

The interplay of formal and informal institutions between local and regional authorities when creating well-functioning public transport systems

Robert Hrelja^a, Jason Monios^b, Tom Rye^b, Karolina Isaksson^a, Christina Scholten^c

^a VTI, SE-581 95, Linköping, Sweden; and K2 – The Swedish Knowledge Centre for Public Transport, SE-223 81 Lund, Sweden.

^b Transport Research Institute, Edinburgh Napier University, Edinburgh, EH10 5DT, Scotland, UK.

^c Malmö University, SE-205 06 Malmö, Sweden; and K2 – The Swedish Knowledge Centre for Public Transport, SE-223 81 Lund, Sweden.

This is the pre-published version of the text. The final published paper can be found at:

Hrelja, R., Monios, J., Rye, T., Isaksson, K., Scholten, C. (2017). The interplay of formal and informal institutions between local and regional authorities when creating well-functioning public transport systems. *International Journal of Sustainable Transportation*. 11 (8): 611-622.

DOI: [10.1080/15568318.2017.1292374](https://doi.org/10.1080/15568318.2017.1292374)

Abstract

This paper analyzes how public transport planning is managed in institutional contexts where governance is spread across local and regional scales. The paper sheds light on two facets of the relationship between local and regional government: first, the decision-making process regarding where to provide public transport services and at what level, and second, integration of public transport with land use planning. An analytical matrix is used to cross-reference the roles of formal institutions (governance established in law) and informal institutions (governance not established in law) against local and regional responsibilities for public transport and land use. Analysis of the interplay between these three axes (formal/informal, local/regional, public transport/land use) reveals how informal institutions help regional and local authorities to negotiate the constraints of formal, statutory institutions and help to “oil the wheels” of delivering measures and policies that make public transport work as a well-functioning system. However, informal institutions clearly have their limits, in the paper exemplified by the remaining challenges to integrate regional public transport and local land use planning. An identified challenge is that, by their very nature, informal institutions are difficult to influence or modify, therefore relying on them to fill gaps in formal institutional responsibilities may be a risky strategy when unpopular decisions are made.

Keywords: governance, formal, informal, institutions, organisation, passenger transport, public transport, collaboration

1. Introduction

The principles for the design and planning of public transport systems might seem relatively simple and well known. Well-functioning public transport systems should, for instance, be built with high speed trunk lines between cities, and there should be integration between land use and public transport planning. The creation of such systems requires a strong integration of regional and local planning that includes both the design of the transport system and principles for land use development. However, what constitutes a well-functioning public transport system is open to contestation. For example, in publicly regulated systems, there is often a tension between regional and local priorities in deciding where to provide public transport services, and at what level it should be managed. In addition, institutional reforms in West European public transport (van de Velde, 1999) have made it more difficult to establish functioning public transport systems due to organisational fragmentation that results in coordination problems, for instance between regional and local authorities. In some countries, this has resulted in more fragmented transport operations on the ground (O'Sullivan & Patel, 2004; van de Velde and Wallis, 2013).

Such reforms have created points in the planning and organisation of the public transport system where formal structures may produce sub-optimal outcomes, resulting in the need for informal structures to negotiate the interface (Rye et al., forthcoming). For the purposes of this research, such moments are termed “critical interfaces”. Examples include regional and local coordination in matters such as the integration of land use and transport planning, and decisions on where to provide public transport services.

The context in which public transport planning operates suggests a need to focus on the micro-level practices of governance of these “critical interfaces”. Which formal and informal structures and relationships between regional and local authorities could help to “oil the wheels” so as to deliver decisions and planning that make public transport work as a well-functioning system?

The key practical problems that this article will shed light upon are both facets of the relationship between local and regional government that need to be effectively dealt with in order to create well-functioning public transport systems. The first is that land use (spatial) planning is rarely the competence of regional government, while public transport planning is more likely to lie within their control. This can lead to a disconnection between regional public transport and local land use planning. The second is that, in publicly regulated systems (as already mentioned), there is often a tension between regional and local priorities in deciding where to provide public transport services, and at what level it should be managed. This tension must be resolved somehow. The potential disconnection (between regional public transport and local land use planning), and the tension (between regional and local priorities in deciding where to provide public transport service) can be regarded as two critical interfaces where effective governance needs to be established if public transport is to work as a system. Analytically, we consider how the interplay between formal institutions (governance established in law), and informal institutions (governance not established in law) affects how these two critical interfaces have been handled. By doing so, the paper contributes to existing knowledge by providing a deeper exploration of how it is possible to achieve effective governance in the type of fragmented institutional setting that is so widespread in the European context of public transport today.

In our analysis, governance should be understood as an analytical concept that opens up for a critical exploration of various “modes” of steering that depends on institutional properties, actor constellations and/or policy instruments (Treib et al. 2007). While governance does indeed comprise both government and non-government actors, we focus on the formal and informal structures between regional and local authorities since this set of relations are critical in many European countries, Sweden among them. The empirical focus is the Skåne region in Sweden, a country where public transport has undergone quite fundamental reforms during the last decade (van de Velde and Wallis, 2013). In Sweden, a new public transport legislation that came into force in 2012 established regional public transport authorities with responsibility for the strategic planning of public transport, including definition of service supply. At the same time, fragmentation still remains, for instance between public transport and land use planning. In common with Sweden, the institutional conditions for public transport in many European countries have changed quite considerably over the past 30 years. There has been a move away from city and smaller county based public transport operations, where the public transport operators are branch companies of the municipal administrations, to the creation of regional authorities, whose job it is to plan and then procure public transport services for the region. The regional authorities are governed usually by boards of elected officials from the constituent local authorities within the region. This pattern is seen in Germany, France, Denmark and the Netherlands, among other countries. Meanwhile, with very few exceptions (such as London, England), land use planning remains, legally, the exclusive competence of local authorities, with any regional planning function being advisory. Thus the potential tensions and disconnects already mentioned in relation to Sweden are seen to exist in other European countries also, underlining the relevance of this paper and its analysis. The choice of a Swedish case, which can be considered as successful because of increases in public transport patronage (see section 3), can therefore clarify the ways to handle this general problem and increase the analytical generalizability from the case.

2. Literature review

2.1 Public transport governance

Research shows that public transport governance in many cases remains fragmented and is characterised by sub-optimisation (e.g. Berman et al., 2005; Hansson, 2013; Hrelja, 2015; Priemus, 1999; Rivasplata & Hiroyuki, 2012; Hedegaard-Sørensen & Longva, 2011). Several studies have noted the need for – but also challenges related to – the development of effective public transport governance when planning and decision-making capacity is formally fragmented between arenas and organisations at various administrative levels, with different aims, roles and mandates (Hedegaard-Sørensen and Longva, 2011; van de Velde, 2014). Previous public transport research has also identified several critical interfaces in the public transport sphere that need to be addressed (Rye et al., forthcoming).

However, there is relatively little research about how tensions and disconnects between local and regional government are handled in micro-level practices of public transport management and planning. Most of the research has focused on the relations between public transport authorities and operators (Hansson, 2013). However, previous research stresses that it is important to take the formal and informal context in which public transport operates into account in order to understand the actions of organizations and the potential for effective governance (Hansson, 2013; Thoresson and Isaksson, 2013; Hrelja, 2015, Hrelja, Pettersson, & Westerdahl, 2016). Rye et al. (forthcoming) looked at the role of informal institutions

supplementing insufficiencies in formal structures for public transport planning. This paper will develop these ideas in two ways. First, by considering the role of regional and local scale, and second, by incorporating the issue of land-use planning.

The following section will therefore review the literature on regional and local planning in order to understand the issues of scale and scope and the use of formal and informal structures. The key ideas for analysis in this paper will then be summarised as the basis for the analytical framework developed in the third section of the review, drawing on the institutional literature regarding the interplay between formal and informal institutions.

2.2 Regional and local planning

2.2.1 Scale and scope

The mixture of national, regional and local governance scales is different in each country, and will derive to some extent from geographical features or population size. However, at least in Europe, there has been a noticeable trend in recent years towards decentralisation and devolution of political responsibilities from the national to the regional scale. Yet it has been achieved in many instances in an uneven way (cf. Jones, 2001; Allmendinger & Haughton, 2007), resulting in an imbalance of roles and responsibilities in addition to an actual change in these roles (e.g. Allmendinger et al., 2005 on the UK). The introduction of a regional level in some cases is an attempt to bridge the gap between national and local planning, yet there may be an imbalance between national desire to ensure top-down coherence of regional plans within the national context (or, in a more negative aspect, legitimise and enforce a top-down development agenda) and allowing bottom-up input from local levels, or in fact attempting to draw together such disparate local needs where regional coherence is deemed to be needed (van Straalen et al., 2014). Coordination of transport planning is indeed one of the latter issues, coordinating transport investment and public transport services across and between cities and towns within a region. Some regional authorities have more formal roles while others can sometimes have unclear responsibilities, being seen by the national level as an easier and smaller number of authorities to manage, and from the local level as having little real authority as most decision making and funding allocation remains at the local level. Indeed, in many cases regional bodies do not set budgets but act rather as a mechanism to guide policy coherence across many local authorities (van Straalen et al., 2014; Hubler and Meek, 2005), seeking horizontal policy integration in key areas such as transport and land-use (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2007).

2.2.2 Formal and informal structures in regional and local planning

Like any scale of governance, the regional scale involves many different types of formal and informal arenas and organisations, all with their own specific composition and way of working – both statutory and non-statutory. The organisations that are formally in charge of planning and land use development may in some cases be constituted by a regional government with elected politicians or it may be based on planners in a regional planning authority, or a regional development agency, or some combination (Counsell and Haughton, 2003).

Studies of regional governance and coordination of regional and local authorities undertaken so far (e.g. Sherriff, 2012; Hubler and Meek, 2005; Amin, 1999; Albrechts, 2012) suggest that

the interplay between these various organisations and arenas requires deeper analysis. One dimension of the transformation of spatial governance over recent decades is the proliferation of what Allmendinger and Haughton (2009; p. 619) describe as “soft spaces” of governance. Allmendinger and Haughton (2010; p. 809) define these as “informal or ‘soft’ planning spaces that sit alongside, complement, and, at times, replace formal planning spaces.” Allmendinger and Haughton (2009; p. 619) state that it “is not that planners are shifting from one set of spaces to another, but rather that they are learning to acknowledge that they must work within multiple spaces, and as part of this adapting to and even adopting the tactics of soft spaces and fuzzy boundaries where these help deliver the objectives of planning. There is a strong element of pragmatism involved in the emergence of soft spaces and use of fuzzy boundaries.”

One interesting aspect that will be taken up in the present paper derives from the analytical challenge, raised by Haughton et al. (2013), of understanding how particular governance assemblages come to be formed in relation to which types of state strategy, and in pursuit of what kind of politics. A trend allied to the implementation of regional planning by countries is a shift over the last two decades towards a neoliberal paradigm whereby regional authorities are intended to pursue policies of economic growth rather than socioeconomic management (Galland, 2012) and sustainability (Timms, 2011; cf. Stead, 2008). The institutional reforms in West European public transport should in some aspects be regarded as being part of this neoliberal paradigm. We will elaborate on this in the conclusions, and discuss the power dynamics resulting from the governance assemblages in an empirical case.

Another key topic in the literature on regional governance and coordination of regional and local authorities in the last decade has been the rise of strategic spatial planning, as contrasted to a narrow focus on land use issues (e.g. Albrechts, 2004; Newman, 2008; Healey, 2009; Allmendinger & Haughton 2010; Galland 2012). Strategic spatial planning coincides with a renewed interest in using planning as a tool for societal development, as cities are facing pressures for economic competitiveness, public participation and climate change responsibilities. The interest in this body of literature is directed towards the question of how to create urban governance capacity in a fragmented regional governance landscape by creating strategies for territorial development that may be expressed in a formal plan. Strategic plans are guiding documents; as such, they tend to be less focused on making actual decisions on individual applications nor do they allocate funds: “spatial plans are indicative and confer no right to develop” (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2010). So while such plans are often produced at the regional level, they may or may not be aligned to actual regional responsibilities for e.g. transport or land use, which will be different in each case. It is quite often the local level that retains the decision making power, especially for land-use, although in sectors such as transport they may decide to cede these powers to the regional level if they see the coordination benefit.

Albrechts (2004) noted that “strategic” planning necessarily prioritises some areas over others, while Healey (2009) discussed the difficulties in drawing together a disparate group of stakeholders to focus attention on resolving such designated strategic issues in an urban area and their capacity for making judgements. Healey (2009) also developed a four-point framework for strategy making: mobilising attention, scoping the situation, enlarging the intelligence and creating frames and selecting actions. This conceptualisation of strategic

planning through such concepts as mobilising attention and the creation of frames indicates that the actual implementation of strategic planning is dependent on the power of informal institutions as discourses and frames, including supporting storylines and metaphors about urban development, and thus not solely by formal plans.

2.2.3 Summary of key issues

The key issues arising from the above review are, first, the trend from more sustainable and inclusive planning goals to economic development goals, which impact on land use and transport planning. In terms of governance, there is often lack of decision-making power at the regional level, which serves a more coordinating role. The question is how this coordination is achieved in the absence of formal powers. In particular, which scale (regional or local) actually makes the decision on new schemes? Often, despite regional plans, it is still the local level who decides but they may choose to cede that power to the region, e.g. in public transport, but they are perhaps less likely to do so for land-use planning. As well as more coordinating and economic development goals, increasing the participation of stakeholders is often a goal in itself, raising questions about how to navigate such “soft spaces”.

2.3 Analytical framework: Formal and informal institutions

In order to understand the formal and informal spaces of planning from a more theoretical perspective, it is relevant to draw on the institutional literature. A vast literature exists on institutional definitions, which lies beyond the scope of this paper (see Monios and Lambert, 2013 and Rye et al., forthcoming for more detailed discussion). North (1990; p. 98) defines institutions as “the humanly devised constraints that structure political, economic and social interaction.” Aoki (2007; p. 6) suggests that institutions are “self-sustaining, salient patterns of social interactions, as represented by meaningful rules that every agent knows and are incorporated as agents’ shared beliefs about how the game is played and to be played.”

A widely used distinction between institutions and organisations is provided by North (1990), for whom institutions represent the rules of the game, while organisations are the players. North (1991; p. 98) points out that institutions “consist of both informal constraints (sanctions, taboos, customs, traditions, and codes of conduct), and formal rules (constitutions, laws, property rights).” Moreover, González and Healey (2005; p. 2056) show the importance of not just formal but informal institutions, whereby innovation capacity “is not just defined by formal laws and organisational competences, but is embedded in the dynamics of governance practices, with their complex interplay of formal and informal relations.”

For the purposes of this paper, the importance of informal institutions refers to the things explicitly mentioned by North (1991), such as customs, traditions, codes of conduct, but also aspects such as joint understandings and shared knowledge (for instance, within a group of professionals), cultural and political norms and attitudes, informal networks, arenas and meeting places, as well as steering cultures that underpin strategic planning. The different ways in which these informal processes can be structured necessitates deeper analysis of their constituent parts and relative power and propensity to action.

This paper uses formal and informal institutions, thus defined, as an analytical framework. In the empirical section we will explore how formal and informal institutions between regional

and local authorities in a Swedish context have helped to handle coordination of regional and local priorities in deciding where to provide public transport service, and the integration of land use and transport planning. An analytical matrix (see table 1) is used to cross-reference formal and informal institutions against local and regional organisations and responsibilities for both public transport and land use.

3. Methodology

The regional and local context, with different political circumstances, objectives, relations between regional and local authorities, planning traditions etc., has a crucial bearing on how critical public transport interfaces are handled. In order to understand how formal and informal institutions affect how regional and local authorities handle critical interfaces we need empirically grounded descriptions, and a practice-based methodology (Flyvbjerg, 2002, p. 354) on which to base our analysis. This calls for case studies, because with the case study method one can study a phenomenon in context (George and Bennet, 2005; Yin, 2009). Management and planning praxis is always contingent on context-dependent judgement (Flyvbjerg, 2004). Skåne offers a context dependent story about governance of critical public transport interfaces that can elicit critical thinking and action among practitioners, and provide novel perspectives on public transport management and planning.

One reason to choose Skåne as case is that some of the institutional changes described in the introduction occurred in Skåne before they took place in other Swedish regions (see section 4.1. for a more detailed description). The regional level has historically been weak in the Swedish political system, which is dominated by the national state level and strong independent local authorities. However, a parliamentary decision in 1999 made regional autonomy possible for a trial period for two regions, including Skåne. The major innovation here was the formation of the Region Skåne (the highest elected political organisation in Skåne) and the formation of the Public Transport Authority (Skånetrafiken) as a public administrative department in Region Skåne (see section 4.2. for a more detailed description). The national parliament made this regional autonomy for Skåne permanent in 2009. Additionally, a distinct feature of the development of public transport in Skåne since 1999 is a strong increase in patronage, more than doubling since 1999 (Skånetrafiken, 2016), making the potential role of formal and informal institutions in this development analytically interesting.

The empirical material in this study consists of written material collected and interviews carried out in 2014–2015. There were some 14 semi-structured interviews with key officers in local authorities (9 officers), Region Skåne (2 officers), and Skånetrafiken (3 officers). All interviewees have a designated responsibility for public transport in their organisation. They also have a good knowledge of land use planning, and of the dynamics of decision and planning processes. The interviewees work, for example, as transport strategist at Region Skåne, manager or strategist at technical service departments in local authorities, or at Skånetrafiken with responsibility for long term public transport planning. We have also made a geographical selection of interviewees in that we have interviewed representatives from local authorities who may be critical of the principles behind the design of public transport in Skåne (we will elaborate on this in the empirical part). This means that we have interviewed officers working in local authorities which are geographically peripheral in relation to the public transport routes prioritised in terms of investment by Skånetrafiken.

The semi-structured interviews were based on an interview guide. The questions asked touch mainly on the following themes: *a) Institutional changes and organisation of public transport* (Which formal or informal linkages/integration with other sectors, specifically land use planning exists or is lacking?): *b) Arguments, justifications* (Which ideas support the development of public transport, land use planning and coordination/lack of coordination between regional and local authorities and policy areas?): *c) Dynamics of planning processes* (Which formal and informal power relations between regional and local authorities exist? Are there conflicts of interest? How are conflicts handled? Which factors affect public transport planning and delivery?).

The written material comprises planning documents, comprehensive and detailed development plans, transport plans, i.e. regional land use plans, regional train and bus strategies, and public transport contracts between regional and local authorities.

The interviews were recorded digitally, with the approval of the interviewees. The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. The subsequent analysis, where patterns in the data were categorised, was based on the verbatim transcribed material. Similarities and dissimilarities between the interviewees' experiences were identified. In the paper, verbatim quotes from the interviews are used to illustrate the analysis.

In the empirical description that follows, we shall first describe the Swedish institutional context, before presenting the case study itself. The article ends with a discussion of the general conclusions that may be drawn from the case study.

4. Background to the case

4.1 The Swedish institutional context

The Swedish organisation of public transport entails municipal authorities and county councils in each county sharing the financial and political responsibility for public transport. Since the 1970s, municipal authorities and county councils in each Swedish county have formed public transport authorities (PTA) and have delegated planning and management of public transport to county traffic companies. County councils and municipal authorities have had the option of deciding whether the county council alone, or the municipal authorities alone without the county council, should bear the responsibility for public transport. The shared responsibility means e.g. that county councils and municipal authorities share the costs of public transport. The reason for this sharing of responsibility has been to increase the regional perspective on public transport. However, in recent decades a range of negative consequences arising from the Swedish way of organising public transport have been reported. For example, a study by Hansson (2011) made the criticism that the county traffic companies had become too strong in relation to their owners, resulting in decreased political influence over the design of public transport. New public transport legislation was therefore introduced in 2012 (SFS, 2010). It has been described as a “hybrid deregulated regime” (van de Velde, 2014).

The current legislation requires counties to establish a Regional Public Transport Authority (RPTA), which is responsible for the strategic planning of public transport – manifested in a Regional Transport Supply Programme (RTSP) that covers both commercial services and services to be contracted. The aim of the legislation is to prevent regional public transport being viewed as an end in itself, rather than as a means to achieve political objectives and to be coordinated with other policy areas. In order to increase the political control over the design of public transport, strategic decisions (e.g. decisions on where to provide public

transport services and at what level), which were previously often made by the county traffic companies, must be taken by the Regional Public Transport Authority. Based on the RTSP, the RPTA is entitled to define Public Service Obligations (PSO) for services in its area, which means that it declares which services it intends to submit to contract. In addition to this, the new legislation allows operators to initiate new lines on a commercial basis. The RPTAs must be notified about such services with a 14-day period for entry and exit registration. Information about the service has to be integrated into the common passenger information system (van de Velde, 2014; SFS 2010:1065). The reforms in Sweden thus reflect the move away from city- and smaller county-based public transport operations to the creation of regional authorities in European public transport, whose job it is to plan and then competitively tender public transport services for the region. At the same time, the shared responsibility for public transport means that the RPTAs must consider the views of municipalities on the design of the public transport system, not least because they are responsible for land use planning.

The legislative changes in Sweden also reflect the potential disconnect between regional public transport and local land use planning. The new Swedish Public Transport Act is aimed at underpinning a more strategic and coordinated approach to public transport for cities and regions, but not at regulating the integration of land use and public transport planning at the local level. The RTSPs are admittedly intended to act as the basis for physical and other societal planning among municipalities. However, in Sweden there is no strong regional planning level that coordinates municipal physical planning with regional public transport planning. It is solely a municipal responsibility to plan land use. In Sweden, this responsibility is usually referred to as a “local planning monopoly”, which indicates the strength of municipalities’ sole control of this issue.

4.2 The Skåne region

There are around 1 253 000 million residents in Skåne, around 280 000 of whom live in Malmö, Sweden’s third largest city, which is located in south-west Skåne. Western Skåne is the most densely populated part of the region, with a number of cities located along a north-south axis that forms an important regional communications channel carrying large flows of travellers and regional commuter traffic by train and bus. The north and east of Skåne have a lower population density and thus less favourable conditions for public transport. The development of the public transport system in Skåne has very clearly been affected by the organisational and institutional changes which have taken place over a 30-year period. In the 1980s and 1990s, there was split responsibility and organisation for Skåne as a region and for public transport. Skåne consisted of two counties with two county traffic companies. These two companies have been described by their former employees as “cat and dog”, and municipal politicians showed little interest in creating a coordinated regional public transport system (Skånetrafiken, 2010). Public transport in that period functioned as “local islands in a Skåne with two counties in the absence of an overarching vision” (ibid, p. 54). There was no prospect of establishing coordinated action on different planning levels due to organisational fragmentation and lack of shared goals. However, ambitions to increase regional autonomy came to alter this (more on this later).

Region Skåne was formed on 1 January 1999, when the two county councils were merged. Region Skåne is the highest directly elected political organisation in Skåne. The Public Transport Authority Skånetrafiken (a body run in administration form by Region Skåne), which took over the responsibility for urban traffic and regional bus and train traffic from the two county traffic companies, was also created in 1999. The resources and costs of public transport in the 33 municipalities in Skåne were handed over to Region Skåne through a tax

exchange. In 2015, Region Skåne had the second highest rate of revenue funding (57 percent) in Sweden (Trafikanalys 2016).

In addition to being responsible for public transport, Region Skåne is also responsible for e.g. infrastructure planning and regional development issues. The collaboration between Region Skåne and the municipalities in Skåne is regulated in so-called public transport agreements. According to the first agreement, from the time when Region Skåne was created, that body has to give the municipalities some influence over public transport design. Moreover, decision making and planning processes must be designed in a way that creates municipal participation and transparency (Region Skåne, 1998). In a corresponding manner, the municipalities in Skåne must give Region Skåne “opportunities for participation and insights into the work on comprehensive planning, detailed planning etc. [...]” (Ibid, p. 4). However, the municipalities in Skåne still have a monopoly on formulating and deciding comprehensive and detailed land use plans. This gives Region Skåne little formal opportunity to influence physical planning in the municipalities.

In conclusion, the making of a well-functioning public transport system requires good collaboration between Region Skåne and the 33 municipalities.

5. Case study results

5.1 The development of the public transport system in Skåne

Since the early 1990s, development has involved responsibility and a mandate for transport planning, regional development issues and public transport being increasingly concentrated in a regional actor, namely Region Skåne. This has brought a strengthening of the formal institutions of public transport management and planning in Skåne. It has been the precondition for the creation of a relatively well functioning public transport system. Since the 1980s, public transport in Skåne has gone from consisting of “local islands” to becoming a regional functional system. Among the concrete changes in public transport design that have resulted in public transport now functioning as a system, it can be noted that major investments in physical infrastructure, the creation of a joint pricing system and traffic information for all of Skåne have resulted in greater cohesion, transparency and simplicity for travellers.

In parallel, informal institutions linking regional and local authorities have also been developed. One example of this is the formulation of general aims about what to achieve with public transport. These aims, which are clearly pronounced in planning documents and strategies at the regional level but non-binding from a formal perspective, have been developed in the context of creation of shared visions about regional development which, in a governance context, have enabled actors to act in collaboration in a way that would otherwise not have been possible. An employee at Skånetrafiken who has been working on strategic development issues for public transport since the 1980s reported that the major conflicts between local authorities, counties and county traffic companies in the 1980s have gradually been replaced by considerably greater cooperation and consensus, from which a vision of Skåne as a region has emerged. The future Skåne is described in several long-term development plans using a combination of the key words “economic growth” and “balance” (Region Skåne, 2004, p. 45). By balance, Region Skåne and the municipalities mean development that involves the towns and cities in Skåne undergoing economic growth based on their specific conditions. Public transport is motivated partly by environmental concerns, but this is definitely not the most important motive for building a functioning regional public transport system. The future growth intended for the region is associated with a spatial future vision where Skåne acts as a polycentric urban region and joint market for housing, work and

leisure (Region Skåne, 1999). Creation of a polycentric region is described as critical for achieving a Skåne in “balance”.

It is clear that public transport is justified as a tool in realisation of the regional political goals for societal development. This is expressed very clearly in regional development plans and strategy documents from Region Skåne. According to Region Skåne, continued expansion of the regional express train line is the single most effective measure for continued integration of urban centres in the region (Region Skåne, 2001, p. 39):

[...] partly because the train has the greatest potential to increase its scope, partly because public transport is an economically attractive alternative for a great proportion of the population and ultimately because it allows regional expansion to take place with minimal environmental effects.

A number of the interviewees from local authorities mentioned that “everything should be close in Skåne” and that it should take at most one hour to travel from one end of the region to the other. This shows the importance that transport is perceived to have for the introduction of the regional strategy. Skånetrafiken metaphorically describes train transport as the life blood of the region (Skånetrafiken, 2008). The potential for public transport to act as the region’s life blood is very clearly linked to the standpoint that public transport must act as a regional *system*, expressed thus by Region Skåne in the Regional Transport Supply Programme:

All parts of public transport feed into each other. The whole is greater than the sum of parts [...]. If the traffic system is fragmented and part of the whole is taken away, the contribution which that part makes to the rest of the traffic system is lost and, correspondingly, the contribution the part in question receives from the rest of the system is lost. The result is worsened conditions for transport. Conversely, if a new line or some other improvement is added, this helps to improve travel and conditions in the rest of the system (Skånetrafiken, 2011, p. 10).

Regional and local authorities have also systematically and on long term basis created personalized professional relationships by collaboration and close work on specific infrastructure projects in Malmö (for example the City tunnel – a rail link running between Malmö Central Station and the Öresund Bridge, and the “Malmö Expressen” – a BRT project) and other large cities in Skåne. Officers from Skånetrafiken and local authorities work close together in these infrastructure projects, in practice in one another’s offices. A local municipal officer explained how she had been working together with a transport planner from Skånetrafiken for months at her office during a project. This exchange of workplaces, sometimes for months, and a situation in which people previously employed by Skånetrafiken become co-workers at a local authority or vice versa, illustrate the development of informal institutional structures which has promoted trust-building, mutual learning and joint norms and understandings between actors from different organisations. A senior officer at Skånetrafiken described how important he felt it was to develop trustworthy relations with senior officers in local authorities since it made it possible to just lift the phone when something needed to be settled. The personalized professional relationships may contribute to functional governance. However, the personalized professional relationships the interviewees describe also raises concern about the legitimacy and accountability of informal institutions (which we will come back to in the conclusions). For example, newly employed officers both at the Region Skåne and local authorities expressed difficulties in tracing planning and decision making processes.

5.2 Regional and local priorities in deciding where to provide public transport services in the public transport system

The first principle that Region Skåne, Skånetrafiken and the municipalities consider to be essential for the creation of a “well-functioning” public transport system is for public transport to be managed “in a business-like way”, which means that it should have a high degree of cost coverage and should be designed according to “passenger demand” (Region Skåne, 1998, p. 9). The business-like intention is most clearly apparent in the fact that Skånetrafiken mainly invests in bus and train lines that have the most passengers and the greatest potential for positive transport development (so-called “high demand routes”), and therefore increasing revenue (Skånetrafiken, 2015; Skånetrafiken, 2011; Skånetrafiken, 2006). Skånetrafiken itself states that the principle of business-like operation is also essential for weaker lines. According to the head of Skånetrafiken with responsibility for long-term development issues:

[...] increasing travel on high demand routes is cornerstone number one
 [...] Unprofitable transport is fed by profitable. Without the profitable, there is no unprofitable. They fit together in a system. [...] They cannot be isolated. The whole system falls in that case.

System thinking results in investment being directed towards high demand routes, since this is claimed to increase passenger numbers and revenue and in turn can also be of benefit to less high demand routes. Application of the principle of operating in a business-like way obviously has potentially controversial spatial effects, since it means that the investment is directed mainly towards the lines connecting the most densely populated cities in western Skåne. This means that municipalities which lack a high demand route indirectly pay for investment in other municipalities; although it could also be argued that they win insofar as the focus on the business-like approach and higher demand routes generates surpluses that can be used to cross-subsidise low demand routes in their area to a greater extent than if the system were managed locally.

According to Region Skåne's commission to Skånetrafiken shall the:

[...] regional assembly's steering of the design of the traffic to key parts
 [...] lie on a general level, and be done through comprehensive policy objectives (Skånetrafiken, 2011, p. 5).

The design of public transport should thus not be politically controlled in detail. In principle, this gives Skånetrafiken the freedom to design the public transport system in a business-like way, without needing to pay detailed attention to municipal politics. According to the interviewees from Skånetrafiken, clear allocation of responsibilities in the public transport area and clear targets for long-term development of transport in combination have permitted “tough tactics” against municipalities when necessary. A manager in a medium-sized municipality in western Skåne reported that:

We can have aims and opinions, but if Skånetrafiken does not agree with us, Skånetrafiken does what it wants.

However, the interviewees also reported that there is overall agreement and general consensus on the targets for physical development in Skåne and for the design of public transport. Nevertheless, this overall agreement does not mean that Skånetrafiken and the municipalities always share the same interests or agree on priorities. As an illustration, municipal politicians and employees also describe the decision making and planning practices regarding high demand routes as comprising constant negotiations with Skånetrafiken on investments and regarding the routes that should be considered high demand routes. Municipalities that are not

directly linked to the major passenger flows in western Skåne claim in particular that they must promote their demands very actively in both formal and informal discussions with Skånetrafiken in order to get their share of investment.

One can question why municipalities that lie outside the strong public transport lines accept Skånetrafiken prioritising these high demand routes. A number of the municipal representatives interviewed said that they would have made different prioritisations and, for example, invested more in lines with fewer passengers if they had had the responsibility for public transport. The reason why the municipalities agree to relinquish part of their influence over public transport to Region Skåne is due to the shared view that public transport must function as a system, but also because the authorities perceive that by acting like one strong and unified region they are more likely to attract national funding for infrastructure investments. In order to enable an overarching approach and a functioning regional system, public transport must be planned by Skånetrafiken, despite the drawback that municipalities do not always get what they want. The alternative, having public transport controlled by each municipality, would result in fragmentation of the public transport system and great problems in coordination, at least according to one interviewee from a medium-sized municipality located in western Skåne. The main reason for the municipalities accepting Skånetrafiken having control over the design of public transport and its high demands for cost coverage is the strength of the perception that a functioning regional system can spread economic growth from larger to smaller conurbations. This results in the less densely populated municipalities which are not directly linked to the higher demand routes in western Skåne accepting investment being directed towards the west. A manager in the small municipality of Bromölla in eastern Skåne said that:

Growth ripples all the way out to Bromölla.

5.3 Integration of regional public transport and local land use planning

The second principle considered by Region Skåne, Skånetrafiken and the municipalities as being essential for the creation of a functioning public transport system is for the design of public transport to be coordinated with the form and location of housing (Region Skåne, 2009). More travellers must be encouraged to choose public transport and greater accessibility to public transport must be created by densifying housing and concentrating it around important bus and train lines. This principle is reiterated in regional development plans formulated by Region Skåne in collaboration with the municipalities (Region Skåne, 2009, p. 40).

Compared with the issue of how the public transport system should be designed, the formal allocation of responsibility for coordination of public transport design with physical planning is the reverse. The concentration of the physical planning role in Sweden at local government makes any attempt at municipal coordination or formal control very controversial. In principle, the municipalities in Skåne will accept no formal mandatory control or coordination efforts that compromise their self-determination. A manager in a small municipality in southern Skåne emphasised that:

If we want to follow the regional targets [on building in good public transport areas], we do that. And if we want to do something else, we do that, too.

Several of the interviewees said that coordination can work as long as Region Skåne does not try to dictate where and how municipalities e.g. build new housing. Regional coordination must therefore take place through voluntary mechanisms that give rise to coordination

between “equal partners”, as the technical manager in a small municipality in eastern Skåne put it. Coordination takes place through Skånetrafiken having the opportunity to express its opinion on municipal comprehensive and detailed plans. It also takes place through projects between Region Skåne and the municipalities that have resulted in joint statements on how the municipalities can pursue urban planning in accordance with regional targets (Region Skåne, 2008). In these projects, a process whereby different perspectives and opinions can be aired has been the main outcome, according to a municipal strategist from a municipality in northern Skåne. It is thus as much a process of generating “buy-in” and understanding from municipalities, as it is regional land use strategy documents.

What we see is thus an example of power sharing between Region Skåne and the municipalities. Even if Skånetrafiken has the formal power to make decisions on the design of public transport, it is in Skånetrafiken’s interests to give the municipalities some degree of influence. An employee with responsibility for strategic planning in a municipality located in western Skåne said that:

Region Skåne and Skånetrafiken could take over the whole decision making process for public transport until they need land. If they have destroyed their possibilities to collaborate by that stage, they will have lost the opportunity to develop public transport in a conflict-free way.

As regards the coordination between public transport planning and land use planning in the municipalities, as mentioned previously there are no formal structures to enable coordination. However, even in this case the best conditions for coordination between regional targets on building in good public transport areas and municipal physical planning are created when public transport is linked to perceptions on the contribution of public transport to economic growth. When municipalities build in accordance with regional targets on densification and new housing in good public transport areas, according to Skånetrafiken this is because the municipalities view access to regional public transport as an economic value that increases the attractiveness of new housing areas. Similarly, a municipal strategist in a municipality located in western Skåne stated that:

The target for growth drives us all. I have never met any regional or municipal politician or civil servant who did not have an interest in achieving growth. Since we have that same desire, we automatically pull in the same direction.

Public transport as a creator of economic value provides Skånetrafiken with some bargaining room, although this is limited with municipalities that want to build in poorer public transport areas. Skånetrafiken can cite poor transport profitability as an argument for not providing the planned housing areas with public transport. However, the economic driving forces in municipalities also explain why the coordination between Region Skåne’s public transport planning and land use planning in the municipalities does not always function, and why a number of smaller municipalities in Skåne build housing in poor public transport areas with a scattered population and little existing societal services, but with strategically important regional communication pathways enabling good access by car to larger cities (Hrelja, 2015).

6. Case analysis and discussion

In Skåne a strengthening of the formal institutions of public transport and management and planning has clearly taken place. Responsibilities and a mandate for transport planning and regional development have been concentrated in a regional actor (Region Skåne). However, the strengthening of the formal institutions has occurred in parallel with the development of

informal institutions in the form of visions for regional identity and development, and the development of arenas and practices that in practice promote close interaction, mutual learning and the development of joint understandings between, for instance, regional and local planners. In practice, the visions and joint understandings mobilise support, consensus and facilitate implementation. The role of public transport in the visions persuades organisations to collaborate and take action on the basis of their shared meanings, when it comes both to deciding where to provide public transport services in the public transport system, and integrating regional public transport and local land use planning. Fundamentally, the visions ascribe a specific role in development strategies to public transport, illustrated by the metaphor of train transport as the “life blood” of the region.

The visions ascribe a specific design of the public transport system, including its role as a well-functioning integrated system. These visions are translated into actual design of the public transport system as the definitions of routes. Regional and local priorities show how the conditions for decisions about where to provide public transport services in the public transport system are clearly influenced by the interplay of formal and informal institutions that produce particular power dynamics. Skånetrafiken has strong formal power over public transport decision making, but Skånetrafiken’s room to manoeuvre rests not only on its formal authority but on the power of the informal institution of the shared vision of public transport’s role for local and regional development. This vision is translated into the “need” of specific public transport design principles, which rests on a belief of the good of a “business-like way” of designing the system. The visions about regional development, and the specific role ascribed to public transport, helps Region Skåne to justify the priorities made. The visions give Skånetrafiken the freedom to invest above all in so-called “high demand routes” (since this is claimed to increase passenger numbers and revenue and in turn can also be of benefit to routes with weaker demand), without needing to pay detailed attention to regional and municipal politics that potentially could result in sub optimisation or fragmentation of the public transport system. This indicates that municipalities have more formal power, due to their formal responsibility to plan land use, over public transport than they sometimes actually choose to use in practice because of the influence of the informal institution; i.e. if they let their land use planning decisions be influenced by non-binding regional goals on building in good public transport areas. It is also the case that since the foundation of Skånetrafiken, public transport use in the region has grown constantly, which has meant that the distributional decisions have been more about where to put new supply rather than where to cut existing supply. This continuous expansion of the public transport system has given credibility to the specific role which is ascribed to public transport in development strategies, illustrated by the metaphor of train transport as the “life blood” of the region. If the situation had been different, with a decline in public transport demand or funding problems, the situation would probably have been much more challenging to the informal institution. It is self-evident that a joint vision of this kind is easier to convey in times of expansion than in times of recession and budget cuts.

Compared with the issue of how the public transport system should be designed, the formal allocation of responsibility for coordination of public transport design with land use planning is the reverse. Here, municipalities are in control. The exploration of public transport and land use responsibilities illustrates how the informal institution of the shared vision of public transport as a means to deliver and spread regional economic growth within an integrated regional system helps to secure what the formal institutions cannot do on their own. The

practical implementation of voluntary regional coordination agreements rests on the strength of the perception of the contribution of public transport to economic growth also in remote and less central parts of the region. However, this informal institution clearly has its limits, since our research shows that some municipalities still take land use planning decisions that do not help, or even undermine, public transport.

One aspect of the interplay that draws on the governance literature is that achieving increased participation from a stakeholder group can be an aim in itself. Hence both the region and local authorities are formally required to take into account the views of the other, even though there is no formal definition of precisely how they should do so and no requirement to agree with those views. This is particularly important in the case of transport, where local authorities agreed to cede their powers to the regional level, with no guarantee of how it would affect them individually in future. This is where the success of the arrangement relies on the informal institution and the interplay with the formal institutionalised responsibilities. The change in formal responsibilities from local to regional to produce a system perspective only works because it is underpinned by regular informal relationships that allow local authorities to have their say, even though Region Skåne is not mandated to listen to them. Thus the formal design requires some informal engagement yet, being informal, its structure is left undefined.

At this point we should underline the frequency and immediacy of these interactions, which was evident in the interview responses. While often the informal institution is referred to as the joint vision (the term used in official documentation and in interviews), this rather static term risks masking the ongoing informal engagement through numerous interactions by email, phone and in person, like presented above. Interviews revealed that these interactions form the basis of long-term personal relationships. In addition, while interviewees were all public planners, their view was that citizens were broadly satisfied with the current system and local businesses were in favour of the business-led approach to economic development. While recognising that this testimony is perhaps unreliable and indeed there is a danger of response bias from interviewees claiming to be in favour of the status quo, this danger is unavoidable in interview-based research. The coverage of interviewees across organisations was designed for the purposes of triangulation in order to reduce such challenges. In any case, the focus of this paper is on how the formal institutions are modified and supported by informally defined institutions, which are less likely to be comprised of non-governmental actors such as lobby groups. The latter will play their role in the system in a different manner, e.g. consultation processes rather than ongoing interactions as evidenced in our case study.

In order to systematise the analysis the results have been summarised in Table 1.

Table 1 – Formal and informal institutions in public transport and land use planning in Skåne

		Regional	Local
Public transport	Formal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Swedish legislation established Regional Public Transport Authorities (RPTA) after 2012 responsible for the strategic planning of public transport. The resources and costs of public transport in the 33 municipalities in Skåne were handed over to Region Skåne through a tax exchange. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shared responsibility for public transport means that the RPTAs must consider the views of municipalities on the design of the public transport system According to the first agreement, from the time when Region Skåne was created, that body has to give the municipalities some influence over public transport design.
	Informal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Skånetrafiken has the freedom to design the public transport system in a business-like way, without needing to pay detailed attention to municipal politics. However, constant negotiations take place between Skånetrafiken and municipalities. Strong perception that a functioning regional system can spread economic growth from larger to smaller conurbations. 	
Land use	Formal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is no strong regional planning level in Sweden that coordinates municipal physical planning with regional public transport planning Region Skåne is responsible for infrastructure planning and regional development issues but these are non-binding. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In Sweden it is solely a municipal responsibility to plan land use. The municipalities in Skåne still have a monopoly on formulating and deciding comprehensive and detailed land use plans. This gives Region Skåne little formal opportunity to influence physical planning in the municipalities.
	Informal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regional coordination takes place through voluntary mechanisms that give rise to coordination between “equal partners”. Skånetrafiken has the opportunity to express its opinion on municipal comprehensive and detailed plans. 	

Table 1 shows that the formal institutions are very much supported and complemented by the informal. These informal institutions can be used to mobilise support, achieve consensus and smooth the way for implementation where formal institutions alone may have produced fragmented public transport systems. This finding can be seen in relation to previous planning research which analyses how governance capacity can be created in fragmented governance landscapes (e.g. Healey, 2009). The formal and informal institutions discussed in this paper are used in a complementary fashion by regional and local authorities to achieve long term and strategic objectives for public transport. Strategic planning may, according to Healey (2009, p. 441), achieve effective governance if planners “accumulate the power to frame discourses and shape action through their resonance with issues and problems which are causing concern within a political community, or “polity”, and through the persuasive power of their core arguments and metaphors. If sufficient power is accumulated to give momentum to these strategic orientations, then the framing ideas may travel across significant

institutional sites of urban and regional governance, to enroll others with the power to invent, invest and regulate subsequent development.” This is what we argue has occurred in relation to these two critical interfaces in public transport in Skåne.

7. Conclusions

A starting point for the paper was that the reforms public transport has undergone during recent decades have created points in the planning and organisation of the public transport system where formal structures may produce (from the viewpoint of certain actors) sub-optimal results, resulting in the need for informal structures to negotiate the interface between local and regional government. Such moments have been termed ‘critical interfaces’. We have analyzed two such interfaces: first, the potential tensions between regional and local priorities in deciding where to provide public transport services in the public transport system, and at what level they should be managed, and second, the integration of regional public transport and local land use planning.

It is true that the regional public transport authority in the case study has strong formal powers. This allowed it to determine the design of the public transport system and prioritize investments in those bus and train routes that have the most passengers and the greatest potential for positive customer development (so called ‘high demand routes’), without needing to pay detailed attention to regional and local politics that potentially could result in sub-optimisation. In practice, however, the handling of the potential tensions between regional and local priorities in deciding where to provide public transport services in the public transport system requires that informal institutions create acceptance of the potentially controversial decisions the regional authority makes. Effective interaction between these informal and formal institutions is also a prerequisite for integrated regional transport and local land use planning, as there is complete lack of strong formal institutions for integration. The analysis of public transport governance in Skåne illustrates how regional and local authorities have established informal structures through collaboration and close work on specific infrastructure projects and through systematically and on a long term basis creating personalized professional relationships. These informal ways of working together have shown to be very important for the development of well-functioning public transport solutions in this case, no matter how strong or weak the formal institutions are. The examples discussed in this paper demonstrate that informal institutions are of major importance for managing the critical interfaces between - in this case – regional and local authorities in Swedish public transport planning.

A practical implication of the results is that regional and local authorities should be made aware of the importance of strong informal institutions. Without such informal institutions, it is much more difficult to succeed with the development of well-functioning public transport systems. The informal institutions found in the case study take the form of ongoing interactions that promote joint understandings and the development of shared visions for regional identity and development strategies that effective public transport can be seen to reinforce. Fundamentally, these visions ascribe a specific role in development strategies to public transport, illustrated by the metaphor of train transport as the “life blood” of the region.

It is important to recognize the power dynamics that are produced by informal institutions. A result of the strength of the perception that a well-functioning regional public transport system can spread economic growth from larger to smaller conurbations in Skåne was that the less densely populated municipalities, which are not directly linked to the strongest routes in

western Skåne, accepted investment being directed towards the west. The informal institutions in Skåne can be seen as an experiment in market-based forms of governance whereby regional and local authorities pursue policies of economic growth. It produced a particular power dynamic that does not necessarily benefit those who are said to benefit. The evidence base that supported the perception that a well-functioning regional system can spread economic growth from larger to smaller conurbations is unclear, as is often the case with these types of ideas about economic correlations (see for example Mullen & Marsden, 2015).

All the same, the results show one potential way to handle the problems that may result when reforming the public transport sector. The institutional terrain for public transport that Swedish regional and local authorities try to navigate is in many ways not very different from that in many other countries. Most other European regions have weak institutions for collective action, especially when it comes to the integration of regional public transport and local land use planning. The conflict of the local vs the regional often arises when competences are granted to the regional level, or where the regional level has a role, even if it is non-statutory (such as non-binding regional spatial planning). The research findings thus mirror broader trends in regional and local planning as discussed in the literature review, such as active citizenship (Amin, 1999) and the need to navigate soft spaces of governance (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009, Stead, 2016). Such spaces create an arena for debate and may produce regional plans with no statutory status that provide multisector visions that inform and coordinate statutory plans. In Sweden this is exemplified by planning that occurs at the intersection between regional and municipal transport and land use planning. Because the public transport legislation does not regulate the coordination between regional public transport planning and local land use planning we see that new attempts to deal with this problem have emerged. In the case study, regional and local authorities produced projects and plans that resulted in joint statements on how the municipalities should pursue urban planning in accordance with regional plans, the latter having no statutory status and thus weak formal power.

Nevertheless, the paper also demonstrates that there are clear limits to relying on informal institutions and raises questions as to whether there are certain circumstances in which the informal regional institution is more effective, such as times of growth. Institutional challenges can be more apparent in difficult situations than in successful ones. By their very nature, informal institutions are undefined hence the decisions and behaviors of individual actors have the potential both to support and to undermine formal institutions. Furthermore, unlike with formal institutions, there can be no formal process in place to address difficulties with informal institutions, such as when discussions break down and compromise cannot be achieved, leaving the governance scale with the formal power to make a decision that may cause friction with the other scale (e.g. a regional transport decision unpopular with certain municipalities). In this case, such instances have been rare, but it is recognised that this is partly because public transport patronage has grown across the region, therefore difficult decisions regarding cutting services have not been necessary.

Despite the growing number of attempts to establish governance through informal structures, more knowledge is needed regarding how these structures can be used to achieve effective governance of public transport, what the actual experiences are and what conditions must be met in order for them to be successful. The evidence from our case study showed that this arrangement works much of the time, but it must be recognized that it can be risky to rely on

informal institutions for the successful operation of formal institutions. For example, when it comes to the integration of regional public transport and local land use planning, evidence was found of some municipalities taking land use planning decisions that undermine public transport, when it was in their interest not to follow regional goals (for example about building in good public transport areas). Due to the lack of formal institutions, there are no checks and balances where such outcomes occur. There is thus a need for future research about the practical effectiveness of informal structures within regional and local transport and land use planning practices, and in particular how they can be improved if they are not working.

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Acknowledgements:

This research was done in collaboration with K2 – The Swedish Knowledge Centre for Public Transport. It was funded by Vinnova (the Swedish Governmental Agency for Innovation Systems).