

Accepted by Planning Practice & Research

‘Clock-watching and box-ticking’: British Local Authority Planners and Performance Targets

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Abstract

The speed of the statutory planning system has concerned UK Governments for decades. The Labour Government of 1997-2010 placed particular emphasis on increasing the efficiency of public services through performance targets. Whilst the subsequent Coalition Government of 2010-2015 removed many targets, those measuring the speed of planning application processing were kept. Empirical material exploring how British local authority planners responded to these targets suggests they have both restricted and empowered professionals and, whilst changes to practice have occurred, professional identities have remained more resilient. This contradictory picture highlights the importance of considering the role of frontline professionals in implementing reforms.

Key Words

Planning, Targets, Audit, Public Sector Reform, Great Britain, Efficiency, Institutionalism

Running Title

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Targets, planning and ‘time-thieves’

In October 2009, the BBC reported that British television presenter Noel Edmonds had been observed driving his personal ‘London cab’ in bus lanes in Bristol with a sign on the back of the vehicle saying ‘Action Against Time-thieves’. Apparently Edmonds had launched a campaign “against people who waste his time”, including the local authority officers who had designated the bus lanes on the routes Edmonds wished to drive along (BBC News, 2009: online). The striking image of a ‘time-thief’ appeals to a widespread popular imagination of public service bureaucracy, an image which has come to dominate public discourse in the UK in the last decade. This includes planning, with former Prime Minister Tony Blair telling the CBI in 2006, “Planning, hopelessly bureaucratic” (in LGC, 2006: online), and current Prime Minister David Cameron announcing “we are taking on the enemies of enterprise...The town hall officials who take forever with those planning decisions that can be make or break for a business - and the investment and jobs that go with it” (2011: online).

Concern with the speed of the public sector, including the local authority planning system, has been a significant policy imperative for central government in the UK for years and clearly resonates with a wider international trend whereby traditional welfare states are being reshaped and reimagined in accordance with the tenants of the New Public Management (NPM) (Clarke, 2004). NPM can be understood as a highly normative corporate archetype of public sector organisation quite distinct from the traditional public administration models. A particular emphasis is placed on ‘efficiency’, which has come to be seen as the *sine non qua* of public services, in

contrast to more traditional goals of equity, democracy deliberation and social justice (Du Gay, 2004). This clearly has wide-ranging implications, not just for the citizen-consumers of public services, but also for the professionals providing these services.

According to the NPM, where services cannot be marketized to increase efficiency, managerialist practices should be adopted (Sanderson, 2001). A key tool of managerialism is the use of performance targets, which were used extensively by the 1997-2010 UK Labour Government. Top-down targets were imposed across the public sector, and particularly in local government (Cowell and Martin, 2003). For local authority planning, the overriding concern was to use targets to speed up the system, which was widely seen as too slow at processing applications, too variable between authorities in terms of efficiency, and causing delays which could then threaten competitiveness in a modern global economy (DTLR, 2001).

Such concern with the timeliness of the statutory planning system manifested itself in the form of targets for the percentage of minor planning applications processed in 8 weeks and major applications processed in 13 weeks applied in England, Scotland and Wales. These targets can actually be traced back to a 1975 government report, the Dobry Report (Booth, 2002), but assumed a new significance under the Labour Government by becoming part of the wider Best Value (BV) indicator set of targets for local government introduced in 1999 (Allmendinger *et al.*, 2003a), increasing the publicity of the performance by local authorities against targets. Furthermore, in England, the targets became heavily incentivized through a link to both financial rewards (the 'Planning Delivery Grant' or PDG) for good performance and penalties in terms of the threat of central government intervention in poorly performing local planning departments (the so-called 'Standard Authority' designation). After 2002,

planning target performance also counted towards the government's overall assessment of a local authority under the 'Comprehensive Performance Assessment' (CPA) process (Allmendinger *et al.*, 2003b).

Concerted effort from central government to speed-up the planning system thus became a key part of a wider modernisation agenda. Whilst a number of government-funded studies questioned the overall effectiveness of these time-based development management targets (see Egan, 2004 and Killian Pretty, 2008), they continued to be measured throughout the Labour Government's period in office. The Coalition Government of 2010-2015 then swept-away CPA and many central government imposed targets, but the speed of planning application determination remained a measure on their 'single data list' of targets in England (DCLG, 2011) and continues to be measured and reported on in Scotland and Wales as well (Scottish Government 2015; Welsh Government, 2015). Although the planning performance targets thus exist across Great Britain, post-devolution, the greatest concern with the speed of planning has been evident in England: whilst the reward of PDG was abolished by the Coalition Government, the threat of intervention for poor performing authorities was strengthened, with a new power for 'special measures' to be applied so applicants could submit directly to central government's Planning Inspectorate and bypass poorly performing authorities (DCLG, 2014).

The impact of targets on the public sector in general has received a great deal of academic attention, but there is comparatively little literature on the impacts of targets on the planning profession (Carmona and Sieh, 2005). This is a significant gap because it is important that planning scholars take account of the socio-political context in which planning is embedded, because the particular emphasis on targets under Labour provide

a case study of a state modernisation agenda with significant implications for frontline professionals, and because of the continued currency of concern about the speed of the statutory planning system in both the UK and other countries. Furthermore, there are very few accounts from frontline planning practitioners themselves, unlike other areas of the public sector such as policing, where a number of officers have written books about their everyday experience of the impact of targets (WPC Bloggs, 2007; PC Copperfield, 2006).

This paper aims to address the gap concerning the impact of targets on the everyday professional life and autonomy of frontline local authority planners by examining their reaction to the time-based performance targets in Britain during the period 2004-08. The paper draws on extensive original empirical material which illuminates how auditing culture interacts with professional activities, which also reshape planners own perspectives of reform. In doing so, I aim to contribute less to the debate specifically about measuring quality in planning (see Allmendinger, 2009) but more generally to consider what the example of targets reveals about the agency of public sector professionals in responding to managerialist reforms which continue to reshape the delivery of planning in the UK and elsewhere. The paper first considers how understanding performance targets as part of a wider process of public sector reform raises important questions about the agency of frontline professionals in practice, before considering the response of British local authority planners to performance targets.

Frontline professionals in an audit society

The growth of the ‘management by numbers’ (Hood, 2007) approach to governing has been termed an ‘audit explosion’ by Power (1999) who contends that we are seeing the rise of an ‘audit society’. The introduction of targets rooted in performance

measurement systems from the private sector tradition of productivity management by New Labour was part of a remaking of the state as one dominated by the economic rationality of managerialism in place of bureau-professionalism (Cochrane, 2004).

There is considerable academic debate about the desirability of targets in the public sector in general (Hood, 2007; McLean *et al.*, 2007; Andrews *et al.*, 2003) and in planning specifically (Wong and Watkins, 2009; Carmona and Sieh, 2005; Houghton, 1997). Often, the literature presents a monolithic picture of deprofessionalisation, of professionals undermined by the rise of managerialism (Duyvendak *et al.*, 2006), with concern targets commodify work and lead to perverse consequences which may actually undermine the services they are meant to improve (Adcroft and Willis, 2005; Noordegraaf, 2006).

Some studies of the implementation of managerialist reforms, however, have found that there is an active struggle for compliance at the frontline of the state and spaces are presented for alternative meanings and forms of practice (Davies and Thomas, 2003; Clarke and Newman, 1997). Indeed, Kolsaker suggests managerialism does not fully displace professionalism, with professionals able to preserve ‘autonomous niches’ (2008: 513). This links to a broader concern of public administration theorists with the agency of frontline professionals in responding to policy change: many scholars have argued that policies are made and remade as they are implemented through processes of mediation, negotiation and modification (Ellis, 2011). Thus, understanding targets as a part of public sector reform may offer differing perspectives to those scholars who have tended to think of them more in isolation as a tool of government.

A particular concern appears to surround the agency and autonomy of frontline professionals when public sector reform is implemented. In studying local government modernisation, Vivien Lowndes (2005) uses the framework of ‘institutionalism’, arguing convincingly for its appropriateness in the face of the conceptual challenge of competing narratives of change of local government which highlight both resistance and acceptance of NPM style reforms. In this context, institutions are not simply administrative and political organisations but formal and informal rules, norms, customs and practices which guide and constrain an actor’s behaviour (Lowndes and Wilson, 2003). The performance regime in planning might thus be understood as institutions, as might also the planning profession, the public service ethos, and what Stewart (2000: 43) calls ‘the inherited world of local government’.

Central to institutionalism is an attempt to understand the relationship between the individual and the setting for determining behaviour, with institutions constraining behaviour yet also being changed incrementally (Peters, 1999); a dialectic relationship where actors are both framed by forces imposing structuring imperatives on social relations but also themselves actively constitute and change those structures, making and remaking institutions on a daily basis (Healey, 2007). Attempts at reform may prove difficult as new institutions are hijacked or resisted by those benefiting from existing arrangements or seeing new rules as hostile to their interests. More generally, new rules will be adapted to local environments, organisations and groups which may all have capacity to absorb co-opt or deflect new initiatives (Lowndes and Wilson, 2003). Indeed, a key idea in institutionalism is ‘sedimentation’: current practices are built on those of the past, with layers of values and understandings left from earlier times influencing new initiatives.

Such an approach offers a powerful frame for understanding the reaction to public sector reform, including performance targets, by professional local authority planners, and their role in enacting those same reform processes. It also places an emphasis on further understanding the actual reaction to reform in practice, which this paper seeks to provide. The following discussion is structured around first considering to what extent the performance targets were a structuring imperative, then considering how practices were being changed in response to this new system wide trigger for change, before considering to what extent new values were inculcated. Finally, consideration is given to what extent institutional entrepreneurs sought to use change to further their own interests.

Researching targets in local authority planning practice

This paper examines how local authority planners were responding to targets by drawing upon extensive empirical research conducted as part of a larger study investigating the reaction of British local authority planners to a host of initiatives being implemented under the banner of ‘Planning Reform’ between 2004 and 2008. The research looked across Great Britain, given the broadly similar frameworks but different detailed approaches to planning reform being pursued by central government in England and devolved government in Scotland and Wales. The concern was not to assess any of the reforms *per se*, but to consider the experience of them by local authority planners and what this showed about the implementation of state modernisation, with a focus on institutionalism at the professional level (see Clifford and Tewdwr-Jones, 2013). As such, the focus was on local authority planners and not any of the other myriad of actors and stakeholders in planning.

A mixed-methods, iterative approach was taken to data collection. The first stage was 17 exploratory interviews with Heads of Planning from a cross-section of local authorities. These exploratory interviews allowed key themes for the study to be identified and these were then taken forward through a six page questionnaire. The survey used Likert agreements, with respondents asked to rate how much they agreed or disagreed with phrases which were usually quotations from the initial interviews. The survey was sent via post to a random sample of 1,987 local authority planners selected from their professional institution's membership list. Survey respondents were asked to volunteer for in-depth interviews and a further 53 interviews were then conducted with planners representing a mix of experience and managerial responsibility. For anonymity reasons, each planner was given a pseudonym appropriate for their sex and cultural background. The triangulated data presents a rich picture of how planners have responded to the target regime.

Implementing performance targets in planning practice

Valuing the measurable: Targets as a powerful new institution

There were strong and frequently negative views surrounding the targets present in both the interview and the survey data. This suggests the performance targets were a powerful new institution structuring planning practice. Table 1 summarizes the reaction of respondents to the Likert statements about auditing and targets in the questionnaire. The survey data were examined to see if there was a significant relationship between geographical location, age, gender, job focus or local planning authority performance (against the indicators) and opinion on any one of the ten items on the Likert agreement (using Chi-squared tests). No significant relationships were found; whilst planning is a highly contextualised activity, these factors did not appear to be key determinants in deciding opinion, suggesting the common institution between respondents –

membership of the planning profession – may be a key determinant in patterning perceptions.

Table 1 – Summary of responses for Likert agreement measuring how much respondents agreed or disagreed with various statements relating to auditing and targets on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)

Likert Statement:	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Median	% Strongly Disagree	% Disagree	% Undecided	% Agree	% Strongly Agree
Auditing and targets have improved the performance of the service	599	3.16	0.996	3.00	4.5	25.5	22.9	43.4	3.7
Auditing and targets have raised the profile of planning in the council	599	3.26	1.029	4.00	3.5	26.5	16.7	47.1	6.2
Auditing and targets have increased the amount of stress for staff	599	4.14	0.716	4.00	0.0	3.5	9.2	57.4	29.9
Auditing and targets have altered the way people work	597	3.86	0.804	4.00	1.2	7.0	12.4	63.8	15.6
Auditing and targets have improved our relations with the public	599	2.40	0.816	2.00	10.7	48.4	31.1	9.5	0.3
Targets should be abolished	601	2.98	1.042	3.00	0.0	42.9	29.0	15.6	12.5
Targets are too obsessed with speed	600	4.26	0.823	4.00	0.0	7.0	3.2	46.5	43.3
Targets restrict scope for professional discretion	601	2.22	0.980	2.00	22.0	49.9	13.1	13.8	1.2
Targets correctly assess the quality of planning outcomes	600	1.86	0.921	2.00	39.8	43.3	10.7	3.8	2.3
Targets places too much emphasis on applicants	597	3.15	0.925	3.00	0.0	28.0	38.0	25.5	8.5

The interview data also suggested that the performance targets were a strong structuring imperative with a large impact on the professional life of planners. There were concerns expressed by interviewees that the targets were changing the nature of local authority planning, reducing it to the completion of endless paperwork and responding to bureaucratic requirements. There was concern that targets had changed what it meant to be a planner, so now people simply ‘worked to the targets’, which had made the job a ‘boring treadmill’. This seems to suggest that the targets somehow deprofessionalise planning by reducing it to a ‘tick-box exercise’ where there is nothing more than a ‘treadmill’ of work ‘under the cosh’.



Figure 1 – Suggestions of a colonizing target culture in *Planning* (Cowan, 2007)

Thomas was clear about this reduction of the role of the planner and was particularly concerned about the impact upon newer planners:

‘What I’m concerned about is that particularly amongst the younger planners who are sort of coming into the process, just see the job as a piece of paper processing. It’s all about making sure that all the forms are filled in... At the end of the day you’ve then got to, having spent a lot of time ticking boxes, you’ve then got to watch a clock.’

There is some support for this in that one of those younger planners, Gwilym, said:

‘I like being a Development Control officer. What motivates me is the eight week period. I’m quite competitive about it.’

So he was motivated by the target, just as Thomas has feared. This is by no means a universal feeling, but it lends support to concerns within the profession about the impacts of the targets on practice (see also Swain and Tait, 2007). Such concerns have been reflected in the professional press (Figure 1) and suggest older values being deinstitutionalised and replaced by an overriding concern with efficiency.

The 'Law of Unintended Consequences': Targets changing practice

There is some evidence, therefore, of the targets being a powerful institution structuring planning practice. A strong strand in the data suggested this change was not change for the better, with much concern about the consequences – unintended by central government – that they were having locally. Roger spoke about the inevitable distortions associated with the time-based processing indicators:

‘If you just have a process driven indicator, speeding-up planning applications, you’ll end up with huge distortions in the planning system ... People will sacrifice the output quality and the actual achievement of some benefit for the community, just for the sake of pursuing that single objective.’

Others spoke similarly about the ‘game playing’ that occurred due to the targets, with many examples given of the ways in which the processing of applications was altered solely to improve target performance. It is these which have received most attention in existing literature (see Allmendinger, 2009) which I will not examine here, but it is important to note that it was this area that interviewees tended to speak about at length. There was plenty of detailed evidence here that practice had changed in response to the increased emphasis on the speed targets, and often not in a way valued by many interviewees, suggesting a mismatch between practice and values.

A number of interviewees felt the focus on performance meant they were providing a poor service overall. This is reflected in the survey material where a majority of survey respondents (59.1%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that ‘auditing and targets have improved relations with the public’ (compared to just 9.8% who agreed or strongly agreed). This again is suggestive of the idea practice has changed as the targets have been institutionalised, but as discussed later, underlying values may not have changed at the same rate.

It is also important to acknowledge here the very real impacts targets were having upon staff. A majority of interviewees spoke about the targets having increased job-related stress. The survey data provides strong evidence for this, with a large majority of 87.3% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that ‘auditing and targets have increased the amount of stress for staff’, compared to just 3.5% disagreeing and none at all strongly disagreeing. Several planners tied targets directly to problems with job satisfaction, stress levels, sickness and retention problems. When asked what impact the targets were having, Margaret replied:

‘Nervous breakdown! No, exhaustion. I was signed off. One guy in DC [Development Control] has been off several months. Two of our senior planners in DC left. They, one of them made a party political speech when he did leave. Said he was leaving because he was sick to death of government targets.’

By coincidence, one of Margaret’s former colleagues had received my survey just a week after he left the council. He wrote a lengthy covering letter attached to his completed questionnaire, and in this he said:

‘I left my job last week, having found the last 2-3 years increasingly stressful ... Above all, the obsession with measuring ‘process’ (and, in particular, speed) rather than ‘outcome’ had damaged planners morale and stifled their creativity and professionalism.’ (Graham)

We thus see that the targets have had a big impact on planning practice and a number of ‘unintended consequences’ on both the planning process and planners themselves experienced. This reflects the picture presented in much existing literature, of managerialism leading to deprofessionalisation. Yet the criticisms planners make of targets suggest a rejection of a focus on efficiency alone as being what planning should

be about: as planners do implement reform, many conceptually distance themselves from it rather than fully internalise it.

Ideological Concerns: A mismatch with the imagination of planning

Criticism by planners of the speed targets was not just related to the unintended consequences resulting from the emphasis placed upon them; some also questioned the very ideological impetus behind the target regime. There was concern that targets represented a mistrust of local government by central government, and that there was an ‘unhealthy’ obsession with efficiency. Margaret felt that the targets were a result of a philosophy that believed people could not be trusted to work for the common good on their own. There was a widespread sense that the targets were being driven by the desire to ensure that planning was both more business friendly and also run according to a more ‘business like culture’. Three planners specifically mentioned Michael Heseltine and his comment in 1979 about planning locking jobs in filing cabinets:

‘We’ve been singled out as a department dragging our feet and holding up business. What did Heseltine say? That we were tying up jobs locked in filing cabinets. So we’ve had it in the neck since then haven’t we?’
(Mandy)¹

Some interviewed contested targets in the light of older values about public service professionals needing to be trusted to work for the public good, a traditional idea of the ‘public service ethos’ (McDonough, 2006; Hebson *et al.*, 2003).

Much more common than any specific attempt to unpick the ideological impulses behind the targets were concerns surrounding the specific impacts of the targets on planning. A key concern was that there was something wrong with the targets because of their focus on speed and their apparent blindness to outcomes, which did not match the planners’ concept of what was important and undermined their professionalism.

With regard to this focus on speed, the survey statement about auditing and targets that elicited the strongest feeling was ‘targets are too obsessed with speed’. Some 89.8% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, with not a single respondent, out of 600, strongly disagreeing.

In the interviews it was suggested time and again that the targets were too centred on speed alone and that this could have an inverse relationship with quality:

‘We are so target orientated, so target driven, and I think on occasion that has been at the cost of quality ... some discretion definitely needs to be in place when you’ve got important schemes.’ (Paul)

Phil and Andrew developed the theme when they both suggested that in the longer term planners would be judged in terms of what was actually built on the ground rather than the time taken to process an application. This is reflected in the survey results: the statement about targets with the second strongest feeling was ‘the targets correctly assess the quality of planning outcomes’. Some 83.1% of respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement. There was genuine concern that, as Paul put it, ‘the quality of development being allowed to get through the net are harmful to the quality of the environment’. There was also concern that the targets were leading to resources being concentrated on processing applications quickly rather than achieving good outcomes, and it was argued that the whole reason for having professional planners process applications is that they are able to exert judgement and actively improve proposals. This is suggestive that the idea of planning as about efficiency has sedimented against older ideals of professionals concerned directly with outcomes in the built environment.

A positive change to practice?

We appear to have a narrative, so far, of targets undermining professionals, having unintended negative consequences and not matching the underlying values of what planning should be about. One of the most striking survey results, however, was that when asked ‘targets should be abolished’, just 12.5% strongly agreed and 15.6% agreed (28.1% totalled) compared to some 42.9% who disagreed. In interview, only one planner thought that targets should be abolished outright, and one thought they had once had a role but now needed ‘retiring’. Other planners were more supportive and feared the ‘free for all’ which might occur without any sort of target. George was not unusual in commenting:

‘No, I don’t think I would actually get rid of targets, no because otherwise what are we going to do? I know I’ve said I think there’s too much central government control, but I don’t think there’s anything wrong with a bit of basic standards that they expect you to adhere to... Otherwise authorities can have a tendency to slip back into complacency.’

This raises the question of whether, although some older values of bureau-professionalism remain resilient, they are at the same time slowly being weakened and deinstitutionalised as targets are institutionalised, to the point planners can no longer imagine professional life without them, or whether there might be alternative explanations. In support of the former, it was apparent that a number of planners thought that the targets have actually improved the way planning works, and that some speeding-up of planning was necessary. In other words, targets have achieved their stated purpose. In the survey, more planners agreed than disagreed that the targets had improved the performance of the service whilst in interview there was discussion of planning having needed speeding-up and that timeliness was an important part of quality of service. Boyd commented:

‘I think the system probably did need some sort of incentive, some sort of speeding, there’s stories of applications taking years to go through.’

Tony went further. He said that speed was important, and that the targets were vital to ensuring timely determination:

‘However well-intentioned you are there are all sorts of things that become part of the professional routine that isn’t necessarily always serving the needs of other people. Any institution in a sense works to benefit itself rather than the people who are using it or supposed to be benefiting from it. I think it probably is necessary to have targets.’

As well as speeding-up planning, some planners also thought the targets had altered working practices. The survey data shows that 79.4% of responding planners agreed or strongly agreed that ‘auditing and targets have altered the way people work’. This implies the targets have been successful in terms of another objective, introducing a ‘culture change’ in the profession, involving new practices and conceptions of planning and the role of planners. This does not, of course, show whether planners think that this altering of the way they work has been a good thing or not, but a significant number of interviewees did tell me how they believed that the targets had cut inefficiency and sharpened their approach. David spoke of the need for planning to become more performance-driven:

‘Where we were before we entered a performance-driven culture was that we probably spent far too much time on almost fruitlessly chasing levels of quality and detail that were of marginal benefit to the area and its community and we needed to refocus our resources, given the push that, I think, everyone wanted to make in terms of regeneration. So, yeah, we had to grow up, we had to change.’

Others endorsed targets because they felt they were useful tools, in ways that those implementing the target regime would have probably intended. These include introducing a more project management type approach and allowing comparability of

local authority performance. There was also talk about a ‘sense of discipline’ and the ability to identify best practice.

Making the targets work for you

The idea that targets are acting to slowly change the values of local authority planners to a new focus on efficiency is, however, undermined by other evidence of more resilient professional identities. Many interviewees highlighted how the targets had apparently led to increased delegation rates for processing applications, so planners were empowered to determine more applications themselves rather than simply making recommendations to elected Councillors. These increases in delegation rates may help explain why so many planners – 71.9% – reported on the survey that they did not feel that the targets had restricted their scope for professional discretion. This is striking because as we have already seen, the targets *do* restrict how, and for how long, planners process applications. Several factors probably combine to produce this result, in addition to the increased delegation rates: firstly, the planner can still recommend whatever decision they like so long as it is in the decision time (refusal within target is still successful from the Government’s perspective), but secondly, there is some evidence that planners have actually been utilising the targets for their own benefit.

A number of ways planners appeared to be actively making use of the targets were evident. Firstly resource issues: the idea that the targets might be used to lever in extra funding to the planning department was mentioned frequently. Under the Labour Government, if you performed well on the targets, there was a financial reward from central government in the form of PDG. Authorities were apparently willing to alter practice to get hold of the funding (one interviewee explicitly linking the financial

incentive to increased delegation rates). Jim saw this as a major positive due to past inadequate resourcing:

‘Planning has been pretty much just bubbling along for the last twenty years ... there are real opportunities being created by being target driven. We’re having to employ the right number of planners, that’s brought a lot of new people in.’

The survey data show that some 53.3% of planners agreed or strongly agreed that auditing and targets had raised the profile of planning within the council. The interview data suggest a number of reasons why, beyond PDG. This included the fact that the targets could be used to gain, or at least safeguard, resources locally. Paul pointed out that the targets had been essential in protecting a reasonable budget for planning:

‘It’s difficult for councils. They’ve got so many competing things. If you look at a unitary authority like ours, when the councillors have got a choice to close a school or put a million pound into planning, what are you going to do? You’re going to keep the school open and say to the planners, ‘I’m sorry, we’ve got no resource for you’ ... So what it did, by introducing targets and rewards, they actually put us on an equal footing to things like education, highways and social services, which was again fundamental, absolutely fundamental.’

Similarly, others were clear that because they would not want to risk a poor target performance or becoming a Standards Authority, Councillors would not risk cutting the planning budget anymore.

Securing resource levels was most frequently mentioned by planning managers, but more junior staff also seemed able to use targets for their purposes too. It was suggested several times that the targets could also be used to manage, or exert control, over applicants and developers. Simon outlined how:

‘We are more prepared to say, ‘Thank you, this is just not good enough, you can either withdraw it or we’ll refuse it, go away and come up with a better scheme.’

Similarly Patrick said that before the targets he would have negotiated at length, but now he felt empowered to tell applicants that they had submitted rubbish and should go and learn to ‘improve themselves’:

‘What used to happen is we used to spend a huge amount of time with people who were hopeless ... [Now] rather than me spending a huge amount of time with you on an application that’s poorly submitted, poorly drafted, not thought through, I was actually able to say, well, actually, this is a really bad scheme. I’m going to refuse planning permission. You need to up your game. It shouldn’t be for me to spend all my time with you ... You’ve got to be cruel to be kind, I think. Occasionally you’ve got to write a refusal and knock it on the head so that they hopefully will learn and improve themselves.’

Such ability to exercise control was apparently possible with regard to managing consultees and objectors as well. Rob said that the targets enabled him to cut back the ‘endless say’ that the public wanted on everything:

“I mean, there has to be, because the public want to have endless says on everything. And they’ll want to continue to have says, especially if they don’t like the answer or the recommendation that the council makes. Now, I don’t think there’s necessarily anything wrong with speed, ‘cos it’s the wider public interest that we’re trying to achieve”

The comment about the ‘wider public interest’ is particularly telling of a certain self-justification for the role of the professional planner which appeals to very traditional imaginations and identities. The contradiction between the focus on performance and that on community engagement – another longstanding strand of government reform – appeared to have opened-up spaces for professional planners to re-exert themselves as guardians of the ‘greater good’. Overall, the data thus shows that planners seem to have

actively used targets to lever in extra resource and recognition for planning, and to manage applicants and objectors. This is evidence of ‘institutional entrepreneurs’ exploiting opportunities afforded by reform to further their own interests, and may help to explain why there was no strong support for the idea of abolishing targets. It also counters the idea that the rise of managerialism leads unproblematically to the demise of the professional.

Targets restricting and empowering professionals?

The speed of the statutory planning system remains a pressing concern for the UK government, like many others concerned to remove all perceived ‘blockages’ to economic growth. There is no doubt that the primary tool used to monitor and manage the efficiency of the system in Great Britain – national performance targets – have had a massive impact on local authority planners over the last 15 years. They have clearly been a new structuring imperative, which have changed practice in ways that have implications for the very nature of planning as a professional activity.

The evidence in this paper reveals that rather than a simple story of acceptance or rejection of targets and their consequences, the response from frontline planners to targets has been complex and even contradictory, in keeping with responses to much public sector reform found by Lowndes (2005). There were some ideological concerns about the very idea of targets, a common feeling that the time-based processing targets were a poor measure, focussing too much on speed at the possible cost of quality and ignoring outcomes. Furthermore there were very strong feelings that the targets were distorting planning practice through a range of unintended consequences, so that the service offered to all users of the planning system became worse overall. There were also suggestions that efficiency alone should not be what matters for planners, and

concerns that targets somehow deprofessionalise planners, making them administrators. Indeed, there was clear evidence that governmental priorities have not been deeply embedded in the reflexive view of the planner's role in so much as there was little evidence of any great inculcation of new attitudes and values about planners purpose being solely the efficient processing of applications in a business friendly manner.

Strikingly, however, in the survey, just 28.1% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that targets should be abolished. There were a range of different explanations for this evident, ranging from the opinion that the targets had worked, that planning performance needed improving, to ideas that targets could be used to further the interests of planning and planners, for example by being used as a tool to lever in extra funding, to raise the profile of the service, and to help the management of applicants and objectors. There was actually some significant value to professional work from the time-based targets, which had apparently altered practice and opened-up spaces for institutional actors to further their own interests. This fits with what the institutionalist frame would lead us to expect when a strong new rule structure is implemented, and highlights the importance of a nuanced, empirically informed account of managerial governance.

It is also noticeable that a fairly narrow range of positions were adopted by planners in reaction to this new institution, as it sedimented against existing local government processes and professional identities. Similar views from planners across Great Britain, despite the fact planning is devolved to the Scottish and Welsh governments, and the lack of difference in views from planners of different seniority or role suggests that an important common institution – professional identity – may be guiding the response of planners. This might help explain the evidence that whilst though work practices do

change in response to audit culture, and efficiency becomes the driver of managerial control within local authorities, the ethos of planning – the deep rhythms of its culture and imaginary of what it means to be a ‘good planner’ (Gunder and Hillier, 2007) – remain centred around a folklore of serving the public, with the ability to improve development proposals through personal intervention.

Recent developments in England continue to question the value added by professional planning, however. Whilst Booth (2002) demonstrates there’s nothing new with an obsession with ‘streamlining’ planning to increase ‘managerial efficiency’, the emphasis placed on this by senior government politicians seems to be ever increasing. Accompanying his July 2015 budget, Chancellor George Osborne published *Fixing the Foundations*, a policy statement which stated that the ‘detailed and discretionary’ planning permission process created ‘the sort of slow, expensive and uncertain process’ that reduces the appetite to build’, and that the government wanted to further ‘tighten the planning performance regime’ so that ‘all planning decisions [are] made on time’ (HM Treasury, 2015: 45-46). As Raco *et al.* have argued, for developers and business representatives, ‘slowness is elided with inefficiency and poor decision making’ (2008: 2671) and the weight placed on democratic accountability, procedural integrity and the careful consideration of the public interest seems at a very low ebb.

The evidence from this paper suggests that the results of this neoliberal obsession with the efficiency of planning will still be influenced somewhat by frontline planners as they enact ongoing reforms. This is perhaps the best guardian against the complete reduction of development management to nothing more than an administrative tick-box exercise rather than an area where value is added.

Notes

¹ “Notoriously, Michael Heseltine (1979) as the first Secretary of State for the Environment of the Thatcher government complained that ‘thousands of jobs every night are locked away in the filing trays of planning departments’” (Carmona and Sieh, 2004: 118)

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