Collaborative practices across organisational boundaries in Scottish transport governance: fit for the future?

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1   Introduction

Having the right institutional arrangements for the best outcomes in governance has long been perceived to matter (Marsden and May, 2006), but there is a tendency to pay more attention to structure than to human agency and social relationships operating inside and around the structures (Vigar, 2002). In considering whether the current transport governance arrangements are suitable for the significant challenges ahead, this paper discusses the relationship between collaborative advantage and institutional history, and their role in underpinning the stability of transport governance in Scotland.

The empirical material comes from a qualitative study of the statutory Regional Transport Partnerships (RTP) covering twelve years. The contribution in this paper is innovative in its focus on the role of collaborative advantage in transport governance. The analytic framework combines sociological institutionalism (Hall and Taylor, 1996) with the Theory of Collaborative Advantage (Huxham, 2003), and uncovers factors influencing the effect of collaboration in transport governance. These insights are increasingly important in the face of several complex trends, including economic austerity, the challenge of adapting to and mitigating further climate change, and the emergence of a diverse set of potentially disruptive transport innovations, often from outwith the traditional transport sector (Pangbourne *et al* 2018).

It is important to recognise that the choices available to RTPs are constrained by the dominant policy discourse of the time, as are all public sector actors. The centre defines the dominant discourse, revealed in its actions: which laws are enacted, policies defined, guidance issued or resources allocated. If any or all of the cross-organisational collaborations have generated momentum, the judgement of whether this makes them fit for future challenges rather depends on how the policy discourse frames those challenges. For example, it probably matters that the action should be coordinated across challenges to minimise the risk of perverse outcomes, but the need for coordination has to be accepted by the centre and backed with requirements and resources. I do not address the question of whether the existing collaborative cultures are optimal for addressing holistically those future challenges I identify above. However, the conclusion addresses the value of maintaining the current structures in order to benefit from the collaborative advantage that can exist when arrangements are stable and mature. It is argued that their now well-developed institutional relationships provides the basis for delivering the second National Transport Strategy without the inevitable loss of momentum that arises from a restructuring exercise. Any loss of momentum in implementing transport policies for climate change mitigation would be particularly catastrophic for example. However, stable arrangements can result in inertia as much as momentum. The next NTS therefore needs to ensure that it facilitates coordination by recognising synergies between different areas and targets resources accordingly to drive cross-organisational and cross-sectoral collaborative momentum.

2   Background to this paper

2.1   **Govern*ance* rather than govern*ment***

In a governance approach there is a much greater emphasis on collaboration and heterarchy than in a top down State-led system of government. Essentially, governance consists of sets of interdependent actors coordinated and steered via institutionalised rule systems for the provision of public goods and services (Treib et al 2007, Poku-Boansi and Marsden 2018). Govern*ment,* prior to the rise of govern*ance* as a distinct concept*,* has generally consisted of a nested hierarchy of organisations involved in managing policy sectors, where action is instantiated through formalised allocations of authority to act. In governance, there is more of a focus on interactive relationships between actors from within but,

crucially, also outwith, governmental structures (Stoker 1998). Successful collaboration between networked organisations becomes critically important as formal authority is less significant when power is diffused across organisations operating at different scales and levels. A general definition of collaboration is that it is "the cooperative way that two or more entities work together towards a shared goal" (Frey *et al* 2006, p384).

Much of the transport governance literature has focused on the structures that have been established to manage the governance of transport in various territories where different levels and scales of regulation and administration are involved, such as within the nations of the European Union. The Multi-Level Governance (MLG) framework explores 'the dispersion of central government authority both vertically, to actors located at other territorial levels, and horizontally, to non-state actors' (Bache and Flinders, 2004, p4). MLG is an important approach to understanding transport governance in the 21st century. We have such a multi-level system for transport governance in Scotland. However, notwithstanding the wide-angle lens of MLG that is able to encompass the breadth of actors both state and non-state, a focus on structure inevitably overlooks the influence of agency, which is key to collaboration. Whilst Swedish researchers have recently published several papers on collaboration in the governance of public transport (e.g. Paulsson et al 2018; Paulsson & Isaksson 2018; Petterssen 2018), comparatively little work focuses on relational aspects of developing strategy at the regional level for all transport issues, not just public transport. Whilst this gap is starting to be addressed (e.g. Hrelja et al 2018, Veeneman & Mulley, 2018), a longitudinal perspective is missing. This work contributes to filling this gap.

2.2   The Theory of Collaborative Advantage

> *"If collaborative advantage is the goal behind both the policy rhetoric of partnership and the ambitions of practitioners who initiate them, why is collaborative inertia so often the outcome?"* (Huxham, 2003: p 404)

The term 'collaborative governance' appears in organisational studies and encompasses the kinds of partnership arrangement that are typically seen in the state restructurings that have been associated with a shift from government to governance as described above. Ansell and Gash (2007) conducted a meta-analysis of existing literature on modes of governance that are oriented towards consensus-based decision-making. Their purpose was to develop a contingency model identifying the most important variables for determining effectiveness of collaborative governance. The factors that they identify include 'face-to-face dialogue', 'trust-building', 'commitment' and 'shared understanding', but the core factors are time, trust and interdependence.

Huxham's Theory of Collaborative Advantage (TCA) is founded on two key concepts: 'collaborative advantage' and 'collaborative inertia'. These are explored through a framework of overlapping issues, such as power, trust, resources, leadership, common aims, membership structure, communication (language and culture), working processes, commitment, compromise, democracy and accountability (Huxham 2003). The idea of 'collaborative advantage' captures the search for synergy as a common reason for encouraging collaborative endeavour, and its dialectical twin, 'collaborative inertia' is a quality that is frequently observed in practice, in which outputs from collaborations seem to be negligible or slow to materialise.

Depending on the point in time in which processes are observed, even if a successful outcome is eventually attained, Huxham observes that collaborative endeavours can suffer from protracted period of inaction or lack of progress arising from conflict or unproductive meetings. In Huxham's work with Vangen, the focus is on three factors: 1) building trust, 2) accepting risk, and 3) forming expectations, but they also highlight the *work* that is involved in nurturing collaborative relationships, described as the 'trust-building loop', as illustrated in **Error! Reference source not found.**. However, this loop, and hence the collaboration is fragile. Loop disruption (termed 'thunderbolts' by Huxham 2003) can easily

occur, either from inside (endogenous) or from outside (exogenous). Examples of loop disruptions relevant to the RTPs are shown in **Error! Reference source not found.** below.
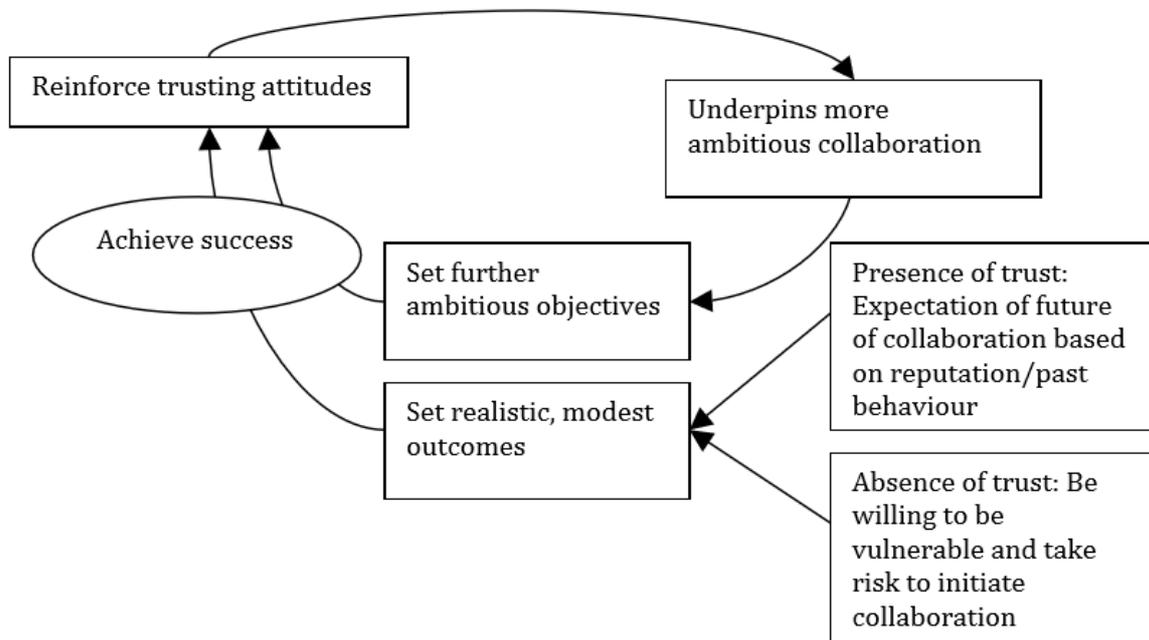

Figure 1 Cyclical Trust-building loop (source: developed from Vangen and Huxham, 2003: p12)

Table 1 Fragility of trust-building: loop disruptors (Source: concept from Huxham 2003, my tabulation)

	Internal (Endogenous) factors	**External (Exogenous) factors**
Individual/Human	Changes in individual officers (partnership staff)	Change in Transport Minister
Political-economic	Changes in local authority policy and resourcing	Change in government policy and resourcing
Democratic	Change in board membership, e.g. after a local election	Change in government: party in majority control or coalition
Project-related	Failure of an initiative or member organisation	Failure of a contractor

2.3   Methodology

The data was generated in a longitudinal qualitative study of the RTPs in Scotland, UK exploring their history, establishment and functioning. The methodology for this research is qualitative and based on analysis of documentary data, defined as formal policy documents and other public documents from various public bodies, such as committee reports, but extending to texts of other types, including interview transcripts (Grant, 2019). Paulsson and Isaksson (2018) have shown how important formal documents are in the establishment of authority in networked transport governance. The documents in this case are both outputs of the processes being studied and evidence in themselves. The research process was made feasible by utilising an in-depth case study approach (Kitchin and Tate 2000; Flyvbjerg 2006).

There are two types of data (interviews and formal documents) which serve to triangulate one another (Yin 2013). The original study focused on Nestrans, Tactran and Sestran (three from seven RTPs), with Hitrans added for the follow-up. Primary material is from 54 semi-structured interviews with key actors and stakeholders carried out 2006-2008, with a further 4 interviews conducted in 2017-2018, selected

purposively for their role in the case study RTPs (HI = Hitrans, NE = Nestrans, SE = Sestran, TA = Tactran) or at national level (SC). The secondary data is the range of transport legislation and formal documents produced by or for political parties, the Scottish Government, Local Authorities (LA) and Regional Transport Partnerships (RTP).

Thematic analysis explored the strategic vision and evidence of specific policy and partnership approaches, contextualised with reference to geographic boundaries of stakeholder organisations, resource flows, transport statistics and political manifestos. The inductive coding of interview texts was based on modified grounded theory, to allow unanticipated categories to emerge from the data, and to enable the research to adapt to a changing political context during the empirical period (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Applying this method identified a number of themes relating to evaluating the collaborative of the RTPs: Institutional thickness (Amin and Thrift 1995) and history; Motivations of partners; Strategic benefit for partners of participation; Coordination and trust-building. These concepts are also used to organise our understanding of the impact of internal and external shocks to RTP processes.

3   Collaboration and partnership in Scottish transport governance

3.1   Overview of the creation of Regional Transport Partnerships

In the period immediately prior to the establishment of RTPs, transport policy in post-devolution Scotland had been characterised as beset by problems of fragmentation arising from excessive localism and inter-council competition for resources and development following local government reorganisation in 1996. This was seen as hampering the establishment of a coherent approach to address national policy priorities for transport, such as better integration between modes, encouragement of modal shift to address congestion, air quality problems and climate change emissions reduction targets. The creation of a new suite of organisations in 2006 was promoted as an opportunity for coordinated action.

> *"one of the purposes … was to give transport professionals backed by people in local government who were really interested in transport a little bit of space to try and build those collegiate links across local authority boundaries and to decide on good priorities" SC6*

However, the insertion of a new regional scale could also be read as a reconstruction of earlier regional structures that tacitly acknowledged a governance failure for transport by side-stepping the question of local government reform (Docherty, 2006). The rescaling was accompanied by a very limited and highly asymmetric redistribution of powers. With the exception of Strathclyde Passenger Transport, which was a rebranding of an existing Passenger Transport Authority/Executive, the other statutory RTPs had no powers beyond those their constituent councils agreed to share, and the only statutory task they had was to produce a Regional Transport Strategy by 31st March 2007. The new structure for transport governance in Scotland resulted in three organisational scales (national, regional and local), and two governmental levels (the national, itself split between Transport Scotland and the Scottish Executive), and the local, consisting of 32 local unitary authorities (LA), for a total population of around 5 million people.

3.2   Collaboration and Partnership Governance

The notion of partnership underpinning RTPs also brings in non-governmental actors, through the compulsory inclusion of non-councillor board members. Thus, state and non-state actors are charged with collectively developing a set of regional transport strategies, for approval by the Scottish Government and on which access to resourcing is predicated. This meets Frey *et al*'s definition of 'collaboration'. However, in 2003, Huxham asked why "collaborative inertia" was so often the outcome *"If collaborative advantage is the goal behind both the policy rhetoric of partnership and the ambitions of practitioners who initiate them".* (Huxham, 2003, p 404). Do the RTPs exhibit momentum or inertia?

Figure 2 below displays some of the changes to the collaborative context that could be seen to have impacted on the successful maintenance of momentum in the trust-building loop:
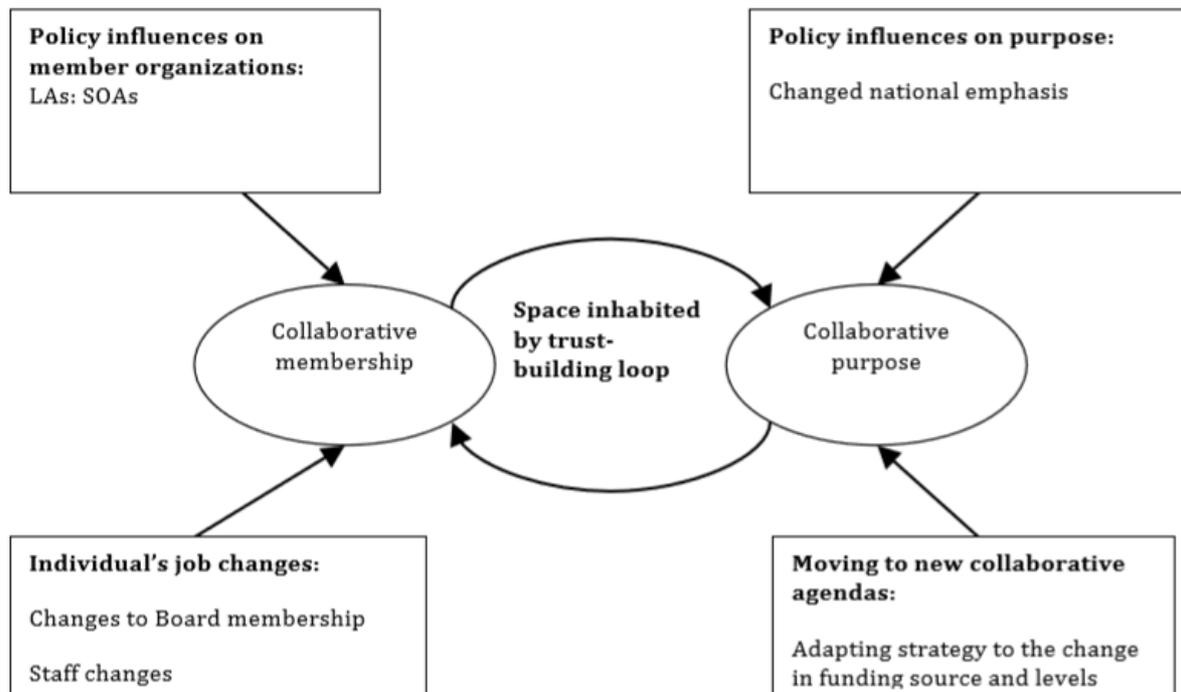

Figure 2 Key changes to RTP collaboration context since May 2007 (adapted from Huxham using project data)

4 Selected findings from documentary and interview analysis

4.1 Institutional history and expectations at RTP establishment

At the time of establishment, there was some degree of continuity for four of the seven RTPs which had predecessor bodies: SPT, Sestran, Hitrans and Nestrans. Of the RTPs examined in this paper, only Tactran had no prior voluntary RTP for the same geography though Tactran constituent member Stirling Council had been part of voluntary Sestran. Histories of joint working were repeatedly raised by interviewees. For example, Hitrans' voluntary predecessor clearly grew out of stable regional networks and thus the collaborative goal was ambitious:

> *"The initial roots of HITRANS came from the Convention of the Highlands and Islands … in late 1998 [it] agreed that a Highlands and Islands Integrated Transport Forum was something that should be looked at. I think a degree of the imagination and the leadership … may have come through Highlands and Islands Enterprise, [whose Head of Transport at that time] had a vision that Highlands and Islands should have a … transport authority in a similar … a Highlands and Islands shaped-fashion, to what SPT had been historically doing in Strathclyde."* HI1

The motivation for voluntary working in north east Scotland comes over a little differently however:

> *"We saw the need for the coming together of people who were interested in transport across the city and shire, and with the business sector in particular… there was an initiative from the councils to set that up, because we felt that we weren't getting our fair share of transport funding… we could make the case better if we were all speaking together."* NE10

Where there was no predecessor body, as with Tactran, there was some evidence of collaborative working (though some commentators commented negatively about some of this, see below):

> "There was joint working between Perth & Kinross and Dundee on certain issues, and the planning framework between Dundee and Angus, it's been quite integrated as I understand it" TA8

However, isolated examples of bilateral collaboration do not translate to a region-wide 'institutional thickness' for Tactran. So whilst the new framework was identically structured and geographically comprehensive it did not create comparable collaborative advantage across Scotland. Some RTPs benefit from their significant institutional legacy of voluntary collaboration with the same or similar sets of partners whereas others did not. A prior partnership was no guarantee of 'collaborative advantage' within a statutory RTP, as the achievement of common aims was not assured in the voluntary phase. For example, Sestran had struggled to work in collaboration:

> "Within the first two years of [voluntary] Sestran, the partner authorities decided that [it] was not a forum … within which the complex issues could be resolved with road-charging in Edinburgh … they also decided that [the Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine] project was really between the Lothians authorities, Sestran as a whole decided it was not a project they wanted to manage … it would be left to the individual councils … So, Sestran faced a major crisis in that if at voluntary level it couldn't actually deliver anything, then what was the point in its existence?" SC11

4.2 National expectations and motivations for participating partners

When it comes to the creation of the statutory RTPs, many interviewees referred to legacies of fragmentation from local government reorganisation as a fundamental rationale for the RTPs, though Scottish devolution was obviously a key factor, as the required legislation was within the remit of the Scottish Government. A recent SPICE briefing summarises the structure and powers established by the Transport (Scotland) Act 2005:

> RTPs are governed by boards which consist of councillors from each of the constituent local authorities, who have voting rights, and external members appointed by Scottish Ministers, who may only vote in certain circumstances. The main task of each RTP is the drafting of a Regional Transport Strategy … RTPs can formally request Scottish Ministers to transfer transport delivery powers from their constituent local authorities if these are required to deliver the outcomes set out in the Regional Transport Strategy, e.g. developing parking policy and taking over responsibility for parking enforcement. SPICE Briefing 2016, p 4

The first National Transport Strategy, signed by Transport Minister Tavish Scott MSP, clearly expected the RTPs to take on more powers as they matured, so as to "*strengthen the regional capacity to plan and deliver services*" (NTS 2006, p7). The NTS was quite specific in what it expected to see in RTSs. There was an expectation that RTPs would work in partnership with LAs in establishing policies and targets for buses, to meet both economic (such as implicitly supporting the night-time economy by including measures to reduce anti-social behaviour in urban centres) and social aims. There were many 'integration' demands on both RTPs and LAs: ticketing, more integrated transport interchanges, and even to integrate transport planning with health service planning (Scottish Executive 2006). However, in relation to accessibility planning, the discourse signal was mixed, expressing support, expecting it to be present in strategies at both regional and local levels but not making them a compulsory measure at either scale (Scottish Executive 2006).

One of the reasons for this is the presence or absence of 'shared understanding' which is primarily about shared goals but depends on compatible organisational cultures and working practices. This is

something that was a source of 'collaborative inertia' from the perspective of board members from a more commercial background:

> *"In my experience of having [sat on one or two bodies] … run by the public sector … is that … enthusiasm that might be there at the beginning is fairly quickly strangled by the volume of … paperwork… I've no time for that … quite a lot of these publicly run bodies … kind of operate as a kind of 'yes we want you there to give us credibility but we don't really want you to influence decision-making too much"* NE13

Tactran had to work much harder than the other RTPs to find shared issues. It had no prior institutional history of joint working for transport across the its geography (despite examples of bilateral joint working on certain issues). The solution was quite different to the other case study RTPs, as it focused on the transport corridors that passed through the region:

> *"the objective … actually wasn't all that difficult…because there is a commonality in terms of the kind of market town/rural area issues that are along the corridor."* TA5

Ultimately though, the 'carrot' of access to resources was a key motivating factor for the LA members, though it was somewhat overshadowed for some RTPs which had a legacy, who felt that the momentum was disrupted by the immediate need to focus on producing a new RTS rather than focus on delivery of previously agreed priorities:

> *"It really could not continue to actively energise that process and the whole strategic transport movement froze for at least 12 months"* (NE11).

4.3 Coordination and Trust

At the time of establishment there were indications that perceived historical antagonism between potential partners influenced the larger size of Sestran and the smaller size of Tactran from the outset of statutory RTPs. Some LAs were able to influence the decision which RTP to join. For example, Moray Council decided to join Hitrans rather than Nestrans and Clackmannan went with Sestran rather than Tactran:

> *"we were invited along to the initial meeting where they were developing the concept of Tactran, and one of the major things that made me decide that we were better to stay with Sestran was the electricity and the tension between Perth and Dundee."* SE10

Much of the work to generate interest in regional transport issues and to create a space-for-itself within the institutional networks (both political and sectoral) across the region was vital for Tactran, but difficult to undertake at the same time as the work required to draft the statutory Regional Transport Strategy (RTS) by the deadline of 31 March 2007. This time pressure resonates strongly with Vangen and Huxham's recognition of time as a crucial element in the trust-building loop (they estimated that 2½ years was the minimum period required without a history of working together or a maturity in the "ability to handle collaborative situations" (Vangen and Huxham, 2003, p20). Time was therefore a resource that Tactran had less of than those RTPs with a history of partnership working prior to their formal establishment, and there was a substantial commitment by Tactran to build formal liaison fora for multiple transport modes.

5 Discussion

5.1 Powering up collaborative partnerships

The creation of RTPs fundamentally altered the existing central-local relationship for transport governance. From the start, the RTPs were affected by the long shadow cast by previous rounds of local government reorganisation imposed by central government, and the prior experience of the significant individuals who were making the case for statutory regional bodies almost certainly had the

idea that the lack of the regional scale was problematic as it was resulting in strategic inertia (e.g. *"are we all happy to wait another 40 [years] when businesses are saying this is constraining on economic growth, this is having an environmental impact"* NE9). However, for the LA interests there was suspicion about central government motives in establishing statutory RTPs (*"we've not been terribly enthusiastic with Sestran going down that semi-formal compulsory route, we've been reasonably happy working co-operatively"* SE11 and *"there's a lot of nervousness about … what it will do to their own authorities"* SE2). This helps to explain the lack of formal powers at establishment:

> *"voluntary was all fine and well, and we all, you know, got on very well together, it was a good curve to start off. Problem is you don't have any teeth. Go to statutory and we still don't seem to have found any teeth, that's part of the problem … we've been given the tools, but maybe not the push that we need..."* SE1

This situation has continued, and the more recent interviewees touched on this issue. However, signals were mixed as to whether or not RTPs should or could make a bid for more powers. There remains a local-central tension over powers, with the regional scale continuing to exist in some kind of limbo in some accounts, especially where the number of constituent LAs is very large, with heterogenous geographies and needs, and there are no formal powers, as is the case with Sestran.

5.2   Future challenges

Many of the larger transport projects have lengthy lead-in times which are not compatible with political cycles. This means that the dominant discourse and priorities can shift either before projects get off the ground altogether, or once they are past the point of no return. For example, the Aberdeen Western Peripheral Route has recently opened after decades establishing the case, consulting, defending, planning and building. The voluntary Nestrans was clear in its Modern Transport Strategy (date) that there would be a need to 'lock in the benefits' from the new infrastructure, to avoid induced traffic from refilling Aberdeen City Centre for example. However, the dominant discourses at local and national level have been in tension with one another following successive political shifts, and the resources that RTPs had to fulfil their strategic aims were also made uncertain, reducing their ability to establish collaborative advantage. Whether the population of the north east can be nudged away from cars as the main mode of access to urban centres remains to be seen.

Ultimately, the significant challenges afflicting transport policy remain similar to those of the recent past, now with greater urgency. The international scientific community is clear about the urgent need for stringent curbs on carbon emissions, knowledge about the public health impacts of air pollution is more concrete than ever (e.g. Khreis *et al* 2017), congestion is an increasing problem on roads and increasingly on rail-based public transport. Bus services have been in critical decline and there are significant social justice implications in the low carbon transition (e.g. Lucas and Pangbourne 2014; Mullen and Marsden, 2016). Strong regional organisations are better placed to deliver integrated solutions to these problems, but a balance needs to be achieved between size and cohesiveness.

6   Conclusions

The analysis uncovered how the history of voluntary collaboration had an early impact on RTP's ability to generate collaborative momentum. The process of coalition building that led to the creation of a comprehensive network of statutory RTPs in Scotland was as much driven by local attempts to raise profile nationally and hence gain resources as it was by centrist tendencies. It was local policy networks that formed the voluntary regional partnerships, and those that were successful significantly influenced the founding of statutory RTPs. Since that time there have been many changes, not least a dramatic reduction in funding for transport initiatives via local and regional institutions. However, RTPs have continued to work within their remit, building regional institutional thickness, working collaboratively on strategic issues, building trust and local consensus and making the case for resources to support priority initiatives that require collaboration across their geographies. Clearly, generating collaborative momentum is central to the effectiveness of partnership governance, and this depends on establishing

common goals and trust. The chances of this happening are greater where the relevant actors have been networked previously.

My research also demonstrated that a history of successful collaboration is a critical factor in partnerships being able to withstand shocks. In relation to future prospects for the RTP structure in Scotland, there is now an institutional history of collaborative working on strategic transport issues across the whole of Scotland's geography. The transport policy cycle in Scotland is at a critical stage where initiating significant structural changes would risk creating inertia. For example, the Transport (Scotland) Bill, whilst something of a portmanteau, contains some interesting proposals with regard to RTP financing and still has some way to go before completion. The implementation of the smart and integrated ticketing provisions on buses would also benefit from the collaborative relations between LA generated by RTPs. How the policy discourse for transport might change further will not be known until the National Transport Strategy review is completed, but it is difficult to imagine that it would not contain aspirations for climate change mitigation or support for social inclusion.

Addressing climate change is going to be particularly challenging, and will require firm policy steering and collaborative action. The Climate Change Plan in particular needs cross-organisational collaboration, for example encouraging Scotland's people towards low carbon living is cross-sectoral, involving urban accessibility, land use choices, the future of work, building standards and meeting individual mobility needs whilst reducing car dependence. The volume of car traffic in Scotland rises inexorably whilst bus travel continues to fall. Whilst train travel continues to rise, much more needs to be done to provide usable bus services as an alternative to the car wherever possible, including as feeder services to railway stations, but lifestyles and attitudes are changing, making it difficult to predict needs. But once alternatives are identified and provided, steering us towards using them consistently is key. Many are pinning hopes on Mobility as a Service, and there are business models and service combinations that could work. RTPs are ideal organisations to incubate innovations, both urban and rural. Scottish transport governance does not need the addition shock of radical change, though the missions and powers of the policy networks will most likely need adaptation to facilitate more emphasis on these critical issues.

7   References

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