TASK FORCES AND THE ORGANISATION OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT: THE CASE OF THE NORTH EAST REGION OF ENGLAND

Abstract

The Task Force has emerged as a mechanism for co-ordinating economic development activity in the context of the current New Labour government’s emphasis upon including ‘stakeholders’ in ‘joined-up’ approaches to ‘cross-cutting’ issues. The paper examines the use of Task Forces to organise economic development at employer, sectoral and territorial levels at the local and regional scale in the North East region of England. The study argues that New Labour’s experimental use of Task Forces reflects a particular mediation of more general tendencies in the historical evolution of state modernisation that varies in particular and contingent ways at the local and regional level. The research reveals the continued importance of the existing public and public/private sector institutions, the less significant and contingent role of the private sector and the Task Force’s contribution to the UK’s ‘quasi-governance’ with its problems of co-ordination, transparency and accountability. A renewed politics of economic development governance is required to establish the
accountability and legitimacy of such bodies in the context of the UK political economy’s emergent multi-layered governance system.
Introduction

“We are calling on the Government to put together a task force, in the same way it has done for other parts of the country, to minimise the effect this will have on workers and their families” (North East Chamber of Commerce Spokesman, quoted in The Journal 15 July 2000).

And so another Task Force was born. This time to address the job losses from the Corus steel-making operations in Teesside. The Task Force ‘phenomenon’ (Barker et al., 1999) or ‘revolution’ (MacLeod, 1998) has seen this form of organisation multiply rapidly across government. At the national level, 295 Task Forces had been established between 1997 and 1999 to address a multitude of policy design and implementation questions (Barker et al., 1999). The Task Force has been especially prevalent in addressing economic development concerns. The former DETR established 39 Task Forces (13% of the total), including the high profile Coalfields and Urban Task Forces (1998), and the model has been utilised by the devolved administrations (House of Commons, 2001). Task Forces have also been sprouting at the local and regional levels throughout the UK. What Bennett et al. (2000: 6) describes, referring to the Coalfields Task Force, as a “unique intervention in the politics of regeneration”. The North East region of England in particular has seen a dramatic flowering of Task Forces in economic development activity, where 28 have been established (all but one since 1997), focused upon employers, sectors and/or territories.

Despite their ‘bacterial growth’ (Barker et al., 1999), little is known about the establishment, operation, organisation, funding, membership or effectiveness of such Task Forces. This paper examines these issues by analysing the experience of the North East region of England in using Task Forces to organise economic development. First, these developments are situated in the context of the historical evolution of state modernisation and New Labour’s role in unleashing the Task Force ‘revolution’ since 1997. Second, recent commentary on the Task Force phenomenon is reviewed. Third, questions of definition, origin and analysis are tackled. Fourth, the empirical case is examined and critical issues for Task Forces in organising economic development activity are raised. The study argues that New Labour’s experimental
use of Task Forces reflects a particular mediation of more general tendencies in the historical evolution of state modernisation that varies in particular and contingent ways at the local and regional level. The research reveals the continued importance of the existing public and public/private sector institutions, the less significant and contingent role of the private sector and the Task Force’s contribution to the UK’s ‘quasi-governance’ with its problems of co-ordination, transparency and accountability. In the face of growing criticism and adverse reaction to the ‘governance by expertise’ embodied in Task Forces, a renewed and democratised politics of economic development governance is required to establish the accountability and legitimacy of such bodies in the context of the UK political economy’s emergent multi-layered governance system.

**Issues in the current era of the historical evolution of state modernisation**
The historical evolution of ‘modern’ nation states has undergone an intensified and profound period of change since the emergent crisis of the post-war growth settlement and (neo-)Keynesian welfarist state forms in the early 1970s (Anderson, 1995; Block, 1994; Habermas, 1999). The ensuing three decades have witnessed protracted debate concerning the changing nature of the state, concerning several general tendencies. First, the deepened internationalisation – or even ‘globalisation’ (Held *et al.*, 1999) – of the world economy has led to the apparent ‘hollowing out’ of nation states as powers and responsibilities have been lost to supranational, sub-national, regional and local institutions (Jessop, 1997). This ‘hollowing out’ thesis argues that a more complex – multi-layered – governance system has emerged with heightened interpenetration between formerly discrete policy domains and institutions operating at different scales (Held *et al.*, 1999) within which (for some) the nation state retains a pivotal role (Boyer and Drache, 1996; Habermas, 1999; Hirst and Thompson, 1999).

Second, political economic ideology and state strategy has been dominated by the ‘global neo-classicism’ of neo-liberalism from the late 1970s (Michie and Grieve Smith, 1995). While containing an array of national variants, a common political economic project and policy programme of deregulation/liberalisation, fiscal austerity and monetary control have underpinned the reshaping of state forms and strategies (Berger and Dore, 1996; Rogers Hollingsworth and Boyer, 1997). The mid-1990s
witnessed reflection upon the performance of the twin poles of 1980s-style market liberalism and pre-1980s state interventionism in the context of the post-1989 transition in the centrally planned economies of the former Eastern bloc (Hodgson, 1999). Debate has ensued concerning a putative ‘Third Way’ political economic project between market and state to provide a guiding theoretical shell for state modernisation (Giddens, 1998; Habermas, 1999). Commentators claim that in the current era of ‘globalisation’ rapid and closely inter-related changes are creating unprecedented levels of uncertainty and complexity such that neither traditional state-centred Left nor market-oriented Right approaches are solely viable for state policy.

Third, there is an apparent crisis of faith in the institutions of government and traditional forms of representative democracy (Block, 1994; Leadbetter and Mulgan, 1997). Public distrust in politicians and the political process is rife and manifest in falling electoral turnouts, public cynicism and the rise of non-traditional bases of collective action (Held et al., 1999). Echoing the classical liberal view of the state (Block, 1994), this tendency has emphasised the failure in the capacities of public institutions to deliver sustained prosperity and has beset especially the advanced industrial economies (Gray, 1997; Habermas, 1999).

These generalised tendencies have punctuated the current period of state modernisation and created a context of uncertainty and complexity. This situation is marked by perhaps several emergent issues. First, a post-ideological pragmatism appears to be shaping the political economic projects of nation states. Some claim state strategy and action is no longer easily ascribed a ‘Left’ or ‘Right’ label as innovative combinations of market and/or state solutions are brought together to address intractable problems (e.g. Giddens, 1995; Turner, 2001). In this pragmatic climate the simplistic ‘quantitative’ understanding of the deepening or withdrawal of state intervention appears to have been exhausted (Block, 1994). In its place, more nuanced conceptions of ‘qualitative’ changes in the mode and nature of state forms have been suggested (O’Neill, 1997) – as states simultaneously both cede (e.g. monetary, fiscal policy) and extend (e.g. welfare state, institutional forms of government) powers in different areas (Martin and Sunley, 1997).
Second, a sense of failure and uncertainty has triggered a wave of profound reorganisation and ‘institutional searching’ (Peck and Tickell, 1994). While changes in the state’s internal mode of operation is response to external crises is not in itself new (see Offe, 1975), experimentation with new forms of governing and policy development and delivery has expanded dramatically in the current era:

“In every capitalist nation, the old institutional frameworks are being abandoned as economic organisations, social groups and states themselves search for new institutional configurations more congruent with the markedly different, and still rapidly changing, economic conditions of ‘post-Fordism’” (Martin, 1999: 4).

Such changes have comprised far reaching constitutional reforms and devolutionary projects aimed at reorganising the structures of central, regional and local government (Tomaney, 2000). The ‘de-statization’ of the political system is evident (Jessop 1997: 574). This process is reflected in the shift from government to governance across territorial scales and functions and in the:

“movement from the central role of official state apparatus in securing state-sponsored economic and social projects and political hegemony towards an emphasis on partnerships between governmental, para-governmental and non-governmental organizations in which the state apparatus is often only first among equals” (Jessop 1997: 574-575).

For Jessop (1997: 575) this involves governance – that is, “the complex art of steering multiple agencies, institutions and systems which are both operationally autonomous from one another and structurally coupled through various forms of reciprocal interdependence”. Such ‘quasi-government’ has been functional to states to incorporate independent specialised expertise and to devolve responsibility but has raised concerns about co-ordination, transparency and accountability (Morgan and Roberts, 1993; Skelcher et al., 2000). However, Jessop (1997) also recognises that government still has a key role to play in the counter tendency of ‘meta-governance’ through, for example, setting the ground rules for governance and ensuring the compatibility of different governance mechanisms and regimes.

The generalised tendencies and emerging issues evident in the current era in the historical evolution of state modernisation carry with them no necessary nor deterministic changes. While common elements clearly exist and inter-state learning
is evident (Jessop, 1997), the extent to which ‘hollowing out’, ‘Third Way’ strategy and the crisis of faith and experimentation with government institutions have proceeded differs significantly between and within nation states. Pressures for reorganisation are mediated by particular nation states and their concrete manifestations are contingent and remain empirical questions. The specific ways in which such forces are reflected in the mode and nature of state forms and strategies are unavoidably refracted by the particular historical evolution of the nation state (Hodgson, 1999), and its position within both the international division of labour and the multi-level governance system operating across and between supranational, national, sub-national, regional and local scales. The reality for the changing mode and nature of state action in different national contexts is graduated and complex and combines evidence of radical transitions and resistance with a mix of old and new pressures and experiments (Martin and Sunley, 1997). This era in the evolution of state modernisation is the context within which New Labour’s experiments with Task Forces may be understood.

**Interpreting New Labour’s Task Force ‘revolution’**

“Labourites had to offset their mummified economies with an ostentatious display of verbosely political radicalism – ‘youthism’, ‘high-technicism’, millennial and style-mania, and the accumulation of think-tanks and divining rods in appropriate official, quasi-official and entirely spontaneous polyhedrons” (Nairn, 2000: 50).

The particular pattern of recent development in the UK state reflects its specific mediation of the general tendencies and emerging issues in the historical evolution of state modernisation. The current era of New Labour in government has presaged a series of significant changes in the UK political economy, including nods in the direction of ‘Third Way’ and ‘Stakeholder Capitalism’ ideas (Hutton, 1999); constitutional reforms and devolution (Tomaney, 2000); post-ideological pragmatism based upon evidence-based public policy making (Stewart, 1999); new combinations of market discipline and state facilitation (Peck, 1999); experimentation with new organisational/territorial modes of co-ordination (Bennett and Payne, 2001); and the
involvement of external expertise in the body politic (Barker et al., 1999). Views
differ regarding the coherence and significance of such changes. For some, New
Labour’s political project fits within a centrist renewal of social democracy through
its experimentation with the ‘Third Way’ (Giddens, 1998). Critical accounts question
the ideologically rootless and opportunistic nature of New Labour (Hutton, 1999).
Some claim New Labour has been actively ‘hollowing out’ the UK state through,
amongst other forces: “a naïve faith in the capacity of innumerable local partnerships,
specialist agencies and ‘little platoons’ to deliver the goods locally (in an innovative
as well as cheap fashion)” (Peck, 1999: 133).

While their significance remains in question, the current growth of Task Forces across
government appears to occupy a key role in New Labour’s state modernisation
project. An integral part of its vision of ‘holistic government’ and revitalising
territorial governance has been the emphasis upon including interest groups
(‘stakeholders’) in far reaching and inter-connected (‘joined-up’) approaches to
intractable (‘wicked’ or ‘cross-cutting’) issues (Mawson, 1999). This approach has
sought to reduce ‘departmentalism’, decentralise decision-making and encourage
innovation in a bid to combat the forces of fragmentation and disintegration that have
hampered Government institutions and policy in recent decades. This vision has
resulted in a rash of experimentation with new organisational/territorial modes of co-
ordination – Task Forces, Zones, Priority Action Teams, Horizontal Working Groups,
Inter-Agency Projects and Neighbourhoods. Echoing a ‘new centrism’ in economic
development (Geddes and Newman, 1999) such institutional experiments have
become widespread (Stewart, 1999).

Upon closer inspection, opinion is divided on the place of Task Forces in this
particular era of New Labour state modernisation. Recent writing has focused on the
role of Task Forces in policy development and government at the national level. On
the Centre-Left, Macleod (1998) traced the emergence of Task Forces to the
independent Industry Forum – established “to facilitate informal non-doctrinaire
dialogue” between business and the Labour Party – that ‘pioneered’ the Task Force
idea in the early 1990s. Macleod saw Task Forces as effective, flexible and ad hoc
arrangements that provide the necessary outside help and guidance to ‘open up’ the
Whitehall machine and deal with cross-cutting issues. In this analysis, each Task
Force implies the search for consensus and demonstrates the Government’s commitment to partnership working and transparency. Macleod concluded that it is unclear and perhaps too early to say, first, whether the Task Force revolution is either a “one-off political fad with a limited shelf life” (p. viii) or an evolving phenomenon, and second, whether Task Forces will have a significant or lasting impact on policy outcomes.

Barker et al. (1999) provided a thorough audit of the Task Force phenomenon in the body politic within the UK. They argued that there is nothing new in state attempts to co-opt the expertise of external interests into state activity (e.g. the Webb’s ‘industrial and social chamber’) but the scale and character of the current Task Force phenomenon suggests it is more pervasive and influential. In contrast to Macleod’s more positive claims, they are concerned about Task Forces’ lack of accountability and haphazard management by government. Lord Smith of Clifton (Barker et al., 1999: 7) makes the point that the Task Forces: “…must not be allowed to coagulate into an hermetically sealed policy universe that effectively undermines due process and inhibits widespread open discussion”. Barker et al. (1999) conclude that Task Forces are a ‘new governing species’ that has avoided the public gaze and has the potential to neglect the public that they are designed to serve. Skelcher et al.’s (2000: 12) analysis of the advance of the ‘Quango State’ under New Labour highlighted the “unforeseen and unsupervised” rush of Task Forces created after 1997. For them, this ad hoc flourish of executive power has added to the ‘quasi-governance’ of the UK as their members remain outside the Nolan public appointment rules (justified on the basis of their temporary lifespan). Since such bodies were co-opted into Government at an influential time for policy making and some had lasted long enough to become permanent Non-Departmental Public Bodies (NDPBs) and hence be ‘Nolanised’, Skelcher et al. (2000) argue that they should be included in reforms to increase transparency and accountability of the ‘Quango State’.

Platt’s (1998) ‘Government by Task Force’ argued that the ‘mushrooming’ of Task Forces raises serious questions about New Labour’s style of government. The allegedly inclusive and pluralist nature of Task Forces is questioned since the voices of women, ethnic minorities, youth and organised labour are inadequately represented relative to business and the private sector. Further, Platt (1998: 4) argues that:
“the Task Forces and review bodies have been designed to foster support for its [government] policies, rather than debate about them. Their main objective is to neutralise political opposition and to create a new national consensus around the central tenets of Blairism”.

Platt concluded that ‘New Labour’ is using Task Forces to concentrate power in the centre and to govern through a wider range of elites, bypassing both public and parliament. A neo-Marxist reading of the Task Force phenomenon might go further in its criticism. Such institutional experiments might be interpreted as an attempt by the state to internalise and contain territorialised accumulation crises arising from the necessary contradictions of capitalism that, in due course, ultimately emerge to undermine the state’s mode of crisis management (Habermas, 1975). A Task Force could be seen as a compensatory institutional intervention by the state that seeks to defend the existing socio-economic order by mopping up the consequences of localised capital devalorisation and exempting capital from significant reparations.

While focusing upon more formalised NDPBs (e.g. Commissions, boards and regulatory authorities), Centre-Right commentators too are critical of New Labour’s voluntary transfer of decision-making power from the executive to new independent bodies staffed by technocratic elites (Mather, 2000). Such bodies – which go “beyond the odd business leader brought in, singly or in a task force to help a government department” (p. 8-9) – ‘de-politicise’ decisions, remove responsibility from ministers and raise constitutional questions concerning their accountability. McElwee (2000) argued that New Labour is ‘surreptitiously’ creating a ‘New Class’ by rewarding supporters with patronage and positions of power at the heart of government. This ‘cronyism’, disputed by Barker et al. (1999), is creating a new establishment convinced of the virtues of social engineering. Alongside quangos, special advisors and peerages: “Another significant vehicle for the rise of this New Class has been the Task Force, creating Government policy behind the scenes” (p. iii). The Government’s ‘big tent’ approach is said to stifle dissent, undermine Civil Service neutrality, trivialise the political process and marginalise parliament. Contrasting Barker et al.’s (1999) ‘de-politicisation’ concern, McElwee claims that private life is becoming more politicised by interests concerned with state intervention. McElwee’s New Class is a new governing elite that is “self-serving, self-regarding and self-rewarding” (2000: p. ii).
This review of the place of Task Forces in this specific period of New Labour’s state modernisation project suggests that, first, new, flexible and often experimental institutional forms, employing innovative modes of organisational/territorial co-ordination, have changed markedly in their scale and character since 1997. Second, these institutional forms have become instrumental to New Labour as a mechanism for incorporating a plural array of (potentially elite) interests (especially from the producer/private sectors but less from women, youth, ethnic minorities and trade unions) to provide independent and specialised guidance for policy development across government. Third, the new institutional forms may work to concentrate power centrally by providing a means through which responsibility (rather than power) can be devolved, debate stifled and decisions ‘de-politicised’. Last, the co-ordination, transparency and accountability of these new forms of organisation, particularly within a multi-layered governance structure, are haphazard and often unclear as they appear to operate outside of the conventional structures of public scrutiny. However, in focusing upon Task Forces in particular, little is still known about why they have been used in specific policy areas, how they get established, what they actually do, how they are organised and funded, and whether or not they are effective. Such questions provide the research agenda for examining Task Forces in economic development at the local and regional level in the case of the North East region of England.

**Definition, origin and analysis**

“The word ‘Task Force’ has become a buzzword… …in the absence of any definition… …wide statistical differences [in their estimated numbers] demonstrate the absence of any common starting point. One person’s ‘Task Force’ is clearly another person’s ‘review’” (Committee on Standards in Public Life, 2000: 124).

In definitional terms, Task Forces remain slippery creatures. National studies identify functionally diverse bodies that serve a variety of purposes and cover a multiplicity of issues. The new bodies even go by different names: Task Forces, advisory groups,
action groups, sounding boards. Their classification is neither a simple or neat exercise. Most Task Forces were established by Ministers early in New Labour’s tenure: “to investigate and recommend new policies and practices or… practical means of implementing policies” (Barker et al., 1999: 11). They were different from established government practice in the scale of their inclusion of ‘external’ interests (particularly business), independence and operation within a given and limited time frame. A distinction was also drawn between these new bodies and the reviews and consultation exercises that were routine Civil Service work as well as Royal Commissions, Departmental Committees of Inquiry, Standing Expert Advisory Committees and Standing Statutory Advisory Boards.

The explosive growth of Task Forces after 1997 may be traced to reflection within the Civil Service. New ideas emerged concerning innovation in government administration. First, discussion ensued about the creation of government (rather than external) ‘task forces’ for issues where: “if it will take two to six months hard work, it should go to a task force – but if, and only if, it requires substantial inter-departmental co-ordination. Anything requiring much longer preparation should go to a Royal Commission” (Daniel 1997). Second, concern developed around the need for “radically re-engineered forms of government, perhaps around project teams staffed by skilled specialists and supported by a central core” (Wintour, 2000).

During the early days of New Labour, Ministers, Whitehall press officers and the media were often happy to call almost any new inquiry a ‘new government Task Force’. Parts of government even felt they were missing out: “We haven’t set up any task forces yet, but it is under review” (Welsh Office spokesperson cited in Daniel, 1997: 27). The name assumed an urgent, pseudo-military connotation that the Government was doing something positive and timely about an issue, contrasting with the softer language of partnership, community development and neighbourhood renewal. Military metaphors such as Task Forces lend purpose and apparent determination to political gestures (Mullan, 2001).

The way in which Task Forces have been used at the local and regional level to address economic development concerns suggests they too are not homogenous creatures and go by a variety of names (e.g. Task Forces, Task Groups, Response
Groups, Rapid Response Groups and Action Groups). The lack of definition for Task Forces reflects the lack of a clearly defined model. There is no evidence of a ‘Whitehall template’ nor record of Task Forces in the North East at the centre of Government (Regional Policy Unit, DTI, Author’s interview, 2000). Historically, creatures similar to Task Forces existed in de-industrialised regions in the early 1980s (Keating and Boyle, 1987). However, the current crop even lack a distinct linkage to the 1981 ‘Merseyside Task Force’ (MTF). The MTF represented “a hitherto untried mode of regional based combined inter-departmental and public/private sector collaboration” (Lindley, 1985: 70) reporting directly to a senior member of the Cabinet Office. Bodies similar to the MTF were utilised in urban policy circles during the 1980s (Greenhalgh, 1999).

Given the uncertainty surrounding the late 1990s emergence of the Task Force (with various individuals and interests claiming they have invented it anew), some common identifying characteristics are required if the concept is to be used for meaningful analysis. Such elements might include: multi-agency; selected and invited membership; ultimately temporary but initially indeterminate period of operation (unlike national Task Forces); non-statutory (i.e. non-Quangos); established for specific purposes; flexible and 'rapid response' operation often via working sub-groups; and working across a range of inter-related levels (employer, sector and/or territory). These dimensions differ in their extent in particular Task Forces (not least in their names) but at least some of these general features are evident. Task Forces share many characteristics with the more commonly recognised partnerships prevalent in the 1990s. Indeed, some writers use the terms interchangeably (e.g. Bennett et al., 2000). The main differences are, first, Task Forces have an indeterminately temporary life – existing long enough to address their stated objectives – whereas partnerships often have clearly fixed lifespans from their inception, and, second, Task Forces have a more pronounced crisis-laden flavour.

Task Forces have different generic roles: advisory (collecting, analysing and dispensing information and advice relating to policy) and implementation (spending money and implementing policy on the ground). Several of the national economic development Task Forces (e.g. Coalfields and Urban Task Forces) were advisory and produced proposals for government action and then disbanded. The local and regional
economic development Task Forces have combined advisory and implementation roles in developing strategies and putting them into action through their members. Different modes of operation for Task Forces are discernable: reactive and regenerative and proactive and developmental. The former focuses upon relatively shorter-term time horizons (e.g. post-closure job search). The latter is medium to longer term and seeks a more fundamental analysis and development strategy for a sector or area. Each mode is not mutually exclusive and there is some evidence of the evolution between these modes as the depth and intractability of some economic development concerns are made apparent by Task Force activity.

**Task Forces for economic development in the North East region of England**

The North East region of England continues to suffer from the economic, social and political malaise associated with structural change generated by the restructuring of its traditional economic base and its relatively marginal position within the national political economy (Pike, 1999a). The chronic nature of these problems has long meant the North East has been a ‘state-managed’ region (Hudson, 1998), susceptible to institutional experimentation in the field of economic development as part of state modernisation projects that dates back to the 1930s Team Valley Trading Estate. Regional agents too are cognisant of the need for adaptive institutions to effect economic renewal, as the RDA Chairman noted: “the North East must recognise that products and services will have a faster turnover rate and actively plan for closures and departures” (Bridge 2000: 5). This is the context in which the North East region has experienced a proliferation of Task Forces to organise economic development activity.

Likened to a ‘hydra’ (RDA Chair, Author’s Interview 2000), the most recent count tallied at 28 such Task Forces (all but one established since 1997), involving 351 individual organisational memberships (Table 1). Their rapid growth has been accompanied by a vision of their effectiveness amongst the ‘regional partnership’:

“The Government Office has a long history of association with Task Forces in Durham through the East Durham Task Force. This was a model of its kind and achieved a deservedly high reputation for bringing together local partners

Similarly, the RDA Chief Executive called the Task Forces ‘vital’ to targeting regeneration. An unformalised but nonetheless relatively coherent Task Force model has evolved largely through ‘learning by doing’, containing many of the general characteristics, roles and modes of operation identified above, although it remains flexible in its organisation to meet specific demands. The Fujitsu Response Group (1999) and, to a lesser degree, the East Durham Task Force (2000) final reports have been used to transfer practice and the Task Force has become part of the accepted response to recurrent economic development crises in the region. Such Task Forces have been much less prevalent at the local and regional level elsewhere in the UK’s regions and countries (e.g. Pottery/North Staffordshire, Prestwick/Scotland, Rover/West Midlands) (Barker et al., 1999; DTI Regional Policy Unit, Author’s Interview, 2000).

Why have Task Forces been used?
Task Forces have become an organisational mechanism for the timely and often rapid ‘inclusion’ of a plural array of interests to address often crisis-laden economic development concerns. The establishment of a Task Force provides a focus for attention and effort for both existing partners and new partners brought in to provide further support. In contrast to the national picture, these Task Forces have been involved in both strategy and policy development and implementation. Similar issues were dealt with in less co-ordinated ways in the past. The protracted decline of jobs in the Durham coalfield from the 1960s, for example, was met with anti-closure campaigns from affected local communities but only piecemeal responses in economic development terms. The realisation of the inevitability of the coal industry’s demise triggered a more coherent response to regeneration and the establishment of arguably the region’s first (East Durham) Task Force by Durham County Council between 1990 and 2000.

Who gets a Task Force and who doesn’t?
There is no single way in which the Task Forces have been established and each is often contingent upon the evolution of particular circumstances. Some are the result of central government initiative and Ministerial decision-making (sometimes) in close consultation with regional local authorities, the RDA and GO-NE (Table 1). Others tend to be more locally grown and local authority-led. Establishing a Task Force has become highly politicised within the region. Objective criteria for Task Force establishment are noticeably lacking. Some interest groups have had to lobby in order to get their situation recognised as warranting a Task Force (e.g. GMB trade union/Textiles Task Force) (Pike et al., 1998). Others have had to wait for particular circumstances to unfold and the political climate to become more favourable (e.g. DTI support framework for the coal industry (South East Northumberland), ‘regionalising’ a national initiative (Oil and Gas Fabrication)).

Recurrent economic development problems can lead to a short-term ‘firefighting’ approach that lacks a more strategic view and may be open to politically expedient manipulation. Despite the loss of nearly 4,000 jobs and pressure from regional trade unions, for example, the Textiles Task Force was not established until a major closure occurred in the Trade and Industry Secretary’s Tyneside North constituency. While it may be coincidence, the timing of the announcement did little to quell speculation about Ministers only responding to problems when they affected their own backyards. In addition, utilising Task Forces in this manner raised concerns regarding tokenism and symbolic policy gestures in the face of an allegedly inevitable ‘globalisation’ of economic activity. In response to the Groves Cranes closure on Wearside, the AEEU works convenor was clear:

“We feel very disappointed. The Government and Peter Mandelson [then Secretary of State for Trade and Industry] have really let us down and have let us fall away and go on the dole. The setting up of the task force was just a token gesture really – lip service – because since that original meeting at Government Office for the North East…we have heard absolutely nothing. The training fund would have been set up anyway, so it’s not like it is purely for us. We are just due to get a share of the £2.5m pool” (quoted in Ford, 1998).

In other cases, interest groups were adamant that they did not want the assignation of a Task Force to deal with their situation (e.g. firms undergoing redundancy
programmes). They feared that it may have drawn unwanted attention, undermined confidence and perhaps even hastened their decline. Some interests failed in their attempts to get a Task Force established – or at least one with sufficient scope and clout to command new resources – and fell back on more locally-grown solutions.

What do Task Forces do?
The strategic aims of the Task Forces were typically moulded by their particular circumstances and shaped by their membership. The first job was for the leading players to decide upon the membership and to draw up their terms of reference. Those addressing closures tended to keep their objectives flexible in order to respond rapidly to unfolding situations whereas the explicitly sectoral and territorial Task Forces often worked with more formalised and longer-term objectives. Each mixed advisory and implementation roles (Table 2). The area-based Task Forces had the most comprehensive brief to address deeper questions of structural adjustment. A transition was evident in the move away from an initial focus on ‘hard’, ‘bricks and mortar’ infrastructure issues to ‘softer’, people and social issues. The ways in which the Task Forces were established were often influenced by what they were set up to do. Where an area had been subject to concentrated economic decline, rather than establish separate Task Forces to respond to each situation, the opportunity was often taken to approach the structural problems of area regeneration in a more holistic and comprehensive manner. In Sunderland, for example, major employers Groves Cranes and the Vaux brewery closed with the loss of over 1,500 jobs in less than two years. The initial Groves Cranes Task Force evolved into the ‘Sunderland ARC’ initiative without a Vaux Task Force being established and is currently undergoing a further transition into an Urban Regeneration Company.

Within the Task Forces it was unclear which member organisations had a legitimate claim to leadership and strategy. This depended upon the balance of membership between senior level ‘leaders’ and other organisational functionaries. Participant organisations often interpreted their role in the Task Force as part of a technocratic process whereby they simply discharged their specialist responsibilities. This effectively ‘de-politicised’ the issues and avoided wider debate.
While political action was evident behind the scenes, particularly in lobbying for their establishment, Task Forces typically attempted to keep politics and politicians out of their activities in order to encourage information exchange and limit leaks.

Little attempt was made to question or contest economic development issues. In the case of closures Task Forces often appeared designed to allow companies to exit with the minimum embarrassment. Buttressed by their democratic legitimacy, local authorities came nearest to this questioning role in their political activity. For instance, South Tyneside Council leaders were involved in expressing concern, seeking clarification and offering support in response to rationalisation at local employers (Pike, 1999b). Generally, Task Forces remained narrowly project-focused and concerned with the task in hand. Leadership and strategy within the Task Forces often appeared driven by events rather than integrated within a broader regional development strategy. Whether this would have been different had their membership have been more inclusive is open to question.

_How are the Task Forces organised and funded?_

In organisational terms, Task Forces reflect a centralised policy agenda to a greater or lesser degree, depending upon who has established them and their purpose. Task Forces established by Ministers nationally are constituted by local and regional input but work within a centrally orchestrated framework and financial structure. Responsibility has been devolved to the local and regional level but the power remains concentrated in the national centre. Those charged with establishing and leading the Task Force often bring a main group together relatively quickly on an invitation-only basis. Senior individuals from the ‘regional partnership’ were enrolled to establish momentum and provide credibility, often delegating their involvement as the Task Forces got to work. Membership was often kept tight, flexible and limited (ranging from 1 to 24 members, averaging 15) to those with something to ‘bring to the table’ to ensure rapid decision-making and a ‘business-like’ and ‘action-oriented’ approach. The initially larger membership present at Task Force inception meetings often whittled itself down through self-selection to those with resources to commit. Some interests were incorporated since it was considered better to have them working
with rather than against the Task Force. Close liaison and monitoring took place amongst members in a ‘can do’ atmosphere of co-operation and collaboration. Despite patchy commitments to being ‘inclusive’ and involving affected local interests, membership often had an exclusive look with relatively limited trades union and community involvement.

Since the Task Forces were mobilised to address issues beyond the remit of any single organisation, membership brought together representatives from an array of selected economic development organisations involved in the region. The high profile Task Forces incorporated members from the upper levels of regional organisations whereas the lower profile concerns reflected a more locally grown flavour. The appropriate chair of the Task Forces depended upon the perceived importance and territorial extent of their remit. Task Forces typically considered that membership should be limited to allow them to work in an effective and expedient manner. Opening the process out was often interpreted as difficult with the potential for slowing and 'bureaucratising' the Task Force. Selection was therefore justified as expanding the specialist capabilities of the group and bringing in particular perspectives rather than more democratic formal representation of interest groups. In the closure Task Forces it was felt that communication and information exchange could be hindered by the participation of aggrieved parties in the process. Here, selective membership was justified on the grounds of commercial confidentiality. However, these selection mechanisms left the Task Forces open to challenge regarding questions of transparency and accountability. There was some evidence of evolution in the Task Force form through one or two stages or through the consolidation of several existing bodies (Figure 1). Task Forces utilised relatively autonomous working sub-groups – whose membership varied and sometimes broadened – to address specific issues, report back to the main group and provide a manageable division of labour.

The Task Forces were rarely direct funding vehicles in their own right and their aims were achieved by members ‘bending’ their mainstream programme budget. Funding came from a mixture of national (e.g. RSA, SRB) and EU (e.g. ERDF, ESF, CIs) sources, incorporating mainly the reallocation of general funds but also some specific measures (e.g. DfEE’s ‘Rapid Response Funding’; Textiles Task Force
‘Competitiveness Fund’). Task Forces appear resource-bound due to rarely any new funding. Funds have often been considered insufficient for the tasks in hand and often, given the rapid nature of the Task Force establishment, the mainstream programme budgets of members were already committed and not easily redeployed. Many Task Force members were therefore left to fund their participation from their mainstream budgets when an ability to vie funds between budget heads may have provided for a more effective, co-ordinated and adaptable response. This fragmentation of funding created problems of institutional territorial parochialism where Task Force members tended to work to their own agenda of target achievement on their own local patch rather than seeking solutions with a broader regional benefit.

**What is the assessment of Task Forces?**

Amid growing national disquiet concerning their effectiveness and the government’s role in either watering down or ignoring their policy advice (see also Ahmed, 2000; House of Commons, 2001; McKie, 2000), the jury is still out on Task Forces for organising economic development at the local and regional level. The independent assessment of their undoubtedly extensive activities has not been undertaken. Many participant organisations have not even evaluated their own involvement. The few final public and private domain reports from Task Forces that exist contain extensive lists of activities and outputs (e.g. CAPITB, 2000; East Durham Task Force, 2000; Fujitsu Response Group, 1999). Without independent and comparative assessment there is little way of verifying their claims, evaluating their relative effectiveness and proving their worth.

While it is early days for many Task Forces, preliminary soundings reveal a mixture of prospects and problems (Pike, 2001). Task Forces appear to have ‘added-value’ by getting the relevant individuals and organisations around the table and focused on a particular issue. At best, Task Forces may provide a co-ordinating organisation capable of mobilising and involving the relevant individuals and organisations with the appropriate expertise to address particular economic development concerns in a timely fashion. Their establishment provides an adaptable focus for activity and the matching of regional, national and European funding support. Critical views of Task Forces refer to their over-use and proliferation, *ad hoc* and reactive manner and
utilisation as a token and symbolic political gesture to illustrate that something was being done. Indeed, there is evidence of perceived resistance to ‘just another Task Force’ due to their failure to prevent localised decline (Wansbeck District Council Leader, *The Journal*, 28 April, 2000). At worst, the Task Force may be interpreted as a short-term, reactive and perhaps politically expedient organisational fix for economic development problems that draws upon a relatively exclusive and limited membership. Their specific and narrowly conceived focus, time-limited and resource-bound nature coupled with concerns regarding their leadership, transparency and accountability may serve to undermine their potential effectiveness.

**Issues for Task Forces in organising economic development:**

*The high level of involvement of the public sector and Local Authorities*

The economic development Task Forces in the North East contain high levels of public sector and local authority involvement. Measured in terms of individuals from organisations that are Task Force members, the public sector is dominant followed by public-private sector organisations (including RDAs and TECs due to their ‘business-led’ boards) (Figure 2). Involvement from the private sector is lower and the remainder is made up of Third Sector, MPs and workforce members. In organisational terms, local authorities are dominant, followed by central Government organisations (e.g. Employment Service, Benefits Agency) and Quangos (e.g. TECs, Enterprise Agencies) (Figure 3). Firms had marginally higher levels of involvement than the RDA. GO-NE and trades unions made up the next highest categories. Alongside voluntary and employer’s organisations, FE and HE had roughly equal levels of involvement. The issue is whether this high level of involvement of the public sector and local authorities is a question of dependence or domination. On the one hand, Task Forces can be seen as heavily reliant upon the involvement of the public sector and local authorities in providing staff, resources and leadership. Indeed, several heavily committed local authorities complained of ‘Task Force fatigue’ and the over-stretching of already over-committed individuals and organisations. On the other hand, the Task Forces were established to bring together a plural array of interests to address a particular concern and could perhaps be less effective if dominated by a particular interest group, albeit a democratically legitimate one. Compounding this
issue, private sector involvement has been less significant and contingent upon particular circumstances, ranging from constructive and supportive to obstructive and damaging.

**Time-limited or standing bodies?**

Given the ingrained structural problems and recurrent need for regeneration in regions like the North East, the question arises whether a proliferation of time-limited, *ad hoc* and piecemeal responses to economic development is sufficient. Task Forces may be rather limited organisations addressing the symptoms rather than the causes of economic decline. In addition, the RDA and some local authorities were beginning to feel the strain of heavy involvement in a range of Task Forces (Table 3). Members were adamant that Task Forces should be time-limited and task-focused. However, a grey area emerged in relation to the broader context of the duration of Task Force operation. Given their initially indeterminate life-span, their duration of operation varied significantly – from under 12 months to currently ongoing after 2 years – depending upon the contingent nature of their specific circumstances.

The question is whether a more strategic, integrated and co-ordinated approach could be taken to structural economic development concerns rather than simply expanding the flotilla of Task Forces to address the symptoms. Such an approach may need to be provided by a standing body – a single organisation, infrastructure or network of individuals and organisations – that might be better placed to deal with situations before or as they emerge. Such a regionally rooted body could perhaps ‘get a feel’ – not in the sense of a prediction or forecast – for situations before they develop into crises. An example is the ‘South Tyneside Redundancies – Rapid Response Group’ that meets regularly to chase progress on previous activities, reviews current work, tries to pick up the ‘weak signals’ of impending problems and is accountable to its local authority (Pike, 1999b). This may prove workable and manageable only at the local rather than the regional level. While this role was acknowledged by the RDA, it was somewhat reticent about taking sole responsibility for such an ongoing strategic overview. In particular, it was also generally unclear how such a regional overview could take account of and link meaningfully into local situations, perhaps requiring a
stronger role for the newly established Sub-Regional Partnerships (Northumberland, Tyne and Wear, Durham, Tees Valley).

Co-ordination
The recent proliferation of Task Forces in the North East raises the question of their over-use and lack of co-ordination. Being short-term, ‘quick fix’ and *ad hoc* leaves them vulnerable to repeated utilisation particularly for regions with structural economic development problems. The spirit of the Task Force suggests it is in some sense special and for utilisation in exceptional circumstances. Staff, resources and effort can be redirected from their existing work and marshalled at short notice to address crisis situations. Yet there is a danger that Task Forces become part of the normal repertoire of responses to economic development issues. The lack of clear criteria regarding their establishment reinforces this problem. Over-use can cause a drain on organisational energy and create fatigue from constantly having to ‘firefight’ short-term issues and meet the demand for involvement in Task Forces (Table 3). There are signs that this problem is being recognised but not remedied since the Task Force model is considered a valid response to particular problem situations rather than something that the ‘regional partnership’ would like to see manifest and ongoing.

This sporadic way in which economic development Task Forces have flowered across the region underlines the need for co-ordination. Whereby duplication and overlap are avoided and complementarity fostered with the activities of existing partners – not all of whom end up being invited to become members of the Task Forces. Notwithstanding situations where individuals hold multiple memberships, opportunities for learning and interaction between Task Forces have rarely been maximised. The question is where the locus of any co-ordination authority should lie within an increasingly multi-layered governance structure operating across a range of scales? Who has the strategic overview and vision to make sense of how these things fit together for the benefit of the region? The RDA? The Sub-Regional Partnerships? A newly beefed-up GO-NE? (see Performance and Innovation Unit, 2000).
Transparency and accountability

The transparency and accountability of Task Forces is a concern. Task Forces appear to be contributing to the ‘democratic deficit’ caused by the growth of ‘quasi-governance’ spending public money and being run by people who are unelected and unaccountable (House of Commons, 2001; Skelcher et al., 2000). Indeed, the former Chair of the Public Administration Select Committee, Rhodri Morgan claimed that just as the Quangos were being brought under the control of the Nolan reforms of public appointments Task Forces emerged as a new ‘second phalanx’ of Quangos outside these rules (Barker et al., 1999). Regionally too, concerns have been articulated, for instance, regarding the future of the Sunderland ARC Task Force:

“The regeneration company is a good thing and I am happy to sign up to it. But the question is how it is set up and who it is accountable to. We don’t want another development corporation-type body with the problem of accountability. The Sunderland partnership wants to be part of the operation”

(Leader of Sunderland City Council quoted in Heywood, 2000).

Economic development Task Forces in the North East are largely able to proffer policy advice, spend public money and co-ordinate implementation in private and without wider political debate. Their largely functional role and often technocratic *modus operandi* tends to ‘de-politicise’ many issues that should properly lie within the political sphere, despite the limited involvement of local and national politicians. There remains a strong case to answer for Task Forces in terms of their transparency and accountability.

While they are non-statutory (unlike Quangos), Task Force’s accountability is questionable on two fronts. First, their narrow financial accountability is often fragmented since the Task Force is usually not the main funding vehicle but is supported by the mainstream programmes of its members. Second is the issue of wider democratic accountability. Some Task Forces have been answerable to the relevant central government Minister that established them but the local and regional dimension of accountability is limited. The local authority-based Task Forces have come nearest to conventional democratic scrutiny of the Task Forces. Here, local authority Officers involved in the Task Forces have had to report back to the full Council of Members and respond to questions, although how much influence this has had on the Task Force’s operation is unclear. Several Task Forces deflected the
accountability question by claiming that in an era of waning public faith in the democratic process they conducted more meaningful consultation with their target local communities regarding their plans. This may signal their desire to shift away from traditional democratic forms of accountability.

At the heart of this transparency and accountability problem for Task Forces is their membership. Patronage is a concern alongside the potential for a descent into a cozy ‘court politics’ of favourites and hangers-on that stifles debate and discussion of alternative economic development strategies in preference to the prevailing ‘common sense’. Since membership is constructed through careful selection and private invite from the instigating organisation, often in relative haste, the Task Forces have tended to be exclusive rather than inclusive. The first signs of a new elite of the ‘usual suspects’ of appointed or nominated members – with no doubt valuable skills and experience to offer – has begun to emerge raising concerns over undue and sectional influence and the domination of regional governance by an emergent regional service class (Lovering, 1999). While the vast majority (84%) of individuals involved held memberships in only one Task Force, nearly 12% were on two, 3% on three and just over 2% on four (Table 4). In addition, the gender of Task Force members is overwhelmingly dominated by men, only 48 of 326 (15%) were women (see Robinson and Shaw, 2000).

How can Task Forces be made more transparent and accountable? How might their membership be monitored and regulated? Should they be made publicly to publish meeting minutes and final reports? Where should they sit in the emerging territorial governance structure for economic development in the UK? Given their proliferation these are thorny questions. Potentially, Task Forces could be made answerable and open to scrutiny by the relevant democratically legitimate bodies in the territories in which they operate. This might be more easily solved at the local and county levels through local authorities. At the regional level, this might happen via the scrutiny role of the Regional Chamber over the RDA in the absence of elected regional government.
Conclusions
This paper has sought to examine the utilisation of Task Forces as an institutional co-ordination mechanism through an empirical analysis of the experience of the North East region of England in using Task Forces to organise economic development activity. The study argues that New Labour’s use of Task Forces reflects a particular mediation of more general tendencies and emerging issues in the historical evolution of state modernisation. Further particular and contingent variations on the national picture are evident at the local and regional level in the context of an uneven process of ‘hollowing out’ at the national level and an increasingly multi-layered governance system. The Task Force concept, while not unambiguous in some areas of usage, is revealed as having theoretical substance and analytical merit. Nationally, the proliferation of Task Forces is evidence of the ‘de-statization’ of the political system and the uneasy tension between governance and meta-governance wherein the ‘shadow of hierarchy’ (Jessop, 1997: 575) cast by national/central government can be seen in New Labour’s extension of powers over the institutional forms of government. Task Forces have been used as a pragmatic means of ‘getting things done’ in often complex and uncertain situations without any apparent ideological hang-ups about how such policy should be developed and delivered. This has meant incorporating producer and private sector interests and claims about mixing state and market solutions to intractable issues ‘Third Way’-style. In contrast, evidence from the economic development Task Forces in the North East region reveals pragmatic and emergent changes in the mode and nature of state institutional forms but they are overwhelmingly dominated in their membership by public (especially local authorities) and public/private (especially RDAs, TECs) sector institutions. Private sector involvement is somewhat less significant and contingent upon the particular circumstances the Task Force is addressing. State and para-state forms appear to remain prevalent for organising economic development at the local and regional level.

Nationally, New Labour’s use of Task Forces as mechanisms for utilising external expertise has reinforced the sense that existing public institutions are unable effectively to deliver. In contrast, the evidence from this empirical case suggests that existing (central and local) public institutions constitute the clear majority of Task Force members and resources and external expertise is evident in only a handful of cases. While it may be functional to government to present Task Forces as an
additional response, the local and regional economic development variety illustrate that it is the existing public institutions – albeit working within new organisational forms – that are doing the work on the ground. Across scales Task Forces are clear evidence of the institutional experimentation characteristic of the current era of state modernisation, albeit mediated by the evolution of the UK’s particular political economy. The economic development Task Forces in the North East are an emergent organisational form developed as a containing response to crisis-laden economic development issues at employer, sectoral and/or territorial levels. No clear blueprint is evident but a relatively coherent model is emerging – adaptive to specific circumstances – that is constructed through the selective incorporation of shared interest groups, mainly from the public and public/private sectors. These Task Forces remain experimental and are largely unproven due to the absence of independent assessment, although they claim (with some voracity) varying degrees of success in achieving their objectives. The peculiarly UK twist to this narrative is that these Task Forces appear to be contributing to the growth of ‘quasi-governance’ (Skelcher et al., 2000) and its attendant problems of co-ordination, transparency and accountability. The North East’s economic development Task Forces confirm this national view as the evidence revealed issues of over-use and proliferation, lack of co-ordination and limited local and regional transparency and accountability.

“A project which began with a slogan of ‘de-quangofication’…[has] led to a circumstance in which quangos, task forces, commissions have multiplied and proliferated. And this is a deep paradox…unless we grapple with this irony in all of its depth…we’ll be stuck with a situation in which we’ll have countless ephemeral, unremembered and ineffective quangos proliferating against a background of weakened ineffective institutions or their shadows” (John Gray, quoted in Walker, 2000).

Task Forces may turn out to be rather more profound in their significance than initially thought. Two deeper currents are pertinent. First, the state’s mode of crisis management appears under threat. As Gray suggests, there is mounting scrutiny and criticism of such ‘quasi-governance’ and growing demands that appropriate co-ordination, transparency and accountability measures be established for such public institutions, particularly in the context of devolution (Committee on Standards in Public Life, 2000; House of Commons, 2001; Skelcher et al., 2000; Scottish
Executive, 2001). A second, reinforcing point, is that the abdication of government responsibility and reliance upon the ‘authority of expertise’ (Walker, 2000) provided by Task Forces avoids the deeper questions about what kind of economic development and for whom? Such value-laden questions cannot simply be resolved by a technocracy since they are inherently conflictual. A renewed and democratised politics of economic development governance is required to render the answers and decision-making relating to such questions transparent, legitimate and accountable in the context of the UK political economy’s emergent multi-layered governance system.

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Table 1: Economic Development Task Forces in the North East region (As of May 2001)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employer</th>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Established</th>
<th>Established by</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Centura Foods</td>
<td>Employer</td>
<td>Hartlepool</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Hartlepool District Council</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courtaulds</td>
<td>Employer</td>
<td>Peterlee, County Durham</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Easington District Council</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dewhirst</td>
<td>Employer</td>
<td>Easington, County Durham</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Easington District Council</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electrolux</td>
<td>Employer</td>
<td>Spennymoor, County Durham</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Sedgefield District Council</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fujitsu</td>
<td>Employer</td>
<td>Newton Aycliffe, County Durham</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Peter Mandelson#, Secretary of State for Trade and Industry</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grove Cranes*</td>
<td>Employer</td>
<td>City of Sunderland, Tyne and Wear</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Sunderland City Council</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Onwa*</td>
<td>Employer</td>
<td>South Tyneside, Tyne and Wear</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Richard Caborn, Minister for Regions, Regeneration and Planning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pringle</td>
<td>Employer</td>
<td>Berwick-Upon-Tweed, Northumberland*</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Berwick-Upon-Tweed District Council</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rothmans</td>
<td>Employer</td>
<td>Spennymoor, County Durham</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Stephen Byers, Secretary of State for Trade and Industry</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siemens</td>
<td>Employer</td>
<td>North Tyneside, Tyne and Wear</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Peter Mandelson#, Secretary of State for Trade and Industry</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Oil and Gas Fabrication Support Group</td>
<td>Sectoral</td>
<td>National, including North East region</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>DTI (National)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North East Oil and Gas Fabrication Action Group**</td>
<td>Sectoral</td>
<td>North East region</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>ONE North East</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Tyneside Call Centre Group</td>
<td>Sectoral</td>
<td>South Tyneside</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>South Tyneside Metropolitan Borough Council</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steel Industry (Corus)</td>
<td>Sectoral</td>
<td>Teesside</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Stephen Byers, Secretary of State for Trade and Industry</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textiles</td>
<td>Sectoral</td>
<td>North East region</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Stephen Byers, Secretary of State for Trade and Industry</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tyne Maritime Group**</td>
<td>Sectoral</td>
<td>North East region</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Indicates a task force created in response to a particular employer's needs.
* Indicates a task force that is ongoing and continues to operate.
** Indicates a task force that is no longer active.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Small Business Service</th>
<th>North East region</th>
<th>-</th>
<th>-</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Blyth</td>
<td>Blyth, Northumberland</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Blyth Valley Borough Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>East Durham Task Force</em></td>
<td>County Durham</td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>Durham County Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>North West Durham Task Force</strong></td>
<td>County Durham</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Durham County Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>South Tyneside Strategic Action Group</em></td>
<td>South Tyneside, Tyne and Wear</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Richard Caborn, Minister for Regions, Regeneration and Planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘South Tyneside Redundancies – Rapid Response Group’</td>
<td>South Tyneside, Tyne and Wear</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>South Tyneside Metropolitan Borough Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>South West Durham Task Force</strong></td>
<td>County Durham</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Durham County Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Sunderland ARC of Opportunity</em></td>
<td>City of Sunderland, Tyne and Wear</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Stephen Byers, Secretary of State for Trade and Industry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>South East Northumberland and North Tyneside</strong></td>
<td>Wansbeck and Blyth Valley, Northumberland North Tyneside</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Richard Caborn, Minister for Regions, Regeneration and Planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Urban Task Force</em></td>
<td>Cities (National)</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>John Prescott, Deputy Prime Minister and Secretary of State for the Department of Environment, Transport and Regions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Italicised Task Forces included in the audit; * Employer-based Task Force became sub-regional; ** Tyne Maritime Group evolved from the North East Oil and Gas Fabrication Action Group as well as the River Tyne Strategy Group, Tyne Users Group and the Âker McNulty Workforce Committee (Figure 1); *** English region coalfields only; # Then Secretary of State for Trade and Industry.

**Source: Author’s Task Force Audit (2000)**
### Table 2: Examples of Task Force Aims by Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employer-based</th>
<th>Sectoral</th>
<th>Area-based</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Redeploy and/or retrain redundant workforce</td>
<td>Analyse sectoral/regional situation</td>
<td>Focus attention on target area problems and opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secure sale of facility and/or site</td>
<td>Recommendations to improve competitiveness and retain employment</td>
<td>Develop action programmes and initiatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assess community and supply chain impact</td>
<td>Assist redundant workforce</td>
<td>Monitor and review progress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Improve co-ordination and integration between agencies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Author’s Research (2000)
Table 3: Number of Task Force Organisational Memberships Ranked by Organisation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation</th>
<th>Number of Task Force Organisational Memberships</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RDA (ONE North East)</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government Office-North East</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Durham County Council</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment Service</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>County Durham TEC</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Tyneside Metropolitan Borough Council</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Tyneside Council</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easington District Council</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Partnerships</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GMB trade union</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sedgefield Borough Council</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tyneside TEC</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Author’s Task Force Audit (2000)*
Table 4: Number of Task Force Memberships Held by Individuals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Task Force Memberships</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>273</td>
<td>83.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>11.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>327*</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Information available only for 327 of the total 351 Task Force memberships.

Source: Author’s Task Force Audit (2000)
Figure 1: Task Force Organisational Evolution

(i) Dissolution

Task Force
(Segg, Sibburt, Fijalkowski)

Dissolution on completion of task

(ii) One Stage Evolution

Dringle Task Force
(Segg, Sibburt, Fijalkowski)

Berwick-upon-Tweed Regeneration Task Force
(Area regeneration- directed)

Drumke Task Force
(Segg, Sibburt, Fijalkowski)

South Tyne-side Strategic Action Team
(Area regeneration-directed)

(iii) Two Stage Evolution

Groves Task Force
(Segg, Sibburt, Fijalkowski)

Sunderland ARC
(Area regeneration-directed)

(iv) Two Stage Evolution and Consolidation

National Oil and Gas Federation Support Group
(area万达 revitalisation-directed)

North East Oil and Gas Federation Support Group
(area万达 revitalisation-directed)

Aker Mcähly Workforce Committee

Urban Regeneration Company

Tyne Maritime Group
(Area regeneration-directed)

Tyne Users Group

Source: Author's research
Figure 2: Number of Task Force Organisational Memberships by Sector
Figure 3: Number of Task Force Organisational Membership by Type of Organisation
This paper draws upon research supported by the University Research Committee, University of Newcastle and South Tyneside Metropolitan Borough Council. Thanks to Stuart Dawley for his research assistance. Thanks to the participants in this project, especially Bob Dobbie and Chris Pretty (GO-NE) and Ken Frankish and Shân Warren (Durham County Council) for the audit reports. This paper has also benefited from comments made by John Tomaney and Alan Harding, two anonymous referees as well as participants at the Urban Regeneration Workshop (University of Durham, November 2000), CURDS Internal Seminar (University of Newcastle, December 2000) and the Human Geography Seminar (University of Liverpool, January 2001). The usual disclaimers, as always, apply.

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This empirical research is drawn from a study that sought to investigate the local and regional economic development Task Forces in the North East region of England in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In-depth interviews were conducted with over 20 key informants from within the local and regional economic development community, including Task Force members and national civil servants. An audit of documentary evidence was also undertaken concerning the extent and character of economic development Task Force organisation and structure (Table 1). The broadly constituted national Task Forces linked to government departments that indirectly impinged upon economic development issues, for example the DTI Competitiveness Task Force, were excluded from this study.

A Task Force organisational membership is where an individual from an organisation is a member of a Task Force. The 351 is the total number of organisational memberships and includes individuals from organisations who are members of more than one Task Force (See Table 4).

The 'Regional Assembly' category (Figure 3) under-represents the involvement of members of the Regional Assembly since the majority of Regional Assembly members have been recorded as representatives of their employer (e.g. local authorities, employer’s organisations, trade unions).