

Chapter 10

Conclusions – Planning in a Failed State

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Introduction

As we discussed in Chapter 1, this book was prompted by the publication of the *Planning White Paper* in August 2020, and the “radical” reform it proposed. That White Paper had forewords written by then Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, and then Secretary of State for [the Ministry of] Housing, Communities & Local Government, Robert Jenrick. To say that the landscape has shifted somewhat since then would be an understatement. The White Paper has now largely been abandoned, some of its contents included in a new Levelling Up & Regeneration Bill. The department of the UK Government responsible for planning has been renamed as the Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities. At the time of writing in February 2023, the Secretary of State in place at the head of that Department is Michael Gove who, precedent suggests, is unlikely to be in place when you read this; and there have been an astonishing six different Planning Ministers in the last 12 months. But most significantly, the UK has had three different Prime Ministers during this period, with Liz Truss replacing Boris Johnson on 6th September 2022, leading to a record-breaking short period of office before being replaced by Rishi Sunak on 25th October 2022. All of this means that the proposals in the Planning White Paper are of little relevance to the future of Planning in England. That does not mean, however, that this book is of no relevance – the opposite, in fact, is true, as its central ‘thesis’ that constant cycles of often ill-conceived central government reform and tinkering have failed to establish consistency and stability around planning seems more salient than ever.

The controversy generated by the Planning White Paper and the consequent loss of a by-election in Chesham and Amersham were arguably the beginning of the end for Boris Johnson’s premiership. Whilst he was ultimately dethroned by his party due to other factors too numerous to detail here, the inability of his

government to successfully introduce changes to the planning system illustrates neatly our argument that the “failure” of this book’s title is not that of planning but of the state within which planning operates, and the political party which has led that state for much of the last 40 years. The symbolic and rhetorical power of Planning in the UK goes far beyond what its legislative framework might suggest – it is variously seen as the cause of, and solution to, an enormous range of society’s problems, from poverty to obesity (Sturzaker & Lord, 2018).

More specifically, this book has provided a powerful critique of the period since 2010 in which the UK has been led by the Conservative party, and the often chaotic approach to planning which has characterised this time. There is little to suggest that the current Prime Minister will introduce any more coherent thinking to the system, with Sunak “caving in” (Allegretti, 2022) in an early battle with his backbenchers over housing targets in local plans. We can therefore expect the chaos to continue, but if an alternative is sought, this volume offers a clear view of what might need to change.

In the rest of this chapter we firstly summarise the findings of Chapters 2-9, identifying the key messages the authors of those chapters have drawn out. We then go on to look across those chapters and identify commonalities and differences, around four key themes – Rhetoric (of ministers and other politicians, and others); Rapidity (of reform and counter-reform to planning systems and processes); Resourcing (reflecting upon the gap between what is proposed or set down in legislation and reality, often due to systemic and systematic under-funding of planning); Regressive outcomes (often as a consequence of one or all of the preceding three).

From housing to infrastructure – the story of 12 years of Planning in a Failed State

Chapter 2: The (housing) numbers game

Since the latter decades of the 20th century there has been an annual shortfall in the number of new homes constructed relative to housing demand. The planning system has often been accused of being the primary cause of this by government of different political complexions. Chapter 2 examined the evidence which exists to back, or refute this claim.

The chapter begins with a stark reminder of the statistics around housing (un)affordability in England – whether owner occupation, private renting or social renting, the proportion of a household's income required to be spent on housing has increased since 2010, in some cases dramatically. There are of course various contributory factors for this. The planning system can only really influence supply, so this chapter focuses upon the numbers of housing delivered by the planning system relative to need/demand, and explores the extent to which it is fair to blame the planning system for any undersupply, returning to 1979 as a starting point for analysis. The analysis shows that house price, and housing unaffordability, grew fairly consistently between the 1970s and 1990s, with a sharper increase since that time, ameliorated slightly by the slump following the 2008 financial crash. Housing supply in England, meanwhile, has rarely exceeded 150,000 per annum since the 1980s, when the last remnants of local authority building died away after Margaret Thatcher's anti-state reforms.

A significant factor in recent times has been the *standard method* for calculating the need for housing in each local authority – the regional planning system which used to undertake this task was abolished in 2010 after being described as a “failed Soviet tractor style top-down” system (DCLG, 2010). After finding that local authorities were insufficiently compliant, the government introduced the standard method in 2018 to enforce a centralised target – this in turn decried by Liz Truss, short-lived Prime Minister, as a “top-down, Whitehall-inspired Stalinist” approach (Malnick, 2022). As noted above, Rishi Sunak is to make the targets

produced by the standard method advisory, allowing rural local authorities, where pressure for new homes is often highest, to deliver fewer homes if the target would “significantly change the character of an area” (Allegretti, 2022). This highlights the tension between centralism and localism explored in Chapter 3.

Chapter 2 concludes by reflecting upon the hollowness of housing targets in terms of considering housing as more than merely bricks and mortar, with the importance of a safe, secure and spacious home being emphasised by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chapter 3: Localism – the peccadillos of a panacea

Launched with much fanfare, as a new scale and alternative to the regional planning structures established in England under the New Labour governments of the 1990s and 2000s, localism’s most tangible effect on planning has been the rights conferred on local communities and businesses to prepare Neighbourhood Plans. With the government agenda for planning attempting to balance localism and centralism, Chapter 3 reflects on the legacies and lessons of almost a decade of experience of neighbourhood planning, and its future, which although as uncertain as every other aspect of planning reform under the current “administration”, appears broadly secure.

The chapter starts by reflecting on the green shoots of localism, the “sick-inducing” (Merrick, 2014) press conference between the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister of the 2010-2015 coalition government. The “programme for government” of that coalition expounded upon the need to distribute power to people, and the 2011 Localism Act was a key component of converting that rhetoric into law. The introduction of Neighbourhood Planning, along with the abolition of regional planning, was in turn the most important part of that legislation for planning. These changes were intended to free communities from what was described as an intensely top-down and bureaucratic approach to planning (for housing), and empower them to create imaginative and context-specific plans for the places in which they lived and worked, with the end result of permitting more (housing) development than under the previous system. As

Chapter 3, and many others, have demonstrated, this latter ambition was not realised, with the number of houses permitted and constructed showing no noticeable increase as a result of Neighbourhood Planning.

Chapter 3 goes on to explore what Neighbourhood Planning has actually achieved, drawing on updated quantitative evidence on the scale and demographic spread of Neighbourhood Plans. It shows that whilst there have now been a fairly large number of Neighbourhood Plans begun, and indeed completed (2700 and 1200 respectively), there are serious grounds for concern about the types of communities who are making most effective use of the powers in the Localism Act. Poorer communities are much less likely to begin the process of producing a Neighbourhood Plan, and equally unlikely to then progress that plan to completion. Reasons for this include the long-established tendency for wealthier individuals and communities to be more likely to engage in planning activity of any sort (Matthews & Hastings, 2012), and the pre-existing systems of governance in rural (generally wealthier) parts of England that give them a “head start” with Neighbourhood Planning. However, Chapter 3 also discusses other factors, such as the unequal impact of state spending due to “austerity” (Sturzaker & Nurse, 2020) and, drawing on our own recent work, the apparent tendency for local politicians in some places to impose additional barriers on attempts by deprived communities to prepare Neighbourhood Plans (Sturzaker et al., 2022).

Chapter 3 suggests that this inequity in Neighbourhood Plan coverage is problematic in itself, as it excludes some communities from full participation in their government (Arnstein, 1969); but is more troubling because it entrenches and exacerbates spatial inequality. The chapter concludes by suggesting that the latest proposed reforms to planning will do little to address this issue.

Chapter 4: Planning at the ‘larger than local’ scale – where next?

Since 2010 and the abolition of the regional scale of planning in England there have been different initiatives which have sought to address the ‘larger than local’ scale. Initially under the 2010 – 2015 Coalition government, an economically focussed and partnership governance model was privileged with

the establishment of Local Enterprise Partnerships with an economic development remit with weak ties to statutory planning (arrangements in other parts of the present UK remained more or less the same). In England, however, the 2010s saw a gradual ‘hardening’ of sub-regional governance arrangements in some places with the emergence of Combined Authorities (CAs), most focussed on city regional areas. In some instances, these have embarked on strategic planning processes under different powers and models, seen by some commentators as heralding a return to strategic planning reflection and capacity. However, the Planning White Paper and subsequent Levelling up and Regeneration Bill have little further to say on the strategic scale of planning. This chapter explored some of these issues based on the experience of the past decade and the current prospects for planning at the ‘larger than local scale’.

Chapter 4 first sets these changes to strategic planning within the broader context of the North-South divide, the persistent economic gap between the South East of England and Northern England, and the recurring attempts to address that gap. Perhaps curiously, one of the first acts of the 2010-2015 coalition government was to abolish regional planning, long seen as a tool to assist in addressing regional inequalities. Regional planning was, however, seen as undemocratic, so it is equally curious that its partial replacement, Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), were arguably even less accountable (Pugalis, 2011, Bentley et al., 2010). LEPs were followed by a series of experiments with different forms of sub-regional governance across England, including so-called “Metro Mayors”, City Deals and Combined Authorities. A key theme which unifies these experiments is their framing by, and reliance on, central government. None of them brought the tax-raising powers that some argue are essential for more effective sub-national governance.

There remains no sign of such powers in more recent changes, badged as part of the “Levelling up” agenda. Instead, Levelling up has involved numerous schemes of grants and other funds to towns and local authorities across England. As we go onto discuss, the transparency and equity of these funding allocations leaves a great deal to be desired, and it seems that for now the “pendulum” of British regionalism discussed in Chapter 4 has yet to swing back in the direction of more substantive changes to systems of

governance. Critical voices even argue that the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill will make matters much worse when it comes to planning at the larger than local scale “by abolishing the duty to co-operate and replacing it with a much weaker policy compliance test” (Ellis, 2022, p.247) and continuing the voluntary basis on which instruments like joint Spatial Development Strategies may be taken-up.

Chapter 5: PD Games – Death Comes to Planning

The extension of permitted development rights to make conversion of buildings to residential use easier presents a typical example of the faith in deregulation as a pathway towards aligning development with demand. But what have been the impacts of this experimentation? Has it resulted in good quality housing and what might be the impacts of any extension of such rights on residential quality? These issues are explored in Chapter 5 through a case study focussing upon health.

Chapter 5 explored how, beyond the bold claims for reform issued periodically by ministers over the last 12 years, fundamental changes to the secondary legislation which sets out much of the detail underpinning planning processes have made it much easier to convert buildings of varying types into housing. The General Permitted Development Order and Use Classes Order are examples of such secondary legislation. Introduced in 1948 to permit small scale development and allow local authorities to focus their attentions on more substantive issues, through a series of amendments in 2010, 2012, 2013, 2015 and 2016, the scope of the legislation has been significantly broadened. As with many of the other changes to planning analysed in this book, the extension of permitted development has been justified as a means of reducing bureaucracy and increasing housing supply. However, as Chapter 5 makes clear, in this context “bureaucracy” is vitally important in regulating the location and quality of homes, and much of the housing permitted by the recent changes is poor against both measures.

The chapter looks in particular at the implications for health of this example of deregulation, in relation to three factors that planning, and planners, have lost control over as a result of development not requiring

planning permission. The first of these is location, and evidence is drawn upon to show that many permitted development homes are poorly located in relation to green space, health services, shops or air quality. The second is space standards, and the consequence of the decision to exempt permitted development homes from such standards until 2021. Much of the housing built was therefore of a size that many consider to be inappropriately small. The third is the loss of the ability to use land value capture mechanisms, commonly used for “standard” developments in England, to pay for facilities to mitigate some of these problems.

The extension of permitted development, then, has manifestly reduced the quality of new homes built in England over the last decade, and meant that many of the poorest in society are forced to live in conditions that those with more choices would consider appalling.

Chapter 6: Building beauty? Place quality in the planning agenda

Place and housing quality are a perennial debate in England. Periodic commissions and research studies have highlighted the failings of governance and production systems, which appear to consistently underperform their roles in facilitating and delivering good design. But this failure is arguably rooted in the ebb and flow in design interest and focus at a government level. The design debate has a cyclical character, forever shifting from a position of strong governance oversight to the view that the market will find its own quality threshold, and back again. This chapter examines the ‘failure’ to deliver a consistent approach to place and housing quality over the last 10 years. This period is one in which a legacy of design oversight, by the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment, was jettisoned in favour of ‘market mechanisms’. Released from planning strictures, the market has been allowed to deliver the ‘slums of the future’ through the exercise of permitted development rights. But elsewhere, in the general market, the conservative ‘beauty’ aesthetic has been re-rooted in the form of the Office for Place, set up by the UK Government in 2021, which marks the normal cyclical return to design oversight, but one that leans heavily on classical urbanism delivered through design coding. The return of this oversight has been welcomed by

many, who view the Office for Place structure as something that can be evolved to correct at least some of the failings of design governance that have become apparent in the last decade.

The chapter starts and ends by reflecting upon the new *Office for Place* for England, and the increased use of codification in relation to the design of new development. As with some other topics discussed in this book, these ideas are not new, and reflect another “pendulum” of changing attitudes and structures of planning. From ancient China, through ancient Rome, the Renaissance and the Great Fire of London, to the garden cities of the early Twentieth Century, design coding has been used to guide the development of urban form. Likewise, the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) was a precursor of the Office for Place, seeking to improve the quality of development in England.

CABE was one victim of the “bonfire of the Quangos” (Siddique, 2010) of the 2010-2015 coalition government, seen as being part of the bureaucracy the incoming administration was determined to slim down. Of course, as noted above, without such ‘bureaucracy’ it is hard to control or guide the quality of development, and the emphasis on increasing the quantity of (housing) development since 2010 has seen a diminution of quality of design. The abolition of regional government, discussed at more length in other chapters, was also deleterious for design, as the Regional Development Agencies had promoted and invested in design. Various studies, including those undertaken by Carmona et al (2020), have highlighted the impacts of these changes and the poor quality of much new development. Chapter 6 refers to another recurring trend, the blaming of local authorities for problems caused by national government, but by 2018 the pendulum had swung back in favour of more control over design. The Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission (2018-2020) led to the creation of the Office for Place and the creation of a National Model Design Code.

How this centralisation and codification can be squared with localism and the ongoing emphasis on communities being involved in planning decision making has yet to become clear, as is the conflict between permitted development (discussed in Chapter 5) and design quality.

Chapter 7: Zoning in or zoning out?

The critique of planning and new proposals to reform the planning system and “rethink planning from first principles” led in 2020 to proposals for the introduction of a regulatory zonal planning system, which it was claimed would create a faster and better planning system than the existing discretionary approach. But are these proposals based on an oversimplified understanding of the differences between discretionary and regulatory models, neglecting, for example, the negotiation between stakeholders and the flexibility which also exists in regulatory planning systems?

Chapter 7 places proposals for a zoning approach within the broader context of an increase in the use of rule-based instruments in the otherwise discretionary English planning system. These include the permitted development rights covered in Chapter 5 and the design codes discussed in Chapter 6. As Chapter 7 notes, the increasing prevalence of such instruments reflects a belief that they will result in quicker, more certain decisions for developers and better quality outcomes. The chapter explores this belief by comparing the English experience with the zoning systems more common in other parts of Europe, starting by understanding how “exceptional” the English approach actually is. Ostensibly the discretion offered by the English system, with most decisions taken on a case-by-case basis, is starkly different from a zoning approach. However, in practice, zoning plans are heavily reliant on the ability of decision-makers to grant exemptions in order to respond to inevitable changes in conditions. The extensive use of such exemptions, argues Chapter 7, may give local planning authorities more discretion than in the English system.

The key argument, therefore is not a question of discretionary vs. zoning planning in principle, but how the system is used, and whether the aim is one of ensuring development quality at sufficient quantity in the right place. Through detailed exploration of how planning works in Germany, the Netherlands and Switzerland, Chapter 7 reveals that these systems do deliver on this aim, in contrast to the English system (the housing outcomes of which are discussed in Chapter 2). Rather than the type of system in place, the

bigger difference between those countries and England is that in the former, local authorities retain more power over development – until and unless they approve a land use plan that accommodates the proposals of developers, development cannot take place. Whilst development rights are usually granted where there is a demand for development, there is significantly less scope for developers to ignore the plans of local authorities by appealing to the government (in the form of the Planning Inspectorate in England).

Chapter 8: Planning and the Environment - Nothing Newt Under the Sun?

The 2020 proposed reforms of planning were launched with a critique of the impacts of environmental regulation on the speed of development – the idea of ‘counting newts’ as a constraint on development has been a popular trope in this recurring critique, used again by the ex-Prime Minister Boris Johnson. Challenges to environmental protection have been partly allied with the decision to leave the EU. Claims that this would result in a ‘Green Brexit’ have always been met with caution by environmental planners and campaigners. Now it seems the same narrative of ‘constraint’ warranting deregulation will be deployed domestically as the focus changes from the effects of EU environmental legislation on planning.

Chapter 8 begins by acknowledging that it is not only the UK which has failed to adequately address major environmental problems – this is a problem in many countries, with state environmental institutions reduced in power and capacity since the late 1990s, a trend exacerbated by the 2008 financial crash. Planning, in the UK and elsewhere, emerged from public health and environmental concerns, and planning now has a wide environmental role. In England, developmental objectives have become the focus of planning systems, with environmental factors reduced to caveats in relation to those objectives – development can take place subject to certain environmental constraints. The broader transparency and openness of planning to participation and engagement is also critical to how well it considers environmental issues. The substantive analysis of Chapter 8 is divided into two chronological sections: 2010-2016 and 2016-2022.

The first period can be characterised by the 2010-2016 Prime Minister David Cameron's call to "get rid of all the green crap". Through this period, planning was scapegoated as a barrier to growth, with, as we have discussed in other chapters, deregulation and cuts to budgets seen as ways to reduce bureaucracy. Local authorities and other state actors had their ability to deal with climate change and other environmental issues cut, decisions which seem staggeringly foolhardy at the time of writing, as summer temperatures in the UK break records. The dismantling of policies for promoting zero carbon homes, and the better insulation that involved, seems likewise profoundly unwise. Chapter 8 argues that one of the few brakes on the UK government going yet further was the European Union, and the requirements of the UK's membership thereof to adhere to various standards on habitats, air quality and impact assessment.

The second period, since the UK's decision to leave the EU, is therefore characterised by the extent of change possible since the brake of EU membership is no longer in place. The *Planning for the Future* White Paper of 2020, the inspiration for this book, presents environmental issues as primarily a local, aesthetic concern rather than the life-supporting processes that are vital for human health and happiness. It is as yet unclear how strong wider processes of environmental governance, post-Brexit, will be; nor of course how these will interact with whatever planning system emerges from the latest change in Prime Minister. The chapter identifies critical issues such as biodiversity loss, the nature crisis and net zero as being central to these questions.

Chapter 9: Stuck on infrastructure?

A strong sub-theme of the debate on planning is that relating to infrastructure with comparisons being made in the press with the it takes to build projects in other jurisdictions. The infrastructure planning regime has been reformed in response. However, is planning the real reason? The HS2 project is due to be complete in 2040 which will be some 76 years after the Shinkansen system started operating in Japan; 76 years before that was 1888 the year of the first "Race to the North" as operators of the West and East Coast Main Lines in Britain accelerated their services between London and Edinburgh; and 76 years before

that was 1812 the Middleton Railway, serving coal pits at Leeds in England, became the first to use steam locomotives successfully in regular service. These are long time scales. Chapter 9 questions whether planning is really the cause of this?

The chapter reviews the evidence underpinning claims that investment in infrastructure such as high-speed rail can help address regional inequalities. There is unquestionably some evidence that it can, though this is dependent on factors including the adaptability of regional economies. The chapter concludes that *intra*-regional inequality is perhaps as important as *inter*-regional, yet is rarely a focus of discussions on infrastructure. Chapter 9 then traces the evolution of HS2, noting the absence of strategic regional government (discussed in more depth in Chapter 4), which would otherwise be a key factor in the extent to which infrastructure delivers regional economic benefits. The wider context of rail infrastructure, specifically the poor and worsening quality of existing rail lines, and the lack of any coherent plan to address this, is highlighted as a major issue; and whilst, as the chapter acknowledges transport investment alone will not rebalance the UK economy, such “boring” spending on local infrastructure is essential. Similarly, though decentralisation and devolution are welcome, fragmentation challenges must be overcome to avoid uncoordinated policies between national level infrastructure planning decisions like HS2 and territorial planning and placemaking at intraregional scale. Transport, and HS2, must be seen as one element of a comprehensive approach – it is safe to say that there is little evidence of such an approach amongst the policy announcements and interventions of the last 12 years.

In this section we have summarised the findings of Chapters 2-9 of this book. Now we look across those chapters to identify cross-cutting themes and recurring findings. We organise these into four sections:

- Rhetoric – the use by government ministers and others of powerful language, often critical of the planning system and/or the planners who work within it, to justify the changes they wish to make to how planning operates. The use of discourse to justify the actions of politicians is of course *de rigueur* – politicians who did not make bombastic claims would be extremely unusual. We highlight the use of

language here because it reinforces a clear pattern of “attack” (Lord & Tewdwr-Jones, 2014) upon planner and planning, which we have suggested elsewhere contributes to poorer planning outcomes (Sturzaker & Lord, 2018). It is therefore far from harmless.

- **Rapidity** – the speed with which changes to legislation and policy have been introduced since 2010, often replicated by the speed of further changes to remedy ill thought through or executed reforms. This characteristic can be seen from the earliest days of the 2010-2015 coalition government, when the wide-ranging Localism & Decentralisation Bill (later the Localism Act 2011) was introduced with no preceding white or green paper, something which was at the time unusual. This pattern has continued, with real impacts on planning – changes to planning which are then amended or withdrawn have significant implications for local authorities trying to implement national policy, who may waste many months on drafting local plans, for example.
- **Resourcing** – Across the chapters in this book we have heard about ambitious plans from the UK Government for planning in England. The same is true of course for many other policy sectors over the last 12 years, from education to health. In nearly all instances, however, the parallel programme of “austerity” which has been implemented has severely limited the opportunities for delivery on these plans. Cuts to local government budgets of 86% over this period have meant that the grand promises have not yielded results on anywhere near the scale promised.
- **Regressive outcomes** – From the recent claims made around “Levelling up”, back through the preceding decade’s talk of rebalancing the UK, ministers have claimed that the changes they are making will improve lives and outcomes for all across diverse places. This is unsurprising – explicitly stating that things would get worse for many people, particularly the poor, is an unlikely vote-winner. However, a consequence of the above three recurring factors, along with other drivers, including seemingly ideology and electoral tactics, have in fact had this result. Challenges such as Brexit have no doubt exacerbated this notably impacting hardest places that were already ‘left behind’, but even notwithstanding that decision, there is evidence from multiple policy areas that the consequence of many of the changes to planning since 2010 has been to make the poor poorer.

We now expand upon each of these points.

Rhetoric

The first thing to note here is the striking similarity between the language being used in 2010 with that deployed today. The Conservative Party's Planning "Green Paper", published in February 2010, referred to the planning system as being "almost wholly negative and adversarial... [creating] bureaucratic barriers rather than enabling communities to formulate a positive vision of their future development" (Conservative Party, 2010, p. 1). It said there would be "Radical change" in order that "Communities should be given the greatest possible opportunity to have their say" (ibid.). 10 years later, Boris Johnson's foreword to the Planning White paper, presumably unconsciously, included uncanny echoes of that language. He described the planning system as "outdated and ineffective", delivering "nowhere near enough homes in the right places". He too promised "radical reform" to "give you a greater say over what gets built in your community", and a planning system that, by removing discretion, would be "simpler, clearer and quicker" (MHCLG, 2020, p. 6).

The Secretaries of State in charge of planning in 2010 and 2020 were also saying very similar things. In 2010, Eric Pickles was effusive about how the Government were freeing people from the constraints of the previous planning system – "Communities will no longer have to endure the previous government's failed Soviet tractor style top-down planning targets... regional plans... were a national disaster that robbed local people of their democratic voice, alienating them and entrenching opposition against new development" (DCLG, 2010). In 2020, Robert Jenrick, in his own foreword to the White Paper, likewise promised that the Government's reforms would ensure that "Communities will be reconnected to a planning process that is supposed to serve them, with residents more engaged over what happens in their areas" (MHCLG, 2020, p. 8).

Specific elements of critique have included that “Planning ‘isn’t brain surgery’” (Carpenter, 2011), so should be opened up to the public; yet, nine years later, the White Paper concluded that the planning system “is too complex” (MHCLG, 2020, p. 10). As we have discussed throughout this book, housing is seemingly an obsession with the Conservative party, with Pickles in 2010 proclaiming that the reforms promoted at that time would increase housebuilding. The White Paper, however, identified the fact that “planning simply does not lead to enough homes being built” (MHCLG, 2020, p. 20). Another obsession is bureaucracy, Pickles in 2011 advocating “unshackling developers from a legacy of bureaucratic planning”; CABE being accused of operating as a “design police” (Sharro, 2010); Johnson decrying the “newt-counting delays in our system”, and promising to “scythe through red tape” in 2020.

At the same time, aware of the enormous symbolic power of the environment, ministers are enduringly keen to emphasise their protection thereof. David Cameron claimed his was “the greenest government ever” (cited in Carter and Clements 2013). In 2015, extension of permitted development was promoted because it would help in “protecting our precious green belt.” (MHCLG, 2015), and the 2020 White Paper stated that reforms would protect “our unmatched architectural heritage and natural environment” (MHCLG, 2020, p. 10).

A neutral observer might wonder how it is possible for planning to be simultaneously faster, more inclusive, less bureaucratic, more certain, greener and yet deliver more housing. As we have seen throughout this book, despite their grand claims, ministers have yet to devise a planning system which does indeed deliver on all those fronts.

Rapidity

As noted above, a pattern of quick, and perhaps ill-thought out, changes to planning and governance changes was set in 2010 when the Localism & Decentralisation Bill was published without a preceding White Paper. This was criticised implicitly by the CLG Committee (House of Commons, 2011, p. 18), and

explicitly by others including Friends of the Earth (Parliament.UK, 2011). This resulted in a lack of broad consultation on the overall approach sought by the government, and there was a similar lack of debate on the bill itself (<https://www.theguardian.com/law/2011/aug/02/localism-bill-debate-rush>). A great deal of the detail on aspects of planning reform, including Neighbourhood Planning, was contained in “secondary” legislation which was published later, and/or amendments to previous legislation. This meant that the Neighbourhood Planning process was “complex” (Sturzaker & Gordon, 2017), ironic given the claim mentioned above by a minister that planning is not “brain surgery”.

This complexity is echoed in other aspects of planning. Permitted development rights, as discussed in Chapter 5, have been expanded in each of the years of 2010, 2012, 2013, 2015, 2016, 2020 and 2021. Keeping up with this pace of change is not just a problem for planners like us who have to teach our students about the constantly changing landscape of planning law! Needless to say, this does not make planning any easier to engage with for the public, and planning practitioners themselves have found it increasingly difficult to navigate the system. Commenting on the frequency of amendments even to the primary legislation establishing the planning system, Pritchard (2022, p.244) thus notes that it is “very difficult for a non-lawyer to understand exactly what is being amended by any particular clause and to what effect”. The standard method for establishing housing need is another area which has seen considerable change since it was introduced in 2018 – with a “clarification” in 2019, changes proposed in 2020 and further suggestions that it would be amended again, perhaps in response to political pressure from Conservative MPs (Donnelly, 2020). As noted above, the new UK Prime Minister has made the targets emerging from the standard method optional, which evidence suggests will see many local authorities seeking to reduce the number of homes they build.

The context within which planning takes place, particularly at the “above-local” scale, has also been subject to waves of change. The regional scale favoured by the Labour government of 1997-2010 was rapidly de-prioritised and de-funded by the abolition of, *inter alia*, Regional Spatial Strategies, Government Offices for the Regions, Regional Development Agencies and Regional Assemblies. Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs)

were a partial replacement for these, intended to be led by the private sector and with boundaries determined by the places involved ostensibly reflecting ‘functional geographies’, not imposed from above. “Regional” remains a word scarcely seen in policy or rhetoric, but the anomaly of England being the only country in Europe without any form of required as opposed to voluntary strategic planning, and the problems this causes, was quite quickly remedied. An amendment to the Localism Act 2011 allowed for the creation of “city deals” between city regions and the government, which could involve strategic planning. City deals were signed from 2012 onwards. As noted in Chapter 4, the relationship between these and elected Police and Crime Commissioners (2012 onwards), has never been clear, with the elected “Metro Mayors” from 2017 onwards added to the complexity. At the inter-regional level, initiatives such as the Northern Powerhouse, Transport for the North and the Midlands Engine, promoted from around 2014 onwards, have briefly sparkled but lacked proper financial support and, certainly in the case of Transport and the North, have been “de-fanged” if they became too influential. The latest proposed legislation, the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill also leaves strategic planning at the larger than local scale as a “purely voluntary pursuit outside of London” (Pritchard, 2022, p.245), meaning that “the question of how to effectively manage the key strands of strategic geography in England, let alone the development of a national strategy have been ignored” (Ellis, 2022, p. 246).

Resourcing

“Non ringfenced government grants to local authorities have fallen from £32.2 billion in 2009/10 to £4.5 billion in 2019/20” (Arnold & Stirling 2018, p. 1). This has fallen further since then, despite the “Levelling up” funds discussed in Chapter 4. Arnold & Stirling predicted a funding gap of over £25 billion by 2024/25. Whilst state spending has fallen across the board in the period since 2010, the cuts to local authority budgets have been particularly severe – between 2009/10 and 2018/19, government departmental spending was cut by 11%, but the budget for the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (now Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities) was cut by an astonishing 86% (Arnold & Stirling 2018). These cuts were not spread equally across the country, as we return to below, and nor were

they spread equally across local authority departments. Unsurprisingly, local government has sought to protect the most vulnerable, seeking to limit the cuts to social care, education, etc. Planning, conversely, has seen more significant cuts in spending, one study estimating a reduction of 42% between 2009/10 and 2017/18 (Kenny, 2019). Some changes to planning law and policy have reduced local authority budgets further – permitted development legislation, by removing some development from planning control, also removes the requirement to pay a fee for consideration of a planning application. At the same time as the cuts noted here, local authorities are being asked to do more, in all these areas and more – Arnold & Stirling (2018) highlight additional duties in relation to public health, social care and homelessness, all of which are likely to receive a higher priority than planning.

These reductions in budgets and increased workload have, of course, impacted upon different aspects of planning. In Chapter 2 we read about the constraints placed on local authorities to plan properly for the optimum type, quality and location of housing. In Chapter 3, the limited spread of Neighbourhood Planning was partly ascribed to an under-resourcing of the system since its inception. At the strategic scale, the Mayor of Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham, was eloquent about the reliance of combined authorities on central funding and their lack of capacity to generate revenue. Diminished local authority planning teams, perhaps now without any form of specialist design expertise, means local scrutiny of design is impaired; likewise, in the absence of a body such as CABE, this gap cannot be filled through other means. An alarming 2/3 of local authorities have cut back on their climate change activity according to Chapter 8, and again the abolition of oversight bodies such as the Sustainable Development Commission exacerbates the issue. Overall, the picture is not encouraging in general, and particularly gloomy for those living in more deprived communities.

Regressive outcomes

The significant cuts to central and local government spending discussed in the preceding section have not been evenly distributed across the country, indeed far from it. Hastings et al (2015) and Lowndes and

Gardner (2016) are amongst those who have plotted the regressive nature of cuts, with more deprived local authorities seeing sharper reductions in budgets. This has had the effect of reducing the “premium” on expenditure per capita once enjoyed by the most deprived quintile of local authorities from 46% to 19% (Arnold & Stirling 2018, p. 3). When he was Chancellor of the Exchequer, the present Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, was recorded boasting about this in Tunbridge Wells, one of the more affluent parts of England¹, making explicit what has seemingly been an implicit aim of government policy since 2010. What have been the impacts of this approach in relation to planning and development?

Poor quality housing is a characteristic of England, with inadequate insulation, small rooms and lack of access to high quality outdoor space problems that afflict many of us. As with many other parts of life, these problems are worse if you are poor – the poorest have less choice about where they live, and appear to be the main target for some of the worse permitted development conversions of offices, etc. In turn, they are the most exposed to problems such as the impacts of climate change or COVID-19, having homes which are less resilient and smaller, and in locations such as industrial estates. This leads to worse health outcomes, in turn bringing, alongside the obvious problems for those individuals affected, more pressure on local authority budgets.

The cuts to those budgets discussed above were intended to be eased by new sources of funding such as the Towns Fund or the Levelling up Fund. However, as discussed in Chapter 4, these funds have, to an almost ludicrous degree, been allocated to areas suffering less from extant budget cuts. 87% of Towns fund allocations have gone to areas with Conservative MPs, seemingly in direct conflict with advice from civil servants. The Levelling Up Fund, likewise, has seen funding going to Conservative seats, including that of the now Prime Minister, one of the least deprived places in England. As Chapter 4 concludes, this approach gives the lie to any notion of true Levelling Up, inevitably meaning that some places will remain “Left Behind”.

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2022/aug/05/video-emerges-of-rishi-sunak-admitting-to-taking-money-from-deprived-areas>

There are limited tools available to planners to try and redress the balance, as a consequence of all that has been discussed in this chapter, indeed this book. Neighbourhood Planning, one of the flagship planning policies of the Localism Act 2011, has been shown to benefit those who are wealthier in various ways. The lack of any statutory strategic planning across most of England means that the tools that may historically have been available to allocate development across local authority boundaries are likewise absent.

The net result of all this is that the disadvantaged are losing out and not only is planning not helping, it is in some instances, due to the centrally determined resource constraints and policy contradictions that planners have to labour under, actively making things worse.

Conclusions

The *Open Source Planning* “Green Paper” of 2010 (Conservative Party, 2010) contained ambitious proposals for radical changes to planning at every scale, from national to community. This was accompanied by rhetoric advocating a move to a “post-bureaucratic age” in relation to planning and other functions of government (Cameron, 2009). Perhaps inevitably, upon collision with the weight of that bureaucracy and the history of planning legislation stretching back more than 100 years, those proposals were watered down. Nevertheless, the Localism Act 2011 and many subsequent pieces of primary and secondary legislation did enact significant changes to the structures and processes of planning. So the planning system in place at the time of writing at the end of 2022 is quite different from that of May 2010 when the Conservative party came to power.

This in itself is as it should be – we agree with the following, expressed so cogently by the Uthwatt Committee of 1942:

Town and country planning is not an end in itself; it is the instrument by which to secure that the best use is made of the available land in the interests of the community as a whole. By nature it cannot be static. It must advance with the condition of society it is designed to serve

(Uthwatt, 1942, p. 12).

Neither ourselves, nor any of the authors of the contributions to this book, are zealous defenders of some previous configuration of planning laws and policies – we firmly believe that planning must change as society changes. We do, however, hold that certain principles must be at the core of whatever approach to planning society determines is appropriate. These include that planning must consider both strategic and tactical matters (i.e. that there should be some form of above-local or strategic planning); that local communities must be given a strong voice but that there should be checks and balances to avoid the “tyranny of the majority”; that progressive outcomes which balance different interests and policy objectives should be the aim of every planning decision made; and that all of this must be appropriately resourced by the state. These principles are, we suggest, widely understood and agreed upon by planning scholars around the world.

It is our view, supported by the evidence in this book and studies of planning, local government and related fields, that the last 12 years represent an unprecedented failure of the UK Government to design and implement a functioning planning system. In relation to the first three of the “four Rs” we have discussed in this chapter – Rhetoric, Rapidity of Reform, and Resourcing – ministers have repeatedly made poor decisions and made the jobs of planners harder than they already were. This has in turn greatly exacerbated the fourth R – Regressive outcomes.

Whether by accident or design, the Conservative-led UK governments of 2010-2015, 2015-2017, 2017-2019 and 2019 onwards have consistently undermined principles of effective planning, to the extent that some have argued that the planning settlement of the Town & Country Planning Act of 1947 has effectively been destroyed (Ellis, 2021). In that context, optimistic souls might have hoped that the radical nature of the

2020 Planning White Paper might have led to an exciting re-imagining of planning in England. However, as others have pointed out, the White Paper was asking “the wrong answers to the wrong questions” (Booth et al. 2020). As we have shown in this book, zoning and the other proposed, and instituted, reforms to planning in England seem unlikely to address the long term issues the nation faces.

We do not wish to finish this book on an entirely gloomy note – despite the catalogue of failings we have outlined in this text, there is room for optimism. There are many ideas out there which could contribute to a re-imagining of planning – from the Town & Country Planning Association’s Raynsford Review² to the Royal Town Planning Institute’s Plan the World we Need campaign³. What is needed is a successful, not failing, state that can devote the time and energy needed to reinvigorating the planning project. We can only hope that at some point soon this becomes the reality. In the meantime, we will continue to work within the cracks of the system we have and making the case for a better alternative.

Epilogue – After 2022...It would be hard to sign-off a volume such as this without commenting on events since the first draft of the text was completed in August 2022. In this time the UK has seen the fleeting premiership of Liz Truss and the economic turmoil and fallout from the ‘mini budget of her Chancellor Kwasi Kwarteng. Meanwhile her replacement Rishi Sunak has vaunted the benefits of a new agreement with the EU on Northern Ireland as it places the region in an “unbelievably special position” with access to both the UK and European Union markets” making it the “world’s most exciting economic zone” - a privilege the whole UK enjoyed before the ‘Brexit’ he campaigned for! As regards the Kwarteng ‘mini budget’, many commentators have this linked to the ‘hard’ application of the economic prescriptions of some of the same think tanks that have helped to construct and sustain the narrative of planning failure introduced in the first chapter. Commenting on the Kwarteng mini-budget, Mark Littlewood of the free-market think tank the Institute of Economic Affairs, for example, excitedly gushed that “This isn’t a trickle-down budget, it’s a boost-up budget. The government has announced a radical set of policies to increase

² <https://tcpa.org.uk/resources/the-raynsford-review-of-planning/>

³ <https://www.rtpi.org.uk/new/our-campaigns/plan-the-world-we-need/>

Britain's prosperity" (IEA, 2022). Back in the real world it was subsequently reported that between the date of the 'boost-up' mini budget announcement on 23 September 2022 and Friday 14 October the Bank of England spent around £65 billion to try and restore some stability to Britain's bond market. However, within weeks of this reputation shredding internationally humiliating fiasco, in response to a speech to the CBI by new PM Rishi Sunak, ,Matthew Lesh (2022), Head of Public Policy at the IEA Institute of Economic Affairs was opining that "Sunak entirely failed to discuss the *single biggest handbrake on our prosperity*: Britain's broken planning system" which "hampers the construction of infrastructure, factories, lab space and housing, which are all essential to innovation and growth" (added *emphases*). It seems that one cannot keep an opaquely funded free-marketeering think tank down and that planning in particular is always kept on stand-by to be wheeled-out as and when needed for any "look at that guy!" moments designed to distract attention from deeper and more egregious failures of government policy. This example also serves to finally remind us that, whilst the chapters above have been critical of the record of governments since 2010, the seemingly perennial narrative of planning failure is not solely promulgated by a given administrations or by one party. Wolf (2023) in reporting on two recent reports on the state of the UK's regional economy/ies -

[Tackling the UK's regional economic inequality](#), co-authored by former Labour Party Shadow Chancellor, Ed Balls (Stansbury, Turner, Balls, 2023) and *Capital losses: The role of London in the UK's productivity puzzle* from the Centre for Cities (Rodrigues and Bridgett, 2023) - notes that their "analyses do come up with one common conclusion: the country needs a radical liberalisation of controls on land use". Meanwhile the Labour Party's 5 Missions for a Better Britain refer to "Updating our planning system to remove barriers to investment in new industries" (Labour Party, 2023). It seems clear that regardless of what the future days hold the themes explored in this book will retain their relevance. Whilst needing to remain positive about well-considered proposals for change, planners will also need to be on their guard against taking the fall for any failings for which they are not responsible, and which not infrequently arise from ill-conceived centrally directed planning policies whose impacts they have warned about.

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