Inter-institutional relations in the governance of England’s national parks: a
governmentality perspective

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Abstract

Using Foucault’s governmentality approach this paper analyses recent developments in power relations between different levels of government. Taking as its empirical focus the relationship between England’s National Park Authorities (NPAs) and the UK government, the paper argues that there are two competing imperatives at work in the governance of England’s national parks: a political imperative to devolve competencies to the regional level to allow for policy differentiation and an administrative imperative to manage and control the public policy process to ensure the achievement of national policy objectives in rural areas. Both imperatives shape the conduct of individual NPAs but to date the managerial tendencies of central government have been more influential in the changing governance of England’s national parks.

1. Introduction

The governance of rural localities has come under increasing academic scrutiny in recent years reflecting a growing interest in the social sciences in the alleged shift from a system of ‘government’ to one of ‘governance’ (Bevir and Rhodes, 2003; Jessop, 1997; 1995; 1994; Rhodes, 1996; 1994; Stoker, 1998). This shift involves two main processes. First the increasing involvement of actors from outside the formal boundaries of the state in the process of governing. This means that governing is now argued to rely on networks of interconnected actors from the public, private and voluntary sectors rather than a hierarchy dominated and defined by the central state (Stoker, 1998). Second the internal organisation of the state has become more complex and ‘multi-levelled’ as sub and supra national institutions partially usurp the competencies of the central state (Jessop, 1994). Government
now relies on a complex network of state institutions that are defined both by their geographical territories and functional remits.

The paper draws on the existing literature on rural governance to argue that there is an increasing need to focus on relations within the formal sphere of government in the analysis of the political regulation of rural spaces. While there is a large and growing literature on relations between the state and non-governmental actors particularly in analysing the growth of rural development partnerships (Cloke et al. 2000; Edwards, 1998; Edwards et al. 2001; Goodwin, 1998; Herbert-Cheshire, 2001; 2000; Herbert-Cheshire and Higgins, 2004; Jones and Little, 2000; Little, 2001; MacKinnon, 2001; 2000; Marsden and Murdoch, 1998; Moseley, 2003; Murdoch, 1997; Tewdwr Jones, 1998; Ward and McNicholas, 1998; Woods and Goodwin, 2003) the changing institutional architecture of the state has received less attention in the rural studies literature (see Ward, 2003; Ward and Lowe, 2002 and Ward et al. 2003 for UK exceptions). In particular as yet there is little theoretically informed analysis of relations between institutions acting at different governmental levels. Analysis of developments within the state is important to rural studies for three primary reasons. The first is because examining change within government is crucial to understanding the development and implementation of public policy in rural localities. The second reason is closely related to the first, referring to the importance of the analysis of the institutional architecture of rural development in academic study of its social, cultural, environmental and economic impacts. The third reason is the necessity of understanding the linkages between the growing reliance on non-state actors in the process of governing and the shift to a multi-levelled system within the state.
This paper adopts a governmentality approach to understanding change within government, arguing that a focus on practices, behaviours and conduct is highly applicable to the analysis of inter-institutional relations. I substantiate this argument by applying the approach to the analysis of relations between central government at the UK level and one particular type of rural development institution, namely the National Park Authority (NPA). Based on primary research the paper demonstrates how relations within government are characterised by two competing imperatives.

The first imperative is to devolve powers, particularly to recently formed regional level institutions such as Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) to allow for greater flexibility and differentiation in the implementation of policy within England. However, the second (more dominant) imperative in the conduct of relations is essentially managerial with the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) regulating the behaviours and practices of NPAs through a series of disciplining rules and the promotion of certain policy norms and expectations. This managerialism is most explicitly expressed through the Best Value performance monitoring process. It is also reinforced in through a commitment to developing a common national vision through which NPAs will explicitly deliver national government priorities for rural England.

The governance of national parks forms the empirical focus of the paper through which these competing imperative are examined. The national parks system was established in England fifty years ago with the twin purposes of the conservation of the environment and the provision of opportunities for outdoor recreation and enjoyment. Throughout the history of English national parks there has been a remarkable degree of continuity in the purpose of national park designation. However, the institutional arrangements for achieving these
purposes have undergone successive rounds of reform. While local authorities once administered national parks, now independent National Park Authorities, funded in the main by central government, take the lead in their governance. Furthermore, whereas once national parks were a highly peripheral area of rural policy, largely ignored by successive administrations in the era of agricultural productivism, they are currently experiencing something of a renaissance. Over the last five years the parks have enjoyed increasing amounts of central government funding, reflecting growing governmental interest in the conservation and recreation usage of rural land. The attention that the national park concept is receiving, in the context of a shift to a post-productivist rural policy, makes the governance of these designations ripe for academic analysis.

The field research on which this paper is based was conducted between August 2001 and August 2003. The research focused on the experience of Northumberland National Park Authority in the North East of England, although representatives from two other NPAs, and a series of national experts and actors were also interviewed. A total of thirty eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with actors from National Park Authorities, regional institutions, governmental bodies and departments, universities and non-governmental organisations. Interviews lasted between one and two hours. In addition to the interviews key policy texts were analysed and the researcher attended a series of relevant meetings and events including National Park Authority meetings and the Association of National Park Authorities Annual Conference 2002.

The paper first outlines the governmentality approach and its development. Section two then examines how an analysis of inter-institutional relations moves forward debates and discussion of rural governance. The third section of the paper then turns to recent
developments in national parks policy to introduce the empirical focus of the paper. In the final sections the two competing imperatives identified as characterising the conduct of governmental relations are examined before concluding that despite the devolutionary impulses of the current administration in the UK the more influential trend is one of increased central control in the governance of England’s national parks.

2. The governmentality approach

Foucault’s concept of governmentality is concerned with the study of the operation of government both in terms of the institutions of the state and the power relations that permeate society (Foucault, 1991; Dean 1999). Governmentality focuses on techniques and rationalities of rule employed by government in exercising social control. In particular the perspective is concerned with the emergence of liberal democratic ‘government’ as a form of rule. In reflecting on the exercise of power in society Foucault (1991, p.102) defined government as:

The ensemble formed by the institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, the calculations and tactics, that allow the exercise of this very specific, albeit complex, form of power.

Foucault understood government not as a set of institutions purely synonymous with the state but as an insipient process that permeates social life. His concept of governmentality is concerned with how a system of government has come to dominate ideas about political organisation since the emergence of distinct governmental strategies and rationalities in sixteenth century Europe (Foucault, 1991, p.89 - 91). Governmentality is, therefore, not a
theory of how government could or should operate. It does not offer an explicit political ideology or an assessment of the successes and failures of any system of government. Instead, it seeks to explore the historical emergence and continual evolution of liberal democratic rule.

Foucault’s own work on governmentality has a strongly historical focus. It is largely an exploration of the emergence of the governmental system or, in Foucault’s own words, how the “administrative state” became “governmentalized” (1991, p.103). This governmentalization process involved the development of technologies and arts of government that allowed for the exercise of governmental power upon populations (Foucault, 1991, p.99). The governmentalization process marked a change from the previous system that relied on the concept of sovereignty for the exercise of political power. Sovereignty implied acting upon territory rather than the people within that territory. In contrast, government is an indirect form of rule that acts explicitly on populations rather than territory (1991, pp.99-101). Foucault acknowledges that the concept of the sovereign nation state is still politically important, as territory still forms the basis of political organisation (Hannah, 2000). However, the emergence of government is distinct in terms of establishing a relationship between individuals, populations and the state, a relationship which constantly shifts as “the continual definition and redefinition of what is within the competence of the state and what is not” (Foucault, 1991, p.103) is played out. As the competencies of the state are constantly brought into question so the institutional framework and the division of responsibility within the state is also subject to change.

Governmentality describes a system of rule where the ‘objects’ are not directly acted upon by an identifiable authority, but where government employs a variety of strategies and
rationalities aimed at shaping the conduct of its subjects (Dean, 1999, pp.9 – 39). Through these indirect mechanisms government ensures the broad compliance of the population with a series of societal and political norms. In short, Foucault offers an explanation for how liberal democracy and its associated forms of governing has achieved its hegemonic status in Europe and Northern America. Governmentality focuses on examining ‘the conduct of conduct’ the mentalities and practices of government (Dean, 1999). The concept of governmentality focuses on how government operates and the cultures that pervade its practices.

According to Foucault, government shapes the rules of conduct through a series of strategies and justifies its actions through a distinct form of political rationality. This rationality relies on the liberal notion of ‘limited government’. According to the principle of limited government the state only acts when it is necessary to do so (Mill, 1993). Any governmental intervention must therefore be justified. In order to define and justify necessary interventions statistics and other knowledges on the population and economy are collected by the liberal state to form the basis of the ‘conduct of conduct’ (Foucault, 1991, p.99). By using statistics to make populations ‘visible’ government is then able to define both problems and solutions. In defining the characteristics of the population government is able to justify any intervention, using this knowledge to highlight problems and provide a rationale for action. Once interventions are made government continues to collect information on the population in order to refine the system of regulation. Governmental strategies therefore continually evolve (Foucault, 1991; Rose, 1996a; 1996b; 1993). This evolution has been analysed by Rose (1996b, p.61) in his work on neo-liberal, or advanced liberal, governmentalities where the state withdraws from direct intervention in the lives of the population, instead governing:
…through the regulated and accountable choices of autonomous agents…to
govern through intensifying and acting upon their allegiance to particular
‘communities’ (Rose, 1996b, p.61).

Government is understood as being concerned with acting, directly or through such
mechanisms as ‘community’ on identified problems both in order to ensure social and
economic stability and to justify its own existence to the population. This system relies on
the consent of the population to be governed, the idea that government is a legitimate form of
power. Government does not rely on holding power by force. Instead it relies on the
formation of a consensual power relationship between the formal state and the population.
This conceptualisation is based on Foucault’s ideas of power as a relationship or process
rather than a quality that can be possessed (Danaher et al., 2000, pp.63 – 81). While this idea
of power as relational is usually applied to government acting on populations, it is also of
utility in understanding the operation of power within a state composed of a complex
network of governmental institutions. As I shall demonstrate below the central state can not
merely impose its will on other levels of government, it relies on the recognition of mutual
benefits in securing compliance.

A governmentality perspective is conventionally understood as the analysis of the ‘conduct
of conduct’, an approach to studying how the formal institutions of government
operationalise social control (Dean, 1999). Government is argued to be at the apex of a
system of regulating the conduct of all individuals within a particular society. Therefore,
government involves a wide variety of institutions both within and beyond the state, as the
exercise of power relies on the formation of relationships between the formal state and the
population. However, although the process of government is in a constant state of flux, the
system of rule retains certain key parameters and constants. The mode of operation changes but the purpose of government remains the same; to maintain a liberal democratic system of rule.

The scope of Foucault’s understanding of the term government means that the governmentality approach has been widely applied to the study of social and political regulation. In the following section I examine how the perspective has been used in recent studies of change and continuity in rural governance to understand the broader trends that underlie particular developments in the practice of government.

3. Governmentality in the analysis of rural governance

Governmentality has been increasingly employed in rural studies since the mid 1990s in two ways. The first ‘classical approach’ involves the adoption of Foucault’s ideas of how government collects information in order to be able to act upon the population and justify its interventions. This utilisation of governmentality is typified by Murdoch and Ward’s (1997) study of the ‘National Farm’ in post war Britain. The second type of study has emerged since the late 1990s and involves highlighting how government increasingly acts through populations, consciously blurring the boundary between ‘the government’ and ‘the population’ (Murdoch, 1997). These ‘neo-Foucauldian’ studies of the role of government in rural localities highlight how the state uses various techniques of partnership, consultation and devolved responsibility in order to directly implicate non-state actors in the act of governing.
Neo-Foucauldian studies of the practice of governing rural localities draw on the theoretical work on the nature of government in advanced liberalism in which government harnesses the self-governing properties of populations (Dean, 1999; Raco and Imrie, 2000; Rose, 1996a; 1996b; 1993; Rose and Miller, 1992). Applying these concepts to rural studies, research has highlighted the development of governamentalities that rely on ‘government through community’ (Rose, 1996; Herbert Cheshire, 2001; 2000; Herbert Cheshire and Higgins, 2004; Ward and McNicholas, 1998; Marsden and Murdoch, 1998, Murdoch, 1997) and the development of governance ‘partnerships’ that transcend the public/private/voluntary sector divides (Edwards et al, 2001; Edwards, 1998; Jones and Little, 2000).

In one study of ‘neo-Foucauldian’ governamentalities, Murdoch (1997) analyses the English Rural White Paper of 1995 and the rationalities employed by government in shifting responsibility for service delivery from ‘the government’ to ‘the population’. He traces the “shifting contours of state intervention” (Murdoch, 1997, p.109) to argue that government is replacing direct intervention with discourses of community responsibility and self-government. Adopting a similar line of analysis, Herbert Cheshire (2000; 2001) explores the changing role of the Australian state in rural development policy. She argues that a series of new governamentalities, including a discourse of ‘governing through community’, have emerged to justify the replacement of direct state intervention. This approach relies explicitly on what Foucault understood as the “self governing” properties of populations directed by the government (Foucault, 1991). However, instead of seeking to act on populations government acts through populations deliberately stressing the role of non-governmental actors in social and political regulation. These ‘neo-Foucauldian’ studies provide examples of how govern mentality has been used to understand the use of partnerships to implement policy as the will of the state.
Studies that employ the concept of governmentality provide analyses of how government operates, and the practices that define its operation. However, to date governmentality has been used to understand the relationship between government and the governed, the state and the populations on which it acts. As the remainder of the paper demonstrates governmentality can also be used to understand the behaviour of different parts of government itself, in particular the actions and rationalities of the central state as it acts on more specialised institutions. Developing the existing literature a governmentality approach can provide insights in the study of inter-institutional relations as the focus on practices and mentalities provides a conceptual framework for examining the conduct of relations within government. Furthermore, the emphasis on the role of knowledge in governmental relations also points to the explicit ways in which the central state conducts itself in relation to the myriad of institutions that comprise the state.

Changes to the structure of the state both in the UK, EU and beyond will mean that relations within it will become increasingly pertinent to the study of rural governance. The terms government or ‘the state’ are no longer synonymous purely with the nation state and its departments and agencies. The creation of supra-national agencies and the growing role of sub-national institutions have resulted in a multi-levelled system of governing (Brenner et al., 2003) in which the formal boundaries of the state are at best fuzzy. As Painter (2003, p.638) observes:

The post-sovereign European polity is a novel political phenomenon.
There is no single centre of authority. Sovereignty today is multi-layered, fragmented, overlapping.
However, while the governing process increasingly relies on actors from above and beyond the nation state level the machinery of central government remains central to political regulation (Low, 2003). Therefore, the operation of government, in particular in the conduct of relations between levels, is still critically important in determining the kinds of policies and interventions that act upon rural localities. As policy is increasingly formulated through negotiations between governmental agencies this complex architecture requires closer examination. This is not to suggest that multi-levelled governance is something new, rather that it is of growing pertinence to understanding the governing process and is an area that is as yet underdeveloped in the rural studies literature. Governmentality provides an attractive theoretical lens through which to understand the exercise of governmental power as it can be applied to the behaviours and strategies of agencies at these different levels.

The utility of a governmentality inspired perspective on power relations within the state is now demonstrated using the empirical example of national parks policy in England. Before analysing the conduct of the central state I briefly introduce recent developments in the governance of England’s national parks.

4. Recent developments in English national parks policy

A national park system was first created in England in the 1950s following the passage of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act of 1949. The park system was therefore conceived at a time of national reconstruction by a Labour administration intent on the reform of governmental policy in the countryside, in particular the planning of the utilisation of rural space (Sheail, 1984). While agricultural productivism was the overriding imperative
the creation of national parks signalled that rural areas also had a secondary role as sites for nature conservation and outdoor recreation (MacEwen and MacEwen, 1982; 1987). Seven national parks\(^1\) were designated in England in the 1950s with the de facto addition of the Broads in the 1980s and the New Forest and South Downs in the 2000s.

Historically the institution of the National Park Authority was a creature of local government. Committees or boards of the relevant county councils formed the original NPAs. However, throughout the fifty year history of the national parks the Authorities have become increasingly autonomous from local authorities and have developed into independent bodies, staffed by professional officers and funded in the main by central government. The position of NPAs remains unusual. They are best understood as hybrids, special case local authorities with close links to local government that also act as non-departmental public bodies with national purposes ultimately responsible to DEFRA. Currently the English parks have two purposes (environmental conservation and the promotion, understanding and enjoyment of the countryside) and, since the 1995 Environment Act, an additional duty to promote the social and economic well-being of park communities. As institutions that have evolved in response to circumstance the funding of NPAs is complex. While a certain proportion of the finance is channelled through local authorities the NPAs are funded by DEFRA both through a direct grant and various national and European funding schemes.

The influence of NPAs as the principal agencies concerned with the governance of England’s national parks has also shifted dramatically since the 1950s. This directly reflects recent developments in land management policy both at the EU and the UK levels. As the dominance of agricultural productivism as the defining discourse of government policy for

\(^{1}\) Northumberland, Lake District, Yorkshire Dales, North York Moors, Peak District, Exmoor, Dartmoor.
rural localities has been challenged (Lowe et al., 2002) so NPAs have been able to position
themselves to capitalise on policy change. These policy shifts are signalled in documents
such as the 2000 Rural White Paper, the England Rural Development Programme and
‘Farming and Food – A Sustainable Future’ all of which underline the value of rural space as
an economic, social and environmental resource through discourses of sustainability.
Likewise, the 2004 Review of the Rural White paper reiterates the value of the ‘protected
countryside’ not only as a site of economic development but also as having natural resource,
recreational and ‘intrinsic’ value (DEFRA, 2004a). Furthermore, government is investing
increasing amounts of money in social and environmental schemes and policies. Examples
include the agri-environment and woodland elements of the England Rural Development
Programme and in the countryside access legislation of 2000 that brought public access to
large areas of open countryside. This represents an increased degree of convergence between
the purposes of national parks and the objectives of EU and UK policy for rural areas, a point
recognised by the Association of National Park Authorities (Association of National Park
Authorities, 2003a; 2002). The context of these recent changes in rural policy priorities is
important to understanding why the 2002 Review was undertaken and its principal outcomes.

In July 2002 Alun Michael, as Minister of State for Rural Affairs, launched the Review of
English National Park Authorities undertaken by DEFRA civil servants in 2001/02. Inviting
comment on the series of recommendations in the Review Michael articulated a clear
governmental purpose for analysing the future of the parks system, “…to make the most of
out national parks as a national asset, now in the future, while ensuring that they form part of
a living countryside – sustainable in social, economic and environmental terms” (DEFRA,
2002, p.6). Michael, reflecting the tenor of the Review itself was unambiguous; national
parks are to be understood as national institutions, part of the DEFRA ‘family’ with a remit to promote the government’s broader sustainable development objectives.

The Review focused on issues of governance, accountability and remit, examining the working practices of NPAs five years after they were granted free standing status within local government (DEFRA, 2002, p.7). The decision to undertake the Review was also taken in the context of the requirement of non departmental bodies to undergo a review process once every five years. Although not technically non departmental bodies DEFRA judged that there was a need for a comprehensive review which examined the system as a whole and in particular focused on questions of accountability and governance. Following a series of ‘consultations’ the Review was developed into an ‘Action Plan’ published by DEFRA in April 2003 (DEFRA, 2003) which included fifty four specific policy recommendations and a detailed timetable for the implementation of the recommendations.

The Review and Action Plan make a series of recommendations including the formulation of a common ‘government vision’ for national parks (p.13). As part of this vision the Review recommends that specific policy advice on the role of NPAs in promoting ‘sustainable rural development’ be developed by central government (p.15). The Review sets out a particular vision of the future of national parks, that resonates with the direction of national rural policy (which continually cites the importance of achieving sustainable development), emphasising the need for partnership between the local, regional and national levels of government in order to utilise national parks as ‘test beds’. This recommendation directly reflects ANPAs ongoing work in promoting national parks as ‘test beds’ in the trailing of new approaches to sustainable rural development (Association of National Park Authorities, 2003a).
The DEFRA review also focuses on the internal governance of NPAs. It recommends that membership be capped at twenty five (p.37) with a slightly increased number of Secretary of State Appointees\(^2\) (the remainder of the membership continues to be drawn from the local authorities which comprise the Parks). Furthermore, it recommends consultation on the introduction of independently appointed chairs selected by the Secretary of State (p.41), and, reforming an anomaly in local finance, the funding of Parks wholly through a direct grant from DEFRA (p.54). In addition the Action Plan states that DEFRA will negotiate with NPAs to introduce a performance based element to funding and implement a series of ‘public service agreements’ such as those already employed to steer local government by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (p.54).

Although these and other detailed reforms to the constitution and working practices of NPAs have been welcomed by the Association of National Park Authorities (2003b) and NGOs such as the Council for National Parks (2002) these incremental reforms also signal a greater degree of direct DEFRA influence in the governance of NPAs. Collectively the recommendations of the Review are likely to result in a national park model which emphasises the national role of the Parks, bringing them under the closer control of DEFRA and diluting the culture of local control to develop specific responses to the raft of policy agendas which impact on Park localities. As is expanded on in the following section, central government is recognising that policy initiatives must incorporate the differentiated nature of the countryside (Murdoch \textit{et al.}, 2003). This recognition is implicit in the process of administrative regionalisation in rural policy. However, it is also evident that in the context of the governance of national parks, the ‘centre’ is attempting to exert a new degree of influence on the approach to managing and capitalising on this ‘differentiation’. In short

\(^2\) This would mean that three fifths of the membership were drawn from local authorities and parish council and two fifths were appointed by the Secretary of State.
government is acting through national park authorities to achieve its own policy ends, a
variation on ‘governing through community’ within the formal boundaries of the public
sector.

The following two sections expand on the argument that government at the nation state level
continues to control policy through regulating the parameters of difference. Government is
not concerned with the detail of policy and is therefore content to allow different degrees of
emphasis and different ‘approaches’. However, government effectively places a boundary
around how far differentiation can go, pursuing a strategy that encompasses a particular
vision and set of objectives for rural England (and consequently for the national parks) that
the detail of policy must be congruent with. The next section analyses recent change at the
regional level tracing the early stages of regional differentiation in rural development policy.
This regionalisation process represents the beginnings of devolution of competency in this
area of key importance to NPAs. However, the second section examines how central
government continues to regulate the conduct of English NPAs using practices of audit and
policy development to promote the idea of a common vision, strategy and goals for national
parks policy.

5. The devolving imperative

Since the general election of 1997 there have been a series of constitutional reforms which
have strengthened the sub-national level in the UK. There has been a ‘devolution’ of powers
to Scotland, Wales and (with some difficulties) Northern Ireland. At the same time, there has
been an increasing impetus behind administrative devolution in the English regions through
the strengthening of the Government Office network, and the establishment of Regional
Development Agencies and non-statutory regional assemblies. Given this programme of governmental reform it might then seem reasonable to expect that NPAs are increasingly feeling the effects of regionalisation, that they are adapting to a devolving imperative which will ultimately result in policy differentiation between regions and hence between park localities.

Recent academic analysis of the work of RDAs has led Ward et al. (2003, p.212) argue that rural policy is being impacted by regionalisation in two, often competing, ways. First, we are witnessing regional differentiation, the gradual development of regionally distinctive policy or policies tailored to the particular needs of the region. Second, there is a process of integration at play as rural development policy is merged with the ‘mainstream’ regional development agenda. However, while there is evidence of both regional differentiation and the increasing integration of ‘the rural’ into regional level spatial plans and strategies, it is vital to recognise that the regionalisation process is in its very early stages.

An examination of the concrete forms that the regionalisation process has taken to date reveals rural policy activity and responsibility within a variety of institutions. The most significant developments have taken place as a result of the creation of RDAs. The RDAs have specific rural development functions and possess a remit to “take account of the particular features of the rural areas of their regions” (Ward et al., 2003, p.202). In practice this means that that an increasing amount of rural development funding is channelled through the RDAs with the government’s Rural Strategy of July 2004 including a commitment to increase RDA funding from DEFRA from £42 million to £72 million by 2005 (DEFRA, 2004b).
Alongside the growth of financial resources administered by regional institutions a series of rural plans and strategies have been developed by partnerships of actors within the regions. These have included regional chapters in the England Rural Development Programme (the document through which the rural development and agri-environment aspects of the Common Agricultural Policy are programmed) and various rural planning and priority setting documents. In producing such documents regional level policy communities or networks have formed or been augmented although the degree to which this has occurred has varied widely across the English regions (Ayres et al., 2004).

How then have NPAs adapted to this regionalisation process? The field research explicitly addressed this question through examining Northumberland NPA and its role in the North East region. The research found a willingness to engage at this level through membership of various regional networks and committees and through input into documents produced during and after the Foot and Mouth disease crisis by the regional institutions in 2001. Not only were Northumberland NPA included in the writing of these documents, but according to those officers involved, the Authority was also able to wield influence in the determination of policy:

We (the NPA) have been able to sit at the table at the regional task force and the regional land management recovery group and play a role in influencing what came out of those groups. I think the fact that we have been there and what we have been able to input has been recognised as being of some use and we will continue to have a seat at those tables (officer, National Park Authority, August 2001).
Actors from the NPA were also able to expand on precisely the sorts of strategies they used in seeking to extend their influence at this ‘regional table’, as the quote below demonstrates, linking the business of the national park with the broader regional development imperative:

“We have got things like the World Heritage Site and Ramsar Sites… so we have some unique natural and cultural heritage which we have a duty to protect but which we can also use to economic advantage. That’s where we are able to influence regional agencies (officer, National Park Authority, August 2001).”

This strategy of involvement was also commented on by NGO actors in the region who perceived that the NPA was broadly successful both in securing rural development funding and promoting its role through regional level activity. This influence was expressed through comments about senior officers and members of the NPA, one actor describing an officer of the NPA as an ‘elder statesman’ of the region able to wield power and, mirroring the language of the NPA quote above, able to claim a place at the ‘regional table’.

Northumberland NPA is therefore clearly working at the regional level in order to promote its own objectives and believes that its interventions at this level are influential. If the Authority perceives that it can have any influence whatsoever then it is unsurprising that it has sought to strengthen relations between itself and the other agencies with a place ‘at the table’. However, the question still remains of how important these relations are relative to the those with institutions at other governmental levels. The answer is, of course, debatable. It is however uncontroversial to state that to date regional institutions possess a relatively small degree of influence over major areas of rural policy such as the CAP and that therefore
the more influential relationship for Northumberland NPA is that with DEFRA centrally. The extent of regional tailoring in England is (in practice) limited. Actors are able to identify the most pressing challenges and problems but the objectives of policy are still largely determined at the UK and EU levels with only limited degrees of regional discretion.

The devolving impulse of the central state has resulted in a growing awareness on the part of Authorities like Northumberland of the potential benefits of action at the regional level. However, as the following section demonstrates NPAs are still primarily orientated towards their relationship with central government. Through examining the conduct of relations between NPAs and the national level it becomes clear that rural policy differentiation (at least in the park localities) is ‘managed differentiation’ in which the central state uses a series of ‘managerial technologies’ to define the parameters of the possible.

6. The managerial imperative

In this section I draw on the idea of ‘managerial technologies’ defined by MacKinnon (2000, p.293) as such practices as “budgetary management, audit and targeting”. These technologies collectively allow for the maintenance of political control by the centre forming the practical means of mediating power relations between the central state and its ‘local’ agencies involved in the implementation of policy. In developing the notion of ‘managerial technologies’ MacKinnon draws directly on a governmentality approach, pointing to the series of strategies and behaviours used in the ‘conduct of conduct’, to ensure compliance with certain norms and expectations. In this section I examine one such example of the mobilisation of ‘managerial technologies’, demonstrating how DEFRA is using a range of
such strategies in its relationship with NPAs in order to discipline Authorities into compliance with key policy and administrative norms.

The 2002 Review of English National Park Authorities and subsequent Action Plan make a series of recommendations that can be understood as signalling a new degree of central intervention in the objectives and working practices of NPAs. The recommendation for a common ‘government vision’ for national parks (p.13), signals a greater degree of national level direction in statements concerning the future of national park policy than has ever previously been the case. The proposed uniformity of objectives and practices with regard to NPAs role in sustainable rural development again provide a central steer where NPAs previously evolved their own interpretation of and response to the 1995 Environment Act. Likewise, the provision for an independent chair and the implementation of public service agreements enhance the ability of the minister to intervene in the governance of NPAs. Public service agreements will explicitly tie the performance of NPAs (judged through reference to a series of DEFRA determined goals and targets) to the annual financial settlements. Furthermore, the NPAs will rely more heavily on the direct contributions of DEFRA in their finance. While the Review recognises that the Parks “have different characteristics, cultures and challenges” (p.5) and that change will be undertaken in an “evolutionary” (p.5) manner the overall tone positions the national park as a national asset that is subject to DEFRA.

The exact degree to which the 2002 Review will mark increased central intervention in the work of NPAs remains to be seen as the recommendations are acted upon in the coming years. However, the dominant discourse of the Review as a policy text is one that

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3 Although guidance has existed in the form of Planning Policy Guidance notes and departmental circulars such as the current Department of the Environment Circular 12/96.
emphasises the legitimacy of national intervention. This is not to suggest that this managerial steer is necessarily a bad thing but rather to highlight that it marks a change in the traditional behaviour of central government in the conduct of national parks policy. The particular construction of the purpose of the national park concept and the role of the NPA acts to legitimise a growing role for DEFRA in regulating the conduct of the Authorities and in determining policy priorities. This increased degree of intervention follows on from previous moves to manage and steer the work of NPAs through a particular auditing process which has been applied to NPAs in recent years, namely Best Value.

In common with local authorities NPAs are increasingly subject to the auditing powers of central government in the regulation of their conduct. The most prominent example of the practice of ‘the centre’ defining the parameters and priorities of local administrations is the Best Value Performance Review process. Best Value was first applied to local government in the late 1990s. It provides a common framework for reporting performance in delivering services and managing finance. The process was first applied to all the English NPAs in 2000 when a statutory duty to produce an annual Best Value Performance Plan was introduced. Each NPA produces the plan following a set framework defined by DEFRA and the Audit Commission. Best Value can therefore be understood as a governmental practice for rendering local level institutions ‘visible’ to the central state. The process and resultant documentation allows central government to ‘know’ each NPA in a particular way, bringing them under the regulatory gaze of the centre to discipline the Authorities to conform to certain norms and prioritise particular areas of work.

There were two basic understandings of the Best Value process that emerged during field research on the governance of national parks. The first understanding highlighted the
benefits of the process to Authorities that were already performing well and had existing mechanisms for monitoring performance. The second understanding related to the burden that the process placed on Authorities, several members viewing it as intrusive and time consuming to complete. According to this view Best Value was purely an accounting mechanism that was an (unwelcome) imposition of central government.

It is clear that if Best Value is used by NPAs to assist in the monitoring of their work and as an imperative to improve performance the experience of being part of the system can bring dividends. However, when the system was first introduced it did pose challenges in terms of the time commitment it required from officers and members. Initially surviving the process seemed to overshadow what the process was trying to achieve. However, now that Best Value has operated for several years and is part of the working practices of Authorities its benefits to certain actors and institutions are becoming apparent. The common system allows for comparison between NPAs, provides a system for highlighting 'good practice' while assisting in identifying areas where Authorities need to improve. The process is uncomfortable for some as it undoubtedly enhances the ability of central government to hold NPAs to account and to define what 'good practice’ is. Furthermore, Best Value is not a once only check on performance, it represents a constant gaze on the work of the Authorities providing an ongoing framework for comparison both over time and between different NPAs.

In addition to providing information for government it also allows organisations and individuals outside government such as the Council for National Parks that seek to oversee the work of the NPAs to compare the work and future plans of the Authorities. The information that Best Value generates is used to ‘know’ the institution of the NPA for the
benefit of both government and the NGO sector. Just as statistics are collected on the population to render them ‘visible’ to government so the state itself employs this technique in its relationship with local level institutions. Practically this means that NPAs account for their actions and policies directly to DEFRA, and as a result of the requirement for publication (itself a particular strategy of rule) the findings of the process are also available to pressure groups (and academics) monitoring their work and direction.

Best Value, when it highlights ‘good practice’, also demonstrates to central government the competency of NPAs. Proof of competency in implementing policy is vital if NPAs want to expand the range of their work. The process benefits Authorities if DEFRA is then more aware of their work, strengthening the relationship between the two agencies. However, this relationship remains an unequal one in which the NPA must fit into DEFRA’s agenda for national parks. This was explicitly recognised in an interview with a senior NPA officer:

They say ‘here’s a lump of dosh, but this is what you are expected to provide’…it has strings attached, there are targets to meet and ‘we are watching you’ (officer, National Park Authority, October 2002).

The message is unequivocal, Best Value only brings benefits to NPAs if the objectives of DEFRA at the centre are broadly sympathetic to those of NPAs and the national park concept. At present the increased degree of DEFRA intervention has been welcomed due largely to the view that the minister is an enthusiast for the national park concept. There was the sense that national parks were enjoying attention from within government because of the prevailing political attitude inside DEFRA expressed in one of the interviews:
Ministers here regard the Parks as important players. You know they very much like the Parks, they see them as playing a major role in whatever the future is…they think that they are good organisations and have an important part to play in government policy (civil servant, DEFRA, March 2002).

The growing profile of national parks in government suggested in the interviews and reinforced by the positive messages in recent policy documents has to be understood in terms of current thinking on rural development and rural land management. As noted above, the position of NPAs relies on broader developments in rural policy, particularly the reform of the structures that govern land management. Furthermore, as environmental objectives have become part of mainstream government policy for agriculture and land management NPAs have been able to draw on their existing knowledge in this area to place themselves as experts in environmental management. NPAs are therefore, individually and collectively through the Association of National Park Authorities, increasingly engaging with DEFRA centrally in order to highlight the relationship between existing work in national parks and the future of agri-environment and rural development policy.

The managerialist tendencies of the central state rely on the active compliance of the NPAs eager to capitalise on the interest that central government is showing in them. In contrast to their historical position as weak, poorly financed and marginal institutions NPAs are now enjoying both increasing levels of finance and a higher profile in the public sector. This brings with it an enhanced power both to act in national park localities and to influence regional and national policy agendas. However, it also brings with it a regulatory gaze
whereby the centre employs managerial technologies to determine the conduct of the Authorities.

7. Conclusions

The ‘conduct of conduct’, the strategy of rule employed by the central state in its relations with NPAs, relies on two, in certain respects competing, imperatives; devolution and managerialism. While it may be expected that the devolving imperative would result in an increasing degree of differentiation between parks, as they are able to capitalise on opportunities to tailor policies to their specific circumstances, the research has demonstrated that the managerial imperative has in fact the more significant influence on NPAs in recent years. This is because the scope of regional differentiation has to date been limited and uneven across the regions and because of the behaviour of DEFRA centrally. DEFRA has sought to ‘know’ the national parks as a means of achieving its policy objectives with regard to promoting sustainable rural development.

The commitment to the regionalisation of rural policy that has been the consequence of administrative devolution in England has therefore resulted in a partial rescaling of activity. For Northumberland NPA this has meant an additional focus for their policy work, resulting in an active strategy of regional engagement in order to maximise their influence in the construction of regional policy goals and priorities. However, the future of devolution relies on whether or not there will be institutions at the regional level permitted by the central state to develop distinctive regional rural policies. In short the regional institutions themselves are subject to the managerialism of the central state as they remain technically, if indirectly, accountable to the Westminster Parliament.
The central-local relation is the primary influence on the conduct of national parks policy. Instead of seeing increasing differentiation in the approach of individual NPAs there is the possibility of an increasing degree of similarity in the policies and approaches pursued as a result of such recommendations as the formulation of a common vision. Differentiation is a policy discourse which is growing in popularity within government not only as a result of regionalisation but also in discourses of localism. However, in national parks at least differentiation is being managed and controlled by the requirement to reflect on the purposes and objectives that each NPA is pursuing with reference to central government priorities for the countryside as a whole.

Drawing on the governmentality approach to understand the relationship between NPAs and DEFRA it is clear that the operation of managerial technologies rely on the behaviours of both sets of institutions. A relationship of political regulation has been formed within the state which brings mutual benefits. It is not that DEFRA is simply able to impose the recommendations of 2002 Review or the Best Value process on NPAs but that the Authorities themselves are actively complying with, and to a degree constructing these processes, as a means of increasing their influence in the governance of rural development policy in England.

NPAs are able to influence regional policies as one of the few institutions with experience of territorial land management, with administering a distinct rural area to achieve multiple management objectives rather than having a focus on a particular sector or policy. As such NPAs are well equipped to advise central government on the practicalities of sustainable rural development, a point exploited and continually reiterated in recent Association of
National Park Authority publications (ANPA, 2003a; 2002). Exactly how DEFRA uses this experience is still unfolding and will form a potentially interesting avenue for future research on central-local relations in the governance of England’s national parks.

The response to recent developments at the national and regional level on the part of NPAs demonstrates that the workings of power within government are understood to rely on actively constructed relations and not on the straightforward compliance of ‘the local’ with the will of ‘the centre’. Just as the workings of social regulation rely on the active compliance of the population to conform to certain norms, relations within the state rely on ideas of mutual benefit. The NPAs (in common with the numerous institutions of local and regional government) need the attention of the centre in the competition for finance and status within the public sector. NPAs therefore use the attention that managerialism both implies and brings to promote particular ideas of their role in the governance of rural localities and their status as rural development institutions. The longer term impacts of such a strategy rely ultimately on how successful the NPAs are in mediating their relationship with DEFRA, their ability to articulate particular visions of rural development that can provide models that are not merely particular to individual national parks but can be of broader utility for those involved in the construction and implementation of rural policy at the regional and national levels.

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