

# Working in the Public Interest? *What must planners do differently?*

Critical thoughts on the state of planning



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**WORKING IN THE  
PUBLIC INTEREST**

Exploring the role of the private sector in planning



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## Contents

- 7 Introduction**
- 8 Proud of planning, proud of planners?**
- 9 Professionalism:**  
What does it mean to be a professional in planning?
- 12 Work-life balance:**  
Planning in a stressed-out society.
- 14 Commercialisation:**  
Roll up! Roll up! Planning services for sale.
- 16 Careers in planning:**  
"It's not you, it's me": Navigating careers in planning and finding an 'organisational fit'.
- 18 Planning ethics:**  
The need for a 'do no harm' principle to help secure the public interest?
- 21 Planners' agency:**  
Where are the spaces to make a positive difference in an imperfect planning system?
- 24 The public interest:**  
Working in the public interest?
- 26 References**



# Introduction

The current moment is generating huge challenges and raising significant questions about how our societies operate and the future of our cities and countryside. Economic shutdowns are bringing structural inequalities into sharp relief even as they illustrate the daunting scale of the transformations required to reduce our environmental impacts. Many pieces have already been written about how we might not just adapt to a post-Covid world but take the opportunity to build better, healthier, fairer, greener cities. Any hopes for significant change would entail fundamental shifts in the role of planning.

At the same time, however, powerful property lobbies threaten a return to a business-as-usual model of development that is led not by care for people and place but the greedy hand of an ever less fettered free market. In England, this is symbolised by a new Conservative government promising to yet again radically streamline a planning system it sees as an impediment to economic recovery.

Current circumstances also therefore challenge us to think more broadly about what planning and being a planner really mean in 2020. What is the purpose of planning? Do planners have the tools, resources, and capabilities to address significant societal challenges, and are they trusted to do so? What role should public authorities have and how might this interface with the logics of the market and private-sector driven development? And finally, what is the 'public interest' that planners often invoke as the foundation for their work, and how might it be compromised by the nature of the systems we operate in and where we work?

The ESRC-funded Working in the Public Interest Project (<https://witpi.group.shef.ac.uk/>) has been seeking answers to these questions over the past three years. The project team from the University of Sheffield, Newcastle University and University College London has been engaging closely with contemporary planning practice in both the public and private sectors, focusing attention on what planners do all day. In depth interviews, focus groups to discuss contemporary challenges in planning, and extensive and engaged ethnography have yielded a rich set of insights into the state of planning and the nature of contemporary planning work across the UK.

In this booklet we offer a series of brief overviews of key themes that this research has highlighted. Our aim here is not to offer a definition or detailed theoretical discussion of the public interest. Instead we hope to explore how various different facets of planning work are changing. At a broad level our argument is that a much wider range of issues and practices, including for example work-life balance and organisational change, need to be considered alongside issues such as professionalism and ethics when thinking about what it means to work in the public interest.

In doing so we hope to stimulate broader debate within and beyond the planning profession about the nature and value of planning. We also aim to highlight a series of key questions and challenges that are shaping planners' work and that will have significant implications for the future.

# Proud of planning, proud of planners?

Whilst the next Government reform initiative or the latest development trends hog the headlines, there is generally far less discussion about the underlying purposes that guide planning, what planning does (and does not) actually achieve and what it means to work in the public interest. By opening up a space to discuss these questions in this booklet we aim to provoke further debate about whether things need to be the way they are or whether we could do things differently, and better?

Following years of political scepticism towards planners, these questions can be hard to address. Many of the planners we met suggested that a 'thick skin' was required to deal with constant criticism and avoid being ground down within a system where they feel undervalued and unappreciated. Faced with these challenges, many opt to get their heads down and get on with it, taking their job satisfaction from the small, sometimes intangible ways their professional advice still makes a difference whilst navigating political, economic and organisational changes that can have significant effects on their working lives.

The Royal Town Planning Institute, for its part, often seems to be on the defensive, torn between boosting morale by finding reasons to be #proudoftime and the need to call out the dismal development that too often results from a dysfunctional and under-resourced system. The rapid growth in private-sector employment over the last 30 years has undoubtedly complicated this position. With many planners' jobs now invested in property development, it is harder than ever for the profession to be directly critical of development outcomes. These compromises need to be negotiated, however, if planners are to regain moral authority in debates over how things need to change.

This booklet therefore aims to generate discussion about both what planners do and what they could do differently, individually and collectively. Drawing on the multitude of perspectives and insights we have gathered through the WITPI project, we offer a range of provocations around the following 6 themes, each written by different members of the project team. The themes are deliberately diverse. Individually and collectively, however, they all focus attention on important facets of what it means to work in the public interest:

## **Professionalism:**

what does it mean to be a professional in planning today?

## **Work-life balance:**

how is planning being affected by work intensification and why does it matter?

## **Commercialisation:**

how are pressures to generate fee income transforming public sector planning?

## **Careers in planning:**

how can young planners navigate the job market to find the right organisational fit?

## **Planning ethics:**

what does it mean to act ethically in planning today?

## **Planners' agency:**

how do planners find ways of making a difference in practice?

## **The public interest:**

what does all of this mean for the ways planners' work in the public interest?



# Professionalism

## What does it mean to be a professional in planning?

How often do planners think about what it means to be a professional? For members of the RTPI, it might be when they get their annual professional fees reminder, or scramble to collate CPD points. For most, it is probably not something that they question very regularly, nor are they likely to ask themselves why the work they do is worthy of the hallmark 'professional'. In this sense, the fact that planning is a profession is normalised – there is a professional body (with the word 'Royal' in the title, no less). Entrants are expected to have completed a masters level course in planning, to undertake CPD, to cite their credentials on their CVs and when they present evidence, say to a public inquiry. But we might still ask what a being a professional actually means. Is it:

- Being a member of a professional body? Maybe, but estimates suggest around a quarter of planners are not RTPI members<sup>1</sup>, and we might want to ask why is this the case?
- Based on our know-how, or the application of technical skills and knowledge? And if so, is there anything cohesive or really specialist in what planners profess to know and do?
- How they comport ourselves? This is a broader and looser meaning, about how people behave towards one another, or what it means to 'be professional' in the workplace.

To what extent do any of these definitions sum up what planners mean when they say that they're 'acting professionally'? It is notable that they all tend to prioritise the outward signs of a 'profession', rather than representing something deeper about the quality and nature of our work that is set apart as 'professional' in quality. It is this which we sought to question when setting about our research.

Decision files in a local authority planning office. © WITPI



# Professionalism

## What do planners mean when they call themselves professionals?

One way to look deeper into what being a professional planner means in the UK at the current moment, is to consider how planners talk about being professional and how this shapes what they do. In talking to and observing a range of planners in the WITPI project, we started to build up a picture of how planners thought about being a professional. These chimed with the types of behaviour and characteristics mentioned by the RTPI in its recent Advice Note 'Probity and the Professional Planner'<sup>ii</sup>. There were three main characteristics claimed for the planner:

**1** **'Fearlessness'** was raised by a few (and merits a section in the Advice Note). This might be understood as having the confidence to challenge others where one feels that a decision is wrong, or of being willing to stand your ground. But on what is a decision to stand your ground based? For the Advice Note, it is planners' commitment to 'sustainable development' – a concept that has become notorious for its multitude of definitions. For others, it might just be that their judgement emerges from accumulated experience which they are willing to stand by – though we might ask how relevant that experience is in a rapidly changing world? Professionals often claim to stand by their judgements, and a number of planners we spoke to gave examples of when they stood up to those in power. But others also referred to more grey areas, in which a judgement might be tweaked, a less than desirable outcome arrived at, despite reservations.

**2** **'Competence' and 'knowledge'** were noted by many interviewees as the hallmark of professionalism. After all, clients pay good money for expertise. This expertise was not always framed around distinctive technical knowledge, but also an ability to get things done, to manage a project or system. However, in an era of populist scepticism of expertise, planners might face accusations that their knowledge is irrelevant or merely exists to serve vested interests. What are the limits to their expertise, and do planners confess to them easily, particularly when they stand to make money from advising clients?

**// We're removed from going on sites, speaking with stakeholders, there's that time element where we can be remote and just focus on the work."**

Outsourced planner

**3** **'Impartiality' and 'independence'** was a strong element of the claim that planners make to being professionals. This was repeated numerous times and is also a headline for the RTPI's Advice Note. It represents a way of looking at planning as a balancing act, of weighing up pros and cons in a neutral manner. This neutrality is often invoked in the service of 'the public interest', of the planner as the all-knowing professional who is able to evaluate all in front of her and come to a reasoned judgement that moves beyond the short term and the partial to a rather more vaguely defined sense of the common good. But for many planners, pinning down the meaning of the public interest was more elusive. And how do they maintain neutrality in the face of decisions that are politically controversial, or indeed run counter to their personal views?

**// You're there, you are a professionally paid adviser, you can make it clear that it is a balanced decision and you can put the pros and... in fact, you should be putting the pros and cons, you should not be writing just towards your recommendation. You should put the pros and the cons and then, at the end, say 'however, this is my decision!'"**

Planner with public/private sector experience

# What don't we talk about when we say we are a profession?

These are all characteristics that planners claim define their profession and they provide a means of justifying their work as special and valuable. But another question is to ask what do planners not claim? Where are the silences and absences from debate? We identified two key gaps:

**1** Internal debate on the value of planners' work or of its impact on society – whilst the planners we spoke to were reflective and personally considered their actions, there were far fewer examples of significant internal debate in the profession about the nature and purposes of what planners do, and whether they genuinely meet public needs, despite frequent challenges to planning. Perhaps this was because (as the Advice Note mentions): "Today, RTPI Members serve a range of interests." There were some spaces in which to debate fundamentals, and some engaged frequently and critically (e.g. in relation to the TCPA's Raynsford Review<sup>iii</sup>), but this was amidst a wider cutting back of CPD budgets and space for debate.

The profession also seems to adopt a defensive and somewhat narrow position, whether in calling its members to be proud of planning in the face of external critiques, or trying to justify its value to society in pounds, shillings, and pence. In our discussions, there was strikingly little debate about the quality of places that planners had contributed towards – perhaps a recognition of the limits to planning in an era of market provision, or the often opposing 'sides' that planners are on when it comes to promoting or managing development.

With about one quarter of planners not being members of the RTPI, and an acknowledgement of the range of interests being served by its members, we might start to ask questions about the cohesiveness of the profession, and whether it is capable of openly debating its goals? In the absence of such debate, however, framing the purposes of planning is left to politicians, shadowy lobbyists and think tanks, leaving planners bemoaning the amount of 'political interference' in planning.

**2**

Linked to this, the intellectual foundations of planning practice were not often discussed – how might planners find distinctive ways of thinking to address key societal problems? Perhaps in the cut and thrust of just trying to manage a complex and fluid planning system, planners have failed to find spaces to consider what it is that underpins what they do and whether it is satisfactory. The RTPI professes to exist not only as a professional body but also as a learned society. Indeed, the history of the Institute includes fervent debates about its responsibility to develop a wider understanding of planning. And yet, we found limited evidence of these debates being taken on by planners, whether within the spaces of the RTPI or outside. Researchers and academics have a role, as do planners in the public and private sectors to advance this, perhaps across the boundaries of professional bodies, and certainly in dialogue with wider civil society.

## Key Questions:

Ultimately, the question of being a professional is about more than a set of compartments. The final quote in this section reveals a key dilemma for planners – to what extent are they truly independent? *Should they just accept the rules written into the wider systems and processes in which they work? And if they don't, how can they raise their doubts and concerns in a productive way as a community?*

**// I sometimes wonder, in a purist's sense, whether planners are professionals or whether actually we're bureaucrats... the whole activity of planning is created by government legislation."**

Public sector planner

# Work-life balance: Planning in a stressed-out society



A busy planning consultant's desk. © WITPI

Convincing evidence that UK employees are working harder and longer exists across all sectors of the UK labour market. This 'overwork culture' comes at a steep cost: UK workers lost 12.8 million days to stress-related absence in 2019, with public service industries particularly hard-hit. Maintaining a healthy work-life balance is increasingly difficult – competitive pressures (often austerity-linked) in both the public and private sectors urge employees to do more with less, while ICT advances at home and in the office enable people to extend their availability and work hard more easily. The rise of working at home during the Covid pandemic has raised our consciousness of these issues. Yet, while an intense, long-hours work schedule is often framed as a lifestyle option that some find appealing, such 'choice' is illusory in organisations where there are fewer people and more to be accomplished.

Although there is strikingly little research on this, from our work it is clear that planning is no exception to this trend. Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) are weathering austerity by becoming lean and commercialised; staff cuts and churn are endemic while rapid policy change and proceduralism generate increased workloads. Fat-cutting exercises in LPAs have negative implications for staff wellbeing, particularly in contexts where development pressure remains high. Meanwhile, private sector practitioners are far from immune to the dynamics of overwork, operating in an increasingly competitive environment where an always-on work culture is often celebrated and rewarded.

The result is deteriorating working conditions where overwork has become business-as-usual. Frequent policy reforms require continuous re-learning and re-jigging of work processes, while an increased focus on targets and box-ticking inflates paperwork and closes down headspace. In lean teams, staff sickness is borne by colleagues who are already overloaded, leading to a vicious cycle of overwork and burnout. There are new emotional demands that fuel this cycle: planners must cope with high-volume, social media-fuelled public objections, navigate their professional identity in a hostile neoliberal political climate, and manage the dissonance between their (idealistic) planning education and a Machiavellian reality where developers are supremely powerful and the client is always right.

Weakened contracts and diminished union solidarity further threaten public sector planners' work-life balance. As LPAs shift to a 'portfolio' staffing model comprising permanent, seconded and agency staff, the protections and privileges that public sector workers have traditionally enjoyed are often absent or diminished. In outsourced regimes, TUPEd workers maintain their flexitime while newer recruits get a weaker deal. Despite this, for some planners, opportunities for work-life balance in the public sector remain more attractive than the higher rewards available in the private sector.

The private sector, by contrast, offers attractive benefits packages that include private healthcare (made even more appealing by a wider structural context where the NHS is crumbling) and wellness perks. Strong corporate cultures can be highly nurturing but, in an increasingly competitive climate, are also an incubator for overwork and presenteeism. Work intensification and instability in the public sector means that consultants who do work for local authorities are often working to tighter deadlines and budgets, while needing to perform with extreme agility. At the same time, changes in the sector, such as the tendency towards large, multi-player projects, demand rapid upskilling, creating new levels of work intensity and stress.

Both sectors suffer from a culture where overwork becomes normalised (in the private sector this is often coupled with a play-hard culture that is equally demanding), where planners eat lunch at their (hot) desks and still never seem to get through the work that needs to be done. It is important that we ask questions about the effects of this, both on planners' work-life balance and on their ability to work in the wider public interest.

**// I quite often work at night and I've always done that."**

Senior public/private sector planner

**// In 2010, we had a team of fifty; it's now 24."**

Public sector planning team leader

**// It wasn't good enough to go home at six o'clock to do the work, you had to be seen to be there, it was full on."**

Former private sector planner

### Key Questions:

Challenging overwork culture and nurturing work-life balance is a political and societal issue that transcends planning. Within the profession, in both the public and private sectors, the overall trajectory is one of declining work life balance. *What might be done to reverse this trend and why does it matter?*

# Commercialisation: Roll up! Roll up! Planning services for sale

// **Why can't we be the place that they would always come to? We can give them great service, good value for money. If somebody else can do that, we can do that!"**

Public sector planner

With budgets decimated by austerity, local government planners face a dilemma. Should they cut services? Sweat staff? Outsource their operations? Beg for mercy?

Commercialisation is an approach that seeks to protect planners' work without the loss of control that has limited the uptake of wholesale outsourcing of planning services<sup>iv</sup>. Commercialisation aims to create lean departments that offset their costs through marketization. Applicants become clients buying services. Pre-application advice and Planning Performance Agreements (PPAs) are particularly important, but some may look to sell services to other authorities or set up trading arms. At the far end of the commercialisation continuum the aim is cost neutrality, calculating fees to cross-subsidise activities like policy making and enforcement.

Advocates of commercialisation highlight a range of positive outcomes. A new focus on pre-application advice allows planners to exert influence early in the design process. Through Planning Performance Agreements, this influence can continue as projects unfold. For planners, this can feel like doing planning work "in spite of the system", which has been modified over recent decades to limit their agency.

// **We've had first-class and second-class stamps for 100 years, haven't we? Just because, someone's paid for a PPA or for pre-app advice, there's no guarantee they get planning permission, you know?"**

Public sector planner

Commercialisation also allows planners to show that they are on board with a new, more constructive, delivery focussed culture. Commercially minded planners disdain the apparently obstructive attitudes of the past, and in being 'solutions-focussed' can perform their rebuttal to narratives that criticise planners as archetypal unyielding bureaucrats putting the brakes on progress. At the same time they argue that commercialisation is also good value for the public. If developers make healthy profits, why shouldn't they cover the full costs of the services they receive?

Sceptics can respond by pointing to the potential for conflicts of interest, as planners begin to rely on selling services to the very organisations they exist to regulate. The cloak of commercial confidentiality means that commercialised pre-application discussions shut the non-fee paying public out of the process, reducing transparency and inclusion. Where planners are firm in their professional resolve and supported by strong organisational cultures one might argue that there isn't a problem, but how healthy are planning cultures? That planners have been unable to make the case for the wider value that good planning creates and have thus ended up focussing narrowly on the immediate costs of activities such as plan-making may bode ill in this regard, especially as we face a significant post-COVID19 recession.

Planners in the private sector, perhaps wary of new competition, are quick to suggest that public sector commercialisation is exploiting a monopoly position. They raise questions about the quality of services developers now pay significantly more for. Is the same old stuff being flogged off with a new label and price tag?



A bike path under construction in a new development. © WITPI

**// At the end of the day, someone gets planning permission, that's a private benefit. Why would you pay for that with public money? So, I think we should be billing for everything."**

Public sector planner

More practically, whilst commercialisation can work in places with high development pressure, such as south east England, questions remain over its viability in areas where development is less profitable and/or the impact of austerity even greater. Relatedly, if new posts are tied to generating income understandings of professional purpose could be fundamentally altered. What value do we put on a non fee-earning policy planner's role within a local authority? Ultimately we might wonder whether this points to a more fundamental problem with the approach, as commercialisation pushes local authorities into competition with one another to attract development.

The commercial shift might also represent planning's role in what we term 'the delivery state' – local government reimagined as fundamentally concerned with 'delivering' development for its area, relegating other concerns about the longer term sustainability of this approach. This is a distinct approach to spatial development, but is it planning? Whilst planners take various positions on the benefits of commercialisation, then, they are united in seeing a difficult wider context.

### Key Questions:

*Is commercialisation the future or the latest stop on a concerning direction of travel: a shift from serving the public interest to servicing the development industry, which finds planners questioning their roles, second guessing what they can and can't do, and wondering whether they are selling their souls to the devil? If commercialisation does need to be challenged, a possibly even trickier question might be asked: just what is the wider value of planning today and how can planners make the case for it?*

## Careers in planning:

# "It's not you, it's me": Navigating careers in planning and finding an 'organisational fit'

Your first job as a planner is likely to be your first 'serious' job. For some it's a great experience and they may stay with the organisation a long time, but for many it doesn't work out. Or they might have a great first experience and then move jobs for a better position, a different challenge, more pay or improved work-life balance, only to find that it doesn't work out. Why? Is it you? Is it some lack of skill, knowledge or fundamental personality characteristic? Or is it the boss, the team, something about the organisation and what it does or expects of you that you can't get along with?

All organisations have a culture and even in a relatively small profession like planning there exists a wide diversity of ways of working. These build up (and change) over time, influenced by many things such as the legacy of management strategies, the personalities of key colleagues, and their blend of different professional ways of going on. This affects what they value and what they look for in a team member, consciously or not. Planners too have a biography and a moral compass. What if the organisation does things that the planner doesn't agree with ethically? Can they ignore their carefully honed sense of good design on a particular application? What if they are asked to suppress information that might shed light on the impacts of a policy or decision? They might also come to realise that their skills won't be valued or that there are limits to how far their career can progress in a given role or organisation.



// **When I came here, one thing I did notice is your opinion was valued more, this sounds dead cheesy like I'm applying for a job interview, but it was."**

Public sector planner

By speaking to planners about their careers our research has explored the ways different people navigate these challenges of 'organisational fit' and career progression. The results provide a range of insights that may be of particular value for those starting out in planning or thinking about a career move. How anyone deals with these issues is usefully summed up by Albert Hirschmann's ideas of *exit, voice and loyalty*<sup>v</sup>. Faced with a workplace dilemma people can either leave the organisation, speak up to challenge a colleague's position, or stay loyal. Over the course of any career many people will opt for each of these, although some are more likely to speak up than others. For those who do want to speak up about issues, or pursue particular agendas such as ecological promotion, economic growth or social justice, it is important to understand whether this will be valued or whether the organisation is not a place that values dissent. Such issues can be especially challenging for early career professionals.

These are issues many planners in our study reflected on when thinking about how career moves had worked out for them. Finding the right fit is different for everyone but involves a combination of the planning values of the organisation, the opportunities on offer (there and elsewhere), personal priorities (for career progression, work-life balance etc) and often some blind chance. Whilst researchers have tended to extol the importance of planning as a vocational commitment, exhorting planners to uphold exacting ethical standards, it's important to remember the messy realities that shape how people's careers develop as their lives and ambitions change.



# Public, private, voluntary?

## Does it matter what sector you work in?

// ***From my experience, in a smaller organisation, you have direct contact with decision makers, their friends; you can put a face to a name, etc. The reporting procedures tend to be a lot more fleet of foot and responsive."***

Private sector planner

// ***[Workers at Citeaze] are very interested in design and what constitutes good design, carrying a ready reference library in their heads of examples they can draw on."***

Case study fieldnote:  
private sector firm

One key axis of career choice lies in the sector the organisation belongs to. The distinction between sectors is more blurry than in the past as local government has become more managerial, including increasing commercialisation of services. Work formerly done in the public sector is often outsourced to the private and sometimes voluntary sectors and increasing numbers of local authority planning departments are staffed by agency workers. Another key feature of recent years has been the increasing purchase of smaller private consultancies by larger, often global, concerns. Such moves provide opportunities, of work overseas etc., but they often bring creeping corporate managerialism and an emphasis on proceduralism. In contrast, smaller consultancies and local authorities can give planners an opportunity to really know a place or region. Whilst nearly all planners value the fact that their jobs allow them to work on diverse projects, some remain more committed to particular places and this shapes their professional choices.

Private consultancies vary greatly not just in terms of size but also in the work they do, offering opportunities for specialisation. Some are oriented toward working for developers, housebuilders, or local authorities. Others work in niches, such as design. Different local authorities too can take certain issues more seriously than others. Smaller authorities may not have in-house teams for particular specialisms or may rely on a single individual for conservation advice, for example.

Many graduate planners are now attracted to the 'training schemes' offered by larger firms. Reversing a former belief that planners needed to 'learn the ropes' in the public sector, these are widely seen as a good basic training, offering structured exposure to different areas of work and support for the completion of professional accreditation requirements. Outside of some larger local authorities, the public sector often struggles to compete with this offer.

Most planners will move jobs several times over the course of their careers (sometimes more). At more senior levels attractive pay and benefits packages tempt people into the private sector or to swap one firm for another. 'Missing generations' caused by recruitment freezes during periods of recession have led to serious shortages of qualified planners at certain levels, intensifying competition and creating opportunities for sometimes rapid career advancement. This has generated the increasing reliance on agency staff in the public sector in areas with high development pressure. In other areas meanwhile, smaller, often rural planning authorities can struggle to fill posts; unable to compete with the lure of bigger cities and what are perceived to be more dynamic challenges.

In short, planning work is very diverse. Opportunities may not be limitless but, outside of major property recessions, they are plentiful. For early career planners, it is worth spending time thinking through what might suit them at this career stage. For those in work, thinking through some of the reasons why a job may not be working out and what else might be out there could be helpful.

### Key Questions:

The nature of planning work and the landscape of job opportunities have both changed markedly over recent years. In some respects there are more and more diverse career pathways open to planners now than ever before. *Does this lead more to choose exit when the going gets tough? How much scope is there in the contemporary workplace for voice or loyalty?*

## Planning ethics:

# The need for a 'do no harm' principle to help secure the public interest?

Planning is important, having multiple impacts on all our lives, and so questions of how those who work as planners behave, and the consequences of their conduct, matter. Accusations of corruption in planning are not unusual. These often point to the idea that planners and/or local politicians have been bribed. There have been some cases of this, of course, such as the 'Donnygate' case from 1993<sup>vi</sup>. Alongside cases of payments to influence planning decisions are accusations of improper influencing or decision-making involving conflicts of interest, including the recent case involving the Secretary of State as well as cases involving local authorities such as Westminster, Northumberland and North Cornwall Councils<sup>vii</sup>.

As important as issues of propriety are, is planning ethics just about avoiding taking bribes or not taking decisions which favour friends and acquaintances? Or should we think of ethics in a broader sense, in terms of what is right for society more generally? The professional status of planning ties the individual practitioner to ethics

through their professional body. In the UK, there are the RTPI's 2016 *Code of Professional Conduct* and the 2017 practice advice note on *Ethics and Professional Standards*<sup>viii</sup>. The 2016 code sets out core principles (competence, honesty and integrity; independent professional judgement; due care and diligence; equality and respect; and professional behaviour) which say nothing specific about planning outcomes at all and could almost apply to any profession<sup>ix</sup>.

The 2017 note offers some practical guidance, but contains the rather confused statement that "historically, acting in the public interest has been defined in terms of protecting public health, public amenity and the environment from 'harm'. Nowadays RTPI Members serve a range of interests."<sup>x</sup> Our own research through the WITPI project has found that the concept of the 'public interest' has somewhat a Humpty-Dumptyish quality, seeming to mean whatever each person wants it to mean, but it does remain a key point of reference for planners.



**// When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."**  
Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass*

The whole justification for planning is surely that it serves broader society, intervening to move us beyond individual interests. This means planning should still seek to serve some sort of notion of a wider public interest rather than weakly saying it 'serves a range of interests', an extraordinary claim which seems to absolve planning professionals of any notion of responsibility higher than the desires of their employer or client. This is something which the American Planning Association has, arguably, a much stronger tradition of considering. In their *Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct* they state that "our primary obligation is to serve the public interest" and define this as including a "special concern for the long-range consequences of present actions", giving "people the opportunity to have a meaningful impact on the development of plans and programs that may affect them", seeking "social justice by working to expand choice and opportunity for all persons", and promoting excellence "to conserve and preserve the integrity and heritage of the natural and built environment".<sup>xi</sup>

The reason a focus on planning outcomes should matter can be illustrated with reference to permitted development (PD) for office-to-residential change of use in England. This has led to a large volume of extremely poor quality housing, including units which are extremely small, with little access to any compensating amenity space, strange internal layouts and very poor natural light.<sup>xii</sup> Given the housing crisis around affordable housing, many of the most vulnerable in society are forced to live in these inadequate units, with potential detrimental consequences for their mental health and wellbeing that have been brought into sharp focus during the covid-19 enforced lockdowns.

The depressing thing has been the way that chartered town planners working in the private sector have been involved in many such schemes. Those professional planners might argue they are serving the interests of the clients they are advising, working within the law and helping deliver housing when there is a housing crisis. Yet, many of these schemes are widely recognised by a range of stakeholders as shockingly bad and are literally condemning inhabitants to lives of misery. Some planners shake their heads and agree whilst simultaneously arguing that they don't set the rules and, if they don't take the work, someone else will.

In the biographical interviews conducted as part of our WITPI project, five of the 23 interviewees (interestingly, all public sector practitioners) explicitly linked the notion of being a 'professional' with ethics. Some noted that their employers offered some scope not to get involved in projects they felt would contradict their professional ethics or values (e.g. nuclear power station developments). But for the majority the lines were far less clear and certain; as Interviewee 9 said, "I think, to be a professional implies that you have a public interest at the heart of everything you do ... but certainly, I think one of the problems with the planning profession is that people who call themselves planners are doing completely opposite things and ... I think it feeds through to the RTPI because it has to have a foot in both camps."

**// One of the problems with the... profession is that people who call themselves planners are doing completely opposite things."**  
Public sector planning manager

There are clearly difficulties and, in many planning applications, there may be chartered town planners on opposite sides of negotiations. Nevertheless, if planning is a meaningful area of professional activity, then professionalism should mean taking into account the impact of schemes which chartered planners are working on and being confident enough to critically examine these outcomes.

### Key Questions:

Planners working on all sides of negotiations need a core set of planning principles and outcomes they are guided by. *Should there be a 'do no harm' principle in planning as proposed in the TCPA's Raynsford Review? Can planners from all sectors agree a common purpose and definition of what it means to serve the public interest?*



## Planners' agency

# Where are the spaces to make a positive difference in an imperfect planning system?

Most planners want to 'make a difference', and most would-be planners originally saw planning as a way to do this. Almost all of the planners we interviewed as part of the biographical element of the *Working in the Public Interest* (WITPI) project postulated that the reason they went into planning in the first place was because they thought it would 'make a difference'. Some were motivated by improving the public realm and protecting our built heritage; others voiced climate change concerns, some highlighted the need for infrastructure and housing; still others raised issues of social equity. Whatever their concern, they saw planning as an agent for change, and a force for good. Some were disillusioned, but most had found a way to live in the imperfect world of planning, and many of them have found a way to thrive without overly compromising their consciences.

Academics and professionals are aware of the use of power in planning to plan, to make decisions, to deliver development; and they are accepting of its presence in whatever planning does or achieves. There is also a general acceptance that planners know how the system works and how to utilise the system for their particular ends, reflected in the profession's strapline of 'mediating space' without focusing unduly on the power dynamics inherently embedded in this mediating.

Within the UK context, and particularly in England, it is easier for government to change the planning system than it is for local planning authorities to produce a plan.<sup>xiii</sup> The planning system is a national government construct, designed in Whitehall, informed by consultation and heavy lobbying, but ultimately shaped by the state. Whatever the construct, it favours particular concerns and particular interests. The existing system emphasises an ongoing housing and infrastructure 'crisis', requiring more housing units in particular; and it favours a neoliberal, marketised approach to delivery, facilitated by the state, and further facilitated by a relaxation of regulation.

Changes to the system alter the agency of planners and other actors. The introduction of 'conformity' to national policy, for example, increased the centre's power to control. Neighbourhood planning genuinely empowers local communities to prepare a statutory plan, provided they have the wherewithal to do it, and comply with 'conformity'. The commercialisation of planning further empowers commercial interests to partake in planning primarily for financial reward, while reduced regulation reduces the power of planners to seek optimum outcomes. Tweaks to the system ripple through, often with seismic repercussions: a relaxation in housing density standards will change the quantity and quality of units we provide nationwide, altering our settlements' morphologies, and potentially diminishing the quality of our public realm if not managed well. Planners and other stakeholders operate within this system utilising whatever agency they can to achieve their particular noble or ignoble ends imperfectly.

Agency in planning takes a variety of different forms. National government's power and control of the system expressed through conformity, and the duty for neighbouring authorities to co-operate, set the parameters of those planning locally and their capacity to operate. Legal powers that permit planners to plan shape the process and the tone of decision-making; democratic accountability ranges from representative local authority planning committees to full-blown community engagement activities to enable those affected by the outcomes to have their say. Concurrently, the need for technical expertise empowers the specialist. Land and property ownership is also a very strong lever, empowering or frustrating wider planning intentions with the owners' right not to cooperate, potentially only overcome with the planners' use of compulsory purchase powers where proven to be necessary.

**// Almost all of the planners we interviewed as part of the biographical element of the Working in the Public Interest (WITPI) project postulated that the reason they went into planning in the first place was because they thought it would 'make a difference'."**

# Planners' agency

Funding always matters, which given the recent emphasis on austerity and the reliance on the market to deliver, favours those that can afford to engage with planning and to develop over those that 'protest too much', whatever the quality of what is being offered. Our focus group data, drawn from eight discussions across the nations of the UK (completed in 2018), and made up almost entirely of local authority and private sector planners, consistently characterised those objecting to development as NIMBYs, convinced that the planners' expertise and judicious use of material considerations had mitigated the worst aspects of proposed development and that locals' concerns were largely unjustified, or not planning-related. As the nature of planning changes, these different forms of agency also shift in emphasis, but some always tend to predominate.

The existing system is fragmented, complicated and replete with processes and procedures that need to be navigated, requiring the skills of the expert planner to give advice, produce documentation to gain suitable statutory recognition, whether that be in relation to a statutory plan or a development decision. Currently, it is also fundamentally permissive, with planners required to proactively engage with development. Inevitably, this reduces the effective agency of the system and of those operating the system to affect outcomes.

The system is also increasingly cumbersome with many planners highlighting the volume of work required to achieve a planning outcome, be it the production of a plan or a development decision; and the volume of work it takes to read and respond to it all.

Without decrying attempts to improve the evidence-based underpinnings of planning's decision-making, it appears that the volume of work has been made worse, partly by technology allowing increased traffic in relation to the volume of supporting documents needed; the volume of plan documents and applications being processed, and the volume of respondents making comment.

**// It is a bit like not having the headspace... you are 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 would realise we didn't need to do it at all."**

Public sector planner

These have all grown like topsy in terms of their size and length. This paradoxically reduces stakeholders' agency. 'Headspace' gets crowded and pertinent points get lost in the noise and activity.

Effectively the system seems to beget the system, with relatively little gain for anyone, beyond financial reward reflected in salaries and commissions.

The system itself is difficult to deliver. At the time of writing, local planning authorities have seen unprecedented cuts to funding resulting in reduced staffing, all while still being required to deliver the same planning functions. Most have also experienced multiple restructuring exercises to streamline service provision.

In 2018, five out of a possible 433 planning authorities have been outsourced as part of a wider council outsourcing exercise; three have set up local authority trading companies of their own. Most have developed a portfolio type of staffing arrangement comprising a hybrid and fluid mixture of permanent staff, seconded staff, contract staff, agency staff and shared working arrangements with other organisations to deliver their services. This was intended to provide sufficient departmental expertise, capacity and agility, to weather the inevitable peaks and troughs in service demand to achieve targets. However, it is also felt that outsourcing reduces the commissioning authority's control.

**// They are just hiring freelancers... from all over the place and you've got no control over who is actually doing [the work]."**

Focus group participant, Leeds

**// 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."**

Focus group participant, London

**// If you've got a department which is effectively managed within the council and it is 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 is working well and everyone's happy with what is happening in the city."**

Focus group participant, Leeds

Some planners aired concerns about the loss of institutional memory and service quality bought about by short-termist approaches to staffing. At the same time, others emphasised the value of an efficient, well-run local planning authority, and the perceived agency of department heads to lead for the benefit of the locality as a whole:

This begins to highlight the difficulties of delivering a quality service in the current planning context. Still, many planners were comfortable about their roles and their agency within them, taking pleasure in pointing to things to which they felt they had contributed. Some were also taking the chance to change their modes of operating to reflect new working cultures.

Some planners had clearly sought out opportunities that fitted their personal commitments and allowed them to feel that they were making a difference, on climate change, neighbourhood planning or the provision of housing. Others sought ways to work against the grain of the system, whether by speaking out on issues that mattered to them or finding ways of quietly pursuing their commitments. In these ways we found examples of planners who have sought to utilise their agency in ways they believe make a difference.

### Key Questions:

The system is constraining; the process can be frustrating; day-to-day activities may be more problematic than challenging; but many planners still find a way through, and believe they make a difference. *How can planners best use their agency to make a difference?*

# The public interest

## Working in the public interest?

Justifications of planning usually rest on the idea that planners' work serves the public interest. All of those we spoke to recognised this idea and believed it was reflected in what they do. Not many wanted to define what the term meant, however. Some rightly pointed out that this sounded too much like an undergraduate exam question, distant from the day-to-day realities of the job. Theoretical debates about the public interest in planning have often involved excursions into political philosophy but, perhaps unsurprisingly, we found little appetite to debate the relative merits of deontological against consequentialist approaches to determining planning applications.

Against such reasonable objections, however, it is important to retain sight of the dangers that the 'humpty dumpty-ish' quality of the public interest generates. There is a worrying circularity in a professional activity that justifies itself through claims to the public interest and then argues that it means just whatever they say and do.

Having said that, we can identify a range of different ways in which planners talked, often indirectly, about the ways they believe they work *in the public interest*:

### a practical attempt to better conditions in cities

**// I would hope it [the public interest] matters to all planners because planning is based on bettering housing conditions for people's health and wellbeing, that's what it came out of, in the Victorian era."** Interview 4, public and private sectors

### the delivery of housing, as an essential and pressing societal need

**// This is the reason we're doing this is because we, as chartered planners, believe that the planning profession can help build more homes because that's what we need for health and wellbeing and families, to reduce inequalities, to reduce homelessness, to increase life opportunities."** Interview 17, private sector

### a balancing of interests

**// It is a balance between delivering a viable scheme that meets clients' needs with serving the public interest and, I'll put my hands up, there have been projects where the public interest has been squeezed out."** Interview 16, private sector

### the provision of technical advice to political decision-makers

**// 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 focus group, private sector participant

Table 1: articulations of the public interest and supporting quotes





Above: Sharing planning achievements at a walkability event. © WITPI

These examples highlight some of the ways the public interest is being defined and realised through planning practices today. The diverse nature of the claims illustrates that it may well be more practical to explore what the public interest means in practice rather than seeking formal definitions based on pre-defined categories. At the same time their contestability points to the value-laden nature of planning work and the need for ongoing professional and societal debate about the purposes of planning, and reflexivity on the part of planners about the effects of their work.

By exploring the workplace experience of planners this booklet has also drawn attention to additional, perhaps overlooked aspects of public interest. Organisational change, career structures and work-life balance, for example, all have significant public interest implications in their own right as well as impacting on the ways planners work. If a reinvigoration of the public interest in planning requires more time and space for meaningful debate and reflection on the purposes of planning, it is important that these dimensions of public interest practice are more widely acknowledged.

### Key Questions:

It is clear that the rules of the game set out in legislation and government policies play a significant (perhaps even over-bearing) role in defining the nature of the public interest that planners can and do pursue across the UK, circumscribing the scope and focus of much planning activity. Whilst planners continue to feel they can make a difference, this is always within (and sometimes in spite of) the systems they work in.

*How can space be made for more meaningful reflection and ongoing debate about the purposes of planning and the kind of system and working practices that would allow them to be realised?*

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# WORKING IN THE PUBLIC INTEREST

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