Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Profit or public service? Tensions and alignment in private planning practice

John Sturzaker[a] and Hannah Hickman[b]

[a]School of Life & Medical Sciences, University of Hertfordshire, Hatfield, UK; [b]Department of Geography and Environmental Management, University of the West of England, Bristol, UK

ABSTRACT

The growth of employment opportunities for planners working in the private sector has resulted in a rapid change in the composition of the planning profession in the UK, with over 40% of Royal Town Planning Institute members now employed in private practice. Existing writing on private planning practice is somewhat circumspect, with the private sector being associated largely with a profit-driven approach. Drawing on interviews with private sector planners, this paper argues that this fails to reflect the lived reality of private sector planners, and in so doing sets out an alternative and more nuanced characterisation of private practice.

Introduction

The planning systems in the UK are based around an 'unusual' amount of discretion, allowing a considerable amount of latitude for decision makers at the local level (Cullingworth & Nadin, 2006, p. 1). This discretionary system, wherein the development plan has primacy in decision-making but can be departed from if 'material considerations indicate otherwise' (Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004), means that decisions on whether to grant consent for specific development proposals are to a greater degree a matter of judgement than in other contexts. In turn, this places a great deal of emphasis on the professional judgement of planners (Tewdwr-Jones, 1999), both in the public sector, advising politicians on whether to grant or refuse planning permission; and in the private sector, advising clients as to whether and how they might achieve planning permission. The proportion of planners in the UK working in the private sector has dramatically increased in recent years (RTPI, 2019), now equating to around half of planners registered as members of the professional body.[1] There has, however, been relatively little work that seeks to explore what motivates planners working in the private sector, or to understand how they use their professional judgement and justify their actions. This paper seeks to contribute to answering these questions, by drawing on interview testimony from such practitioners.

In doing so, it joins an increasing body of work examining the activity and behaviour of practicing planners. This work is reviewed in more depth below, and explores issues such as the professional identity of planners (Campbell & Marshall, 2002); the

experiences of younger planners (Tasan-Kok & Oranje, 2018); ethical perspectives and challenges faced by planners (Lauria & Long, 2017, 2019); the professional responsibilities of planners (Murtagh *et al*., 2019); and what motivates planners (Johnson, 2010, 2012). To a large extent, this work has tended to focus upon planners working in the public sector. With few exceptions (such as Loh & Arroyo, 2017; Linovski, 2019, 2021), private sector planners are either ignored or decried as 'profiteer planners' (Taşan-Kok & Penpecioğlu, 2018, p. 113), assumed to be motivated by personal gain and little else. This is perhaps unsurprising given the origins of planning in the UK as a state activity (Cherry, 1996), and the ongoing normative preferences for many for a strong public sector to constrain the activities of private capital. There may be a danger, however, that personal preferences in that direction limit the scope of our understanding of planning as a real-world practice.

Whilst planning in the UK might be different to other contexts regarding the nature of decision-making, it is not unique in featuring substantial numbers of planners working outside of the employ of the state. For example, 65% of members of the Planning Institute Australia report working in consulting (PIA, 2020), although noting the trend towards the hybridisation of practice in Australia (Steele, 2009), consulting may be one part of a portfolio career. The activities of planners such as these are rarely the focus of planning scholarship. It is undoubtedly the case that some or many such planners are indeed concerned to ensure they earn the salary they feel they need to pay their bills, and we do not in this paper seek to act as apologists for them. We do, however, suggest that it is important to understand and analyse what private sector planners claim their motivations to be and how they justify the work they do.

In this paper, therefore, we seek to explore four questions: 1) How do planners behave? 2) Whose interests do private sectors planners claim they are serving? 3) How do private sector planners strike a balance between their professional obligations and those to their clients? 4) Are the espoused approaches and motivations of private sector planners broadly in line with those working in the public sector? In what follows, we do so by exploring existing literature related to questions of planners' behaviour (addressing question 1); outlining our empirical approach; analysing our interview data (addressing questions 2–4); and, finally, concluding with reflections upon the future of the planning profession.

Why do private sector planners do what they do?

The changing nature of the planning profession

As noted above, it is common for analysis of the activities and behaviours of planning professionals to focus upon those working in, or for, the public sector, ignoring or neglecting those working in the private sector. This neglect could be justified in different ways, including on the grounds that particularly in Europe, planning has a history as an overwhelmingly public sector activity. It is also possible to discern, however, an implicit or explicit understanding of planners/planning in the private sector as being motivated largely by profit, or acting as 'agents of private capital' (Harvey, 1989; cited in Linovski, 2019, p. 1674). This may in turn mean that scholars feel they are somehow less legitimate

as a focus of research or even, perhaps, as 'not perceived as planners at all' (Hickman & Sturzaker, 2022, p. 246).

We would argue that ignoring the activities of private sector planners is not (any longer) appropriate. As noted above, in the UK and Australia, and possibly elsewhere, though data on Europe is less readily accessible, around half of members of professional planning institutes now work in the private sector, a rapid change from even a decade ago (Hickman & Sturzaker, 2022). This change has been described as a 'co-evolution between reforms' (Raco & Savini, 2019, p. 4) as state spending in these countries has diminished, shrinking the public sector planning workforce, at the same time as increased emphasis has been placed upon the private sector to drive development, expanding that workforce (Steele, 2009; Haughton & Hincks, 2013; Lord & Tewdwr-Jones, 2014). It is also the case, however, that there is a long history of public-private working in many contexts, including the UK (Inch *et al.*, 2022), and that there are ever more complex patterns to such working, with private sector planners often working as consultants for public bodies (Loh & Norton, 2013; Linovski, 2019; Slade *et al.*, 2019; Inch *et al.*, 2022) and public sector planners acting as 'clients' and needing to interpret work produced by planning consultancies (Parker *et al.*, 2019). In Australia this has been described as a 'hybridisation' of public and private planning (Steele, 2009).

It is only in recent years that scholars, in the UK at least, have begun to focus on the implications for planning theory and practice of the turn to the private sector (cf. Inch *et al.*, 2022). It is fair to say that there has been historically more reflection in the USA on what planners themselves are or should be doing (cf. Davidoff, 1965), and on the differences between the public and private sector of the planning profession (for example Read & Leland, 2011; Loh & Norton, 2013).

A similar distinction can be observed in relation to the professional bodies which govern planning in the UK and the USA – Tait *et al.* (2020) criticise the Royal Town Planning Institute's code of conduct and associated advice on ethics and professional standards (RTPI, 2016, 2017), arguing that they seem to 'absolve planning professionals of any notion of responsibility higher than the desires of their employer or client' (p. 19). They suggest that the American Planning Association/American Institute of Certified Planners' *Code of ethics and professional conduct* reflects a 'much stronger tradition of considering' such issues (ibid.).

How planners interpret such codes in practice is one focus of the literature around ethics and planners' behaviour.

Ethics

Schweitzer (2017) suggests that the ethical tensions facing planners 'tend not to change' (p. 159) and in general relate to who benefits from decisions that they make – whether themselves (in terms of career advancement); the employer (whether public or private sector); the 'public interest' (a concept we return to below) or particular groups in society.

There may of course be tensions between these different potential beneficiaries, and weighing up competing claims can be challenging for planners (Campbell & Marshall, 1998). Lauria and Long (2017, 2019) draw on questionnaire surveys and interviews with planners, mostly in the public sector but with a minority of private sector participants, to assess how practicing planners align with different ethical perspectives – mostly drawn

from the code of ethics of the AICP. Private sector planners were less likely to espouse a utilitarian framework (concerned with doing the most good for the most people), with a hedonistic perspective (self-interested) more common.

This self-interest is often perceived by scholars and public-sector planners as influencing private sector planners' decisions – an emblematic quote perhaps being '"Private consultants are like lawyers – they'll defend anything if paid enough"' (Campbell & Marshall, 2002, p. 104). It can be appropriate to compare planning with other professions – Linovski (2019), reflecting on the tensions inherent in working for (large) private sector businesses, identifies that in the profession of accountancy, working for the largest firms in that sector correlates with seemingly laxer attitudes to professional norms. However, in relation to planning, Loh and Norton (2013) found that, although groups of private and public sector planners both felt that there were differences between the values of their respective groups, there did not in fact appear to be so in practice.

As noted above, a commonly perceived ethical pillar for planning is the expectation that planning and planners should act in the public interest.

Public interest

The public interest as a justification for planning activity is subject to challenge because, *inter alia*, it has been used to justify (re)development projects which have proved intensely controversial in many contexts (Maidment, 2016) and because it is increasingly hard to discern a single universal 'public', never mind to explicate the interests of the public(s) (Tait, 2016). However, the public interest 'nevertheless remains the pivot around which debates about the nature of planning and its purposes turn' (Campbell & Marshall, 1998, p. 181). This remains the case today, with professional codes of conduct for planners in various contexts emphasising the importance of the public interest (Hickman & Sturzaker, 2022), and 'The notion of planning as contributing to public benefit emerged spontaneously in most of the interviews' with professional planners undertaken by Murtagh *et al.* (2019, p. 4). Those interviews, however, were almost all with public sector planners – can the public interest be legitimately drawn upon by planners working in the private sector?

It has been argued (Grizen, 2010, cited in Loh & Norton, 2013), that a public interest claim can really only be made by planners working in the public sector, 'public' being equated in this case with the state and hence only available to those planners employed by the state. However, references abound to challenges faced by public sector planners both in identifying the public interest (Campbell & Marshall, 1998) and in attempting to uphold or valorise it in the face of political pressure (Oranje *et al.*, 2018; Sykes, 2018). In many contexts there is an increasingly pro-development attitude on the part of elected politicians, in order to generate income, as per Harvey's entrepreneurial city thesis (Harvey, 1989). Slade *et al.* (2019), looking specifically at the UK, found that this had led to a reduction in conflict between public and private sectors in relation to the public interest, with both 'sides' being equally keen to see development delivered. This is not a universal trend, (Fox-Rogers & Murphy, 2016) finding little evidence in their interviews with Irish planners of an entrepreneurial ethos. But where it does exist, how do private sector planners use the public interest to justify their actions?

The literature suggests at least two primary approaches. The first is to draw upon issues of reputation and professionalism, emphasising the importance to individuals and their firms of being seen to be 'good' (Slade *et al.*, 2019). The second is to emphasise the role of the private sector planner as an interface between developers and local authorities and the importance of such an interface in improving outcomes. This might be in relation to improving the quality of the development by ameliorating client expectations in relation to income (Slade *et al.*, 2019); or acting as a counterpoint to local (political) biases, bringing transparency to the development process (Vigar, 2012). In either case, those planners in the private sector who scholars have spoken to emphasise that it is possible to serve the public interest from outside traditional public sector roles. Inch *et al.* (2022, p. 3, emphasis added) suggest this can be 'optimistically understood to entail a shift from a public **sector** to a public **service** ethos'. In the next sub-section we look at the question of public service, and how this concept might motivate planners.

Motivation

Much work looking at public service motivation arises in the US, and is usually focussed upon those working in the public sector, i.e. for the state. However, the definition of public service motivation presented by Perry (1996), we suggest, can be applied to those working in other sectors of professions such as planning: 'Public service motivation is defined as an individual's predisposition to respond to motives grounded primarily or uniquely in public institutions' (p. 6). Perry then developed a model for exploring the public service motivation, comprising four dimensions: 'Attraction to public policy making, commitment to the public interest, compassion, and self-sacrifice' (p. 20). Given the increasing blurring between public and private sector planners in the production of public policy (Parker *et al.*, 2019), perhaps all four can be applied across the planning profession. Further, if we view planning, and membership of a professional organisation such as the Royal Town Planning Institute, as being oriented towards the public, we would argue that public service motivation is cross-sectorally appropriate as an analytical tool.

Work exploring why planners do what they do (such as Baum, 1997; Peterson, 2006) suggests that planners are indeed motivated by 'making the world a better place' (Johnson, 2012, p. 31), perhaps using the public interest not only as justification for actions but also as a motivation for action. This is often identified as a driver for becoming a planner as opposed to embarking on some other, perhaps better remunerated, career (Fox-Rogers & Murphy, 2016) and for remaining in the profession despite the challenges it brings (Murtagh *et al.*, 2019).

Those challenges, however, can act as powerful demotivators, generating resentment amongst planners and, potentially, changing planners' behaviour. One such challenge is the perception that planning is 'under attack' (Lord & Tewdwr-Jones, 2014) from politicians and others. Professions which originated in, or are associated with, the public sector, can be subject to 'Government bashing' (Johnson, 2010, p. 573), with complaints about bureaucracy seen to negatively impact upon the motivation to try and make the world a better place. It can be argued that, particularly in England, planning has been 'bashed' in this way for several decades, with pressure from the press, public and politicians constraining the actions of planners to such an extent that they may be

impeded from taking the best course of action (Sturzaker & Lord, 2018). Others have found perceptions amongst planners that planning is seen as an obstacle to change in countries including Brazil (Rocco, 2018). This can mean that planners feel powerless and default to unimaginative, bureaucratic approaches (Gunn & Hillier, 2012; Fox-Rogers & Murphy, 2016).

As we will go on to discuss, this can result in planners leaving the public sector in search of opportunities to make more meaningful change in the private sector, one of the themes which emerged from our empirical work. In the next section we explain how we undertook this work.

The study

The empirical material presented here is drawn from 10 in-depth interviews with private sector planning consultants and two online roundtables. The former were selected to reflect a range of types of planning consultancy, including sole practitioners, specialist planning consultancies and planning consultants in large multi-disciplinary firms. All were at a senior or director level. The latter comprised two separate online discussions with planning staff in two firms: one specialist planning consultancy, and one multi-disciplinary firm. One of our interviewees was in each roundtable. A total of twenty consultants, at a variety of career stage, participated in these (noting that in the second of these all participants were at director level). The participants ranged in age/experience, gender and ethnicity. Ethical approval was obtained from our employing institutions before we began the interviews and roundtables, and procedures required by that approval, e.g. obtaining consent for participation, guaranteeing anonymity, were followed throughout. All interviews were transcribed and analysed by the authors using a set of agreed common themes to enable key themes and differences to be drawn out. For reasons of anonymity, material here is not directly attributable, but we use codes in the table below to distinguish between different participants. Collectively, these consultants had experience of working for a wide variety of both private sector and public sector clients. The latter area of work is a substantial one for many consultancies, and the focus of other work (Schoneboom et al., 2022). Our specific interest here is with consultancies' work for private sector clients. We have also focussed upon consultancies in this paper, excluding other aspects of the private sector (for example planners who work for house-builders). We have interviewed examples of the latter and will return to these in future work. Our sample is representative of a large proportion of private sector planners – RTPI (2019) data estimated 76% of private sector planners worked in consultancy of some sort, whether their employers were single or multi-disciplinary, large or small, planning-focussed or otherwise. Most of our respondents work primarily in England, though one of our roundtables (see Table 1) was with an international company and included directors from North America.

It is important to note three issues around data here. Firstly, we did not sample the research participants in a systematic way – they were practicing planners known to the authors or identified through snowball sampling. They are therefore not a representative sample of their profession. In what follows we do not seek to make statements about the planning profession as a whole – we treat the interview and roundtable testimony as insights into how a selection of planners working in the private sector (claim to) act.

Table 1. Participant coding.

Roundtable/interview, organisation and employee type	Code	Date
Roundtable, specialist planning consultancy, director level	R1D	28 June 2021
Roundtable, specialist planning consultancy, associate level/senior-planner level	R1MT	28 June 2021
Roundtable, specialist planning consultancy, early career	R1J	28 June 2021
Roundtable, multi-disciplinary, director level (international)	R2D	29 September 2021
Individual interviewee, sole practitioners	ISP	May- June 2021
Individual interviewee, multi-disciplinary firms	IMD	April 2021
Individual interviewee, specialist planning consultancies	ISPC	March – April 2021

Secondly, as many of the participants were known to the authors this meant that trust was easy to establish, but of course may have impacted upon what the interviewees felt able to discuss with us. Thirdly, and we return to this issue in our conclusion, we, as with all authors working with respondents' self-reported positions, must come to a decision about how we treat that self-reporting. Our interviewees may have been dishonest, or exaggerating, about their positions, in order that we did not think less of them; they may have been lying *to themselves*; or we can assume they are telling the truth. In reality, of course, there are likely to be some elements of all three in any interview testimony. We have taken the position that the views expressed to us are accurate, but of course we need to remember that we were speaking to (often senior) professionals who it would be foolish to assume are not aware of the need to protect their or their employers' reputations, despite the reassurances of anonymity in the research.

Whose interests do private sector planners believe they serve?

Consultants were unanimous that their motivations for becoming planners stemmed from what they variously described as core planning values, either seen in terms of broadly expressed notions of the public interest or public service, or in terms of substantive topic-based interests:

> I have been very idealist driven . . . I do think planning has a public service duty (IMD).

> I think what is clear . . . is that the most people get into planning with an interest in the environment and improving it. Everyone has that base setting (R1D).

The idea of a 'base-setting' is very striking: suggesting coalescence amongst planners around 'a sense of making a difference to people and places' (Grange, 2013, p. 225). Several participants spoke with some conviction about their motivations being no different from those of planners working in the public sector (as found by Loh & Norton, 2013), stating unequivocally, '*We are all planners aren't we?' (R1D)*, and '*we all have the same code of ethics we have to adhere to*' (R2D) including in relation to serving the public interest. Here, it is clear that for these private sector planners, the idea of public service motivation as described by Perry (1996) has relevance to their work in a private sector setting, with notions of public benefit having emerged spontaneously as in Murtagh's *et al.* (2019) interviews with public sector planners. This counteracts the idea that core motivations are around profit.

What was more interesting, perhaps, was how they saw these motivations in relation to their work with private clients: how did they balance the public service motivation with

the demands of their client, something that Inch *et al.* (2022) suggest they would find particularly problematic? A minority of participants stated without hesitation '*my view is always we're serving the public*' (R1MT), but the majority of consultants' responses were categorized into either those that were clear that their clients' interests were their principal focus – '*if you are working in the private sector then of course your clients' interests do come first*' (R1J), or those that saw themselves as balancing multiple interests. Of those consultants that saw themselves as balancing multiple interests, most shared the view that '*the balance has to go to the developer*' (R1MT), but in so doing clearly wrangled with how to express this:

> . . . clients, but then I thought no actually, that's not the case, as a planner we also serve ourselves as a company, we do serve the public interest . . . (R1MT).

So whilst these planners might describe their motivations as planners as being around the public interest, there was clear appreciation that for most participants these interests were not the sole or even predominant interest in their work with private clients. This exemplifies the tensions for all planners of different potential beneficiaries noted by Campbell and Marshall (1998), but here there was a strong sense of weighting in favour of their clients' interests, not simply balancing different interests – though, as we return to below, it is also important to acknowledge that not all clients are the same, and some espouse their own version of serving the public interest.

Of those that gave precedent to their client's interests, it was notable how they saw the public interest as being safeguarded, '*a byproduct*', of the planning system, a de facto outcome of working within the system: '*the planning system should serve the public . . . we're one half of it, we're actors within it, so I'm thinking about whose interests do I serve within that system . . . in the same way as a lawyer defending a murderer, it's all part of the same system as long as it's not done through skullduggery*' (R1D). So whilst perhaps unsurprisingly, 'self-interest' in the terms described by Campbell and Marshall (2002) was rarely declared, it is in the last observation that we get closer to their characterization of consultants as being prepared to 'defend anything if paid enough' (p. 104).

How is a balance struck between professional obligations to the public interest and the demands of clients?

All consultants acknowledged the potential for conflict between the demands of clients and the [public service] ethos of planning, speaking openly about the circumstances in which they perceived this conflict to arise: '*Ethical issues bite with me if a project's objectives don't align with progressing sustainable development*' (IMD); '*of course at the heart of capitalism is to serve the interest of a client. But as a consultant you have to balance the need to create value with your own judgement*' (R2D). Particularly in this latter quote, references to capitalism and value are tacit acknowledgement of a client's need to generate profit. However, what is interesting here is whether a client's need for profit is synonymous with a profit-driven approach by the planning consultants themselves in advising their clients, the presumption in some of existing commentary on the rise of the private sector planner (Kunzmann 2016; Tomaney & Ferm, 2018; Taşan-Kok & Penpecioğlu, 2018) and one assumed to inherently challenge planning's core values; or whether consultants can be (partly at least) driven by other factors.

Those we spoke to reported positions in line with the latter approach, firstly in the nature of the advice they provide and secondly, through the choice of clients they work with and the types of projects they advise on.

In terms of the former, they largely saw this in terms of steering a client towards positive planning outcomes – not just doing the will of the client regardless of outcome. Consultants talked of '*pushing*' their clients in certain directions, but in so doing acknowledged that success was very client dependent and – perhaps unsurprisingly – ultimately influenced by '*the degree to which it makes a difference to their bottom line*' (R1D). Thus, participants often observed the most persuasive route to achieving certain planning outcomes with clients was financial:

> our ability to be impressive is not the ethics we hold, it's our ability to make the case for those ethics in ways that are convincing to others . . . I find I'm constantly saying, well, if you make this walkable, the rent will be 25% higher. (R2D).

This could be seen as a cynical, profit driven approach, or as an attempt to 'sell' better planning outcomes as a way of making more profit. The latter view suggests that these consultants are implicitly acting as an interface between capital and the state in the way that Slade *et al.* (2019) suggest.

Use of the word 'professional' is interesting. Instead of trading off the idea of being seen to be good as Slade *et al.* (ibid) suggest, here consultants are instead using the idea of professionalism – highlighting their potential input as being more professional than counterpart consultants elsewhere in the industry – to justify taking on certain projects to themselves (and others?):

> We had the opportunity to bid for discharge for planning conditions for a [controversial minerals project] in the north. Another part of the business asked if we would collaborate. Within 30 mins I had someone come to me and say we shouldn't be doing this, shouldn't be supporting a coal mine full stop. I said let's examine that job. It already had planning consent, this was discharging of conditions, would we be able to do better job than someone else – could we do a better ethical job?

(R2D). This demonstrates the potential for a range of perspectives on what might constitute ethical practice in any given circumstance: where one planner may justify taking on work to achieve a better outcome than an alternative advisor, another may remain opposed in principle to supporting particular types of work.

Secondly, consultants spoke about client selection and choice, suggesting that they have significant agency in these regards. One firm mentioned an aide-memoire of organisations they would not work for: '*We have taken a stance on organisations that we will never work with. I have said I would never do any work for the volume house builders. They have dubious ethics, driven only by profit not place*' (IMD). Another spoke about being pre-emptive: '*We are compromised if we think about economic value. We need to define value in the round . . . We seek out clients with those ideas, rather than short term equity gain*' (R2D). This directly conflicts with the 'consultants are like lawyers' argument (Campbell & Marshall, 2002).

Many spoke about the nature of specific schemes, with one consultant stating, '*the ethics of a project . . . is central to the types of projects which we are taking on*' (R1MT). Some were specific: '*. . . We have decided that we are no longer going to do a project unless*

we can demonstrate net gain in climate change' (R2D). Interestingly, the same interviewee later said *'... there is no real grip on future mobility and hydrogen, electrical vehicles, but there is quite significant road building ... ethically, should private practice be supporting Highways England doing that? – yes we are. But we are going to be pushing them really hard to take radical issues on'.*

Through client choice, and project selection, these consultants are clearly not simply motivated by a profit driven approach, either on behalf of their client or, importantly, in terms of their own revenue/business growth. Whether their motivation is genuinely the public interest, or the desire to enhance their (firms') reputation (as per Slade *et al.*, 2019), is not entirely clear. Neither is how these might be balanced in the case of a conflict between their professional obligations and their *employer's* codes of conduct, which may emphasise 'loyalty to the firm' (Linovski, 2019, p. 307) and include a wide range of requirements (Erwin, 2011). Either way, the ability to choose clients was acknowledged as a derivative of level of experience and seniority. More senior interviewees spoke of being able to '*protect themselves*' from clients less aligned with their planning values:

> If I was asked to work on Heathrow I'd struggle with that ... I have protected myself by always ensuring I have other work. Junior colleagues aren't going to get the same protection – but I would try my best to support them if they had those concerns. I was asked to submit for a big job in Saudi Arabia. I rang up another director and said I'm not comfortable for ethical reasons. I don't have a problem doing that probably because of my age and position ... If I was told 'I had to do it' then I'd have to find another job. (IMD)

Importantly, several of those we spoke to conceded that whilst they might have turned down '*more ethically dubious work*' (R2D), this would '*more than likely*' (ISPC) be picked up by other '*more commercially minded companies*' (ISPC).

This evidences the diversity within private planning practice: whilst some depict a high level of agency to choose clients that align with their professional values, this is not uniform and there was a strong sense from our interviews that there are other consultants out there carrying out work that some consultants would feel less comfortable with. Nevertheless, more common was the observation:

> ... I've never had to turn down work from something I felt to be immoral or unethical, but I have lost out on work where I insist on giving accurate advice and then clients are not interested in me representing them because I've no interest in representing their view (R1D).

Here, it is important to acknowledge the potential for inconsistency – double standards even – in planners' perspectives on balancing professional obligations and the demands of clients. Whilst the planners we spoke to positioned themselves as ethical, wanting to distance themselves from some other practices where they perceived profit might override ethical considerations, as we saw above, they also acknowledged the persuasive power of profit in seeking good planning and their need to have ultimate regard to their client's balance sheets.

Are the differences between public and private so pronounced?

One of the most striking aspects of these conversations with private sector consultants was the frustration expressed by the oft used depiction of these professionals as being on the 'dark side':

> I find that attitude, really, really frustrating really disappointing. You know just you know implies that they're the only ones with ethics, which is just wholly wrong (R1D).

In fact, these consultants went one step further, to suggest that their counterparts in the public sector might be equally, if not more, compromised in their ability to effect positive planning outcomes that aligned with their professional motivations and convictions, albeit in different ways. Here, participants highlighted the ethical challenges for public sector planners, of working with and advising elected members, that might result in having to '*defend something they professionally find difficult because of political expediency*' (ISP) resulting in '*their professional integrity being knocked*' (ibid) or experiencing '*recommending a scheme for approval that is over-turned*' (R1D). As one consultant emphatically stated:

> The public sector is completely compromised by its political environment. There is completely irrational decision making by those in the public sector - no one has the balls to give professional advice to the political class. Because they are ultimately worried about their jobs. I'm not being derogatory its simply the facts. I get really cross, because as far as my experience goes . . . neither one [the private sector] nor the other [public sector] is simple (R1MT).

The complexities and political pressures facing public sector planners may be different, but they are nevertheless acknowledged to be present (Kitchen, 1997; Grange, 2017; Oranje *et al.*, 2018; Sykes, 2018). As one consultant succinctly put it:

> I think that's why looking at the public sector as well, I think perhaps why I find it quite so easy . . . I don't really have any power to abuse, I can give my opinion and I can represent a poor style standpoint but I don't make the decision and I can't I can't withhold anything from anyone. I have don't have the power to potentially abuse . . . (R1D)

Here, it is useful to also reflect on Schweitzer's work (Schweitzer, 2017), suggesting that the ethical tensions for planners relate to who benefits from the decisions they make. Whilst it would be dishonest to suggest that the private sector planner makes no decisions with ethical consequences in the advice they provide to clients, it is highly relevant that the private sector planner is *not making planning decisions*.

Taking this one step further, several consultants offered the view that the private sector planner might in fact have more agency '*to actually plan positively*' (ISPC) in the way in which they advised their clients. Some proffered the view that they moved to consultancy '*to be part of something where something actually happens*' (ISPC), and felt they had more opportunity in the private sector to affect positive planning outcomes:

> . . . most of the time we are involved as planners in the design process, we're talking to our colleagues, we are the one' on the front line going to the communities, you know the designers, you're formulating development principles . . . in local government your main job is to critique you don't generally get to share the positive aspects of designing . . . being part of how you're going to create a community (R1D).

Finally, one consultant wanted to emphasise the role of the private sector in providing public goods through planning obligations. For this planner, securing public benefit from a scheme was an explicit outcome of their advice:

> . . . the fact that there is general reliance upon developer contributions to pay for so much . . . we are you know we're building the roads are building your skills we're building you

affordable housing, which would just simply not exist, were it not for private sector development (R1D).

Whilst this feels somewhat self-justificatory, it reflects the complexity in the provision of public services and goods impacting planning practice, and for this planner at least, a sense that their work with clients on planning obligations was an opportunity for them to enhance public benefit.

Conclusion

In this paper we have sought to explore the tensions between public service and profit that potentially exist in private practice, casting a light on an under-researched aspect of the planning profession. Following a literature review exploring extant research on how planners behave, we have, through analysis of interviews and roundtables with planners working as private consultants, explored this issue through asking three questions, which we also use to structure this conclusion.

Firstly, we asked *whose interests do private sector planners claim that they are serving?* This, we found, was something that our interviewees appeared to struggle to elucidate, suggesting that it was not a day-to-day consideration for them. The public interest was something which came through quite strongly, in contrast to the established position in the literature. What was also clear, however, was that these planners were unapologetic about promoting their clients' interests, as well as their own and their companies'. A number of those we spoke to emphasised that these were not mutually exclusive, and that high quality development could address all these interests, though perhaps not equally.

Following on from this, we asked *how do private sector planners strike a balance between their professional obligations and those to their clients?* This balance was some-thing our participants did seem to have considered. Some suggested that their role was to enhance the schemes proposed by the development sector, and in doing so meet their professional obligations. Throughout, we heard about some schemes consultants were uncomfortable with, though whether they were happy to work on such schemes or not varied, perhaps based on factors including the level of seniority and therefore the responsibility felt towards junior colleagues – ensuring the business brought in enough income. One aspect to consider here is what clients themselves are seeking from the planning process. Some consultants wanted to strongly counter the idea that private clients were primarily focused on maximizing the economic value of projects, suggesting that a shift in the private sector was resulting in consultants being evaluated differently: '*Now our clients are telling us it's important, asking us "what is your social value?" – asking you that before they put their money in. It's really started. In some submissions, social value question is worth 20%*' (R2D).

Thirdly, we asked *are the espoused approaches and motivations of private sector planners broadly in line with those working in the public sector?* Our evidence suggests that the answer here is yes. We have noted above a concern for the public interest, similar to that found in recent studies of public sector planners (such as Murtagh *et al.*, 2019). In terms of ethics, consultants were acutely aware of the potential for critique of their work as un-ethical in planning terms. Whilst the expectation that planning should serve the

public interest was clearly present in this study, this was not central when participants referred to the ethics of projects or their advice. Instead, it was something broader, around achieving good planning outcomes, and included references to place, tackling climate change and sustainable development. Whilst some consultants referred to the planning system as the safeguard (a deontological view of ethical practice), our sense is that most of the consultants we spoke to saw the ethics of their practice in a utilitarian framework, doing the most good for the most people – meeting their client's needs *and* securing public benefit. This in turn aligns with a substantial proportion of US public sector planners interviewed by Lauria and Long (2019), with similar proportions using deontological and utilitarian ethical frameworks. We further heard a considerable amount of resentment at attitudes within the public sector, and indeed beyond, that to work in the private sector is to 'go over to the dark side'. Almost without exception, the participants in our interviews and roundtables found this insulting, suggesting it reflected a lack of understanding of the role they (felt they) play in the development process.

Whether it was expressed in terms of ethics, the public interest or something else, our analysis of the discussions we have had with planners working in the private sector suggests they do indeed have a commitment to a 'public service ethos' (Inch *et al.*, 2022, p. 3). It is important, in concluding this paper, to return to a caveat we noted above regarding the 'trustworthiness' of these testimonies. It may be the case that those we spoke to were deceiving either us or themselves about the nature of their activity, keen to conceal a naked embrace of the profit-seeking motive. We could be accused of naivety in taking them at their word, or obeisance to the capitalist project in accepting that it is possible to combine that pursuit of the bottom line with wider, perhaps societal and environmental outcomes. These criticisms can of course be made about any walk of life, including academia, and we do not suggest that they have no merit. Conversely, in most contexts the contemporary scene of planning practice is one within which there is some degree of partnership between the public and private sector – much development is financed, planned, coordinated or constructed by private businesses. Simply ignoring the activity which goes on within those businesses is not tenable. At the least we hope that this paper has demonstrated the utility of engaging with the large proportion of professional planners who work in this sector; and we further believe that we have shown the complexity of the activity and the motivations of those planners.

Note

1. That professional body estimates that 'About three quarters of planners [in the UK] are RTPI members' (RTPI, 2019, p. 6).

Disclosure statement

References

Baum, H. S. (1997) Social science, social work, and surgery: Teaching what students need to practice planning, *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 63(2), pp. 179–188. doi:10. 1080/01944369708975913.

Campbell, H., & Marshall, R. (1998) Acting on principle: Dilemmas in planning practice, *Planning Practice & Research*, 13(2), pp. 117–128. doi:10.1080/02697459816139.

Campbell, H., & Marshall, R. (2002) Values and professional identities in planning practice, In: P. Allmendinger & M. Tewdwr-Jones (Eds) *Planning Futures: New Directions for Planning Theory*, pp. 93–109. (London: Routledge).

Cherry, G. (1996) *Town Planning in Britain Since 1900: The Rise and Fall of the Planning Ideal*, (Oxford: Blackwell).

Cullingworth, B., & Nadin, V. (2006) *Town and Country Planning in the UK*, 14th ed. (London and New York: Routledge).

Davidoff, P. (1965) Advocacy and pluralism in planning, *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 34(4), pp. 331–338. doi:10.1080/01944366508978187.

Erwin, P. M. (2011) Corporate codes of conduct: The effects of code content and quality on ethical performance, *Journal of Business Ethics*, 99(4), pp. 535–548. doi:10.1007/s10551-010-0667-y.

Fox-Rogers, L., & Murphy, E. (2016) Self-perceptions of the role of the planner, *Environment and Planning: B, Planning & Design*, 43(1), pp. 74–92. doi:10.1177/0265813515603860.

Grange, K. (2013) Shaping acting space: In search of a new political awareness among local authority planners, *Planning Theory*, 12(3), pp. 225–243. doi:10.1177/1473095212459740.

Grange, K. (2017) Planners–a silenced profession? The politicisation of planning and the need for fearless speech, *Planning Theory*, 16(3), pp. 275–295. doi:10.1177/1473095215626465.

Grijzen, J. (2010). *Outsourcing planning: What do consultants do in a regional spatial planning in the Netherlands.* Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Amsterdam University Press.

Gunn, S., & Hillier, J. (2012) Processes of innovation: Reformation of the English strategic planning system, *Planning Theory & Practice*, 13(3), pp. 359–381. doi:10.1080/14649357.2012. 706630.

Harvey, D. (1989) From managerialism to entrepreneurialism: The transformation in urban governance in late capitalism, *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography*, 71(1), pp. 3–17. doi:10.1080/04353684.1989.11879583.

Haughton, G., & Hincks, S. (2013) Austerity planning, *Town and Country Planning*, 82(1), pp. 23–28.

Hickman, H., & Sturzaker, J. (2022) Ethical principles in an increasingly diverse planning profession: The potential impact of different types of planners, *The Town Planning Review*, 93(3), pp. 241–249. doi:10.3828/tpr.2021.43.

Inch, A., Wargent, M., & Tait, M. (2022) Serving the public interest? Towards a history of private sector planning expertise in England, *Planning Perspectives*. [Preprint]. doi:10.1080/02665433. 2022.2063165.

Johnson, B. J. (2010) Planning practice & research city planners and public service motivation city planners and public service motivation, *City Planners and Public Service Motivation, Planning Practice & Research*, 25(5), pp. 563–586. doi:10.1080/02697459.2010.522854.

Johnson, B. J. (2012) Public service motivation and the technical, political, and facilitator roles of city planners, *International Journal of Public Administration*, 35(1), pp. 30–45. doi:10.1080/ 01900692.2011.635454.

Kitchen, T. (1997) *People, Politics, Policies and Plans*, (London: PCP).

Kunzmann (2016) Crisis and urban planning? A commentary, *European Planning Studies*, 24(7), pp. 1313–1318, doi: 10.1080/09654313.2016.1168787.

Lauria, M., & Long, M. F. (2017) Planning experience and planners' ethics, *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 83(2), pp. 202–220. doi:10.1080/01944363.2017.1286946.

Lauria, M., & Long, M. F. (2019) Ethical dilemmas in professional planning practice in the United States, *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 85(4), pp. 393–404. doi:10.1080/01944363. 2019.1627238.

Linovski, O. (2019) Shifting agendas: Private consultants and public planning policy, *Urban Affairs Review*, 55(6), pp. 1666–1701. doi:10.1177/1078087417752475.

Linovski, O. (2021). Conflicting Interests: Professional Planning Practice in Publicly Traded Firms. In: Hurl, C., Vogelpohl, A. (Eds) *Professional Service Firms and Politics in a Global Era*, pp. 295–319. (London: Palgrave Macmillan).

Loh, C. G., & Arroyo, R. L. (2017) Special ethical considerations for planners in private practice, *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 83(2), pp. 168–179. doi:10.1080/01944363.2017.1286945.

Loh, C. G., & Norton, R. L. (2013) Planning consultants and local planning, *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 79(2), pp. 138–147. doi:10.1080/01944363.2013.883251.

Lord, A., & Tewdwr-Jones, M. (2014) Is planning 'Under attack'? Chronicling the deregulation of urban and environmental planning in England, *European Planning Studies*, 22(2), pp. 345–361. doi:10.1080/09654313.2012.741574.

Maidment, C. (2016) N the public interest? Planning in the Peak District National Park, *Planning Theory*, 15(4), pp. 366–385. doi:10.1177/1473095216662093.

Murtagh, N., Odeleye, N., & Maidment, C. (2019) Do town planners in England feel a professional responsibility for a climate-resilient built environment?, *IOP Conference Series: Earth and Environmental Science*, 297(1), pp. 012036. doi:10.1088/1755-1315/297/1/012036.

Oranje, M., Venter, S., & Ferreira, A. (2018) Good intentions, deep frustrations, and upward mobility: Just another young planner's day in South Africa, In: T. Tasan-Kok & M. Oranje (Eds) *From Student to Urban Planner: Young Practitioners' Reflections on Contemporary Ethical Challenges*, pp. 74–85. (Abingdon: Routledge).

Parker, G., Street, E., & Wargent, M. (2019) Advocates, advisors and scrutineers: The technocracies of private sector planning in England, In: M. Raco & F. Savini (Eds) *Planning and Knowledge: How New Forms of Technocracy are Shaping Contemporary Cities*, pp. 157–168. (Bristol: Policy Press).

Perry, J. L. (1996) Measuring public service motivation: An assessment of construct reliability and validity, *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 6(1), pp. 5–22. doi:10.1093/oxfordjournals.jpart.a024303.

Peterson, S. J. (2006) *The Ethics Of Urban Planning: Remembering The Old AICP Code (1978-2005) | Planetizen Features, Planetizen*. Available at https://www.planetizen.com/node/20046 (accessed 2 August 2022).

Planning and compulsory purchase Act 2004, c. 38. Available at https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2004/5/section/38?view=plain (accessed 17 November 2022).

Planning Institute Australia (2020) *Membership Statistics* [Personal Communication], (Canberra: Planning Institute Australia).

Raco, M., & Savini, F. (2019) *Planning and Knowledge: How New Forms of Technocracy are Shaping Contemporary Cities*, (Bristol: Policy Press).

Read, D. C., & Leland, S. M. (2011) Does sector matter? An analysis of planners' attitudes regarding politics and competing interests in the planning process, *The American Review of Public Administration*, 41(6), pp. 639–653. doi:10.1177/0275074010390031.

Rocco, R. (2018) Planning for rights: Bewildered young planners in Brazil, In: T. Tasan-Kok & M. Oranje (Eds) *From Student to Urban Planner: Young Practitioners' Reflections on Contemporary Ethical Challenges*, pp. 168–180. (Abingdon: Routledge).

RTPI (2016) *Code of Professional Conduct*, (London: Royal Town Planning Institute).

RTPI (2017) *Ethics and Professional Standards: Advice for RTPI Members*, (London: Royal Town Planning Institute).

RTPI (2019) *The UK Planning Profession in 2019: Statistics on the Size and Make-Up of the Planning Profession in the UK*, (London: Royal Town Planning Institute).

Schoneboom, A., Slade, J., Tait, M., & Vigar, G. (2022) *What Town Planners Do – Exploring Planning Practices and the Public Interest Through Workplace Ethnographies*, (Bristol: Policy Press).

Schweitzer, L. A. (2017) Introduction: Planning ethics in the 21st century, *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 83(2), pp. 159–160. doi:10.1080/01944363.2017.1290496.

Slade, D., Gunn, S., & Schoneboom, A. (2019) *Serving the Public Interest? The Reorganisation of UK Planning Services in an Era of Reluctant Outsourcing*, (London: Royal Town Planning Institute).

Steele, W. (2009) Australian urban planners: Hybrid roles and professional dilemmas?, *Urban Policy and Research*, 27(2), pp. 189–203. doi:10.1080/08111140902908873.

Sturzaker, J., & Lord, A. (2018) Fear: An underexplored motivation for planners' behaviour?, *Planning Practice & Research*, 33(4), pp. 359–371. doi:10.1080/02697459.2017.1378982.

Sykes, O. (2018) Things can only get better'? Transitioning from planning student to planner in the England of the 1990s and 2000s, In: T. Tasan-Kok & M. Oranje (Eds) *From Student to Urban Planner: Young Practitioners' Reflections on Contemporary Ethical Challenges*, pp. 137–150. (Abingdon: Routledge).

Tait, M. (2016) Planning and the public interest: Still a relevant concept for planners?, *Planning Theory*, 15(4), pp. 335–343. doi:10.1177/1473095216660780.

Tait, M., Inch, A., Slade, J., Gunn, Z., Vigar, G., Schoneboom, A., & Clifford, B. (2020) *Working in the Public Interest? What must planners do differently?* Available at https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10113579/1/WITPI_WhatMustPlannersDo.pdf

Tasan-Kok, T., & Oranje, M. (2018) Editors' reflections and conclusions, In: T. Tasan-Kok & M. Oranje (Eds) *From Student to Urban Planner: Young Practitioners' Reflections on Contemporary Ethical Challenges*, pp. 296–309. (Abingdon: Routledge).

Taşan-Kok, T., & Penpecioğlu, M. (2018) Confronted and disappointed? Struggle of Turkish planners against authoritarian state-regulated urban development, In: T. Tasan-Kok & M. Oranje (Eds) *From Student to Urban Planner: Young Practitioners' Reflections on Contemporary Ethical Challenges*, pp. 107–123. (Abingdon: Routledge).

Tewdwr-Jones, M. (1999) Discretion, flexibility, and certainty in British planning: Emerging ideological conflicts and inherent political tensions, *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 18, pp. 244–256. doi:10.1177/0739456X9901800306.

Tomaney, J. & Ferm, J. (2018) Introduction: contexts and frameworks for contemporary planning practice, In: J. Ferm & J. Tomaney (Eds) *Planning Practice: Critical Perspectives from the UK*, pp. 1–19. (London: Routledge).

Vigar, G. (2012) Planning and professionalism: Knowledge, judgement and expertise in English planning, *Planning Theory*, 11(4), pp. 361–378. doi:10.1177/1473095212439993.