



WORKING IN THE PUBLIC INTEREST

Exploring the role of the private sector in planning

WITPI PLANNER PEN PORTRAITS

Ben Clifford

Bartlett School of Planning, UCL

**with Andy Inch, Jason Slade
and Malcolm Tait**

Department of Urban Studies & Planning,
University of Sheffield

**and Zan Gunn, Abigail Schoneboom
and Geoff Vigar**

Architecture Planning and Landscape,
Newcastle University





WITPI PLANNER PEN PORTRAITS

Ben Clifford

Bartlett School of Planning, UCL

with Andy Inch, Jason Slade and Malcolm Tait

Department of Urban Studies & Planning,
University of Sheffield

and Zan Gunn, Abigail Schoneboom and Geoff Vigar

Architecture Planning and Landscape,
Newcastle University

Illustrations by Rob Cowan

July 2020



The University
Of Sheffield.



Newcastle
University

Contents

Introduction	5
One: The local government lifer	7
Two: The doyen(ne) of public planning	9
Three: The grandee of the consultancy	11
Four: The community focussed planner	13
Five: The planning manager	15
Six: The multi-disciplinary consultancy-arian	17
Seven: The bright young thing	19
Eight: The public-spirited recession planner	21
Nine: The planning planning consultant	23
Ten: The planner's planner	25
Join the conversation	26
Acknowledgements	26

Introduction

What does it mean to be a 'planner' in the contemporary UK? The activity of what's variously been labelled town and country, urban and regional, or spatial planning is now well established. Over 25,000 planners claim professional status through membership of the RTPI. Yet the profession is not static. The system has evolved over time. So has its organisational context and professional delivery. In recent years, driven by ideas of private sector efficiency and the budget cuts of austerity, local government services have been outsourced, delivered in partnership with the private sector, or changed by increasing pressures of commercialisation. And as planning has become more complex, it is ever more common for developers to employ planning consultants, or for specialist expertise to come from the private sector. Nearly half of all UK chartered planners now work in the private sector.

The implications of this evolving organisational context for planning have been the subject of our ESRC funded research project, *Working in the Public Interest*. This has involved different work packages, including archival work on the history of public and private sector involvement in planning in the post-war period, focus groups on the nature of contemporary planning work, desk based research on the extent of outsourcing across UK local planning authorities, and detailed ethnographic work on the reality of everyday planning work in different organisational settings.

There was also a work package which involved biographical interviews. These were 23 detailed interviews with a cross-section of planners to explore their career paths, professional self-understanding, working practices and values. The interviewees were working in all four countries of the UK (including a regional spread across England), included seven who have worked just in the public sector, seven just in the private sector and nine who had experience of both sectors, and a mix of seniority and personal characteristics (such as gender).

The interviewees were mainly recruited through alumni and networks of the WITPI academic team and cannot claim to be completely 'representative' of the entire planning profession, but hopefully provide an insightful cross-selection of planners. All the interviews were transcribed, and on the basis of their professional history (particularly sector(s) worked in and career trajectories) plus views expressed during the discussions, the twenty-three interviewees were characterised into ten composite 'ideal type' planners. Each of these ideal types draws on at least two interviewees, but most were based on three (with some interviewees being considered to provide examples of two different ideal types due to career changes).

It is important to emphasize that none of these ten planner types are based on any single individual but are composites and abstractions from across our interview data. Many people might fit the characterisations of more than one of the types presented here, particularly over the course of a longer career.

The ten ideal types are presented here as 'pen portraits' of what might be considered typical planners. Each one consists of a written description of how that type of planner might describe their career and role, some direct quotations from the interviews with planners in that category on the public interest / purpose of planning / what it means to be a professional, and some notes about the characteristics that may distinguish planners of this type. There is also a visual representation of each planner type: these are not pictures of real people, but illustrations produced by Rob Cowan, who we asked to read each pen portrait and then draw the mental image of the person that came to mind.

The pen portraits do, in places, try to be slightly provocative. In many walks of life, our professed values sometimes become compromised and planning is no exception. That is reflected here, although hopefully no single pen portrait is any more disparaging than another! The aim of this approach is to help us think through professed and practised values in planning, as well as the variety of roles, career paths, professional self-understandings, working practices and values present in planning. Contemporary planners have quite different roles, working in very different (and changing) organisational settings and perhaps working towards quite different goals. Arguably, many stakeholders – including academics researching planning – often talk as if there were just one type of planner, typically working for a local authority, or at best two types: a local authority planner and a private sector planning consultant. In reality, the professional positions being filled by those who lay claim to the label of being a 'planner' are much more differentiated. Hopefully these pen portraits help us think through the varying roles and values within planning, and the implications of that variety.

Given the approach taken to recruiting interviewees and the inevitable constraints of time and resource to conduct these rich biographical interviews, there may be some potential planner types that we have missed. Inevitably there may also be different views on how we should characterise planners into types. There is also an interesting question of how these ten planner types map into different national contexts. Your feedback on these pen portraits is welcomed.



Number one:

The local government lifer

I'm a bit of an old cynic and like to present myself as a 'guerrilla in the bureaucracy' but deep down I really believe in the idea that planning can help make people's lives better and improve the environment. I keep talking about retiring or finding something else to do with my time, but I still have a residual belief in local government making a difference. Perhaps it's my leftist bent and a memory of the original 'change the world' idealism (and ego) with which I entered planning. I don't think the public sector is perfect and would say my loyalty is more to the people and place where I work, but not the council. However, although I recognise the shortcomings of senior officers and councillors, I really don't feel I'd fit in the private sector.

I think there is a fundamental difference between working for an organisation whose driver is the public interest and one whose driver is profit, which is like a drugs habit: addictive and making you less objective. I, of course, am *always* objective. I'm a bit unusual in these post-austerity days, there's not many like me left in the council, so I think it's all the more important for me to make the case, giving that 'fearless' advice and help people do the right thing.

Notes

Entered the profession before 1990 and has worked in local government ever since

Slightly less numerous than pre-austerity

More likely to be male

Typically views planning's purpose as about making people's lives better

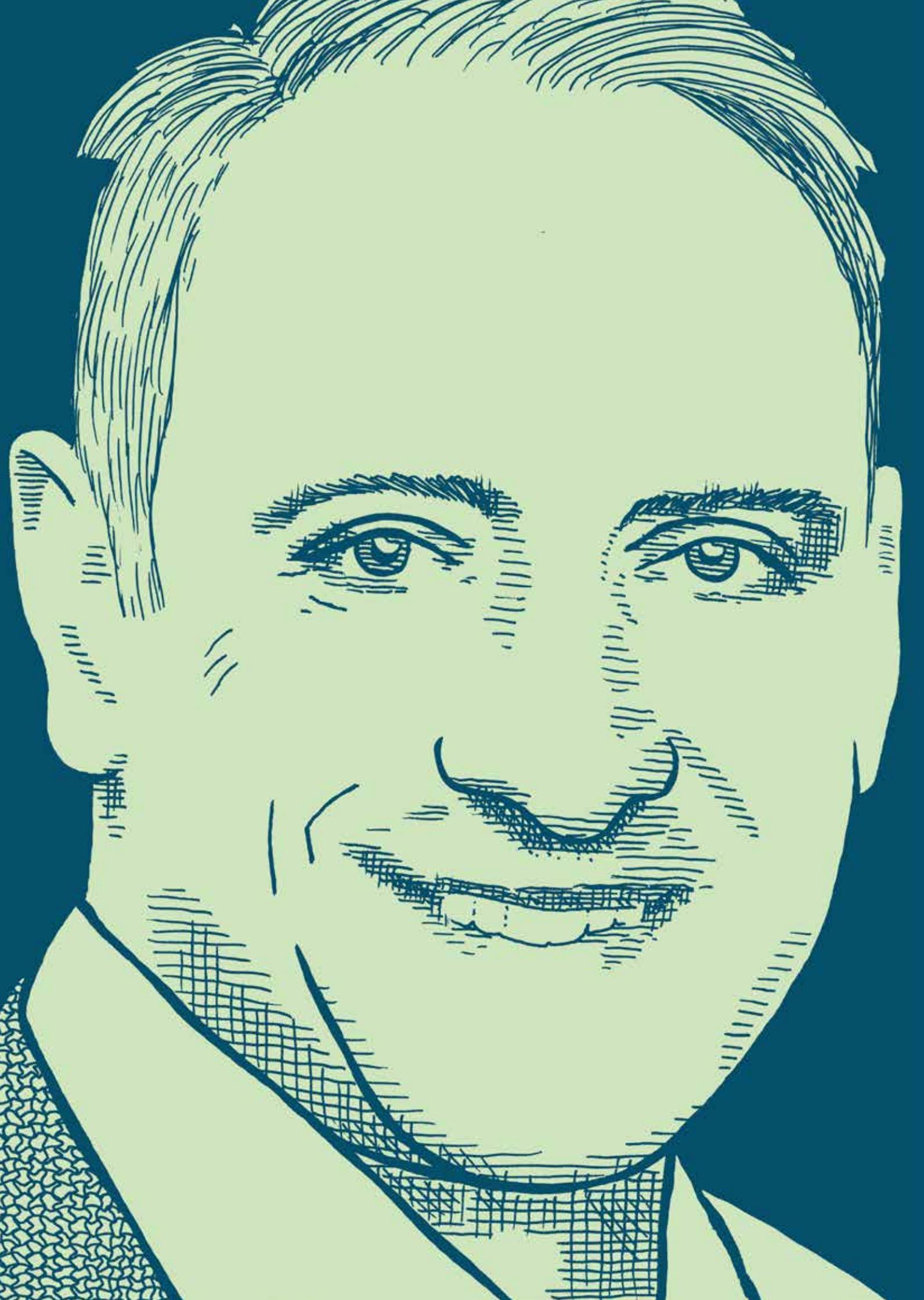
May comment on seeing the democratic process as an integral part of planning

Likely to be cynical about various reforms and concerned planning's role has been reduced to 'damage limitation'

May believe you're able to be a bit more challenging about schemes from the relative security of the public sector, and think you're able to act more professionally in terms of giving robust planning advice when you're not concerned about client fees

Possibly left leaning politically, having entered planning believing it could help change the world

- “ I would struggle to see how being taken over by a company like Capita could ultimately be seen to be working in the public interest”
- “ I think it's about seeking to making a difference, trying to make a difference to people's living environments. Planning is about making people's lives better, fundamentally. I was brought up in that atmosphere and it was one of the main drivers for me into town planning”
- “ In practice it's a top down approach, this is what the government says we need to be doing, this is what we're going to do ... a bad model as a local authority planner”
- “ When I was a planning student, I imagined it was a much more rational process than it is”
- “ I know councillors don't get the best press, but I still believe they are elected by their communities to represent them. It's local democracy. Local people have to decide what happens to their local area”
- “ Then you go into development management and ... often it's just a case of damage limitation, smoothing off the rough edges of development”
- “ I would challenge another planner's actions, even though they're effectively wearing the same badge as you ... I would challenge thing when I think they're wrong and have done many, many times and often lose the battle, but it doesn't mean I wouldn't do it again”
- “ I think there's a fundamental difference between working for an organisation whose key driver is public interest and working for an organisation whose key driver is making a profit”
- “ The consultant will remain nameless, but he was trying to convince me that this scheme - which was the worst scheme ever, honest, the worst ever - was good and it was appalling ... I suppose that's why I could never work in the private sector because I would be too honest”
- “ The RTPI has a foot in both camps”



Number two:

The doyen(ne) of public planning

I describe myself as 'local government through and through' even though I'm now technically a self-employed private consultant. It avoids all that pesky HR type stuff and allows me to actually focus on planning. It's all about delivering the big schemes for the long-term. I was an idealistic young man when I entered the profession and over the years, I've played the system to try and get the right outcomes. That means growth, but for public benefit. I'm a big figure in planning and I am getting to the point in my career where I can look back at my successes with some relish. I get bored if there's not enough development happening.

I like working on the big, contentious projects, having a good knockabout argument and reckon I've been able to use my influence in the corridors of political power. I know all the stakeholders. I think planning is about the public interest, place and balance, but that is best secured by dedicated professionals working to get stuff done. Development can transform places positively if there's a long-term commitment and a sense of vision planners can get politicians and communities to agree to; it's about not getting bogged down. A good planner should be brave and stand-up for their professional judgement, even if that judgement might just really be a matter of opinion. Did I mention I worked on the Olympics?

Notes

Has spent most of their career in public sector planning, but this might include organisations like the Planning Inspectorate as well as local government and may now work as a self-employed consultant working for local government

Perhaps questions the notion of a unified 'public interest' but understands and uses the public good justification for planning, seeing a need to manage the market and its externalities

May talk about place-making and balancing competing demands as the overarching purpose of planning

Likely to believe the role of a planner is to have an opinion and give robust advice

Could be closely interested in actually seeing development delivered and motivated by large schemes they've been involved with and can point to, believing planning is about seeing significant developments actually happen 'on the ground'

Might have a personalised hard hat

- // There are multiple public interests and they can be quite legitimate. Planning is an activity which is based on values, it is a value laden activity, and guess what, people have different values"*
- // The private sector will have an understanding of the public interest, but its commitment will be to one particular interest"*
- // It has to be in the public interest, overall"*
- // I think you are there, you're paid to give a professional opinion ... give it. Give it, be able to evidence it and back it up, but give it"*
- // It's how can you use your skills and professionalism to achieve the needs of the community in the longer run"*
- // Planning is there for the public good, it's a realisation that ... you need to control the market in order not to have bad externalities"*
- // I suppose the broader purpose of planning is in terms of getting stuff delivered and sustainable development and housing numbers. As my career's developed and you move further up ... your focus moves from the scheme in front of you to your responsibility for shaping a vision"*
- // You've got to get the politicians to be in a position where they can make those decisions"*
- // I think it's about seeking to making a difference, trying to make a difference to people's lives"*



Number three:

The grandee of the consultancy

Growing up in a new town, I was exposed to planning from an early age. I still love the technical side of planning work and evidence. I've been lucky enough to work in good consultancies and have loved the variety and challenge of planning's role as a development broker and facilitator. I've been around a while and I know all the main players in the development game. I'm lucky enough that I can spend some time supporting the RTPI in my region and will tell anyone who listens how we need to move away from the old silo 'private versus public' attitudes: we should collaborate together as professionals to make better places and realise planning's public interest purpose. Yes, that does mean delivering just the type of project I've currently got a commission on.

We need strong planning and brave politicians delivering good growth, with good infrastructure. Good development, development that involves thinking about place-making and sustainability, is possible and that's what the public need. I often think on the value of planning as I'm flying to my next project, looking out of the window from business class at the terrible sprawl in countries without a robust planning system.

Notes

Has spent most of their career in private sector planning, but may have had a short spell (particularly earlier in the career) in local government

Is currently a consultant but has engaged with the wider planning community, perhaps through involvement in a body like the RTPI or commissions on behalf of the Ministry

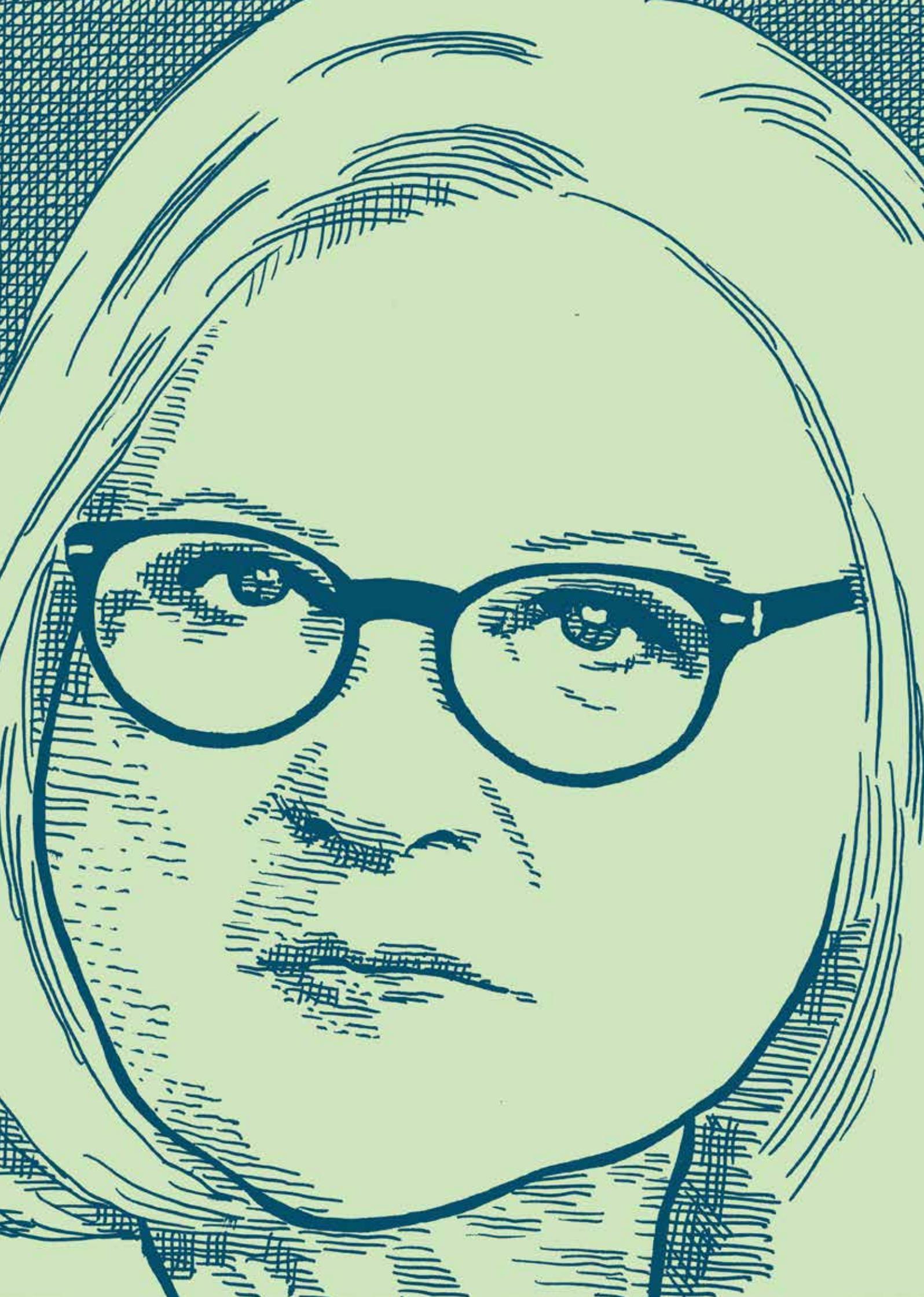
Has a position of relative security in their employment, enabling them to be more selective with clients and engage with the wider planning community

Likely understands the notion of a public interest justification to planning, but perhaps believes this relates primarily to their own area of expertise, such as sustainability

Perhaps takes a very growth-centric view, seeing planning as about managing impacts from development and delivering development

May well admit to some previous commissions they are less proud of, where perhaps the public benefit of a scheme has been 'squeezed' by something like viability

- “ I always thought the role of elected members and the secretary of state was taking decisions in the public interest. I thought that plan making was trying to create environments that were not only efficient, but in the public interest” [but my view has now changed]
- “ [The purpose of planning?] I would like to think it was making people's lives more comfortable, helping with creation of job opportunities, assisting moves towards sustainable development. I think, regretfully, we've lost many of the tools that we had and financial resources we had in the past”
- “ I think there's been a fairly consistent thread throughout my career, understanding that planning, development, clearly has an impact on the public, on communities and the onus is, I would suggest, on the planner to ensure that there's an awareness of those impacts and where they are detrimental, come up with mitigation measures to address that”
- “ The purpose of planning is about working in the public interest, or having an awareness of the public”
- “ It sounds high minded but throughout my career we've turned down several juicy private developer commissions who have made it quite plain they want to smash their way through local authority policy”
- “ It is a balance between delivering a viable scheme that meets clients' needs with serving the public interest and I'll hold my hands up, there have been projects where the public interest has been squeezed out”



Number four:

The community focussed planner

After all these years, I thought I would have packed away my drawing board by now, but Neighbourhood Planning has kept me busy doing work I have a passion for. If I wasn't supporting communities develop their plans, I'd be volunteering to do one for where I live. I initially considered studying architecture at university, but planning required lower grades to get in. I think it's a myth that if you're working in the public sector as a planner, you're working in the public interest. I don't think it's that different between the two sectors actually: in the local authority you have to satisfy the Council's agenda just like the private planner has to follow the client's agenda. And that agenda is often detrimental; the profit motive can be so damaging.

Planning deals with such big and important issues, it has to be done collaboratively so I work with communities and to challenge some of the received wisdom that too many planners pass off as 'professional expertise'. The public interest is making sure everyone is heard equitably. I worry the balance has shifted in planning too far towards developers and public benefit is hard to achieve. You can't just have a time-is-money attitude when working with communities, except when I calculate my fee schedule, of course!

Notes

May work in local government, particularly larger authorities which have staff dedicated to neighbourhood planning, but more likely to be in a specialist consultancy or a self-employed consultant

Perhaps older and more comfortable in having the notion of the technical expertise of planners be critiqued

Most likely a passionate advocate of the principle that planning should be about engaging communities to try and make their environments and lives better

Probably thinks there is a place for professional expertise, but this should not be protectionist

May be concerned that political reforms are undermining planning and that the aspiration is gone, to be replaced by 'just preventing the worst'

May have had a community focus to their work predating neighbourhood planning (if in England)

- " It's about the community, the public, however you want to describe it, as opposed to the individual and their particular needs or wishes. An individual, if you've got an interest in something, you're not going to get an objective overview"*
- " The point of planning is things in the right places, delivering what people need to live decent lives"*
- " In some places, the purpose of planning is not to refuse permission for anything because going to public inquiry costs a lot of money and the council is not prepared to pay those bills. Granting planning permission for more houses means you get a bigger Council Tax base"*
- " I think we're back in mythology, that by working in the public sector as a planner, you're working in the public interest"*
- " You get a change of administration from Tory to Labour, Labour to Tory or whatever, where you will find a sudden, dramatic change and therefore, the planners go bump, bump, clunk, clunk, click, just like a fruit machine and they start behaving differently"*
- " I think I probably had greater aspirations for what planning might, could and should achieve in a more visioning sense, future communities, exciting new futures, all those sorts of things, making radical change"*
- " That sort of notion of professionalism which has got that bit around territorialism as well as protectionism and boundary ... but there's also professionalism which is about being outgoing, about understanding where your profession fits"*



Number five:

The planning manager

As a teenager I had no idea what I wanted to do but I always had an interest in places and ended up becoming a planner. I had lots of contemporaries who went into the private sector, but I always wanted to work in the public sector and have felt lucky that I could have the chance to progress a career here. I enjoy the variety of work in a council and taking an interventionist approach to planning, trying to actually implement the local plan. It's about deciding how places should grow and taking communities with you. It's about achieving good development for people. There's a moral drive to try and do things to make places better, but it's challenging when you've had to sack half your staff.

I worry about the quality of work we get when we put work out to tender. I worry we need to do more to make sure planning has a seat at the top table in local authorities, so that we can influence the big decisions (any pay raise for me would be entirely incidental). There is no reason why the public sector cannot be as efficient and effective as the private sector and re-invest the benefits of that in our communities rather than sending them off to shareholders. That is the public interest, absolutely central, and the reason I get out of bed every morning and am still checking emails late every night!

Notes

Works in local government and has managerial responsibilities for other planners

May have some brief private sector experience, but likely to have been in the public sector for most or all of their career

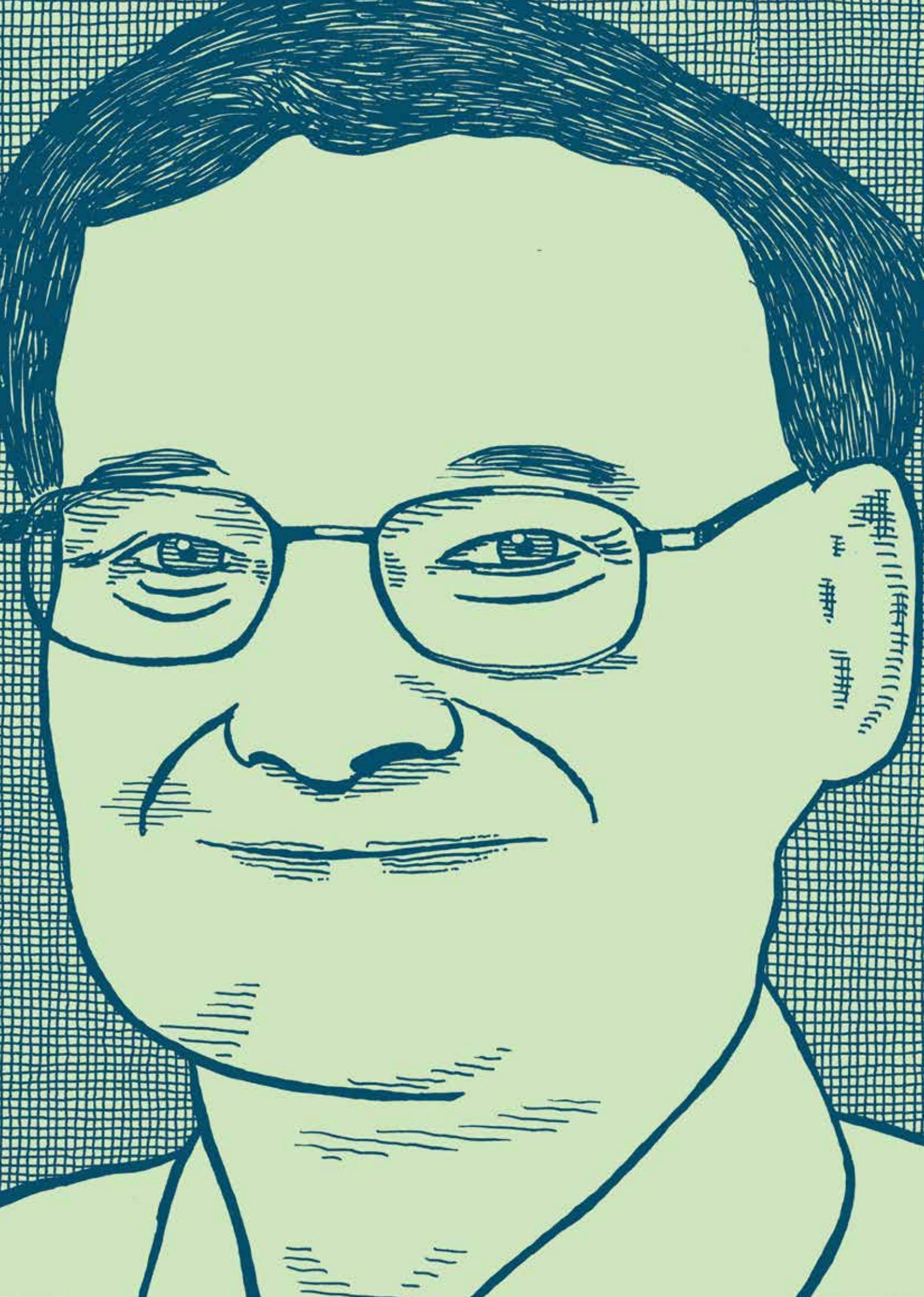
Probably sees the public interest as a vital justification for planning and may have used the term – or the term 'the public good' – in everyday practice

Possibly sees planning as needing to drive what's good for the public, thinking an understanding of that originates with planners rather than the public

Most likely has a rich understanding of local politics and stakeholder attitudes

Perhaps sees professionalism as about protecting planners from councillors

- " I would say certain people in the local community don't like me, so have I served their interests?"*
- " I don't think it's because I'm getting old, but we're possibly driven more by process and I suppose it does drive me through the roof sometimes"*
- " It's beaten into you right the way through. Public interest is an interesting thing because you can hide behind it or you can serve it"*
- " To create new places and build communities. It's really critical, it has a really important role to play in health and housing and getting people about and accessing services, so big picture stuff"*
- " In a local government context, you're not making money to make money, you're making money to serve the public interest in some way"*
- " It's about how you act and how you serve people"*
- " The public interest test is absolutely there, that's why I'm determined to keep building houses, when a lot of middle-class people have already got houses say that you shouldn't because the public interest test isn't about the majority of people who shout, it's about serving the needs of the whole community"*
- " I think the public interest can be very local"*
- " I think it's conduct, consistency and maintaining your professionalism because there'll be instances, I'm sure, when you're dealing with councillors, sometimes there might be pressure, if they want to support a certain scheme, professionally, people can't do that. You need to be mindful of ethics and Code of Conduct and that kind of stuff"*



Number six:

The multi-disciplinary consultancy-arian

Studying geography at university gave me a bit of a passion about the environment but I thought I really needed a professional career, so off I went to do a planning Master's. I thought about the public sector after that, but I liked the graduate scheme run at my company and am now a passionate 'company man'. I think technical planning interventions can help improve people's quality of lives and address environmental issues, particularly the climate crisis. I am personally passionate about sustainability, although I've worked on some airport and highway infrastructure schemes. I embrace a challenge and love to drive teams and projects. Money isn't everything but it is important to me to get a fair reward for my hard work. I think my company is different to other private consultancies: we're more collaborative and less combative.

I see myself as working in partnership with the public sector – and talk about 'we in the profession' – with an ideal that planners work together to make the right decisions for society. I like projects where I can be involved all the way through and can sell the advantages of having an 'outsider' status as a consultant. For me it's about professional expertise, which can be applied for the public good in either the public or the private sector. But we need the public to get with what's good for them. I like to see a well-resourced local authority that can stand its ground for the interests of its local area; I'm depressed by central government reforms and lack of capacity post-austerity. There's a certain element of being a planning geek about me. I even give up my own time to work on my local neighbourhood plan. I think I'm one of the good guys.

Notes

Has worked primarily or exclusively in, and is currently in, the private sector

Works for a large multi-disciplinary consultancy, which may do engineering / infrastructure / environmental work, or where planning is only part of the organisational focus

Perhaps feels more comfortable in this type of consultancy rather than an organisation at the 'sharper' end of private practice and is quite loyal to their employer

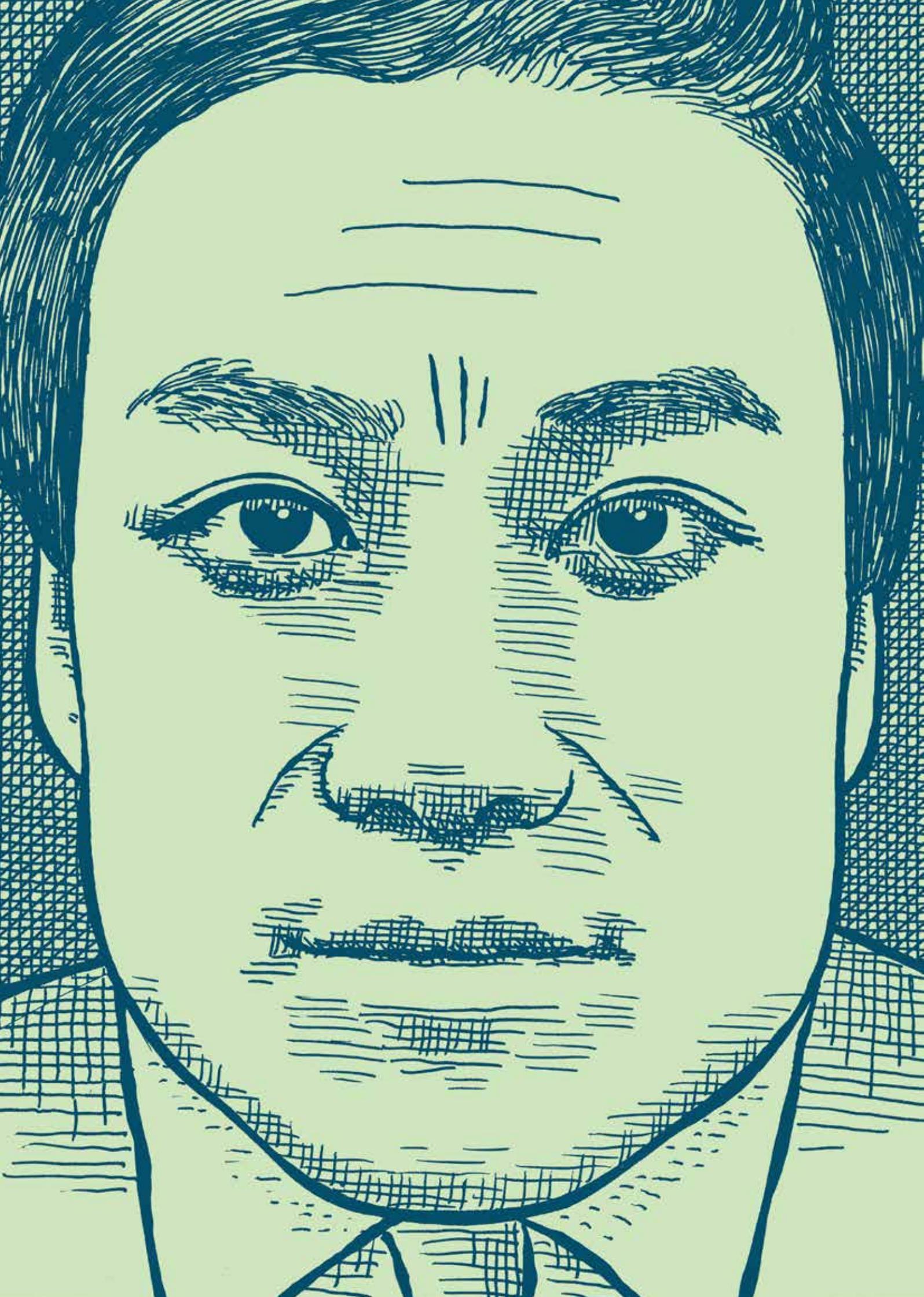
Possibly passionate about notions of place and holds an ideal of planning as placemaking

Can point to schemes they've been involved in and highlight a contribution made to something they profess to value, such as sustainability

Likely to argue professional expertise is important in the service of society and environment (at the right price)

Perhaps involved in planning beyond work, for example through supporting the RTPI or working on a neighbourhood plan

- "The public interest? It's not a term I hear bandied about much"*
- "I can't think of anything I've worked on which I haven't felt is serving the public interest"*
- "I think it's about weighing up the different consequences of development, understanding the relative benefits and harms and maybe coming to a decision that's the right one"*
- "I definitely value the value of planning and when I tell people I'm a planner and proud of it and always strive to do a good job, but also, I think, an objective job, so sometimes when we have clients who want something specific and there are occasions when you have to say 'that's not what planning does,' or 'that's not what my role as a planner is'"*
- "It's interesting talk to people in the public sector who haven't had that same pressure to become MRTPI, or the same support to do it, because I was very well supported through the process and it's made very little difference to them"*
- "I've stood up to individual clients who try to twist your findings"*
- "I think the public sector does still have the public interest ... I think that at [x] consultancy [where I now work] the public interest is very important because of the type of client and type of projects we work on. One of the reasons I did leave [y] consultancy is I felt I was working for clients who were making a huge amount of profit on places that I could not afford to live"*
- "Having knowledge and expertise and then using that with a sense of responsibility and ethics ... for me it goes back to knowledge and using it with a kind of sense of responsibility"*



Number seven:

The bright young thing

I've moved around a bit as a young planner but when opportunity knocks, I'm keen to try and progress my career and make my CV stand out. My first consultancy wasn't a positive experience. There was a lot of pressure, and they were a bit too all about the profit, so I moved on. I really enjoyed the next role, working with some great clients, but I was too ambitious to stay in that role. I mean, you can't stay in the same job for three years, can you? So I contacted a partner at another consultancy who I met when I was nominated for 'Young Planner of the Year' and moved on again. The pay was better and hopefully one day I can actually afford to live in one of the places I've helped get permission for.

I do think planning can make a difference by building places that people want to live and spend time in. I always think, 'would I like to live here?' I'm conscious of only ever having worked in the private sector so I spend time networking with 'other types of planners' through the RTPI. I worry what some of my peers think about me though. I once turned down work which I felt did not need doing – I mentioned it in the ethics section of my APC – yet I'm concerned I'll be pigeon-holed as a pro-developer, anti-community planner. Then again, I do like the entrepreneurial side of the private sector. Maybe I'll have my own consultancy one day.

Notes

Works in the private sector and argues the private sector fulfils the public interest as people need houses and planners help deliver good growth

Has experience of working in multiple organisations. Most likely several consultancies but may also include some time in local government or the third sector

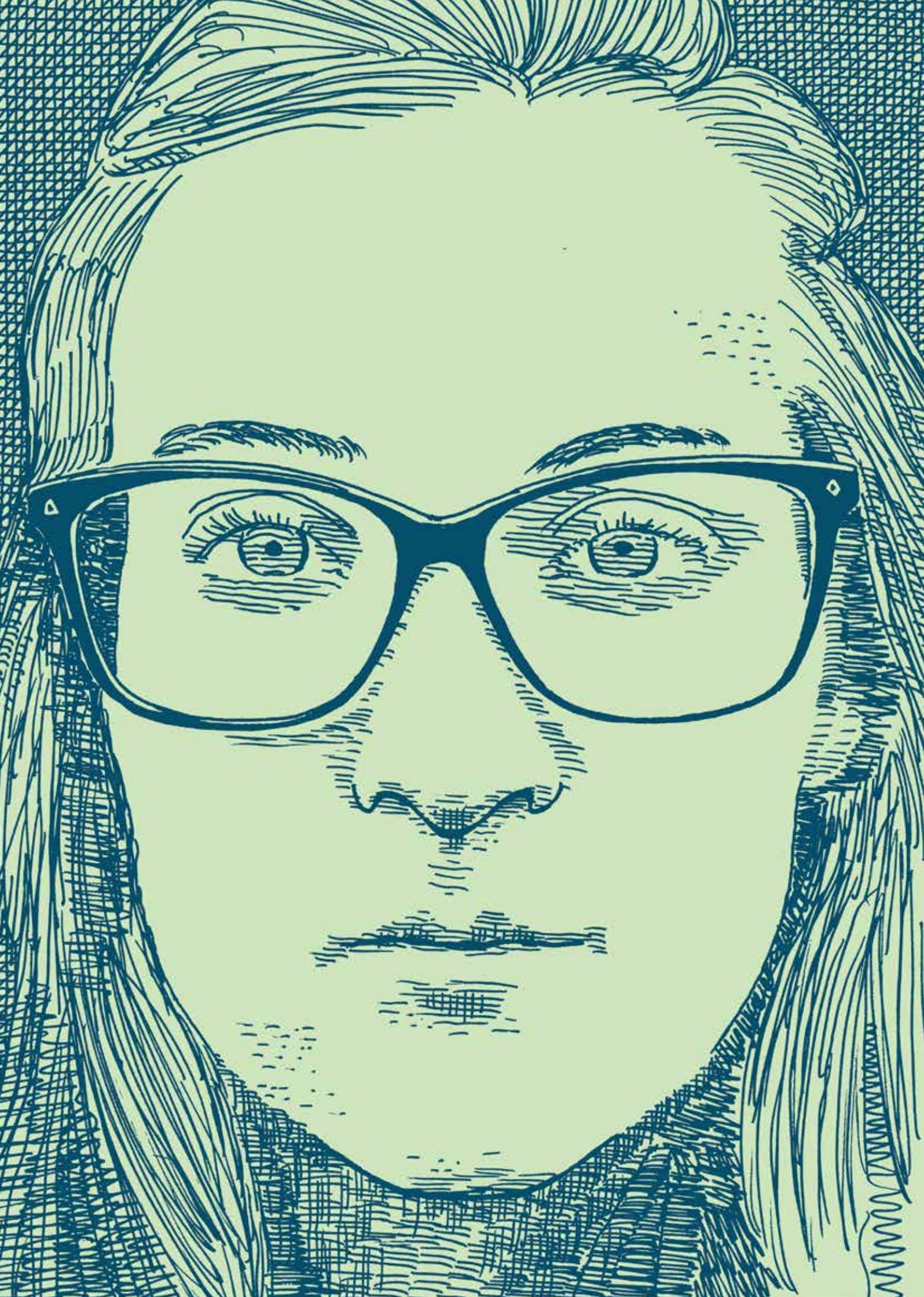
May feel more comfortable working in some consultancies than others

Highly ambitious and motivated by self-advancement

Probably conceives of professionalism as about how you conduct and present yourself

More likely to have MRTPI status than a local government planner of the same age, having been actively supported / encouraged through their APC by their consultancy employer

- “ *The public interest? When I go to public consultation events, it's traffic, how I'm going to get from A to B? ... That's a really important thing in planning because I get so frustrated about ... in fact ... my journey to work, as the crow flies, is actually not very far, but it's better to drive*”
- “ *No matter whether I'm representing homebuilders and their interest, they want the same thing, they want to build more homes and yes, it's because it's a commercial decision for their business, but actually, it has to fit in with policy, otherwise they won't be able to do it*”
- “ *[Planning?] It's there to accommodate and help manage the change needed in our environment. I've always worked in the South East where there's always been the obvious need for growth, but that growth needs to be managed ... looking at the best locations for that growth*”
- “ *I suppose another underlying factor throughout my whole planning experience is the housing crisis. I have actually now got on the housing ladder, but it's not where I want to live*”
- “ *It's managing the land in the public interest ... if it's to serve a private interest only because a lot of the time, you're serving both, then is it the right thing to be doing?*”
- “ *I'd like to think that I could give my professional view and not be clouded too much by the demands of my client and I will, if I really have concerns as a professional RTPI, to make them aware of the need to mediate and negotiate through the process ... it's to try and find a way that will please everyone, whilst achieving a type of development I would say I'd be proud of*”
- “ *I would hate to look back, later on in my career and think I can't believe ... because I was working for a certain industry at a certain time, I was saying things that I don't professionally believe in, so ... everything is submitted, it might be slightly ... try and word it, y'know*”



Number eight:

The public-spirited recession planner

I describe myself as a 'proper recession planner'. I got a passion for planning from my degree but struggled to get a job when I graduated soon after the financial crash, so took a job outside planning which I hated. Then I managed to get some work experience, unpaid, at my local council which evolved into some temporary paid work in their DM team. It was wanting something more permanent that led me to respond to a call from a recruitment agent and move onto a planning consultancy. It's a bit more about making money in the private sector but lots of developers don't want their name on rubbish, and with cuts local government has become more like the private sector, trying to make money through things like pre-apps. It's not all black and white, I don't think it's a case of the 'dark side' anymore, and yet, being in the private sector wasn't for me.

It was alright at first, but then a company merger really changed the culture of where I worked, and I was uncomfortable pushing back against reasonable requests from local authorities on behalf of clients. Some of the directors had very big egos and it was all a bit too competitive without much sense of individual freedom or public good. It was enough to push me to return to a local authority, albeit I'm now an agency planner. I'm not getting the long-term security, pension or benefits, but I feel like I'm working as part of a team again and actually trying to mediate, negotiate and improve things for the benefit of society. I feel I'm given more responsibility and can try to directly influence a place, although being agency means I'm not too tied down. My Mum worked for the Council, and it feels like I've come back home.

Notes

Entered the profession around the time of the financial crash

Has worked for multiple organisations. Currently works in the public sector but this may be as agency rather than permanent staff

Probably has experience of working in the private sector but may feel more comfortable working in the public sector. May well contrast their role in local government with their experiences in a consultancy

May think that professionalism depends on who you work for

Understands the role of planning as about negotiating to try and secure some public benefit from development and pulling things together

“ [The purpose of planning?] ... *doing things that are in the best interest of the wider public, but part of the reason I think they system is broken is because people do not engage properly with that wider public to come to a consensus ... I think the engagement is about resources*”

“ *There is a whole bunch of consultancies out there that we would call the anti-planners that are not bothered about any of the public interest and are out there just to get money and screw people over and that's a massive change, I think, in the whole profession*”

“ *Generally, it does serve the public interest. I do sometimes sympathise with objectors though ... quite frankly, it must be an absolute nightmare for some*”

“ *I would just say the public interest is just looking out for them, so they don't know how much a 13 storey building is going to affect them, but it's our job because we've studied planning and we know more about it, to assess how it will impact them and weigh up the options to say that it may take a bit of their daylight sunlight out, however it is going to have a community centre ... and it's going to get us a lot of Section 106 and CIL money ... They don't understand that*”

“ *Professionalism ... I think it means acting with integrity, but also ... I know I said I believe in public interest and ... my values more sit in public sector, but someone else's values might more sit in the private sector ... it's about understanding both sides ... it depends on the situation and... [it] depends on the director or the person you're working for*”

“ *In the public sector, I'm going to maintain my RTPI membership, but I have to pay for it myself now and it's very expensive and ... it doesn't actually add an awful lot to the value of the information that you're giving out as advice. It's more valued in the private sector now*”

“ *I would say, in the public sector ... although you take your job seriously ... there is still time to ... get on with your colleagues and again, if anyone needs help. I think, maybe in the private sector, it's more like ... you must get on with it and you must do it as quickly as possible, otherwise you're wasting time and that means you're wasting money*”



Number nine:

The planning planning consultant

My Dad used to play golf with a planner so I thought it would be a good option for me. I considered working in a local authority after university, but I was put off by their recruitment practices. It was probably a lucky break because of the dysfunctional organisational and political dynamics in so many councils, albeit I like employing former local authority planners because they're well rounded and know how to get a permission. Saves money on training too. The purpose of planning is to deliver development, but hopefully good development that helps regenerate places and benefit current and future generations. Right now, that means building more homes, and I have little time for members of the public who can't see that.

I've worked on lots of appeals too and it can be good planning; you can't sit around waiting for local authorities with their time-consuming democratic processes. I've also helped to work through conditions to 'value engineer' permissions because planning should be about delivery; problem solving and fighting the corner for my clients is not a bad thing. Both sectors have their role in the process; it's good to keep local government on their toes. I'm opinionated and I like to work hard. You can progress a good career in the private sector but that's not just for my own benefit, I think I've helped make things a little better than they might otherwise have been.

Notes

Works for a planning focussed consultancy

May have worked in a local authority briefly or may only have ever worked in the private sector

Views likely to vary considerably between consultants and consultancies

Likely to have a sense of their expertise and believe in planning's professional expertise more than the views of local communities. Probably believes in the importance of there being a planning system and may in private express concerns about some government reforms

May see getting planning permission as a bit of game to be played

Quite possibly drives a nice car and thinks about traffic a fair bit both 'on and off duty'

Can construct a good argument as to why any development can be considered beneficial

" I've always seen planning as ... an invented system with a purpose to make sure that development is, in a broad sense, in the public interest and that private interest doesn't completely overawe that ... even though I'm now on the side that's trying to promote the private interest over the public interest, it is clear that that is what the system stands for"

" To a certain extent, planners are their own, worst enemies. We ask too many questions of the public ... We've got an aging population, so we need to build more houses just to stand still"

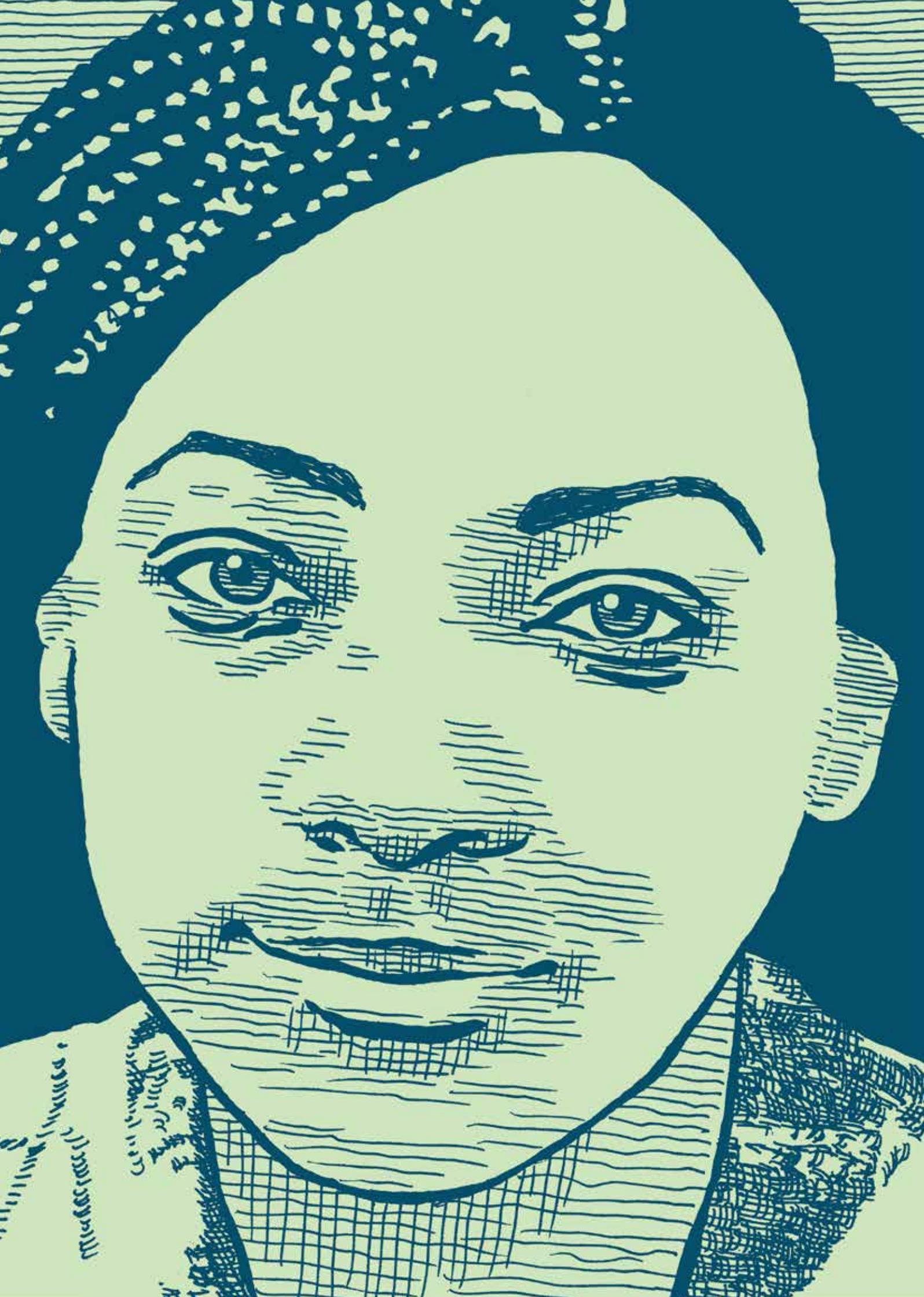
" I'm not sure I got a very strong feeling where you would expect it in the local authority that it was all about serving public interest. I wasn't overwhelmed by that as the main driver"

" I say 'I make everybody's life a little bit better' and I think that is the role of planning... with my master-planning regeneration strategic planning policy hat on, that's absolutely what it's all about ... it's slightly different if you're talking from a development management point of view because it's at the minutiae of achieving that, but putting the right stuff in the right place with the right infrastructure is all part of that bigger picture"

" I guess, to be a good planner, you need to have a lot of understanding of the industry ... part of the problem with planning is that your average person does not understand the system"

" I do think that sometimes, I would think 'actually d'you know what, I can't make that argument because I am a RTPI accredited town planner, I signed up to a Code of Conduct"

" We're always very good at pointing at fabulous, successful developments in Europe, but look at the power the chief planner has there. We don't have that culture in the UK anymore, the planners have become the whipping boys ... I think planning has managed to undermine its professionalism over a number of years. I think the profession has lost confidence"



Number ten:

The planner's planner

I like being able to point out the window and show interesting developments I have been involved in. You can see the results of your work in the physical environment all around you as a planner. I work for the Council in the place I used to visit my grandparents as a child. I have the odd prick of conscience about some of the development we allow (yes, I did recommend approval for *that scheme* and I'd rather not discuss it), but I do try and make things less bad, and sleep better at night for it. On the whole, I reckon that I am doing some good in the world.

My husband, who works in the private sector, thinks I'm a doper, that public sector work is a breeze compared to his long hours, but it's become a bit tougher since austerity has reduced staff numbers in my department. In my more cash-hungry moments, like when I think of having a bigger garden for the kids, I feel the pull of the private sector, but I won't ever actually move. I think some people are cut out for private practice in planning, and some for local government. You have to have a thick skin if you're a planner: we're often unsung heroes but we go about our business quietly and make significant improvements to proposals to promote the public good through our understanding of a place and how the local politics work. For me the public interest can be achieved at a variety of scales by making decisions in accordance with policy. Getting decisions like that, and better yet then actually seeing them built, is really rewarding.

Notes

Works in local government

May have worked outside local government, but only briefly

Thinks about the public interest being understandable at different scales and having a political dimension

Sees the purpose of planning as building better places with a concern for sustainability

Most likely thinks about policy and policy compliance a lot

Very systems and procedure driven

May well understand the local geography fairly well and even have connections to the authority they work for (such as living there, and thus have their own local knowledge)

- " I mean, well, surely the public interest is to make decisions in accordance with the policy which has been proofed to look at those public interest tests ... it could be government policies in terms of education, healthcare, care for the elderly, all those things are coming into play ... But it could be something as little as an extension blocking out somebody's light but that extension's for someone who is disabled. What's the public interest? You've got to weigh up that this man has less light in his back kitchen, or this other man gets his wheelchair into the shower, that's the balance that has to be struck"*
- " It goes down from the very, very hyperlocal interest, the neighbours worried about the loft conversion [to an] impact internationally"*
- " The purpose of planning changes so much, depending ... I started under a Labour government, now we're in a weird Tory government and you can see, even from that small period of time, the purpose has changed so much"*
- " I know what the idealistic purpose of planning is, it's either building better places, the right homes in the right places, all these kinds of lines you see and that's a good purpose, but whether it delivers that is anybody's guess"*
- " For me, I have a line where I will never write anything, or never say anything or do anything that I ... not never, but I won't write something just because that has to be written ... It's got a political decision, but I'm not going to sit here and say black is white"*

Join the conversation

Do you think these pen portraits present a fair representation of the contemporary British planning profession? Are there any obvious missing types? Would a planner working directly for a housebuilder or for the third sector (such as an environmental charity) represent a distinctly different type to the ten we have presented here? Do you think there are different understandings of the public interest, professionalism and the purpose of planning across the different sectors, organisations and types of work that constitute the planning world? If so, does this matter? We'd love to hear your feedback.

e-mail: ben.clifford@ucl.ac.uk

Twitter: @WITPI_Planning

Acknowledgements

These pen portraits are a composite typology produced on the basis of the characteristics, careers and expressed viewpoints of a larger group of planners from across the UK who participated in biographical interviews as part of the ESRC funded 'Working in the Public Interest' research project.

The interviews were conducted by the full WITPI team: Ben Clifford from UCL; Andy Inch, Jason Slade, Malcolm Tait and Matthew Wargent from the University of Sheffield; and Zan Gunn, Abigail Schoneboom and Geoff Vigar from Newcastle University.

We are very grateful to the anonymous interviewees for their time and participation in the project. The interpretation of the careers and viewpoints in these pen portraits is an amalgam of the original interview data and responsibility for this interpretation lies with Ben Clifford.

Final thanks to Rob Cowan for the illustrations in this booklet. Drawing on a longstanding engagement with the planning world, Rob has conjured-up a picture to represent each pen portrait and these help bring our characters alive.





The University
Of Sheffield.



Newcastle
University