

Planners of the future, planning for the future?

Hannah Hickman, Katie McClymont, Adam Sheppard consider whether there is a disconnect between planners' aspiration, education and practice.

'Why wouldn't you want to be a planner right now? What could be more creative than trying to harness the benefits of growth for local communities? Yet am I finding it so hard to recruit and retain young graduates.'

Stephen Kelly, Director, Greater Cambridge Shared Planning

Why do students elect to study town planning at university? What has motivated that decision, and, importantly, what do students aspire to achieve as a result of their choice? In this article we consider this within the context of practice today:

- o Is there a disconnect between the expectations and aspirations of students and the reality of practice?
- o What exactly is this 'reality'?
- o How does this relate to how the profession is perceived both by others, and by itself?

Writing about planners often frames the majority as operating with a sense of common values (or shared ethos) around the pursuit of social, economic and environmental sustainability, with a desire to create good places in which to live, work, and play. The idea of 'making the world a better place' may sound contrived, but it is not unusual for this phrase to arise in anecdotal evidence when practitioners voice their reasons for entering the profession, or when prospective students are asked about their motivations for selecting a particular planning-related programme.

The complex and contested concept of the 'public interest' has traditionally been part of this shared ethos, and the notional value that planning should serve the public interest continues to be the normative reference point for legitimising and evaluating planning

activity, both in principle and in practice.^{1,2} Indeed, as an activity long associated with the state, many have asserted that ‘society expects planning to serve the public interest’,³ and that ‘to lose sight of the public interest is to lose sight of the very purpose of planning’.⁴ Moreover, planning is variously extolled by its own professional body as offering a career that offers ‘diversity’,⁵ and elsewhere as providing an occupation that offers ‘intellectual stimulation’,⁶ and a role which results in the creation of ‘places that are sustainable, dynamic and creative’.⁷

Advocates for planning thus describe it as a positive, future-focused activity, and portray its fundamental role in ‘joining up infrastructure, homes, work and leisure opportunities with huge benefits to society, the environment and the economy. At its best, planning delivers transformational change.’⁸ Against this backdrop, who wouldn’t want to be a planner?

However, there are contrary voices that question the enduring reality of the public interest ethos of planning. These voices have media coverage and inform the national/public narrative concerning planning in the UK and the extent to which practising planners feel that their work is a positive endeavour in support of common values.⁹

Some aspects of planning – development management in particular – have often been criticised as providing purely regulatory restrictions on development, thus acting as barriers to growth. But more pertinently for some commentators, recent shifts in the framing of planning policy and legislation have seen the core purpose of planning under attack, driven more by an apparent hegemonic neo-liberal ideology, with planners – and therefore the idea of planning as an activity and a profession – portrayed as ‘enemies of enterprise’.¹⁰ The recently revised version of England’s National Planning Policy Framework is, for example, clear about the economic purpose of the planning system in building ‘a strong, responsive and competitive economy ... to support growth’,¹¹ with the words ‘public interest’ appearing only once.

For those such as Raco,¹² this is evidence of an ‘inversion’ of planning’s core purpose, framed in support of growth, with planning decisions evaluated in terms of their contribution to economic prosperity, rather than broader pre-defined public interests. In this narrative, planning is no longer a visionary, future-focused place-shaping endeavour. The planners ‘dream’ is described as having ‘gone wrong’,¹³ or been ‘lost’,⁴ with planners become ‘willing collaborators in the capitalist project in order to enhance land values and increase the competitiveness of their localities’¹⁴ or deemed irrelevant or harmful to society’s interests.

Concurrently, austerity cuts have seen the resources of planning departments diminished, with practice in some instances necessarily reduced ‘to a technical calculation exercise’¹⁵ in support of growth, forcing a re-imagining of the ‘very ethos of what the planning system is for and what it should do’.¹⁶

There appears, therefore, a deep uncertainty among many academic commentators over the way that planning has been re-imagined by successive governments, and a fear that its purpose has been repositioned, undermined, or compromised to such an extent within a neo-liberal framework that a set of values summed up, however vaguely and poorly defined, by the term ‘the public interest’ are occluded, and that there is now less room in daily practice for broader concepts around place-making and the future of communities to be implemented, or even discussed.

What does this mean for young planners?

The above somewhat dichotomous and rather disheartening narrative may not come as a surprise to many practitioners and theorists, yet for young emergent planners it has the potential to be particularly disruptive. Critically, some recent international accounts report an increasing mismatch between what initially motivates students to study planning – *an ‘ideal of planning’, with ambitions to make places better* – and the reality of day-to-day practices of planning.¹⁷ Early practice experiences are, it is argued, failing to live up to this notional ideal. ‘Disillusion in many young practitioners’ is being reported, inducing them to abandon the ‘planning ethos they were taught – often very early in their careers’, leading to ‘despair, disappointment’:¹⁷

‘In 2016, nearly one in five public sector planners considered leaving the profession and it has been well publicised that the negative press and dwindling resources have had a real impact on morale.’¹⁸

In parallel with Raco’s ‘inverted’ planning ethos,¹² young practitioners are being forced to ‘re-calibrate’, ‘quickly disregarding’ any values extolled in education, ‘with the realities of having to get on with the work’ and ‘under pressure’ to act contrary to beliefs.¹⁷

Should we be worried?

This is worrying for planning practice. A disillusioned young planner is, at the very least, a less enthusiastic practitioner – less motivated to hang onto remnants of, or work towards, achieving that ‘planning ideal’. At the very most, there is a risk of losing that young

planner to other disciplines, raising serious questions about the profession's future sustainability. Similarly, there is a risk that prospective students will elect to look elsewhere, leading to a skills shortage due to a lack of new graduates in the longer term.

This is also concerning in relation to our understanding of the realities of contemporary planning practice, the way planning is viewed by society, and therefore how planning is taught in our planning schools. On the one hand, if a fictitious notion of a planning ideal is being taught that does not reflect the reality of practice, is this irresponsible, setting up young practitioners for almost inevitable disappointment? On the other hand, if, as educators, we ourselves remain motivated by an ideal of who or what planning should serve, should we not seek to motivate students to take that with them in the hope that they find spaces of planning practice with a sense of greater good/public interest?

But is the dichotomy as simple as all that, and are we over-playing the negatives?

However, this reported mismatch between initial study-based motivations and early practice-based experiences may be more complex and nuanced. With planning no longer a predominantly public sector activity, and many and variable routes and roles for planners across a range of organisations, this variety is likely to be reflected in early practice experiences. The ethos of planning may well live on in practice despite the re-imagining described above, including within private sector practice. Academic commentary may also be challenged by a lack of contact of some academics with planning as it is practised (empirical evidence of the everyday), resulting in a danger of over-playing the negative, with conceivably self-reinforcing outcomes.

There is evidence of positivity: 'Town planning is a fantastic profession', notes Rayner,¹⁸ and Serena Ralston's deftly titled piece, 'Falling into planning: how four planners found their profession',¹⁹ describes the journey of four enthusiastic practitioners into planning. The Royal Town Planning Institute's annual 'Young Planner of the Year' award brings with it many positive practice examples, with, for example, this year's winner, Heather Claridge, describing her role, and the role of planning, in Glasgow's fascinating 'stalled spaces' project.²⁰ These planners have carried an 'ideal' of planning into practice, a practice they find exciting and fulfilling, suggesting that the negative portrayal of planner's experiences in recent academic literature – in Tasan-Kok and Oranje's¹⁷ and Ferm and Tormaney's¹⁴ volumes in particular – may be incomplete.

Why should we seek to understand this?

Existing writing – while important and engaging – largely comprises collections of stories. There is little in-depth empirical material and few longitudinal studies of the journey from student planner to practitioner.

The surprising paucity of work in this area means that we know relatively little about whether this more anecdotal narrative is a more widespread reality. Much of this existing writing is also international, with little work focused on UK practice: a significant gap given the unique spread of planning activity here, with its high percentage of private sector practitioners and its particular legislative and policy frameworks. Do undergraduate and graduate students enter the planning profession with hopes of pursuing the public interest? Are these hopes dashed within the early years of practice? If so, is this a problem? And for established practitioners, educators and commentators like ourselves, the question remains: what can be done?

Furthermore, although young planners in the UK – both practitioners and students – have platforms to share their views with one another, particularly through university student networks and the RTPI's Young Planners' Networks and conferences, there is an 'empty vessel of empirical work on young planners' experiences',¹⁷ with student planners and young professionals rarely heard.²¹ There is a blank space in our knowledge about planning students themselves. The truth is we simply do not understand enough about their experiences, motivations and aspirations:

- o Why do they come?
- o What motivates them to study planning, particularly now that practice happens in many spaces?
- o What sorts of planners do they want to be?
- o Are they motivated by common values, an 'ideal' of planning?
- o Will they carry this into practice?
- o Will the different types of early practice experience align more closely with initial motivations and expectations?

This is important knowledge in and of its own sake, but we also have responsibility as educators to understand the process of transition from education to practice in order to shape an appropriate curriculum, as well as to inform our own intellectual understanding of how planning is changing. If we are teaching an ethos of planning practice that does not exist in practice any more, can we, or should we, as educators better prepare students for these realities, or do we have a role to embolden and envision?

An old joke about higher education practice springs to mind: the aim of a lecture is to get the professor's notes into the student's notebook without the content entering the mind of either party. If we are not conscious of what we are teaching, and whether this has an impact on the thinking of our students in terms of their professional motivations and aspirations for practice, what do we really see as the role of the planning school? We may equip students well in terms of their academic learning, and wider employability skills, but do we shy away from 'ideas of planning',²² hoping they will re-emerge in their writing (and subsequent practice) without them entering into engaged debate or reflection about what is actually inside our head or inside theirs?

What next?

Motivated to explore this further, we are instigating, as a first step, a study of planning students – both undergraduate and postgraduate – studying at the University of West of England. This is to be a longitudinal study in order to track how students' initial motivations for studying planning and views on the ethos of planning relate to their early experiences in professional planning.

The aims of this study are to explore:

- o the reality of the perceived mismatch being reported in the wider literature;
- o how this reflects on teaching; and, critically,
- o what this tells us about contemporary planning practice and the future potential of this profession.

With this information, we aim to begin to address both the absence of knowledge in this area and the challenge that this knowledge may bring to our understanding, assumptions and aspirations for what planning is or what it may be.

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Notes

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- 7 See Barton Willmore's 'Town planning' webpage, at <http://bartonwillmore.co.uk/Services/Town-Planning>
- 8 *Planning 2020 – Final Report of the Raynsford Review of Planning in England. Executive Summary*. TCPA, Nov. 2018, p.2. www.tcpa.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=10b27df2-c77f-41c1-a46c-6c9d5b83ce6e
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- 13 A Lord and M Tewdwr-Jones: 'Getting the planners off our backs: questioning the post-political nature of English planning policy'. *Planning Practice & Research*, 2018, Vol. 33(3), 229-43

- 14 J Ferm and J Tomaney (Eds): *Planning Practice: Critical Perspectives from the UK*, Routledge, 2018, p.3
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