British local authority planners, planning reform and everyday practices within the state

Abstract

Reform of the planning system, and the local authority context in which it operates, has been high on the political agenda for all governments in the United Kingdom in the twenty first century, reflecting common broader international trends under New Public Management and neoliberalism. Whilst such reforms have been subject to a great deal of academic attention, much of this work has focused on central government perspectives and understands these reforms based on policy documents and Ministerial statements. Whilst revealing important contextual, ideological and intentional imperatives, such perspectives can overlook the way in which reforms are mediated by frontline professionals as they implement them. Drawing on extensive empirical data with British local authority planners considering their reaction to a host of recent reform initiatives such as changes to plan-making, performance targets, austerity and deregulation of planning controls, this paper outlines the importance of a focus on this everyday scale of governance. Arguing for a decentred approach, understanding the situated agency of professional planners, the paper concludes that policy implementation remains a messy process and that notions of professional identity and narratives about what it means to be a 'good planner' remain important in understanding reform specifically and 'the state' more generally.

Key words

Planning reform, United Kingdom, planners, professional identity, policy implementation, decentred governance

1. An age of hyper-reform of the planning system

'The planning system helps create sustainable communities by influencing markets to promote more positive outcomes for society. But, over time, the planning system became ossified and inefficient – and so we embarked on a major programme of planning reform', John Prescott (2006: 2)

'We also need a responsive planning system and a business-friendly environment… Unfortunately the top-down, bureaucratic planning system we inherited from the previous Administration met none of these requirements… That's why we wasted no time … radically reforming the planning system' Eric Pickles (2015: online)

Reform of the planning system in the United Kingdom has been high on the political agenda. Whilst illustrating slightly contrasting views of the purpose of planning, the above quotations from the UK government ministers responsible for it under previous Labour and Coalition governments illustrate the determination at the centre of government to reform planning in recent years. During this period, we have seen a suite of reforms pursued by both the UK government (responsible for the statutory planning system in England) and the devolved governments of Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales: Haughton and Allmendinger talk of a 'state of near perpetual reform' (2016: 1688). Concerted processes of planning reform have also been seen in many other countries in recent years as well (Inch, 2010; Grange, 2014; Gurran et al, 2014).

In the UK, these reforms have sought to rescale and rescope planning, changing the way plans are produced (at the local government scale) to encompass not just land-use regulation but also consider the broader spatial implications of public policy and be more delivery focussed; the introduction of new strategic spatial plans (at the regional/national scale) for Greater London, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales; and the introduction (under Labour) and abolition (under the Coalition Government) of regional spatial plans in provincial England. The reforms have also sought to make planning more participatory and responsive to its 'customers' (for example through new methods of community engagement under Labour and the introduction of micro-scale community-led Neighbourhood Plans in England under the Coalition government) and to make it more efficient and economically responsive (Allmendinger, 2011; Clifford and Tewdwr-Jones, 2013). More recently, a concerted effort of deregulation has seen increases to 'permitted development', for example the ability to convert office buildings to residential use without needing planning permission from the relevant local authority (Parker et al, 2018; Clifford et al, 2019). These planning reforms have sat alongside a suite of reforms to the local authority context within which the statutory planning system primarily sits in the UK, including ideas about modernising local government (particularly the introduction of numerous performance indicator targets under Labour) and the implications of

austerity (particularly the significant cuts to funding of local authorities under the Coalition and Conservative governments and the resultant loss of experienced staff) (Morphet 2007; Lowndes and Pratchett 2012; Gunn and Hillier, 2014).

This frenetic pace of change has been subject to a great deal of academic attention, yet much of this work has taken a distinctly broad, top-down view, studying these reforms on the basis of policy documents, legislation and other perspectives provided publically by central government politicians and civil servants. Indeed both Ministerial quotations at the start of this paper suggest coherent reform easily implemented. Whilst existing scholarly work has been illuminating in illustrating the broad thrust of planning reform and the wider governance contexts through which this must be understood (particularly highlighting, for example, the way these reforms can be understood as representing a form of neoliberal spatial governance (Allmendinger, 2011) or as top-down spatial liberalism (Boddy and Hickman, 2018), the influence of think tanks on central government planning policy (Haughton and Allmendinger, 2016), and the relationship between reform and ideology more generally (Shepherd, 2018)), much of this work does not appear to appreciate the realities of policy implementation and life on the frontline of the state. This is not to say that there is not existing work interested in frontline planners (for example, Hoch (1994) and Forester (1999) focus on planners and their narratives, whilst Inch (2010) and Grange (2017) highlight the way culture change agendas have sought to regulate the attitudes and motivations of planners), but rather that work specifically examining planning reform and related state modernisation tends to take a very centralised perspective. This is noted by Sartorio et al, who comment that 'change in planning in the United Kingdom has been a recurrent theme in planning practice and research. However, there is little looking at practitioners … in relation to change' (2018: 605).

The need for a more 'decentred' reading (following Bevir, 2013) to fully understand policy making around planning reform is dramatically illustrated by the implementation of the new style local plans (then called 'Local Development Frameworks'), first introduced in England in 2005. The centrepiece of the government's Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004, it was announced by central government that all 396 English local planning authorities would have a new style plan in place by March 2008. In reality, only 22 achieved this (Clifford, 2013a). Although a dramatic example of how an apparently widely supported policy idea can work out very differently during implementation, a closer reading taking into account the everyday scale of the state demonstrates how this example speaks to wider trends for central government policy to be contradictory, unclear, and needing to be put into practice by local government practitioners working under resource and other constraints.

In this paper, I draw on empirical work studying the experience of, and reaction to, planning reforms by local authority planners in Great Britain. This comprised 70 in-depth interviews and a questionnaire survey yielding 612 responses from local authority planners, conducted between 2004 and 2008 in response to Labour government reforms (see Clifford and Tewdwr-Jones, 2013), and a more recent set of 24 interviews with local authority planners in relation to the Coalition and Conservative government reforms (see Clifford, 2018 and Clifford et al, 2019). Interviewees are all referred to by a pseudonym. The aim of the paper is not to narrate or assess any of the myriad of planning reforms per se (which has already been done by a wealth of scholarship), but instead to place a central focus on the role of frontline state agents in implementing reform. In doing so, I argue that the practices, views and identity of such personnel do influence the reality of policy in practice and thus must be central to our understanding of state activity. In the next section, I consider the context for the everyday scale of practice within 'the state' and arguments for taking a more decentred understanding, then turn to consider emergent key themes relating to putting planning reform into practice.

2. Life at the frontline of 'the state'

That some scholars of planning reform have tended to concentrate on the 'hard infrastructure' of planning legislation and policy, examining this through ministerial speeches and documents published by central government, reflects a certain imaginary of the state. Much like the activity of planning itself, there is often an implicitly Weberian concept of the state as rational, universal and based closely on administrative process and legal principle. Despite decades of research from public administration theorists, and others, highlighting the messiness of policy implementation (Hill and Hupe, 2002), it seems an imaginary of the coherent, unified state is deeply embedded. Indeed, the rise of the 'New Public Management' invites us to believe that an increased focus on business-like processes, change management and performance indicators in public services has resolved the classic issue of implementation failure (Barrett, 2004) and perhaps help explain the tendency to focus on understanding planning reform from a top-down, centralised perspective rather than looking at what Lipsky (1980) termed the 'routines and devices' of 'Street Level Bureaucrats'.

Furthermore, 'the state' can often appear definitive and rational because

'higher-level bureaucrats and communications employees construct coherent narratives for the public, which tend to provide narrow insight into what actually takes place… Written policies … represent idealized version of what *might* be or what *should* happen' (Mountz, 2003: 626-627).

Political leaders are also intimately involved with this construction. In 2009, questioned about police misusing an out-of-court disposal known as a 'conditional caution', then UK Justice Minister Maria

Eagle flatly refused that officers were adopting informal practices to utilise a flagship reform in ways policy makers had not intended. Presented with evidence that officers were doing just that, she replied 'this is not the case' (in Ellis, 2009; online). Ministers frequently deny the direct experience of thousands of frontline staff, and through their speeches contribute to the appearance of a rational, definitive state closely following their policy steer.

Appearances can, however, be deceptive. Implementation is often messy, incoherent and incomplete because the state is often messy, incoherent and incomplete. To understand the various currents and counter-currents of reform and restructuring we need to understand the state's internal contours and fissures. In an era of fragmented and multi-scalar governance, it should not be surprising to see different, and even contradictory, policy initiatives emerging from different parts of our governing system. As Painter comments: 'The complex geographies of central-local relations contribute to the production of unintended state effects and to state practices that escape the control of the actors who initiated them' (2006: 764). It is often at the frontline of the local state, where policy is put into practice, that the incoherence within and between policies can come to the fore and micro-political struggles ensue.

This is at once well recognised, but easily forgotten: the very notion of '*the* state' is symbolically singular and the term all too often used unthinkingly despite long-standing calls to rethink this highly contested concept (Coddington, 2011). This construction has a powerful grip on our imagination, so much so that it's vital to remind ourselves regularly that the state is not a unified actor: there is a need to challenge 'authoritative monological master subjects (God, Man, the Unconscious, the Sovereign as well as the State)' (Painter, 2006: 760). The state is not a simple organisational actor, nor a coherent collective actor, and the simple binaries constructed between state and nonstate actors and between policy and practice should be avoided (Moutnz, 2003).

Instead, we can open up the 'black box of the state' and take a more decentred approach:

> 'Decentred theory … explains types of governance as the contingent results of situated agents acting on beliefs that they reach by drawing on inherited traditions to respond to dilemmas' (Bevir, 2013: 5).

Such a decentred approach has been promoted for some years through the work of Bevir and Rhodes (2003, 2008, 2010, 2012 in Sartorio et al, 2018) and places an emphasis on the role of actors who mediate and enact policy. Indeed, in drawing attention to the socially constituted character of state institutions, we are reminded of the nature of the state 'peopled' organization (Peck, 2001: 451). As Painter comments:

'Passing legislation has few immediate effects in itself. Rather, its effects are produced in practice through the myriad mundane actions of officials, clerks …. In addition, the act of passing legislation in the first place also depends on the prosaic practices and small decisions of parliamentary drafters, elected politicians, civil servants and all those who influence them' (2006: 761).

This, then, is a further factor in the messiness of implementation of state policy: the fact it is done by people. As Jones comments, 'states, therefore, are based upon the mundane and decentred practices of state officials and ordinary citizens' (2012: 807).

The state is thus *embodied*: behind each decision are individuals with their own complex webs of social relations, operationalising government policy against the backdrop of their own thought worlds, personal histories, working practices, institutional cultures, values and identities (Jones et al, 2004; Sartorio et al 2018). It is through the *everyday* practices of these individuals that the state is constructed (Coddington, 2011). An everyday perspective is often used in relation to social life apparently beyond the state, an imagined sphere of the informal as opposed to the official. It is far rarer to apply these insights to the study of state institutions and practices, and that work which does tends to look at the boundary between the formal and informal, between the state and the citizen (constructed as that is). An everyday focus can, however, equally be applied to practices *within* the state. Such a perspective draws attention to the mundane, a multidimensional meeting ground of different activities and social fields (Burkitt, 2004).

In unpacking the peopled performance of the state at the everyday scale, it is important to consider how seemingly objective standards involve countless judgements calls, negotiation, the combination of policy, common sense, professional judgement and other means of 'feeling through' a task. Everyday practice is marked by its inventiveness, of fabrication in the face of uncertainty in the messy space on ongoing interaction between experience and policy (Valverde, 2012; Hentschel, 2015). As Mountz argues:

'I conceptualize the state as an everyday social construction. This approach entails looking at the bureaucracy as a site where the nation-state is produced … and where the everyday relations … bleed into the dimensions of bureaucratic life' (2003: 626).

A decentred approach, viewing the state as a product of social life, places an importance on considering the beliefs, dilemmas, traditions and political contexts for the study of governance (Bevir, 2013).

A key issue, however, relates to classic debate around structure and agency. The decentred approach argues that 'the state is just an aggregate description for a vast array of meaningful

actions that coalesce into contingent, shifting, and contested practices' (Bevir, 2013: 210). There has been some contestation of this (alongside a broader concern expressed by Wagenaar (2012: 89) that the concept of 'decenteredness' is 'underdeveloped'). For example, Goodwin and Grix argue that 'we do not accept, for example, that aggregate concepts such as structures and institutions can only do explanatory work when reduced to the beliefs and practices of individuals' (2011: 541) and highlight that the central state does make policy, pushing through some elements of implementation and incentivising preferred behaviour. MacLeod (2016) expresses concern that a decentred 'radical contingency' can miss powerful and illuminating overarching social phenomena. There is some similarity here to Cooper and Mele's (2002) suggestion that care must be taken to avoid privileging everyday practices exclusively as it can ignore important structural processes and flows, and their dialogic interplay with social behaviours.

A decentred approach does not, however, actually argue that frontline state agents have complete autonomy but rather are 'situated agents' who can be influenced by social contexts, and particularly by inherited traditions (Bevir, 2013). Furthermore, in most accounts of governance and state reform the agency of state personnel is often under- rather than over-played (MacKinnon and Shaw, 2010). For example, whilst Lipsky argued that policy was best studied where it is enacted, rather than where it is drafted because 'the decisions of street-level bureaucrats, the routines they establish, the devices they invent to cope with uncertainties and work pressures, effectively become the public policies they carry out' (Lipsky, 1980: xii), Taylor and Kelly (2006) have criticized this as out-dated, arguing that the discretion of frontline professionals has been much reduced by audit, targets, participation and consumerism, leaving reduced ability to influence (and effectively make) policy.

Lipsky's work is explicitly acknowledged in more recent scholarship regarding a decentred approach. Bevir comments that 'Street-level bureaucrats can resist and thwart initiatives by drawing on their local traditions' (2013: 165) whilst Durose (2009) comments on the importance of looking at the everyday work stories of frontline workers. Similarly, Coburn (2016) highlights the continued importance of consideration of agency, questions of which remains fundamental to understanding policy implementation (see also Marshall, 2016; Abdelnour et al, 2017; Bevir and Needham, 2017). Whether Taylor and Kelly's dismissal of the continued relevance of such a perspective is reasonable can be tested by what Painter calls 'closer attention to the ordinary practices through which the state effects are actualized in daily life … the mundane, but frequently hidden, everyday world of state officials' (2006: 770).

This paper seeks to pay such closer attention to the ordinary practices and everyday world of UK local authority planners. Although the notion of opening the 'black box of the state' is not novel, there remains a need to avoid reifying the state (Marshall, 2016) and to undertake the detailed work of attempting to apply such an understanding empirically. Such a task involves focussing on the 'micro-level of institutional agency' (Sartorio et al, 2018: 609) and, in this case, considering how much 'acting space' (Grange, 2014) local authority planners actually have.

In the remainder of this paper, I want to consider briefly some examples of how and why our understanding of planning reform in the UK can be enlivened by just such a decentred focus on the everyday world of local authority planners. This is achieved through taking such an approach to several different episodes of planning reform seen in the UK over the last 15 years, involving planners working in different parts of the system. Space precludes a detailed discussion of the full reform contexts, but sources which do this are referenced throughout. Firstly, I reemphasise the importance of the frontline in actually realising policy given the persistence of classic implementation issues; I then turn to highlight how spaces for autonomy remain at the frontline; before considering the importance of issues of identity for everyday practice.

3. Putting policy into practice

Two examples of direct reform to the planning system in England demonstrate the continued importance of considering the realities of experience at the frontline of the state to fully understand policy. Firstly, the already mentioned introduction in 2005 of the new 'Local Development Framework' (LDF). Ministerial statements and central government documents implied a new, rational plan-making system which would quickly address a host of issues. On the ground, the experience was very different. As the slow rate of plan making became apparent, central government increasingly pointed to local authority planners as the problem: they lacked the right skills and needed a 'culture change' (Inch, 2010; Clifford, 2013a; Gunn and Hillier, 2014).

Planners on the ground did not, however, seem overtly opposed to the ideals of the reform initiative, just the realities of implementing it. Brian was typical of the sentiment expressed by many planners:

> 'I think the ideas behind planning reform, to make the system more transparent, more accountable, speedier, engage the public more, all those things are entirely laudable and something that we would all want to aspire to. Unfortunately … it hasn't quite worked out like that.'

There were widespread concern that, in practice, the system was complex and labour-intensive, with many new processes proscribed by central government to produce plans. Daniel spoke of a 'deadly

combination' of too much process and too little clarity about aim, whilst Jane felt it was the fault of poor, rushed legislation:

'There are logical and legislative inconsistencies. Woefully inadequate legislation, regulation, internally contradictory, desperately unclear, very badly written and drafted.'

The result was frontline planners having to make sense of the issues at the local scale, yet they were hampered in this task by factors such as central government guidance documents on elements on the new system coming out six months late. Richard described the results:

'I think our major frustration has been the lack of clear guidance and the way we've had to fumble around, really … in, in actually understanding what it is the [government] expects of local authorities. And I suppose, my honest opinion is that I'm not sure that they really know what they expect … it, it feels like a make-it-up-as-you-go-along approach.'

Other issues apparently concerned the resource available to implement the new plan making approach, which required a lot more evidence gathering than the previous system, and required staff to learn new procedures whilst still carrying on with their day-to-day tasks. All of this was apparently carried out against a backdrop of multiple different reforms being introduced by central government. Experienced on the ground, Barry viewed the results thus:

'Planning reform? It's just one thing after another, isn't it? There doesn't seem to be any real, clear direction where the Government are going, where they want to go. There is no possibility for anything to settle down before there's one reform after another.'

There was a feeling of central government being disjointed itself. Jane mentioned that:

'What we're suffering from really is this Government not being joined up in its thinking… we find ourselves, at local level, trying to resolve issues that really should have been sorted out elsewhere. For example, disputes between government agencies and the Government.'

These contrasting expectations resulted not just from the central government department responsible for planning, but also from other government departments and agencies (such as HM Treasury) offering views and initiatives.

Although central government in many senses blamed frontline planners for the slow implementation of the LDF system, the top-down narrative that they lacked skills and understanding of the new 'spatial planning' approach and required a 'culture change' misses important details revealed by considering the everyday work stories of frontline planners. These suggest broad support for the ideals of the reforms to the scope and scale of plan-making, rather than the resistance suggested, but practical difficulties under resource constraints.

A more recent planning reform has been one narrowing, rather than broadening, the scope of planning: the increases in permitted development introduced by the Coalition government in England in 2013. 'Permitted development' is development which does not require planning permission, i.e. detailed consideration and consent from local authority planners. One particularly controversial element of this reform has been allowing the conversion of an office building to residential use without planning permission (which would have been required for this ever since 1948). Central government Ministers have hailed this as a great success, arguing it has delivered thousands of additional new housing units (Holman et al, 2018; Clifford et al, 2019).

The perspective from frontline planners has been very different. Every planner interviewed disagreed with the policy. As Terri commented: 'It's hard to explain … that you can convert an office block and we can't look at the amenity, the space standards, all the things that normally we would do'. The changes cut to the very heart of what planners see their role as about, since they could not longer control the location, design, size and mix of units nor negotiate any contributions from developers towards local infrastructure improvements or affordable housing; areas that local authority planners understandably believe they can bring value in the service of their communities. Thus John said:

> 'When the office to resi thing came in, I have to admit, I thought it was the stupidest thing I'd ever heard, in my time in planning, anyway. I did actually object to it as an individual as well as on behalf of the council - which I wouldn't normally do - I wouldn't normally use my free time on planning stuff but this time I did'.

Although every planner interviewed objected to the policy change in principle, beyond that their actions fell into two camps. One group responded by mentally switching off and focussing attention elsewhere. These planners were usually aware of some office-to-residential conversion schemes in their area but had stopped paying close attention to these, refocussing effort elsewhere. John fell into this category, commenting he had tried to keep an eye on conversions coming through this permitted development route at first out of professional interest in their quality but 'you just ended up making so much work for yourself that you're not getting any fee for and we're not in a position where we can really do that'.

The other group, however, continued to try and exert some control using any means still open to them. There was no guidance from central government on this, but through local experimentation and advice, opportunities to still have some influence had been found, for example Rachel explained 'it took us a while to realise that actually, there is scope to impose some conditions'. Ryan had been fairly stringent in finding scope to intervene and refuse some of the conversions, taking delight in recounting examples where the previous use had not strictly been an office but

rather education use, or in one case a funeral director, so the government's deregulation for office-to-residential conversion would not apply. A lot of the difference between local authorities in their approach to dealing with this permitted development seems to hinge on the attitude of their planners, and whether they mentally move attention away from something they disagree with or decide to put effort into finding ways to modify the perceived damage to the built environment as far as possible within planning legislation and procedure.

The very nature of modern governance – fragmented, with politicians constantly seeking quick wins – seems to work against proper consideration of policy implementation. It is therefore still at the frontline of the local state, sandwiched between high expectations from central government and from the citizens they need to provide a service to, and with constrained resources, that planners have to try make sense of policy initiatives and put them into practice. This is achieved by muddling through, sharing practices and experiences directly with colleagues and indirectly through professional networks, improvising on past experience and knowledge, and 'fabricating' (Hentschel, 2015) to try to make a new system operate effectively. Some of these 'performances' (Blomley, 2014) are more successful than others: the first two attempts to make a plan under the LDF approach in England (by Lichfield and Stafford Council planners) failed to pass government inspectors, causing shock-waves through the profession, but the third (by Plymouth Council planners) was perceived as a success and widely emulated. Lack of successful performance by multiple planners can also result in action by central government, such as the 2008 revision to plan-making processes which reduced a number of steps to simplify the process (Clifford, 2013a).

The implementation of a policy initiative never takes place in a vacuum, and often involves interpreting multiple different reform initiatives in coincidence. A focus on the everyday practices within the state – the place things are brought together – thus remains vitally important. This focus on the 'how of government', on the messiness of implementation also furthers our understanding of 'the state'. Indeed, it was notable in interview that planners seemed to conceive of themselves as somehow not part of the 'government', which was often spoken of as an external actor, even though as frontline public servants their activities were vital to the construction of that government. As well as the continued importance of implementation issues, a focus everyday practices also remains important because of the continued presence of spaces for autonomy and discretion by frontline professionals, which I consider next.

4. Autonomy resinscribed

In common with many others in the public sector, British local authority planners have been heavily impacted by reforms in recent decades which seemingly work to reduce their discretion and

autonomy, traditionally seen as central to notions of 'professional' status. Increased public participation, which can be seen as essentially questioning their expertise to understand communities and their preferences, serves as a 'check from below', whilst the use of audit and targets act as a 'check from above'. Yet we can soon find very real examples of reform processes actually opening-up new spaces for autonomy.

A striking example here relates to performance targets. The Labour government placed a particular emphasis on performance targets which measured the time taken to process planning applications (this focus remains to the present day), with the performance of each local authority closely monitored. Strong concern was evident, with almost 90% of survey respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that the targets were 'too obsessed with speed', and 83% of survey respondents disagreeing or strongly disagreeing that 'targets correctly assess the quality of planning outcomes'. In interview, planners like Brian expressed strong trepidation that 'if you're not careful you'll end up valuing the measurable rather than trying to measure the valuable', whilst Paul even went so far as to comment that targets were 'one of the worst things to happen to planning in many years.'

Complaints about the targets were common in interviews, falling into four broad categories: ideological concerns about target-driven governance, complaints that the targets measure the wrong thing, complaints that there has been too much emphasis placed on them, and complaints that the current target regime has led to unintended consequences. The everyday experience of working with the targets provides important evidence which central government policy-makers seem either ignorant of, or to have ignored, for years. A typical example was Thomas discussing the 'game playing' that resulted from the targets:

 'It's having a corrupting effect on the service partly because planning authorities play games. They say, no, we're not accepting this planning application; it hasn't got everything with it... You [also] get a situation whereby consultations have run on and you're unhappy about certain aspects of the scheme but the eight week deadline is looming. You then have to make a decision as to what you should do... Now in a lot of cases ... we are making a decision before that scheme is ready.... it makes our statistics look good but it doesn't help the developer.'

Given the many apparent unintended consequences of targets in practice, and the strength of concern expresses about them by frontline planners, one of the most striking results in the survey was that when asked if 'targets should be abolished', most planners did not agree (just 12.5% strongly agreed and 15.6% agreed). This was in stark contrast to some literature which suggested frontline professionals would have little regard for performance targets imposed by central

government. Interview data suggested the answer lay partly in the way that targets were used in everyday practice, which could be in positive for the frontline planner. Firstly, rather than restricting scope for professional discretion, the targets had apparently increased the delegation rates for processing applications, so planners were empowered to determine more applications themselves rather than simply making recommendations to elected councillors (a slower process).

Secondly, however, there was some evidence that local authority planners were actually utilising the targets for their own benefit. In pre-austerity local government, this could be by levering in extra funding to support the planning department as local authority leaders would not want the publicity surrounding poor performance against the targets. Jim spoke about 'the opportunities created by being target driven', and others outlined how they could utilise target performance to either gain extra income from central government in reward for good performance (the Labour government's Planning Delivery Grant), or safeguard resources within local government so that authority leaders were not embarrassed by a poor performance.

Other benefits were also apparent. Several times during the interviews, it was suggested that the targets could also be used to manage, or exert control, over applicants and developers:

> 'We are less prepared to accept poor quality applications and then negotiate improvements. You know, we are more prepared to say, "Thank you, this is just not good enough, you can either withdraw it or we'll refuse it, go away and come up with a better scheme"' (Simon).

Similarly Patrick said due to targets he felt empowered to tell applicants that they had submitted 'rubbish' and should go and learn to 'improve themselves'.

This apparently related not just to applicants for planning permission, but also to the wider public who might seek to object to those applications. One of the key tensions evident in the planning reform agenda has been between central government's professed desires to speed-up the planning system and to make it more participatory. Dick commented that 'I don't think those two things are compatible.' One solution, however, appeared to be to use targets as an excuse to restrict public participation:

> 'The public want to have endless says on everything. And they'll want to continue to have says, especially if they don't like the answer or the recommendation that the council makes. Now, I don't think there's necessarily anything wrong with speed, 'cos it's the wider public interest that we're trying to achieve' (Rob).

Whatever the merits of this use of targets as a rationale to cut short participation, it demonstrates how they have opened-up new spaces for professional autonomy and discretion in everyday practice.

This was not the only such example. Whilst public participation has traditionally been seen as reducing, and evening threatening, professional autonomy, frontline planners seemed to construct a particular role for themselves which maintained a privileged role. There was frequent discussion of participation as something needing careful professional management lest it get 'out of control'. So, for example, Mark commented that:

> 'By their very nature, participatory mechanisms are often quite uncontrollable, and that does set off a tension. So, it, it needs a lot of managing and, I think, as the nature of local government politics is changing, there's more and more focus on, on officers to manage that.'

There was a clear positioning of the frontline planner as a mediator of participation processes and as the judge of legitimacy in the knowledge produced through them. The argument made by many planners during the interviews was that there was a need for planners to ensure that those who shout the loudest (the figure of the NIMBY was frequently invoked) do not come to dominate the planning process, to the detriment of the 'greater good':

> 'It must be a democratic decision and process to a certain extent. What they say is important but it's obviously a question of balancing what are in effect kind of private, personal interests against the greater good' (Toby).

Indeed, the planner was often seen as a champion of the values and interests of the 'silent majority', the polar opposite of the 'vocal minority' (Clifford, 2013b). It is easy to be critical of the privileged position of the planner to discern the wishes of the 'silent majority', but this Benthamitic 'greater good' construction appeared very important to many planners in justifying their everyday actions.

More recently, the austerity agenda of the Coalition and Conservative governments have led to large cuts to the funding of local government in the UK, which is traditionally more dependent on central grants rather than locally raised finance than in many other countries. There have been cuts of over 30% for English local authorities since 2010 (Gardner, 2017). These cuts have fallen particularly heavily on planning services, which are often viewed as something where staff cuts will have less immediate consequence than other service areas such as social services (NAO, 2014 in Harris, 2015).

These cuts have undoubtedly placed huge pressures on frontline planners and presented real challenges to them. Without downplaying those at all, engaging with frontline planners through interview has, however, revealed the ways in which some have been able to defend their role. Dave explained that he had managed to convince the Council's leadership that planning was able to deliver growth and thus income in the future:

> 'There will be no government grant in 2020, you're on your own, so if you're not creating income from growth, where are you creating your income from as a local authority when …

demand on your adult and social care is only going in one direction... the planning division creates income … not only by pre-apps [pre-application discussions between the planners and developers, for which a fee is chargeable] … not only through planning application fees, but income indirectly created by CIL receipts [Community Infrastructure Levy, a charge planners can put on new development to fund local infrastructure], Section 106 receipts [funding that planners can negotiate local developers pay towards offsetting the impacts of their development and supporting affordable housing], business rates receipts and new home bonus receipts and council tax receipts.'

This narrative of planning as able to deliver for local authorities is indicative of the idea that in public sector reforms what Lowndes (2005) terms 'institutional entrepreneurs' can sometimes exploit reforms and find opportunity in them. Similarly, Durose writes about 'civic entrepreneurialism' and the way in which 'local governance is a contested site for policy action where frontline workers are 'situated agents' using their 'readings' and 'local knowledge' to act entrepreneurially (2009: 36). Overall, these various routes to defending professional autonomy are a further reminder of the importance of focussing on the everyday scale, and the unexpected practices which may therefore be revealed. It also reminds us that issues of identity can influence the interpretation of reform agendas as they are put into practice, to which I now turn.

5. Questions of identity

The imagined space of the 'greater good' was a recurrent theme in interviews with local authority planners, seeming intimately linked to the professional identity of many (Clifford, 2012 cf Inch, 2010). Each local authority planner is, of course, an individual and as such can have very different views on their role and activities. Some strongly contrasting views on elements of planning reform agendas were very apparent during interviews. For example, in relation to measures to increase public participation, Mike was clearly more on the side of finding difficulties with public participation:

'It's not important to me personally at all quite frankly. I could do without the buggers'.

On the other hand, Daniel was emphatic in his support for participation:

'Well I regard it as, it's absolutely vital. I think sort of the old style of hierarchical, you know, things emerging from the darkened rooms is absolute poison and it shouldn't have happened … you couldn't imagine planning without participation'.

And Michael could be said to be entirely on the fence:

'There's a sort of a love/hate relationship on public participation'.

Such individual views clearly do matter. As Mountz (2006) reminds us, employees of the state have individual perspectives, and as individuals are embedded in wider networks flowing between state

and non-state spaces which impact their views. Even in the constraints of the modern public sector, it would be impossible if strongly held individual convictions did not somehow influence an individual actor in their enactment of the state. Mike, for example, explained how he minimized the attention paid to 'angry letters' from objectors to planning applications, whilst Daniel explained at length the steps he took to ensure meaningful dialogue in participation events when preparing his local plan. In both cases, the individuals still followed the procedural requirements of their role.

Despite this important individual element, however, there was also an apparent collective element to notions of identity, based on similar reference points recurring with multiple different interviewees. There seemed to be a distinctive 'local authority planning ethos', a sense that performing the role involved a distinct space of meaning. This drew heavily on notions of public service. For example, Sarah said, 'the wider public is who I serve and I have a duty to them and to the profession', whilst Mark commented, 'I think planning is about society… there is this notion that if you act in the best interests of society, in the long run, everyone will benefit'. It was also about serving particular places, George talking about his long association with the town he worked in and Daniel talking about 'the people of the district'. There seemed a real sense that people had become local authority planners to, as Lucy said 'to make the world a better place', which Jane called being an 'evangelistic bureaucrat' (specifically evoking the title of a 1972 book by John Davies, albeit one in which he was being critical of planners whereas Jane evoked it as a badge of pride).

The professional achievements interviewees said they were most proud of showed a distinct technical bias, rather than being proud of things recent government reforms favour, such as efficiency. For example, Mandy commented on a scheme she thought was morally right:

> 'What is my proudest achievement as a planner? I think probably I managed to persuade a very angry planning committee and my manager and his manager and his manager up to the chief exec … to back an application that we had for a drug rehabilitation centre in the town centre. I think it was the right thing to do morally'.

Other planners mentioned getting certain policies into plans to protect cherished local places, environments or buildings, or being involved in specific applications which turned into valued developments, often specifically linked to a notion of public benefit.

A strong sense of vocation remained apparent in interviews with frontline planners, and for most, it seemed related to helping facilitate good development and extract public benefit from that. The sense was very much that what Sam called an 'old welfare state ideology' of public service. Du Gay (1996) calls the New Public Management an 'identity project' but on the ground identities do not appear to have changed quite as expected (cf Grange, 2014). In interview, planners did not describe

themselves as taking job satisfaction from processing a planning application quickly to meet government targets. There were still important notions of working in the service of a place and its communities in the identity of frontline planners. This meaning attached to being a local authority planner was important in that it was forged at the scale of the everyday and then influenced the way these state agents perceived reforms. This in turn does affect the implementation of policy, even if the response was often less overt resistance and more cognitive dissonance.

This sense of identity constructed through the experience of performing the role on the ground also shaped the collective sense of what it meant to be a 'good planner'. Yet a commonly cited notion of being a 'good planner' was also the ability to understand policy and follow 'the rules'. The role of a planner involves making and applying policy through plans and planning permission processes, and in interview planners often spoke of their role as working in a 'quasi-judicial system'. Although ambiguities may be exploited and solutions preferential to the interests of professional planners promoted, rarely were government reforms outright resisted. There was often a tension between opinion of certain reforms and a professional identity that relies on implementing policy. The different traditions of what it means to be a local authority planner, the narratives created and shared of what are successful performances of being a professional planner, do clearly help explain the comparatively narrow set of responses to potential reforms that were perceived to be reasonable, as evidenced in common trends from a diverse collection of planners working in different roles, at different levels of seniority and in very different places.

6. Conclusions

This paper has sought to contribute to debate about taking a 'decentred approach' to governance. The reaction of frontline planners' to planning and local government reform acts to reassert the importance of Painter's comments that:

> 'The outcomes of state actions is always uncertain and fallible. This may seem obvious, yet it is striking how infrequently the gap between the state institutions claims about their effectiveness and their actual effects is recognized … [There is a need to] take seriously the problem of translating policy into practice through the mobilization of mundane practices' (2006: 761).

A lack of detail in reform initiatives, or resource to support their implementation, as well as potential conflicts between different government policies – the inherent complexity and contradictoriness of state institutions – means that frontline local authority planners must make sense of policies from central government as they're put into practice. Ambiguities in reform agendas open up spaces for institutional entrepreneurs to protect and further their own interests. For example, performance targets and public participation ideals actually create opportunities for planners to resinscribe

autonomy so that discretion is not dead but rather changed. The implementation of reform is also influenced both by personal views as well as collective senses of what it means to be a professional planner and local authority official, social processes of identity formation from the ground up.

The frontline of the local state is the scale of detail, the location where the state in motion clashes with the more static ritual of everyday life. Everyday practices are 'neither merely nostalgic idiosyncrasies nor intentional acts of organized resistance' (Cooper and Mele, 2002: 305) but meaningful attempts to maintain the ability to do a job. Many planners seemed to genuinely believe in traditional notions of public service, and ideals of serving particular places. Much of the reaction to reform initiatives, and the exploitation of the continued messiness of implementation and associated space for professional autonomy appeared to be in defence of trying to protect those ideals, but done whilst trying to do (and keep) a job.

This raises the notion of 'situated agency' (Marshall, 2016). Local authority planners must utilise legislation and policy instruments introduced by central government (even whilst sometimes exploiting ambiguities in them) and must face the materiality of austerity-driven grant cuts leading to fewer planners (even whilst sometimes using changed financial contexts to justify their role). This is compounded by the powerful notion that part of being a 'good planner' includes following policy and legislation. The result of this is that general thrust of planning reform has, over time, shifted behaviours and outcomes to fit with broader central government objectives and ideologies (see, for example, Shepherd, 2018 and noting that central government practices in turn are also the result of the actions of myriad actors).

Planning reform cannot *just* be understood through looking at local reinterpretation and radical contingency (cf Cooper and Mele, 2002; Goodwin and Grix, 2011; MacLeod, 2016). Given that so much research on planning reform 'seems to emphasis the political or technical dimensions of change' as opposed to considering the linkage 'between institutional change, organisational change and planners' situated agency' (Sartorio et al, 2018: 605-606), however, there appears little danger of that. It is still common to find narratives evoking *the* state as a unified actor rationally making coherent policy implemented seamlessly in relation to planning policy, hiding the internal conflicts and heterogeneity of a state which is variegated and peopled, actively constructed through the activities of its bureaucrats and their everyday work.

The main argument of this paper is that scholarship of planning reform can, therefore, still be illuminated by a furthering of a 'decentred' reading of the state. The term 'decentre' is not unproblematic (see Wagenaar, 2012), and the examples in this paper might also be understood as

showing the ways in which the state is diffuse and resisted, with spaces for autonomy and path-dependencies. Yet the core concept of the need to understand the ways in which the local traditions, narratives and situated agency of frontline planners and their responses to the dilemmas frequently thrown-up in their practice influence the reality of the way the state operates in the planning sector is important. Overall, the reaction of frontline planners to myriad reforms over the last 15 years which have been considered in this paper reminds us that a focus on the everyday does not just illuminate the space of the informal in reaction to a perceived homogenous bureaucratic monolithic state, but should also be applied *within* the state. This can be furthered through a decentred reading.

Acknowledgements

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