

## Cite this article

Onyango V, AlWaer H, Gazzola P and Radfar M (2023)  
Exploring austerity and planning reforms: insight from UK stakeholders.  
*Proceedings of the Institution of Civil Engineers – Urban Design and Planning* **176**(3): 95–105,  
<https://doi.org/10.1680/jurdp.21.00048>

## Research Article

**Paper 2100048**  
Received 13/12/2021;  
Accepted 16/01/2023;  
First published online 24/01/2023

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# Exploring austerity and planning reforms: insight from UK stakeholders

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**This paper explores the extent to which UK planning system reforms introduced during austerity affected the expectations, purposes and outcomes for and of planning. The perspectives of UK-wide planning system stakeholders were sought and collected through an extensive questionnaire. The findings indicate that though most reforms were welcomed in principle, the anticipated benefits had not been delivered. Instead, a loss of experienced staff and capacity, and the favouring of a neoliberal ideology that inadvertently constrained the purposes and delivery of the reforms, affecting in turn, planning's evolving raison d'être, occurred. With frequent mentioning of austerity as a needed tool for financial management, given the current national economic conditions—for example, in the UK (living cost crisis, post-Covid need for economic growth, public funding of facilities), the relevance of this paper is in warning about the risks of planning reforms, which must now be more precautionary and evidence driven during austerity.**

**Keywords:** environmental aspects/local government/town & city planning

## 1. Introduction

The UK's planning system has been periodically subjected to reforms (Grimwood, 2019, 2021; Smith, 2017), with the most recent reforms between 2010 and 2019 having been driven by efforts to simplify and streamline the planning system to facilitate economic growth (Smith *et al.*, 2016), following a neoliberal rhetoric. The 2008/2009 financial crisis saw the UK planning system reformed to deliver quicker and more accessible decisions, ostensibly to unlock land and remove unnecessary red tape to development (Slade *et al.*, 2019), deliver 'savings' and 'best value for money' (Parker and Wargent, 2021), as well as smart regulation principles (Gunningham and Sinclair, 2017). A programme of high, immediate and sustained cuts to public spending within a wider political discourse of austerity were deemed necessary to kick-start the economy following the deepest and longest recession that the UK had experienced at that time (Haughton and Hincks, 2013).

Since post-First and Second World Wars, the UK planning system had been used to facilitate development; yet, according to Goonewardena (2007), the use of austerity narrative to underpin the reforming of planning and its lingering influence in British political discourse, is raising questions about planning's raison d'être. A growing body of published work supports the view that the UK Government's portrayal and use of austerity as a tool for financial crisis management, has led to

countervailing forces and constrained planning purposes (Parker and Wargent, 2021). Narratives such as 'end reckless overspending', 'restore fiscal credibility' and taglines like 'doing more with less' (Goonewardena, 2007), are said to have created conditions that challenged planning's rationale and articulation of purpose(s), including the effectiveness of planning decisions and outcomes (Miessner, 2020).

Ample literature exists on 'austerity urbanism', reflecting ongoing debates about the interaction between austerity, neoliberalism and urban governance (Davies and Blanco, 2017; Goldsmith, 2020). This includes the extent to which austerity has affected planning's ability to deliver affordable quality housing, eroded and narrowed the scope for sustainability and environmental protection (Onyango *et al.*, 2019). While numerous studies have commented on the impact of austerity on planning's strategicness in the UK and beyond (Davies and Blanco, 2017; Onyango *et al.*, 2019; Tulumello *et al.*, 2020); other studies have cautioned and argued that this cannot be solely attributable to austerity (Madanipour, 2016), citing examples of innovation in planning responses (Richardson and White, 2021).

Notwithstanding this and looking back at the past decade, according to Slade *et al.* (2019), planning through and during austerity has led to the recognition of the salience of 'the austerity planner', thus of a new breed of planners who

must learn the art of delivering quality outcomes during periods of financial crisis management. Should this mean sustained cuts to the public sector and increased growth in the private sector as occurred during the 2008/2009 crisis (Haughton and Hincks, 2013), then the question about whether planning can continue to serve and act in the public's interest becomes key (Raynsford *et al.*, 2018). This question is pertinent to the current state of planning, as depicted in the more recent review of the planning system of England (Raynsford *et al.*, 2018), and release of the latest suite of reforms aimed at reinvigorating the UK economy post the Covid 19 global pandemic (Grimwood, 2021; MHCLG, 2020).

In May 2022, the Department for Levelling Up committed to reforming the planning system to create a 'simpler, faster and more modern planning system'; ensure homes and infrastructure could be delivered more quickly across England; create a 'more efficient and easier to use' digital and map-based service, which allows more active public engagement, and; help to protect and enhance the environment by introducing 'quicker, simpler frameworks' for funding infrastructure and assessing environmental impacts (PMO, 2021). Within this context and given the continuous and lingering influence of austerity politics underpinning planning reforms during straitened times, this paper aims to further explore the interface between planning and austerity and contribute to the 'austerity urbanism' literature.

This is done by looking at whether UK planning system reforms introduced following the 2008/2009 financial crisis impacted the expectations, purposes and outcomes for and of planning, and whether this has in turn led to a fundamental shift in planning's *raison d'être*. To address the study's aim, the perspectives of UK-wide planning system stakeholders were sought, and their thoughts collated, to inform reflections on the future of planning. The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. Section 2 sets the context of the study, followed by the presentation of the methodology in Section 3. Sections 4 and 5 discuss the findings and their significance, respectively. The conclusions and recommendations are drawn in Section 6.

## 2. Setting the context\*

Conceived in 1947, the UK's planning system manages the development and use of land in the public interest, through frameworks that emphasise collaboration and negotiations, requiring planning authorities to work with applicants and allow for the public to comment (DCLG, 2014). It is based on the recognition that development decisions affect people, their environment, and the economy (AlWaer and Illsley, 2017; Campbell and Marshall, 2002; Rómice *et al.*, 2022). Tasked

with ensuring that the right development happens in the right place and at the right time, planning plays a critical role in identifying what development is needed and where, and what areas need protecting or improving (AlWaer and Kirk, 2016). More recently, the breadth of planning has widened, to include other tasks such as the promotion of culture, health, nature, while embracing principles of affordability, inclusion, and fairness in the delivery of planning outcomes (Osment, 2020). The UK has a devolved planning system, which enables England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, to tailor policies to their specific needs while sharing basic structures and principles (Winter *et al.*, 2016).

Over the last 40 years, the UK planning system has undergone radical reform and deregulation motivated by a highly selective evidence base about planning being 'anti-competitive' (Raynsford *et al.*, 2017). Recent literature on the reforms highlights the acceptance of a dominant role for market values in all aspects of the planning framework; a potential risk that the role of planning becomes a residual one subservient to 'marketisation' as an effective basis for planning (Savini and Aalbers, 2016). The Barker review of planning (2002–2004) noticed that the terms of reference for the planning process were now beginning to focus on the provision of housing as a primary outcome (Barker, 2006). Since 2010, the nature of reforms picked up in pace and for the first time, planning legislation was relaxed to accommodate housing growth and private sector provision of housing units (Bradley, 2021). This relaxation was driven by well-rehearsed narratives of 'unhelpful' planning systems holding back the country's development potential (Colenutt, 2020): a view well-captured in 2011 when the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, described planning as the 'enemy of enterprise' (Raynsford *et al.*, 2017).

Yet, as noted by previous review reports, including that produced by the Barlow Commission in 1938, the Scott Report, the Uthwatt Report, the 1942 Beveridge Report, and the more recent Raynsford Report (Raynsford *et al.*, 2018), if left to market forces, it is suggested that planning would likely result in a range of complex market failures and chronically impact on people's welfare. Within this broader context, it then becomes important to develop a better understanding of how a political choice like austerity influences planning practice and outcomes.

## 3. Methodology

This paper aims to explore the interface between planning and austerity, by looking at whether UK planning system reforms introduced following the 2008/09 financial crisis impacted the expectations, purposes and outcomes for and of planning, and whether this has in turn led to a fundamental shift in

planning's *raison d'être*. To address the paper's aim, a two-step approach to the methodology was adopted: desk-based study and questionnaire survey.

### 3.1 Desk-based study

A desk-based study of UK government planning documents, reports, and of the scholarly literature published between 2009 and 2019, was conducted. The purpose was to first identify and analyse key reforms to the UK planning system, to subsequently explore them in further detail. 13 reforms and their associated objectives were selected and further reduced to five (Table 1), as ranked in terms of their impact on planning's *raison d'être*. This was done based on the views and experiences of 22 participants who took part in a one-day brainstorming workshop in Dundee in April 2019.

The selected reforms ranged from single issues, such as fees for pre-application advice and online application procedures; more complex practices, such as sharing of services across departments and LPAs; multi-faceted concepts, such as devolved decision-making, delegated decision-making, and permitted development rights (PDR). Though some of the reforms predated austerity, they were highlighted as instrumental in responding to austerity and in revitalising economic activities, particularly house building (Bradley, 2021). The participants were selected by way of an online-based internet search, on the basis that they worked with, or used the UK planning system, and therefore understood it well. They represented Local Planning Authorities (LPAs), house builders and planning

consultants who experienced the reforms: seven from England and 15 from Scotland.

### 3.2 Questionnaire survey

A semi-structured questionnaire survey was conducted to gather the perspectives of UK-wide planning system stakeholders on the extent to which planning's expectations, purposes and outcomes, were impacted by planning reforms introduced during austerity. The reforms identified in the desk-based study were used to inform the design of a questionnaire survey distributed to UK planning stakeholders, including those who 'operate' the planning system (i.e. planners from LPAs and national park authorities); and those who 'use' the planning system (i.e. developers and applicants). The stakeholders were identified through a web-based search. The online questionnaire was distributed to 931 email addresses, of which 374 emails were not delivered. 96 completed questionnaires were returned, 96% of which came from England and Scotland, while LPAs and operators constituted 50% and more than two-thirds of the participants, respectively (Table 2).

The questionnaire was structured in three parts:

- background information of participants – for example institutional affiliation, role in planning, and experience;
- evidence and opinion on extent recent austerity had impacted on pre-stated planning reforms;
- perspective on ideal reforms to UK planning to cope with periodic/prolonged financial crises such as austerity.

**Table 1.** Selected planning reforms based on the criteria that the participants were most concerned about

Reform	Its key elements
Consolidation of policies	Planning legislation was consolidated in 1971 and then 1990. In 2012, 44 separate planning policy documents of over 1500 pages were condensed into a single National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) of about 50 pages long (DCLG, 2012). To make planning policy and guidance in England less complex and more accessible to the public, while introducing a strong pro-growth vision and a 'presumption in favour of sustainable development' (Grimwood, 2019, 2021).
Pre-application	A frontloading exercise involving informal meeting(s) with a planning officer, to discuss feasibility of ideas and problems that might occur. To deliver a more proactive and streamlined approach to development application workflows, reduce costs by filtering out potentially unsuccessful applications for quicker determinations and better-quality outcomes (DCLG, 2012; Tait and Inch, 2016).
Permitted development rights (PDR)	Development proposals that cause limited or minor impacts, are unlikely to require full planning permission, and are processed by way of PDR (DCLG, 2014). This handed back the full value of development rights to developers, without requirement to pay Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) or Section 106 on Permitted Development schemes.
Delegated decision-making	The Localism Act 2011 devolved decision-making to local areas, allowing decisions to be handled by LPAs' delegated planning officers rather than higher level authorities. To enhance the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of consenting processes. It introduced: 'neighbourhood planning' to enhance democracy, local economic growth, and more effective administration (Tait and Inch, 2016); community rights to build, pre-application consultations with communities, and required LPAs to cooperate with their neighbours in preparation of their development plans.
Smarter work practices	More paperless administration and online IT systems ('ePlanning'). To generate income, LPAs introduced fees, – for example, for pre-application advice. Sharing of services by way of inter-organisational collaborations and amalgamations of departments and services introduced to reduce overheads and make savings.

**Table 2.** Participants' background roles and characteristics (with some overlaps)

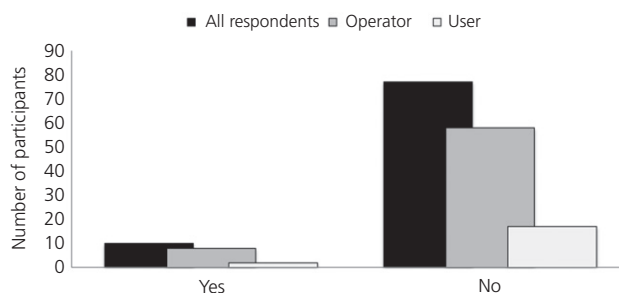
Institutional identity	Roles
LPA 46 (48.0%); Planning committee member 12 (10.0%) Statutory consultee 4 (4.1%); Planning policymaker 4 (4.1%); Planning inspectorate 1 (1.0%); Private sector 25 (26.0%); Other 4 (4.1%)	Operator 71 (74%); User 22 (22.9%); Other 3 (3.1% i.e. consultant & academics 2; statutory consultee 1)
UK countries	Areas of operation
England 62 (64.6%); Scotland 24 (25%); Wales 11 (11.5%); Northern Ireland 3 (3.1%)	Urban 72 (75%); Suburban 63 (65.6%); Rural 77 (80.2%)
Scale of development	Types of development
Local 86 (89.65); Major 74 (77.1%); National 28 (29.2%)	Housing/residential 93 (96.9%); Commercial 76 (79.2%); Industrial 71 (74%); Agricultural 57 (59.4%); Mixed use 69 (71.9%); Infrastructure 48 (50%); Other 19 (19.8%)

Our questions captured the period 2010 to 2018 when enough time to form adequate opinions had lapsed, relying on their experiences on how austerity directly impacted the successful delivery of pre-stated planning reforms. The qualitative questionnaire data was subjected to a thematic analysis, while the quantitative questionnaire data was analysed with SPSS statistical environment to generate descriptive (e.g. mean, standard deviation) and analytical (correlation, significance) data in tables and charts for effective display. Subsequently, the findings are presented using the five selected planning reforms as a framework.

#### 4. Findings

This section presents the findings of the secondary data analysis and of the questionnaire survey, highlighting where significant, the differences in perspectives between planning 'users' and planning 'operators'. The data is not disaggregated by UK nation. Overall, 89% of the stakeholders surveyed agreed that austerity-led reforms to the planning system precipitated changes in priorities, such as the provision of housing units. There was consensus that the reforms had not delivered on their promises and that the planning system had not become more efficient, effective and better fit for purpose (Figure 1). Moreover, the reforms led to a more transactional approach in urban practice, – for example, setting of binding performance targets and timelines for responding to planning applications, with a keen eye for income generation from the planning services offered.

More in detail, the surveyed 'users' expressed concern about the costs associated with using the planning system, while the 'operators' were concerned about the impact of reforms on their earning potential and implications on the delivery of planning services and on meeting targets. The frequency of the reforms to the planning system was raised as a concern, with 81% of the respondents indicating that the lack of support [resources] during austerity did not allow for the reformed system to settle. The respondents questioned the extent to which the reforms were driven by



**Figure 1.** Have the recent reforms to the UK planning system achieved the objective of making it cheaper, more efficient, effective, and better fit for purpose?

evidence, while private investors in housing supply made profit:

Govt intervention is tinkering at the edges yet they fail to see the true picture. Planning is NOT the brake on the housing delivery crisis. I have granted permission for 5000 houses yet very few are being built – so the market is not flooded and the prices remain high!!!

A deeper insight into the stakeholders' perspectives is provided in further detail, using the five planning reforms selected in the stakeholder workshop, as a framework.

##### 4.1 Consolidation of policies

The respondents expressed mixed views about the NPPF. While it reduced the volume of policy documents and enhanced their accessibility to 'users' of the planning system, it was also described as 'woolly' in that it introduced greater ambiguity about how policy statements should be interpreted and in turn, implemented. According to the 'users':

there were now too many different application types and alternative routes through planning, introducing complexity as each proposal had to be individually assessed at the pre-application stage to

determine whether it even needed planning permission. Yet, for the operators, There just was not enough time to do so; this [the NPPF] created additional work that did not attract income, placing additional pressure on an already under-resourced and over-stretched workforce.

Overall, the respondents noted that while the previous system of policy documents was overly complicated, the consolidation of guidance and policies through the NPPF had become a legal minefield of interpretation, often over a single word in a document.

#### 4.2 Pre-application

Pre-application advice was introduced as a key requirement for applications for Development Consent Orders for major infrastructure projects (DCLG, 2012). It welcomes early discussions before submitting a planning application, identifies problems which may need to be solved, and gives advice about the acceptability of a proposed development. Section 37 (applications) and 50 (pre-application process) of the Planning Act 2008 sets out statutory requirements for applicants to engage in pre-application consultation with local communities, local authorities, and those who would be directly affected by the proposals. This front-loading approach is designed to ensure a more transparent and efficient examination process, to provide greater certainty about the application; offer a more proactive and streamlined approach to development application workflows, and; reduce costs by filtering out potentially unsuccessful applications for quicker determinations and better-quality outcomes.

Most ‘operators’ (60%) commented favourably on the measure emphasising pre-application discussions, as the discussions contributed positively to working relationships, and improved the quality of subsequent planning applications and design outcomes. They also warned that: ‘... it is dealing with these issues [pre-application discussions] that can hold up the planning process especially when capacities are low ...’ and ‘...can take significant number of resources at the front end of the process’. For 88% of the ‘operators’, the pre-application discussions contributed to swift determination and more certainty for applicants, though 4% disagreed and the remaining were not sure. By stark contrast, only 9% of the ‘users’ agreed, while 63% disagreed and the remaining 28% were not sure (Figure 2).

Most ‘operators’ (82%) felt that asking for *additional supporting information* beyond the statutory minimum, – for example, for Pre-Application Consultation or Design and Access Statements, was necessary and proportionate to the decision-making process. However, most ‘users’ (81%) disagreed. Power games, as a contest for authority or influence, were also mentioned. Here, the overlaying of PDR with the prior notification and prior approval processes was perceived by ‘users’ as LPAs’

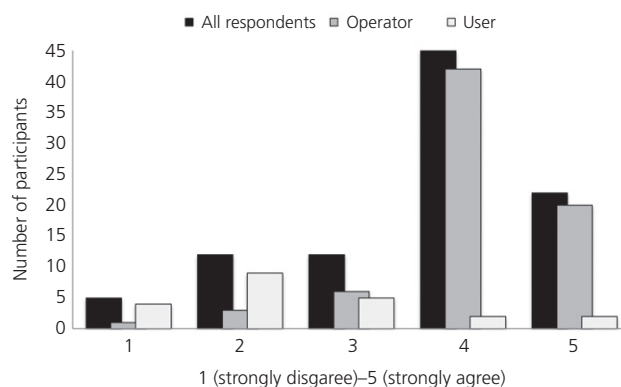


Figure 2. Did pre-application discussions contribute to a greater degree of certainty and swift determination of applications?

attempts to claw back control they had lost by way of the reforms. Most respondents (64%) felt that the amount of supporting information requested by LPAs had increased over the austerity period, and 23% thought it had not significantly changed. No one said it had decreased yet the reforms were supposed to reduce paperwork.

While ‘operators’ now Focused more on meeting their statutory obligations – for example timelines, ‘users’ focused more on their costs and burdens, and perceived pre-application as lengthening the application process:

... the time taken to gain approvals is now even longer since with major applications the Authorities now determine when the application can be lodged and the pressure is therefore off for them to deal with applications timeously; It just seems to be adding another layer rather than simplifying and speeding up the process.

‘Users’ also thought the quality of pre-application advice had deteriorated (perhaps due to the loss of skilled and experienced officers) and was not as quick or easy to obtain as under previous informal arrangements. Many stated that advice was usually negative, guarded, non-committal (issued with a caveat that it was an informal opinion only) and often proved unreliable. This is likely due to planning officers not having sufficient time to adequately read all the documents within statutory deadlines; and the loss of specialised expertise due to loss of funding. While benefits were recognised when applied to large scale and more contentious developments, some ‘users’ felt that for small developments, pre-applications were unnecessary.

#### 4.3 Permitted development rights (PDR)

Introduced in The Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) (England) Order 2015, current PDR forms a key part of the UK government’s reforms to the

planning system. PDR removes planning permission for changes in use of buildings within each subclass and for certain changes of use between some of the use classes, giving rights to make certain changes to a building without the need to apply for planning permission (Barton and Grimwood, 2021). Some PDRs cover building operations, such as home extensions, whereas others cover change of use of buildings. They derive from a general planning permission granted by Parliament, rather than from permission granted by the LPA. Before some PDRs can be used, the developer must first obtain 'prior approval' in relation to specified aspects of the development from the LPA.

According to the respondents, the implementation of PDR was challenging and often led to inconsistent decisions. A loss of control and scrutiny by LPAs was said to be undermining confidence in the planning system and leading to an increase in enforcement complaints. 79% of the 'users' commented positively on PDRs but warned that 'Any benefit there may be to the system from extending PDR has been lost by the over-complicated conditions/process that must be followed'. Caution was also expressed by most 'operators' (77%): 'Extending PDR is dangerous in that control of development becomes less and less'; PDRs 'Allows substandard design solutions to go unchecked'; and 'Choice should not be between detailed control and no control'. Overall, fewer operators (53%) than users (86%) agreed that extending PDR was an effective way to reduce costs and ease the strain on the planning system, with some concerned that the extension of PDR might have a long-term impact on the quality of designs, the appropriateness of development proposals and sustainability. These concerns are echoed elsewhere (see Parkhurst, 2017).

44% of the respondents thought that the changes to PDR had little impact on the economic growth of businesses. According to the 'operators', the PDR system placed additional burdens on LPAs: from the time and costs incurred giving advice to applicants, processing applications, and dealing with complaints about developments, while receiving little or no fee remuneration for this work. Notwithstanding this, most respondents recognised the benefits of PDR, but ONLY if applied correctly, as PDR had the potential to reduce costs and strain on the planning system.

#### 4.4 Delegated decision-making

Elevated as a tool to spur development, under the Localism Act 2011, this planning reform aimed to facilitate the devolution of decision-making powers from central government control to individuals and communities (DCLG, 2011). For example, it provided community empowerment by making it easier for local communities to bid for and take over assets, create charitable trusts, and apply to carry out services provided by the council. It

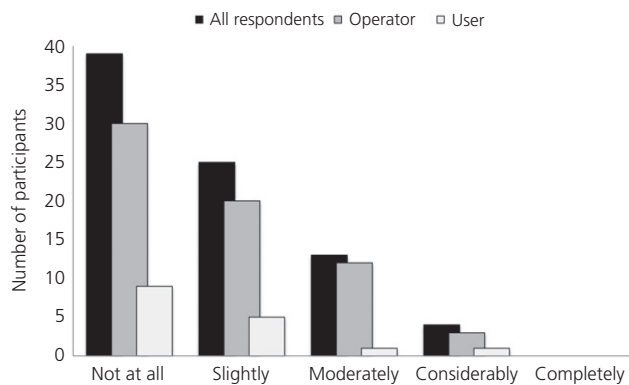
apparently made the planning system more democratic, more effective and ensured that decisions about housing were taken locally; besides allowing neighbourhood plans to be developed and a requirement to consult the local communities during pre-application (Tait and Inch, 2016).

Most respondents (90%) thought that the delegation of decision-making and of determination on an application by a suitably qualified and experienced planning officer, rather than planning committee, was positive as it allowed for efficiency gains. Delegation had the potential to significantly cut costs, reduce workload, free-up officers from needing to present reports to planning committees, whose decisions were at times criticised for being politically motivated and for not always following the planning officer's recommendations. However, some respondents were concerned about the delegation of power to unelected planning officers, who were now able to determine the outcome of planning applications.

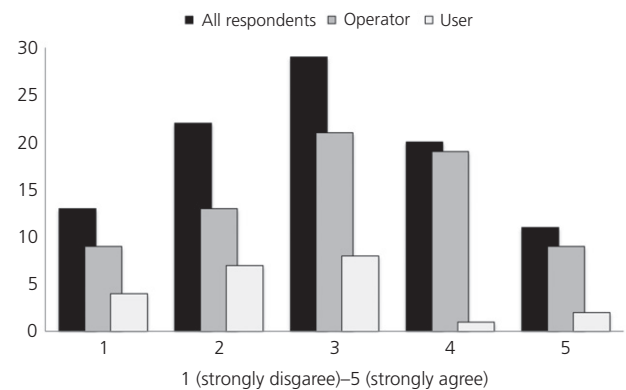
#### 4.5 Smarter work practices

This consisted of measures aimed at increasing the efficiency of the planning system – for example, optimising the use of workplaces and technology in a timely and cost-effective way (IT-based services, online applications, interactive information (guides) on services and answers and so on), to realise savings for the taxpayer. Participants reported mixed experiences on their routine work practices based on several factors – for example, extent of financial cuts to LPA budgets and LPA coping strategies. Some LPAs had no strategy or struggled to recognise that they needed one. At one end, a participant related that his LPA's senior planning management team (most experienced and specialist staff) left, with those remaining struggling to implement appropriate coping strategies and 'fire-fighting through a barrage of complaints'. Other LPAs became quite entrepreneurial. They recognised planning's role as a key driver for the delivery of development and economic growth within their area, and invested in their planning, besides implementing various resource management strategies to reduce expenditure and increase income. Overall, 48% of the respondents felt that changes in working practices had not brought the anticipated benefits (Figure 3).

According to the respondents, the emphasis on agile working practices (internet, technology and smart administrative practices (ePlanning)), increased accessibility to planning resources and was found very useful. Paperless work practices, with more people being online, allowed many LPAs to improve the scope and quality of information available to 'users' through their websites. Instead of paying for formal pre-application discussions, applicants were often referred to web-based resources, the quality of which was praised. However, in terms of access to planning officers and obtaining informal guidance, 'users'



**Figure 3.** To what extent have changes to planning policy and working practice aimed at increasing efficiency compensated for any loss in manpower?



**Figure 4.** Did planning authorities become more approachable and less adversarial in their interactions with applicants since austerity?

reported more difficulty, which negatively affected them especially where issues leading to a refusal could have been resolved if there had been opportunity for direct engagement. The underlying cause here is not unwillingness of planning officers, but a reduction in staff coupled with increased workloads resulting in officers being unavailable for face-to-face discussions when needed. The challenge was in planning officers not having adequate resources to deliver as required.

Respondents also identified inter-organisational collaborations and restructuring as a welcome management response strategy, as some LPAs shared services to reduce overheads. The planning service was already undergoing a major culture change when austerity occurred, heightening the need for planning officers to shift their culture from one of a statutory service provider, to one driven by a compelling need to facilitate economic growth by way of more innovative approaches (Richardson and White, 2021). 82% of the respondents indicated that these collaborations were cultivating positive and proactive working relationships; and delivering better planning submissions, quicker determinations, higher approval rates and better-quality planning outcomes. However, a relatively much lower proportion of the ‘users’ (52%) agreed about the benefits of this approach.

The respondents warned that a collaborative approach could only truly work if all parties were willing to engage and planning officers had enough time and experience. Yet these two factors were adversely impacted by austerity-led cuts to LPA budgets (Gray and Barford, 2018). Opinions differed when asked whether LPAs had become more approachable and less adversarial following the reforms. 39% of ‘operators’ believed that they had become more approachable, while 50% of ‘users’ disagreed (Figure 4). 31% of respondents reported little or no change in attitude.

While several respondents stated that the workforce remained dedicated to the planning reforms, development management became a treadmill with little capacity for planning officers to creatively apply their skills to a wider extent. Being under-resourced, over-worked and under constant pressure to meet statutory deadlines also resulted in a stressed workforce. The increase in absence due to sickness, put further pressure on the remaining staff, creating a vicious cycle. However, participants also identified ways in which morale was maintained or increased: effective change management, increased professionalism, individual commitment of officers.

There were also complaints that late requests for supporting information was applied as a delaying tactic to help planning departments cope with a lack of staff and still meet statutory timescales. The ‘operators’ who indicated that they were over-stretched also admitted that they simply did not have time to read it all, confirming ‘user’ suspicions that much of the material accompanying applications was not reviewed. One ‘operator’ simply stated he was just grateful if reports were succinct and Focused, adding: ‘loss of specialist skills within LPAs reduced the ability to interpret material submitted and left officers relying heavily on the assertions made in statements without adequately understanding the underlying facts’.

## 5. Discussion

This paper contributed to the ongoing debates about the interaction between austerity and planning, presenting anecdotal evidence as to how austerity contradicted the objectives for planning. It shows how austerity, which is a political ideology and not an economic theory, led to planning reforms resulting in contradictory effects. This matters to the ‘austerity planner’, who must learn how to deliver quality planning outcomes within an austerity environment that is providing antithetical

impetus to traditional purposes of planning, – for example, public good. The policy-makers must also temper their expectations – for example, of delivering quality housing units, or environmental protection targets, or a more efficient reformed planning system, during austerity. Overall, the bigger picture on austerity's implications to important planning functions, must be understood, and limitations to what planning can do in such contexts, acknowledged. Therefore, governments will have to 'act under uncertainty', which should mean responding in a precautionary fashion to the evidence that does exist, including acknowledging the weak link between claims for planning reforms and improvements to planning and its outcomes.

Overall, the findings concur with austerity urbanism literature, confirming that austerity-driven reforms to the planning system precipitated significant changes in planning outcomes, priorities, and work practices, values or attitudes. Although Scottish and English planning systems have diverged considerably since devolution (Cave *et al.*, 2016; Winter *et al.*, 2016); the responses from the various UK nations tended to agree on impacts, albeit to different degrees of concern. In terms of outcomes, several reforms did not fully deliver the pre-stated benefits. For example, a simpler system had not been delivered by a more complex NPPF, more affordable houses were not delivered, and PDR had not encouraged the growth of businesses as anticipated in the rhetoric for the reforms.

In terms of priorities, the findings supported Bradley's (2021) assertion that planning reforms in the UK were now keener to promote the supply-side of land for housing in service of opportunities for profits to investors, instead of prioritising the delivery of new affordable homes. This corroborates Colenutt (2020), who argues that the NPPF, by requiring local plans to evidence house provisions, is unworkable as developers cannot build affordable housing because they will always say it takes away from their profits and land value. The finding that the reforms prioritised housing supply and revenues from planning services, serves to echo arguments that marketisation and financial gain were a motivation for the reforms (see Savini and Aalbers, 2016).

In terms of work practices, our findings confirm a shift in values, reflecting Cowell and Owen's (2006) observation that planning in England should be analysed as a form of neoliberal spatial governance. According to Allmendinger (2016), neoliberal spatial governance explores how the changing nature of urban planning has transformed from a system for regulating and balancing change in the built and natural environments in the public interest, to facilitating economic growth for narrow, sectional interests. For example, planning 'operators' attitudes were now favouring the promotion of business and private sector activities – for example, building houses, without a

balanced consideration of adverse impacts on the environment and general societal welfare. There was now a keen eye to raising revenues and being cost-effective, as opposed to providing essential services in the name of public good.

Our findings revealed how morality, a topic relatively unaddressed in the austerity urbanism literature (see Murphy and Fox-Rogers, 2015) emerged, related to LPAs charging for non-statutory services and the instruction to officers to not offer informal advice for free. That austerity's impacts were pervasive, regardless of whether the nation supported (England) or opposed (Scotland) it (see also Onyango *et al.*, 2019), also raises a morality question as those opposed to austerity still suffered its consequences. The notion of public good was rarely mentioned by the respondents as a motivator in the considerations of the reforms. However, unsurprisingly, the findings revealed clear differences in opinions between 'users' and 'operators' across each reform, alongside contradictions about the impacts of the reforms. While the consolidated NPPF was designed to make planning simpler, it achieved the opposite effect as 'users' described it as 'woolly'; while 'operators' argued that it created additional work that did not attract income. While ePlanning and paperless work practices allowed many LPAs to improve the scope and quality of service available to 'users', however, coupled with charging fees for planning advice, this reduced 'users' access to planning officers and obtaining informal guidance, contradicting the overall purposes of the reforms.

According to 'operators', while pre-application discussions were helpful, 'users' felt that charging fees hindered their effective use of the service, especially when the fewer planning officers were relatively more difficult to access. Also, austerity-driven cost-cutting led to specialist knowledge (e.g. urban design, archaeology, heritage, conservation, sustainability, environmental assessment, ecology, biodiversity, landscape) being lost by LPAs, but without any commensurate efficiencies being delivered. This led to less rigorous analysis of these areas and delayed decision-making, with potential detrimental impacts, instead of enhancements, to planning outcomes. This echoes Carmona's (2019) study of new housing in England, which identified design flaws mainly because LPAs did not always have adequate specialised staff and time to analyse the plans, yet they were under pressure to approve new homes.

Altogether, the above examples reveal how austerity's impacts – for example, reduced resources and hollowing out LPAs' capacities (see Gray and Barford, 2018), could precipitate maladjustment in the system. This means that the anticipated objectives were not met, or there was unsatisfactory adjustment or failure of the reformed UK planning system to react satisfactorily to the demands of its environment. From engaging with the findings in the study, some pertinent issues

can be raised. For instance, must each financial crisis trigger planning reforms, and furthermore, what principles and criteria should guide how the interests of ‘operators’ and ‘users’ are balanced against each other and the greater public good? It has been widely observed that if used wisely, planning can overcome market failure and help generate valuable public goods (Raynsford *et al.*, 2017).

Although The Raynsford Report concluded that there was no consensus about what the current planning system ought to be for, the findings in this paper accord with Colenutt’s (2020) argument that the reforms are driven by lobbyists, or by a logic of financialisation, rather than public good. This has implications for the recommendations about greater use of systems-thinking approaches (Vester, 2007), which can evidence the *ex-ante* performance and outcomes of planning under various scenarios, and better inform the reform agenda based on more empirical approaches. This can help to avoid maladjustments. Until there is sound evidence on the interaction of and role of planning during austerity, governments should apply a precautionary approach to their purported purposing of the planning function to resuscitate the economy. Having seen how austerity weakened planning, by way of countervailing factors that challenged the very objectives for the reforms, it is time UK stakeholders agreed on a new purpose for planning as argued in The Raynsford Report, which cannot be unjustifiably subdued by ephemeral political exigencies and interest groups, at the expense of other laudable objectives for planning – for example, environmental protection.

Overall, it is worth noting that the 96 respondents in this study offered a slender data set that was not statistically significant, given the potentially broader sample. Furthermore, the 46 LPAs that responded across the over 330 across the entire UK are not enough to make a claim of representativeness; neither are the 25 private sector responses representative of the large number of Developers and Planning Consultants who are active in this field. Therefore, our findings are at best tentative and would benefit from further validation based on from findings larger data sets.

## 6. Conclusion and recommendations

This paper explored the extent to which the UK planning systems’ recent reforms, within an austerity policy atmosphere, delivered on the envisaged benefits. This was met by interpreting the testimony of ‘operators’ and ‘users’ of the system based on a questionnaire survey. At a high level of analysis aggregating mostly participants from England and Scotland, it was found that there was no strong evidence that a simpler, streamlined and less costly planning system had been delivered as anticipated. For example, the targets for housing units, which were to be expedited by the reforms, did not materialise, while

housebuilders made considerable profits. Furthermore, areas of contradictions between what austerity was constraining or incentivising, and what planning should traditionally deliver, were emphasised, and in turn led to a fundamental shift in planning’s *raison d’être*. For example, the amount of supporting information requested by LPAs had increased over the austerity period, yet the reforms were supposed to reduce paperwork.

The key message is that the pre-stated expectations on planning reforms could not be adequately delivered because austerity measures inadvertently constrained the capacity of planning officers to creatively apply their skills to a wider extent, as LPAs were under-resourced, and attitudes and practices became more aligned to motivations arising from austerity imperatives – for example, expediting housing provision. Also, examples of maladjustment were noted – for example, when power games, as a contest for authority or influence, was identified in relation to LPAs’ attempts to claw back control they had lost by way of the reforms. Furthermore, charging for some previously free planning services, motivated maladjusted behaviour as some ‘users’ began to perceive the planning system as a paid transaction that must deliver their expectations.

In conclusion, we highlight three related aspects that merit further investigation. First, as the reforms are still working their way through into practice, there is room for longitudinal studies when the long-term impacts can be more definitively established. Using other indicators beyond stakeholder opinions, – for example, quantitative ones, can provide a fuller picture on the research question. Second, as the reforms have a political ideology underpinning them, the inherent contradictions with normative planning functions – for example, public interest, should be further investigated. Third, the evolutionary implications, – that is, long-term directions of the reforms should be carefully considered, to understand what planning systems may be emerging, to avoid maladjustment, and help consider what mitigatory measures may be applied. This can inform the design of planning systems that are inherently immune to periodic shocks and ephemeral ideologies – for example, austerity.

Some methodological constraints are worth mentioning. Firstly, the researchers could not fully control for how participants interpreted the questions asked in the questionnaire. However, this was partly mitigated with the use of non-complex language, and a range of optional answers where possible, by way of a Likert scale. Secondly, the small numbers of participants prevented from making statistically robust inferences – for example, to bring out the role of contextual differences in the jurisdictions across the four UK nations. This would have situated the paper within methodological

nationalism, which conceives of the nation-state as a unit of analysis or as a container for social processes. The scope for generalisability of this study's findings, beyond the UK, is limited to igniting reflection and debate, among those who want to understand the role of planning during periods of austerity. As the study listened mainly to 'operators' and 'users' only, there is scope for widening similar studies to encompass the broader community – for example, NGOs, community members, tradesmen and so on., who may have different perspectives on the research question.

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