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Early Career Planners in a Neo-liberal Age: Experience of Working in the South East of England

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Abstract

Since the 1970s, neo-liberal government policy has changed the context in which planners work, and resulted in a growth in the number of planners working in the private sector and changes in the roles of planners working in the public sector. This article reports on research investigating the impact of these changes on recent planning graduates working in the South East of England. The research findings highlight differences and similarities in the experience of public and private sector planners in terms of their job satisfaction, perceptions of the role of planners, ethics, career trajectories and membership of the profession.

Key words: neo-liberalism; planning profession; public and private sectors; recent graduates; job satisfaction and ethics

Introduction

Since the 1970s, neo-liberalism has come to dominate public policy internationally. It has restructured the relationship between private capital and the state, promoting growth in market-led development (Sager, 2011). Neo-liberalism has had a profound effect on planning policy and practice. Whilst planning has been characterised as an obstacle to growth, it has survived, because it protects property owners from the negative external effects of neighbouring activities and provides public goods, which the market fails to deliver. The promotion of market-led development has resulted an increasing proportion of planners working in the private sector. It has also led to organisational change within the public sector due to a shift away from traditional political administrative systems to New Public Management (NPM), which has introduced systems of organisation and control imported from business into the public sector.

The need to balance pro-growth policies with democratic legitimacy has resulting in inherent instability in neo-liberal policy, as governments attempt to balance these conflicting objectives (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2013). The planning profession is caught in flux between two ideological currents, the neo-liberal current prioritising private development interests and the democratic current prioritising collective interests through participation (Sager, 2015). The inherent instability which results from the attempt to balance conflicting objectives means that the way in which policy is implemented varies at different conjunctures in different places. This paper focuses on experience of recent planning graduates, working in the South East of England. The paper begins with a review of literature on the evolution of the planning profession and the ethical issues that this raises, in order to place the research in a wider context and frame the research questions.

An evolving profession

Planning is a relatively new profession, which developed in the twentieth century, inspired by the Garden City Movement in the UK and the City Beautiful Movement in the USA (Cherry, 1974 and Peterson, 2003). In the second half of the twentieth century, as planning increasingly became a state activity, it became a more established profession, and in many countries, a largely public sector profession. In the context of the retreat from Keynesian welfare policies, there has been persistent criticism of the planning system in the UK; criticism has come from politicians, who regard planning as impeding the operation of the free market in land, and from communities, who see the planning system as failing to address their needs and frequently resulting in poor quality development (Raynsford Review Team, 2018). A series of reforms have compounded rather than resolved problems and resulted in a complex and confusing system, and a distrust of the planning system and planners. There are concerns that this distrust has impacted negatively on the morale of planners, particularly leading to disillusionment amongst young planners (Hickman et al., 2019).

Although the characteristics of professions vary in different social and economic contexts, they are widely defined as knowledge based groups (MacDonald, 1995; Burrage et al., 1990). As planning draws on a range of disciplines, there has been considerable debate as to whether planning has a distinctive knowledge base (see Davoudi & Pendlebury, 2010). Some commentators (Evans, 1993; Healey & Underwood, 1979) are sceptical about planners' claim to be professionals, as in their view planning lacked an exclusive knowledge base. Despite this ambiguity about the knowledge base of planners, research has consistently found that planners in the UK view themselves as professionals, but this has been accompanied by a view that the

professional body, the Royal Town Planning Institute, was not relevant to their practice (Campbell & Marshall, 2002b; Healey,1985; Slade et, 2019).

Another defining feature of a profession is a claim to serve the public interest. As the planning profession was created to improve the quality of urban environments, and then to implement government planning policy, it arguably has a strong claim to serve the public interest. However, post-modern critiques have undermined planners' claim to be politically neutral technical experts serving a unitary public interest (Campbell & Marshall, 2002a). The increase in the proportion of planners employed by private consultancies in a range of Western countries, including Australia, Canada, the UK and the USA (Linovski, 2018; Loh & Arroyo, 2017; Moore, 2012; Parker et al, 2018; Steele, 2009), also raises the question of the extent to which planning consultants working for private clients serve the public interest. In the UK, 44% of planners now work in the private or third sectors compared to 56% in the public sector (RTPI, 2019). However, there is not a simple binary divide between planners working in the public and private sectors. Linovski (2018) concluded, from her research in Toronto, Canada, that private consultants working for both public and private clients, and professionals moving between sectors, resulted in permeable sectoral boundaries. Moore (2012) also drawing on research on developments in Toronto, pointed out that 'public and private have always been provisional, contingent, historically and socially constructed categories'.(Moore, 2012, p. 583). Gunn and Vigar (2012) found that in England, a significant proportion of the profession working in the private sector has led to the emergence of complex interrelationships between sectors. The concept of hybridity is used to explain the resulting blurred boundaries in urban development and the blending of values, norms and narratives, which change discourses about what constitutes good practice. Steele (2009) drawing on research in Queensland, Australia, suggested that the blurring of sectoral boundaries is resulting in a new breed of hybrid planners, who work both in and between public and private sectors.

Cutbacks in public spending and the introduction of business-orientated management practice in the public sector have had a major impact on the environments in which public sector planners operate. The features of NPM, which have had the most impact on the administration of planning, are an emphasis on customer focus and service targets to manage performance. For planners a customer focus is complex as the general view is that planning serves multiple clients, including politicians, the local community and the wider public. Clifford (2012), based his research on public sector planning in the UK, argues that the discourse of customer focus can conflict with the original one of planning serving the public interest and that this can lead to the interests of developers being privileged. He found that the majority of public sector planners viewed their role as balancing competing interests. Some commentators question the extent to which planners are able to mediate between different interests in the context of their role increasingly being seen as to facilitate development. Based on research in Dublin, Eire, Fox-Rogers and Murphy (2016 p. 86)) conclude 'it has become more normalised for planners to support development interests, rather than act as advocates for disadvantaged groups'. However, Campbell et al (2014) argue that, despite the widespread implementation of management strategies informed by NPM, there is potential for planners to operate with a degree of autonomy and positively influence development outcomes.

As well as introducing a customer focus and target culture, NPM also has impacted on the structures of public sector organisations with a strengthening of central corporate management and the contracting out of services (Pollitt & Dan, 2013). This has led to leaner senior management teams, and Chief Planning Officers in the UK and Ireland are now rarely included in the top tier of local government (Calvert, 2018). In the context of continuing conflicts about

the purpose of planning, Inch (2010) concluded, from his research on public sector planning practice in England, that local authority planners found it difficult to transcend their traditional regulatory role and take on a wider strategic role. In his view, this was because their continued distinctive agency rested on their knowledge of legal powers, and because planners were generally in a relatively weak position within local government, at some distance from the corporate centre.

Planning policy in England has in recent decades been the subject of regular rounds of reform. The election of the Coalition Government in 2010 heralded further planning reforms, which rejected the proactive and coordinated system of spatially planning of the previous Labour Governments (Allmendinger, 2016). This round of reform combined policies of localism with policies of deregulation. It aimed to enable local communities to resolve tensions between development and conservation though the introduction of neighbourhood plans, whilst promoting market-led development through extending permitted development rights, simplifying planning guidance and introducing a presumption in favour of 'sustainable development'. Jupp and Inch (2012) point out that these reforms heightened the tensions between communities wanting to shape future development in their localities and private developers wanting to operate in an unconstrained market. Local authority planners are left trying to manage these conflicting objectives.

Slade et al's (2018) research investigated the work of contemporary planners in the context of the changing relationship between the public and private sectors in the UK. They argue that that in the context of the government policy of austerity, a new type of planner is emerging who makes little distinction between working in the public and private sectors. They suggest that this is because the increasingly business-orientated style of management in local planning authorities has eroded the differences between sectors and created a 'tick-box' culture, where planners are under pressure to process applications as quickly as possible. They report, in the context of pressure on resources, that outsourcing has become a feature of the practice of UK planning authorities, who regularly, if sometimes reluctantly, use private consultants to tackle peaks in workload and to access specialist expertise. They characterise modern planning professionals, particularly recent graduates as 'austerity planners' who

> often have little room for proactive planning or independently executing their professional judgement – and this is something that is seen to be eroding both their job satisfaction and their interest in critical reflection. They are highly mobile, having a tendency to move jobs and organisations rapidly in pursuit of more pay and experience. But this may come at the expense of building long-term relationships with customers, places, and colleagues (Slade et al, 2018, p.9).

Professional Ethics

The neo-liberal emphasis on market-led development has resulted in planners being viewed as mediators rather than technical experts.(Vigar, 2012). This changing view of the role of planners has resulted in a greater focus on planning ethics and a shift of focus from procedural correctness to a focus on values (Campbell and Marshall, 2002b). Planners operate in a political context and the dominance of market logic can affects how public sector planners operate. Campbell & Henneberry (2005) found that public sector planners in England, in order to maximise the benefits from planning gain, favoured high yield development which did not meet other planning objectives. Fox-Rogers and Murphy (2016) found that public sector

planners in Dublin were moving away from viewing their roles as technocrats to seeing themselves as mediating between conflicting interests, but they noted a lack of willingness to recognise the role of planners in facilitating development by powerful economic interests.

Although all planners are subject to the same professional codes of conduct, private sector planners face different pressures, as they need to attract and retain clients (Linovski, 2019). There is thus a potential conflict between serving their clients' interests and serving the public interest. However, research on the ethical challenges faced by planners indicates that many consultants express a strong commitment to working in the public interest, and see their role as explaining public policy and persuading their clients to do the right thing ((Gunn & Vigar, 2012b; Loh &Arroyo, 2017). It is argued that private sector planners generally avoid supporting poor quality development as against their interests, because it could damage their reputations.

In 2001, the Royal Town Planning Institute produced a *New Vision for Planning,* which acknowledged the changing context in which planners operated, and sought to reinterpret and confirm the core values of planning. It recognised that planning was a value driven activity and emphasised that it should be sustainable, inclusive, and aim to reduce social and spatial inequalities. Although the focus on values in this vision document was seen as an important development (Campbell and Marshall, 2005; Campbell, 2012), it did not directly address the ethical challenges arising from an increasing proportion of the profession working for private clients or the pressure on public sector planners to support market-led development.

A recently published book (Tasan-Kok & Oranje, 2018) reported on how the education of young planners in sixteen countries had equipped them for the ethical challenges of contemporary practice. It discusses how recently qualified planners are responding to working in the prevailing political and economic context of neo-liberalism, describing some as using their technical knowledge and skills to become negotiators and consensus builders, and others as taking more activist roles working closely with communities. However, this edited collection gives little consideration to differences in experience of planners working in the public and private sectors, which is the subject of this paper.

Research aims and methodology

To investigate the impact of the neo-liberal planning policy on early career planners in the South East of England, our research examined their job satisfaction, perception of their roles, ethical challenges, career pathways and views on membership of the profession. We focussed on planners who had completed the initial planning education (as prescribed by the RTPI (2012)) within the last 10 years and who had a minimum of 2 years' work experience (in some cases, one year of their experience was prior to completion of their initial planning education). We contacted past students and colleagues working in practice to identify people interested in participating in the research. We balanced the sample to include a mix of planners working in public and private sectors in a range of roles. We conducted 26 in-depth semi-structured interviews, which we recorded and transcribed for analysis. Interviewees were asked about their initial reasons for going into planning, their education, work experience, job satisfaction, skills needed in practice, ethical challenges, aspirations for career development and involvement in the RTPI. As the focus of this paper is recent planning graduates' experience of work and their professional identity, the issues which emerged relating to education and skills are not discussed in this paper. All those interviewed were working in London and the Greater South East. Thirteen were currently working in the public sector (most for local

authorities, but some for other public bodies), twelve in the private sector and one in the third sector. Seventeen had begun their careers in the public sector and nine had started in the private sector. Six of the public sector planners interviewed currently worked in development management, six in policy or regeneration, and one in enforcement. Ten of the private sector planners interviewed assisted clients, mainly in the private sector, with getting planning permission for development projects, and two worked in urban design. Eleven interviewees had previous experience of working in a different planning role. They had an average of slightly over four years post initial planning education work experience.

Research findings

Job satisfaction

The interviewees were overwhelmingly positive about their work. Being able to contribute to better development outcomes and to seeing the physical results of their work were central to this. A local authority planner working in development management, when asked about what gave him job satisfaction, replied: 'I would say negotiating with applicants or usually with agents is probably the best bit where you are seeking to bring a scheme to a level of acceptability and meeting policy requirements, and finding a way of getting applicants to agree to that.' One private sector planner explained how he got satisfaction from seeing the results of his work: 'The first permission I got was for a block of flats and I went back to see it. When I first went it was a crumby office block, and it was completely unfit for purpose and no one wanted it. Now it is eight smartish flats and going back to see it, that's a satisfying thing.' A planner leading a local authority regeneration team also got satisfaction from seeing physical results: 'For me to see anything starting to come out of the ground is great as I know what goes into it, the lead-in time, the frustration and all the pitfalls along the way. When you actually get something physical that has changed the environment and it has done so because of your interventions, that is good.'

For many, not just those in the public sector, the sense of social purpose was important to job satisfaction. An urban designer working in the private sector elaborated: 'Currently, I do a lot of social housing projects and I think the fact that they add real value to places and they make a real impact in people's lives.' In the private sector, client satisfaction was important to job satisfaction. A private sector planner explained: 'I think it is working with clients that gives me the most satisfaction. Working with clients is what gets me through the day. That's the main driver. I love what I do, but it is the end goal to get to a point where a client is happy.'

For many of the interviewees, particularly those working in development management, the variety of work was important. One local authority planner remarked: 'I like development management because it is very varied in terms of what you deal with day to day. It is quite a fast paced dynamic job. I enjoy that every application is a bit different.' Another made similar comments: 'I enjoy the job variance that you get. So, there is this split between being in the office and doing quite technical interpretations and policy and report writing. Then, there is also the people skills. You do get to deal with all sorts of people, different scales of development and then, going out on site.'

Whilst overall the planners whom we interviewed were positive about their work, the government policy of austerity and changing policy priorities at local and national level impacted negatively on local authority planners. Cutbacks in public expenditure resulted in frequent restructuring, heavy workloads, and poor IT and administrative support. A local

authority regeneration team leader commented: 'The universal challenge of anything involving a local authority is the abysmal financial state of affairs.' A local authority planner highlighted some of the impacts of this lack of resources on staff: 'Over the years you are expected to do more with less staff and less time, some people do end up doing long hours now…The IT is often appalling in local government.' A manager in a local authority commented on the lack of administrative support: 'We don't have the structures of support that we would have had under the previous regime. If you are managing a team of ten people, it would be ideal to have some kind of administration support even if only for one day a week to help with those matters, which we don't.' Local authority planners, who worked on policy, were frustrated by the length of time it took to get plans adopted and the impact of changing priorities of central and local government on plan making, which sometimes resulted in abortive work and having to redo consultation.

Many of the private sector planners interviewed were frustrated by delays in getting decisions on planning applications. They recognised that this was the result of the poor resourcing of local authority planning departments. One commented: 'The public sector is becoming increasingly squeezed and that affects others. Clients are on our back about why haven't we got a response. It does affect us as well and I think a lot of developers would like to see the public sector better resourced and the government aren't doing that.' Private sector planners working on master plans and development briefs for local authorities were also concerned that lack of resources would impact negatively on implementation. One elaborated: 'You worry what's going to happen in the future and whether or not that piece of work will actually have an impact. They are too stretched to engage with the process let alone use the piece of work properly afterwards.'

Our findings of a high level of job satisfaction contrast with the findings of Slade et al (2019), which highlighted low morale due to a 'box- ticking' culture. Key to the job satisfaction of the planners whom we interviewed was their ability to positively influence the outcomes of development. A possible explanation for this difference is that their research involved planners based in all parts of the UK, whereas our research focussed on planners in London and the South East, which has a more buoyant economy than other parts of the UK. This results in developments yielding higher levels of profit and thus offers public sector planners more scope to negotiate better development outcomes. Seeing the physical results was another important factor in job satisfaction, as was variety in daily tasks and in the scale of projects. Although other researchers have seen outsourcing and the use of agency staff by local planning authorities as lowering staff morale, these issues were not raised by our interviewees. This is possibly due to the public sector reluctance to outsource, which was identified by Slade et al (2019), resulting in a reduction in these practices. Despite the overall high levels of job satisfaction, our research highlights the negative impacts of government policy of austerity and the consequent pressure on resources on public sector planners, and the frustration amongst private sector planners resulting from delays due to this shortage of resources.

Perception of the role of planners

Whilst the planners interviewed recognised the importance of technical knowledge, they did not see themselves as technicians. There was a consensus among private and public sector interviewees that their role involved mediating between different stakeholders. A local authority planner explained: 'You get a lot of different issues that arise and you have to sort of, you know, manage the developer, manage the agent, manage the public, manage the politicians, manage time and manage the seniors above you. It is bridging those together and

trying to walk away thinking that you've solved it in the best possible way.' Private sector planners also saw themselves as mediators. One private sector planner commented: 'As a consultant I am the middle man. My job is to try and get the client and the council to agree.' However, whilst there was a recognition of common ground between public and private sector planners, there was also an acknowledgement of a divide. One interviewee reflected: 'We speak the same language but ultimately, I am responsible to the person paying my fees – that's my duty of care, but a local authority planner is responsible to councillors and ultimately to the community they are serving. This is the fundamental tension in planning – the system we have in this country means you've got private interests against public interests.' Whilst public sector planners interviewed saw their role as promoting socially equitable outcomes, only those who were working or had worked in the third sector saw their roles specifically as advocates of community interests.

Ethics

When asked about ethics, some interviewees referred to procedural issues, but more focused on issues which related to development outcomes including the quality of housing, provision of affordable housing and developer contributions to infrastructure. Some local authority planners under pressure to approve residential schemes to achieve target numbers for new homes were concerned about how this impacted on quality. One commented: 'I work in a pro-growth borough and I do like that, but sometimes it gets to the question "Is it refusable. Is it really that bad that we should refuse it?". Quality is sometimes compromised in lieu of housing numbers.' Some private sector planners also had concerns about quality. One explained: 'Sometimes you have a scheme and you have been asked to put it through, and you are feeling like this is probably one of the worst things I have ever seen …. That is really uncomfortable.'

There was particular ill ease about conversions of offices to residential use, which since 2013 have not required planning permission. Developers do need to seek prior approval from the local planning authority, which involves the assessment of certain impacts. However, planners are not permitted to apply planning policy to these applications, meaning that they are unable to secure developer contributions or require compliance with housing quality standards. One private sector planner commented: 'We are acting on schemes that are bringing those buildings back to life, but I am also aware of what the results can be in terms of space standards. To an extent I think those sites could be used for a better purpose, so I am bit conflicted on that, but at the same time it is within legislation.' A local authority planner expressed particular concern about the social impact of poor quality office to residential conversions as in her experience they are generally occupied by very poor people on housing benefit.

Interviewees from both sectors reported conflict about the proportion of new housing which was required to be affordable and developers' contributions to infrastructure provision. Developers are able to provide a lower proportion of affordable housing than required by local planning policy, by arguing that this is necessary to make a scheme financially viable. A private sector planner elaborated on the ethical challenge that this presented: 'It is quite difficult because sometimes you'll be asked to look at a scheme. I know the land receipt – I know everything about it. And then when you're arguing or making a case for less affordable housing or fewer contributions, you do sometimes feel like its shaky ground because it doesn't always feel right.' Several private sector planners felt it was ironic that they were helping clients to reduce the amount of affordable housing when in the heated housing market in London and the South East, they were unable to afford to buy their own homes. A local authority planner was concerned that there should be greater public benefit from development: 'There has been so

much money to be made out of residential in the last five years. We should have been taking that opportunity to get really high quality and really hammer home contributions and community facilities, and people benefitting from planning. At the end of the day we need development, but there is so much money in the uplift in getting planning permission, really we should see the benefit.'

Policy work presented somewhat different ethical dilemmas. One local authority planner explained that in his borough there was a north/south divide with the deprived areas being concentrated in the north of the borough, which had been neglected and were now being targeting for new housing development. He had worked hard to persuade councillors to ensure that the local communities were consulted and that plans for regeneration and new infrastructure would benefit them.

Although there were some shared concerns about the quality and equity of outcomes of development, private sector planners felt that their responsibility was ultimately to work in their clients' interests and to comply with legislation, whilst public sector planners saw their role as promoting socially just, high quality development. Some public sector planners were critical of the ethics of some private sector planners with whom they interacted, but they recognised that not all private consultancies operated in the same way. One explained: 'It is morally incumbent on planners to give genuine advice. If the client doesn't want to listen to it that's fine, but I would like to see a world where – and I know there are consultancies that do it because I have seen it – firms will turn work down if they do not agree with it.' The private sector planners interviewed reported differences in how commercial and ethical issues were balanced. One, who worked for a consultancy that had taken on an office to residential conversion with poor space standards for a new client, commented: 'It was a new client with the expectation that there would probably be more work, which there was. You could argue that in that sense, the ethical side was outweighed. But you come back to, whilst we feel like that as a company, it's in legislation. It's very hard for us to preach to the clients.' Another interviewee, working for a different firm, had a conflict with a client who wanted to omit trees from a site plan as they would restrict development. She thought this was wrong and explained the problem to the partner in charge, whose response was: 'If you want to walk away from this project, we can.'

The procedural issues raised by interviewees related to matters on which the professional code of conduct gave guidance and on which their employers generally had clear policies. Some private sector planners had come across conflicts of interest and clients who wished to act unethically, but they felt their employers provided clear guidance on how to deal with such problems. A few local authority planners were concerned that individual councillors put pressure on to progress particular schemes, but others felt that that their authorities had adequate procedures in place to deal with any conflicts of interest which might arise.

Career Trajectories

Nearly half of the interviewees were still with their first employer since completing their initial planning education and relatively few had moved between sectors. A few were totally committed to remaining in the public sector even if meant earning less money and suffering some frustrations as a result of squeezed resources. One said: 'I had made a conscious decision to work in the public sector, that decision was based on the fact I wanted to do something for the common good, something socially responsible that makes people's lives better.' Another explained why he would not consider working in the private sector: 'I think that if you work

privately it is all going to be profit motivated. You need to justify what you are doing and how it contributes to a project. It's very much that you have to sacrifice some ethical/moral choices in order to maximise a development and maximise profit for the company.' Despite a strong sense of commitment to the public sector, the majority of the public sector planners interviewed were prepared to consider working in the private sector, but frequently with some caveats. A local authority regeneration manager when asked about her future career path responded: 'In private practice I could make shedloads of money, but I like working in a public sector environment and I think I have something to contribute. It would take quite a bit for me to look outside of that, but we are only ever one restructure away.' A public sector planner explained: 'I am pretty sure that I wouldn't work for a straightforward planning consultancy, because I don't think that I would be able to square that kind of work with my ethics essentially. But if it were more involved with design or research, which informed planning policy, I would definitely consider that.' Several local authority interviewees commented on limited opportunities for career progression because of restructuring and lack of movement of senior staff. An interviewee previously employed in the public sector, but now working in the private sector commented: 'In terms of career progression, it is more clear-cut, whereas in the public sector you are stuck at one level until someone retires or leaves.'

Most interviewees, whose first job after completing their planning education was in the private sector, had remained there and thought that was where they would continue to work. Several saw their future with their current employers and hoped to rise up the hierarchy. One commented: 'A serious life event would have to happen for me to want to leave my current company. I am really happy there. I hope that I can progress up the company.' Another interviewee, who worked in a private consultancy, saw benefits in having experience of both sectors, but reflected that it was hard to move away once you had started in the private sector.

Our findings contrasted sharply with Slade et al (2019)'s characterisation of austerity planners, who moved frequently between jobs and sectors in search of higher pay. Amongst our interviewees we found a range of commitment to working in the public and private sectors. Some planners were totally committed to the public sector, some totally committed to working in the private sector, and others prepared to consider working in either, but because of the pressure on public sector resources, movement was likely to be from public to private sector.

Membership of the Profession

The majority of interviewees had become chartered members of the RTPI, but there were stronger incentives for private sector planners to do so. All but one of the private sector interviewees had already achieved chartered status or were currently in the process of doing their Assessment of Professional Competence (APC) in order to do so. They were actively encouraged to become chartered members by their employers, who mentored them and paid their fees for the APC and for ongoing membership. Career progression and pay rises were frequently linked to achieving chartered status. One interviewee explained: 'I submitted it as soon as I could. You are an assistant planner and you cannot be a planning consultant, upon which salary increases depend, unless you qualify as a planner and do your APC, so there is a big carrot.' Another elaborated on the reasons for employers supporting membership: 'My employer wants me to have it, as it looks good to clients if you have been recognised by the RTPI.'

Planners working in the public sector were generally sceptical about benefits of RTPI membership and most received little support for it from their employers. One interviewee

explained why he was not pursuing membership: 'I personally feel that if my employer isn't encouraging me and supporting me to pursue that accreditation it is not a priority.' Another saw membership being of value to the private sector rather than the private sector and commented: 'RTPI accredited doesn't mean you're any better at your job, but it helps sell a service.' Nonetheless the majority of interviewees working in the public sector had either become RTPI members or were considering it. One interviewee explained: 'I spent however many years in planning education so I feel that I need to, but my current Council doesn't support it.' Whilst local authorities and other public sector employers do not usually require their staff to be RTPI members, it was important for those who aspired to public sector management roles. One interviewee in a senior management role elaborated: 'It comes back to those credentials you need to be credible, particularly in senior management roles. Any job you go for, they want you to be professionally accredited.'

Our findings confirm the view of other researchers (Campbell and Marshall, 2002b; Healey, 1985; Slade et al 2019) that many practicing planners consider that the RTPI has little relevance to them. Although the interviewees saw themselves as professionals and the majority of the interviewees had already become members of the RTPI or were in the process of becoming members, few were positive about the benefits of membership other than it being a route to promotion and salary increases in the private sector, and to senior jobs in the public sector.

Conclusions

Although our research involved a relatively small number of planners concentrated in a particular region of the UK, it is possible to draw some tentative conclusions about the impact of neo-liberalism on the planning profession and to identify areas for further research. Despite persistent criticism of the planning system and of planners (Parker, 2020; Raynsford, 2018) and the pressure on resources in the public sector, we did not find that early career planners demoralised and disillusioned. Whilst the views of interviewees differed in many respects, they shared high levels of job satisfaction. This may have, in part, been, because we used our existing networks to identify people interested in participating in the research, and perhaps people, who feel positive about their work, are keener to talk about it. Nonetheless, despite the overall view of interviewees that their work is rewarding, public sector planners did report on the negative impacts that the policy of austerity was having on their work.

Both public and private sector planners that they felt that they were able to positively influence development outcomes, confirming the view of Campbell et al (2014) that, despite the constraints of neo-liberalism, planners can operate with a degree of autonomy and make independent judgements. Interviewees in both sectors had a shared view of their role involving mediation between different interests. Private sector planners saw themselves as negotiating outcomes for their clients, which were acceptable to the planning authority, whilst public sector planners saw themselves as balancing the interests of a wider range of stakeholders including applicants, councillors and the wider community. However, some public sector planners reported that, because of pro-growth planning policies, they were under pressure to accept schemes, which they considered to be poor quality, giving some support to the view that it has become normalised for planners to support development interests (Fox-Rogers & Murphy, 2016).

Our research does not support the hypothesis of the emergence of a new breed of hybrid planners, equally prepared to work in either the public or private sector (Steele, 2009; Slade et

al; 2019). We found some planners totally committed to the public sector, some totally committed to the private sector and some prepared to consider working in either sector. Our findings indicate a reluctance to move between sectors. Despite the pressure on resources and heavy workloads, public sector planners showed considerable commitment to the sector. Nonetheless, the majority of those interviewed said that they might in future consider moving to the private sector, whereas private sector planners said that they were unlikely to move to the public sector. A continuing squeeze on public sector resources is therefore likely to result in movement from the public to the private sector and in planners remaining in the public sector becoming increasingly beleaguered.

Our research indicates that both public and private sector planners share some ethical concerns about development outcomes, but it also highlights some tensions between sectors. As other researchers have indicated (Linovski, 2019; Loh & Arroyo, 2017), we found that private and public sector planners face different pressures and thus different ethical challenges. The conflicting neo-liberal objectives of promoting market-led growth and maintaining democratic legitimacy (Allmendinger, 2014; Jupp & Inch, 2012) result in a division between planners in the public and private sector. Whilst private sector planners did see their role as explaining public policy to their private clients and encouraging them to comply, they did not always succeed. This resulted in some planners promoting schemes which they considered to be of poor quality. Ultimately private sector planners saw their responsibility as being to comply with legislation, in contrast, to public sector planners had a broader view of their responsibility to work in the public interest. Leaving the guardianship of the public interest in planning to a public sector, weakened by neo-liberal policies of austerity, risks further undermining public trust in the planning profession. There is a need for more discussion across the profession to build a consensus about the values that should underpin practice and clarify the responsibilities that practitioners in both sectors have to serve the public interest. Wide engagement in a continuing debate would strengthen the RTPI and make the Institute more relevant to planners in public and private sectors.

As the context in which planners work continues to change, further research is needed to evaluate how planning practice in different regions and in different countries is evolving and how the experience of public and private sector planners varies. As research on planners working in the private sector and the resulting ethical challenges has mainly focussed on Anglo-Saxon Countries, research in other countries would be of particular interest. In the context of shifting public and private sector boundaries, research on ethics and values is crucial to understanding the changing profession. As the experience of recently qualified planners, job satisfaction and morale are crucial to the future of the profession, these needs to be central themes of future research. It would also be interesting to explore the experience of planners at different stages of their careers and of planners working in different fields such as strategic planning, environmental planning, urban design and regeneration.

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