



RTPI

Royal Town Planning Institute



**WORKING IN THE
PUBLIC INTEREST**

Exploring the role of the private sector in planning

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SERVING THE PUBLIC INTEREST?

The reorganisation of
UK planning services in
an era of reluctant
outsourcing

WORKING IN
THE PUBLIC
INTEREST

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About this report

Working in the Public Interest

This report is part of the Working in the Public Interest (WITPI) project – an Economic and Social Research Council-funded collaboration between the University of Sheffield, University of Newcastle, University College London, and the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI).

It is the largest investigation to date into the changing relationship between the public and private sectors in the delivery of local planning services in the UK, and what these changes mean for the profession's understanding of, and role in delivering, the public interest. WITPI has four strands of work:

1. Archival work to trace how the idea of the “public interest” has changed over time, in relation to different patterns of service delivery.
2. Focus groups with planning professionals to provide an up-to-date account of trends in planning service delivery across the UK, augmented by a Freedom of Information (FoI) request to all planning services on the outsourcing of arrangements to provide this service.
3. Biographical interviews with planning professionals to develop an in-depth understanding of the way changing practices, professional identities, and models of service delivery have shaped their careers.
4. In-depth “ethnographic” case studies of how planners in different organisational settings have defined and realised matters of the public interest.

More information about WITPI and its various strands of work is available at <http://witpi.group.shef.ac.uk/>.

This report

This report was produced by a team of researchers from the Newcastle University and the RTPI, as a product of the second WITPI workstream. It investigates trends in local public sector planning service delivery from the perspective of current planning practitioners, what they feel about the impacts of these changes on their work, and their implications for wider issues of public interest.

The data on which this report draws emerged from two sources: A series of eight focus groups, conducted between February and September 2018 by the research team, and the results of a Freedom of Information (FoI) request submitted by Dr Ben Clifford MRTPI of University College London's Bartlett School of Planning.

The focus groups lasted two hours each, and were carried out with a range of public and private

sector planning professionals of various ranks, roles, and ages. The sessions took place in Belfast, Bristol, Cardiff, Edinburgh, Leeds, Leicester, and London. We held two sessions in the last of these in order to cover Greater London and the wider South East separately. Individual, in-depth write-ups of these focus groups are available on the project website at:

<http://witpi.group.shef.ac.uk/blogs/>.

The FoI request was sent to all Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) in England (363), Wales (25), Scotland (34), and Northern Ireland (11), including National Parks, and all responded. The questions we asked can be found on the project website at <http://witpi.group.shef.ac.uk/research-activities/freedom-of-information-request/>. This data has been used to give context, and an overview of the outsourcing of planning activities by planning authorities. It also enriches this report with specific details on the scale and scope of outsourcing that would not have emerged through the focus groups alone. We will publish this data in a separate report early in 2019.

The qualitative data collected through the focus groups was rich and deep but, aside from the FoI data we use for context, this report can only speak to these views as they were expressed, and not more widely. References to FoI data are included in the endnotes of each chapter.

Acknowledgements and further information

We would like to take this opportunity to thank all the Local Planning Authorities that responded to the FoI request and all the participants who gave up their time to contribute to the focus groups. We hope that this report reflects your views and your concerns, and proves a useful snapshot of the current state of planning service provision.

If you would like any more information about this research please contact Dr Daniel Slade, RTPi Research Officer, at daniel.slade@rtpi.org.uk, or Dr Susannah Gunn, Co-Investigator on the WITPI project, at zan.gunn@ncl.ac.uk.

Executive summary

The age of reluctant outsourcing

Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) find themselves operating in a harsh environment; almost a decade of UK-wide austerity has made resourcing a serious challenge. The Government's pro-housing and pro-growth agendas have resulted in an overwhelming focus on these two issues – often to the detriment of other important agendas and a more holistic model of planning. In England, in particular, deregulatory planning reforms have weakened planners' ability to ensure development is coordinated and of a high quality. It has also produced a fractured, complex governance landscape.

This report draws on a series of focus groups held across the UK in 2018, supplemented by an FOI request made to all UK LPAs, to explore public and private sector planners' experiences of how local planning service delivery is changing, and what these changes mean for the planning system's ability to deliver in the public interest.

It finds that LPAs have had to adapt to survive in this environment, often adopting private sector working practices and aggressively pro-development stances to draw in the funding they need to resource their planning teams. But, while LPAs are increasingly acting like the private sector, and the private sector continues to be seen as an indispensable and legitimate source of the expertise and capacity they need, there are signs of a growing backlash against the partial outsourcing that has proliferated in recent years, particularly in England. While full outsourcing has always been rare, and only occurred in England, this appears to be part of growing dissatisfaction with the practice in general across the local public sector.¹ Our participants pointed to higher long-term costs, weaker relationships with applicants, and greater staff "churn" as some of the reasons for this rising scepticism within planning.

This is not to say that LPAs no longer outsource key areas of their work, or that they will not do so in the future; there are strong forces that continue to drive both of these things. Rather, we are now in an age of *reluctant* outsourcing.

Balance, box-ticking, and leadership

The concept of "balance" – weighing up different considerations, interests, and requirements – remains central to the way both public and private sector planners in the UK execute the public interest. And, in many ways, little has changed in the "toolkit" they use to carry out this balancing; professional expertise, accreditation, and continuing development remain central to their decision-making and credibility. However, "proceduralism" – in other words, a "box-ticking" culture – has closed down a lot of the space planners traditionally had for reflection, professional discretion, and proactive planning. In so doing, this is making it harder to undertake the kind of long-term strategic

thinking our participants equated with delivering the public interest.

There are certainly exceptions. Our participants highlighted how large, transformative projects can carve out spaces that make this possible. But these cases go against the grain, and opportunities like these were seen as disproportionately concentrated in large urban authorities that experience high development demand.

Strong, experienced, local planning leadership could also make a difference by ensuring strategic oversight, institutional memory, and smart commissioning. In the process, our participants felt that effective leaders with a good knowledge of planning maintain and make the case for efficient, in-house planning services. But again, while we heard many examples of effective leadership and case studies of inspirational change, more often reported were the challenges LPAs face in recruiting experienced leaders. Austerity and restructuring has led to a lack of experienced senior planners in the public sector, and consultancies offer an enticing, well-regarded, well-paying alternative to a public sector that is commonly regarded by planners as having serious image problems.

Meet the austerity planner

The longer-term consequences of these shifts – in funding, outsourcing, leadership, and practice – are being keenly felt by modern planning professionals, and particularly recent graduates, whose professional careers have been defined by austerity and post-2010 planning reforms in England. They are adapting to the above social and professional contexts by adjusting their expectations, career trajectories and, crucially, relationships with the public interest. In turn, they are reshaping the world in which they work, and the way in which the public and private sectors interact to deliver services.

Our more senior participants certainly saw some positives about this cohort we characterise through the idea of the “austerity planner”. For a start, their skills are in high demand. The austerity planner is also generally relatively well paid and rapidly promoted. But our participants also expressed some deep concerns. They often have little room for proactive planning or independently executing their professional judgement – and this is something that is seen to be eroding both their job satisfaction and their interest in critical reflection. They are highly mobile, having a tendency to move jobs and organisations rapidly in pursuit of more pay and experience. But this may come at the expense of building long-term relationships with customers, places, and colleagues. The austerity planner’s propensity to base their career choices on *where* they want to work, as much as for *whom*, is having a polarising effect on service delivery in different places.

This is clearly a very rough – and in some ways purposefully provocative – profile of planners whose professional careers have been defined by austerity and post-2010 planning reforms. It undoubtedly reflects wider societal shifts, and certainly only the perspective of our (generally, but not entirely, older and well-established) focus group participants. Nonetheless, it raises important questions about the future of the profession and its relationship with the public interest.

The current picture of local planning service delivery in the UK is not a universally gloomy one, but

it does raise serious questions. These questions are not necessarily the same across the nations, and indeed, planners in Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland remained more optimistic than their English counterparts. There was, however, a prevailing sense across all our focus groups that local authority planners currently face huge challenges to their ability to plan effectively in the public interest.

References

¹ Walker, T., Lawson, S. (2018). From Transactions to Changemaking: Rethinking Partnerships Between the Public and Private Sectors. London: New Local Government Network. Available at: <http://www.nlgn.org.uk/public/wp-content/uploads/From-Transactions-to-Changemaking-1.pdf> (accessed on 03/12/2018).

Preface: What is the public interest, and why does it matter to planning?

Defining the public interest

The “public interest”² is one of the fundamental justifications for the intervention of planning in development decision-making. It underpins planning practice, legitimises planning decisions, and provides part of the *raison d’être* for planning itself.³ Yet it is also a concept that is surprisingly difficult for planners and others to define.⁴ This is not a new observation; planning academics have noted for years that competing definitions abound.⁵ Some position the public interest as “assisting in the protection of disadvantaged and marginalised groups”;⁶ whilst others paint it as being about balancing competing private interests,⁷ or their aggregates. Others express a concern that arrangements that simply retain the institutional status quo limit the space for dissent against powerful interests, marginalising the already disadvantaged and disenfranchised, and characterise this as the “dark side of planning”.⁸

The Ethics and Professional Standards Advice for RTPI Members argues that:

“The defining feature of the planning profession is the duty ‘to advance the science and art of planning (including town and country and spatial planning) for the benefit of the public’...”⁹

Noting that “acting in the public interest involves having regard to the expectations of clients, employers, the local community and politicians as well as future generations”, this document also recognises that “tensions can often arise when trying to reconcile these different interests and challenges”. In so doing, it highlights the importance of considering the benefit of the public, as well as the client, while also giving space for planners to determine for themselves how this is best accommodated in any given situation.

The following discussion reflects on how public interest is being understood, how planning is being administered, and the challenges this is posing for more progressive understandings of public interest.

Our participants’ views on the public interest

These differing perspectives on the concept of public interest were reflected in our focus groups; our participants were more comfortable discussing specific ways in which it might be executed, served, or threatened than defining it, and stuck to broad principles. These did include “reducing inequality”, ensuring the “wellbeing of communities”, and positioning “the public interest over the private gain”, but they simultaneously recognised the complications of applying such a term in a

diverse society with a government whose overriding policy focus for many years has been economic growth.

Even then, there were distinct variations in how different communities of planners across the UK conceptualised these broad principles. In Belfast, our participants were acutely aware of how the public interest plays out in potentially partisan ways through service delivery at the local level and in practice. They noted that navigating different interests requires detailed situated knowledge:

“The public interest for one area will conflict with what’s in the public interest for another area, which leads to a different set of challenges.” (Belfast)

They also questioned whether a definition should start with the individual or the social as the unit of analysis and whether, in a time of high unemployment, particular concerns such as “just getting jobs in here” should be allowed to dominate. Welsh planners defined the public interest around a sense of the collective that emerges from a strong and valued history of social democratic participation. Meanwhile, in Scotland discussion centred around a long-term view at a national scale:

“The closest I’ve got to it is what the country, what the country as a whole needs in order to be a successful country, a good country to live in maybe.” (Edinburgh)

There was, nonetheless, a sense here that communities could be myopic about their particular concerns and interests. Our participants characterised this as being a view of: “Not right next to me thanks very much”, and suggested that we (i.e. planners) “don’t get that [long-term, full public interest] message across enough nationally and politically...”.

A participant in our Leicester focus group characterised the English planning system as having “no element of compensation and betterment... so it’s about balancing these two things and deciding who or what body of people are more important”. The perspective from our English sessions was that the public interest itself was constructed as combative. All of our five English focus groups reflected on the scalar dimensions of public interest, where what was needed for national benefit was not necessarily well received at the local level, particularly in relation to housing and large infrastructure provision. They also highlighted differences between rural and urban preoccupations, with a participant in our Bristol session highlighting:

“If you’re elected to look after the residents of South Gloucestershire, you’re trying to protect their green fields, their greenbelt, if you’re elected to look after the people who live in Bristol, you want to solve the housing crisis and give somebody a chance to get on the market.” (Bristol)

Similarly, a participant in the London focus group noted the intergenerational differences reflected in those who were already homeowners seeking to retain their housing value, while their children were more interested in getting houses built. There was also a recognition of balancing the technical with the political as two expressions of establishing development need. Indeed, across all the focus groups, regardless of location, “balancing” these differences was felt to be a key role of professional planning decision-making, and this concept is a key theme in Chapter 4.

The majority of consultancy contributors underlined their commitment to public interest issues, and

the potential reputational damage it would cause them to be advocating “inappropriate” developments to be built. They also highlighted the amount of work they did with their client throughout the application process to refine these proposals to bring them into accordance with policy expectations. However, there was some tentative questioning in a couple of our sessions about whether developers had to pay attention to “public interest”, or whether this was something that was up to the public sector to engage with and enforce. Several private sector participants acknowledged that there had been occasions where consultancy firms had been surprised that their client’s applications had been approved relatively easily.

Across most of the focus groups, including Scotland and Northern Ireland, with perhaps the exception of Wales, there was a view that, at times, the public interest had become a partisan Trojan horse used by all (housebuilders, communities, councillors, other stakeholders) to justify their private concerns, and that it could reflect their individualised private benefit, with them having little genuine regard for wider societal need.

Yet despite these seeming deficiencies, public interest was still identified as an important aspect of planning, and that it continues to provide the accepted – if largely unspoken – rationale for gaining better outcomes for localities and communities.

The scope of this report

Despite, or perhaps because of, these varying definitions and concerns, the “public interest” remained central to how all our participants defined, legitimated, and valued their own work, regardless of their background. Given the changes planning across the UK has undergone over recent years, this raises some important questions: How are patterns of private sector involvement in the delivery of services changing? Is the (apparently) increasingly central role of the private sector in public sector service delivery reshaping planners’ understandings of planning’s public interest rationale? What do these patterns mean for planners and their careers?

The potential scope of this report is clearly substantial, and we can only present one small “cut” into these topics and questions. Nonetheless, in what follows, we explore practitioners’ views on:

- Current trends in service provision across the UK;
- Changing career trajectories of planners across the UK, and how these interact with these trends in service provision, as well as different understandings of the public interest;
- What both of the above mean for planning’s ability to serve the public interest in the future;
- Current and emerging tensions across each of the above.

With this in mind, we can only speak to the views of those who took part in our focus groups. We therefore limit ourselves to presenting social/economic/political contexts as they emerged from these focus groups, supplemented by the results of the FoI request. For example, we discuss the impacts of austerity, “millennial” culture, and local government reform at various points, but only because these were important to our participants’ understandings. Similarly, much (but definitely

not all) of our focus group discussions naturally focused on development management as a specific area of practice and, therefore, so too does this report. The archetype of the “austerity planner” emerges as a way of capturing the ways in which planners whose careers had been defined by austerity and post-2010 planning reforms are influencing, and have been influenced by, changing patterns of service delivery, but this only represents a composite of our participants’ various views.

Structure of this report

In Chapter 1, we set out the current planning context across the UK, reflecting on the policy – and crucially, cultural – changes devolution has brought to local planning service delivery in each of the nations. It also reflects on current patterns of planning service delivery, and argues that while outsourcing is occurring, LPAs are doing so with increasing reluctance.

The chapters that follow summarise the key themes that emerged from our focus groups: Chapter 2 reflects on how local authorities are increasingly acting like the private sector to survive, adopting increasingly pro-development “business mindsets”. Chapter 3 considers the changing character of the planning professional and the role of “professional identity” within this context. Chapter 4 then follows closely, arguing that planners see proceduralism and “box-ticking” as an increasingly serious threat to their ability to work in the public interest. Chapter 5 highlights the crucial role that many of the participants felt that strong leadership plays in the delivery of the public interest through robust planning services, as well as the challenges LPAs face in retaining the services of experienced planners. Chapter 6 then draws the report to a close by exploring how each of the trends discussed above are influencing modern planners’ career trajectories, and what these might mean for the future of the public interest. It does so through concept of the “austerity planner”.

References

² This term is generally used interchangeably with ‘the common good’ in the context of planning.

³ Campbell, H., Marshall, R. (2002). Utilitarianism’s Bad Breath? A Re-Evaluation of the Public Interest Justification for Planning. *Planning Theory*. 1 (2) pp.163–187.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Murphy, E., Fox-Rogers, L. (2015). Perceptions of the Common Good in Planning. *Cities*. 42. pp.231–241.

⁶ Parker, G., Doak, J. (2012). *Key Concepts in Planning*. London: Sage, p.19.

⁷ Yifatchel, O. (1998). Planning and Social Control: Exploring the Dark Side. *Journal of Planning Literature*. 14 (4) pp.395–406. Cited in Murphy, E., Fox-Rogers, L. 2015. Perceptions of the Common Good in Planning. *Cities*. 42. pp.231–241.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ RTPI (2017). *Ethics and Professional Standards Advice for RTPI Members*. Available at: https://www.rtpi.org.uk/media/2675025/ethics_update_2017.pdf (accessed 21/11/2018).

Chapter 1: We are now in the age of “reluctant outsourcing”

Summary

Contrary to the tone of much of the debate on the subject, wholesale outsourcing (see table on pages 19 and 20) for different modes of outsourcing in the UK) of planning services in the UK remains rare. Our FoI revealed that only eight of the UK’s 433 LPAs have adopted this model, and perhaps not unexpectedly, all of them are in England. Most LPAs have where possible tried to keep planning services in-house and have chosen other models and ways to weather austerity, and are increasingly seeing their planning service as a commercial asset and vital source of funding for the non-profitable aspects of their planning services.

Though many LPAs want to retain traditional staffing arrangements, most have developed “portfolio” departmental staffing profiles, comprising a hybrid, fluid mixture of permanent staff, seconded staff, contract staff, agency staff, and shared working arrangements with other authorities or organisations. While certainly not without its disadvantages, this model has become increasingly common as a way of ensuring LPAs have both the technical expertise and the flexibility needed to achieve tight performance targets in the context of austerity and volatile peaks and troughs in service demand.

Overall, while there is an increasing reluctance to both partial and full outsourcing – due to its perceived high cost, the loss of control it brings, and a growing perception that the service quality is diminished – partial outsourcing remains extremely common. This is primarily because of competence shortages, capacity shortages, and an ongoing need to bring in external sources of expertise and evidence where LPAs think there might be a legal challenge to a planning decision.

Divergent planning cultures and overall levels of outsourcing

As described in the Appendix (page 47), the overall picture across the nations is one of diverging planning cultures, with the Welsh and Scottish governments in particular viewing the role of their planning systems very differently to how the UK Government views the English planning system.

Nonetheless, wholesale outsourcing of planning, where council workers have been “TUPE’d”¹⁰ out to a non-Council-owned commercial company (such as Capita or Engie) as part of a service provision agreement, remains rare across the UK, perhaps surprisingly so; only five out of the 433 LPAs that responded to our FoI request had done this.¹¹ A further three English LPAs have set up their own trading companies to provide services to themselves.¹² This latter arrangement, through which a local authority recognises and attempts to capture the commercial potential of its own planning services, TUPEing out council planning staff to its own trading arm, can include a

“Teckal”¹³ cost-sharing arrangement that limits commercial activity to 20%. In the focus group discussion, participants tended to use terms such as “fully outsourced” to denote the “Capita-style” model in which a private firm that is not owned by the local authority captures profit generated by public services, and we have aimed to retain this usage in the report. Setting up a trading arm was usually discussed not as outsourcing *per se*, but as a means of keeping services technically in-house, as part of the commercially savvy LPA service delivery strategy described in Chapter 2.

All of the above examples are in England,¹⁴ and our participants in Belfast, Edinburgh, and Cardiff viewed full outsourcing, alongside a generally more prominent role for the private sector in service delivery, with concern, and as a particularly English issue. Indeed, a Welsh planner characterised what she had observed in an English context as “[companies] eating up authorities”. Politicians in England were perceived to construct planning as part of “the problem”, and a participant in our Cardiff session described the UK Government as “using planning in England as a negative football to kick around”. These differing perceptions of planning’s usefulness have informed the levels of support afforded planning by their respective nations, with the devolved nations purposefully defining themselves against this English perspective.

Reasons for reluctance in outsourcing across the UK

One of the most striking themes across all our focus groups, regardless of nation or region, was a growing reluctance over outsourcing of any type. This appears to match findings from other recent studies examining local government’s opinions in outsourcing public services in general,¹⁵ and is linked to issues of cost, control, and the quality of the service provided:

1. The need to be cost-effective has become increasingly important to LPAs, and there was a consensus – including amongst our participants who professionally advised public sector clients on outsourcing – that it is generally “cheaper [in the long-term] for the public sector to do it itself”. This was thought to be the case because private sector service providers naturally need to take a “cut” to be commercially viable as business entities in their own right. As several of our participants noted, this pushes costs up:

“...all of a sudden [outsourcing company] are taking a massive fat margin out of it and you think it is crazy” (Leeds)

“I had staff leave, gone to an agency and the same agency want to sell you back the same staff that left for twice the price” (Leicester)

So, where possible, it appeared that LPAs were more inclined to keep service provision in-house, but this was not always possible due to the volume of work and staff shortages.

2. Control was an important issue at initial procurement, and long contracts might not be sufficiently flexible to accommodate new and unforeseen requirements on services. Equally problematically, in most outsourced arrangements, managing the practicalities of service delivery becomes the contractor organisation’s responsibility, but this might not be done to the client organisation’s requirements. Our participants provided examples of contractors sub-contracting,

working remotely and not visiting sites, or deploying staff of very variable quality and seniority. For example:

“They are just hiring freelancers... from all over the place just to get through the volume of work and you’ve got no control over who’s actually doing it.” (Leeds)

3. The quality of services provided diminished as a result of the lack of control, continuity, and local knowledge described above. Short-termist recruitment results in consultants and applicants finding it difficult to talk to an allocated planning officer about their applications, and public sector planning teams often absorb the loss of a short-term contract worker leaving:

“...somebody is working on something and then suddenly they are gone, and there is no consistency necessarily on the projects because they have moved on.” (London; Greater London)

This diminished service quality was perceived as hugely problematic, and there were examples of LPAs seeking to reduce their dependence on short-term contracts, and move instead towards greater sharing of staff competencies. We discuss the drivers and negative impacts of “churn” in more detail in Chapter 6, in relation to recent changes to planners’ career trajectories.

Overall, our participants felt there were several advantages to keeping service provision in-house where possible, and felt that a well-managed department should be able to resist outsourcing:

“A good, sound planning service that’s set up and well-oiled, you know, it’ll take some beating.” (Leeds)

Planners offered several key reasons why in-house planning “is the sensible thing to do”, including that it offers more control over the process, is more efficient since fewer people need to be involved, and creates opportunities for building lasting relationships with clients.

The “portfolio model” as a key mode of planning service delivery across the UK

Though outsourcing is increasingly unpopular, local authorities are turning to a “portfolio” model of service delivery and staffing as a way of weathering austerity. This entails seeing their planning service not just as a public service, but as a commercial asset, and requires the profitable elements of the service to fund themselves as well as the non-profitable elements; in some instances LPAs are setting up local government trading companies (see the table on pages 19 and 20). Many are selling the profitable elements of their services, including any expertise they may have (notably design and conservation) to other LPAs. And in some cases, they are also simply selling spare professional labour, particularly in development management, to other LPAs, who need to reduce their application backlogs.

Many LPAs want to retain “traditional” staffing arrangements, but most are needing to develop “portfolio” departmental staffing profiles, as described by one of the planners in our London (Greater London) session. By this he meant that these departments were usually made up of

predominantly permanent staff (employed by the council), alongside some seconded staff¹⁶, contract staff, and agency staff¹⁷. In addition to this, staffing arrangements also included shared working agreements with other authorities or organisations¹⁸. It was thought that this type of working created sufficient departmental competence/expertise, capacity, and agility to achieve performance targets in the context of austerity cuts and volatile peaks and troughs in service demand. These modes of provision are described and further explored in the table on pages 19 and 20.

However, such modes of service delivery were not seen as universally positive; while they were seen as agile and efficient, participants also expressed concerns that they bring an acceptance of more precarious working conditions (see Chapter 2), greater staff mobility (see Chapter 6) and, in some cases, a reduced sense of responsibility and loyalty between members of staff and their organisations (Chapter 6).

Drivers of the “portfolio” model

Though they generally regarded keeping services in-house as being the ideal model of service delivery where it was possible, our participants described the main motivations for adopting this “portfolio” model of partial outsourcing as expertise/competency shortages, capacity shortages, and contestation of evidence:

1. Shortages of leadership competencies within public service providers and the subsequent need to resolve these issues through other means were crucial. If a leadership position remained vacant, the immediate solution was often to try to resolve it through a partnership arrangement with another LPA, seconding staff in (perhaps from a large reputable company), or to employ senior staff from the private sector who had often previously been employed in the public sector (possibly in the same role, but now operating as a sole practitioner).

2. Capacity shortages generated by very variable volumes of work (particularly in development management)¹⁹ require flexible staffing arrangements that enable LPAs to increase capacity at peak times but shed or redeploy it when local demand is lower. Short-term contracts and agency work were a means of achieving this.

3. LPAs regularly need to buy in expertise which they lack in-house. This may simply be because the skills required to carry out a particular analysis, or develop a particular plan, are too specialist for the LPA to practically keep in-house. But participants also pointed to instances in which work was given to consultants to promote the sense that it was independently produced, and thus politically incontestable. This could happen when producing the evidence base for controversial local policy, for example. Consultants are also often hired to take the place of a planning officer whose committee has previously gone against their recommendation on whether to refuse or accept an application.

Table: Examples of public–private provision of local authority planning services

	Arrangement	Description of Provision	Examples, Trends, Consequences
Local Authority	Commit to in-house provision	<p>Avoiding commissioning work and/or insource where they can, with conviction (sometimes political) that public sector provision provides value-added gains over short-termist/expensive consultancy.</p> <p>In an austerity climate, commit to a lean commercial outlook and cost-neutral service provision.</p>	<p>“It has taken us a couple of years to get the service...back to the standard that we wanted because they simply weren’t invested in whilst they were outsourced.” (LPA Planner, Leeds FG)</p> <p>“It’s cheaper for the public sector to do it itself, always.” (Consultant, London FG)</p> <p>“I think the culture towards public services is very positive in Wales.” (Consultant, Cardiff FG)</p> <p>Fol: Most LPAs in England, Scotland, Wales, N. Ireland have not significantly outsourced.</p>
Local Authority	Set up a trading company	<p>Setting up their own companies, for example, in housing or conservation, and selling their expertise to customers as a firm.</p> <p>Can include “TUPEing” of LPA staff and a “Teckal” cost-sharing arrangement that limits commercial activity to 20%.</p>	<p>“Local authorities now are getting their own house building division and buying land, making sure that the price doesn’t inflate so that they can deliver good affordable schemes.” (Consultant, Leeds FG)</p> <p>“They’re not just wanting to say yes to planning consent, they’re wanting to see how they can get involved in the development as well.” (Consultant, Leicester FG)</p> <p>Fol: Cotswold, W. Oxfordshire, Forest of Dean, and Cheltenham councils set up Publica.</p>
Local Authority	Join up to share and trade expertise	<p>Sharing and/or selling resources across LPAs (and even private sector) to produce plans and cover needed expertise.</p> <p>Includes subsidising a specialist by commissioning out to neighbouring authorities, and potentially leveraging lower public-sector service cost rates to sell expertise to consultancies (with possible ethical concerns).</p>	<p>“We were both [referring to neighbouring LPA] sat in each other’s public enquiries supporting the approach we were taking with housing.” (LPA Planner, Leeds FG)</p> <p>“When there are still gaps on issues such as GIS and maybe archaeology... you can sometimes call on experience from neighbouring councils, so shared services... we sometimes find that as more productive than going out to a consultant.” (LPA Planner, Edinburgh FG)</p> <p>“We’ve talked to [consultancy] about employing someone between us, interestingly, because we can’t afford one each.” (LPA Planner, Leicester FG)</p> <p>Fol: Havant and E. Hampshire councils have employed a shared head of planning service.</p>
Local Authority	Charge users for service provision	<p>Extending fee and service regimes in response to the government’s local self-sufficiency drive.</p> <p>Includes reviewing “customer service”, planning performance agreements, pre-application consultation, and itemising contributions.²⁰</p>	<p>“The developers actually wanted to pay for [the pre-application service] because they saw some value.” (LPA Planner, Leeds FG)</p> <p>“[Contribution to funding the Local Plan] should be a definite line item to planning fee income.” (Consultant, London FG)</p> <p>Fol: Not asked as part of Fol request.</p>
Agency / Short-term	Provide service via agency staff and short-term contracts	<p>Facing unstable future, relying on costly agency or temporary staff to manage peaks and troughs in demand. Often combined with consultant use as part of a “portfolio-staffing” model.</p> <p>Widespread temporary contracts. “Austerity planner” gains rapid advancement without gaining sufficient experience. “Churn”, exacerbated by agency encouragement to pursue new jobs, undermines consistency and ability to make decisions according to specific local context.</p>	<p>“I’ve been a contractor on a short-term contract... just like rolling for three months, just because they don’t know what is going to happen to that service.” (LPA Planner, London FG)</p> <p>“Recruitment agencies play the individual agency workers off against each authority.” (LPA Planner, London FG)</p> <p>“Local authorities realised actually they’ve got a service to provide and there’s a bit of this dash to get bums on seats to fill those roles in.” (LPA Planner, Leicester FG)</p> <p>Fol: Not evident in Wales, Scotland, and N. Ireland but highly significant in England.</p>

Consultant	<p>Commission consultant as expert or “critical friend”</p>	<p>Routine commissioning of discrete pieces of work (e.g. urban design, conservation work, Housing Market Assessments) as one-offs. Includes “arm’s length” engagement to challenge existing culture or provide mentorship/quality assurance.</p> <p>Used to access specific expertise (especially on big-ticket or novel projects), to legitimate controversial decisions, and to reduce risk, but increasing need for justification of expenditure.</p>	<p>“We’re looking at a [specific transport development] at the moment where we don’t have the in-house expertise to deal with a [specific aspect] so, yeah, you bring in the relevant professionals externally to help on those more specialist areas.” (LPA Planner, Leeds FG)</p> <p>“Whatever the big ticket item is, where there’s a new skill set required... quite often it’s the private sector that responds faster to that in sort of upskilling.” (Govt. Agency Planner, Edinburgh FG)</p> <p>“The advice I was being given from above was ‘Give them to a consultant because that’s externalising the risk.’” (Academic/Former LPA Planner, Belfast FG)</p> <p>Fol: Aberdeen Council contracts with landscape specialist Doug Harman Associates.</p>
Consultant	<p>Bring in a consultant on secondment</p>	<p>Junior consultant planners fill gaps and reduce application processing backlogs. Senior consultancy planners perform (often senior) management roles involving leadership and procurement.</p> <p>Public sector senior staff become sole practitioner consultants, bought back in to the public sector, sometimes expensively, to do similar work as they were doing previously.</p>	<p>“Permanent staff members in planning policy have jumped out and jumped back in as contractors because, one, they get more money, two, they get more flexibility.” (LPA Planner, London FG)</p> <p>“I’ve worked for one or two authorities where, effectively, I’ve fulfilled the client role in the authority because they haven’t had the resource to do it themselves, and that’s authorities exposing themselves to a significant level of risk, frankly.” (Consultant, Cardiff FG)</p> <p>Fol: W. Sussex Council backfilled policy vacancies with staff from the planning consultancy Adams Hendry/Blueprint.</p>
Fully Commercialised	<p>Outsource partial/ complete service to commercial service provider</p>	<p>Agreement (usually about 15 years) between LPA (client) and non-council-owned service provider (company) for the company to take over the partial/whole service provision, utilising ‘TUPE’d’ LPA staff augmented with its own.</p> <p>Sense that LPAs feel they are “wising up” to providers’ seductive promises; Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland politically/culturally averse to this level of outsourcing.</p>	<p>“They’re just hiring freelancers... from all over the place just to get through the volume of work and you’ve got no control over who’s actually doing it.” (Consultant, Leeds FG)</p> <p>“Ultimately, people are going into these things more with their eyes open.” (Consultant, Leeds FG)</p> <p>“Sometimes in England, with Capita and those kind of models, it’s gone, virtually a whole service has gone out to a private sector; that hasn’t really happened in Scotland.” (Consultant, Edinburgh FG)</p> <p>“[Remote planning] is quite a good way of taking the objective professional planning opinion away from councillors a little bit” (Consultant, commercial service provider, Belfast FG)</p> <p>Fol: There are 5 commercially outsourced authorities, primarily through Capita and Engie.</p>

FG = Focus group (eight focus groups were held in cities around the UK).

Fol = 2018 Freedom of Information request made by Dr Ben Clifford to all UK planning services.

References

¹⁰ By which local authority staff are transferred to a private company under the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) 2006 Regulations.

¹¹ Five authorities have followed what was emerging as the standard model of outsourcing with a private company such as Capita now conducting planning work for the council: Barnet Council, Breckland Council, North East Lincolnshire Council, North Tyneside Council, and Salford Council.

¹² Three authorities have created local council trading companies to provide services to themselves: Barking and Dagenham Council, Cotswolds Council, and West Oxfordshire Council. Barking and Dagenham have set up Be First, a wholly owned subsidiary of the council. Cotswolds and West Oxfordshire, together with Forest of Dean and Cheltenham councils have set up an arms-length local authority-owned company named Publica Group Ltd. Cotswolds and West Oxfordshire staff have largely been transferred to Publica, and these are utilising this company as their primary service provider. Cheltenham and Forest of Dean councils reported they have only partially outsourced to Publica.

¹³ Forster, L. (2016) Teckal – the basics explained. The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy. Available at <https://www.cipfa.org/policy-and-guidance/articles/teckal-the-basics-explained> (accessed 08/01/2019).

¹⁴ Though even this only accounts for 2.2% of English authorities.

¹⁵ Walker, T., Lawson, S. (2018) From Transactions to Changemaking: Rethinking Partnerships Between the Public and Private Sectors. New Local Government Network. Available at: <http://www.nlgn.org.uk/public/wp-content/uploads/From-Transactions-to-Changemaking-1.pdf> (accessed 03/12/2018).

¹⁶ Seconded refers to a temporary transfer of a particular employee to another job or post to complete a particular assignment, with the employee retaining employment with the original employer. An example of this type of transaction includes West Sussex backfilling policy vacancies using seconded staff from the planning consultancy Adams Hendry/Blueprint.

¹⁷ The FoI data highlighted this as an issue across England, but particularly in the South West of England, South East England and London. It revealed that many authorities are spending considerable sums on agency workers, for example, Stratford-on-Avon spent nearly £273,000; and Torridge Council spent £313,550 utilising agency staff from six agencies to provide its planning services during a period of “unprecedented turnover of [its] planning staff”. Focus groups identified this agency-working as a particular issue in London, where LPAs were seeking to move away from their dependency on agency working. The FoI identified examples countrywide, but notably in the South East of England, where costs also appeared to be higher.

¹⁸ From the FoI, Snowdonia National Park Authority reported that they receive mineral and waste advice from a shared service that was set up by North Wales LPAs in March 2010. This shared service is run by Flintshire Council as lead authority; it is set-up as a permanent service, and it costs Snowdonia National Park Authority £1,942.57 annually.

¹⁹ From the FoI, 41 LPAs, all in England, indicated that they routinely outsourced their development management application processing service.

²⁰ See <https://www.rpi.org.uk/investingindelivery> for more information.

Chapter 2: LPAs are increasingly acting like the private sector to survive

Summary

Amidst a growing reluctance to outsource, and increasing under pressure to fund themselves, LPAs are adopting survival strategies orientated to being pro-development and lean, and relying on income generated from development. These local authorities are also achieving economies of scale, and a market for their specialisms, through joint working strategies and, in a small number of cases, capturing the commercial value of the service via a local authority trading company.

Convinced that a tightly run in-house service has a competitive advantage, and ensuring streamlined provision with continuity in staffing, some departments have engaged energetically in external benchmarking and “fat-cutting” exercises. Reluctance to embrace these measures, which are seen as necessary for the survival of the service, is perceived as irrational, “old school”, or “out of touch”.

In this climate, conflict between the public and private sectors over the public interest has reduced, and the development process is increasingly perceived as a vital income stream. Major development projects, in particular, are seen as a means of image enhancement, easing recruitment woes and driving upskilling. While a less combative application process is associated by some with a “maturity” in the system, others are concerned that there is insufficient scrutiny of available evidence.

Lean organisation

While there was a clear preference across our sessions for keeping service provision in-house where possible, this was only deemed viable when LPAs operated in a lean, tightly monitored, and business-like manner. In our Leeds focus group, a senior LPA planner who is committed to keeping planning in-house explained his commitment to leanness, noting:

“Ten years ago, I’ll be quite honest, there was a lot of fat in the planning department.” (Leeds)

Scrutinising internal processes and using external benchmarking to streamline workflows, this planner has ensured that uncooperative staff are “managed out of the organisation”. Pleased with the results, he noted that his department is one of only a few that, per application, makes a profit. However, following increased development pressure and several rounds of austerity-driven cuts,

this quest for leanness has perhaps taken its toll on his staff:

“The team is certainly stretched, there’s no doubt about that.” (Leeds)

This modern, business-orientated planning culture is less prominent in Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, but planners in these locations have often brought back notions of lean, target-driven organisation from stints in English LPAs. Similarly, a business culture is imported from consultancies, not least by planners who move back and forth between sectors. Thus, across the UK, planning professionalism is increasingly defined in a context of business-like efficiency.

No “outside” to the business mindset

The business mindset is seen by many as necessary for the survival of public sector planning. As a consultant in our Leeds focus group who acts as an interim leader in troubled LPAs framed it:

“It’s about being fit for purpose, being part of that journey and surviving because you’re a cost-effective overall unit.” (Leeds)

Embracing a need for organisational transformation towards stripped-down cost-effectiveness, our participants characterised those who resist as out of touch with the *zeitgeist*. Commercially orientated initiatives, such as councils setting up their own trading arms, were seen as business savvy ventures, and were not widely critiqued by participants. In Northern Ireland, planners referred to the “job for life” or “easy-ride” culture as an anachronism, noting that those who are unable to adapt to targets “find it very difficult to fit into that new regime” and need to change or get out. In Wales, a consultant who was “helicoptered” into a local authority described a mutual learning process whereby resistant officers start to see the benefits of streamlined techniques brought in from the private sector.

Though they often valued the personal relationships they equated with “traditional” planning culture, our participants rarely questioned this entrepreneurial mindset – particularly with regards to the shift from “development control” to “development management”. They argued that communities are more on board with development than is evident from the media. Occasional thoughts on development such as “Well not everyone does want...” tended to go unfinished. However, as a more overtly critical London planner framed it, in a context where resistance is futile, community (and planning officer) acquiescence around major development plans may reflect resignation rather than support:

“You are powerless to stop the push toward high density, towards greater heights, greater intensification within areas of high value.” (London: Greater London)

While a financially-driven, stripped-down service was rarely problematised in the focus groups, there was some concern that private firms cherry-pick projects that are more profitable and interesting, leaving less financially productive, more mundane aspects to the public sector. As one Leeds planner put it:

“My concern there is that we’re left with all the stuff that costs a load to do for the

income it generates.” (Leeds)

This feeling that LPAs are missing out on “all the nice projects” (i.e., those large urban extension, new settlement, and major infrastructure projects that draw in funding and – our participants felt – opened up space for creative and proactive planning – see Chapter 4) was also felt to deter planners from public sector careers.

Facilitating development

Our participants generally celebrated the income generation and image enhancement that being seen as a “pro-development” planning department brings. In our Edinburgh session, a head of planning described the bad old days as “anti-development men sitting there... and feeling very bitter about the private sector and development”. By contrast, he framed today’s planners as “more accommodating men” who are there to facilitate rather than fight development. He noted that, although there are still some “fairly anti-development councils”, the previously stark split between public and private sector no longer exists. As such, the Scottish planning application process was seen as less confrontational than it previously was – something one consultant attributed to a “maturity” in the system. Partly driven by austerity, the current evidence-led process is based more on a principle of scrutiny rather than “knee-jerk” combat. However, in Bristol, concern was raised that such scrutiny often falls short. As one recently retired planner argued, “some of that evidence is poor and it’s unchecked”; thus, the tendency of consultants to hold back information that is not in their client’s best interest is overlooked. Under-resourcing and lack of in-house experience (which is often the reason evidence-gathering is outsourced in the first place) was seen as a key vulnerability:

“There’s not that experience there and mistakes are being made.” (Bristol)

Fees generated by users of the planning service are increasingly integral to its operation and development is a welcome income generator for cash-strapped departments. Focus group members felt that developers and homeowners are largely happy to pay increased fees for support and guidance in the application process, provided they see results. In our Leeds session, a senior planner described developers’ enthusiastic take-up of his department’s fee-based pre-application service:

“We were providing some quality advice and the developers actually wanted to pay for that because they saw some value.” (Leeds)

This stance, he argued, has attracted major projects, which have improved the image of the city and made recruitment easier, since involvement in these long term and often transformative projects makes the city more appealing to planners looking to upskill and advance their career (see Chapter 6). This income-generating, positively branded approach to planning was thus framed as a win-win for development and public sector job creation.

A similar story was told about pre-application services in Wales, where provision of an agent forum had greatly improved relations: “I know that of late the agents speak extremely highly of their

interface with the planning authority". While acknowledging this kind of win, a London planner argued that more transparent information on where planning fees go (for example, towards funding the Local Plan) would further enhance buy-in.

What does this mean for the public interest?

The prevailing business mindset in LPAs points to smoother alignment of planning and developer goals which, for some, serves a key role in revitalising towns and cities, by generating employment and creating vibrant places, as well as funding the LPAs' operations. This orientation can be seen as a positive response to austerity conditions, in which LPAs are modernising to efficiently and sustainably deliver services to clients, and playing a central role in the economic growth of their areas.

However, there is a concern that LPAs are increasingly unable to rigorously scrutinise evidence supplied by developers and their consultants, unbalancing decision making processes. Funding the planning service through applicant fees raises the possibility that sub-standard projects might be allowed through in order to pay for staff and services. The service is arguably incentivised to allow lucrative projects, and not ones that deliver the public good. Within this logic, projects that require unremunerative levels of time and resource may be side-lined. Finally, public sector efficiency drives (or TUPEing of staff to a commercial local authority trading company) may have negative implications for staff wellbeing – an important, but sometimes neglected, consequence.

Chapter 3: Professional membership remains important to many

Summary

Professional membership and the RTPI Code of Professional Conduct are key in helping planners to orientate themselves towards the public interest. While being chartered remains a legitimising requirement in the private sector, accreditation is sometimes undervalued and under-resourced in the public sector.

Looking across sectors, some feel that private sector planners should be able to focus on serving the client's interest, while others felt that both sectors should approach the public interest in a balanced way. Major abuses were thought to be prevented by reputational risk, and both sides are "kept straight" by their attachment to a larger system that allows them to "take their hats off" and sit around the table together.

Strong professional ethics highlight the importance of planner discretion in protecting the public interest, yet concerns over lack of professional accreditation and embeddedness in a system orientated to commercial gain highlight possible threats to the common good.

Professional membership as an "ethical backstop"

Our participants saw the public interest as intertwined with the exercise of sound professional judgement. Professional membership, as a formal recognition of and commitment to this, thus provides an important "backstop" that underpins their commitment to serving the public interest. Crucially, professional membership also *legitimises* their role in serving the public interest, especially when planners themselves struggle to define the concept (see the Preface).

The RTPI Code is also valued in orientating planners to the public good, especially when operating in territory that falls outside of formal policies or procedures. Indeed, while the argument can be made that a policy-compliant decision is a decision in the public interest, most planners regard that policy as a guide rather than a mandate or absolute. This somewhat detached orientation to policy is underscored by the profession's emphasis on discretion and, in the British planning systems, the position of policy as just one consideration amongst many.

Here, the RTPI Code, with its emphasis on independence, gives planners some critical distance from, for example, the government's greenbelt development policy or a client's self-interest. In protecting the public good, concern was raised that chartered status should be a high-profile

requirement and mark of soundness, as in quantity surveying or legal practice. As one consultant in our Cardiff session argued:

“If you get a surveyor you don’t even look at a non-RICS one; you don’t even look at a lawyer that hasn’t got the right letters.” (Cardiff)

Chartered focus group participants derived security and a sense of integrity from belonging to a profession that is underpinned by well-defined ethics. As one planner in Wales argued, “otherwise you’re not actually doing a profession, are you? You’re just doing a job.”

Many felt that chartered status is increasingly undervalued in the public sector, where it is often left up to the individual to determine whether or not they pursue their professional licentiate. In contrast, it was felt that the private sector generally requires that early career staff become chartered members of the associated professions, and then often support staff in the accreditation process. This perceived unwillingness on the part of LPAs to fund planners in obtaining chartered status was attributed to a number of factors. These included austerity-driven cash shortfalls and the tendency for young planners to “cut their teeth” in the public sector before moving out to consultancy, such that organisational investment in their training is lost (see Chapter 6).

This reluctance to support the pursuit of chartered status was also thought to be part of a vicious cycle, whereby the barriers and disincentives young planners face in pursuing accreditation reduces the demand LPAs perceive graduates have for it. As one veteran planner in Leicester described it:

“When I graduated, thousands of years ago, my absolute objective was to get [chartered by the RTPI]... I would say now, the graduates... they’re not even that bothered about starting their [career progression] diaries.” (Leicester)

This is the case even when, more widely, our participants felt that there is clear demand for chartered planners in the labour market (see Chapter 6).

Professional identity in the public versus private sector

Our participants felt that the planning system should be designed to serve the public interest, but disagreed on whether private and public planners serve it in the same way. In Scotland, a consultant argued succinctly that the private sector is able to be client-focused since it is embedded in the larger planning system:

“You have to be supportive of the planning system as a whole and respect the fact that it’s there in the public interest but you’re working either in your own company’s or your client’s interests, and that’s why somebody else makes the decision.” (Edinburgh)

Others argued that, guided by professional ethics, consultants should weigh the public interest in the same way as public sector planners. Here, concern was raised that young consultant planners sometimes have difficulty meeting the MRTPI ethical requirements, presumably because they paid

insufficient attention to concerns other than their clients'. As a recently graduated consultant planner in our Cardiff session argued:

“It should be where both public and private are both thinking of both public interest and the client’s interest as well.” (Cardiff)

In considering the basis of their professional judgement, one of the consultants argued that serving the public interest means planners using discretion for public benefit, rather than submitting to profit-driven interests:

“Using proper professional judgement and discretion then you can create the conditions where there is a public benefit and public interest in development rather than just rolling over to pressures or... commercial pressures perhaps.” (Belfast)

Some consultants confessed to doing some “rubbish” projects at various times to make money. Others admitted that they interpret the public interest strategically to suit their clients’ needs:

“We’re a private company, there’s an element of following the money. If the client’s got land or has got something that has some potential, you would advise them of that.” (Cardiff)

However, guided by a sense of professional ethics, consultants also described urging clients towards ethical behaviour. As one consultant in Leeds put it, he might feel comfortable taking on a client if he felt he had some influence in coaxing them towards a more ethically sound direction: “I think the test is can you sleep at night”. In a similar vein, a consultant in Bristol objected strongly to the notion that consultants merely do their clients’ bidding:

“I can’t recall a time when I’ve ever been told to say something by a client. A client comes to us, they pay what I think is a ridiculous amount of money to give them advice, and they pretty much always listen to it.” (Bristol)

Consultants also reported that, as a matter of professional integrity, they were sometimes unwilling to work with clients who refused to listen or seemed incapable of reform. As a consultant in Wales explained:

“If they want to do something that’s completely outrageous, or they want someone to bang their fists on the table against a local authority, it’s not how I operate and I wouldn’t do it.” (Cardiff)

Risk of reputational damage, which is intertwined with professional ethics, was felt to encourage planner behaviour that is consistent with the public interest. The Bristol focus group explored this point thoroughly, arguing that it is the planning system in which both sides of a given application are embedded that ensures that the public interest is served and that professionals put forward a robust, appeal-proof case. As one consultant in this group put it, the role of the appeal system and the inspector is highly valuable:

“It stops the planning consultancy over-egging the case and it addresses the political bias point on the local authority, so it keeps both sides straight.” (Bristol)

What does this mean for the public interest?

In spite of these differences in orientation to the public interest, planners are keen to avoid a tribal, “siloed” approach. In our Edinburgh focus group, participants celebrated an ability to “take their caps off”, transcending public or private affiliation in favour of “collaboration for the common good”.

On the one hand, our participants felt that professional planners were able to maintain a strong professional identity that is undergirded by the RTPI Code of Professional Conduct and rooted in organisational and personal ethics that are orientated to the public good. Within this framing, planners’ independent judgement and their unique ability to balance different issues and interests contribute solidly to the public interest. This permits planners a degree of critical distance and discretionary acting space, even from Government policies that they deem to be contrary to the common good.

On the other hand, questions were raised around the value that the emerging cohort of practising planners place on adherence to professional values. Indeed, as explored in the next chapter, the capacity for independent, discretionary judgement may, in fact, be on the decline amongst those whose careers have been defined by austerity. Lack of public sector commitment to the profession and its ethical code may point to the removal of an important ethical backstop that could, in turn, erode the public interest. Additionally, planning consultants’ claim that they are free to “follow the money” and represent client interests, based on the notion that the larger system will protect the public good, may not stand up in a planning system that is increasingly orientated to commercial gain.

Chapter 4: “Box-ticking” is undermining planners’ ability to work in the public interest

Summary

Our focus group participants saw their professional expertise and judgement as their main tools for executing and, crucially, “balancing” decisions in the public interest. However, they worried that a range of factors, particularly an increasing focus on proceduralism and box-ticking, is eroding planners’ ability to use their professional discretion to execute the public interest.

This raises questions about the extent to which situated judgement is important when deciding planning applications, versus detached neutrality. It may also be indicative of a wider, gradual, shift from a planning system that decides and executes the public interest through professional discretion, to one that does so through predefined rules and procedures.

Major projects such as nationally significant infrastructure were identified as rare opportunities to carve out space for the strategic and proactive thinking our participants saw as a prerequisite to planning in the public interest.

Planners saw balance and professional discretion as central to executing the public interest

The idea of “balance” was central to how our participants thought about executing the public interest. On one hand, “balance” presents a central, structural component of the UK’s planning systems; local authority planners need to weight different considerations and evidence when deciding applications, and have a relatively high level of local discretion when doing this.

On the other hand, participants referred to balance in terms of the need for planners to carefully weigh the rational realm of formal evidence and planning expertise against the realm of “politics” and the desires of different interest groups. Cutting across both these points, planners in our Cardiff focus group also pointed out that some projects are big, complex, and contentious enough that they are simply not encompassed by national or local policy, and cannot be resolved without an effective understanding of local politics.

But how was this balancing done? All of our focus groups identified professional expertise – and the discretion to use this professional expertise creatively and proactively – as a key tool. The space for this, however, was judged to be under threat from a working environment increasingly defined by box-ticking and proceduralism.

Proceduralism and “box-ticking”

Proceduralism – an emphasis on procedure and ‘box-ticking’ rather than concrete outcomes – was identified across all our focus groups as a particularly important threat to LPAs’ ability to work in the public interest. It takes many forms, most prominently an overwhelming focus on pursuing particular targets or metrics (for example, number of houses built, or application processing time) at the cost of all other measures of success and quality, but participants also raised the extensive evidence requirements LPAs and applicants now face (which, in turn, often require the hiring of specialist consultants), and a reluctance or inability of planners to exercise their own judgement when deciding applications (and instead sticking rigidly to the words of policies).

The impacts of such proceduralism were seen to be as multifaceted and overlapping as its causes, but two were reported as particularly significant. First, proceduralism was seen as reducing the “headspace” planners have to think proactively and strategically about how to meet the public interest across projects, in contrast to reacting, piecemeal, to large numbers of individual planning applications and bureaucratic requirements. As a public sector participant described it:

“It’s a bit like not having the headspace... You’re having to ‘box-tick’ and get through a mass [of papers], but actually if we all just stopped and thought about things instead of requesting this survey or that survey just to get it off your desk and back to us, if we sat down and talked it out, we’d realise we didn’t need to do that...”
(Leicester)

“...50 houses here, 50 houses there and everybody is on the back foot, that doesn’t feel like good planning at all.” (Leicester)

This lack of headspace also reduces the robustness of the individual decisions made. As one private sector planner put it:

“...everybody is under so much pressure just to tick the box and then hand things through. Sometimes we were quite amazed at the things we managed to get through.” (Leicester)

Second, and closely related the above, it undermines public sector planners’ ability to exercise their professional discretion and judgement to make decisions based on material considerations beyond policy, and to work in the “art of the possible” (as one participant put it) when negotiating with applicants to ensure high-quality developments. This was seen as particularly significant, given that UK planners are operating within planning systems that are fundamentally underpinned by the principles of local material considerations and discretion.

It was also seen to reduce planners’ job satisfaction by limiting opportunities to exercise creativity and be proactive in the pursuit of the public interest which itself, as we discuss in Chapter 6, has knock-on effects for career trajectories and the public interest.

Situated judgement versus detached neutrality, and the role of elected members

Going hand-in-hand with the British planning systems' traditional emphasis on local discretion, a detailed, embedded, knowledge of local place, politics, and relationships and the building of personal relationships with clients were seen as crucial to being able to execute the public interest. A planner in our Leeds focus group felt:

“...understanding the members and understanding the local context are actually more important because if it is a close call whether it is approval or refusal then actually local knowledge is probably quite critical” (Leeds)

Proceduralism was regarded as a serious threat to this type of knowledge, as was the closely related practice of processing planning applications remotely – something which technological advances have made increasingly easy in recent years. Consultancies (and in some cases LPAs delivering services for other local authorities) are taking advantage of this type of working to cut down costs for labour and rent, and take advantage of pools of highly qualified labour.²¹

This sat uneasily with the seemingly contradictory argument – made across all of our focus groups by proponents and opponents of the above view alike – that the delivery of local planning services should be a detached, neutral decision-making process that operates outside of local politics and relationships. However, there was a sense that planning was actually becoming increasingly influenced by local and national politics. Indeed, one participant in London bemoaned their “independence being skewed by involvement with the public”, while a consultancy planner reported feeling uncomfortable during secondment in an LPA, where he felt his rational, neutral decision-making was “biased” by the political positioning of local elected members.

Major projects

Participants identified major projects (principally urban extensions and nationally significant infrastructure projects) as rare opportunities for LPAs to plan in the public interest. Major projects were seen as:

1. Catalysing long-term, proactive, and strategic thinking and leadership. Participants bemoaned what they saw as a lack of national vision or leadership for planning policy (which, for some, was symptomatic of a lack of faith in progress or any real belief in the planning system as a way of improving society), and saw major projects as rare opportunities for LPAs to think strategically and proactively about the long-term future of the places they shape.

2. Forcing LPAs to (re)develop strategic and proactive management structures. In grappling with the management challenges posed by large projects, local authorities introduce more “joined-up” management structures and training, which (re)link planning teams with delivery teams and improve coordination with other authorities. This, participants felt, combatted what they saw as the deleterious effects of proceduralism and management reforms, which reduce strategic thinking across teams.

3. Drawing in expertise and resources, and producing economies of scale. In taking these steps to ensure the sharing and internal/external coordination needed to deliver large and/or strategic projects, economies of scale may be achieved that enable some local authorities to no longer have to outsource to possess expertise in more technical areas of work. Additionally, the scale and technical demands associated with delivery of major projects force local authorities to upskill and invest in resources, and such projects bring with them the funding streams that enable this to happen.

What does this mean for the public interest?

Our English participants discussed proceduralism within the context of wider changes in government policy, which, taken together, may be indicative of a wider shift in the way that the public interest is safeguarded in planning in England.²² The expansion of Permitted Development Rights, for example, has reduced local planners' discretion, providing developments fulfil particular criteria. Permission in principle and other policy experiments drawing inspiration from "zonal" approaches to planning follow a similar logic, by bringing the determination of what constitutes the public interest further "forward" in the decision-making process, away from individual, local discretion, and "towards" national and local policy. Similarly, some participants felt that S106 agreements and the Community Infrastructure Levy have formalised mechanisms for ensuring that applicants for developments that might otherwise damage the public interest provide some recompense. As one private sector planner in our Cardiff focus group remarked, in an ideal world, in which developments are only given permission in the public interest in themselves, these tools "shouldn't be needed" to ensure that developments deliver towards "the public good".

These changes may suggest that the situation is less one of proceduralism *eroding* planners' ability to deliver the public interest *per se*, and more that we are seeing a broad shift towards a rule-based approach to ensuring/enforcing that decisions are made in the public interest, and away from one based on expert discretion and professional judgement. This opens up and is reinforced by the remote processing of applications.

Given that local discretion and materiality are core pillars of the British model of planning, this may be a profound change – but it is not one that is *necessarily* negative. Indeed, planners in our Leicester focus group saw the increasing evidence requirements regarding heritage, environmental standards, etc., associated with proceduralism as generally pushing up the standards of applications.

The picture regarding major projects as rare opportunities to proactively pursue the public interest is a similarly complex one. While they may represent welcome opportunities for proactive planning, major projects are clearly not distributed equally across the country, and our participants felt that they were disproportionately likely to occur in the urban, high development demand, local authorities that already find it easier to provide planning services than their rural or poorer counterparts. This, when viewed alongside the propensity for graduate and young planners to move to such areas (described in Chapter 6), is likely to exacerbate rural–urban divisions in LPAs' abilities to deliver effective planning services.

References

²¹ The FoI data provides the example of a joint enterprise between a public services consultancy and a South East England LPA which had opened offices in Northern Ireland. The office was largely processing applications relating to the South East of England, and had moved, in part, to take advantage of Belfast's low rents and a highly qualified pool of planning graduates coming from Queen's University Belfast.

²² That there was little sign of a such a shift in Wales, Northern Ireland, and Scotland might suggest further divergence of planning culture with England.

Chapter 5: Concerns about public sector leadership are widespread

Summary

Our participants closely associated strong public sector leadership with proactive and assertive LPAs that have the ability and inclination to pursue the public interest. Effective leaders' professional gravitas gave members, planners, and the community confidence in their decisions and trust in their professional judgement. They had clear strategic vision for their departments and the role of planning as a delivery mechanism for a range of policy priorities, a sense of direction, and a capability to achieve this with their existing staff, as well as the ability to develop staff effectively.

The public interest was seen to be under serious threat where effective planning leadership is lacking, and our participants in England and Wales felt that there is shortage of experienced senior planning staff, especially in the public sector. This "haemorrhaging" of senior public sector planning officers is a result of a combination of structural forces, including austerity, local authority management structures, and the perception that private sector consultancy work offers lucrative, prestigious opportunities for those wishing to move.

Both our public and private sector participants stressed that this lack of local planning leadership at the "top table" is seriously undermining the public sector's ability to deliver high quality services, leaving planning departments vulnerable to disempowering reform, undermining institutional memory, and reduced strategic oversight – including for commissioning – with consequences for both public and private sectors' ability to serve the public interest.

Whilst our participants highlighted the importance of effective elected leaders for democracy and planning service delivery, they also pointed to the damage "maverick" or poorly informed members could cause to the public interest.

The value of strong leadership

The value of strong leadership was recognised as essential to a flourishing organisation, whether public, private, or voluntary sector.

Amongst the focus group participants, we saw senior executive planners, both public and private, who were clearly leading, often in difficult circumstances. They provided the service ethos, while their professional gravitas gave members, planners, and the community confidence in their decisions and trust in their professional judgement. They had clear strategic vision for their departments, a sense of direction, and a capability of achieving this with their existing staff and of developing staff effectively. Overall, effective senior planning officers were perceived to be "worth

their weight in gold”:

“Because not only have they got to have the right technical knowledge, they’ve got to have all these other skill sets that are about developing relationships, building relationships, empowering, motivating, seeing the bigger picture, being corporate and enhancing the reputation of the service, selling the service, all those sort of things.” (Leeds)

Elected leaders and their relationships with planners also have a crucial role in shaping service delivery

The consensus was that, within the public sector, the quality of the relationship between politicians and local planning services was key, and that their ability to lead was significant in determining the success of the planning service. Examples were given of members strongly supporting planning departments, planning officers, and planning decisions. The role effective leaders play in providing their staff with the confidence to act proactively within a highly pressured and proceduralised situation (see Chapter 4) was a key theme here, with a planner in our Edinburgh session noting that:

“You needed leadership, and you needed confidence, and you needed that at elected member and officer level to get things done.” (Edinburgh)

A planner in our Leicester focus group highlighted the importance of local politicians taking a supportive corporate view of the delivery of services, including the planning service, and of training senior team members in leadership skills. Similarly, a planner from our Leeds focus group acknowledged that local politicians could be staunch advocates of planning departments where they retained good relationships with the service. Indeed, it was generally recognised that an effective planning lead was more likely to bring about this positive relationship:

“If you’ve got a department which is effectively managed within the council and it’s working well for its stakeholders and for the politicians... then actually keeping it all in-house is the sensible thing to do... if I’m doing the right bloody job then I don’t even contemplate [outsourcing] because everything’s working well and everyone’s happy with what’s happening in the city.” (Leeds)

As this quotation implies, strong corporate leadership was often discussed in the context of outsourcing, being seen as a key reason as to why some LPAs had managed to keep many of their services in-house. Conversely, in some extreme cases (that were nonetheless widely cited by our participants), members could hold the threat of full “Capita-style” outsourcing over the heads of their planning staff if relationships were poor.

It was also recognised that it was easier to facilitate change where members were supportive of the changes, with a participant in our Cardiff session giving the example of how they, as a senior planner with a public sector background, had been bought in as a sole practitioner to instigate change, and was supported in this endeavour by members to great effect.

Conversely, a common view was that relationships between local members and planners could be strained. A London consultancy planner lamented that some authorities were characterised as either “member-led” or “officer-led”. Many examples, UK-wide, were given of strained relations, often resulting in appeals, undermining services’ ability to provide a democratically accountable, efficient, effective service, and making it vulnerable to reforms that would diminish its power to act in the public interest.

Despite a perception that the profile of elected members on planning committees had changed, from old retired individuals to a younger type who were characterised as operating more professionally, several focus group participants felt that this did not alter the variable quality of elected members on planning committees. It was thought by some participants that planning committees are regarded by many as a “second-tier”, less prestigious committee for local politicians to sit on, while at the same time being more difficult than other committees for members - planning decisions often being complex, contentious, and unlikely to gain members political capital.

In relation to the quality of planning decisions being made, many planners were of the view that their committee members were apt to be a bit “random” or “maverick”. Consequently, members needed to be reminded or taught that planning decisions should be made only on planning grounds, rather than other considerations. Many of our local authority participants discussed the training they encouraged their committee members go through ahead of being involved in decision-making. Some, notably in our Wales, Greater London, and South East of England focus groups thought that committee members gave a different perspective to the professional perspective of decision-making, often highlighting significant factors relevant to the community and the locality that needed to be considered to ensure that a more balanced, locally grounded, decision was determined.

A lost generation in the English and Welsh public sector?

While our participants saw effective leadership as crucially important, we heard widespread concerns that experienced leadership was lacking in the public sector. Indeed, the current recruitment challenges felt across the sector (discussed in more detail in Chapter 6) were seen as particularly acute in senior public sector planning roles in England and Wales, where it is especially difficult to retain and recruit senior planning officers of high calibre. The fact that LPAs have restructured in the face of austerity has exacerbated this issue, with many senior staff accepting retirement and redundancy packages – something that has resulted in a loss of senior-level experience. These positions have since proven difficult to fill, as a participant in our Leicester focus group argued:

“There is concern that there’s a big gap at the moment in getting that higher-level leadership ability within planning to take the public sector where it needs to be. And that’s partly the reason why a lot of services are vulnerable.” (Leicester)

In two of the focus groups, participants indicated that the loss of leadership capacity made it

difficult for certain LPAs to commission work. Indeed, one participant noted that the authority he had been seconded to also seconded leadership expertise into the LPA from his firm; and the Fol data revealed a case of two LPAs (Havant Council and East Hampshire Council) deciding to recruit Head of Service and Deputy Head of Service to Planning jointly, to work for both the councils' independent planning services.

Elsewhere, our participants noted that this under-supply of experienced planners has resulted in some LPAs promoting staff to positions for which they might not have the experience:

“Now I find myself going to speak with senior planners in various local town halls but that are very fresh out of planning school, but they’re senior planners because they have to be because there’s no other people to take the posts.” (London: South East of England)

And across the country, restructuring has generally amalgamated services into larger, more diverse units. The remits of many senior planners have been extended beyond planning, while most planning services are no longer led by planning professionals:

“The Head of Service or Director or whatever it might be... they’re not in fact chartered planners, and very often don’t take any great interest, perhaps understandably, in the profession.” (London: South East of England)

This view tallies with recent research by the RTPI²³, which found that only 23% of 212 local authorities in London, South East England, North West England, Wales, Ireland, and Scotland had a head of planning service that reported directly to the Chief Executive. 9% had no clear ‘head of planning service’ role (covering both development management and planning policy) assigned.

Some felt that this detracted from many leaders’ understanding of planning both in itself and within the context of other services. This then undermined their willingness and/or ability to fight for the service at the point where the planning service needs to be defended as a key delivery mechanism for a range of policy priorities.

Attractive alternatives beyond the public sector

Across our focus groups, one of the primary reasons given for the difficulty LPAs face in securing high-quality leadership is that the private sector simply represents a more promising career path than the public sector. Indeed, a prevalent view was that consultant planners were more highly regarded in the sector than their public sector counterparts, who were viewed as undervalued. In stark contrast, consultancy firms were viewed as more likely to recruit on merit, not need, more fully supported professional training, and were seen as valuing staff’s professional membership more highly. Young planners, in particular, often discussed their experience of the public sector’s relative indifference to their professional training compared to those of the firms they joined (see Chapter 6). This was considered to be enticing to ambitious planners that are likely to be tomorrow’s leaders.

Some well-worn ways out of the public sector emerged, including well-respected senior personnel

joining a large reputable firm when they tired of the public sector:

“You can sometimes find people at the top end, especially if you’re in the private sector, because you can recruit them from the public sector.” (London: South East of England)

Less well known, but prevalent UK-wide, was the reputable sole trader offering senior management expertise back to the public sector, possibly (but not necessarily) after having taken redundancy from the public sector, and sometimes at great expense. That said, many senior planners and other planning staff remained strongly “loyal” to the public sector and to their particular ethos of public service provision.

The ramifications of a lack of public sector leadership

The loss of high-calibre, experienced senior personnel was thought to leave planning itself vulnerable, with one participant from Leicester arguing that there is also a lack of belief in, or strategy or leadership for, planning at the national level in England. Others in our London session perceived that the service was viewed as a “Cinderella” service here, with the head of planning being paid less than other service heads. Those services lacking leadership were perceived to be weakened and subject to further threat.

It was felt by participants in our Leicester focus group that “non-planner” senior personnel in planning positions tended to be cautious of major projects, because they were perceived to be both potentially politically controversial and labour-intensive, regardless of the benefits they might bring to places or the funding they might bring into LPAs. They could instead retreat to parochial, procedural approaches to planning, which our participants felt would be less likely to deliver the public interest (see Chapter 4).

Participants also expressed concerns that tacit knowledge and institutional memory was lost when senior planners left the service, and that due to vacancies and interim replacements filling in, short-termism could take hold. This was a particular concern for participants in our London (Greater London) and London (South East) sessions, with the latter going on to argue that in some cases weak leadership could also result in responsibility for agenda-setting, decision-making, and staff training also being downplayed. Lack of leadership could thus undermine the quality of the service provided to the detriment of service-users and place quality, further reducing confidence and trust in the service provided.

What does this mean for the public interest?

Overall, all our participants, regardless of sector, felt that strong public sector leadership was essential to ensuring that the public interest was properly articulated and pursued. Where leadership was lacking, it was thought that this had a detrimental effect on the department as a whole, which then reduced its ability to deliver a service focused on more long-term

considerations, detracting from its ability to operate in the public interest.

References

²³ RTPI (2018) Chief Planning Officers: The corporate and strategic influence of planning in local authorities. Available at: <https://www.rtpi.org.uk/media/2905314/chiefplanningofficersfinalprint.pdf> (accessed 04/01/2018).

Chapter 6: The rise of the “austerity planner”

Summary

There was a prevailing sense across our focus groups that the changes described in this report – in outsourcing, governance, procedure, leadership, and management – were bringing about some fundamental shifts in the practices, career trajectories, and attitudes of planners and how they engaged with the public interest in each of these respects.

Many of our more experienced participants felt that this was producing a younger cohort of planners who, though generally well paid and in demand, have a tendency to move jobs rapidly, can possess a lack of interest in professional development, and have little room for creativity or executing professional judgement in their work. This was something that, in turn, has eroded both their interest in and ability to do these things.

We capture these changes through the archetype of the “austerity planner”. As a characterisation and typification, the austerity planner is not intended to represent the experiences of all modern planners – nor do they share all of its features. But what it does do is capture how our participants viewed generational changes in UK planning practice and careers – particularly those that have been defined by austerity and, in England, by the post-2010 planning reforms. This does not necessarily mean it applies only to young planners.

As a concept, the austerity planner raises important questions about how the changing public – private relationships described in this report are shaping planning careers and everyday planning practice – as well as what these changes might mean for the future of the discipline and its ability to work in the public interest. In what follows, we outline some of the austerity planner’s key features, and in doing so draw on key themes from previous chapters.

The austerity planner makes little distinction between the public and private sectors

The austerity planner is less likely than their predecessors to follow the well-trodden career path of beginning their working lives in the development management team of an LPA after graduation, moving into planning policy (likely in the same or a nearby LPA), and then eventually joining a planning consultancy. Indeed, the view that the austerity planner was much more likely to start their career in the private sector than previous generations was widespread across our focus groups, as was the perception that they make little distinction between the merits of working in either. Participants put forward several possible reasons for this; perhaps austerity has reduced LPAs’ abilities to offer incentives to work in the public sector and, as previously noted, public sector

planning was widely regarded as having serious image problems. In any case, both of these points are compounded by the fact that, as observed in Chapter 2, there is less to distinguish the public and private sectors in practice than was once the case.

The austerity planner is generally in high demand, but they gravitate to large, economically successful, urban centres

The austerity planner²⁴ is in demand, and has little trouble finding work. This is largely a result of an under-supply of planning graduates, and many LPAs recreating positions lost earlier in the decade due to austerity. While this labour market is undoubtedly an opportunity for the austerity planner, planners in our Belfast and London sessions expressed concerns that this meant that planners with little experience were often in senior positions.

Though generally thought to be high, demand for planners does, however, vary greatly across the country, and the drivers of this demand also vary; the market was seen as buoyant in areas facing high development pressure, while areas facing low development demand were struggling to recruit, leaving posts that needed to be filled.

As this might suggest, there was a widespread view that the austerity planner's employment decisions are being increasingly driven by lifestyle choices and *where* they want to work, as much as for *whom*. Indeed, planners in our Bristol focus group felt that the austerity planner was less likely to make sharp distinctions between working in the public or private sector, because they primarily make career decisions based on what would enable them to live in the city. It just happened to be the case that large consultancies – generally located in regional centres – provided the most likely means of achieving this. Similar situations were reported across England and Wales.

This combination of varying demand and the austerity planner's propensity to gravitate towards large urban centres has important consequences for service delivery – accentuating current divides. While the larger consultancies located in these cities, and urban LPAs, find it relatively easy to hire planning graduates and “grow their own”, smaller, rural, and less prosperous cities and towns found it difficult to attract applicants, with posts often remaining unfilled for long periods of time.

Finding alternative ways of filling these posts – for example, via agencies or outsourcing – would often present a further drain on resources and polarise existing inequalities. Our Leeds group reported with concern that a relatively small post-industrial town in eastern England had to outsource its planning services partly because it simply could not attract applicants through in-house recruitment. Meanwhile, a medium-sized city just 16 miles away had no such problems. This was a pattern repeated across the country in rural areas, and our FoI request revealed other examples²⁵.

The austerity planner is highly mobile, and “churn” is a serious challenge for service provision in the public interest

Overall, the austerity planner is much more highly mobile than the planners of previous eras. This is the case within organisations, as a result of their high demand, and across sectors and geographies, as described above. But one key characteristic of austerity planners is that they are also much more highly mobile *between* organisations than their predecessors.

This “churn” was something reported with concern across all our focus groups, and while particularly acute in public sector development management roles, the upheaval it produces was identified by senior public and private sector planners alike as one of the most serious challenges they face in delivering local planning services. Just six months was regularly cited as an extreme, but common, period of time some young planners spend in post.

The impacts of churn were universally reported as negative; in the first instance, the quality of services LPAs provide to applicants are affected; churn severs the personal relationships between applicants and officers, which many saw as crucial to the smooth and effective delivery of development management. This was also problematic from the perspective of many working in the private sector, as it can result in consultancies struggling to maintain good, personal, relationships with the LPAs to which they submit planning applications.

LPAs’ resourcing can also be affected. They invest time and money training graduates, who would then often leave after a matter of months – effectively meaning that they do not get a return on their investment. This then contributes to the gaps in services that LPAs reluctantly turn to agencies to fill. Participants reported that morale is affected in turn, as managers turn to agencies to fill gaps in their teams, often hiring the very same staff who recently left to work in the agency, but on a higher hourly wage than their teammates who had stayed. Indeed, some LPAs reported purposefully but reluctantly recruiting previous staff on agency contracts in order to maintain some degree of continuity in their service for applicants.

More personally, many felt that the austerity planners’ propensity to move on rapidly could stunt their professional development and impede the development of the skills required to think proactively, base decisions on local contexts, not succumb to proceduralism, and achieve the planning “balance” previously discussed.

Participants in one focus group posited several possible causes of this churn. The theory that it was linked to growing materialism across society and interest in financial incentives was popular. So too was the theory that the high number of vacancies simply enabled rapid movement, and that the austerity planner was naturally “gaming” the market by moving posts (either into consultancy or via a recruitment agency) in order to gain rapid promotion and take advantage of this fluidity. This was all occurring against the backdrop of a generally more precarious employment and housing market, and the rise of the portfolio model of staffing discussed in Chapter 1.

Others pointed to less concrete, lifestyle-related factors, with an increasing desire in graduate cohorts for flexible working again highlighted as particularly important. Another possibility was that proceduralism had eroded planners’ job satisfaction and attachments to their roles. But, most

commonly, a combination of these factors received blame:

“...we talk about career progression and they want to know how quickly they can get up the ladder and you’ve got to attract them with all the other things. A car is almost a given but ‘what else is there in it for me?’ So, just this adaptable working is what they seem to want as well. But, I agree, everything is not quite so ‘you want to work forever’ and the mentality is a different thing.” (Leicester)

However, much of participants’ blame for churn was laid at the door of specialist recruitment consultants, whose business practices one participant in our Leicester group compared to that of football transfer agents – turning players’ (i.e. planners’) heads by appealing to the desires of young planners, and encouraging movement between posts, in order to earn commission:

“A: ...Like you said, if you go to a Planning Magazine [an industry magazine that has a popular job listings section], 460 jobs...

B: This week.

A: Yeah.

B: Wow, really?

A: But if you put the direct employer search on that, that reduces down to about 80. It’s consultants just punting everybody around all the time. They’re a bit like football agents; they’re talking it up, so they’ll get onto their client and say, ‘Actually, there’s another job around the corner, extra ten quid an hour, do you want to go for that?’, ‘Okay, I’ll go for that’.” (Leicester)

Similar comparisons were made in our London focus group. Here, the situation was seen as particularly problematic, and one participant focused their ire on the way in which recruitment agencies discreetly conducted market research and played off individuals against each other in order to stimulate churn:

“...in the London sector it’s purely about money, and it’s purely about contracting agencies and recruitment agencies playing the individual workers off against each authority... They will rotate work around London, and each time they do they’ll get more money and they’ll tick the box of the outputs that those agencies need. So my staff I know are continuously getting harangued by the agents... And you can only expect people to be there six months/nine months.” (London: Greater London)

The responses different organisations had taken to incentivising their younger planners to stay in post depended very much on how they interpreted the austerity planner’s motivations for moving positions. Those that saw material and financial incentives as key, questioned to what extent the public sector could compete on these fronts, given the challenges discussed earlier. However, others saw lifestyle preferences as more important. Indeed, two participants in our Leicester session – one from the public sector, one from the private – saw flexibility and diversity as particularly important to younger planners, and had discussed jointly employing graduates and then giving them experience working in both of their organisations (that this would also have kept costs down was an added bonus).

The austerity planner's career is marked by proceduralism, and they often have little opportunity to think about the public interest

Much of the austerity planner's career is marked by proceduralism. As discussed in Chapter 4, this is partly a product of the demand for their services processing planning applications, the sheer volume of which is both the reason for their employment, and reduces the "mindspace" required for proactive planning. This, coupled with the narrow regulatory terms in which planning work has been framed in England (and to a lesser extent, the UK) in recent years, and this has shaped the austerity planner's experience of work towards a more generally narrow regulatory role.

As explored in Chapter 3, planners remain committed in principle to an ethical code that upholds the public interest. However, this conviction must withstand an environment that often offers little opportunity to practice proactive planning, use professional discretion, or reflect upon one's role in the planning system. Furthermore, it must prevail in an employment arena that heavily disincentives sustained attachment to organisation or to place. As our exploration of proceduralism has revealed, individual discretion itself may, increasingly, be succeeded by the removal of planning decision making to "neutral", box-ticking ground. This is a situation that is exacerbated by the difficulties LPAs face in employing and keeping effective planning leadership.

In an era of work intensification, commercialisation and austerity, the rapidly moving austerity planner benefits from mobility and choice, but their relationship to the public interest remains contested and often tenuous.

References

²⁴ We assume here that the austerity planner has graduated from a RTPI-accredited planning degree, likely at master's level, having completed an undergraduate degree in a social science.

²⁵ For example, from the Fol: Walsall Council in the West Midlands have outsourced historical conservation and ecology matters to Jacobs Consultancy, as part of the planning policy team role to provide comments on planning applications to development management planners. This outsourcing of advice on conservation and ecology was as a result of the LPA being unable to recruit staff, and the Council informed us that the arrangement will continue until they are able to do so. The Council spent £13,392.22 on ecology and conservation services from Jacobs in 2017/18.

Appendix: Divergent planning cultures in the UK

England

As well as changes to planning,²⁶ the English system has also seen multiple rounds of local governance and devolutionary reforms.²⁷ This has resulted in a fragmented, variegated system of planning service provision. This is partly by design, though the introduction of ad hoc, negotiated, and/or “bottom-up” governance structures (such as neighbourhood plans and combined authorities); and partly as a result of remnants of some previous governance arrangements being retained (such as the London Plan, which was a product of New Labour-era regional planning). This led one of the South East England focus group participants to comment:

“A lot of the difficulties with added complications, the added burden placed upon individual local planning authorities in recent years comes out of the Balkanisation of planning with the abolition of regional strategies and the Localism Act.” (London: South East England)

The Coalition Government’s White Paper on open public services in 2011 promoted greater use of different forms of service delivery.²⁸ This coincided with Government reducing local authority funding, and encouraging them to explore alternative ways of delivering local services,²⁹ including the possibility of “outsourcing” entire services, or to “share services” through the use of Local Authority Trading Companies (LATCs)³⁰ (see table on pages 19 and 20), an example of which was discussed in our Leeds focus group. More recently, there appears to have been a shift in Government thinking away from the promotion of outsourcing as necessarily the best model.³¹

The FoI data showed that eight English LPAs have fully outsourced their planning services and that these are spread fairly uniformly across all the English regions (discussed in more detail below). Eighteen English LPAs (4.9% of the UK total) indicated that they had partially outsourced their services, but within this group the level of outsourcing varied from relatively small-scale³² to extensive.³³ Though they were not directly asked about them in our FoI request – which means that we do not have comprehensive or systematic data on the subject – but a number of LPAs also outlined how they had turned to shared services as an alternative.

The FoI also revealed the extensive use of agency contract work by LPAs throughout England, but only in England. This appears to be more prevalent in the South than the North, with prices for recruitment in the South also a little higher. One LPA had used as many as six of these agency companies, and paid as much as £273,000 collectively;³⁴ while another authority had paid £416,000 in 2017/18 to a single agency firm for development planning officers for a year. This is further discussed as a phenomenon in Chapter 6, but was generally identified as a problem, rather than a solution, by the majority of our focus groups.

Wales

Since devolution, planning policy has been almost completely devolved to Wales, with the exception of some elements of nationally significant infrastructure planning. This generates a Welsh planning context that is increasingly distinctive from other parts of the UK, with Wales setting its own national policy for town and country planning mainly through the document *Planning Policy Wales*. A suite of legislation³⁵ underpins this document which – from an English perspective – has a notably strong focus on the ways in which the Welsh planning system supports social, environmental, intergenerational, and well-being-related policy.

This led focus group participants to argue that “*Actually* the Welsh Government has seen the planning system as an important tool in its stack of responsibilities and mechanisms” – in strong, implicit contrast to the way they saw the UK Government’s perception of planning in England. Implicit juxtapositions underpinned much of the discussion in our Welsh focus group, with the English system providing the mirror against which the Welsh planning culture understood itself.

As noted earlier, the Fol data suggests that no Welsh LPAs have completely outsourced their planning service provision. However, four (i.e. 25% of) Welsh authorities reported outsourcing minerals and waste planning responsibilities to other LPAs in Wales. There were also a number of LPAs who had arrangements with other LPAs to cover their minerals and waste responsibilities,³⁶ and the use of consultancy firms for their particular expertise is widespread.

Scotland

The Scottish system has also diverged from the English since devolution, in 1999, made land use planning the responsibility of the Scottish Government. Much like the English system, it has been subject to recurring waves of reform,³⁷ generally driven by concern that the system could do more to support housebuilding and that policy could be streamlined. Indeed, the former is a key motivation for the Planning Bill currently passing through the Scottish Parliament. However, political discourse around planning in Scotland has generally been more supportive of planning, and has afforded it a stronger, more confident, environmental and social role. Our participants related this to a collective sense of civic pride and national identity – a point that participants in our Edinburgh focus group were keen to make:

“Our environment is important to us, whilst it might not always be reflected in individual decisions, that general political sense that our natural and our historic environments and our towns and cities, they’re all really part of who we are. So you’re pushing at an open door quite often for some of the issues that affect communities.” (Edinburgh)

Again, much like participants in our Cardiff group, Scottish planners thought that Scottish politicians often viewed the English planning system as an example of how not to plan in the public interest. In fact, diverging from the English approach to planning was seen by some as motivation in itself for Scottish politicians. One participant put this simply: “our politicians want to be different

to England; they don't want to do what they've done in England". This divergence from England, and the sense that the system was therefore going to "be further away from England in terms of culture and approach and ethos" was a cause for celebration for many of our participants.

The FoI data suggests that no Scottish LPAs are outsourcing or part-outsourcing their service provision. However, two, South Lanarkshire and North Lanarkshire, are commissioning services.³⁸ There is also little evidence that Scottish authorities are using agency working.

Northern Ireland

As part of a wider local government reform reducing 26 authorities down to 11, a new planning system was introduced in Northern Ireland in 2015. Heralded as the most substantial change to planning in Northern Ireland in 40 years, this Act has devolved the core planning competencies from the Northern Irish Executive to 11 newly formed local authorities. These 11 authorities are "now responsible for drawing up local development plans, making the majority of planning decisions, and shaping how their area grows and develops in ways that respond to the needs of the communities they serve".³⁹ They are currently progressing their local plans in accordance with Northern Ireland's planning policy, law, and guidance.

Northern Ireland's culture of planning service delivery is, therefore, in a state of flux, and participants in our Belfast focus group saw little appetite for outsourcing, or even procuring services, as a result of this. This is despite efforts, revealed in our focus groups, by would-be service providers to sell their services to them. Indeed, the FoI data suggest that there are no totally outsourced authorities in Northern Ireland, but that one authority partially outsources to another,⁴⁰ and a different authority has a service agreement with another local authority to deliver their Local Development Plan's Environmental Impact Assessment.⁴¹ It also appears that a number of local authorities do not outsource at all, or do so only on an ad hoc basis, and that there is limited appetite to make use of agency workers.

References

²⁶ National Planning Policy Framework replacing Planning Policy Statements (2012), Loss of Regional Tier of Plans; introduction of Duty to Co-operate (2012); National Planning Policy Framework revised (2018); Localism Act 2012; Planning and Housing Act 2016.

²⁷ Planning Act 2004; "Strong and Prosperous Communities" 2006; Planning Act 2008; Planning Act 2009; Localism Act 2012; Planning and Housing Act 2016; Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009; and Cities and Local Government Devolution Act 2016.

²⁸ Gov.uk, Latest documents by organisation: Open Public Services. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/latest?organisations%5B%5D=open-public-services> (accessed 20/11/2018).

²⁹ Sandford, M. (2016) Local Government: Alternative Models of Service Delivery House of Commons Library Briefing Paper 05950 20-06-2016. Available at: <http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN05950/SN05950.pdf> (accessed 20/11/2018).

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Fenland Council, in the East of England, reported that they had brought in tree advice as and when required in planning matters from Arboricultural Solutions and the cost was £19,000 in 2017/18.

³³ North Somerset Council, in South West England, uses a company called Agilisys Ltd. to carry out their planning application registration for them. This is included as part of an overarching outsourced support service between the council and Agilisys, the contract running until 2020 and having an annual value of approximately £15 million.

³⁴ Stratford-on-Avon, also in the West Midlands (England), use a variety of agencies to provide staff for development management on a short-term basis, namely Oyster, Matchtech, Vivid, Park Avenue, G2, and Macdonald and Company. The contracts vary in duration and value but in 2017/18 the total cost was nearly £273,000.

³⁵ Most notably the Planning (Wales) Act 2015 and Environment (Wales) Act 2016.

³⁶ Examples of Welsh LPAs outsourcing arrangements with other LPAs to cover their minerals and waste responsibilities:

a) Neath Port Talbot Council has a Service Level Agreement (SLA) with Carmarthenshire Council to assist with delivering their minerals development management service.

b) Pembrokeshire Council has an SLA with Carmarthenshire Council to deal with their minerals planning and minerals enforcement work.

c) Powys Council has outsourced minerals and waste to both the North Wales Minerals Group (since 2011) and Carmarthenshire Council (since 2010). These are both rolling contracts, with the value of commission relating to workload.

d) Vale of Glamorgan Council also reports that minerals and waste planning is undertaken on their behalf by Carmarthenshire Council via an SLA.

³⁷ After a lengthy period of consultation, the Planning etc. (Scotland) Act 2006 introduced a system with the strategic National Planning Framework for Scotland, including the power to designate nationally significant development projects, Strategic Development Plans for the four major city regions of Glasgow, Edinburgh, Dundee and Aberdeen, and local development plans produced by local planning authorities. 2009 saw the introduction of a slimline version of the Scottish Planning Framework replacing Planning Policy Statements, and attempts to streamline the development management processes. Streamlining of processes has sought to improve efficiency and effectiveness in the delivery of planning services, but there is little evidence that it has actually managed to do so. Despite some feeling that the post-2006 system was still bedding in, a further review of the planning system occurred in 2015. This introduced a new Planning Bill that proposed

further significant changes to the system, including the strengthening of the National Planning Framework, the removal of city-region scale Strategic Development Plans and the introduction of community-prepared Local Place Plans. The core priority driving reform seems to be concerns that the system is not sufficiently supportive of new housebuilding. A new Planning Act is expected to be approved in 2019.

³⁸ These arrangements are as follows:

a) North Lanarkshire report that they have individual contracts with Ironside Farrar Ltd. for specific pieces of work within a multi-disciplinary consultancy framework agreement also involving South Lanarkshire, namely Policy Advice on the Strategic Visioning – Mixed Use Town Centres: the contract value is £22,000; State of the Environment Report and SEA Support: the contract value is £29,000).

b) South Lanarkshire reported that they are a member of the Glasgow and Clyde Valley Strategic Development Planning Authority (GCVSDPA). The GCVSDPA provide strategic planning advice to South Lanarkshire Council. The current annual contribution for this service for South Lanarkshire Council is £72,437.50. South Lanarkshire Council has been a member of GCVSDPA since local government reorganisation in 1996. The eight local authorities involved are East Dunbartonshire, East Renfrewshire, Glasgow City, Inverclyde, North Lanarkshire, Renfrewshire, South Lanarkshire and West Dunbartonshire Councils.

³⁹ Mid and East Antrim Borough Council (2015) Planning Reform - Transfer of Planning. Available at: <https://www.midandeastantrim.gov.uk/business/planning/planning-reform-transfer-of-planning/> (accessed on 03/12/18).

⁴⁰ Causeway Coast and Glens Council in Northern Ireland reported that some legal services used to be provided by a private organisation, Carson McDowell LLP, and that they still provide legal services with regards to enforcement cases opened prior to the transfer of planning functions from the Department of the Environment to local government authorities in April 2015.

⁴¹ Derry and Strabane Council, Northern Ireland, have a service level agreement with Mid and East Antrim Council, Northern Ireland, to assess and advise on environmental impacts as required.



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