The meaning of "strategy" for area regeneration: a review

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265

Abstract *Explores whether effective area regeneration requires a more strategic approach because of the greater dispersal of roles and the need to take operations into the next planning period. Using three dimensional perspectives to see strategy as the summation of process, content and context, the paper presents implications of calls for more strategy. Discusses the meaning of strategy and problems with relating it to area regeneration practice. The main conclusions are: any evaluation of strategy must go beyond the use of a single strategy document; key factors in the organisational context must be addressed; calls for strategy need to be specific and clarity in expression is essential.*

Introduction

Effective area regeneration (or indeed many other areas of public service provision) requires a strategic approach. This is felt by local authorities in their response to issues such as the reorganisation of local government, and it is also apparent from central government initiatives including City Challenge and the Single Regeneration Budget Challenge Fund which are characterised by the requirement to develop and implement strategies. It is also evidenced by the growing number of academic commentators who note a necessity for a more strategic approach and the regularity with which the need for strategy and strategy development is raised as a key issue for local governance. For example Lawless in his inaugural lecture stated that "regeneration requires a much more strategic overview" (Lawless, 1996, p. 28). Meanwhile Robson (1994) welcomed the new policy arrangements of SRB and IROs with the promise that SRB bids will be "more securely co-ordinated and strategically driven than was the case with programme dominated expenditure" (Robson, 1994, p. 221).

There have been a number of drivers influencing the calls for strategy. For example the dispersal of roles formerly undertaken by a local may require greater co-ordination across local areas or regions of issues of a strategic nature. Alternatively an organisation may wish to reconfigure its operations to take it into the next planning period or government term. Both require strategy development, but of a very different nature.

As people see the need for strategy arising from a number of different contexts, so they see the process of strategy development in a number of ways. For some a strategy might be akin to a regional development plan, for others a strategy is a short, even an unwritten, statement of intent to guide the configuration of an organisation.

This paper uses a framework developed by Pettigrew and Whipp (1993) to illustrate the various aspects of strategy and its meaning for area regeneration. By using the three dimensional perspectives of seeing strategy as the summation of process, content and context the paper presents implications of calls for more strategy for researchers, policy makers and practitioners. The paper starts, however, by examining the theoretical problems with developing an understanding of the meaning of strategy for area regeneration. It then goes on to look at practical issues for area regeneration. It concludes by drawing out some of the implications of the ambiguity of strategy for researchers, practitioners and policy makers.

Theoretical problems with "strategy"
Semantic confusion
The statement that people use the same language to mean different things or a different language to mean the same thing is as true with issues relating to strategy as it has been in many other contexts. Bennett notes that "many people use the words 'strategies', 'plans', 'policies' and 'objectives' interchangeably" (Bennett, 1996, p. 4). In academic discourse this has raised questions particularly between planners and business strategists. At issue here is the distinction between comprehensive planning and area strategies (Bryson and Einsweiler, 1988); in other words when is a strategy not a strategy but a plan.

Oversimplification of business strategy literature
There is no single perspective of what strategy is in the private sector. The business strategy literature reflects the complexity and diversity of strategic thought in the commercial sector. It is important to note that there are as many different perspectives on strategy in the business literature as there are in other areas – the rational strategy model (Ansoff, 1987) is but one of several models. Within these models various people highlight the importance of different factors. Channon (1973) wrote about the influence of structure on strategy, others have focused on leadership (Leavy and Wilson, 1994), culture (Stacey, 1993), or industrial analysis (Porter, 1980). Mintzberg (1987) has played a key devil's advocate role and has argued that there is no predetermined strategy but that strategy has to emerge, not necessarily in an incremental way, rather that it should be left to those that *do* to be crafted, and only when it has emerged will it actually be recognised.

This complexity of thought and diversity of perspective is however seldom reflected in the UK planning, or local area regeneration literatures. While that of the USA is more fully developed, in the UK commentators are only beginning to question the primacy of the normative model and recognise its limitations (e.g. Gray, 1997; Healey, 1997).

Transposition of business ideas to public sector management
Theories, examples of practice and different perspectives on business strategy have had a considerable amount of shelf space devoted to the subject over the

past two or three decades. Whittington (1993) for example noted several years ago that there were 37 books in print with the phrase Strategic Management in the title. Transferral of that experience to the public sector context is difficult in practice and may even be inappropriate according to some commentators (Bloom, 1986).

At a fundamental level Egan has noted that strategy is meaningful only where there is competition; "the two most challenging phenomena facing organisations in capitalist society: competition and strategy. As in warfare the two are inextricably linked" (Egan, 1995, p. 1). There is some overlap between the public and the private sectors in terms of competition; private sector businesses increasingly are forming alliances and developing ways of collaborative working which are perhaps more familiar to the public sector. Meanwhile the public sector is being exposed to the rigours of the market place through CCT or the development of pseudo-competition as in SRBCF. But strategy as a way to enhance provision of regional infrastructure for example appears to have, at best, a tangential relationship with this idea of strategy and competition as a compound process. From this perspective it can be argued that where there is no competition there is no need for strategy.

There are further ideas which can be pursued in both the public and commercial sectors whose logic directs that there are several circumstances in which the pursuit of a strategic approach is inappropriate. For example if the costs of strategy development are likely to outweigh any benefit, if the operating environment is liable to change significantly but in an unpredictable way (after a merger for example), or if there is rapid turnover of key personnel.

Academics appear to have recognised that while there are differences between the private and public sectors the two sectors can learn from one another. Dodge and Eadie (1982) conclude that although differences exist between the sectors, strategic planning can be used successfully in the public sector. This is echoed by Common *et al.* (1992, p. 10) who claim that "one useful impact of initiatives designed to make the public sector more business-like was that ideas of strategic planning started to be contemplated seriously".

Whilst there has been acceptance of the transferral of strategy concepts to public and public-private sector area regeneration organisations, the theoretical problems of definition manifest themselves in a number of ways.

Problems with strategy in area regeneration practice

The previous section has shown that in the business literature there are a number of perspectives on the desirability of strategy, and its nature. In the practical application of strategy and strategy development these issues become evident.

Regional and organisational hierarchies
Several commentators see the desirability of a more strategic approach to regeneration as an issue of regionalisation. The fragmentation of

exhibited many features of traditional bureaucracy, including hierarchical structures, limited automation and IT applications, low levels of training, a poor work culture, language and cultural barriers, and an overall orientation towards inputs and processes rather than service delivery and results. Within the first three years of the new order, substantial effort was devoted to reforming the bureaucracy. New public service legislation and regulations were introduced, new and powerful central personnel agencies were created, English became the language of administration, and substantial authority was devolved to departments and provinces. Despite these reforms, progress in improving results in terms of service delivery, especially to previously disadvantaged communities, was mixed. Towards the end of the 1990s increased attention was paid to means of improving service delivery. Three important initiatives in this regard were *Batho Pele* (1997), the adoption of eight nationwide principles for better service delivery; a public private partnerships initiative (2000) and the promotion of alternative service delivery. While alternative service delivery initiatives are largely at pilot stage, they offer a promising alternative both to traditional bureaucracy (with its cost and poor service delivery focus) and to a narrow version of privatisation (which could involve heavy social costs, job losses, and regressive redistribution of wealth). This paper reviews these developments and outlines some promising alternative service delivery pilot projects.

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Keywords Urban regeneration, Strategic management, Strategic evaluation

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administrative structures, combined with the consequent need for better co-ordination has been one factor driving this interpretation. A second factor is the notion of subsidiarity and the transferral of decision making to the locality. These two drivers have been accompanied with a raft of guidance and clear priorities for the types of activities which will be sponsored from national or European funding sources (such as ESF, and Challenge Funds). Hence Danson and Lloyd (1992) suggest that strategies should be developed at a regional level to establish a framework which then gives guidance to lower levels. A regional strategy is then seen as a device to ensure that a number of organisations and agencies operating within an area do so in a co-ordinated, coherent and responsive manner.

Strategy documents may also need to address one or several issues across local areas within a region, for example strategic planning guidance for the regions or inward investment strategies for regions. It is questionable whether such area wide strategies really fit into the category of business strategy at all. Strategy (in the management sense) focuses specifically on a corporation or agency and has a very limited spatial dimension.

Calls for a regional strategic framework have a structural implication. The only organisations which currently have a regional remit are government offices and some partnership organisations such as SERPLAN. What may spring from a desire to better co-ordinate resources then quickly raises issues of governance, participation and accountability.

There is a second issue surrounding hierarchy, that of organisational hierarchy. Definitions of strategy generally agree that it is something to do with configuring the resources available within, or to, an organisation to achieve its future goals. Bryson and Einsweiler (1988, p. 1) for example have said that "strategic planning is a disciplined effort to produce fundamental decisions and actions that shape and guide what an organisation (or other entity) is, what it does and why it does it". It is also something which is perceived must come from the top of an organisation. Walton (1997) has commented that within local authorities there is a tendency for the "Vision" thing - the strategic function to be located within chief executives' offices while planners have retreated to the role of administrators.

Yet this is at odds with several aspects of area regeneration which are promoted as best practice. In particular the notion of empowerment of communities, and widespread participation in the regeneration process. The divide between strategists who make decisions and other groups who implement them, can create conflict within an organisation or an area (Duffy and Hutchinson, 1997) and the appropriate process of strategy development must be given careful consideration. Furthermore the predominance of partnership working (a very particular form of "organisation") and all of its inherent characteristics can make it difficult to figure out what the organisation is – let alone what it does and why.

The strategic plan – a product or a process?
The general model for producing strategy is the rational model which begins with strategic issues, develops visions, accumulates and analyses information, develops projects, plans and processes to achieve the vision, sets targets, monitors, evaluates and then reviews. It is this which informs the Challenge approach to area regeneration; for example the SRBCF bidding guidance clearly requires partnerships to identify not only their general strategic approach but also to plan which projects will be supported and then to monitor their implementation. The strategy process is conceptualised in two distinct phases, strategy formulation and strategy implementation.

In this sequence of events the product of the formulation phase is some form of document. This is a strategy document which is publicly available, agreed and to which the sponsor organisations can be held accountable. Many examples can be found of area regeneration strategies produced as part of the Challenge Fund process or local authority EDUs.

There are however problems with this approach; Breheny (1991) for example has noted problems with implementation of strategies which have been ascribed to the divorce of formulation from implementation. This is perhaps less the fault of individual schemes and more to do with problems of overly simple conceptualisations of how the strategy process should proceed. Parkinson (1996, p. 4) recognises the normative nature of this conceptualisation of strategy as a series of steps which should be taken – but maybe not always are taken. Schoenberger (1994, p. 1011) has also noted the "sense in which the process is overly mechanistic". There is a danger of seeing strategy development as a series of techniques, the correct application of which will ultimately lead, in this case, to regeneration.

An alternative way to view strategy is as a continuous, iterative learning process and in a changing environment it should be expected that as soon as one strategy is agreed and disseminated it is out of date and revision and reappraisal become necessary.

Summary
There are therefore a number of problems with the meaning of strategy for area regeneration, both theoretical and practical. The consequence of these (and other) factors is that there can be resistance to the idea of strategy within organisations and partnerships. Leach comments that "corporate strategies, mission statements and strategic visions have long been targets for cynicism and ridicule" (Leach, 1996, p. 27). He nevertheless goes on to conclude that when it is used appropriately, strategic management can be a powerful tool for making important strategic choices and for further developing the governance agenda.

Strategy: process, content and context
There are a number of complexities, misunderstandings and issues surrounding the conceptualisation of strategy. The remainder of the paper uses

an existing framework of analysis to further clarify what strategy can mean, and identify the variety of factors which combine to generate an understanding of a strategic approach.

The framework of analysis is that developed by Pettigrew and Whipp (1993) following a broad examination of competition in automobile manufacture, book publishing, merchant banking and life assurance and organisations' response to it. It examines the importance of the strategy development process, its content and the context within which strategy is developed. The components of their "trinity of forces" are shown in Table I.

The model proposes that these factors be overlain by a multilevel approach, in the commercial sector this would be at the firm, sector and national context. In the context of area regeneration it may be more appropriate to refer to geographic scale or micro and meta levels of analysis. The paper uses this model to comprehend the many aspects of strategy and the inter-relatedness of key factors. It does not seek to identify an optimal approach or indeed to use one particular case to illustrate the approach (though this would be feasible).

Strategy as process
Models. Perhaps the most frequently expressed view of the process of developing a strategy (if it is expressed at all) is as a rational process. This is clearly the paradigm within which Challenge funds are allocated and much government advice is formulated. It is an approach which has a number of clear advantages particularly in a more stable environment or within a bureaucratic structure. But it is not necessarily best suited to organisations operating within the political and turbulent context of area regeneration. Other models include Freeman's (1984) stakeholder model which proposes that an organisation's strategy will only be effective if it meets the needs of its stakeholder groups. A hybrid of these two approaches has been developed by Warner (1997) to appropriate the methodology of strategic development planning at the community level. A third model (which can be used in conjunction with the

Process		Change managers
		Models of change
		Formulation/implementation
		Pattern through time
Content		Assessment and choice of products and markets
		Objectives and assumptions
		Targets and evaluation
Context		
	Internal	Resources
		Capability
		Culture
		Politics
	External	Economic/business
		Political
		Social

Table I.
Trinity of forces

other two) is a decision process model in which strategy development essentially answers four questions: Where are we going?; How do we get there?; What actions do we take?; How do we know if we are on track? (Lorange, 1980).

Change managers. A rational process of strategy development is often guided by senior managers sometimes with wider consultation – a stakeholder model by contrast naturally assumes that there will be much wider discussion, and identification of issues and negotiation to achieve a mutually acceptance compromise among all key stakeholders. McArthur's (1995) work with community partnerships in Scotland for example has shown signs that the participation of local people will broaden strategic agendas. The third model highlights the issue of where the locus of decision-making power is held.

Finally the dynamic of the rational model is such that the production of a "strategy" is a key output, other models may emphasise that the process of putting together a strategy is often as important as the document itself. So for example some commentators have noted the benefit of having a range of stakeholders involved to make implementation easier. Alternatively Healey for example notes that "strategy does not just lie in the text of some plans. It lives in the minds of actors in policy communities" (Healey, 1997, p. 4) It is certainly the case that if a range of partners have participated within the strategy development process they are more committed to its successful implementation.

Pattern through time. Rubin (1988) has added a further issue to understanding strategy, that of time. He understands the outcomes of public sector strategy development processes in terms of two key issues, one is "environmental character" and the second is the temporal horizon. If strategy is a pattern of action then the time horizon over which it is viewed clearly becomes an issue. More recently Bramwell (1997) has traced the development of strategies for area regeneration though the saga of the world student games in Sheffield. One of his key conclusions was that an effective strategic response has only evolved after the event, but that nevertheless it is effective. The extent of that success will however only be observable over a long term perspective.

Strategy as content

The Pettigrew and Whipp (1993) model sees the content of strategy as the assessment and choice of products and markets, setting objectives and targets with some evaluation. In the context of area regeneration the content may be the choice of priority areas, groups or themes rather than products and markets.

This perspective can be used to examine what the strategy actually says. For area regeneration they may be used to prioritise areas of need (the decisions taken by urban authorities about which areas to propose for City Challenge for example was a strategic – as well as a political – decision). Alternatively the strategy might choose to focus on key issues such as business support, training, inward investment, and environmental improvement.

One criticism of area regeneration strategies is that they all tend to look the same. Midwinter and McGarvey (1993) in particular are highly sceptical of the value of strategies in general but mission and value statements in particular which they call "bland statements" which have "more to do with public relations than the internal management of local authorities". While this may be a valid generalisation there are explanations which underpin this neutrality. Government strategic guidance often suggests the types of activities which those developing strategies may wish to consider. For the SRBCF the list of seven strategic objectives was so broad that it encompassed almost anything which partnerships may wish to have addressed in the name of regeneration. In the first round at least many took this as an instruction to hit as many of these "targets" as possible (Fordham *et al.*, 1997).

In some instances the strategy document has to fulfil a number of functions. TECs' Corporate Plans for instance form a central part of the assessment process for TEC Licensing, they have to address simultaneously the economic development needs of the area and the TEC's own strategy, and they are required to provide the detail set out in the Government's Strategic Guidance which in itself has a long agenda of issues. Consequently their content may not always be satisfactory (Pieda, 1995).

The appropriateness and effectiveness of the use of targets, monitoring and evaluation is also questionable. Our work on TEC corporate plans found that the links between environmental analysis, project selection and monitoring criteria were often nebulous (Policy Research Institute, 1995). Finally the role of evaluation in area regeneration is often undervalued both in strategy generation and strategy review. Indeed the rational model of strategy which underpins the Challenge approach effectively operates to minimise the effect of learning from evaluation within a scheme, although lessons can be transferred across to subsequent schemes.

Finally, we should note the generic nature of the content of strategies. The classic business strategy types include the choices of merger, acquisition, divestment or expansion. Hambleton (1994) has spoken of other types of strategy such as three strategies for public service reform being to extend markets, extend democracy and new managerialism, all of which operate at a meta level of analysis.

Strategy as context
In the model the strategy context can be divided into two elements: internal and external.

The internal context of strategy development can incorporate ways in which an organisation configures itself to achieve its strategic aims. In the business literature this particular aspect of competitiveness has gained increasing prominence with the resource based view of the firm (Barney, 1991). Within individual agencies the drive to become more "business like" and to improve what Elcock (1991) has called the 3Es, economy, efficiency and effectiveness,

can shape how an individual organisation shapes its own strategies and those of the area in which it operates.

For area regeneration the internal context of strategy development is complicated by the prevalence of partnership working. Huxham and Vangen (1997) for example have shown that in several instances many partners do not know who their partners are. This poses some severe problems for strategy development, if strategy is meant to shape the organisation, its actions and its direction, then having an organisation which its own members recognise would seem to be a good starting point. In other longer established partnerships, a strategic approach must be agreed between the partners, but then should also inform the operations of each individual partner. Strategy development for partnership groups in this political and complex environment is never going to be straightforward (Scottish Office, 1996; Peck and Tickell, 1994; Hutchinson, 1994).

Despite these internal issues, partnerships continue to work together and to try to develop a strategic response to key problems for area regeneration. The external environment is a key explanatory variable. Indeed the Local Government Training Board (1990) have defined three types of strategy as a function of external factors. The first is a "politically-driven" strategy which may be in support of, in opposition to, or independent of central government. The second is the "unique authority" strategy which is a pro-active or reactive response to local circumstances. The final type is no strategy where an organisation is wholly reactive to external circumstances.

Whilst most studies will evaluate the content of strategies or focus on the processes (pluralistic and consultative versus top down), the contextual element is often underplayed. Leavy and Wilson concluded that "national context and public policy are now important contextual influences on the strategies of organisations in even the world's leading economic power" (1994, p. 171). This finding is even more salient for smaller organisations for whom public policy is a major input to their activities.

Implications and conclusions
According to Pettigrew and Whipp's (1993) model a strategic approach to area regeneration must involve an appraisal of whatever strategic issues need to be addressed, the process of developing new ways of thinking and of working, and an understanding of both the organisational context and the political and economic conditions. The strength of the model is that it is comprehensive. This is also its main weakness, it encourages what Leavy and Wilson call a "descriptive tapestry" (1994, p. 171) – which lends its use to individual case studies to develop narratives of experience. This is a time consuming process and one which does not offer an off-the-shelf package of strategy-and-how-to-make-one.

There are nevertheless a number of implications for researchers of strategy for area regeneration. The first is that any evaluation or review of strategy would need to go further than using any strategy document on its own. The

process of strategy development, and the key factors in the organisational context must also be addressed. This is particularly true given the rhetorical function of strategy documents.

Second, general calls for more strategy need to be more specific; a regional framework for investment is a very different form of strategy from one which offers an organisation direction into the next few years. It is helpful to address which configuration of strategy, structure and process are being referred to, and indeed whether this refers to the micro or meta level of analysis.

Finally the literatures used to contextualise any study need careful consideration. There are as many views on strategy and what it is in the business literatures as there are views of what constitutes area regeneration in the field of public policy and practice.

For practitioners and policy makers a key message is that different partners will understand the semantics of strategy in a different way and may see it fulfilling a range of purposes. Lack of clarity may contribute to the cynicism felt by many in local authorities about the use of strategy.

Second it is important to recognise that the process is as important as the content. An external agent can facilitate strategy development, but they will encounter problems if asked to deliver a meaningful strategy working in isolation from the organisation, and the context in which it operates.

Finally, the model is not prescriptive. It indicates that there is no one best way to do strategy. So while organisations and agencies working to achieve area regeneration may initially follow a rational process, it will become evident that this is a normative approach (Parkinson, 1996). Strategies, and the development process will change in time in response to the changing organisational context.

According to Pettigrew and Whipp (1993) there are two key qualities which characterise those organisations which use strategy for competitive advantage. The first is an ability to understand the forces in play and how they change in time. The second is having the competence to mobilise and manage resources to achieve an effective strategic response. With these two qualities in place agencies involved in area regeneration may effect strategic change.

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