



Office of the  
Deputy Prime Minister  

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Creating sustainable communities

# *English Regional Governance in 2004*

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SURF Centre: University of Salford  
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# Executive summary

## Introduction

1. This is the final report of a research project that would have evaluated the operation and effectiveness of Elected Regional Assemblies, had they gone ahead. This study was awarded by ODPM to a consortium led by the SURF Centre (University of Salford) in 2003. It reports on work undertaken for the first two phases of what was originally intended to be an eight-year project: the feasibility stage, concluded at the end of 2003, and the baseline stage, which ran to the end of 2004.
2. The evaluation phase of the project (2005-2011) was cancelled following the decisive vote against the creation of an Elected Regional Assembly (ERA) in the referendum in the North East in November 2004 and in light of the Government's subsequent decision not to go ahead with further referendums or to introduce the planned Regional Assemblies Bill into Parliament.

## Evaluation challenges

3. An evaluation of 'the extent to which, collectively and individually, ERAs in England [would] have met the objectives they were intended to' represented a more complex challenge than a traditional policy or programme evaluation. In particular it was difficult to specify, in advance of the final legislation, any subsequent Government guidance and the establishment and operation of one or more ERAs, what the 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' objectives for ERAs might ultimately be.
4. The SURF consortium faced these challenges by designing a methodology that (a) adapted a range of quantitative and qualitative evaluation techniques to the particular circumstances in which ERAs were evolving and (b) provided for flexibility which would have enabled the building in of greater future clarity about what Government expected from ERAs and what any individual ERA proposed to achieve. This methodology was then applied during the baseline phase of the study in order to put the performance of any future ERA into an appropriate historical and comparative context. The baseline work generated a number of key observations about regional performance (against a variety of economic, social and environmental indicators), the effectiveness of existing regional governance arrangements, and popular perceptions of regions and expectations of ERAs that would have underpinned future evaluation activity.

## Comparative regional performance

5. The SURF consortium's quantitative analysis of regional performance showed there to be strong evidence of recent improvement in all English regions *and* a growing gap between the southern regions and the rest. The South East, the Eastern region and the South West emerged as the regions with the best and most balanced performance, overall. London was found to be pre-eminent in terms of economic performance but this did not translate directly and unambiguously into a high quality of social and environmental life in the capital given the tendency for the benefits of London's economy to 'leak out' to, and support positive change indirectly in, a steadily expanding, surrounding 'super-region'.
6. The performance of the two midlands regions was found to be moderate by national standards. The West Midlands emerged as slightly stronger in terms of economic performance but trailed the East Midlands on a number of physical/environmental and social indicators. The three northern regions formed a group in which economic performance, comparatively, was poorest. Within this group, the North East stood out as the region in which the connection between economic underperformance and social problems was most stark. The evidence suggested that northern region ERAs would have faced a higher degree of difficulty in attempting to bring regional performance up to the levels sustained in the southern regions and in supporting the Government objective of reducing regional disparities in growth rates over the longer term.

## Regional governance

7. Findings from a survey of regional agencies and other organisations involved in the delivery of regional strategies suggested showed that the performance of current regional agencies – Regional Development Agencies and Regional Assemblies – was perceived to be very moderate. In terms of influence, the regional agencies were seen as being dominated by central government and to have more influence over one another than upon other organisations and interests whose co-operation and resources were needed to deliver regional strategies effectively. Regional public opinion, and the voice of community and voluntary organisations within regions, was viewed as having negligible impact upon regional agencies.
8. Qualitative case study evidence underlined this analysis. It showed that, whilst regional agencies exhibited a growing maturity in their ability to work together and generate broadly consensual strategies, their ability to provide clear and focused regional leadership and strategic priorities were limited by a range of factors. These included: a complex and difficult-to-understand division of responsibilities between regional agencies; the existence of multiple lines of accountability within which they have to operate; the confusing and managerially complex multiplicity of strategies and programmes running within the regions; limitations to regional evidence bases; a tendency by the agencies, *in extremis*, toward institutional self-protection, and; the lack of clarity about how regions can and should influence national departmental policies and choices.

## Popular perceptions of regionalism

9. A series of Focus Groups undertaken in the three northern regions in the run-up to the North East referendum suggested that, in terms of regional governance, there was little support for either the status quo or a prospective move to an ERA constructed along the lines outlined by Government. Existing regional agencies were found to have achieved very little visibility, credibility or legitimacy in the eyes of a representative sample of regional electorates. At the same time, there was little confidence that an ERA would make a substantial difference.
10. This pessimism was partly due to scepticism about whether 'the region' was an appropriate scale at which to deliver policies given that popular identification with regions was low. Partly it was due to a sense of disappointment with the idea of a primarily 'strategic' ERA with relatively little control over resources in areas that focus group participants felt to be important to them. Mostly, however, it reflected a very low level of trust in politicians, *per se*, and a feeling that another elected body would do little for ordinary life chances.

## Conclusion

11. The evidence from the first two phases of the LTE study suggested, overall, that the recent strengthening of regional governance arrangements and the proliferation of regional strategies and programmes appeared to have made no discernible difference to long-run patterns of uneven regional development in England but that culpability for this could not be laid at the door of the regional agencies. Whether ERAs constructed along the anticipated lines would have had a greater impact was dependent upon the way they were resourced and the way they might have used their influence to define and promote the delivery of sharper, more integrated and focused regional strategies.
12. Had the evaluation phase gone ahead, the SURF consortium would have tested the degree to which any future ERA regime: helped simplify lines of accountability for regional strategy; faced tough regional choices and encouraged their delivery; was able to develop and promote a clearer sense of regional priorities than is currently the case; was able to marshal more robust and sophisticated evidence in support of policies and programmes; was able to align delivery as well as strategy; was able to achieve 'buy in' on the part of other organisations in the public and private sectors, and; had a greater impact than current regional governance arrangements on the delivery of national and regional targets and on the way these targets are understood and shaped.

# 1. Purpose and scope of this report

- 1.1 It reflects and builds upon the work that consortium members undertook during the first two phases of the project: the feasibility stage, which was concluded at the end of 2003, and the baseline stage, which ran to the end of 2004. In the original contract for the study, ODPM set out its expectation that this report should comprise a baseline study that reviewed the state of the English regions and of English regional governance, set out a methodology whereby the operation and effectiveness of Elected Regional Assemblies (ERAs) would be assessed, and defined a work programme that would deliver a 'formative' evaluation of ERAs, in 2007, and a 'summative' evaluation, in 2011. This timetable was designed to dovetail with that anticipated for the creation and evolution of ERAs, pending the result of three referendums on whether to create them that were originally due to be conducted, by postal ballot, in the northern English regions in the autumn of 2004.
- 1.2 It is now a matter of historical record that this timetable became redundant, during the course of 2004, in two main stages. First, the Government, in response to concerns about the safety of the postal voting process that came to light following the European Parliamentary elections in June, decided to postpone the referendums on ERAs in the North West and Yorkshire and the Humber but to allow the referendum in the North East to go ahead as planned. Second, the referendum in the North East on 4 November produced a vote of 78:22 against the introduction of an ERA in the region. The Deputy Prime Minister subsequently announced that the Government no longer intended to proceed with either the referendums in the North West and Yorkshire and the Humber or the introduction of the planned Regional Assemblies Bill, which would have enabled the creation of one or more ERAs in 2006, during the 2001-05 Parliament.
- 1.3 Interpretations of the Government's announcement vary. A minority advances the view that referendums in the other two northern regions and the introduction of a revised Regional Assemblies Bill into Parliament remain possible in the medium term. The majority view is that the North East referendum result effectively 'killed' any prospect of the creation of elected regional government in England for the foreseeable future. History is on the side of the latter group; the failure of the 1978 referendums in Scotland and Wales to give a green light to devolution resulted in a gap of more than twenty years before the option of creating a Parliament and an Assembly was offered to the Scottish and Welsh electorates once more. Whichever interpretation one tends toward, though, the result, for the LTE project, is the same: it became impossible to proceed with the project, as originally specified, under these changed circumstances.

- 1.4 The events of 2004 inevitably had far-reaching implications for the LTE study. The ODPM opted to terminate the SURF consortium's contract as of the end of the baseline phase, meaning that the long-term evaluation phase of the study (2005-2011) was cancelled. Nonetheless the Department felt it would be valuable to complete the first two phases of the project as planned and to (a) set out the baseline position, as at 2004, that would have provided a context to the work of ERAs, and (b) set out our proposals on how ERAs could have been evaluated, had any been created.
  
- 1.5 The remainder of this report complies with the Department's requirements insofar as this proved possible given the stage that had been reached, by the time of the North East referendum, in the process of establishing ERAs and specifying their future aims, powers, resources, responsibilities, structures, modes of operation and potential impacts. This is achieved in four main sections. Section 2 considers the main aims and objectives of the study, as it was originally conceived, and describes how the study team addressed the methodological challenges of designing the LTE study when there was still a possibility that one or more ERAs could have been established on the original timescale. It then briefly describes the elements of the LTE work programme to the end of the baseline phase. Section 3 then presents a summary picture of 'the state of the English regions' as revealed by the consortium's quantitative and qualitative work during 2004. Section 4 draws upon a series of focus groups staged in the three northern English regions in the period leading up to the referendum in the North East to present an insight into popular perceptions of the regions, regional agencies and the regionalisation process. The final section reviews the baseline analysis and outlines the approach that would have been taken to the evaluation of ERAs had any been created.

# 2. The LTE study and the baseline phase

## 2.1 The ODPM's original brief

2.1.1 In its original brief, the ODPM identified two overarching aims that it wished to see achieved by the study, along with four key objectives that were intended to guide the research programme. The aims expressed the overall, long- and medium-term aspirations of the evaluation as follows:

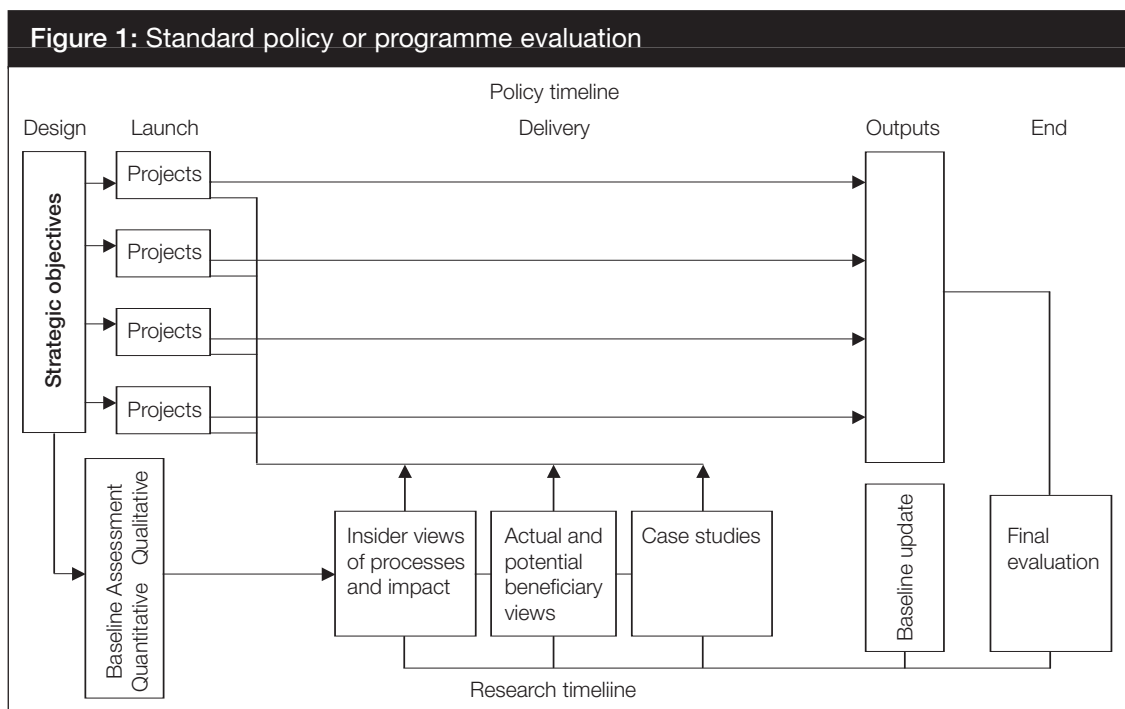
- To evaluate the extent to which, collectively and individually, ERAs in England have met the objectives they were intended to [longer term, to 2011], and
- To analyse the baseline position, pre-ERAs, setting down a wholesale analysis of the 'environment' (organisational, economic and other) into which ERAs are to be created, including a detailed review of existing governance relationships within each region [medium term, to 2005].

2.1.2 The four supporting objectives related more directly to the anticipated phases of the study. They were:

- To produce a feasibility study, setting down the objectives of ERAs and proposing an analytical framework and potential methods for evaluating the extent to which those objectives have been met (and how) [short term, end of 2003];
- To undertake a detailed analysis of the baseline (pre-ERAs) position within each region in respect of those dimensions in which we would expect to see ERAs having an impact [medium term, end of 2004];
- To review the existing governance 'environment' within each of the English regions in order to 'audit' the baseline relationships between sub-regional and regional organisations and identify the nature and effectiveness of those relationships and, therefore, the (potential) role of ERAs [medium term, end of 2004];
- To evaluate whether ERAs have met their objectives, both collectively and individually. The evaluation is to include both a formative element [longer term, 2007] – to evaluate how ERAs meet their objectives – and a summative element to identify the outcomes from ERA policy [long term, 2011].

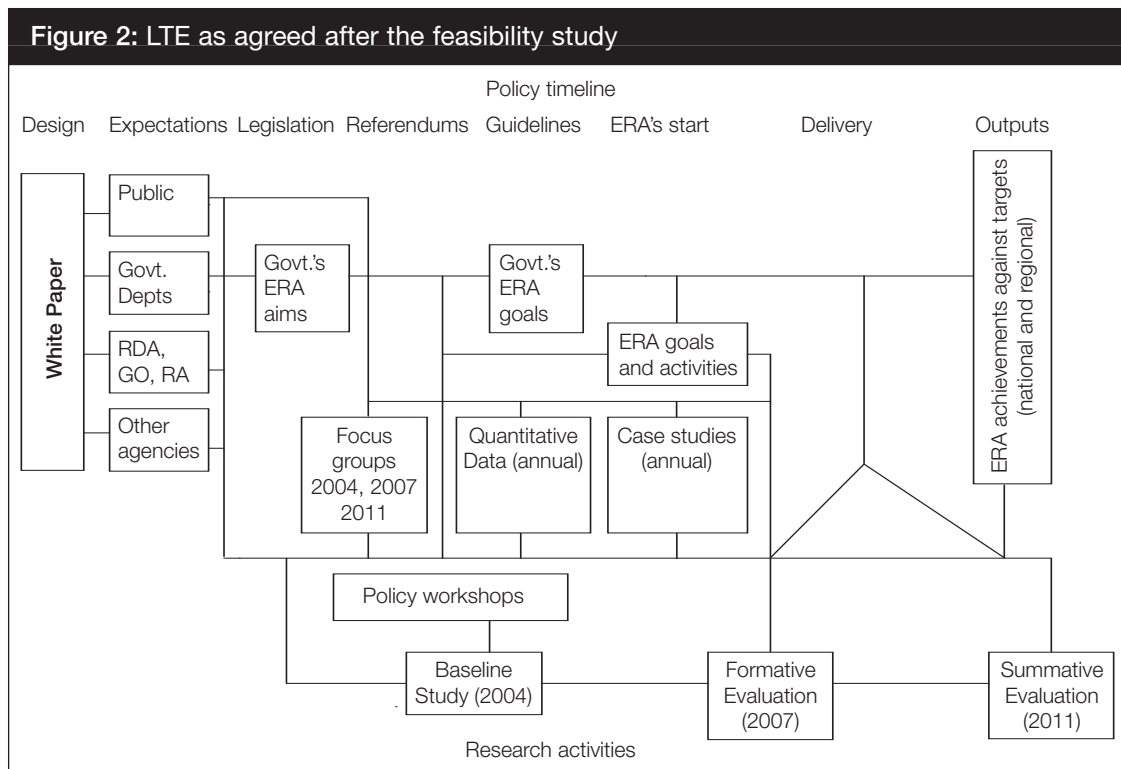
## 2.2 Designing the evaluation

- 2.2.1 The events of 2004 clearly meant that the first aim of the study and its fourth objective became redundant. However it is still worth considering the way the consortium dealt with the methodological challenges set by the Department’s overall aims and objectives as this sheds some useful light upon how the study would have proceeded. The Department considers that a description of the way we developed our approach will be useful to other researchers who may be asked to undertake similarly complex evaluations in the future.
- 2.2.2 Our evaluation approach was set out in our original tender for the study and further refined and clarified in a draft work plan submitted to the Department in September 2003 and in a feasibility study delivered in February 2004. In essence, we argued that no simple or quick ‘fix’ could satisfy the objectives set out in the brief, not least because a number of key factors made the planning and realisation of a long-term evaluation of ERAs considerably more complex than a more traditional policy or programme evaluation. Figures 1 and 2 describe, in diagrammatic form, the main differences between a ‘standard’ evaluation and the approach we developed in expectation of the establishment of one or more ERAs.
- 2.2.3 As Figure 1 shows, had we been attempting a standard programme evaluation, our methodology would have comprised a number of inter-related quantitative and qualitative research tasks. We would have begun with the strategic objectives of the programme in question and constructed a quantitative baseline analysis that identified a range of indicators of change in the general environment – physical, social, economic, organisational – that the programme was intended to affect. The quantitative baseline would then have been updated – once, at the end of the programme, at minimum but ideally more frequently – in order to ‘benchmark’ change in thematic areas closely related to intended programme outcomes. If resources allowed, baseline data would also have been collected for additional geographical areas in which the programme was not running – ‘policy off’ areas – in order to provide counterfactual comparisons.



2.2.4 Qualitative research methods, based on interviews, detailed case studies, surveys and/or focus groups, would then have been used to ascertain the effectiveness of particular projects undertaken in support of individual strategic objectives – in terms of the processes developed to deliver them and their perceived and demonstrable ‘success’ – and of the programme as a whole. The main focus of the qualitative work would have been upon ‘insiders’, that is those charged with programme management and project delivery, and with groups of intended or potential beneficiaries. The final stage of the evaluation would then have set the results of the qualitative and quantitative work alongside data on programme outputs in order to provide the basis on which an informed judgement could be made on how far changes in the environment that the programme was intended to affect could be attributed to its activities.

2.2.5 As Figure 2 shows, the analytical approach we proposed for the LTE study was based upon the desire to replicate this robust and comparatively straightforward evaluation model but to adapt it to the particular circumstances and timeline that would have been relevant to the evolution of ERAs. The central components of the evaluation we proposed were therefore the same as for a standard policy or programme evaluation but designed and phased differently according to the particular needs of the study. The methodology for the study was agreed to depend upon a number of complementary sources of information and data.



- 2.2.6 The first requirement was to establish a set of indicators of economic, social and environmental change, related to the policy and issue areas in which ERAs would have been active, for all regions. The proposed mechanisms for achieving this were a *quantitative baseline review* and *annual updates*. These were seen as important if the study were to be able to 'benchmark' the regions, track important contextual changes in the environments in which ERAs would have been active and provide ways both of relating the outcomes of ERA activity to key aspects of regional change and of distinguishing between 'policy off' and 'policy on' regions. The key issue that the consortium had to face, here, was how indicators could be chosen in advance of key objectives and performance measures being set for and by ERAs.
- 2.2.7 The second requirement was to develop a qualitative understanding of (a) the operation and perceived effectiveness of current regional governing arrangements, and (b) why and to what extent an ERA, established along the lines proposed by the Government, might improve the processes and impacts of regional governance. The mechanism for achieving this was an annual *regional case study programme* drawing primarily upon the viewpoints of key agencies and actors involved in the delivery of regional strategies. In view of the fact that the evaluation was intended to focus primarily upon regions in which ERAs were created but at the same time to enable comparison with 'non-ERA regions', we chose to make a higher level of research investment in regions that had, or were more likely to move towards, ERAs than in the rest of the regions. This was seen as the most appropriate method for (a) developing a detailed understanding of the dynamics of regionally-specific inter-organisational relations and processes of regional strategy development and delivery as they are currently configured and (b) anticipating and then tracking the differences that ERAs might have made had they come on stream.
- 2.2.8 The third requirement was to provide concrete demonstrations of the conditions under which innovative and effective regional strategies (or aspects thereof) were formed and delivered. Here, we initially considered a one-off *questionnaire survey* of regional agencies and stakeholders (in all regions) and an *inter-organisational mapping* exercise (for the three regions due to have referendums) as potential mechanisms for describing and understanding the nature and quality of inter-organisational relationships. Following discussions with the client and the LTE Advisory Board and in light of the results of similar survey work commissioned by the Department from McCallum Layton in 2003, however, we came to the conclusion that these were relatively crude instruments that were unlikely to be able to capture the complexity and dynamism of regional strategy development and delivery across a very broad range of policy areas. (Case study work in the North West, for example, identified 18 overarching and sector-based regional strategies running concurrently within the region).
- 2.2.9 With their agreement, and in line with comments made to consortium members during a series of introductory interviews with regional agencies for the feasibility study, we chose not to undertake a further questionnaire survey. Instead, we:
- Analysed the McCallum Layton data, focusing upon the light it shed upon the particular questions we felt it important to pose, and

- Moved away, in our work, from research-extensive instruments to more research-intensive ones, rooted in specific, detailed explorations of the extent to which regional agencies (including ERAs, had any been created) act, co-operate and attempt to behave corporately in the service of regional electorates and stakeholders and with what effect.

2.2.10 It was agreed that this more intensive approach, necessarily more selective, would need to be defined and redefined annually in order to ensure that (a) cumulatively, it covered each of the major policy areas in which ERAs were expected to be active, (b) it afforded comparability across all the regions whilst at the same time (c) it enabled a stronger focus upon changes within regions that had, or were more likely to move towards, an ERA regime. During the baseline period, these imperatives were catered for by adjusting the approach to the regional case study programme and by undertaking development work on a series of ‘policy area workshops’ at which it was intended to bring together regional agencies, Government departments and other stakeholders to engage in more detailed, constructive and exploratory debate on the differences that an ERA might make and how.

2.2.11 The fourth requirement was to provide an assessment of the degree of ‘regional consciousness’ and understanding of regional institutions and regional strategy on the part of regional publics in the three original ‘referendum regions’ (i.e. the North East, Yorkshire and the Humber and the North West) and of ‘ordinary’ attitudes toward, and expectations and experiences of, ERAs, were they to be established in those regions. This was seen as essential if the study was to be able to (a) get beyond privileged and better-informed ‘insider’ and ‘elite’ views, (b) develop an understanding of lay attitudes to the questions that ERAs were seen, by Government and more engaged regional stakeholders, as potential answers to, and (c) provide firm indications of any change in popular perceptions and understandings over time. Again, we considered the possibility of region-specific questionnaire surveys as a mechanism for delivering this element of the study. In view of the low level of understanding about the activities of existing regional agencies and of the Government’s plan for ERAs, however, our favoured mechanism for achieving this was a *focus group programme* which was undertaken in the ‘baseline year’, 2004, and would have been repeated in 2007 and 2011 had the long-term evaluation component of the study gone ahead.

### *Specific challenges of ERA evaluation*

2.2.12 Figure 2 summarises the logic of the LTE approach. It shows how each of the research components fitted within an overall framework and describes the sequencing that would have been adopted had any ERAs been created. Two sets of issues arise from this schematic representation of the principles underlying the consortium’s approach. The first, dealt with in the remainder of this subsection, relates to the way in which it was intended that the evaluation would have evolved. The second, dealt with in 2.3 below, concerns the implications of the truncation of the study after the NE referendum and the implications for what can be presented, in changed circumstances, on the basis of the baseline work.

2.2.13 On the first of these, it is important to quickly encapsulate the inherent differences between an evaluation of ERAs – or of the performance and impact of regional governing institutions, more generally – and a more standard policy or programme evaluation. The most important of these are that:

- The LTE study was asked to focus upon the operation and effectiveness of complex *institutions* – under current regimes of regional governance and potential future ERA ones – rather than a policy or programme with a clearly articulated, predefined set of aims and objectives, and
- Whilst it was made clear in the White Paper *Your Region, Your Choice* – and, with some modifications, in the later draft Regional Assemblies Bill – which policy and thematic areas ERAs were expected to be active in and the widely varying mechanisms of influence they would be empowered to use in those areas, there was little additional intelligence available about how ERAs were expected, within Government or in the regions, to operate in practice.

2.2.14 The principal conceptual question that therefore needed to be addressed concerned the nature of ERA objectives and how they could be understood and articulated as the core building blocks for the evaluation. Our considered position, here, was that a workable understanding of the notion of ‘ERA objectives’ could not be imposed from the outset but needed to evolve and become more closely defined during, and indeed partially as a result of, the research programme. In our original tender we argued that it would be necessary to ‘provide and operate on the basis of a workable agreement between national and regional contributors to the evolution of ERAs as to what it is reasonable to expect them to achieve and how’. We did so because we recognised that the ability of an external group like ourselves to legitimately specify future objectives of and for ERAs was limited at a time when:

- No ERAs were due to be created until 2006 at the earliest and hence there would be no ‘statements of intent’ from ERAs that could serve as the basis for ‘bottom up’ evaluation in the medium term. We considered this to be an important knowledge gap given that a significant part of the evaluation would necessarily have focused upon testing an ERA’s performance against the aims and objectives that it set itself;
- On the basis of the White Paper and the draft Regional Assemblies Bill, and in advance of both the final legislation that would have enabled the creation of ERAs and any subsequent Departmental guidance that may have provided greater detail about Government requirements of them, it was not entirely clear what the state of thinking was within national departments about what they, individually and collectively, were expecting of ERAs. In short, the ‘top-down’ component of the evaluation was also set to evolve over time and needed to build, in the short term, upon relatively general Government aspirations for ERAs.

2.2.15 Put simply, then, the consortium needed to develop an approach to evaluation which allowed for the fact that:

- Government expectations of ERAs were initially set out in very general terms but were set to become more explicit as the LTE study evolved.

- Knowledge of the explicit objectives that ERAs would have set for themselves was not due to become available in the short term and, furthermore.
- Top down and bottom up formulations of 'ERA objectives' not only remained to be defined in detail but could, potentially, have conflicted in practice; for example, a significant 'bottom up' achievement of an ERA in the eyes of regional stakeholders or electorates could, in certain circumstances, have been manifested by evidence of its resistance to Government guidance, policy or funding priorities. This could conceivably have resulted in a 'failure' to deliver one or more national objectives as a direct result of pursuing regional goals.

2.2.16 The evaluation team also had to steer a course through significant controversy over whether the package of 'strategic powers' on offer to ERAs, involving no additional resources from Government and an expectation that the precept an ERA would be empowered to place on the council tax bill of local authorities within a region would be modest – 5p a week was the estimated figure cited by Government – would generate significant, visible and added benefits over and above current arrangements.

### *Government expectations of ERAs*

2.2.17 This did not mean that the consortium was working from a blank canvass. A close reading of the 2002 White Paper suggested that the Government had a working understanding of the way ERAs, had any been established, could have had a positive impact upon the processes and impacts of regional governance. This was captured as follows in Chapter 3 of *Your Region, Your Choice*:

The role of elected assemblies will be to make regional governance more **effective**, and more **accountable** to the regional electorate. In many respects the two go hand in hand: the Government believes that greater accountability will itself lead to a more effective decision-making process. In turn, giving an elected assembly the strategic lead on regional issues will help to improve regional performance.

2.2.18 The Policy Statement published alongside the draft Regional Assemblies Bill in the summer of 2004 underlined the high level of expectation that Government attached to the awarding of strategic powers to ERAs, had any been created. In his preface to the draft Bill (p1), the Prime Minister suggested that the move to create an ERA gave the regions 'an unprecedented opportunity to have a greater say over the key issues that affect them, as well as the power to devise their own solutions and set their own priorities....so that we can compete more effectively with Europe and the rest of the world'. The Deputy Prime Minister, in similar vein, noted (p3) that the draft Bill, had it been enacted, would have created 'a wide-ranging general power for the ERAs' and argued that this, along with the assumption of ERA control over funding streams currently delivered through existing regional agencies, would have enabled any future ERA 'to make big strategic decisions over matters such as housing, planning, transport, and fire and rescue', thereby giving it the potential 'to make a real difference to jobs, growth and the quality of life in northern regions'.

2.2.19 The Policy Statement went on to explain (p8) that the Government's *overall* regional policy, across the UK, formed part of its programme of constitutional reform and devolution, and was therefore driven primarily by the search for further democratisation and subsidiarity, whereas its regional policy *for England*, by contrast, 'is aimed at improving regional prosperity, including by tackling disparities within and between regions'. Hence the role of an ERA, it was stated, 'should be to improve the quality of life, particularly by improving regional economic performance, and to advance sustainable development throughout its region'. An ERA would do so, it was argued (p8-9):

- By developing an overarching, strategic vision (or 'scheme') for its region
- By employing its 'wide-ranging powers' – to promote economic and social development and improve and protect the environment – in support of the delivery of this vision
- Through delivery of its specific executive responsibilities (e.g. sponsorship of the relevant RDA and a regional cultural consortium, oversight of a regional fire and rescue authority)
- Via a 'significant influencing role' as defined, for example, by the ability of an ERA to make a minority of appointments to the boards of regional public bodies and a requirement that an ERA be consulted on such bodies' strategies and investment plans, and
- Because it was accountable to the regional electorate.

2.2.20 The draft Regional Assemblies Bill and the accompanying Policy Statement built upon the 2002 White Paper and set out details of the mechanisms through which an ERA's activities in each of its areas of responsibility would be channelled. These are set out in Table 1, below. Neither the White Paper nor the draft bill and accompanying documentation, however, offered any detailed indication as to how the ERA activities enabled by these mechanisms were expected to bring about the anticipated impacts. Nor did they attempt to quantify those impacts.

**Table 1: Functions and influencing mechanisms of ERAs**

Functions and sponsor Regional deliverer(s), key strategy document(s)	Mechanism for ERA influence
Economic development (DTI) RDAs Regional Economic Strategy	RDAs will retain operational independence and responsibility for RESs but ERAs will take over financial control of RDAs and have effective <b>veto</b> power over RESs  ERA will <b>appoint</b> the Chair and Board members of RDAs (subject to 50% of them having 'had experience of running a business')
Business support (DTI) SBS (national, regional teams) 45 Business Link contractors	ERAs and RDAs to be <b>consulted</b> on SBS (nat.) 3-year strategy 45 Business Link contractors and annual Business Plan.  SBS to <b>have regard for</b> RES  SBS to <b>consult</b> ERAs on the criteria to be used for new Business Link contracts and on the bids received.  ERAs to <b>play a role</b> in monitoring the performance of Bus. Link contractors  ERA to <b>work closely</b> w/SBS, others on SME development  Govt to ensure ERAs are <b>involved</b> in devt. of bus. support policy (e.g. by being <b>consulted</b> on HEIF bids)
Training and skills (DfEE) LSC (national), LSCs (sub-regional) FRESAs (Frameworks for Regional Employment and Skills Action)	ERAs to <b>draw up</b> FRESAs, setting out regional priorities  ERAs to <b>appoint</b> 2 members of each LSC board (but ensuring at least 1 has a business background) and to be <b>consulted</b> on other appointments  LSC nationally to <b>consult</b> ERAs on its guidance to local LSCs  Local LSCs to <b>have regard for</b> regional strategies and to <b>consult</b> the relevant ERA on its plans
European programmes Regional Co-ordination Unit, GORs	ERAs to <b>take over</b> GOR roles on structural funds for any structural fund expenditure in future programming periods, e.g. to <b>Chair</b> the Monitoring Committee, <b>play a key role in</b> producing SPDs and <b>lead</b> in negotiations with the EC on SPDs
Planning (ODPM) GORs (for Regional Planning (Guidance) Regional Assemblies (for Regional Spatial Strategies)	ERAs to <b>take over</b> responsibility for preparing and issuing Regional Spatial Strategies and to <b>be able to request</b> the SoS use his/her call-in power to determine strategic planning applications
Housing (ODPM) GORs/Housing Corp. (now Regional Housing Boards)	ERA to <b>prepare and publish</b> a regional housing strategy and to <b>allocate</b> housing capital funding to RSLs, LAs
Transport (DfT) GORs, Highways Agency, Strategic Rail Authority	ERA to be <b>responsible</b> for a Regional Transport Strategy, to <b>advise</b> Govt. on local scheme funding and their consistency with regional strategies, to <b>propose</b> schemes of regional importance to the Highways Agency and the Strategic Rail Authority, to <b>allocate</b> Rail Passenger Partnership grants and be <b>consulted</b> by national transport infrastructure providers

<b>Table 1: Functions and influencing mechanisms of ERAs – <i>continued</i></b>	
<b>Functions and sponsor Regional deliverer(s), key strategy document(s)</b>	<b>Mechanism for ERA influence</b>
Arts, culture, tourism (DCMS) Arts Council, regional Arts Councils, Sport England, English Heritage, Lottery distribution co.	ERAs to <b>fund, sponsor and lead</b> Regional Cultural Consortia which will draw up regional cultural strategies for <b>agreement with</b> and <b>publication</b> by the ERA. Govt. to <b>devolve</b> arts and sports functions which 'are regional in character' in a way that protects strategic national priorities. ERA to <b>fund/sponsor</b> regional tourism programmes, non-national museums, single regional agencies for museums, libraries and archives, and upkeep of English Heritage sites. Subject to the agreement of the Lottery distribution company, ERAs to <b>appoint</b> members to lottery regional awards committees and be <b>key consultees</b> on the company's strategic plans
Public health GORs/Regional Directors of Public Health	ERAs to have a <b>duty to promote</b> public health and, working with regional directors, to <b>support</b> the development and implementation of regional health improvement strategies. To <b>appoint</b> the RD of Public Health as the ERA's health adviser
Rural policy (DEFRA) Rural Development Service, Countryside Commission	ERAs to be <b>responsible</b> for delivering rural regeneration programmes, to <b>actively engage</b> with regional Rural Affairs Forums, be a <b>lead partner</b> in implementing the regional elements of the England Rural Development Programme and to have <b>responsibility</b> for ensuring rural issues are addressed in regional strategies
Environment (DEFRA)	ERAs to make <b>appointments</b> to the Environment Agency's regional committees, to <b>prepare and implement</b> a regional strategy for biodiversity, to <b>prepare and oversee implementation of</b> the waste element of regional spatial strategies and <b>be consulted by/consult</b> Environment Agency, Countryside Agency, English Nature on mutual strategy development
Crime reduction (Home Office/ODPM)	ERAs to be <b>consulted</b> on local Crime and Disorder Partnership strategies
Civil contingency planning GORs	ERA to <b>co-ordinate</b> , with GORs
Fire service (ODPM) [Function potentially added by the 2004 Fire and Emergency Services White Paper]	ERA to oversee the activities of new regional fire service bodies, created through the amalgamation of existing sub-regional fire services

2.2.21 It should be noted that the Government view of the potential impact of ERAs, when it was tested against external, expert opinion, was not shared by everyone. The written evidence submitted to an ODPM Select Committee inquiry into the draft Regional Assemblies Bill, for example, suggested that, whilst there was overall satisfaction with the general powers that the Government intended to provide ERAs with, there was widespread concern with what were seen as the limited specific powers – and related resources – that were due to accompany them. The dominant concerns articulated to the Select Committee were that the activities of an ERA with a broad remit but more restricted responsibilities and resources would (a) overlap with those of other statutory agencies, and (b) fail to bring about economic, social and environmental transformation within their regions unless they were backed up by further, specific powers and resources.

2.2.22 Amongst the organisations advocating greater devolution of resources in particular policy areas (e.g. transport, training, business development, culture and the arts) were the Regional Assemblies for the North West, North East and South East, the West Midlands Constitutional Convention, business organisations (CBI, Manufacturer's Association for the North of England), trades unions (Unison Northern), think tanks (New Policy Institute, Institute for Public Policy Research, Policy Exchange), local government bodies (Local Government Association, Local Government Information Unit, Local Choice Local Voice, Burnley Borough Council), transport organisations (Passenger Transport Executives' Group), campaign groups (Yes 4 the NE, Yes 4 the NW, English Regions Network), political groups (Northern Region Liberal Democrats) and academics (Centre for Urban and Regional Development Studies, University of Newcastle). By contrast, only three organisations that wrote to the Committee – two NDPBs, Sport England and the (national) Learning and Skills Council, plus the Council of Mortgage Lenders – expressed the view that the proposed transfer of powers and funding from Whitehall and NDPBs to ERAs had gone far enough or too far.

### *Implications for the evaluation*

2.2.23 The LTE study was not asked to 'weigh' informed opinion about the merits of the Government case for ERAs or to build aspects of external organisations' critique into the evaluation. Its required starting point, rather, was to take Government aspirations for ERAs at face value. What the above discussion nonetheless demonstrates is that it was only possible, during the first two phases of the LTE study, to go so far along the road of translating general Government expectations into a future work programme *if* our study was going to retain the necessary flexibility to build in future clarity about ERA objectives on the part of Government and ERAs themselves during Phase III. This 'wait and see' approach was augmented by work which encouraged more focused and productive discussion on the likely effects of ERAs on processes of regional governance. The consortium sought to achieve this in two ways. First, our development work for policy area workshops was driven by a desire to engineer situations in which representatives of Government departments and regions who operated at the interface between the centre and the regions in particular policy domains would be encouraged to focus specifically upon the difference that an ERA may have made. Second, we reflected upon the findings emerging from the case study work during the baseline phase and used them to identify a number of key themes through which it would be possible to link the general expectations of ERAs to concrete research tasks. We return to these in the final section of the report, once we have considered the baseline work that gave rise to them.

## 2.3 The baseline study

2.3.1 The work undertaken during the baseline phase was designed primarily to address the second overall aim of the study, to fulfil its second and third objectives and to provide the team with the tools to address its longer term aim and objectives. (Note, however, that we have already described how the first objective, which entailed specifying the objectives of ERAs, was not as immediately realisable as it might have seemed when the original brief was written). The cancellation of the long-term evaluation phase of the LTE study means that the time line described in Figure 2 was effectively discontinued at the end of 2004. In the next two sections we set out the results of the baseline work as if it were still leading to Phase III of the LTE but in the hope that it will also be of interest to readers with a general interest in regional governance in England.

2.3.2 Sections 3 and 4 present a picture of ‘the state of the English regions’ as at 2004 and of popular perceptions of regions and regionalisation processes. These draw upon the following:

- The quantitative data gathering work undertaken by CURDS to a specification agreed with the client and the LTE study Advisory Group following discussion of the feasibility study. This describes the baseline position as at 2004 – and, where available, trends leading up to 2004 – across a range of indicators chosen for their relevance in describing regional ‘performance’ in a range of environments in which ERAs were expected to be active. These indicators, because they describe key aspects of the contemporary state of the regions, are just as relevant in describing the context in which existing regional institutions are active.
- Analysis of relevant quantitative data sets from the McCallum Layton survey of inter-agency relationships within regional governance in each of the English regions.
- A qualitative assessment of regional responses to the invitation, by HM Treasury, to produce Regional Emphasis Documents (REDs) in all 8 English regions. The RED production process was chosen as a concrete object of study because of its usefulness in generating comparative information about (a) relationships between the three core regional agencies (the Regional Assembly, the Regional Development Agency and the Government Office for the Region), (b) relationships between these organisations and wider stakeholder interests and agencies, (c) the state of regional intelligence and evidence bases that supported REDs, and (d) the ability of regions to identify and substantiate key regional priorities. In short, the RED production process represented a unique ‘window’ into the way current regional agencies responded to a common opportunity to represent regional strategy and priorities to Government.

- Three policy area-specific case studies, conducted in the three regions in which it was originally intended to stage referendums on the move to ERAs. These focused upon policy areas that were relevant to future ERA activity and in which it was agreed, after discussion with the client and the advisory group, that regional agencies had exhibited a degree of innovation and independent thought. They were: science policy and business development (in the North West), transport (North East) and European programmes (Yorkshire and the Humber). These policy domains were also chosen because they covered areas in which the performance of ERAs would be based upon strategic influence rather than immediate, direct control over resources and hence represented potentially good examples of the more difficult evaluation tasks facing the consortium and,
- Three sets of focus groups, involving 8-10 people in each case, staged in each of the three northern regions in the campaigning period leading up to the referendum in the North East, i.e. at the point when public awareness of the Government's plans for ERAs, in principle, should have been at its height. The focus groups were undertaken in three locations chosen to represent the full range of settlement types within each region; a major conurbation, a smaller town and a rural area. Focus group participants were chosen to reflect the socio-economic, gender, age and ethnic balance of the region in question. The focus groups concentrated upon: understanding popular understandings of and degree of attachment to participants' region of residence; testing the degree of familiarity and support for current regional governance arrangements; understanding participants' views about key policy issues and the extent to which they were 'regional', and; assessing the degree of awareness and support for the option of establishing an ERA.

2.3.3 A number of appendices are included at the end of the report in order to provide further detail of the methodologies we adopted in undertaking aspects of the work. Appendix A details the locations within which focus groups were staged and the methodology used for selecting focus group participants. Appendix B reproduces the guidance note used for the RED production process analysis. Appendix C reproduces the guidance note for the policy area-specific case study work. Appendix D reproduces the discussion guide used for the focus groups.

# 3. Comparative English regional performance and governance

## 3.1 Overview

3.1.1 As described in Section 2, two key requirements of the baseline phase of the study were to assess the pre-ERA position in respect of (a) regional ‘performance’ across a range of environments in which ERAs would have been active and (b) the existing governance environment within the regions that ERAs would have been inserted into and changed. In light of the earlier discussion about the consortium's methodological approach to the study, two provisos need to be made about the material presented here relating to these two requirements.

3.1.2 First, the review of quantitative indicators of regional performance was seen as a context setting exercise rather than one that, at an early stage in the evolution of the LTE study, could realistically prejudge the sorts of outcome that ERAs might be expected, or expect themselves, to produce. Flexibility was built into the proposed future development of the quantitative strand of the research programme that would have enabled further indicators, more directly related to the ultimate individual (regional) and collective (national) objectives of ERAs, to be added at a later stage. The ‘first cut’ at defining indicators of regional performance and gathering primary data on them is therefore best interpreted as a ‘year zero’ assessment of regional similarities and differences which together illustrate the varying degrees of difficulty faced by current regional agencies – and by ERAs, had any been established – in improving regional performance.

3.1.3 Second, the review of the performance of existing regional governance arrangements concentrated upon understanding the degree of comparability between regions with reference to the results of detailed, specific case study analyses. Once again, flexibility was built into the consortium’s methodology that would have enabled:

- The identification of further topic areas through which it would have been possible to continue comparing key aspects of performance across all 8 English regions, and
- Further detailed work within the three northern regions on policy areas in which ERAs would have been active. This would have meant that, by the time the first ERA had been established, evidence would have been gathered about the performance of regional agencies across the whole range of activities that any ERAs would have been engaged in and on the implications that followed for how an ERA’s performance could be evaluated within the consortium’s forward research programme.

As with the quantitative work, this more qualitative baseline work is best interpreted as a ‘first cut’ in the attempt to evaluate the state of regional governance rather than evidence of the broader, more comprehensive analysis that would have been available by the time the first ERA was established.

- 3.1.4 The next two subsections detail the consortium’s approach to and initial findings on the ‘state of the English regions’ as revealed by the quantitative and qualitative work, respectively. In the final section of the report, we develop conclusions from the findings of this work and that reported in Section 4 on public perceptions.

## 3.2 Comparative English regional performance

### *Benchmarking the regions*

- 3.2.1 The overall aims of the quantitative strand of the LTE work were to define an initial set of statistical measures – or indicators – on which data could be gathered through baseline research and which, as the study developed, were capable of being augmented or modified in order to align more directly with detailed ERA objectives as they emerged. The implication, for the LTE study, of the complex set of often indirect mechanisms of influence that ERAs would have inherited is that it would not have been reasonable to expect that the creation of ERAs *per se* would have led to a rapid turnaround in entrenched problems such as population decline, low educational achievement, under-employment and associated evidence of deprivation. It is worth remembering that local authorities – which command far more expenditure per head than was envisaged for ERAs – are evaluated primarily in terms of their administrative *processes* rather than their impacts upon aspects of the well-being of their areas’ residents and ‘users’. Yet whilst it would have been implausible to attribute seminal changes occurring in regions to the activities of ERAs, major concerns such as economic growth still needed to be monitored as an essential part of the context which led to their development. Summative indicators would have needed to cover these critical contextual issues, but in so doing the evaluation would not have suggested that any ERAs that did not reverse deep-seated problems were ‘failing’ in any simple sense.
- 3.2.2 The challenge, therefore, was to select a comprehensive but manageable set of indicators that collectively provided an ‘overview’ of progress in addressing quality of life differences between regions related to the aspirations for, and powers and resources due to be entrusted to, ERAs. In choosing these indicators, we were particularly concerned to ensure:
- *Balance*. ERAs were primarily expected to make a contribution to the economic development of their regions, in line with the Government’s core aspiration for regional policy in England. However the fact that they were also charged with promoting social development and the improvement and protection of the environment as part of a broader contribution to sustainable regional development meant that a balance had to be struck between indicators of economic, social and physical/environmental change.

- *Comparability.* The requirement to evaluate ERAs in terms of their contribution to national as well as region-specific objectives put a premium on datasets that were available for all regions and provided the basis for comparisons between regions that may have had ERAs and those without. Whilst the development of region-specific indicators would have made sense once ERAs had begun to set their own, potentially different, objectives, the immediate priority was to avoid bespoke datasets that were available for or within only some regions and to choose those that were available for all.
- *Robustness and interpretability.* It was important that data sources were accurate and reliable and that the indicators they provided enabled us to avoid ambiguous interpretations.
- *Replicability.* The emphasis on monitoring change in regional performance and prospects implied that most indicators would require a data source that was available in regular time series. We therefore focused upon datasets that were updated at least every one or two years and had been available for several years in the past, so that future trends could be bench-marked against recent experience.

Our search for data that matched these requirements as closely as possible led us to select an initial set of indicators spanning three broad domains – economic, physical/environmental and social. These are listed below in Table 2.

Table 2: Initial indicators of regional performance and change	
Policy domain	Indicators
<b>Economic</b>	
Productivity	Gross Value Added per head of population
Enterprise	Number of registered businesses per thousand people of working age
Economic participation	% of working age people who are in work
Wealth	Average disposable income per head
Attractiveness to visitors	Level of spending by holiday-makers per head of population
Attractiveness to residents	Net inflow of migrants per 000 resident population
	Identifiable public expenditure per head cf. lottery funding per head
<b>Physical/environmental</b>	
Demand deficiency	Vacant and derelict land
Housing quality/demand	Low demand housing
Housing quality	% of unfit dwellings
Sustainability	'Sustainable travel' (% non-car/van travel to work and school trips)
<b>Social</b>	
Deprivation	% of the population living in the most deprived 20% of areas in England
Health/lifestyle	Average life expectancy
Health risks	Child health risks (% adults smoking compared to child poverty)
Educational attainment	% of working age people possessing qualifications at NVQ level 3
Low aspiration	% of working age people with no qualifications
Crime	Burglaries per 000 households
Fear of crime	% of population worried about disorder

## *Analysis*

- 3.2.3 Our full analysis of regional performance across each of the indicators listed in Table 2, along with a full set of figures depicting the dynamic of recent changes, is available on the ODPM website. Here, we concentrate upon the 'headline' results of the quantitative baseline review. At one level, our findings will come as no surprise to anyone who is familiar with a steady accumulation of evidence about the growth in disparities between the English regions in recent years. They nonetheless provide compelling quantitative evidence that the Government's commitment – set out in the long-term element of the joint HMT-DTI-ODPM PSA target on regional economic performance – to reduce regional disparities by 2012 will not only be difficult to achieve but will need to halt and quickly reverse powerful trends that stretch back through the period we monitored and well beyond.
- 3.2.4 The data underline the powerful associations that exist between levels of performance (and underperformance) on key economic indicators and those on physical/environmental and social indicators, albeit in a way that demonstrates that 'regions' – particularly when they are as artificial as those in England – cannot be considered self-contained socio-economic systems. In reality, of course, the impact of change within a particular region invariably has implications, over time, for others. This is particularly clear in the south of England. Across our indicators as a whole, the South East, the Eastern region and the South West emerge as the regions with the best and most balanced overall performance. London, whilst it holds a pre-eminent position on most of the economic indicators we used, exhibits a more mixed picture overall because its superior economic performance does not translate directly and unambiguously into a high quality of life within the capital itself. Rather, the benefits of London's economic dynamism are unequally shared across different groups and neighbourhoods within the Greater London 'region' and at the same time 'spill over' into, and help strengthen the performance of, neighbouring regions. Even though region-level data is relatively crude, the evidence from the quantitative baseline review is entirely consistent with the argument that the English economy is increasingly dominated by a 'super-region', covering large parts of southern England, with London at its centre.
- 3.2.5 Beyond this emerging super-region, whose performance in reality is driven by London and those parts of the rest of southern England best connected to the capital, there is a significant 'performance gap'. The West Midlands and the East Midlands form a second group of regions in which economic performance is moderate, by national standards, and where there is mixed performance across our indicators. Of the two, the West Midlands emerges as slightly the stronger in terms of economic performance but trails its midlands neighbour in terms of physical/environmental and social performance.

- 3.2.6 The three northern regions then form a final group of regions in which economic performance is comparatively poor, a factor which differentiates them from the midlands regions even though there is a significant degree of comparability between midlands and northern regions on many physical/environmental and social indicators. (The West Midlands, for example, has a similar profile in terms of physical/environmental indicators to the similarly urbanised and industrialised North West and North East. The social profile of the East Midlands and Yorkshire and the Humber are also broadly similar, overall). Within the group of northern regions, the North East stands out as the poorest performer and the region in which the connection between relative economic underperformance and social problems is most stark.
- 3.2.7 None of this is to argue that the performance of northern regions has worsened in absolute, rather than comparative, terms in recent years. Indeed, region-specific trends on our indicators across the northern regions show significant improvement. What the data show clearly, however, is that these improvements have been – and will, under current policy trajectories, continue to be – insufficient to reduce the performance gap between northern and southern regions. The fact that one indicator on which the performance of the northern English regions bore comparison with the rest – the % of the population attaining NVQ level 3 qualifications – only serves to underline the fact that, whilst ‘talent’, as revealed by good performance within the non-university education system, appears if anything to be weighted towards the north and the East Midlands, the regional distribution of environments able to attract and utilise that talent favours the southern regions (hence, for example, the high levels of net migration into the South East, South West and Eastern regions).
- 3.2.8 Whilst the indicators we chose were intended to demonstrate variation in regional circumstances rather than identify indicators of what ERAs could reasonably have been expected to change, the quantitative baseline review demonstrates the degree of difficulty that would have faced the regions that were ‘first in the queue’ for ERAs. It showed that these regions, comparatively speaking, are progressively losing ground, in terms of economic, social and environmental changes, to the rest of the English regions and are less able to retain the residents or attract the incomers and investors that could help counter that trend.
- 3.2.9 Just as it would have been unrealistic to expect ERAs to effect ‘miracle cures’, so culpability for the state of regional affairs described above cannot be laid at the door of existing regional agencies. What the LTE needed to do, in designing a methodology for the planned Phase III, was to develop an understanding of the effectiveness of existing regional agencies and identify ways in which an ERA regime could potentially improve upon it. This was the purpose of our work on comparative regional governance.

### 3.3 Comparative English regional governance

#### *The evidence base*

3.3.1 As noted in Section 2, the consortium moved away from research-extensive methods in assessing the current state of regional governance and towards a more focused, research-intensive approach. Whilst this inevitably meant that much of the work completed for the baseline phase of the study on this theme was qualitative and illustrative, we justified this approach, and secured agreement to it by the Department, on the basis that a nominal ‘comprehensiveness’ would have been achievable only through a wide and shallow surface analysis that would have told us little about the quality and depth of inter-relationships between key regional agencies or about innovation in policy areas within which ERAs would have been active. As already noted, we therefore based our approach upon a two-tier case study programme that examined the process of producing Regional Emphasis Documents (REDs) in each region and produced three policy area-specific case studies in the three northern regions. The latter formed the basis of the development work we undertook on the plan for policy area workshops. We did, however, supplement this qualitative work by analysing data produced by McCallum Layton as part of its survey of ‘Regional governance: inter-agency relations’ during the spring and summer of 2003. The remainder of this subsection summarises the results of this analysis before reporting upon the qualitative work completed by the consortium on this theme.

#### *Regional inter-agency relations: survey evidence*

3.3.2 The purpose of the McCallum Layton questionnaire survey, copies of which were sent to all English local authorities and a sample of other organisations involved in the definition and delivery of regional strategies, was to assess ‘the nature and extent of joint working and relationships between offices of executive agencies, non-departmental public bodies, regional assemblies, central government bodies and local authorities in the English regions’. The response rate for the survey amongst both local authorities and non-LAs was 42%, yielding a sample size of 268 (comprising 162 LAs and 106 non-LAs). The sections of the questionnaire that were most relevant to the LTE study comprised two sets of questions; one concerned with perceptions of the performance of the three key regional agencies, the other with respondents’ views about which organisations most influenced the three agencies and how much influence they had over others. A summary of the relevant findings is set out in Tables 3 and 4, below.

3.3.3 The most striking features of the survey findings dealing with perceptions of the performance of the three regional agencies are (a) their broad similarity, both between agencies and across regions, and (b) the evidence they provide about the moderate esteem in which regional agencies were then held. The neutral value in Table 3 – that is, a finding that respondents, overall, neither agreed nor disagreed that regional agencies were performing well – is 2.5. As can be seen in the final column, the overall ‘grading’ of all three agencies was exactly the same. They each ‘scored’ 2.7, denoting a very marginally positive view, but hardly a ringing endorsement, of their performance. Much the same pattern was found in more detailed responses about perceptions of agency performance across a number of components of effectiveness, for example the degree to which an agency was perceived as having an influential voice within its region, took stakeholder views on board, delivered its strategies, spent its money wisely, worked well in partnership and so on.

**Table 3: The performance of regional agencies, by region**  
*Based on the question ‘does the agency perform its job well, overall?’*  
*Values: 4 = strongly agree, 3 = agree, 2 = disagree, 1 = strongly disagree*

Region	London	SE	SW	E	EM	WM	YH	NW	NE	Ave.
<b>Regional agency</b>										
RDA	2.8	2.7	2.7	2.4	2.6	2.6	2.2	3.0	2.8	2.7
Government Office	2.8	2.6	2.9	2.5	2.7	2.6	2.6	2.7	2.9	2.7
Regional Assembly	3.0	2.8	2.5	2.6	2.5	2.6	2.9	2.6	3.0	2.7
All agencies	2.9	2.7	2.7	2.5	2.6	2.6	2.6	2.8	2.9	2.7

3.3.4 There was slightly greater variation within individual regions. As can be seen from the table, the RDA in the North West, along with the Government Offices for the South West and the North East recorded slightly higher values than their counterparts in other regions. The same was true of the Regional Assembly in Yorkshire and the Humber and its London equivalent – a combination of the Mayor and the Greater London Authority. By the same token, the RDAs in the Eastern region and Yorkshire and the Humber, the Government Office in the Eastern region and the Regional Assemblies in the South West and the East Midlands recorded slightly lower than average values. The limited range of ‘scores’, however, suggests there to be little fundamental difference in views about regional agencies. If the overall values for each of the regional agencies are averaged out by region, as they are in the final row of Table 3, the overall finding is that there was very little difference between regional stakeholders, across the regions, in their view of the effectiveness of regional governance as at 2003: whilst they clearly did not perceive the regions to be badly served by ‘their’ agencies, they were not significantly positive about the merits of the regional status quo either.

3.3.5 A broader spectrum of responses emerged from questions about the degree to which regional agencies were influenced by others and how much influence they themselves wielded. On the first of these, there was consensus that central government was far and away the most important influence on regional governance as a whole and on Government Offices and Regional Development Agencies in particular. By contrast, regional public opinion was perceived to have negligible influence on any of the three key regional agencies and both community groups and voluntary and environmental organisations were seen as having very limited influence. Business was seen as having some influence over RDAs but less over GOs and RAs. The Regional Assembly, even though it is the one regional agency within which local government is well represented, was seen as little influenced by local authorities. It should be noted, however, that the strong representation of local authorities amongst questionnaire respondents contributed to this outcome in that local authorities were much more likely to perceive themselves as having little influence over RAs than were non-LA respondents. Another ostensibly counterintuitive finding in the top half of Table 4 is that RAs were seen as the most autonomous – that is, ‘least influenced’ by external bodies – and RDAs the least autonomous of the regional agencies. A more sophisticated interpretation of this finding, however, would be that RAs are the least, and RDAs the most, formally connected of the regional agencies to the other organisations listed in the questionnaire, for example through funding channels. Seen this way, RAs can be interpreted as having significant ‘autonomy from’ other organisations but without having a great deal of ‘autonomy to’ achieve independent regional goals.

<b>Table 4: Influences acting upon, and influence wielded by, regional agencies</b>				
<i>Based on the questions 'how much influence do you think the following have on regional agency x' and 'how much influence do you think agency x has over the policy and actions of the following'? Values: 4 = a lot, 3 = some, 2 = very little, 1 = none at all</i>				
<b>Regional agency</b>	<b>RDA</b>	<b>GO</b>	<b>RA</b>	<b>All agencies</b>
<b>Influenced by:</b>				
Central Government	3.7	3.9	3.2	3.6
GO	3.2	X	3.1	3.1
RDA	X	2.9	3.1	3
RA	2.9	2.8	X	2.8
Other regional agencies	2.7	2.8	2.7	2.7
Business	3	2.4	2.6	2.7
Local Authorities	2.6	2.7	2.1	2.5
Voluntary/Environmental groups	2.3	2.4	2.5	2.4
Community groups	2.1	2.3	2.5	2.3
Regional public opinion	2	2.1	2.3	2.1
Average	2.7	2.5	2.3	2.5
<b>Influences:</b>				
RDA	X	3	2.9	2.9
RA	2.9	2.9	X	2.9
Local Authorities	2.9	3.2	2.7	2.9
GO	2.8	X	2.8	2.8
Other regional agencies	2.8	2.9	2.5	2.7
Business	2.5	2.2	2.1	2.3
Voluntary/Environmental groups	2.4	2.3	2.2	2.3
Community groups	2.2	2.3	2.1	2.2
Average	2.6	2.7	2.5	2.6

3.3.6 The most striking feature of the bottom half of Table 4, dealing with the degree of influence that individual regional agencies are perceived to have over other organisations and interests, is that regional agencies were considered to have more influence over one another than they are over other sorts of organisation. Whilst, on the face of it, local authorities appear to be similarly strongly influenced by regional agencies – and particularly GOs – this finding is once again affected by the high representation by local authorities amongst survey respondents given the tendency for local government to see itself as more influenced by regional bodies than was the case amongst non-LA respondents. By contrast, business, voluntary and environmental organisations and community groups were considered to be relatively little influenced by regional agencies.

3.3.7 The broad picture that emerged from the survey data, then, was that:

- The effectiveness of regional agencies was perceived, overall, to be moderate
- All three regional agencies were seen as being much more influenced by central government than they were by regional public opinion or regionally-based organisations and interests, and
- The regional agencies were perceived to have more influence over one another than upon other organisations that would be expected to play a key role in helping deliver regional strategies.

What the survey data lacked, however, was any clear sense of why these findings should have emerged. The qualitative work undertaken for the LTE provided a richer understanding of the broad accuracy of these findings.

### *RED production*

3.3.8 The LTE consortium examined the process of producing REDs in each region because it was seen as providing a very useful ‘window’ onto the extent to which current regional agencies were able to act corporately, in response to an important external opportunity (i.e. to influence the 2004 public spending review). This, we felt, would tell us a great deal about the strengths and limitations of existing regional governance arrangements and help clarify the potential contributions that ERAs might have made in the future. The eight case studies were carried out in mid-2004, some time after the submission of REDs but in advance of any formal response to them by HM Treasury. Since individual regional reports on RED production are available on the ODPM website, we focus here upon the general messages emerging from this work.

3.3.9 There was general consensus across all regions that HMT’s invitation to produce a RED was viewed positively and taken as welcome evidence of a move towards introducing a stronger regional element to the English system of expenditure planning. This position was shared by the key regional agencies – the Regional Development Agency (RDA), the Government Office (GO) for the region and the Regional Assembly (RA) – within each region. In all cases, RED production was viewed as an opportunity to clarify and promote priorities already established through existing regional strategies for the purposes established by HMT. In no region was the RED process seen to necessitate a wholesale revisiting of regional priorities. Rather, it was viewed as a more limited, pragmatic and tactical ‘fit for purpose’ exercise.

3.3.10 HMT set out its expectations of the process in a guidance note as follows:

The objective is to enable departments to prepare proposals for re-prioritisation and for productivity and efficiency improvements which take account of evidence from the regions. It will be for regions to make a strong and influential case to departments in their REDs for any re-prioritisation. This exercise should not be regarded as an opportunity to make the case for additional resources. REDs will be most effective where they are able to set out strong evidence relating to areas in which departmental funding in the regions might be more effective if re-prioritised, or delivered in a more efficient way. The RED should include an assessment of how, from a regional perspective, mainstream Government spending could be re-focused to be more effective in contributing to meeting the Government's objectives. It should also identify areas where existing Government interventions are not adding value and where some reallocation of resources could therefore be appropriate.

3.3.11 Regions varied in their preparedness to produce REDs. Whilst it was generally acknowledged that regional agencies had been forewarned of HMT's intentions, there was little attempt to 'gear up' for the challenge in advance of the formal invitation being circulated early in October 2003. The speed with which regions 'got out of the blocks' therefore depended on the effectiveness of pre-existing arrangements for joint-working between the 3 main regional agencies – through, for example, work on the regional economic performance Public Service Agreement (PSA) target, reviews of Regional Economic Strategies (RESS) and work towards Regional Spatial Strategies (RSSs) – the degree to which this had resulted in the development of a co-ordinated information and evidence base for regional policy-making and the way the process was driven within the region.

3.3.12 HMT guidance was generally seen, by regional interviewees, as highly prescriptive. Whilst RDAs had led on less formalised regional inputs to the 2004-06 spending round, the instruction that the GO should be responsible for submitting the RED – which effectively put GOs in the lead – was not seen as controversial. Regional views differed on how appropriate the stipulation that REDs should not exceed 12 pages in length was, with some considering it a useful discipline and others seeing it as unnecessarily constraining. There was widespread concern, however, about timetabling, with all regions reporting that the need to submit the RED within 3 months caused some difficulties in terms of mobilising staff support, putting consultation arrangements in place and commissioning bespoke research to support the region's case.

- 3.3.13 In all cases, RED production was dominated by the 3 key regional agencies. In each region, arrangements were put in place to enable co-ordination between the 3 agencies on the format, content and priorities to be pursued and a division of labour for the drafting process (largely based upon the split of functional responsibilities between the agencies). All regions reported that the opportunity for consultation beyond the core agencies was limited by the time available. As a result, REDs tended to produce 'elite consensus' rather than broader organisational support. That said, in some regions (e.g. NE, East), formal arrangements were put in place to facilitate the sharing of draft REDs with, and feedback from, a wider group of stakeholders. In others (e.g. NW, YH), consultation was more informal and tended to draw upon stakeholders that the 3 agencies viewed as being most able to contribute to the production process.
- 3.3.14 The selection of key priority areas was relatively uncontroversial, given the history of previous joint-working between the 3 agencies, the existence of myriad agreed regional strategies and the need to tailor the RED production process to the external demands of the exercise. If RED *content* was broadly unproblematic and easily arrived at, however, their tone, style and emphasis triggered greater discussion based upon differences in regional agencies' functions and accountability. GOs were generally seen as the most conservative players in that they were perceived as putting greatest emphasis upon clarifying what sort of document would 'go down best in Whitehall' and designing the RED accordingly. RDAs, as DTI-financed organisations reporting to a dedicated board, were seen as more independent but overwhelmingly focused upon making arguments that would enable them to fulfil their core economic development functions more effectively. RAs, whose principal responsibilities are in the field of land-use planning and who are accountable to a much broader constituency of local authorities and regional social and economic stakeholders, were often viewed as having faced in contradictory directions. On one hand, they advanced the strongest in-principle cases for stakeholder involvement in the process and championed social and environmental as well as economic issues. On the other, they were viewed as minor players in terms of staff capacity and potentially prone to paralysis in terms of their ability to support selective priorities whose effect, if supported, could be to 'reward' some of the geographically-based constituencies represented on the assembly – particularly by local authorities – over others.
- 3.3.15 There were mixed views as to whether the evidence base available to regional agencies was adequate to the task of supporting the arguments advanced in REDs. In some regions – particularly those that had already been working towards revisions of RESs and new RSSs – it was felt that significant investment had been put into gaining a greater understanding of regional dynamics and debating the implications for strategic choices. A minority of regions were able to supplement this information through additional research commissioned specifically to support the RED production process. Even in those cases, however, there was a concern that greater data availability did not always translate very easily into robustness and consensus in terms of analysis and the clarity of policy messages that needed to be taken on board.

- 3.3.16 In other respects, the process of putting REDs together illustrated some important gaps in regional evidence bases. In most cases, this was seen as resulting from shortcomings in the availability of robust, up-to-date, regional monitoring data. Just as important, though, were two other ostensible ‘intelligence gaps’. One arose from the widespread feeling that evaluative evidence was in short supply. Whilst regional agencies were able to demonstrate ‘regional need’ through the mobilisation and analysis of data, they often found it hard to demonstrate what was and was not working in terms of policy initiatives designed to address different problems and needs. Many regions also highlighted what they saw as the paucity of robust, functionally disaggregated data on public sector investment in the regions. These shortcomings were seen as having made it hard to respond to HMT’s call to provide persuasive evidence for shifts in expenditure priorities and modifications to the way national policies were delivered in and through the regions.
- 3.3.17 The picture painted by our analysis of RED production bears out the broad conclusions from the survey data. It is one of similarity, rather than distinctiveness, between the regions. In all cases there had clearly been significant, pre-existing joint-working between regional agencies and a great deal of maturity and sophistication had developed in the mutual generation of strategic documents. Regional agencies were generally found to be able to work comfortably and effectively together and to be ready to subsume any differences that exist between them when the need for unity in the face of an external audience was required. There is a difference, however, between this appearance of elite coherence and the impact it has upon the choices made by the regional agencies themselves and other key service providers.
- 3.3.18 Our analysis suggests that the production of REDs did not result in the expansion, redefinition or overturning of pre-existing regional priorities (as defined by the key regional agencies) or in a significant sharpening and focusing of regional priorities. Nor did it result in the development of a greater understanding – as opposed to a selective restatement of – the key challenges facing the regions. That is not to argue, however, that the process did not have an impact.
- 3.3.19 There was general agreement that RED production resulted in a strengthening and deepening of the relationships between the key regional agencies. There is also some evidence that REDs, at least in aggregate, had an impact upon the way HMT viewed regional spending issues. The consistent emphasis within REDs on the need for greater regionalisation of transport policies and programmes, for example, clearly had an effect and gave greater impetus to an emerging view within the Department of Transport that there was merit, in terms of securing greater value for money from transport-related decision-making, in moving towards stronger regional inputs into departmental choices. This is reflected in the piloting of Regional Transport Boards, the Department’s preparedness to review the basis upon which transport allocations – traditionally based upon criteria that emphasise the safety and speed of transport movements – are made in order to introduce a stronger spatial economic development element. Further ‘regionalisation’ of transport funding, and a potential move to longer-term, indicative transport spending allocations for the regions, subsequently appeared in a HMT consultation paper on devolving decision making.

- 3.3.20 There is less evidence, however, that REDs had much impact on the orientations of other Government departments or that HMT responded to region-specific arguments as opposed to the weight of opinion across the regions. After our regional interview programme was completed, HMT published a generic document describing the ostensible impact of REDs, collectively, on the spending review process. It also undertook to produce further, region-specific responses. A close reading of the composite document, however, suggests there is little clarity about whether it was the RED documents that triggered the incremental refocusing of departmental priorities it describes or whether the impetus for change came from other sources.
- 3.3.21 The evidence that REDs had an impact upon the way in which governance within the regions operates is more scant. Whilst the key regional agencies clearly used the priorities set out in REDs when pressing their cases, informally, for greater consideration by Government departments, there are very few indications that other public agencies within the regions – be they local authorities, NDPBs or other stakeholders – see REDs as relevant either to the messages they might wish to transmit ‘upward’, to Government, or to the way they design or modify their own policies and expenditure choices.
- 3.3.22 The consortium’s work on RED production processes posed two questions about the future: how might things have been different if they were happening tomorrow, and what could we have expected if an ERA had been established? Interviewees found it easier to answer the former question than the latter. There was general consensus, from a regional perspective, that the RED production process would have been improved (a) had there been more time available, which would have enabled wider consultation and provided greater prospects of ‘buy-in’ on the part of agencies at regional, sub-regional and local level, (b) had HMT been less prescriptive about the form, content and parameters within which REDs were produced, and (c) had there been greater clarity and openness about the process through which regional inputs were considered and acted upon by HMT and spending departments.
- 3.3.23 At the same time, though, HMT would be fully entitled to argue that none of the regions took the parameters in which they were asked to work sufficiently seriously that they were able to come up with suggestions about how expenditure in some areas could be reduced in order to provide the potential for additional spending in others. In this sense, no regional response exhibited the maturity and focus that would have been needed to specify desirable investment trade-offs that would serve regional strategy goals.

- 3.3.24 There were conflicting views, too, about how regional inputs to national spending review processes might have operated differently had an ERA regime been in operation. There was a general expectation that an ERA, as opposed to the current triumvirate of regional agencies, would have led any future RED production process in the region in which they would have been created. However, whilst it was relatively clear that an ERA would have felt itself empowered to speak on behalf of 'its' RDA, there was much less clarity about the role that the GO would be charged with, not least because the future shape and functions of GOs under an ERA regime remained unclear. There was no consensus amongst interviewees as to whether the potential loss of national influence that would result from any downgrading of the GO role in representing regional interests within Government would have been outweighed by the potential 'clout' of an ERA.
- 3.3.25 Regional interviewees who were most positive about the potential future role of an ERA suggested that a clearer framework of regional democratic accountability would have enabled clearer priorities to be advanced through REDs, thereby enabling 'tougher choices' to be made at a regional scale, to the benefit of the region as a whole. Those who took this view were at pains to suggest, however, that the RED production process, even had it been repeated under an ERA regime, would be but one of the ways that an ERA would have sought to articulate its priorities to Government. A contrast was made, here, between the formal channels of regional representation enabled through the RED process and the more informal, politicised mechanisms through which, for example, the Scottish Parliament or the Welsh Assembly communicates its priorities to Government and with what effect.
- 3.3.26 Interviewees who were more sceptical about the potential effectiveness of an ERA advanced two main arguments. The first was that their experience of voluntary RAs, the majority of whose members are indirectly-elected, suggested that the democratisation of regional policy making was likely to lead, not to clearer prioritisation, but to lowest common denominator 'solutions' to regional problems and potentials. The second was that the politicisation of regional decision-making could lead to polarisation and conflict, rather than integration and consensus, between central government and regions, particularly in those circumstances where different political parties may have been in control at national and regional level.

### *Policy area case studies*

- 3.3.27 The overall logic of undertaking policy area case studies was set out in Section 2. Once again, because the detailed studies are available elsewhere, we concentrate here on summarising this work as a whole, paying particular attention to ways in which ERAs may have been able to achieve more than is possible under current regional arrangements, even in those cases where regional agencies are acknowledged as having acted creatively. Hence this summary should not be read as a balanced review of the strengths and limitations of current regional governance arrangements but as an exploration of the ways in which ERAs might have enabled further improvement.

3.3.28 To recap, the policy areas selected in the three regions were as follows:

North East:	Transport policy
Yorkshire and the Humber:	European Programmes
North West:	Science policy

These specific policy fields were selected because each had been the subject of special attention – for different reasons – by the main organisations involved in regional development policy. In the case of the North East, there are long standing concerns about the way in which national transport policy impacts on the region. While (national) transport policy has long been principally concerned with the consequences of congestion, a coherent transport strategy is seen by many stakeholders in the region as more important in relation to achieving the economic regeneration of the NE region. The designation of South Yorkshire as one of the UK's few Objective 1 regions under the terms of European Structural Funds has presented a new challenge to regional actors to integrate European and UK policies if they are to maximise advantages presented by the influx of new resources to the region. In the North West, a crisis surrounding the future of a major scientific facility stimulated a particular concern with science policy. The decision of the government to locate the new DIAMOND synchrotron in Oxfordshire rather than at Daresbury in the NW, the base for the current national facility where there was accumulated, related scientific expertise, prompted the creation of the North West Science Council, an initiative aimed at linking scientific excellence to regional development objectives.

3.3.29 In each of these policy fields activity is governed, to a greater or lesser extent, by strategies which are supported by broad groups of regional stakeholders. Transport policy in the North East is embodied in the Regional Transport Strategy, a component of the Regional Spatial Strategy, which is the responsibility of the North East Assembly and its partners. The European Structural Funds in Yorkshire and the Humber, including Objective 1 and Objective 2 funds, are governed by 'partnerships' embodied in Programme Management Committees. Science policy in the North West is embodied in the North West Science Strategy (NWSS), which was developed by the North West Science Council. Each of these arrangements involves multiple actors – generally from the public, private and voluntary sectors – in both the design and delivery of the strategies. In none of the cases in question does the regional/sub-regional body have autonomous discretion over the dispensation of resources.

3.3.30 The diversity of regional contexts and policy fields provides a comparative basis for an assessment of the effectiveness of existing regional governance arrangements in tackling important issues. A number of themes emerged from the analysis of the three studies.

### More regionalism, less governance

- 3.3.31 In general terms, the regional decision-making structures were found to have struggled to impose a real coherence on the determination of policy priorities. For instance the North East study showed that the practical delivery of transport policy is fragmented between (often competing) local authorities, executive agencies (such as the Highway's Agency) and non-departmental public bodies (such as the Strategic Rail Authority) and a range of private bodies (notably in the provision of bus services). Similarly, while the creation of the North West Science Council provided a new focus on efforts to boost the science base, and became responsible for the administration of a new (and temporary) North West Science Fund, there remained a number of critical relationships that fall outside the remit of the Science Council. These include relationships with universities, conducted for example through the Higher Education Innovation Fund, and with the North West Energy Council whose activities have a potentially important bearing on the development of the requirements of the region's science base. Indeed the North West Development Agency and Government Office for the North West have a range of direct relationships with universities and other bodies which they guard closely. To some extent therefore, innovation within the process of regionalisation has led to a proliferation rather than a streamlining of actors involved in policy processes and has generated further challenges of coordination.
- 3.3.32 Further issues of coordination also arose as a result of different sub-regional arrangements and the need to ensure their incorporation into wider regional planning arrangements. In the North West, for example, the Manchester city-region represents an important economic development actor in its own right. Sub-regional initiatives linked to the broadening of science policy, such as Manchester Knowledge Capital, have their own programme and strategy boards and bring together local government, industry and university representatives, as well as economic development agencies. Such initiatives are at best loosely coupled to larger-scale regional activities and can even in some sense be seen as competitors to regional initiatives.
- 3.3.33 In the transport field in the North East, the fact that Tyne and Wear is covered by a Passenger Transport Authority, which has direct responsibility for the Tyne and Wear Metro and Tyne Ferry means that local authorities in this particular conurbation are afforded a more direct role in the provision of public transport than in other parts of the North East. However, there remain significant problems in integrating transport policies for Tyne and Wear and those of surrounding areas. For instance, it has proved impossible to gain inter-authority agreement about common car parking charges, which many regard as vital to the success of public transport strategies. More generally, Local Transport Plans (LTPs), whatever their other merits, cannot deal with macro issues. Regional Transport Strategies largely fail to provide a strategic context for the development of LTPs, which are driven by a combination of national policy priorities and local concerns.

- 3.3.34 In the case of the Structural Funds in Yorkshire and the Humber there was general agreement that the alignment of the principal strategies that govern economic development in the region had been achieved effectively but that integration with the Objective 1 programme had proven more difficult to achieve in practice. The proliferation of strategies, with their numerous targets and indicators, were perceived as a hindrance to the efficient performance of the Structural Funds, while the tight spatial targeting of EU resources does not always coincide with the desire of regional agencies to move grant monies around the region in order to maximise their effectiveness and impact.
- 3.3.35 The value of regional strategies and decision-making was widely acknowledged by those involved in the processes concerned, but many regional actors continued to express frustration about the failure to develop fully integrated and relevant regional thinking. In the North West, for instance, many involved in science-related activities stress the degree to which the region continues to lack mechanisms for ensuring that 'scientific excellence', viewed in narrow terms, contributes to regional economic development and the delivery of the Regional Economic Strategy.

#### **National piper, national tune**

- 3.3.36 Whilst regional strategies, in principle, provide important statements about regional needs and how they might be addressed, the dispensation of resources remains dominated by bodies with national lines of accountability. In the North East, major investments in the transport infrastructure are made by national agencies such as the Highways Agency or Strategic Rail Authority. Both these bodies have a regional presence and even programmes, but their planning functions and funding regimes remain highly centralised. Funding and appraisal rests to a large and direct degree with the DfT despite the emphasis within recent legislation on the decentralisation of decision-making and delivery. As such, while a limited degree of flexibility is possible in the local translation of national objectives and priorities, visible in Local Transport Plans, the driver remains the national framework of objectives and priorities.
- 3.3.37 In the North West, the creation of the regional Science Council in the aftermath of the Government decision to site the DIAMOND facility in the South East rather than on the site of the current facility in the North West has had little impact upon the spatial disbursement of science funding, based upon peer review and criteria of national research excellence. In this context, regional energies have tended to focus upon 'rebalancing' the proportion of national research funds attracted to the region and developing mechanisms of co-funding rather than developing a sophisticated understanding of the relationship between science and regional development as the basis for regional science strategy. Thus some regional actors perceive that a regional science policy is welcomed by Government because it affords the possibility of increasing investment in science without requiring additional resources from central agencies.

### **In search of regional priorities**

- 3.3.38 The relative weakness of regional structures means that there is evidence that difficult issues are not being addressed, far less resolved. None of the principle bodies in each of the policy fields has the authority to overcome parochialism in the handling of important issues. For instance, in the North East there is a general consensus that improvement to airport efficiency and capacity is critical to economic competitiveness in an emerging 'weightless' knowledge economy. Newcastle Airport is strategically important to the regional economy, handling 5 million passengers per year in comparison to 700,000 at Durham Tees Valley Airport (formerly Teesside Airport). And yet, in the Regional Transport Strategy (RTS), they are treated as if they have the same status in terms of size and economic impact. This situation reflects a fear, on the part of those charged with developing the RTS, of provoking inter-authority conflict if the strategy is seen to favour Newcastle over Teesside.
- 3.3.39 Parochialism, reinforced by the paucity of the evidence base upon which informed decisions could be built, can also lead to the distortion of priorities. Within the North East there has been a long-standing demand, strongly supported by elements of the regional media, to 'dual the A1' north of Newcastle. Yet among those involved in transport planning in the region few accept this case, arguing that there is no evidence that such a major investment would generate the benefits repeatedly claimed for it. For many the case for dualling the A1 is not proven and yet it remains a key priority in the RTS. Moreover, few involved in the regional transport decision-making are prepared to publicly challenge what most regard as a shibboleth.
- 3.3.40 Regional bodies have struggled to influence national policy priorities. For instance, despite the evident growth of a new tier of science policy governance in the North West (and, increasingly, in other regions), there is little to suggest that national policy agenda, funding formulae and expenditure allocations have shifted significantly as a result. While RDAs have gained new roles in relation to innovation and knowledge transfer, the dominant trend in national science policy is one of centralisation and selectivity which favours the already successful research groups and facilities, concentrated disproportionately within the southern regions. Indeed, evidence from the early disbursements under the Higher Education Innovation Fund suggests that the trend toward selectivity – ostensibly based on 'place blind' selection criteria but regionally imbalanced when it comes to outcomes – is growing.

3.3.41 Similarly, in relation to transport policy, there is little evidence that a focus on the relief of 'congestion' and a concern with traffic speeds and safety is being mitigated to take into account the variation in transport needs between regions. Actors in the transport policy field generally take the view that because of the criteria on which national investment decisions are made it is difficult to construct a rationale for transport funding that are more relevant to the less stressed infrastructures in regions like the North East.

### **Renewing the regional elite?**

3.3.42 If some of the policy fragmentation in regional structures and the difficulties that are found in developing and delivering independent regional strategies reflect the dependence of regional agencies on higher levels of government, however, there is also evidence at the regional scale of the 'colonisation' of particular policy fields by a relatively narrow range of interests. Within the North West, the rapid development of a new regional science policy has been driven by a relatively limited set of public and private sector organisations. The regional science council, for example, is dominated by large firms despite the fact that the main focus of innovation and enterprise policies is ostensibly upon SMEs. Such firms tend to emphasise the need to invest in 'existing strengths', which favour existing large firms, rather than identify emerging areas of potential. This raises the broader question of stakeholder capacity to engage with the new governance structures. Those organisations with large resources remain best placed to access and occupy the structures of regional governance. This in turn raises questions about the accountability and transparency of bodies which at least have some influence over regional decisions.

### **The limits to regional innovation**

3.3.43 None of the above is intended to suggest that current regional governance arrangements stifle creativity. The three case studies we undertook are evidence, in themselves, of an evolving role for regional agencies in influencing policy delivery in ways that are more sensitive to the particular combinations of needs and opportunity within individual regions. It is also too early to make definitive judgements about what the ultimate impact of recent institutional innovations such as regional science councils and transport boards might be. The evidence so far suggests, however, that the independent steps that regions have been able to take have been small. Thus, for example, the introduction of real time information for bus passengers in the North East provides a good example of the way in which the identification of common interests and concerns across local authority areas and transport operators led to the development of a common strategy and infrastructure that produced region-wide benefit. It provided for a co-ordinated approach to delivery, through an integrated tendering process for the installation of relevant technologies, whilst allowing for variation in the pace at which individual local authorities rolled out the programme according to their own priorities and resources.

3.3.44 What the case study evidence does suggest, however, is that such innovations have tended to occur within relatively narrow parameters. When regional demands have expanded beyond those parameters and begun to challenge national policy frameworks and allocation formulae – something it might be expected that an ERA would have done more vigorously, helped by a stronger regional mandate – the result has tended to be a strong reassertion of the primacy of ‘national interests’ over regional ones and the reversion, by regional agencies, to agenda that can be determined and delivered through existing resources.

### *Key features of current regional governance regimes*

3.3.45 Our baseline analysis of the current state of regional governance produced a very mixed picture of the effectiveness and influence of the three key agencies that now operate in each English region. On one hand it suggested growing maturity, in all regions, on the part of the three agencies and a steady evolution in their ability to work effectively together in the production of regional strategies and in response to region-specific challenges. Without further changes, however, there were limits upon the ability and willingness of regional agencies to go much further than they already have in providing clear and focused regional leadership and developing integrated, sharply prioritised regional strategies that are able to guide the choices and actions of the panoply of organisations and interests – national and supra-national, as well as regional, sub-regional and local – whose support is needed if they are to be delivered effectively. The principle factors we found to be at play here are detailed below.

3.3.46 *The complex institutional division of regional labour.* The three key regional agencies have partially distinct and partially overlapping functional responsibilities with the RDAs leading on economic development and overseeing various sub-regional partnerships and localised delivery vehicles, the GO leading on social exclusion and neighbourhood development issues but also overseeing regional, sub-regional and local agency activities across a broad range of policy areas relevant to the ‘family’ of Government departments represented within them, and the RAs assuming primary responsibilities for regional land-use planning. With the best will in the world, this often results in regional strategies being constructed along sector – or profession-specific lines, in isolation from others, even whilst there is simultaneous commitment to horizontal ‘joining up’ between them. Hence, for example, we found 18 regional strategies to be running concurrently within the North West, all of them scheduled over different timescales and subject to separate development, consultation, delivery and review processes.

3.3.47 *Multiple lines of accountability of regional agencies.* GOs, at one level, have the simplest lines of accountability in that they are staffed by career civil servants employed by and ultimately answerable to national departments. In practice, however, it is not easy to fashion a sense of corporate mission across the multiple, vertically integrated department-specific activities that GO staff are involved in. Nor is it simple to move from a 'translational' role, based upon the regionally sensitised delivery of national departmental policies, programmes and priorities, to a more 'transformational' role, based upon an independent sense of regional priorities and a more critical view of the extent to which departmental prerogatives contribute to them. RDAs are also accountable to Government through a performance management, targeting and auditing regime designed for them by their principal sponsor department, the DTI. However they also receive funding from other Government departments, which naturally want to see 'their' money channelled in ways that help realise their departmental missions and PSA targets in the regions. RDA boards, although appointed by the relevant Secretary of State, bring a variety of alternative perspectives to bear upon RDA work and strategic orientations. At the same time, the GO is tasked with evaluating RDA performance on the Government's behalf and the RAs, too, have a role in holding the RDA to account and ensuring 'read across' between Regional Economic Strategies and other regional strategies. RAs, meanwhile, have a membership comprising most, if not all, local authorities in their regions plus a variety of appointed social and economic partners. Whilst their executives often develop a sense of regional purpose, rooted in the RA's region-wide functional responsibilities and their own professional codes, it is not unusual for local authority members to adopt a more local orientation and to see the RA as a forum at which to defend or promote parochial interests, particularly in heterogeneous regions in which a sense of economic, social or cultural cohesion is lacking. In this context, and bearing in mind the different functions they perform, it is perhaps unsurprising that the sense of responsibility and mutual accountability that regional agencies feel to one another is invariably tempered by their need to conform to the real or perceived wishes of a range of other 'masters'.

3.3.48 *Multiplicity of programmes delivered within the regions.* If strategic integration is something of a challenge in a context wherein regional agencies have different but overlapping functional specialisms and widely varying accountability arrangements, then integration between strategy and delivery is still more complex. There was neither time nor resources, within the LTE study, to identify and describe all the programmes that are linked directly or indirectly to the large number of extant regional strategies. Had we done so, however, we would have found a bewildering variety of programmes, each with their own sponsors, funding regimes, timescales, key partners, delivery arrangements, targets and procedures for monitoring, auditing and evaluation. Whilst regional agencies exhibited a highly developed ability to locate these programmes within regional strategic frameworks on paper, we found no evidence to suggest that this degree of fragmentation – largely driven by new initiatives developed in good faith at the national level – did anything but harm the cause of purposeful, co-ordinated regional strategy delivery.

- 3.3.49 *Limitations to regional evidence bases.* At a time when increasing emphasis is placed on the notion of ‘evidence-based policy’, regional agencies were conscious of limits upon ‘regional knowledge’ in two distinct senses. First, the data available at the regional scale from standard statistical sources was generally felt to be inadequate, even allowing for recent improvements (e.g. in the level and reliability of regional expenditure data made available through PES). Second, evaluative evidence was perceived to be in short supply, meaning that regional agencies felt less confident than they would like in demonstrating ‘what works and why’ in terms of the impact of regional strategies. A third issue, which emerged from our case study observations, concerns analytic capacity. Whilst the slow emergence of independent organisations such as Regional Observatories represents a tentative move in the right direction, our analysis suggested that investment in analytic capability – in house or through third parties – is seen by regional agencies as something of a luxury even though it could be argued that it is not so much data that is lacking but consolidated regional intelligence.
- 3.3.50 *Regional institutional self-protection.* One of the key ‘failures’ exhibited by REDs was the refusal, on the part of the three regional agencies, to prioritise to the degree advocated by HMT, i.e. to identify policy areas where a reduction in resources would be tolerated in order that there could be increases in others. Whilst this could be interpreted as a prudent tactical ploy to some extent – no region saw it as politic to advertise its willingness to see a reduction in resources rather than use the RED process, against the advice of HMT, as a ‘bidding game’ – it also suggests that the protection of institutional budgets, ultimately, was more important to the regional agencies than a sharper inter-agency focus on regional spending priorities.
- 3.3.51 *Lack of clarity with regard to the influence of the regions at the centre.* Another feature of the RED process was that it was unclear to regional agencies what use was going to be made of REDs. Whilst HMT later released details of the way in which, in its (retrospective) view, the arguments put forward by REDs, collectively, had had an impact upon departmental thinking and choices, it remained the case that RED production, for the regions, had been more an act of faith than a clearly defined process by which they could affect the outcome of the spending review.
- 3.3.52 *Uncertain prioritisation of regional priorities within the public spending process.* The lack of clarity about the ‘clout’ of REDs, and by implication of regions, was exacerbated by the fact that ‘regional issues’ were seen by HMT as just one of the cross-cutting themes that needed to be fed into the spending review process and set alongside the standard and longstanding negotiations between HMT teams and spending departments. Whilst the evidence is only anecdotal, it would appear that spending departments ‘reverted to type’ during the review process and were not sure how to act upon HMT’s exhortations to take regional inputs seriously.

3.3.53 We return to the implications that these observations would have had for the LTE study, had it gone ahead, in the final section of the report. First, though, we consider the extent to which the idea of the assertion of regional priorities through dedicated, elected regional institutions was found to have any resonance for representatives of the group who, ultimately, were intended to benefit from ERAs; regional electorates.

# 4. Popular perceptions of regions and regionalisation

## 4.1 The purpose of the Focus Group programme

4.1.1 Section 3 presented alternative ‘snapshots’ of the English regions in terms of (a) quantitative measures of regional ‘performance’ and (b) the perceived strengths and weaknesses of existing regional governance arrangements as identified through interviews with individuals who were familiar with the status quo and the Government’s approach to ERAs. Also key to the performance of regional institutions, however – whether elected, indirectly elected or appointed – is the degree of interest in, commitment to and ownership over them felt by regional electorates that invariably have less familiarity with institutional structures and Government policy than ‘insider’ groups.

4.1.2 We felt it was important to understand the degree of connectivity to and commitment toward ‘their’ regions and their institutions felt by regional publics because:

- We wished to test the degree to which the absence of direct regional accountability by existing regional agencies affected their standing, visibility and effectiveness, and
- An ability to energise ‘ordinary people’ and mobilise them behind a set of aspirations for a particular region was likely to be critical to the success of ERAs and we wished to gain an understanding of how likely it was that they would be able to do so at an early stage in the process of moving towards an ERA regime.

4.1.3 The focus group programme was designed to fill an important gap in the knowledge base in this regard. Prior to this strand of research being undertaken by the consortium, there was little detail available on public attitudes to regional devolution in England or about the likely determinants of voting behaviour in any referendums on the creation of ERAs. A number of opinion polls had been carried out at various points over the years leading up to the LTE study, and many of these had shown apparently strong support for the introduction of ERAs. But they also revealed a striking lack of awareness of the purposes and detail of government policy. Attitudes in those circumstances, we felt, were likely to be soft and malleable, and the opinion poll results as a result needed to be viewed with some caution.

- 4.1.4 For this reason it was decided not to explore public attitudes through mass opinion surveys, but instead to use the more qualitative technique of focus group research. Focus groups cannot deliver statistically representative results. But they do allow participants to explore issues more deeply and to consider alternatives typically too nuanced for an opinion survey's 'yes', 'no' and 'don't know' responses. In that way they can open up a fuller understanding of *the range of responses* the public has on particular issues and offer explanations for those different responses.
- 4.1.5 The focus group research reported here, to the specification described in Section 2, was conducted between 22 June and 15 July 2004. Each group was moderated by a member of the project team according to a standard discussion guide which is reproduced in Appendix D. The research was conceived and carried out before the announcement on the postponement of two of the three referendums. The discussion guide was therefore based on the assumption that all three referendums would go ahead as was originally planned.
- 4.1.6 The discussion guide was designed to prompt discussion on:
- Questions of regional identity
  - Attitudes to devolution in general
  - Knowledge of and attitudes to Government policies for the English regions
  - Referendum voting intentions (intentions were sought at the start and at the end of each group).

Below, we present findings on each of these themes.

## 4.2 Regional identity and belonging

- 4.2.1 Participants were prompted by a showcard to choose any number of identities that applied to them ranging from 'local' to 'regional', 'English', 'other UK nation' (Scottish, Welsh, Irish), 'British', 'European' and 'other'. The aim was to explore how far the region was or might become a frame of reference for thinking about politics. The most popular choices were 'local', 'English' and 'British'. Regional identity was weakest in the North West, and where it was claimed had a more general north-south rather than specifically North Western meaning (especially among those who had left, and later returned to the region). Regional identity was strongest in Yorkshire, and understood both as a historic sense of Yorkshireness, but also – as in the North West – as a more general distinction between northerners and southerners. The north-south distinction was articulated in stereotypes:
- 'northern' = friendly, approachable, communitarian, unpretentious, welcoming, generous
  - 'southern' = cold, aloof, class and status conscious, individualistic, flash, aggressively ambitious, etc.

- 4.2.2 We found the ‘identity border’ between Yorkshire and the North East to be somewhat blurred, with some participants in Northallerton (North Yorkshire) claiming a North Eastern regional identity, and some in Darlington (in the southern North East) claiming a Yorkshire identity.
- 4.2.3 Most participants were comfortable in claiming multiple identities, often stating they would describe themselves differently depending whether they were in their home area, elsewhere in the UK, or abroad. There were some signs of a growing salience of different, ‘sub-British’ national identities in the UK, with some stressing their Englishness as a demarcation line vis-à-vis other UK nations and others stressing their Britishness out of concerns that ‘Englishness’ (or ‘Scottishness’ etc) was divisive. Most participants displayed a high level of rootedness in their local area and, at times, an extremely vigorous and highly localised ‘patriotism’ (especially in the rural locations, but more generally in Yorkshire, and in Huddersfield in particular).
- 4.2.4 When pressed to identify those features that were especially characteristic of their region – our prompts included class, economy, heritage, food, sports, accents – participants in the North West had particular difficulty. Accents and sporting affiliations were felt to demarcate different areas within the region (e.g. Warrington as a rugby league, not a football town, with few affinities to ‘Scouse’ Liverpool); there were few overarching commonalities for the region as a whole, except being ‘not southern’. In all three regions the more peripheral, rural locations felt little in common with the major urban centres, though in the North East and Yorkshire rural participants nevertheless described typical regional characteristics in much the same way as the urban participants. It was close to unanimous in the Yorkshire groups that ‘the Humber’ did not belong with Yorkshire. The characteristics of Yorkshire and Yorkshireness were the most clearly defined and formed three clusters:
- ‘the county’/‘the rose’/‘not Lancashire’ – county history here provided a point of identification that was not as pronounced elsewhere
  - the moors and dales/countryside/Heartbeat country/North Yorkshire (chosen also by Sheffield participants in South Yorkshire)
  - friendly/outspoken/hospitable/honest/sense of community (again, at times explicitly, in contrast with southerners).

North Easterners claimed a similar set of attributes concerning landscape and culture, though with a stronger focus on sport, accent and a ‘slower pace’ of living (i.e. than ‘the south’).

4.2.5 What is surprising about these findings on identity is how modestly they were reflected in attitudes on political issues. Local patriotism was not matched by strong commitment to local politics or administrative boundaries; north-south distinctions were not consistently matched with a concern to give the north a stronger political voice; and the strongest sense of regional identity (Yorkshire) was matched with the least enthusiasm for regional government. There appear to be two broad explanations for this apparently apolitical regionalism/localism:

- An intense distrust of all politicians, national, local and – incipiently – regional
- A strong and at times indignant perception that no-one (allegedly) had informed citizens of the issues and initiatives that have reshaped regional politics and governance since 1997.

One crude indicator of the latter was the general inability of participants (with few exceptions, and these mainly in the North East), when given a map detailing local authority boundaries in the northern half of England, to draw in the boundaries of their region with any degree of accuracy. The ‘mental maps’ of regions drawn by most participants approximated more to sub-regions and counties than they did to the standard administrative regions that define the territories covered by regional agencies.

## 4.3 Devolution as a general principle

4.3.1 Participants were asked to discuss whether devolution in principle was a good idea, reflecting in particular on the reforms since 1997 in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. There was no consensus view within or across the three regions, except perhaps that people didn’t know enough about devolution elsewhere in the UK to make an informed judgement. There were few clear conceptions of the benefits brought by devolution elsewhere in the UK, except that some felt that allowing for the expression of different identities, needs and preferences was in principle a good thing. The most readily recalled devolution fact was the controversy over the costs of the Scottish Parliament building. Some – in the admittedly highly parochial Huddersfield group – articulated a crude version of the West Lothian question, asking why there were still ‘dozens’ of Scottish MPs at Westminster; ‘why aren’t they back up there ... there’s dozens of them ... [they should] send them all back home’.

4.3.2 Others presented a different sense of unease about devolution, fearing ‘competition’ (for resources?) from devolved bodies elsewhere (in the Alnwick group, close to the Scottish border) or seeing devolution as divisive, risking the break-up of the UK. In some cases the latter claim was connected with Europe in the sense that national autonomy was seen by some as being eroded from without, so should be protected from within (voiced in Darlington, and across the North West, which of the three regions was most strongly British and most weakly regional in self-identification).

- 4.3.3 Two other broad discussion points emerged. One was a strong feeling, present in several of the groups and across the whole North East, that central government ('London') was remote, didn't know best, and was full of self-serving politicians (one group in the North East cited the Prime Minister as a politician from the region forgetting 'where he came from'). Only one group – in Sheffield – made a positive case for central government in the sense of ensuring equitable and fair outcomes for all, no matter where they lived. Otherwise distrust of 'London' was widespread, especially in the North East (and Northallerton); but only rarely was it translated into support for a distinct, regional voice for the northern regions. Participants who felt London's remoteness was a problem mostly seemed resigned to sub-optimal governance, and did not seem to think that regional devolution would make a difference.
- 4.3.4 This sense of resignation linked secondly to perceptions of politics and politicians. There were strong concerns within all groups about the trustworthiness and motivations of politicians, irrespective of the party they represented or the spatial scale at which they operated. Thus it was assumed that the people of the devolved territories were served just as badly, or at least no better, by their new 'regional' political elites as they were, previously, by UK-level and local politicians, and that the same would apply to ERAs. The perceived waste and dishonesty surrounding the Scottish Parliament building was evoked as an example of politicians being 'all the same'. There were already 'too many' politicians, 'you only see them at election times', they 'do not do enough'. The twin ogres of 'cost' and 'bureaucracy' readily popped up in this discussion as the inevitable outcomes of 'politicians'. There was also some hint of the impact of recent national political controversies: 'I don't trust them ... more so now after the Iraq situation' (a Newcastle participant).
- 4.3.5 There is evidently a danger in these circumstances that the detailed issues at stake in regional government would be swamped by this pervasive sense of mistrust in any referendum campaigns and results. Northern dissatisfaction with the current structure of government certainly does not translate smoothly into support for change in the structure of government.

## 4.4 Policy on the English regions

- 4.4.1 The next set of discussion points concerned: awareness of the current institutions of regional governance; the policy issues that people felt were most important in their region; and the roles and powers of the ERAs (based on what was contained in the White Paper). Here, one or two people in most groups had heard of Regional Development Agencies and some of them had a rough idea what they do ('something to do with business promotion' or 'bringing employment into the area'). Across *all* groups just two or three people in total (out of nearly 50) had heard of Government Offices and the current 'partnership' Regional Assemblies and *none at all* knew what either of them did. There were misgivings about this largely new information, including: concern that RDA boards were appointed by the (remote) Secretary of State (though again this did not translate into support for a devolved, regional appointment process); and annoyance ('incensement' in Darlington) that these institutions, plus a variety of quangos also introduced into the discussion, were operating without participants' knowledge.

- 4.4.2 Most of the policy issues identified as being of concern to participants were often not *regional* policy issues, understood in terms of the roles of current or future regional governing institutions. Concerns about education and health dominated the responses (and when later shown the list of functions proposed for ERAs the absence of education and health was viewed critically by participants). Law and order issues also figured prominently, in two ways: not enough was reportedly being done to tackle crime and anti-social behaviour; and speed cameras were seen as being used over-zealously as a fund-raising device. Also widely cited were employment, especially the absence of quality employment opportunities, and public transport. The following were also mentioned in at least two groups: immigration/asylum; the environment; and local property prices ('driving young people away' from rural locations in Keswick and Alnwick). Group moderators noted that these policy concerns were expressed in a personalised, individualistic way; there was little sense of there being some kind of regional (or, indeed, national) 'general interest'.
- 4.4.3 It was also news to most people that referendums on introducing ERAs had (at the time) been announced. Again there was widespread annoyance about this 'why don't we know about them!'; evidently the ODPM's information campaigns had passed our participants by. Some participants were reluctant to believe that the referendums represented a genuine choice and suspected that 'the government has already made its mind up anyway', just, in 'fact' like the EEC referendum in 1975 when 'everybody voted no but we still went in'(!). Public cynicism about politics is evidently deeply ingrained.
- 4.4.4 Participants were prompted by a showcard listing proposed ERA functions to discuss the scope and effectiveness of what ERAs would be able to do. On balance participants were not impressed. There was widespread criticism that the key issues of health and education were not on the list ('they're missing and they're the main concern'). Participants could see the value of regional powers in some fields, including housing, environment, crime reduction, transport and public health, but further elaboration on the funding and 'strategic' powers that ERAs would have had in these fields tended to dampen any incipient enthusiasm. There was a strong view that ERAs would not have enough clout and would be too much subject to central government control ('lack of power to do things differently from Westminster'). This had much to do with an inability to appreciate the idea of 'strategic' powers. In part the concept was simply unfamiliar, but even with explanation there remained general scepticism about the ability of an ERA to deliver real added value by 'joining up' policy-making in the region and cajoling policy actors into thinking regionally.

- 4.4.5 There were a number of other general themes. First, in most groups there was concern that ERAs would have too much overlap with the functions of local governments (though again this may have to do with the lack of understanding of the strategic role envisaged for ERAs). Second, in the North East concerns were expressed about the likely ‘calibre’ of politician elected to ERAs (though given general views on ‘politicians’ it is safe to assume much the same views were held elsewhere). There was a view (in Darlington) that, if an ERA were to happen, its members should have ‘experience’ (i.e. outside politics), should be outside the ‘party machines’, but on no account should be from universities (full of ideas but no experience of the ‘real world’). Finally, in all three regions, especially in the rural groups, there were worries that an ERA – given that it would have relatively few members in relatively big constituencies – would be remote: ‘We’d never see them’; it would be ‘Newcastle-centric’; ‘Hull and Humberside ... it’ll all be going on over there’.
- 4.4.6 We asked about two specific aspects of government policy on ERAs: the insistence on single tier local authorities in ERA regions; and ERAs’ council tax precepting power. There was little opposition in all of the groups, including places currently with two tier local government, to moving to single tier local government. There was certainly no attachment to the idea of ‘historic’ counties. This is consistent with all recent public attitudes work; people seem unconcerned with particular boundaries for local government units, but concerned instead with the effectiveness of local government in providing services. In the focus groups the provision of information on the plan to move to single tier local government in ERA regions helped to neutralise concerns about ‘another tier of bureaucracy’.
- 4.4.7 There was a mix of predictable and more nuanced responses on the question of the precepting power of ERAs. The Yorkshire groups were mostly predictable, with a general consensus in all three groups that there should be no increases in council tax, either for ERA running costs or for additional economic development projects in the region. ‘London’ should pay. In the North West the proposed precept for running costs – at the stated average of 5p per week – was generally thought insignificant (‘that’s only a pint a year’). And in all three North East groups participants would be willing to pay their 5p if it returned ‘value for money’. There was however a widespread scepticism that the precept would remain at this level, or that value for money would, in the end, be delivered (‘I just can’t see any kind of benefit at a reasonable cost, because I think it’s going to cost us more money, employ more people with the same job descriptions’). There was no support anywhere for additional precepts for economic development projects [though provision for this in any case disappeared in the draft Regional Assemblies Bill].

## 4.5 Referendum voting intentions

4.5.1 We asked participants at the start and at the end of each group discussion how they would vote in a referendum: yes, no or don't know. The results are given below in Table 5 as percentages across the three groups in each region and as a total for all groups. The sample size was too small to be taken as any sort of predictor for 'real' voting behaviour. However the result of the more considered vote, following the discussion, was very similar to the eventual result in the North East referendum, with the number of people intending to vote 'no' outnumbering those intending to vote 'yes' by a factor of 4:1. They show that our participants in the North East, before and after discussion, were least opposed to the introduction of ERAs, and that our Yorkshire participants were most opposed, and in the end quite vehemently so (though that result was skewed by an 80% 'No' return from the highly (small 'c') conservative Huddersfield group).

Table 5: ERA referendum voting intentions amongst Focus Group participants						
	Before Discussion			After Discussion		
	Yes	D/know	No	Yes	D/know	No
<b>NE</b>	35	54	12	15	69	15
<b>NW</b>	17	61	22	9	57	35
<b>Y/H</b>	25	61	14	0	52	48
<b>Overall</b>	26	59	15	8	59	33

4.5.2 As significant as the 'headline' results was that in all but one group opinion shifted away from the 'yes' option after discussion. The exception was in Darlington, where an initial return of 1Y, 1N and 7DK became 1Y and 8DK. Otherwise there was a general drift from 'Yes' to 'Don't Know' to 'No'. The biggest group at start and finish were 'Don't Knows'. Significantly many of the Don't Knows wanted more information before making an informed choice. A number of participants commented along the lines that 'we have been privileged in hearing about what's happening' as a result of being invited to the focus group session. But, equipped with a little more information participants now had more questions than answers, and there was a strong feeling that the government needed to prioritise getting accessible information out to voters: 'I'd like to hear a lot more about what they're going to be doing before I make a decision, a lot more information'. Few had noticed the beginning of the TV campaign designed to get people to vote and amongst those who had seen the advert there was confusion as to what it was about. Some admitted a tendency to put public information that came through their letterboxes 'straight in the bin'.

## 4.6 The people vs. ERAs, regional governance, the region, or politicians?

- 4.6.1 The findings of the nine focus groups were in part paradoxical. Our participants felt (a) dissatisfied and, by and large, disadvantaged by government 'from London' and (b) claimed notable levels of distinctive regional identity, in Yorkshire and the North East based on 'positive' attributes, and everywhere based on broader north-south distinctions. But they did not link (a) and (b) together as an argument for regional government.
- 4.6.2 Participants were not convinced that ERAs would be effective or would deliver value for money. They felt that ERAs would not have sufficient clout, would not have powers to impact on core policy concerns on health and education, and would, inevitably, over time, tax them too much. Participants were confused by the idea of a strategic authority not directly responsible for delivering public services; they found it hard to see how strategic leadership could make any difference. But there was no significant support for retaining two-tier local government, even in two tier areas.
- 4.6.3 A recurrent, and deeply felt, theme which helped to explain scepticism about plans for ERAs is an abiding distrust of politicians. This distrust appeared far stronger than in similar focus groups conducted a year and a half earlier (for the West Midlands and Yorkshire and Humber Regional Assemblies) and may reflect more general, short term factors, such as the stage then reached in the electoral cycle or what were still recent memories of the distinctively unpopular Government support for war in Iraq.
- 4.6.4 Participants felt badly informed about government policy on regions, and felt annoyed about this (although they also admitted that they may not generally consider information delivered through traditional channels). Government information campaigns had failed to reach this group of participants.
- 4.6.5 In the course of discussion, as they learned more about policy on regions, participants became less likely to support, and more likely to oppose, the introduction of ERAs. The biggest group of participants felt, especially after hearing in most cases for the very first time what government planned, that they did not have sufficient information to make an informed decision. The dilemmas for government and for 'yes' campaigners, which were clearly not overcome by the time of the North East referendum, appeared to be how to balance the fact that (a) exposure to information about ERAs during the focus groups did not result in more positive voting intentions, but (b) people clearly felt the need for more information and once so equipped were enthusiastic to engage in further discussion.

## 4.7 Implications

- 4.7.1 Overall, the focus group findings offered little in the way of comfort to anyone who might have wished either to defend the status quo on regional governance or to advance the case for ERAs in the form anticipated in the White Paper and the draft bill. On one hand, existing unelected and indirectly elected regional agencies had clearly managed to achieve very little visibility in the eyes of regional publics. Worse still, once their existence and roles were pointed out, participants expressed strong reservations about their legitimacy. At the same time, the high level of distrust in politicians, as a breed, and the sense of disappointment with the idea of primarily 'strategic' ERAs were such that there was little popular appetite for changing the status quo through the only route that was then on offer.
- 4.7.2 The challenge for the LTE was not to propose answers to this particular conundrum, but to recognise that it existed and to reflect the implications of the focus group findings, along with those unearthed through the work reported in Section 3, in its approach to the long-term evaluation of ERAs.

# 5. Review and implications

## 5.1 Summary of results from the LTE study's first two phases

5.1.1 Let us now turn to the implications that the work completed during the baseline phase of the study would have had if the LTE had continued into its third phase. We have seen how the baseline study found that:

- There is wide variation in the recent economic, physical/environmental and social performance and trajectories of the English regions, with an emerging 'super-region' centred upon London and comprising much of southern England performing best, the midlands regions performing moderately and the three northern regions that were originally chosen to have referendums on the move to ERAs exhibiting the poorest comparative performance.
- Whilst recent trends in all regions are broadly positive, the Government's commitment to a reduction in the difference between rates of regional economic growth by 2012 remains challenging.
- The proliferation of regional strategies and the growth in the activities of the three key regional agencies operating within each English region appear to have made no discernible difference to this long run, uneven pattern of regional development.
- Culpability for uneven regional development cannot be laid at the door of regional agencies, whose responsibilities are to deliver a variety of programmes within their regions, not to have regard to the needs and potentials of others.
- Regional agencies are perceived to be performing moderately well. They show increasing maturity and sophistication in the production of regional strategies and in joint working. However there is little evidence that they are able to make difficult strategic choices for and within their regions and to garner support for their delivery from higher and lower levels of government and other stakeholders.
- This is seen as partly due to the degree of control that central government departments wield over individual regional agencies. However it is also affected by: a complex institutional division of regional labour; multiple lines of accountability of regional agencies; the multiplicity of programmes delivered within the regions; some important limitations to the regional evidence bases available to support regional strategies; a tendency among regional agencies, *in extremis*, towards institutional self-protection, and; limited influence by regional agencies upon central government policy choices and expenditure priorities.

- 5.1.2 The Government's aspiration for ERAs was that they should use their strategic influence, some specific executive powers and resources and the status and clout derived from their direct accountability to regional electorates to improve upon the effectiveness of existing regional governance arrangements. The findings of the first two phases of the LTE study suggested that whether they would have been able to do so remained an open question. There are three key issues at play here, all of which would have informed our approach to the long-term evaluation.
- 5.1.3 They first concerns the *resourcing of ERAs*. In a parallel piece of work undertaken for the Northwest Development Agency during the baseline study period, SURF calculated that, had an ERA empowered along the lines set out in the White Paper and the draft bill been established in the North West, it would have exercised direct control over 2% of total public expenditure flowing into the region and influenced the spending of a further 4%. Even allowing for the fact that a substantial proportion of the remaining 94% of identifiable public sector funding flowing into the region is accounted for by direct transfers to individuals through the welfare system rather than spent by other agencies, it is clear that there would always have been a limit to the ability of a modest ERA tail to wag a very substantial dog.
- 5.1.4 The second, related issue concerns the relative *influence of ERAs*. Substantial scepticism was found, amongst focus group participants, more knowledgeable regional policy 'insiders' and, through the ODPM Select Committee inquiry, external experts, about the capacity of ERAs to realise the Deputy Prime Minister's aspiration that they would 'make a real difference to jobs, growth and the quality of life in northern regions' in a way that current regional governance arrangements are unable to do. Returning to our checklist of limitations on current regional agency performance, it is possible to see how an ERA would potentially have had significant influence over the regional evidence bases available to support regional strategies. An ERA regime would also have simplified the lines of accountability of regional agencies in that the functions of the current RDA and RA would effectively have been merged within a single body and made directly accountable to regional electorates. The degree to which an ERA might have been able to reduce the complexity of the institutional division of regional labour, streamline the number of programmes supporting the delivery of regional strategies, overcome a tendency toward institutional self-protection and wield greater influence over central government policy choices and expenditure priorities, however, would have depended less upon the autonomous choices of an ERA and more upon its ability to develop close working relationships with other levels of government.
- 5.1.5 The third issue concerns the *objectives set for and by ERAs*. As noted in Section 2, clarity about Government expectations of ERAs was at an early stage of development when the North East referendum vote brought work on this issue to a halt. Had the plan to create ERAs proceeded, it would still have taken a further two years before the first ERA was able to set regional objectives and targets for itself. In this context, it was difficult to anticipate with any degree of precision just how an ERA would have been expected to improve upon the performance of current regional governance regimes.

## 5.2 What if there had been an ERA?

5.2.1 In light of the observations made above, had the consortium been continuing with the LTE study in expectation of the creation of one or more ERAs it would have focused upon a number of key themes that would have enabled analysis of the extent to which an ERA was able to overcome the limitations of current regional governance arrangements, as revealed through the work completed in the first two phases of the LTE. The principal concerns would have been to:

- Identify, and assess the advantages of, the simplification of the lines of accountability that accompanied a move to an ERA regime
- Operationalise the notion of 'tough regional choices' and the extent to which an ERA was better able to identify and act upon them than are current regional agencies, individually and collectively
- Understand the basis upon which an ERA was able to develop an alternative approach to 'regional prioritisation', within and between policy areas for which it became responsible and, through establishing and 'selling' a more coherent regional framework, by influencing the choices of other stakeholders and delivery bodies
- Assess improvements in 'evidence-based policy' attributable to ERAs and how they related to regional prioritisation processes
- Assess the extent to which an ERA was able to require and influence the alignment of delivery as well as strategy
- Understand the impact of the above on facilitating greater regional and sub-regional 'buy-in' to the objectives and programmes of ERAs and encouraging supportive action on the part of other stakeholders and deliverers, and
- Distinguish between an ERA's impact as understood by (a) better performance in the delivery of targets negotiated with Government departments, (b) regional innovation in policy development and delivery (whether or not that formed part of any future national 'target' regime), and (c) the policy directions and expenditure priorities of Government departments and those of the Non-Departmental Public Bodies they oversee.

5.2.2 These foci for research would have been operationalised through the phased repetition and further development of the various blocks of work described in Section 2. Specifically, this would have employed comparative work on ERA and non-ERA regions in order to deliver:

- Careful analysis of any final Regional Assemblies Bill (and subsequent Act) plus additional Government guidance to ERAs designed to guide the consortium's approach to defining what the Government's (national) objectives for ERAs would be

- Analysis of the explicit strategic intentions of any future ERA, as recorded in policy documents and mission statements and/or communicated through the case study programme, designed to guide the consortium's approach to defining what an individual ERA's (regional) objectives would be
- Analysis of the degree of consistency and dissonance between national and regional objectives for ERAs, as they became defined in greater detail, and their implications for an overall evaluation of ERAs
- Annual collection of the core quantitative indicators described in Section 3 in order to monitor general changes in the environment in which ERAs would operate
- Continued use of case study work in all 8 regions to compare the way in which regional agencies (including ERAs, once established) responded to common challenges. An obvious focus for research in 2005, for example, would have been the way in which regional agencies organised the processes of reviewing RESs and developing RSSs and City Regional Development Plans in order to promote better integration between regional strategies and the development of a common evidence base
- Up until the establishment of the first ERA, continued use of the 'referendum region' case study work to assess degrees of innovation in policy areas in which ERAs were expected to be active
- After the establishment of the first ERA, a selective refocusing of the policy area specific case study work to track the development of strategies and programmes by ERA regions
- Continued development and refinement of the quantitative indicators, designed to focus in on more specific areas in which ERAs, once there was clarity about their national and regional objectives, were expected to have an impact
- Collection of ERA programme monitoring data in order to compare ERA outputs with changes in regional indicators
- Repeats of the focus group programme in 2007 and 2011, designed to assess changes in public identification with regions, public attitudes to ERAs and perceptions of their effectiveness, to feed into formative and summative evaluations, and
- Triangulation of quantitative, ERA output, case study and public perception data in order to produce a formative evaluation in 2007 and a summative evaluation in 2011.

# ANNEX A

## Focus Group locations and recruitment methodology

The LTE consortium commissioned Total Research Solutions (TRS) Ltd. to recruit Focus Group participants in a key regional conurbation, a smaller independent urban centre and a rural area in the three northern regions. The locations that were selected were:

North East: Newcastle, Darlington, Alnwick

North West: Manchester, Warrington, Keswick

Yorkshire and the Humber: Sheffield, Huddersfield, Northallerton

TRS was asked to recruit 8-10 members of Focus Groups in each of these nine locations. In total, 81 participants were recruited; no group had fewer than 8 or more than 10 members. Recruitment was through face-to-face interviews 'on the street' in each location and participants were selected according to the following criteria:

- Gender balance
- Ethnic minority representation in areas with significant minorities
- Socio-economic balance according to the standard group A – group E classification. However A's and E's were excluded as experience suggests that social opposites impede group dynamics
- Age balance across the range 18-70, though within limited bandings, so that the youngest and oldest participants in any one region did not figure in the same groups (as experience suggests that age extremes impede group dynamics). Three groups had age ranges of 18-30, three 25-50, and three 45-70
- Balance across political affiliations, but excluding left and right extremes because of negative effects on group dynamics
- Balance of political engagement and interest, as represented by voting behaviour. (There was a minimum requirement that 50% of each group must have voted in the last general election).

The following are summary data across all groups:

- Male 51%, Female 49%
- Group B 15%, Group C1 42%, Group C2 33%, Group D 19%
- Full-time employment 67%, part-time 15%, not working (including students and maternity leave) 12%, retired 6%.

## APPENDIX B

# Analysis of the production of Regional Emphasis Documents (REDS): Guidance note

### *Aims*

To illustrate the effectiveness of current regional governance arrangements in meeting a common, strategic challenge

To anticipate the difference that future regionalisation processes and/or the establishment of ERAs could make on RED production

### *Objectives*

To assess what RED production in each region tells us about:

- (a) Relationships between the 3 core regional agencies (RA, RDA, GO)
- (b) Relationships between these and wider stakeholder interests and organisations
- (c) The state of regional intelligence and evidence bases that supported REDs
- (d) The ability of regions to identify and substantiate key regional priorities.

To assess the impact that REDs are seen as having had on:

- (a) Central government priorities and relationships with regions
- (b) Symbolic/representational and practical action with the regions.

To ascertain views of how the process of RED production would be different if:

- (a) It were to start again now
- (b) There had been an ERA in place.

### *Key questions/prompts*

#### **Background**

How was the invitation to produce a RED viewed within the region and to what extent did views differ by agency/organisation?

To what degree was there consensus about regional priorities before the invitation to submit REDs was made?

To what extent was RED production anticipated and planned for and how did it build upon previous initiatives/strategy-development processes/relationships?

How did the region decide how the process should be managed and why?

### **Process**

Who was involved in RED production, how was this decided?

To what extent did the process engage a wider group of stakeholders/opinion within the region and how?

How were priority themes selected and key messages to Government about them decided?

What sort of evidence base did the RED draw upon and what were its strengths and limitations?

### **Implications**

What does the experience of RED production tell use about the depth, quality and range of inter-organisational relationships within the region, both between the 3 key agencies and beyond?

Did it establish, expand, redefine or challenge regional consensus?

Has it improved understanding of the region and the challenges it faces?

To what degree is it consistent with pre-existing regional strategies?

### **Impact**

What effect has the RED and the process that produced it had upon:

- (a) Relationships with HMT and other Govt. depts
- (b) Government priorities and ways of 'seeing' the region
- (c) The policy and expenditure choices of regional, sub-regional and local agencies and the way they related them to the regional agenda.

### **Future**

How would the process of RED production have been different had it been starting tomorrow?

How might it have been improved?

How might the process or product have differed had the region had an ERA?

## APPENDIX C

# Policy Area-Specific Case Studies in the Referendum Regions: Guidance note

### Rationale

The LTE project will employ policy case studies in the three referendum regions as a means of gathering more qualitative insights into the effectiveness of current regional governing arrangements in areas in which ERAs will be active and assessing the potential 'difference' that ERAs might make in policy areas where there has already been a degree of bottom up policy innovation.

- North West – Regional Science Policy
- North East – Regional Transport Policy
- Yorkshire and Humber – European programmes/relations with EU/EC

Initial reports of no more than 20 pages should be produced, based on a total of 13 interviews per region. The reports will be used in the following manner:

- Made available on the project website (to be initiated Summer 2004)
- As a basis for the policy scenario workshops in London in Autumn 2004
- Feeding into the final report for phase II and as appendices

## Structure

The reports should be structured into three sections:

### *1. Descriptive*

Description of concrete initiatives in policy areas in which existing regional arrangements have led to the emergence of specific regional innovations. Areas to be covered include context, what happened, causal influences, factors and triggers, who was involved, how different actors behaved differently and a commentary on what substantive difference the whole process may have made in the particular policy area.

This part of the report should also include an 'organisational wiring' diagram showing the actors and agencies involved within the policy area/initiative and including international, national, sub-regional and local agencies where relevant.

### *2. Analytic*

Analysis of the implications of this experience for ERAs and speculation on how developments in the policy area might have been different had an ERA been in place. This should be related to the powers and resources to be given to ERAs and assessment of how ERAs might have used this to their advantage within existing networks. Might the outcome have been similar/different; easier/harder etc?

### *3. Evaluative*

Evaluation of what the experience of existing regional governance arrangements in a particular policy area and speculations on the 'difference' ERAs might have made reveals about what ERAs might be realistically expected to achieve and how we might know whether and how they have been successful.

# APPENDIX D

## Discussion guide for Focus Groups

### *Note on Formats*

*Aims are italicised*, directions to facilitator in parentheses.

### Preliminaries

[Distribute questionnaire to each respondent – includes age, name, party identification, general election vote (if any) in 2001, social class (self-ascribed), employment (if any), voting intention for ERA referendum]

### Introduction

*10 minutes*

*The aim is to get people to introduce themselves and to find out about their background in the region, how long they have lived there, whether they were born there, where they came from originally*

- [1. All participants should introduce themselves
2. As part of introductions or as supplementaries respondents should be asked about their background – we want to know how ‘rooted’ in the region they are]

### Identity

*15 minutes*

*The aim is to find out how important regional identity is alongside other identities respondents may have, and how aware people are of the regional boundaries in which they live.*

[Distribute showcard at the beginning of this section]

3. Looking at the card in front of you, can you tell me which if any of the words on the card describes the way you think of yourself

[Showcard shows standard identity list: local, regional, English/Scottish/Welsh/Northern Irish, British, European. NB it is important to make clear that respondents may have more than one identity, and may feel different identities equally strongly. This is not an either-or issue]

4. Thinking of the different words you used to describe yourself a few minutes ago, which would you say is the most important identity to you, and why?

[This question will be a route into asking supplementaries designed to capture how strong regional identity is, how important to people in comparison to English/Scottish etc, British and other identities]

5. When someone says '(Yorkshire and the Humber, North West, North East)', what does this mean to you?

[Explore the meanings attached to these regional descriptors – could be accents, 'character' (straightforward, bloody-minded ...), heritage/history, natural environment/topography, sport, food, industry, particular cities, symbols like important buildings]

6. Looking at this map, do you think you could draw in the boundaries of the (Yorkshire and the Humber, North West, North East) region?

[Distribute map of the northern half of England with local government boundaries, but not regional boundaries drawn in; reassure participants that a rough guess is fine – aim is to probe awareness levels]

## Devolution (in general)

*15 minutes*

*The aim is to set the subsequent discussion on policy for the English regions into context by reference to devolution in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and London.*

7. Over the last few years the government has established new elected bodies in other parts of the UK – a Scottish Parliament and elected Assemblies in Wales, Northern Ireland and London. Each has important powers to influence policy and public services in the country/region concerned. Do you think the government is right to have devolved power in this way?

[This question should open up a discussion of: a) what devolution is for (perhaps to do with identity, perhaps with making better policy) and b) what Westminster is for/whether it is always best placed to make policy for all parts of the UK]

8. Partly because of devolution in Scotland and elsewhere, there is now a debate about how best to organise government and public services in the English regions. Do you think there should be some kind of devolution to the English regions, including (Yorkshire and the Humber, North West, North East)?

[We're staying at a general level on constitutional options here. Discussion should also touch upon the possibility of the status quo – i.e. Westminster to remain responsible – or that of an English Parliament]

# Policy on the English Regions

45 minutes

*The aim is first to get a sense of the status quo: what are people's main concerns about public services? And what is their knowledge of current structures of governance in (Yorkshire and the Humber, North West, North East)?*

9. What are the policies and issues that you feel are most important a) for you personally and b) for the (Yorkshire and the Humber, North West, North East) as a whole?

[This will help us get a sense of the main public concerns – which we can then ‘cross-check’ against what’s on offer for the English regions; we should also get a sense of whether there is any genuinely regional policy agenda in people’s minds]

10. Which bodies do you think have a major influence on the way policies and public services are run at the moment in the (Yorkshire and the Humber, North West, North East)?

[There is an obvious link to play here: how are decisions taken on the issues respondents identified as important in the previous question. We should expect reference to things central government provides directly (e.g. social security, employment), national policies with some form of local delivery (e.g. police, education, health), and local council services (roads, waste, social services).

Supplementary questions should probe whether people are aware of the current set of regional institutions:

- the Government Office for (Yorkshire and the Humber, North West, North East), responsible for the delivery and coordination of (some) central government services in the region
- the Regional Development Agencies, responsible for promoting the regional economy
- the (Yorkshire and the Humber, North West, North East) Regional Assembly (appointed bodies including representatives of local government, business and the voluntary sector), which monitor the RDAs and try to coordinate the policy roles of its member groups by devising common strategies
- Organisations (‘quangos’) run by central government with offices in the region which deliver major public services (e.g. Learning and Skills Council; Environment Agency; Benefits Office etc).

11. The government has announced that the English regions, including (Yorkshire and the Humber, North West, North East), can have their own elected assemblies, elected every four years. Though these would not be as powerful as the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly, they would have the power to shape policies in the region in fields like economic development, planning, housing, transport and tourism. Do you think an elected regional assembly is a good idea for (Yorkshire and the Humber, North West, North East)?

[There will be a number of supplementary points that need to be addressed here and (in case they do not arise spontaneously) are listed below. The aim is to look at potential plus points and minus points so that respondents can come to a balanced evaluation]

- 11a. Some say that elected assemblies would be just another tier of bureaucracy ...
- 11b. Some say that if the Scots, the Welsh and Londoners can have their own elected body, then so should we ...
- 11c. Some say that it would be better to give more powers to local government rather than create new institutions ...
- 11d. Some say that if there are so many central government organisations working in the region, they need to be brought more under the control of people in the region, and having an elected assembly is a good way to do this ...
- 11e. Some say that all these new bodies, like the Scottish Parliament and the English regions, are harmful because they weaken the voice of Britain as a whole ...
- 11f. Some say that Westminster politicians are too remote from real concerns on the ground and that an elected assembly would help fill the gap ...
- 11g. Some say that elected regional assemblies are a good idea in principle, but what is on offer is just a pale reflection of what the Scots and the Welsh have, and is not worth having ...

[This last supplementary may need further introduction: The Scottish/Welsh bodies have very large budgets and can make/amend laws. The English regional assemblies have much smaller budgets, and will have what the government calls 'strategic' powers. This means they will set out policy aims for the region and require/persuade others in local government, business etc to carry out those aims]

12. If we do move to the establishment of elected regional assemblies, the government has said that there can only be one tier of local government below the regional level. This will make no difference in most cities, but it will mean reorganising local government where there are currently both district and county councils. Do you think this is a good idea?

[Explanatory points: the government is worried about over-government/too many politicians; others think it wrong to get rid of the historic tradition attached to counties]

13. If regional assemblies are introduced, their running costs will be covered by an increase in council tax of about five pence per week for the average council tax payer. Would you see this as reasonable?
14. Regional assemblies could also ask for additional rises in council tax to help pay for important regional projects. Would you see this as reasonable?

[Likely to find resistance to additional taxation – so as supplementary question ask who then should pay for an important project a regional assembly says is vital and will for example bring new jobs]

15. There will be a referendum in (Yorkshire and the Humber, North West, North East) on whether or not an elected regional assembly should be set up, probably in October this year. Will you vote for an elected regional assembly or against?

[There should be an opportunity for follow-up questions for those who say 'no' to the last question on whether there are circumstances in which they might change to a 'yes' vote, e.g.: if the assemblies were to have more powers; if other regions had decided to vote for assemblies and there was a danger of getting 'left behind']

