 2009, the toxic organisational environment rendered the Assembly's survival under the Coalition Government impossible.

New Labour's approach to regional planning and governance presents a revised perspective on planning in England. Tensions between central and local actors, between the traditions underpinning the planning profession and practice, and economic growth agendas are emphasised. A further contribution is made by explaining aspects of the Regional Housing Board's relationship with Government housing agencies and regional planning. The theoretical approach to understanding public sector demise indicates its potential for development in situations where public sector organisations cease to exist. A view held by some political actors that regional working was a European Union attempt to weaken the British nation state was not given credence by those interviewed, nor did it explain the demise. Assemblies and their brief lived successors, Leader's Boards, represented an ideological tier of governance incompatible with Coalition Conservatives' 'small-state'. The thesis builds on existing Critical Theory and responds to Davies (2011) plea for further substantive accounts to validate and illustrate this literature.

The thesis's focus on governance in the spatial tier between Central and local Government remains relevant to current housing and planning agendas, to managing sub-regional housing markets, to address public health crises and the current Government's aspirations for 'levelling up the regions'.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my grandchildren
Auraya, Lyra, Isaac, and Elijah

and in memory of my parents

Irene E. Forrest 1926-2013

John R. Forrest 1918-2013

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Glossary

ADP	Approved Development Programme (of the Housing Corporation)
AWM	Advantage West Midlands (the Regional Development Agency for the West Midlands)
BiS	Department for Business, Innovation and Skills
CAA	Comprehensive Area Assessments
CiH	Chartered Institute of Housing
CURS	Centre for Urban and Regional Studies, University of Birmingham
CPRE	Campaign to Protect Rural England
CRC	City Regions Commission
DBERR	Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform
DBIS	Department for Business, Innovation and Skills
DC	District Council
DCLG	Department for Communities, and Local Government
Defra	Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
DTI	Department of Trade and Industry
DTLR	Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions
EiP	Examination in Public
ESCR	Economic and Social Research Council
EU	European Union
GLA	Greater London Authority
GLC	Greater London Council
GORs	Government Officers for the Regions (of England)
GOWM	Government Office for the West Midlands
HCA	Homes and Communities Agency
HMA	Housing Market Area (usually Sub-regional HMA)
HMT	Her Majesty's Treasury
HoC	House of Commons
HPD	Historical Path Determinism
IDeA	Improvement and Development Agency.

IILs Impact Investment Locations

JSIB Joint Strategy and Investment Board

LA Local Authority

LEPs Local Enterprise Partnerships

LIPs Local Investment Plans (drawn up between the HCA and local authorities)

MP Member of Parliament

NE North East (region of England)

NEC National Executive Committee (of the British Labour Party)

NHF National Housing Federation

NHPAU National Housing and Planning Advisory Unit

NIT New Institutionalism Theory

NLP Nathaniel Lichfield Partnership

NDPB Non-Departmental Public Body

NVivo A qualitative data analysis software package

ODPM Office of the Deputy Prime Minister

ONS Office of National Statistics

OSG Other Stakeholder Groups (Part of the WMRA Governance)

PASC Public Administration Select Committee

PDL Previously Developed Land

PM Prime Minister

PPS 3 Planning Policy Statement 3 Housing

RAWM Regional Action West Midlands (funded by AWM: role included nominating voluntary and third sector bodies to the WMRA's Other Stakeholders' Group)

RegenWM Regeneration West Midlands: Funded by AWM to promote regeneration excellence and improve skills

RCU Regional Coordination Unit

RDA Regional Development Agency

RES Regional Economic Strategy

RFA Regional Finding Advice

RHB Regional Housing Board

RHN Rural Housing Network (in the West Midlands)

RHS Regional Housing Strategy

RPB Regional Planning Body

RPE Regional Planning Executive (of the West Midlands Regional Assembly)

RPG Regional Planning Guidance

RPP Regional Planning Partnership (of the West Midlands Regional Assembly)

RPG 11 Regional Planning Guidance 11 (West Midlands non-statutory planning guidance)

RQ Research Question

RRAs Responsible Regional Authorities

RS Regional Strategy

RSS Regional Spatial Strategy

RTPI Royal Town Planning Institute

SERPLAN South East Regional Planning (The London and South East Regional Planning Conference)

SNR Review of Sub-National Economic Development and Regeneration

SoS Secretary of State

TSA Tenants Services Agency

TUC Trades Union Congress

U.K. United Kingdom

WMBC West Midlands Business Council (Part of the WMRA Governance)

WMCA West Midlands Combined Authority

WMLB West Midlands Leaders' Board

WMLGA West Midlands Local Government Association

WMRA West Midlands Regional Assembly

WM West Midlands (A region of England)

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

The Conservative Party's 2010 General Election 'Policy Green Papers' (Conservative Party, 2009a; 2010) included proposals to close regional assemblies and do away with regional spatial strategies (RSS) (Sandford, 2013). Nevertheless, the speed and thoroughness of the abolition that followed, without replacement sub national planning arrangements came as a surprise to many.

This thesis explores the experience of Labour's regional assembly governance and regional spatial planning in England, outside London, between 1998 and 2010 through a case study of the West Midlands Regional Assembly (WMRA). It examines the implications of the assemblies' abolition for the wider understanding of sub national spatial planning and potential future governance at this scale. Figure 1.1



Figure 1.1 The Regions of England (plus Wales and London)

Source: Swain, Marshall, and Baden, 2013a: p4 1

¹ Acknowledgements page xvii in Swain, Marshall, and Baden, 2013a states, ' Figures 1,1are reproduced acknowledging that they contain Ordnance Survey data c Crown Copyright and data base right 2012

presents the geographical location of the English regions plus Wales and London (both of which had separate legislation for their devolved governance arrangements).

Prior to the abolition of regional institutional and policy architecture the vacuum this created appeared inconsistent with assumptions that in the U.K. public policy has largely rested on interdependency and synergy (e.g. Barlow and Röbe, 1996; Moran, 2001; Rhodes, 1996; 1997; 2000; 2007) between levels of government: incremental policy adjustment and clear succession strategies were a normal and integral part of institutional changes. The post-war continuity of professional approaches to planning and the collaborative tradition that enabled land use planning to work in the U.K. seemed likely to ensure substantial, if modified, continuity.

Reflecting this expectation, many professional staff at the West Midlands Regional Assembly were surprised (as a senior Assembly planner ASPO1² recalled), some shocked, following the 2010 election, when the new Secretary of State, Eric Pickles undertook a wholesale dismantling of the regional architecture.

The regional governance arrangements that were dismantled in 2010 were largely associated with John Prescott, then Deputy Prime Minister and Secretary of State for Environment, Transport and the Regions. Prescott was a longstanding advocate for regional devolution in England to complement the New Labour constitutional reforms to devolved government in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and London.

However, two senior New Labour Cabinet members Raynsford (2016) and Quinn

² See Appendix 1.1 for anonymised interviewee roles and reference codes used throughout the thesis. 30 primary interviews were undertaken with a range of stakeholders to inform this study. Appendix 1.1 explains the coding system used to ensure anonymity of the interviewees. The year of the interview is also given in Appendix 1.1.

(2010) referred to the lack of support within the New Labour cabinet³ though it had been in the 1997 New Labour manifesto (Labour Party, 1997).

With Regional Chambers established in 1998 to provide some scrutiny of the newly created Regional Development Agencies and the development of regional planning tensions soon arose between the Treasury's focus on economic growth and competitiveness and the wider scope of (and slowness to prepare) regional spatial strategy. Although ODPM found a way to meet the Treasury's antipathy towards regional planning, through the production of Planning Policy Statement 3 on Housing , and specifically ensuring adequate new residential land supply; but once the 2004 referendum on a regional assembly for the north east of England had been rejected, no further momentum for democratic devolution was credible nor attempted. John Prescott's role in the New Labour Government subsequently changed and this loss of regionalism's champion saw little further development other than that recommended by Kate Barker (2004) and agreed by the Treasury⁴.

The abolition of the assemblies by the Labour Government in March 2010 had not involved, the removal of any strategic planning function between authorities: such a removal without some credible replacement was not widely foreseen. Why was it such a surprise and why had the end not been foreseen earlier and steps taken to address this?⁵

Prior to the General Election the professional expectation both in the Assembly Secretariat and the Regional Development Agency (RDA), Advantage West

³ Discussed further at Section 5.3.

⁴ These issues are discussed further at Section 5.3.

⁵ Discussed further at Section 9.6 and Sub-section 11.4.1.

Midlands was that strategic spatial and economic development policy making would continue; just the name on the door might change (AWM1; ASSM1; ASPO2). This mind set could not have been more wrong.

1.1 The Coalition Government and the Abolition of the English Regions: Inter-Party Ideological and Policy Compatibility?

Some, including the Labour Party senior leadership (Stuart, 2011) may have thought that the ideological differences assumed to exist between the Conservative and Liberal Democratic Parties would have mollified the radical nature of the Coalition government and therefore did not anticipate the severity of the programme of regional institutional abolition that was enacted after the Coalition Government was formed in 2010. However, Lee (2011; p6) refers to the formation of the Cameron-Clegg Government in May 2010 as an 'ideological coalition of the willing' and not just a simple pragmatic response to the outcome of the General Election arithmetic. Lee also plays down other possible reasons for the ease with which the Coalition Government was formed, good personal chemistry between the party leaders or their privileged social, and educational background. Ideologically the Liberal Democrats had moved steadily away from Labour as a natural ally to a position much closer to the Conservatives. This occurred 'long before Clegg was elected Liberal Democratic leader in December 2007' (Stuart, 2011; p 42). The more authoritarian of Labour's policies on civil liberties and the centralisation of government at the expense of localism plus the Iraq War, all added to the Liberal Democrats increasing their distance from New Labour (Stuart, 2011). These changes, largely coming through the rising new generation of Liberal Democratic leadership, made the prospects of political alliance between the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives more likely than the Labour leadership realised (Stuart, 2011).

David Cameron defined himself as a 'liberal Conservative' with ideas of 'communal obligations and institutions' (Lee, 2011; p7) and a shared common ground between Liberal Democracy and liberal Conservatism which *inter alia* included a philosophical approval of localism. According to Lee (2011) under Cameron's Leadership the Conservative Party moved into the centre ground of British politics such that Cameron was able to say just before the General Election that there was barely any distinction between Conservatives and Liberal democrats on several issues. In forming the Coalition, Norton (2011) summarised the core priorities for the Conservatives as economic, and deficit reduction, though cutting back public expenditure, included removing non-departmental government bodies. The main objective for the Liberal Democrats was constitutional reform, not least proportional representation in parliamentary elections.

Both the common ground and some differences in respect of regional matters can be seen in the two Parties' 2010 manifestos and associated policy papers. The Conservative Party's intentions to radically change the basis on which planning would be undertaken were published in a Policy Green Paper on Housing, '*Strong Foundations: Building Homes*' and Communities (No.10) (Conservative Party, 2009b), and another on planning, '*Open Source Planning Green Paper*' (No.14) (Conservative Party, 2010). Through these the Conservatives declared their intention to replace the national system of evidenced based policy (i.e. Government issued national population projections cascaded down the tiers of regions and local authorities into new housing requirements) with one using local financial incentives to encourage the amount of new housebuilding each local authority wanted. Thus all national and regional housing targets would be abolished along with the regional planning system.

The Liberal Democrats (Burgess, et al., 2010; p4) had noted just prior to the General Election that they too shared the philosophy of economic incentives and locally determined policy for new housing building. The corollary to this was that the Liberal Democrats would abolish regional house-building targets consistent with their antipathy to supra-local planning mechanisms. Their 2010 General Election manifesto claimed they were,

‘the only party which believes in radical political reform to reinvent the way our country is run and put power back where it belongs: into the hands of people. We want to see a fair and open political system, with power devolved to all the nations, communities, neighbourhoods and peoples of Britain’
(Liberal Democrat Manifesto, 2010 p87).

However, the Liberal Democrat manifesto did not explicitly refer to regional assemblies or the Leaders’ Boards.

Broadly similar to the Conservative’s, the Liberal Democrats were intent on ‘local people’ deciding what should be done in their area and would, ‘...radically decentralise politics so that local people have the powers and the funding to deliver what they want for their communities; (Liberal Democrat Manifesto, 2010; p89). As part of this Government Offices for the Regions would be scrapped as would the posts of regional ministers.

However, the Liberal Democrats were not as comprehensive as the Conservatives in seeking to abolish the regional tier and had some constructive proposals for the regional tier including the development of local and regional banks through Local Enterprise Funds, and Regional Stock Exchanges, whose role would be to encourage local investment in businesses their locality (Liberal Democrat Manifesto,

2010). It was the stated intention of the Liberal Democrats that regional development agencies should continue where they had 'strong local support' (Liberal Democrat Manifesto, 2010; p26) and be reformed to concentrate on economic development. After some uncertainty during the opening months of the Coalition Government about the ability of the West Midlands RDA to survive (AWM1) the Government decided to abolish all RDAs in the English Regions became clear.

As for the Liberal Democrat view of regional assemblies, a councillor (APGLibDem), well connected with the national party, and involved in the WMRA governance provided an insight into the Party's position which echoed the Liberal Democrat policy approved by their Conference in 2000. At that time, their policy was summed up as being:

'Liberal Democrats support directly elected regional assemblies. We wish to pull all (regional) quangos together under the umbrella of regional assemblies. We would simplify the current mess of regional administration, to make it far more transparent, approachable and accountable to ordinary people.'(CFER, 2010).

According to APGLibDem's account, while substantially dissatisfied with the way WMRA was set up and aspects of how it worked, the national Liberal Democratic view was nonetheless that there should be not only regional governance but regional government with directly elected members. This would be a genuine devolution and not an arm of central government. Explaining why the Liberal Democrats in the West Midlands stayed with the WMRA, APGLibDem said,

' we, in the end, decided it was pointless, but we stayed with it (the Assembly) because we thought that the principle was important and that maybe we would get more if we got it (an elected assembly)'.

Although the 2010 Liberal Democrat manifesto said nothing about regional assemblies, it is possible APGLibDem's account is not at variance with the Liberal Democrat's position going into the General Election. APGLibDem accounted for the abolition of the assemblies as being the result of Conservative political dogma.

Although the Conservative and Liberal Democratic Parties were not identical on all points of their manifestos' proposals, there were philosophical principles that they held in common: local determination of planning for housing and the removal of regional governance structures. These shared principles allowed a mutually of ideas and intent which was rapidly set down in agreed programme of institutional closures to be enacted swiftly once in power.

1.2 The Coalition Government's Stated reasons for Abolishing Regional Assemblies

The reasons given by the Coalition Government for the abolition of the regional assemblies⁶, (albeit they no longer existed in that form⁷), lacked credibility and rationality to many of those involved in regional working, especially in strategic planning. The Government argued (DCLG, et al., 2010; Pickles, 2010a; Pickles, 2010b) that regional spatial strategies had failed to deliver sufficient housing.⁸ The

⁶ See Section 4.4 for a discussion on why the London Spatial Development Plan was not abolished at the same time and therefore not included in the research design.

⁷ The New Labour Government had abolished the regional assemblies at the end of March 2010, replacing them with Leaders' Boards made up of Local Authority Leaders from their regions. It was these Leaders' Boards that the Coalition Government abolished along with other regional bodies e.g. RDAs and Government Offices for the Regions.

⁸ For a fuller presentation see Appendix 10.1. Coalition Conservative reasons for abolition of Regional Spatial Strategies.

antagonistic tone towards regional planning was captured by Kris Hopkins MP, Minister for Housing's, statement, 'Top-down regional strategies and eco-towns failed hardworking families who aspired to own their own home and built nothing but resentment.' (Public Sector Executive, 2013). The Conservative Party presentation of regional spatial strategies (RSS) as top-down 'tractor style' Soviet planning tools (DCLG, et al., 2010; Public Law Today, 2010), belied both the evidenced need for new housing to be delivered, and the role of local communities in generating and meeting that need. From a professional view regional planners regarded the Government's arguments as unfounded, moving away from strategic evidence based policy. Some of the leading Conservatives in charge of the WMRA as Regional Planning Body (RPB), felt the abolition of newly established regional working under the RDAs was unnecessary.

Throughout the period from 2003 to 2010, I was an officer of the West Midlands Regional Assembly (WMRA) responsible for housing matters, the Regional Housing Strategy (WMRA, 2005), and involved in housing aspects of the Regional Spatial Strategy 2 Revision Preferred Option (WMRA, 2007). The implications of my positioning for the research are discussed in Chapter 4⁹. For this introduction I record that in the run-up to the May 2010 Election, the staff of the former West Midlands Regional Assembly, (by then re-designated as the West Midlands Leaders' Board), felt that some form of regional working would continue.

During the life of the WMRA, the Secretariat believed it had the confidence and respect of its, mainly Conservative, governance members. It hoped they would be

⁹ See Sections 4.5 -4.9

advocates on its behalf with their national Party if the need arose. The unanimity of the West Midlands Strategic Planning Authorities (County Councils and Unitaries) in support of the earlier Regional Planning Guidance 11 (DETR, 1998) was publicly maintained in the submission of the RSS Revision (WMRA, 2007) through to the Examination in Public (EiP) in 2009. There were good reasons, however, to doubt whether this unanimity was genuine and whether some steps were taken to undermine the whole process of Regional Planning in the event of a Conservative Government coming into office. Some Conservative members welcomed the Coalition Government's Localism doctrine (APGovC4) believing that new housing development would be genuinely under local control. However, this quickly drifted from scepticism to profound frustration (APGovC4). The national need for new housing had not gone away, was a priority of the new government, and local authorities now lacked a regional body to 'blame' for the pressures to accept higher new housing numbers.

Given the disbelief, before 2010 about the abolition of regional working why was regional planning and the wider regional policy architecture completely abolished? Criticisms of regional planning seemed unfounded and the needs of the population for new housing, as well as economic growth, challenged the rationale for abolition without replacement. Given the unconvincing stance of the Coalition Government, what other explanations are there for the demise of the regional assemblies? Did the political membership of an Assembly contribute instrumentally to its demise?

The literature on planning, reviewed later in this thesis, failed to anticipate or account for recent changes or provide satisfactory answers to these questions. Standard accounts of planning emphasise continuities and the resilience of organisational

arrangements, policy and practice and insufficiently identified the weaknesses and challenges they faced.

1.3 Continuity and Rupture in English post-war urban planning and the Abolition of Regional Strategic Planning

It is important to explain why the changes brought in by the Coalition Government in 2010 caused such surprise to the professional planners involved in strategic spatial planning. These changes represented the most significant rupture in the Post War period in the political philosophical basis and functioning of the planning system.

Since the first Thatcher Government in 1979, the rationale for the planning system had come under close and hostile scrutiny. The planning system was criticised as being a hindrance to economic growth, arguably the most powerful of the charges made against it. However the dismantling of the planning system in the metropolitan counties which took place in the mid-1980s was more due to a clash of ideologies over economic liberalism and the London Mayor Ken Livingstone's attempts to support London's industrial base and fund minority and other community organisations (Gordon and Travers, 2010).

The Thatcher Government's irritation had grown when the Greater London Council put up, 'banners announcing London's unemployment totals that were prominently displayed opposite parliament' (Gordon and Travers, 2010; p4). The Government responded,

'by abolishing the GLC (Greater London Council) – together with its counterparts in other English metropolises, though it was the political activism of the GLC that provoked their culling.'(Gordon and Travers, 2010; p4).

Notwithstanding the abolition of Metropolitan County Councils, the Metropolitan Districts became unitary authorities, responsible for strategic planning, and some developed means of collaboration and operating which meant strategic planning continued to evolve. There was a change in organisational responsibility but in most metropolitan areas and regions continuity in the practice and development of strategic planning policy. From the author's personal recollection, as a planner in West Yorkshire during the early 1980's, the Metropolitan Districts formed inter-authority strategic policy based groups, for example to represent their interests to the European Union (The Heavy Woollen District Authorities in the former West Yorkshire Metropolitan County Council area) and devised strengthened strategic policy elements of their Unitary Development Plans (e.g. Wakefield Metropolitan District Council's strategic policy approach to future residential land release). In non-metropolitan authority areas the County Councils continued with their structure plan making function. In the West Midlands region (the conurbation including Coventry and the surrounding County Councils (see Figure 1.1) continuity in strategic planning was evidenced by the cooperation of local authorities through the West Midlands Regional Planning Conference, referred to in Section 2.5 in this thesis.

However in stark contrast to the earlier period, from May 2010, the Coalition Government's abolition of the regional spatial strategies (RSSs) involved an unprecedented break in continuity in the post war English planning system. This was achieved in two ways. First was the abolition of English regional governance, except in London (see Section 4.4), which also removed without replacement or other transitional arrangements, the formal strategic tier of spatial planning. Thus there was no organisational body charges with responsibility and that had capacity to conduct comprehensive and coherent inter-authority strategic spatial planning. Apart

from a Duty to Cooperate (in the Localism Act, 2011), between district and unitary planning authorities, policy coordination across local authority areas was left to individual authorities to negotiate if they saw fit: and this could be regardless of economic geography or an evidence based sub-regional housing market area.

This 'localism' philosophy also supplanted the welfare underpinnings of what remained of the post war planning system with one based upon market forces and financial incentives to stimulate new housing development. Whilst the population projection based system operated by the Office for National Statistics with the Department of Communities and Local Government had not been without its faults, the principle of the planning system using evidence to steer the direction of the private sector and others to meet population needs over time had not been dismantled previously, even when planning had come under serious unsympathetic scrutiny. The new approach was wrapped in the Coalition Government's ideas of 'localism', though the Localism Bill was not preceded by a White Paper (Mountfield, 2012) and dismantling government involvement in communities by rolling back the state, replacing it with the 'small state' and encouraging a voluntaristic participation in new neighbourhood planning should communities wish to engage in this manner.

Together these disruptive changes wrought a 'hiatus' in the operation of the planning system, as one senior local authority planner put it (LAP1). They were also a disappointment. As a leading West Midlands councillor (APGovC4)⁸ explained some District Conservative politicians hoped the new planning system (DCLG, 2012) would

allow them the freedom to choose their own housing policy numbers but soon found this to be illusory¹⁰.

1.4 The Research Questions

These considerations generated the primary research question and three subsidiary questions (Figure 1.2).

Fig 1.2: West Midlands Regional Assembly Case Study Main and Subsidiary Research Questions

1. 'What explains the demise of the New Labour English Regional Assemblies, and how this came about?'

Subsidiary Questions

2. Why was Regional Planning as the English Strategic Spatial Planning of the time (outside of London and the devolved nations), abolished?

3. What was the role played by planning for housing?

4. What else led to the ending of the West Midlands Regional

Other issues arise, including why the regional project changed so radically while Labour was in office, what was the nature of regional assemblies as 'institutions' and who (if anyone) 'owned' them. The evidence presented throughout this thesis indicates that the Coalition Government's explanation for the abolition of regional governance and planning was deficient. It also indicates that explanations must go beyond references to party politics and traditional changes in the political complexion of government. This thesis does not address the retention of strategic planning in

¹⁰ See Table 7.4.

other parts of the United Kingdom, nor in London. A discussion of why London was not included in the research is presented in Section 4.4.

Acknowledging that other public sector bodies, including regional development agencies and the Government's own Regional Offices met their demise after 2010, it was possible that the answer to the primary question lay beyond regional 'planning for housing' issues. Given the strategic position of the WMRA in the history of the development of the RSS, nationally, my 'participant observation in retrospect' method, placed me in a privileged position to rigorously examine the processes that led to abolition. I had good access to Assembly records, Secretariat staff, governance members and officers, both in regional and national bodies, and this facilitated a case study research design as the best way to pursue these research questions.

In conducting this research, I sought to provide a different and in-depth perspective on a topic that is sparsely covered in the planning literature. Being situated in the WMRA Secretariat allowed me to present a balanced and well-informed account through a rigorous analysis of a rich evidence base not in the public arena. This challenges shallow and simplistic judgements that purport to justify the abolition of regional planning and its organisational architecture and the complexity of the unresolved issues about the events leading to the demise.

The reason for seeking to understand better why this demise occurred lies in changing policy on regional and sub regional issues and the apparent intractability of the problem of the spatial-scalar fix (Pearce and Ayres, 2012; interviewee CV3) for the governance of sub national territory and associated policy domains. In 2010 the English strategic planning system was in a hiatus (LAP1), leaving it unstable and in

need of further change. Similarly change was anticipated for the newly created business led Local Enterprise Partnerships (DBIS, 2010), and the Duty to Co-operate legislation (Localism Act, 2011) urged upon Government by the RTPPI (2010) to salvage some form of inter-local authority relationship over shared planning issues, not least housing supply. Notwithstanding the abolition of the regional planning apparatus neither the dynamics of regional economic geography nor sub regional housing markets were 'abolished', only the means, however flawed, for addressing these. The notion that Government was fashioned as 'small state', with power over land use localised into neighbourhood plans would not survive long as these dynamics worked into the political issues of the future.

Four years later the Scottish referendum result created the opportunity for the English cities to claim greater devolution of power (albeit on Treasury terms), revitalising the city-regional agenda (HoC, 2015; Public Sector Executive, 2015).

This produced various Combined Authority arrangements (e.g. HMT and WMCA, 2015) and again raised questions about strategic policy goals and who sets them. This included strategic planning, powers and budgets, questions of accountability and governance, inter-authority relations, involvement in new structures, questions about those communities outside, new arrangements and the role of the Treasury.

The thesis focuses on the perceptions and behaviours of key actors in the WMRA Secretariat, specifically the senior managers and professional planners, the Assembly's local authority governance nominees, the Civil Service, especially Government Office for the West Midlands (GOWM and ODPM/DCLG) and national political actors. The components of the Assembly's external political environment are crucial to understanding how each actor group behaved in relation to each other and

the core regional spatial strategy policy task. These are traced over time and linked to specific theories related to explanations for each group's primary and sometime covert stance in relation to the Assembly. Seeing the changes in stance over time in response to the pressures from the external political environment has suggested four eras covering Labour's period in office and this has been used in framing evidence and analysis.

1.5 Structure of the Thesis

Chapter 2 reviews the English regional and regional planning literature relevant to the research questions, including some contributions published since the period of the study. Allmendinger's (2011) review of planning under New Labour informed the shaping of this study but there is a significant gap in the literature that fails to explore why the abolition of regional planning in 2010 took the form that it did and left a vacuum behind. It is this gap in the literature that is addressed in this thesis. Chapter 3 explains the creation of a mosaic of theories, drawn mainly from New Institutional Theories as explained by Peters (2012) but initially stimulated by Allmendinger (2011). The mosaic of theories, used to explore the New Labour regional project over time, has contributed substantially to the research questions and analysis.

Chapter 4 presents the author's methodological approach, taking the role of 'participant observer in retrospect' which underpinned thirty interviews with professional and political actors inside and outside West Midlands region. Chapter 5 sets out the historical sequence of the main events. This provides the context for the interview evidence organised by actor groups. Chapter 6 covers the evidence from the Assembly Secretariat; Chapter 7 the Assembly Conservative Governance;

Chapter 8 the agencies and regional bodies; and Chapter 9 that of a national political actor, and actors from the regional and national Civil Service. Chapter 10 draws this evidence together by actor groups, by era and, reflects on its relation to theory.

Chapter 11 summarises the research findings, draws broader conclusions on implications for planning, the contribution to knowledge, and implications for future for research.

A mosaic of theories in part incorporating elements of insights from the failure of private sector organisations has been taken further by adapting this to explain the demise of the Assembly as a public sector body. Drawing on the concept of the use of hegemonic power from Critical Theory (Davies, 2011) the abolition story leaves central government with fundamental issues to be addressed and also suggests that Critical Theory may have run out of explanatory power, at least to reveal how central governance operated in the New Labour period. However, abolition and centralising control do not remove the underlying regional dynamics of housing needs and markets, which continue to pose challenges for government.

If policies wax and wane over time, in a pendulum cycle, 2010 marked an extreme point with the almost total abolition for English regional devolution. At the time of writing the pendulum appears to be moving back in a spatially fragmented manner with Combined Authorities, new structures and individually negotiated devolved responsibilities. Beneath these developments the issue of whether government control is devolved, and to whom, remains. Recent developments provide an opportunity for future research using the theoretical approach developed for this study. Such research would need to test new forms of sub national governance to see if they have constitutional integrity and capacity to survive in an ideologically unstable and changing political environment. How government addresses regional

issues and economic imbalance is framing a national political agenda for the Labour Party (2019) and the Johnson Government of 2019 (Blagden, J, 2020; Talbot et al., 2020).

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This Chapter reviews published literature that relates to the research questions presented in Figure 1.2, addressed in this thesis and explanations for the way that regionalism and regional planning developed in England.

A systematic literature search made use of the University of Birmingham e-library, Google Scholar, and other online search engines. The University library was searched regularly electronically for peer reviewed articles, and books. The few articles not available electronically at the University Library were sourced via Google and Google Scholar. Appendix 2.1 gives the search terms used over the course of the research. Geographically the primary areas of search were England, the English regions, and the West Midlands Region. The timeframe for the literature review covered was two periods, 1998 to 2010, New Labour's time in office (see Table 2.2), and post -2010 for reflections and insider accounts of New Labour and perspectives on the future of strategic and regional planning. An online search of 'grey literature' publications was regularly undertaken from Think Tanks, planning policy lobby groups and academic institutions. Examples are given in Appendix 2.1.

Appendix 2.2 presents my recollection of events during my time as a member of the WMRA Secretariat from 2003 to 2010. The advantage of doing this systematically is set out in Chapter 4. An additional source of material examined to widen my

contextual understanding was the WMRA press archive, now held by the University of Birmingham.¹¹

2.2 English Regionalism

Bradbury and Mawson (1997) provide a 'bookend' for the start of the New Labour era and identify the elements that shaped New Labour's regional proposals at the 1997 general election, and the loose ends, constitutionally and practically, which would still need to be resolved if this constitutional experiment was to succeed. The extent to which the implications of these 'loose ends' (e.g. the isolation of district shires in the regionalisation process, and what would happen if Region and Government disagreed) were foreseeable and proved to be accurate pointers to where New Labour's regional policy floundered.

New Labour began its regional project with the establishment of RDAs and associated Regional Chambers in the Regional Development Agencies Act 1998. In 2002 the Government published its White Paper '*Your Region, Your Choice*' (DTLR, 2002) setting out proposals for elected regional assemblies to be subject to referenda in each English region outside London. In the West Midlands, the Regional Chamber and the West Midlands Constitutional Convention campaigned for the creation of an elected Assembly. This was supported by various research commissions to develop ideas for the form this might take in the West Midlands including Ayres and Pearce (2002a), and Jeffery and Reilly (2002), who drafted the

¹¹ The WMRA archive including Press and RSS Phase 2 Revision Examination in Public documentation is held by Urban and Regional Planning in the School of Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences, at the University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham B15 2TT, United Kingdom.

joint WMRA's and West Midlands Constitutional Convention's supportive response to the White Paper.

2.3 New Labour and Planning.

Allmendinger's (2011) early definitive account of New Labour's planning legacy came swiftly after the end of the New Labour era and acts as the, other significant 'bookend' to that era. This account provided a near-past description and analysis of New Labour's approach to planning in England and included housing supply issues. The discussion is mainly of planning at local authority level, with some reference to Regional Spatial Strategy but very little on Regional Planning Bodies, (the Regional Assemblies). Whilst not concentrating on Regional Planning, Allmendinger (2011) provided a detailed account of political development and evolving, conflicting, priorities, and legislative – regulatory change. This discussion unravelled a complex account in which only some issues had a bearing on the research questions in this thesis. Allmendinger's work was helpful in framing the research including the use of 'eras' within the New Labour period in Government, the acceptance of neo-liberal dominance in the globalised world economy as a backdrop to events, and the role of the Treasury in contesting with ODPM the place of planning in achieving economic and housing growth.

The identification of different periods in New Labour's view of the usefulness or otherwise of planning in delivering its own agenda offered a structuring device. The view taken depends on the particular period, the normative stance and the nature of the issue. Table 2.1 presents four periods of Planning under New Labour associated with several non-ideological discourses and 'attitudes towards planning'

(Allmendinger, 2011; p32) against which the main characteristics and activities of Government can be plotted.

Table 2.1 Planning under new Labour 1997-2010: Four Periods

Source: Adapted from Allmendinger 2010 pp20-37

When New Labour?	Characteristics and events
1995-2000 Continuity and devolution	Planning as a pragmatic means to a political and policy end goal
2002-2004 Market reorientation, speed and delivery	Prevalent in this and other periods: - planning should not inhibit growth and competitiveness in a globalised economy. Unresolved tension between old 'command and control' role of restricting development (to protect and enhance the environment) and a positive role to enhance competitiveness.
2004-2007 Sustainable communities	Planning about political consolidation delivering a range of Government objectives under the concept of new 'spatial planning' and the 'management of change', attempting to reconcile objectives.
2007- 2010 delivery, refocus, scaling back	Social inclusion and localism involving public involvement and participation at odds with the target based culture which placed authorities under pressure Planning as networked governance, managing multiple scales of governance and organisational involvement. Partnerships viewed as 'governance glue' which planning skills facilitated and which still had a statutory core to enable this, but Government had planning on a short reign if it should fail to deliver.

These competing discourses have been allocated to the period in which they appeared with greatest emphasis, but they coexisted and rose and fell in emphasis across periods. The background conviction of New Labour was that globalisation of the international economy was the essential (neo-liberal) economic paradigm to which political decisions had to be subordinate. The Treasury conviction was that policy had to support growth and competitiveness but there was a persistent view that planning was too slow, hindering this macro-economic objective. It seems conflicts that Government on this began much earlier than many in the assemblies

realised and this had major impacts on the regional project before the General Election of 2010 (Allmendinger, 2011).

The rationale for creating new regional structures and establishing their competing discourses whilst new statutory processes were being introduced needs to be understood. Within these ‘bookends’ there is a range of literature charting the course of regional planning and discussion of regionalism. These are categorised broadly in Table 2.2, although some like Sandford (2005) have a chapter on theoretical analysis of regionalism in relation to network governance, or Healey (2006), who takes an Institutionalist view of planning.

Table 2.2 The Course of English Regionalism and Regional Planning in Selected Literature from 2000 to 2008. Source: Author’s arrangement of literature.

On Regionalism	Tomaney and Mawson(2002)	Hammond(2002) in Rydin and Thornley	Sandford (2005)	Hardill et al. (2006)
	Deacon (2008)	Bradbury(2008)		
On Planning	Deegan (2002)	Marshall. Glasson andHeadicar (2002)	Dimitriou, and Thompson (2007)	Johnson, and Whitehead (2004)
	Houghton, and Counsell (2004)	Tewdwr-Jones, and Allmendinger, (2006)	Glasson, and Marshall, (2007)	
On Planning and Housing	Imrie and Raco,(2004)	Baker,and Wong,(2006)	Gallent, and Tewdwr-Jones,(2007)	
On Planning and Governance, Theoretical Discussion	Vigar, Healey, Hull, and Davoudi, (2000)	Newman,(2001)	Healey(2006)	

Between Bradbury and Mawson (1997) and Allmendinger (2011) the literature, includes regionally specific accounts and summaries of the regional and planning story up to the point of their publication but unlike Allmendinger (2011), they lack the

benefit of a dénouement. Thus, each of these references has its limitations, in time, but also in choice of scope, and the degree of optimism or reservation each held over outcomes for the regional project. Some authors also have a clear normative stance with regard to new forms of partnership and devolved governance (e.g. Healey, 2006).

Following abolition, the first published reflections on regional planning were by two planning authors. Bowie's (2010) book on planning and housing in Greater London described in detail the development of policy and the parts played by key actors but did not attempt a theoretical analysis using political science governance models. In contrast the second (Allmendinger, 2011) had a detailed theoretical analysis drawing heavily on new institutionalism and discourse theories. However, while this made reference to Regional Planning Bodies the processes at work within these were not closely examined and nothing specific was written about the West Midlands. This left open the opportunity to bring the story and theoretical understanding up to date, albeit with the benefit of hindsight and research for this thesis which took place after 2011.

Morphet and Pemberton (2013; p384) acknowledge 'considerable unease' at the speed with which the regional structures including planning were dismantled. In contrast, Baker and Wong (2013; p93) provided their mostly 'gloomy analysis' in a retrospective summary appraisal of the shortcomings of Labour's RSS system. This critique did not include the West Midlands, focusing mainly on the North West. They appeared to decry a consensus based approach, labelling the RSS process as weak, struggling to agree policy priorities, ending up with inoffensive 'bland 'motherhood and apple pie' statements.' (Baker and Wong, 2013; p92).

Very little is said about regional housing boards in a literature that largely confines itself to a traditional professional planning perspective. Bowie (2010) discussed the importance of affordable housing supply and negotiations in London but as a function of the planning process. The Mayor of London did not receive powers to be the Strategic Housing Authority (in his own office) until April 2008 and this was a consolidation of strategic regional power running counter to the direction of travel elsewhere in England.

Swain, et al. (2013) reviewed the course of planning through the New Labour period and assessed the lessons for the future of regional or sub-regional strategic planning. In this largely descriptive publication, they argue that, '...the issues that regional planning were intended to tackle have not gone away with the dismantling of the previous system.' (Swain, et al., 2013; p7). This view is supported by this thesis. Baden (2013) confirmed that the RSS was expected to deliver its own functions, national policies, particularly economic productivity and wrote,

'The Treasury wanted regional planning to assist economic growth and delivery of the Regional Economic Strategies (RESs) particularly through the provision of housing to support labour mobility....' (2013, p113).

Pritchard (2013), driven by this economic theme, focused on housing in the East Midlands and leaves untouched the issues and tensions facing the West Midlands. What was not addressed is the different magnitude and complexity of political contestation in the West Midlands and the South East where Government's insistence on higher housing numbers exceeded what some Conservative councils were willing to accept.

Swain, et al.(2013) concluded some form of sub-national strategic spatial planning should be reintroduced. These conclusions refer to both short and longer term, and are of a technical, process nature. They fail to address the fundamental issues that explain the demise of the regional planning system. It is doubtful whether the implementation of these conclusions would protect a future regional planning system from the fate that befell the 2004 statutory RSS system.

Little academic literature exists about the relationship between English regional housing and Regional Spatial Strategies and much of what has been published came before the period at the heart of this research. Robinson (2003; p249) discussed the 'central-local paradox' of the Government trying to control local housing policy while there was a growing need to understand and manage sensitively regional and sub regional housing markets. Locally generated regional housing fora gave credence to the idea that there was some locally based appetite for exploring and developing voluntary regional housing partnerships. Cole (2003) provided an assessment of the early emergence of regional housing strategy in the context of 'network' governance, issues about developing housing strategy at the regional level, and the prospects for integration with planning and economic development.

Barker (2004) brought discussion of planning and housing together within the regional assemblies, with consideration of the issues prevailing up to 2005 for the regionalisation of housing policy. Two of her recommendations had major implications for English Regional Assemblies discussed Chapter 5¹²: these were the merger of Regional Housing Boards (RHBs) with the Regional Planning Bodies and

¹² See Sections 5.9 and 5.11.

setting up of what became the National Housing and Planning Advisory Unit (NHPAU). This body presented advice to ministers on new housing numbers for RSSs that were alternatives to those given by the RPBs. The WMRA was at the vanguard of this contested policy area.

Lee (2019) took a resilience view of aspects of the English regional planning for housing activity during the New Labour era, arguing that those involved in the epistemic community (i.e. the broad membership of policy makers across sectors) through their own agency, constitute a slow burning shock to the planning for housing process. Lee (2019; p1194) asserts the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 gave rise to the RHSs. The RHSs were never statutory and were begun a year before in line with the Sustainable Communities Plan (2003) under the GORs. The WMRA example could also be seen to challenge Lee's perspective: conflict with Government over housing numbers suggest that it was not totally in thrall to the pressures to conform to dominance, guidance, and pressure from the wider epistemic community.

2.4 The West Midlands – Press Coverage on Regional Assemblies 2002-2004

The WMRA Press Archive compiled by a company contracted by the Assembly was reviewed to gather contextual, political and public attitudes towards the establishment of the regional assemblies. This material was used to inform the construction of research questionnaires¹³ and to provide a balancing view to offset my own perspective and triangulate with information obtained through interviews.

¹³ See Sections 4.10, 4.11 and Appendices 4.4 and 4.7

Most of the material referred to the period 2002 to 2004 when Government planned to hold referenda in each region until the failed referendum of the 2004 in the North East (Norton, 2008; Sandford, 2009).

The majority of the coverage including journalism, letters from MPs in the region, local councillors and the public was negative towards the notion of supporting an assembly in the region. The positive coverage was from a few key members of the West Midlands Constitutional Convention and until 2003, Labour leaders of the newly formed Regional Chamber (e.g. Morran. 'Assemblies will not be talking shops'. Wolverhampton Chronicle 28 Nov 2002).

A selection of the range of principal arguments in the negative coverage are presented below¹⁴:

- The proposed assembly would be in Birmingham giving the dominant regional city further power over the rest of the West Midlands. This was of particular concern to residents and politicians in rural areas.
- The proposed size of the assembly of 35 elected members allocated according to local authorities' population size was seen as reinforcing Birmingham's dominance and disempowering shire areas.
- Opposition to 'artificially created' assemblies due to concomitant potential abolition of County Councils and Parish Councils.
- Assemblies would be expensive.
- Assemblies would be talking shops.

¹⁴ Appendix 2.3 presents the detailed references.

- Belief that regionalisation was an EU, and UK Government plot to bypass the English Parliament, dissolving the significance of the English nation state in favour of an EU 'super state' and government from Brussels via the new regional assemblies.

This last theme was tested in the political interviews and generated some conformation that 'triangulated' with the archival material. This was a view known to some interviewees but not held directly by the interviewees themselves.

The few regular pro- regional devolution campaigners frequently responded to these arguments and articulated positive alternative views. By 2003 the prospect of a referendum in the West Midlands was receding. The result of the NE referendum removed discussion of the in-principal arguments for devolution from the press.

2.5 The West Midlands – Planning and Housing Literature

Following the launch of the Sustainable Communities Plan (ODPM, 2003) GOWM asked the WMRA's Regional Housing Partnership to prepare a Regional Housing Strategy (WMRA, 2003). This drew on evidence prepared by the University of Birmingham (Ferrari, et.al., 2003). The RHB accepted this and asked for a further RHS to be prepared for a fuller range of topics and more coverage of the rural areas. The RHS (WMRA, 2005) was prepared by the WMRA Secretariat with research undertaken by several authors including Sheffield and Birmingham Universities (e.g. Bibby, 2004a; 2004b; Lee and Murie, 2005; CURS, 2005). Some of this evidence base was refreshed for the preparation of the RSS Revision Preferred Option (WMRA, 2007) and for the EiP in 2009, (e.g. Green Balance, 2009).

Regional planning literature on the West Midlands is not extensive and does not focus on the specific research questions posed by this thesis. Hall's (1973) seminal

work on the '*Containment of Urban England*' gave a detailed account of the growth of the West Midlands and the role of Green Belt policy up to the early 1970s. A former WMRA planning officer wrote a *Brief History of the West Midlands Planning Authorities' Conference 1967 – 1981* (Clarke, 2006) and there is a descriptive regional planning history from 1950 to 2000 by Chapman et al. (2000).

A senior Warwickshire County planner, (Deegan, 2002) provided a descriptive contextual account of the development of regional planning in the West Midlands, feeding into the early period for this study. Deegan's (2002) overview of the Region's economic and institutional position included the nascent Regional Chamber (later Regional Assembly), prior to 2002. It also highlighted the particular importance of the West Midlands Local Government Association's (WMLGA's) Regeneration and Environment 'Conference' as the Regional Planning Body, with the WMLGA's administration providing the professional secretariat. These staff were to take on a dual role as both the WMLGA's and WMRA's secretariat. Deegan (2002; p197) commented on the WMLGA's, '...path breaking achievements' over the RPG revision in 1998 where the WMLGA secured, 'unanimous agreement between the region's local authorities to the regional total and distribution of new housing.'

Prior to May 2001 the West Midlands had been under, '....the near monolithic control of local government and its institutions in the West Midlandsby the Labour Party', (Deegan, 2002; p196) but Deegan (2002) anticipated a shift in the balance of political power at the local elections (which transpired), and implicitly questioned what this might presage for local authorities' approach to regional planning and their relationships within the RPB. Ayres et. al. (2002) described institutional development in the West Midlands, before the Regional Housing Boards, and referred to the

Region's trajectory as partly dependent upon a long history of regional planning to assist with housing solutions for Birmingham's growth.

Writing on housing policy in the UK, Mullins and Murie (2006) referred to the Communities Plan (OPDM, 2003, and 2005a), which introduced the Regional Housing Boards with their Regional Housing Strategies, initially chaired by the Regional Directors of the Government Offices in the Regions. They made two points with a bearing on this thesis,

'...Regional Housing Strategies ...were viewed as being equal to Regional Planning Guidance and the Regional Economic Strategy. The assumption was that housing was as important as planning and economic strategies in determining what happened regionally and locally' (Mullins and Murie, 2006 p80).

Housing policy was subjected to further '...depoliticization and professionalization...'. and was intended to be a 'more subtle process' (Mullins and Murie, 2006; p80) than either central or specifically local policy making.

Prior to the abolition of the assemblies, research by Deacon (2008) referred to the East of England and the South West regions. Deacon examined the extent to which regionalism in the UK was driven by the developing role of regions in the EU. By 2007 the Sub National Review (HMT, et al., 2007; p2) regarded 'poor alignment' between RESs and RSSs as a hindrance to RES effectiveness. Deacon (2008; p.224) concluded that Government regarded Regional Economic Strategies as more important in pursuit of economic growth than the RSSs whose statutory status was an unhelpful issue to be addressed.

The West Midlands RDA saw its implementation of Government policy for growth and competitiveness as endorsing the RES and over-riding the wider ranging RSS. However, the RSS, had already been confirmed by Government and made statutory in 2004. In the WMRA regional planning mind, the RSS was dominant sequentially, temporally, legally, and in the over-riding merit of its long-term goal of making the West Midlands a sustainable region. In contrast the RES did not prioritise Urban Renaissance but encouraged growth around the periphery of the conurbation further hollowing out the urban core (the antithesis of the RSS objective), though this was moderated through robust discussion between the two strategy making bodies. Before 2006 AWM had no strategic interest in its RES about regional housing priorities which were essentially outside its remit. Its conceptual approach to housing was that market forces would see new housing follow the spatial consequences of its economic lead. Later, as the Sub National Review mooted the idea of the RDAs having a housing role, AWM commissioned studies on the interface between the regional economy and housing (Ove Arup, 2006; SQW and Cambridge Econometrics, 2007).

The main regional bodies, (GOWM, AWM, WMLGA and WMRA) foresaw some of these potential problems. Ayres, et al., (2002) record,

‘...emerging institutional structures (had) given rise to anxieties about the clarity of roles and relationships and duplication and overlap in the preparation of various regional strategies...’ (p71).

The regional bodies sought to manage these issues through each being voluntary co-signatories to a Regional Concordat in 2001. This was intended to,

‘...provide a framework to clarify the multitude of territorial boundaries and organisational remits and *assist in integrating regional strategies.*’ (p71 emphasis added) and ‘...enshrining cross-sector partnership working...’(p72).

Under this arrangement the WMRA became the coordinator of regional strategies. However, the individual organisational pressures to deliver according to their remits and be accountable to different political masters, for example AWM to ministers, WMRA to local authorities and comply with ODPM/ DCLG formal guidance for the RSS, diminished the effectiveness of the Concordat.

The WMRA’s strategy coordination role was separate from its RSS role as Regional Planning Body but added weight to the Assembly’s role in negotiations when intervening to achieve this cross-strategy coordination. At the beginning of the RHS production, civil servants from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs was very keen for the West Midlands RHS to take an independent line from the Region’s RSS in devising strategy for the rural areas. The WMRA senior management settled any temptation for the RHS (WMRA, 2005) to diverge from the RSS, confirmed in 2004, by directing that the RHS would follow the RSS especially in the contentious issue of new housing numbers. Within the WMRA although regional housing strategy work was given formal ‘parity of esteem’¹⁵ (WMRHB, 2006) with the RSS, the regional planners within the Assembly, and local authorities maintained a default position of seeing the RSS as being pre-eminent. This ensured the Government’s ONS population projection updates would be consistently applied through the RSS revision and taken as a ‘given’ for the RHS. By making the RHS secondary to the RSS in this respect, the Assembly avoided potential direct conflict

¹⁵ Written by author in his capacity as an officer of the WMRA.

with GOWM, but asserted the primacy of the RSS revision which became the focus for policy tensions both with AWM over revisions to the RES and with GOWM.

The view that regional housing processes led to a 'depoliticisation and professionalisation' of housing strategy, taking policy influence away from the local due to the way regional institutions functioned (Mullins and Murie, 2006; p80) is open to challenge. The GOWM led RHB could be seen as depoliticised, though the RHS (Ferrari, et.al., 2003; WMRA, 2005) was overseen by the WMRA's Regional Housing Partnership (with several local authority housing strategy officers as members) under the Assembly. Once the RHB transferred to the WMRA the local authority members on the Board strengthened their political oversight, and the second RHS (WMRA, 2005) was written by professional officers, and academics supported by academic research (e.g. Bibby, 2004a; 2004b; Lee and Murie, 2005). Where Mullins and Murie (2006) anticipated an increasing assertiveness of central government, '...drawing power up from below, rather than down from above,'(2006; p80)., this was borne out, not over the RHS, but in the RSS policies for new housing. Part of this thesis is the story of increasing Government domination over policy for new housing numbers in the RSS. The outcome was not an easy win for Government nor a straightforward given, but a strenuously contested process in which local political strength deployed alongside professional evidenced based policy was tested before an Examination in Public.

The City-Region relationship of Birmingham to the West Midlands was summarised by Murie, et al., (2003) with reference to GOWM and the Regional Development Agency. The Regional Chamber's advisory role is mentioned but not developed. Prior to the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 the West Midlands Local Government Association was the (voluntary and non-statutory) regional planning

body, having prepared its non-statutory Regional Planning Guidance before the RPG was confirmed in statute in the 2004 Act along with the WMLGA and Assembly as the statutory RPB.

Other literature on the West Midlands includes Beighton's (2004) study of the regionalisation of housing policy comparing the West Midlands with Wales. Pearce, et al. (2005) discussed the implications regional devolution for rural policy in the context of the West Midlands and speculated about the wider impact on assemblies of the negative outcome of the North East referendum result,

'The implication of the North East referendum is that the English regions face a period of uncertainty and incremental change will stress measures to improve policy co-ordination and delivery. Unelected Assemblies, in particular, may find it difficult to justify their role as strategic planning, housing and transport authorities and as 'regional champions', when they lack direct democratic legitimacy and accountability' (Pearce, et al.,2005; p210).

Green and Berkeley (2006) provide a historical summary of the formation of the West Midlands Region, characterised by it being neither of the North nor of the South of England. Among its population the sense of regional identity is low, which is countered by the longer traditions of regional planning than in other regions except the south east. Having acknowledged this post war history of joint local authority working resulting in the approved Regional Planning Guidance, Green and Berkeley focus on a descriptive structural summary of AWM's Regional Economic Strategy. Disappointingly they do not explain the spatial policy tensions between the RPG aims and those of the RES and do not relate this to sub regional housing markets nor the challenges the region's economic geography posed for regional planning for

housing. This literature leaves open scope for a more rounded appreciation of the contribution planning and housing bodies and policies have played in shaping the West Midlands during the New Labour era.

Preuss's (2006) thesis on the RSS monitoring and review process focuses on the South East of England RSS experience. Subsequently Preuss was a planner in the WMRA Secretariat and published a critique of the weaknesses in RSS implementation, referring to the emphasis in Government advice and professional practice on, '... partnership working', 'joining up' various policy areas 'aligning' the programmes and spending activities of a multitude of actors.' (Preuss, 2011; p294).

Preuss (2013) also contributed from his West Midlands experience a technical chapter on the role and importance of monitoring and intelligence to 'evidence based policy' (2013; p135).

At the very end of the New Labour Government the Parliamentary West Midlands Regional Committee published its report (HoC, 2010c) on the future of housing and economic development in the region. The evidence received by the Committee was recorded as being overwhelmingly in favour of retaining strategic planning at the regional level, supported the single Regional Strategy and encouraged devolution of planning issues to sub-regional and local levels where appropriate. All this was swept aside a month later, by the incoming Coalition Government.

Deacon (2008) examined the extent to which the roots of regionalism in the UK were driven by a competitiveness for EU funds and a 'hollowing out' of the national state to facilitate new forms of regional economic governance in a globalising world economy. In addressing the anti-EU conspiracy theory argument Deacon (2008,

p13) quotes Keating (2008, p72), that, 'no evidence has ever been produced of a plan to by-pass nation-states and create a Europe of the Regions'.

Following abolition of the assemblies and their successor leaders' boards in 2010, Oliver (2011) completed a small-scale study of how local authority councillors interpreted and exercised their roles as nominated members of the West Midlands Regional Assembly. Oliver noted that the WMRA had, '....weak accountability structures in place, leading representatives to adopt a trustee conception of their roles.'(2011; p3). Whilst interesting in its insights, which corroborate the tenuous links which existed at some stages between nominated Assembly members and their authority leadership, its regional planning reference was mainly to an eco-town proposal in Stratford District and did not cover the issues pursued in this thesis.

2.6 New Labour in Government - Insider views

There have been several retrospective reviews and commentaries on the New Labour Government (e.g.Seddon,2007; Faucher-King and Le Galés, 2010; Davis and Rentoul, 2019). Of greater interest for this thesis are the various insider accounts (e.g. Diamond, 2011; Minkin, 2014; Avril, 2016a; 2016b) based on personal experiences gained through prolonged participant observation. These primary accounts do not address regionalism directly but do tell much about the political climate within New Labour and its approach to governing.

The value of these insider accounts within the published literature is the light shed on the inner workings of the Labour Party in government. This reveals more of the background contextual setting of WMRA's external political environment. This literature contributes a form of validation of the perspective the Assembly and its officers had of Government as a major component of its organisational boundary.

They dovetail well with the evidence brought forward in this research, showing the extent to which the managerial style of the New Labour leadership was not going to yield outcomes that some harboured in the early years of New Labour's regional policy.

The most extensive account is from Minkin (2014) who was an advisor over several years at the heart of the Labour Party. Avril's (2016a; 2016b) accounts draw on Minkin (2014) but are also based on her own insider roles '...from the early 1990's to the mid-2000s...' as. '...observer, party member and campaigner, conference visitor ... delegate, [and] steward'. Avril witnessed,

'first-hand the culture clash between traditional members andnew members [and] the tensions between local parties and regional and national party staff' (Avril, 2016b; p6).

Avril (2016 b) adopts the characterisation of the senior New Labour leadership seeking to use a '.... "permanent revolution", or "rolling coup", a succession of waves designed to take full control of the [Party]...'. This approach to Party management took centre stage, 'taking precedence over all other functions, in order to create cohesion and consensus within the party.'(Avril, 2016b; p7). Minkin defined this as the "managerised" party (Minkin, 2014; p700). However, this attempt to manage its external political environment was shown to have failed due to its control dogma both in the Party and with the media, its closing down of internal dissent and debate over ideas, which generated disillusion, and distrust within the Party. These traits were in evidence in the Government's response to the WMRA's RSS Revision.

A similar story is conveyed by Davies (2001) in her account of New Labour leadership manipulation of the NEC from 1998 and 1999 where dissent was quashed

and formal Party processes sidelined. Negative disabling consequences followed for those who sought to air alternative views. In this account John Prescott is also characterised as compliant with the control of dissent and not an independent voice of 'Old Labour'.

Diamond, (2011) also provides an insider account of working as an advisor in No 10 Downing Street through the premierships of Blair and Brown. This account is expressed with a balanced, objective tone, less driven by Minkin's '...sense of outrage...' (Avril, 2016a. p165) at New Labour purporting to be about partnership and devolved autonomy (Diamond, 2011) only to find power re-centring within the Prime Minister's Office, and above all on Blair himself (Avril, 2016a). The centre of New Labour power is defined by Diamond as No 10, the Cabinet Office and Treasury (Diamond, 2011). Consistent with the assemblies' experience. Diamond confirms that New Labour generally took '.... a distinctive approach to governing, with a significant strengthening of the strategic centre of British government' (2011, p146).

Diamond makes no explicit reference to regional policy in his account of New Labour's search for guiding principles.

'After 2001, four reform principles emerged based on choice, diversity, flexibility and autonomy, although they had little impact on public service professionals or the wider public' (Diamond, 2011. p156).

Diamond's comments on this aspect of Labour's disconnect with the public sector and its professionals helps to explain the Assembly's experience of the RSS Revision and ministers' apparent insensitivity to the political viability of regional devolution after 2007.

The awkwardness with which English regional devolution was launched and received, corresponds with Diamond's observation that New Labour's ambitions for constitutional modernisation originated in its 'ideology of the enabling state'(2011, p146) and '...grafted onto the existing Westminster model' (2011, p146). New Labour's approach sought individual empowerment with greater political pluralism whilst centralising its control and this can also be traced in their relationship with the 'devolved' regional assemblies. As part of their modernising agenda, Diamond (2011) refers to New Labour's use of 'earned autonomy' (2011,p157) for local government to which could be added local government led regional bodies. It is possible to infer that insofar as assemblies were seen expressions of local government, New Labour were not impressed, hence the increasingly autocratic relationship explored in this thesis.

Diamond (2011) exposed a conflict of view between civil servants in the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (DBERR) and attempts to intervene in the economy, referring to their, '....hostility to almost all forms of government intervention in the economy. This was to continue almost unabated under New Labour'. (2011, p159). However, at the regional level, competitiveness and productivity was a key policy area. The Department for Trade and Industry/ DBERR view would have had more direct implications for the RDAs, but the perceived failure of the assembly-led regional spatial strategies to engender economic growth was the focus of a robust debate between ODPM, the Treasury, and DBERR's predecessor, the DTI¹⁶.

¹⁶ See Section 9.2

Diamond's conclusion that the inability of Labour's Prime Ministers to achieve the outcomes they sought revealed they sometimes lacked:

'...a coherent view of what the state should do and how it should do it.

Ministers quickly grew frustrated that the policy ambitions being pursued in Whitehall were not being implemented or achieving results in the way they expected' (2011; p160).

This observation confirms the impression from the West Midlands where tensions over regional spatial planning for new housing were played out from 2005 onwards. In part the story of the West Midlands RSS Revision can be seen as the outworking of this regional -national governmental conflict and the rising frustration this area of policy generated for all the parties and actors over the New Labour period.

Raynsford (2016), was a minister first for Housing and Planning and then for Local and Regional Government and published his reflections on several political themes including housing, regional planning, and regional devolution in England. On regional planning for housing outside of London, Raynsford acknowledged the reluctance of councils and local communities to accept new housing but pressed on believing, '....perhaps naively, that these nimby tendencies could over time be countered by determined advocacy....'(Raynsford, 2016; p60) on four fronts. These were prioritising new housing on previously developed land, promoting mixed tenure development to include meeting local needs, improving design, and the presentation of evidence-based needs at examinations in public (Raynsford, 2016).

Raynsford (2016) reveals he was not keen to see the RSS system introduced, citing the short term disruption he felt this would cause without clear long term benefits, The pressure for radical planning reform came from some in the Treasury who

believed that the planning system hindered economic growth. Raynsford (2016), however, recalling debates on planning reform, found it hard to resolve this deregulation position with the countervailing pressure for communities to have their voices heard. These experiences of community tensions over new housing communicated through the regional planning system as seen from within government corroborate WMRA experience. Similarly, the Treasury, versus DCLG debates over the role and future of regional planning are borne out by interviews held with civil servants involved in these at the time.

Raynsford (2016) provides a useful summary of the course of the regional devolution policy through to the failure of the NE referendum, citing, among other reasons, national level lukewarmness in Government towards elected assemblies and Government Departmental hostility, especially from Transport. This rendered the prospect of an elected assembly as one lacking powers, unlike the Greater London Authority. The prospect of an assembly with local authorities being made into Unitaries to counter criticism of there being too many government tiers had the negative consequence of bringing together a body of councillors who all felt their interests were threatened. However, Raynsford does not go on to discuss why Government continued with nominated assemblies after November 2004 and how this was seen within Government. These themes; the place of strategic planning; community resistance to new housing, and an assembly with a perceived democratic deficit still functioning, come together in this thesis.

Other post-2010 literature consists of research into the state of devolution and its demise at the cusp of the national political change in 2010 (Smith and Wistrich, 2014), and that of planners reviewing the state of English urban and regional

planning and suggesting how and why it should play a significant role in the future of policy and its delivery.

In the post New Labour period almost all the institutions and processes of strategic policy development, monitoring, partnership working and advice on the allocation of resources were rapidly dismantled by the incoming Coalition Government in 2010. Research in three unidentified English Regions was carried out in 2009 and immediately prior to the General Election in May 2010 (Smith and Wistrich, 2014). This indicated that some leading local political voices felt that elected regional assemblies would have been a positive direction for regional governance to have taken had the regional assemblies been given meaningful responsibilities and thereby addressed the democratic deficit. Some optimism, not uncontested, similarly attached to the newly started Leaders' Boards. Other reasons behind the abolition of almost all regional governance were the impact of rationalising local government down to one tier with the attendant losses to national politicians of a vocal, local, political elite acting for them in national elections. Also discussed were the large size and diversity within the regions and the generally weak public identity with them. The Coalition Government's intention to abolish or rescind all regional strategies including RSS, and Housing was also not universally welcomed as there were issues in play at the regional level that had to have some means of being addressed at that scale. Smith and Wistrich did not discuss the part that may have been played by regional planning in contributing to the drive to abolish regional governance. This thesis addresses that gap from a West Midlands perspective.

From 2010, planning literature (Ellis and Henderson, 2014; 2016; Rydin, 2012; 2013, Harris, 2019) laments the erosion of the original planning pioneers' vision and purpose of planning and its post-war enactment. This literature then searches for

the means to reclaim that purpose and sense of hope planning was intended to reflect and inspire. Harris refers to Healey's argument (from 2010) that in the future planning must be founded upon a 'faith 'in the ability of collective action to produce better conditions ...and to open up opportunities that could enhance the future chances of human flourishing' (Harris,2019; p99).

Ellis and Henderson (2014; 2016) and Rydin,(2012; 2014) describe the loss of influence and role of planning in policy making and see this as contributing directly or indirectly to symptomatic adverse consequences, including homelessness, inadequate responses to climate change and sustainable development. The arguments for planning to be reinstated and acted upon are set against the adverse effects of climate change and rising inequality. Allmendinger (2016) and Harris (2019) go further in their analysis of the plight of planning.

Allmendinger (2016) closely traces the growth and dominance of neo-liberal ideas promoting supply side criticisms of planning hindering economic growth and interfering with the market price mechanism. Neo-liberalism's advocates have sought over decades to undo the interventionist economic and social policies of the post - war era. In this contest, planning was seen as a part of the welfare state and a hindrance to the free operation of de-regulated markets which would, it was believed, resolve almost all the public policy issues where free markets were free to operate (Harris, 2019).

The post 1997 Treasury view embraced a neo-liberal set of assumptions and beliefs which took the view that '...planning and other regulations were the root of the UK's competitiveness problem'(Allmendinger (2016; p3) was intellectually countered by ODPM but the Treasury stuck to its conviction's and continued to legitimise

arguments to weaken and remove planning controls. The 2008 recession was taken as an opportunity to reinvigorate this anti-planning drive as the Treasury, right leaning think-tanks and commercial representative groups sought to promote economic growth (Allmendinger, 2016).

Against this backdrop Allmendinger (2016) highlights two facets to the post -2010 planning system, an emphasis on local issues shaping local planning policy and a generalised overarching, limited set of national planning principles and guidance within which such locally driven planning will be framed. These national planning principles are set by national government and are expected to steer planning in assisting development, speeding up and delivering economic growth. However, the wider and erratic rise of neo-liberalism has resulted in more than a simple rolling back of the post war planning system, but has achieved in England particularly, '....a sophisticated capture and roll-out of spatial governance' (Allmendinger, 2016; p10).

In this post -2010, period under Conservative led governments planning has been cast as 'part of the problem' (Allmendinger, 2016; p8) and embedded in an overall new consensual political discourse, '...thathas become depoliticized and deploys empty phrases such as 'urban renaissance', 'spatial planning', and 'sustainable growth' ...to appeal to a wide range of interests.'(Allmendinger, 2016; p9). To have these phrases depicted as vacuous presents a challenging note for this thesis as it examines the consequences for WMRA and its Urban Renaissance centred plan for the sustainable future of the West Midlands. This plan sought to make the West Midlands region sustainable and it was in defence of this core Urban Renaissance philosophy that the WMRA relationship with the Labour Government was stretched to breaking point.

Both Allmendinger (2016) and Harris (2019) trace the demise of planning back to the philosophical arguments of Hayek (1944) and the way that was turned into a programme of influence and change by the Mont Perlin Society (Harris, 2019; Mirowski and Plehwe, 2009) giving rise to the 'new-right' and its operational policy formulations generally referred to as 'neo-liberalism' (Harris, 2019; p4). Crucial to planning, individualism is set against collective visioning and action. For Harris, it is not that 'planning has failed' (2019; p4), but that planning has been extensively argued to be, '...unnecessary, even dangerous and counterproductive, especially when it possesses a vision of a better society and how this might be achieved...' (Harris, 2019; p5). Inherent in the culture shaped by neo-liberal views is an overarching short-term mindset which effectively rules out collective imagining of the future. This philosophical grip on the political and public mind is such that planning (including spatial and strategic planning) has no place, since it is deemed irrelevant, even antithetical to a society which realises its needs and wants through the operation of deregulated free markets (Harris, 2019).

Allmendinger (2016) and Harris (2019) see this process as having been successful in implanting this neo-liberal frame of reference, dominating the philosophical assumptions of not only political governance and discourse but that of many think - tanks, the media and in the public. However, Harris, (2019) considers the survival of the planning system in the UK, albeit subordinated to a neo-liberal ethos, arguing that the heart of the 1947 system has remained,

'...in part, because the anti-planning instincts of Thatcherism eventually had to give way to the traditional Conservative vote in the urban peripheries where there were backlashes against planning deregulation...' (Harris, 2019; p36).

and the consequences of major developments in these places.

2.7 Conclusion

The literature on regional governance and regional planning prior to 2010 is substantially a descriptive commentary on the course of regional working . Apart from Allmendinger's (2011) use of New Institutional Theory, the English regional planning literature is generally light on theoretical explanatory analysis of why events took the course they did. This review of English regional planning literature presents a summary of the conflicts and issues that both contextualised the New Labour regional project and, to the point of their publication, charted their course. Authors writing prior to 2010 could not have predicted with accuracy the outcome of the May General Election. Furthermore, even when the Conservative Party published its pre-election papers (e.g. Conservative Party,2009a) it was not clear that wholesale abolition of the regional (or strategic) spatial planning system without coherent replacement, was likely. As Smith and Wistrich (2014) say of their interviewees among the regional and local political elites before May 2010 none were able to foresee a Conservative led Coalition Government nor the 'unseemly haste', (Raynsford, 2016; p64) in setting about the abolition of regional planning.

Other post -2010 regional planning literature that, seeks to learn lessons from the New Labour era of regional planning makes no attempt to theorise or triangulate the factors in play at local, regional and national level, nor explain why the regional architecture and regional planning ended. The insider accounts refer to the neo-liberal mindset of New Labour but the implications for the regional planning project are not explored.

Despite the predominantly descriptive nature of the regional literature reviewed here, links can be made to more theoretical literature in the next Chapter. An important example is the use of Complexity Theory (Haynes, 2003) where the idea of radical clearance of previous organisational structures in 2010 without replacement is discussed, to see what might emerge over time as acceptable new organisational forms and functions. This resonates with the Coalition Government's abolition of regional governance and planning, its collective institutional memory, cultures, and values.

Whereas the literature does not explain, other than superficially, why the regional project ended, this thesis uses broader theoretical explanations to understand and synthesize the underlying causes. This thesis provides a synthesis and overarching explanatory account through the perspective of a case study of the WMRA. This account gives shape to the complex outworking of the early latent weaknesses, tensions, and threats to the regional project revealed over time and their ultimate impact on the WMRA's prospects for survival.

The West Midlands planning literature which covers the period from 2003 to 2010 does not address the internal actor relationships nor the interaction between these and the external political environment as the nature of New Labour in Government changes over time. Thus there is a clear gap in the literature which this thesis addresses, including RPB governance, the role played by regional planning for housing in the Assembly's demise, and other factors that led to the abolition of regional working. The thesis develops theory to frame this complex and dynamic set of relationships. The next Chapter therefore reviews the theories used in building a theoretical model of the processes at work in bring about the demise of the WMRA and regional planning.

CHAPTER 3 THEORY

3.1 Introduction

This Chapter presents theories used to investigate the research questions (see Figure 1.2) and inform the research design. Rhodes (1997,p 80) advises that ‘No theory is ever true, it is only more or less instructive.’, and reassuringly suggests that because politics is ‘too eclectic’ no one theory can dominate in some form of ‘theoretical imperialism’ (p 80). Consistent with this advice, the key elements of theories which relate closely to, or resonate with, the life and demise of the WMRA have been used in the research.

The use of several theories to develop a ‘mosaic’ theoretical picture, as argued for by Michael and Popov (2016), helped move from a search for just one theoretical perspective to an interlocking of several theoretical components through which to interpret the events and behaviours of the key actors.

The role that time played in the theoretical overview of the demise of New Labour’s regional project is an important element of this ‘mosaic’ approach. The extent to which theories about organisational failure contributed to the analysis is discussed. This Chapter concludes by summarising the elements of theory used in relation to the key actor groups and WMRA’s political environment and the design of the interview questions rooted in these theories is described in Chapter 4¹⁷.

¹⁷ Sections 4.10 and 4.11

3.2 The Initial Components

A review of various theories was set against an initial assessment of where the answers to the research questions might lie. Following the logic of organisational analysis presented by Anheier and Moulton,(1999) and Amankwah-Amoah (2016) in broad terms, the answers were likely to be found,

- a) in aspects of the Assembly's external organisational environment,
- b) within the organisation itself,
- c) in the interface between groups of actors or
- d) across all, in some combination.

The broad categories of actors were the Assembly Secretariat, its governance, the other government national and regional agencies operating in the West Midlands region, and at the national level, the New Labour Government, Civil Service, and Conservative shadow ministers. Within some of these broad groups sub-sets of actor groups came to be identified.

The other key dimension was the significance of the passage of time though the period under study, and the role time can play from a theoretical perspective. When studying political life Pierson (2004) stresses the importance of moving from a "snapshot' view' (p2) to one where 'distinctly temporal dimensions' (p3) are integrated into the theoretical understanding and not just an aspect of methodology. The two areas of political science Pierson (2004) discusses are, ' "rational choice theory" and "historical institutionalism" ' (p 8); using themes of, 'path dependence, issues of timing and sequence, the significance.... of "slow-moving" processes....., and problems of institutional origins and change.' (p9). Allmendinger (2011) explains

that over a lengthy period in office, New Labour developed its policies, programmes and legislation such that no one foundational principle or ideological stance is easy to identify to cover all the variations. In order to begin to isolate out the key components of how New Labour operated within a changing array of influences, Allmendinger adds the dimension of time into his discussion, although warns that imposing a framework of eras risks oversimplification. The 'time' component in this study was significant in framing the narrative account in Chapter 5 and the analysis in Chapter 10.

3.3 Organisational Failure or Demise?

The issue of whether the primary research question should be cast as one of organisational failure or demise had to be addressed to build a theoretical basis for investigation. However, most literature on organisational failure reviewed refers to the commercial, industrial sector, (Amankwah-Amoah, 2016; Hercleous and Werres, 2015), the North American context (Thompson,2014) or individual elements of the U.K. health sector (Walshe, 2003; Ravaghi, et.al., 2015; Sheaff,2017). One article, Michael and Popov (2016) discussed theoretical shortcomings in predicting the size of governments in relation to macroeconomic change. Hercleous and Werres (2015; p491) supported the importance of a, 'time -sensitive processual perspective of how a corporation can move towards failure', through the slow development of 'strategic mis-alignment' (p491) over time with the organisation's environment. None of the literature was of direct relevance to the WMRA case study and English regional governance between 1998 and 2010.

However, there was some contemporary work on abolition of Non-Departmental Government Bodies and government agencies. O'Leary (2015) undertook a

snapshot study of the reasons for the 'Bonfire of the Quangos' in 2010/11 by the Coalition Government. Government was reported to have based its programme of closures on a threefold test: was there a 'precise technical operation'; did the body make 'impartial decisions... about the distribution of taxpayers' money'; and did the body 'fulfil a need for facts to be transparently determined, independent of political interference?' (O'Leary, 2015, p1342). However, the effectiveness and consistency of these tests was in doubt as published sources found older agencies stood a better chance of survival and that advisory bodies '...were five times more likely to have been identified for abolition,' (O'Leary, 2015, p1342). O'Leary suggested this was probably related to the low political and administrative cost of abolition. In the case of the regional assemblies the political cost was undoubtedly low. However, O'Leary's research did not consider the complexities of regional working, nor the role of regional planning.

Insider accounts and observer views of organisational failure (Anheier and Moulton, 1999) were used to develop the analysis, including work on the closure of non-profit organisations. Hager et al.,(1999), in '*Tales from the Grave: Organizations' Accounts of Their Own Demise*', comment that there are few studies of organisational failure based on the accounts of former managers and Anheier (1999) adds that in some cases '...mission completion,' as opposed to 'failure', underlay organisations' death' (p9).

In the private sector context Amankwah-Amoah, (2013) made the case for organisational failure not to be seen merely as 'given' objective realities but rather as constructions, defined shaped and imposed though the perceptions of those who were involved. For higher profile organisations these included media, legal and political commentators. Amankwah-Amoah (2013) used a weaving together of

attribution theory and concepts from social judgement theory. The importance of attribution theory lies in examining various arbiters of the causes of organisational failure or demise. These are collated, synthesised and blame for the failure apportioned to individuals and to organisations. The direct or indirect relationship between an observer and the failed organisation may affect the judgement reached about the failure and the roles played leading up to this.

The core of social judgement theory lies in evaluators who may gather or hold different information about organisational demise such that they make different judgements about the events and who to blame. Evaluators and observers place differing weights on some information, giving significance to some and 'downplaying others' (Amankwah-Amoah,2013; p52). These insights offered useful cautions for the selection and interpretation of interviewees as well as stimulating reflective assessment of my own bias as 'participant observer in retrospect'. These cautions led me to identify and question 'certain givens' about the WMRA and its history and to consider alternatives or realities about the organisation's potential room for manoeuvre by politicians and management.

Amankwah-Amoah (2016) found, among other factors, that organisational 'failure' or demise could be attributed to: -

- organisations in a commercial sector unable to control their commercial environment being 'selected out' in a rather 'Darwinian' manner (p3389),
- the way organisations responded to unforeseen, destructive 'jolts in the external environment can generate waves of organisational failure.....' (p3389),

- the way leadership in organisations behaved, referred to as ‘the upper-echelon perspective’ (p3390) centred on the negative characteristics and inadequacies of the senior management team,
- the insistence on organisations continuing with a ‘....strategic persistence even in the face of changes in the business environment....’,
- both young and old organisations were seen to be prone to failure,
- organisational ‘inertia’ (p3391) rooted in past success, and
- Organisations which became ‘....increasingly misaligned...’ with their environment.

Amankwah-Amoah (2016) also noted that when firms become ‘bureaucratic and complex’ (p3391).... ‘this stifles their progress and ability to make necessary changes’ (p3391).

The question of to what extent abolition was a case of ‘organisational failure’ can be considered by adapting and applying relevant conclusions reached by Amankwah-Amoah (2016) This enables an internal view to be taken of how the organisation responded to external pressures and what this implies for public sector organisational failure. Several of these points echo with those found in the New Institutional Theories discussed below.

3.4 Theories Selected in Research design

Early post New Labour planning and planning for housing literature (e.g. Bowie, 2010; Swain,et.al., 2013) lacked a theoretically informed approach, unlike that of Allmendinger’s (2011). Allmendinger (2011) looked at the New Labour era in a near time retrospective with a theoretical approach using two versions of Discursive Institutionalism (Lowndes,2005; Schmidt,2008) within New Institutionalism Theory

(Peters,2012). These Discursive Institutional theories were used in the context of the higher-level philosophical position of New Labour that had accepted neo-liberalism as its ideological framework for its economic and competitiveness policy. Lowndes concept of 'rules of the game' (Lowndes, 2005 p 292) is used referring to 'values, norms, interests, identities, and beliefs', (March and Olsen,1984, quoted in Allmendinger,2012 p 44). These rules can originate within, alongside, above and below an organisation subjecting it to an 'institutional matrix' of different rules. Thus the relationship between New Labour's neo-liberal position, its infusion of rules and norms into its policy objectives would influence its ways of managing their implementation. About these rules, Lowndes (2005; p292) observes,

'different rule-sets change at different rates and in different directions, reflecting power relationships and the 'embeddedness' of local governance in specific historical and spatial contexts'.

The role of 'institutional entrepreneurs' (Lowndes, 2005, p297) with particular skills in arguing for new ideas which may include the rediscovery of previously discarded ideas or processes ('institutional remembering') is particularly important in bringing about institutional change (Lowndes, 2005, pp.297-301). Institutional entrepreneurs may also draw upon ideas from other organisations with which they interact or may actively seek ideas from other organisations in their organisational environment.

Allmendinger (2011, p158) sees this characterisation of 'rule sets' as having a 'sticky' quality which results in 'inertia or continuity policy' due to deeply embedded cultures, practices, and organisational norms of behaviour resistant to change. Allmendinger (2011, p45) also argues that Schmidt's (2008) use of New Institutionalism Theory contributes to explaining how policy change occurs. This focuses on 'the role of

discourses within an institutionalised framework' and pays particular attention to the ideas which policy actors bring in the way these are carried forward into political practice.

Lowndes (2005) explains that as organisational environments change and past 'rules of the game' become less effective or relevant, institutions can face an erosion or breaking up of past certainties. This may,

'... open up creative spaces in which institutional entrepreneurs seek to adapt 'rules of the game' in order to respond to changing environments....'

(Lowndes, 2005,p306).

In these circumstances institutional entrepreneurs employ '....strategies of 'remembering', 'borrowing' and 'sharing' (Lowndes, 2005, p306) drawing on ideas and values from the past or from organisations in the same sector.

These perspectives suggest that the presence or absence of institutional entrepreneurs and how effective they are is a key factor in organisational change and survival. The absence of institutional entrepreneurs in the context of the life of the West Midlands Regional Assembly is discussed in Chapter 10¹⁸.

Schmidt's (2008) discussion of Discursive Institutionalism views two older versions of New Institutionalism Theories, (Historical and Rational Choice) as being too structurally orientated and to provide too little scope for individual agency operating through layers of discourse, especially over the development and communication of

¹⁸ See Section 10.5.2

ideas. In Schmidt's version discourse is both about how actors coordinate the development of policy but also,

'communication between political actors and the public in the presentation, deliberation, and legitimation of those ideas, against a background of overarching philosophies.'(2008, p332).

Furthermore the 'rules' are considered to be both acting as structures imposing on actors but also subject to actors' ability to generate changes to the rules or reinterpret them within the institutional context so that the actors can,

'.....create and *maintain* institutions while their foreground discursive abilities enable them to communicate critically about those institutions and so to change or *maintain* (them)' (Schmidt,2008, p332.emphasis added).

Although the development of Discursive Institutionalism has occurred chronologically after Historical Institutionalism, Rational Choice Theory and within Sociological Institutionalism the population ecology model (Peters, 2012), there are aspects of these that more closely map onto the behaviour of actor groups and my experience of participating in the WMRA. Taken together these theoretical elements helped to inform and frame the research questions and the subsequent analysis also draws on the contributions of Lowndes, Schmidt and Allmendinger.

However, this study seeks to go beyond Allmendinger's (2011) discussion of New Labour's planning reforms, spatial planning and the professional planning role, to examine the dynamics of regional planning and national institutions operating in a regions, the complexities of an assembly's membership and the inter-relationships this generated. The focus for this research, whilst including the national level is taken from the regional level. Here the (im)permanence and even fragility of the

institutions was in a different league to that of the institutions of government. Central government may modify itself and change dramatically, but it would continue to exist. It was therefore necessary to build on Allmendinger's account to explore what happens when institutions and organisations can no longer 'maintain' themselves, then fail, and to understand why this occurs.

This level of fragile stability changes the spatial and governance frame in which these theories apply. At a national level there is a structural 'permanence' (e.g. Rhodes, 1997) of the core governmental institutions which did not prevail at the regional level. In this context it was necessary to move beyond existing work to explain not only a consensus governance in crisis but related organisational demise.

It was also necessary to focus more directly on the functions of Regional Planning Bodies and Regional Housing Boards, whether devolved or delegated and what contribution they made, or could have made. The regional institutions and the planning and housing story over this period were complex with organisational actors interacting from many sectors and across spatial scales, that other relevant theories, especially within New Institutional Theories, were examined to understand the abolition of regional governance and regional planning. These further institutional theories are discussed in the next section. The abolition of all planning and housing regional activity and structures was so complete that the very vehemence of its demise is worthy of critical examination. What offended so greatly that such drastic measures were felt to be justified?

3.5 A Mosaic of Theories as an Integrating Concept¹⁹

Before going on to discuss aspects of New Institutional Theory as explained by Peters, (2012) the organising concept of a mosaic of theories is outlined.

Michael and Popov (2016) refer to the use of several theories to develop a 'mosaic' of theory which allows a more bespoke interlocking of several theoretical components to interpret the events and behaviours of key actors. Michael and Popov (2016) make the case that neither theories based on a deterministic view of the environment shaping an organisation nor a rational choice theory which expects government to anticipate and adapt to change in good time are sufficient explicators of behaviour in and around organisations. They argue for a 'mosaic view' of organisational theory' (Michael and Popov, 2016, p55) where different theories apply in time and circumstances.

The use of some New Institutional Theory by Allmendinger (2011), the structuring of time over the New Labour era and reference to the ideological back drop of neo-liberalism, are all used in this study. Three of the types of New Institutional Theories identified by Peters (2012) appear most applicable, in the light of my own experience, and apply to different aspects of the Assembly and its regional and national organisational environment. These were Historical Path Dependency in relation to the Secretariat senior management and regional planning function, aspects of Rational Choice Theory to illuminate how the Conservative nominated members of the Assembly conducted their role over time, and the population ecology model which contained analogous concepts which engaged with both a changing

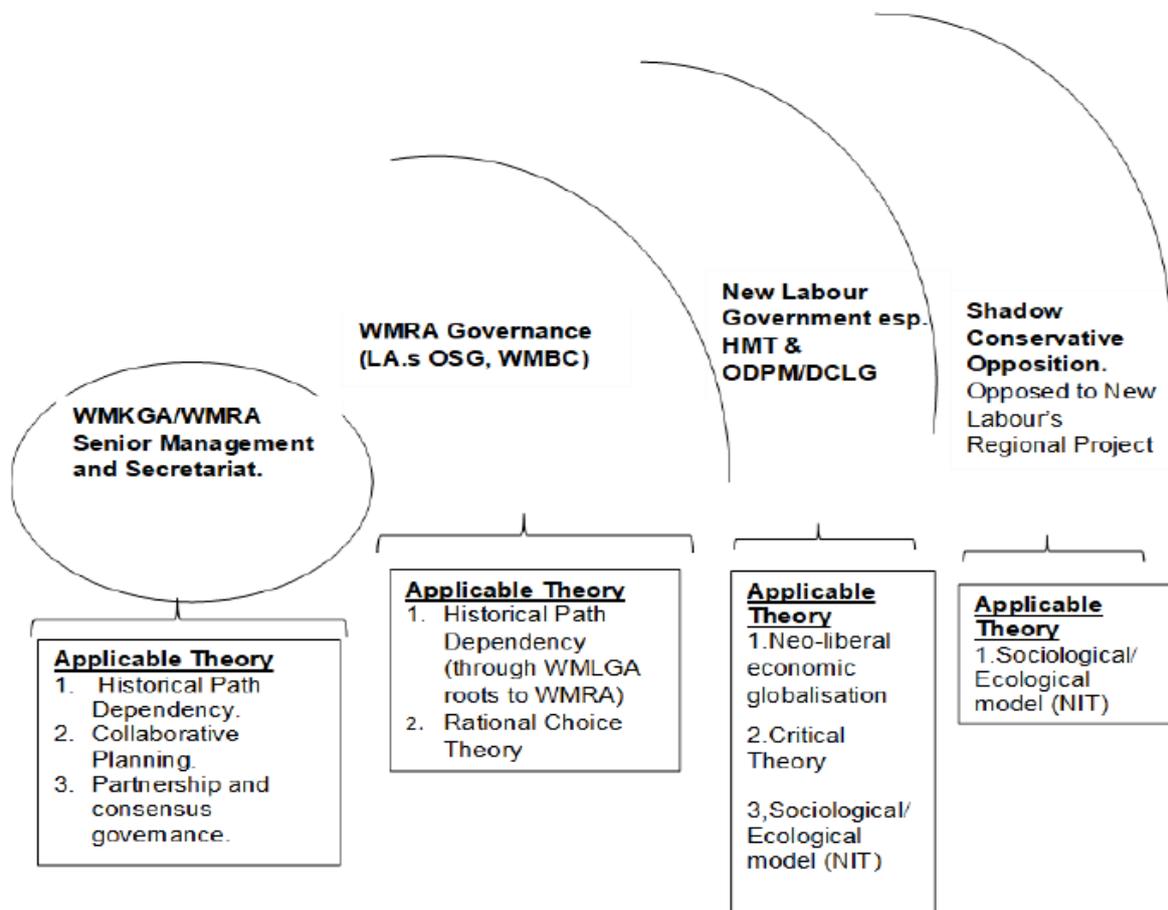
¹⁹ See Sections 10.11 and 11.8.4

organisational environment and the effect of a hostile or toxic environment for an organisation. Each of these is discussed in detail below.

Other theory which added insights and was capable of being applied to interpret in the actor interviews came from Collaborative Planning Theory (Healey, 2006) Critical Theory (Davies,2011), and Complexity Theory (Haynes,2003). The collaborative theory of Healey sat well alongside the Historical Institutionalism Theory in its relationship to the Assembly Secretariat and it's governance, Critical Theory embraced both a critique of collaborative planning and a link to the neo-liberal ideological backdrop that formed the immediate organisational environment until May 2010. Complexity Theory offered potential in helping to explain something of the Coalition Government's actions in 2010 in their swift removal of almost all the regional governance architecture.

Figure 3.1 maps this mosaic of NIT theories selected in relation to particular groups of actors and depicts the core of the mosaic of theory used to explain the demise of the WMRA. (Figure 10.5 builds on this core incorporating theory on organisational failure e.g. Anheier and Moulton,1999; Amankwah-Amoah, 2016.)

Figure 3.1. Theories used in the research grouped in relation to principal actor groups.
Source: Author



Appendix 3.1 summarises several theories considered but not used with discussion about their applicability to this study. These include Assumptive Worlds theory, and Institutional Logics and other approaches to New Institutional Theory (Peters, 2012).

3.6 The Relevance of New Institutional Theories to this Research

New Institutional Theories (Peters, 2012) focus on power relationships, the different levels at which ideas are debated, the informal and formal codes and rules which are employed and the extent to which institutions are driven by structural forces or whether individuals (agency) can account for some of the change processes that occur. This includes the values and justifications that organisations

and people, such as planners and political actors, use in their engagement in discussion and negotiation of policy, either in defence of the existing or as change is sought.

In exploring what type or types of New Institutional Theories (Peters, 2012) could be used in this thesis consideration was given to Normative, Rational Choice, Historical Path Dependency, Empirical, Discursive and Constructivist, within Sociological Institutionalism the 'Organisational and Population Ecology Model', and Interest Representation (Peters,2012). The key elements for explanations of change, including organisational failure were considered alongside my own WMRA experience. Each was appraised for its relevance and potential for understanding the course of regionalism and their relationship to my preliminary understanding of the course of events from 2003 to 2010.

From the appraisal of the theories discussed in this Chapter, it became apparent that no one theory would adequately embrace all the facets of the complex multi-layered English regional governance system. In particular, there were different frameworks of culture, history, ideology, belief, professional and locational identity which operated separately for key groups of regional actors. Beyond that there were another set of theoretical issues which lay at the national political level. Although it was possible to take this application of theory to a low level of resolution thereby examining say, the local authority officers designated to play regional planning roles, this was felt to be too detailed, and overly complex.

Three variants of NIT stood out as matching key aspects of one of the main actor groups as discussed in the section below. Historical Path Dependency and Rational Choice Theory applied to the WMRA Secretariat and its governance whereas the

population ecology model applies to the WMRA organisational environment, specifically in the New Labour era and then the subsequent Coalition Government from May 2010. These contributed to the development of the core research questions for interviews.

3.7 Historical institutionalism

Historical institutionalism's core features summarised by Peters (2012) refer to the early choices made at the beginning of an institution's existence about such matters as purposes, remits, and policies have an ongoing deterministic quality affecting subsequent decisions made by the institution. This 'path dependency' is seen to continue, 'until some significant force intervenes to divert them from established direction' (Peters, 2012, p21). Such persistence can result in a sub-optimal stasis in an institution but as long as this delivers sufficient contribution to the institution's goals, the perceived costs of change act as a barrier to major reform. Thus, decisions about choices made in the institution's past seem to shape how the institution behaves, even though past circumstances may no longer be relevant and therefore the theory takes a 'long run' perspective.

Literature on devolution and regionalisation (e.g. Bradbury and Mawson, 1997) suggests the applicability of 'path dependency' theory for England as a whole, and the West Midlands Region (Ayres et.al., 2002) with its long regional planning tradition (Chapman et al.,2000). Bengtsson and Ruonavaara (2010) refer to the rare use of path dependency theory in housing. They argue for identifying the 'efficiency mechanism of path dependence ... to do with the coordinating capacity of established institutions' (p195), a 'legitimacy mechanism' (p195) at work between society and political actors and a 'power mechanism' (p196) potentially affecting an

actor's power as well as their own and others perceptions of that power. However, this theory is criticised for being simplistic, vague or difficult to validate (Mahoney, 2000, Kay, 2005). Kay (2005) goes further, saying that the theory has been used,

‘without a clear and convincing account of decision-making....(it) explains only stability and not change....(but is)a useful concept for policy studies’ (p553).

Peters (2012) acknowledges some lack of clarity about the nature of path dependency such as whether this is an intended persistence or an, ‘inertial tendency for....initial policy choices to persist’ (p70). The way change is brought about is also unclear. For instance, policy can be seen to change in the face of political pressure. Peters (2012; p70) considers the role of individuals within institutions to be ‘vague’ but refers to ‘ideas’ as an agent of change affecting the way policy develops.

Historical Institutionalism appears more about the endurance of institutions, their structures, cultures and their policies. Major change is acknowledged in the life of institutions with the label, ‘punctuated equilibrium’ (Peters, 2012; p78). Some change is ‘slow burning’ evolving over time, ultimately leading to substantial change. Other institutional change can be more sudden and fundamental, even ‘revolutionary’, (Peters, 2012; p76). However, determining which processes or events are minor and which may be fundamental is not addressed in this theory.

3.8 Relevance of Historical Institutionalism to this Research

The core features of Historical Institutionalism are relevant for two inter-related aspects of regional working in the West Midlands Region. These are the long path of regional planning (Chapman et al.,2000), and the concomitant long running West Midlands Local Government Association, made up of and paid for by all the local

authorities in the Region. After its establishment in 1998 the WMRA was formed by the WMLGA which effectively controlled the Assembly's local authority governance. This gave WMLGA effective control over the WMRA despite minority membership from the business and civil, community, and third sector bodies. To this extent Historical Institutionalism's relevance was to the local governance aspects of the WMRA. The more tangible path dependency is in the course of the regional planning work embodied within the professional planning and senior management of the WMLGA and then WMRA Secretariat. So embedded were these two aspects in the political and professional culture, mind sets, and values of the WMLGA that their potential theoretical importance cannot be ignored.

Given the multiple pathways and complex interaction between the policy discourses the various institutions and actors at each spatial scale involved in regional governance, including RSS, Path Dependency had potential explanatory power in identifying key features of regional working in the West Midlands. The limitations of this theory, especially in accounting for major change, suggests other theory would be needed to explain the course of events leading more fully to the abolition of regional governance. By examining how the Assembly operated internally and in its external environment, it was possible either to add to this theory or show how, with other allied theory, the demise of regional governance could be understood.

3.9 Rational Choice Theory

Rational Choice Theory has aspects which help to interpret how nominated local authority members of the WMRA were possibly behaving. In Rational Choice Theory the behaviour of actors in institutions is driven by the 'utility-maximising decisions of individuals' (Peters, 2012; p47). As Peters acknowledges this theory places its

emphasis on individual actors deciding how best to maximise decisions in situations for their own benefit or 'utility' (p47). However, where groups of such actors have coinciding interests their institutional impact is the greater and more defined by their collective self-interest even if at root their motivations are individually generated in their own political context, such as their own political reputation and re-electability.

In this theory the boundaries of individual political behaviour set by, 'rules (which) establish the conditions for rationality', (Peters, 2012; p48). This creates 'a "political space" within which... independent political actors... function.' (Peters, 2012; p48).

The concept of institutions in this theory is defined by these rules and the way they shape the behaviour of political actors (Peters, 2012).

3.10 Relevance of Rational Choice Theory to this Research

In the WMRA context, the institutional component to which this theory most closely applies relates to the different political parties within the governance structures of the Assembly. Increasingly from 2003, Conservative Party Assembly members were nominated by local authorities. As nominees the assumption was that members shared a prior approval and commitment to the approved Regional Planning Guidance with its central strategy of Urban Renaissance and shift of future housebuilding away from rural areas to the urban metropolitan core of the West Midlands.

Peters (2012) refers to rules being more built into an institution rather than something that evolves. Such rule sets could include government's prescriptive requirements for the production of a regional spatial strategy, the organisational substructures, processes and consultation arrangements. These statutory and

regulatory frameworks defined behaviour of the Assembly as Regional Planning Body within a bespoke quasi-judicial national planning system.

Whilst membership of the WMRA was not mandatory for local government politicians, and Conservative members' involvement was often one of pragmatic tolerance. Rational Choice Theory suggests their membership together with their associated acceptance of the rules, implied there was some exchange of benefits derived from membership of the Assembly. The collaborative nature of Assembly working can be seen to be consistent with Rational Choice Theory where an important benefit can be obtained through ensuring, 'some greater predictability of the behaviour on the part of other individuals....constrained by institutional membership.' (Peters, 2012; p 53). In this theory Peters (2012) refers to a characteristic of institutions that the essential rules are agreed at the outset so that all those engaged in the institution believe they have a common understanding about what they are participating in. For local authority members nominated to the Assembly the question arises as to whether the degree to which this understanding was undermined or even betrayed, by the way in which the rules of the game were changed or subsequently reinterpreted and whether the benefits of membership came to be seen as a potential threat to members political interests.

Peters (2012; p57) refers to 'game-theory versions' of this theory in which legislative actors try to ensure administrators and professionals work in 'compliance' (p57) with their legislative policy agenda. In the case of the Assembly the game was not so much with the administrators and professionals as with the local government nominated members of the Assembly who were themselves politicians with their own political 'game' to manage.

In this game theoretic version, Peters (2012) explains the 'game' is where those involved in the institution, 'construct a pay-off matrix that makes it in the interest of all those actors to comply' (p 57). If an institution is expected to have a long life there will be several cycles of decision-making in which actors, 'can make up for losses on one round in subsequent iterations of the "game."' (p 54). In this case the theory suggests, 'from the perspective of rationality, if the means of making stable choices is not present ... there is an extremely contentious political environment' (Peters, 2012; p54).

Thus where the future life of the institution is uncertain with the possibility either, that the institution may be closed before the next iteration of the game or may continue in some form (as with the WMRA immediately prior to the May 2010 election), political actors within the Assembly had to manage their position with care. If the RSS revision 'game' were to be played through only one cycle of revision, nominated Conservative politicians might consider a different course of action than if some sort of continuity was expected. Peters (2012) notes that if the 'game' has only one round then actors may defect from the institution or cease to comply. In these circumstances they may seek to win by ignoring any consensual institutional rules without fear of negative repercussions. This suggests that political actors may behave very differently from the theory-based expectation of rule compliance found in other forms of New Institutional Theory.

3.11 Sociological Institution Theory: Organisational and Population Ecology Model

The two New Institutional Theories discussed above relate to the Assembly Secretariat and its governance and have been selected to help explain how these actors behaved in their own right and in relation to each other.

Sociological Institution Theory complements these approaches by providing a population ecology model which connects these actors to the Assembly's national political environment and the theories applied to the Assembly actors, even though this sociological approach is, '....indirect opposition to the rationalistic roots of Rational Choice Theory.' (Peters, 2012; p 142).

Peters (2012) suggests one of the most relevant aspects of Sociological Institutionalism for the public sector is organisational ecology (Hannan and Freeman, 1989) and population ecology models of organisations (Lowery, et.al., 2015). At its core the population ecology model regards organisational behaviour as analogous to the behaviour of 'populations of biological organisms' (Peters, 2012; p132). Thus within a given biological environment only so many organisms can survive, and it this conceptual metaphor that is used as a model to interpret the organisational environment.

The organisational environment is said to have a specific carrying capability which limits the number of organisations that can survive in that environment. It also suggests that in an organisational environment for a particular domain there will be an ideal organisational form to which bodies will be drawn into conformity. This concept of 'isomorphism' (Hannan and Freeman, 1989; Peters, 2012; Halpin, 2015) finds that organisations evolve towards similar designs in order to succeed in securing resources in a given environment and treats the advantages to be achieved in accessing resources as the dynamic behind the evolutionary style process whereby those who fail to conform cease to continue . It follows from this that, '....distance from the ideal is a strong predictor of organisational survival or failure.' (Halpin, 2015, p232). However, whereas biological organisms do not possess the ability to change themselves within the timeframes of ecological change,

organisations may have a more rapid adaptive capability therefore a more flexible responsiveness to their environment than a strict application of the population ecology model might suggest.

The organisational environment is said to be divided into 'niches' which have specific qualities that allow particular types of organisation to survive. These characteristics include statutory and regulatory authority, institutional political support, and wider public political support (Peters, 2012, p132). Peters (2012, p132) explains that 'Some niches are "wider" than others...' which allows a greater variety of organisations to operate successfully. However, one of the most important aspects of the population ecology model, 'is the survival of organisations in this presumably hostile environment.' (Peters, 2012, p132), which may offer some insight into the vulnerability of organisations.

One insight from this model is that both very young and very old organisations are particularly prone to failing. Any prejudicial changes in the 'carrying capacity' of a given organisation environment will adversely affect the ability of organisations to survive (Peters, 2012). The particular contribution of this theory, '.... is to emphasise the dependence of institutions on their environment, and their "embeddedness" in society....'. (Peters, 2012, p133). This theory also implies that organisations are in competition with each other for survival, whether through influence in public or professional realms, or in government. As Peters (2012) observes, failure to adapt results in organisations ceasing to exist.

Sociological Institutionalism has also contributed the concept of 'sedimentation' (Peters, 2012, p134) whereby organisations accumulate layers of values and experiences throughout their lives. This concept is similar to that of 'layering' in

Historical Institutionalism. These layers of historical experience accumulated in organisations become preserved and form part of a deep institutional memory which contributes to the way organisations undertake internal change. The weight of this historical legacy can make change slower (Peters, 2012), and the theory raises questions about, whether this feature of organisations inhibits change or affects their ability to respond quickly enough to external change.

Peters discusses the relationship between Discursive Institutionalism and Sociological Institutionalism and states,

‘...in order to understand the role that ideas play in shaping policy one must understand the entire discourse within which it is embedded.’ (2012, p 136).

At a practical level this raises the question whether an ‘evidence-based policy approach’, to regional policy formulation in spatial planning failed and dramatically contributed to a changing political climate against regionalism. Communication with the wider public over policy may have failed. This raises a question of how, if at all, the rationale for regional planning for housing policy was handled and whether this was affected by the complexity of the regional architecture. If policy was to receive public approval, especially when contentious, it needed to transmit clearly its rationale from formulation to implementation across numerous layers of organisations and actors in numerous places and against a changing political environment over time.

Peters also notes that one of the roles of institutions is to, ‘control social behaviour more generally in society’ (2012; p138). Regional working and regional planning could be seen in this light and in the absence of a consensus for its remit, or even an understanding of its public purpose, such control as the regional spatial strategy was

seen as imposing on local development plans and hence housebuilding, would be perceived as lacking legitimacy.

According to Peters (2012, p140) sociological institutionalism has a positive tendency to consider that organisations, '....must, and will, find means of adapting to changes in their environment'. The expectation is that organisations will see the threats they face in their environment and find appropriate solutions by adapting their organisations to conform to these external forces. Further, Peters (2012), refers to a tendency for organisations to attempt to shape their external environment to meet their own needs for continuity and anticipates this will happen in the public sector. These ideas raise questions for how the WMRA behaved in the face of external organisational threats and challenges.

Nownes (2004) explanation that the population ecology model focus is on sectoral organisational populations rather than specific individual organisations and that, 'change in the organisational world is primarily a function of organisational selection rather than organisational adaptation' (Nownes, 2004; p32).

Change occurs across an organisational niche such that organisational populations are subject to Darwinian style adaptive change. Those organisations not capable of adapting are replaced with new organisations rather than attempts to achieve managed change within an organisation (Halpin, 2015). An understanding of what happens at the 'niche' level maybe helpful but the idea that some sort of Darwinian selection occurs does not allow for individual organisations to attempt internal change in order to survive. It ignores the possibility of individual actors, and policy entrepreneurs attempting to institute change.

3.12 The Relevance of Population Ecology Model to this research.

The use of the population ecology model (Peters, 2012) helps understand the relationship between the actions and perspectives of the Assembly, its national political environment, and its wider regional-local political environment. Several of the concepts discussed above resonate closely with the observed course of English regionalism particularly in the later part of the New Labour era. This theory emphasises how organisations are dependent on their environment and their degree of embeddedness in society, especially where society presents a 'hostile environment' (Peters, 2012; p132). The finding that the age of organisations, both young and old, are at high risk of failure offers an intriguing possibility that as a very young organisation WMRA was vulnerable, but at the same time, given its roots in the West Midlands Local Government Association the Assembly could also be considered part of an old organisation. The concept of the regional spatial scale becoming a crowded niche and this itself contributing to hostile organisational environment again matches with the observable course of events.

As referenced above, there is an expectation in this and other New Institutional Theories that organisations adapt to their external environment, but few theories offer explanations of organisational demise. The population ecology model does address this aspect and is therefore an appropriate theory for this research. Given the strong historical tradition of regional working in the West Midlands, especially in planning, and how regional working through the WMRA became particularly turbulent and difficult for some Conservative local authority members, selected aspects of historical institutionalism, rational choice theory and the population ecology model all justifiably contribute to the theoretical approach to this research.

3.13 Other Theoretical Contributions

Elements of other theories also offered particular insights which have been incorporated into the research design. Specific questions were designed to ensure these elements were not overlooked, and where possible, incorporated into the mosaic of theory.

The idea of collaborative planning (Healey, 2006) emphasises institutional infrastructure and processes which are more about client consumers of policy than government producers and is contrasted with technocratic, corporatist governance. Healey had a clear normative stance with regard to new forms of partnership and devolved governance, described as coming within the field of 'Sociological Institutionalism' (Healey, 2006 p326). This involved a collaborative, people sensitive, governance in which competing stakeholders have 'shared – power worlds' (Healey, 2006, p205). Policy making processes were seen as more legitimate, better coordinated, creative, inclusive of all stakeholders but. Healey challenged a tendency for 'collaborative approaches..... to be overly-concerned with consensus-building rather than working with the energy of conflict and contestation.' (Healey, 2006, p320). Given the centrality of consensus to the West Midlands Regional Assembly partnership and network policy development this is an important area of examination.

The implications of seeing the policy priorities of the Labour Government as bound and directed by its embrace of neo- liberal globalisation (Allmendinger, 2011) needs to be tied more closely to the theoretical understanding of the working of the Assembly. Davies's (2011) discussion of Critical Theory, and its engagement with earlier Governance theories (e.g.Rhodes,1997) provides some theoretical concepts

for seeing neo-liberalism not just as an-ideological backdrop but to explain central government actions towards regional assemblies. This compliments the population ecology model in accounting for the changing relationship between Government and regional assemblies over time.

Davies (2011) criticises the network governance theories (e.g. Marsh, 2008; Rhodes, 1997) on several grounds, including their 'normative bias towards networks' (p2), and the treatment of 'trust' and whether it, 'really holds networks together and....whether this is... a good thing, ' (p2). Davies is not convinced that hierarchical, top-down, governance has given way to network governance. This supposed source of partnership and consensus working was intended to characterise the way WMRA functioned with local government, civic society and other horizontally related regional bodies. However, for Davies "network' governance... look(s) very like the... hierarchies they were supposed to replace.' (2011, p 3).

Applying theoretical concepts from Gramsci, Davies, 'argues that coercion is the immanent condition of consent inherent in capitalist modernity' (2011; p5). Referring critically to the network management and governance approaches of Kickert, et al. (1997), Davies refers to the construct of network governance which deploys 'directed influencing' (2011; p13) with actors working collectively to achieve 'win-win' policy solutions for all participants. Davies refers to an ideology of network governance as core to neo-liberal hegemony but acknowledges that network governance may have achieved some degree of de-politicised influence. However, Davies argues that this influence 'cannot transcend hierarchy' (2011; p8), which remains at the heart of the system of government.

Quite powerfully redolent of the values governing WMRA's partnership working, Davies summarises Kickert et al.'s (1997) concept of networking as a 'consensus-orientated mode of coordination, encouraging the mutual adjustment of actors' behaviour' (2011, p13). This view of partnership working is regarded by Davies as optimistic and dependent on a

'...value system of mutual interest trust and reciprocity' across state market and civil society' (Stewart, 2003 quoted in Davies, 2011; p14).

The place of trust as the 'glue' (Davies, 2011; p14), is central and without this network governance cannot act effectively.

However, Davies (2011; p66) argues that the success of this trust-based approach, 'seems highly counterintuitive' as the trend is towards 'externally regulated behaviour'. Trust is seen as a serious problem for the continuation of network governance, partnership and consensus working. Trust may be too weak to bear the weight of the political tasks in which partnership is engaged. Pragmatism in partnership work seems a more likely basis than the ideal of trust-based collaboration. Where trust-based partnerships appear to exist they may be based on false foundations such as an organisational cultural imperative imposed on its members' behaviour, 'particularly in collaborative institutions where politicised discourse is taboo.' (Davies, 2012; p67). This may generate an inability to see how other participants approach the partnership which may then be seen to be founded on a 'false premise, that of naïve trust' (p67). These critical and challenging concepts are considered to be helpful in both formulating and analysing the interview questionnaires.

The concept of 'hegemony' can be applied to how government interacted with regional institutions. Hegemony in its 'ideal' form would be realised when all resources including social, are drawn together to achieve the single goals of economic and political fields contributing,

'additional power..... to a dominant group in virtue of its capacity to lead society in a direction that not only serves the dominant group's interests is also perceived by subordinate groups as serving a more general interest.'
(Arrighi, 2005, quoted with original emphasis in Davies, 2011; p103).

The Labour Government began its regional project by encouraging concepts of devolved responsibility to interpret local evidence as the basis for devising regional strategic planning policy and regional housing strategy. Government sought the creation of local housing and planning partnerships and sub regional strategy development as the localised basis for achieving a consensus around these policies. The way in which the possibly naïve, consensus-based spirit of this earlier era was supplanted by the Government as it sought to impose its hierarchical control, maps well onto the Gramscian concept of hegemony. The element of time again featured strongly in the transition experienced at the regional level as it was affected by the outcome of intra-governmental arguments about regional planning in particular.

For these reasons, these Critical Theory concepts (Davies,2011) were used in the research design augmenting the theoretical approach to understanding how the organisational environment at a national level impacted on the regional, and for insight into how the concepts of trust in consensus based partnership working were justified and genuine, or illusory.

Turning to Complexity Theory; in a discussion about organisations facing major transformational change, Haynes (2003, p37) commented that, 'managers sometimes welcome disorder if this opens up opportunities for exploring new ways of doing things and opportunities to evolve.'. Given the Coalition Government's swift abolition of almost all things regional in 2010 the idea that government might be motivated to accept the loss of professional and institutional memory around regional working, and to dismantle strategic planning across local authority boundaries to see what might be required later, seemed a relevant question for those who might have insights into Conservative policy intentions before 2010. The validity of pursuing this was underscored in a BBC interview with Danny Kruger, special adviser to the Conservative Party Leader, David Cameron who said in the 2005 General Election, the Conservatives believed in 'a period of creative destruction in the public services' (BBC,2010), which he attributed to Conservative philosophy;

'..... the idea of liberal economics, which is all that creative destruction means, is part of the heritage of the Conservative Party...'(BBC, 2010).

When asked about the validity of this question, Civil servant CV2 agreed, 'Yes, I buy that, it is the old... Schumpeter creative destruction'.

Two other concepts from Haynes (2003) application of Complexity Theory in the public realm are used; 'bifurcation' (p33) and 'edge of chaos' (pp33-34). Haynes summarises these as,

'Bifurcation is the point in time when organisations and systems are both on the edge of chaos and subject to dramatic change' (p33).

At such times organisations face very unpredictable futures and may grow dramatically 'or die altogether.' (Haynes, 2003; p33).

3.14 Conclusion

This Chapter has identified the various theories that have informed the approach adopted and built upon in this thesis. At several points aspects of New Institutional Theories (Peters, 2012) resonated with the research questions related to the WMRA. These are summarised below and discussed in more detail in the light of the completed research in Chapters 10 and 11. The relationships between the key actor groups and the theories which seemed most relevant to the study are summarised in Table 3.1 below.

Table 3.1 Summary of the Relationship between the WMRA Key Actor Groups, their Political Organisational Environment and the Mosaic of Theories.
Source: Author's Application of Theories Discussed in Chapter 3

Key Actor Groups	Theories related to Actor Groups
WMRA -Secretariat including Regional Planning staff	Historical Institutionalism -Path Dependency – (Peters 1999) Partnership working (Healey, 2006) 'Collaborative Planning: Shaping Places in Fragmented Societies'
WMRA Senior managers	Partnership and consensus working (Governance Theory – devolved power) Historical Path Dependency: Rooted in political continuity of WMLGA to WMRA and history of regional planning.
WMRA -governance members (Local Authorities Other Stakeholder Groups, West Midlands Business Council (WMBC)	Some local authority members – Historical Path Dependency through WMLGA roots to WMRA. Rational Choice Theory – layers game for political advantage and survival (vis Government, neighbouring local authorities, historical West Midlands metropolitan -shire tensions; internal local authorities political management, ownership of or distancing from WMRA and RSS planning policy for housing.
Regional Agencies operating in the West Midlands	WMRA acting together under the West Midlands Concordat – governance theory and Collaborative approach (Healey,2006) but also driven by logic of national government's ideology and determination to achieve its growth objectives.

Table 3.1 Continued	
Key Actor Groups	Theories related to Actor Groups (Continued)
National Level – Civil Servants under New Labour,	<p>Neo-liberal economic globalisation and competitive approach – Critical Theory (Davies,2011) assertive hegemony over devolved partnership working, (momentum to autocratic government), Intervention in supposed devolved regional planning.</p> <p>Sociological/ Ecological model (NIT) -degree (and lack) of awareness by WMRA of extent to which wider political climate was becoming increasingly hostile (toxic) to regional working.</p>
Conservative national level.	<p>Shire Conservative anti- regional lobbying: RCT game to change ‘the game’ rather than continue to play another round of RSS planning policy review.</p> <p>Sociological/ Ecological model (NIT). Awareness of wider political climate had become toxic towards the survival of regional working, including regional planning. Carrying capacity of external political environment declined sharply, as Conservative critique of ‘Big State’ (seen as overcrowded with public sector organisations) was replaced by ‘Small State’ policy principles.</p> <p>Complexity Theory- radical clearance of all previous regional governance and planning and cultures, values and legacy of HPD. Wait and see what sub national arrangements might emerge. These will be fostered if they reflect the new ‘Small State’ version of neo-liberal economic philosophy.</p> <p>Critical Theory: -New Labour increasingly revealed a centralising hegemony despite their devolution policy and legislation.</p> <p>Coalition government policy revealed powerful hegemonic control determination in the guise of localism.</p>
WMRA demise	<p>Integrative analysis using Amankwah-Amoah’s (2016) factors in private sector organisational failure adapted for WMRA’s demise.</p> <p>The identification of key factors in organisational demise were used to integrate the core mosaic of theories and their insights into a comprehensive model of WMRA demise and to suggest how this could be applied in other examples of public sector organisational failure, or closure.</p>

The questions generated for the interview questionnaires²⁰ were developed from the theoretical concepts in this Chapter and are discussed in the following Chapter. The Analysis Chapter¹⁰ draws together and integrates the findings from this mosaic of theory in order to provide the overarching theoretical insights based on the WMRA experience into how regional working was first seriously reformed by New Labour in 2009 and then abolished by the Coalition Government in 2010.

The next Chapter 4, Methodology goes into detail about the process of designing the research based on the issues generated by the research questions, the mosaic of theory applied to each of the main actor groups and the inter-relations between these and the WMRA's organisational environment.

²⁰ Examples of the Questionnaires are given in Appendix 4.7

CHAPTER 4 METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

This Chapter explains the approach taken to answering the research questions, through the design of a case study, using thirty semi-structured interviews. It examines in detail my personal contribution through participant observation in retrospect and the measures taken to be explicit about how this contribution shaped the research and how personal bias was addressed. The detailed aspects of operationalising the theoretical framework into research questions is discussed as are the ethical issues. The selection of who to interview and the issues this generated are explained. Reflections on the practical and theoretical aspects of conducting the research conclude the Chapter.

4.2 The Research Questions

As presented in Figure 1.2 the research questions were: 'What explains the demise of the New Labour English Regional Assemblies, and how this came about?'; Why was Regional Planning as the English Strategic Spatial Planning of the time (outside of London and the devolved nations), abolished?; What was the role played by planning for housing with implications for the future?, and 'What else led to the ending of regional assemblies and regional structures? These research questions engage with the closure of regional assemblies (and their replacement Leaders' Boards) in 2010, the speed of decisions and the absence of any robust transitional arrangements following the repeal of regional planning functions.

4.3 Research Design

Several approaches to undertaking this research were possible. Table 4.1 presents the approaches considered and a summary of the strengths and weaknesses of each and summarises the rationale for using a West Midlands case study.

Table 4.1 Alternative Research Designs and Feasibility Summary.
Source, Author adapted from Yin (2009)

Alternative Research Designs	Summary Evaluation
<p>Multiple case study Documentary Attempt research across several regions in a multiple case study by use of documentary, sources e.g. Assembly minutes, press articles, RSS planning documents</p>	<p>Although I had access to some policy individuals in all Assemblies, which made this feasible, such a study would necessarily be shallow and lack geographical focus. The dilution of my West Midlands experience arguably would work to lessen any bias on my part. However, the scale of documentary research required could have made it unmanageable in the time available and was unlikely to produce enough insight into the range of questions generated by the theoretical issues.</p>
<p>Multiple case study Interviews Research across several regions by means of interviews with key individuals, political Assembly members from Local Authorities and Secretariats.</p>	<p>As above plus Insights likely to be limited due to too few interviews in each region and a lack of depth or understanding of the tensions and dynamics of actor groups in each assembly.</p>
<p>A Single Regional Case Study A West Midlands case study of Regional Assembly abolition viewed from the West Midlands by means of documentation</p>	<p>Documentation would not allow the in depth understanding to be gained from interviews. The risk of my own bias being placed upon the interpretation of the data would be higher than with interviews taken from a wide range of stand points. Countervailing views would not be well sourced or strongly heard in this approach.</p>
<p>A West Midlands case study based upon interviews with key actors, political and professional</p>	<p><u>Feasible</u> – My own role allowed me to act as a Participant Observer (in retrospect) to the events from 2003 to 2010. In addition, I had, A wide range of willing personal contacts Access to Assembly archives and press cuttings Research could be conducted in depth before time eroded detailed recollection.</p>

Yin (2009) gives three categories of reasons to have a research design of one case study. Each of these is appraised against the primary research question in order to set out the reasoning for a single case study approach. The assessment presented in Table 4.2 shows the WMRA was typical of English regions in that it shared the same external political environment but was both unique and significant because of its contested inter-face with central government.

Table 4.2 Testing the Primary Research Question against Yin's Criteria for a Single Case Study. Source: Author adapted from Yin 2009 pp47-48

<p>1. Critical case to test 'a well- formulated theory'. Clear set of propositions Clear understanding of circumstances in which the theory is believed to hold true.</p>	<p>No such well- formulated theory is available. The theoretical understanding is likely to be complex as the course of events had aspects which ran counter to recent governance theory, and path dependency if applied strictly to the regional tier. It was not clear at the outset whether theories which address abrupt change could use the West Midlands Regional Assembly experience as a critical case.</p>
<p>2. The case is extreme or unique</p>	<p>There were eight devolved regions so there is little substance to regard the West Midlands experience or contribution to national issues as 'extreme'. However, the WMRA case did exemplify uniquely contested key policy space with Central Government over the place of new housing in the RSS as a growth aspiration of the Labour Government.</p> <p>The uniqueness of the WMRA position was that it was the first to have an RSS approved (in 2004) and it was in the vanguard of testing and experiencing government's shifting attitude towards Assemblies as RPBs.</p>
<p>3. The case is typical or representative. The lessons learned would be considered representative or 'average' for the type of case</p>	<p>The West Midlands is not an 'average' region in England though it shares economic characteristics of both the North and the South of England. In this sense it is a microcosm of English economic geography (as asserted by CV3).</p> <p>In broader terms the national political environment was shared by all assemblies and in this regard the WMRA was typical.</p>

4.3.1 The Reasons for Selecting the West Midlands as a Case Study.

It was clear to me from the outset that a case study based on the West Midlands would be worthy of research first, because of its unique conflict at a crucial and particular point in time. with the Labour Government and second my awareness of the growing political grievance against the pressure to build more homes in the Shire areas notwithstanding the formal unanimity of the local authorities in their continued support for the RSS Revision as it sought to respond to this pressure.

The conflict coloured the Assembly's regional planning dealings with Government leading up to the submission of the RSS Revision (Phase 2) Preferred Option in December 2007 and the subsequent events as described in Chapter 5. This conflict afforded me insight into the political ramifications it generated among some of the WMRA's governance members.

This specific and singular conflict with Government which responded in a unprecedented manner came to a head with the minister, Baroness Andrews' letter of January 2008 responding to the submitted RSS Revision Phase 2 Preferred Option and further developed by the letter of the Minister for Housing and Planning (Caroline Flint) in July 2008, pointing out the unique position of the West Midlands at that stage, and reminding the Assembly that Government had taken steps to obtain evidence on how additional housing numbers could be accommodated the RSS Revision at the Examination in Public (EiP). The Minister noted the significance of the WMRA's position in that it would be the first to have to address the NHPAU's evidence at an EiP, saying,

‘The West Midlands is at a different stage in the RSS revision process to other regions and there is an opportunity in the West Midlands for NHPAU's

advice to be considered through the current Phase 2 RSS revision' (Flint, 2008).

The Minister further directed the Assembly to, '...also take into account the NHPAU advice. Attached to this letter is more detailed guidance on how we expect that to be done', (Annex to the Flint (2008) letter).

This uniqueness in the course of New Labour's English regional planning (i.e. postponing an EiP, commissioning counter evidence and directing the WMRA to be the first region to engage with the NHPAU on its terms in accordance with Government guidance) set the WMRA apart from the other regions in the final years of New Labour's period in office.

These political circumstances focused on the West Midlands were watched by the other English regions to see how the Government were going to deal with a recalcitrant region being the first to pass through the unique twin circumstances of facing evidence from the NHPAU and Government procured counter evidence (NLP, 2008a; 2008b).

These events and their significance for research were well known to me as they had been part of my contemporary professional experience. Furthermore, notwithstanding the unanimity of the West Midlands local authorities formal and unanimous ongoing to support the RSS Revision from 2007 to the EiP in 2009, I had heard councillors (mainly Conservative) in both formal and informal settings express their political dissatisfaction with the emerging effect on their constituencies of GOWM/ DCLG pressure to build more homes in their areas. These opinions came from some but not all parts of the Region. Given the strength of feeling with which these views were expressed it seemed reasonable to conceive that these councillors

could be sufficiently aggrieved to express these views to Conservative shadow ministers and take political action covertly against the regional planning processes of New Labour. At that stage it was unclear how these councillors felt about the WMRA itself and whether it was regarded as complicit or a channel of useful resistance to Labour's housing growth pressures.

If these councillors felt aggrieved enough to act, the same may have been true in other regions. Later during the research interview phase civil servant, CV3, referred to the South East of England, the East of England and the South West as also being resistant to housing numbers. The covert action taken by regional political actors was later borne out by a national Conservative politician SMC1. On this issue the West Midlands was probably not unique but did seem to be among a group of regions with similar pressures and concerns.

This depth of study offered in the West Midlands, was deeper than I could have achieved in any other region. The justification for a West Midlands case study lies, therefore, in its capacity to reveal the processes at work in the vanguard of the challenge posed to Government and vice versa.

4.3.2 Methodological Advantages of using the WMRA

Having established the West Midlands was a valid and meaningful basis for a research case study my insider position presented the opportunity to shape the methodology, in part, by allowing me to draw upon my prior recent involvement by means of Participant Observation in Retrospect explained in Section 4.10.

My insider position meant that I could approach a West Midlands case study with an existing knowledge of people, organisations and events that would have taken another researcher a considerable amount of time to absorb. This prior knowledge

would have been less in any other region. It also enabled me to approach a case study of the West Midlands Regional Assembly with an appreciation of the wide range of potential interviewees, each with insight into their particular component of the regional governance and planning system.

The case study selection outlined above enabled me to undertake the research in the Region where I knew the processes and organisational interactions that had played out. This enabled me to contribute to the shaping of the research through my prior participation in both the RSS Revision, the Regional Housing Strategy, with regional bodies and with some officers and members of local authorities at a senior level. This allowed a form of 'Participant Observation in Retrospect' to underpin the research design. I knew, with varying degrees of depth, most of the regional actors relevant to this research and had participated in many of, but not all, the meetings and processes that had occurred in strategy making and in ongoing liaison with regional and government bodies.

Equally important, I was 'in the office' and an integral part of the culture, the debate and discussion. I observed the changing mood and reactions to events as they unfolded. I saw how these impacted primarily on the Assembly Secretariat and senior managers. The impact was also discernible on the political Regional Planning and Housing Boards, associated structures involving local authority officers plus many from the Other Stakeholder Group, business sectors and other regional bodies. I had access to the archives of the Assembly, especially the Regional Planning Body on the RSS revision process.

However, the advantages afforded by my insider participant observation in retrospect approach were not a fully sufficient condition for choosing the West Midlands. It was

also important to be sure that the West Midlands example would provide at least as good a case study as any other region. In this context the pressures in the West Midlands arising from the planning for housing issues were shared by other regions.

4.3.3 Reasons for not Undertaking Multiple Case Studies

At the outset of the research design I had considered carrying out more than one case study to allow comparisons to be made and to establish whether the West Midlands experience was corroborated by other regional experiences or whether the West Midlands had played a unique part in the outworking of New Labour's approach to regional planning.²¹ I soon realised this would create either a superficial or a very lopsided study in its coverage and depth. To make the study manageable it would have been necessary to limit the range of people interviewed. In addition it would not have been possible to achieve a comparable level of insight, including contextual, about other regions' – their detailed planning history, insider understanding of governance issues, relations with other regional bodies, awareness of their RSS production and planning for housing issues with DCLG. The extent to which each of these could have been covered would have been shallow and very difficult to triangulate within other regions' interviewees' accounts. The result would have doubly weakened the research. The West Midlands case study would have had to be scaled back to accommodate the inclusion of additional regions. The outcome would have been a less thorough exploration of any region and reduced ability to triangulate data between different actor groups, a significant strength of the single West Midlands case study. Some of the important analysis of the range of interviewees in the West Midlands would have had to be sacrificed, weakening the

²¹ See also Section 4.18 Reflective Assessment of Research Method.

account and leaving it open to challenge that it had not extended to some key people or organisational relationships that had a bearing on the research. Any attempted comparison between less comprehensive case studies would be likely to lack the degree of penetration and insights required to achieve explanatory power to draw meaningful conclusions. It is also not clear that the same theoretical framework could have been applied and would most likely have needed to be adjusted for each additional region. The loss of effectiveness overall would have been exacerbated by the constraints on thesis word length.

It was for these reasons I decided not to proceed with a multiple case study and proceeded with a research design for the West Midlands and a research methodology that capitalised on my insider perspective, aware that there were key characteristics of this particular regional planning experience that were unique in their timing reinforcing the soundness of the decision to use this region for research.

4.3.4 Meeting Yin's (2009) Criteria for a Single Case Study Research Design

In Yin's (2009) terminology the West Midlands RA had 'unique' characteristics that make it suitable for a case study to explore the research questions in this thesis. At its heart the uniqueness criteria lies in the New Labour Government's suspension of the progress to the EiP in order to collect and present alternative housing land proposals to the EiP Panel was an unprecedented move which adds to the value of using the WMRA in this study. The circumstances that applied at this critical stage to the West Midlands Region were 'exceptional' using Yin's (2009) criteria and were relevant to the outcome for the regional project as a whole under New Labour. The conflict with the West Midlands drew the hostile attention of ministers as exemplified by the language and argument in the letters from ministers Baroness Andrews

(2008) and Caroline Flint (2008). The West Midlands became a test-bed for New Labour operating its regional policy and governmental machinery, revealing its willingness to confront and seek to override rather than acknowledge the consequences of hitherto 'devolved' policy responsibility. The actions of the New Labour Government towards the WMRA were 'unique' (Yin, 2009) and contributed to the decisions to abolish assemblies and transfer statutory planning functions to RDAs more than the events in any other region.

Secondary advantages arising from selection of the West Midlands case included the extent to which the West Midlands could be characterised, as it so often was by the WMRA, as a region that broadly reflected the north- south economic and housing profiles of England. Using Yin's (2009) terminology, although the West Midlands was neither a 'sample' nor a 'typical' English Region, it did act as a microcosm of English regions. It experienced both the problems of economic decline, with associated housing stress in north Staffordshire and North Warwickshire, and overheated and under supplied housing markets, in the south of the Region. This was accompanied by widespread social housing need across the West Midlands (WMRA, 2005).

The different actor groups²² provided their own perspectives on the events that are highlighted in Chapter 5. It shares with the other regions a national narrative of key events, legislation, policy development and navigation of major national level inputs to regional working and regional planning. Each set of actor perspectives differed giving distinctive understandings of the significance of these events as drawn out in the Analysis (Chapter 10). It is the range of perspectives obtained and the triangulation of the different views by actor groups within the West Midlands that

²² Selection of the interviewees is discussed at Section 4.13.

demonstrate the strength of this research and contribute to the justification of a single case study research design. This method contributed a much richer and more nuanced account than was likely to have been achieved from a smaller number of more homogenous or 'usual suspect' actors. Had I used a multi case study design it would probably have been limited in the access I would have been given. To achieve the quality of insight I achieved required a focus in depth on one region with a substantial analysis of triangulation, establishing significant different perceptions and accounts between actors.

Thus for the research design I decided to pursue a single West Midlands based case study, with interviews at the national level with Civil Servants, rather than attempt a multi-case study involving other regions, such as the South East and East of England.

4.4 Why was London not included in the Research Design?

For the sake of completeness in the discussion of research design and case study selection the reasons the Coalition Government treated London differently to the other regions is now reviewed briefly. Although not intended to be an in depth examination of the contrast between the abolition experience in the English regions and that of London, the question remains as to why the different approaches were taken by the Coalition Government.

In 2010 the Coalition Government abolished the structures of English regional governance and put in hand the revocation of Regional Spatial Strategies. This was not applied in London and so the abolition of the higher tier of statutory strategic spatial planning was not absolute across England. One of the main reasons why London was treated differently was that it had different governance arrangements.

Although these arrangements as well as those for the English regions were introduced by New Labour, London governance had separate, unique legislative arrangements. Perhaps more significantly the proposals for an elected London mayor and a small Assembly with a scrutiny role had been approved in a public referendum with a large 'yes' vote at 72% against a 'no' vote of 28% with a turnout of 34.1% (Sandford,2018, p4). Although the legitimisation of regional governance by regional referenda had been the New Labour Government's intention the negative result in November 2004 was taken as grounds for not pursuing this route to democratic legitimacy (Gordon and Travers, 2010).

Among other policy areas (such as, housing strategy, and transport) where the London Mayor has powers and responsibilities, '...the Mayor is required to produce a Spatial Development Strategy (known as the London Plan)' (Sandford, 2018; p13). Under both Labour and Conservative Mayors', the London Plan had economic growth as a major components. This appears to have been based upon a belief that the global role of financial services in the central business district required population and employment growth.

In 2010 at the time of the abolition of regional planning outside London, the London Mayor, Boris Johnson, was a Conservative. He was preparing a revised London Plan, published in 2011. Although this revision moved to emphasise quality of life issues across London the London Plan became an 'investment prospectus' (Gordon and Travers, 2010; 8) directed at the Chancellor for the resources to deliver the infrastructure needed to underpin and facilitate the anticipated growth.

The inter-relationship between government institutions and broadly shared reading of the capital's needs to sustain growth, created the conditions not just of public support

but of a balance of usefulness experienced by national government and the London city government though its processing of strategic issues, not least in its strategic spatial planning role. The continuation of London strategic spatial planning therefore has, in part, to do with the synergies that arose from the geographical co-location of national government and London city government and the shared view of London's importance for the national economy. Central government could 'keep an eye' on what the London city government was doing and was able to engage with ease due to their close proximity.

Under the London governance arrangements the Mayor's responsibilities were largely in strategic policy development and, without the resources or powers to implement plans, the damage the Mayor could do was limited. Treasury control over capital spending limited the scope for the Mayor to independently effect major changes but the GLA was useful in thinking through major infrastructure projects such as Crossrail and London Docklands which would add growth potential to the capital's economy. On balance the distinctive London arrangements had proved useful and acted as a filtering and simplifying mechanism working between Boroughs and the Greater London Authority (GLA): the statutory planning role had a positive contribution to make in managing complexity and achieving both Governmental and the London Mayor's economic goals.

Further reasons for the GLA's continuation could lie in the observation New Labour had made in its 1997 Election Manifesto that London was, at that time, the only West European capital lacking an elected city government (Sandford, 2018). Gordon and Travers (2010) refer to this as the 'symbolic' importance of London being seen internationally to being governed strategically and not left in a fragmented state as after the abolition of the GLC. There was possibly a credibility factor to be projected

across the global financial and international investment bodies as well as other national governments: if London was to be a place for investment then it needed to show it had a coherent vision and grip on the management of its functioning as a major metropolitan economy.

There were similarities between the London strategic planning system and the RSSs in the English regional governance arrangements, but none of the latter had the complexity of the London and Greater South East for Government. The issues between the greater South East and London and within the capital presented a wider, more complex and nationally significant range of difficulties than those faced in the English regions. For New Labour the effort, time and cost of dealing with English regional political issues became increasingly frustrating, especially with the WMRA. It resorted to abolition of assemblies and recentralising powers using regional bodies. The Coalition Government driven by ideological as well as more pragmatic issues of administrative (in)convenience felt it could better control the spaces of regional governance if that governance apparatus were not in place. The Coalition Government transferred some regional deliberation on business strategy and growth to the LEPS, leaving local authorities with their Local Development Frameworks and their historic patterns of working with neighbouring authorities, whether in alliance or traditional tension (as between Birmingham and the Black Country or the West Midlands conurbation and the West Midland Shire Authorities).

In London the track record of both Labour and Conservative Mayors, and the then current Conservative political control seems to have worked in favour of the continued operation of the Mayor, the GLA, and strategic spatial planning. This contrasted with the situation in the West Midlands case (even though it was Conservative controlled) and the other English regions. If explanations for why the

English regional assemblies were abolished without the same being applied to London are valid, then probably the two most significant would be the English regional assemblies' lack of a democratic mandate, following the negative result of the North East referendum, coupled with the threat posed by additional housing numbers in RSS proposals in those parts of the Conservative heartlands where these were very unpopular and generated mounting local political concern.

However, the driver for Conservative ministers' keenness to abolish the Leaders' Boards (the assemblies had been abolished by New Labour on 31 March 2010) was arguably a much more visceral and emotive one. The Coalition Government saw the regional governance arrangements, outside London, through their ideological lens of being part of the unnecessary state that they were committed to roll back, to the point that the term 'region' became too toxic for local government or civil servants to use in the presence of politicians and ministers.

It seems the reasons for abolition of the English regional assemblies was not based on a finely grained assessment of the merits and demerits of English regional working nor a mirror image of the reasons to retain the London governance. The Conservative Shadow Minister for Communities and Local Government, Caroline Spelman, was reported by a Conservative WMRA politician (APGovC2) as saying, 'there was nothing that (the Assembly) were doing as far as she was concerned that had any merit or any value' (APGovC2). A WMRA senior planning manager ASSM1 also thought the 'Conservative mind set' was not making finely judged distinctions,

'they just wanted to abolish everything with the 'r' word in it, and because, well two things really; it was seen as something that John Prescott had set in train under Labour and they wanted to be seen to be sweeping it away, but also I

think they were arguing that, ..it got in the way of their new big idea of localism, a bottom up planning.

4.5 The Foundations of the Research Method

Having determined the appropriate research design the detailed method of delivering this was assembled. The methodology used was founded in the first instance upon two sources, my experience and theory. The research questions were rooted in my experience of regional working, New Labour's replacement of assemblies with Leaders' Boards and what transpired under the Coalition Government. My most relevant direct personal experience was of working in the West Midlands Regional Assembly from 2003 until 31 March 2010. Previously (from 1989 to 2003) I had worked in two West Midlands metropolitan authorities in planning and housing roles. The other foundational element was the part played by theories discussed in Chapter 3 testing how far these could help explain the ending of New Labour's English Regional governance project.

4.6 Addressing my personal involvement.

The next sections discuss the issues in accounting for my personal perspective and my 'conceptual baggage' (Kirby & McKenna 1989) and how this posed potential problems for the research. My experience shaped the research directly and indirectly. However, I took measures to ensure, as far as I could, that this was an objective study, and to avoid or at least make explicit where research decisions were shaped by prior knowledge. Literature on 'insider-outsider' research is discussed and applied to my position as a former WMRA staff member. This acknowledges the potentially negative aspects of an actor, who was intimately involved in some of the events as experienced, conducting research. This is followed by explaining the

research advantages which accrued from my former position and professional relationships with many of the interviewees.

4.7 Emic and Etic Approaches to Research

In the fields of anthropology and ethnography the concepts of 'emic' and 'etic' standpoints are used to differentiate the insider –outsider research perspectives in relation to the object of the research (Harris, 1976; Morris et.al.,1999; Greene, 2014; Peters, B., 2017). The term 'emic' refers to research by an insider in relation to the culture or group under study, using inductive, bottom-up analysis and starts with the perspectives and words of participants. This is contrasted with the 'etic' approach where research is conducted by an outsider, using deductive, top-down reasoning, and starts with theories, hypotheses, perspectives, and concepts from outside of the setting.

My approach started from an emic position, particularly within the Assembly and by extension my former colleagues. This increasingly diluted where the interviewees from other bodies were more distant from the WMRA Secretariat and my own professional activity. These interviewees were then subjected to theories (etic) in the shaping of questions blending experience and aspects of theory.

4.8 My Positionality and the insider-outsider distinction.

Greene (2014) summaries 'insider research' as being,

'Insider research is that which is conducted within a social group, organization or culture of which the researcher is also a member' (Greene. 2014; p1)

This matches my position within the Regional Assembly and the concept of 'positionality' also addresses my own situation as a participant observer, albeit in retrospect²³. According to Greene (2014) 'positionality' refers to a situation where the insider is an individual who possesses a priori intimate knowledge of the community and its members (Merton, 1972).

With insider research there are,

'... aspects of an insider researcher's self or identity which is aligned or shared with participants' (Chavez, 2008, quoted by Greene, 2014; p2).

Greene accepts, nevertheless, that valid research can be conducted by a researcher possessed of these characteristics. Insider research has its contrasting form, 'outsider research', defined by Merton (1972; p31) as being research that is undertaken by those who do not have a priori knowledge of the community under study, nor its members.

Greene (2014) acknowledges that this dichotomy is argued by some (Breen, 2007; Trowler, 2011) as better conceived of as a continuum. In this conceptualisation of the research model both insider and outsider researchers have to address positionality and how this affects the data collected and the analysis. The insider researcher is often confronted with issues of ethics and methodology that arise only in this type of research and that positionality is not a fixed location for the researcher. Positions can be relative and 'insider research can be 'totally' within the community under study sharing 'multiple identities or profound experiences with the community they are

²³ The research began just over a year after the abolition of the Assembly.

studying.' (Greene,2014 p2). A partial insider would have more detachment from the body or organisation under study.

In considering where I locate myself in this typology of research it is important to acknowledge potential different perceptions: whilst I consider myself to be a partial insider, others may see me as a total insider, at least because I was a senior officer in the WMRA. Whilst I was an insider during my employment in the WMRA Secretariat, as a researcher I have endeavoured to detach myself, in order to be open minded in the research processes and be open to alternative and contrary views, values and opinions. In addition, I was not a total insider to the other organisations that made up the regional architecture including the Government Office for the West Midlands, the Housing Corporation, DCLG, Advantage West Midlands, or any of the member local authorities that made up the WMRA. My role also provided me with a network of contacts nationally, in other regions and in local organisations and local government

My position in the Secretariat allowed this research to take place, affording me the advantage of a rich understanding of participating and observing at first hand the workings of the regional planning and housing functions. Although taken in retrospect, these can be used in a participant observation manner (Bogden,1972; Jorgensen, 1989; DeWalt and DeWalt,2011).

At the time of conducting the research interviews from 2011 to 2014 there was a considerable volume of publicly available documentation, much of it on the Assembly's archive web site. Having been present during the period which generated this documentation, some of it written by me and some with my

involvement, I have an understanding of the genesis of this documentation that can belong only to the few who were involved in its creation.

In engaging in the interview process, I adopted a 'self-aware' position as a researcher, not least because, to be as objective as possible, I had to question the accepted narratives of my own professional and former organisational group. This helped address the criticism that I may have been too subjective or was normalised into and unable to detach myself from the Assembly culture.

Encouragingly for my approach Greene considers insider researchers to have the "ability to ask meaningful questions and read non-verbal cues," (Greene 2014 p3) nor are they easily 'hood winked', fobbed off with misleading, or overly defensive responses. My pre-existing knowledge allowed me to ask 'meaningful questions and read non-verbal clues' and to be familiar with the culture of the organisations in which interviewees had, or still did, work as Greene (2014 p3) anticipates. Other positive aspects of Insider research allow for the use of the researcher's prior knowledge of the wider organisational history, contextual environment and the actors within it (Greene, 2014). Access to potential interviewees proved to be greatly facilitated by my existing relationships in all but one case.

The potentially negative aspects of insider research include being too subjective because of over-familiarity with the organisation and its actors. This could impede clarity of analysis and introduce bias or loss of objectivity because the researcher is 'too close to the culture under study to raise provocative questions.' (Greene, 2014.p4). However such risks, real as they are, can be managed, and insights can be gained which outsider research would be unlikely to achieve.

The steps taken to manage the negative risks have involved:

- The start of the research was delayed for a year to allow time for the personal upheaval and immediate impact of events which had adversely affected me to dissipate. This allowed a more measured and reflective frame of mind with which to begin the process of designing the research project.
- Acknowledging the position I held and my personal values in relation to regional working,
- Early in this reflective process I committed my personal narrative account to a separate record (see Appendix 2.2). This allowed me to proceed with an uncluttered collection of memories and feelings about the detailed events that had transpired. It allowed me to park and largely forget my personal account, freeing me to engage with respect, integrity, curiosity and objectivity the accounts provided by the interviewees.
- By using concepts from theory to draft and inform the interview questions a robust framework was put in place. This allowed a theory led inquiry to be undertaken with my personal role providing a backdrop of shared experience with many of the interviewees. This varied in degrees of depth, continuity and proximity dependent upon the roles played by the actors interviewed.
- By adopting a relevant theoretically informed framework and set of questions to guide the research rather than be led by my own preferences and personalised constructions of events.
- A careful and systematic selection of interviewees was achieved as set out in Sections 4.13 and 4.14 above. By selecting for interview a range of people who, though were generally well disposed to me personally, did not necessarily support or agree with the WMRA or its RSS policies for housing.

- This interviewee selection was designed to maximise the identification and capture of a range of different accounts and perspectives and minimise the risk of simply conducting confirmatory interviews.
- The interview material was analysed to draw out differences in perspectives both within and between actor groups, rather than simply to develop generalisations through triangulation. This confirmed the importance of multiple perspectives on reality that have shaped the process studied.
- Much of the interview material went beyond that which was to be found in the documentary material. In order to triangulate the personal accounts of interviewees with the documentary record, where this was possible and relevant, these have been included and referenced. The WMRA's archive of regional press from 2002 to 2004 covering the campaign for elected regional assemblies was comprehensively examined (see Section 2.4).
- In addition to framing research interview questions round concepts derived from theory, findings from Amankwah-Amoah,(2013; 2116) work on organisational demise was used to interpret interview data . This provided a framework of possible reasons for organisational demise with which to assess the significance of responses rather than an unfiltered judgement based on my recollections or potential prejudice.

Further, not all interviewees were with WMRA staff: 12 were from organisations outside the WMRA, only seven were from the WMRA Secretariat, and the 11 nominated to the Assembly governance and participation structures included people whose relationship with the WMRA became increasingly uncomfortable. I interviewed some within the WMRA who were not directly involved in planning for housing were more distanced from the policy areas in which I was involved.

The primary research question itself refers to understanding events which often lay outside the WMRA, how and why events took the course they did, and not an attempt to justify myself, the WMRA or any political party. Equally I have not sought to take a polemical view and blame or seek a vengeful account of the actions taken even though I was personally affected by the decisions of the WMRA and politicians in 2010.

The range of people interviewed and the selection of topics and questions allowed for and deliberately opened up the possibility of hearing opinions, views and discovering factual information which may not have been personally comfortable for me to hear. In presenting and analysing the interview material, in Chapters 6 to 10, I have sought to give space and appropriate weight to the evidence and to allow counter narratives and alternative explanations to be considered where these might have been dismissed had they been suggested prior to embarking on this research. One such is the significance for some interviewees (e.g. WML1) of the belief that the regional assemblies were part of a European Union plot to subvert the English State to a European regional federation.

I have asked an interviewee and another former Secretariat member to read and comment on Chapter 5 to ensure I have not missed any vital episode or event in conveying the factual account of the period of this study.

4.9 Ethics

Before the research questions could be tested in a set of six pilot interviews ethical approval for the research was obtained from the University of Birmingham. The promise of anonymity for the interviews and measures taken to address this in a 'small world' of actors many of whom know each other have been discussed above.

In order to assist with preserving anonymity, I considered giving those with multiple and different roles over the period a unique reference code for each role, thus generating a list of actors longer than the thirty interviewees. I decided not to do this as it created an overly complex set of personae.

ESRC (2005) 'Framework for Research Ethics' requires researchers to ensure interviewees are aware that the published research could include 'critical findings about policies and organisations'. All interviewees were aware from the background information given on the research, the questionnaire, and the interview discussion that this possibility existed. Permission to record interviews was explicitly requested and received in every case. I explained that interviewees had the right to withdraw at any point during the interview or at any stage up to publication (Wengraf, 2001)²⁴.

Other ethical issues relate to the use for research of my recollections of personal conversations, and meeting which were not public, or where the minutes are not on public record. In this thesis it has not been necessary to go to individuals on any such recollections of my own. These have been used very sparsely and individuals have not been directly or indirectly identified. No breach of trust is involved where my recollections have been used.

4.10 Participant Observation in Retrospect.

Having established that I have addressed potential issues of bias and subjectivity, I have adopted a 'Participant Observation in Retrospect' approach. This involves a distinctive, innovative methodology and is itself a contribution to knowledge.

²⁴ The Participant Information and consent form is given in Appendix 4.6

This case study has a substantial contribution from participant observation approached in retrospect, in near –past time. It is not a standard textbook approach (Bogden,1972; Jorgensen, 1989; DeWalt and DeWalt,2011) to evidence gathering. As a professional officer in the WMRA Secretariat, I was inside the organisation, but at the time not a researcher. I did, however, intensely observe developments at a national level and their impact on the Assembly secretariat, regional organisations and local authority planning and housing officers. I retained a copious body of daily notebooks of my work throughout my time at the WMRA.

Figure 4.1 shows a simplified version of the WMRA Secretariat Policy staff structure and my position as Head of Housing in relation to Regional Spatial Strategy coordination team and Senior Management. It was the range of my contacts and relationship with the RSS team that first generated the idea of retrospective participant observation, which I believed could be extended to my network of regional and national bodies. This allowed me to see the sequence of impacts on the WMRA generated by national developments on regional planning and regional governance.

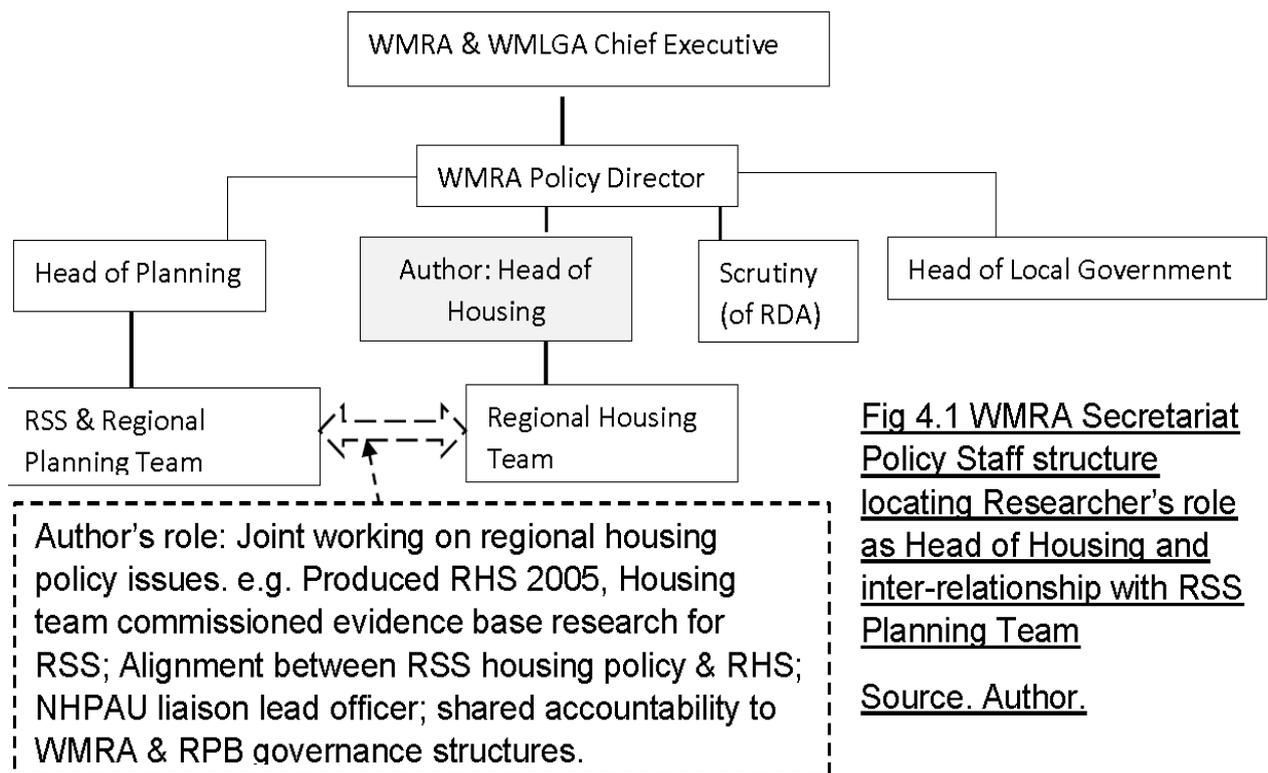


Fig 4.1 WMRA Secretariat Policy Staff structure locating Researcher's role as Head of Housing and inter-relationship with RSS Planning Team
Source. Author.

This personal experience indicated the benefits for the research as my 'participation' turned to 'observation' soon after the events. This methodology provided a robust foundation for my approach to understanding the processes and outcomes of the New Labour regional project.

The core challenges for retrospective accounts relate to how past events are recounted, explained, rationalised and problems of imperfect recall. Some use of documentary sources can help to triangulate with interview accounts, but the emphasis in this study has been the triangulation between evidence provided by people, inside the WMRA, in other regional West Midlands organisations, the national Civil Service, professionals and politicians across the main parties and interviews with people who were more marginal to events who could contribute a detached account from their position.

As the development of the research took place I documented and reflected upon the issues raised. This research diary comprised tables, worksheets, draft experiments in linking narrative to theory, to the development of the questionnaire and planning whom to interview. Reflections included how ideas worked in practice and changes I made to address issues that arose. Considerable reflection went into evaluating the different ways in which interviewees treated the interview process and the factors that seemed to be dominant in shaping their accounts. This was essential in assessing the extent to which interview data could be useful and reliable without discounting accounts that did not sit comfortably with my own.

4.11 From Theory to Interview Questions

Alongside my own experience the other key foundation of the research method was the selection of theory from which to develop questions. My approach to the use of theory was discussed in Chapter 3. Using Peter's (2012) explanation of New Institutional Theories I isolated key features of each theory relating to its core concepts, and what it had to say about institutional and organisational change, and failure. Different theories seemed to work well in two respects. One was the relationship with the spatial scale of governance (national, regional, or local), the other with different groups of actors within the WMRA. In drawing together the components of these theories, a synthesis was created in one overarching conceptual framework. Against this I set out my personal reflections and perceptions of what had happened. These were mapped onto each type of NIT selected in order to identify a best fit among the selected concepts and theories. The fit was neither always neat nor complete. Appendix 4.1 gives extracts of the detailed aspects of the three New Institutional theories (Peters,2012) I found most relevant against my experience working for WMRA.

Figure 4.2 sets out the process of moving from personal perspective through my application of theory to the questions used in interviews. Appendix 4.2 provides an extract of the first iteration of moving from the components of the thesis to interview questions.

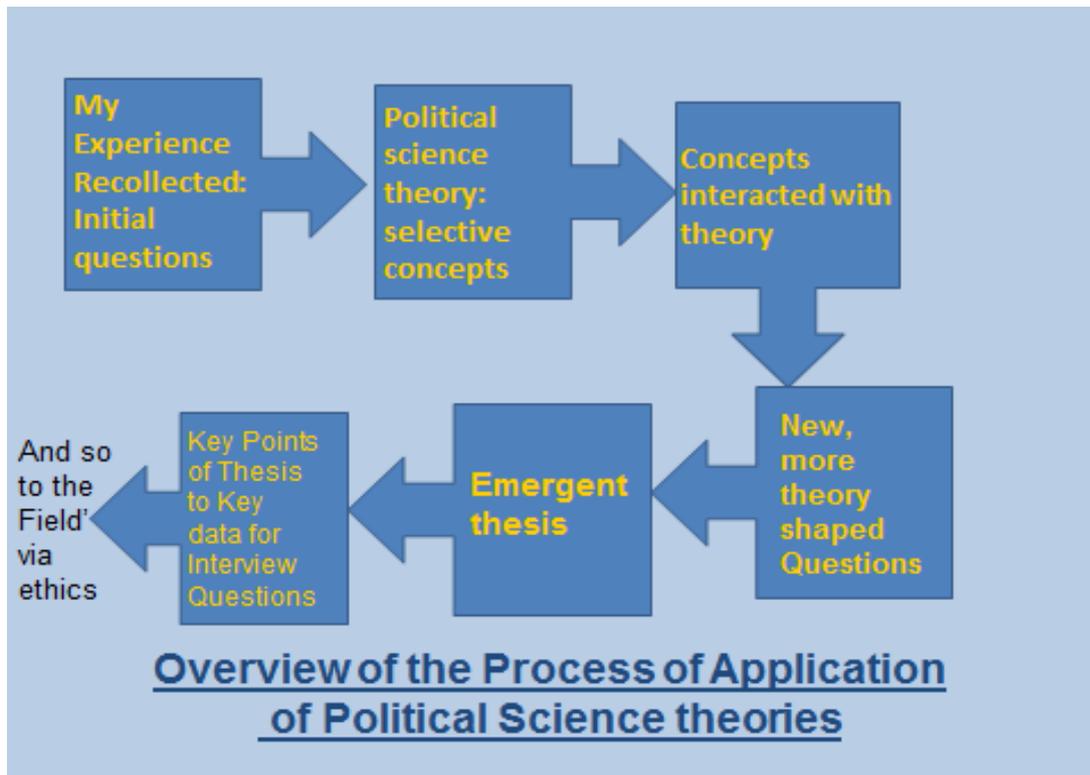


Figure 4.2. Overview of the Process of Application of Political Science Theories in the Development of Research Questions. Source: Author.

Other theories considered to contain the useful applicable concepts in relation to principal groups of actors are included in Table 4.3 below. The contextual background theory was taken from Allmendinger's (2011) reference to neo-liberal economic ideology as the driver for national policy during the New Labour period. This was consistent with Davies (2011) use of Critical Theory, a Gramscian analysis to critique the thinking and practice of networks and partnership governance. This fitted well with the roll back of regional devolution after 2005, and the reassertion of central control over regional planning

Use of Theory	Group or domain to which theory is applied
NIT. Historical path dependency for Regional Planning in the West Midlands Devolved power to partnerships and consensus working Healy (2006)	Local Authority & Regional Planners
NIT elements of Rational Choice Theory	Political Regional/ local governance
NIT ecological institutionalism (Peters, 2012)	Wider governance environment and impact on the regional level
Critical Theory (Davies, 2011) Governance and networks (Rhodes, 1997)	Wider governance environment, national political arena
Ideology of neo-liberalism (Allmendinger, 2011)	Wider government context: planning & social policy
Some use of Complexity theory applied to post 2010 (Haynes, 2003)	National Government & local authorities managing uncertainty in the post 2010 regional disruption/ hiatus (Interviewee LAP 1).

Table 4.3 Theoretical Concepts in Relation to Principal Groups of Actors

Source: Author based on Analysis of Theory Literature Reviewed in Chapter 3

The Coalition Government's removal of regional planning was consistent with Critical Theory but dovetailed well with another concept from Complexity Theory applied to organisations (Haynes, 2003). Haynes suggested that disruption to institutions, in this case regional ones, could be a useful means of disconnecting future policy development from a set of embedded institutional memories. This could apply to the Coalition Government of 2010 which had no ideological sympathy with regionalism.

For this study the Regional Assembly was taken as the nominated local authority members who formed the political body, the members of the community interest groups (Other Stakeholders and Business Council), and the senior managers and paid staff of the Assembly Secretariat. As the RPB and RHB were constitutionally, and in the case of the RPB, legally part of the Assembly, their membership was also included. This extended the local authority members involved specifically in the RPB across thirty-three West Midlands local authorities, as well as Other Stakeholder

Groups and the Business Community. This definition excluded the following from the Assembly: planning officers of the Strategic Planning Authorities (the Metropolitan, Unitary and County Councils) whom the Assembly choose to pay from the Government regional grant to work alongside the Assembly Secretariat.

It might be argued that the thirty-three local authorities and the numerous other stakeholders, including the public and media, also formed a layer of influence on regional events. To have attempted to include these in a detailed research programme would have exhausted the time and other resources of this study. Some of these voices were heard vicariously in part, in that the local authority members on the RPB and Assembly were channels for their constituents. For example, the politicians interviewed were asked about the impact they felt from these quarters; one senior Conservative politician was asked whether public pressure affected the Conservatives' resolve to do away with both regional planning and regional working. By taking a range of theories into account and by allowing a research framework which was sufficiently broad to capture and interpret data at each institutional layer, from national, regional and local, the explanatory narrative would be robust and properly evidenced. Having mapped the theoretical elements against my own experience I reassessed the validity of the research question and three subsidiary questions given in Figure 1.2.

4.12 Developing the Questionnaire

The questionnaire was developed in the light of initial research questions, informed by theory and more substantive policy literature. Figure 4.3 outlines the main elements of the process from formulating the original questions to testing these in six pilot interviews and reflecting on their successful use with interviewees.

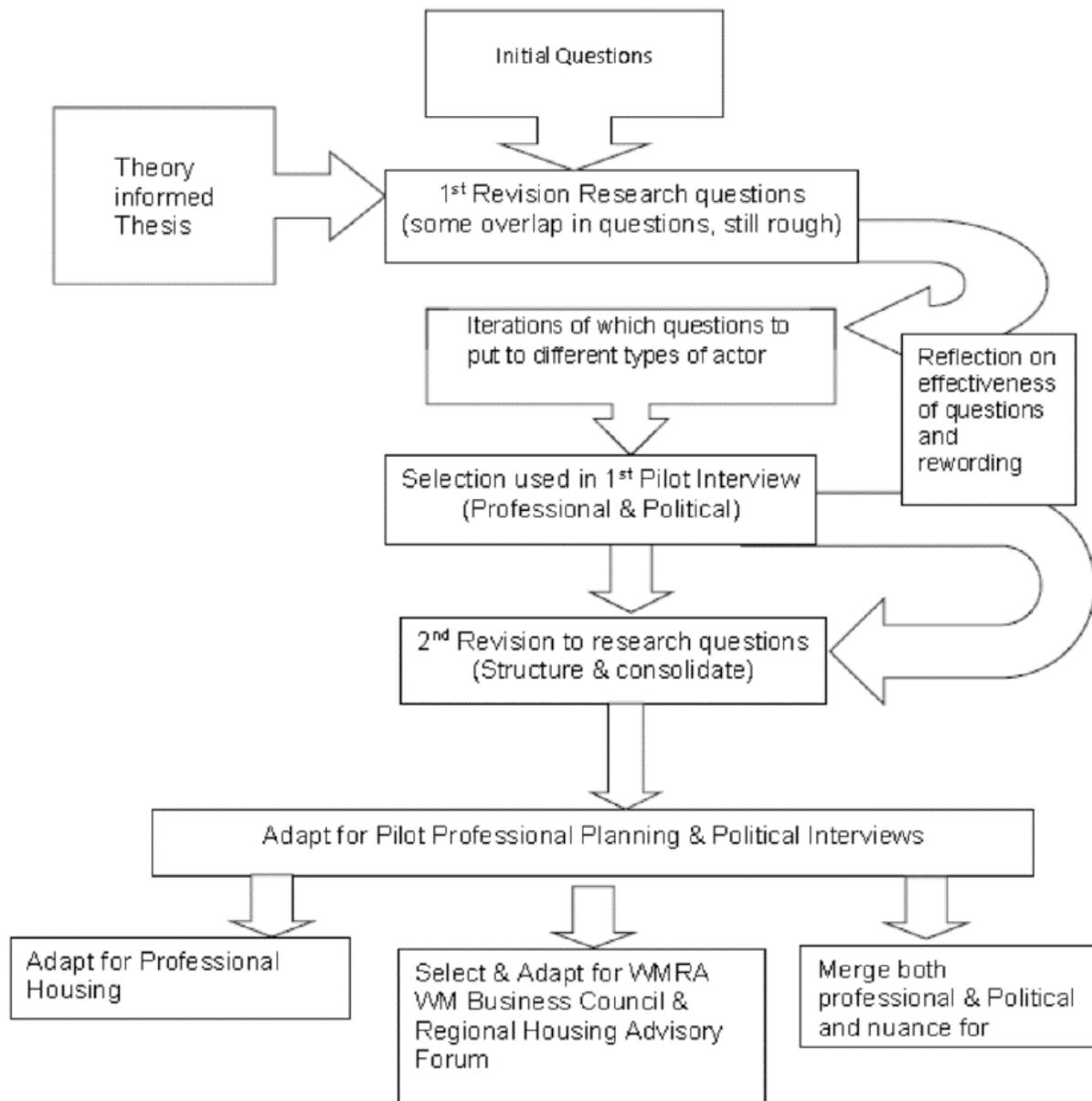


Figure 4.3. Pilot Interviews: Question Generation and refinement Process.
Source: Author

Several questionnaire drafts were drawn up and revised to establish how to express and order the topics, and who best to interview with which questions. The means of achieving this was done with matrices listing the potential interviewees on the vertical axis and the questions on the horizontal axis marked with an indication of who should be asked which questions.

Splitting the questions down to the different eras would have also involved separating out the different roles many of the interviewees had held and allocating the questions to the interviewees by era and role. It is doubtful whether imposing another layer of differentiation on the questionnaires would have generated greater insight or compelling data. Having discounted this cumbersome approach, separate questionnaires were drawn up, initially for political and professional interviewees. The questions in each were further refined to adapt them to the type of interviewee and their actual experience or role. These were tested during six pilot interviews. It was found early on some questions generated essentially the same answer as an earlier question though these were attempts to delve beneath initial responses. Such duplication was removed in revised formats.

The pilot questionnaire topic headings and discussion on these is given in Appendix 4.3. There were several questions asked of all groups. Appendix 4.4 shows the application of theory to the questions piloted in the first six interviews.

The questions used language and terminology shared between professional and political interviewees based on broadly shared experiences of what had happened. This meant the interviews with professionals sometimes developed a closer personal shared recollection. This contributed to an awareness that the interviewees' answers were (or appeared) 'credible' but I had to be guarded given the risk that shared narratives could involve unspoken assumptions which did not reveal new or different insights.

To avoid generating answers which reflected my own experience or biases, questions were framed and asked in a neutral way, open to allow for contrary perceptions to be given. The questions indicated the area of interest but were

sometimes couched in open wording, while some were more direct. As far as possible the interviews followed a chronological approach. This helped keep the narrative easier for the interviewee and for later analysis. The interviewing style used also allowed for unexpected or interesting insights to be followed up to explore unanticipated areas using a responsive interviewing technique.

At the end of interview each interviewee was asked if anything important had not been asked or touched upon. This aimed to reveal any issue which was completely unanticipated but important to the interviewee who nonetheless might have not mentioned it unless explicitly asked. Only on one occasion did this produce an unforeseen topic, namely the Liberal Democratic manifesto intention to remove the Government Offices in the Regions: the Coalition provided the opportunity to deliver this. In some instances where interesting insights had been shared it was possible to go back at the end and seek clarification. One interview was shorter than the time anticipated due to other business, so this was completed by email. Whilst this provided very straight forward answers the depth of tone and insight was lacking compared with the face to face interviews. None of the interviewees wanted to rebalance or change their accounts at the end of their interviews.

4.13 The Criteria for Selecting Interviewees

Figure 4.4 presents a schematic representation of the organisational arrangements operating in the West Midlands Region centred on the WMRA. The Assembly is shown subdivided into the various actor groups: the Secretariat (Planners, non-planners and senior managers), the Governance participants (Conservative, Liberal Democrat, West Midlands Business Council, Other Stakeholder Group) and those outside the Assembly and in a direct relationship with it. These actors in the WMRA's

organisational environment included those operating at the regional level, in national political roles and national Civil Servants.

I anticipated, from my prior knowledge, that these actor groups represented the primary sources most likely to demonstrate different experience and views and consequently capable of contributing to and addressing the research questions via the research questionnaires: and not just confirming any preconceptions that I had. The Participant Observation in Retrospect approach that I was using involved identifying some actors who, from what I had heard them say in formal or informal settings would probably have important insights or evidence. It also meant interviewing actors because they were in other institutional settings and where the insights they could offer was less predictable.

The selection criteria were therefore;

- Coverage of the organisational and functional range of regional activity as depicted in Figure 4.4.
- The potential for each prospective interviewee to have direct knowledge of, or information about, the topics in the research questionnaire.
- Interviewees likely to be willing to participate, and contribute at a useful level of openness, assisted by the assurance of anonymity.
- Coverage of the timeframe of the events being studied. Some actors were only in key roles for part of the research timeframe. It was necessary to obtain interviews with actors who, sequentially covered the entire period. This applied particularly to Assembly senior management, and Assembly planners.
- Obtaining perspectives from actors who had a different standpoint. These provided a useful means of triangulating insights about key events, or objective reflections on the Assembly's actions, ways of working, relationships and

interactions across its internal and external boundaries. These contributions were not likely to be offered under some 'felt obligation' to convey a set or sanitised account. Examples include interviews with non-planning Assembly Secretariat staff, and local authority planners.

- Obtaining a range of insights including from actors whose organisational relationship with Assembly not always harmonious, and included periods tension, and disagreement. These contributions were not likely to be part of an Assembly consensus narrative, allowed triangulation of accounts and helped ensure objectivity in the understanding that emerged from the research process. Examples of these included, the Regional Development Agency (AWM), Government Office, and NHPAU.
- Availability and willingness to be interviewed.

A significant component of the evidence sought was likely to come from the Conservative Assembly Governance members. I decided to interview four Conservative members, not only to ensure a range of Assembly governance opinion with which to triangulate accounts but also to gain insights from four different parts of the Region thereby gaining a better understanding of the local political and public opinion these Conservatives had to represent.

I was fortunate in having further potential interviewees who had worked with the WMRA during its life, if any of those initially approached declined to be interviewed. None of those listed below were asked to participate as I had thirty interviewees who responded positively giving sufficient coverage and together met the criteria set out above.

These potential interviewees included;

- Three WMRA regional planners,
- Four WMRA non-planning officers
- Fourteen local authority officers
- Two officers of the Housing Corporation and the Homes and Communities Agency
- Two senior housing association managers,
- Four private sector consultants and professional body officers

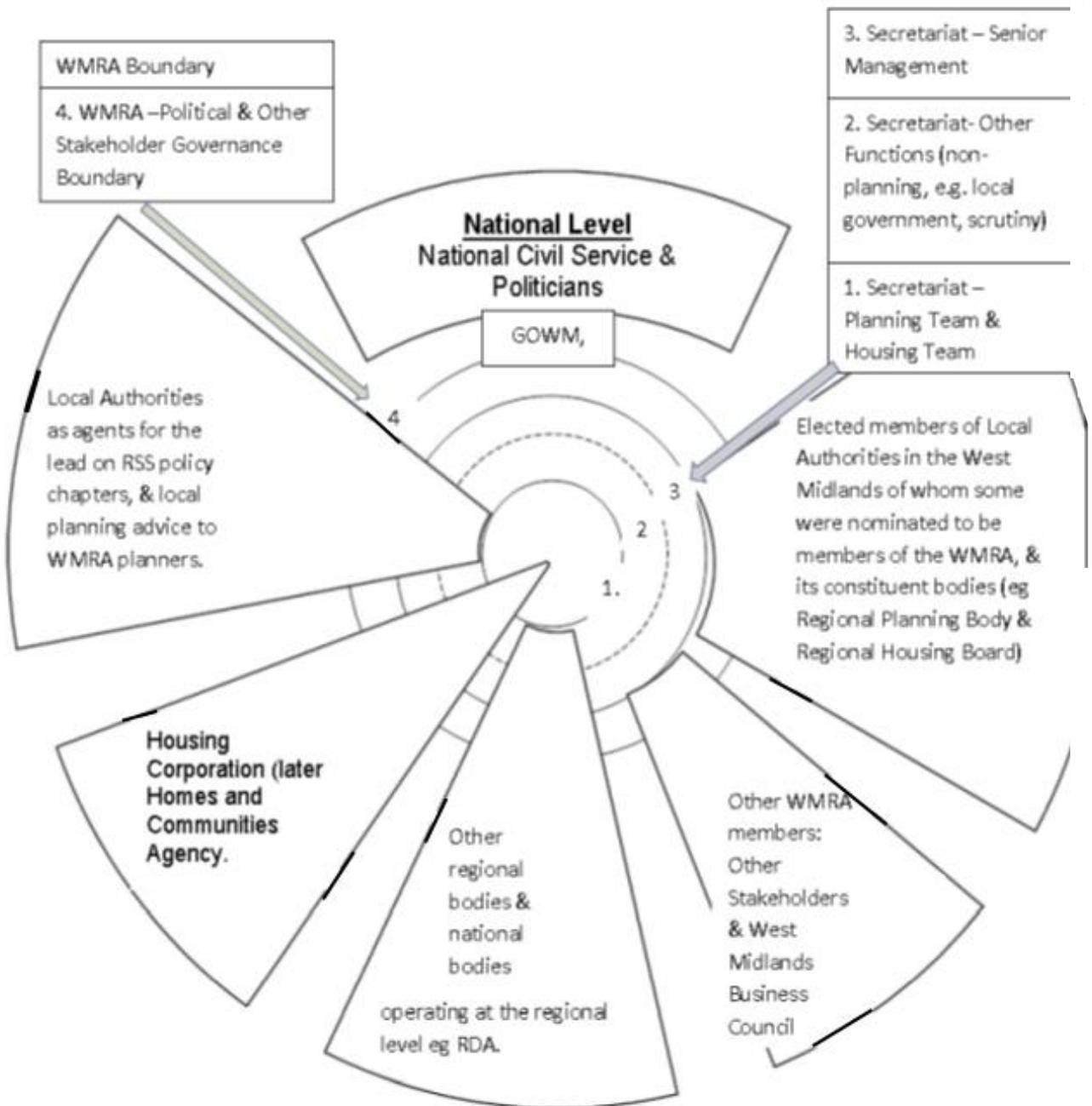
I also had contacts in each of the other English Regions including London which I could have invoked had a multiple case study approach been taken.

4.14 Who was interviewed?

Thirty semi –structured interviews (including the pilot six) were held with key actors. Figures 4.4 and 4.5 indicate the location of the interviewees mapped onto a schematic diagram of the Assembly in relation to its organisational environment between 2003 and 2010. Figure 4.4 sets out the regional architecture centred on the WMRA. The concentric rings differentiate groups of actors within the Assembly: the senior management, non-planning Secretariat and, at its core, the RSS planning team. This perspective suggests regional planning was at the centre of the Assembly’s function. Some regional planners would argue this is reasonable given it was the Assembly’s main statutory function under the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act, 2004. Others would argue that the WMRA had a wider coordinating, partnership building role and strategic planning was but one important part. Having acknowledged this, the graphic Figure 4.5 enables interviewees to be mapped.

The emerging regional structures in 2009, principally the Leaders’ Board working with the Regional Development Agency, began operating in shadow form before

Figure 4.4 The West Midlands Regional Architecture: Components of the West Midlands Regional Assembly, and its Regional and National Context as the basis for locating Research Interviews. Source: Author.



being statutorily enacted²⁵. This did not exist long enough to sufficiently change the nature of the networks which underpinned this research. Given the Assembly formally carried on its work until the end of March 2010 these graphics are sufficient for their purpose.

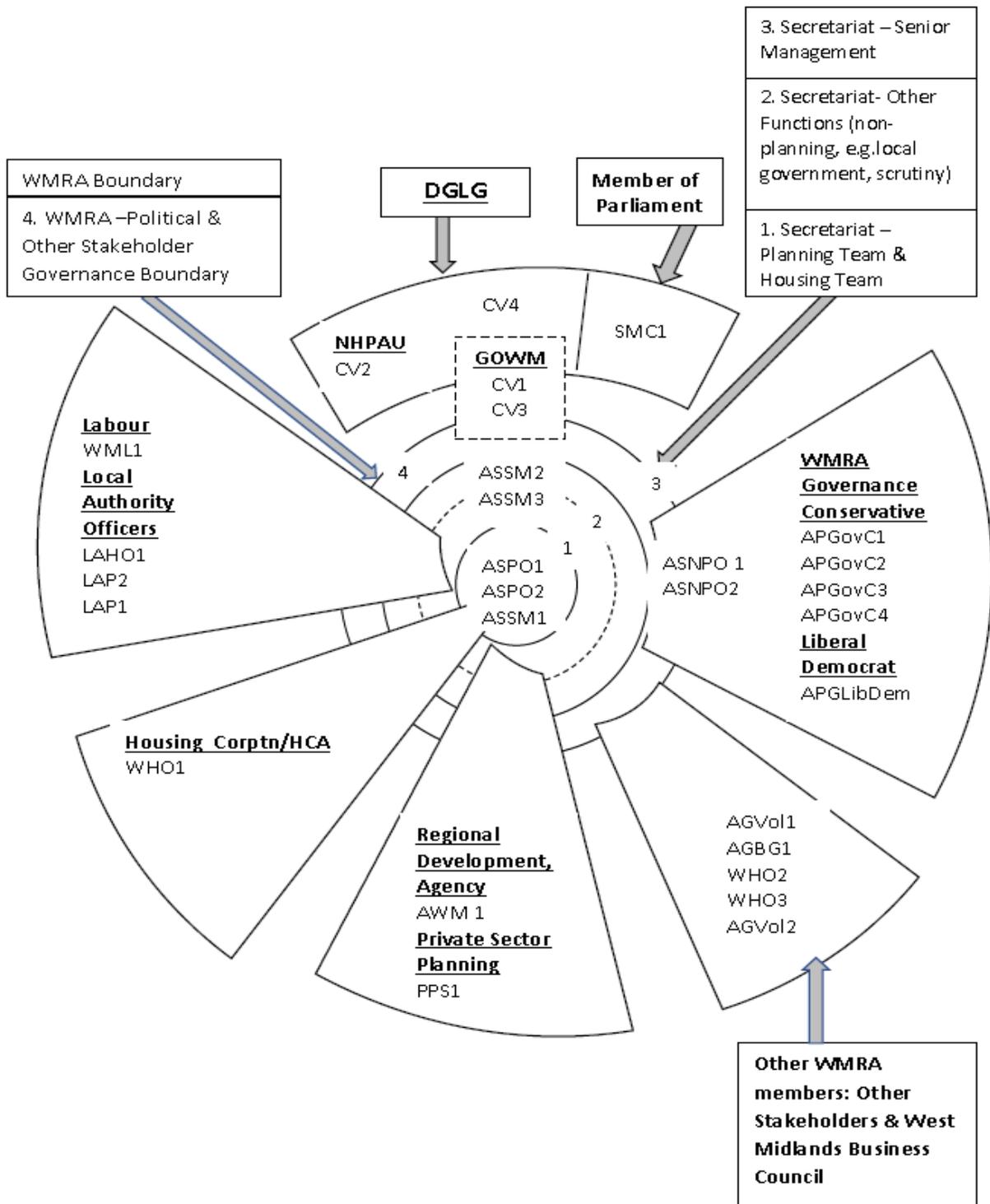
Figure 4.5 maps the interviewees (using their unique codes shown in Appendix 4.5) on to the organisational architecture of Figure 4.4 and demonstrates both the range of actors interviewed and their different organisations and roles. Some of these actors had very different perspectives to my own. Whilst this breath of coverage could not guarantee the elimination of bias it does point to a serious attempt to go beyond my experience in seeking other perspectives.

Political actors interviewed included those in WMRA leadership in the expectation these would share their national party thinking, especially the Conservatives whom it was hoped would have understood what went 'wrong' for the WMRA and English regional assemblies. It was also hoped the politicians would reveal how regional working and the contentious parts of the RSS were viewed by their constituents. The views of other stakeholder members of the WMRA were sought as part of the overall governance of the Assembly. The views of local authority officers involved with the RSS and RHB were sought as they may have had a close awareness of their public and their councillors' opinions.

Although Figure 4.5 locates Assembly actors in their primary roles, during their careers some held other positions within the WMRA either before or after this designation. Such accounts were valuable since they offered insights gained from

²⁵ See Section 5.16

Figure 4.5 Mapping of Interviews onto the West Midlands Regional Architecture and its National Organisational Context. Source: Author



multiple standpoints. This contributed to a better understanding of how the Assembly worked, and in some cases why external signals were not read accurately. The degree of 'distance' in an interviewee's relationship to the working of the Assembly, and the period covered, enabled the influences on their views to be better identified and to some extent contributed to the 'authority' with which they could express opinions about what was happening beyond their own specific organisational position. It also suggested where some distortion or bias may have arisen. Interviewees were asked to give the key events as they saw them. This highlighted what they regarded as significant in the path to abolition, giving an indication of where their account might focus, leaving other events less well articulated or even remembered.

Appendix 4.5 summarises the procedure followed in arranging interviews.

Interviewees were guaranteed anonymity with their identity referred to in the thesis by coded reference only²⁶. The close nature of many of the inter-relationships between interviewees meant it is possible some could work out who other interviewees were. Where this seemed a possibility, an interviewee would be shown the relevant text and asked if they were content for it to be used. Where necessary deeper anonymisation could be employed.

4.15 The Programme of Interviews

Pilot interviews were completed in 2011-12 and having reviewed the questionnaires, the main interviews were completed in 2013 and 2014, interrupted by two periods of absence. The length of interviews ranged from forty minutes to three hours. Some

²⁶ Appendix 4.6 gives the Participant Information Sheet and Consent form used when inviting potential interviewees to participate in the research. The Consent Form was signed at the start of the interview.

interviewees were interrupted and rearranged second and in two cases third sessions. Most interviews were about two hours.

The programme of interviews sought first to interview people whom I knew well and were spread across the organisational field (Figure 4.5). The last group were those more remote from me. These included several critical interviewees conducted with a set of questions that had been well tested. The opportunity was taken to test some additional questions that the pilot and first main group of interviews had raised .

These included the place of the European Union in anti-regional thinking, the historic tensions between the Birmingham City Council and the surrounding rural and shire local authorities, and the way regional working picked up this tension and played it through the regional debate and political exchanges. Another was the absence of significant regional leaders able to influence Government on behalf of the West Midlands region.

4.16 Did the questions work?

Interviewees responded in different ways to the opportunity to be interviewed. Some wanted to simply help a former college and took a distanced neutral view not seeking to project a particular stance. There was potential for some distortion in the evidence where the interviewees acted to:

- a) justify their role, achievements and conduct in the sense of establishing their legacy or contribution during the era of the research study,
- b) explain why their organisation had taken, for a greater or lesser period, a contrary stance against the Assembly and wanted to justify themselves
- c) justify themselves to the researcher as a former employee or colleague, or as someone with whom they had taken a contrary stance by virtue of their role

- d) find out what the WMRA position had been and what WMRA staff really thought of them. or,
- e) represent themselves as technocrats in a strictly apolitical role whilst operating in a very political context, to the extent that they 'blanked out' this aspect of their account.

Some from the Other Stakeholders Group were keen to justify and promote the importance of their role. Consequently, the evidence provided here was less significant and given less weight in the presentation of evidence and analysis. This was a reasonable position to take: their bias did not directly impact on the key issues being addressed through the interview. I was however careful to ensure their views were seriously considered if anything offered worked against any potential bias I may have had. Occasionally there were comments about which I felt a rising sense of objection. I took this as a warning that my inherent bias was being activated and therefore took note to enable an unbiased approach if important in the analysis and interpretation of the interview data.

My intention was to ask non-directive questions and allow a narrative to emerge with very little interruption. The rules of receiving narrative history (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber, 1998) came into play, aware that interruptions on my part would cause the narrative to dry up or be diverted, leading to interviewer led data. I was concerned to balance the occasional need for intervention and to work through the questions without blocking the disclosure of valuable information. Intervention was sometimes needed, however, to complete the interview on time, or respond to a question from the interviewee.

Whilst the questions were asked within a themed framework, the answers did not always fit neatly into this. One politician chose to give his personal account of the

WMRA followed by responses to the interview. Thus, the initial narrative account had to be filtered for content to avoid duplication. Others had a more tightly packaged, consolidated story and that was all they would draw upon regardless of my approach. Some others digressed as the open style of questioning allowed or encouraged.

Most interviews produced the main body of information in the first hour and anticipated some of the questions, thereby reducing the need to ask more precise questions later in the interview. Where interviewees had not addressed some important issues, I asked some more direct questions towards the end of the interview.

One interviewee, who had remained in a public sector professional role interpreted the questions through the contemporary post 2010 and post regional political lens of localism. This person, regardless of their previous roles, took an essentially negative view of their prior involvement. The interviewee seemed to distance themselves from their Regional involvement because they were employed by a local authority which welcomed the changes. Some interviewees had a narrative package about their role during the regional era and once delivered, were incapable of articulating anything beyond this. Their experience had been consolidated into the story I was told and no amount of coming at issues from different, more nuanced, perspectives drew any more insight. Others were the opposite and could have talked at great length with insight as each nuanced question was put.

Some Civil Service interviewees relied upon an 'official' line with heavy reliance on published Government policy documents from the New Labour era and did not attempt to give behind the scenes information on what was 'really' happening. As the

interview passed the one hour mark several interviewees began to share what they felt more openly. However, some civil servants really did not seem to have a clear view of Conservative policy development over regions and never really saw the changes coming. These civil servants were not, I suspect, trying to protect themselves or be unduly cautious for fear of anything. Their role had not given them some of the insights I sought.

Other civil servants were more forthcoming and gave very helpful insights.

Sometimes this was because they were no longer in their previous role or they had not agreed with the abolition of regional governance or strategic planning. Others trusted the anonymity and were mostly happy to speak openly on that basis. Of the professional officers, those who had retired were generally more relaxed and open in their sharing of opinion and understanding, save one who followed a straight forward account of the New Labour government's policies without much critical reflection, taking policy statements and ministerial announcements at face value, not 'reading anything between the lines'.

Retired politicians were the most open and were prepared to say more but in general politicians were reflective and open about their experience of the New Labour era. I suspected they were sometimes not willing to open up differences between factions of the Conservative Party at local authority or regional level. However, there were two critical exceptions to this. One was the acknowledgement of the hostility to their involvement in the Assembly that some Conservatives experienced locally, from MPs and MEPs; and the other was when the Conservative Party manifesto policy writers effectively over-ruled allegedly pro-Assembly Conservative members before in the run up to the May 2010 election.

4.17 Approach to Analysis

Analysis began with transcription of the digitally recorded interviews. Where these had taken place in quiet rooms, whether at my own home, the home of an interviewee, or the University library, these were generally very clear. Interviews held, at interviewees' request, in a hotel atrium and a coffee shop, were less satisfactory but most of the material produced was audible.

The initial analysis of the evidence involved identification of insights marked on a copy of the transcript. These were then transferred to an Excel spreadsheet with question topics arranged on the vertical axis and categories of answer on the horizontal. This produced 'insights' but raised the issue of how to draw these into a coherent explanatory narrative.

After three interviews had been broken down in this manner, it became apparent that too much material for collation was being generated and further iterations were needed to select significant insights. This encouraged me to read the transcripts with this close analytical judgement in mind, selecting key themes and referring back to the research questions and the theories used to highlight significant insights.

There were several ways the interview data could have been processed. These are summarised and evaluated in Table 4.4 below, having attempted use of each option. Thirty interviews ranging between 40 mins to over 2.5 hours meant there was a lot of data to process. After trying the approaches given in Table 4.4, the transcript approach allowed for a manual and intellectual connection of different interviewees' key narratives, explanations and themes. The physical act of typing gave way to handwritten transcription as this proved quicker still, however when later I sought to

revisit interviews for specific topics, typed transcripts could be 'word-searched', whereas handwritten scripts had to re-read, a much slower process.

Table 4.4 Options for Processing Digitally Recorded Interviews. Source: Author

Approaches to Analysis of recorded interviews.	Evaluation
1) Verbatim transcription,	Very time consuming approach and with responses which were less focused some time was wasted. Does justice to the richness of the data. Allows for a full capture of the data.
2) Play back of recordings, make and type up notes only	This was quicker than 1 above, but still time consuming. Still does justice to the richness of the data and allows for a fairly full capture. Risk of imposing a bias to the account by the selection of what to note followed by filling in explanation.
3) Listen & type in short sections	In my experience this drifted back to option 1 but started out quicker than 1. Felt this approach lost the overview and had similar risks as option 2.
4) Listen to interview and draw out main points.	Had the advantage of speed. A lot of data lost and failed to match the specific and targeted questions which were part of the research design and original intension. There appeared to be a risk of effectively altering the research design after the interview without a proper justification.

As mentioned above the approach used in the first three interviews with an Excel spreadsheet carried over into a less mechanistic but sensitised awareness of tracing out key and emerging themes which could then be written up.

I discussed with other research students their experience of conducting this stage of the research. The possibility arose of using NVIVO or other analytical software packages and I looked further into the use of NVIVO.

The criticism of software-assisted data analysis has been given (Computer Assisted Analysis, 2008) as:-

- researcher distanced from data,
- temptation to over analyse, especially specific words and phrases, and
- missing what the data may reveal as a whole.

I found there these were fundamental issues with NVIVO and chose not to use it.

There were also practical issues to do with all the interview material needing to be typed to be input into the system. In addition, the selection of search criteria appeared to prejudge the analysis whereas a manual, albeit slower, analysis allowed the themes and significant data to emerge. The transcripts were interspersed with time markings so that later use or quotations could be retrieved from the digital recording or the transcript.

Several of the interviewees from external bodies were keen to ask me my personal reflections on the 'real' view the Assembly - usually meaning the Secretariat, - had of their organisation, or my opinion on the underlying developments that led to the demise of regional working. I felt this was a reasonable expectation but had to be handled with care. In almost all cases this counter-questioning began towards the end of the interviews. Generally, I sought to defer responding until the end so as not to contaminate or distort their evidence and prolong the actual interview.

There were, nevertheless, some occasions where it seemed best to respond at the time in order to allow the interview to continue and for the interviewee to be more open than had I - albeit diplomatically - declined to respond. Having considered the transcriptions of the interviews I did not feel the data received was contaminated by this process.

4.18 Reflective Assessment of Research Method

Some aspects of the initial research design were more ambitious in their scope, than the design which was ultimately used. In part this over ambitious idea for the research was born of a desire to use the large quantity of archival material from the WMRA especially hard copy data on the public consultation for the RSS Preferred Option in 2007. To do systematic research on this was beyond the resources available including time.

A form of multi-case study had been envisaged with cross checking some findings with an individual former strategic policy actor from the South East of England Assembly, the East Midlands and the East of England Regional Assembly. In the event it was decided sufficient good quality data had been obtained to address the research questions in a single case study.

Although a timetable for completing the thesis was drawn up this was disrupted by personal circumstances leading to several formal Leaves of Absence. The plan to conduct the interviewees in a series of stages took several months longer than originally intended. It is possible some of those in the last stage of the interview process experienced some loss of detail due to memories fading.

I was very fortunate in having a wider range of potential interviewees from the West Midlands in all sectors whom I could have interviewed had those initially approached declined. I received only one refusal and had sufficient alternative coverage for this not to have materially affected the research. That said, it is always possible someone had information which would have portrayed events in a different light. However, such a fresh insight would be unlikely to contradict or undermine the findings presented. It seems more likely that additional interviews would have added detail

and enriched the knowledge of what happened without fundamentally redrawing the analysis.

On the topic of attempting to counter my potential bias I have considered what the research would have looked like had I come from a very different standpoint. Had the research been conducted from a different organisational or attitudinal position it would still have had to account for the evidence I obtained, including those of an anti-regional stance.

This research would be difficult to replicate in the form presented here. All the actors are alive²⁷ but locating them now, gaining their cooperation and obtaining a good recall of events would be very difficult. Whether actors from the New Labour period would want to recall their accounts is perhaps more doubtful as people move on in their thinking and professional experience. Accounts of events from the late 1990s to 2010 are likely to be lacking the detail that has informed this thesis.

A recurring reflection has been whether the study had too wide a scope and was not as manageable as it could have been. A question which I discussed frequently was, 'What constitutes too many interviews?'. In this study the number was justified as ensuring a robust evidence base and as much objectivity and range of types of actors across the regional institutional arrangements. However, not all the interviews needed to be used directly, some reported similar views, and some did not contribute as much to answering the research questions.

Since many, but not all, the people interviewed knew me there was much that did not need to be said. This allowed the interviewees to start a long way into the regional

²⁷ To the best of my knowledge.

experience. It was plain I could not easily be told untruths, glib statements, nor deflected into areas someone not previously so involved could find themselves. There were several instances where memory and recall was a form of reconstruction which required 'reading' the manner of the respondents perceiving their agendas and biases (e.g. party line, self-justification, legacy building, seeking to be understood, or post conflict reconciliation). With some professionals and other stakeholders, it was important to understand whether they were projecting a 'public voice' or 'inner voice' with the latter being the more revealing of their experience and private understanding. Those interviewed from a less sympathetic position were more difficult to read and I suspect that areas remained hidden. Seeking to understand the processes inside political bodies is sensitive. It remains a reflective issue as to whether there was a better way into this perhaps with documents, speeches, web sites. However, these are part of the public voice and the insight into the inner workings requires the sharing of the interviewees 'inner voice'. Alternatively, a very different form of research design is needed to uncover this such as real time participant observation.

4.19 Conclusion

Having identified a principal and subsidiary research questions the work carried out for this thesis has been designed to provide an original and robust account of the demise of regional governance and planning in England. The research was designed to make the most of my previous professional relationships, allowed interviews to go further than a researcher might find possible if coming from the outside of the organisations and processes. This allowed me to act as a 'Participant Observer in retrospect' and was able to capture people's recollections and views before memories faded.

The completion of thirty interviews selected to reflect different roles and experience within the regional planning and governance system provided a robust evidence base with a spread across a range of political and professional actors, who had been in the WMRA, other regional bodies and national Government. The interviews were completed between November 2011 and March 2014 and is probably unrepeatably in the form set out here. Documentation will survive for a while, but some of the online records have been removed (as at 2017). The significance of some of the documentary record can also be misleading. For instance, the apparently key document between West Midlands Regional organisations and Government Office for the West Midlands, the 'Regional Concordat' (WMRA,2002;2006) was said by Assembly senior manager (ASSM2) not to have the significance it appeared to on a plain reading of its contents. More fundamentally, a reading of the documentary record shows the Conservative led Councils all supporting the draft RSS at the Examination in Public in 2009. Without in depth interviews with key people involved in that process the potentially nuanced positions taken by these authorities would be difficult to ascertain.

The research design involved reference to archive material as well as key actors. Reference has been made to the press in the literature review and forms a useful contribution to the analysis. A combined approach of using documentary sources and interviews was technically possible as the WMRA's RSS archive is held at the University of Birmingham.

The thirty interviewees completed provided rich insights and data and yielded more than enough material with which to formulate a cogent analysis of the reasons for the ending of the WMRA in 2010. Throughout the research process, in designing this study, conducting and analysing interviews, the research has benefitted from my

insider knowledge and contacts but I have sought to ensure that this has not involved importing my preconceived ideas and biases. The volume and richness of the material available for analysis has itself facilitated this.

CHAPTER 5 THE COURSE OF ENGLISH REGIONALISM.

5.1 Introduction

The original research material presented in this thesis relates to the period 1998-2010 and refers to a policy and political context that changed throughout that period. This Chapter provides a simplified chronological account of the key events that form a narrative background for the thesis. The period is divided into eras marked by the changing stance of the New Labour Government towards regionalism, distinguishable by the passage of legislation, the creation of new regional bodies, and the later dispute over the numbers of new homes to be built. The eras used here and in Chapter 10 based on my perspective as part of the WMRA Secretariat are;

- 1998 to 2004: The era of stability and confidence,
- 2005-6: Early pressures on the Assembly,
- 2007-2009: Conflict, autocracy and disillusionment,
- 2009-2010: The end of regional governance.

The narrative begins with an explanation of what the West Midlands Regional Assembly was, its functions, its relationships with the rest of the regional governance architecture, and national and local government, An overview is given of the role of the Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott in promoting English regional devolution and the associated tensions this encountered inside the New Labour Government and the chapter concludes with the Coalition Government's introduction of the substitute for sub national strategic planning, the Duty to Cooperate.

5.2 What was the Regional Assembly?

The White Paper '*Building Partnerships for Prosperity*' (DETR, 1997), set out Government's plans for Regional Development Agencies (RDAs), overseen by nominated Boards and Regional Chambers. Building on existing informal regional local authorities' fora, where these existed and were prepared to cooperate, the Regional Development Agencies Act, 1998 encouraged the formation of voluntary regional chambers.

The Government's White Paper (DETR, 1997) expected the partners to these voluntary arrangements to achieve 'the equitable involvement of all the regional partners...(and)... an appropriate gender and ethnic balance' (DETR, 1997 quoted in Wood, 1998, p12). The local authority nominated membership would be dominant and reflect the balance of political representation across the local authorities. Other members would include those with an interest in the economic development work of the RDA and a wide range of civil society organisations. (Wood, 1998). RDAs, though accountable to Ministers, were expected to have regard to the views of the regional chambers in drawing up Regional Economic Strategies and Corporate Plans, and to be open to scrutiny by the Chamber (Wood, 1998).

All eight English regions outside London had, by 2002, retitled regional chambers as regional assemblies (Allen, 2002). Each Assembly had been formally recognised by the Government as representative of their regions, with funding coming from both local authorities and from 2001, the Government (Allen, 2002). The West Midlands Chamber was constituted in 1999 and took the title of 'Assembly' in 2001 (Ayres and Pearce, 2002b). The West Midlands Regional Assembly had a membership of 100 nominees, comprising:

- 68 local authority representatives
- 16 business sector representatives and
- 16 Voluntary and community partners.

The West Midlands Local Government Association was the co-ordinating body for local government representation on the Assembly. Business representatives were nominated from elections held by the West Midlands Business Council among the industrial and commercial sector. The Other Stakeholders Group was made up of nominees from the voluntary, civil society, trade union, and third sectors, coordinated by Regional Action West Midlands itself funded from the RDA, Advantage West Midlands.

Government's White Paper (DTLR,2002) presented the longer-term goal that Assemblies would be directly elected and responsible for the RDAs. From 2000, the roles of the WMRA were listed by Ayres and Pearce (2002b) as follows:

- Provide a single regional, 'coherent voice' (p31) on important matters affecting the West Midlands,
- Lobby to further regional social and economic interests,
- Provide the principal consultative mechanism for regional matters,
- Arbitrate on inclusivity regarding partnerships and organisations in regional structures, and
- 'Make regional policies more transparent to the public' (p31).

Figure 5.1 depicts in graphic form how the WMRA saw itself in early 2003. It aspired to a wide range of coordinating and influencing roles beyond its RDA scrutiny and Regional Planning roles. These core roles required partnership and network arrangements and built on WMLGA regional planning structures. From 2004,

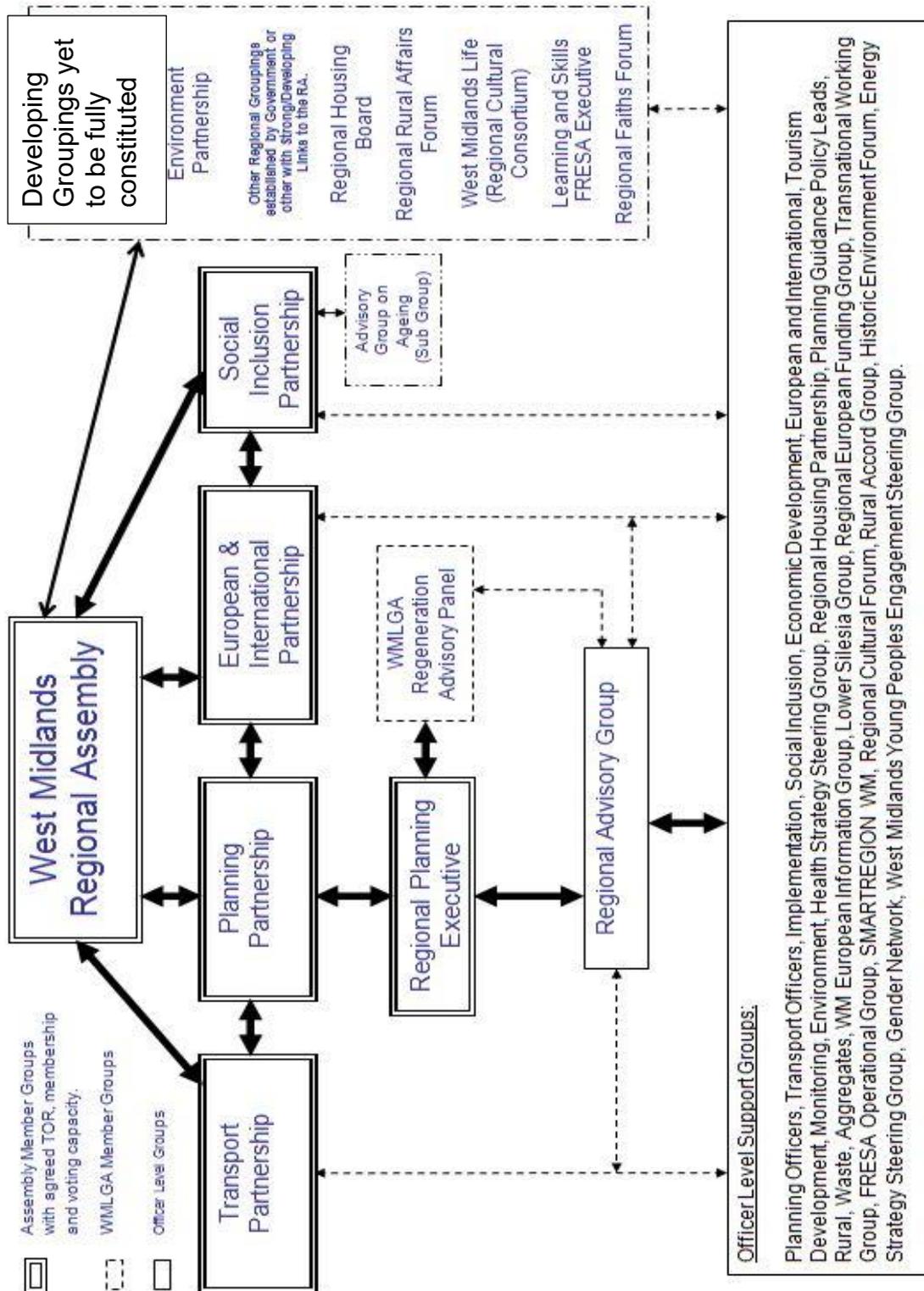


Figure 5.1 West Midlands Regional Assembly Structures and Regional Inter-relationships 2003. Source: WMRA documents, 2003

following an invitation from GOWM, WMRA became the Regional Planning Body taking over responsibility from the WMLGA.

5.3 Overview of the Role of John Prescott and the Tensions within New Labour over English Regional Devolution

New Labour implemented its constitutional modernising regional policy for the three devolved nations, London and established regional development agencies by 2001. However, progress on achieving English regional democratic devolution, which had been part of its 1997 manifesto had not been addressed (Harrison,2006). A former minister, Joyce Quinn (2010), attributed the slow pace of progress to Blair and Brown being positive about RDAs as part of their economic competitiveness policy but much more sceptical about democratic devolution. However in the opening years of New Labour's second term in office, the New Labour Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott, a long term advocate of regional government, took the first steps to create elected regional assemblies, publishing the White Paper 'Your Region, Your Choice' (DTLR, 2002) and introducing .the Regional Assemblies Bill 2004, (Harrison, 2006). A civil servant interviewee (CV4) explained, the Deputy Prime Minister,

'...had a very strong personal view on what he wanted, He genuinely saw regional planning as being the way for change,...

and felt the public would identify with regions, 'So he had a very strong personal buy into that,'. However, CV4 noted, 'The rest of the Government were more agnostic.'. The Treasury ceased to give regional assemblies and regional planning their backing from 2003, though a prolonged difficult debate with ODPM. With Kate Barker's involvement they secured an agreement that regional planning had a role to play if it met,'...the need for some stronger mechanisms on land release...and having a

quantum of housing land to address housing demand and need.’(CV4). The publication of ‘Planning Policy Statement 3 Housing, was a direct response to Barker,’ and was part of the bridge ODPM had to put in place with the Treasury with whom attitudes ‘were becoming hardened’.(CV4).

Quinn’s (2010 p89) insider account records,

‘Tony Blair (the PM) himself was unwilling to deliver quickly on regional government within England and that he was unconvinced by arguments for it,,,’.

Furthermore Raynsford (2016 p118) writes that some senior Cabinet members were at best ‘lukewarm’ about English regional devolution, and some were ‘frankly hostile’. Quinn (2010 p89) was also aware these attitudes were ‘widespread’ and consistent with anxieties within the Civil Service and Whitehall about the effects on them and their careers as a result of devolution to the Celtic nations, and were resistant to further devolution.

Once the 2004 referendum in the North East had returned a clear rejection of the proposal for a regional assembly Elcock (2009) says English regionalism was in retreat. The North East outcome took the wind out of the sails for John Prescott’s plans to advance regional government. A civil servant (CV5) reflected that ,

‘The ‘No’ vote result in proceeding to elected Regional Assemblies, pointed up a key issue as to whether the Government was really behind regional structures or was it just a pet project of John Prescott. He was a very senior minister who the Government was happy to let get on with things, but were not prepared to back him up by devolving greater responsibilities, nor any money to the Assemblies. This was the fundamental flaw...’.

In May 2006 Prescott lost his departmental responsibilities and in 2007 both Blair and Prescott resigned their Party leadership and political offices. CV4 recalled subsequent Secretaries of State at the Department for Communities and Local Government did not match John Prescott's ambition. Stephen Byers was 'far more ambivalent and Hazel Blears was very much more about communities.' (CV4).

Reflecting upon the outcome of the English regional project, a former Secretary of State at DCLG (2009-2010), John Denham (2018) supported the view New Labour had not been ready for 'radical devolution to England' and concluded ,

'... it is clear that no level of the Labour Party had really thought through how England should be governed. The party had too readily assumed that the centralised institutions of the unitary state were fit to govern effectively',(Denham,2018).

5.4 1998 to 2004: The Era of Stability and Confidence

5.4.1 New Labour and Planning

Allmendinger's (2011) reflections on planning under New Labour emphasise changing normative stances and shifting agendas and refers to four periods²⁸. This approach is reflected in Table 2.1, and a structured timeframe has been adopted in this thesis. Underpinning Labour's convictions was the view that globalisation was the essential economic paradigm (Allmendinger, 2011) within which political decisions operated. There was an overarching 'compass bearing' in New Labour thinking and Treasury conviction that policy themes had to support growth and competitiveness. This contributed to a persistent view, that planning was too slow

²⁸ See Appendix 5.1

and hindered macro –economic objectives. Within the Labour Party the leading advocate of English regional governance was the Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott MP, who was Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions from 1997 to 2001 and First Secretary of State in the Office of Deputy Prime Minister until 2006.

Ayres and Stafford (2008) summarised the main drivers of English regionalism as,-

- the promotion of economic growth,
- improve local democratic decision making,
- a belief that regional diversity should be encouraged so that service delivery would be more effective, and,
- national and local policy would be better joined up at the regional level.

However, not all Government departments owned these ideas.

5.4.2 A West Midlands Perspective on English Regionalism: Key events in Planning and Housing.

The graphic presentation of the timeline of English Regional events from the 1990s to 2010 is given in Figures 5.2, 5.3, 5.4, 5.6 and 5.8. These indicate the course of regionalism and refer to the significant national, regional, and local events, trends and debates affecting the West Midlands Region from the 1990s until 2010. By 2003 the West Midlands the Government’s Regional Office, the RDA (Advantage West Midlands), the WMRA (2002) and the WMLGA signed a ‘Regional Concordat’ which summarised their respective roles and intended cooperation. Two further versions would be signed before the end of the decade. Assembly relations with some rural local authorities were discordant over an interpretation of the RSS ceiling on planning permissions for private sector new house building. Several authorities had

used up their capacity for giving planning consent early in the plan period leading to frustration with the regional tier. Contrary to some authorities' belief GOWM did not view meeting new affordable housing needs subsidised by the Housing Corporation as breaching the 'embargo' as it became known among these authorities.

Through the early years of New Labour's regional proposals for England provided regional policy actors with a new mandate with apparent autonomy that inspired and imbued enthusiastic empowerment to a young WMRA organisation. This was notwithstanding continuities and parallel existence with the WMLGA which underlay this specific organisational architecture, with its long history of post war regional planning (Chapman et.al.,2000). It was in this climate of partnership and consensus that the West Midlands RPG was formulated.

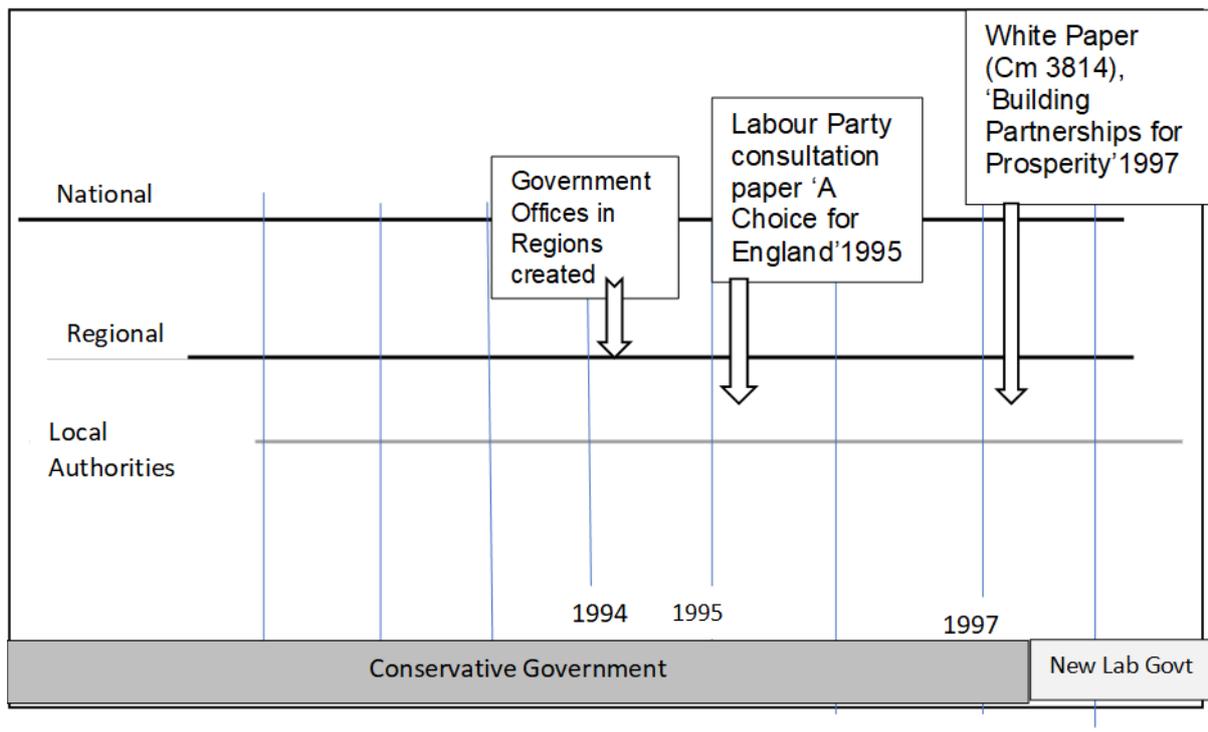


Figure 5.2 Timeline of English Regional Events from 1994 to 1997. Source: Author

From the late 1990's to 2004 the RPG's aim (Figures 5.2,5.3 and 5.4) was to reverse the historic pattern of the larger part of the conurbation's housing requirements being

met by the surrounding authorities and for pressure on the green belt to be resisted (Hall,et.al.,1973). This appeared to have cross regional agreement and support. The strategy resonated with the report of the Urban Task Force (1999) and the following White Paper (DETR,2000) designed make the urban areas places where middle class wealthy families wanted to live, stemming, and then reversing the loss of wealthier households from the conurbation. This sought a long-term sustainable region in its pattern of regeneration, growth, renewal of public service infrastructure, whilst reducing pressure on settlements and smaller cities in the surrounding areas

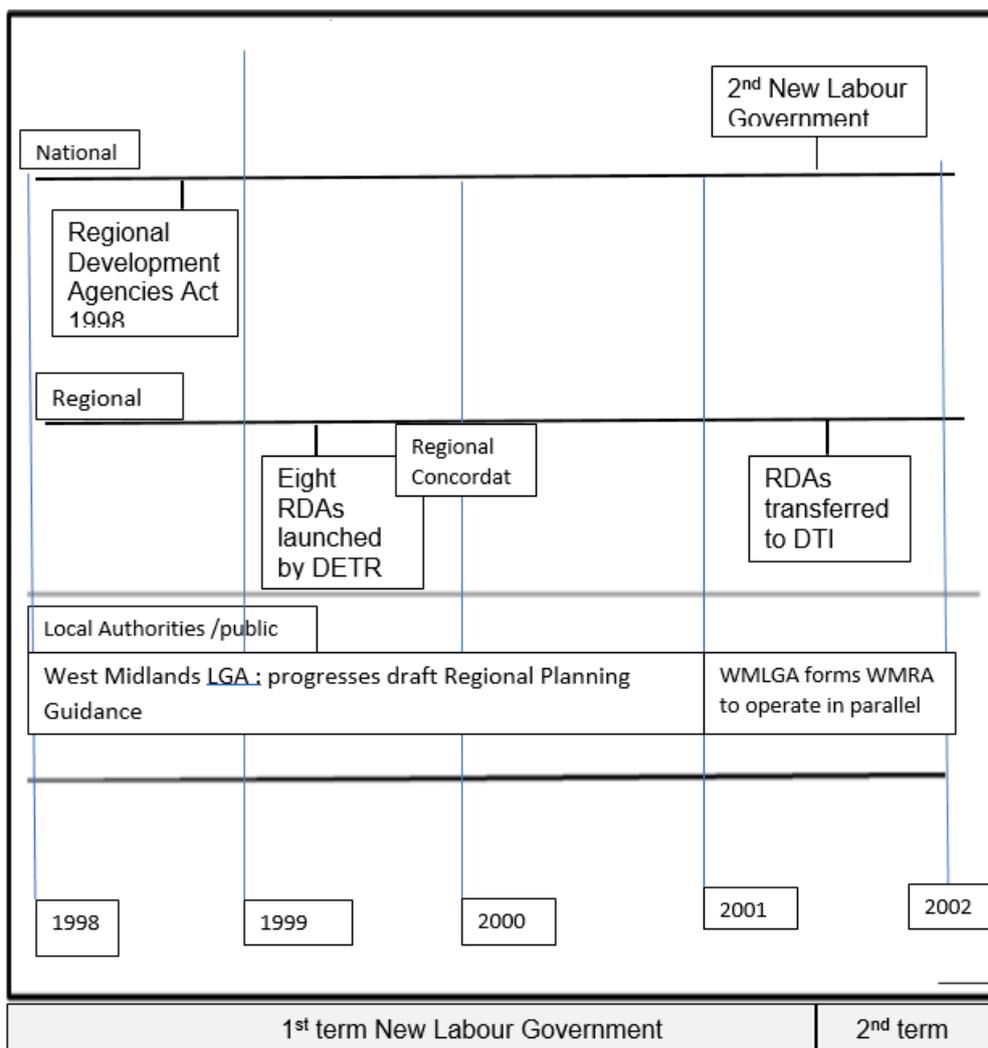


Figure 5.3 Timeline of English Regional Events from 1998 to 2002 Source:Author

5.4.3 Regional Partnership Autonomy

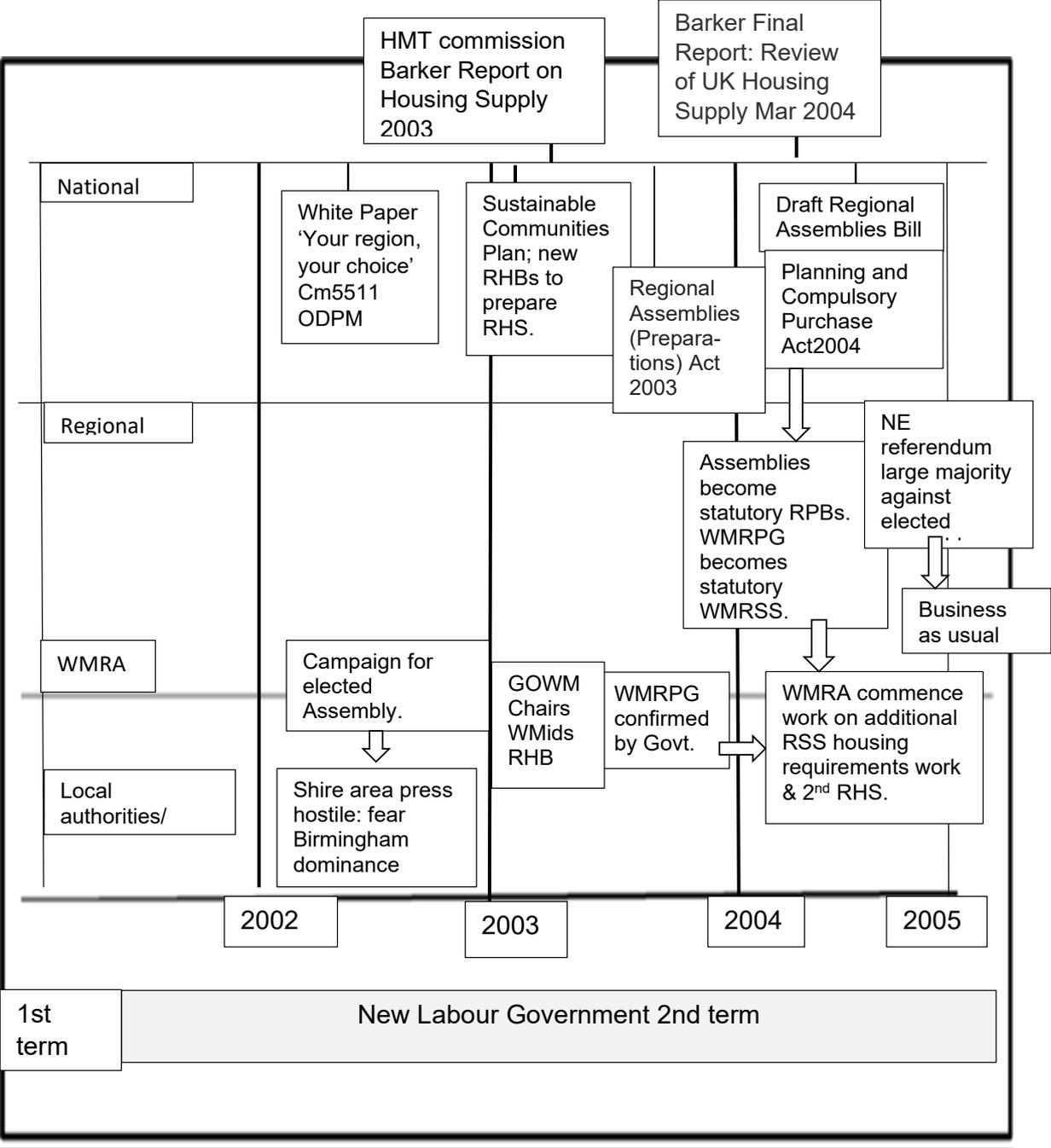
The WMLGA Secretariat had coordinated the RPG work with the Strategic Planning Authorities in a collaborative partnership working which had become the embedded culture of the WMRA Secretariat and Assembly partnership groups. This culture was evident in the Assembly's planning structures and to some extent in those of its regional housing work.

How far this collaborative consensus based approach was understood beyond the Assembly or genuinely taken up by others is unclear. It is doubtful, for instance whether the RDA was ever committed to this. However, it determined the WMRA's approach to the RDA in strategy making and in scrutiny of the RDA functions. In addition, the involvement of the Business Council and Other Stakeholders was on a voluntary basis, which epitomised the consensus character of the WMRA.

The Secretariat did acknowledge that government had the last word on the RSS but did not foresee a conflict late on in the process. However, this was reconciled with the Government's decentralising agenda as a procedural formality, or a safeguard should there be a serious errant outcome. The sense was that Government would not override evidence-based policy prescriptions derived from collaborative partnership arrangements. If this were not the case the rationale for regional partnership working would be called into question.

It was also clear that not all Government Departments understood, much less owned, the principles of regional devolution and the resources they controlled, such as the Department for Transport, (Peters and Pierre, 2004). This ambiguity eventually generated tensions in the spatial strategy especially, but not exclusively, over the quantity and location of new housing required.

Figure 5.4 Timeline of English Regional Events from 2002 to 2004; Source: Author



Ayers and Pearce (2005) recorded some hope for a ‘shift in policy making away from Whitehall and the forging, over time, of English regional institutions vested with considerable autonomy’(p3). The Deputy Prime Minister had said in 2003,

“I’m proud that we have shifted the balance of power away from Westminster and Whitehall and changed the culture that ‘Whitehall always knows best’” (Prescott, 2003, quoted in Ayres and Pearce, 2005, pp.582-583).

Peters and Pierre (2004) expressed caution about taking an optimistic view of Government letting go of its centralised control to regions due to Whitehall’s dominance and ambiguity of centre -regional relations. This view was also taken by (Ayres and Pearce, 2005), who concur that Government evolved new means to retain their position though giving directions and retaining control of process and resources. The idea that the power of Governmental institutions was on the wane was at best overstated. This theme is picked up by Davies,(2011) and used in the analysis in this study.

5.4.4 Sustainable Communities Plan

The Sustainable Communities Plan (ODPM, 2003) set out, among other things, new approaches to funding and policy initiatives for housing. Regional Housing Boards were introduced, chaired by the Regional Directors of the Government Offices in each region. Regional Housing Strategies (RHSs) were to be prepared, the first within a few months to allow new regional housing capital funding to be allocated between local authorities and the Housing Corporation’s Approved Development Programme (ADP).

The WMRA Regional Housing Board began the second Regional Housing Strategy in 2004, produced by the WMRA’s officer Regional Housing Partnership. GOWM and ODPM civil servants were clear when asked by the author at the time whose RHS it was, that the RHS was the WMRA’s not the Government’s, and that Government had devolved these matters to the Assemblies. More remote observers (Ayres and

Pearce, 2002b) were not so convinced by the extent of devolution in the preceding arrangements and it may be inferred these assurances were weaker than they appeared.

5.4.5 North East Referendum 2004 and Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004

The Regional Assembly (Preparations) Act 2003 allowed referenda to be held region by region for elected regional assemblies. The Government's intention had been to hold referenda in the North East, North West and Yorkshire and Humberside Regions but decided to hold the first in the North East. This was believed to be the Region that most felt the need for a greater devolved status following the devolution of power to Scotland. The proposal to set up an elected regional assembly was defeated by 77.9% against, 22% in favour, on a 48% turnout (Rallings and Thrasher, 2006; Norton, 2008; Elcock, 2009; Sandford, 2005, 2009).

From the author's own experience there was no obvious negative consequence in daily work arising from the NE referendum result. In the West Midlands it was 'business as usual'. However, Shaw and Robinson, (2007) argued that the balance of power had shifted to the RDA in the North East and the Assembly there had an uphill struggle to regain credibility. In their assessment, 'there (had) not been quite the return to 'business as usual' that some might well have wanted' (p13), though this was not evident in the West Midlands.

The Government Offices were still expecting the DCLG grant work to continue to be the responsibility the Assemblies and the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 made 'nominated' regional assemblies the statutory Regional Planning Bodies with responsibility for drafting and revising Regional Spatial Strategies.

The non-statutory RPG became statutory RSS in 2004 and so carried more force in planning terms. This was founded upon the vision of reversing decades of outmigration of the better off from the West Midlands conurbation to the surrounding shires. The achievement of the West Midlands strategic planning authorities in achieving consensus over this strategy marked the 'heyday' of regional planning in the West Midlands as one WMRA Secretariat planning officer (ASPO1) put it.

5.4.6 HM Treasury: 2003 to 2005.

Whilst John Prescott and the ODPM were pursuing the regional agenda the Treasury appointed Kate Barker, an external member of the Bank of England's Monetary Policy Committee in April 2003 to conduct a Review of UK Housing Supply. The Treasury brief focused on house building;

'The number of houses being built in the UK is not keeping pace with demand and damaging the wider economy,The Review considers a range of factors that might be constraining the supply of housing in the UK arising from industry failures or the policy environment.'(HMT,2003).

An Interim Report (Barker,2003) and Final Report (Barker,2004) proposed two key regional institutional changes, both implemented in 2005. One was the merger of the Regional Housing Boards and Regional Planning Bodies, the other, the creation of a National Housing and Planning Advice Unit to advise ministers on planning for housing issues, especially regional housing requirements.

5.4.7 The Regional Housing Boards

There is a fuller story of the RHBs but this is not central to this thesis and so it is not developed here in detail²⁹. The RHBs were moved to the regional assemblies by means of a letter³⁰ from an official at the Department of Communities and Local Government (Ruback,2006). The new RHB arrangements were intended by the WMRA to mirror the RPB as far as possible. so in the WMRA the RHB was given the name 'Executive' as depicted in Figure 5.5.

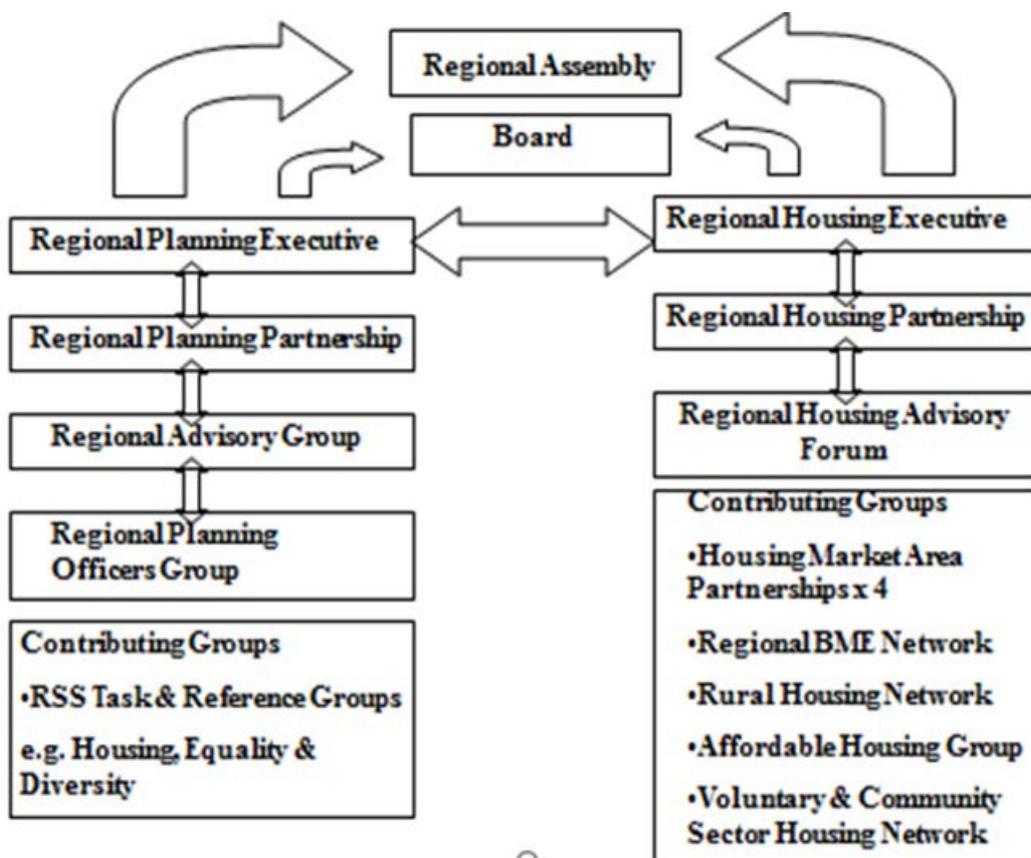


Figure. 5.5 The Relationship Between Planning and Housing Structures following the transfer of Regional Housing Board functions to the WMRA. Source: WMRA, 2007a

²⁹ For specific issues of the relationship between the WMRA's RHB and RPB, see Section 8.7.

³⁰ The DCLG letter of 27 June 2006 was addressed to Paul Bevan, Chief Executive of the SE Regional Assembly on behalf of all the Assemblies.

The RHS was to be aligned with the RSS and the RDA's Regional Economic Strategy. In monitoring the delivery of the RHS, in large part through the planning system, the RHBs were expected to support and encourage partnership working, particularly in sub-regional housing markets. Whilst RHBs were moved from the GORs to Regional Assemblies, in the West Midlands the RPB and Regional Housing Board were not merged into one structure. Rather they had separate chairmen with some cross over membership both under the WMRA Board and full Assembly.

5.5 2005-7: Early Pressures on the Assembly

5.5.1 Tensions over Regional Policy: 2005-2007

By 2005 the pressures from Government to accommodate more housing growth had the effect of placing the new RSS under pressure to reinstate the historic pattern of meeting housing needs from the conurbation in the shire areas. This pressure was mainly associated with targets for economic growth and international competitiveness. From 2005 as the partial RSS revision was undertaken, with the requirement for greater housing numbers at the core, the RPB, the WMRA Secretariat, and local authority planning officers were trying to defend the confirmed RSS and find ways of maintaining a region wide consensus and meet Government's demands.

The key events from 2005 to 2007 are given in Figure 5.6. Through 2005 internally contradictory positions within Government became apparent. The implications of the NE referendum for assemblies' democratic legitimacy appeared at odds with the newly acquired statutory RPB role and RSS status. This was further confused as the Treasury appeared to become a dominant driver of the regional housing supply side agenda for economic growth purposes. For the assemblies, whose accountability

what resolution would emerge. In the meantime, Government through its oversight of the Assembly's business plan and GOWM was driving the WMRA to keep to the very tight timescales for delivering the revised RSS (DCLG, 2004) and presenting Government with the WMRA's RSS Revision Preferred Option, especially on new housing numbers.

Notwithstanding Treasury focus on economic growth, ODPM were still pursuing policies to create sustainable, mixed communities (ODPM,2005a;2005b;2005c). It reaffirmed its development of the regional architecture:

'Since 1997 we have strengthened the GOs and devolved more responsibilities to new regional institutions – Regional Development Agencies (RDAs), regional planning bodies (regional assemblies) and Regional Housing Boards. These reforms strengthen the capacity of each region to take strategic decisions on its key priorities.' (ODPM, 2005a, p24).

ODPM sought to strengthen local and regional political apparatus by calling for 'strong leadership' (ODPM, 2005a, p10) in partnership working to address the need for housing. It also noted that this would require '....working in – or with – the regional assembly to develop Regional Spatial Strategies that integrate housing, economic development and new infrastructure.'(ODPM,2005b, p10). There was a sub-text that ODPM felt that if local government and the RPBs did not deliver it would have lost ground to the Treasury.

5.5.2 The Treasury Moves First

In their first major practical intervention in regional policy, the Treasury (with ODPM) began to implement the Barker review's recommendation that ministers should receive independent housing and planning advice (Barker, 2004). The establishment

of a National Advice Unit was approved in 2006 and launched in June 2007 as the 'National Housing and Planning Advice Unit'. This Unit of twelve staff, was to be independent, with an oversight Committee (NHPAU,2008a). It would be non – statutory with its continuation reviewed after three years. Informed by an expert staff it would set and advise on national affordability targets for each region. This was seen as addressing an inadequately researched evidence base across the regions. This advice to ministers was not intended to remove the responsibilities of the RPBs which would take a wider view than the NHPAU.

The NHPAU's remit included recommending what numbers of new homes should be built as RSSs were being prepared. The WMRA Phase 2 partial revision of its RSS included housing and was at the vanguard (Flint, 2008) of the new process heading to be tested, through an Examination in Public. Figure 5.7 shows graphically how the

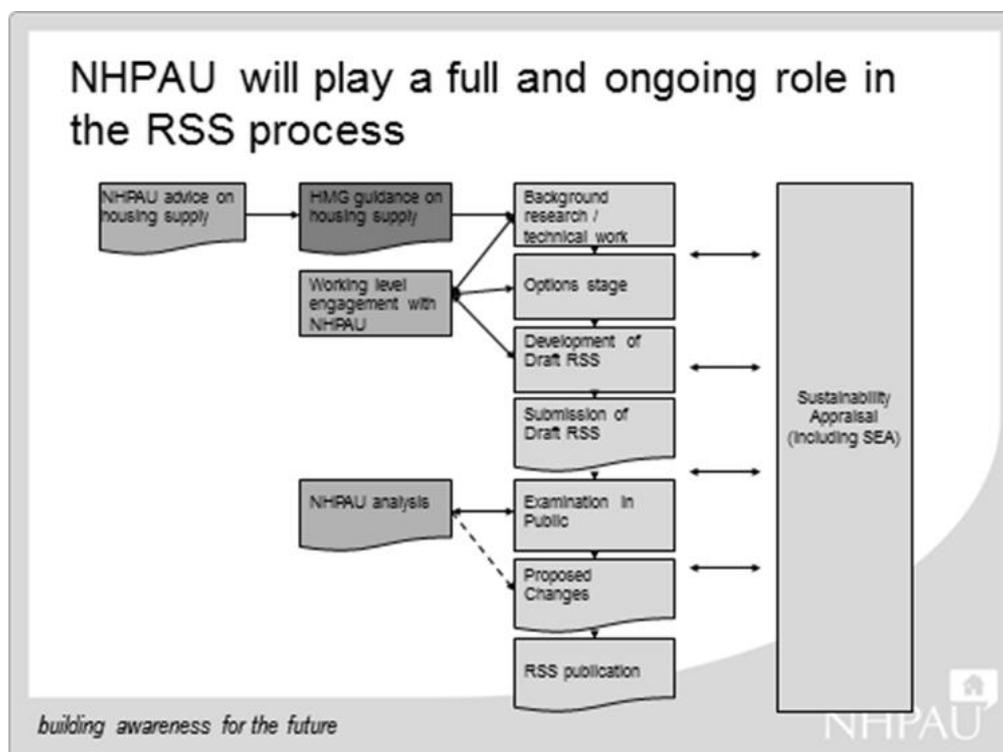


Figure 5.7 The NHPAU role in the Regional Spatial Strategy Process.
Source; Williamson, 2008.

NHPAU conveyed its intentions to regional bodies, including the WMRA and GOWM. Concurrently in 2005 the Treasury embarked on another plank of its strategy to strengthen economic growth by again commissioning Kate Barker to review, among other things, the efficiency, speed, and 'flexibility, transparency and predictability' that business required of the English Planning system. This was in the belief that planning hindered growth and responsiveness to globalisation (Barker, 2006a; MacDonald, 2006). Barker (2006b,p17,para.1.28) concluded that in at least some places land use regulation was impeding the development of economic clusters.

The final report (Barker, 2006a) reconfirmed 'the importance of the planning system as a vital support to productivity and economic growth'. The recommendations sought to improve the clarity of the economic benefits of development and review green belt boundaries to achieve sustainability and regeneration. Both Barker's Treasury studies (2004, 2006b), can be seen as part of the wider context of the European Union Lisbon Agenda which prioritised growth, jobs and meeting the conditions for joining the Euro (MacDonald,2006).

5.5.3 West Midlands Regional Planning 2005-2007

The West Midlands Regional Planning Body was in the forefront (Flint, 2008) of working through the new planning system after 2004. RPG11 was the first RSS confirmed by the Secretary of State albeit with further work to be done, especially on allocating new housing figures down to district council level. By 2005 the RPB also had to take into account the new population and household forecasts and the evolution of government's focus on economic growth.

In the period to 2007 demand for housing continued to rise as did the difficulty of accessing the housing market as affordability ratios of income to house prices

worsened. The WMRA had to respond to household projections that implied 223,000 extra households in the West Midlands by 2026. Housing delivery was slow and affordable housing delivery was barely half that required with households waiting for social housing having risen by 60% in 10 years. In July 2007 a Housing Green Paper (DCLG, 2007) included plans to increase housing supply, deliver two million new homes by 2016, three million by 2020 and meet a target of 240,000 additional homes a year by 2016. This required substantially increased rates of construction.

Through 2005 to 2007 the WMRA planners coordinated work by the 33 local authorities to bring forward a technically credible, politically acceptable, and deliverable supply of land. This was a complex, difficult process carried out under GOWM's tight timescales. It was debated and negotiated in GOWM's presence in the RPB's meetings. As this process took place, regular meetings with the NHPAU were also held where differences in approach became clearer. The WMRA's RSS Preferred Option (WMRA, 2007) was for 365,600 new homes to 2026, whereas the Government's 2004 population projections translated into 382,000. However, the NHPAU advised ministers 415,200 to 455,500 new homes were required to 2026 (GOWM,2008).

The West Midlands local authorities felt pressure from the NHPAU and GOWM. The WMRA settled on a RSS Preferred Option (WMRA, 2007) that had higher housing numbers than the existing RPG11/ RSS, was deliverable politically and within the capacity of the construction sector, if all went well. The Assembly's Preferred Option proposals over the period from 2007 for 20 years was recommended to Government by a complete consensus of the overwhelmingly Conservative led Regional Planning Partnership.

5.6 2007-2009: Conflict, Autocracy and Disillusionment

The events in the third and fourth eras from 2008 to the General Election in May 2010 are summarised in Figure 5.8.

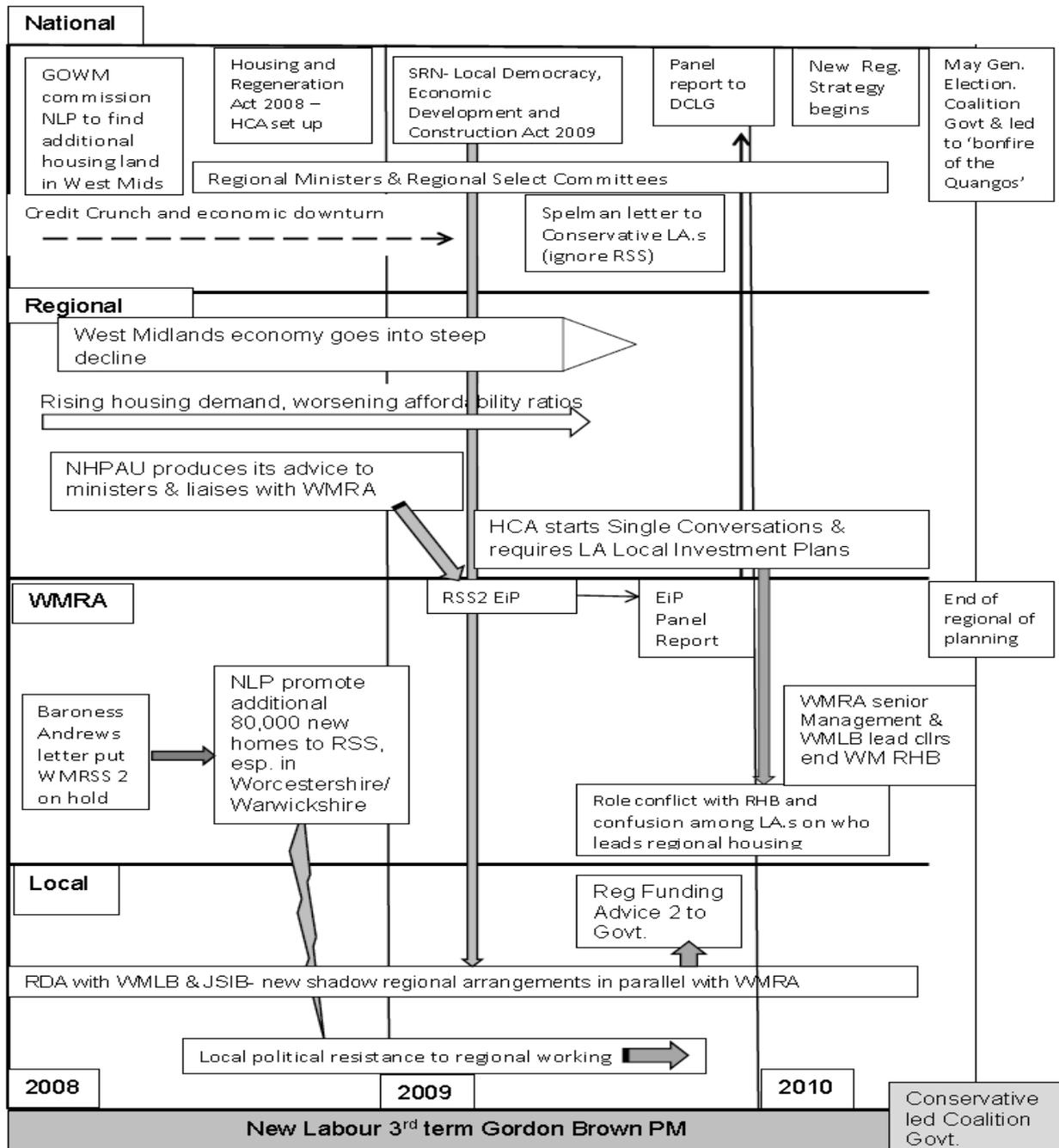


Figure 5.8 The Last Years of Labour’s Regional Governance 2008 – 2010.

Source: Author

5.6.1 The Gordon Brown Years: The Pace of Change Accelerates

The early stages of the Credit Crunch,(Gieve,2008;BBC,2009) as it was known, was not a direct concern of the Assembly, unlike the RDA. The Assembly's focus was on dealing with the Government's interventions on the RSS Preferred Option and demonstrating to DCLG its timetable for the EiP in the spring of 2009 would be met. By June 2009 the growing financial crisis had one specific relevance to the Assembly. The collapsing rate of housing construction played well for the Assembly's argument that the higher housing numbers Government sought, at best, were going to be 'back loaded' to the end of the 2020s, if they were to be achieved in the plan period. When the severity of the regional impact was understood it fell to the newly formed shadow RRAs led by the RDA and the Joint Strategy and Investment Board (JSIB) to respond.

During this era the way that Government handled the West Midlands RSS Phase 2 Revision created political tensions in the region. In January 2008 the Government effectively rejected the WMRA's Preferred Option. Despite GOWM civil servants attempting to put the West Midlands' case, a DCLG minister, Baroness Andrews wrote to WMRA putting the next stage of consultation on hold (Andrews,2008). The letter expressed determination to intervene outside the Government's own procedures. It referred to the 'economic drivers' and showed that Government had moved on from the Urban Renaissance principles of RPG11, referring to these as a 'very rigid application of....principles...'. The reference to more housing numbers starting to 'impact on affordability' was a clear indication ministers were taking the NHPAU's advice and were prepared to drive the process to achieve the numbers they wanted.

GOWM commissioned Nathaniel Lichfield Partnership, to provide additional evidence for a future Examination in Public demonstrating more land for housing was available than the local authorities and Assembly had offered. The consultation process on NLP's study (NLP,2008a,2008b) which proposed up to an additional 80,000 houses, particularly in Warwickshire and Worcestershire, did not conclude until December 2008.

The effect of NLP's study was felt politically within the West Midlands and was observed by the other RPBs as they prepared their RSSs. The realisation that the RSS process which the West Midlands Regional Planning Partnership had negotiated for over two years could be challenged in this way precipitated a loss of Trust within the West Midlands. This was summed up in a House of Commons speech by Sir Peter Luff, MP for Mid Worcestershire, who referred to the housing numbers policy being,

‘...suddenly torn up in one of the most undemocratic and unwarranted interventions in local affairs by a Minister that I can recall.’ (Luff, 2008),

and Baroness Andrews, had,

‘...., told us that all our efforts had been wasted and that, under her instructions, we must go back to the drawing board. It is no wonder that people are cynical about politics.’ (Luff, 2008).

5.6.2 Regional Reform: Regional Ministers

Shortly after Gordon Brown became Prime Minister on 28 June 2007, he appointed nine Regional ministers for England including London (Ministry of Justice,2007; Maer and Horne,2007). Their responsibilities were to promote the interests of the regions in Government, Parliament and in wider regional bodies, especially Government

Regional Offices and, on economic development, the RDAs (Ministry of Justice, 2007; Maer,2008). The Regional ministers for the West Midlands were Liam Byrne MP, from 28 June 2007 to 6 October 2008, followed by Ian Austin MP from 6 October to 11 May 2010.

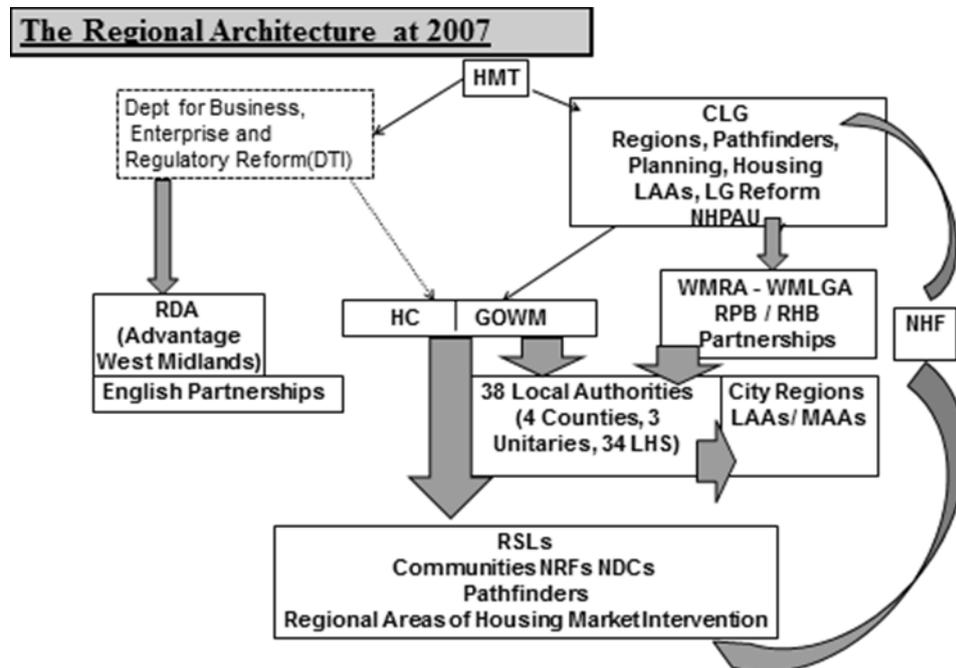
5.6.3 The Review of Sub-National Economic Development and Regeneration

At a national level Gordon Brown's 2006 Budget announced that the 2007 Comprehensive Spending Review would be informed by policy reviews and in July 2007, Government published proposals for a 'Review of Sub-National Economic Development and Regeneration' (SNR) (HMT,2007),followed by Government's response (DCLG and BERR,2008; DCLG,2008). The Treasury moved up to its next major challenge to regional working with the SNR which sought in part to simplify regional structures and decision-making, announcing the abolition of Regional Assemblies (Maer, 2008). About the future of regional arrangements, the Treasury website for 17 July 2007 said the SNR would,' encourage economic growth and tackle deprivation at every level' *inter alia*,

'by .. streamlining the regional tier outside London, based on more effective and accountable RDAs which would be responsible, working closely with local authorities, for preparing a single strategy for the region.'(HMT,2007)

The West Midlands regional governance architecture in 2007 is shown in Figure 5.9, the consequences of the SNR for this group of organisations is shown in Figures 5.10 and its development by 2009 in Figure 5.11.

Figure 5.9 The West Midlands Regional Architecture at 2007
 Source Author as Forrest, 2010



In its March 2008 consultation document Government proposed to abolish Regional Assemblies and create a new Regional Strategy (RS) based on merging the non-statutory Regional Economic Strategy, Regional Housing Strategy with the statutory RSS (DCLG and BERR, 2008). The lead body for this would be the RDAs which in the case of AWM would have a new spatial strategy role with which they were unfamiliar professionally and culturally.

5.7 2009-2010: The End of Regional Governance.

5.7.1 The End Game

The policy and legislation that followed this allowed the RDA and new Local Authorities Leaders' Boards to share joint responsibility for developing and submitting the new Regional Strategy to Ministers and advice on regional funding priorities (JSIB, 2009). The RDAs and the Leaders' Boards were referred to in the

Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act, 2009, as the Responsible Regional Authorities (RRAs). Figure 5.10 places the RRAs and the newly formed shadow West Midlands Joint Strategy and Investment Board (JSIB) in the fluid and uncertain context of how expertise and planning management would contribute and oversee the production of the Regional Strategy.

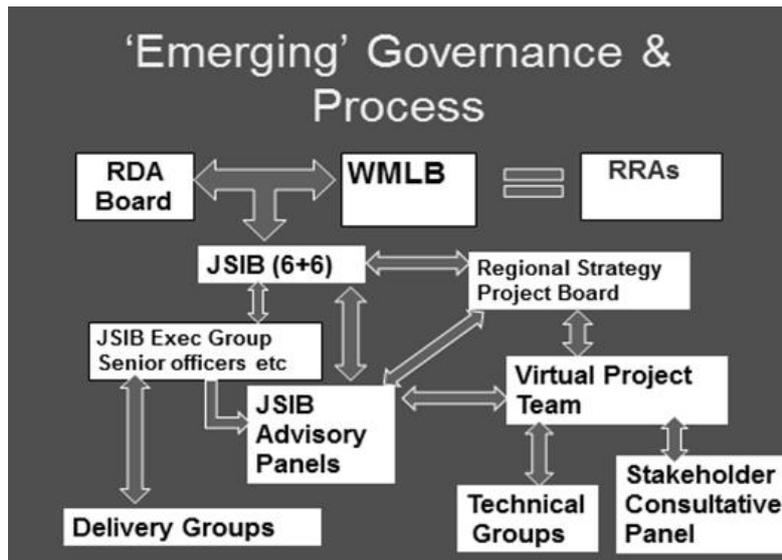
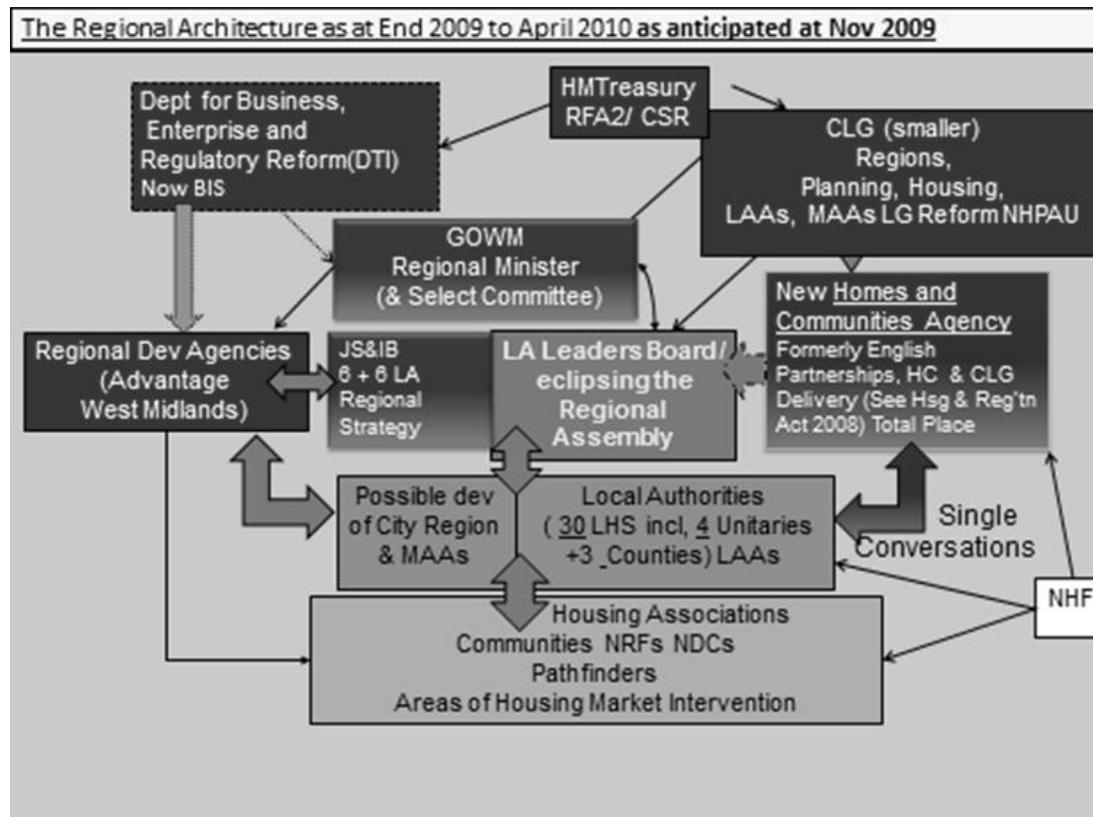


Figure 5.10 The Emerging West Midlands Regional Governance Model 2009-2010
Source: WMRA,2010

The SNR outcome as it appeared to the WMRA is given in Figure 5.11. This created a situation in which there were two regional governance structures operating side by side from 2009 to the end of March 2010, just before the May General Election. One was the continuing Assembly role as RPB and RHB, the other a shadow precursor to the incoming regional architecture involving new shared structures between the shadow Leaders' Board and the RDA. Civic and community stakeholders would no longer be part of the new RRAs but would be consulted. The scrutiny role would pass back from local authorities to the newly established Regional Select Committees.

Figure 5.11 How the Emerging New Regional Architecture appeared to the WMRA Nov 2009. Source: WMRA, 2010



Despite the replacement of assemblies with Leaders' Boards, in the West Midlands the RDA and Leaders' Board formed the West Midlands JSIB, with GOWM attending. This shadow JSIB was made up of six Advantage West Midlands Board members and six Leaders from the WMLB. The JSIB was intended to oversee the new Regional Strategy for the RDA, dominant in its new statutory responsibility to submit a single Regional Strategy to Government. The shadow JSIB first met in November 2008 and quickly submitted to Government the West Midlands 'Regional Funding Advice 2' (JSIB, 2009) for investment priorities.

However, the parallel working of these structures and their cumulative impact marked regional working over this period. Rather than creating a simpler regional tier, these parallel sets of regional structures probably created the opposite

impression. Two factors arise from this: although the number of bodies would be reduced through mergers into the new HCA the new arrangements spawned new structures (e.g. JSIB), within a re-centralisation of power to the national government level though the HCA and the newly empowered RDAs.

5.7.2 The West Midlands RSS Revision Examination in Public 2009

Whilst the new shadow bodies were beginning their work in 2009, the outgoing regional planning system continued with the Examination in Public (EiP) of the RSS Revision with the contentious new housing requirement, a major issue of debate. However, the local authorities all asserted their formal unanimous endorsement of the RSS Revision Preferred Option (WMRA,2007) presented by the WMRA.

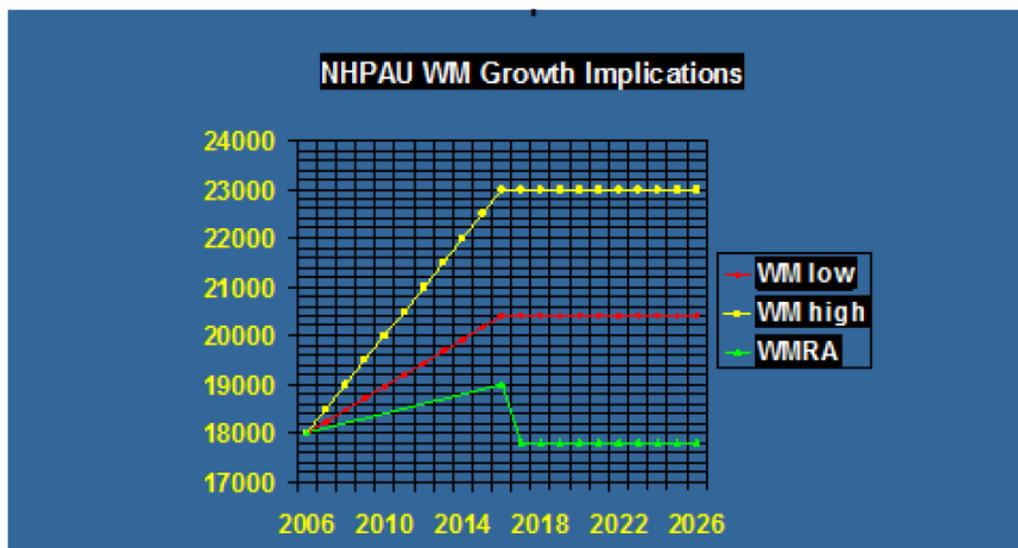
At the Examination in Public, the GOWM, NHPAU, and Homes and Communities Agency, took positions against the WMRA on new housing numbers. Advantage West Midlands were reluctant to overtly join with GOWM as the RDA's own conviction was that the numbers being sought could not be matched by new employment.

The Report on the Examination in Public (Planning Inspectorate, 2009) proposed the West Midlands build 398,000 new homes, slightly higher figures than the WMRA had proposed but lower than the NHPAU had sought as shown in Figure 5.12 (Marr,2008)³¹.

³¹ D. Marr was a senior Civil Servant, Head of Housing and Planning at the Government Office for the West Midlands. The presentation was to officers of the WMRA and West Midlands local authorities.

Figure 5.12 NHPAU West Midlands Growth Implications. Comparison of New Housing Annual Build Rates in the WMRA RSS Phase 2 Revision Preferred Option and the high and low Rates of the NHPAU.

Source: Marr.D.2008, Working Together to Deliver Housing Targets: Housing Green Paper 2007 Overview.



Key: Annual Housing Rate of Delivery
 WM High – NHPAU High level annual requirement for the West Midlands
 WM Low - NHPAU low level annual requirement for the West Midlands
 WMRA – WMRA’s RSS Revision Preferred Annual Build Rate

The Inspector supported the essential principles of the RSS in its promotion of urban and rural renaissance but recommended some policy changes requiring further assessment. This was expected by July 2010, (McKenzie, 2010) and the Secretary of State’s Proposed Changes were also anticipated. These were never published but some Assembly planners believed that if they had been, the Government would have imposed higher housing figures than the Panel recommended. Once the Coalition Government came to power in May 2010 there was no prospect of the RSS system continuing.

5.7.3 The Spelman Letter

Before the Panel Report was published Caroline Spelman MP, the Shadow Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government wrote to Conservative MPs and councils in August 2009 (Spelman,2009; Mathiason, 2009). The intention was to undermine the progress of RSS policy. The GOWM consultant's NLP had identified a several potential areas of additional new housing, including in her own Meriden Constituency (Solihull News,2008; NLP,2008b³²).

The Spelman letter (2009) opened with a statement about the Conservative's intention to, '...abolish the bureaucratic and undemocratic tier of regional planning' along with all the organisational apparatus both Assemblies and Leaders Boards. It promised a new Conservative Government would publish new policy and legislation to revoke some or all RSS housing development targets. Spelman's advice would allow Planning Authorities to '...put the brakes on elements of Regional Spatial Strategies...'. The tone of the letter was consistent with both hostility towards the RSS and confidence that high office was near at hand. West Midlands Conservatives increasingly opposed the Labour Government's regional planning system, focused largely on the housing numbers, and were anticipating a General Election victory. Consistent with the growing antipathy towards any organisation, strategy or process with the word 'regional' in its title, the Regional Strategy became the West Midlands Strategy, and the West Midlands LGA became the West Midlands Leaders' Board.

³² See Appendix 5.2 for extract from Nathaniel Lichfield Partners proposed option for a Meriden Gap New Settlement and further discussion at Sections 5.12; 8.9; and 9.5.

5.7.4 Homes and Communities Agency

The establishment of the Homes and Communities Agency on 1 December 2008, by the Housing and Regeneration Act, 2008 was another layer of reform at national level which operated at regional and local level. The HCA was formed principally from the investment functions of the Housing Corporation, English Partnerships and parts of the Department for Communities and Local Government. The new housing and regeneration agency with considerable powers and a consolidated budget, was a member of the West Midlands JSIB and explicitly supported the New Labour Government's new housebuilding targets (DCLG,2007). However, this simplification and strengthening of the regional level architecture directly impacted the RSS process, and the work of the RHB.

The HCA was tasked with accelerating regeneration in under-performing towns and cities, and with sustained economic revival. This focus was underlined on 29 April 2009 by a joint statement from the HCA and the RDAs who committed '.... to working together to develop economically, socially and environmentally thriving and sustainable places across England.'(HCA and English RDAs, 2009,p1; Lloyd,2009).

The joint statement (HCA and English RDAs, 2009) pledged to develop regional investment planning strategies to prioritise public investment within each region. The statement also said the agencies would review the role of the regional housing boards (RHBs) which were still embedded in the regional assemblies where their role was remained to ensure the better integration of regional housing strategy and RSS planning policy for housing.

At the Assembly Secretariat there was awareness that this joint statement had produced a negative reaction in DCLG as the RHBs were the DCLG minister's remit,

not that of the HCA or that of the DBERR. The concern was no less at the regional level where the statement added to the confusion over the ongoing and future role of the RHB. In the absence of a Government statement to the contrary, the RHB expected to be under the WMLB, and the HCA was expected to be accountable for its part in delivering the affordable housing programme and the RHS.

This role conflict in the West Midlands continued as the HCA began its new Local Investment Plans with individual local authorities while DCLG and the WMRA Secretariat were continuing to encourage housing delivery in line with sub regional housing market areas (WMRA,2005). The role took on an additional dimension when the WMRA began an RSS Implementation Plan whilst the HCA was planning with local authorities where major infrastructure, (e.g. a new river crossing), should be located to release residential land. Some improvement was achieved when the West Midlands HCA wrote to the WMRA Secretariat affirming the HCA's commitment to regional working (Spooner, 2010) especially supporting the RSS housing delivery targets.

Against the backdrop of the worsening economic crisis in 2009, while the Assembly awaited for the EiP Panel Report (Planning Inspectorate, 2009) the regional political momentum had passed to the RDA and the shadow JSIB which despite the crisis was still presenting Government with considerable investment plans in its Regional Funding Advice 2 (JSIB,2009). This advice from the JSIB and HCA, with its twenty high impact investment locations (IILs) also brought to a head a growing confusion over who was leading the regional planning process while the RSS Phase 2 EiP was underway and well before the Panel had reported. This made the regional planning system look slow, rigid, and overtaken by events

This impression suited those, including politicians who wanted quick action, not least because since 2008 the West Midlands economy was in steep decline and needed intervention, but it opened up a gap between the statutory RSS process and the regionally significant investment decisions which were beginning without coordination with the WMRA, giving the appearance of being done ‘on the hoof’ between the JSIB, the HCA and some of the local authorities.

Political impatience with regional working grew both nationally and regionally. For the Labour Government this was with recalcitrant regional planning and behind this, the local authorities. For the Conservatives, their patience with regionalism had run out and the economic crisis added stress to the regional governance structures.

This state of affairs was frozen in 2010 as the new Coalition Government quickly closed down regional bodies including the Government Office, the Leaders’ Board, and the RDA. The HCA survived the ‘culling of the Quangos’ (PASC,2010; Redwood, 2010), but retained only four of seventeen offices, and with its budget reduced from £80 million a year to £40 million.

5.7.5 Regional Planning and Abolition of Regional Governance 2010.

The Labour Government pursued its planning for housing agenda in the West Midlands through to the General Election in May 2010 but GOWM’s grip on the RPB did not hold for the RHB. Following discussions between key local authority leaders on the WMLB and the Assembly, the Leaders’ Board Chief Executive took the decision to end the WM RHB. This was announced precipitately to the RHB at its February 2010 meeting without prior notice to the chairman, members, staff, GOWM, nor with DCLG who were responsible for the RHB. The action appeared to reflect impatience with ‘regional’ bodies, especially the Assembly. The rationale was given

that if a body did not make regular executive decisions on tangible issues there was no purpose served by its existence. This overlooked the central role of the Assembly which by design was strategy development, coordination, monitoring and facilitating delivery as given by ministers.

It is a moot point whether the Assembly and Leaders' Board senior leadership, political or executive, had the authority to close the RHB without consulting the GOWM or DCLG. The Conservative political leadership, armed with confidence and sense of invulnerability to any disapproval by the Labour Government, took this precipitous decision. It demonstrated the extent to which senior officers felt able to offer up functions to senior members for swift cessation either because they personally approved of the political climate or they felt the need to be seen to be implementing measures in line with it. The GOWM decided to do nothing about the removal of the RHB and wait for the outcome of the General Election.

The Conservative Party in opposition had produced their own 'green paper' (Conservative Party, 2009a) that proposed to pursue their version of localism and under the new planning system, introduced by the Coalition Government in 2010. There was to be no formal strategic planning above district or unitary authority level. The RSSs were revoked, despite some legal challenges from developers.

A Duty to Collaborate between local authorities was introduced in the Localism Act 2011 in response to severe criticism from developers, the Royal Town Planning Institute, and some local politicians. This rapid removal of an integral part of the national planning system came as a shock to many professional planners in the public and private sectors. The issues which regional planning and other regional working had been set up to address had not gone away. A transition to a new

system had been seen as rational and therefore inevitable for the good governance of the country. A fragmented planning system without a coherent strategic tier seemed inconceivable and national housing requirements could not be met based on local political will alone.

5.8 Conclusion

This summary of the course of regional working has used four eras to provide a frame for the evolution of regional devolution from confidence and cooperation, through increasing waves of turbulence and tension, to the demise of the Assembly and its successor bodies. As national Governmental objectives hardened around economic competitiveness and meeting social policy objectives, its stance towards the regional tier became increasingly unsympathetic to its origins and developed an increasingly autocratic stance. Behind this appeared to be the near supremacy of Treasury views over those of DCLG which upheld the place of planning in the policy tools available to government. An increasingly volatile, fragmented, conflicted system undermined the consensus partnership based planning system. Together these made for a difficult environment in which to function, made worse by the financial crisis, leading to the demise of the Assembly's successor bodies in 2010. The account now turns to examine the story in depth as recounted by the Assembly's staff, governance members, and those in its wider organisational environment.

CHAPTER 6 WHY WAS REGIONAL WORKING ABOLISHED? EVIDENCE FROM THE WEST MIDLANDS REGIONAL ASSEMBLY SECRETARIAT.

6.1 Introduction

This is the first of four chapters which present the evidence on a range of issues which contribute to an understanding of why the New Labour Government's regional project ended in 2010. This includes evidence of the part played in abolition by regional planning for new housing in the West Midlands Region. Each Chapter presents the evidence from one main group of interviewees. This Chapter is drawn from the contributions of staff and senior management of the Regional Assembly Secretariat. Chapter 7 presents the evidence from the constituent groups which made up the governance of the Assembly. Chapter 8 covers the evidence given from other regional bodies which worked alongside the Assembly, and Chapter 9 presents evidence provided by civil servants and national politicians.

This chapter begins by considering what evidence there is that the regional project was doomed from the start, by failure in design or its initial set up and the part played by the Assembly's two primary statutory functions - the democratic scrutiny role of the Regional Development Agency, and the strategic Regional Planning role. The part played by the Assembly's constituent bodies, tensions between them, and the manner in which they operated are assessed for damage to the organisation's reputation. The extent to which the Assembly was threatened or damaged by external actors is then discussed culminating in the Sub- National Review. The final sections discuss the position of MPs and the public awareness of the Assembly concluding with some brief comment on underlying emotive issues, the belief that

regionalism was an agenda of the European Union and the issue of place and identity.

The West Midlands Regional Assembly's (WMRA) operational core was the Secretariat. These were the senior management, professional planners, and officers who worked closely with them. In this last group was the researcher, as Head of Housing with a small team that undertook RSS and other non-planning housing work. The senior officers were at the managerial apex of the Assembly. The three groups of Secretariat staff did not all hold the same perspectives or opinions. Such differing views of the same events enrich the research findings and provide scope for greater insights to emerge.

6.2 Was the Regional Project doomed from the Start?

This section presents the evidence provided by the WMRA's Secretariat on whether it was clear from the start that regional arrangements would not work either due to initial design or implementation.

6.2.1 The Beginnings of the West Midlands Regional Assembly

Prior to the establishment of the West Midlands Regional Assembly there had been a, '....strong, long tradition' (ASSM2) of joint West Midlands local authority working stemming from the decades since the 1950's.

A West Midlands actor with a wide range of local authority and Secretariat experience recalled at the outset there was '...goodwill and support '(ASPO2), which, '....applied to most senior politicians across the Region.' (ASPO2,).

Joint authority working at both member and officer level had included statutory joint working on waste and aggregates, as well as joint working under the West Midlands

Local Government Association (WMLGA) on the non-statutory Regional Planning Guidance (RPG 11) (GOWM, and ODPM, 2004). A longstanding member of the WMLGA and then WMRA staff recalled the smooth continuity of progression whilst the organisational framework which employed and governed them changed. The movement from WMLGA to WMRA,

‘... was a natural progression in a sense. All it did was to bring in the people we’d talked to as partners actually into the organisation. ’
(ASPO1),

and,

‘The foundations of regionalism had been in place for some time so in many senses it was an evolution, but for the Conservatives that fear of regional government, even though they developed a form of regional governance, was something else.’ (ASSM2).

The structure of the Assembly did not ‘arrive’ fully formed, nor did Government impose a radically different structure on the West Midlands. In setting up the regional chamber as the Assembly was first called ‘There was a democratic process ... back to localities.’ (ASSM2) which was described as,

‘A little bit of a convoluted chain but ... it was there.... this was quite ground-breaking at the time.’(ASSM2).

The Assembly’s political legitimacy was felt to be secure because Government guidance said that local government would be the majority party:

‘.... in terms of membership, the local government side was easy to do. We had the West Midlands Local Government Association and had its

governance structure, and so it was easy enough for the (WM)LGA structure to nominate members onto the Chamber ...(and).... who would be Chairs and Vice-Chairs'. (ASSM2).

Large corporate business did not wish to be involved as they were said to have had neither the time nor inclination. Although the wider West Midlands business sector was reported to be not very organised it saw opportunities generated by the creation of the Assembly. They looked at matters on a sectoral basis not as local government did geographically. The business sector organised themselves into the West Midlands Business Council by industrial sector to act as,' ... the WM Business voice ... an umbrella group of umbrella organisations.' (ASSM2).

Notwithstanding this positive start some Secretariat planners and senior managers felt New Labour had not thought through their regional proposals (ASSM2: ASPO2). In their opinion there was a serious lack of clarity about how the delegation of authority to a regional tier would work, (ASPO2).

A senior Assembly manager did not accept that the Assembly's trajectory was doomed from the start. Whilst aware of some negative attitudes from the beginning, these were not necessarily a clear indication that Regional Assemblies would not survive. (ASSM2).

6.2.2 The impact of the North East Referendum

As described in Chapter 5, the first (and only) referendum on regional devolution was held in the North East in 2004. The result was described by actors in the West Midlands as, 'The body blow ...'(ASSM2) had, '...stopped the forward momentum'. (ASNPO1) and '...was a mega factor..... Sent a message ...forget about that, meaning regionalism. People turned away. Key issue lost.' (ASPO1).

Although the outcome of the referendum was a serious setback, the Assembly staff took strength from other aspects of their constitution that imputed a continued legitimacy. These were the WMLGA nomination of local authority members and, in the same year, the newly conferred status as statutory Regional Planning Body which underlined the role local authorities were playing. A senior manager acknowledged there was always some scepticism over legitimacy, but

‘...if it had any legitimacy it was given by the presence, involvement, and leadership of local authorities.’ (ASSM2).

Regarding the Regional Development Agencies Act 1998, local authority members did,

‘... recognise that there was an Act of Parliament too, so that gave ... (the Assembly) some legitimacy. (Councillors) felt their local authority roles were recognised in statute and they brought some democratic and institutional legitimacy.’(ASSM2).

6.3 Did the Assembly’s functions lead to its demise?

This section presents the Secretariat views on how its functions contributed to the end of regional working, and especially whether regional planning for housing did the damage. The focus in this section is on the process.

The Regional Development Agencies Act 1998 had set up both the Regional Development Agencies and the Assemblies (initially called regional chambers) whose first role was to provide local democratic scrutiny of the RDA’s investment activities. The scrutiny of the Regional Development Agency, (AWM) started badly and very gradually improved (ASNPO2).

The Assembly inherited the WMLGA's draft RPG11 and, in 2004, secured its approval by Government which made it the statutory RSS for the Region the same year. The period up to this point was a golden age of regional planning for the West Midlands. According to a Secretariat planner,

'If someone was to say to me, 'What was the hey-day?' The Regional Planning Guidance process was the hey-day where everybody seemed to be;.. wanted to be in the party...part of this thing. It worked well. It just worked well. There was an energy, an enthusiasm... Yes, the 'belle epoch' of planning. Yes .It was. And there was a philosophy as well, which came through.' (ASPO1).

After this sense of stability and success, regional planning came under increasing pressure to maintain a region wide local authority consensus on revision to policy, especially new housing allocations. Of the two statutory activities regional planning was more significant in shaping the Assembly's relationship with the public and Government. As explained in Chapter 5, 2005 marked the point where the Government started to require more housing numbers in the RSS 2 revision than had been approved in the RPG 11, and for these to be allocated down to district council areas in counties with two tier authorities. Both began to create negative reactions.

The pressure to deliver the higher housing number began to expose the weakness of the regional model such that,

'...when it really got tested, especially through the issue of the higher housing numbers....that became the straw that broke the camel's back'. (ASPO2)

One interviewee (ASPO1) felt the regional planning process became more controversial once it was made statutory in 2004. The RSS process laid out in *Planning Policy Statement 11: Regional Spatial Strategies* (ODPM, 2004), imposed a tight time scale laid down for the process. (ASPO1) which was said by a Secretariat planner to be too fast for a well-developed consensus to be reached.

At the same time, the process was too slow. The economic growth ambitions of Government and the business sector required swift strategy production and implementation. Thus,

‘.....the RSS, the thing about ‘statutory’ ...it was a step too far. I was always worried it was a step too far because economic development needs to be fast of foot.you were encumbrancing (*sic*) economic strategy work and development with statutory processes which were inevitably slow and cumbersome ‘(ASPO1).

Despite this concern, a consensus was reached with the endorsement of the RSS 2 Revision Preferred Option (WMRA, 2007). For a senior Secretariat manager (ASSM2) the Assembly model of inclusive partnership working and strictly following the Government’s specified process, together demonstrated the correctness of the Assembly’s conduct. This consensus was said (by ASSM2) to remove the likelihood of any adverse representations outside the formal regional planning system.

‘We had gone through an awful lot of discussion and debate to try and reach a consensus. We did not get everybody in that consensus, but we got most people in there. we had buttoned it down. It was ready to be implemented and rolled out. It would have been tricky to implement.’
(ASSM2).

Looking back to the foundations of the pre-2004 consensus on the RPG 11 a more critical perspective was offered which would matter more and more from 2005, as the RSS 2 housing numbers issues became more tense. It was said that the RPG process had negatively impacted on the on lower tier Shire District Councils, essentially failing to gain their acceptance of the process. The Districts, being rather unaware of the regional planning process,

‘...suddenly became aware that they had been going along with housing numbers in particular ...’ (ASNPO1),

and realising, ‘...that was not quite what (they) thought.’ (ASNPO1).

ASNPO1 recalled the County Planning Authorities had moved ahead of their Shire District Council counterparts in their engagement and understanding of the development of RPG policy (ASNPO1), so,

‘Districts found it very hard to keep up with, up to speed with what was being agreed and decided, or the process, because of capacity issues largely and not being directly involved in..... debates. And for officers you can also read members ...I always have felt ...that was a weakness in the Regional Planning system ...’ (ASNPO1).

Referring to the RSS 2 Revision Preferred Option process in 2006, ASNPO1.said that,

‘... by the time that the Phase 2 figures had come around, but it was quite clear that the Worcestershire Districts...hadn’t quite understood how much housing they were going to get and what that meant.’

How the Secretariat saw the members react is presented in the next Chapter.

6.4 Was abolition due to the working of the Assembly's membership bodies?

This section presents the Secretariat evidence about the nature and quality of the Assembly's make up, the manner of the working of its component organisational partnerships, and the implications for the reputation of the Assembly.

A Secretariat planner (ASPO1) commented upon local authority members' response to the RSS Revision, expressing a generally positive appreciation of member involvement before 2005 but noting that members subsequently became disenchanted, because they never considered the RSS relationship with AWM. As the RSS 2 Revision took shape some senior County Councillors,

'... didn't seem to understand the philosophy and the big issue we were facing'. (ASPO1),

and were,

'.... not on the same wavelength and yet (were) powerful people.... '(ASPO1).

Referring to the period 2006 to 2007, a Senior Secretariat manager (ASSM2).described how once the political significance of the Government's demands for additional housing were known the calibre and status of the members being involved changed from back benchers to more influential councillors who were concerned, and became engaged with the Regional Planning process.

This however left a large body of councillors not directly involved in policy production and oversight, and they became increasingly aware of the local implications of the greater housing numbers and regarded the consequences as unpalatable. This was particularly so for councillors from some of the rural and Shire areas. In order to

survive electorally, some local authority members distanced themselves from the regional planning process in which they or their colleagues had participated and, when in their constituencies, blamed the Assembly for what had become an unwelcome policy.(ASSM2).

Local authorities around the conurbation were often keen not to be viewed as just rural as within their bounds were many small cities and larger urban settlements. Whilst members were involved and the WMRA both secured a formal consensus to the RSS 2 Preferred Option (WMRA, 2007) and maintained this to the 2009 Examination in Public, this did not assuage these rural and non-metropolitan concerns(ASSM2). Blaming a more remote body, little understood by the public and without a strong media voice could have resulted in reputational damage to regional working. (ASSM2).

Referring to the last years of the New Labour period in office senior managers thought Conservative members also took this line,

‘.....locally because their national party was making very loud noises about the regions being a useless spatial entity and planning not working.’ (ASSM2)

Ultimately the RSS 2 process and housing numbers policy became Government driven and was seen as autocratic. As a result,

‘...Conservative thinking was that this was all too cumbersome, too directive in terms of local interests ...’ (ASPO1).

However, ASSM2 was unaware of any representations made by local councillors disaffected with the regional spatial strategy process, to either the Labour Government or the Conservative Party nationally. This senior manager thought this was very unlikely to have happened and ASSM2 considered the testing of the RSS 2

through the Examination in Public was a sufficient means of ventilating any concerns. This apparent silence may have been taken by ASSM2 as agreement or acquiescence to the RSS Revision, but the more likely reading is that this was a hidden danger for the Assembly. The Secretariat held that its planning for housing strategy was unanimously supported by the local authorities, whereas the lack of dialogue with some District Councils and the County Planners meant there was some resentment because the RSS had restricted private housing in their areas thereby cutting off their ability to negotiate new affordable housing (under Sec106 planning agreements) when affordability ratios indicated the high levels of need for such housing (WMRA,2005).

6.5 Communication between Assembly's Local Authority Members and Local Authorities.

Interviewees were asked about the inner workings of the groups that made up the political and associated governance of the Assembly. These groups and the quality of the members may have had a critical bearing on how the organisation was seen to perform, affected its reputation and prospects for survival. There were a range of perspectives among the Secretariat.

As has been noted the Assembly '... was always a local government led organisation,' (ASSM2) with an absence of political controversy and taking of party political positions (ASPO1). Of the non-local authority actors, no reference was made to them causing a negative attitude towards the Assembly in the early period.

However, by 2009, following the successive waves of Government intervention (including suspension of the RSS Revision process by Baroness Andrews, and the Sub-National Review), the Other Stakeholders Group was blamed by the Assembly's critics for the Assembly's slow and indecisive Regional leadership, with the

implication that this was due to a weakness of the consensus model of working.

(ASSM2)

Local authority members' contribution to the Assembly, varied in quality and changed over time. In the early years, members were characterised as a mixture of back benchers and others in prominent positions. Some brought expertise and experience, others 'were just making up the numbers' (ASSM2) so,

'...the Assembly had some very good members and some you would be embarrassed by...' (ASSM2).

Thus the standing of the Assembly was undermined by some members who,

'...would not represent the views of their Council on the Assembly but the (wider) views of local government...' (ASSM2),

and other authorities where they,

'... did not quite trust the people they put on the Assembly to give their council's view. This was a problem of their making, because if they put 'no-hopers' on, mere 'time servers' not in their cabinet, then they could not bring their council's views. That was not most of them (ASSM2).

The senior management were concerned to counter the threat posed to the Secretariat and Assembly by the failure of members to communicate effectively with their Councils on Assembly business (ASSM2). They,

'.... were very keen to follow the statutory path and process for the RSS very transparently so when discussions and decisions were happening about policies others knew within Councils, not just the elected members on the Assembly or on the Planning Partnership.' (ASSM2),

and,

‘ So we couldn’t be accused of running off and making up a policy that nobody knew about.’(ASSM2).

6.6 Tensions between West Midlands Local Authorities

Notwithstanding the years of joint working on regional planning, ‘apolitical pragmatism’ (ASSM2) and a desire to make WMRA work, historically there had been tensions between West Midlands local authorities long before the Assemblies were created (Hall,1973).

A senior Secretariat manager confirmed,

‘...tensions that had existed for ‘donkeys years’ between districts and counties’ (ASSM2).

A Secretariat officer (ASNPO2) was also aware of tensions in the West Midlands rural areas arising from their perception of inequalities associated with regional governance;

‘There was a rural viewpoint that the rural areas were losing out. Despite the perception it often was not true. But to the rural members it did not matter because in their view,’ We should have had our money.’, ‘Labour has got it all’ or, ‘Birmingham has got it all. Always Birmingham’ (ASNPO2).

Even between 2009 and early 2010, during the transition from Assembly to Leaders’ Board there was tension in the new West Midlands Leaders’ Board, between Birmingham and surrounding authorities:

‘It is not party politics that stands out in the West Midlands but the difference between the rural and urban divide and the dominance of Birmingham. What

brought a lot of people together was the fight against the common enemy, Birmingham' (ASNPO2).

These weaknesses in the political bonds between Councils and the Assembly belied the impression that it had the combined strength of its constituent authorities. The tensions between the urban – rural authorities were known to create an adverse impression with Government. Although there were tensions between Birmingham and the Black Country these were not about the proposed new housing numbers, not least because the RSS Revision Phase1 on the more detailed policies for the Black Country had been completed.

6.7 Competition for the Strategic Planning role, the Treasury's Sub National Review, and the impact of other external actors.

This section presents the views of Secretariat staff on the Assembly's relationships with external bodies and the extent to which the demise of regional working can be attributed to one or more of these potential competitors for the regional planning role³³ identified in Table 6.1.

The one powerful role the Assembly had was its regional planning function. Other Regional bodies and national ones operating at the regional level had investment programmes sometimes with wide remits from Government. These bodies may have had an interest in controlling the spatial policy which directed, channelled, or constrained where their operations could take place.

³³ See Chapter 8

Potential Competing Organisation	Where challenge might come from, Formally or by Implication
Strategic Planning Authorities (Unitary, Country and Metropolitan Councils.)	Counties lost their Structure Plan function, but Section 4(4) of the Planning and Compensation Act 2004 gave them a privileged position allowing them to offer their strategic planning advice first to the Regional Planning Body.
City –Region.	West Midlands conurbation found it difficult to form a coherent response to the pre-2010 City-Region ideas. Birmingham sought a pre-eminent role as the centre of the City Region. (ASSM2)
National Housing and Planning Advisory Unit (NHPAU)	By charging this body with producing regional new build housing figures as advice to ministers, it was in very significant role conflict with the WMRA although it frequently tried to –say this was not the case. (Head of Housing’s first-hand observation)
Regional Development Agency: Advantage West Midlands (AWM)	SNR outcome made RDAs ultimately responsible for the new integrated Regional Strategy. The AWM planners very keen but not senior management who did not understand the RSS as a process or a policy tool. (ASSM2)
Homes and Communities Agency (Housing and Regeneration Act 2008) From 1 Dec 2008	An overlapping remit with regional planning in its ‘Communities’ role and an impetus to spend a large budget on housing <u>and</u> infrastructure such as bridges and roads to open up housing sites, thereby putting it ahead of the implementation work coordinated by the WMRA. (Head of Housing’s first-hand observation)
Private sector consultancies.	Suggested they could take over the role, noting that the Government Office for the West Midlands (GOWM) had commissioned Nathaniel Lichfield Partnership to do this as a Government counter proposal to the RSS2 Preferred Option for presentation at the 2009 EIP (ASPO1)

Table 6.1 Organisations Potentially in competition with the WMRA for the Strategic Planning Role (Source: Author’s Observation and Analysis of Research Interviews)

The Strategic Planning Authorities did not attempt to take back their structure plan function but after the Sub National Review saw the new joint AWM and West Midlands Leaders’ Board as a form of continuation of the previous arrangements under the Assembly. The potential role duplication and conflict of City/Region and

Assembly, was negotiated away locally, between local authority leaders and the Assembly in a way that GOWM also agreed, which accepted that,

“.....you could have a City/ Region and a Region,..... The City –Region would support what the WMRA was trying to do for the Major Urban Areas in the Spatial Strategy’ (ASSM2).

However, a Secretariat planner felt the City/Region debate had been unsettling within and around the Assembly,

‘.... I always felt this was confusing the regional agenda to a degree although it was running in the same direction in policy terms..... (the debate) was just causing noise across’.(ASPO1).

The Secretariat viewed the impact of the NHPAU as significant, sending the RSS 2 revision off course, generating unnecessary concern in local authorities and among the public. It contributed to creating the circumstances in which GOWM appointed private consultants (Nathaniel Lichfield Partners) to effectively redo the Assembly’s new build housing numbers policy work (ASPO1). The local authorities understood where the pressure to increase housing numbers was coming from and this contributed substantially to the loss of whatever measure of faith there had been in the genuineness of regional devolution.

The creation and role of the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) is discussed in Chapter 5³⁴. The impact of the HCA came after the SNR outcome was resolved but was considerable. The large size of the HCA’s budget, its direct investment planning with individual local authorities by-passing the Assembly’s Regional Housing Board

³⁴See Section 5.19 and further discussion at Section 8.6.

(RHB) seemed to duplicate its role and caused local authorities to read into this that the days of the Assembly's influence were over.(WMRA's Head of Housing: Personal Observation).

To Assembly senior management, feeling the relationship with local authorities should go through the Assembly, the HCA was read as being,

'...one step removed from local government. Far too removed from local government.'(ASSM2).

The HCA,

'...worked with us but not really as a partner.....Towards the end they did not turn up at (Regional Housing Board) meetings. They did not recognise us as being important.' (ASSM2).

The establishment of the HCA was '....part of the beginning of the end really, for Assemblies.'(ASSM2). What the Housing and Regeneration Act 2008 began, the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009 completed with the abolition of Regional Assemblies and their replacement by Local Authority Leaders' Boards working with the RDAs.

6.8 The Assembly's Remit and Relationship with Government Departments

The Assembly's direct relationship was with the Department of Communities and Local Government, of which the Government Office for the West Midlands was a part. However beyond this were the Treasury and the Department for Business Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (BERR) to which AWM was accountable. These powerful Departments of Government each had their expectations of regional matters, and regional economic performance. Herein lay the bones of a conflict

The period after 2005 with problems between the Assembly and Government over the inability to propose enough new housing was considered to be detrimental to the Assembly resulting in the Government Office for the West Midlands (GOWM) commissioning Nathaniel Lichfield Partners to redo the Assembly's work (ASPO1).

Another Secretariat planner also noted how this period saw the '....real downturn in goodwill...' (ASPO2) which affected the West Midlands local authority politicians and essentially came,

'...from the rejection by the Government of what the Region had agreed in 2007 in terms of the regional housing numbers' (ASPO2).

A senior Secretariat manager did not see this as a driver of national Conservative policy development against regional working but considered this was '...probably fed by a growing dissatisfaction in West Midlands politicians.'(ASPO2).

Despite this disquiet among mainly Conservative politicians, ASPO2 said,

'But I don't think that many Conservatives were, within the West Midlands, really harbouring an agenda of, 'We must get rid of this Regional Assembly'.'. '

The Civil Service was impatient with Assemblies' involvement in 'other stuff ' (ASNPO1) meaning, for example social inclusion, and health, However New Labour did not see Regional Planning as having failed, '....because they wanted to keep that...' (ASNPO1). After the SNR concluded, ASNPO1 felt the Government's view had been,

'We want you to focus on delivering planning and there is an argument to say New Labour had said 'We do not see much of a role for all this other stuff, we don't want that done regionally, we want it to be focused on economic

development but we do see the importance of operating regionally with some sort of governance structure, drawing up from localities hence the Leaders' Boards.'

6.9 The Review of Sub-National Economic Development and Regeneration

At the same time as the RSS 2 revision was underway the Treasury initiated a review of sub-national working (SNR) (Treasury et al. 2007) as described in Chapter 5³⁵. This focused particularly on the roles of the Assemblies and RDAs and focused on how best to achieve the Government's economic growth ambitions.

The national local government contribution was given in the Local Government Association's publication '*Prosperous communities II: vive la dévolution!*' (LGA,2007). A Secretariat officer saw this as clearly '..... undermining regional government.' (ASNPO1) even though,

'Ironically, the West Midlands was admitted to be largely a spatially - *economically* coherent region' (ASNPO1, emphasis added).

The other main group of organisations involved in the SNR were the larger Regional Development Agencies. Their accountability was both to the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and to the Assembly (ASSM2).

An Assembly senior manager said the experience of trying to work with AWM was characterised by, '...frustration and exasperation....' (ASSM2), tensions born of different functional roles, different staff cultures, lack of communication in policy

³⁵ Section 5.15

development, political and democratic insensitivity(from WMRA's perspective), which resulted in a period of difficult relationships, '....edgy at best.'(ASSM2).

In addition, there were inherent difficulties in consensus working which some took as a reason to be critical of Assemblies, for instance,

'AWM got exasperated by (consensus working) on a number of occasions, which may be why (the AWM Chairman) Sir Roy McNulty's views that there was no leadership, because leadership can mean leadership by consensus, but can mean making difficult decisions which not everyone agrees with. On the whole we (WMRA) went for a consensus approach' (ASSM2).

The significance of regional spatial planning was a serious underlying tension between the two organisations.

Embedded in the WMRA Secretariat planning thinking was a mission expectation received from the RPG 11 Panel Inspector Coreen Swain. A Secretariat Planner (ASPO1) recalled that the Inspector placed the RPG 11 at the heart and apex of all regional strategies and indicated they should follow the RPG lead;

'....we at West Midlands Local Government Association were promoting this as a strategy not just for planners, and the Examination in Public Inspector was very much taking that philosophy and taking it on even further. in the early Panel Report,... So she is very concerned that it should influence all other strategies and she was looking to strengthen the link ... with the RES (Regional Economic Strategy) and skills' (ASPO1).

In the Secretariat's mind this plainly included AWM's Regional Economic Strategy: but these expectations were not shared by AWM,

‘I was always uncomfortable about the relationship with AWM. And I was never quite certain about whether they had a real understanding about the RPG philosophy...and in fact...the depth of their strategic thinking...’ (ASPO1).

A Secretariat officer concurred considering the inability of both Government and regions to achieve a proper reconciliation,

‘...would be the structural weakness in regional governance’ (ASNPO1).

The outcome of the SNR made RDAs ultimately responsible for a new integrated Regional Strategy bringing RSS and AWM’s Regional Economic Strategy (RES) together. The WMRA Head of Housing recalled officers from the low housing demand Pathfinder organisation, ‘RENEW North Staffordshire’ at Stoke on Trent, saying that the mood of the RDA staff was triumphant, with phrases like , ‘We won’ being used. This confirmed the climate within WMRA at that time. Far from the regional relationship being one of partnership, it had been a contest for organisational survival and supremacy, marked by competition not joint collaborative working. That said, the senior management of AWM did not want the planning role: its Board neither understood nor wanted the responsibility. The theme of inter-organisational competitiveness in WMRA’s organisational environment is addressed in Chapter 8.

ASNPO1 put the outcome of the Sub National Review in perspective when compared with the almost total abolition of regional working after the General Election in 2010.

‘I think even towards the end of New Labour they (the Labour Government) understood the importance of operating at the regional level. They were not proposing getting rid of regions. They proposed getting rid of Assemblies.

They wanted to give more power to the RDAs, so to some extent the broader regional agenda, was seen to have failed by Labour' (ASNPO1).

The period of the Sub National Review from 2007 coincided with an increasingly tense standoff between Government and the WMRA over the RSS 2 Preferred Option housing numbers. Government was frustrated in its housing growth ambitions while the other West Midlands local authorities, especially in non-metropolitan areas, were increasingly alienated by the pressure. The Assembly, as a local authority led body retained its consensus, just, by not fully accepting the Government pressure.

6.10 Engagement with MPs

The research interviews explored whether the Assembly could have better protected itself by fostering understanding and support from MPs and the wider public. Until the Government introduced Regional Ministers as part of its review of the regional architecture late on in its period in office ASSM2 admitted the Assembly was weak in its engagement with MPs (ASSM2). Furthermore, the Assembly paid,

'...very little notice ... to political fire coming from the MPsThe Conservatives were focused a bit more around AWM' (ASSM2).

Rather than attempt to address negative opinion the Assembly senior management took the view that it should deliver on the RSS revisions (ASSM2).

From 2005 to 2010,

'Conservative MPs seemed to take every opportunity in the local press to herald the demise of regional working and that quango and that unnecessary

layer of bureaucracy. There was a drip feed of MPs to downgrade anything regional.'(ASSM2).

ASSM2 felt none of this fundamentally changed the WMRA position, standing or reputation at the national level. However, a Secretariat planner considered Mrs Spelman MP, Shadow Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, was a key influence (ASPO1);

'When I spoke to her I really got the impression....she didn't really understand the nature of some elements of planning. And she also wasn't willing to listen.... She did not, I think, understand the role, the role that strategic planning had played in terms of protecting Solihull and maintaining the Greenbelt and all the rest of it' (ASPO1).

MPs were seen as having lost interest as a consequence of the result of the NE Referendum in 2004, (ASNPO2). However, by 2008, some leading local authority Conservatives did appreciate the benefits of working together at the regional scale. This put them at odds with the national Conservative Party when its policy for the General Election in 2010 was being drawn up. ASPO2 confirmed this from personal discussion with a Conservative Leader of a major West Midlands local authority, quoting him as saying he was, '... not a great enthusiast for regional working...But I think it is necessary in the West Midlands' (ASPO2). This Leader was reported to have said that his national party leaders were not of the same view, and that Conservative Party policy development was in the hands of young people who did not understand, (ASPO2) but '...their minds were made up'(ASPO2).

6.11 Press and Publicity - What the public knew.

A Secretariat planner felt the public acceptance of the RPG11 in the early days of the Assembly had been , '...incredibly successful...', but, after 2004, when the Government required higher new housing figures in RSS 2 Revision, selling the new housing figures to the public was much more difficult (ASPO1).

For most of the public the Assembly, '...was a very distant organisation'. (ASSM2),

'We did not try hard, ...because we recognised our main customer groupings were local authorities and business organisations, not even direct business. We had to work through (local authorities) because we did not have the money to work with the public..... With our budget and with role we couldn't get close to the public at all. The only people who got us close to the public were the local papers' (ASSM2).

In addition, in some areas the public mood was affected by the criticism over housing development proposals outside the conurbation, and for being based in Birmingham, in itself, ' a provocative thing anyway' (ASSM2) echoing an historic intra-regional prejudice outside Birmingham towards the city.

Whilst a senior Secretariat manager accepted there was an argument for the Assembly to have done more to explain 'The big picture stuff.' (ASSM2) it was not clear this would have changed the narrative in the media,

'...jumping on the local bandwagon of (complaint) about building on the green pastures of Worcestershire and Warwickshire' (ASSM2).

Once the RSS 2 Preferred Option had been consulted upon in 2007 some of the negative public response in the rural areas under greatest pressure was expressed

passionately. There were a complex mix of reasons for this: the effect on the environment, the concern that such development would bring in outsiders, and the feeling that this was in the hands of a remote body, 'the Region', a place the rural public especially did not identify with impacting a place to which they had strong sentimental attachment. The idea that the Shire or Unitary local authorities were more likely relate to the WMRA and were in part, collectively, the authors and arbiters of these planning policies did nothing to reduce the strength of feeling. All this only grew worse as the pressure to increase the housing numbers associated with the NLP work for GOWM took place, as 'all this was clear to the Shires and Districts' (ASPO1).

In summary, the Secretariat evidence was fairly consistent in its views on how external organisations affected the WMRA. Behind these commentaries run deeper issues of whether in its earlier days the collaborative values of consensus partnership of all working together 'inside the tent' (ASPO1) gave the Assembly a complacent and therefore benign view of its wider world. The legacy of the RPG process reinforced the belief in consensus and partnership working to the extent that Assembly staff may have been slow to acknowledge growing organisational and institutional competition.

The apparent competitiveness of some external bodies, including AWM, could be seen as a response to the Assembly seeking to nullify AWM's influence. Others, such as the HCA, could have been simply acting in their own interests and goals, exercising their own power, with the assemblies' influence unintentionally diminished.

6.12 The Role of 'Emotive Issues' in the Demise of Regional Working

There were other areas where real passions were aroused for some members of the public and politicians. One was a belief that regionalism was part of a European Union agenda to reduce the power of the British state. The others were about sentimental attachment to place and identity, and public misunderstanding about where responsibility lay for site identification in the planning process.

Both nationally and within the West Midlands business community there was a view that regionalism was a European Union plot to reduce the power of the UK state (Jenkins, 2005; ASNPO2). However, a senior Secretariat manager saw a missed opportunity in relation to Europe which could have been used to sell the idea of regional governance to the public. Although EU funds were channelled through the RDAs, the Labour Government could have used the allocation of European funds to positively influence public opinion about regional working (ASSM2),

A Secretariat officer was clear that,

'The existence of a regional tier of government was abhorrent to the Conservatives by the time of the wind up, – the build up to 2010 election, but I think largely caused by housing numbers,.... but also there is another dimension to that –the notion that regions were a creation of Europe and were in a way..... to some extent there is some truth in that' (ASSM2).

Whilst it did not seem the Conservative councillors on the Assembly linked the European agenda to regionalism (ASSM2), for those that did this added to the negativity about regional working.

There was some public resistance to the idea of the West Midlands being defined as a region as opposed to a positive identification with counties. This issue, largely one

of sentiment about place and identity possibly underlay some responses to the RSS Revision. Little insight into this was offered by the Secretariat because they had to work with the region Government had defined (Pritchard, 2013). The formal regional planning role gave no space for the Secretariat to respond to this issue. Another contentious issue which the Assembly planners had to ignore was that of site-specific allocation of housing. This was a local authority function, and in two tier Shire County areas, that of the district councils. The Secretariat would have passed such representations to those Councils to be factored into their local development plans.

6.13 Conclusion: Summary of Findings

The accounts of the Secretariat relate to four stages in the Assembly's life. First, from inception in 1998 to 2004 the Assembly Secretariat appeared self-confident and had sense of its own secure position. It had evolved from within the West Midlands Local Government Association which had been in place for years. This gave the Assembly a secure, locally rooted political legitimacy. Such confidence was made all the more convincing, to the Secretariat at least, due to what it believed was its ongoing success in achieving a broad political consensus over the Regional Planning Guidance (RPG11) and culminated in the Secretary of State's approval in 2004. The perceived lack of need to engage with MPs and reliance upon the local authorities to carry the main promotional interface with the public was consistent with this stance. There was no evidence at the time that the North East referendum result seriously disturbed 'business as usual' from GOWM and within the Assembly. For the Secretariat, the referendum did not mark the end, finding continuing legitimacy by other means, but with hindsight staff recalled it had had a major impact on political opinion about the future of Assemblies.

The second stage saw this early self-assuredness wane as underlying tensions gradually emerged in the two years following late 2004. No threat to regional working was felt at the outset but it seems the Secretariat took Conservative councillor engagement as support when some of them actually they had concerns about regional working. Despite the Secretariat's belief in the inclusive consensus which produced the RPG, some shire district councils were not comfortable with the process nor even aware of the implications for them. This Secretariat planners' mind set over the inclusivity of the process was exemplified by their reference to RPG partnership members as 'inside the tent' (ASPO1). Despite the Concordat between WMRA, AWM and GOWM, AWM did not settle into cooperating with the Assembly's scrutiny role easily. It did not view the RPG as the lead strategy for the Region – unlike the Secretariat which thought the RPG set the frame and policy direction for the RDA's Regional Economic Strategy and investment activity. Even more seriously, there was a general underlying lack of clarity over the true nature of regional devolution and the Assembly's role.

The third phase was a period of growing anxiety generated externally as several challenges loomed. With hindsight the first of these was heralded by the result of the North East referendum in 2004, but not until the Treasury initiated the Sub National Review did the cumulative effect of the referendum result and the SNR generate uncertainty about the future for the Assembly. Further, the Government Office for the West Midlands and the newly formed National Housing and Planning Advisory Unit increasingly placed the local authorities, via the Assembly, under pressure to accommodate more new housing than they felt able to.

Finally these stresses combined to initiate a period of sustained crisis, which increasingly destabilised the Assembly and ultimately ended in it being wound up.

The outcome of the SNR showed the Government's preference for the RDAs notwithstanding the creation of the Leaders' Boards to replace assemblies. The West Midlands Regional Assembly's primary strategic planning function also added to the stresses facing the organisation. Notwithstanding the maintenance of the local authority consensus over the RSS 2 Revision, some political members, especially in the Shire areas, disowned their part in the regional planning process. The lack of clarity over how devolved the Assembly really was came to a head over this issue. The imposition of the National Housing and Planning Advisory Unit's 'advice' was difficult enough but the Government's effective rejection of the RSS 2 Preferred Option in 2007 and commissioning consultants to prepare alternative evidence was felt very deeply as almost a betrayal of the partnership model of working.

6.14 Conclusion: Implications for Theory

The sequence of events discussed in this Chapter can be related back to the theoretical considerations discussed in Chapter 3. For the WMRA Secretariat, the first self-confident stage was rooted in the continuity of both institution and function. The Secretariat served both WMLGA and Assembly at the start with one Chief Executive, and the WMLGA political structures nominated councillors to Assembly positions. The WMLGA had produced the RPG11 through a consensus and partnership approach and the progression was marked when the RPG became statutory RSS in 2004. This amounted to a clear, seamless continuity for the Secretariat. This is not to say English regionalism was so constitutionally embedded as to be one of historical path dependency (Peters, 2012), but within the West Midlands that claim can be justified. Where it did not apply was in the AWM relationship, though the RDA did have to come to terms with the coherent power of

the local authorities embodied in the WMLGA – WMRA institutional and statutory arrangements.

The Secretariat perceived the local authority members on the Assembly as having started with some indifference; but as the political stakes rose with the RSS 2 they had to calculate what position to adopt to secure their re-election. Some felt the need to distance themselves from the RSS 2 proposals and yet maintain a consensus over figures which, though too high for their taste, would be worse still if the whole process were taken over by Government. This type of calculated behaviour is strongly suggestive of the Rational Choice Theory model (Peters, 2012), operating for political actors in a complex game for political survival.

The Assembly felt it had begun in philosophical and policy harmony with the Government, evidenced by its approval of the Urban and Rural Renaissance strategy in RPG11. However, that apparent harmony diminished as the pressure for growth in housing numbers and greater economic growth increased. The theoretical discussion on this is reserved for Chapter 10. A more 'top down' political character seemed to dominate the New Labour Government's position (Allmendinger, 2011) over against the WMLGA's and Assembly's practice of consensus working, and a broadly inclusive consultative approach.

What is clear at this point is the Assembly's way of working shaped, as it saw it, by a consensus partnership model, irritated those who wanted quicker and more decisive leadership. This tension was present with Government after 2005 as the Treasury referred to the Barker Review, the NHPAU and the SNR. Their primary, even sole, focus on economic development, contrasted with WMRA trying to meet growth expectations but still trying to stick to its sustainability policy values and inclusive

partnerships. This polarisation, constituting a shift in the organisation's environmental ecology (Peters, 2012) became increasingly toxic for its survival.

From a Critical Studies perspective (Davies,2011), WMRA's attempt to assert its own understanding of devolved power in relation to the RSS and the spatial aspects of economic growth policy, was ultimately intolerable to the increasingly autocratic Labour Government. It acted, as this theory would suggest, in a hegemonic manner to recapture and recentralise power. This occurred, for example, by the shift of powers and responsibilities to the RDA under the Department for Business Innovation and Skills, the centralising of budgets and empowering of the HCA, and then, under the Coalition Government, by complete abolition.

CHAPTER 7: EVIDENCE FROM WMRA GOVERNANCE MEMBERS.

7.1 Introduction

Building upon the evidence drawn from interviews with members of the WMRA Secretariat, this Chapter concentrates on the views of four Conservative councillors who were leaders of the Assembly or its component structures. They were all in senior positions in district, shire county or unitary authorities within the West Midlands region.

The focus on Conservative political leaders of the Assembly reflects a key feature of the research design - these figures potentially had power and influence over the reputation of the Assembly with the Conservative Party nationally. Whether there was any real power or influence at the national level is explored here from the West Midlands side of that relationship. The national Conservative view is dealt with in Chapter 9. West Midlands influence became more important as the 2010 General Election approached when the issue of regional working was clearly on the Conservative Party's agenda

The views of other members involved in the governance of the Assembly were sought, including Liberal Democrats, the Other Stakeholders Group and the West Midlands Business Council. None of these however, at the regional level, had potential influence on the shape of national Conservative Party policy on regional working.

7.2 Conservative members' views on the WMRA and Regional working.

The core hypothesis relating to leading Conservative councillors who were members of WMRA was that the Secretariat believed the Assembly's work was appreciated by

its political leadership, increasingly dominated by Conservatives from 2003. Particular focus has been on relationships between local and national Conservatives from 2007 to 2010 and how far these were understood by the WMRA Secretariat. When WMRA staff were addressed by leading Assembly members, staff believed they were held in positive esteem. The Assembly was small, efficient and low-cost compared with the Regional Development Agency and GOWM. For regional planners, the uniformity in Conservative support was evidenced by the consistent unanimity of local authority support for the RSS Phase 2 Revision. Ostensibly, for the Secretariat this unanimity appeared consistent from 2005, when the requirement for higher housing figures was introduced, through to the EiP in 2009. Critically, it was maintained through 2007 when the Preferred Option was submitted to (but not accepted by) Government. However, beneath this apparent consensus, several local authorities were not prepared to accept the higher numbers.

For the WMRA Secretariat, especially the planners, there was a feeling during Labour's latter period in Government that whatever reorganisation of regional functions occurred there would be continuity of work in some form of regional agency. This view was reinforced by a belief that there was an unchallengeable rationale which protected the permanent place of sub-national strategic planning in the English planning system. These perspectives are presented in Figure 7.1 which illustrates how the internal and external political environment was read by the Secretariat, particularly the Planning and Housing teams. The behaviour of the West Midlands local authorities over the RSS2 Revision, coupled with the appreciative tone and content of the Assembly's senior Conservative leadership about its work, provided the basis for the view that threats to regional working would be successfully defended.

In order to examine how far this perception of the Assembly's Conservative senior leadership was valid the views of four leading members were recorded. Their general attitudes to regional working were compared before looking at their opinions on the Assembly's main activities.

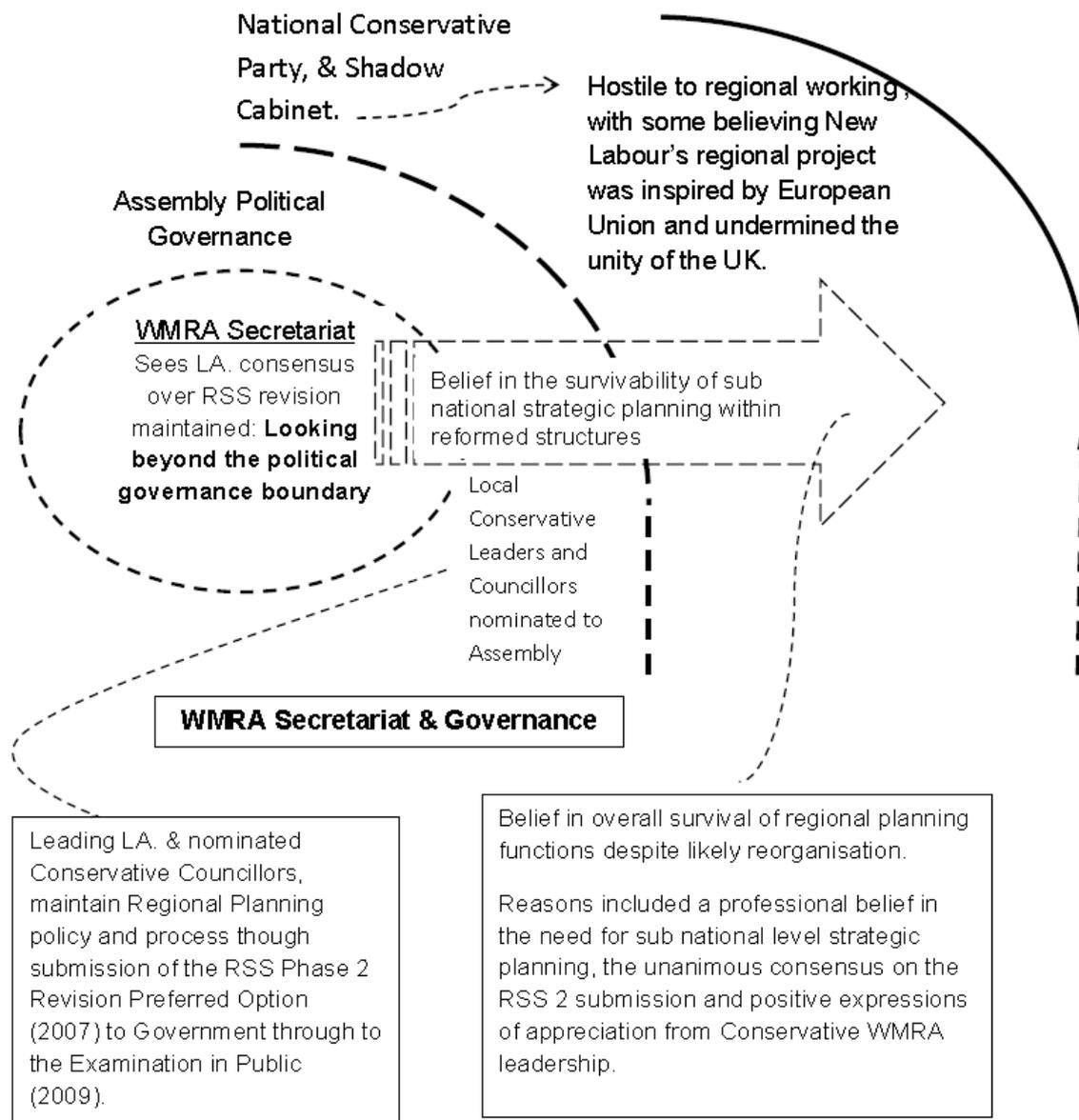


Fig 7.1 The WMRA Secretariat's Optimistic View of the National Political Environment and the Survival of Sub National Strategic Planning.
 Source: Author based on Analysis of Interviews

7.3 Conservative Approaches to Regional working

Table 7.1 summarises the views of four leading Conservative members of the WMRA on regional working. The Conservative members were not unanimous in their acceptance of regional governance, but all agreed the WMRA provided a useful forum for its members for networking, sharing of views, ideas and to widen their horizons beyond their district or county area. This was the strongest positive view they agreed upon about regional working. APGovC2 saw this as an argument for some wider institutionalised networking.

APGovC2 said, 'The Conservative Party didn't understand the benefits of regional working ... (being) able to be together; community was a great strength for the ways we delivered joined up services' (APGovC2). By referring to 'services' APGovC2 either believed the Assembly was like a local authority or regarded the strategic functions of the Assembly as 'services'. APGovC1 was also positive about the benefits of some form of regional working. Despite these views, all four Conservative leaders were in agreement in rejecting regional *government* on grounds rooted in their philosophical position, or perhaps following a Party line.

It might have been supposed that the Conservative interviewees, would have shared a consistent and unified set perspectives on the merits of regional working. This was not entirely the case. Some shared common ground did exist on aspects of regional working. Each interviewee rejected the principle of regional government. Not all Conservative opinions were, at first sight, entirely consistent. APGovC2, having stated a Party position on regional government then allowed for regional governance as joint local authority working with others, and went on to say,

Table 7.1 Summary of Leading Conservative Assembly Members views of Regional Working. Source: Author based on Analysis of Interviews

<u>Leading Conservative WMRA Nominated Members</u>			
All interviewees followed their Party line which rejected the principle of regional government. There was more ambivalence about the merits of regional governance. All acknowledged some value in the WMRA providing a place for local authority nominees to discuss informally and share information.			
APGovC1	APGovC2	APGovC3	APGovC4
<p>Accepted there was some case for regional governance.</p> <p>'Regional assemblies and by extension all associated regional governance were seen as very much a political threat', and were an attempt by John Prescott at 'urban dominance of the governance of the rest of England'.</p> <p>From a Conservative point of view regional assemblies were never recognised, nor accepted.</p> <p>Regretted the manner of the shutting down of the WMRA. Felt more could have been retained if change had', been done with a little bit more thought to it, rather than closing them down', and '... no doubt there was an awful lot of capacity and energy that could have been pumped in and that is what we lost...', referring to the possibility of how post 2010 regional or sub-regional working might have been redesigned, as 'hinted at' in the Lord Heseltine Review (BIS, 2012).</p>	<p>Broadly approved of regional governance by local authority nominees and felt, 'The West Midlands was effectively the only Regional Assembly that properly worked the way I think it should have done'.</p> <p>At abolition, 'because there was no middle ground, we ended up throwing the baby out with the bathwater'.</p>	<p>Rejected regional assemblies as a means of governance.</p> <p>Saw WMRA working to the concept of city region. Any top-down (Government led) regional assembly approach to strategic planning above the county level was criticised.</p> <p>County level best for strategic planning on grounds of balance between local accountability and the necessity of imposing strategic planning policy.</p> <p>Major concern; WMRA did not operate like a local authority which took votes to make explicit what decisions had been made. This turned consensus partnership working against the Assembly.</p> <p>P.A believed differences of view were ignored. Personal credibility with Councils undermined so that, '... a lot of issues, ..., were never resolved... through the (consensus) model'.</p>	<p>No acceptance of regional working – irrelevant to local authorities on the periphery of the region, and believed they were prevented from joint working with neighbouring authorities in another region.</p> <p>Regional planning only possibly useful to Birmingham.</p> <p>Saw WMRA as a threat so involvement in Assembly was pragmatic and defensive '... well if it's there, then we have got to go in and make as much noise as we can to sort of hold the line'.</p>

'The West Midlands was effectively the only Regional Assembly that properly worked the way I think it should have done' (APGovC2). However, this member thought an unelected WMRA was preferable to an elected assembly which would, in APGov2's view have been the start of regional government.

7.4 City- Region issue

APGovC3 summed up a West Midlands Conservative perspective held by those from non-metropolitan areas about the concept of the City-Region recalling that,

'They didn't like city region. There is a... conventional wisdom or a dominant political view was that the city region dominated ... to the detriment of the rural areas around Birmingham and the Black Country and Coventry' (APGovC3).

This was a consistent concern throughout the RPG and RSS Revision process and had, at its heart, the long running tension between the Metropolitan and Shire areas. This concern was heightened when under David Miliband's ODPM initiative in 2006-2007 the City-Region concept was developed further to build economic growth potential (DCLG,2006; HoC,2007).

APGovC3 stressed the dislike of the City-Region idea four times early in the interview. This was explained,

'So what I am trying to paint is a picture of, - don't like city-region because the rural areas are ignored, but (also) a different understanding of what terminology is used. In West Midlands, that is the West Midlands county council, or a region.... but common through it all was, they don't like city-region' (APGovC3).

APGovC3 recounted the forging of a consensus with Birmingham which allowed the Conservatives to present a regionally consistent alliance against the concept.

APGovC3 recalled,

“They didn’t like city-region and the consensus that we got around it was that, with Mike Whitby [then Leader of Birmingham City Council] was,, what is good for Birmingham, is good for the West Midlands, and what is good for the West Midlands is good for Birmingham, that is how we arrived at a consensus across the, across the Party’ (APGovC3).

Both APGovC3 and APGovC1 referred to the appointment of a County Council officer to closely shadow the City-Region Policy Director, sit in a desk right next to him, ‘and watch him like a hawk...’.(APGovC1). APGovC1 was satisfied with this arrangement saying ‘.... and the policy I think was incredibly successful’.

7.5 Bureaucracy, Regional Identity, and inter-authority Fragmentation.

In other criticisms of the WMRA, APGovC1 felt the regional planning work became too bureaucratic and slow. It is possible this related to a misunderstanding about Government process for the RSS Revision which placed pressure on the Assembly planning team. The WMRA had to achieve a region wide consensus over all the RSS revision work whilst constantly negotiating and engaging with the NHPAU and dealing with Baroness Andrew’s intervention³⁶.

On the geographic aspects of a regional tier of governance there was a divergence of view. APGovC2 said ‘I think there is a West Midlands identity...’, and that the

³⁶ See Section 5.13.

travel to work area of the conurbation was something that could not be ignored’.

APGovC2 saw some inevitability in the logic that if,

‘Birmingham is the heart (and)..... the driving force of the whole of the West Midlands then ... what we need is regional Government with Birmingham at the heart of it. That is an argument that is very ... strong.’
(APGovC2).

However, this posed APGovC2 with a political dilemma admitting ‘.... I don’t support that argument because I don’t want to be dominated by Birmingham’ (APGovC2).

Other Conservative leaders were much less sanguine. APGovC1 felt the West Midlands region was lacking in a popular sense of place-based identity, characterised by a sense of fragmentation. APGovC1 admitted the West Midlands, ‘wasn’t a ridiculous region, but nonetheless, people felt no affinity to it. A pragmatic concern was that Birmingham would take up the majority of funding coming to the West Midlands and rural areas would be forever ‘second class citizens’ (APGovC1).

For APGovC4 the West Midlands was too fractured in its historic and continuing internal political relationships naming, for example, the metropolitan versus non-metropolitan areas, and Birmingham’s tensions with Solihull and the Black Country (APGovC1). APGovC2 and APGovC3 also raised this point. APGovC3 expressed the opinion that the very concept of a region was too big for ordinary people to understand rather than their own sense of place which was at a smaller scale, (APGovC3,). APGovC3 concluded that ‘we are in essence serving the people of a place and that is where regionalism went wrong’.

7.6 Underlying suspicions and assumptions – Role of Europe

A topic that could have had a bearing on West Midlands Conservatives' attitudes towards regional working was the connection between the European Union and Labour's regional proposals. The four Conservatives interviewed held a range of views, with varying intensity and personal ownership, that the EU was a significant influence, motivator, or political driver of regional working as proposed by John Prescott. Table 7.2 summarises these views.

Table 7.2. WMRA Conservative members' views on the role of the EU in English Regional Working Source: Author based on Analysis of Interviews

APGovC1	APGovC2	APGovC3	APGovC4
<p>'I'm sure it helped to strengthen the nightmares of those that thought that. The anti-European people would look for easy answers' '... what happened with the Conservatives is, it is very easy ... to say, 'regional governance, Europe, awful, appalling',.'</p>	<p>'European scepticism did play a role.'</p> <p>'It's almost as though what we wanted to do was do away with regional assemblies so that there was no way of regions within Europe being able to relate to regions within the country.'</p> <p>'Not being articulated but I think it was an undertow of what we've got.'</p>	<p>Acknowledged some local Conservatives believed that Europe was the architect of regional governance, and this played a part in the positions Conservatives took. However this was not a strong influence. ' I think it was a throw away line actually....'.</p> <p>Not a view thought to be held by senior Conservatives in London.</p>	<p>John Prescott MP seen as the author of a divide and conquer approach '...the great (thing) about dividing things into regions is divide and rule isn't it, you can break things down into small enough little parcels.... then there is nothing much left to.... actually oppose what you are trying to do.'</p> <p>Although John Prescott MP, did not say so,' in as many words' 'The whole drive behind these regions, I am sure was to set us up on the European model of regions and cities'</p>

Of the four Assembly Conservative governance members interviewed only APGovC4, could be said to represent the view that the New Labour motivation was to both advance the cause of EU policy and to use regional working to dominate the Conservative shires of England. The others paid little credence to such opinions which they did not believe shaped national level Conservative views and this was borne out by the Shadow Conservative minister (SMC1)³⁷. Interestingly, a West Midlands Labour politician (WML1) was clear the, 'reason the why regional agenda...(was)...knocked on the head,' was the association in Conservative minds with the EU. WML1 said,

'for many in the Conservative Party regionalism was a Brussels plot .
.....and I do very much believe that had an influence on Conservative Party thinking in opposition as to why regionalism was a bad idea. (They thought) Regionalism was the breakup of the nation state and that Brussels preferred to work with regions.....This was the view of some Conservative politicians who were quite influential. Their view was ,,,,you couldn't let regionalism carry on because it would be the end of England as an entity.'

This mindset was 'difficult to address because it was more visceral than rational.'(WML1).

7.7 The Construction of a Political Position: Confusion or a Robust Defence?

One of the arguments used by Assembly proponents was that since the WMRA was run by a local government majority, the resultant RSS Revision was a product of

³⁷ See Section 11.2

West Midlands local authorities planning input. However, APGovC2 argued the West Midlands local authorities acting within the Assembly,

‘...were fundamentally different to other regional assemblies. What we did was to say ‘what (do) you as local government want, and how can we then integrate that into a single strategy for the Region. Now I don’t think other areas did that. I’ve always been totally confused by the view that on planning that we had got a Conservative Government saying we are going to repair/repeal all these terrible RSSs, and this imposition of unelected bodies onto deciding on the number of housesthat go with it’ (APGovC2).

In APGovC2’s view what the Coalition Conservative Government ‘...were claiming and doing, was looking to repeal county structure plans’, brought together in the RSS. APGovC2 stated,

‘...what they (Coalition Government) were actually trying to repeal, and it never actually dawned on me until quite recently that what we had done was to take all of the county structure plans and all of the existing planning policies that covered the whole region, put them all together and encompass them into a single document. Now in doing that when we talk about repealing these “terrible regional RSS” is actually doing in repealing the local government strategies which we put together prior to 2005.’ (APGovC2).

Even more idiosyncratically APGovC2 expressed a view on regional planning saying,

‘...the fact that we talk about a Regional Spatial Strategy is absolute rubbish as far as the West Midlands is concerned because **it never existed** in that way.....I’m not sure the regional planning has ever come onto the horizon as being something that anyone considered.’ (APGovC2, emphasis added).

Furthermore APGovC2 believed that the Government and others ‘.....never properly understood ... that the dynamics of planning were changing’. APGovC2’s view was that regional planning had rendered the county tier irrelevant to the strategic planning process. APGovC2 said of the statutory regional planning system,

‘it put counties into the position of being in the second-tier and Districts being the third tier and then **counties became an irrelevance**. You had the Assembly as being the overall coordinating body, but **the real driving body became the Districts**’ (APGovC2, emphasis added),

and that,

‘I’m not entirely sure that anybody really quite came to terms with that. I don’t think anybody really understood what the impact was ...’ (APGovC2).

Aspects of the APGovC2’s account were unexpected and require some reflective commentary. This is taken up in the conclusions to this Chapter.

7.8 A Critical View of WMRA: A ‘Straw Man’ Argument or Fair Comment?

APGovC3 explained how he judged the soundness of a properly constituted political body and used this to assess the Assembly. APGovC3’s model had six organisational characteristics; responsible, accountable, consult, influence, delivery, and narrator, against which the Assembly lacked clarity, and went ‘failing into confusion’ (APGovC3). As for the ‘narration’ function, APGovC3 believed an organisation needed to explain itself, but questioned whether the Assembly knew who its audience was. The public did not know of the Assembly which ended up with it sending ‘mixed messages and an impasse and a powerless body because it wasn’t allowed to do’ (APGovC3).

The WMRA was a strategic policy making body, with very limited resources, reliant on the local authorities to act as its interface with the public, and as such would have had difficulty meeting APGovC3's expectations. The lack of robustness in the design of the Assembly was all the greater because those nominated councillors who attended the Assembly and its partnership structures were expected to communicate with their wider local authority colleagues. The same applied to local authority officers representing sub regional groups on the Regional Housing Partnership and similar RPB officer support structures. APGovC3 personally seemed to fulfil this role noting, 'I would understand the political aspect of reporting back to councils'. (APGovC3).

Whilst some of this view seemed fair comment, the overall stance appeared to set up a 'straw man' Assembly open to popular ridicule for those with a predetermined, negative disposition. APGovC3 did not discuss the possibility of local authorities taking responsibility for the way the WMRA functioned even though they were the dominant sector that ran it. APGovC3's position employed a distancing stance which can be argued to have disingenuously separated the WMRA from the local authorities, disguising the direct inter-relationship.

APGovC3 appeared to believe the Assembly was complicit with NLP in contributing to NLP's proposals for additional residential land supply given by GOWM in evidence to the EiP. The Government's unprecedented direct intervention in the RSS process before the EiP would have been understood by local authority planners. However, what was happening may not have been entirely clear to some Assembly members; that the GOWM-NLP action was against the Assembly and, by extension a false impression was conveyed to local authority councillors who had no direct regional involvement (APGovC3).

7.9 Failures of Organisational Design and Communication

There were some areas of confusion or misunderstanding in the minds of politicians about the regional model generally, and the strategic planning process. These could have had implications for the political views taken of the Assembly and its work which led to negative political views being conveyed about the Assembly's role to the national Conservative Party.

The design of the Assembly's structures involved an idealised political and professional set of assumptions about how it should work and whose responsibility it was to undertake the communication needed to allow all parts of the regional bodies politic to be properly informed. This was expected to integrate the WMRA and its sub structures with its constituent member authorities. If local authority officers from one authority were focused on some technical work which affected several authorities and this was not sufficiently communicated, a weakened understanding could occur.

APGovC4 considered that the reliance on online distribution of documentation for the Regional Planning Partnership (RPP) failed completely and consistently; he/she never really understood the justification for the decisions put to her/him for endorsement. Although questioned closely about the role the local authority support and planning services or the WMRA could have played to rectify this, APGovC4 insisted no solution was ever found and the whole process of involvement in the RPP was frustrating. APGovC3 also felt distanced from the RSS Revision process as the Regional Planning Executive took the lead in the preparation of the Preferred Option. However, the wider membership from across the West Midlands on '.... the Regional Planning Partnership,was a model of consensus, (but) got morphed and got more distant from members' (APGovC3).

It seems that the effective communication between those engaged in the detailed RSS process did not always function according to expectations. This generated distancing by those on WMRA regional planning body structures and their role in communication back to their councils and clarifying issues was seriously undermined. This bred a feeling of dissatisfaction with the work of the Assembly. APGovC4 also experienced distancing and lack of real involvement in the RSS Revision production. He/she concluded that, as a relative newcomer to the RPP in 2007, the whole RSS process was stitched up by the urban and northern authorities. APGovC4 said, referring to Cllr Rex Roberts (Staffordshire County Council), the chairman of the Regional Planning Executive,

'I had a very peripheral view just going into the (Regional Planning) Partnershiponce every three months..... You weren't really sort of in, because as far as I could see Rex and all that lot had all got it sewn up that by the time it came to the Partnership and we were just cannon fodder to stick our hands up, you know....So, it looked like it had all been sewn up in Staffordshire....it was all kind of,... city you know, urban and north (APGovC4).

While APGovC2 adopted a broadly positive view of the operation of the WMRA, APGovC3 was ideologically negative and considered the Assembly could not have done anything to change the outcome. The failures of communication and weak integration between Assembly and its wider constituent local authority members left it vulnerable to the development of hostile opinions which did lasting reputational damage. Some of this was the responsibility of those who did not to make the system work whether deliberately or not, but the Assembly could have taken trouble to understand and counter these impressions.

By 2008 the extra work demanded by the creation of the NHPAU and the GOWM intervention under Baroness Andrews meant the focus of the WMRA was drawn to these issues. This left less capacity to explain the processes and implications to a wider local political audience. Given the Assembly was seen by some as a threat, the Labour drive to insist on more new housing added to that sense. For those Conservative WMRA members unable to understand or control the pace of events frustration and concern would have grown, and thoughts turned to how they could deal with this. It is not hard to see how such conditions would have generated a political response to their national Party.

7.10 Was Regional Devolution Genuine?

At the heart of credibility of the regional project was the question of the genuineness of the devolution afforded to the Regional Assembly. Table 7.3 summarises the views of the four Conservative members about the governance of the WMRA. At the outset APGovC3 felt the voluntary sector (Other Stakeholders Group) and the Business Council believed they had a voice but over time they became disillusioned as nothing changed and frustration built up. It seemed that policy was increasingly being driven from Government. Interestingly this was not just about regional planning policy but by the final years was ‘.... directed at AWM...’ (APGovC3).

However, the most significant test was the Assembly’s role to shape regional planning policy. The test was whether the outcome of the RSS Revision, especially over the scale and location of new housing, would really count. What the Labour Government did on this would affect Conservative political attitudes towards regional working generally and, for some, regional planning.

Table 7.3 WMRA Conservative Views on the Genuineness of Regional Devolution
Source: Author based on Analysis of Interviews

Leading Conservative WMRA Members	APGovC1	APGovC2	APGovC3	APGovC4
<p>Post 2004 Regional Assembly Devolution; Genuine or a Misunderstanding?</p>	<p>In 2008 Nathaniel Lichfield's figures for additional new housing damaged the reputation of regional working.</p> <p>'... what it did was, it was able to unite people against the Government policy and then it, goes against the very principle of regional governance.'</p> <p>This episode revealed, '... there was no such thing as regional governance, it was a façade, because at the end of the day Government still wanted these things and therefore, it would dictate its target to you</p>	<p>Implicitly APGovC2 disbelieved the Assembly was a form of devolution; held an opinion that the RSS Phase 2 revision was driven by district councils.</p> <p>This was challenged by Baroness Andrew's letter (suspending the RSS Revision in 2008) and by Conservative ideological deafness and non-understanding when the merits of regional working were presented.</p> <p>APGovC2's position was consistent with the statements of self-perception made about own successful leadership role in WMRA.</p>	<p>'... there was, I think the misunderstanding of what its powers were and what it could do.....'</p> <p>'I think a lot of people went rolling in thinking, 'Oh marvellous, we are going to have a real opportunity'. The voluntary sector did and the business sector did, They finished up being cynics I think at the beginning there was a genuine belief in devolved power, but then as time went on ... they were getting a little bit, hang on.....'</p> <p>'... devolution, it possibly was intended to be genuine, but it wasn't seen....'</p> <p>Complained of a lack of transparency, understanding and voting over devolved decision making.</p>	<p>Did not believe there was genuine devolved power or autonomy to generate policy.</p> <p>Government Office was just an arm of government sitting there doing the Government's will.</p> <p>'I think we all paid lip service to it (devolution), but, we had to because if you weren't, if you had got a seat at the table and you didn't turn up, then you would be letting your team down, so we all played along with it because you had to.'</p> <p>'I think the WMRA thought they were going to have some power, but I don't think they ever really got it, I think they just had to do what they were told. I always got that impression.'</p>

Table 7.4 summarises the main opinions given by each WMRA Conservative interviewee about the role of housing and devolution. While APGovC1 and APGovC2 were not concerned about the pressure for additional housing, the other two Conservative actors were. Understanding the NHPAU and NLP's role was slight but was taken as a proxy for Government intervention seeing these mechanisms for their political importance in their unprecedented intervention, and in some areas, unreasonable demands undermining the spirit of the devolution.

Awareness of NHPAU's impact on the RSS Revision was slight but the part played by GOWM's Nathaniel Lichfield report was more widely known and caused concern. APGovC3 and APGovC4 had no interest in the technical work and NHPAU's arguments seemed never to have influenced local political views, despite DCLG and NHPAU civil servants visiting the West Midlands to explain their modelling. The pressure for additional housing was seen as a direct consequence of international migration (see Table 7.4). There was no knowledge of the NHPAU's purpose (Nickell,2008) or technical modelling work (Mean, and DCLG,2011) prompted by the Barker Report recommendations (Barker,2004) which was more about reducing the long term rise in the affordability ratio through supply side increases in new housing. In summary three of the four Conservatives thought that however genuine the early position was on devolution to regional assemblies, for the WMRA the Baroness Andrews (2008) letter signalled Government was reasserting control over the RSS.

Table 7.4 Was the issue of additional housing numbers significant for political views about WMRA and the RSS revision? Source: Author based on Analysis of Interviews

APGovC1	APGovC2	APGovC3	APGovC4
<p>'I think housing is always very emotive..... it scares the crows never mind the people.'</p> <p>'From our point of view the housing numbers weren't as, as big a political issue. In fact, we actually welcomed the subsequent adding on because that helped us in the rural areas to create more capacity in the rural areas.'</p> <p>'.....although we found then the Nathaniel Lichfield figures helpful for us. We were, we were the exception rather than the rule.'</p>	<p>APGovC2 did not believe the Government's requirement for additional housing created a Conservative political backlash in areas most affected and cause representations at Party HQ.</p> <p>APGovC2 acknowledged '...everybody was up in arms about housing numbers in total, but I've almost got a feeling that nobody actually worried too much about it.'</p> <p>APGovC2- 'I'm not entirely sure that it was the biggest issue in the world. People would accept that you got to increase housing numbers.'. On the additional housing numbers APGovC2 acknowledged, 'Worcestershire I recall had got some things which they were in strong debate over.'</p>	<p>APGovC3 was 'vaguely' aware of the National Housing and Planning Advisory Unit but had no awareness of it's role or input into the planning process.</p> <p>APGovC3 knew more new housing was being required and did not care why or what the justification was. APGovC1 said, 'I think the thing was we were getting to be a bit, this is.You had had enough of it already. This is getting pointless, this is.'</p> <p>All that mattered then was the grass roots impact.</p>	<p>The impact of RSS housing numbers from 2007 was an all-consuming political issue, partly due to the lack of transparency over how they had been calculated.</p> <p>APGovC4 believed the numbers were due to international migration. '...and this is really when I think, the resistance started because you could see the Government Office really just kind of, pushing the agenda forward because everything else seemed to have kind of got, I don't know, bogged down'.</p> <p>APGovC4 towards the endwe foolishly thought, oh well we don't like these huge numbers, and actually politically it was unacceptable, the numbers were unacceptable, there were definitely political problems in Malvern Hills District, <i>there weren't political problems here</i>, but they definitely were there,(emphasis added)</p>

The impotence of devolution became increasingly apparent after the Baroness Andrews letter of 7 Jan 2008. APGovC3 recalled that Conservative council leaders on the RPB,

'... blamed the government. They [council leaders] would turn up at the Regional Assembly,- just thinking of the Leaders in question, and they would speak, but did anything happen? No. So they would complain. ..., so the members would stay involved, but nothing happened (APGovC3).

In summary three of the four Conservatives thought that however genuine the early position was on devolution to regional assemblies, the Baroness Andrews (2008) letter signalled Government was reasserting control over the RSS policy in line with its national growth policy imperative, including housing numbers. Baroness Andrews letter made this clear through reference to the Housing Green Paper (DCLG,2007). Whilst APGovC2 clearly saw this letter in the same way as his/her colleagues, saying, 'What wasn't supported was the Nathaniel Lichfield revision which was generally regarded as lunacy'. Notwithstanding this, APGovC2 held a different view which maintained the foundations of the Assembly's integrity were in its locally focused joint working between councils.

7.11 The Role of GOWM

The Government Office was a key presence throughout the work of the RPB and the RHB and observed all the principal meetings of the Assembly. There was a close professional relationship between the Assembly and GOWM civil servants with. GOWM often presenting briefings on emerging planning and housing numbers. Neither APGovC1 nor APGovC3 expressed a view about GOWM. Both saw Government, mainly in the form of ODPM and then DCLG as the power behind

GOWM. APGovC3 thought that John Major brought in GOWM, because, '... European policy had to have a regional basis...'

For APGovC4, however GOWM was something of a 'bête noire'. During the post 2007 period of the Assembly's RSS work dealing with NHPAU and the NLP housing land report, he/she depicted GOWM as,

' moving the surveillance. It was like moving the prison watchtower into the middle instead of, instead of watching from London, they were watching from Birmingham (APGovC4).

As the Government Office insisted on taking its preferred higher new housing figures than the RSS Revision to the EiP, this action, '... was just seen like the Government trampling all over us. it (GOWM) was an arm of the Government, absolutely' (APGovC4).

APGovC4 was clear that the blame for the political hiatus generated by the housing numbers being imposed on the RSS Revision was the fault of the Government Office³⁸. The frustration with GOWM was highlighted when APGovC4 questioned a senior GOWM planner to clarify how the additional housing numbers had been calculated. The response was recounted; 'Well have you got a better way of calculating the answer, which I didn't think was any answer at all' (APGovC4). APGovC4 saw the WMRA as passive and therefore ineffective, but not malign, saying, '.... we always felt the Assembly were just doing what they had been told to do by the Government Office.' (APGovC4), and recalled how a senior GOWM civil

³⁸ See Section 9.5.

servant would,' turn up to planning partnership meetings (who) used to very much reinforce that view. He would come along and tell everybody what to do'(APGovC4).

APGovC2 saw the Government Office as simply ensuring Government - Assembly communication at officer rather than member level. This worked amicably, until a regional minister was appointed in 2007. Overall, GOWM was only administrative without involvement of politicians (APGovC2). For all that APGovC2 recalled GOWM did not add much value to regional working, saying, 'I have a feeling that I would have done away with the Government Office ... I am not entirely sure the Government Office performed a really valuable function' (APGovC2).

7.12 Regional Ministers

APGovC2 considered the GOWM to be the face of administrative government but the appointment of the MP for Birmingham (Hodge Hill), Liam Byrne as minister with responsibilities for the region, changed the Government Office into being a political office (APGovC2). APGovC2 was less positive about the regional ministers appointed and felt this 'was wrong' (APGovC2) as 'the Government Office had been neutral politically, that local authorities could talk to Government Office, say particularly on a planning matter' (APGovC2). In APGovC2's opinion,

'What Liam Byrne did was effectively set up an office and say that the Government Office is my empire and he, and also Ian Austin after him, they both regarded the Government Office as their regional empire and that then brought the political parties effectively into conflict with Government Office over some policies and things (that) were being done. And I think that was a very, very bad thing to have happened' (APGovC2).

According to APGovC2 once the minister found the WMRA was 'very much Conservative controlled..... he lost interest' (APGovC2).

By contrast and over the same period APGovC1 had a more positive account of his relationships with the West Midlands regional ministers. He recounted how the minister had involved him in establishing the regional transport priorities and in the regeneration of New Street Station (APGovC1). Whether the relationship differences these two had with ministers had a connection to the appointment to which APGovC1 referred was not covered. It may be APGovC2's account was coloured by personal chemistry with the minister or by APGovC1 being preferred and entrusted with a significant role with some public recognition.

7.13 Partnership and Consensus Working

Consensus, especially between local authorities was a fundamental principle of WMRA's policy development work and was believed by the Secretariat to be widely accepted as the *modus operandi*. The maintenance of this consensus was seen by the Assembly management as essential to its stability as an institution and success in securing long-term political support. The Government's interventions not only created stress in the local authority political consensus, but damaged voluntary support for the Assembly. The consensus on the RSS Revision was maintained through to 2007 when it clearly broke with GOWM. The rest of the Assembly Planning Partnership was maintained through to the EiP in 2009.

However, some authorities were less willing to agree to new housing than proposed in the Preferred Option. This left doubts about whether the apparent consensus was genuine. A senior Assembly manager (ASSM1) felt at that time the consensus had become, '....more and more expedient.'

None of the Conservative Assembly members who were aware of the consensus model appeared to know where it originated. While senior managers felt pride in the consensus model and the fact that voting was not necessary, some members regarded this as a weakness. APGovC3 described Assembly business meetings as consisting of a succession of papers, presented without a clear mechanism for establishing everyone had actually agreed each item before moving on. APGovC3 explained the consequence of this;

‘You know, did we ever have a vote? I don’t think we ever did. It was more, this is a paper that is being presented and we are moving forward to the next. The reason, ...you have ...a vote and it is passed, is you move on.because (if) you don’t have a vote, running sores can develop and they can carry on because people still think, well I can actually get away with less housing, because they never asked for more did they?’.

This political perspective, critical of WMRA’s working identified a weakness in governance processes, resulting in ‘running sores’, which became mixed up in with frustrations about decision making over Government pressures to increase housing numbers. This called into question two things: the officer perspective that the RSS Revision had the degree of unanimity of support they believed was enjoyed; and the legitimacy of the decision-making process and hence the outcomes of policy decisions.

The evidence from the research suggests the ‘consensus model’ in the West Midlands was exclusively a WMRA idea. WMRA managers and staff may have assumed and acted as if this were the basis of partnership working but it seems doubtful this was ever very widely understood or adhered to by others. Secretariat

planners and other professional staff upheld the consensus principle from pre-1998 through to the EiP in 2009, believing the regional local authority consensus to be real and holding. The same principle applied to the RHB work too. As the previous Chapter showed a regional planning consensus may have been there in 2004. From 2006-7 the questions are, did the political partnership consensus break down or become eroded in spirit and in practice? However, some Assembly members seemed never to have heard of this consensus, so for them the concept did not form part of their approach to their role on the Assembly structures.

Table 7.5 and following discussion considers the evidence gathered on this question.

Table 7.5 Was there a Collapse in Confidence in WMRA Partnership Working?
Source: Author based on Analysis of Interviews

APGovC1	APGovC2	APGovC3	APGovC4
Although there was public concern, the NLP additional housing figures worked to the advantage of the Council in its rural growth strategy.	'I don't think so.' Member felt- APGovC2 - clear regional planning and the housing numbers issue was largely non-contentious except when Nathaniel Lichfield Partnership presented their report.	' I think in the finish it did,Yes, at the finish...Yes, it was (due to a) change of Leaders, lack of involvement' Member thought towards the finish the ending of confidence was due to collapse of continuity and understanding. 'Yes, and you could see membership dropping off.' (towards the end.) 'It wasn't a crisis and bang. It was just a slow decline and eroding in confidence ... and people (WMRA members) had recognised that this wasn't the place to be'.	The cooperation with the RSS process,' very much changed towards the end because when we were promised that the regional strategies would be abolished and that that tier of government would go.' 'we thought, oh well we don't like these huge numbers, and actually politically it was unacceptable, and so it was very much...hands off'.

APGovC2 saw the concept of a local authority consensus over the RSS housing figures in the Preferred Option as tautological. The input to the RSS Revision, in APGovC2's view, was that local authorities owned the policy; so to have then objected to the policy and not adhered to the overall submission would have been 'awfully silly' (APGovC2). From this standpoint the notion of the WMRA achieving and holding to a consensus through huge pressure from Government, NHPAU, GOWM with NLP up to and including the EiP, was not such a dramatic achievement. For APGovC2 it did not register as an issue. The next stage in the damage to the consensus model as a consequence of the Government's intervention in the RSS Revision is summarised in Table 7.6.

Whether the consensus over the RSS maintained through to the EiP was genuine is a critical issue regarding the Assembly Conservative members. Did they deliberately give the impression of agreeing the new housing numbers in the Preferred Option, whilst 'holding their breath' in the belief they would never have to deliver?

As APGovC4 said, the numbers were unacceptable politically and the national Party was giving signals by 2009 they would abolish the RSSs and Assemblies if elected. The Conservative members needed to choose a political strategy of appearing to go along with the RSS process, (in case Labour were returned), whilst keeping in good favour with their electorates by resisting the NLP additional figures and ensuring the RSS system never delivered. The only sure way of achieving this was a Conservative victory in 2010.

Table 7.6 Did a Crisis of Confidence in the RSS process lead to the End of the Consensus and Lead to a Covert Political Movement to Exit Regional Working?
Source: Author based on Analysis of Interviews.

APGovC1	APGovC2	APGovC3	APGovC4 from 2007
<i>Topic not covered</i>	<p>Did not believe there needed to be a consensus or political cooperation over the RSS Preferred Option (2007) new housing numbers, saying, 'I'm not too sure it did. I think it was always there in people's minds that what we had got to do was come to a conclusion on housing'.</p> <p>Member believed the same applied when the WMRA went to the EiP in 2009. Referring to the need for a consensus to be formed, or held member said, 'I don't think anybody argued about that'.</p>	<p>Acknowledged the voluntary nature of their involvement thinking, 'we had got to be there if only to stop some of the mad cap stuff and try and encourage better stuff, so I think you had got to be there,' although he had pessimistic view of the whole process.'</p>	<p>One attitude was , was the RSS necessary but if Conservatives had to be involved APGovC4 recalled the view was 'well if it's there, then we have got to go in and make as much noise as we can to sort of hold the line. So that was kind of the way it was played.'</p> <p>Member did not believe the RSS process was working, 'Baroness Andrews had to come in because that was the only way they were going to get what they wanted, because the thing just wasn't working.'</p> <p>'I don't think was working at all. There was kind of passive resistance I think, from a lot of politicians to these huge numbers. A lot of people wouldn't admit to that , it was kind of, a bit sort of nary like, they were just kind of sitting on the ground with their legs crossed and not doing anything, they weren't actually doing anything wrong, but they weren't kind of pushing the agenda forward you know.'</p>

For the reasons evidenced above, APGovC2 did not think this consensus issue was relevant nor was there any duplicity happening since the housing new build figures in the Preferred Option for each district council area were effectively their own.

By contrast, APGovC4 expressed the clear view that the consensus was maintained as a political expedient until the outcome of the General Election was known saying, 'Oh, that was very much the thought, and we thought they (RSSs) would disappear

immediately', (APGovC4) after a Conservative Government was elected. APGovC4 recalled the Conservative Assembly members,

'....went along with it (the RSS) on the basis, particularly the Conservatives, on the basis they thought, well you know, we will let this go along because actually it is not going to happen at all (APGovC4).

APGovC4 confirmed this '.... was a shared view' with Conservative colleagues.

As for the political pressure generated before the Election by the additional new housing Labour required, APGovC4 revealed that the Conservative members' approach was to bide their time.

'Well I think at that stage we just switched off and hoped it would never happen. And by that time, yes the regional assemblies were definitely seen as (being directed by).... the government. ... By that time the Assembly had ceased to be effective because I think everybody knew they were going to go.'(APGovC4).

APGovC4 gave further confirmation of the effective ending of consensus based partnership working and hence the tacit ending of collective agreement over the RSS. APGovC4 recounted,

'There was kind of passive resistance I think, from a lot of politicians to these huge (housing) numbers. A lot of people wouldn't admit to that.... but it was kind of, a bit sort of nary like, they were just kind of sitting on the ground with their legs crossed and not doing anything. They weren't actually doing anything wrong, but they weren't kind of pushing the agenda forward you know'.

Table 7.7 presents the views of WMRA Conservative interviewees about representations made to Conservative Central Office about regional working and the housing aspects of the RSS. APGovC3 was probably the best connected of the WMRA Conservative leaders with national Conservatives and would have been able to make direct representations on regional working. He/she acknowledged that there were Party discussions (APGovC3) on issues including regional planning but recalled that these exposed a lack of appreciation of regional and local level participation in that Assembly: Conservative members had to work with the New Labour regional system. APGovC3. said of national Party colleagues '.... they don't quite understand that we have to work with them....'.

Table 7.7. WMRA Conservative members' knowledge of Representations to Conservative Party Central Office and West Midlands MPs.
Source: Author, based on Research Interviews.

APGovC1	APGovC2	APGovC3	APGovC4
<p>'...to be fair, we did make some representations, but it was always dismissed, to make the point very clearly; look okay, we hate regional governance changes, but you know, we do need to recognise that some of them have some values, don't throw out with the bath water'.</p>	<p>'Some members from the national Conservative opposition (thought) ...I should be working to frustrate regional assemblies...(but) you work with the tools you are given.'</p> <p>'I went down for a meeting with Caroline Spelman and I suppose we had an hour or so with Caroline in her office and there was nothing that we were doing as far as she was concerned that had any merit or any value.</p> <p>'She got very much confused between regional assemblies and AWM... She couldn't really come to terms with the difference.'</p> <p>A meeting...we had with Caroline Spelman (and) ...a whole stack of Leaders from the West Midlands...to say, you've really got to rethink your view.... Things are very different in the West Midlands and you need to just think things through. She wasn't prepared to do that.'</p> <p>Conservative political view: '...was very easy to take a position,... which said, we are against regional governance,...., and I think ..., with hind sight... we should have.... made a stronger representation, but to be fair, we did make some representations, but it was always dismissed'. Member argued regional working had some value, so 'don't throw out with the bath water'.</p>	<p>Member was well connected with Conservative Central Office: 'I know everybody down there.' and was well placed to make representations about regional matters.</p> <p>Member knew Caroline Spelman MP Shadow minister for DCLG well. Eric Pickles, I would be getting to know,... so I would be meeting, ... Eric in different places and coming from where I am, with a sort of major support of the Conservative Party, I would get to meet various people when they visited. So I would ... meet different people in the shadow cabinet.</p> <p>The West Midlands regional Conservatives were informing shadow ministers of the implications of planning issues, e.g.'... you are going to have to have more houses in Redditch or Bromsgrove and how is that going to pan out?'</p>	<p>I know that our MP's were involved. In fact in a way our MP's didn't help because they jumped up and down and said, oh the numbers are ridiculous,</p> <p>Referring to the NLP additional housing numbers, member confirmed the local MPs '.... took it, they took it upwards (to the national Party) and, and, but unfortunately sent it downwards (to the local public) as well, which didn't make it easy for us to actually go along with it.' ... and to, and to make, make the number a kind of you know, a thing that was acceptable'.</p>

APGovC3 said other representations to the national Conservative Party were, 'letters written by the (Conservative) Group Leader and, and things like that,' but this member doubted 'whether any notice was taken' and thought 'they just dodged them to be honest'(APGovC3).

All the Conservative actors were aware of or directly involved in making representations to their Central Office. In some cases, this was to point out the merits of regional work, or the constraint of having to work with the system as Labour had devised it. There were also representations about the regional planning system and housing numbers about which MPs made an issue locally as well as in Parliament.

7.14 National Conservative Anti-Regional Hostility

The national Conservative position was explained by each of the interviewees as always being negative. The West Midlands Conservative local authorities dominated control of the WMRA, but APGovC4 acknowledged that, with no guarantee of a Conservative Government after 2010, local Conservative councillors had to be involved in the Assembly. The nature of that involvement differed from member to member. APGovC2 explained that,

'I had a view from some members from the National Conservative opposition that what I should be doing was working to frustrate regional assemblies ... There was no certainty at any stage that we were going to end up with a Conservative Government so I had to work with Government ministers....And I believe I worked the best way I possibly could. Probably to my own long-term cost' (APGovC2).

APGovC2 lamented the lack of attempts by the national Party to talk through the benefits and weaknesses of regional working. Rather, he confirmed the views of APGovC1, that,

‘There was a vision that assemblies were something of an evil part of Labour-control and Labour Government and I think that because of that you need a number of political banners to hold up, and I think one of those banners was ‘we are going to do away with regional assemblies’, and regional assemblies were seen as the sort of evil of all this’ (APGovC2).

APGovC1’s perspective was that,

‘...the [Conservative] national party politics and particularly policy making, never got out of that entrenched anti Prescott mode of regional governance ... about Labour dominance, (of) rural areas, therefore we will have none of it...’(APGovC1).

Although APGovC1 felt any semblance of regional governance had gone long before the 2010 Election but the institutions still remained, ‘.... and so what you got was this, what I call, political venom’, (APGovC1,15.55), which meant the regional institutions had to go irrespective of any analysis of whether they had done a good job or not. The working atmosphere at local, regional and national levels,

‘....got to the stage as we know you don’t mention the R word, which is quite a ridiculous situation to be in...’ (APGovC1).

The situation with the Conservative Party became so toxic that any document or work done by a regional body was automatically binned for being regionally contaminated. (APGovC1).

Another more individual ground for negativity towards regional working especially in relation to Europe was suggested by APGovC2 regarding his relationship with a West Midlands MEP. APGovC2 wondered whether the MEP wanted his own regional profile in Europe, suggesting the MEP may have wanted,

'...a strong regional influence in Europe. I think he felt [WMRA] undermined his position. He has never quite said that to me in so many words'
(APGovC2).

APGovC2 thought the MEP would argue,

'...he is there to represent the West Midlands and therefore why did we need the Regional Assembly to do it. That is a personal view.' (APGovC2).

7.15 Personal Political Consequences

Of the four interviewees the two Conservatives who were most prominent and positive about the roles they contributed to the WMRA governance were the two who attracted the most negative, and even hostile comments from national Conservatives, especially West Midlands MPs and MEPs. Equally those interviewees whose profile during the New Labour era were not prominent and who expressed critical views of regional working, and regional institutions seemed not to have attracted such opprobrium. However, when one of these took a more prominent role after 2010 with the short-lived successor organisation, West Midlands Councils, this attracted critical questions (APGovC3).

It did not appear that most of the WMRA Conservative members suffered politically for their involvement with the Assembly. However, APGovC2 explained that he/she had,'...tried to talk to (a named MP) about this and he just won't listen' and felt:

‘He has no view other than I was disloyal to the Conservative Party in being (involved in) a regional assembly which was against the Party’s national strategy in opposition’ (APGovC2).

APGovC2 described how he/she had been politically snubbed and isolated at national level and closed the interview with the words,

‘I think the probability is that the knives [had] been well enough out for me over my [role in] the Assembly, not necessarily that I have any great hang-ups’ (APGovC2).

A WMRA senior manager and a GOWM Civil Servant (CV3) also saw the political isolation and hostility experienced by leading Conservative Assembly members. The political engagement of Conservative Assembly Leaders (APGovC1 and APGovC2) working within the regional system with some enthusiasm led them to believe that Conservatives in high profile positions could exert a positive influence on national plans for changes to the regional system of working. However, APGovC2 noted, ‘The Conservative Party didn’t understand the benefits of regional working to be able to be together. Community was a great strength for the ways we delivered joined up services’.

7.16 Did Regional Planning lead to the end of Regional working?

APGovC2 felt national references to regional planning as the reason for abolition of the assemblies were insincere. APGovC2 said,

‘I don’t think planning was a factor if I’m absolutely honest. I think that that was a banner not a reason... I think the reasons for doing away with the regions as this ‘terrible imposition’ that you have which really was a red herring. It was a Trojan horse to do something different, but I think that

probably regional planning still exists in some form but not in such a way that anybody is going to feel we have a regional planning policy'.

APGovC2 reflected that the reasons for the ending of the assemblies only became clearer to him later. APGovC2 said,

'I'm not sure I felt it at the time, but I think that looking at it now, the Assembly was in a very vulnerable position because it had the complete support of local government within the West Midlands. It had no support from the Conservative opposition and the Labour Government felt that it had been hijacked because it was no longer their baby. And what I think is that once Conservative opinion nationally... Well I suppose once opinion changed nationally that we were not going to have regional government and once the Conservatives had cleared their view based upon the south-east of England that assemblies were a bad thing and should be killed off ..., you clearly then start to get a change in the view of politicians locally that they have got to continue to live and run their local authorities, and they have got to start to fall into line.'

APGovC2 concluded the assemblies,

'fell between two stools. The Labour Government wanted elected regional assemblies and the Opposition to that meant they didn't want any regional assemblies at all and there was no middle ground. And because there was no middle ground we ended up throwing the baby out with the bathwater' (APGovC2).

7.17 Conclusion: Summary of Findings

The Assembly members' interviews reflected their assumptions and how they interpreted their own role in regional working. Some had unconventional perceptions, different from those of other Assembly members or the Secretariat. APGovC2 considered that District Councils were the dominant regional political entity for strategic planning and did not appear to appreciate the significance of the Section 4 (4) provisions of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004. These were introduced as a 'hostile amendment' in the House of Lords by sponsors of County Councils and included requirements for the assemblies, as RPBs, to seek strategic planning advice from County Councils, which, in turn, were required to provide it (ODPM, 2004).

Whilst some policies had been carried forward from County Structure Plans, this member overstated how far the RSS was compiled from previous plans and did not include the additional housing numbers Government sought. While the RPG, confirmed in 2004, reflected a West Midlands local authority consensus, the core Urban Renaissance policy and would reverse migration from the conurbation by better off households, it differed from the sum of County Structure Plans. APGovC2's perspective blended some fact, with some selective oversimplification, and possibly misunderstood aspects of the regional planning system. The lack of acknowledgement of Counties' Section 4(4)³⁹ (ODPM,2004)role could represent part of a *post hoc* formulation that set aside devolution and regarded the assemblies' democratic deficit as politically advantageous. APGovC2 characterised the RPB, when it submitted the Preferred Option for approval, as subordinate to Government.

³⁹ Also covered by the Sec 4(4) provisions were Metropolitan and Unitary Authorities.

This attempted to rationalise Conservative councillors' regional involvement from the higher ground of an elected District Council, thereby countering the hostile views towards participation felt by some Conservatives.

APGovC2 may have constructed a similar justification for Districts' agreeing to levels of new housing and to West Midlands authorities' unanimity in resisting GOWM pressure. Under these terms Assembly involvement could be presented as an advantage to constituents because of District Councils' perceived elevated role: this provided an honourable basis for Conservative councillors' involvement in a Labour regional project.

Although the three Conservative councillors interviewed served on the Assembly concurrently, their views were not as unified as expected. The comments and positive appreciation of the WMRA's work, combined with a leadership mindset that played down the significance of regional planning, meant that the Secretariat was not fully aware of three elements:

- a) underlying changes to the political consensus and member involvement;
- b) failures in the Assembly's organisational design and communication with its nominated members;
- c) hostile representations of regional working from local to national level.

In some West Midlands Conservative Shire areas the Government's extra demands were quietly welcomed, even though their residents may have been 'horrified' (as APGovC1 reflected), and despite the unprecedented, high handed intervention being an easy target against the Labour Government. However, in areas where resistance to the proposed levels of new housing was strong, (especially the south of the region) the mindset of authorities was different. In these places the hypothesis in

Figure 7.1 was borne out. Some Conservative members, notwithstanding reservations, owned their Assembly governance and planning roles, suggesting these members could be advocates for the continuation of regional planning to their national Party. The unanimous local authority support for the RSS Revision Preferred Option added weight to this assumption. However other Conservative actors were essentially hostile and only there to stop ‘mad stuff’ (APGovC3) and keep GOWM under watch. The involvement of these members within a consensus/partnership model was much less genuine: they quietly disowned the institution, yielded to GOWM pressure under duress and awaited the end of the organisation, hopefully at the next General Election.

7.18 Conclusion: Implications for Theory

The exploration of the Conservative approach resonates with new institutional theory in all three of the forms selected for this thesis. The successful historical path dependency, with the WMLGA underpinning the WMRA in regional working, achieved regional and Governmental approval in 2004 and contributed to the view that the organisation and its planning mission was on a stable footing. However, this does not explain how continuity ended or why some Conservative members saw their best long-term interests (regionally, locally and nationally) served by regional institutions ending. Some members had no awareness of historical continuity, did not care about it or see it as relevant when informed about it. The organisation’s historical memory was not likely to survive long if the shared understanding of how it maintained the institution was not known or valued. While a sufficient proportion of the professional and managerial staff held this institutional history and transferred it in their socialisation and indoctrination of new staff, there was no such process for new political members.

When the WMRA came under Government pressure to change the Preferred Option some members felt that this was detrimental to their interests. Again this resonates with elements in New Institutional Theory. The response of some Conservative members broadly followed the tenets of Rational Choice Theory. Members played the game of maintaining a consensus they did not believe in but took steps to end the system which threatened them locally. This approach could not be conducted overtly so was characterised by members' studied inactivity ('sitting on their hands', as APGovC4 put it), non-attendance at meetings and waiting to see the outcome of the General Election.

The third type of New Institutional Theory, the population ecological model from Sociological Institutionalism (Peters,2012), resonates with the actions of Conservative Assembly members who contributed their experiences and concerns about regional working to thinking at a national level. The regional project had never been welcomed by Conservatives nationally and local-regional Conservatives reinforced that view. The Labour Government contributed to the damage they were doing to the political climate for assemblies by the way they drove their agenda for economic growth through increased house building. Economic growth could have been a goal shared with the Conservatives, but by choosing regional mechanisms to achieve this Labour alienated Conservatives. The underlying suspicion that John Prescott sought to dominate the shires through regional institutions, and worse, that this was a European Union inspired plot against England as a political entity, only deepened the political environmental toxicity of all things regional. This goes towards explaining the intensity with which the word 'region' was deemed unusable in 2009 to 2010 in political and administrative work.

CHAPTER 8 PARTNERS OR COMPETITORS? OTHER ORGANISATIONS IN THE REGION.

8.1 Introduction.

The research design for this thesis acknowledged the need to understand the perspectives of actors in organisations with functional relationships with the West Midlands Regional Assembly. This Chapter and the next address the Assembly's external political environment as conceptualised by the New Institutional Theory population ecology model (Peters, 2012) introduced in Chapter 3. This Chapter focuses on the regional political environment within which the WMRA was embedded. The interviewees referred to were mainly with staff of regional bodies or national bodies operating at the regional level. The views expressed reflect different standpoints from which to analyse the Assembly's inter-organisational relationships, especially its RSS work. Much of the evidence about inter-organisational competition has had to be inferred. This material provides a benchmark from which to compare accounts and allow the possibility of challenge to the narrative shared by actors within the Assembly.

The Chapter considers the extent to which regional actors saw themselves as competitors, and in what sense. It refers to the Regional Development Agency (Advantage West Midlands), the West Midlands City–Region, the Housing Corporation and its successor the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA), the National Planning and Advisory Unit (NHPAU)⁴⁰, the Strategic Planning Authorities and private sector planning consultants.

⁴⁰ The evidence from NHPAU here relates only to 'competition' and the larger part of NHPAU evidence is discussed in Chapter 9 as is GOWM a Civil Service body with primary links to DCLG.

8.2 Partners or Competitors?

Chapter 6 indicated that regional players were seen by some in the Secretariat, as competitors of various types to the Assembly. The Secretariat planners had concerns about varying types and degrees of threat to its RSS work. These pressures from the near external regional political environment came in rapid succession from 2004 onwards. They were a complex outworking of different role conflicts with other organisations where drivers, mandates, goals and responsibilities 'rubbed up' against the WMRA's work. Some of this was viewed as a potential threat or desire to take over an aspect of the RSS role, but some was more an unintended by-product without the direct aim of achieving a hostile competitive take over. These broad types of behaviour conflicted with the Assembly's consensus- partnership ethos and some took considerable time to manage, generating additional work including with the Assembly's governance members.

Until 2004 the West Midlands regional work on the RPG, the WMLGA and then WMRA had the regional planning field largely to itself with a clearly understood process with widely accepted historical antecedents. Strategic local authorities and other stakeholders had achieved a consensus based RPG, although some shire district authorities were not so engaged and never bought into this process or its outcome. This apparent calm was clouded and challenged as the partnership of local authorities, stakeholders and others encountered increasing tensions with the arrival of other actors on the regional stage.

8.3 Advantage West Midlands

The Assembly Secretariat, especially planners, believed there was a desire in some quarters of the Regional Development Agency to take over preparation of the RSS.

The evidence from the regional actors is given in Table 8.1. Although interviewees AWM1 and ASSM2s' evidence suggested the aspiration to take over the Spatial Strategy role was not dominant, apart from some of the AWM planners.

Table 8.1 AWM as a potential competitor to the WMRA
Source: Author's analysis of Research Interviews

Potential Competitor: AWM	WMRA Secretariat View	Evidence from Regional Bodies	Other regional views
<p>AWM was one of eight English RDAs created by the Regional Development Agencies Act 1998. (See Chapter 5) It was responsible for the non-statutory Regional Economic Strategy to raise the regional GDP and to promote</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) regeneration and economic development; b) business efficiency ,competitiveness; and address c) employment; d). skills e) sustainable development. <p>RDAs took over responsibility for administering EU regional development funds from regional Government Offices.</p>	<p>ASSM1 commented on AWM vying for the strategic planning role: AWM was, '...jealous because they thought. 'What we (AWM) do, our aspect of planning is more important to economic (<i>sic</i>), housing and we need to get on with it and all these procedures and consultations at the Regional Assembly says we have got to do; they are just slowing things up. We want to do it our way.' (ASSM1).</p> <p>On AWM, WMRA senior planner, ASPO1 felt '... everybody (was) ...playing their own little game.'.</p> <p>About wanting the strategic planning role ASSM2 said, 'The AWM planners would have loved it. But the Chief Exec and others just did not want that hassle'.</p>	<p>AWM1 said the RES and RSS Revision, '... brought the organisations, the strategies and the philosophies into conflict. AWM and the RES wanted to achieve its targets by going with decentralising market investment trends. The RSS sought to reverse these to achieve Urban Renaissance.'.</p> <p>Acquiring the RSS function: AWM would be 'more empowered to advertise their own agenda'(AWM1)</p> <p>AWM1 'felt certain people in AWM did want this (RSS role).Individuals, some would have loved the authority and status.'.</p>	<p>A local authority strategic planner (LAP2) believed local authority members conflated the Assembly with AWM seeing them effectively as one and the same. 'AWM...working with markets you have to be flexible and I think one of the challenges and probably one of the downfalls of regional spatial planning was that it was viewed as being inflexible, dictatorial and lacking in local ownership.'(LAP2).</p>

AWM1 said taking over the RSS would have secured alignment with AWM's RES approach and remove constant rounds of policy debate as the two strategies tended to pull in different directions.

However, AWM1's account did reveal a contested relationship over policy and roles. There was a prolonged competition for influence over the shape of the West Midlands economy and patterns of investment. AWM1 stated,

'The RSS was looking at Urban Renaissance, and the 'functioning economic geography' evidence showed a different picture. This was the 'doughnut effect', where the actual growth was occurring outside the conurbation' (AWM1).

ASSM2 referred to,

'huge debates, discussions and antagonism ... in the early days. This was a big issue which was never resolved as two different approaches to economic growth'.

AWM1's observations on policy tensions closely mirrored those of the Assembly officer (ASNPO2), but AWM1's account regarded the relationship as more 'prickly'. Throughout ASPO2's West Midlands career, regional consensus working was the 'basic ethos' despite sometimes being 'cumbersome'. ASPO2, 'personally was happy to embrace' this model. This ethos was reflected in the choice of language used to describe relational aspects of the Assembly's working with AWM. ASPO2 referred to 'creative tensions' with AWM and 'slightly jostling each other but basically on the same side'. Through a collaborative approach ASPO2 described WMRA seeking 'common ground' and common interest', neutralising the areas of functional conflict between the RSS and RES.

AWM1 thought WMRA 'won' this debate by bringing the RES into line with the RSS Revision, but AWM1 twice mentioned that the Assembly consequently inherited, 'a legacy of resentment'. Although the consensus model was proudly adhered to by the Assembly, AWM were made to feel 'the junior partner'. WMRA appeared to be determined, 'not brook too much opposition' if AWM did not agree their approach and AWM was, 'shouted down' and 'stamped on quite quickly' (AWM1). Although relationships matured over time for pragmatic reasons, AWM1 recalled 'Some senior staff of AWM were irredeemably hostile to the WMRA regardless'.

This competition for policy dominance in shaping West Midlands growth and development continued against the backdrop of the SNR⁴¹ which included, *inter alia*, reference to AWM taking on a housing role. Before this was resolved AWM generated an atmosphere of competition with the Assembly and vied for influence with local authorities. From my personal observations this confused the local authority sub-regional housing partnerships set up by the GOWM and Housing Corporation, diminishing the influence of the RHB and Assembly.

Before the assemblies were abolished on 31 March 2010, AWM and the new Leaders' Board had set up joint shadow structures which produced a Regional Investment Framework (JSIB, 2009). A senior Assembly planner saw this publication as an example of,

'another thing that suddenly came out of left field (from AWM). All good stuff in one sense but not in the same game as it were' (ASPO1).

⁴¹ See Section 5.15

Although this did not contradict the RSS policies the RSS planners felt it was operating in their area without proper regard or involvement. With Labour's abolition of assemblies, new RRAs took over and their pre-eminence was established with their ultimate responsibility for preparing a hybrid Regional Strategy (albeit jointly with Leaders' Boards) and including a statutory part to cover former RSS policy.

8.4 David Miliband's City-Region Debate

Partly due to the 2004 NE referendum result, Labour looked for new models of local governance (NLGN, 2005). These new ideas were launched in the New Local Government Network's report for the City Regions Commission, '*Seeing the light?*' (NLGN,2005) and ODPM's '*A framework for City-Regions*' (Harding,et al.,2006). A commentator picking up on the referendum result noted the City Regions Commission,

'.... were pushing at an open door, ... Labour's attention had quickly turned to other models.....(and)... the notion of city-regions quickly gained currency in policy circles around New Labour' (Stevens, 2005, webpage).

Interviewees' comments on this potential alternative to the Assembly are summarised in Table 8.2. The CRC (NLGN,2005) report recognised that the City-Region concept could replace or work within existing regional arrangements. Despite David Miliband's city summits (HoC,2007) the debate caused concern to the Assembly planners: it created '*...a lot of noise off....*'(ASPO1) , and confused the regional agenda,' not least because, 'the geography was different'. This amounted to 'a competitive process' which,

'was like riding two horses. I didn't know whether there were two horses being ridden ...both going in the same direction but not certain there was the

coordination. There was almost a competition between what was the most important of the processes' (ASPO1).

Table 8.2 Evidence relating to the City -Region Debate as a potential competitor for the RSS role. Source: Author's analysis of Research Interviews

Potential Competitor: City- Region	WMRA Secretariat View	Evidence from Regional Bodies	Other regional views
<p>Ministers had wanted the City -Region idea to explore 'best practice around the world, particularly other parts of Europe asking. 'Are there other forms of partnership that we ought to be exploring', including the, 'spatial areas for certain decisions to be taken.' (WML1)</p> <p>City Region concept was an alternative form of regional governance (Stevens, 2005; NLGN,2005; Marshall et al.,2006; HofC.2007). It stalled after D. Miliband moved to Defra before a White Paper (DCLG,2006) was published.</p>	<p>Assembly planner, ASPO1: the 'City - Region debate created...a lot of noise off...', and confused the local political landscape for West Midlands regional Planning.</p> <p>The City -Region and RSS process 'didn't gel well.'. It confused the regional agenda as, 'the geography was different'. This amounted to 'a competitive process' (ASPO1).</p> <p>ASSM2 felt the City -Region threat was more a distraction; characterised it as a means of RSS implementation. The threat failed to materialise because of the inter-authority wrangling.</p>	<p>A regional labour interviewee (WML1) said 'The idea of City -Region, David Miliband, CLG, perhaps they were genuinely looking to something that would have been different from regional assemblies as the way forward for devolved power within England. But I never sensed they (Labour Government) were trying to get rid of regional assemblies.'</p> <p>WML1 agreed there was a low key tension, ' but... never overt' between the political discussions about a City-Region and the Assembly.</p> <p>When examined in depth it was not clear what a new City-Region would do, 'that no-one else' could do and 'wasn't necessary when you had the regional assembly as well.'. (WML1)</p> <p>The region's planning for housing issues the City-Region partnership, '...looked at housing for quite some time but ultimately could never make a decision about it ...in part because the Regional Assembly (was) doing this already.' and had the statutory power.</p>	<p>To many Assembly members the City-Region initiative was a political threat which risked putting Birmingham in a dominant position.</p> <p>WML1 -the West Midlands rural councillors preferred the Assembly to the City -Region saying they were 'a bit more enthusiastic about this idea of a regional assembly in part because it meant they were playing on the same playing field as the metropolitan authorities'. Rural councillors feared the loss of influence implied by the City-Region model.</p>

It was not only the Assembly planners who had concerns. WML1 explained that rural councillors were worried about the loss occasioned by the regional assembly arrangements: a new found equality of representation and closer proximity with the metropolitan authorities, especially Birmingham. The rural areas sensed some threat from the prospect of a City-Region so, 'the rural authorities valued the Regional Assembly more than the metropolitan members' (WML1).

A senior Conservative WMRA member (APGovC1) commented,

'We had this City-Regions thing that was established, well we didn't understand that, and I think history will prove that neither did the City-Region itself and of course, they fell out amongst themselves.... we then became very united as a group of shires... (in) an informal relationship and ... met quarterly... ' (APGovC1).

Eventually the City-Region idea lost traction but CV1 confirmed the real nature of the threat to the Assembly:

'it... was Government's intention for them (City-Regions) to have a much more pivotal role. So, if City -Regions had developed you could see them taking over responsibilities from regional assemblies.'

WML1 explained that in Government and the Civil Service,

'it was realised ...this (WM City -Region) partnership wasn't working ...if (members) were saying behind closed doors to ministers or senior civil servants, 'It's okay but we're only in it because we think we have to be...' and 'that is why ministers go off and give it to Manchester and Leeds.'

Ultimately the Assembly survived this threat because,

'The City-Region in the West Midlands did not proceed for several reasons, 'to do with history, politics, both party and small 'p', personalities, ultimately the size of Birmingham, always ...a problem for the Black Country' (WML1).

Later in 2014, when the outcome of the Scottish referendum created a similar opportunity, the Metropolitan local authorities forged an agreement that led to the formation of the West Midlands Combined Authority⁴².

8.5 National Housing and Planning Advisory Unit.

In 2006, the Government implemented a Barker Report (2004) recommendation setting up the NHPAU, mandated to provide independent advice to ministers on the levels of new housing required in each RSS. Table 8.3 presents the evidence from civil servant CV2 and the observations of senior planners and Assembly managers. The NHPAU acknowledged its remit was a single focus whereas RPBs had to balance a range of competing interests and achieve a set of sustainable policies (CV2). The NHPAU had no remit, intention or capacity for competing with the assemblies except in the singularly important planning for housing issue. Assembly planner ASPO1 confirmed that was the case for the WMRA. CV2 acknowledged the NHPAU, 'wasn't born into a consensus' and outlined its remit:

' ... to provide advice, independent, professional advice based in what we would say was proper research and evidence on housing supply and affordability issues'.

⁴² See Section 11.5.2

Table 8.3 The National Housing and Planning Advisory Unit as a competitor for the RSS planning for housing role.

Source: Author's analysis of Research Interviews

Potential Competitor: NHPAU	WMRA Secretariat View	Evidence from NHPAU
<p>The National Housing and Planning Advisory Unit formed in 2006, following Barker Review (2004) to provide Government with independent advice on housing supply by region.</p>	<p>The housing issue become the big thing... in terms of (RSS) Phase 2, the setting up of the NHPAU and all the modelling and that philosophy' (ASPO1)</p> <p>'... setting up .. the NHPAU was rather like sending in the 'gunslingers...playing a particular game'. Despite the style of clever presentation, 'you just knew there was something wrong. We were being forced to play the game but they had set out the rules of the game.' The Shires and the Districts understood this.' (ASPO1).</p> <p>ASSM1: '...the Government just pushed ... pushed elected members too far inventing the NHPAU; the entirely aspatial analysis they came up with to justify their higher housing numbers. That was never going to be sellable, ...(to)... local authorities'.</p> <p>ASSM1, 'Whitehall kept at arm's length because... there was a feeling that the Government Office had gone native,' being persuaded of the Assembly's well evidenced case. ASSM1 said this was evident at the EIP, where GOWM, 'were having great difficulty expressing a coherent counter view, and they had to defer to the economists from the NHPAU who...were just arguing, literally an aspatial justification for higher housing numbers.' ASSM1 concluded, 'The NHPAU certainly increased resentment amongst shire Tories. All of them'..</p>	<p>CV2 acknowledged the NHPAU, ' wasn't born into a consensus'.</p> <p>Its remit was' to provide advice, independent, professional advice based in what we would say was proper research and evidence on housing supply and affordability issues.</p> <p>NHPAU not remitted to compete with the assemblies as such , but did seek to influence on the narrow front of housing numbers , the most contentious political issue for those communities which were resistant and to the Labour Government in its social and economic policies at a critical time as the next General Election loomed.(CV2)</p> <p>CV2 presented the NHPAU work as offering sound technical evidence for 'adult discussion'</p> <p>On RPB autonomy CV2 ' ..didn't think about it. Did see them as fundamentally important to achieving our objectives...trying to ensure a high quality discussion of housing need and demand across the country.'</p> <p>We were determined to work with organisations which we saw as holding the power' – saw RPB as being responsible for the 'planning mechanism' and therefore powerful.(CV2).</p>

CV2 presented the NHPAU work as offering sound technical evidence for 'adult discussion'. Although not stated explicitly this carried the inference that there was something lacking in the WMRA's own technical work in arriving at the housing numbers. This was something the Assembly never felt was fair or reasonable given its own expertise, that of the County Strategic Authority staff involved and the inclusion of technical work commissioned from universities.

For the West Midlands, the Affordability Model commissioned by the Government and used by NHPAU (Mean, and DCLG,2011) produced a new housebuilding requirement higher than that based on the ONS demographic projections⁴³. It was argued that this would reduce the affordability ratio, but only for a few years⁴⁴. The numbers involved exceeded the metropolitan authorities' view of their capacity to bring forward previously developed 'brown field' land thereby threatening the rural areas with additional housing and undermining the RSS principles of Urban Renaissance.

The NHPAU's advice was embraced by Government, and Baroness Andrews (Andrews, 2008) instructed the Assembly to delay the RSS process while GOWM tasked Nathaniel Lichfield Partnership to show more housing land could be found for the EiP. This led to a view among Assembly members that the supposedly devolved regional planning process was now being driven from Government.

For the Secretariat, the NHPAU was acting in a directly competitive role over policy; but this was nowhere near the NHPAU expressed self-perception (CV2). They felt

⁴³ See Section 5.17

⁴⁴ Personal observation from author's attendance at an DCLG Advisory Panel for the development of the econometric model.

their rational, apolitical advice was soundly based in the furtherance of good social and economic policy objectives and should be given a fairer hearing.

By July 2008 DCLG realised it needed to formalise its expectations of how assemblies should address NHPAU's work and issued a letter (Flint, 2008) to elaborate on PPS3 (Housing) requiring each assembly, *inter alia*, to use NHPAU's advice 'on the impact of affordability in the region'. For the West Midlands, the Minister for Planning and Housing, Caroline Flint, (2008) justified NLP's involvement as consistent with this, given that,

'The West Midlands is at a different stage in the RSS revision process to other regions and there is an opportunity in the West Midlands for NHPAU's advice to be considered through the current Phase 2 RSS revision'.

Despite these words, WMRA regarded other requirements in this Ministerial letter, such as the availability of residential land, the sustainability assessment of proposed development and 'any new infrastructure' as providing sound reasons for defending its position.

8.6 Housing Corporation and Homes and Communities Agency

Another form of competition arose in two phases, first with the Housing Corporation, which was fairly benign and where problems were more the result of inherent design weaknesses affecting the way the early regional architecture operated. The second arose once the HCA became operational from the start of 2009. The Assembly found this much harder to deal with. Table 8.4 presents the evidence from an officer

Table 8.4 The Housing Corporation and Homes and Communities Agency as a regional competitor.
 Source: Author based on Analysis of Research Interviews

Potential Competitor: Housing Corporation and HCA	WMRA Secretariat View	Evidence from HCA
<p>Housing Corporation: a Non-Departmental Government Body for investment in social and affordable housing and a sector regulator.</p> <p>Superseded in December 2008 by Homes and Communities Agency: - an 'executive non-departmental public body, sponsored by the DCLG'. Remit included helping to, '... create successful communities by making more homes and business premises available to the residents and businesses who need them'. (HCA, 2018)</p>	<p>ASSM1 (Similar to AVMM) the HCA was 'jealous' because they thought '...., our aspect of planning is more important to the economy, and housing and '....we need to get on with it and all these procedures and consultations at the regional assembly says we have got to do, they are just slowing things up, we want to do it our way'.</p> <p>ASPO2 recalled after the Sub-National Review the HCA was going to be a challenge. 'They were doing all sorts of activities sometimes treading on our toes ...but it was more about what was going to happen'.</p> <p>ASSM2 recalled some irritation with the HCA among West Midlands regional bodies. 'Everybody ... was a bit annoyed at the footprint, the different boundaries to the West Midlands Region; a quango having responsibility for allocating money, not via the Assembly. That was a backward move.'</p> <p>ASSM2 : attempts were made improve relationships with HCA and 'Pressure was applied through the RHB but HCA were fairly immune to that'.</p> <p>ASSM2 agreed the creation of the HCA brought fundamental change to WMRA/ WMLB working through the RHB and local authorities. The HCA, '... had control over a large amount of the money ... Yes that was a lot of influence...And it felt it was one step removed from local government. Far too removed from local government.' (ASSM2).</p> <p>'They (HCA) worked with us but not really as a partner.' -Something they had to do. Towards the end they did not turn up at (RHB / RHP) meetings. They did not recognise us (WMRA) as being important. ASSM2 thought the establishment of the HCA was part of the beginning of the end really for Assemblies. And that was under Labour.' (ASSM2)</p>	<p>WHO1: RHB seen as potential threat to Housing Corporation. Feared RHB may take decisions that worked against the delivery of its affordable housing programme and the expectations of its national Board.</p> <p>WHO1: Acknowledged the HCA had 'a much wider focus on economic development and economic growth.' than the Housing Corporation.</p> <p>WHO1 suggested the HCA was originally an amalgam of different organisational cultures. Some had no prior experience of engaging with local authorities or regional assemblies, 'but had a new remit to pursue, economic regeneration and all those other things while being a big-hitter.' (WHO1)</p> <p>The HCA 'maybe didn't understand' the relationship expected by the WMRA Secretariat and with the West Midlands RHB. (WHO1).</p> <p>A professional contact of the author's who had been a secondee working in DCLG at the time the Housing and Regeneration Act 1998 was in preparation recalled that civil servants drafting this legislation had been told to avoid contact or discussion with the regional assemblies about the provisions of the Act.</p>

(WHO1) from the Corporation and HCA, and perspectives from the Assembly Secretariat.

WHO1 recalled that the commencement of the Regional Housing Boards in 2003, chaired by the Government Offices, had raised concerns in the Housing Corporation's regional office about their independence to determine where affordable housing investment should go. WHO1 recalled that the new RHBs created,

‘more regional bureaucracy to get around but raised the tension of who we were working for, the Government or the Region’.

When the RHB function transferred from GOWM in 2006 to the Assembly this concern was recast in the new arrangements. There continued to exist a duality of accountabilities, whereby the Housing Corporation, a Non-Departmental Public Body (NDPB) was expected to work within the RHB's Housing Strategy (WMRA,2005) but at the same time be accountable to its own (national) Board.

The RHB received Corporation reports on housing investment but when housing associations failed to take up their capital allocations the Housing Corporation's Board decided where funds were reallocated. Ultimately the Corporation's accountability lay there. This was not a threat to the Assembly itself but appeared to render the RHB powerless, weakened the Assembly's standing with local housing authorities and created disillusion with the genuine accountability of a Government body.

This tension over split accountability was coupled with the way that Government ministers and civil servants saw the assemblies as ‘local government’, about whom WHO1 confirmed, ‘there was definitely this view that civil servants’ preferred to rely on their own agencies to deliver Government policy. WHO1 recounted how some

local authorities were held in low regard, as almost 'nutters' (WHO1) about whom the Civil Service view was,

'We can't work with them or they don't know what they are up to or haven't got the capacity (to deliver). Therefore, you (the Housing Corporation) go and sort them out. So ...the Regional Assembly was sometimes seen as being made up of ... local authorities and some of those people who didn't have what it took'(WHO1).

This lack of confidence in local government, imputed to the Assembly, came out sharply when additional capital funding for housing was made available. The advice to ministers from the West Midlands RHB to maintain the historic apportionment of regional housing capital funds between the Corporation and local authorities was firmly rejected by GOWM with the Housing Corporation's support.

The Housing Corporation evolved from being a partner in the RHB, albeit with an ambiguity over its allegiance, to being seen as an enforcer of Government's will against the principle of devolved bodies giving advice and expecting this to be respected. The usually unspoken assumption underlying the practice of giving advice was that it would not be sought if those giving it did not know best what was required in the region, and there was no point in being voluntarily involved if there was a real possibility that regional advice would be ignored.

This view of local government's competency or capability, formed before the creation of the assemblies, was so embedded in the Corporation and Civil Service culture that any contrary evidence from the Assembly did not change these opinions. The unity the WMRA Secretariat asserted, based on the unanimity over the RPG and RSS2 Revision, was overshadowed by metropolitan-rural tensions, seen during the

City -Region debate, and could have been ascribed to a regional political unity among mainly Conservative authorities against a Labour Government.

The RHB's role was significantly undermined when the HCA was established. Its remit, staff resources, powers and budget dwarfed that of the RHB. The HCA set out to build strong bilateral investment plans with local authorities and did not attempt to work through the RHB. As such the local authorities could see that the HCA had effectively been given a position in the regions which rendered the RHB ineffective. The HCA also began to operate beyond simple housing investment under its 'Communities' remit and was swiftly planning to undertake strategically important infrastructure investment which the WMRA was still preparing through consultation in its RSS (non-statutory) Implementation plans. These actions began to make this aspect of the regional planning process partially irrelevant as the HCA acted while the Assembly struggled to catch up.

8.7 The RPB's containment of the Regional Housing Boards

Following the transfer in 2006 of the RHBs to the Regional Assemblies there was concern among some senior local authority and WMRA planners and managers that RHBs could be an alternative power base that interfered with RPB work. Nationally assemblies responded to this in different ways. In some regions, including the South East of England, RHBs were subordinated to the RPBs, taking the view that 'housing' was an implementation aspect of strategic planning. In the West Midlands, the RHB 'parity of esteem' (WMRHB,2006) with the RPB and was established as a separate executive WMRA committee, with some cross-over membership between the RPB and RHB. However, any potential conflict or competition for influence was addressed by only allowing the RHB information on policy development after the

RPB had approved it. Thus, the RHB was informed but had no effective say in RSS policy content. One unforeseen, (but arguably foreseeable) consequence of this was that RHB members from shire districts noted their powerlessness in shaping the direction of the RSS 2 Revision. They took exception to being close, but denied access, to the process; and as pressure for increased housing numbers in their areas rose, they became alarmed by the implications. Such pressures and political impotence within the Assembly found expression in other ways to the detriment of the Assembly and the regional planning process.

8.8 The Strategic Planning Authorities.

The Metropolitan, County and Unitary authorities had some residual desire to take back the strategic planning function from the Assembly. The WMRA had carefully built its RPB structures of Partnership and Executive to persuade local authorities to engage in the RSS process. This attempt at inclusivity was matched by the initiative of County Strategic Planning authorities which had successfully achieved a statutory right to give their advice on RSS preparation to the RPB in Section 4(4) of the Planning and Compensation Act 2004.

Referring to the RSS preparation, ASSM1 recalled the strategic planning authorities' jealousies towards the Assembly, 'hence the Sec 4(4) hostile amendments in the 2004 Act'. County planners had seen that the status of country structure planning had already gone or was on its way out. Thus for the shire counties it was replacing what they already were in the process of losing (ASSM1). These authorities would have, 'preferred to have been the ones doing the strategic planning'(ASSM1).

Another senior Assembly manager (ASSM2) recalled 'a half-hearted' offer from Birmingham City Council to do the RSS for the West Midlands Region.

'The only one that was semi-serious was Birmingham offering to do it on behalf of everybody else, but that was never going to happen because nobody else was going to let them' (ASSM2).

8.9 Private Housing: Developers and Consultants

There were two types of competitiveness which took place involving the private sector. One was a vying for influence over spatial policy between the private housing building sector and the Assembly's Other Stakeholders Group (OSG) members, particularly CPRE. For them WMRA was part of their external regulatory and political environment. This was despite OSG being within the Assembly governance. This interesting relationship was not directly relevant to the research questions and has not been developed further in this thesis.

The other source of potential competitors for the regional planning role came as an implication arising from the conflict the Assembly had with Central Government over the Preferred Option and the use of private sector planning consultants as commissioned agents of Government to undertake some or all of the regional planning process. ASSM2 acknowledged there was some low key 'mutterings about this', in the final months of the Assembly's life when some form of continuity of the regional functions were still anticipated under the new RRAs⁴⁵, but prior to the abolition the regional architecture.

This idea was sown by Baroness Andrews' 2008 letter which instigated the commissioning of private planning consultants (Nathaniel Lichfield and Partners) by the Government Office to provide additional evidence on where more housing land

⁴⁵ See Section 5.6

could be found. The threat was that the Labour Government might find this an attractive way of bypassing Assemblies in the RSS policy revision and future Reviews. The threat would have been strengthened if, as seemed likely, private consultants, as agents of Government collaborated and synchronised their advice alongside NHPAU. Taken together this could have become a potent challenge to the Assembly or the Leaders' Board role, had it continued.

The NLP options for new areas of housing development displayed a crucial weakness in the use of consultants not embedded within the planning history of a region and wider political sensitivity. NLP produced and openly consulted on a plan with potential options across the West Midlands Region (NLP,2008a; 2008b). This included a settlement centred on the Meriden Gap,⁴⁶ the greenbelt countryside separating the Birmingham- Solihull conurbation from Coventry. This totemic green belt area, preventing coalescence was in the Meriden constituency of the shadow Conservative minister for Communities and Local Government. Such a proposal was bound to cause a severe impatience with the regional planning process and add weight to representations against regional governance.

8.10 Types of Competitiveness

The cumulative effect of the SNR, the alternative policy advice coming from NHPAU, the political impact of NLP's insensitive proposals and delay affecting Examination in Public fuelled a growing sense of power draining away from the WMRA. Taken together these amounted to external threats to which the Assembly had to respond as forms of competition for the RSS role or the policy content.

⁴⁶ See Sections 5.18, 8.9, 9.5,.and Appendix 5.2

Under pressure from GOWM to deliver the RSS, notwithstanding the Government's own delay in 2008, WMRA had to continuously engage on several fronts holding to the consensus partnership model (as it saw it) of devolved working. It did this with the organisations and interests which were themselves re-evaluating their relationship with the Assembly as new ideas, organisations and national policy debate created space for alternative forms of working. These spaces became areas of implicit competition for position and influence within the changing regional governance architecture. This period also allowed organisations acting in the regional administrative space to lose or loosen, the commitment they may have had to Assembly coordinated consensus working. New and different understandings and expectations grew to meet the Government's agenda and co-existed with formal adherence to the original devolution principles. The local authority unanimity was publicly maintained at the 2009 Examination in Public notwithstanding the preceding tensions with the Government Office, RDA, NHPAU, and the HCA.

Some RPB planners may have felt all participants should have been solely focused on achieving the WMRA goals, as this was the statutory responsibility. An expectation of loyalty to the RSS policy development could be expected from those local authority planners who were co-authors of the policies, and paid regional grant by the Assembly for this role. The single-minded focus of WMRA Secretariat planners may have caused them to regard some actors (e.g. private planning consultants; City –Region) more as a nuisance absorbing time and resources. Assembly manager ASSM2, gave the NHPAU as an example of this, saying,

'It never felt we took a lot of notice of them. We did take notice because we had to....but it was grudging. They shaped the debate to some extent'.

Once a low key competitor received a new remit by Government (e.g. AWM and HCA) it became more serious, even if the organisation, such as AWM, did not really want this. ASSM2 considered the HCA need to be seen as making a difference and its arrival '...was part of the beginning of the end really for Assemblies.... A quango having responsibility for allocating money, not via the Assembly'.

8.11 Conclusion

The range and types of competition faced by the WMRA through its Secretariat, in its regional organisational political environment are presented in Table 8.5.

Competing interests can be categorised into those seeking to affect some specific outcome, for instance, the number of homes to be built; and those protecting a position or a line of accountability/mandate outside the Assembly, such as the Housing Corporation. Even internal partners of the Assembly had these characteristics. The local authorities, including officers, sought to protect their superior status and democratic legitimacy in the face of an active political Regional Assembly. This ran counter to the originally stated proposition that the Assembly was about the devolution of Central Government power. These actors' voluntary involvement was based on this understanding, albeit imperfectly defined and communicated. However this driver for participation in regional governance was constantly restrained by a sense that the Assembly was also a potential threat to its participant local authorities and considerable caution was the mind set for several senior officers and members.

Table 8.5 WMRA and Organisational Competitiveness
Source: Author Based on Analysis of Interviews

Type of Competition with WMRA	Regional Body or Government Organisation operating at the Regional Level.
Perceived Competition as a misreading of partnership working. Inherent weaknesses in design of Regional Architecture.	WMRA and AWM over RSS and RES; RHB and GOWM over powers to make decisions; RHB and RPE with HCA over remit and accountability.
Ambiguity in accountability being experienced as rival centres of control, and therefore completion in directing the outcomes of the organisation	WMRA with its local political control versus AWM as an agent of DTI/ BERR, Housing Corporation accountability in the RHB versus to its own National Board
Competition arising from a Government created body mandated to provide independent advice, or investment plans.	NHPAU in RSS policy on new housing. HCA eclipsing the WMRA and RHB role in delivering Regional Housing Strategy.
Central control in a supposedly devolved regional governance model.	GOWM appointing consultants to add to RSS evidence base. Housing Corporation & GOWM in removing investment decision choice from RHB.

Thus a practice of collaboration and consensus working existed alongside a sense of varying degrees of threat. This sustained, for some, an underlying wariness in operational working within the RSS and RHB functions. Politically, members from rural areas were defensive in their dealings in the Assembly, especially over impacts on the local environment and as the Government drive to increase housing numbers took hold from 2007.

WMRA Secretariat defensiveness protected the integrity of its devolved status, something which was shared with some local authorities and most other stakeholders. This was partly about holding the organisation together against increasingly powerful centrifugal destructive forces within the Assembly and its external organisational environment.

The range and types of competitors with which the Assembly had to cope with was a measure of the unsettled position of the organisation in its regional institutional niche. The signals and actions of Government turned a relatively stable external environment into one which became inhospitable and crowded as competition grew for power over policy and cut across the Assembly's remit.

The WMRA was focused on keeping ODPM/DCLG approval for its budgetary management, RSS planning and RHB work. The Assembly sought to do this while maintaining its ethos of partnership working, following a normative model of how planning partnerships should work (Healey, 2006). The greater the turmoil and uncertainty surrounding the outcome of the RSS (due to the Government's pursuit of increasing house building to contribute to economic growth), and the Assembly's future, the more the ideas of centralising hegemony (Davies, 2011) become relevant.

In summary, the Assembly's regionally defensive response to its competitors was to retain Government approval as far as local authority members could allow, and to fend off attempts of regional bodies to rival WMRA's role. Local authority planning and housing officers were competing for the attention of other regional organisations to secure the influence they had once felt was the sole domain of the Assembly. The other side of those relationships was for regional bodies and agencies to demonstrate to key people in their organisations that they were effectively advancing their organisation's agendas in the changing environment. The next Chapter looks at this national level organisational political environment of the WMRA.

CHAPTER 9 PARALLEL UNIVERSES: REGIONS, CENTRAL GOVERNMENT AND THE OPPOSITION.

9.1 Introduction

Chapter 5 gave the descriptive narrative of the key events and regulatory changes that defined the course of English regional working up to its abolition. Chapters 6, 7 and 8 have established key actor perspectives on how the political and organisational environment of the regional assemblies had been changing throughout the period 2004- 2010. This Chapter widens the evidence base to look at the West Midlands Regional Assembly's external political environment at the national level. The Chapter includes evidence from DCLG, NHPAU, and the Government Office for the West Midlands which was a representative of ODPM/DCLG straddling the national-regional tiers: it draws on seven interviews, five with GOWM and DCLG civil servants, one West Midlands Labour politician, and one Conservative shadow Cabinet member.

The evidence from these sources enriches the picture of the processes and tensions acted out under the Labour Government. It shows more clearly why Labour abolished regional assemblies, how far back that challenge to the existence of the assemblies went, where the powerful parts of the Government machinery were and how this drove its objectives forward.

9.2 How the Treasury reasserted control over English Sub National Governance

Among the civil servants interviewed there was broad consistency about how the Treasury was involved in regional matters. According to a former ODPM civil servant, who had had responsibility for regional planning,

'The Treasury wanted regional planning to assist economic growth and delivery of Regional Economic Strategies....though the provision of housing to support labour mobility...' (Baden, 2013, p113).

A West Midlands Labour politician summarised his experience of the Treasury: they were not keen for any Department to get control of anything, so the idea that regional assemblies had real devolved power would have been at their expense and that would have been unacceptable (WML1). In WML1's opinion this Treasury position was not specifically about the regions, more the Treasury behaving true to its form. This political observer thought, from his experience '.....HMT think they are the Government' (WML1).

CV4 gave a personal account which clarified the significance of the Treasury for the direction of regional policy and especially regional planning. Not only was the Treasury default position on regions one of scepticism preferring a national approach to securing economic growth including housing, but in 1997 it had only,

'...bought into regionalism if it could deliver economic growth. I think it soon became clear that what they witnessed playing out allowed them to default back to the very centralised view on what should happen.' (CV4).

Allmendinger (2011,p29) indicates that between 2002 and 2003, '...the Treasury...had become increasingly interested in the role of planning in competitiveness andthe impact upon economic growth and competitiveness of housing affordability'. In the regionalism context, CV4 considered that the Treasury understanding did not clearly differentiate between assemblies and regional development agencies as the main obstacle (CV4). For the Treasury,

‘.. it was all about national growth and the most efficient way of engendering national growth....They are not that interested in place per se (CV4)So for them it was ‘ Will this regional governance apparatusquickly demonstrate that it is going to deliver growth? And I think what they saw from the first four or five years from ‘97’ onwards very much spoke to them that this isn’t going to deliver the growth’ (CV4).

By 2002/3 the Treasury view was that the regional approach was ‘too complex, trying to grapple with too many difficult things’ (CV4). This was seen as playing into the Treasury’s, ‘....general presumption that it’s probably better directed by them’ (CV4).

Having concluded that, ‘All this regional policy was an added layer of complexity that wasn’t going to add value’ (CV4), by 2003 the HMT decided to initiate the Review into UK Housing Supply (Barker, 2004), generating in ODPM some,

. ‘....obvious suspicion, if not resentment that the Treasury had extended its remit to housing policy’ (Allmendinger,2011,p30).

This was a significant step in the Treasury decision to take back control from regions. Key to this approach was that policy, ‘should not be about a balance or an alignment. It should be market led’ (CV4). Given the belief that ‘markets know best’ what decisions to take and where growth goes, it was for ‘planning and other policy regulatory regimes to follow’ (CV4).

By 2003 what the Treasury had seen of regional planning confirmed their opinion and the Barker Review terms of reference were summarised as,

“This isn’t working regionally. We have a national problem here with growth, (and) housing. Therefore Kate, give us some good national recommendations

and metrics, and prove to us that the national approach is better than what's going on" (CV4).

ODPM civil servants expected the Barker Review to result in a fresh look at planning guidance. This was happening while the Planning and Compensation Act, 2004 was going through Parliament. This Act gave assemblies the status of statutory Regional Planning Bodies responsible for preparing the statutory RSS for their region. These concurrent, divergent signals created confusion in the relevant departments, and for MPs. Allmendinger (2011,p30) noted,

'The combination of the launch of the Barker Review and the passing of the 2004 Planning Act created a degree of confusion around the government's intentions for planning.'

Labour's initial purpose had been to speed up the planning system and provide business with more certainty. Whilst the Treasury was signalling 'that housing markets and price stability were of ...national significance' (Allmendinger,2011, p30), the Planning Act, 2004 proposed new planning mechanisms, including RSSs. These actions did not appear to be in coherent synchronicity, so much so that, 'This confusion filtered through to the debates on the Bill in Parliament.' (Allmendinger, 2011,p30).

CV4 felt the impact of HMT intervention in 2003 was 'profound' and delayed the issuing of planning guidance PPS 3 on housing while broader discussions played out. Whilst the Treasury drive to 'get rid' (CV4) of the regional planning system was being felt, ODPM were resisting this, arguing that they could show an economic value in having a strategic planning system. This was summarised by CV4 as a 'turbulent time.' (CV4).

The HMT argument for a 'market led' approach was strongly expressed to ODPM, with a singular focus on the merits of the economic case for releasing land and getting ODPM's regulatory approach out of the way. As CV4 recalled,

'You could feel the ante being raised. You could feel it politically. You could feel it in ODPM. You could feel it in our discussions with Treasury. There was a very...positions were getting if not entrenched, they were getting firmed up. We knew we were going into a period of very strong difference.'

A brief account of these discussions was, based on the minutes of a Treasury established steering group which ran for over two years until December 2005 and included both ODPM and the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit (Reeds, 2008). This highlights the tensions between the Treasury over the degree and actuality of 'independence' in the Regional Planning system and the need for housing growth to be balanced against the needs of the environment. This corroborates the tone and substance of the DCLG civil servant, but leaves the account provided below (of the civil servant, CV2, close to the NHPAU) requiring careful interpretation. The cycle of 'free market' versus RSS planning reached its high point with the modified implementation of the Barker Review's recommendation that Ministers should have independent advice on the housing numbers required to be built in each region, especially to tackle affordability and reduce the ratio of house prices to incomes.

9.3 The Establishment of the NHPAU and its 'Independence'.

By 2004 CV4 regarded regional assemblies as having become 'quasi-tools of centralised power'. Subsequently an important point on that path was the establishment of the NHPAU under ODPM at the Treasury's behest. For CV4 this marked,

‘the most visible expression of getting close to centralised government again setting some very clear directions, levels of ambition and then that the regions would deliver as an executive arm of government’.

From the Civil Service view, one (CV2) who was closely involved with the NHPAU felt that the remit (Nickell, 2008; Green Balance, 2007) and membership of the NHPAU Board were reliable evidence that the NHPAU was not, ‘inside the tent as part of Government’. This civil servant was keen to assert that,

‘Very clearly from our remit we were not that. If you look at the governance of the NHPAU ...we had quite a hard hitting independent minded board’ (CV2).

Reeds (2008) reported that both Ministers and Kate Barker felt the concept of the advice being seen to be "independent" was key but not very convincing. Baden (2013, p125) put the most favourable gloss on the NHPAU’s role in the West Midlands as, ‘....unsurprisingly widely misunderstood.’.

This issue of NHPAU’s independence continued to be stressed in the Treasury led steering group. However, in reality Reeds (2008) believed that given the importance of the housing numbers issue and the two years taken in getting more homes built, ‘... independence would have been the last thing they wanted’, and that,

‘Demolishing opposition was a feature of the group's work and the independence of the national advisory unit recommended by Barker was not an obvious priority’ (Reeds,2008).

Prior to 2006 the RPBs had a legitimate defence for their understanding of the requirement for new housing because they were founded on the population projections of the apolitical Office of National Statistics (ONS). NHPAU arrived on the regional stage (albeit as a national agency) for political reasons and its plea to be

both independent and solely evidence based was difficult for the assemblies to accept at face value. This was notwithstanding NHPAU's own econometric and household projection modelling (Mean and DCLG, 2011), intended to demonstrate how many homes had to be built to reduce the affordability ratio (NHPAU, 2008b; Mean, and DCLG,2011). However, the pressure it placed on some West Midlands local authorities to provide new homes beyond those needed to meet demographic requirements added to local authority and Assembly resistance. Knowing these figures were being put before ministers undermined the Assembly's confidence that policy positions were being reached fairly and before an open debate of the evidence at the EiP.

There was Civil Service concern about the potential clash that awaited Government at the point where the housing numbers from the Regional Planning system did not meet the Unit's advice on what was needed to deliver the national goal (Reeds, 2008). The issue was never really resolved but the type of organisation that most gave the appearance of independence was an advisory non-departmental body. Not only did the Treasury get its preference in this, but this left unresolved ODPM's concern that housing numbers should be balanced against environmental considerations (Reeds,2008), essential to the public acceptability of the Unit's advice. NHPAU's remit (Green Balance,2007) made no mention of this (Reeds, 2008).

Reeds (2008) acknowledged the terms of reference referring to providing, '...independent advice.....to the regional planning bodies throughout the planning process.', and it seems very likely the staff of the NHPAU felt their work was 'independent' and evidence based.

Having stressed the genuineness of the NHPAU's 'independence', CV2 went on to explain how this worked, a process which somewhat eroded the concept of independence as the Regional Planning Body and local authorities understood it. The civil servant close to the NHPAU did acknowledge the Treasury and NHPAU 'shared a similar outlook' (CV2). There were regular meetings, with senior officials and ministers at the DCLG and the Treasury (CV2), to track progress closely. CV2 acknowledged when referring to Gordon Brown as Chancellor, the powerful, significant role the Treasury had when CV2 said, 'If you can take the Treasury along with you then that is obviously helpful in certain quarters'.

9.4 From 2007: Sub National Review of Economic Development

The tense period of debate up to 2006 when the NHPAU was announced, progressed into the Treasury led Sub-National Review of Economic Development (HMT, 2006), as announced in the 2006 budget (HMT, 2007). The two episodes flowed into one another with the relationship described as a 'strong causal link' (CV4).

Whilst these measures were being put in place there were still ministers who wanted the regional approach to work and were very aware of the politics involved in both increasing housing supply and promoting the Sustainable Communities Act 2007. However, with the undersupply of new housing highlighted in the Government's Housing Green Paper (DCLG, 2007) and the national requirement of 240,000 new homes a year not being met, ministers were increasingly inclined to accept the more compelling use of power provided by the Treasury. This was summarised by CV4 as Minister's having set up their colours in terms of increasing housing so '....all these

things were a very strong ambition'. Ministers regarded the proposed regional planning for housing numbers as inadequate in some regions, and were,

'...thinking "Well, if the regions won't do this in their own right for whatever reasons, then we're going to have to get more involved" ' (CV4).

In the Treasury mind and notwithstanding Government's Planning Policy Statement 3 on Housing, regional working still needed to be recentralised under its control. The SNR was HMT's strategy counterpart to achieve this. CV4 confirmed this policy progression as a, 'continuity' (CV4).

A mark of this ministerial determination, continuing into the weeks before the May 2010 General Election, was the decision announced by DCLG Minister John Healey to strengthen and widen the NHPAU remit, giving it, 'a stronger role in developing the evidence base of local need and demand ' (DCLG, 2010a). The intent was that, among other things, the NHPAU would get involved at the sub-regional and local planning scale, and widen its advice. Furthermore, it would press on local authorities how this advice should be judged, economically and for social and environmental sustainability. Some in the development industry took a strong hint from the announcement that the NHPAU enhanced role would come with 'an element of compulsion'. (Brownfield Briefing, 2010).

The wording by DCLG (2010a) on its website implied criticism of the Regional Planning Bodies when it stated,

'Discussion of how many homes of what type should be built where has been greatly hampered by the lack of clear and impartial evidence about what is required...'

This DCLG reference to 'impartial evidence' raised a question about what 'impartial' meant to DCLG. For the WMRA, being impartial was how the Secretariat felt it had handled its interpretation of the Office for National Statistics's regular population projections used in arriving at the RSS housing policies: but the assemblies had been abolished just the day before Minister Healey's announcement (DCLG,2010a) , and replaced by newly designated Responsible Regional Authorities, tasked to produce a Regional Strategy with regional local authorities' Leaders' Boards, ultimately under the RDAs.

9.5 The View from the Government Office for the West Midlands.

GOWM civil servants were not as closely involved, if at all, as their ODPM/DCLG colleagues in the debates with the Treasury. GOWM civil servants' accounts of the course of events were much closer to Government's published policy on housing (DCLG, 2007). Whether this adherence to Government's policy positions and the absence of detailed comment on the Treasury debate with DCLG was due to a reluctance to stray from their Departmental official text, or whether they had only a slight awareness of it, is hard to tell. That said, CV1 was aware that there were two themes which dominated the Government's RSS agenda with the regions right to the very end. This was an emphasis on improving access to housing for disadvantaged groups and, 'Gordon Brown's recognition that the performance of the housing market was the real key to the economic performance of the country and its relationship with Europe' (CV1).

GOWM's relationship with DCLG may have had a part to play in buffering or obscuring from WMRA the more nuanced detail of what was happening between the Treasury and DCLG. GOWM was directly linked to the Regional Coordination Unit

within DCLG. This Unit which was administrative but also appeared to have a policy role. This potential role conflict created uncertainty for GOWM about who they were engaging with. At its clearest, the RCU coordinated regional policy and acted as an intermediary with other Departments (CV1). Eventually GOWM maintained its contacts directly with Departments.

Another factor which clouded the overall picture for those at GOWM and hence the WMRA was the ambivalence felt by Government towards regional planning and regional bodies. In some contrast to CV1, GOWM civil servant CV5 felt neither the Government nor the Civil Service really accepted regional planning and regional assemblies. In this respect CV5's perspective was consistent with CV4's comment that the majority of Government Departments did not relate to regional planning activity. There were only three or four Departments at the Centre who wanted regional planning to work and the majority ranged from scepticism to 'not playing' (CV4).

CV5 echoed CV4's view that the regional project did not get off the ground because,

'... different departments don't accept other departments activities as constraining them and I don't think CLG really owned Regional Planning Guidance ... and that also put the assemblies in a difficult position' (CV5).

Prior to 2003 there were three planners in DCLG working on the regional planning process having to cope with nine regions, new regulations and legislation. When the lead for the team changed around 2006, the replacement was not a planner (CV5). Overall, it struck CV5 that Government's approach was not helpful in many ways .

The three GOWM civil servants (CV1, CV3, CV5) all stressed GOWM's role in trying to articulate the WMRA's case on housing numbers with DCLG. CV1 recounted how,

‘...we were continually representing the West Midlands in Government as being a model of how partnership working ought to take place’.

These efforts were not seen by local authorities but, worse, GOWM felt hampered in its attempt to represent a West Midlands regional view in 2006-7 because there was suspicion that political considerations had influenced the figures local authorities put forward for inclusion in the RSS 2 Revision (CV1). This lack of transparency, as GOWM saw it, justified both the NHPAU and NLP work. Both CV1 and CV3 felt the local authorities were too focused on debating the numbers than concentrating on delivering the new housing required.

These tensions in the West Midlands were exacerbated by the South East of England Regional Assembly’s (SEERA) disagreement with Government over housing numbers. Davies (2007) reported SEERA was, ‘roundly criticised’ by Yvette Cooper (Labour minister) on the BBC Politics Show in July 2007 for, ‘...arguing for cuts in the level of house building over the next few years, which is just bonkers, given the needs that we have.’. This did little to change the widely held national political perception (felt to be incorrect by CV1) that regional governance did not work. CV3 concluded that,

‘DCLG was pretty unsuccessful in persuading the rest of Government that regions mattered, that local government mattered actually, that anything other than the Centre mattered.’.

For CV3, although the political aspiration was clear, the institution and structures of the Civil Service was ‘...quite regionally blind...’ (CV3).

GOWM saw their role as concentrating on getting the WMRA’s RSS revisions through the Government machinery and then on the local authorities delivering the

new housing. On the Central Government side this process involved the 'quite sensitive' (CV1) process of DCLG fending off attempts by other Departments, including Treasury, to get their own policies into the RSS text.

Increasingly from 2007 to 2010, CV3 thought it was clear the Government were forcing local government to do as it wanted. In CV3's view the regional assemblies were not strictly the focus for this. The assemblies were merely a 'manifestation of local government' (CV3) and the issue was between the Government and the local authorities.

By 2008 the observable reality of the West Midlands RPB was of a group consensus across local authority and other stakeholders. Many local authorities were waiting to see whether infrastructure would appear to enable sites in controversial areas to be released, having agreed positions on new housing numbers that would require the policies and evidence to be tested at the EiP in 2009, and beyond. During 2009/10, the RSS 2 Revision process was awaiting the Inspector's report on the EiP and the opposition Conservative shadow minister, Caroline Spelman, took a political initiative by issuing a letter (Spelman, 2009) to all local planning authorities recommending all work on the RSSs should be stopped as these would be revoked as soon as the Conservatives came to power. As was seen in Chapter 8 this was viewed very negatively by the private sector, however the strength of Spelman's intervention may have had something to do with NLP's suggested option of developing a new settlement across her West Midlands Meriden constituency⁴⁷. From 2009, Spelman's letter challenged the whole RSS process (ASPO2) and for the local authorities, largely froze it until the 2010 Election. It then took longer than the incoming

⁴⁷ See Sections 5.12;8.9,and Appendix 5.2

Government had expected to revoke the RSSs, even after the regional organisations were abolished.

9.6 Not Seeing it Coming: Conservative Opposition to Regional Assemblies

The WMRA had several avenues of contact with Central Government. Although these were believed by the Secretariat to be fit for the purpose of managing the Assembly's key external relationship with Central Government without knowing it, it was flying blind, or at best myopically.

The most prevalent of the Assembly's contacts with Government was the ubiquitous presence of GOWM civil servants at the meetings of the Regional Planning Body and Regional Housing Board, as well as other subsidiary structures. In addition senior managers and Heads of Planning and Housing met with OPDM /DCLG civil servants on a regular basis, through the English Regions Network. Assembly senior management also met GOWM and DCLG civil servants to scrutinise the Assembly's business plan, budget and performance.

From 1998 to 2010 there was an increasing Conservative political presence in WMRA's governance, achieving overall control by 2003. Given the range of contacts with the Civil Service the Secretariat and some participants in the WMRA's governance felt they could read the mood of Government towards the regions. This view proved to be flawed. Reliance on GOWM for deeper insight was misplaced because it was a more remote arm of ODPM/DCLG than was appreciated in the Assembly. GOWM's contact with ministers and its influence with either DCLG or HMT was slight and not clear cut. Contact with ministers was reported by civil servant CV1 to be limited among senior officials to escorting ministers on visits to

regions. The regional Civil Service felt conversations on these occasions were influential (CV1). Otherwise Departmental contacts were largely functional.

Secondly, the Assembly management view did not fully appreciate the subordinate place of DCLG to the Treasury and their view of the assemblies. Worse, for the Assembly to adjust in time to its changing external political environment was the lack of appreciation of how the Conservative Shadow Cabinet views were taking shape in the period leading to the 2010 General Election. According to a shadow cabinet minister (SMC1) these views were being turned into policy fuelled by hostile representations against the regional planning system and the imposition of new house building targets. These included the West Midlands RSS Revision which was at the forefront (Flint, 2008) of the new statutory RSS process among the English regions.

9.7 Conclusion

This Chapter has examined features of the Assembly's external political environment which explain why this was increasingly crowded, unsettled, and eventually toxic for the Assembly's survival. The Assembly was preoccupied with attempting to manage its external environment, particularly GOWM, DCLG, NHPAU, and NLP, together with the Secretariat hoping its Conservative political governance would own and protect the Assembly from hostile intent if a Conservative government were elected. There was a growing disequilibrium between the Assembly and the Government over its national imperative to achieve economic growth which the Assembly felt it had accommodated but had not to the satisfaction of the Government.

The significance of the part the Treasury played was clear from interviews (CV5, WML1), documentary and other sources (Ayres and Pearce, 2005; Reeds, 2008).

The research design did not include an interview with a Treasury civil servant or minister, but the views obtained are all consistent in confirming the role played by HMT. It is unlikely that an interview could have been secured and had it been, it is doubtful whether a helpful level of candour would have been forthcoming and whether the picture presented in this Chapter would have changed.

The Treasury took an increasingly impatient attitude towards supposedly 'devolved' regional working not delivering its agenda, and that triggered a review, couched as consultation, where the outcome was predetermined. The result of the SNR was not the end of regional working, just the end of regional assemblies. Responsibility for the strategy functions was relocated and control recentralised. Part of the Assembly's difficulties lay in its belief that it was accountable to DCLG, which it was, but the reality was more nuanced.

Despite the Assembly seeking to manage its relationship with its crowded external environment, regionally, nationally, and politically, it seemed to miss, or at least not know how to address the vital significance of the Treasury. This was probably also true of GOWM, which would have compounded WMRA's weakness in achieving influence at DCLG and especially HMT.

The culmination of these unsettling waves of pressure had an impact within the Assembly, disrupting its partnership consensus model. For the Secretariat this led to a doubling down on delivering its RSS and other strategies. For some in its political governance it was a shifting of allegiances away from acceptance of New Labour's devolved working to making covert representations to the Shadow Cabinet to end regional planning and regional assemblies. This discrete action sought to address

their political vulnerability and concern if a Labour Government was returned and its housing intentions then realised in their constituencies.

The course of these events raises the question of whether the Assembly or the English regional assemblies together could have done anything differently. CV2 saw the regional trajectory over the long term as a journey or the swing of a pendulum. CV3 was more critical of the Labour Government suggesting it did not have to make so much of the RSS issue, as the RSS would ultimately be its adopted policy. The West Midlands local authorities could have gone back to their previous regional Joint Committee and carried on doing regional planning. According to CV3 New Labour was not brave enough about local government whose whole approach to reorganisation was 'an unmitigated disaster' (CV3) and not thought through strategically enough. The Labour Government was seen as too centralist and did not prioritise regional working highly enough (CV3).

It was inevitable by reason of its position in the regional architecture that GOWM, situated between Central Government and the local authorities, would affect the overall operation of devolution and the perceptions of all participants. This was compounded by an ambiguous relationship with the WMRA in terms of who the Assembly belonged to; itself not a static relationship but one that reshaped perceptions as events moved forward.

The local authorities, and to some extent the WMRA Secretariat, placed great importance on the expressed views of the GOWM. After the 2004 North East referendum result, local housing authorities were increasingly reluctant to accept WMRA Secretariat advice or suggestions until GOWM or (less so) the Housing Corporation expressed the same view, preferably in writing on their crested headed

paper. An informal dialogue prevailed between GOWM senior staff and the Secretariat which allowed for the sharing of understandings and for the GOWM to hint at the direction they would wish to see policy and its implementation take. It was believed that the WMRA's policy development process, evidence gathering and analysis, of which GOWM was always apart as an observer was fed back to DCLG so that the Secretariat could feel confident it had managed its relationship with Government.

However, the efficient working of this model was idealised. In the event GOWM was nowhere near as influential and was unable to influence the larger more tectonic debate between the Treasury and DCLG who, as CV3 recounted, failed to persuade Government. DCLG officials had to accommodate the Treasury economic growth imperative in their advice to local authorities in PPS 3 and in the redesign of the regional architecture under the RDAs.

Not only was the Government 'regionally blind' as CV3 confirmed but the WMRA was not exerting control over its political external environment as it had hoped. This was evident nationally after the Barker Housing Supply report, with the establishment of the NHPAU and the outcome of the SNR. In the West Midlands the Baroness Andrews letter of January 2008 on the RSS 2 Revision delayed the Examination in Public and the Nathaniel Lichfield Partnership (2008a,2008b) produced evidence for more housing land than the WMRA had proposed⁴⁸. These interventions removed any lingering hope that GOWM could defend the WMRA position on new housing numbers in the RSS 2 Revision.

⁴⁸ See Appendix 5.2

If this correctly models the professional officials' relationship, that of the political leadership of the Assembly was also prone to be misunderstood by the Secretariat and even by some of those Conservative councillors involved in leading the Assembly⁴⁹. Neither GOWM nor the WMRA Conservative political leadership were able to defend the Assembly, its RSS Revision, nor could they positively influence the external political environment to allow the Assembly or its key functions to survive.

⁴⁹ See Chapter 6

CHAPTER 10 EXPLAINING THE DEMISE OF REGIONAL GOVERNANCE AND REGIONAL PLANNING

10.1 Introduction

This Chapter synthesises the evidence presented in Chapters 6 to 9 and interprets the overall themes drawing on theoretical perspectives introduced in Chapter 3. This analysis uses the four eras of the regional project presented in Chapter 5, leading to Labour's radical reform of its regional project and subsequent abolition by the Coalition Government. The possible radical objectives of the post-2010 Government in pursuing abolition without alternative arrangements are summarised.

The next sections consider three underlying questions: whose assembly was it, was WMRA an 'Institution' within the terms of New Institutional Theory, and how did attitudes to regional working change over time?

The Chapter concludes with the use of the mosaic of theory integrating insights from commercial organisational failure theory. A graphical depiction is used to show the relative strengths among key actor groups of their support for regional planning and governance and the points in time when elements of theory applied. The discussion draws together the factors that contributed to the Assembly's demise and how the political organisational environment impacted adversely on the Assembly. The Chapter concludes with an integrated overview of the organisational demise process facilitated by the mosaic of theory.

10.2 The Four Eras of Labour's Regional Project

The four eras of New Labour's regional project from the Assembly's perspective identified in Chapter 5 were:

- 1998 to 2004: The Era of Stability and Confidence;
- 2005-6: Early pressures on the Assembly.
- 2007-2009: Conflict, autocracy and disillusionment;
- 2009-2010: The End of Regional Governance.

Each era is analysed using perspectives, previously presented, from the actor groups involved and linking to relevant theory.

10.3 The First Era: 1998 to 2004 Stability and Confidence:

10.3.1 The Secretariat View

The period 1998 to 2004 was characterised as stable but with dormant issues. This era was subjected to less theoretical analysis because it was only in the later stages that underlying tensions become evident and affected the behaviour of the actor groups. In this period, the Secretariat displayed a self-confident stance, secure in its longstanding roots in the WMLGA. It was buoyed up by the success it achieved in unifying the Strategic Planning Authorities across West Midlands and obtaining Government approval in 2004 for its radical Regional Planning Guidance (RPG 11).

However, this unity was incomplete and the support for RPG11, later the statutory RSS, was less than universal across the Region. The WMRA had not developed a rapport or close understanding with MPs in the West Midlands over its planning policies. Several District Councils in shire areas had been overshadowed by County Planning Authorities in the RPG process. Some District planners had not shared the planning for housing issues with their housing department strategy colleagues.

Whilst, for many, the result of the NE Referendum in 2004 signalled the end of the dynamism and legitimacy of the regional project, the assemblies continued and 'business as usual' was signalled from the Government Office, ODPM, and assemblies. The NE referendum result could have troubled WMRA planners, but the Planning and Compensation Act 2004 made the Assembly the statutory Regional Planning Body and converted the RPG into statutory RSS. The potential for the referendum to disturb the status quo was removed. ODPM and GOWM were clear the RSS Revision work had to continue with its statutory legitimacy replacing any prospect of direct election. This legitimacy was bolstered by local authorities continuing to make nominations to the WMRA through the WMLGA.

There were no motions to wind up the Assembly as a result of the NE referendum, and GOWM urged the Assembly to proceed with RSS Revisions which were part of the Government's approval to the RPG 11. The Government Regional Grant kept coming and was shared with Strategic Planning Authorities to facilitate their officers leading the next phases of RSS Revision. The wider Secretariat, including senior management, were content with this position and supported it. Consequently their relationship with Assembly governance structures remained largely harmonious. As the Assembly became more established, with more responsibilities and funding from Government, tensions grew over the evolving management of the WMRA and the WMLGA. Operationally the Assembly and WMLGA became increasingly separate, although they shared senior management, and the WMLGA nominated local authority members to the WMRA. Nonetheless the embeddedness of the WMRA in the WMLGA, and local authorities' unanimity over the RPG 11/RSS continued to sustain the Secretariat's conviction that it had unanimous support from West Midlands local authorities.

During this period how the WMRA's key actor groups regard for each other was largely inherited from the WMLGA culture, its established norms and understandings. There was clear attachment to the pre -2004 consensus partnership of local authorities, regarded by Assembly planners as the 'heyday' (ASPO1) of West Midlands regional planning. These established WMLGA norms made the Assembly's approach to regional planning entrenched and apolitical: leading WMRA planners to regard their professional role as overseeing a technical exercise in which political differences did not impinge. Tensions between rural and urban authorities were acknowledged as part of historic and continuing inter-authority relationships but both the WMLGA and WMRA were considered robust and effective enough to contain these tensions and facilitate policy agreement between authorities. The RPG11 Urban Renaissance strategy demonstrated this rapprochement. The collective history and achievement for WMLGA and its planners provided a continuity for partnership working, consistent with path dependency. Within the Secretariat there was a deep, almost romanticised bond with the apolitical way of working that had successfully achieved the RPG. Having negotiated a change in post-war patterns of new housing across the West Midlands, consensus and working arrangements remained unchanged and unchallenged (internally or externally). They continued with confidence, although under increasing pressure.

The WMRA planners and senior secretariat regarded the RSS Urban Renaissance strategy as reflecting a consensus between officers and councils. In the management literature it has been suggested that such stable continuity within the senior management of an organisation can lead to problems for organisations: '....strategic persistence even in the face of changes in the business environment.....' may arise where senior management has been in place for a long,

albeit unspecified, time (Amankwah-Amoah, 2016; p3391). This has some resonance with WMLGA-WMRA senior staff and political leadership.

The path dependant drive of the WMRA planners was not, however, a 'hidden hand', driving the organisation blindly along a predicable path; nor was it a successful strategy for organisational survival. Nonetheless the set of rules and norms about how successful regional planning should be undertaken in a consensus model constituted a path dependent logic for West Midlands regional planning in its RSS Revision.

10.3.2 1998 to 2004: Conservatives' Attitude to Regional working

Between 1998 and 2004 Conservative councillors nominated to the WMRA had a complex stance on regional working. Their participation was on a pragmatic basis as some of their local authority colleagues and constituents had an underlying suspicion that Labour's political objective was driven by European Union ambitions for regional working. Some Conservatives were hostile to the EU, and this negativity was transferred to regional working as 'guilt by association'.

Conservatives were divided over the West Midlands regional identity: some leading Conservative WMRA members who believed there was a clear West Midlands identity were long-standing participants in the WMLGA and had been party to the production of the successful RPG 11; other Conservatives, working at a national level and those who became involved in the WMRA in later years felt public perceptions invalidated regional governance. Further differences of view lay in Conservative beliefs that Labour did not understand rural areas.

In the later phases of the Labour Government, Conservatives who were not closely involved in the regional project and joined later, found regional structures confusing.

The various agencies (especially AWM and GOWM) and regional strategies (economic, spatial, housing and others), conveyed the impression of an oversized, uncontrolled growth in an expensive layer of governance. These Conservatives felt regional governance undermined local government's mandate and authority.

10.3.3 1998 to 2004: The Organisational Environment.

Between 1998 and 2004 the WMRA became more established, following the brief set by ODPM and overseen by the GOWM. It was initially controlled by a Labour majority who supported Government's regional White Paper (DTLR,2002) and the campaign for regional devolution. The WMRA struggled to win the RDA's cooperation over its scrutiny role but the Assembly's officer-level Regional Housing Partnership became the strategic advisory body and prepared the Regional Housing Strategy at the behest of GOWM whose Regional Director chaired the Regional Housing Board.

On the surface these relationships seemed to be bedding down, notwithstanding difficulties with the RDA. The wider organisational climate seemed tranquil, with the forthcoming referendum as the major uncertainty. Until 2004 the dominant theoretical model that best fitted this confident trajectory was historical path dependency - with past modes of regional planning work being seamlessly continued from WMLGA to the Assembly as Regional Planning Body (RPB). What was not apparent was the Treasury view, after 2003, that regionalism was either unsuccessful or too slow in bringing about economic growth. The Treasury commissioned the Barker Reviews (Barker,2003, 2004) of housing supply and some emerging recommendations would subsequently impact on assemblies and disrupt the smooth working of the RSS process particularly in the West Midlands.

The failure to get a positive NE referendum result for elected regional assemblies did not act, as a 'punctuated equilibrium' (Peters,2012) for the Secretariat in its path dependant mode. However, for Conservative members who, by 2004, controlled the WMRA it did mark the beginning of a slow 'phase transition' (Haynes,2003.p33) culminating for them in a form of 'bifurcation' (Haynes,2003.p33) in January 2008 when the Labour Government essentially rejected the RSS Revision Preferred Option.

The referendum outcome triggered rethinking by some Conservatives who, already holding sceptical views about regional working, found they had insufficient room to manoeuvre and had to manage potential threats to their own political interests and uncertainty over future events. The longstanding members and officers of the WMRA and WMLGA continued to exhibit a form of path dependency out of conviction and embedded mutual trust. For the Secretariat, at the core of the WMRA, the apparently benign organisational environment would not last: the first era was relatively stable, but seeds were planted that would later prove damaging.

10.4 Second Era: 2005-6 Early Pressures on the Assembly

Several factors put the Assembly under pressure in this period but the most important was a demand from Government to allocate more land for new housing in the RSS Revision. The sources of this were a combination of migration into the region, the Government's desire to bolster regional economic growth through housing development and a desire to increase construction sector output to address worsening affordability in private housing.

The Assembly faced a technical challenge to be accommodated within the RSS Revision, but this rapidly became a place specific political challenge as local

authorities and members of the Assembly or RPB, had to translate extra growth into site specific proposals in Local Development Frameworks. The RSS and therefore the Assembly became the lens through which these pressures were focused onto individual constituencies, not all of which were willing to accept them. The WMRA also had to work to the tight Government timescales for producing the RSS Revision recommendations, assess the rising profile of the Treasury implementing Barker's recommendations (Barker,2004), and presenting regular performance and budgetary returns to ODPM/ DCLG, while safeguarding the West Midlands local authority consensus.

10.4.1 2005-6: The Secretariat Response

The approved RPG 11 strategy was vigorously defended through the 2005 to 2006 period, during the preparation of the Preferred Option of the RSS Revision (WMRA,2007). The WMRA planners wanted the RPG core principles, confirmed by Government in 2004, to be upheld in the face of Government led pressures to increase new housing numbers. The established Urban Renaissance narrative, with its principles and priorities, was passed by senior staff to new staff and this was significant in shaping the Assembly's institutional framework for the next phase of RSS Revision. The Secretariat maintained their insistence that the process was apolitical even though it was tacitly political after 2003 when the Treasury commissioned the Barker Review.

The contribution of international migration to increased housing requirements may explain some of the antagonisms that new numbers generated in parts of the West Midlands Region. There is no room here to discuss the details of this. There was longstanding resistance in some Shire areas to meeting metropolitan housing needs

and this strengthened with the additional pressure, beyond that agreed in RPG 11. Immigration inflated housing requirements were unwelcome due to the anticipated impacts on social, environmental and public service usage and for some senior Conservatives (APGovC4) this was a reason for not accepting higher housing numbers. Despite the data and expert justification for increased housing targets there were different political views over the legitimate number of new houses to build. This contributed to an underlying frustration with experts whose conclusions and policy recommendations did not make political sense in some areas expected to provide sites.

10.4.2 2005-6: WMRA Planners and the External Political Environment.

Assembly actors regarded political consensus centring on the Urban Renaissance 'sustainable regional future' as a positive strength to be promoted to GOWM and ODPM/DCLG. The WMRA planners, with local authority support, justified their resistance to Government's demands on housing numbers through a regulatory argument - that work on the RSS was a Revision and not a full Review. A Revision did not require the fundamental principles of the RSS to be re-examined. However, this did not appear to cut much ice with Government. The WMRA actors were aware of Government's expectations, and the Assembly made a deliberate choice of path, albeit framed within a set of historic references and practices pointing to a rigidity in Assembly senior management thinking akin to that identified by Amankwah-Amoah (2016) as contributing to organisational failure in the private sector.

The Assembly's failure to accurately read its external political environment was compounded by the planners' belief in the Examination in Public process to vindicate their position, whilst diminishing the strength of Government determination over the

housing figures needed to address the 2004 -2005 population forecasts. This determination points to the hegemonic character (Davies, 2011) of New Labour which began to appear in the second era and more strikingly in subsequent eras. Beneath the arguments for the WMRA's resisting Government demands, there was an underlying awareness that to give way risked fracturing the political consensus that was a key part of the Assembly's foundation and risked ending the WMRA.

The Assembly's position kept the local authority consensus and became a deliberate choice though rarely acknowledged openly by senior management, whilst publicly arguing for the RSS Revision Preferred Option (WMRA, 2007). The Assembly extolled the collective local authority consensus as a democratic and a technical evidenced based virtue, justifying its resistance to Government pressure. However, adherence to the Assembly's path dependency mode of undertaking regional planning work in a unified consensus against Government was insufficient to match central government hegemonic power (Davies, 2011). Gradually the pressure signalled the intent to reverse devolution and re-secure Government dominance.

There were some mixed messages from Central Government which obscured the overall direction or Government's intent. Barker (2004) had recommended the merger of RHBs, hitherto led by the Regional Directors of the Government Offices, with the Regional Planning Bodies. This was an expansion of the assemblies' roles and taken by them as a positive endorsement of their good standing with Government. A further initiative of Government, following a Barker recommendation, was operating by 2007: a new government unit set up to provide ministers with advice on regionally required levels of new market housing. This created a degree of uncertainty in the RSS process as the Preferred Option was prepared with GOWM failing to move the Assembly to emerging DCLG's requirements.

10.4.3 2005-6: WMRA External Boundary Management

Despite threats to unsettle the smooth trajectory of Assembly working, the WMRA Senior Management were limited in their 'organisational boundary management'. They did not consider that they were resourced to manage the wider local authority and public awareness of the Assembly's role and believed local authorities had to own responsibility for the policies they recommended to the Assembly and Government.

As the second era unfolded, Conservative authorities were being asked to promote the views and policy imperatives of a Labour Government as delivered and articulated to the WMRA by GOWM. The WMRA and West Midlands local authorities agreed to increase new housing numbers but not to the extent required by Government. The Secretariat considered this a defensible position and relied on the formal planning process of EiP to prove their vindication. The continuing planning professional commitment to the RPG 11 principles, and the WMLGA/WMRA unity on these resulted in a powerful challenge to Government by submitting an RSS Revision Preferred Option. Notwithstanding continued path dependency among Assembly planners and WMLGA actors, there was a growing fracture between GOWM and the Assembly: the consensus which had brought the RPG11 to approval in 2004 broke down because Government sought higher housing numbers than some authorities would accept.

For the WMRA Secretariat not to anticipate that Conservative Councils would use this position for political gain, or at least defensively, was naïve. Unsurprisingly there was little public support in some areas where additional housing growth was recommended in the RSS Revision (WMRA, 2007). The WMRA ability to manage its

organisational environment was weakened by its reliance upon local authorities to publicly advocate a policy not agreed prior to 2004, and likely to be received negatively in their constituencies. The WMRA, created as a weak organisation by Government, was further undermined once consensus came under external pressure.

Some members of the Assembly had approved the RSS Revision on planning for housing but disavowed this before politically convenient audiences. GOWM understood this was happening and this hardened Government's resolve to press local authorities, through regional planning processes, to find more land for housing. As these processes worked through from 2005 into 2007 regional planning generated increasing disillusionment among some WMRA and RPB members over the degree of freedom and devolution that the WMRA actually had. The stability of the Assembly was tested and Secretariat planners and governance members struggled to find positions that allowed them to manage their own responsibilities and interests as events unfolded. Senior Secretariat managers aimed to maintain stability, the principles of partnership and consensus and also to deliver across the range of Assembly strategies.

10.4.4 2005-2006: The External Political Environment: Central Government

The role of the Treasury changed and grew over the lifetime of assemblies. Tracing this course, the Treasury was reported by CV4 to have largely 'given up on regions for driving economic growth by 2003'. This was not understood in the WMRA. ODPM did not seem to change its attitude to regional assemblies until 2006 by which time John Prescott was close to leaving ODPM. This attitudinal shift cleared the way for the Treasury's more 'hegemonic' (Davies, 2011) objectives. Government's attitude

towards assemblies moved from respecting them as devolved bodies, to an expectation that they respond as a directed arm of Government. Government expected its policy intentions to be acted upon and sought to exert close control. GOWM regularly attended Assembly meetings including the RPB and WMRA felt pressure from a Government requiring close compliance with timeframes for RSS delivery. As it became apparent Government would be offered a compromise on housing numbers, with technical justification, GOWM communicated to ODPM that its expectations would not be met. Ministerial attitudes hardened and GOWM's role evolved from observer to adversary, while continuing to advise both WMRA and DCLG.

10.5 Third Era: 2007-2009 Conflict, autocracy and disillusionment

The challenges to the Assembly from its external political environment grew after 2007 with the NHPAU proving the most substantial for the RSS Revision. Barker (2004) had recommended creating regional units to 'independently' calculate housing needs figures for recommendation to Ministers. In response the Treasury set up the NHPAU, ostensibly under the DCLG. The NHPAU essentially challenged the RSS technical work on the quantity of new housing required. Dealing with the NHPAU's interventions required significant Assembly technical engagement to resist new housing numbers above those the WMRA felt were reasonable. WMRA remained committed to its Urban Renaissance strategy at the heart of the RSS. There is no space here to discuss the detail but the WMRA planners felt they could argue their case convincingly at the EiP. The Government's reactions were several (see Chapter 5) but in January 2008 Baroness Andrews rejected the Preferred Option new housing proposals. GOWM's commission to NLP and further engagement with the NHPAU followed. These actions contributed to disillusion within

the Assembly governance and Secretariat over the genuineness of devolution and the integrity of regional working in partnership.

Government's action in commissioning its own evidence to challenge the Assembly involved an unprecedented exercise of ministerial power and WMRA's experience can be characterised as an 'edge of chaos' event where managers face outcomes that are out of their control and negative for their organisation (Haynes, 2003;p31). Central Government's clash with WMRA over new housing exposed tensions and heightened complexity in partnership working.

Government used the West Midlands as an example for other regions, demonstrating it would use regional processes, or adopt ad hoc strategies, including commissioning evidence, to achieve its goals. This conveyed the message that assemblies must respond to Government positively on its terms rather than assert local preferences, notwithstanding the evidence-base and any exposure to debate before an EiP Panel. The progression of this theme through the second and third eras, to the EiP in 2009, demonstrated a reduction in the resilience of the regional project.

Simultaneously the Assembly continued its difficult relationship with AWM. In an assessment of AWM's performance the National Audit Office expressed reassurance that the RSS, RHS and the RDA's economic strategy were 'strongly aligned' (NAO, 2007;p23). This belied the RDA's desire, contrary to the emphasis of the RSS, to reinforce market driven patterns for economic development outside and around the conurbation, in its Economic Strategy (Bryson and Taylor, 2006). This would have promoted growth around the conurbation and risked stimulating housing development where the RSS was committed to minimising pressure. Alongside this

the Treasury's Sub National Review proposed a regional planning and housing role for RDAs; and the creation of the HCA with powers and budgets with which the RHB could not compete.

10.5.1 2007-2009: The WMRA Conservatives

For WMRA Conservative members Government's intervention in 2008 exposed and exacerbated weaknesses which had been dormant within the WMRA model. Some Conservatives saw GOWM as working against the interests of local authorities. However, one interviewee (CV1) referred to GOWM making strenuous efforts to advocate the West Midlands case with DCLG but argued the WMRA position was based on a 'misunderstanding' of its own making.

Baroness Andrews' letter of January 2008 can be said to have had a 'punctuated equilibrium' effect (Peters,2012, p78), for some Conservative Assembly politicians, much greater than the 2004 NE Referendum. From this period historical path dependency has much less purchase in explaining events in the West Midlands and does not explain Central Government's position other than in a form of mirror image, contesting the determination of West Midlands planners to defend the Urban Renaissance principles of its RSS. This was seen by the WMRA and Government as placing it in the vanguard (Flint, 2008) of national attention: other assemblies were awaiting the outcome of Government's determination to achieve its national policy goals in the English regions through the RSS process.

The WMRA operational working continued but, increasingly, the new realities of Government's view of assemblies eroded WMRA's institutional stability. There was a sense among GOWM and ODPM/DCLG civil servants that the WMRA planners' determination to uphold the principles embedded in RPG 11 was too entrenched and

accompanied by a whiff of dogmatism. The resilience of the WMRA planners appears to stand historic path dependency theory on its head: the WMRA continuation with its regional strategic policies did not secure its future but weakened it. For some in Central Government this seemingly blinkered resistance contributed to a hardening of attitudes against the WMRA's Preferred Option. This contributed to Government impatience toward the Assembly and their conclusion that assemblies had to be replaced by more compliant arrangements responsive to their policy direction.

The increasing technical and concomitant political pressures within the RSS Revision generated an unstable political environment for the Assembly. Government intervention created an uncomfortable and potentially threatening local political situation for some Conservatives. For these members, these changes generated the instability that resulted in a covert 'bifurcation' (Haynes,2003) whereby they ceased to owe the Assembly organisational loyalty, and provided the justification to act outside the WMRA, galvanising them into lobbying nationally to abolish assemblies. This demonstrates the naïve trust in the foundation and early operation of the WMRA made weak by a design which never achieved fully fledged status by being directly elected. It was kept weak by a Civil Service which did not share, and for the most part, opposed the Prescott vision of its devolved mission. Having lost this crucial regional champion in Government, the Treasury and other departments, such as Transport, and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BiS) set about asserting their centralising grip on regional assemblies and the policy areas covered in the RSS. This progression fits the course suggested by Critical Theory (Davies, 2011) with Government exercising its hegemonic influence over structures which

once believed themselves to be genuinely devolved only to find disillusionment in the face of autocracy.

At this point the desires of political actors who felt politically threatened and the parts of the Civil Service which were anti-regional converged, though not in an alliance, to seek the end of the regional planning process. There was a part of the Assembly's Conservative Governance that covertly sought to influence the organisation's environment to strengthen the case for its demise. Kast and Rosenzweig (1985) have suggested organisations are expected to attempt to influence their environment to achieve equilibrium and secure support. In the WMRA some Conservative members saw WMRA and GOWM as hostile elements in *their* political organisational environment. This raises the question, when considering the interests of organisational actors, whether the primary allegiance of some actors may be, or may become, antithetical to the organisation of which they are part.

10.5.2 2007-2009: 'The Misunderstanding'

One feature of the WMRA, apparent from the outset, came powerfully and disruptively to the fore in the third era. This was WMRA's belief that there was a genuine devolution to local authorities at the regional level including the development of the RSS. This grew through the years of joint local authority regional planning and, since 1998, had provided the rationale, motivation and legitimacy for collective involvement in the Assembly. It gave local authority members confidence that the regional planning advice they gave to the Secretary of State would be respected. Therefore, subject to independent testing at an EiP, the Assembly originally believed its RSS Revision would be broadly accepted, even if the minister was not strictly bound to do so.

The Labour Government and Civil Service did not see it that way. One regional civil servant (CV1) referred to 'the Misunderstanding' over the reality and true nature of devolution to assemblies. At its heart was the issue of the genuineness of devolution and where control lay in the regional planning process and the strictly legal position that RPBs advised Government and Ministers decided what they approved or did not. The Assembly's misreading was also one of failing to perceive the latent hegemonic power in Government. The Assembly rendered itself unable or unwilling to think in these terms because of its partnership mindset and the store placed by key Secretariat actors on good personal relationships with civil servants.

This raises the question of whether the Assembly (with others), or the Government, damaged enthusiasm for regional governance. The dissonance created by the conflict over new housing numbers goes close to the heart of whether or not the role of regional planning was instrumental in bringing down regional working and governance. This is important in understanding some key justifications underpinning national Conservative opinion and why regional planning did not continue after 2010.

A deep-seated flaw existed in the understanding of the Assembly's role by actors engaged in regional governance processes. This flaw related to planning for housing and the role of the RHB in making strategic decisions about housing capital investment. In the original Assembly officer and political partnership structures, there was a belief in genuine devolution of responsibility to produce locally informed, collectively agreed, strategic planning policy. This was strengthened from 2004 by acquired statutory status. Professional planners knew the Secretary of State technically had the final decision, but a severe or sweeping use of this power was not envisaged. For many local authority members, especially the sceptical, for whom the RSS was a devolved process, the installation of the NHPAU, and in the West

Midlands, the Baroness Andrews intervention (January 2008) removed critical legitimacy from the regional planning process. From 2007 there were new WMRA Conservative members who lacked the memory of past regional planning unanimity. Their political involvement was different from their predecessors and grew into resistance to Government's pressure.

Once the Baroness Andrews letter had been sent, Government appeared to view regional working as mechanistic. It conveyed the expectation that assemblies should respond to its expressed wishes fully and automatically, including the 'advice' from the NHPAU. This expectation of responsiveness was referred to by the civil servants from GOWM (CV1) and ODPM/ DCLG (CV4). Government became frustrated by the lack of compliance by local authorities through Assembly processes, but, 'it wasn't felt to be Government's responsibility to manage the acceptance of that at a local level.' (CV1). CV4 similarly acknowledged DCLG had no conception of how the Government's adversarial approach would affect the motivational and psychological foundations of regional partnership working. These human dimensions were inconsistent and unimagined in the Government's machine-like, bureaucratic notions of regional governance. It did not seem to occur to Government, or its Civil Service, that regional actors who became increasingly disconcerted would subsequently act to help bring the regional system to an end.

During this period Central Government was reconsolidating control over 'devolved' regions and hegemonically undoing devolution. This was achieved by being increasingly directive, setting up the NHPAU and NLP commission to generate alternative evidence, and applying pressure through the RPB's processes. This increase in the organisations in the WMRA's external organisational environment seeking to apply pressure to change the RSS housing supply policy outcome, fits

with the dynamics of Critical Theory operating through the New Institutional population ecology model⁵⁰ (Peters, 2012). The ideological position of Government, preoccupied with economic growth and global competitiveness, was activated against the WMRA through the operation of central power to reassert its own agenda. This was consistent with the Labour acceptance of globalisation and neo-liberalism but was not the only driver. Labour also saw political peril in social policy terms of a consistent undersupply of housing accompanied by affordability issues. Cumulatively these could have negative electoral consequences.

Government autocracy had another damaging effect for the West Midlands regional housing and planning structures. This was the disenchantment of a few key institutional entrepreneurs⁵¹ (Lowndes, 2005, p297) who, in the 1998-2004 era, had been instrumental in bringing the metropolitan and shire areas together around the Urban Renaissance strategy of stemming conurbation outmigration and reducing new housing in shire districts. The loss of these voices within the WMRA and its partnerships affected the ability to secure a unifying consensus for the regional project. Institutional entrepreneurs withdrew because they could no longer rely on the support of their organisations once their influence in the face of GOWM determination was at an end. For some WMRA Conservative members this marked, an unarticulated, but real change in attitude. For these members, the calculus of their political involvement was consistent with aspects of Rational Choice Theory (Peters,2012).

⁵⁰ See Sections 3.11 and 3.12 for an outline of Peters (2012) population ecology model in New Institutional Theory.

⁵¹ See Section 3.4.

This withdrawal by institutional entrepreneurs can be seen as another form of 'punctuated equilibrium'. For these local authority actors the package of Government interventions ruptured the foundations of the partnership and trust which gave the Assembly its original credence. That being so the older, though somewhat marginalised, WMLGA was also wounded. This body was left nominating members to increasingly vulnerable Assembly structures. When the SNR outcomes were announced the WMLGA dissolved and reformed as the WMLB: and expired in 2010 under the Coalition Government.

Through the third era WMRA planners continued to believe in the Urban Renaissance strategy recently approved by Government. By 2007-2008 Government had moved its national priorities. Holding to the Urban Renaissance strategy in the belief Government could be persuaded to modify its national policy imperatives in favour of West Midlands priorities was a forlorn hope. Consequently in 2007 WMRA failed to secure reaffirmation of this strategy. By 2008 the economic crisis put long term regional spatial planning processes well down the political agenda nationally and in the West Midlands. The Region dropped markedly in its performance against other English regions (House of Commons, 2010a;2010b) and its unemployment rate rose to 9.66 per cent, the worst of all the English regions and the nations of the UK (McCann, 2016;Table 2.10, p80).

10.5.3 2007-2009: How the Secretariat misread its Organisational Environment

Given what became apparent from mid-2009 onwards, how did the Secretariat's self-belief and determination to persist with its RSS principles last so long? WMRA planners had a technical justification, based on the Government's own RSS advice, that a Revision was not intended to question or fundamentally alter the Strategy's

core principles. For them, the Urban Renaissance strategy approved in RPG 11 was not up for renegotiation. Although this did not satisfy Government, the Secretariat felt secure in its future for other reasons.

Figure 10.1 depicts the perceived relationships between the Secretariat, the Assembly's governance and the wider political environment. The WMRA Secretariat was at the heart of these relationships, surrounded by governance actors, mostly nominated local authority councillors - the majority were Conservative from 2003; and at the end of the WMRA's life 29 of the local authorities out of 31 were Conservative. This discussion draws on evidence from WMRA Conservative leaders to explain why the Secretariat's perspective was flawed. The Secretariat felt it had delivered the local regional agenda and enjoyed the respect of its senior political leaders. It had resisted Government and taken its case to the EiP. It knew it was a lean organisation and had been encouraged by appreciation voiced by the Conservative leadership.

This allowed some optimism that Conservatives would support the Assembly and continuation of its work. However, this optimism was essentially a veil that obscured a less tolerant Conservative mindset. The veil did the Secretariat a disservice in disguising the extent of the dangers facing regional working. It created a false sense of sufficient stability, and the illusion of the likelihood of continued regional strategy work. The Secretariat was being persuaded by its own professional 'world view' that the planning system needed high level spatial planning and sought comfort for this position from those who doubtless did genuinely appreciate the strategic planning role, even if it only served lower level district planning.

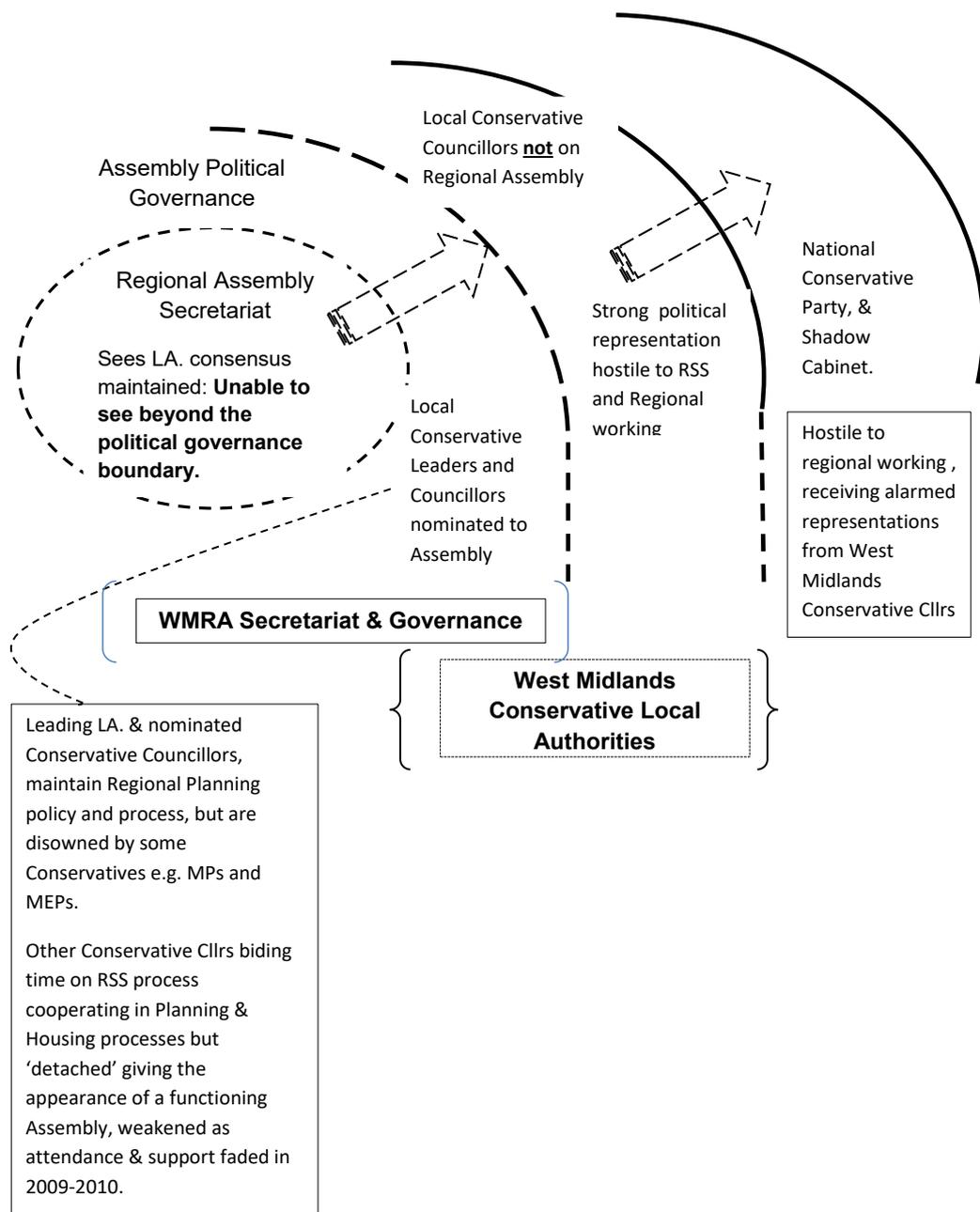


Fig 10.1 Why the WMRA Secretariat thought consensus had been maintained and how its reading of the external political environment was flawed.
Source: Author based on Analysis of Research Interviews

The apparent lack of insight into the political dynamic that existed between parts of the West Midlands region and Conservative local authorities, Conservative MPs and the Conservative Opposition obscured the severity of the political climate that would prevail should Labour lose the next election.

10.6 Fourth Era: 2009-2010 The End of Regional Governance

Notwithstanding the convictions of WMRA planners, the understanding held, albeit sceptically, by local authority officers and members since the start of the Assemblies, was now undone. This erosion of the psychological contract (Handy, 1993; Cassara, 2001; Coyle-Shapiro and Kessler, 2002 and 2003), voluntarily entered into between Assembly members with the Government removed the rationale for the collaborative working of the RPB. It deflated local authority motivation to continue regional participation other than to observe and inform their nominating bodies. The increased tendency for local authority WMRA members to withdraw from Regional Planning Body meetings culminated in what might be termed, 'passive resistance' (APGovC4) to policy development.

This era was marked by the parallel running of two regional governance systems: the established assemblies and new agencies following the Sub National Review and Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act, 2009. The stage was set for abolition of the regional assemblies to be replaced by the new RRAs (Leaders' Boards, RDAs, GORs), on 31 March 2010. Joint production of a new Regional Strategy was intended between the newly formed Leaders' Boards and the RDAs, as Regional Planning Bodies. Whilst waiting for the legislation to come into effect the WMRA continued its RSS Revision work.

WMRA Conservative members maintained the appearance of consensus over the RSS through 2008 to the EiP in 2009. Assembly Conservative members could not be certain that Labour would be defeated in 2010 and, to minimise the local political risk in some areas, growth in housing numbers was conditionally accepted on the basis that expensive infrastructure would be needed to open up new areas for residential

development. Members in these areas calculated that the funds for this were unlikely to materialise, not least because of the economic crisis and recession. From a Rational Choice Theory perspective some Conservative Assembly members and their Councils factored in the possibility that there would be another round of the regional 'game' after the 2010 General Election. By appearing to cooperate with the RSS process they positioned themselves to influence the process after 2010 if a Labour Government was returned. Notwithstanding this apparent continued consensus their hope of a Conservative national victory allowed or encouraged them to seek abolition of the regional process and RSS policies that were locally unpalatable. WMRA planners thought the RSS 'game' was still being played according to the 'rules'. However, some in the Assembly RPB had 'defected' consistent with Peters (2012) presentation of Rational Choice Theory. Some Assembly members were described as, 'sitting on their hands' (APGovC4). The 'win' for these was to effectively ignore, without repercussions, the 'superficial' consensus based RSS 'rules of the game', and work to remove the perceived threat from regional planning.

Even publication of the Conservative Green Paper (Conservative Party, 2010) on the future of regional assemblies and regional spatial strategy did not unduly disturb the WMRA Secretariat planners' stance. The conviction that some form of strategic planning would endure between authorities with the new Regional Strategy remained until after the May 2010 General Election when it became apparent that these processes and structures would be wound up.

Whilst the WMRA work continued and before new regional arrangements were formally instituted, senior officers of the WMRA and Advantage West Midlands set up shadow structures to begin the work of the new system. The new shadow RRAs

produced the West Midlands 'Regional Funding Advice 2' (JSIB, 2009) in February 2010, for Government. Some Conservatives approved its brevity, clarity and speed of production. However, other Conservative councillors, outside the six authorities which worked directly on the JSIB with Advantage West Midlands, felt further alienated from regional processes. The process did not remove Conservatives' negative opinion of the RDA. In this final stage the collective Conservative political antagonism over the term 'regional' became quite febrile. This anti-regionalism was experienced by Local Government officers, regional bodies and the Civil Service. The WMRA /WMLB Chief Executive announced to Assembly staff that the new Regional Strategy would be the West Midlands Strategy, deliberately avoiding any reference to 'regional'. Such omissions were evident in other WMLB published statements such as its 'Introduction to West Midlands Leaders' Board' (WMLB, 2010).

The WMLB replaced the WMLGA and summarised the changes of responsibility. WMLB would now '.... focus the activity of Local Government in the West Midlands ... and ...meet the new demands facing the sector...(including)...a Strategy for the West Midlands.' (WMLB, 2010,p1). Figure 10.2 depicts the changes in the political organisational environment for the WMRA/WMLB Secretariat. Anti-regional sentiment emerged very quickly once Conservative politicians became confident of a national General Election victory.

The passionate hostility towards all references to the word 'regional', even before the May 2010 Election marked a peak of intolerance that foreshadowed the swiftness and extent of the subsequent removal of the regional architecture.

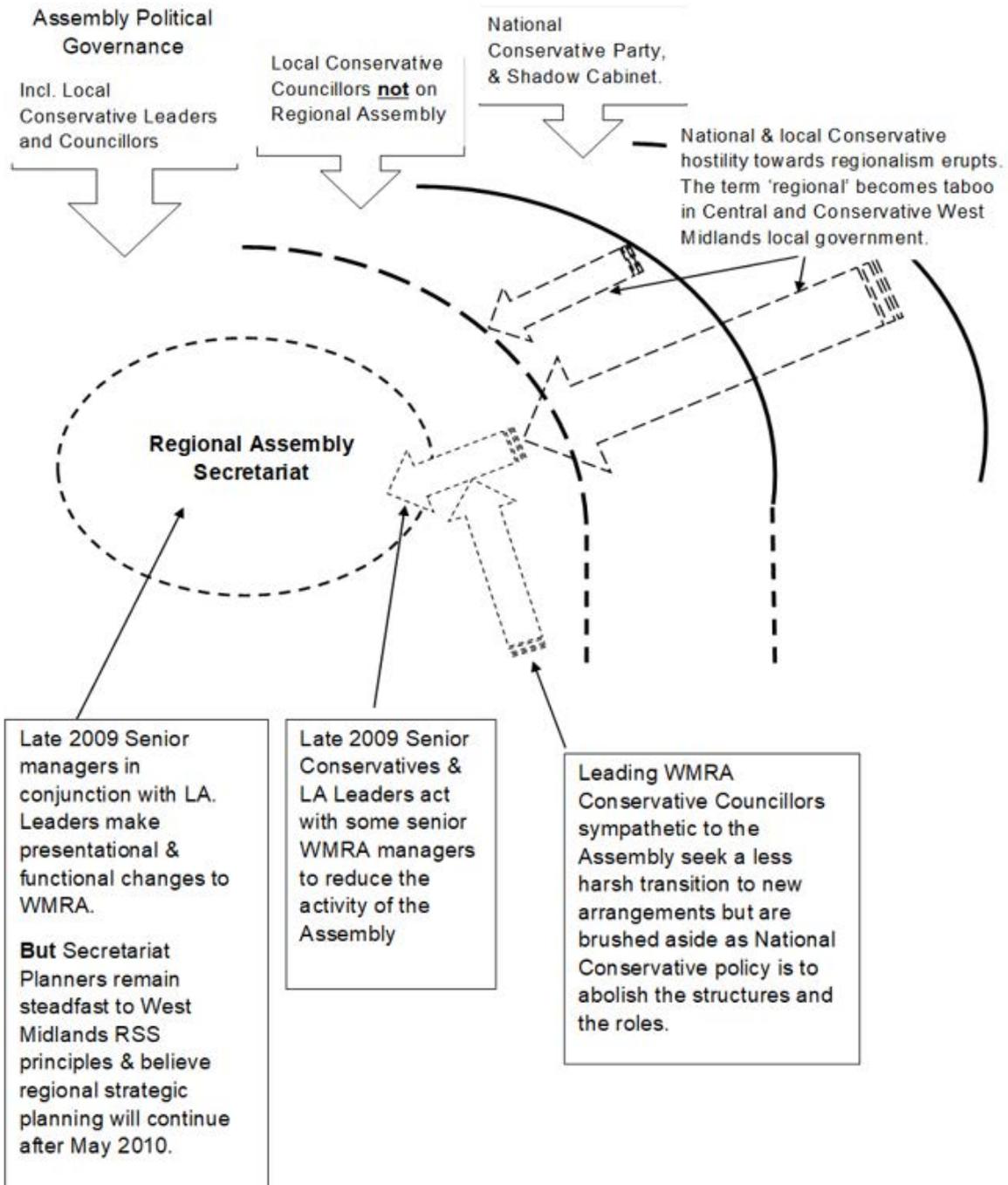


Figure 10.2 An Anti-Regional Organisational Environment Impacts on the West Midlands Regional Assembly/West Midlands Leaders' Board 2009-2010.
Source: Author based on Analysis of Research Interviews

This episode revealed the degree to which the Assembly's organisational environment had become toxic. Once in office, the Conservative Coalition minister Greg Clark used the language of toxicity when the order was laid in Parliament to abolish Regional Spatial Strategies:

'Regional edicts, which allowed communities no say, *injected poison* into the planning system which stymied development.' (Pickles, E., et al. 2010, emphasis added).

Conservatives nationally realised how the RSS system was viewed in their constituencies, not least in the West Midlands. This adverse organisational climate reflected Conservative policy intentions and was taken up without reservation by many leading West Midlands Conservative politicians. Those who did not agree were bypassed and their protestations dismissed.

WMRA senior management yielded to the emerging pressure from the political environment: the extent to which their defence of their organisation seemed to wither was not just seen in the abolition of the word 'regional' from the titles of the new policy processes and documents. As the author recalls, the adoption of an accusatory mindset against the Assembly Secretariat, by its senior management was evident in harshly toned face to face briefings with policy staff, the February 2010 pre-emptive abolition of the RHB by the then Chief Executive without the WMLGA Chairman or GOWM involvement, and the elimination of all regional working that was deemed not to be making decisions, including closure of the Regional Environmental Partnership (ASSM3). It seemed that a 'straw man' that allegedly did nothing tangibly useful, had been set up to accuse an organisation whose business was essentially to prepare and coordinate strategies. Having cut its role down, little

remained other than the statutory functions. Even then regional planners did not foresee the abolition of all formalised regional strategic spatial planning by an incoming Conservative led government.

From May 2010 the advent of the Coalition Government led to the abolition of the Leaders' Boards, and subsequently the RDAs, their Regional Observatories, and Government Offices for the Regions. Some smaller scale regional structures continued in reduced form: Homes and Communities Agency, and 'BIS local' (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills). Public Health England retained a regional presence, and European funding administration continued under a small residual West Midlands Councils body. Politically the West Midlands local authorities continued to send two representatives to the European Committee of the Regions meetings from 2010 (APGovC4).

10.7 'Whose Assembly was it?'

Having analysed the trajectory of the WMRA towards abolition there remain some questions which require consideration from a higher vantage point. Three are discussed below. The first of these is 'Whose Assembly was it?'. The narrative articulated by the Coalition Government was that regional assemblies had failed. Although this may be regarded as political rhetoric, the Labour Government's actions in legislating for the abolition of assemblies, the transfer of power and RPB function to the RDAs clearly reveals a Labour narrative of failure for assemblies.

Interviewees gave different views on the question about whose the Assembly structure really was, and some felt the question defied a simple answer. For the Secretariat, it was largely the WMLGA, and the local authorities. The perspective of WMRA Conservative members was less unanimous. Long-standing local authority

senior members involved in the RPB, the WMRA Board and other governance structures, regarded the Assembly as 'owned' by the WMLGA. However, for members who had no awareness of the WMLGA's past role or the wider organisational context, other than the threat posed by the RSS process, the Assembly appeared to be effectively owned by Government and GOWM in particular.

Until 2007 Government understood the strategies of the Assembly were locally rooted and owned by members from the Region. Subsequently Government's view shifted with the Assembly expected to cooperate with and follow the requirements of national policy even if that was judged to be inconsistent with its adopted strategy. Government never accepted its requirements contradicted the approved RSS; it just added to them. For those parts of the Labour Government which had an involvement with the regional structures, the 'ownership' issue was more opaque. This was partly due to differences in position between departments and changes over time. Overall it seems Government wanted to regard assemblies 'both ways'. It suited Government to hold assemblies at arm's length, say they were responsible for their uncooperative stance, as in the case of WMRA, but also to require compliance. Frustratingly, for Government, assemblies were voluntary and could not be instructed to comply. In this, there was de facto recognition that the Assembly had influence and continued to exert moral and professional authority derived from its legitimate membership, professionalism, and a residual sense of the original unwritten 'contract' from the initial phase of devolved governance. Even if Government asserted its overarching control it could not forcibly overturn WMRA policy advice without arguing its position through the EiP,

Had Labour been returned to office and written its required housing figures into the RSS Revision, it would have had to deal with the local authorities. For some, a post - 2010 Labour Government's policies would have been seen as imposed: and due to the recession and collapse of the construction sector the pace of implementation would have been slow. For others the prerequisite infrastructure funding for large capital items such as bridges would not be available for years. In this scenario it is possible to foresee the growth of public resistance and political antagonism as green belt and green fields became the route for preferred new residential development. The WMRA understood the pressure to build new homes. Notwithstanding the 2008 recession, Government would not wait for urban brownfield sites (Previously Developed Land) to be remediated in sufficient quantities and time to avoid development on green field sites, This risked avoidance of expensive urban 'PDL' sites by developers, thereby prejudicing the Urban Renaissance core of the RSS.

For civil servants, HMT and DCLG, the assemblies were frustrating due to the lack of Government control over policy. WMRA was seen as a locally run, Conservative dominated body opposing the 'national interest' policy imperatives for new housing. This complexity revealed the constitutional weakness of the regional 'democratic' tier, with multiple centres of legitimate power vying to achieve supremacy. The WMRA's spirit of devolution was backed up by an historical track record of local authority joint working, and an approved regional strategy to deliver long term sustainability in RPG11. It had a statutory mandate as the RPB, albeit without ultimate power to approve its own policy advice. Against this the RDA competed for regional influence driving its programme, preferring not to deal with local government or the WMRA.

After the referendum in 2004 Government still felt it had the democratic mandate to develop regionalism by creating regional ministers, and other bodies which contested the space held by the WMRA. This reduced WMRA legitimacy and created more loci of Central Government power by proxy. Examples of this were:

- suggesting the strategic housing function might go to the RDAs,
- contesting housing numbers policy through the NHPAU,
- contesting residential land supply through NLP's commission
- unsettling the regional architectural through the SNR,
- creating the HCA with powers, budgets and a mode of operating that effectively cut out the WMRA in Regional Housing Strategy implementation, and
- the HCA implementing key elements of the RSS with local authorities while the WMRA was still trying to write an Implementation Plan with infrastructure partners.

The regional architecture was not just complex, it was fraught with shifting power and influence, mostly running against WMRA's institutional stability. The Assembly was ultimately demonstrated to be the Government's. This was consistent with the Soft Systems Theory (Checkland and Scholes, 1990; Wilson, 1990) definition of the system owner as the one who has the power to destroy the system. This applied to the regional project twice in 2010: when Labour abolished the assemblies; and when the Coalition Government removed the regional tier almost entirely, starting with the Leaders' Boards. The idea of 'permanence' (e.g. Rhodes, 1997) when applied to the core institutions of government proved too simplistic when projected onto New Labour's regional tier by the actions of the Coalition Government in removing so many of its agencies. This leads to a further question posed by New Institutionalists

Theory; whether the WMRA was ever a fully formed institution in its own right and what implications arise from this?

10.8 Was the WMRA ever an ‘Institution’?

Peters (2008) gives a series of six tests for establishing whether an organisation has the characteristics of an institution. These are autonomy, adaptability, complexity, coherence, congruence, and exclusivity. The two where the WMRA was weakest, autonomy and exclusivity are considered below. Each of the others is discussed in Appendix 10.2.

10.8.1 Autonomy

The degree of autonomy and perceived autonomy shifted over time. Some Assembly members thought they had a real degree of autonomy, and this was initially encouraged by GOWM regarding Assembly produced strategies as the Assembly’s, rather than written on behalf of Government. Further, Assembly officers believed their reliance on technical evidence prepared according to Government guidelines secured professional autonomy and respect for the advice. Local authorities, however, were more concerned about maintaining their own autonomy but found, on the most important political issues in the RSS Revision, that they did not ultimately control the outcomes. For Conservative Assembly members this was essentially the same as not controlling the Regional Assembly. This viewed power at this sub national scale as a zero-sum game and weakened the Assembly’s ability to achieve genuine autonomy.

The Civil Service shifted from its initial position to one that claimed Assembly members had a ‘misunderstanding’ about autonomy and devolution. Central Government did not consider WMRA members’ view of their organisational remit and

power as important. Civil servants dealing with Assembly issues were remote and regarded their power to change the regional organisational architecture and downplay or challenge policy advice as given. The extent of ministerial direction behind this was unclear.

10.8.2 Exclusivity

WMRA's core remits, including planning, were originally unique and, in part, underscored by statute after 2004. However, the SNR began to challenge the stability of the assemblies by instituting a total redesign of regional governance. Over time other bodies operating regionally also challenged the Assembly's role and the influence of spatial planning over regional investment and infrastructure delivery. The RDA had its own views and pulled in different policy directions (ASPO1, AWM1). NHPAU challenged the professional advice of the WMRA planners and local authorities. The Housing Corporation had to meet its Board's demands to commit programmes regardless of the Regional Housing Strategy (WHO1) while its successor body, the HCA developed investment plans bilaterally with each local housing authority and began using its ability to fund hard infrastructure, effectively challenging the slower RSS process. Finally the Leaders' Board with the RDA effectively took over the prioritisation of strategic investment commitments and locations for Government funding from the RSS process (ASPO1).

10.8.3 Conclusion: 'Was WMRA ever an 'institution'?

On balance the WMRA did have the characteristics of an institution but these were fragile, lightly and imperfectly embedded and under increasing pressure. Whether having a majority of necessary characteristics constitutes the WMRA as an institution depends on the significance of autonomy and exclusivity where the Assembly was

and became progressively weakest. The WMRA acted as an institution believing itself to have sufficient legitimacy regionally and nationally but was fighting for survival on most criteria from 2005 onwards as new bodies or proposals were launched. As each new initiative came from Government so local government officers frequently took the view that the latest creations relegated the Assembly in the policy area or organisational relationship affected. If the WMRA was an institution initially, by 2007-2008 it was buffeted, and its regional and national status had diminished. This emphasised its newness and exposed it as a young organisation, the deeper roots of the WMRA in the WMLGA did little to protect it from external forces. The only significant Assembly based resistance showing the strength, and not inertia, of its path dependency was local authority cohesion around RPG 11, transferred into the RSS. This resistance brought about the only breach in the regional consensus over regional planning policy, which was the break with GOWM and DCLG over new build housing numbers in 2007-8.

It took the Treasury about seven years to remove the assemblies from when they 'lost interest'(CV4) in their purpose as indicated by the Regional White Paper (DTLR,2002). This suggests assemblies were not easy to close or remodel without professional and local government involvement. Regardless of incipient Conservative scepticism and the donor's regret at having given away some power or influence, reclaiming it was not simple. A GOWM civil servant (CV1) used the term 'reclaiming' central power quite naturally, even while arguing the whole devolution mind set had been a 'misunderstanding'. The community involvement aspects were readily discarded in the SNR reforms to regional working. The assemblies may have been created weak, and ultimately dispensable, but their slow journey to abolition suggests something substantial had been created and could not be washed away

overnight. The Coalition Government however had no qualms, not least because Leaders' Boards were very newly formed, but abolition of the more substantial RDAs took longer and involved more debate inside Government (AWM1).

The use of New Institutional Theories has helped to explain how the key actor groups behaved but also highlight the vulnerability of an institution where the full range of theoretical elements are weak at the outset or become so over time.

10.9 Attitudes to the Decline of Regional Working.

The attitudes of key actor groups towards regional working, especially planning, and how they changed in relation to each other are shown in Figure 10.3. Of necessity, a single depiction of these views is a generalisation, but it helps to show the relative strength of attitudes over time, their direction of travel, and their position in relation to each other. The inter-relationship of key themes as they developed through the eras of Labour's regional project are given and the significance of the WMRA's external political environment is traced across these eras showing how it became toxic and then fatal for the Assembly after the 2010 General Election. Some groups, including political parties other than Conservative are not shown, nor are specific lines for the WMBC and the OSG. None of these fundamentally defined the course of events from the WMRA side. Further discussion is given with more detail in Appendix 10.3.

Figure 10.3 traces the confident view the WMRA Secretariat and Planners had of their task and role. This was born of successfully achieving unanimity over the radical RPG 11 and receiving Government approval in 2004 along with statutory Regional Planning Body status. This confidence never seriously waned, though it plateaued out as the Government's pressure to go beyond the calculated and locally politically perceived capacity of the Region to build new homes.

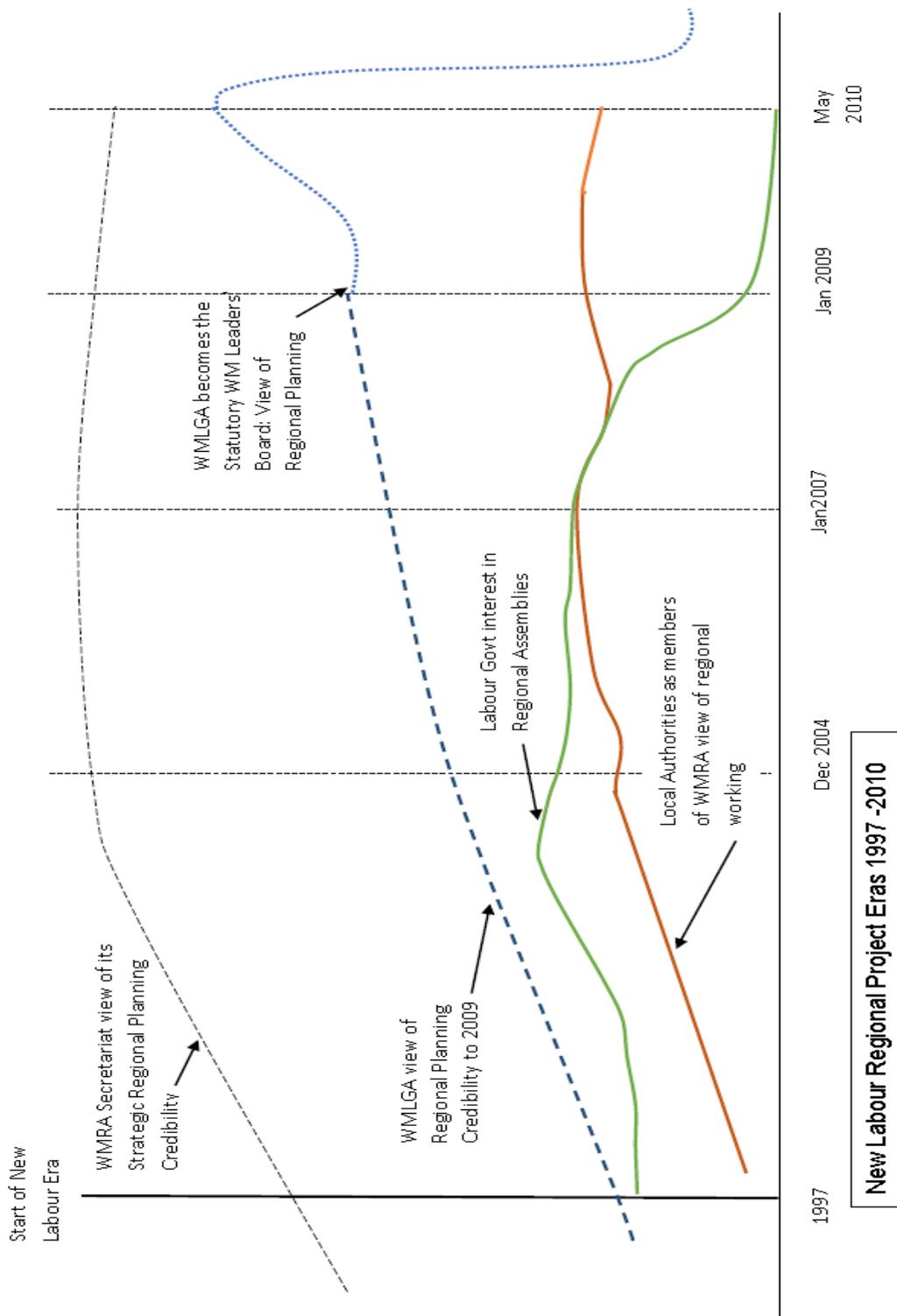


Fig 10.3 The Relationship of the Groups of Actors over time in relation to the Credibility of Regional Assembly working and Regional Governance.
Source: Author's Observations and Analysis of Research Interviews.

The relative stability and unruffled course of the WMRA planners stands in contrast to the trajectories of the other three actor groups. These other actors had their own objectives, nationally and locally, and these led them to waiver and, in time, lose faith in the RSS process.

The WMLGA view of the regional project began under Labour leadership in the Assembly. The graphical depiction represents a continued positive WMLGA relationship with the Assembly, consistent with its quasi-parental oversight and its sympathetic stance to regional working over previous decades. The trajectory to 2008 is therefore positive and broadly tracks that of the WMRA Secretariat, showing a shared collective mindset on their core function and the decision to resist higher levels of new housing in the RSS Revision. In January 2009 the outcome of the Sub-National Review led the Conservative controlled WMLGA to move quickly to establish new shadow structures in response to Government's intentions. Whilst some RSS work continued, the delays following Government's interventions on the RSS Revision, and Government postponing the EiP, left members feeling the process was too slow, and had been taken over by Government. Such disenchantment is shown graphically by a dip in the credibility of the RSS process. However, a positive WMLGA attitude was engendered when Government sought rapid advice on regional investment, and this was swiftly delivered by new regional structures. Local authority members and Assembly senior management noted with approval the speed of concluding this 'Regional Funding Advice 2' submission. This increased WMLGA's approval of regional working. This period was also marked by changing Conservative regional leadership as new WMLB leaders eclipsed the outgoing Assembly leadership. With the arrival of the Coalition Government, the appetite for regional working deflated along with the abolition of these structures.

The concurrent cuts to local authority budgets meant authorities could no longer sustain self-funded regional work of any substance once Government regional grant was withdrawn.

The West Midlands local authorities are shown separately from the WMLGA. The Conservative authorities were more sceptical, and some were hostile to regional working, so their overall complexion and position was the least favourable of all the actor groups. Whilst the early years to 2004 followed a broadly comparable trajectory with the WMLGA, its enthusiasm was less. Once the NE referendum result in 2004 was known, local authorities regarded the Assembly as weakened and this contributed to the Assembly losing power and legitimacy. The statutory RPB role was not seen as an adequate or equivalent substitute for the abandonment of an elected status.

Increased pressure from Government after 2004 was felt locally and the Assembly RPB structures became the vehicle for resistance. Some recognition of this is shown during this period to 2007. Baroness Andrew's letter (2008) caused a lowering of respect for the overall regional planning process as the spirit of devolution was seen to be evaporating. As the WMRA clearly expressed the will of local authorities rather than allowing Government to impose its preferred new housing figures, local authorities maintained their public facing unity over the submitted RSS Revision. With the advent of the SNR revised regional structures, the local authorities attempted to adjust to the new system with selective and concentrated power in only six of the 33 Council leaders jointly working with the RDA. Other local authority leaders became members of the Leaders' Board forum. This risked isolating the regional work of leaders from other councillors before adequate processes were put in place.

The trajectory of the Labour Government's attitude towards regional working in Figure 10.3 is altogether more unsteady. The political devolution project of John Prescott was initially secure with the emphasis on establishing the RDAs. In Labour's first era regional planning was not a high priority. By 2003 to 2004 it had become more prominent as a tool for economic growth, about which the Treasury were not convinced. The stable attitude to regional planning in the West Midlands came under increased stress from negotiation between Government and local authorities over new housing policy targets. Following Baroness Andrew's 2008 letter to the WMRA suspending the Assembly's work on the RSS Revision, the Government's interest was no longer positive and declined as they looked to the NHPAU and their own commissioned research to confront the WMRA at the 2009 EiP. As Government moved towards major sub-national reform its interest in the RSS process dropped away, being taken over by establishing new roles for the RDA as RPB, coping with the economic recession and anticipating the forthcoming General Election.

10.10 Post 2010

Following their establishment, the Conservative led Coalition Government's rapid implementation of a small state, localism ideology raised questions about what really drove this programme. It might have been thought that the severity of the economic recession required abolition of government bodies and public sector cuts. However, the Prime Minister David Cameron made it clear that the cuts would have happened regardless of the economic situation (Watt, 2013). Haynes (2003) refers to an aspect of Complexity Theory that provides an insight into Conservative Government thinking. This is when managers welcome or instigate a total removal of existing systems, structures and personnel and leave the previously active functions without replacement. This approach prevents past institutional ideas and memory from

'infecting' or continuing into any future structures. A period of fallow follows: waiting to see what emerges, whether issues arise that really need addressing or whether new activity seeds the cleared field with new, more acceptable ideas for overall governance or system owners.

This perspective was tested, with interviewees who had some insight into Conservative government thinking, with mixed results. A local government Conservative (e.g. APGovC3) closest to Government expressed confidently that part of the new Government's strategy was to make a definite break with all that had gone before. Another in the national Party (SMC1) was guarded, suspecting a challenge in the question, but acknowledged the planners needed to shift to adapt to Conservative policy. Others less directly informed saw the idea as too 'Machiavellian' (e.g. AWM1).

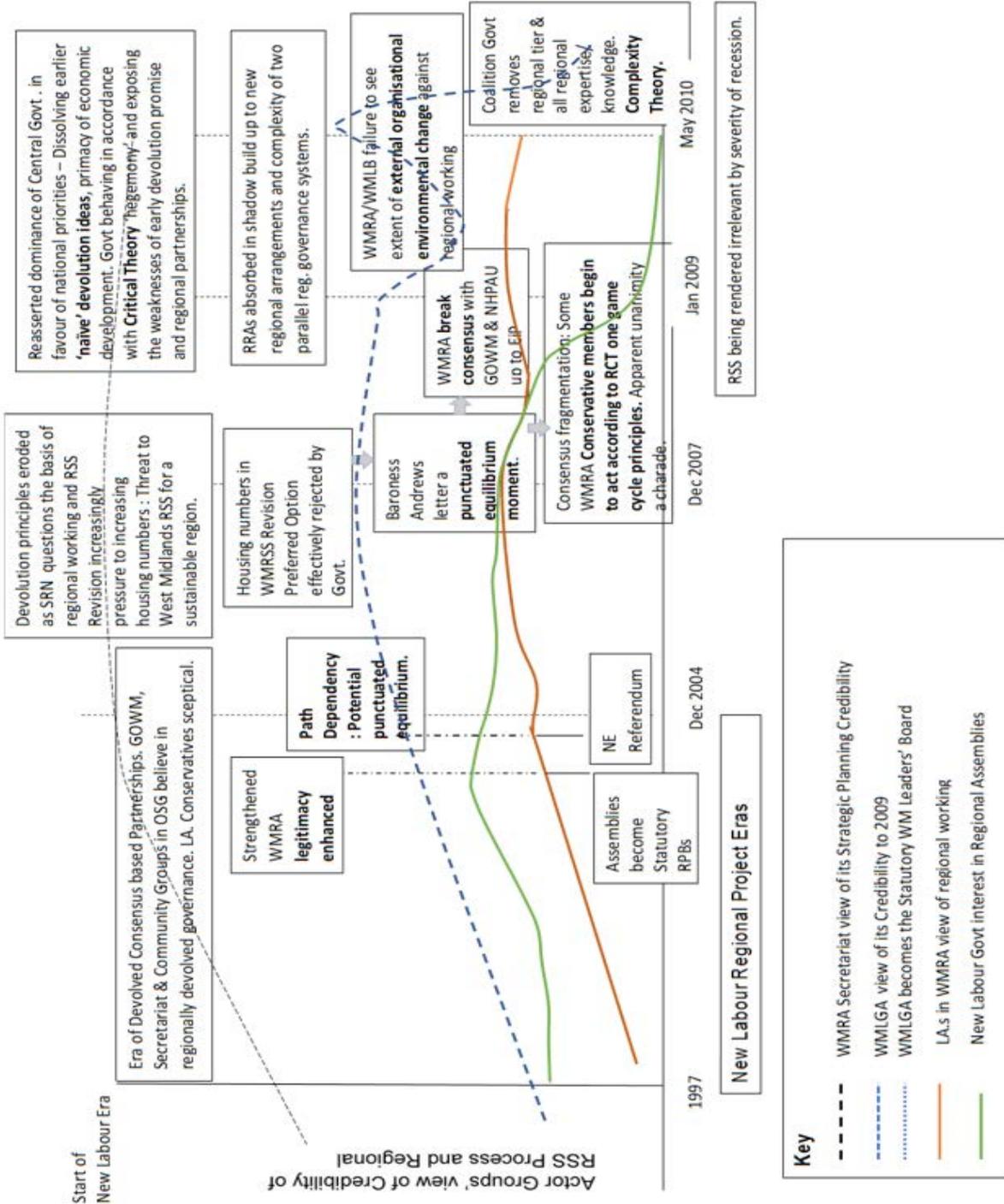
10.11 The Mosaic

The application of theories to actor groups allowed a theoretical picture to be brought together which coherently explains the behaviour of these groups in relation to each other. This has allowed an integrated and holistic story to be told which acknowledges complexity but also allows the main dynamic elements to fit together to explain how actors within and outside the WMRA conducted their roles over the life of the organisation. This mosaic approach has generated a deeper insight beneath the surface story which the minutes of RPB and WMRA Boards or full assembly meetings would reveal.

Using the same timeline as Figure 10.3, the principal events and theoretical concepts are presented in Figure 10.4. These summarise the main events that relate

Figure 10.4 Mapping key Theory elements to WMRA Organisational Lifecycle Trajectory against Actor groups' Views of the Credibility of RSS Process and Regional Working.

Source: Author's Observations and Analysis of Research Interviews



to the theories used and draw together the layered and differentiated trajectories associated with each actor group across the complete period of the WMRA's life. This use of the theory suggests characteristics for each actor group that affect their individual courses in relation to the fortunes and tribulations of Assembly governance and which grew in complexity and tension. Taking three of the main theoretical elements of the mosaic, Table 10.1 shows points of intersection in the external political environment, where they originated within the WMRA and shows how empirical evidence maps onto the theories.

Historical Path Dependency has been seen not to act as a blind force or 'hidden hand' in shaping the actions of WMRA Secretariat planners and WMLGA leaders. It was, however, a consistent force throughout the life of the WMRA, regardless of the increasing pressures from Assembly members, the external pressures directly on the RSS Revision policies for planning for housing and wider reform of the regional architecture under the SNR.

The place of Rational Choice Theory matches the actions of those elected Conservative members and their Councils who felt most threatened by Government's pressures to take additional housing numbers. The path dependency concept of punctuated equilibrium has been useful in bringing a theoretical perspective to key events which impacted on the Assembly from its external political environment. However the overall complexity of the position required theories with more explanatory power. From Complexity Theory 'bifurcation' provides insight into the overt and covert attitudes and behaviours of nominated Conservative members whose game playing in relation to the RSS process had to be skilful to ensure their survival, whichever way the 2010 General Election result went. It also provides insight into the behaviour of the Conservatives after 2010.

Table 10.1 Summary of the Theoretically Informed Factors Contributing to WMRA's Organisational Demise. Source: Author

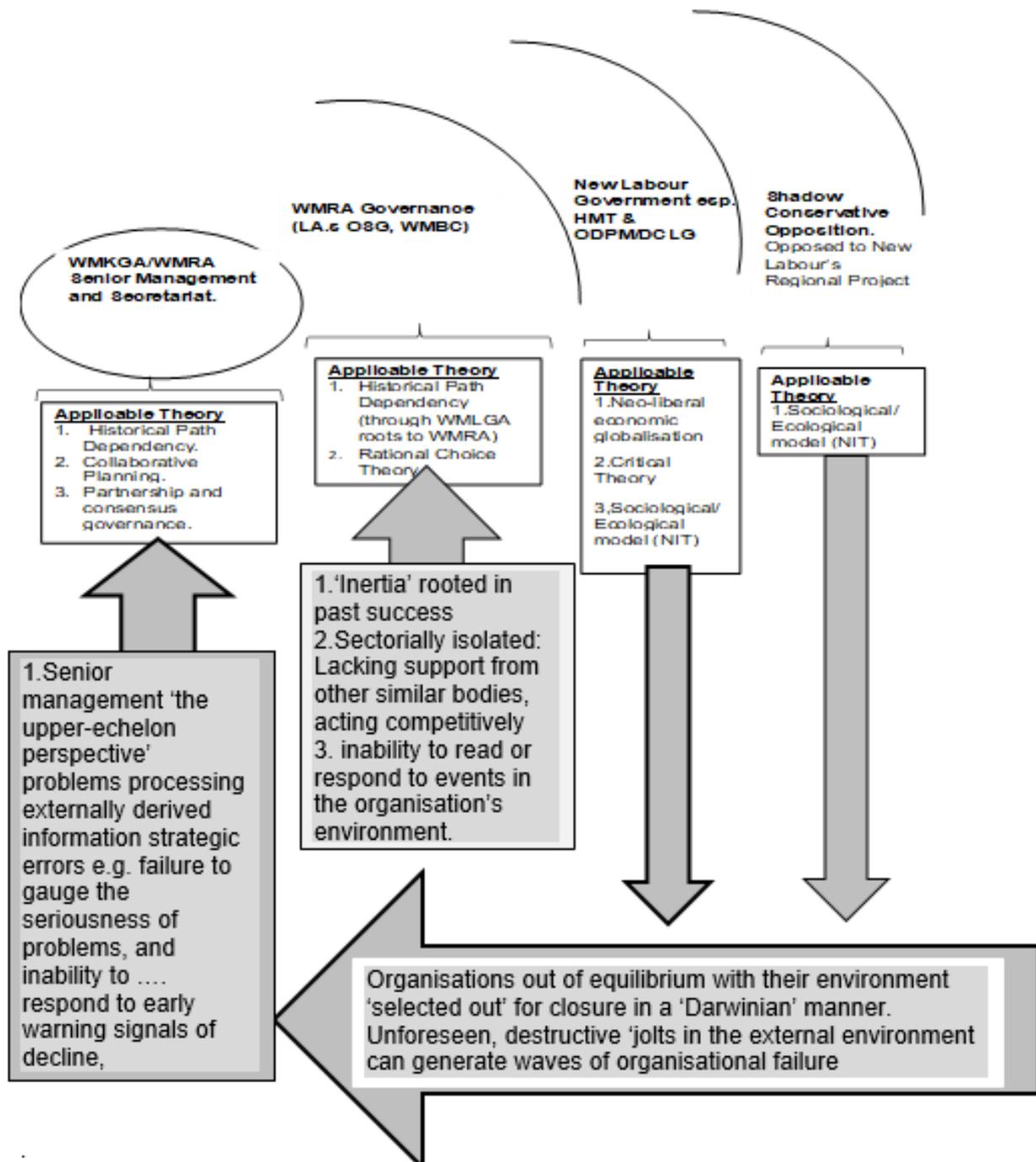
Table 10.1 Summary of Theoretically Informed Factors Contributing to WMRA's Organisational Demise			
Amankwah-Amoah (2016)	Peters (1999)	Haynes (2003)	Research Findings
External Reasons			
Commercial organisations unable to control or fit their commercial environment are 'selected out' for closure in a 'Darwinian' manner. (p 3389)	Sociological ecology model; organisational climate for regional working became toxic as some Conservative rural areas came under pressure to accept more new housing. Also regional tier became crowded with organisations with inter-related functions competing for L.A. attention.	Phase transitions or phase transformations: periods in history when the core data patterns and relationships in society change (p50) e.g. Regional bodies unable to influence the national and world economy. Recession 2007-8 created a 'phase transition' in economy including in housing construction sector.	From 2005 Central Govt required RPBs to increase their new housing targets in RSSs & achieve better regional economic growth. For WMRA this clashed with its RSS of Urban Renaissance & local political resistance to the required extra housing.
Unforeseen, destructive 'jolts in the external environment can generate waves of organisational failure.....' (p3389)	Historical Path Determinism. Punctuated equilibrium events change course of an organisation. Often unpredictable in advance.	Phase transformation events e.g. 2008-10 unforeseen effects of WMRA senior Conservative members acting at national level to get regional working and RSSs abolished.	The 2004 NE referendum result gave a jolt to the overall regional project but not fatally. For the WMRA the Baroness Andrews' letter (2008) did provide the basis for a potentially existential threat to the WMRA and regional working.
Internal reasons contributing to organisational failure			
Inadequacies of senior management team leadership: 'the upper-echelon perspective' (p3390) problems processing externally derived information leading to, '..... strategic errors such as failure to gauge the seriousness of problems, and inability to respond to early warning signals of decline.' (Amankwah-Amoah, 2016 p3390)	Operation of Rational Choice Theory behaviours by WMRA local authority members missed; e.g. Failure to see the disingenuous positioning of some WMRA governance members post 2007 by senior managers and Planning professionals	theoretical complexity approach. strong grasp of the external environment able to forecast risks, understanding transformations with adaptive inclusive processes. (p117) For WMRA survival this ability was absent.	Probable over-reliance on senior LA. members of the WMRA to protect and promote the WMRA's work at national level

Table 10.1 Summary of Theoretically Informed Factors Contributing to WMRA's Organisational Demise continued

Amankwah-Amoah (2016)	Peters (1999)	Haynes (2003)	Research Findings
Internal reasons contributing to Organisational Demise continued			
<p>Concept of over-reach. Organisational remit: extends into different markets or new areas of activity to the organisation. Span of control; weaknesses in the senior management team e.g. lack of expertise.</p>	<p>Historical Path Determinism – in regional planning in general, the strategy of Urban Renaissance and the continuing role of the WMLGA in supporting the WMRA.</p>	<p>Over-reliance on a key policy approach in public organisations can lead to dependency on that approach: thus disastrous when major phase transformations occur.</p>	<p>WMRA as a wider Partnership body seen by some in Civil service as a failure to focus on its core RSS and housing remit. Giving itself the appearance of a larger regional organisation registered with sceptical / hostile LA. members as justification for their fears of a regional tier of government being imposed by stealth.</p> <p>Past history of West Midlands Regional planning activity, and the confirmation of the RPG 11 Urban Renaissance strategy plus the development of an embedded WMRA in the WMLGA gave a false sense of security to the Assembly.</p> <p>RDA, HCA, County Councils all had active agendas or unwittingly either competed with or by-passed the WMRA.</p>
<p>Sectorally isolated: Lacking support from other similar bodies.</p> <p>Antagonising competitors</p>		<p>'Edge of chaos' (p31)-metaphor for understanding interaction of large public sector organisations</p>	<p>Seeking to avoid antagonising competitors including the NHPAU & New Labour gov.took a large part of the WMRA planning and senior management time and energy causing it not to address the threats to the Assembly's existence from the Conservative led gov post May 2010.</p>
<p>Understanding the organisational environment; Shareholder or Board caution and inability to read or respond to events in the organisation's environment.</p>	<p>Failure to understand the consequences of an overcrowded sector leads to severe competition for resources – financial, political capital eg credibility with Government & public. Loss of support & organisational demise.</p>	<p>Use of partnership working democracy involves points of chaos(p31),in which time is a critical component. Can lead to the 'emergence' (p32) of a new order or dissolution.</p>	<p>Misplaced & and ineffective reliance upon local Conservative leaders to protect the WMRA. Trying to be both the outgoing WMRA and support the new WMLB simultaneously meant its management capacity was used up with little left to address even greater threats to its existence.</p>

Figure 10.5 Theories Relating to Principal Actor Groups, integrating Insights from Commercial Organisational Failure Theories

Source: Author's Analysis of Research Interviews and incorporating aspects of Commercial Organisational Failure Theories (Amankwah-Amoah,2016).



The part played by the integrative process model of organisational failure derived from Amankwah-Amoah (2016) is depicted by the grey shaded elements in Figure 10.5. This theory based on commercial organisational failure has been used to reinforce the integration of other theories used to understand the behaviour of individual actor groups inside and outside the WMRA. This model adds insight into senior management behaviour and provides additional understanding of organisational demise in the public sector, discussed in Chapter 11.

In Allmendinger's (2011) account of New Labour's planning legacy the theoretical backdrop to the Government role in planning was an acceptance of neo-liberalism, seeking growth and competitiveness in a globalised economy. This account of the course of regional assemblies and regional planning has mobilised Critical Theory (Davies, 2011) to enhance the explanation for these events. This dovetails well with the neo-liberal convictions of New Labour and especially the Treasury, in prioritising growth and redesigning the governance architecture to provide Central Government with the dominance it needed to secure its economic goals.

10.12 Conclusion

The mosaic of theory used in this thesis has increased the focus on different aspects of what WMRA governance actors were thinking and doing; but the emerging explanation for the demise of the WMRA does not principally lie inside the Assembly. Two aspects linked the internal working of the Assembly with the external organisational environment.

The first was the role of Conservative members who advocated the abolition of either the RSS system, or regional working as a whole, because additional housing was felt to pose a threat for them and their constituents. How far this shaped Opposition

thinking is unclear, but it seems certain to have reinforced shadow ministers' conviction that regionalism was undesirable. By responding with a commitment to abolish regional working they reinforced local support.

The second relationship between the internal WMRA working and the external organisational environment was the misreading by the Secretariat of Conservative political support. The Secretariat was loyal to its WMLGA roots and saw itself as belonging to the local authorities in the region. The degree of control increasingly placed on the WMRA by the Labour Government created an uneasy tension and the break with GOWM over the RSS Revision Preferred Option in 2007 put the Assembly at odds with Government. The Secretariat, however continued to believe that following a policy line approved by local Conservative Councils insulated them from external political challenge, even if the national government became Conservative. This, and the apparent local authority consensus over support for the RSS Revision resonates with Critical Theory by highlighting naivety towards the power and devolved freedom of sub national partnership working in the WMRA. In addition, the idea of a national planning system without a sub national strategic planning component was professionally unthinkable. Both beliefs were mistaken. The Assembly misread the external political environment and, in part, misread the behaviour of their own members by believing they would not act against the Assembly's continued existence.

Reflecting on the dynamics of the wider regional spatial planning system over the New Labour period it is evident that planners were embedded in a collaboration and partnership model of working. Within this broader system view there were, to varying degrees, elements that were anti spatial planning. These included elements in the Civil Service (Treasury, Department for Transport, BiS), those parts of the private

development sector which saw planning as a hindrance and politicians who shared that view and may also have seen planning as a threat to their political position. Such a wider perspective renders advocates of the collaborative view of planning as vulnerable to being blinded to threats by wishful thinking. This can be seen in the way partnership working ultimately failed the WMRA in its strategic relationship with Central Government. There were factors which seriously weakened the Assembly in its design, and in the manner in which it was thinly resourced financially. It was reliant upon West Midlands local authorities to speak for it when, at both member and officer level, these same people were often very suspicious of the Assembly. As was said directly to the author, local authority officers coordinating aspects of the RSS Revision and local authority Assembly members saw their loyalty as to their Councils, and therefore were never happy with what the WMRA did.

All this was not considered by Government which appeared content to have regional structures as long as they were closely watched and directed through the Civil Service. DCLG apart, this group seems to have also been largely uninterested in regional working, or potentially threatened by the regional role, especially if assemblies were directly elected. After the NE referendum and the departure of John Prescott, Government Departments manoeuvred to contain the regional threat and then tame it by subordinating functions under the RDAs. This sequence of actions demonstrated growing pressure from the WMRA's organisational environment. Ultimately pressure from the Treasury applied through the DCLG, GOWM, NHPAU, the SNR and in part the HCA, showed the Assembly to be wholly powerless to shape, influence, much less control its organisational environment. The steps Government took created an increasingly difficult climate for the Assembly and the

demand to deliver higher housing numbers made the WMRA's political environment increasingly toxic.

The Government was apparently unaware that it was effectively destroying the organisational environmental conditions for the Assembly's survival. By 2008 the WMRA could not win this organisational environmental challenge. If WMRA complied with Government fully it would have lost the overt consensus and much of its political support. As the WMRA continued its Urban Renaissance policy before increasing housing numbers sufficiently, (inevitably including in Shire areas), its position with Government was under threat. Government effectively took over the RSS planning for housing function, not only through the NHPAU but specifically by commissioning NLP to provide alternative evidence to counter the Assembly.

The hegemonic mind-set of Central Government sought to recover control of wayward bodies believing themselves to be devolved in spirit and law, if not in full constitutional status. Central Government's actions were driven by ideological imperatives of economic growth and competitiveness and this matches behaviour discussed in Critical Theory. Key concepts from New Institutional Theory (especially the population ecology model), Critical Theory and Complexity Theory were used together to provide theoretical insight explaining the ideological drivers for both Government and Civil Service actions.

CHAPTER 11 CONCLUSIONS: ORGANISATIONAL DEMISE AND THE FUTURE OF PLANNING

11.1 Introduction

This thesis has presented an original account of an important period for regional governance and strategic spatial planning in the UK. A case study of the West Midlands Regional Assembly was based on an insider perspective and informed by in depth interviews with managerial, professional and political actors who played different roles in regional governance and planning until its replacement by the West Midland Leaders' Board in 2010.

This Chapter starts with a summary of findings linked to four initial research questions. It continues with a thematic discussion of factors that led to the demise of WMRA, recognising that explanations go deeper than the four research questions or the limitations of a merely descriptive chronological narrative as in Chapter 5. Critical events in the later stages of the WMRA's life, had their origins in an earlier period when their significance was rarely grasped. The Coalition Government's publicly stated reasons for abolition were discussed in Chapters 5 and 10 but other, more plausible explanations for why Labour abolished the assemblies and why the Coalition Government abolished both Leaders' Boards and Regional Spatial Planning have been advanced.

An important question arises from the findings, namely, 'Were there times when demise or dissolution could have been avoided?' Radical alternative routes that WMLGA could have taken are discussed.

The Chapter concludes by discussing: the future of strategic spatial planning; the contribution to knowledge made by the thesis in relation to the reasons and

processes that led to abolition of the Assembly; the role played by and relationship between its regional housing board and the regional planning process, theory and method; the unresolved issues of sub-national governance implications of planning being subordinated to a neo-liberal economic ideological imperative; and issues for future research.

11.2 The Research Questions - Findings

The research questions were initially presented in Figure 1.2. These were not set up to generate simplistic 'either, or' answers: they did not preclude that possibility, but were open to the likelihood that the outcome for the WMRA and its short-lived successor, the Leaders' Board, was a complex interplay of forces and actions by key groups. The answers have been shown to be complex, requiring the collation of several themes over the timeframe of the research. This summary answer to each question is therefore necessarily simplified.

11.2.1 RQ1 'What explains the demise of the New Labour English Regional Assemblies, and how this came about?'

This question has been addressed through the case study of the WMRA. There are two main parts to the explanation for the ending of Labour's English Regional project. Firstly, the WMRA was confrontational in its non-compliance with Government's expectations: over time it became progressively less aligned with its external political environment, including public awareness. Secondly, the Assembly's senior managers were unable to perceive or foresee threats or to respond to protect the organisation. It might have been expected that the Assembly members (mainly local authority nominated Conservative councillors) would have acted to protect the

WMRA, yet in its final years some members added to the toxicity of its organisational political environment by covertly lobbying for its abolition.

11.2.2 RQ2 Why was Regional Planning as the English Strategic Spatial Planning of the time (outside of London and the devolved nations), abolished?

The Labour Government's response to regional defiance was to close assemblies and bring the separate economic and spatial strategy components together in a new Regional Strategy overseen by the RDAs with local government involvement.

However, for the Conservatives the threat was not assemblies' resistance to housing targets. Whilst the regional planning system did threaten some of their constituencies' communities with unwelcome new housing, more fundamentally assemblies represented an incompatible, ideological tier of governance depicted not as devolved but as top-down, and needing to be removed to achieve a 'small-state' society.

11.2.3 RQ3 'What was the role played by planning for housing?'

The role played by regional planning for housing was less clear from the interviewees, especially Conservative politicians. For some the whole regional tier, was overbearing, expensive, bureaucratic, and too slow to deliver, so it had to go on ideological grounds. Despite Conservative Assembly members making positive representations, Caroline Spelman was reported by a Conservative politician as saying, 'there was nothing that (the Assembly) were doing as far she was concerned that had any merit or any value' (APGovC2). For those Conservatives who felt most directly aggrieved by proposals for new housing, the RSS system provided a cutting edge for anti-regionalism and a focus for their keenness to remove the machinery - both regional planning and the organisation responsible. By the time of abolition this machinery was the Leaders' Boards and RDAs.

Since the abolition of regional governance, it has become evident that the need for a regional level of understanding and management did not cease in 2010. As the Conservatives subsequently experienced, political conflict would arise where new housing was required, especially involving the loss of greenbelt. The case for city-regional working re-emerged and spawned an irregular, pragmatic pattern (in geographical coverage and responsibilities) of Combined Authorities with elected mayors.

11.2.4 RQ4 'What else led to the ending of WMRA?

An important element in why the Assembly was severely weakened was its complex origins in the WMLGA. It was inherently flawed by having the characteristics both of a young and old organisation⁵². This, and the Assembly's own RSS policy stance, prevented the Assembly from reading and adapting to a changing, increasingly hostile political environment.

Among the WMRA Conservative members the idea that assemblies were part of a European Union plot to transfer power from the national to the regional level never featured. However, for some MPs and Conservative councillors not in the Assembly this was a belief that reputationally worked against some Assembly Leaders. From the evidence of a shadow minister (SMC1) this was not a factor in abolition. David Cameron said early on in his first term as Prime Minister that the abolition of the structures of government would have happened regardless of the recession (No.10, 2010; McSmith, 2010). The Coalition Government faced a regional governance architecture which had been systematically weakened by the previous Government

⁵² See Sections 3.3, 3.11, 10.8.3 and 11.4.4

through its lack of directly elected democratic legitimacy and through re- centralised control. With a mandate to reduce the size of the state and with all things regional achieving a pariah status, there were no remaining obstacles to its removal.

11.3 Further Discussion of Findings

The original research questions addressed in this thesis open a wider set of issues about regional governance and planning in England. The following sections highlight insights and understandings beyond the specific original questions and in particular, reflect on the significance of different responses by successive governments, centralisation of power and other changes and tensions affecting policy and planning.

11.3.1 The Labour Government response

The Labour Government's response to some regions' use of the RSS system to resist central driven housing numbers was to transfer ultimate responsibility for the new Regional Strategy to Regional Development Agencies. Local government's role (in Leaders' Boards) would be subordinated to Central Government and ministerial rulings.

At the same time the creation of the HCA brought together housing and regeneration budgets and reserve planning powers. The HCA operated directly with local housing authorities but largely by-passed the Assembly's Regional Housing Board. By working bilaterally with local authorities in shaping new housing investment and other infrastructure before the RSS revision had been through the Examination in Public, the HCA rendered much of the Regional Assembly's RSS Implementation planning work redundant.

11.3.2 The Conservative Coalition Government Response

To the extent that WMRA managers believed the Assembly would be defended by the Conservative WMLGA 'going back to its origins', they missed the turn in mood that took that hope away. By 2009 all things 'regional' had become an anathema at all tiers of governance for most Conservatives. The Coalition Government's measures were consequently more drastic. At best regional spatial planning was viewed by West Midlands Conservative local members as interfering with their superior democratic mandate; and, at worst as threatening their localities', social mix, traditional character, sense of place and identity. For some authorities increased housing numbers presented an imminent social and environmental threat to their constituent political base. This gave the RSS a negative branding; and it could not be allowed to continue. The scale of this perceived threat was enough to generate a backlash against the architecture of regional governance and the RSS system, regardless of Labour's reforms. Prior to the Conservative Party releasing their pre-election Open Source Planning document (Conservative Party, 2010) they had developed an intention to abolish the whole system. The Coalition Government's planning reforms no longer had an inter-local authority or other strategic tier to mediate and present reasoned justifications in relation to regional and sub-regional planning issues (Barclay, 2012).

In recentralising control, the Coalition Government went further by removing the *locus standi* of the planning system to argue for housing needs to be met other than at a local level. The reforms effectively ignored the dynamics of sub-regional housing markets, albeit with a duty to cooperate with neighbouring authorities. The Conservatives abolished sub-national housing targets for local plans thus leaving the

attainment of a hitherto unchallenged policy goal, to meet the nation's housing requirements, without a clear framework within which to plan.

The RSS was ultimately abolished because it was an instrument of what Conservatives referred to as 'the big state' (Beech, 2009; Cameron, 2009; Smith, 2015). Local authorities initially appeared to be permitted to choose the amount of housing they deemed suitable for their area. Top down strategic guidance was replaced by the New Homes Bonus (Wilson, et al., 2017), designed to appeal to market instincts within local authorities, providing financial rewards for permitting new house building. Thus, rooted in neo-liberal ideology, market forces aided by monetary motivations were used to address this housing policy goal. This has not been explored further here, but, in an interview in 2014, a leading Conservative councillor (APGovC4) indicated that the Coalition Government's new planning system represented a recentralisation of power regardless of its purported belief in a 'small state'. (Beech, 2009; Cameron, 2009; Smith, 2015).

11.3.3 A Triumph of Centralising Hegemony

The Coalition Government's promotion of localism in 2010 went further in recentralising power than Labour's reforms. Davies (2011) identified such actions as the use of hegemonic power to shift control to the centre. This left communities with limited ability and resources to focus beyond local questions and an expectation they would adopt a 'Big Society' role managing local issues. It removed any effective capability to challenge centralised hegemony. Critical theorists (Davies, 2011) question the genuineness of devolution with its naïve culture of consensus working in partnership structures and survival only as long as it delivered what central

government wanted. Deviation from national policy goals framed around meeting economic growth and addressing housing supply shortages was not tolerated.

Although not apparent to the assemblies themselves, at the time, the 'clawback' of central power, began as early as 2003 when the Treasury concluded that the RSS system would not deliver economic growth, or not soon enough. The Treasury used its inquiry into UK housing supply (Barker, 2004) to contest the planning domain of ODPM. This grew into the far-reaching SNR out of which the task of preparing regional strategies was passed to the RDAs with local Leaders' Boards, as joint production partners with final responsibility resting with RDA boards and ministers. Finally Labour passed legislation to abolish assemblies, and the Coalition Government then abolished Leaders' Boards and RDAs.

11.4 Other Factors Contributing to the Demise of the WMRA.

By examining the internal processes of the WMRA as Regional Planning Body it is evident that there was an overall failure to read and adapt to the changing external political environment. The New Institutional population ecology model (Peters, 2012) of organisational demise (see Table 10.1), meshed with accounts of private sector organisational failure (Amankwah-Amoah, 2016) provides insights into the demise of regional assemblies. Three critical episodes of failure by the Assembly to read and address what was happening in its political environment are highlighted in this thesis. Before elaborating on these, I reflect on the way in which the demise of regional planning and the WMRA was experienced by those, including myself who were affected at the time.

11.4.1 Reflections on Why the Abolition of Regional Planning was a 'Surprise'.

In Chapter 1 I used the term 'surprise' to capture in one word as succinctly as possible the reaction of many regional planners and others involved in regional working within and outside the Regional Assembly to the radical political programme of regional institutional closure and dismantling of the regional strategic planning apparatus by the Coalition Government.⁵³ The use of the term 'surprise', whilst genuinely accurate, held within its ambit a range of responses felt by individual planners, senior Assembly managers, and some Assembly governance members. This range of feeling was reflected in the interviews. One of the areas of questioning used in the interviews sought to reveal when the intention to abolish the assemblies and RSSs had been known by them personally. From civil servants and Assembly senior managers the first they knew was the publication of the Conservative Party's 'manifesto' papers (Conservative Party, 2009b; 2010).

Subsumed within 'surprise' were feelings of anger, incredulity, frustration, and disappointment at what appeared to be a lack of understanding, rationality, and the precipitate nature of rapidly ending both regional planning and the newly created joint arrangements under the RDAs and Leaders' Boards. The 'surprise' for each planner was partially dependent upon the regional body in which they worked and probably felt most keenly at different times for different planners -, from the publication of the Conservative's pre-election 'manifesto' material (Conservative Party, 2009b; 2010) in the latter part of 2009, through to the confirmation that the RDAs would be abolished in June 2010.

⁵³ Also discussed at Section 9.6

The leading party in the incoming Coalition Government had stated in its pre-election 'manifesto' material (Conservative Party, 2009b; 2010) that it would abolish regional assemblies and RSSs. Perhaps some misread these statements taking them *too literally*, that is, thinking that the outgoing Labour Government had already done the Conservative's work for them on 31 March 2010. If so, that was naïve. Planners, believing the rationale for a strategic tier of spatial planning between the national and local authority scales was a fundamental component of the overall planning system, may have read the Conservative's 'manifesto' words through the lens of their own professional convictions. To countenance a system lacking this strategic function was not credible, and would be irrational, creating 'chaos' (Helm and Rogers, 2010) albeit this was consistent with Conservative policy influencers such as Nicholas Boles MP. He advocated his positive vision of 'chaos' as an alternative to a 'central, top-down planning (that) did not work and local variations in services could be a good thing.' (Helm and Rogers, 2010), Such radical disruption was referred to by Jon Cruddas MP (Labour) as, '... a recipe for chaos, bordering on anarchy.' (Helm and Rogers, 2010), and contrary to the country's proper governance. For some, the continuation of the strategic planning role was logical and therefore inevitable. Even as the Coalition Agreement (Cabinet Office, 2010) was being negotiated the expectation among some planners, including those in AWM was that the RDA would continue and therefore the Regional Strategy with its dual economic and spatial strategy focus would proceed. Interviewee AWM1 referred to a visit by Sir Vice Cable to AWM in 2010 where the message received was that the RDA would probably continue. Only later (in June 2010) did it become clear the RDAs had lost the argument for their continuance and that further hope for a regional strategic planning future was also lost.

Perhaps the length of time previously taken under New Labour to confirm that local government would retain a regional role in the outcome of the SNR process and that the RSSs would remain (in a shorter form) as part of the new Regional Strategies had been warning enough. But at least a consultative and rational solution had emerged (which is not to say it was better or preferred by planners) that kept an inter-local authority strategic spatial planning tier in being and local government had a major, if arguably subservient role in the new process. To eventually lose, having won something workable under the SNR added to the collective disappointment among Assembly regional planners who believed their work was respected and supported by the WMRA political leaders. With this came an optimistic hope that this would provide a defence to help deflect any threats posed from less appreciative elements in the Conservative Party. From the later part of 2009 this optimism waned as national Conservative policy became known. For most regional planners it was a sense of profound disappointment that had the longer 'half-life' after the multi-faceted 'surprise' had evaporated.

11.4.2 The Treasury and Regional Working

The lack of appreciation about the role of the Treasury in contesting the place of strategic spatial planning can be traced back to 2003 but legislation in 2004 that had appeared to support the RSS and RPB system, created a false confidence in the stability of the political foundations for regional planning. This was a deep-seated flaw in the Assembly's understanding of its RPB role and, although not apparent at the time, weakened the Assembly.

11.4.3 Formal Support for the RSS alongside Covert Lobbying

The unanimous support from local authorities for the RSS Revision 2 Preferred Option (2007) worked for Conservative councillors in two ways. It played to their political base by contesting the level of new housing the Labour Government demanded. It also gave public support to the RSS (albeit with lower housing numbers than Government required) when facing Government and provided some political positioning room to protect themselves should a Labour Government win the election in 2010.

Regional planners and local authority RSS policy leads, who believed in the Urban Renaissance strategy, drew comfort from this unanimity. The less attractive possibility, from the Secretariat's perspective, was that many local Conservative politicians would disown the WMRA and some blame it (arguably unfairly) for Government imposing RSS housing numbers that adversely affected their constituencies. These disingenuous expressions of support for the RSS Revision later turned into active lobbying for the demise of regional working and planning. Notwithstanding this, the WMRA Secretariat still expected its political leadership to protect planning and other Assembly roles if these were called into question by a new Conservative led government.

11.4.4 The Reliance on 'Friendly' Political Support

In anticipation that a Conservative Government might question the existence of the Assembly, the Secretariat relied on its positive relationship with its leading Conservative members to defend its continued role. The reliance on this support might have been regarded as successful given the outcome of the SNR both in the formation of Leaders' Boards and regional spatial strategy retained within the new

Regional Strategy. Assembly senior managers may therefore have had their faith in its efficacy reinforced. What was not fully realised, however, was the political opprobrium attached to senior Conservative Assembly members by hostile Party colleagues, some of whom reportedly believed the regional project was a European Union plot to weaken national government. Thus, the support provided by WMRA Conservatives who were willing to promote the WMRA was brushed aside during preparations for the 2010 General Election. The lobbying of some West Midlands Conservatives against regional working had greater impact and provided ammunition for those intent on abolishing the whole regional apparatus. It also seems that the Assembly, and GOWM civil servants were unaware that the Conservative philosophy was being recast to embrace the 'small state' following the ideas of political influencers including Blond (2010).

The part played by these three components would probably have been enough to ensure the WMRA's demise. The most crucial flaw was the internal confusion at the heart of how the WMRA was conceived. However, a further deeply embedded feature of the Assembly needs to be highlighted. Peters (2012) and Amankwah-Amoah (2016) observe that young and old organisations are both prone to failure. It was a feature of the WMRA that it displayed these characteristics simultaneously though without this being appreciated by its key groups.

11.4.5 The WMRA as both a Young and Old Organisation

The Assembly had a complex dual character: it was a new organisation but was seamlessly wrapped up in an old one, the WMLGA. The WMLGA's and WMRA's mutual relationship was robustly argued by its Secretariat as a logical, politically secure and effective way of rooting the Assembly in the existing local government

culture and regional structures, affording it both local political protection and acceptability. However, the weaknesses of this arrangement were neither expressed, nor addressed. To a casual observer viewing the WMRA from a distance this relationship this was not clear and neither were the long-term implications for the survival of the organisation.

The WMRA was born an 'old' organisation rooted in the WMLGA with rigidities already embedded. At the start of the Assembly's life in 1998 key senior managers and planning professionals worked for both the Assembly and WMLGA. These people carried the institutional memory, narratives, policy history and shared experiences from before 1998 into the WMRA. The pre-1998 WMLGA political structures continued to shape the democratic process nominating councillors to the Assembly. For many in the Secretariat and the governance structures the Assembly was essentially the same core organisation as the WMLGA, with the continuation of the same historic regional planning task. The Assembly took as genuine the notion of devolution and regional governance from New Labour. This was also the view in 2004 when both ODPM and GOWM civil servants expressed their view to the author that the Regional Housing Strategy was the Assembly's not Government's. The Assembly's position on its primary allegiance remained intact for its founder members throughout its life. New Conservative governance members who joined later had little understanding of these antecedents and saw GOWM and DCLG as the owner of the WMRA over the RSS planning for housing issues.

The Assembly, especially its Secretariat, drew strength and a sense of being in equilibrium with the West Midlands Authorities and ODPM/DCLG. The Assembly characterised itself as a coherent and co-joined part of the WMLGA and so inherited the weaknesses of a longstanding organisation. Not seeing this, the Assembly

projected a principled stance independent of Government as befitted the organisation representing West Midlands local government. It took devolution as a mandate to act within that remit: its local legitimacy came from its embeddedness in the WMLGA as much as from its statutory planning role. However, by projecting this profile, both locally and nationally the Assembly became more dissonant in relation to both local and national level governance.

To Conservative councillors not socialised into the WMLGA history, the WMRA and RSS seemed new and increasingly threatening. To Government how the WMRA worked was unknown and unimportant. Government saw a body which was non-compliant with its wishes, resistant and not under its control. The consequences of these perceptions taken together worked through to the Treasury recentralising control and subsequently the Coalition Government removing organisations and a planning system seen as posing a threat to political acceptability in some sensitive heartland Conservative areas.

Although there were significant issues contributing to the Assembly's demise, the deeper design weaknesses with their latent power to undo the Assembly were more important. These were the strategic flaws that yielded to the pressures applied by external political actors, even though neither realised nor explicitly intended this organisational damage to occur. The general Conservative distaste for regional governance crystallised over strategic planning for new housing. This went to the heart of a deep seated conflict in British political life, namely the tension between planning as a major component of the post-war welfare state and the Thatcherite neo-liberal reform in favour of deregulated market led economic growth (Thornley, 1993). This is explored later in this Chapter, after considering whether the WLGA and WMRA could have avoided the dissolution of regional working.

11.5 Could Dissolution have been avoided?

The research interviews generated opinions on whether the Assembly could have done more to secure its survival. Although most interviewees thought little could have been done differently the question remains whether, in hindsight, a different path could have been followed. At the heart of this is whether a more secure constitutional settlement could have been put in place which would survive changes of central government.

Two radical possibilities can be posited. One would have been the politically 'brave' option in 1998 for the Labour controlled WMLGA to have nothing to do with regional assemblies without constitutional safeguards about funding and autonomy. After the NE referendum in 2004 a second possible route could have been taken for the Conservative controlled Assembly (and WMLGA). It could have threatened to close the Assembly down unless the Government came back with a more constitutionally secure and attractive proposal. WMRA could have done this since membership and participation were voluntary. By acknowledging the democratic deficit made stark by the referendum's negative result, the Assembly could have further exposed the democratic deficit component in the continuation of the regional project.

The WMLGA did not follow these approaches. The first option was politically implausible given Labour had just been elected in 1997 and the newly formed regional chamber was Labour controlled. A challenge at that time and at that scale was unrealistic. As the WMRA Conservatives increased their representation on the WMRA, they too had little appetite or power to force this issue despite the 2004 referendum. The majority Conservative view was to live with regionalism's weaknesses and wait for their opportunity to end the Labour project. When asked

why Conservative members were voluntarily involved in the Assembly there was a degree of shallowness to their responses. Mainly the answer lay in the belief that they had to be part of the WMRA to access funding. But assemblies were strategic policy bodies and this response relates more to influencing Government and its regional agencies including the RDA. For Conservative WMRA members' involvement was the default option, where attendance was less politically risky than being absent. As one leading Conservative (APGovC1) put it, Labour kept winning elections, so they had the upper hand for years and the Conservatives reluctantly had to participate.

11.6 The Uncertain Future of Strategic Spatial Planning.

Prior to 2010 there had been broad historical continuity in the evolution of planning system, including the introduction of a two tier strategic and local planning structure (see 1.3 for fuller discussion). In addition before the RSSs were introduced in 2004, in some regions of England, county planning authorities cooperated in non-statutory approaches to regional planning. For example SERPLAN (South East Regional Planning Conference) operated for London and the South East and in other regions: the North-West Regional Association (Wray, 2014) and the West Midlands Regional Planning Authorities Conference (Section 2.5). The abolition of strategic planning with the removal of the RSSs and associated needs based approach to addressing housing requirements amounted to an unprecedented disruption and rupture in the post war planning system generated a 'hiatus' in strategic planning.

The underlying ideological tensions in the role of strategic planning have grown since the 1980's revealing themselves through political processes at all levels and throughout the period leading up to the end of regional governance and the RSS

process. Accounts of changes in planning policy over the 1980s and 1990s (e.g. Thornley, 1993) have emphasised the primary aim of 'aiding the market', (Allmendinger and Thomas, 1998 p10). With hindsight these accounts have nonetheless underestimated the strength of unresolved tensions between planning practice and market orientated economic management. Allmendinger and Thomas (1998) go on to refer to '....the stridency of approach coupled with the eschewing of compromise and consensus.' (1998, p236) in the New Right thinking which the Treasury adapted or continued into the New Labour era. This tension was unlikely to be resolved by tinkering with organisational or administrative designs. The New Labour regional experiment was a failed attempt to engineer a transition from the traditions and practices developed in the UK since 1945 of a consensual, negotiated approach to planning (Healey, 2006), to an approach that would work with neo-liberal economic development policies. The failure of the devolution experiment left a vacuum, and developments in the ensuing period continued to demonstrate these tensions in planning for housing in a neo-liberal environment.

In the post-war period government institutions, structures and agencies, tended to have a high degree of permanence, albeit with adaptations over time. A key perspective on this is that local and central government needed each other equally to govern effectively (e.g. Rhodes, 1997). No one form of governance dominated. Neither was secondary. This relationship, rooted in a cross-party, broad political consensus over the role of central government and the appropriateness of interventions in a mixed economy ensured institutional longevity. This has now changed, although the post-war values and purposes which underpinned the planning system persist in many public institutions and among professional practitioners. In the context of regional planning it took the conflict between Central

Government and WMRA to indicate how far this prevented a new national settlement being debated, even if HMT and DCLG maintained the strategic planning system, albeit under closer Central Government control through RDAs. What the WMRA and other assemblies did not see was how far the Labour Government would go in response to the EiP Inspector's Panel Report (Planning Inspectorate, 2009).

When councils built housing for rent up to the late 1970s, and were also the planning authority, their control over the locational decisions for new development was considerable (see e.g. Hall et al., 1973a; 1973b). In particular, councils were able to avoid major challenges which would have resulted from incursions into the green belt. This managed system of meeting housing need was weakened when councils effectively ceased housing procurement in the 1980s. From then on housing supply relied on the private market supplemented by privately run housing associations operating within a quasi-judicial and adversarial planning system.

From the 1980's the consensus over the need for an adequate supply of new homes of the right type in the necessary locations, was eroded. The broad consensus over the role of the state in housing was replaced by a polarised political ideology between neo-liberalism and social democracy. Evidence that this was a continuing significant issue was provided by a Civil Service interviewee (CV4) who indicated that this tension continued after John Prescott left ODPM and framed a major policy debate between HMT and DCLG over the future of planning. Against this background governmental regeneration and growth agencies were increasingly involved with an ideologically driven agenda. These agencies lacked autonomy and were weak from the outset with Central Government able to exert control to radically change direction. Government bodies created in these circumstances, especially when there is controversy from the outset, are vulnerable either to closure by their

own masters, or to abolition following a change of party in government. The survival in 2010 of the HCA, though much reduced in size, remit and budget provides an example of an agency able to affect a transition across political control. It had the capability to adapt to meet the incoming government's support for home ownership, so continued to share some common political ground with its Labour Government creator.

Some Government Departments played into these tensions. The Transport Department never really acknowledged the strategic role of the Assemblies and HMT did not wait long before it decided in 2003 to criticise assemblies because they had failed to deliver economic growth. This view did not acknowledge that assemblies' remit was not exclusively about this and that sustainability was equally important. Economic development was the RDAs' remit and their budget and organisational size were both much larger than the assemblies'. The early lack of cooperation between the AWM and WMRA slowed down progress on effective joint working. Nevertheless, the Treasury did not give regional bodies the time to become established before reaching their judgement; nor did they wait for regional planning to become statutory a year later and see how this worked alongside the RDAs' non-statutory economic plans. This impatience probably masked other motivations for undermining regional working, not least the threat of loss of control occasioned by the initial implementation of regional devolution. Where key Government Departments including HMT did not value the collective efforts of local government brought together in the assemblies, they were not going to accept inherent, or unresolved imperfections in the system. Hence Central Government behaviour created adverse consequences for the regional assemblies. The Governmental

process became more partisan with growing differences between Parties, even if there were some shared policy objectives.

11.7 The Continuing need for Sub-National Spatial Planning

The rejection of the RSS and RPB model left the future of strategic spatial planning in the balance. However, the need for regional or sub-regional working beyond the Duty to Cooperate in the Localism Act (2011), demonstrates that abolition did not resolve the sub-national strategic planning problem by ignoring it. This is illustrated by two concurrent planning matters unfolding in the West Midlands: the creation on green belt of a 6,000 home Sustainable Urban Extension at Langley, Sutton Coldfield (BCC,2017); and the establishment of the West Midlands Combined Authority (HMT and WMCA, 2015).

11.7.1 Langley Urban Extension, Birmingham

The Langley Sustainable Urban Extension on the NE periphery of Birmingham highlights how the vacuum generated by abolition of the Assemblies and RSS has been filled. It involved a prolonged period of contention between residents in a largely Conservative voting area and the Conservative Secretary of State who eventually insisted the development proceed. The abolition of the RSS left the local authority planning system without an agreed view of the new housing supply needed, notwithstanding a new duty to cooperate (DCLG,2012) with neighbouring authorities.

A combination of recession effects on construction, the hiatus in the strategic planning system, risk averse finance for mortgages, fragile market confidence (for newly forming households and those who may have wanted to move home), led to a decline in housing starts and transaction rates. House prices rose ahead of growth in incomes, and the age of first-time buyers increased (challenging the aspirations of

young adults whom the Conservative Party hoped were its natural constituency). Pressure on Government to address the situation generated questions about the planning system and some local authorities' willingness to see new homes built in their area (Stephens et.al.,2018).

The Conservative Government elected in 2015, introduced the Housing and Planning Act 2016. This included provision for Government to take over local plan production if local authorities failed to make progress. However, this legislation quickly exposed the inherent conflict for government trying to meet housing requirements and also satisfy its Party supporters. On 12 May 2016, the day the Act received Royal Assent (HofC, 2016; Carpenter,2016a;2016b) the Secretary of State issued a 'holding order' under a new s21A power, inserted into the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act, 2004. This prevented the adoption of Birmingham's newly completed Local Plan (BCC, 2017), intended for July 2016, even though this had been deemed 'sound' by the Planning Inspector (Clews, 2016; p15 para 60). This last minute Government intervention appeared to be a response to the local Conservative MP, lobbying the DCLG minister in support of a long campaign in his constituency against the proposed Urban Extension on the green belt. One Planning lawyer commented,

'...the aim of the Housing and Planning Act 2016 '(ss143-148) was that every local planning authority has a local plan in place. So it is somewhat surprising that the temporary intervention measure has been brought into force in order to delay the adoption of the local plan for the local authority with the largest population in England.' (Baker,2016).

A new Secretary of State reviewed all the factors in 2016 and, on the grounds that the processes had been followed correctly, determined that the scale of need was exceptional and justified building on the green belt (Walker, 2016). This met with a very angry reception from the Conservative MP for Sutton Coldfield in Parliament (Milne, 2016) and in his constituency.

The Coalition government had abolished regional bodies with relative ease, but the Langley case demonstrates that the ongoing dynamics of housing and residential land needs did not go away. Strategic planning issues continued to operate across local authorities' boundaries and remained a challenge. Conservative voters continue to use and rely on planning law to defend their social and physical environment from development. Government eventually overturned the 'holding direction'. This was a powerful example of contestation over planning for new housing being played out between different sides within the same political Party in Government. So aggrieved was Sutton Coldfield's MP, Andrew Mitchell, that he put the Government on notice that he would seek to strengthen planning law to prevent green belt development (Walker, 2016). As long as Conservative voters feel planning law provides some measure of protection it is likely this aspect of statute will remain in place while strategic decisions are taken without strategic spatial planning frameworks to guide them.

11.7.2 The West Midlands Combined Authority

The use of the word 'regional' in planning and administration died out for four years until the Scottish referendum in 2014. The result and increased devolution for Scotland (Dennison, 2015; Hazell, 2015) created the opportunity for the Conservatives to enable English city regions to make their case for a form of

'devolution' of powers to achieve economic growth and regeneration (Travis and Clark, 2014; Wintour, 2014). From this came the emergence of bespoke deals between groups of local authorities and HMT, under the generic title of Combined Authorities.

The West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) which came into operation in 2016 had, unlike for example Manchester, not negotiated strategic planning powers with the Treasury. This highlights the weaknesses of an institutional design where a sub-national agency is perched on top of local government which retains and exercises strategic planning powers. The WMCA is expected to deliver the Local Enterprise Partnership strategies for its area and deliver new housing development but individual councils retain strong independent powers and views especially over development in the green belt.

WMCA has substantial funds for land assembly and remediation and is identified with increased targets for house completions within the region and with specific development sites. Funding for major infrastructure projects including HS2 is separately allocated by the Treasury and the Department for Transport. Where relevant, delivery on these requires local authority planning but government can override this and determine which projects go ahead. Thus a distorted system prevails that is neither transparent nor regionally accountable and likely to continue to arouse local opposition. The overall WMCA system is weaker in its design than that which preceded it. A sceptical view would suggest that like the WMRA, the WMCA lacks the teeth to guarantee that it will deliver on the regional economy and its housing requirements and consequently is unlikely to provide a sustainable solution. It has however been positioned and has recreated as a convenient buffer for Government to manage local disaffection.

Beyond the protection of environments, the use of planning in guiding major infrastructure development and land uses seems less secure ten years on than before 2010. If a list of projects is all that is needed, as proposed by the WMCA Mayor and as previously contained in Regional Funding Advice 2 (JSIB, 2009), a business led, Treasury approved system of decision making seems likely to become established, making slowly evolving statutory plans redundant. Whether this becomes the norm, depends on the degree to which the public feel their interests are being overridden in a system where the public voice is not represented. The third runway at Heathrow, and gas fracking are two further examples where issues of sufficient scale arise and the mediation of a strategic planning process is still required. As one interviewee said, 'the British have not found a way to deal with difficult issues' (CV3). This appears still to be the case despite the abolition of regional structures and processes.

The conclusions from this brief discussion of ideological drivers affecting the national approach to housing development are that, whereas before the 1980s the system largely balanced local and central concerns, it has been centralised and government is more prepared to over-ride local concerns. This has major consequences for governance, planning and for meeting national and local housing needs. These centralising tendencies draw attention to the lack of foundational constitutional protections for John Prescott's devolution to English regions. The designation of the assemblies as statutory RPBs provided a real but thin cover of legitimacy which evaporated as soon as Labour was ready with new legislation (the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act, 2009); and this was itself overtaken by the Coalition's programme of abolition. There was no protection from the power of the Central Government which was prepared to upset the balance between local and

central government, despite the significant negative consequences for governance and for meeting national and local needs. These centralising tendencies draw attention to the lack of constitutional protections underpinning John Prescott's devolution to the English regions. The current patchwork of Combined Authorities represents a slight shift in the pendulum back towards sub-national governance arrangements, but such movement is not a straightforward reversal of the trajectory from abolition.

This thesis suggests if regional governance is to be genuinely and successfully established, without which history is likely to repeat itself, a deeply embedded constitutional reform is required. Such change would require a very significant driver. Consideration of where this may come from is necessarily speculative but, for instance, the Labour Party Conference of 2018 raised the regional disparity issue and opened the possibility of new policy thinking (McDonnell, 2018a, 2018 b). Leaving the European Union could also create a level of disruption to the political machinery of national government (with its hegemonic instincts), for such ideas to be contemplated. As the Scottish Independence referendum, 2014 helped to give rise to English Combined Authorities, another such Independence referendum as sought by the Scottish Government (Freeman, 2019) might add further momentum for a new constitutional framework for the governance of England.

Such drivers signify the type of major upheaval required to bring about the political consensus needed for a long-term stable basis for any successful sub-national governance. The wider context since the New Labour years has changed with the Scottish referendum, the English Combined Authorities, and Brexit.

This thesis has shown the significant changes that have occurred in British governance between the national and sub national scales. The assumptions of stability, national consensus, and organisational permanence which still shape the thinking of some planning professionals have been replaced by centralising mind-sets in Civil Service and major political parties. These changes had been underway since the 1980's but the abolition of regional assemblies has shown Central Government preferring to create weak and potentially temporary agencies, without the power to defy their creator. Where this requires some apparent disingenuous duplicity in the use of language to secure local political participation, then this too forms part of the process of getting local cooperation.

For now, sub-national governance seems likely to continue to be a series of temporary, fragile arrangements, subject to change as political champions move on and each architecture is seen to be vulnerable to the arguments of those who feel disadvantaged for one or more reasons. These reasons may be real or just as importantly, perceived, such as imbalances of power between levels of governance, seeing these as a zero-sum conflict. Similarly, such perceptions may include access to resources, geographical exclusion where sub-national governance systems do not extend over the whole country, feelings of communities situated at sub-national boundaries not being heard, and loss of historic identity. Although different arrangements may be tried none are likely to last for long in an environment of social and economic polarisation, political ideological differences and shifting electoral outcomes unless they address the essential conflict between the assumptions underlying planning practice and neo-liberal ideology.

11.8 Contribution to knowledge

This thesis has presented empirical evidence within a framework of a mosaic of theories, time periods and substantive themes. Within this a detailed analytical and unique account has been given of the processes from within the organisation and by those participating from outside, whereby a regional assembly met its demise. Whilst planning literature (Swain et al.,2013) sought to learn the lessons of New Labour's Regional Planning, nothing was said of the part played by the regional housing boards in this context. This study has referenced relevant aspects of the RHB role and its relationships with Government housing agencies.

No one theory sufficiently explains all actors' behaviours over time and there is merit in using a mosaic approach (Michael and Popov,2016) which addresses the key interactions between actors, both horizontally and vertically, across and between the layers of spatial governance. This thesis has begun a process of theory building using ideas drawn from New Institutional Theories (Peters,2012), Complexity (Haynes,2003) and Critical Theory (Davies,2011) and taking insights from the demise of private sector organisations (Amankwah-Amoah,2013) to develop a theoretically informed understanding of public sector organisational demise and the ending of a strategic spatial planning system.

Reliance upon one theory is insufficient to gauge the effect of the Labour Government's national growth and neo-liberal agendas on local and regional governance. The evidence presented indicates that a sophisticated interplay of the perceptions and actions of individuals influenced institutional outcomes over time. These outcomes were shaped by internal aspects of WMRA design and functional working, and by external actions 'done to' the WMRA by Government following its

recentralising of control, evidencing its growing hegemony over its 'devolved' regional partnership project. At the heart of the trajectory of the WMRA's lifecycle lay flawed understandings and changing attitudes over the credibility of the regional project by political actors⁵⁴.

Although the WMRA was weaker than it initially realised, its attitude to the new housing requirement in the RSS Revision proved intractable from Labour's viewpoint. This intractability was complicated by changing personalities in Government as well as inter-departmental inconsistency over regional policy in Central Government. Tensions erupted in 2008 with the Labour Government's intervention in the West Midlands RSS Revision, and nationally with the SNR. This created uncertainty in the WMRA organisational environment and its weakness, rather than its intractability led to the end of the Assembly under Labour. This process handed the Coalition Government sufficient ammunition to 'justify' to itself and its supporters the abolition of the assemblies' successors and regional planning. This account and the insights it affords is not presented in the available literature.

11.8.1 Methodological Contribution.

This thesis has been framed, in part, by questions arising from being at the receiving end of Government's regional arrangements. Thus, the exploration passes from the core of the Secretariat, to the WMRA governance, and then outwards to the immediate regional organisational environment and lastly to the Civil Service and shadow Conservative Government. The case study methodology has used an original, distinctive, and innovative approach to understanding the inner workings of

⁵⁴ See Chapter 7

the WMRA over the last increasingly turbulent eight years of a thirteen-year life. The case study had a substantial contribution from interviews with actors involved in planning in different roles and from participant observation approached 'in retrospect', in near-past time. This is not a standard approach to research design or qualitative evidence gathering. My in-depth personal experience provided a strong emphasis on the benefits of my professional 'participation' turned into observation soon after the events.

Every effort has been made to be objective in the design, execution, and presentation of this research. It is possible that a researcher from a different body in the external organisational environment, (e.g. Conservative Central Office, or a Civil Servant), could have undertaken a similar study. The research questions might have been framed differently by virtue of the researcher's position in relation to the Assemblies. Depending upon where the researcher was organisationally situated their insider knowledge would have shaped their initial perspective. Some differences could also have emerged if an alternative research design was used. For example, with a multiple regional case study, the interviewees selected and the quality and depth of prior relationship them would have generated some different insights, but these would have been consistent with the narrative set out in Chapter 5. Given the regular contact I had with the other English Regions through my membership and chair role on the English Regions Network housing group, often attended by a DCLG policy civil servant, I am confident the overall course of events in the assemblies' external political environment analysed in this thesis was broadly shared across the regions. Any researcher would have had to include interview data from WMRA as it was at the leading edge of the new RSS process at the time of its EiP in 2009 and engaged with DCLG and the NHPAU. These key sources of

evidence would have generated a picture consistent with this account. This research design has resulted in a robust approach to understanding the processes and reasons that contributed to the outcomes of the New Labour regional project. My role within the Assembly meant my research learning went beyond that which a conventional external research study would have been likely to achieve. This was due to the fully integrated nature of my role and responsibilities, the longer time period involved, the richness of my insider experience and the quality of the relationships I experienced within the organisation and region.

11.8.2 The Immediacy of the Research

The contribution to knowledge also lies in the timeliness of this research, being undertaken in the four years following abolition. The immediacy of the fieldwork ensured that I captured relatively fresh memories of what taken place. Actors were interviewed before their memories had faded beyond useful recollection. A more open-ended timeframe would have weakened the research. Many actors have now retired and moved away from the region making replication less feasible.

11.8.3 Replicability of the Research

The research method used in this thesis is capable of being replicated in other organisational studies. As noted in Chapter 3, there is literature on organisational failure, but there is little where the former managers of an organisation have contributed to revealing how demise occurred. Studies of public sector organisations' demise in the UK are rarer still and tend to be more about project failure leading to organisational adaptation (e.g. Walshe, 2003; Ravaghi, et al. 2015; Sheaff, 2017). This substantial gap in the literature justifies the actor focused approach taken in this thesis.

Key components are required for this method to be successfully replicated. These are: sufficient time immersed in an organisation in a participatory capacity; having observed a sufficient range of events and discussions; having good professional and personal relations to gain subsequent access to key individuals for interview; and having access to actors who seem likely to have held different views about the organisation and its remit. In the interests of achieving objectivity, it is essential that interviews are undertaken with actors who were involved as well as those more remote, oppositional, or neutral towards the organisation under study.

The thesis has provided a unique critical examination of the process within and surrounding the WMRA as it moved from apparent stability and confidence to abolition. The range of actors interviewed and the depth to which these went have built an understanding well beyond anything based on documentary sources including emails and formal minutes.

11.8.4 Use of a Mosaic of Theories

A mosaic of theories largely linked to the interests and professional or political domains of the key actor groups has enabled a coherent overall picture to be developed of actors' behaviours as events unfolded. Not only did the theories suggest a penetrating set of questions, but they indicated which issues should be prioritised because of their explanatory power in integrating the positions taken by the different actors into a coherent whole.

Out of this emerged an understanding of how differences of view where held, produced dissonance, were hidden from their colleagues in the WMRA but were used in manipulating the Assembly's organisational environment. Such a mosaic approach would work in studies where a heterogeneous set of actors, supposedly

operating in a consensus, partnership model of governance find there is overt, and especially covert, conflict and where potential misreadings of each other and the organisation's environment are significant. Such use of theories, applied across a range of actor groups, allows a more powerful relevance to be achieved between theory and actor group than reliance on one theory applied to all. This assists in achieving 'objectivity' in the research and limits the potential distortions in interpretation if one theory (Peters,2012) is drawn upon to account for the behaviours of actor groups.

The replicability of the mosaic approach assists in understanding complex relationships involving multiple organisations, groups of actors and with shifting dynamics in all of these over several years' time span. Many studies are of single organisations at a point in time or, over a brief period. This use of theories helps with more complex research where a lengthy timeframe is involved with multiple actor groups from different organisations.

Important in the selection of theory is some prior awareness of the narrative account as to who the principal actor groups were and what the main factors appeared to be in the dynamics of the processes under study. This gives an initial indication of theories which may have relevance. Some theory may be very applicable in explaining the internal behaviours of groups of actors but if the critical forces at work lie elsewhere, these internal theories may be limited in helping to explain what happened.

It is not argued that the theories used in this study are the only ones that could be used. The use of other theories in a mosaic approach could work effectively if the explanatory qualities matched the initial observed interests and behaviours of the

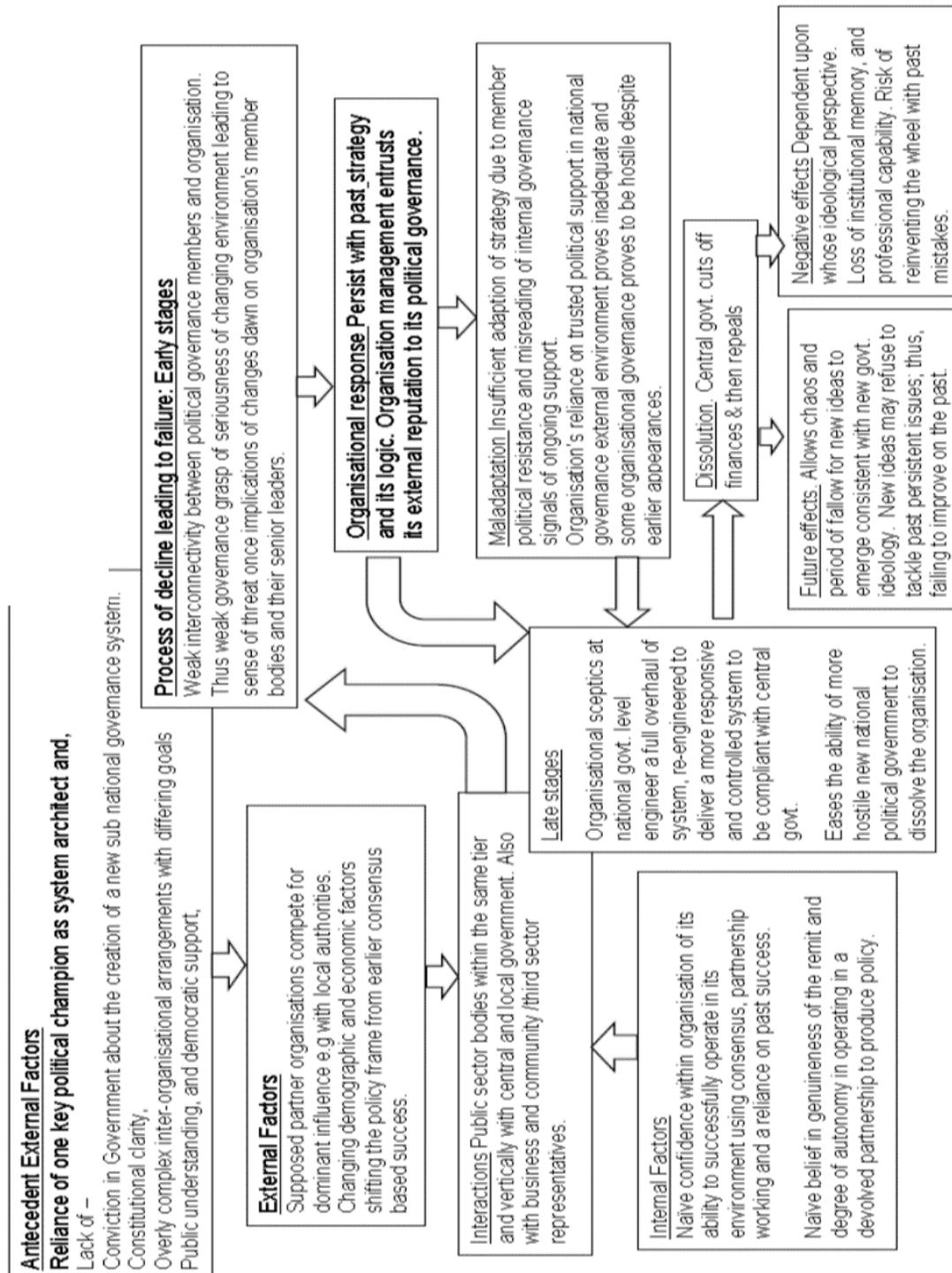
groups under study. In this approach the choice of theory is highly contingent upon a range of factors including those in the wider organisational context. Another is the timeframe and the dynamics at work over the given period. The mosaic approach allows a meta- theoretical framework to be constructed, tested and refined, through the research design and use in the field. Each design will be bespoke to the individual elements and complexities of the subject under study and 'variables' at play.

Peters (2012) says, of theories about organisations and institutions and their processes and interactions: each has their strengths in certain areas but leave some aspects less clearly explainable. This thesis demonstrates the mosaic approach allows for potential complementarity and strengthening of the overall theoretical account. In the case study used in this thesis, it is doubtful whether any one theory would have done justice to an understanding of the whole account. Theory focusing on the internal working of the WMRA would have placed an emphasis on this area which would have missed the significance of the complex interrelationships between some actor groups and this environment. The full benefit of using a mosaic approach however is that the interconnectedness of the theories provides coherence in revealing the overall picture of events and why groups took the actions they did.

This thesis has demonstrated that some observations about the demise of commercial, private sector organisations (Amankwah-Amoah, 2016) have resonance with the New Institutional Theories. These have been drawn upon in explaining how WMRA's governance, management and wider political environment contributed to its demise. Haynes (2003) observes that organisations can have more complex objectives in the public sector and must satisfy non-financial requirements other than the financial 'bottom-line'. As this research has shown, where this complexity exists

serious mis-readings between actors in the organisations' political, social or economic environment can occur. The main elements from the mosaic of theories used are mapped in Figure 11.1,

Fig11.1 Sequential Stages of decline leading to failure for a public sector organisation. Source: Author, adapted from Amankwah-Amoah, 2016.



sequentially to mark out the stages of the Assembly's progression to demise. Similar templates of public sector organisational demise or failure can be developed, tested and refined as further research of this type is undertaken. The transference of those theoretical characteristics which have been seen to work in understanding the demise of the WMRA may help to develop theory to predict future public sector organisational failure.

11.9 Unresolved Sub-National Governance and the Limits of Hegemonic Power

The thesis builds on existing Critical Theory and responds to the argument that this literature would benefit from further substantive examples and accounts to validate and illustrate it. For example, Davies (2011) argued that new research studies were needed to further develop the Critical Theory approach. Much of the existing literature inclines towards theoretical and conceptual discourse but this thesis has involved original research that explores planning policy and practice, changing governance structures and explanations for major shifts in governance arrangements, including the demise of regional assemblies and regional spatial strategies. Although, for example, the earlier work reported by Peters (2012) and work on education by Haynes (2003), work together with the conceptual framework from Critical Theory and specific policy areas, there are few recent, substantive illustrations and no comparable discussions of the New Labour regional experiment or recent changes to strategic spatial planning. An existing account of recent regional planning (Swain, et al., 2013) is preoccupied with detailed aspects of planning policy and practice, and largely overlooks the changing organisational political environment highlighted in the Critical Theory literature. Consequently, it understates the internal and external professional and political practices identified in

this thesis, and the underlying conflicts between neo-liberal approaches to economic development and the enduring political legacy of public sector professional planning practice.

The thesis demonstrates that a full explanation for the demise of regional governance and planning goes beyond short term, party political competition and reflects continuing, multiple and complex changes. These are especially so within an organisation like the WMRA, which by its design was porous to multiple views and allegiances at political and professional levels. This was despite the WMRA having the sense of being securely embedded in its political environment. There is some resonance, for an 'open', participatory political organisation with the experience of private sector organisations as they fail. However, in the public sector, political and ideological tensions, spatial dimensions of decision making, and power add substantially to the complexity of the demise process.

These distinctive dimensions are identified in Critical Theory (Davies, 2011) as the exercise of hegemonic power, the assertion or reassertion of central government power over apparently devolved, partnership style governance bodies. This thesis provides an original study of how the exercise of this power, principally by the Treasury, played out after 2003 to achieve greater control of assemblies. Having reached that point, an incoming Coalition Government exercised ultimate control by disbanding almost the entire regional architecture including regional spatial planning. By referring to a specific substantive policy area, identifying the different perspectives associated with various groups of actors and highlighting the underlying tension between neo-liberal economic management and established planning practice the thesis adds to existing perspectives.

Regional strategic spatial planning became central to the new regional governance arrangements in 2004. The focus on these planning arrangements highlighted institutional tensions that would not be apparent either from abstract conceptual and theoretical discourse or analysis of governance arrangements per se. Mere abolition of regional bodies and the RSS process was never going to address the unresolved planning for housing issues in Conservative areas resistant to new development. These still remain to be addressed. The insights of Critical Theory stall at this point in that having identified the dynamic of hegemonic power, what government does next is less than straight forward. Government can use its power assertively to direct that new housebuilding will take place on, for instance, the green belt, but the longer-term political cost for the Party in government may be severe where its decisions have over-ridden local opinion.

The limits of Critical Theory in this context points to the need to acknowledge a fundamental challenge facing the Country as a whole. It exposes the need for a deeper philosophical consensus about the values that should drive decision making, and what is prioritised. At present the profound economic, ideological, social and spatial divides in the UK mean that difficult decisions which require the stability of long -term institutional solutions fail to be secured. Such difficult decisions are instead either avoided (as observed by CV3), subjected to minimalist deceptive half measures and rhetoric, side stepped through delaying decisions, or oscillation between increasingly fragile administrative systems prone to antagonistic rejection when government changes.

11.10 Issues for Future Research

This study has suggested that regional and sub regional planning is likely to remain contested and subject to change. The abolition of the New Labour regional apparatus has not resolved the problems that these arrangements were designed to address. Issues remain unresolved for planning and governance and, as Haynes (2003), writing more generally on complexity in the public sector, has suggested, new forms of response are likely to emerge. With the Combined Authorities and ongoing political tensions over using green belt land for housing there are strong contemporary reasons for undertaking further research at the sub national scale.

The tensions highlighted by this thesis will continue to affect planning and how tensions are managed through Combined Authorities or other structures is an important area for study. Combined Authorities are the first set of sub national governance arrangements since 2010 and affect how major urban areas, with their hinterlands are shaped. Research will be needed to investigate how planning mediates between local authorities, to consider problematic issues that arise and to further evaluate the implications associated with the New Labour regional project.

Where strategic planning has not been part of the agreement between local authorities and Government, the role strategic spatial planning could play may help illustrate its value in managing sub national economic regeneration, growth and securing new housing development.

Since the abolition of regional assemblies and other bodies including the West Midlands Regional Observatory and a range of private sector planning research companies, there has been a loss of monitoring and intelligence data at the regional level and this adds to the need to research what has happened since 2010. Since

2010 Government has encouraged local authorities to work together across political friendship boundaries, for example in Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) and some Combined Authority groupings. Research into the consequences of this approach is required to establish how communities have been affected directly and unintentionally, where governance has not been based on economic geography. Such research would benefit from the 'insider account' approach. The emphasis would be on understanding issues of power, hierarchy, authority, overt resistance and covert subversion. Such studies may find there are institutional preconceived justifications for the type and role of future spatial working arrangements. These may be rooted in sentiment based attachment to historic geographical entities or an ideologically rooted refusal to look at different sub national scale solutions that would require sustainable agreement about housing requirements being met as a national priority - not one characterised by parochial resistance and a preference for spatial and social polarisation.

At a more fundamental level the role of strategic spatial planning in an ideologically polarised society needs to be reimagined. The attempts at encouraging a consensus based partnership approach by Healey (2006) fitted within the views about the devolving of power from the centre to smaller scale networks, have been referred to as naïve (Davies, 2011) and optimistic. If current political scepticism over the role and effectiveness of planning continues, and any residual 'welfare state' values from the origins of British Town Planning continue to draw down negative political repercussions for the profession, then alternative forms of doing planning may be needed. An even more market orientated planning system may require planning to release any residual welfare and redistributive values and adopt a more politically focused advocacy style (Sager, 2013), seeking to enable and empower communities

adversely affected by market forces. Such a recasting of the British planning profession could take place at all scales including the regional and sub regional. Research into how this transition could work might draw upon experience in other countries and suggest how alternatives might be adapted to the current and uncertain circumstances of England's social, economic and political future.

The future course of globalisation and the UK's exit from the EU are major uncertainties which could have significant investment and economic growth consequences for the UK. An independent Scotland may generate constitutional repercussions in England with planning system consequences. Research needs to scenario plan for these on a regional scale to test for robustness and to seek economic security.

11.11 Final thoughts

This thesis demonstrates that tensions between neo-liberal approaches to economic development and planning policy are fundamental (Allmendinger, 2016). These are not overcome through tinkering and managerial reform or changes in governance structures. The vacuum created by the abolition of regional governance and the RSS, in England outside London, proved unmanageable through contemporary market led economic development agendas, and new initiatives such as LEPs and project based investment programmes of the WMCA are perhaps best described as partial substitute. The implication of a continuing unresolved tension lends further weight to the value of a Critical Theory perspective that associates such tensions with deeper seated conflicts rather than with short term failures of adaptation and organisational inefficiencies. In this case the issues associated with different patterns of housing development are not resolved by localism, detailed adjustments

of planning guidance, changes in government structures or the adoption of a 'small' rather than 'big state' approach to government. The different interests that have driven conflicts in housing continue irrespective of changes in regional and sub-regional structures and policies.

As yet the English regions have not found a new strategic planning role which is stable and widely accepted. Recent reviews of the regional planning system (e.g. Raynsford, 2016) have only really offered an approach to strategic spatial planning which looks backward rather than learns from the lessons of the New Labour era to inform a strategic spatial planning system for the future. Such an approach does not seem to resolve the challenges posed by neo-liberalism and therefore the search for a strategic planning system that helps to deliver growth but also manages market weaknesses will continue, probably for quite a long time to come.

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13 Appendices

13.1 Appendix 1.1 Interviewees' Roles, Year of Interview and Anonymisation

Codes

Interviewees' Roles	Code	Year of Interview
WMRA Secretariat Senior manager	ASSM1	2013
WMRA Secretariat Senior manager	ASSM2	2013
WMRA Secretariat Senior manager	ASSM3	2013
WMRA Secretariat Non planning officer	ASNPO 1	2012
WMRA. Secretariat Non planning officer	ASNPO2	2013
WMRA Secretariat planner	ASPO1	2012
WMRA Secretariat Planner	ASPO2	2013
WMRA Political Governance Conservative	APGovC1	2012
WMRA Political Governance Conservative	APGovC2	2013
WMRA Political Governance Conservative	APGovC3	2013
WMRA Political Governance Conservative	APGovC4	2014
WMRA Political Governance Liberal Democrat	APGLibDem	2013
Civil Servant -Regional	CV1	2012
Civil Service -National	CV2	2013
Civil Servant-Regional	CV3	2013
Civil Servant - National	CV4	2013
Civil Servant -Regional	CV 5	2012
Shadow Minister Conservative	SMC1	2013
AWM Planner	AWM 1	2013
West Midlands Labour, City Region, National & Regional politically connected,	WML1	2013
West Midlands Housing Officer: HC: HCA	WHO1	2013
Planner: Private Sector	PPS1	2013
Strategic Planning Officer Perspective on senior officer / political opinion	LAP 1	2013

Interviews listed below Conducted. Evidence was largely background, contextual, and perspectives gained were supplementary to the interviews listed above.		
WMRA Regional Housing partnership Senior Strategy Housing Manager	Background senior officer views from a sub-regional housing market.	2012
City Region	Perspective of a senior officer /political opinion	2013
Other stakeholders Group rural view	Background context from Assembly Other Stakeholders Group	2012
West Midlands Businesses	Background context from Assembly Business Group	2013
Regional Housing role West Midlands	Regional housing association context	2013
A Housing Association Chief Executive, WMRA Regional Housing Partnership & RHB	Perspective on housing issues: senior officer / political opinion	2013
WMRA Other Stakeholders Group member	Environmental policy context: Assembly Other Stakeholders Group	2013
WMRA Regional Housing Partnership/ Advisory Forum member	Perspective on housing issues: senior officer / political opinion	2013

Note: Some interviewees had more than one role and are coded separately for each role

13.2 Appendix 2.1 Search Terms for Systematic Literature Review

Abolition of English Regional Governance
Abolition of English Regional working
Abolition of Regional Assemblies
Abolition of Regional Governance
Advantage West Midlands
City Regions England
Duty to Cooperate
English Governance
English Government
English Local Government and regional working
English Local Government and regionalism
English Regional Devolution
English Regional Governance
Federalism and the UK
Insider Accounts of New Labour in Government
Local Government Association and English Regionalism
National Planning Policy Framework
New Labour and Regional Planning
New Labour Party Insider accounts
New Labour Regional Policy
New Labour Regionalism
North East Referendum 2004
Regional Development Agencies
Regional Devolution
Regional Governance
Regional Housing Boards
Regional Housing Strategies
Regional Planning

Regional Spatial Strategies
Regional Spatial Strategy
Regional White Paper
Regionalism
Regional Development Agencies
Regional Development Agency West Midlands
Sec 4(4) Authorities
Strategic Planning in England
Sub National Review
The Future of Planning
The Future of Regional Planning
The Future of Regionalism in England
The Future of Strategic Planning
West Midlands Constitutional Convention
West Midlands Local Government Association
West Midlands Region
West Midlands Regional Assembly
West Midlands Regional Economy
West Midlands Regional Planning
Your Region, Your Choice

Online 'Grey Literature': Examples of Sources.

Think-tanks

IPPR, Centre for Cities, National Institute of Economic and Social Research, New
Local Government Network, Policy Exchange

Policy lobby groups

Campaign for the Protection of Rural England,
Town and Country Planning Association,
Royal Town Planning Institute

13.3 Appendix 2.2 Author's Personal Recollections of Working at the West Midlands Regional Assembly 2003-2010.

Explanation

This interview was given in 2011 by S. Forrest to Dr_Patricia Jones, a researcher at the Centre for Urban and Regional Studies, University of Birmingham. The interview was centred on the New Labour Government's policies for sustainable communities, how far community groups were consulted or involved in strategic housing policy making in the West Midlands and this focus is evident in the material presented here. However, the interview was wide ranging and touched on various elements of the way WMRA worked and policy challenges over time.

The interview was recorded but suffered from technical difficulties making much of it inaudible. In order to provide a usable alternative I used the questions and those parts of my answers which were clear enough to provide a transcript, saved (as Memory File, 2011). This process accounts for the change in style as the interview progresses. This Appendix is that transcript and reflects the author's perceptions and recollections as the former Head of Housing West Midlands Regional Assembly at that stage, as generated by the questions asked, before the author had embarked upon his PhD and before interviews had been carried out with others that could have affected recollections. The text has not been altered or amended for any reason since it was first written, nor has any alteration been made to the arguments it contains.

This interview was completed at the very beginning of the PhD research design and provided a very helpful stimulus to set out my recollections and reflections on my time as Head of Housing at the West Midlands Regional Assembly. The topics put to me in the interview generated a process of clarification and the basis for filling out

my recollection in greater depth. The interview provided a timely opportunity to explain and examine my role and the many relationships I had developed with officers and members from local authorities, other regional bodies in the West Midlands and nationally. This role had involved me being closely involved in the planning for housing policy debate that took place over the Revision to the Regional Spatial Strategy, as well as roles in leading the preparation of the Regional Housing Strategy (2005), servicing the Regional Housing Board from 2006 and leading the Assembly's liaison with the National Housing and Planning Advisory Unit, all of which contributed to framing my methodological approach of Participant Observation in Retrospect.

Transcript and author's Recollections made in 2011 based on the Questions used in the Interview

Regional Assembly structures- What were the processes to encourage and ensure local authorities' accountability to communities?

Of the former regional structures The WM Region - I was involved from 2003-10 as Strategic Housing Advisor and then in a new post of Head of Housing at the Regional Assembly for the West Midlands. WMRA by 2004 had become the statutory regional planning body. The WMRA itself was made up substantially of local authorities, then the business sector and other stakeholders, e.g. chair of the Council of Parish Councils, trades unions etc, the TUC regionally, faith groups, CPRE, quite a few different groups.

In 2003 the Sustainable Communities Plan introduced Regional Housing Boards albeit chaired by the regional director at the Government office (GOWM), with the Housing Corporation, English Partnerships and RDAs being the core members.

In the West Midlands, GOWM included the WMLGA/WMRA as members, on the basis that the Government's given you (the West Midlands) the RHB role but you know the region better than we do, work with us.

There was already a pre-existing regional group, the Regional Housing Partnership, which was an officer stakeholder group, not a political group. It was made up of directors, LA housing and other key players, particularly regional National Housing Federation, the community and voluntary sector – they were effectively the operational, expert advisory body and was the agency that offered to do the work for the Regional Housing Board. So those were the principal structures that existed at 2003.

Post Kate Barker - 2006 or thereabouts - as part of Barker's recommendations (2004) she thought the regional housing board and the regional planning bodies should come together under the assemblies and that was accepted by Government, at which point the assemblies became the overarching planning body and the regional housing board. There was a good deal of attempts to design a crossover of membership and policy debate. This was supposed to be merged but a literal interpretation was not considered the most effective means of doing this: very close joint working under the assembly political lead was the way forward in the West Midlands.

As a result of the Regional Housing Strategy produced in 2005 (second one), we were asked by Government to identify the sub regional housing market geography and housing market dynamics in the West Midlands region and based upon work done by Peter Bibby (Sheffield University) and Peter Lee (CURS; University of Birmingham), four sub-regional housing market areas were identified;

1. North Staffordshire;
2. Hereford and Shropshire in the west;
3. Worcestershire, Warwick and Stratford in the south and then
4. the conurbation and surrounding districts particularly to the north, south Staffordshire districts and the north Warwickshire districts.

This wasn't a perfect fit with the analytical work that had been done but it was a close administrative fit and the Government Office and the Housing Corporation decided to select and ask a LA in each of those four areas to be the lead for some sort of sub regional collective working between the local authorities and each sub-region. This was not imposed and was not prescriptive but was on voluntary basis. There was a degree of diversity between each of the sub regions as to how they set themselves up, who would be involved and how they progressed. Certainly, there was an intention they should work closely with planners. All of this came about before DCLG produced its own guidance on these matters and to some extent the WMRA work helped to influence DCLG about what might happen and was held up as a good example of sub regional working in one of their guidance documents.

What engagement was there with communities? Was there any involvement structurally?

Probably not, because LAs by statute were the strategic housing authorities and because WMRA was only very thinly staffed. The RHB had only the resources to little more than to produce the Regional Housing Strategy, monitor to alongside the RSS process, and through the LAs implement the RHS, and give advice to ministers on the use of the Regional Housing Pot (the capital funding for housing that came into the region). Within this was the strategic decision about what was the balance of funding that should go to the Housing Corporation and what should go to the LA.s. However it got a bit better than that because the Regional Housing Partnership

included not just LA.s but voluntary housing sector and housing association representation.

Were any tenants associations involved?

No that was a separate discussion that took place in the consultation on the RHS.

There was NHF membership representation.

There were one or two others but later on when prospects for a National Tenants Organisation emerged we encouraged that and would have developed those relationships had regional working continued.

What was the role of the Tenants Services Agency in driving regional working?

The TSA were funding at least one organisation which was trying to build a representative tenants organisation that drew on organisations across the country based in Walsall. There was temporary contract, but it was in the last year 2009-2010, of the Labour Government so it did not get very far. The TSA probably had other things to do. The TSA was not positive and dynamic at the regional level in its interactions with the WMRA or some major LA.s. The TSA didn't have the same structures as the Homes and Communities Agency nor did we sense the same energy and confidence from the TSA as from the HCA.

The strategic position of the regional work was very much between the Treasury and to some extent the Business Dept and the LAs and with other regional voices that were representative. Below the LAs you had the housing associations and communities. There was some involvement and discussion about the Regional Housing Strategy but the Region (WMRA) frankly had to rely on the LAs to carry any consultation at community level.

In the Sub-regional work, for example in the North Staffordshire Housing Partnership six monthly conferences were held on key regional and sub regional issues and these included community groups. So the involved community groups' voices were heard.

Other Organisations with whom consultation took place

Housing associations were the main consultees, with private house builders, and some of the private rented sector.

The main contacts were with local authority staff, especially the senior housing strategy officers from those local authorities the GOWM and Housing Corporation had asked to lead the Sub Regional Housing Partnerships. For the North HMA Stoke was the lead authority.

However, the WMRA Secretariat also had direct contact with the housing strategy staff and some planners from the other authorities who were in the North HMA.

These were Newcastle, Staffordshire Moorlands, East Staffs, and Stafford. But Stoke really drove it quite substantially – it had the resources, it had the commitment and Stoke had been asked by the Government Office to lead in that sub regional housing market. They included the voluntary sector and community groups.

The other Sub Regional HMAs did not include these. It was difficult to get the local authority planners involved in some areas.

The South HMA proceeded well for some time from the starting; - it had a committed senior local authority manager to draw it together and drive it but once that person left the momentum was more difficult to sustain.

In the West HMA, in terms of a functioning group they did work together quite well and continue to do so.

In the Central HMA which involved the metropolitan and surrounding authorities, it proved quite difficult to manage the sub regional HMA work with a large number of authorities as client for research. To try and manage that better the local authorities in this central area of the West Midlands decided to work in three groups.

These were,

- the Black Country and surrounding areas with Telford,
- Birmingham Solihull with Lichfield and Tamworth, (reflected the commuting and journey to work footprint of Birmingham)
- Coventry and the surrounding north Warwickshire authorities.

In the end they didn't like that arrangement and came back to working together as one; but by then one of the leading figures amongst the senior officers was no longer on the scene and that led to a kind of hiatus in leadership at that time. Leadership was picked up by Wolverhampton but then the work began to run into the buffers of the end of the New Labour era, so it struggled then really get to grips with all it needed to do.

To what extent was there a 'bottom up' influence coming from communities that affected strategic decisions?

The main influence from a 'bottom –up' sense, was a *political* influence that came through, so the mood of members was reflecting the mood of some of their constituents, (either for or against more new housing in the RSS revision).

Particularly in the rural authorities outlying or peripheral to the West Midlands region the issues facing housing members and planning were probably generating a certain amount of disquiet, some hostility, so some members would have reflected that. Also

the swing from a mix of Labour and Conservative LA.s with no overall control to a predominantly Conservative led region in 2003 with very few Labour led authorities left (Sandwell and Stoke were the only Labour left): the overall mood had switched to Conservative issues and concerns which were already not convinced about regional working. One or two members involved in housing and who took part in seminar events were very hostile or dismissive at times - not all, some Conservatives were much more positive and were willing to make the regional structures work and saw the advantage of the regional work, others didn't understand it were much less convinced, so it wasn't a uniform hostility across the Region.

Political will as a key to LA officers were involved in Regional working

If there was a strong political commitment then WMRA Secretariat were aware of that officers felt empowered to contribute and collaborate. Where there wasn't that commitment from some of the authorities their officers got involved in a 'watching brief' sense to make sure nothing happened against their LA. interest.

Did LA.s mobilise communities against the Region

Generally this was not in evidence, though the consultation process on the RSS Phase 2 new housing numbers attracted formal opposition from some groups such as parish councils. Had the RSS Phase 3 revision which included policy proposals to distribute the allocation of new gypsy and traveller pitches across the region then the hostility to the draft proposals from some authorities could have developed into a more widespread public and media campaign. The process effectively stopped with the winding up of the Assembly so this never reached the Examination in Public stage where this might have become more of an issue for people and communities to mobilise against.

Rural and non- metropolitan urban district response to the first RHS 2003 and informal RPG 2003 (became statutory RSS 2004).

Back in 2003 LA.s seemed to wake up to two sorts of shocks. It turned out, as I discovered early in my time at the WMRA that the Shire District housing staff hadn't been aware or involved in the production of the RSS. The Counties had been the principal authorities in the rural areas along with the Unitary and Metropolitan authorities in formulating the RSS.

Whilst the Shire Districts should have been involved in the preparation of the RPG, and Districts were invited to take part in RPG preparation meetings, there was a degree of non-involvement. Thus, it seemed to some Districts the whole business of the regional spatial strategy production was going on 'up there' and didn't seem to involve district housing authorities comprehensively, if at all in the strategic policies that were emerging. These would have radical implications for local housing development well into the future for twenty or more years.

The counties, Unitaries and metropolitan authorities had been generating the RSS and this would have involved District planners and their Planning Committees. Whilst some such communication must have gone on, the consciousness of the implications of the final pattern of future housing land release still seemed to surprise some in the District Councils once the RSS was approved by Government in 2004 and thus the die was cast.

If communication between County planning and district planning was poor then it was quite possible the district planning and housing communication was also poor in many places. From the sequence of meetings I had with District housing officers in 2004 I was told they knew little of what was being decided, thinking the policies were imposed by the WMRA rather than acknowledging the RPG was the product of LA

joint working. In some cases, this might have amounted to a certain amount of 'burying of heads in the sand' about what planners were up to and especially what it meant for housing in specific terms. Whatever the reason the general District housing view was that regional bodies were remote and 'over there' in 'distant' Birmingham, exposing a long term historic tension in West Midlands inter-authority relations.

When the District Councils in particular realised, in 2003-4, that this RSS plan had been confirmed by Government with the implication that new housing land supply was to be reduced in rural areas in a strategic step change, it came as a bit of a shock. This was the more so as the Districts were becoming aware of the growing need for more affordable housing and that affordability ratios were worsening. Access to market housing was falling away for local and relatively low paid households. In some areas, migration of people with high levels of equity were moving into the Shires both from the West Midlands conurbation and from the South East and South of England, which created additional demand pressures that contributed to higher house prices.

Some years after the use of Section 106 agreements for the provision of affordable housing on private development schemes had been explored and mainstreamed in most urban authorities, some rural districts started to see the need to negotiate for these affordable homes. They were hoping to use the regular housing land supply for market housing to achieve this. Just as their affordability ratios were getting worse, the regional planning system was about to reduce new housing land supply. To make matters worse several rural authorities had given planning permissions for market housing at a rate higher than the RSS intended, so that from an early date several Districts had effectively exhausted their housing land supply before the additional

affordable housing component had had an opportunity to be negotiated. The RSS had a policy of urban minima and rural maxima for new housing numbers so in some districts a new house building moratoria was required to comply with the RSS.

During 2003-4 notwithstanding that this outcome may have suited some rural interests and communities, this issue of housing land supply and some districts' perception was they could not supply affordable housing as the (market) housing land supply had been reduced. This formed a complex politically contentious issue both between districts and GOWM who insisted affordable housing could still be built and that any regional planning related reduction was only about new open market housing. The WMRA inevitably was caught up in this, and in 2005 once the Government, wanted to push for further housing growth in the RSS revision the debate became more complicated. For the WMRA this challenged the Urban Renaissance strategy of reversing historic trends in metropolitan – rural new house building. However, it also removed the convenient excuse of blaming the Region for an inadequate supply of affordable housing which some communities in rural areas were quietly satisfied was not happening. In all this however the need for affordable housing was itself never intended by the WMRA or GOWM to be blocked by the moratoria. This was aimed at private house building. Affordable homes funded by HA.s or the Housing Corporation were never intended to be held back by a moratoria and had bids for grant to support such schemes submitted some may have been successful.

The other factor that 'threw' the Districts was John Prescott's new RHBs and the regional housing strategy. From 2003 affordable housing investment decisions were made against the priorities set out in the regional housing strategy not on the lobbying of individual districts as had been the standard modus operandi up until

then. The 2005 new West Midlands Regional Housing Strategy, produced by the WMRA and its broad officer partnership on behalf of the GOWM, included a positive response to the moratorium issues discussed above. Included in its WMRHS for the use of the housing capital funding allocated to the West Midlands, was a priority for new affordable housing in the South of the West Midlands.

In an attempt to get a strategic set of priorities about the use of resources so that they were not just frittered away, in a non-strategic fashion, the Government looked to the RHB to demonstrate that the RHB knew what was going on in the West Midlands sub regional housing markets; and with the need for affordable housing, what the priorities were and where best to invest and in what type of housing. Government through the RHB submissions to GOWM wanted the assurance that resources would be used in a coherent strategic intervention to maximise impact, meet needs, help deliver regeneration, and support economic development.

Rural Housing Network

In response to the first WMRHS 2003, Government wanted a fuller RHS to be prepared. In response to this the rural districts sought to ensure their voice was given equal weight to that of the urban and metropolitan areas. Some rural HA.s, HC, RDA and its Rural Regeneration Zone, regional NHF, GOWM, and CPRE and Rural Housing Enablers, chaired and coordinated by the Countryside Agency formed a Rural Housing Network, serviced by Telford Council, to act as a focused contributor to policy formulation for the next RHS. From late 2003 to 2005 this group meet with WMRA on a regular basis to develop a better understanding of the housing needs of rural areas.

This was part of the coordinated response by rural authorities and other stakeholders to the unwelcome and unforeseen, surprises of the RSS, about which little could be done at that time. However, the RHS was open to influence, albeit constrained within the framework of the RSS planning for new housing policies. These set numbers of new homes for Metropolitan, Unitary and County areas but not down to shire district level. This would be the subject of a further RSS revision to establish the allocation of new housing to shire district level. This became RSS Phase 2 revision and was overtaken by the later household projections, Government's growth aspirations and the 2007 Housing Green Paper, the advice of Kate Barker the NHPAU, and the GOWM's own evidence prepared by NLP consultants.

Rural communities, housing needs and Issues of Strategy Implementation.

The Rural Housing Network intention and that of the WMRA was to provide evidence for a more balanced representation of rural and metropolitan housing requirements down to local authority level. Some HA.s were involved and when the 2005 RHS was open for consultation some parish Councils contributed their opinions.

The Rural Housing Network membership did not go down to local community or neighbourhood level direct representation. That was for the local authorities to manage. However, the rural local authorities' experience, that of the housing associations and the rural housing enablers did give a rich and geographically varied picture of the housing needs and community attitudes towards affordable and social housing.

These made an important contribution to providing a contemporary and sensitive backcloth to the rural housing aspects of the West Midlands RHS (2005).

It was not the place of a regional body, one run largely by local authorities, or its Planning and Housing Strategy, to bypass the role and place of the local authorities in engaging directly with specific individual communities, even assuming the WMRA secretariat was staffed to do this, which it was not.

The RHS was consciously written and evidenced down to sub regional level in line with ODPM requirements expressed to GOWM, and in its published guidance. The RHS could identify affordability hotspots and some specific places, say towns or broad areas, where evidence suggested the local housing strategy or planning policy should do further work. For example, this could be to examine, and if need be address, these issues that had registered at the regional level. Thus the Regional Housing Strategy would go down to Sub-Regional level, give some prioritisation to those specific issues more locally that seemed to require local attention and leave it for the local authority with the housing associations and Housing Corporation's social and affordable housing programme to address. It was hoped that regional and sub-regional monitoring of the RHS would track how interventions addressed these issues.

This was the intended approach and to some extent it worked through the cooperation and diligence of the local authorities to engage with the detail and specifically address priority issues. Regional and sub regional priorities sometimes became blurred over time, requiring local pragmatic solutions as local political priorities, the art of what was possible in a development sense and an under resourcing of the strategic housing function in smaller local authorities shaped tangible outcomes. Also apparent was the need for the RHS regional and sub-regional housing priorities to be owned by the planning departments and incorporated into their strategies and priorities. It was here that the call for planning

and housing to work closely together, more often floundered than succeeded. And even if the planning strategy officers were onside, that still left the development control function to take these into account. At times this part of the planning process seemed oblivious or unmoved by the RHS and any priorities derived from it notwithstanding apparent support by the authority.

The Scope of Rural Freedom to Influence Regional Policy and Anti Regional Attitudes

At the Regional level the Regional Housing Network had no other constraints placed on it other than the RSS was 'a done deal' until a future formal revision or a later review. This did not stop a constant expression of dissatisfaction from some which absorbed time and energy in addressing or refutation as the situation required. It also set up an established discourse of accepted wisdom which was partially myth. This had largely to do with statements that the RSS prohibited housing in rural areas so no affordable housing could be allowed. As discussed above this was the mythic defence from those districts where housing planning permissions had been exhausted at a higher than planned rate in the very earliest years of the RSS. (e.g. Warwick, Stratford, South Shropshire were cases in point). GOWM and the WMRA constantly had to tackle this by asserting that affordable housing should always be open to delivery whilst evidenced needs and pressures remained. Whilst there was a rural ceiling on open market housing development as part of the pressure to deliver the rebalancing of the West Midlands region's housing supply and foster urban renaissance, until ministers spoke opening about the unacceptability of moratoria with something of an edge in these comments directed at the Assemblies as if it were their fault. The rural housing 'ceiling' policy limiting new open market housing was removed as the RSS Phase 2 revision was developed through the Assembly and

the planning authorities sought to protect the overall strategic objective of the confirmed RSS.

The other issue which formed part of the received rural view of regional housing 'truth' was that the RSS policies had been handed down and imposed by a remote regional body which had no connection and input from the local rural area. If the districts had not been involved in the RSS policy formation or the County planning authorities and not consulted with their communities and populations effectively then the accusation was understandable, if somewhat wrongly cast, in that the active regional planning entity was their own County and probably District authority.

In terms of the RHS 2005 when finally agreed and submitted the Regional Housing Network pronounced itself satisfied with the result and felt 'it could not have asked for more' (Housing Association. Chief Executive member of the RHN).

Not all rural districts were involved in the Regional Housing Network and some officers in rural shire districts remained antithetical to regional bodies and strategy. Where their principle objection was to the RSS new housing policies – e.g. Redditch DC. – then nothing the RHS could say would change that.

Consultation and the Sustainable Communities Plan.

The RHBs had been set up by Government under their Sustainable Communities Plan UK and a suite of regional documents. These were not to be confused with local Sustainable Community Strategies produced at individual local authority level.

The 2003 Sustainable Communities Plan, and the locally produced Sustainable Community Strategies with the Local Strategic Partnerships have to be clearly distinguished. The two policy development processes had very similar names but were carried out at very different spatial scales, the Sustainable Communities Plan at

regional and national level, and the Sustainable Communities Strategies at local authority level.

Locally based Community Strategy work may have informed housing authorities in their input to regional consultations on the RHS and the Regional Housing Capital Allocation Strategies for the government's Comprehensive Spending Reviews of 2006 and 2008. Local authority engagement with their communities may have shaped what came out in terms of operationalising the Regional Housing Strategy but there was no obvious relationship down to the Community Strategies.

Regional Housing Strategy delivery

How the RHS was to be delivered in local areas took a different route. There was no statutory or legal requirement for local authorities to take any notice of its policies. RHS policies had to be regarded as encouraging and supporting good practice and would indicate where and to what end resources would be directed when they were available.

There had been a discussion between local authority officers and Regional officers and DCLG about whether the RHS should be statutory, like the RSS. It was decided that the advantages of flexibility, speed of production and revision outweighed the disadvantages that came with formal statutory processes, including the procedures for consultation and Examination in Public and the much high tests of evidence which were applied to the RSS policy proposals.

When asked how the RHS would be delivered, DCLG officials stated this should be through the planning system. They took as a given that the planning system would embrace the RHS as part of its own set of policies to be implemented. Whilst the RHS could be regarded as a material consideration in the development control

process it had neither the weight of formal planning guidance and policy nor guaranteed sufficient local political support consistently needed for it to influence the course of events in Local Development Framework production. Occasionally the RHS was quoted as supporting a planning decision but often it was local housing need evidence that weighed more heavily, or more obviously in decision making at a local scale.

Different Regions handled the relationship between regional housing strategy and regional planning differently. The essential divide was, on the one hand, those Regions which took their RSS as singularly supreme and therefore placed their RHS within the RSS implementation context as a form of planning implementation subordinate to the RSS. In this respect therefore the RHB strategy making role was subordinate to the RPB role. Examples of this style were the SE of England and to some extent the East Midlands. The other approach of which the West Midlands was one example, along with the East of England and South West, there was a greater parity between Regional Housing and Planning functions. This partly echoed a national debate in organisations such as the Chartered Institute of Housing that feared the planning system subordinating housing to its professional rubric and not having time or professional interest in those aspects of the housing function that were not really planning matters , e.g. equity loan finance for private sector home improvements. In this latter category the WMRA structures were designed to ensure crossover of membership and agendas where (at least in theory and intent) joint policy debate and decisions were needed. Occasionally joint meetings between RHB and Regional Planning Executive in the West Midlands were held. This approach helped both regional housing and regional planning to get on with their core business, However it left regional housing policy to fend for itself in the local authority

arena with little direct collaboration with planning to own and deliver a shared policy vision and agenda despite attempts to engender this closer working style.

Resistance to a genuine or full merging of regional housing and planning policy making was partly born of.

- culturally entrenched attitudes on the part of key professionals,
- a lack of clarity on the part of Government on how the relationship was expected to work
- the design of individual departmental responsibilities in local authorities sometimes failed to facilitate joint working and did not own each other's policy goals,
- low staffing levels and high workloads in both field mitigated against time being spent to develop joint approaches,
- in some authorities, low levels of strategic thinking especially in housing where the housing enabling delivery role tended to overshadow the strategic due to the pressure to get houses built,
- different statutory and regulatory frameworks which did not coexist in an operational context with ease.

The Audit Commission's Comprehensive Area Assessments

These did not have a great impact on regional working. Where authorities were being criticised for a lack of strategic housing understanding or poor strategic performance in housing then that would galvanise officers to get involved in more strategic work such as engaging with the Sub regional HMA Partnership. Where the WMRA housing team did notice a direct impact of the Audit Commission, was not through CAAs but the Audit Commission's criticism of the Low Demand Pathfinders for not getting involved in shaping Regional policy and priorities. The North Staffordshire 'Renew' Pathfinder responded to this pressure more directly than Birmingham Sandwell 'Urban Living'. The involvement of both these had been

sought in the RHS 2005 production but little was heard from them until it was the final draft of the RHS.

The secretariat was unaware of any direct call from the Audit Commission to specific local authorities to engage regionally in housing. However, the intention was that housing should be understood strategically in terms of housing markets and where and why certain interventions were needed. These should be translated into development or other action. The CAA had this in its approach with Local Strategic Partnerships though the secretariat were aware there was a wider field of responsibility but were unaware as to how accountability was achieved.

Consistent with (and possibly supported by the Audit Commission) the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) ran strategic housing training for members and officers to improve the capability of the housing strategy sector across the country. The West Midlands was said by some consultants who acted for the IDeA that the region was one of the poorest nationally for the quality of its housing strategic capability. When a centrally funded programme of event was advertised, and participation sort the response from the West Midlands was less enthusiastic than IDeA and WMRA had hoped for. However events were held in each sub regional HMA Partnership area.

The IDeA spoke at WMRA housing events such as strategic housing training. The Audit Commission informally met with the housing team of the WMRA on two or three occasions to review their work. The Audit Commission seemed content and never did a formal appraisal of the WMRA housing work.

The Place of 'Bottom-up' influence.

As the WMRA was a regional strategic and largely advisory body, it drew its key sources for shaping policy from two key places. One was the statistical evidence base (e.g. population and household projections, local authority data returns to CLG, commissioned research and other quantitative data from Government, other stakeholders and local government). The second was a more informal accumulation of discussion, attitudes, concerns and comments which came through from civil servants, local authorities, other government agencies and the business sector in informal dialogue and through formal contributions in meetings. Community and neighbourhood opinions were channelled however imperfectly through councillors, council leaders and cabinet members, NHF regional coordinators and housing association senior officers. as well as other campaigning lobby groups such as the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) which represented environmental groups on the Assembly. This mix acted as both channel and filter across a very wide range of policy partnership bodies coordinated by the WMRA and which gave a rich and evolving backdrop of bottom up opinion which complimented formal analytical work on the statistical evidence base.

The Assembly was a creature of Central Government in that it was funded by DCLG, with civil servants attending both officer and official Assembly political meetings. Ministers and civil servants also communicated through letters giving the Assemblies information on Government policy changes and the remit they wanted the RHB, (for instance) to fulfil. However, for the Assembly to work it needed to hold together a wide range of politicians from different parties around an agreed common consensus.

That these local authority politicians and other stakeholders all occupied the same administrative space, the West Midlands was not sufficient to achieve this consensus. There had to be an agreed understanding that collaboration and consensus, voluntarily given would be the best route to addressing shared problems. Getting to a consensus on there being a shared problem, for instance absorbing the household growth of the Region in a sustainable and long term cost effective manner was key to this, but not immediately apparent to all. The RSS solutions were fraught with practical, financial, and political tensions which were always acting entropically against the ideal of an Assembly grounded in consensus.

The other reason for the need to be seen to be working within a consensus was the Whitehall view that the West Midlands was divided and did not speak with a coherent voice. This in itself was probably not the main problem. What focused most minds on demonstrating a regional West Midlands consensus was that this negative perception was costing the Region in access to future capital funding. The regional showcase for countering these opinions were the two occasions the Region was invited to present a joint Regional Funding Allocation advice submission (2005) and the even more significant Regional Funding Advice (2009-10), submission by the RDA and Joint Strategy and Investment Board (made up of AWM ,WMLB, WMRA).

A Regional Consensus Locally Disavowed - with Destructive Consequences for Regional Governance

These issues were not widely understood locally and there was a failure to communicate these regional issues downwards. However, the de facto control and the main resources for local level communication were with the local authorities. At this level local politicians, if they were so minded, could use the Regional Assembly as that remote body 'over there' telling the 'poor beleaguered' local authorities what

to do. This was disingenuous but it did not stop it happening. The public support for the Assembly was weak through a variety of reasons, including,

- Lack of public identity with the concept and geography of the West Midlands Region,
- The selective filtering and control of information about the Region by local authorities of what was understood about regional activity,
- The need for mature political working (Labour minister at 2004 CiH conference sought this) was not delivered sufficiently,
- The Assembly not being directly elected allowing a democratic deficit to be exploited in shaping public perceptions, and
- RSS planning compromise decisions on land for housing.

A region wide public consensus would have needed a shared understanding by communities (separated geographically, socially and economically) which did not widely understand the long-term consequences of failing to achieve a sustainable region. The regional solutions were portrayed as imposed, bureaucratic and unaccountable and were therefore ripe to be torn up when the opportunity came. Once the pressure mounted for more new housing than had been confirmed in the RPG feelings, in the Shire areas especially, became offended about the consequences. Whether this was due to perceived environmental impacts, in transport congestion threats, the scale of growth of small settlements like Pershore or Evesham cast by local politicians as out of all proportion to their historic rates of growth or socially. In this latter case there was a parochial fear of an influx of people from 'other' places, and worse other social groups into communities where they were deemed not to belong taking priority over genuinely local people in social housing allocations. The aggregation of such fears led to a political counter thrust to see local communities empowered as they saw it, to protect what they had.

The Post -2010 planning system focused on growth, so retained the difficulties this brought for those who resented or resisted the consequences of this in their locality. With attitudes of 'we don't want them (new homes or their residents) here', there persisted an absence of a concept of national social solidarity. There was little evidence of a sense of 'being in it together' with all people and their families needing to have their housing requirements met in the same national, regional or sub regional space. A previous thirty-year process of polarisation of income and wealth increasingly empowered the better off to compete for the best environments. These sought after places came under pressure not just from private sector owner occupation but were considered by many already living in those places to be threatened by 'non-market' social housing. For some the presence of this tenure in their midst was unacceptable, unless perhaps the provision was exclusively for households specifically recognised as 'local' and therefore having some inherent right to be housed in that community. For many of those using their economic power to migrate (or retreat) into highly valued environments, usually rural, part of their motivation for doing so was to escape the urban social mix, seeking to socially differentiate themselves into a society and the environment that only similarly equipped households could afford. The maturing neo-liberal Thatcherite and New Labour model with its relaxed approach to growth in income and wealth differentiation produced a competition for space in the West Midlands which exacerbated house prices in the south of the region in particular but also around the inner rural districts adjacent to the metropolitan area. This allowed the better -off to leave behind the less prosperous and their social and physical environments. Deregulation does not seem to offer the population of a protection of a free market. Population grows and households are still formed so solutions still have to be found

which some feel is imposed. This is still not accepted by many of the better off who feel the housing required can be provided elsewhere, out of sight to them.

Low Demand Pathfinders and Regional Engagement

Only Renew North Staffordshire seemed to appreciate or act upon both the relevance of strategic policy to its success and the contribution it could make to changing and shaping strategic policy to bring about the conditions for its longer term success.

The Pathfinders in the West Midlands Region were invited to attend Regional housing officer groups such as the Regional Housing Partnership and then Regional Housing Association Forum. Senior officers from the Pathfinders presented their work and progress to the RHB, most memorably at the inaugural meeting of the transfer of the RHB to the WMRA.

The Urban Living Pathfinder seemed very focused on the local level and the issues between Birmingham and Sandwell. The programme was shaped by the pressures arising from more immediate local housing market conditions, of housing stock condition, redevelopment and reinvestment. This Pathfinder choose not to engage regularly with the regional and sub regional policy processes. From the RSS / RHS policy perspective the Low Demand Pathfinders were key vehicles for achieving Urban Renaissance in that they attracted large sums of public finance which could have contributed to the realisation of this strategic goal.

Regional Spatial Strategy Policy: Setting Priorities

The key RSS priority, although there were four, was at its heart, the aim to achieve an Urban Renaissance which was intended to transform the market forces of the West Midlands, making the metropolitan areas ones which people aspired to live and

remain in through their housing career, thereby removing the pressure of outmigration to the rural areas.

It is a moot point how far this policy was really driven. The concept of Urban Renaissance was not well articulated into monitorable criteria and the officer working party lead by Birmingham City Council dissolved after a short period. It was left to general encouragement, Housing Corporation affordable housing investment, the low demand pathfinders and market forces to deliver. This was backed up by the strategic policy of the step change in the release of housing land (i.e. dampening down rural land release for housing and positively encouraging development on urban previously developed land – brown field sites).

By 2005 growth (rather than urban renaissance) had already become a Government policy imperative. Local authorities were changing their policy language and engaging with Government to fit within the new orientation. RHS policy expression had to be modified to satisfy local authorities on this (as well as GOWM). However, this was not to the exclusion of continuing to support the Urban Renaissance policy as a strand of legitimate policy within the growth imperative. At the Regional level, planners viewed with suspicion this change in emphasis with its new growth area incentives. The concern was this shift of emphasis would divert resources from the regeneration of the metropolitan inner-city areas going instead for the line of least resistance towards rural readily developable sites. Such a trend would undermine the RSS and pull growth away from the Major Urban Areas (as defined in the RSS).

What is left at the Regional level for communities to work with? What structures are accountable to communities?

In the period after 2010 above the local authority level there is very little regional activity going on to be accountable. With the closure of the WMRA, RDA (AWM), GOWM and the other agencies funded by AWM such as RegenWM, there are few bodies left at the Regional level. This reflected the extreme rejection of even referring verbally to the Region in spoken or written in Government or local political discourse.

As for those decisions that still needed to be made, for example major planning infrastructure and the allocation of capital funds to housing associations via the HCA, these went back to civil servants and even in some cases to ministers.

Since the key governance structures established under New Labour and the Major Conservative Government had gone at the regional level the regional structures in other bodies such as the National Housing Federation no longer served a useful purpose and also closed. The representative body for the voluntary and civil society sectors in the West Midlands, Regional Action West Midlands has downsized dramatically but survived having refocused its purpose to engage with such regional structures as may emerge.

What remained of the regional presence in 2012 were,-

- West Midlands Regional Homelessness Forum
- West Midlands Councils as a small coordinating body
- BIS local (remnants of GOWM for Local Enterprise Partnerships and Big Society promotion)
- HCA regional structure but with reduced budgets
- RAWM and
- the West Midlands Voluntary and Community Housing Sector Network.

One of the roles of the regional assemblies was the coordination of regional policy across a wide range of functions. These various regional strategies no longer exist and so there is nothing left to coordinate at that scale.

The West Midlands local authorities retained a small coordinating regional organisation in West Midlands Councils, but its role and size was very restricted. This was no longer a policy development or advisory body to Government. It continued for a few years and then closed.

With the loss of these functions there has been a loss of strategic overview. In regional housing the earlier acknowledgement that housing markets, including sub regional ones, operated across administrative boundaries now has no systematic means of tracking how these dynamics are operating. There is no one body left resourced and charged with this responsibility. Individual local authorities acting voluntarily in concert with neighbouring authorities could do their own combined study but the degree of spatial rationality and objectivity in the choice of study area must be open to question in the absence of a regional level overview. In the West Midlands Region places where joint planning work can be expected include the continuation of a pre-existing sub regional grouping of Coventry and Warwickshire, and the South Worcestershire authorities (Worcester, Wychavon, Malvern Hills District Councils).

The local housing authorities' Local Investment Plans once initiated by the HCA could have provided the components of a regional, or more likely sub regional action plan, with an evidence base spanning the Region. These LIPs were only optional for authorities and the HCA involvement in a local authority area was at the authority's invitation, reflecting at least the appearance of a shift in the balance of power in the

early Coalition Government years after 2010, from state to local even for those bodies with a regional presence that did remain.

The coordination of policy at the regional level was something the New Labour Government had intended to bring in, combining RES with RSS and probably RHS. This was to have been combined into a single integrated Regional Strategy, focused on managing and promoting economic growth. This was introduced in the last days of the Labour Government and was then set for repeal in the Localism Bill.

Under the Coalition Government of 2010 the local authorities would either act alone in developing planning and housing strategic policy or perhaps with neighbouring authorities. This may have involved some dialogue with the private sector. The Coalition Government's intention was that business should be uninhibited in investment and growth and so working directly or through LEPs local government could devise new ways of planning for future infrastructure needs without a regional or sub regional tier to coordinate and rationalise this.

New forms of privately funded redevelopment and infrastructure were anticipated to be likely including Tax Increment Financing, and other forms of accessing the enhanced value of land where regeneration is to take place in order to fund and deliver up-front infrastructure.

The Coalition Government faced tensions arising from its approach to localism. Localism and the removal of intervening professional and democratic processes resulted in a lack of mechanisms for managing community representation where large infrastructure projects were proposed. In these, the minister would, 'democratically' decide in the national interest. This could bring home to communities the limits to the devolution of power. Examples of such development included the

storage of low level nuclear waste and the HS2 rail service with some local community cynicism voiced about community empowerment. There may be an erosion of credibility around the Neighbourhood Planning and the political rhetoric with which it has been accompanied, with much the same outcome as afflicted Regional Spatial Planning.

Regional Housing Boards – Who was on them and why?

The core membership was set out in a ministerial letter and included ex-officio members from GOWM, HC then HCA and English Partnerships. The logic of the Kate Barker merger recommendation for RPBs and RHBs was that there should be membership shared between the RPB and the RPB to facilitate the crossover of ideas and ensure consensus at the partnership political level.

As for how the political membership was selected, this differed between regions. In the West Midlands the structures and constitutional forms were already in being with the WMLGA Planning and Environment Committee being the fore runner of the subsequent RPB structure.

The West Midlands RHB, when transferred from GOWM to the WMRA, was the constitutional body which held the formal responsibility for providing advice to the minister on behalf of the Assembly, whereas for the RPB, the formal structure was the Regional Planning Partnership and the RPE. The Regional Planning Partnership had a much larger membership nominated from across the local authorities in the region and Other Stakeholders and business and delegated certain decision making responsibilities to the Regional Planning Executive. Notwithstanding this difference between the regional housing and planning structures within the WMRA, the membership of the RHB met two sets of principles. Local authority members on the

RHB were selected on a proportional basis to the political representation on the Assembly (itself based on the numbers of councillors elected in the region for each party) and secondly, there should be representation from each of the four sub regional housing market areas. In addition, there were the nominated representatives for the West Midlands Business Council and the Other Stakeholders' Group.

This structure pushed the representative composition of the RHB down to sub regional level and provided the opportunity (in theory at least) for Sub Regional HMA officer partnerships to liaise with and exchange briefings with members on the RHB. By this means it was hoped to build a regionally and sub regionally cohesive housing policy network. This would link both officers and members so that policy debate at the RHB and in the sub regions would be well informed, linked in with regional planning policy development, and receive a degree of political leadership.

The Effectiveness of Sub Regional Housing Market Area Representation

This design did not work as well as intended. There were only a selection of members directly involved in the RHB. Most authorities were not represented. Those officers attending the Sub Regional HMAs were increasingly drawn from the third or fourth tier once Directors and Assistant Directors in local housing authorities had established what was happening. These third and fourth tier officers had varying levels of contact with Cabinet members for housing. However there was no effective connectivity between RHB local authority members and the Regional Housing Partnership officers who were often employed in neighbouring authorities. The effectiveness of the link between these elected members and officers was never comprehensively developed, or only in a few places where a closer level of

involvement in regional working was approved by an authority. Thus in most cases RHB members were largely disconnected from officers representing their sub region on the RHB and the sub regional housing partnerships. As a consequence, most local authority members were probably oblivious to the RHB.

Thus horizontal communications between members on regional housing issues was not effective. There was a further aspect to this disjointed communication. Although the GOWM and the Housing Corporation had agreements that specific individual local authorities would lead the sub regional HMA group of authorities, these were officer based leads, not elected members. Thus the lead authorities at an officer level were not necessarily represented on the RHB by one of their members. This also lead to a loss of connectivity such that the HMA would proceed at officer level but little if any of this work or debate would reach the elected members on the RHB except and unless this was presented in reports by the Assembly Secretariat. In order to facilitate this and mitigate the poor communication issues a standing item was put on the RHB agenda and HMA leads asked to provide a short report on progress.

The annual May local elections brought about changes in membership which may have widened knowledge of the RHB and its role. From 2008, as the New Labour era was felt to be ending by the Conservatives, their attendance on the RHB diminished. Some also decided not to attend for other reasons.

The structures would have worked more effectively if,

- More energy and reliable input had been provided from several local housing authorities,
- Better communication between members and officers within sub regional HMAs had been achieved,

- Reliable communications between the sub regional structures and the RHB members were achieved, and
- More of the strategic planning issues for housing had been shared with the RHB (as it was this was carefully managed by the Secretariat management to avoid opening a wider debate outside the Regional Planning Partnership on politically sensitive local authority housing land supply issues).

This could have been further assisted by each HMA, thus,

West (Shropshire and Herefordshire) – developing fairly good integration at sub regional and regional level with both officer and members

North- good officer leadership by Stoke and Renew North Staffordshire involvement but not well integrated to political membership or between housing associations and the WMRA,

South (Worcestershire and Warwickshire) – Individual authorities had strong political representation but HMA officer integration with these appeared poor. Housing association leadership stronger. Worcestershire housing authorities demonstrated cohesion but less so by 2009-2010 in sharing the HMA with South Warwickshire authorities. Warwick and Coventry wanted their own partnership and the HMA retreated to its constituent counties by late 2009.

Central HMA (West Midlands metropolitan authorities and some neighbouring hinterland authorities)

- Oscillated between working in three further geographical sub-groups of their choice but which proved contentious, and then as one wider HMA. Loss of key officer leadership created a vacuum which lead to a drift.
- The Central HMA had within it a strong Black Country component, supported by a sub-regional RSS (Phase 1 review) and a Black Country Consortium of four local authorities which undertook joint planning policy work. At the eastern end the 'Coventry Solihull Warwickshire partnership' continued to plan sub regionally with

slightly destabilising consequences for the housing strategy teams who felt drawn in different directions. Further within this Coventry Solihull, Warwickshire Partnership their did not seem to be a coherent and comprehensive unity on strategic policy with Solihull appearing to prioritise work with Birmingham on regeneration and renewal.

- The Central HMA was also confused by whether or not it would form part of the emerging City– Region or be replaced by a body solely comprising metropolitan authorities. Nothing came of the City–Region and just as a new consensus around sub regional working was taking shape the Assembly closed its housing operation and then was abolished as DCLG withdrew funding.
- The South Staffordshire housing authorities retained their own sub structures for communication in the south of the County.

RHB Leadership

The leadership for the RHB formally came from the Chairman who was the Cabinet member for Housing in a large urban metropolitan authority. His subdued enthusiasm for the Assembly, of regional work and strategy was well known.

Unsurprisingly the Chairman was content to let the Assembly Secretariat bring to the RHB the business required by Government as expressed by GOWM and the Housing Corporation. There were some issues upon which the Chairman required a briefing but the RHB did not initiate policy or set direction. The Assembly Secretariat role in the RHB was to respond to the issues raised by the local authorities in their HMAs, the housing evidence base, monitoring and research reports, the evolving RSS revision, Government housing policy, and that of the Housing Corporation, and other Government bodies.

Only on the subject of whether or not to approve a bid for Gypsy and Traveller Grant on an expensive site did the RHB intervene demanding cost savings and further work.

Were Regional Structures part of the 'Big State' machinery and State Planning?

Referring to the Regional Assembly, the principal of regionalism was to devolve power from the centre, and this did occur in some respects such as the bottom up influence from housing authorities in the Comprehensive Spending Review 2008-11 and the Regional Funding Allocation (2005) and Advice (2009).

The resistance to national demographic and political pressures through the RSS Phase 2 revision on allocating land for greater housing numbers showed that the WMRA spoke for the regional 'voice' and did not yield completely to the GOWM, ministerial pressures or NHPAU housing market modelling.

The WMRA (at least in its own view) was not a 'centrist' or 'statist' body but it was vulnerable to ministers making it the channel for centrally directed policy decisions which could override regional policy or preferences. This will have given the impression that the Assembly was part of a centrist state control. This is not to be wondered at, partly because the ministers held the money and had national political priorities that ministers had to be seen to be addressing. The Assembly was ever only advisory and was a shadow or fledgling body not properly formed with a directly elected mandate. It never had the aggregation of powers and responsibilities with budgets that the Regional White paper envisaged if a referendum had been held with a positive outcome. So the WMRA was always vulnerable to ministerial override.

Such pressures, which became more frequent as the national housing and then economic situation deteriorated, had the negative effect of undermining the psychological contract between Government and local government, experienced through the framework and functioning of the Regional Assembly. The Assembly was a voluntary activity which stretched local authority resources to contribute to it.

Once Assembly advice was overturned then both credibility and enthusiasm waned. This happened with the 2008 'high level' split of the Regional Housing Pot between capital funding for the Housing Corporation and local authorities, and the appointment of the NLP partnership in 2008 to 'second guess' the RSS phase 2 Revision housing proposals. At that stage the sense that the Regional structures were part of a centrist state machine would have grown.

The process of developing policy was based upon nationally provided ONS population forecasts and a locally derived opinion on the appropriate regional planning response. This regional processing of the evidence base and the formulation of the policy response was not centrist and if regional and sub regional housing land requirements were to be understood, the work needed to be done.

Housing market forces continued to operate across the West Midlands sub regions, albeit the objective for a range of sustainability reasons was to reverse these so that more housing was provided in the major urban areas than the rural areas. There was certainly a degree of direction in the planning policy for housing, but this was a consensus reached locally and not without tensions. So even this was a democratic policy not one forced blindly on the region by a national machine.

The Central Government policy priority for growth did become a strong national objective which had to be managed within the framework of the RSS and which was tested in front of the EiP Panel in 2009. Some growth areas were resisted successfully, and the democratic and professional processes operated to test, check and refine both government and regional aspirations. We will never know what the Labour ministers would have decided had they been in office to respond to the Inspector's Panel Report. In the end, the final proof of how far ministers were

prepared to go in forcing their policy views on the West Midlands will never be known, (or may be when government papers are released decades ahead).

The Housing Corporation/HCA could have its priorities for investment overridden by Central Government in response to national political priorities. A recent example of this was the priority given to measures to counter the recession effects, one in mortgage rescue, although the numbers were small and another in the 'Kickstart' regeneration process to restart construction on shelved or mothballed development schemes. There were points at which ministers intervened to address issues of national importance. The 2008 RHP advice of 'high level split' between HA.s and LA.s was a key example. Because Birmingham, Sandwell and Stoke still owned their municipal housing stock, as did a few other LA.s, the split had been broadly 50:50 between them. This was quite different from other regions where the stock had been largely transferred to housing associations and other housing organisations, and so the split was more typically 80:20 in favour of the HA.s. However the Government wanted to put more money into affordable housing following the advice of Kate Barker. The Government did not want the split recommended by the West Midlands RHB and wanted more to go to the housing associations, without assessing whether they could absorb the increase in their programmes. Pressure was brought to bear by Government to get the RHB to change its 'advice' to be inline this ministerial intention on pain of losing the funding if the RHB did not comply. It was not that the extra affordable housing would not meet a real need. It would. It was just that this was not the democratically voiced advice of the RHB and based upon consultation with LA.s. The structure they set up advised the Government one way and the Government want something different. So the pattern was of two continuing strands of government policy, growth, and meeting the household growth projections.

The RHS delivery was never pushed by Central Government beyond the Housing Corporation allocation of housing grant. Even here the budgetary priority to spend the money took ultimate precedence over ensuring it was allocated in accordance with the RHS and the Capital allocation strategy.

The RHS referred to the need for the demographic needs of the population to be matched to an appropriate mix of housing. The housing stock had to meet the needs of the economic growth requirements of the local area. The place for this to be worked through and carried out was by the local authorities, though despite encouragement from the Secretariat it is doubtful whether this was ever thought through. Despite the principle of strategy directing what was needed where, developments were opportunistic in locations used and market driven in terms of mix and type. It was said that given needs were so numerous any affordable housing would meet a need. This was the weakness of strategy without the means of controlling delivery.

13.4 Appendix 2.3 Literature Review: Press Review 2002-3

The range of opinion recorded in the WMRA Press archive is discussed in Chapter 2. Apart from the positive arguments for an elected assembly made mainly by a few West Midlands local authority councillors the substantial majority of opinion printed was negative in content and character. Quantifying such material was not possible, not least because several articles appeared under different 'mast heads' servicing different parts of the West Midlands. There was nothing to indicate the basis upon which the archive had accumulated press cuttings. The items in Chapter 2 are set out here with their citation sources.

A selection of West Midlands press references is given below covering the range of negative press towards the idea of an elected regional assembly for the West Midlands:-

- a) The proposed assembly would be in Birmingham and therefore gave the regional dominant city further power over the rural West Midlands. (e.g. Connolly.S. 'Brum Can't Run Itself: MP's shock blast over assembly fears' Birmingham Evening Mail 13 Dec 2002).
- b) The proposed size of the assembly of 35 elected members allocated according to local authorities' population size was seen as reinforcing Birmingham's dominance and disempowering shire areas, (e.g. P. Bradborne MEP Edgbaston: Birmingham Post 15 Nov 2002)
- c) Opposition to 'artificially created' assemblies due to concomitant potential abolition of County Councils and Parish Councils. (e.g. Opposition to regional government. G.West letter to Bromsgrove Advertiser, 28 Aug 2002; Scathing Attack of Assembly [by P. Luff MP] Worcester Evening News 19 Oct 2002;

Axe Looms over Parish Councils, [by V.Taylor Conservative PPC Hereford].

The Ross Gazette 5 Sept 2002)

- d) Assemblies would be expensive (e.g. Assemblies would cost taxpayers, Hereford Times 17 Oct 2002).
- e) An assembly would be a talking shop.(e.g. Devolved into a talking shop Birmingham Post. 24 Oct 2003;'Talking Shop' assembly would cost taxpayers £174m a year. P.Dale in Birmingham Post 24 Nov 2003)
- f) Belief that regionalisation was an EU, and UK Government, plot to bypass the English Parliament, dissolving the significance of the English nation state in favour of an EU 'super state' and government from Brussels via the new regional assemblies. (e.g.The Brits must speak up and loud. J. Alexander letter to Hereford and Leominster Journal 25 Feb 2002; Withdraw from Euro Charade by J.Goss letter to Shropshire Star 27 Feb 2002.; The EU has its own Regional Agenda, C.Cooke letter to Atherstone Herald, 8 Aug 2002; Another step towards Federalist Ambition, by P Bradbourn in Staffordshire Newsletter 26 June 2003; We will lose our identity, letter by M. Sheppard UK Independence Party, in Alcester Standard 21 Nov 2003).

13.5 Appendix 3.1 Theories Considered but not Used.

Initially a wider appraisal of potentially useful theories were examined to see how they might assist in understanding the course and demise of regionalisation under New Labour.

Over the 1980s and 1990s theories about national policy making have been developed and used in major housing studies such as Dunleavy (1981) and between housing , social policy and other welfare state provision, Clapham. Kemp and Smith (1990). These refer to competing theories namely,

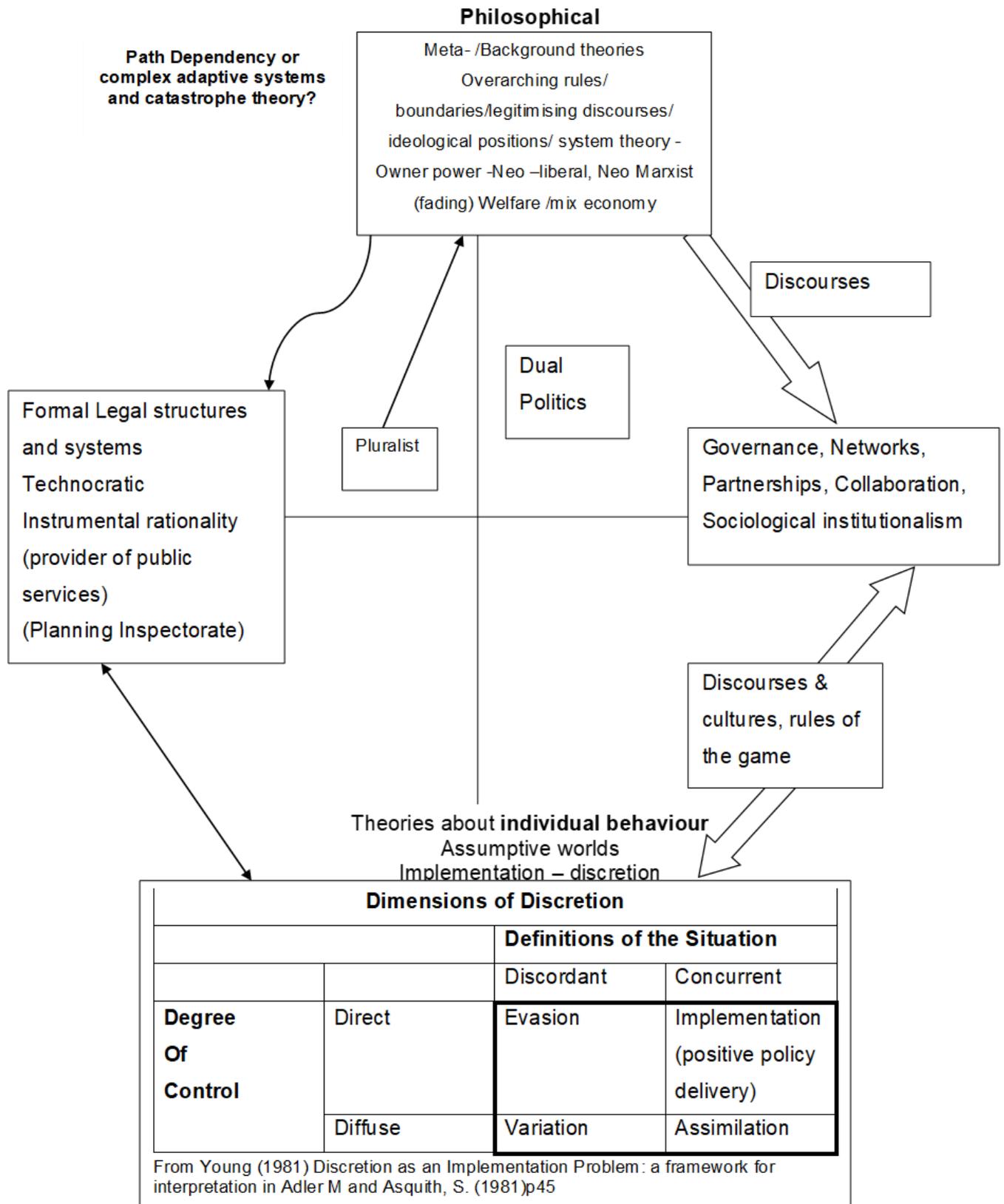
- Pluralist
- Neo –pluralism
- Neo- Marxist
- Corporatism and
- Dual politics.

Assumptive Worlds

Of interest was the possible insight provided by the concept of ‘assumptive worlds’ (Young and Mills 1980; Young, 1981; Fudge and Barrett, 1981) adopted by policy actors built up through their layered career experiences which comprise their model of the world, their values and personal professional ideology. This theory suggests the explanations for the behaviours of policy actors in applying policies are shaped by these views of reality, which can be quite different from the expressed formal view of their organisation, and the purposes it ascribes to its policies. Since these theories were developed radical change has taken place in the way public services, the organisational arrangements and actors have changed.

However, the underlying power relationships may still function though the visible organisational architecture has changed over the intervening years. These theories were considered as they might have had a potentially useful base from which to take

Diagram for Initial Application of Theory to the Study of Regionalism and Regional Planning and Housing in the West Midlands



'back bearings' in theoretical development. This was thought possible since there is scepticism in newer theories, claiming the old underlying patterns have not gone away (Davies, 2011) and therefore the theories that best applied then may have resonance now.

This theory could have been significant in assessing whether key Secretariat staff imposed a form of regional working, partnership management or policy which ploughed an independent furrow from either that required by Government or by local government. Had this occurred this theory could have worked in conjunction with other theory, for example, Allmendinger's 'institutional entrepreneurs' (2011,p55). These can be powerful agents of policy change when previous policy solutions no longer work or are accepted. In the WMRA the previous Regional Planning policy developed under the WMLGA and approved by the New Labour Government in 2004 was not only accepted in the region but defended robustly by local authority planning professionals and governance members as pressure from Central Government then grew over the new build housing numbers policy. Schmidt's (2008) 'Public Philosophies' with its 'normative' component – deep world views, and values, which underpin and provide the justification for the ideas or values implicit with a policy, appears similar to the 'higher level' of an individual's 'assumptive world' and could have been applied to the Assembly Secretariat Planners , senior managers and some the Assembly's Regional Planning Body political governance.

13.6 Appendix Table 3.1 Summary of New Institutional Theories

considered but not used in research design.

New Institutional Theory	Degree of Use of Theory (Peters, 2012)
Normative,	Some concepts useful in assessing the WMRA, its role and actors' behaviour. The 'logics of appropriateness' concept was useful: questions about values – Consensus , partnership working, and organisational legitimacy were used in research. However, Theory lacked sufficient usability to investigate the local authorities and other membership elements of the WMRA and its regional interlocutors. Theory had some relationship to WMRA working but did not contribute clearly to understanding the WMRA's experience and how and why regional working was ended.
Empirical,	Experimental design based methodology. Concepts of 'multi-level governance' (p 98) and the potential to, 'provide greater flexibility and autonomy in policy' (p 99) relate to the research topic. Concepts of 'shared sovereignty' (p 98) between central and subnational government are seen as potentially leading to, 'greater political efficacy and trust.' (p 99). However little theoretical development of institutional change or demise.
Discursive, and Constructionist	As discussed above. Contribution to understanding institutional change considers how actors cope with the prospect of not succeeding in having their ideas implemented. Peters offers 'exit' (p 120) as one of the choices open. Alternatively, an actor may attempt to 'tinker' (p 120) with existing ideas to produce 'incremental change' (p 120). Whilst this theory offers ideas with which to examine research data it is insufficient to address the complexity of the WMRA and its relationships.
Interest Representation	This approach sees institutions as, 'socially or theoretically constructed' (p 151) such as 'epistemic communities and policy networks' (p 151). It considers networks in which,

	<p>'organisations function within larger aggregations of organisations.' (p 143). However this theory tends to apply in stable relationships between state and society which allow 'rational calculations by the participants' (p 149). There is an expectation that 'constituent organisations Cooperate with other organisations to work towards a general consensus...' (p 149). There are overlaps in the concepts of 'epistemic community' with discursive institutionalism and party ideologies and policies are close to normative institutionalism's 'logics of appropriateness'. (p 145). According to Peters (2012) this theory has been mainly applied to aspects of political parties and interest groups.</p>
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Although an Institutional Logics (Scott, 2001;Thornton and Ocasio, 2008) perspective connects with the different actor standpoints within the WMRA, the three types of New Institutional Theory (NIT) as discussed by Peters (2012), provided a more readily identifiable framework for understanding the dynamics between the actor groups which led to the WMRA's demise. Institutional Logics theory applies more readily to an organisation and its governance as a closed system where the boundary management function operates to select and recruit both staff and managers who are broadly engaged to support and deliver the aims of the organisation. In the case of WMRA this was a much more open system where the senior management of the organisation was unable to exercise complete control of recruitment to both the technical work of policy development and even more importantly it did not sufficiently control the local authority nomination process for selecting WMRA governance membership which as was be seen had important adverse consequences for the organisation. Here the electorate shaped first the outcome of the local authority elections and then based on the proportions of elected

councillors by party were the nominations to the WMRA made by the WMLGA. This allowed some of the actors involved in the Assembly's governance to import covertly hostile attitudes and intentions both over regional governance in general and about the RSS. On this some nominated councillors acted in a subversive manner to sabotage the future of regional strategic planning through representations to the Shadow Conservative ministers.

Among key authors on governance (e.g. Pierre and Peters, 2000) is Rhodes (1997), whose approach may be summarised as 'interdependence confounds centralisation.'(p3). The view that the formal Westminster model of governance founders on the complexity of the variety of institutions and their relationships, is referred to as a 'differentiated polity....characterised by functional and institutional specialisation and the fragmentation of policies and politics.' (Rhodes, 1997,p7). Pierre, (2011) has provided a later critique of governance theory with which to consider the recent English pathway to the abolition of regional governance.

13.7 Appendix 4.1 Analysing Selected New Institutional Theories

Using Peters,(2012) against Author's Experience of Regional Working whilst an Officer of the West Midlands Regional Assembly 2003 to 2010.

This Appendix comprises three figures, extract examples of the work sheets used to process each of the New Institutional Theories (Peters, 2012) selected relating the researcher's participant observation experience to the respective theories.

Figure 4.A Reading Historical Path Determinism against Researcher's Experience of working in the WMRA.

Figure 4B Reading Rational Choice Theory against Researcher's Experience of working in the WMRA

Figure 4.C Reading Sociological Institutionalism (Population Ecology Model) against Researcher's Experience of working in the WMRA.

Fig 4.A. Reading Historical Path Determinism against Researcher's Experience of working in the WMRA

Theories :	Characteristics	Application to Regional discussion	Methodological issues and questions
<p>Historical</p>	<p>P20 Choices made early in the life of an inst... early policy choices – and associated inst commitments determine subsequent decisions. Understand the initial decisions to understand the development. Path dependant – continues 'until some significant force intervenes to divert them from established direction.' Peters 20123^e 64 P21</p> <p>P70 'Path dependency' inertial tendency for initial policy choices to persist. But what if this is inertia rather than persistence?</p> <p>Are the policy choices due to normal institutional patterns of policy making rather than an explicit influence of institutions over those policies. Ideas play a significant independent role p71</p> <p>Problem explaining change.</p> <p>Role of individuals not clear</p> <p>Dominance of ideas early in organisation but do they actually determine the nature of the inst itself p89</p>	<p>Does path dependency have to be conscious persistence? Is inertia the only alternative?</p> <p>If path dependency can be about continuing with a possibly sub optimal policy but pragmatically continuing knowing it delivers some benefits in practise. P71 Was this New Labour's 'What matters is what works' approach to public policy? Within Regional Assembly what was the potential for path dependency?</p> <p>Young inst. But former WMLGA as political forerunner and structure used for selecting political nominations to WMRA eg WMLGA appointed the Chair of the RHB and Regional Planning Body</p> <p>Could this have within it a continuity of expectation about how policy was to be developed? Was the consensus rule adopted from this pre-existing structure?</p> <p>Did the long running Regional Planning Officer Group (under the WMLGA as well) import its own path dependant logic about several things- The legitimacy of the process</p> <p>Identify the ideas that shaped the WMRA and other RA's</p> <p>Applies to Sub National Review changes. The first iteration of inst change.</p> <p>What continuation of ideas – into future what form might regions take, is there a natural evolution from destruction to localism and fragmentation back to uncoordinated re-aggregation (born of logical , pragmatic functional necessity) which eventually will articulate the need for a rational adjustment to rectify the spatial and other inconsistencies leading to some form of re constituted regional form which fills the gap in policy themes, development and management which neither national nor local can satisfactorily undertake.</p>	<p>What of role of ideas about regionalism which preceded the regional inst but were adopted and developed there? Is there a path dependency within Labour especially which is also longer term opportunistic in exploiting political circumstances which allow the regional inst /org experiment to be operationalised?</p>
<p>Historical cont'</p>	<p>Role of ideas – central aspect of structures to 'sell' p84 the ideas of inst to current and future members. Self –selection of those attracted in. Similar to process on Normative Institutionalism (norms and values very similar to ideas) & also similar to Discursive Institutionalism but historical inst has a dominance of one idea over others not an indeterminate milieu of ideas.</p> <p>Institutional design could be the selection of ideas that dominate and drive the inst for its life p84</p> <p>Rationalistic design v political conception of policy choice p85</p> <p>P85 org redesign of existing institutional frames more significant component of the historical inst model than initial design. A conscious reaction against the existing inst and policy frame especially is seen as no longer functional.</p>	<p>Identify the ideas that shaped the WMRA and other RA's</p> <p>Applies to Sub National Review changes. The first iteration of inst change.</p> <p>What continuation of ideas – into future what form might regions take, is there a natural evolution from destruction to localism and fragmentation back to uncoordinated re-aggregation (born of logical , pragmatic functional necessity) which eventually will articulate the need for a rational adjustment to rectify the spatial and other inconsistencies leading to some form of re constituted regional form which fills the gap in policy themes, development and management which neither national nor local can satisfactorily undertake.</p>	<p>Did any of these ideas contribute to its ending?</p>

Fig 4.B. Reading Rational Choice Theory against Researcher's Experience of working in the WMRA

New Institutionalism Theories Worksheet with Application to Regional Experience, July 2012. EXTRACT

Theories:	Characteristics	Application to Regional discussion
<p>Rational Choice Theory (RCT)</p>	<p>Behaviour a function of rules and incentives Institutions are systems of rules, inducements for individuals to maximise own utilities. Shows equilibrium, functionalist, inst emerge to meet social and economic necessities.</p> <p>Variants p51</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principle – agent models • Game – theoretic • Rule – based <p>RCT – common assumptions – maximise utility - Common set of problems Structure induced equilibrium p51 How to reach a decision that is not imposed by hierarchy? How to ensure compliance in public inst (problem for principle – agents p52)</p> <p>Non – historical and design of inst to a template based upon Easy to change culture and org by changing incentives – contrary to Historical and Normative Institutionalism</p> <p>'The virtue of the institution is that the rules are agreed upon in advance so that the participants realise what they are agreeing to when they join the institution p54</p>	<p>What necessity drove their reestablishment in a RCT view? Analyse Regional Assemblies from an RCT perspective. Is there a different utility for each group of actors? Did they achieve equilibrium? Was it threatened? How, where why, to whom, what consequence? List the actors- did each have a different utility maximisation position and was this negotiated into an equilibrium or submerged, until over time the context changed and allowed submerged goals to be realised.</p> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin: 10px 0;"> <p>Each political party – LG, Govt Chief Execs/ LA, Leaders CLG Ministers/ CLG civil servants/ GOWM/ HMT Planning profession – LA/ Private sector Housing Strategists: LA/ Sub groups of Regional Assembly – RPE/ RPP: RHB/ RHP and successors/ RA Secretariat – Planning /Housing /Senior management</p> </div> <p>The regional organisational system was multilayered. Were different models operating on different layers? Eg Were LA, Councillors operating to a political RCT on their own plain while also (appearing) to act within the rules and logic of appropriateness within the Regional Assembly?</p> <p>Does not seem to work for the Regional Assemblies. To what extent did this operate for the politicians – clus? Were the rules of producing strategic plans for the region agreed? Was the logic of meeting household growth, changing the balance of rural – urban development, accommodating immigration in new housing numbers understood and accepted. (By the public, clus, planners, national political parties)?</p>
	<p>RCT assumes there will be rounds of the 'game'. If not then there is no opportunity to make up for losses in one round. In this case the RCT suggests from the perspective of rationality, - the means of making stable choices not present so there is an extremely contentious political environment</p>	<p>RSS was (30 yr) long term (albeit with reviews 15yr) so not perceived to be a 'game' of rounds but a one off political decision process so behaviour was agitated and the contentiousness rose out from the confines of the plan policy making process and went into the meta – political level (national) for a drastic solution- but not under New Labour – it still wanted to achieve its growth of new housing and with authoritarian drive changed processes to make its will realised. The political recourse was in the Conservative Party with its pledge to abolish RAS.</p>

Fig 4.C. Reading Sociological Institutionalism (Population Ecology Model) against Researcher's Experience of working in the WMRA

Theories :	Characteristics	Application to Regional discussion	Methodological issues and questions
<p>Sociological Institutionalism</p>	<p>P21 Relationship between state and society. Corporatism / corporate pluralism Networks with form and structure Relationship of formal and informal and between gov and society</p> <p>P130 note capacity of organisations to persist after ostensible purpose has gone institutions have a capacity to defend their core values (and especially their fundamental existence) even when confronted with objective conditions that might seem to negate their utility. p130</p> <p>Organisational ecology models- p132 environment of organisations is only so strong, to be able to support a given number of organisations. (Carrying capacity)</p> <p>Organisational niche- mixture of resources that enables a specific type of organisation to survive (eg budgetary, legal mandates, political support, mass political support)</p> <p>Some niches wider than others.</p> <p>Important question for population ecology model is organisational survival p132 in hostile environment. Survival as a function of age, where age of organisations affects chance of survival. Both very young orgs and very old orgs being in jeopardy. Emphasises the dependency of organisations on their environment and their embeddedness in society and economy. P133</p> <p>Suggests also organisational competition for resources, survival p133</p>	<p>So what went wrong for Regional Assemblies? Did some Regional LGA structures survive? Were these set up and owned differently? (Is this due to financial limitations, views about the roles which need to be fulfilled, - the areas of society that need to be 'serviced' by organisations?)</p>	<p>Could the Regional organisational niche sustain Assemblies or were the 'resources' too little?</p>
<p>Sociological Institutionalism Cont.</p>	<p>Just as systems of meaning. Behaviour depends on the meanings incorporated and symbols manipulated (?) p133. ... cognitive emphasis. Has more to do with perception than with evaluation. Just as professional membership may create a trained incapacity to perceive problems and evidence in other than the professional manner, so the membership in an institution is argued to create the same sort of perceptual frame. P134 affects how decisions are made vs how inputs are received Why do relatively similar inst emerge in very different social and political settings? = isomorphism Convergence - for different reasons</p>	<p>Note the WMRA was a very young organisation (1997) grafted onto, or out of a longer running WMLGA. But regionalism did change the nature of the new Assembly from the WMLGA committees that existed before. Did this evolutionary arrangement lead to a self-deception that the WMRA was secure because it was rooted in older structures and the senior political positions were held by WMLGA LA Members?</p> <p>Did the crossover of membership convey within itself the comfort of thinking it was a more mature organisation than it was, when seen from outside, or from LA's more generally? Central Govt would not have seen this as an older organisation as they were looking for their agenda of RSS to be fulfilled. Govt would probably have approved of the organic regional development but would have placed less store by this than the WMRA - staff and key members.</p> <p>This competition came out most clearly in the RDA verses WMLGA positions during the Sub National Review period and process. LA is also competed for influence in strategic planning policy development, but this was within the WMRA. For them the WMRA was a type of institutional environment within which competitiveness and ideas negotiation took place.</p>	<p>What effect did this have on the Assembly? Did it lead to over confidence, arrogance or an exceeding of its role and remit to its own detriment?</p> <p>Consider whether this applies to the case study regions compared with the West Midlands? Did it have consequences for the outcome and organisational survival?</p>

Theories :	Characteristics	Application to Regional discussion	Methodological issues and questions
<p>Sociological Institutionalism Cont.</p>	<p>Sedimentation p134 = characteristic of life that current practices are built on the past and that beneath practice are layers of values and understandings left from earlier times. P135 = reflects the historical and cumulative nature of institutions. Transformed over time but retaining past history whilst also redefining themselves too. Note consequences for conceptualisation of change. There may be value incompatibility over time requiring adjustments which could slow change down.</p> <p>Inst archetypes p135 (ideal types) and change is limited at any one point in time to a range of other archetypes. Change between archetypes – deinstitutionalisation and reinstitutionalisation. Replacing elements.</p> <p>Institutionalisation process key p137</p> <p>P138 regulative rendition of <i>inst</i> relies on rules and control for defining institutions. Here <i>inst</i> seekto regulate behaviour within <i>its</i> confines, and perhaps also to control social behaviour more generally in society.</p> <p>P140 <i>insts</i> try to recognise challenges in their <i>env</i>, and conform to those requirements- But also try to shape their <i>env</i>, too not waiting passively to respond. And to meet <i>its</i> <i>env's</i> needs.</p> <p>Public sector orgs are supposed to have greater ability to shape their <i>env</i>, by building political support, create their own clientele p140</p> <p>Org ecology – impetus for change comes from outside. If it cannot adapt it will die. Internal change less significant than the number of orgs attempting to occupy a domain. Carrying capacity</p>	<p>Changes following SRN – WMRA and WMLGA give way to <i>WU</i> <i>Uds</i> Leaders Board and 'Joint strategy and Investment Board' in the last year or two of New Labour Government.</p> <p>Were Regional Assemblies too broadly active across policy fields which they had no national and may be a doubtful local remit for, or were they too focused and constrained by their CLG remit, very limited funding, obese government <i>overweight</i> and business plan accountability?</p> <p>Carrying capacity of <i>env</i> in 2010 had shrunk allowing the economic situation as interpreted by Government to the public as a pretext for ideologically driven change. Assemblies were very cheap. Local Government could have been rationalised and regions been elected as part of a localisation / devolution agenda. But the hollowing out of the state would have been greater and this it is suggested was a concern to both Labour and Conservatives, so alternatives were not promoted.</p>	<p>Was this the underlying view of the purpose of planning and RSS housing policy especially? To control development and the trend in market forces to achieve what the planning, and political class saw as a more sustainable (good) society. So the RSS would have an influence on individuals in future. To what extent was this seen, when and how it was interpreted (grossly overestimated and feared?)</p>
<p>Sociological Institutionalism Cont.</p>	<p>The good institution p141</p> <p>Population ecology model (similar to isomorphism – adapting to external pressures – process of change mimesis , coercion , normative) – Longevity = success</p> <p>Inst /organisation has little control over its own capacity to survive p141</p> <p>Cognitive- capacity to process inputs of information appropriately</p> <p>Normative- <i>inst</i> inculcate its values into members</p> <p>Regulative- RCT- controlling behaviour of participants through rules and incentives</p> <p>=together these control <i>inst</i> and behaviour of individuals.</p> <p>The difficulty for the public sector is specifying the environmental conditions under which institutions may be created and dissolved. p142</p>	<p>Applies to WMRA</p>	<p>Test whether this is supported</p>

13.8 Appendix 4.2 Extract of the First Iteration of moving from the Components of the Thesis to Interview Questions.

This extract has been redacted to obscure the details of the potential interviewees along the horizontal axis.

Thesis to Interview Questions (extract)

From Theory to Thesis	a) CLO staff	c) Conservative Party Policy Unit	c) Conservative Home	f) Authors of Open Source Planning	g) Labour MPs (former Regional Ministers)	f)	j) GOWM	j) GOWM	RDA,AWM	Housing Corporation	Possible interviewees
1. 'Why did Regionalism end?', (Applies to all 3 tiers)	ASK	ASK	ASK	ASK	ASK	ASK	ASK	ASK	ASK	ASK	ASK
2. a) Regional Planning for housing- so threatening drove thinking that regional institutions had to close?	ASK	ASK	ASK	ASK	ASK	ASK	ASK	ASK			
b) or regionalism so flawed, - lack of legitimacy damned Regional planning?	ASK	ASK	ASK	ASK	ASK	ASK	ASK	ASK			

13.9 Appendix 4.3. Pilot Questionnaire Topic Headings

The topic headings under which questions were asked,

- Introductory – situating the interviewee in organisation(s) , role(s) and timeframe
- Request an overview of the course of regionalism in the New labour era (to establish what the interviewees saw as the key events prior to responding to questions and discussion)
- Relationship between Regionalism and Regional Planning?

Characteristics of Regional Assembly working

- Institutional Change
- Perception of planning for housing issues.
- Impact of SNR, NHPAU & NLP (modified to focus on political impact for political interviewees)
- Alternative factors, perspectives?
- Review of pre-interview briefing. (Did it help, guide or impose a false bias/ constraint?)

The questions developed under each of the topics listed above were refined and developed in their wording in anticipation of each interviewees' roles, history, and experience.

Beyond seeking to obtain a narrative view of events in and surrounding the work and ending of regional working the questions sought to test whether events happened as the relevant theory suggested. Given much of the New Institutional Theory is incomplete in its explanation of predicting the failure or ending of organisations the perspectives given might help to explore this area further and add to the theoretical relevance to regional governance.

The first part of the interview was given to situating the interviewee's position, role, career in regional working, and the periods in which they were involved. Interviewees were asked to say how close or distant they were to the range of other groups of

actors, so as to see how strongly embedded they were and where, in or outside of the regional architecture. This showed what the degree of awareness each actor had and about which aspects. It also suggested the extent to which their responses were influenced by a wide, or narrow, range of connections. Such data helped understand the degree of influence such inputs may have had on their account, what vested interests they may still feel obliged to respect, and hence the weight and manner in which they account should be used in the analysis.

This process acted as a corrective with some interviewees where my initial pre-interview understanding of their connections had been only partial, or in the case of one civil servant quite mistaken. They were much less connected to the central government Civil Service and to ministers than I had thought to be the case.

It was further hoped that narratives and perspectives counter to my original draft thesis would emerge. These would have to be given particular attention to prevent a biased account and would need to be reflected in the final analysis. One such was the finding that some lined the existence of regions with the European Union to the detriment of the importance of 'England'. Similarly some evidence may be found to support or challenge theory.

13.10 Appendix 4.4 From Theory to Questions: Application of Theory in the Pilot Research Interviews.

Document redacted to protect interviewees' anonymity.	
Theoretical basis for Questions	Proposed Questions in first six pilot interviews
<p>This introductory section establishes,</p> <p>a) the organisations the interviewee worked for from 1997 to 2010, and their roles</p> <p>b) the relationship of the interviewee with other actors and establishes the degree to which they were embedded, and therefore knowledgeable about those bodies where they were either employed or had some degree of contact.</p> <p>c) theoretical value: situates actor in relation to time/era, places actor within the relevant theoretical framework (e.g. as an WRMA planner in Secretariat subject to partnership working, consensus, and allows exploration of Historical Institutionalism and path dependency)</p> <p>Comment:</p> <p>i) this approach avoided the researcher making assumptions based on past experience, which on occasions proved to be incomplete, and</p> <p>ii) revealed that the extent of contact with other actors was much less than anticipated, or that the depth of understanding was either more or in some cases less than anticipated.</p>	<p><u>Situating Your Experience</u></p> <p>First please tell me the positions you held and when.</p> <p>What was your range of contacts within and outside the Assembly?</p> <p>What were your 'interfaces' with WMRA LA. members, other Regional bodies, Govt Civil Service, local authority senior management, planners, other significant groups of policy or professional or political actors?</p>
<p>This section establishes an early appreciation of the interviewee's key recollections about the course of regionalism. This helped to clarify and interviewee's view about what was important and where their primary perspective was rooted, and over what issues.</p> <p>Possible identification of 'punctuated equilibrium' events.</p>	<p><u>Your Perspective of the Historical Trajectory of course of regionalism in the West Midlands</u></p> <p><u>Beginning at a time when you were first involved in regional matters:- I would like to hear your account of the key stages in the life and demise of Regional Governance*</u>,</p> <p>*Regional Assembly / Leaders' Board, and associated structures.</p>

<p>Theory – Historical Path Dependency Issues related to change over time.</p>	<p><u>Additional Question in Secretariat Planning Questionnaire</u> What do you recall were the political views about establishing WMRA? Subsequent trajectories of those views? e.g Any local authority role in the Planning and Compensation Act 2004 and the Sec 4.4 amendment?</p> <p>What did you know of the National Conservative Party view – 1997 -2004 and 2005-2010?</p>
<p>This open-ended question sought to gather perspectives on the different actor groups with whom the interviewee had contact. Dependent upon which groups were discussed this data contributed to the theoretical perspectives related to those groups, (e.g. perspectives on local politicians contributed to data in relation to Rational Choice Theory). The 2nd question in this section sought to trace any indication of how and why attitudes in actor groups may have changed over the course of regionalism. This contributed to an understanding of ‘time’, the dynamics of change, why actor groups were responding to whom, and why. But also related directly to the primary research question.</p>	<p><u>Perspectives on Key ‘Actor’ Groups.</u></p> <p>Your ‘interfaces’ :- What were the views of regionalism from these different groups that you were aware of?</p> <p>Could you trace the course of the development of those views over the 2002-2010 period – for each group (e.g. Local Authority Cllrs by party, LA. planners, WMRA Management, WMRA planners, DCLG, HMT)?</p>
<p>These questions explored what relationship there may have been between the WMRA planning activity and its external organisational environment. Theoretical value: these questions seek to integrate the relationship between actor groups, and therefore the extent to which the theories which relate to their behaviour contribute to a more holistic understanding of the trajectory of the Assembly. The second question is key to obtaining perspectives on a fundamental dichotomy of the relationship between regional working generally on regional planning. Theoretical value here relates to the organisational environment, population ecology model, and whether the critical theory perspective was at all evident.</p>	<p><u>Relationship between Regionalism and Regional Planning?</u></p> <p>Was there in your view any relationship between policy work at the regional level including Regional Planning and the view taken of Regionalism, - whether in the politics of the region or at a national level (New Labour & Conservative)?</p> <p>Did the end of regionalism drag strategic planning down with it? Or were both equally going to end for the same or different reasons?</p>

<p>Much of the organisational and New Institutional Theory literature focuses on how organisations adapt to their environment and therefore survive. This question explores this in relation to WMRA. Question also relates possible 'punctuated equilibrium' defence and literature on organisational failure/demise</p>	<p>Was there anything Regional Assemblies did, or did not do that caused or influenced hostile opinions in Govt and Govt depts. towards them? Regional institutions - any opportunity to change and survive?</p>
<p>This section relates to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) governance theory literature b) Davies's Critical Theory critique- the place of 'trust' and the genuineness of partnership collaboration. <p>Topic has '<u>horizontal</u>' regional aspects which tie into the political governance of the Assembly – 'trust' and genuineness, hence;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> c) Rational Choice Theory applications for politicians involved, and <u>vertical</u> aspects of d) the meaning and reality of the Assembly's 'devolved' relationship with Central Government i.e. organisational environment. e) 	<p><u>Characteristics of Regional Assembly working</u></p> <p>the emphasis on <u>Partnership</u> working - origins, reasons, outworking, role in regional governance</p>
<p>Question seeks to find the root of the Assembly's culture of consensus working. Theoretical issue: is this due to a long term practice, transferred from WMLGA to WMRA, or required by government, or some other source. It raises issues of what different actor groups and individuals understood by 'consensus', if anything, and what view they took of its impact on the Assembly. –</p> <p>Ties into Partnership working, norms of appropriateness and creates a potential conflict for some political actors if they are working to a different model, Rational Choice Theory.</p> <p>Local and regional consensus creates a value based resistance to external organisational influence and power seeking to mould policy outcome to its agenda. Theory relates to operation of 'hegemony' in Critical Theory.</p>	<p>The '<u>consensus</u>' model of political and policy development working. Who required this?</p> <p>What role did it play over the life of the WMRA and the RSS?</p>
<p>An open question to ensure other unspecified issues are not overlooked all out by virtue of the way in which the questionnaire is constructed.</p>	<p>Any other key features or cultures which shaped the way the WMRA did its work?</p>

<p>Question relates to Organisational Environment, - a) the issue of timing, and the degree to which complete organisational failure was not foreseen by the Assembly's Secretariat and governance, b) theoretical aspect-contributes data to the integration of how different actor groups operating within their predominant theoretical model related or failed to relate.</p> <p>Second question relates to the population ecology model in the degree of competition for a key niche in the region.</p>	<p><u>Institutional Change</u></p> <p>When and why (if ever) did it appear Regional Assemblies and or regional planning was vulnerable to extinction either by New Labour or by Conservatives?</p> <p>Who else was vying for this strategic planning role?</p>
<p>Question relates to the timing and ability of Secretariat to scan its external environment successfully (Organisational Environment issue). Leads to discussion about where the greatest threat to the organisation came from the degree to which different actor groups were aware of this.</p>	<p>What were you aware of about the development Conservative thinking on Regional working, at Regional and National level? (culminating in the Caroline Spelman letter (Aug 2009) to Strategic Planning Authorities)</p>
<p>Question relates to some key events national and regional level. Theoretical aspects here are to do with the effect on path dependency within WMRA, effect on political behaviour and therefore implications for Rational Choice Theory and the changing attitude of New Labour Government from the Assembly's Organisational Environment.</p>	<p>Did you perceive the New Labour Kate Barker Review, the NHPAU or the commissioning of NLP have a political impact at LA. level or WMRA and shape local political attitudes to regional working?</p>
<p>Yvette Cooper MP Minister of State for Housing and Planning to 2005- 2008 reported by Davies,(2007), criticised the South East of England Regional Assembly for arguing the level of housebuilding be reduced at the same time the government published its Housing Green Paper (23rd July 2007) which sought to promote new housebuilding in England at 240,000 per year.</p> <p>Being aware of this comment, this question was included to test out whether similar views might be expressed by the New Labour Government about the WMRA. In terms of theory this relates to the WMRA's external Organisational Environment possible indication of growing New Labour 'hegemony'.</p>	<p>Were (and if so why and when) Regional Assemblies seen as oppositional to Govt? If so what level of tolerance did govt have for this?</p>
<p>This open question sought to provide opportunity for any key issues that might have emerged from other regions to be brought to light</p>	<p>What were you aware of happening in other regions that might cast light on the overall course of regionalism in England?</p>

<p>This open question sought to provide an opportunity for any issues as yet not discussed come to light.</p>	<p><u>Alternative factors, perspectives?</u></p> <p>In considering the overall question of why regionalism came to an end , are there any other factors at local , regional, or national level which you feel should be taken into account , that we have not yet covered.</p>
	<p>Additional questions and revised wording for Civil Service and professional planning interviewees. Main question in bold with interviewer prompts in lowercase, used as required.</p>
<p>An exploratory question aimed to differentiate Conservative political opinion in the region between different potential interest groups.</p> <p>Also seek to establish change in views over time.</p>	<p><u>Nuancing the Conservative Political View</u> Ask about a local authority role in getting amendments to the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 on Sec 4(4) regional working.</p> <p>Rural vs urban – any differences?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - View of WMRA - View of Regional Planning – any differentiation <p>Rural Conservative – range of opinion on regional governance Change over time (Mellowed, hardened, focus intensified or shifted, went from general view to specific issues?)</p>
<p>This question sought to understand from a Civil Service perspective Shadow Conservative view of regional working during the New Labour era.</p> <p>Theoretical background: Organisational Environment</p>	<p><u>What was known about the National Conservative Party view on regional working?</u></p> <p>It position of regional governance – trajectory of political view(s)? – Static of developing?</p> <p>What was known or discussed about future policy intent towards regional governance for the time when in power.</p> <p>When /why did policy harden to become ‘abolition’? Who was involved – contacts nationally? Was any local or regional representation made – if so by whom, on what, to whom, with what effect?</p>
<p>Theoretical background: partnership and governance theory is affecting both professional planning officers and political Assembly governance.</p>	<p>3 ‘networks’- cooperation ,Explore -in response to Central Government imposition, or generated voluntarily?</p>
<p>Theoretical background: particularly relates to <u>trust</u> and Critical Theory critique of governance theory regarding the genuineness of devolution of power to partnerships and to the region.</p>	<p>4 Voluntary nature of involvement, - opens up the issue of why be involved? What was Govt view of the benefit or payback? What limits or advantages did you this have?</p>

<p>Theoretical background: relates to Critical Theory and concept of trust. Seeks to understand possible differences in the views of different actor groups and how these might relate to the course of events from within the Assembly.</p>	<p>5 What view did you take of the Regional Assembly institutional legitimacy (relate to the agreement to work in a consensus model and to allow trust to develop (if it did).)? (Statute & referenda?)</p>
<p>This question sought to understand the professional planning mindset with regard to the future role for strategic planning towards the end of the life of regional governance. Theoretical background: both Historical Institutionalism and the effect of path dependency and professional mindsets, and organisational environment-the limitations and weaknesses of an organisations inability to read the changing political environmental context.</p>	<p>Explore professional belief in the invulnerability of regional strategic planning due to a long history & rationality of the necessity and wisdom of strategic planning, ---had it actually outlived its social and political environment?</p>
<p>These were additional questions designed to explore the pilot question on consensus working further.</p>	<p>Additional questions on Consensus working</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What degree of cooperation did this involve politically /professionally? • Any Instructions to GOWM officers on partnership working? Did this change? • What was your view of how consensus worked in relation to planning policy (incl, for housing)? • Any differences with other LA.s' or WMRA's views on consensus as a political model for decision making. • What were CLG's or GOWM's criteria for agreeing what this meant in practice? (esp, planning for housing)
<p>Theoretical background: questions designed to explore the inner workings of the Assembly political governance processes and whether the stresses of New Labour's interventions impacted on the fundamental values and model of working in the WMRA. Theoretical background: Governance Theory partnership working and Critical Theory on trust.</p>	<p>Consensus model – Did you see at any stage a time when this was under critical reconsideration? If so Why ? If it did, when and how did trust in the Partnership and consensus model come to be eroded? <u>Did you ever see a Collapse of confidence</u> in the process of partnership working,especially –in rural shires around the conurbation,</p>

<p>Theoretical background: as Peters (2012) explains RCT assumes there will be rounds of the 'game'. If not then there is no opportunity to make up for loses in one round. In this case the RCT suggests 'from the perspective of rationality, - the means of making stable choices not present so there is an extremely contentious political environment. Question sought to operationalise this theory for the local authority members of the WMRA.</p>	<p>To what extent – locally and especially regionally- was consensus held and maintained as a political expedient until the outcome of the General Election was known? le what was the consensus about at his time and was it genuine / constricted or still general and open ended?</p>
<p>A specific question related to the heart of the research.</p>	<p>What do you feel were the motives for abolishing regional Governance? And Regional Planning?</p>
<p>Theoretical background: relates to regional re-institutionalisation from Peters (2012, p135) comment that changes in ideal type forms of institutional are limited any one point in time to a range of alternative archetypes. Where this involves re-institutionalisation elements of the existing institution may be replaced.</p>	<p>Shift to WM Leaders' Board/ JSIB? Was this a viable model of Regional governance?</p>
<p>These questions were introduced because, a) much of the theoretical literature does not seem to give due weight to the role of powerful feelings in shaping events that may affect institution, notwithstanding reference to the role of agency, institutional entrepreneurs, and the discussion of ideas. The degree of moderation in these terms failed to grasp the reality of fear sentiment and anger that part of the national, regional, and local political reality.</p> <p>Question on the perception of the European influence behind the regional architecture emerged from one of the pilot interviews.</p>	<p>Press and RSS 2 consultation replies reveal some strong feeling. What was the role of role of sentiment, passion and fear in driving political positions and national party policy making over regional working?</p> <p>What part did belief that, or fear of, Europe as the architect of regional governance play a part in political positions in local and other Conservative areas?</p>
<p>Theoretical background: complexity theory concept operationalised for interview. Chaos as policy prescription to see what emerged later within the control of Govt that would operate within a clear market driven /non-interventionist institutions and processes.</p> <p>A radical not incremental determination to bring about deep long term, permanent change.</p>	<p>What credence would you give to the idea that the Conservative policy intent was to so dismantle / clear regional and other NDPBs that there would be a fundamental break with the past institutions, processes and ideas/ expertise?</p>
<p>Theoretical background: the key question for the research. This contributed to the understanding of the relationship between different actor groups across governance scales and helped to integrate the theoretical mosaic used in the research.</p>	<p>Did Regional Planning for new housing numbers or any other Regional strategy policy play a part in any representations made to the national Conservative policy unit?</p>

	<p>Some additional questions were asked of some interviewees over specific things that they were involved with such as David Miliband's City-Region policy and the absence of significant professional and political leaders from the West Midlands to shape national policy with regard to the region.</p> <p>Each interview contains some bespoke questions related to the interviewee's personal knowledge and some questions were omitted because it was clear they have no basis for responding in an informed way.</p> <p>Political interviewees raised the topic of traditional rivalries between urban the metropolitan authorities in the West Midlands regardless of political party in power which gave rise to subsequent questions during the course of the interviews.</p>
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13.11 Appendix 4.5 Summary of the Procedure followed in Arranging Interviews.

Prior to each interview I had contacted each person by phone or email to request their participation. This was followed up with an information sheet about the purpose of the research, a consent form to comply with ethical requirements, and a copy of the questionnaire. Interviewees were asked to give feedback on the information sent out before the interview, what they thought about the questions and the conduct of the interview. The interviewees' responses to the first pilot interviews were approval for the open nature of the wording of the questions, and some prompting was helpful. The questions had not been constraining and allowed the interviews to express their experience and views. It had been helpful to have sight of the questionnaire before the interview.

The interviewees were selected to give a spread of roles and organisations. These covered most of the different sectors of the research field, namely the WMRA Secretariat, Senior Planner and non-planner, a civil servant, Assembly political leader, a voluntary member from the West Midlands Business Council, and a local authority senior officer involved in regional work. The pilot interviews were also tried with people whom I knew to be very willing to participate and would be critical friends in giving feedback rather than wanting to avoid discouragement.

The interview strategy was to use the questionnaire, given beforehand to the interviewees in the hope that having looked at it prior to the interview, it would have stimulated recollections and achieved a more in depth and rich recollection. In the event there was a wide range of responses to this. Some choose not to read it either because of time constraints, they had a narrative account already worked out and

had decided this was how they would respond, and some I suspect found it too detailed or probed or sought nuanced differences between political groups which they did not feel able to answer.

However most did read and respond positively to the prior sight of the questionnaire. Some had made substantial notes on the questions and used these in their answers. Overall the approach was a robust one but some further rewording of complex questions to a simpler form would probably worked better for a few interviewees, especially from the Other Stakeholder Group and some political interviewees.

Sequence of Additions, reformatting and changes to questions

The experience of undertaking the pilot interviews was evaluated for their effectiveness in both communicating the questions and being clear what information was being sought about the interviewee's previous regional involvement. The approach to asking for this information was adapted, as what had been intended as a swift and short acknowledgement of 'where, when and with whom' the person had had a regional role, some developed into a substantial explanation. Closing off the flow of this information risked losing some potentially interesting history but was necessary if the interview was to be kept to time. In a few cases interviewees were willing to spend a much longer than the time initially agreed and resume the interview at a later date.

By the third interview of the pilot I added an indication of how long I hoped each section of the interview would take. This was intended to help interviewees pace their answers and the depth to which they went. This did not seem to have much

effect for those interviewee for whom time was not much of an issue and who seemed more intent on saying what they wanted to convey regardless of the time.

If an interviewee only had an hour then their responses were relatively concise.

Use of a responsive interview approach to follow issues raised which had not previously been foreseen, had to be carefully judged so as to pick up only those matters which related to the research question, where it was possible to judge this.

The positive aspect here was the possibility of allowing unforeseen information to be collected, thereby demonstrating that interviewees were hold rigorously held to my preconceived and potentially biased influence. The risk of allowing the interview to be diverted was one of ending up off track and running out of time.

In the fifth interview I tried to match the sequence in which the interviewee wanted to tell their account by switching the order of questions to improve the flow logically and chronologically of issues raised. Whilst this attempted to make the process easier it proved not to be very successful and at times lead to some confusion by not following the written sequence and became too complex to manage.

I was aware on a few occasions that I felt an emotional negative response to ideas and opinions that jarred with my own deeply embedded views. I took this as a positive warning of potential bias and where this was important in addressing the research questions in the evidence chapters, I ensured these views were included.

Some interviewees continued in both private and public professional practice after the abolition of the assemblies and Leaders' Boards in 2010. Where events

subsequent to 2010 seemed helpful in understanding what went before, what dominant Conservative thinking had been shown to be in practice, or what lessons could be learnt, a question on this was added to the interview.

Where each of the specialist/ external/ and non- WMRA Secretariat interviewees had a particular seam of unique experience or insight to offer the questionnaire was adapted to specifically draw these elements out. An example of this was the interviewees who had insight into the Labour Party position and New Labour's period in office.

The responses to the pilot interviews were all of sufficient quality to include in the analysis alongside those conducted in the subsequent main phase of interviews.

13.12 Appendix 4.6 Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form

Planning and Housing in the West Midlands and other English Regions, 2003 -2011: Understanding How and Why This Ended.

Participant Information Sheet

Introduction

I am a doctoral researcher at the University of Birmingham. My research is looking at the processes at work in England from 1997 to 2010, which led to the demise in 2010 of both regionalism as a form of sub – national governance and the simultaneous ending of Regional Strategies, especially strategic planning for meeting new housing requirements. This research considers evidence from national, regional and local authority governance institutions and organisations. It is part funded by the University of Birmingham.

Why is this research being undertaken?

My research will examine how the events and processes surrounding regional policy and administration worked from 1997 to 2010, principally in the West Midlands and two other regions, where Regional – Central relations were in most tension over the strategic planning for housing issues. Most of the evidence will be collected from interviews with those involved at the time in political, professional and other partnership capacities.

Why have I requested your help?

Either in my former capacity as Head of Housing at the West Midlands Regional Assembly or from advice I have received from people with whom I worked I believe that you would be a valuable participant in this research project. However, before you make a decision as to whether you would be willing to participate, I would like to explain what is involved.

What happens if you agree to take part?

If you agree to take part, please keep this information sheet. I will ask you to sign a consent form and you will have a copy to keep.

I will ask various questions relating to your role within an organisation, or a wider partnership body which operated at the regional or national level and within wider networks within which you may be, or have been, a member. These questions will ask you to relate your account of working on regional policy, governance, planning or housing issues and to share your personal perspectives and those of the organisation or organisations that you were involved with during that period.

This interview will take place at an agreed place, which could be a place of work, at the University or other suitable agreed place. The areas of questioning will be set out in an interview guide, which will be sent to a week prior to the interview. This interview will last for around one and a half to two hours. A follow up interview may be requested and there will be an opportunity to read the analysis and comment.

Interview recording, and how the recorded material be used?

I will ask if you consent to the interview being recorded. If you agree, then the audio recording will be used only for analysis. Quotes may be used within written work but these will remain confidential and will not be attributed to you as a named individual. Only I will have access to these recordings.

Participation?

If you agree to take part in the research and then change your mind, you are entitled to completely withdraw from the research without reason. You will be able to withdraw from the research any time before analysis of the information has taken place, which will be September 2013. To withdraw, contact myself or David Mullins by email or telephone (details below). Any data or information which has been collected from you will be destroyed as confidential waste.

What are the benefits of taking part?

It is hoped that the evidence gained from this research will help to inform the work of partnerships in governance arrangements, evolving sub national governance partnerships and networks and those that emerge in future. Taking part in the project may provide your organisation with the opportunity to reflect on current practice and options.

Keeping your Participation Confidential

All of the information which you provide to me will be kept completely confidential. All information given within your interview will be coded and no-one will have access to any information to be able to identify you from that code. You, or your comments, will not be identifiable in any reports or publications. The data will be kept for a period of ten years after completion of the research project and then will be destroyed as confidential waste.

How will the results be used?

Each contributor will be offered summary findings and you will have the opportunity to comment on this..

The results from the research will be used within the PhD thesis which will be publically available, and some findings may be used in academic publications.

The next steps...

If you agree to take part please keep this information sheet and let me know when would be a convenient time and place to meet. I will send you an outline of the topics to be covered at least a week in advance of the interview.

Thank you for reading though this information, and please feel free to ask any questions relating to your participation or the research project.

The contact details for this project are:

Researcher –

Supervisor –

Informed Consent Form For

Title of the project: Regional Planning and Housing in the West Midlands and other English Regions, 2003 -2011: Understanding How and Why This Ended.

Fair Processing Statement

This information is being collected as part of a research project looking at how and why regional planning, housing and associated regional governance organisations came to be abolished, what lessons can be learnt, and how theory can be developed in the light of this experience. It is being undertaken in the Institute of Applied Social Studies in the University of Birmingham.

The information which you supply and that which may be collected as part of the research project will be entered into a filing system or database and will only be accessed by authorised personnel involved in the project. The information will be retained by the University of Birmingham and will only be used for the purpose of research, statistical and audit purposes. The data will be kept for a period of ten years after completion of the research project and then will be destroyed as confidential waste. By supplying this information you are consenting to the University storing your information for the purposes stated above. The information will be processed by the University of Birmingham in accordance with the provisions of the Data Protection Act 1998. No identifiable personal data will be published.

The research is funded by University of Birmingham (College of Social Sciences – Fee only Bursary)

Statements of understanding/consent

- I confirm that I have read and understand the participant information leaflet for this study. I have had the opportunity to ask questions if necessary and have had these answered satisfactorily.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason. If I withdraw my data will be removed from the study and will be destroyed.
- I understand that my personal data will be processed for the purposes detailed above, in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998.
- I understand that the interview will be recorded and that I am free to ask for the recording device to be turned off at any time without reason.
- I understand that I will not be identifiable in any reports or publications and quotes will not be attributed to me as a named individual, and that I will be consulted if there is any possibility of my being identifiable from an anonymous direct quote.
- I understand that I will be offered summary findings and have the opportunity to comment on this.
- I understand that the completed thesis will be publicly available and some findings may be used in academic publications.
- Based upon the above, I agree to take part in this study.

Name, signature, and date

Name of participant _____

Signature _____ Date _____

Name of researcher obtaining consent _____

Signature _____ Date _____

A copy of the signed and dated consent form and the participant information leaflet will be given to the participant and retained by the researcher to be kept securely on file.

13.13 Appendix 4.7 Examples of three Post-Pilot Questionnaires: Civil Servants, Professional Planners, and Assembly Politicians.

Guide for interviewee (Sent before interview) Professional / Civil Service																																							
Colour Code																																							
Situating= From Professional Col 3																																							
Situating= From Political Col 4																																							
Situating= From both																																							
Situating= amended Qu																																							
Note - Ask about Conservative & New Lab & CLG- HMT contacts.																																							
Situating Your Experience Role, Time and Position/ Organisational History/ interfaces with other actors.																																							
Intro 1																																							
Your Perspective of the Historical Trajectory over the 1997 -2002- 2011 period Beginning at a time when you were first involved in regional matters:- I would like to hear your account of the key stages in the life and demise of Regional Governance* Seek the interviewee's Perspectives on Key 'Actor' Groups on regional governance. Especially:-																																							
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WMids LA Cllrs –Con <table border="1"> <tbody> <tr> <td>• WMids LA Cllrs –Con</td> <td></td> <td>National New Lab</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>- Lib Dem</td> <td></td> <td>Nat Con</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>- Lab</td> <td></td> <td>Other local</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>- Others-independents</td> <td></td> <td>WMRA WMBC</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>• LA. housing strategy / enablers</td> <td></td> <td>WMRA OSG</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>• WMids LA. planners</td> <td></td> <td>CLG,</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>• WMRA Housing</td> <td></td> <td>HMT</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>• WMRA Management,</td> <td></td> <td>Other?</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>• WMRA planners,</td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> </tbody> </table> 				• WMids LA Cllrs –Con		National New Lab		- Lib Dem		Nat Con		- Lab		Other local		- Others-independents		WMRA WMBC		• LA. housing strategy / enablers		WMRA OSG		• WMids LA. planners		CLG,		• WMRA Housing		HMT		• WMRA Management,		Other?		• WMRA planners,			
• WMids LA Cllrs –Con		National New Lab																																					
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• WMRA Management,		Other?																																					
• WMRA planners,																																							
Nuancing the Conservative Political View																																							
Ask about LA role in getting amendments to the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 on Sec 4(4) regional working.																																							
Rural vs urban – any differences?																																							
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - View of WMRA - View of Regional Planning – any differentiation 																																							
Rural Conservative – range of opinion on regional governance																																							
Change over time (Mellowed, hardened, focus intensified or shifted, went from general view to specific issues?)																																							

Intro 3

What was known about the National Conservative Party view?

Its position of regional governance – trajectory of political view(s)? – Static or developing?

What was known or discussed about **future policy intent towards** regional governance for the time when in power.

When /why did policy harden to become ‘abolition’?

Who was involved – contacts nationally?

Was any local or regional representation made – if so by whom, on what, to whom, with what effect?

Relationship between Regionalism and Regional Planning?

1. Was there in your view any relationship between policy work at the regional level, including Regional Planning, and the view taken of Regionalism, - whether in the politics of the region or at a national level (New Labour & Conservative)?

Did the end of regionalism drag strategic planning down with it?

Or were both equally going to end for the same or different reasons?

Characteristics of Regional Assembly working

2 the emphasis on **Partnership** working - origins, reasons, outworking , role in regional governance

Your expectations & assumptions

Met or not met and if not -how/ when?

3 **‘networks’**- cooperation ,Explore -in response to central government imposition, or generated voluntarily?

4 **Voluntary** nature of involvement, - opens up the issue of why be involved? What was Govt view of the benefit or payback? What limits or advantages did you this have?

5 **What view did you take of the Regional Assembly institutional legitimacy** (relate to the agreement to work in a consensus model and to allow trust to develop (if it did).)? (Statute & referenda?)

6 Explore professional belief in the invulnerability of regional strategic planning due to a long history & rationality of the necessity and wisdom of strategic planning, ---had it actually outlived its social and political environment?

7 The **‘consensus’** model of political and policy development working.

Who required this? What role did it play over the life of the WMRA and the RSS?

8

- What degree of cooperation did this involve politically /professionally?
- Any Instructions to GOWM officers on partnership working? Did this change?
- What was your view of how consensus worked in relation to planning policy (incl, for housing)?
- Any differences with other LA.s’ or WMRA’s views on consensus as a political model for decision making.
- What were CLG’s or GOWM’s criteria for agreeing what this meant in practice? (esp, planning for housing)

9 Consensus model – Did you see at any stage a time when this was under critical reconsideration? If so Why?

If it did, when and how did trust in the Partnership and consensus model come to be eroded?

Did you ever see a Collapse of confidence in the process of partnership working,especially –in rural shires around the conurbation,

10 Were you aware of any **other key features or cultures** which shaped the way the WMRA did its work?

11 Institutional Change

When and why (if ever) did it appear Regional Assemblies and or regional planning was vulnerable to extinction either by New Labour or by Conservatives?

What made you think this – direct involvement, hearsay, public statement.....?

12 Who else was vying for this strategic planning role?

Was there anything in the powers, influence or responsibilities of the Regional Assemblies that were sought after by other political institutions or groups.

Possible prompt,

Was there a 'jealousy' factor, or was this not relevant?

13 NHPAU's advice to CLG and its effect on the RSS policy development process and its model of working? How did you see this?

Did you perceive the New Labour Kate Barker Review, the NHPAU or the commissioning of NLP have a political impact at LA. level or WMRA and shape attitudes to regional working?

14 (NHPAU & NLP)

What was the degree of pressure from Government to increase housing land availability – (**from whom, why, immediate and underlying objectives**)?

Was it HMT or CLG or a specific minister's concern (Chancellor, CLG Sec or other)?

How did this play out

Nationally

WMids RA

15 Were (and if so why and when) Regional Assemblies seen as oppositional to Govt? If so what level of tolerance did govt have for this?

Perception of Planning for Housing Issues.

Impact of SNR, NHPAU & NLP

16 Did you perceive or agree that there was a link between New Labour's economic competitiveness policy and planning for new housing numbers policy.

17 Managing local political tensions in housing growth.

What arguments used ?– for & against

(e.g. economic growth, regeneration, meeting housing need , attract infrastructure investment)

18 To what extent – locally and **especially regionally-** was **consensus** held and maintained as a **political expedient** until the outcome of the General Election was known? le what was the consensus about at his time and was it genuine / constricted or still general and open ended?

20 Your view of other rural shire political stance on Regional working and RSS2
Any variation in position, strength of feeling?

21 What were you aware of about the development Conservative thinking on Regional working, at Regional and National level? (culminating in the Caroline Spelman letter (Aug 2009) to Strategic Planning Authorities)
22 Back stop question – supplementary. A ‘game changer’ in the life of the West Midlands Regional Assembly?
23 What do you feel were the motives for abolishing regional Governance? And Regional Planning?
24 Shift to WMLeaders’ Board/ JSIB? Was this a viable model of Regional governance?
25 Press and RSS 2 consultation replies reveal some strong feeling. What was the role of role of sentiment, passion and fear in driving political positions and national party policy making over regional working? What part did belief that, or fear of, Europe as the architect of regional governance play a part in political positions in local and other Conservative areas?
26 Was there anything Regional Assemblies did, or did not do that caused or influenced hostile opinions in Govt and Govt depts. towards them? Regional institutions - any opportunity to change and survive?
27 What credence would you give to the idea that the Conservative policy intent was to so dismantle / clear regional and other NDPBs that there would be a fundamental break with the past institutions, processes and ideas/ expertise? Chaos as policy prescription to see what emerged later within the control of Govt that would operate within a clear market driven /non-interventionist institutions and processes. A radical not incremental determination to bring about deep long term, permanent change.
28 What were you aware of happening in other regions that might cast light on the overall course of regionalism in England?
29 About lessons for future? What sub national governance could work?
<u>Alternative factors, perspectives?</u> 30 In considering the overall question of why regionalism came to an end , are there any other factors at local , regional, or national level which you feel should be taken into account , that we have not yet covered?
<u>Post Interview Reflect and Review Interview</u> Briefing lit. (Did it help, guide or impose a false bias/ constraint?)

Guide for interviewee (Sent before interview) Professional Planning

Situating Your Experience

Would you please begin by telling me your **Role(s), years and Position/ Organisational History/ interfaces with other actors?**

Who have you had contact with and to what degree?

Checklist of actors

• WMids LA Cllrs –con		WMids LA. planners,	
- Lib dem		WMRA Housing	
- Lab		WMRA Management,	
- Others-independents		WMRA planners,	
• Nat New Lab		CLG,	
• Nat Con		HMT	

Intro 1 Beginning at a time when you were first involved in regional matters:- I would like to hear your account of the **key stages in the life and demise of Regional Governance***, Regional Planning and Housing. from the time you worked at WMRA or other org.

*Regional Assembly / Leaders' Board, and associated structures.

Intro 3 What do you recall were the **regional political views** about establishing WMRA?

Subsequent trajectories of those views?

E.g. Warwickshire and the Sec 4.4 hostile amendment?

Changing New Labour views- 1997 -2004 and 2005-2010?

What did you know of the National Conservative Party view – 1997 -2004 and 2005-2010?

Relationship between Regionalism and Regional Planning?

1. Was there in your view any relationship between policy work at the regional level, including Regional Planning, and the political view taken of Regionalism, - whether in the politics of the region or at a national level (whether New Labour & Conservative)?

Characteristics of Regional Assembly working

2 . Please tell me about your view of the emphasis on **Partnership** working - origins, reasons, LA. outworking, role in regional governance, how it worked in Regional Planning?

3 Please tell me about the nature of the Regional – local – national '**networks**'- the nature of their cooperation.

Explore -in response to central government imposition, or generated voluntarily? Weaknesses / limitations / failures?

4 To what extent was the participation in WMRA and in Regional Planning **Voluntary**? What was the voluntary nature of involvement, -

Opens up the issue of why be involved? What was **the benefit or payback?** What **limits** did this have?

Your perspectives on the WM Business Co & Other Stakeholder Group?

5 What view did you take of the Regional Assembly's **institutional legitimacy?**

6 WMids has a long history of regional planning work. How did this affect the WMRA view of RSS and Regional planning work?

Was there a shared view about strategic planning as a legitimate activity?

<p>7 The 'consensus' model of political and policy development working. -Who required this? What role did it play over the life of the WMRA and the RSS?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What were your local and regional criteria for agreeing what this meant in practice? (esp, planning for housing) • reservations / scepticism, or unquestioning embrace.
<p>9 Consensus model – any time when under critical reconsideration? If it did, when and how did trust in the Partnership and consensus model come to be eroded?</p>
<p>10 Any other key features or cultures which shaped the way the WMRA did its work?</p>
<p><u>Institutional Change</u></p>
<p>11 When and why (if ever) did it appear Regional Assemblies and or regional planning was vulnerable to extinction either by New Labour or by Conservatives?</p>
<p>12 Who else was vying for this strategic planning role? Was there anything in the powers, influence or responsibilities of the Regional Assemblies that were sought after by other political institutions or groups?</p>
<p>13 What was the effect of NHPAU's advice to CLG on the RSS policy development process and its model of working? How did you see this in terms of the 'health' or threat to Regional Planning?</p>
<p>14 How far was the pressure from Government (NHPAU & NLP) to increase housing land availability a serious or critical challenge to continuing work on the RSS 2? (Consensus was given but what were the political calculations in this.)</p>
<p>15 Were (and if so why and when) Regional Assemblies seen as oppositional to Govt? If so what level of tolerance did Govt have for this?</p>
<p><u>Perception of Planning for Housing Issues. Impact of SNR, NHPAU & NLP</u></p>
<p>16 Did you perceive a link between New Labour's economic competitiveness policy and planning for housing policy? What importance did this hold and did it change? Examples?</p>
<p>17 Managing local political tensions in housing growth. What arguments used ?– for & against (e.g. economic growth, regeneration, meeting housing need , attract infrastructure investment)</p>
<p>18 To what extent – locally and especially regionally- did you perceive consensus was held and maintained as an expedient until the outcome of the General Election was known? What was the consensus about at 2008- 2009 and was it genuine / constrained or still general and open ended?</p>
<p>19 Was there a time when Cllrs & officers had to rethink purpose of continuing to engage in the RSS process – noting that the LA.s did agree to defend the RSS consensus proposals at the EIP?</p>
<p>21 What direction did you(via GOWM ?) receive from Govt to 'make' or 'enforce' draft Regional Planning policy for new housing numbers conform to Govt expectations? How did the NLP commission come about? What were you aware of about the development Conservative thinking on Regional working, at Regional and National level? (culminating in the Caroline Spelman letter (Aug 2009) to Strategic Planning Authorities)</p>

23 What do you think were the motives for abolishing regional Governance? Any direct evidence? And Regional Planning?
24 Shift to WMLeaders' Board/ JSIB? Was this a viable model of regional governance? What issues did the new Single Integrated Regional Strategy pose for planning and housing – given the economic emphasis?
25 role of sentiment, passion
26 Was there anything Regional Assemblies did, or did not do that caused or influenced hostile opinions in Govt and Govt depts. towards them? Regional institutions - any opportunity to change and survive?
28 What were you aware of happening in other regions that might cast light on the overall course of regionalism in England?
29 About lessons for future? What sub national governance could work?
<u>Alternative factors, perspectives?</u> 30 In considering the overall question of why regionalism came to an end , are there any other factors at local , regional, or national level which you feel should be taken into account , that we have not yet covered?

Guide for interviewee (Sent before interview) Political
<u>Situating Your Experience</u> Role, Time and Position/ Organisational History/ interfaces with other actors.
<u>Intro 1 Your Perspective of the Historical Trajectory</u> over the 1997 -2002- 2011 period Seek the interviewee's <u>Perspectives on Key 'Actor' Groups</u> on regional governance. <u>Especially: -</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WMids LA councillors –Conservative Rural Conservative – range of opinion on regional governance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Change over time (Mellowed, hardened, focus intensified or shifted, went from general view to specific issues?)
<u>Intro 2 Nuancing the Conservative Political View</u> Rural vs urban – any differences? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - View of WMRA - View of Regional Planning – any differentiation Own Authority Conservative view- Assembly Conservative view- what differences?
<u>Intro 3 What was known about the National Conservative Party view?</u> It position of regional governance – trajectory of political view(s)? – Static of developing? What was known or discussed about future policy intent towards regional governance for the time when in power. When /why did policy harden to become 'abolition'? Who was involved – contacts nationally? Was any local or regional representation made – if so by whom, on what, to whom, with what effect?
<u>Relationship between Regionalism and Regional Planning?</u>

1. Did Regional Planning for new housing numbers or any other Regional strategy policy play a part in any representations made to the national Conservative policy unit?
<u>Characteristics of Regional Assembly working</u>
2 Partnerships- Your expectations & assumptions Met or not met and if not -how/ when?
3 ' networks '- cooperation, Explore -in response to central government imposition, or generated voluntarily?
4 Voluntary nature of involvement, - why be involved? What was the benefit or payback? What limits did this have?
5 What view did you take of the Regional Assembly institutional legitimacy (relate to the agreement to work in a consensus model and to allow trust to develop (if it did).)? (Statute & referenda?)
6 Explore historical effect of WMLGA in the underpinning of the WMRA – did this provide legitimacy and give an invulnerability of regional working?
7 Consensus working – your understanding? What explanation was given (by?) Or discussed about 'consensus' working?
8 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What degree of cooperation did this involve politically? • Any Instructions to officers on partnership working? Did this change? • How did consensus working relate to planning policy (incl, for housing)? • Any differences with other LA.s views on consensus as a political model for decision making. • What were your local and regional criteria for agreeing what this meant in practice? (esp. planning for housing) • Any officer dimension at CE, Director level? What Issues?
9 Consensus model – any time when under critical reconsideration? Why or why not? If it did, when and how did trust in the Partnership and consensus model come to be eroded? <u>Was there ever a Collapse of confidence</u> in the process of partnership working, especially –in rural areas around the conurbation, Herefordshire, Warwickshire, Worcestershire and Staffordshire? How did this change your approach & That of other Conservatives on the Assembly?
10 Were you aware of any other key features or cultures which shaped the way the WMRA did its work?
<u>Institutional Change</u>
11 When and why (if ever) did it appear Regional Assemblies and or regional planning was vulnerable to extinction either by New Labour or by Conservatives?
12 Was there anything in the powers, influence or responsibilities of the Regional Assemblies that were sought after by other political institutions or groups. (Was there a 'jealousy' factor, or was this not relevant?) Or was an alternative motive for abolition of the institution or its functions, ideological –hostility to the institutional essence and –or its functions.)

<p>13 Did the</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New Labour Kate Barker Review 2004, • the CLG creation of the National Housing and Planning Advisory Unit or • the commissioning by the Govt of Nathaniel Lichfield Partners (for evidence for the RSS 2 that the West Midlands could take more housing) <p>have any political impact at LA. level and shape attitudes to regional working?</p> <p>Prompt Qu</p> <p>Were you and your local political colleagues aware of the NHPAU and NLP – and what impact or influence did you see them having,</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regionally • Your council • Your constituents • What was the grass roots view of RSS 2 impacts? <p>Where messages about this were sent to Conservative Party policy unit?</p> <p>Can you say what the essence of those was?</p>
<p>14 How far was the pressure from Government (NHPAU & NLP) to increase housing land availability a serious or critical challenge to continuing work on the RSS 2? (Consensus was given but what were the political calculations in this?)</p>
<p>15 Were (and if so why and when) Regional Assemblies seen as oppositional to Govt? If so what level of tolerance did Govt have for this?</p>
<p><u>Perception of Planning for Housing Issues.</u> <u>Political Impact of SNR, NHPAU & NLP</u></p>
<p>16 Did you perceive or agree that there was a link between New Labour’s economic competitiveness policy and planning for new housing numbers policy</p>
<p>17 Managing local political tensions in housing growth. What arguments used? – for & against (e.g. economic growth, regeneration, meeting housing need, attract infrastructure investment)</p>
<p>18 To what extent – locally and especially regionally- was consensus held and maintained as a political expedient until the outcome of the General Election was known? Ie what was the consensus about at his time and was it genuine / constricted or still general and open ended?</p>
<p>19 Was there a time when Cllrs & officers had to rethink purpose of continuing to engage in the RSS process - noting that the LA did agree to defend the RSS consensus proposals?</p>
<p>20 Your view of other rural shire political stances on Regional working and RSS2 Any variation in position, strength of feeling?</p>
<p>21 What were you aware of about the development Conservative thinking on Regional working, at Regional and National level? (culminating in the Caroline Spelman letter (Aug 2009) to Strategic Planning Authorities ‘ignore RSS’)</p>
<p>22 Back stop question – supplementary. A ‘game changer’ in the life of the West Midlands Regional Assembly?</p>

23 What do you think were the motives for abolishing regional Governance? Any direct evidence? And Regional Planning?
24 Shift to Leaders' Board/ JSIB? Was this a viable model of Regional governance?
25 Press and RSS 2 consultation replies reveal strong public feeling about regional governance. What was the role of role of sentiment, passion and fear in driving political positions and national party policy making over regional working? Prompt What part did belief that, or fear of, Europe as the architect of regional governance play a part in political positions in local and other Conservative areas?
26 Was there anything Regional Assemblies did, or did not do that caused or influenced hostile opinions in Govt and Govt depts. towards them? Regional institutions - any opportunity to change and survive?
27 What credence would you give to the idea that the Conservative policy intent was to so dismantle / clear regional and other NDPBs that there would be a fundamental break with the past institutions, processes and ideas/ expertise?
28 What were you aware of happening in other regions that might cast light on the overall course of regionalism in England?
29 About lessons for future? What sub national governance could work?
<u>Alternative factors, perspectives?</u> 30 In considering the overall question of why regionalism came to an end, are there any other factors at local, regional, or national level which you feel should be taken into account, that we have not yet covered?

13.14 Appendix 5.1 Table A5.1 Four periods of Planning under New Labour 1997 -2010:Periods, Characteristics and Events.

Source: Adapted from Allmendinger 2011 pgs. 20 - 37)

When New Labour?	Characteristics and Events (Items refer to Allmendinger's ' Attitudes towards Planning ' but here are allocated to the period in which they appeared with greatest emphasis. These competing discourses, changing normative stances, and shifting agendas coexisted and rose and fell in emphasis over each period.)
1995-2000 Continuity and devolution	Planning as a pragmatic means to a political and policy end goal
2002-2004 Market reorientation, speed and delivery	Prevalent in this and other periods: - planning should not inhibit growth and competitiveness in a globalised economy. Tension unresolved between planning as old 'command and control' negative role of restricting development (to protect and enhance the environment) and the need for a positive role in enhancing competitiveness.
2004-2007 Sustainable communities through spatial planning	Planning about political consolidation delivering a range of Government objectives under the concept of new 'spatial planning' and the 'management of change', attempting to reconcile objectives.
2007- 2010 delivery, refocus, scaling back	Social inclusion and localism involving public involvement and participation but at odds with the target based culture which placed authorities under pressure Planning as networked governance, managing multiple scales of governance and organisational involvement. Partnerships viewed as 'governance glue' which planning skills facilitated and which still had a statutory core to enable this, but Government had planning on a short rein if it should fail to deliver.

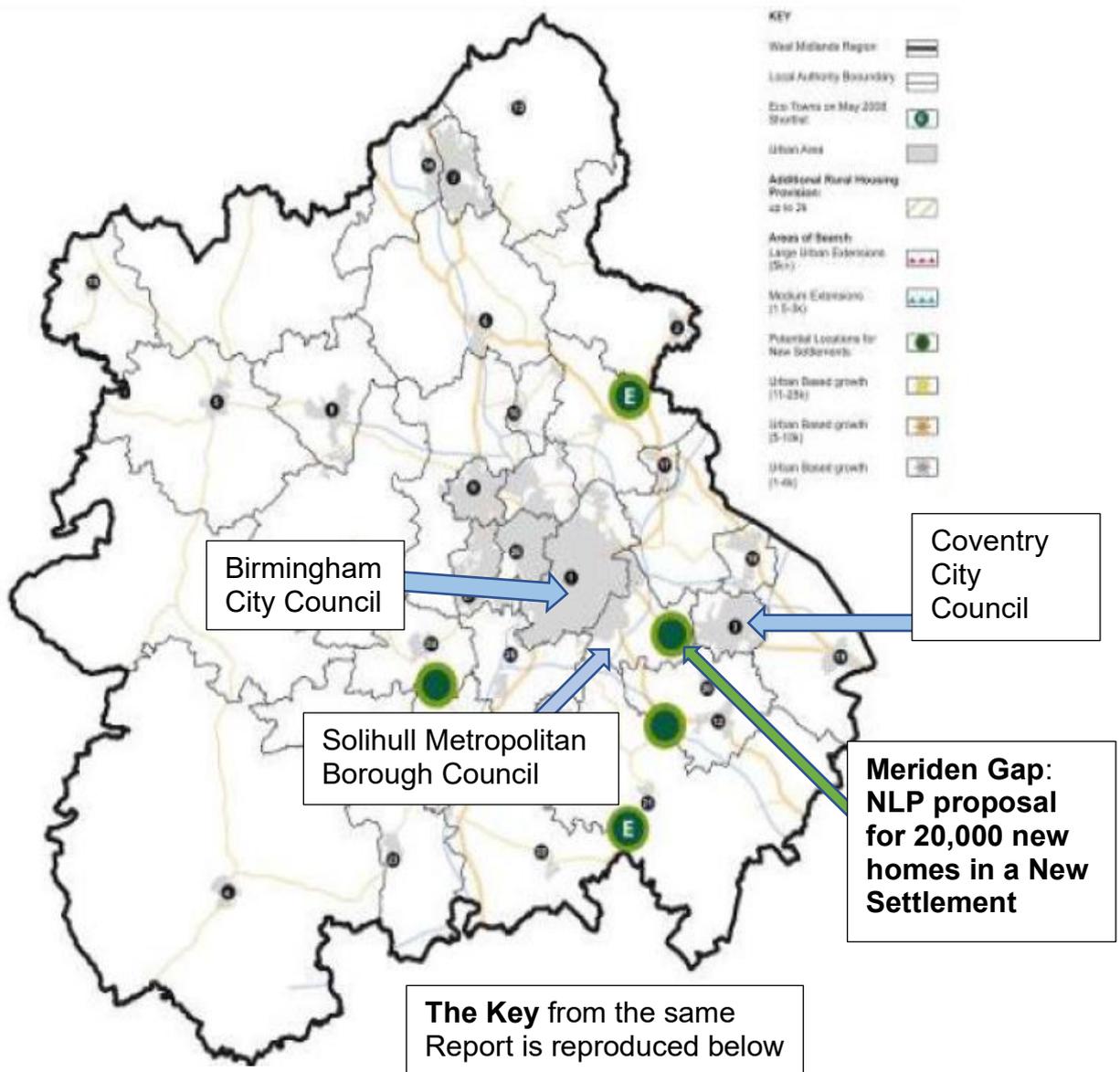
13.15 Appendix 5.2 Nathaniel Lichfield and Partners Proposed Option 4

Nathaniel Lichfield and Partners Proposed Option 4 including a New Settlement in the Meriden Gap between Solihull and Coventry.

The Plan and Key are reproduced with the kind permission of Lichfields.

Source: Extract from a Report for Government Office for the West Midlands, 'Development of Housing Options for the West Midlands' Vol 1 Main Report Nathaniel Lichfield and Partners(2008a) and Vol 2 Appendices, by Nathaniel Lichfield and Partners (2008b) accessed online in Bromsgrove District Council papers 'Report to Council: Development of Housing Options for the West Midlands'

Option 4 New Settlements



Areas of Search

Large Urban Extensions
(5k+)



Medium Extensions
(1.5-3k)



Potential Locations for
New Settlements



Eco Towns on May 2008
Shortlist



Urban Based growth
(11-25k)



Urban Based growth
(5-10k)



Urban Based growth
(1-4k)



**Additional Rural Housing
Provision:**
up to 2k



• Extensions to the urban area. Residential, but scope for mixed uses, including retail, employment, services, schools, health care etc.

• Free-standing new settlements, probably with scope for development to c.20,000 dwellings either within the RSS period, or more likely beyond.

• Development within the urban area, on previously-developed and other land that is suitable for housing, including within mixed use developments. Potentially part of regeneration proposals.

• Additional housing to be developed in rural areas, including market towns and villages, to address affordability

13.16 Appendix 10.1 Coalition Conservative reasons for abolition of Regional Spatial Strategies

Coalition Government Ministers (Pickles et al.,2010) justified dismantling the RSS system referring to regional planning for housing supply as ‘a national disaster’, and ‘failed’(Pickles,2010a). The justifications for doing away with the RSS system made by Eric Pickles MP, and his Departmental ministers are summarised in Appendix Table 10.2 below. They focused solely on the issue of housing supply, referring to the RSS system as ‘a national disaster’, and ‘failed’. overly prescriptive over the location and timing of new homes, threatening the Green Belt and being the cause of entrenched opposition to new development. The system was represented as robbing local people of their democratic voice and being imposed by bureaucrats from above.

The Table below sets out these accusations which were substantially rhetorical, premature in judgement, over simplistic, ignored the place of meeting national needs, local government’s leading role in the assemblies, and some were simply incorrect or incapable of objective verification.. Many of these were incapable of objective justification. The paucity of the intellectual justification for the Coalition Government’s actions and the difficulty in engaging with its reasoning meant explanations had to be sought through a wider range of insights and theoretical analysis.

Appendix Table 10.1 Critique of the Reasons Advanced by Conservative members of the Coalition Government in 2010 for the Abolition of Regional Planning

Coalition Conservative reasons given in 2010 for abolition of Regional Spatial Strategies (Pickles, 2010a,2010b,, , Pickles, E., Clarke, G. DCLG, 2010, Public Law Today, 2010)	Findings and comments based on this Research
Failed, a national disaster	The 2004 statutory RSS system expected the RSSs to cover a 30-year period with a major review after 15 years. It was not an implementation vehicle and relied upon the market to deliver most of the housing required. No RSS , including the rebranded RPG11 was completed by 2010. To say the process had failed was at best a very premature judgment
Expensive	The WMRSS was produced with very few regional resources. The Assembly had a very small budgets compared with the GOWM and AWM. Much of the Regional Grant given to the WMRA was passed on to the local authorities who led on the production of each RSS policy themed chapter.
Time-consuming	<p>The consensus model did take time as policy debate had to take place across all the 33 local authorities and with business and Other Stakeholders including rural, environmental and community interests, Country Landowners' Association and housing developers.</p> <p>For the WMRSS the major delays in the process were originated by the Labour government, imposing the NHPAU into the policy debate, and DCLG suspending the Preferred Option process to EIP until it had received further consultancy advice to support its case for more residential land to be identified.</p> <p>The WMJSIB (2009) produced the RFA2 document within months but was criticised for its lack of inclusivity and consultation. The democratic process takes time and structures needed for involvement.</p>
Top-down targets from regional quangos and bureaucrats	The housing requirements originated in the population projections of the ONS. Some West Midlands local authorities processed these into household figures for the RSS, subject to complex modelling. The EiP would

	<p>consider these issues. At its heart these ‘top- down’ targets were designed to meet the needs of the nation both socially and economically. The Coalition Government abandoned reference to meeting national requirements in favour of locally decided preferences (Localism policy).</p> <p>From 2008 it was common for Conservative politicians to blame the regional body for the RSS housing figures even though they were a carefully estimated reflection of the region’s own needs.</p>
<p>Prescribed exactly what, where and when to build.</p>	<p>RSS policy on new housing defined the numbers distributed by district and unitary council areas. It did not allocate sites, this being the role of the LDFs made by the District Councils. While there were estimated rates of construction for the region, these were very vulnerable to changing economic conditions as evidenced by the major fall in housebuilding in 2008-9. The ‘when’ of new house building was , and remains very dependent on the market.</p> <p>The accusation that the RSSs prescribed these aspects with detailed timing and locational exactitude was erroneous and misleading.</p>
<p>Robbed local people of their democratic voice</p>	<p>The RPBs were considered remote from the public and hence this criticism has some weight. However, the assemblies were designed to be substantially local authority bodies with community and business representation and working in a non-adversarial partnership manner.</p> <p>The criticism raised the question about how issues of sub regional housing market areas, crossing local authority boundaries can be managed to maximise social and economic benefits at an appropriate spatial scale without local decisions having adverse adjacency effects.</p>
<p>(Regional planning) injected poison into the planning system which stymied development / alienated people, pitting them against development, entrenching opposition against new development.</p>	<p>This accusation is redolent of the hostile ground swell of political antagonism towards new house building found in some areas of the West Midlands. The comment is over simplistic in that many areas welcomed the NHPAU’s housing advice and were prepared to accept higher figures, (e.g. Herefordshire, Lichfield).</p> <p>The opposition to new development was not going to be removed by removing the regional planning system, as the Government and those areas opposed</p>

	<p>to new development soon found. This is discussed further below.</p>
<p>Threatened the destruction of the Green Belt</p>	<p>The WMRSS sought to avoid encroachment on the Green Belt through its strategic policies on locations for development. This was a fundamental strength of regional planning. It allowed inter-authority solutions to distribute development within the overarching sustainability strategy. A post 2010 planning policy of Birmingham City Council's Langley Sustainable Urban Extension on green belt in a strong Conservative area exemplifies the weakness of the Conservative's failure to reconcile their public reliance on local determination, with the ongoing dynamics of regional economic and housing realities.</p>

13.17 Appendix 10.2 Was the WMRA ever an ‘Institution’ within the terms of New Institutional Theory?

Peters (2008 pp9-11) gives a series of six tests for establishing whether an organisation has the characteristics of an institution. These are autonomy, adaptability, complexity, coherence, congruence, and exclusivity. Autonomy and exclusivity are discussed in Chapter 10 Analysis together with the conclusions to the question posed about the institutional characteristics of the WMRA. Some examples of the challenges the regional planning role faced over exclusivity are given and each of the other characteristics is taken in turn in this Appendix.

Adaptability

WMRA was adaptable in its contribution to many policy areas on a voluntary partnership basis, building a West Midlands Partnership structure. In response to its external environment it sought to adapt to local regional pressures through fostering and coordinating partnership structures to demonstrate inclusivity and shared ownership of regional issues (e.g. health and wellbeing, social housing, rural affairs, sub-regional housing market area partnerships).

In the RSS the scope was very limited, other than in the research it commissioned to empower it in the formation and justification of policy. The RPB held to consensus on the new build housing strategy rooted in the RPG as approved in 2004.

ODPM/DCLG set the process and national policy frame through guidance on process and PPS 6.

Complexity

General regional architecture was too complex for those not directly involved to understand. This was partly to do with the number of organisations and relationships that existed. The remits and roles were unclear to the public and to many local

councillors. The language of regional planning and of social housing was very jargon based and hindered communication, generating frustration and negative attitudes towards communication on these matters.

RSS processes and the internal technical justifications were heavily professionalised using technical forecasting models and complex professional debates over which was the most accurate or preferable.

Coherence, & Congruence.

Whilst the core remits of the WMRA were coherent and rational, covering strategic planning, sustainability, scrutiny of the RDA and strategic housing policy, the basis for the wider range of Assembly activity was less well understood.

Congruence, in theory, existed between the Assembly's Regional Planning remit and for example the Regional Economic Strategy of the RDA. However, major differences in organisational and professional cultures, goals and methods of working left the RDA and RSS at times pulling in different spatial directions. The WMRA still held Urban Renaissance as paramount for the regional sustainability with growth being centred upon the metropolitan areas. The RDA sought to follow market trends and grow the regional economy in the ring of authorities and transport network around the metropolitan areas.

Exclusivity- Examples of Challenges to the regional planning role.

Allmendinger's (2011) discussion of New Institutional Theory refers to a characteristic of 'multiple and overlapping processes' (p41). An example is the ongoing competitive tension between English spatial planning and a changing national political context. Here different views about planning's purpose were in play

at multiple scales including regional. The statutory operated alongside informal planning with, 'temporary functional short-circuits...addressing.... time-consuming cumbersome statutory processes....' (2011, p44). This could characterise the place of RFA 2 process in 2009. Irritation among Assembly planners that RFA 2 was ready for submission within months whilst the RSS 2 Revision was still being prepared for the EiP. They acknowledged the RFA 2 did not contradict the RSS saving face by agreeing RFA 2 was just one means of implementing the RSS. However, it did provide a vehicle for directing Government expenditure into the regeneration of the West Midlands before policies have been debated at the EiP.

13.18 Appendix 10.3 The Timeline of Credibility of Regional Planning and Working by Key Actor Group

The following three figures (Figure. A10.1, Figure A10.2, and Figure A10.3) are based upon the same template used in Figure 10.3 in Chapter 10 and the principal events and the associated theoretical concepts are given in Figure 10.4 in Chapter 10. These figures draw together the layered and differentiated trajectories of each of the key actor groups across the whole period of the WMRA's life. They use the same trajectory lines to show the relative credibility of RSS planning work to each actor group. These trajectories are divided between the three figures to allow for text to be added along the timelines and to summarise the key events and issues relating to changes in trajectory across the 1998-2010 period.

The Credibility of the RSS Phase 2 Revision: WMRA Secretariat and Planners

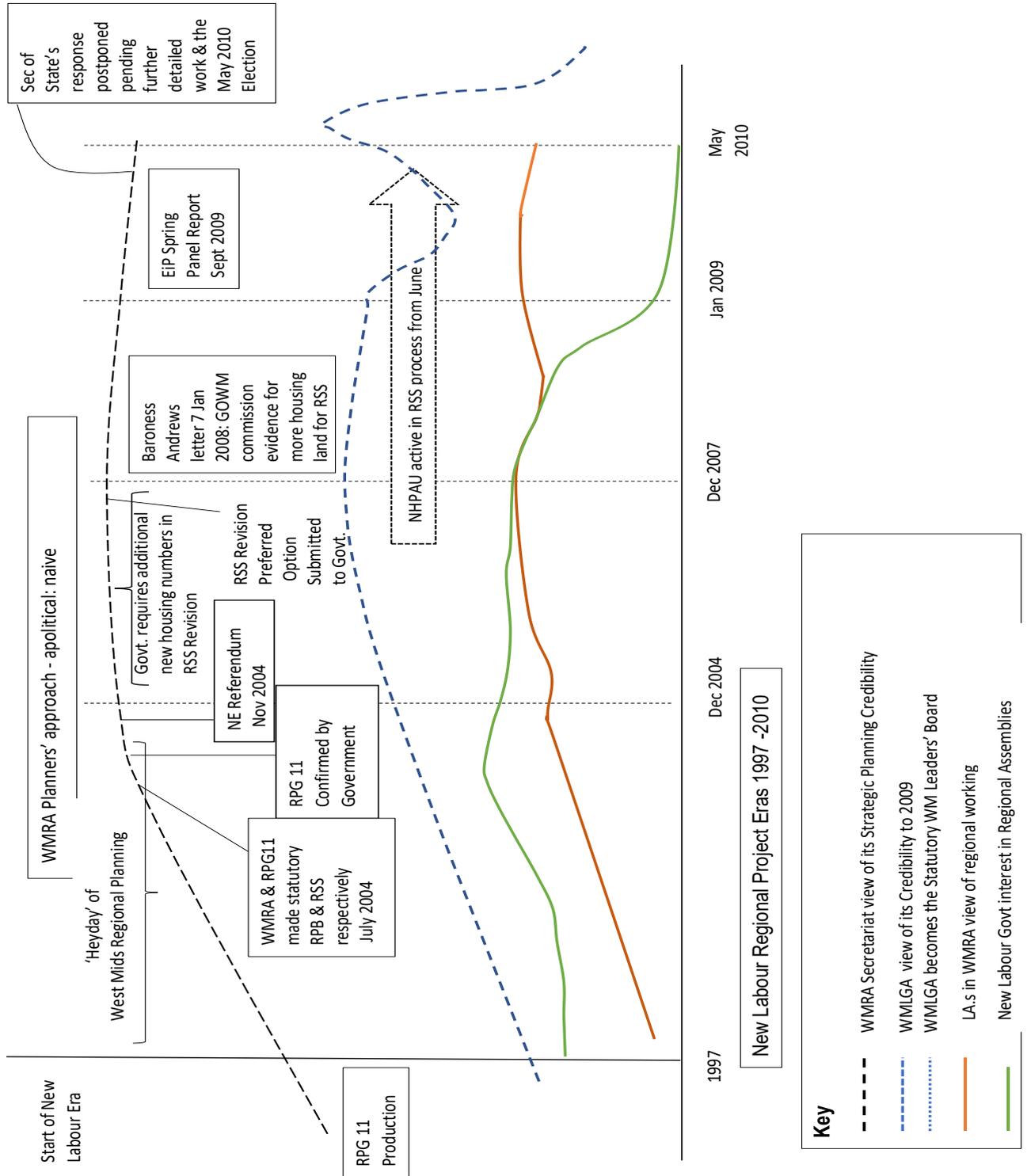
In Figure A10.1 the WMRA planners' own view of their credibility, supported until the 2009 EiP by their senior management is depicted as very confident and resilient to pressure across the whole of WMRA's lifecycle given their confidence in their approach being deeply embedded in the West Midlands Local Government Association's history of regional planning. The main feature of this actor group's self-belief in the technical, apolitical correctness of their policy advice and their determination to stand by this in the face of Government pressure to effectively reverse the RSS distribution approved in the RPG11 of new housing across the region.

Even with the outcome of the SRN placing future regional strategy ultimately under regional development agencies, the WMRA planners saw their spatial strategy contribution, both in terms of policy and structural organisation, continuing within the

new Responsible Regional Authorities most likely under the new West Midlands Leaders' Board. Senior management of Advantage West Midlands neither understood the RSS nor wanted the role of producing it in any guise. This strengthened the WMRA planners' view that their work would continue, suggesting that historic path dependency would effectively describe how the regional planning function would have continued under a post -2010 Labour regional governance regime.

Figure A10.1 The Credibility of the RSS Phase 2 Revision over time: WMRA

Secretariat and Planners. Source: Author Base on Analysis of Interviews.

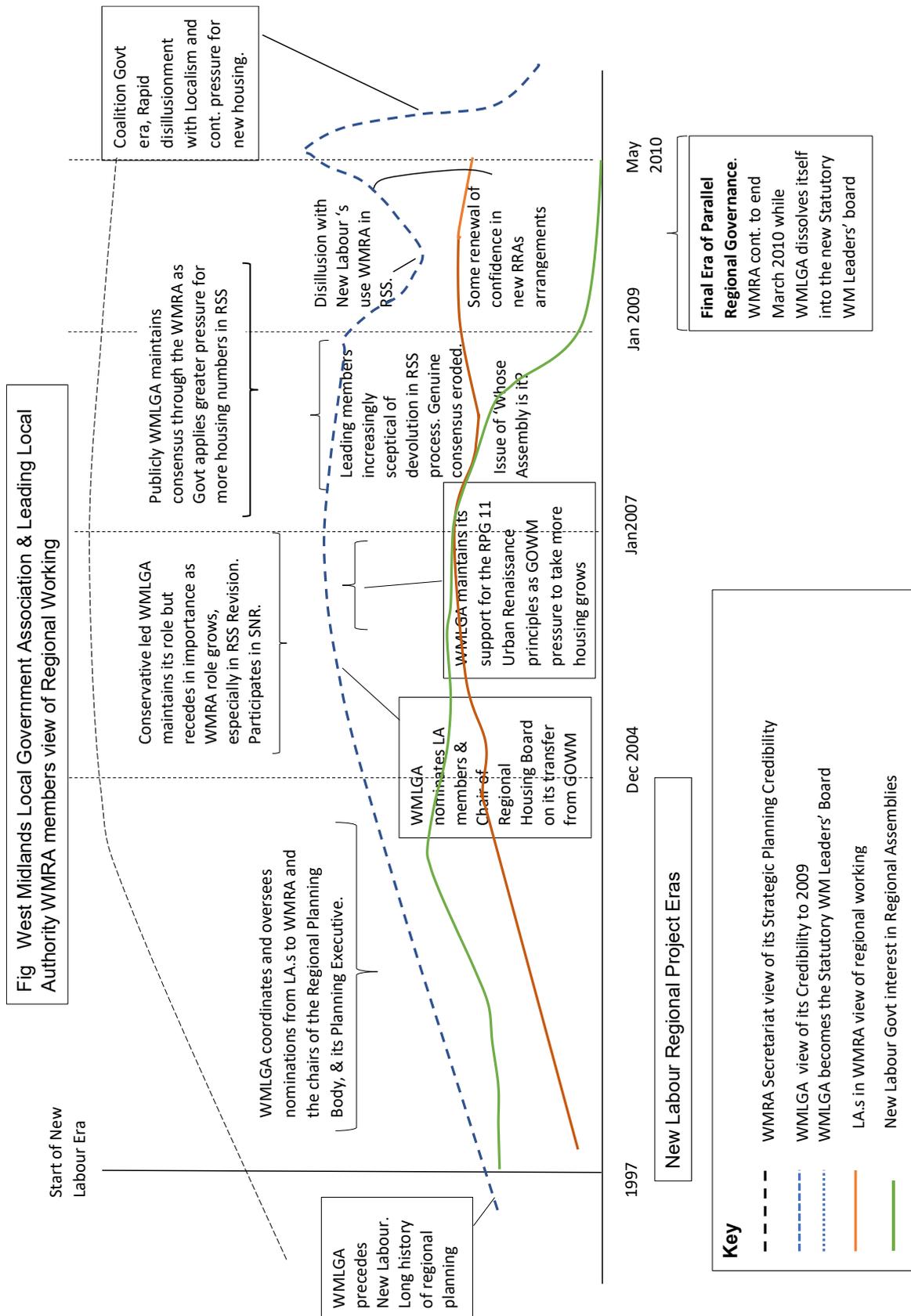


The Credibility of the RSS Revision and Regional Working: Senior Conservative WMLGA Leaders /WMRA Local Authority Governance Members

Figure A10.2 plots the main influences on the local authority governance of the WMRA including the senior Conservative WMLGA members who held longstanding roles in steering the political processes of both WMLGA and Assembly organisations. The principal course of this trajectory was its keeping in step with the WMRA Secretariat and planners through most of the life of the organisation, demonstrating its awareness and support for the past RPG 11 and the cross party, cross region consensus over the RPG 11 strategy and that of stemming the rate of outmigration from the metropolitan urban core to the rural shire town and small cities. This support was maintained as the RSS Revision Preferred Option was negotiated between the local authorities and endorsed the decision not to increase the new housing figures to the extent required by Government. The professional and political governance of the WMRA consciously maintained its position consistent with path dependency theory in the continued resilience of this core aspect of the WMRA's operation. Throughout this period to the 2009 EiP. WMRA planners and the local authority RSS policy lead officers continued to regard the overtly unanimous local authority political support for their work to be unchanged. This political support for the RSS Revision submission and the overall work of the WMRA continued through to the end of the EiP in June 2009, by which time the new parallel WMLB shadow structures were effectively taking over from the WMRA. The Assembly's lack of formal role in economic development made it seem irrelevant to the local authorities and RDA as the recession deepened and the construction sector slowed dramatically and shed a substantial part of its capacity. The diagram shows the

interest in RSS working dropping away in 2009 and a hope for a shorter more immediately relevant and economically helpful.

Figure A10.2 The Credibility of the RSS Revision and Regional Working: Senior Conservative WMLGA Leaders and WMRA Local Authority Governance Members
 Source: Author Base on Analysis of Interviews



Regional Strategy being created between the WMLB and AWM. The speed, targeted relevance and good reception by Government of the shadow JSIB's 'Regional Funding Advice 2' document gave support to this hope. Once the Coalition Government came into power all interest in regional working died as the structures were wound up.

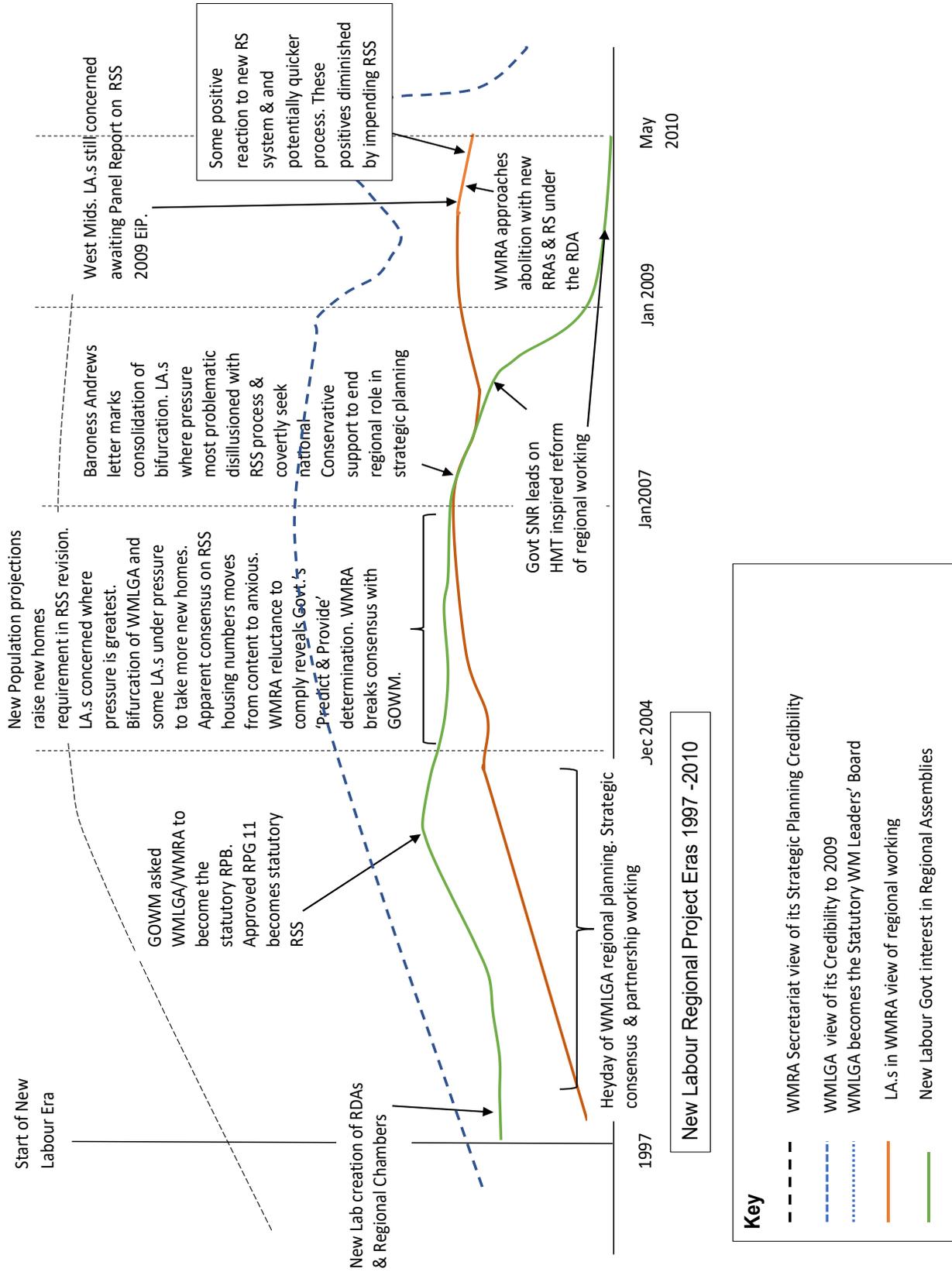
Labour and West Midlands Local Authorities

The final diagram in this sequence Figure A10.3, gives key events for two trajectories, the West Midlands Local Authorities and the Labour Government. The West Midlands Local Authorities are considered to have a similar though more detached and even sceptical stance of regional working during the first era. They were more detached because many of those attending meetings of the WMRA structures were often not senior people in their authorities, did little or no reporting back to their Party or Councils, and in Shire Districts were less strategically orientated given the Country Council strategic roles with the Assembly.

The result of the NE Referendum dented confidence in the regional project continuing, though it did. As the RSS Revision work continued to 2007 the local authorities were in a consensus over the outcome as submitted to Government.

The pressure applied by the Labour Government from 2008 to 2009 consolidated the sense of disillusionment in whatever credibility devolved regional working had at the outset. For the Local Authorities the demise of regional influence was a positive removal of a threat, but the continuation of Government pressure for new housing revealed plainly where the real threat originated in their view. The creation of the WMLB and its shadow predecessor gave some cause for hope to the local authorities as shown by the trajectory and text in the diagram. This ended with the Coalition Government removing the regional planning tier in 2010.

Figure A10.3 The West Midlands Local Authorities (not WMLGA) and ODPM/DCLG views under the New Labour Government of the credibility of Regional Assembly working and Regional Spatial Strategy. Source: Author Base on Analysis of Interviews



The Labour Government trajectory is a simplification of the emergent view projected by Government as a vectored outcome of the main Departments, Treasury and ODPM/DCLG involved in the debates over the benefits of regional planning. The trajectory wavers over the first and second eras reflecting the competing influences with the NE referendum result largely being cancelled out by the regional planning process being made statutory. In Government the interest in the regional system was waning as some assemblies including the WMRA became resistant to meeting Government's new housing requirements.

Once Baroness Andrews ministerial rebuke to the WMRA had been sent, in January 2008, and with NLP appointed later in 2008, the Government's interest shifted to the detailed outcome of the SNR. The abolition of regional assemblies and the RSS system was in legislative motion, so the trajectory of the current regional system's credibility dropped away completely.