INTRODUCTION
This paper describes a PhD project funded by the Scottish Government, to observe and analyze the dynamics of change from local to regional structures in Scottish transport governance, and make early assessment of strategic effectiveness of the new structures. Coming from a human geography perspective, the project uses a qualitative approach based on interviews and documentary analysis. The original project brief was written by two of the academic supervisors, Dr Iain Docherty of the University of Glasgow and Professor Jon Shaw now of University of Plymouth. As a result of the Transport (Scotland) Act 2005, seven statutory Regional Transport Partnerships (RTP) were created to cover the whole of Scotland. They formally commenced on 1 April 2006 and were heralded as the way forward for strategic transport planning. For the first time, all of Scotland’s local authorities were required to work with each other and with independent Board members, in defined geographic partnerships, to generate strategic visions for transport regions covering the whole of Scotland. The creation of the statutory bodies was built in part upon the perceived success of the four voluntary partnerships that had evolved to counter the strategic gap and fragmentation of transport governance that was created by local government reorganisation in 1996 that created 32 unitary authorities to replace the Regional and District two-tier system (Begg and Docherty, 2003). The first hint that the voluntary partnerships mentioned above might become the basis for something more centrally driven was given in the 2003 Labour/Lib Dem Partnership Agreement, and in the years preceding the 2007 election, the creation of both Transport Scotland and the RTPs. The main phase of research covers the period between establishment of the RTPs, and the submission of Regional Transport Strategies in March 2007. However, throughout many of the interviews there was a strand of uncertainty relating to the impending 2007 elections that was impacting on the RTPs ability to make the case for acquiring further powers from their constituent councils. Thus given the significant change of administration in Scotland at Holyrood level and the impact on RTP Board continuity of the changes at the local level, publicly available documents were used to assess some of the impacts of these developments to re-evaluate early findings.

Research questions and methodology
Whilst relatively little work has been published on the geography of transport governance, there is a substantial body of conceptual work on public governance. The concept which has central relevance in the geography of governance structures is that of power-relations, and the framework that has been adopted for this study has developed from work on neoliberalisation and the ‘hollowing-out’ of the power of the (central) state (Peck, 2001, 2004; Rhodes, 1997), and subsequent work tracing the ‘filling-in’ of powers at other levels/scales (Goodwin et al, 2005). The reintroduction of a regional scale for transport strategy has clear implications for local-central relations, and identifying key elements of resulting relationships and tensions formed a pivotal focus for addressing the research objective. A qualitative approach was used, based on semi-structured interviews with 54
key national, regional and local stakeholders, combined with documentary analysis. Four questions were developed:

1. How do the structures constrain or enable the key agents to achieve the outcomes specified at national level?
2. How does the composition of an RTP impact upon effectiveness?
3. What evidence exists of significant conflicting agendas between agents operating at different scales?
4. What processes are operating and how do they relate to theorizations of governance?

**Case study regions in context**
Three RTP were selected as the focus of study: Nestrans, Tactran and Sestran, chosen to encompass variety in geography, composition and institutional history whilst each commencing with the same minimum level of powers, the so-called Model 1. Figure 1 below gives a map of Scotland’s Regional Transport Partnerships (the Orkney and Shetland Islands have been omitted from the map), and highlights the three case study regions.

![Figure 1 Map of the Regional Transport Partnerships of Scotland, highlighting the three case study regions](image)

Although Sestran had a voluntary predecessor, of the case study regions it is probably Nestrans that had the developed the strongest voluntary RTP, consisting of a tight coalition
of Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire Councils, Scottish Enterprise Grampian and the Aberdeen and Grampian Chamber of Commerce, with a co-ordinator. This group developed a pioneering strategic vision for the north east with their Modern Transport System that was endorsed by the Scottish Executive in 2003. This collaborative effort is seen as a key factor in gaining approval for the Aberdeen Western Peripheral Route, which had a long history of not making progress up to that date. Nestrans’ success as a voluntary partnership was drawn upon in promoting the idea of statutory RTPs, and Nestrans itself believed that it had exhausted the possibilities of the voluntary partnership format:

“Through voluntary co-operation between Councils and the involvement of other partners much has already been achieved by the 4 voluntary Regional Transport Partnerships in Scotland in providing an essential regional dimension to the planning and delivery of transportation. However, as Nestrans acknowledged in its response to the Scottish Executive’s 2003 consultation Proposals for a New Approach to Transport in Scotland it was reaching the limit of its potential contribution as a voluntary RTP and the consolidation and development of this role would require more formalized structures with RTPs having a statutory base and appropriate funding”.

Nestrans consultation response to Scotland’s Transport Future: Proposals for the Design of Regional Transport Partnerships

The thinking was presumably that a statutory body would be more powerful, because they would have formal powers. However, as research work progressed it became apparent that the issue of formal powers was still central in the minds of many respondents, because the three RTPs studied have the most dilute form of powers possible under the legislation having only certain statutory duties common to all public bodies, and the requirement to produce a Regional Transport Strategy. This lack of formal powers has assumed particularly significance with the SNP’s entry into power.

Power
The emphasis on the ‘location’ of power, or more properly the operation of power relations (Allen 2003), in governance literature makes this issue a key concept to unravel. Where it settles both formally and informally, by whom, where and how it is exercised, and how this influences success or failure in implementing policy at whatever level/scale is obviously important. Despite a coalition policy discourse which appeared to stress new, flatter forms of local and regional decision-making and partnership, expectations that power would exist in a hierarchy of power remained in two ways, firstly that scaled tiers of governance should be formally nested, i.e. the national, regional and local, but that secondly, informal hierarchies would emerge within the RTPs between the local authority (LA) partners. Particularly in larger RTPs, local authorities may have contrasting and conflicting agendas and needs. For example, new internal peripheralities can be created if some RTPs focus resources on tackling the pressing economic demands of large travel to work areas, rather than addressing the social inclusion needs of dispersed rural hinterlands. The interviews were used to establish a picture of the formal structures and how these relate to formal and informal practices. The interview schedule therefore emphasized drawing out participants’
experiences of power and influence that were manifested within RTPs, or were imposed upon them during their infancy, from other sources, particularly by the centre. Power is an issue that has been somewhat neglected in the governance literature. Academics talk of processes that ‘hollow out’ and ‘fill in’ governance: efforts that slim down government apparatus at the state level, and reduce state involvement in direct service delivery tend to lead to filling in at other levels with new public and private organisations or by giving existing organisations new powers precisely because some kind of power must still be exerted to get things done. If one thinks of power as a relational effect, as well as a formally instituted right to act, conferred by government, however, the statutory RTPs do not appear to have become significantly more powerful than was possible before for a few of reasons. Whilst such formally conferred powers to act or regulate are undoubtedly important, it is at least in part because of the resource control that accompanies this. Financial resources and how they are distributed have a big effect on power relations – we typically regard those with more financial resources as having more influence and clout – in any power relationship their agenda carries more weight – we can say they have ‘power to’ act and to persuade. However, that is very definitely not the only thing that matters, as organising around a clear agenda, and pursuing it single-mindedly can also do a lot to persuade the holder of resources to route them via a convincing and capable voluntary body rather than some body. This is why some voluntary bodies can develop effective powers to achieve things, built very largely on trust and a shared agenda that fosters a common identity. It was in this manner that the voluntary phase of Nestrans can be described as successful, and it is perhaps the lack of any kind of predecessor body that has resulted in some difficulties for Tactran in building trust between the local authorities and in the RTP itself as a meaningful body for the somewhat uncohesive geographic territory covered by the body.

Results
On the basis of this research it would seem that the academic conceptualisation of separate processes of ‘hollowing-out’ and subsequent ‘filling in’ are insufficient to describe the processes going on in Scottish transport governance. Here, when one includes the formation of Transport Scotland, the processes cannot be clearly separated, but are messily intertwined, creating a cluttered institutional landscape, with fuzzy remits and uncoordinated strategy processes. Thus we have seen a process of ‘over-stuffing’, that limits capacity to progress, arising from the under-powered nature of the newly created regional scale for strategic transport intervention and a spreading of strategic effort across multiple organisations and review processes that are not well co-ordinated.

The fracture between remits and the plethora of bodies involved is heightened by uncertainty created by electoral cycles over resourcing and policy objectives. This is not compatible with the cost, complexity and long term nature of many measures required to tackle transport problems, which require political will and strength of leadership to overcome (Begg and Docherty, 2003). Increasing the formal number of sites and scales at which strategy is developed and implemented makes clarity of will and strong leadership difficult as the accretions of earlier phases of governance still exist, with different scales and agendas. The following interview extract illustrates how over-stuffing occurs:
“this was the context at that time two years ago, when [senior civil servant] in private was admitting that the growth of public expenditure in Scotland is not sustainable, erm, I made the point that one of the problems that we create for ourself in the governance of Scotland is, and the Executive has been very guilty of this, we’re very adept at creating new bodies, but we don’t tidy up the landscape afterwards.”

non-elected RTP Board member, March 2007 (Author’s italics)

Another respondent demonstrates how the interests of local government and the expectations placed upon it mean that it cannot withdraw from the strategic work on big transport projects, and at the same illustrates a perception from local government that the creation of the RTPs was in part a mechanism for the Scottish Government to control the transport governance network through seven conduits rather than 32:

“I think there is another issue as well …, because these big transport projects whether they are regional or in the local area, they are tied in with so many other council initiatives, economic development, education, whatever it is, that I can’t see the local authority ever being totally excluded from the picture, and I don’t think the Executive have quite got that”.

LA officer, Feb 2007

The RTPs have been cautious about seeking powers due to the uncertainty over resources, the expectation of impending electoral change and nervousness on the part of the constituent councils. Councillor members of RTPs would have found it difficult in the run up to an election to advocate something that may not be in the narrow interests of the LA. Subsequently, the impact of Single Outcome Agreements has been to shift the balance of power back to local authorities before RTPs got off the ground. The new funding approach meant that RTPs had to wait for Councils to settle internally on their priorities post May 2007 and then demonstrate how the RTS contributed to constituent councils’ SOAs. To obtain resources, RTPs must justify themselves to their multiple constituent local authorities now, rather than to the singular unit of the Scottish Government.

“The whole purpose of setting up these bodies was to overcome the difficulties with small councils, if you’re going to get the best use made of your resource and your planning, you’re going to have to do it at a larger level, … you can’t do that if you don’t have the powers, you’ve then got to ask for the powers at least. … Even if we put them in the back pocket and say, ‘right, we have these powers if necessary’. … That’s where I’d start, give us all the powers of local authorities, don’t exercise them until we need to … but they’re not going to ask for them.”

non-elected RTP Board member, Mar 2007

Conclusions
The status of the RTPs, voluntary or statutory, is a key part of answering the research question, “How do the structures constrain or enable the key agents to achieve the outcomes specified at national level?”. Clearly the administration that promoted the legislation to establish a statutory regional structure for transport governance believed that it would be enabling. However, the shift from voluntary partnerships that had been
established where there was an appetite to do so, so statutory coverage of the whole Scottish territory created a number of new tensions. For example, the loss of control of the RTP boards by local authority council committees, led to concerns about democratic accountability, which were regarded in different ways by different agents.

Uneasy geographical coalitions and uncertainty over resourcing were at times a barrier to meaningful strategies, which had instead to be seen to be geographically even-handed, and the new bodies suffered from negative perceptions of the agendas and interests of key stakeholders more than they benefited from trust in relationships that had previously been nurtured over many years (in some cases). Ultimately, poor timing meant that initial strategy submissions fell victim to sweeping political change, with the incoming administration subsequently pursuing quite a different agenda that is focused on ‘freeing’ local government through the Single Outcome Agreements. As power relationships are key drivers of organisational effectiveness, the switch of emphasis for resource allocation has effectively sidelined the Regional Transport Partnerships, leaving them vulnerable to a cull on the grounds of ineffectualness, before they have had a real opportunity to demonstrate the benefits of governing transport across a broader scale than that permitted by Scotland’s bitty collection of 32 local authorities.

The complexity of transport governance in Scotland is hampering coherent and strategic thinking about future pressures, in particular responsiveness to the potentially huge challenges of climate change, and leaving the field open to short-termist policy capture by economic interests. Having fewer ‘independent’ bodies engaged in developing single sector strategies that are harnessed to the dominant interest groups of their areas, will assist Scotland to meet the challenges ahead. Thus, in order to overcome the persisting difficulties in coordination from parallel and poorly linked processes, including those for strategic development, the over-stuffed governance structure needs to be simplified.

However, the post 2007 situation is no better for transport, as the issue of where powers ought to lie for the best outcome in terms of rational strategic transport planning has been put into abeyance while other governance issues are addressed by the new Scottish Government, particularly the SNP goal of independence. In the meantime, the existing local government structure is tasked with ‘getting on with it’. Because most of the RTPs were not invested with solid powers at the outset they have been left vulnerable and in limbo by this change of emphasis. In effect, the incoming administration was able to ignore them, even though they voted for their creation, simply because they hadn’t been given a powered structure in the first place by the Labour-Lib Dem coalition. In a power-relation It doesn’t really matter whether one party’s assessment of another’s agenda or interests is accurate or just an imperfect perception, as they will act and react as if it is real. Sadly negative effects of this are more long-lasting than positive impacts. It is always easier to lose trust than to gain it. By increasing the number of governance stakeholders, each actor must make assessments of the agendas of others across more relationships. This makes multiple sites for tension to develop, with more complexity and less chance of easing difficulties. New tensions will emerge between and within regions themselves, between the regions and the centre and also between the local and the regional, as well as local centre. As Alex Macaulay so succinctly put it in an interview for Local Transport Today:

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“We fudged it in Scotland regarding the clarity of RTP powers. The transfer of powers from local authorities has proved very difficult…like turkeys voting for Christmas”.

Alex Macaulay, SEStrans (LTT 2007 495, p9)

I began with a sporting metaphor, and I have strayed to a culinary one in which the local authorities are the turkeys – by not voting for Christmas, after the Labour/Liberal Democrat partnership made it possible for them not to by fudging the primary legislation, they have enabled the SNP to knock the stuffing out of the embryonic regional scale, everywhere except SPT, by the simple expedient of not giving them substantive quantities of financial resources and putting the onus on constituent councils to fund the RTPs should they wish.

It is hard not to agree that Scotland has too many governance organisations for a country of only 5 million people, but 32 local authorities are also not the right level for meaningful transport governance, as many of them are simply too small to achieve anything. However, without support or formal powers, seven regional bodies are not able to achieve anything either, especially as many of the regional partnerships are themselves probably not really needed strategically except to try and balance expenditure across Scotland. Therefore, to return to the sports metaphor of the title, the regional scale has, at least initially, stalled on the starting line

REFERENCES


