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# ‘The object is to change the heart and soul’: Financial incentives, planning and opposition to new housebuilding in England

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## Abstract

In 2014 the UK government announced plans to reduce opposition to housing development by making a direct payment to households in England.<sup>1</sup> This was part of a wider experiment with behavioural economics and financial inducements in planning policy. In this paper, we explore this proposal, named ‘Development Benefits’, arguing it offers important insights into how the governing rationality of neoliberalism attempts to govern both planning and opposition to development by replacing political debate with a depoliticised economic rationality. Drawing on householder and key player responses to the Development Benefits proposal we highlight significant levels of principled objection to the replacement of traditional forms of planning reason with financial logics. The paper therefore contributes to understandings of planning as a site of ongoing resistance to neoliberal rationalities. We conclude by questioning whether Development Benefits represent a particular strand of ‘late neoliberal’ governmentality, exploring the potential for an

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alternative planning rationality to contest the narrow marketisation of planning ideas and practices.

### Keywords

Opposition to development, planning for housing, neoliberalism, financial incentives, conflict

## Introduction

The neoliberal project is characterised by belief that the extended role of the modern state distorts the rational guiding hand of free market economic preferences. Since the 1980s this principle has led to numerous experiments in the reshaping of state intervention through the application of market logics across economic and social policy, favouring individualised over collective engagement with service provision. Neoliberal government seeks not only to privatise but to economise and monetise the political landscape, narrowing wider democratic debate to issues of price and encouraging citizens to view themselves as individualised customers (Brown, 2015). Margaret Thatcher's statement that 'Economics are the method; the object is to change the heart and soul' has therefore been taken as a foundational statement of the political rationality of neoliberalism and its intention to remake citizen-subjectivities (Butt, 1981; Dardot and Laval, 2014: 44).

Our interest in this paper is with a particular experiment in neoliberal statecraft proposed by UK governments to ease or remove opposition to housebuilding in England by making direct financial payments, labelled 'development benefits' (DBs), to residents likely to be affected by development. We argue this initiative can be characterised as a distinctive extension of wider neoliberal experiments with governing through economic methods, incorporating 'financial policy instruments' (Du Gay, 2012) as a technology for transforming prevailing planning rationalities.

From a governmental perspective, the logic underpinning this 'behavioural economic' intervention has intuitive appeal. The global financial crisis of 2007–8 exacerbated long term, significant shortfalls in new housebuilding, viewed as a root cause of a widely perceived 'housing crisis' in England.<sup>2</sup> Against an estimated need for more than 200,000<sup>3</sup> new houses to be built annually, only 107,980 units were completed in 2012–13 (MHCLG, 2018). Resident opposition (often unhelpfully referred to as NIMBYism) can be a powerful constraint on development, especially when exercised through planning systems with strong elements of devolved, local democratic decision-making. As the UK government has recognised, opposition to development might be a rational response where development is perceived to threaten existing residential amenity and property values. A financial contribution compensating for perceived losses may therefore reduce opposition or even, in the words of one UK Housing Minister, transform the very subjectivities of opponents, turning them from 'NIMBYs' into 'homebuilders' (Inch, 2012).

Making direct payments to residents to reduce opposition therefore represents an attempt to shift the 'heart and soul' of state–citizen relations in planning through appeal to a core item of neoliberal faith, i.e. that citizens will respond as homo-oeconomicus to 'rational' economic incentivisation (Brown, 2015). There are considerable practical issues surrounding who should receive such a payment and how much would need to be offered; however, the efficacy and legitimacy of the approach rests on the assumption that issues which generate political opposition to new housebuilding can be addressed through some form of financial

payment. As such, the proposal raised profound challenges for the established ethos and practices of planning, including concerns about the impacts on formally democratic decision-making processes of reducing planning in the public interest to a matter of financial calculation. The prospect of the state or developers ‘buying’ planning permission is highly controversial when the core task of planning is understood to be making the case and regulating for good quality place-making that respects or enhances existing residential amenity.

The paper draws on our involvement in research commissioned by the UK government to test the feasibility of the proposed ‘*development benefits*’ policy. We trace the origins of the experiment as a response to the problematic politics of planning for potentially unpopular new housing, the reaction of key target constituencies and the decision by government to abandon the proposal. Beyond the particularities of this initiative, our wider interest is in the significance of attempts to use financial incentives to remake planning and wider democratic relations under neoliberal rule in the UK and beyond.

We therefore make three distinctive contributions to debates about the reshaping of planning ideas, practices and subjectivities. First, in an era marked by the widespread problematisation and even ‘scapegoating’ of planning (Gunder, 2016), we argue it is important to critically examine the construction of opposition to development as a problem requiring governmental intervention. In particular, this requires that research carefully separates evidence of opposition and the forms of political pressure this generates for national and local government from any necessary relation to the perceived delays and blockages that have motivated governmental reform initiatives in states and jurisdictions internationally.

Second, we argue that strong principled opposition to this proposal offers insight into continuing resistances to the idea that planning decisions should be governed by economic logics and individual self-interest. If the object of DBs was to change the ‘*heart and soul*’ of planning–citizen relations by interpellating citizens as caricatures of homo-oeconomicus, the abandonment of the scheme highlights how financial considerations struggled to rework established rationalities of planning. Responses to DBs also therefore reveal ongoing commitment to established forms of planning reason, resistant to any intimation that planning permission can be ‘bought and sold’ and potentially offering insight into political alternatives to the neoliberal problematisation of planning.

Third, we suggest the problem that underpinned the DB policy – how to reconcile development and socio-political reproduction – can only be effectively addressed by engaging with the broader non-financial basis of opposition to development and the political subjectivities it generates. In this regard, we argue the limited purchase of the DB proposal illustrates a wider, but as yet politically uncertain, problematisation of the extent to which market discipline can be relied on to realise public interest objectives. We therefore speculate that the apparent ‘failure’ of the DB policy in England may be considered part of a phase of ‘late’ neoliberalism in which the political significance of the housing question has begun to unsettle core assumptions underpinning the government of land-use regulation.

The rest of the paper is structured in seven parts. We first examine core features of the neoliberal problematisations of planning and then opposition to development. We then go on to explore how successive governments in England have struggled to manage the politics of local opposition within the terms of this dominant logic, leading to a succession of attempts to govern from a distance. This allows us to trace the emergence of financial incentives as a response to a persistent policy problem framed by neoliberal concerns about planning’s perceived lack of responsiveness to market signals. We then describe the attitudes of citizens, planners and local elected officials towards the DB proposal,

highlighting both principled and practical resistance to the extension of economic logics to discipline and reshape local planning cultures. A discussion of the implications of the turn towards financial incentives and the resistances it encountered follows, assessing what this suggests for the politics and possibilities of a democratic planning rationality capable of governing opposition to housing development under late neoliberalism. A short conclusion then recaps the central contributions the paper makes.

## Neoliberal government and the problem of planning

Neoliberal concern for the proper limits of state activity is built on the grounds of what Foucault ([1980] 2008: 76) described as a prevailing anxiety or ‘phobia of the state’ and its perceived constraint on the free flow of markets and individual choice (Dardot and Laval, 2014). This has led to a pronounced emphasis on what Mitchell Dean (2006) calls the ‘government of government’ – the widespread problematisation and attempted transformation of established state practices, like spatial planning, through the introduction of new disciplinary techniques. These are intended not just to limit the role of the state vis-à-vis the economy as in classical liberal theories but to bring actors’ conduct in line with new forms of (marketised) governing rationality.<sup>4</sup>

Drawing on Foucault’s prescient analysis of the governmental rationality of neoliberalism, Wendy Brown (2015) points to the centrality of homo-oeconomicus as the subject through which neoliberal government seeks to: ‘... transmogrify[y] every human domain and endeavor, along with humans themselves, according to a specific image of the economic... In neoliberal reason and in domains governed by it, we are only and everywhere *homo oeconomicus*’ (9–10).

Brown (2015: 221) further argues that the political rationality of neoliberalism is characterised by the displacement of homo-politicus and the reduction of government to governance, understood as a technical exercise in depoliticised problem-solving:

The neoliberal solution to problems is always more markets, more complete markets, more perfect markets, more financialization, new technologies, new ways to monetize. Anything but collaborative and contestatory human decision making, control over the conditions of existence, planning for the future; anything but deliberate constructions of existence through democratic discussion, law, policy. Anything but the human knowledge, deliberation, judgment, and action classically associated with *homo politicus*

For Foucault ([1980] 2008: 76) neoliberal state-phobia was significantly reinforced by the demonization of post-war economic planning. Attempts to reform state regulation of land and property markets across the global north since the early 1980s highlight a broad sense in which planning ideas and practices have remained a problem for neoliberal government (e.g. Gunder, 2016; Lord and Tewdwr-Jones, 2014). Repeated reform initiatives illustrate the extent to which planning has become a site of political attention and active policy experimentation as governments have sought to reshape institutions, attitudes and practices considered out of step with prevailing political rationalities, even where evidence of negative economic impacts remains limited (Adams and Watkins, 2014; Gurran and Phibbs, 2014). This leads Gunder (2016) to argue planning has become an ideological scapegoat, constructed as a key impediment, blocking the fulfilment of late capitalist society’s policy fantasies of the better futures that unfettered market-led development will deliver.

Debates about the definition and limits of neoliberalism also, however, highlight dangers in overstating the scope and power of neoliberalism to remake government and society

(e.g. Barnett, 2010; Peck, 2013). Many accounts, including Brown's (e.g. Honig, 2017), have been accused of exaggerating the dominance of neoliberal rationalities whilst overlooking their fallibility, the complex ways in which they fail and perpetually provoke resistances, what Foucault labelled 'counter-conducts', premised on 'refusals of specific forms of governmental power' (Huxley, 2018: 213; Rose et al., 2006).

Continued experimentation in 'the government of planning' illustrates that the field presents particular challenges for the roll-out of market-based rationalities, in part because active spatial management and land-use control is socially, electorally and economically important and frequently controversial (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2013). Brown's 'homo-politicus' (or following Matthews et al. (2013) 'homo-democraticus') rather than homo-oeconomicus has therefore tended to figure as a core subject of planning rationalities. As such, planning provides a potentially productive 'way in' to explore the 'variable practices, manifestations and spaces of resistance' that continue to shape the uneven, variegated and contested neoliberalisation of spatial government (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2013: 24; Brenner et al., 2010). Exploring the power of neoliberal rationalities therefore requires attentiveness to the complex ways in which '[p]lanning both encounters and calls forth resistances to particular exercises of governmentality, potentially inciting and enacting counter-conducts that are refusals to be governed "like that"' (Huxley, 2018: 215).

## **The problem of opposition to development**

In general, planning systems are charged with managing the contradictory demands generated by capitalist urbanisation and the political tensions this generates.

This role involves reconciling competing societal desires, for example, to ensure continuous development, conservation of land or the amenity of existing homeowners. The legitimacy of planning as a governmental activity frequently rests on its ability to mediate or displace conflict generated by development.

Opposition to development can be motivated by a wide range of concerns from the protection of assets, commitments to environmental or social justice through to desire to exclude particular social groups from a neighbourhood. Often it is underpinned by strong place attachments and mistrust of the impacts of development (see e.g. Davison et al., 2016; Matthews et al., 2013). It is, therefore, important to critically explore the variety of different concerns motivating opposition, the diverse political configurations that it can take across diverse geographical sites and how this shapes its (perceived and actual) efficacy and subsequent policy responses.

Established scholarship therefore challenges use of the term Not-In-My-Back-Yard (NIMBY), highlighting its frequent use to delegitimise opposition, reducing the motivations of opponents to narrow self-interest (Burningham, 2000). The prevalence of opposition has, however, led to recurring political concern that planning processes are proving incapable of governing 'NIMBY' mobilisations against locally unwanted land uses, generating significant negative impacts for economic efficiency and social justice by, for example, displacing unwanted development onto communities less able to defend themselves or preventing the construction of socially necessary infrastructure, including new housing (Schively, 2007).

Growth pressures in economically important regions frequently bring the imperatives of market-led development for economic competitiveness into conflict with property-owners committed to the defence of residential areas and property values they have been encouraged to understand as symbols of aspiration and reward for their commitment to the virtues of the free-market order (Lake, 1993). In such contexts homeowners, with the social and

cultural capital to make themselves heard and who perceive new development as a threat, can form locally powerful political lobbies that exert influence through planning systems.

Opposition to development has therefore been constructed as an increasingly significant problem across the global north in recent years (see e.g. Davison et al., 2016 in Australia; Myers, 2007 in the US; Sturzaker, 2010 in the UK), contributing to dissatisfaction with planning and generating attempts to streamline development regulation and democratic influence. However, if planning processes struggle to manage such conflict, the resultant political tensions also pose challenges for attempts to leave planning to the market as deregulation runs the risk of alienating the ideologically and electorally important support of 'homeowners'.

In England, the focus of the present paper, middle-class homeowners are often supportive of strong local planning controls as a means of maintaining existing residential amenity, shaping conservative local planning cultures in certain, typically affluent, locations (e.g. Murdoch and Abram, 2002; Vigar et al., 2000). Hall's (1974) classic study 'The containment of urban England' evidenced regressive distributive effects produced by the conservative operation of planning controls. However, despite clear evidence of continued opposition (Matthews et al., 2013), and case studies illustrating the tactics and effectiveness of opponents (Sturzaker, 2010), there is less aggregate, contemporary evidence of the overall role of opposition in either slowing or blocking housing development.

In the context of neoliberal state-phobia and the 'scapegoating' of planning, it is important to critically assess the ways in which both planning and opposition to development are constructed as problems requiring the application of particular governmental responses. We return to these arguments below, first however we explore the emergence of financial incentives as a technology designed to govern 'from a distance' in response to the perceived problems of planning's economic irrationality and the politically problematic strength of local opposition to development.

## **Governing opposition to housing development in England**

The political unpopularity of new housing development has long created difficulties for national planning policy in England, leading to a succession of attempts to govern local decision-making from a distance (Murdoch, 2004). From the early 2000s onwards, concern about affordability and the negative socio-economic consequences of house price inflation led to the 'rediscovery' of housing supply as a political problem in England (Bramley, 2007). Prevailing approaches had operated through a 'numbers game' where targets for quantities of new housing were negotiated between levels of government (Vigar et al., 2000). Operating alongside the prioritisation of urban regeneration on previously developed land, however, this mechanism was increasingly considered too weak to guarantee required levels of new supply.

As a result, New Labour governments in the 2000s strengthened regional planning, allocated large-scale urban extensions to become 'sustainable communities' and appointed Kate Barker, a former member of the Bank of England's monetary policy committee, to review housing supply and the land-use planning system (Barker, 2004, 2006). Barker's recommendations, backed at the time by a parallel review of local government finance (Lyons, 2007),<sup>5</sup> led to increases in regional housing targets but centred on the need to make the planning system more responsive to market signals. This included proposals to introduce incentives for local planning authorities to promote higher levels of housebuilding.

Both the Barker and Lyons' reviews, argued that, particularly in areas of high market demand, local authorities and communities were expected to accept new housing

development that generated negative externalities (such as increased congestion and pressure on school places) but were not adequately compensated through the highly centralised system of local government finance prevailing in England. Understood in orthodox economic terms, opposition could be considered a collective action problem; despite any wider, collective benefits it is rational for individual owners whose property values and quality of life are negatively affected by development to object to proposals.

The turn towards financial incentives resonated with the wider currency of behavioural economics within the civil service at this time, notably the powerful Treasury. Such approaches therefore influenced successive governments, symbolised by the setting up of a so-called nudge unit or behavioural insights team in the Cabinet Office in 2010 to introduce ideas from behavioural economics and psychology to find ‘intelligent ways to encourage, support and enable people to make better choices for themselves’ (Cabinet Office, 2011: 3; Leggett, 2015). The emphasis placed on financial incentives under a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government from 2010 to 2015 therefore represented a continuation of attempts to find new ways of governing a long-standing policy problem which had become more acute as a result of a precipitous decline in new housebuilding following the 2007–8 financial crisis.

### **Financial incentives as a governmental technology**

Both coalition partners had made election pledges to revoke the regional planning structures created by their New Labour predecessors, arguing the locally unpopular housing ‘targets’ they imposed were symptomatic of a failed, centralising approach to government. In place of this regime, the Conservatives had promised a ‘*revolution*’ in planning that would be achieved by ‘replacing top-down targets with bottom-up decision-making, transferring powers currently held by remote and unaccountable quangos into the hands of local communities’ (Conservative Party, 2009: 9).

The new ‘localist’ planning system promised to simplify national guidance and decentralise power to local people.<sup>6</sup> However, the proposals promised not only to minimise the disruptive role of the central state in planning for housing but also to find new ways of dealing with the problem of local opposition and therefore to facilitate increased housebuilding:

... to make this local decision-making work, we need also to change the incentives provided by the financial framework ... The solution lies in giving local councils and local communities incentives for house building, not targets. By creating a real and substantial financial incentive to reward communities that accept house building, we guarantee that those directly affected by development are those that benefit. (Conservative Party, 2009: 9)

As in other parts of the world, financial instruments have been deployed in England to mitigate negative externalities and secure community benefits from development. However, legal agreements called planning obligations were previously agreed and levied at the local authority scale (Crook, 2016). The new proposals promised to go further. By appealing directly to the rational self-interest of local communities, imagined as the biddable homo-economicus of neoliberal thought (Matthews et al., 2013), it would be possible to produce new, pro-development citizen-subjectivities, accepting of the need for development. The introduction of financial incentives in place of directive targets was rhetorically constructed as a key to turning New Labour’s NIMBYs into enthusiastic enablers of development (Inch, 2012).

In this regard, the localism of the coalition government revealed itself less as a project to decentralise and empower local actors and more as a distinctive articulation of the political rationality of neoliberalism, seeking to govern from a distance by shaping an environment in which individual freedom and choice would be exercised in 'responsible' ways (Clarke and Cochrane, 2013). Financial incentives were positioned as the *technology* through which this responsible approach could be brought about, a 'financial policy instrument' intended to change attitudes and behaviours by appealing to the rational self-interest of homo-oeconomicus (Du Gay, 2012).

The initial result of the shift towards incentives was the introduction of the New Homes Bonus (NHB), a financial payment made to local authorities for six years for each new home built within their boundaries (Dunning et al., 2014). The NHB was intended to target the attitudes and behaviour of both local planning authorities and communities who, understood as financially motivated economic actors, would be able to clearly see the benefits of accepting growth.

The coalition government was committed to making financial considerations, like the NHB, a core consideration in local planning. England's planning practices have evolved in a distinctive manner since the right to develop land was nationalised in 1947 with plans guiding but not zoning development, leaving considerable discretion to decision-makers to weigh up the 'material considerations' relevant to development proposals on a case-by-case basis. What constitutes a 'material planning consideration' has never been defined in legislation and case law has established a broad understanding that anything related to the use and development of land is potentially relevant to decision-making. However, one enduring principle has been that development rights cannot be 'bought and sold' as this would threaten the probity of decisions taken in the public interest (Walter, 2012). Debates around the buying and selling of planning permission have been particularly pronounced in relation to how planning gain should be recouped and the extent to which potential benefits should influence decision-making<sup>7</sup> (e.g. Crook, 2016).

These debates were rehearsed again when government revised planning legislation to explicitly include 'local finance considerations' as a material consideration. The national planning professional body, the Royal Town Planning Institute (2011), argued that the change threatened to undermine established principles of planning decision-making, where financial considerations should only be given weight if they are capable of making otherwise unacceptable development proposals acceptable in planning terms. Government sought to ease these fears by stating it simply wanted to ensure incentives were explicitly considered, not that they should be the basis for decision-making. The episode nonetheless highlighted the extent to which financial incentives continued to be considered a potentially inappropriate influence.

In practice, meanwhile, a parliamentary select committee was highly critical of the government for its failure to evaluate the impacts of the NHB (House of Commons, 2013). Subsequent government-funded research suggested that, whilst many local authorities understood the bonus as a potentially powerful incentive, very few felt it had any effect on decision-making or, crucially, that it had or *should* filter down to local residents (Dunning et al., 2014).

In January 2013, Nick Boles, the government minister for Planning, drew on a recent report by the think-tank he had previously led, *Policy Exchange*, to propose what he described as a direct 'bribe' (which he wanted to call the 'Boles Bung') to communities who took advantage of new powers to draw up statutory neighbourhood plans. In exchange for designating higher levels of housebuilding in such plans, neighbourhood groups would

be offered direct control of up to 25% of planning gain levies collected from developers (Wintour, 2013).

By the end of 2013 the author of that report, Alex Morton, had become a government advisor and, coincidentally or otherwise, the Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne announced proposals to pilot a new policy initiative ‘to ensure that households benefit from developments in their local area’ by offering direct payments to reshape attitudes and behaviour and thereby reduce opposition to new housing development (HM Treasury, 2013: 59; on this episode see also Haughton and Allmendinger, 2016).

Direct ‘development benefits’ payments to households therefore emerged as an extension of an incentives-based approach to disciplining local planning decision-making that was being actively pursued within and around government. In the next section below, we assess the proposed DB scheme and how this further appeal to homo-oeconomicus was received.

### **Exploring the logic and limits of DBs**

The potential for financial incentives in planning has long attracted economists. However, there are many knotty political and practical choices about how a financial incentive for development operates, for example who receives the payments (spatial distribution, owner/resident) and whether the payment should be made to those who oppose development or to all those who live in a defined catchment area? The question of whether the payment might be made to all residents rather than those who oppose is important because (a) a payment to all residents might involve considerable deadweight payments to households not opposed; and (b) an incentive to all residents might encourage those who are neutral or in favour of development to challenge those who resist. However, as policy-makers recognised, there was limited direct evidence to inform the DB proposal. Indeed the evaluation study reported on in this paper was seen as providing an important evidence base in the absence of knowledge of any meaningful testing of individualised financial inducements in planning systems internationally.

The ‘overall aim’ of the ‘Development Benefit (DB) model’ was ‘to reduce the extent to which development is blocked or delayed as a result of opposition by local residents’ (Communities and Local Government (CLG), 2014). The pilot DB scheme was intended to contain three elements: an initial theoretical evaluation of the model, a series of local authority pilots and a subsequent evaluation of their findings. The authors were part of the research team contracted to conduct the first stage, theoretical evaluation exploring: drivers of opposition, and the extent to which DBs might address these; the potential impact of payments on attitudes and behaviour towards development; the potential impact on housing supply; and the impact on the planning system (for further details, including an extended explanation of the research approach and methods, see CLG, 2017).

The core of the study was a survey of attitudes to financial payment involving residents living within 200 metre radius of potentially contentious sites for new housebuilding where opposition would be likely if development proposals came forward. The sample of residents was drawn from six areas, purposively selected to represent geographic, urban–rural and planning policy variation across England (from a typology of all local planning authorities, reported in Dunning et al., 2014) as well as the presence of both pressure for housing development and opposition to either the local plan or recent planning applications.

One hundred and nine householder interviewees were recruited (minimum of 15 per case study) through an initial telephone screening of a random sample of commercially available telephone contacts. The screening identified householders that were ‘likely to oppose new housebuilding’ and were willing to participate in an interview either via telephone or

face-to-face. We also conducted telephone interviews with 3–5 ‘key players’, local planning officers, politicians or development industry representatives, working in each local authority area (22 interviewees in total) to contextualise the level of opposition to development in their locality and to canvas their views on the principle and practicability of DBs.

The audio-recorded interviews covered attitudinal evidence about opposition to development, the DB proposal and perceptions of the role of financial incentives in planning decision-making. They involved a series of open questions such as ‘Would you be opposed to new housebuilding in your local area?’, but householder interviews also included closed, multiple choice questions, such as ‘If you were to receive a financial payment if new housing development went ahead, would you be less likely to oppose the development?’ (Yes/No/Maybe/Don’t Know). For each closed question, interviewees were given the option to explain their answer.

### *Background and motivations for opposition*

In general, the householder interviews included a spread of responses across age and income categories, albeit with a bias towards wealthier owner-occupiers who existing research identifies as more likely to oppose new development (72% were aged 50 plus). Whilst all of those interviewed had been pre-screened and therefore considered themselves ‘likely to oppose’ new development, 25% self-identified as very strongly opposed, with 44% strongly opposed and 31% viewing their opposition in weaker terms. Fifty-five per cent suggested they were likely to act on their opposition, typically by making representations to their local authority but also by contacting councillors or attending meetings. Whilst aware of local campaign groups, few of those interviewed were directly involved or felt they were influenced by such activities.

Opposition to new housing development was described by respondents in a variety of different ways, but frequently focused around the impacts of new development on amenity and infrastructure:

So when they’re talking about new housing developments, that’s great if you have infrastructure: schools and roads and GP practices. The schools have been great – the surgeries are great. It’s not about their quality of service, it’s their capacity really. (Householder in South-West)

This was particularly marked in case study areas with recent histories of major development, with concerns raised about cumulative effects on the character of local environments: ‘... it just seems like this area is being swamped with the volume of houses. Slowly but surely, its turning into one big sprawl. We will lose the village and community feel of the place...’ (Householder in London commuter belt).

In addition, particularly in London, householders expressed concerns that the cost of new housing meant it was not affordable for ‘normal people’.<sup>8</sup>

Whilst most of the householders interviewed believed they had a good grasp of planning issues, many felt their power to influence decision-making was limited: ‘I can play no role at all in influencing planning. There’s nothing I can do as the council don’t care. I feel totally helpless and ignored as a citizen. This is a consensus in the community’ (Householder in London commuter belt).

### *Responses to DB - Principled objections*

The headline responses to the idea of DBs from both the household and key player interviews were strong and clear. Eighty-four per cent of respondents stated that a financial

payment would not make them less likely to oppose housing development. Only 6% of households stated that a payment would encourage them to be less opposed to housing development. Of those, the majority estimated £4000 or more would be required to alter their behaviour.

Significantly, the notion of a payment was described by 48% of householders using derivations of the concept of bribery, including ‘corruption’ and ‘backhanders’:

To be given the offer of a payment doesn’t sound right. It’s unfair, it is buying people off. Regardless of your opinion, if you are given money, it negates your right to express an opinion. I wouldn’t take it. It would feel like blood money. (Householder in South-East)

The reaction of key players was no different, with the notion of payment being met with ‘widespread distaste’, referred to as ‘insulting’ by one elected member and, tellingly, as giving the impression of the ‘buying and selling of planning permission’ by another.

Evidence from the interviews therefore pointed towards strong *principled* objections to DBs on the basis that planning decisions should not be influenced by direct financial payments and that opposition to new development should not be ‘bought off’.

By extension, interviewees also suggested alternative perceptions of how planning decisions *should* be made; principles it was feared would be distorted by the introduction of individual payments. Several householders and elected members, for example, raised objections based on the potential for payments to fundamentally alter the democratic processes around planning decisions: ‘I would be appalled if people – residents and/or elected members were not allowed to give their views freely and development benefits is questionable in relation to the democratic process’ (Elected member in East).

One householder in the east of England noted clearly: ‘I don’t want the payment, I want to be involved and the community involved that is payment enough. I would rather have them listen and act rather than give me a payment’, suggesting a commitment to planning decisions being made through a process of local democratic deliberation.

Key players interviewed were particularly concerned about potentially negative, unintended effects, including that payments would undermine their attempts to engage communities in conversation, harness legitimate opposition as a means of improving development outcomes or build acceptance in the longer term. They saw DBs as potentially undermining trust relations, serving to ‘inflare and antagonise’ in contexts where communities frequently doubted that local authorities and government represented their best interests, rather than those of profit-seeking developers.

Householders too suggested that payments could negatively impact community cohesion, fostering rather than mediating conflict, both between households receiving payments and those outside any prospective payment boundary, and between households accepting or rejecting payment: ‘I think it could cause really bad feeling, if one gets it and another doesn’t. It would stop some people fully exploring their options. It almost breaks up a community by giving cash to people’ (Householder in London commuter belt).

A clear view therefore emerged that payments would potentially have divisive impacts, principally on (1) local community relations – between those receiving the payment and those not, and (2) the relationships between local authority officers, elected members and communities.

This was linked to a wider view that the impacts of planning decisions should and could not be individualised or determined solely by proximity to development. Many interviewees expressed a desire to see resources directed towards collective provision of infrastructure

rather than DBs: 'If money is available, it would be better spent on people's real concerns – infrastructure and education' (Member of neighbourhood planning forum, South-East).

This argument was particularly strongly presented by key players in the East of England and London commuter belt case studies. In the latter, the local authority had developed a strategy of allocating large sites that would take a significant percentage of the Borough's projected housing need. This strategy had been developed over a number of years, prompted by long-standing political opposition to development, concern at the effects of gradual in-fill on the 'village' character of the area and a strong local consensus that infrastructure had failed to keep pace with development. Major development sites were considered a locally acceptable approach to the problematic politics of planning for housing, enabling fragile agreement that development was necessary and should be positively planned to maximise public benefits. As the impacts of large-scale development were felt collectively across the Borough, it was argued that all available funds should be channelled into infrastructure provision. Concerns were also expressed that financial payments may undermine the hard work that had gone into securing political commitment to the large sites strategy.

### *Responses to DB - Practical objections*

In addition to principled objections, interviewees also suggested a range of more practical concerns about how any DB scheme could be made to work. Many householders, for example, queried the level of payment that would be required to influence people's behaviour, asking where the money for DBs would come from and whether such payments could be afforded without undermining the viability of development or reducing planning gain.

In addition, respondents pointed to apparent flaws in the logic of the proposal. For example, since it was not intended to directly influence planning decisions, proposed payment would not be conditional on the withdrawal of opposition: 'If it's a big enough payment, won't most people take it? I suppose I might take the money and oppose too' (Householder, east of England).

Beyond such significant practicalities, key players also questioned whether the proposed payment was targeting a problem that really needed to be addressed: 'Any planning system can deliver development if you have the political will, DBs are a complete irrelevance' (Planning Consultant, south-west).

Echoing the views of householders who felt opposition was rarely effective in blocking or delaying development, key players argued the planning system was already set up to facilitate development proposals against opposition. For example, the threat of costly appeals promoted a risk-averse culture to refusing planning permission in increasingly cash-strapped local authorities. As a result some interviewees suggested that opposition, whilst vehement and politically challenging, was often rendered somewhat symbolic, highlighting a need to separate the political conflict generated from any necessary impacts on development activity.

Contrary to the rhetoric of localism, other changes introduced under the coalition government were also felt to have reduced local control over development, and therefore the potential efficacy of opposition. Most notable here were the effects of a new National Planning Policy Framework which had mandated that local plans would only be approved where they could prove a five-year supply of economically viable land was available for housing development. In the absence of an up-to-date plan, there was a presumption in favour of sustainable development that would leave authorities vulnerable to speculative development applications. As a result, the emerging planning regime had generated considerable anxiety, with many authorities drawn into arguments about the viability of sites as

they struggled to have plans approved. Key players therefore worried their power to shape development had been significantly reduced and expressed concern that unplanned housing development may stimulate further opposition, undermining attempts to sustain political will around the need for new housing.

Having summarised these responses, in the next section we analyse what they tell us about the role of financial incentives as a governmental technology for reshaping local political opposition to housing development and bringing citizens into line with the governing rationalities of neoliberalism.

## **Discussion: DBs and the prospects for planning in late neoliberal times**

The results of the theoretical evaluation were clear and unequivocal, raising a range of both principled and practical objections to the proposed DB scheme. Following the submission of our findings, the government received only three expressions of interest from local authorities to pilot DBs. The proposal was then quietly dropped.<sup>9</sup> If the ex-ante evaluation was important in rendering visible the political tensions and practical difficulties associated with DBs, the programme was abandoned primarily due to the lack of local authority interest. Given our findings, that lack of interest is not surprising. Involvement in pilots would likely have been highly contentious for local authorities struggling to manage the fallout from a more permissive approach to development at national level.

The withdrawal of the DB proposal is not necessarily a final setback for the use of individualised financial incentives in planning in England. Only a year later a Conservative Prime Minister, Theresa May, intervened to redirect proposed community benefit payments for unconventional gas developments from local authorities direct to households (Boffey, 2016). Government has also further legislated that '*financial benefits information*' needs to be included in all planning officers' reports to elected decision-makers (Legislation.gov.uk, 2016). This suggests a continued concern to financially discipline planning processes and a potential for further experimentation with incentive-based planning reforms as a means of producing more economically rational behaviour at the local level. There is also some evidence that austerity is intensifying financial pressures on local authorities in ways that may increase the weight afforded to financial considerations in future (Raco, 2018).

Despite the withdrawal of DBs, responses to the proposal generated significant insights into both the nature and efficacy of opposition to development and planning as a site of resistance to financial policy instruments. Our evidence on opposition to development is inevitably partial in its focus. The study did not involve a real payment, which might elicit a different response, or explore whether payment might mobilise support for development. In addition, it does not account for potentially diverse configurations of the politics of opposition across England (let alone more widely). Nonetheless, key players questioning of whether the DB policy proposal targeted a 'real' problem raises the possibility that opposition to development may be a political issue without necessarily having significant effects on the allocation of land for new housebuilding (or necessarily figuring as a chief cause of national housing supply shortages). This resonates with Gunder's (2016) concern that planning has become a scapegoat for the reluctance or inability of neoliberal governments to manage market failures that require more active state intervention.

It is therefore important to consider the extent to which a focus on opposition to development as a key issue may have contributed to a failure to explore other potential causes of low levels of new housebuilding including, for example, underlying patterns of land-ownership, financialisation and the business models of developers (Archer and Cole,

2016; Cochrane et al., 2015; Edwards, 2015). This highlights the importance of carefully distinguishing the construction of ‘problems’, like planning delays and opposition to development, from their political or planning effects on the ground.

The turn to financial incentives in England exemplifies what Wendy Brown (2015) and others identify as core features of the political rationality of neoliberalism (see above). The DB model proposed to reshape planning relations by appealing to the financial self-interest of homo-oeconomicus (see also Matthews et al., 2013), seeking to introduce a particular form of individualising, economic logic into the traditionally more collective and policy-based rationalities of planning. Reflecting the continued power of state-phobia and its expression through neoliberal mistrust of public planning, a financialised landscape of planning decision-making would undermine the potential for a collective state planning solution.

The evolution from the NHB to DBs, a more individualised form of incentive, was promoted by influential think-tanks and illustrates how, in spite of evidence of failure, the neoliberal solution has been to call for *more* rather than less application of technologies of economic governance. The turn towards ‘financial policy instruments’ (Du Gay, 2012) as a means of governing planning therefore represents a distinctive extension of forms of experimental state-craft that have been central to the roll-out of neoliberal rationalities, further illustrating how England has been at the leading edge of experimentation in the reworking of established planning logics (cf. Haughton and Allmendinger, 2016; Allmendinger and Haughton, 2013).

Tellingly, there have been recent signs of a shift in governmental rhetoric around planning for housing in England. The intensification of the ‘housing crisis’ as a national political issue and recognition that levels of housebuilding are running well below the numbers of planning permissions granted (Shelter, 2017) has led politicians to begin questioning the role of the private sector in the production of housing shortages. Conservative manifesto commitments to support a return to council housebuilding and heightened state powers to tax land values (e.g. Conservative and Unionist Party, 2017) point to a change in previously prevailing rhetoric and a greater willingness to consider market failure as a cause of housing supply shortages. It remains to be seen whether or how this might translate into concrete policy change. However, it seems possible that core assumptions underpinning the neoliberal problematisation of land-use regulation may be open to question in new ways. Political opportunities may therefore be emerging to reshape the rationalities governing planning under late neoliberalism.

In this context of potential political change, it is important to consider what the vehement resistance to the DB model can tell us about the *limits* to neoliberal rationalities and their power to reshape ‘the heart and soul’ of planning in England.

As Huxley (2018: 216) argues, counter-conducts that involve ‘asking how not to be governed like that’ can open up valuable reflections on alternative planning rationalities and subject positions. By provoking questions about the *principle* of planning being governed by financial logics, interviews with key players and homeowners generated a range of claims about alternative principles that would be threatened by DBs. Central to this were three key ideas rooted in homo-politicus’ domain of ‘democratic discussion, law and policy’ (Brown, 2015: 221): (1) that planning decisions cannot be bought and sold but should be based on policy and law, drawing on criteria that define good land-use outcomes rather than financial incentives; (2) that planning gain should operate at a collective level to better capture land values and ensure provision of infrastructure and services; and (3) that this should be underpinned by democratic processes and enable local deliberation (and disagreement).

Refusals to be governed by DBs should not be read to entail any wider resistance to neoliberal hegemony, nor should they be assumed to offer a politically progressive

alternative to the challenges of planning for housing (cf. Huxley, 2018, 214). Establishing an alternative planning rationality on the basis of these alternative principles, therefore, remains a significant political challenge. Despite that, these might be considered three key pillars of a prospective planning rationality<sup>10</sup> that could be developed and expanded as a basis not just to defend against the scapegoating of planning but to strengthen alternatives to the political rationality of neoliberalism and its governing logics in England and beyond. Even in the context of pervasive state-phobia, it seems that many citizens continue to see a role for the state in allocating land for development based on planning rather than financial principles.

## Conclusions

Recent experiments with financial incentives, like the DB proposal discussed here, have targeted the ‘heart and soul’ of planning in England, seeking to transform established planning rationalities by appealing to the financially motivated self-interest of homo-oeconomicus in order to overcome opposition to housing development. This reflects the power of a particular variant of behavioural economics within UK government which resonated with prevailing neoliberal critique of planning being fundamentally anti-development.

Whilst this paper has focused on the specificities of planning in England, the DB experiment has wider resonance for understanding the ways in which neoliberal rationalities seek (and frequently fail) to govern planning. In particular, we have argued that the DB episode offers three contributions to debates on the contemporary politics of planning.

First, in a context of neoliberal state-phobia and the scapegoating of planning, it illustrates a need to examine how both planning and opposition to development are constructed as problems requiring neoliberal reform, carefully assessing the relationships between the politics of opposition, planning processes and their impacts on development.

Second, strong, principled resistance to the encroachment of financial considerations in England highlights a need to pay close analytical attention to planning not just as a site of ongoing neoliberal experimentation but also of resistances and ‘counter-conducts’. Despite a long-standing political project to undermine the legitimacy of public planning, the DB experiment revealed commitments to engaging with planning decision-making through the logics and practices of homo-politicus rather than homo-oeconomicus (Brown, 2015). Refusals to be governed ‘like that’ may therefore contain important insights into alternative planning rationalities.

Third, we have speculated that the apparent ‘failure’ of the DB policy in England might be symptomatic of ‘late’ neoliberalism in which the political significance of the housing question has begun to unsettle core assumptions underpinning governing rationalities. In this context, opportunities may emerge to articulate alternatives to the neoliberal government of planning, questioning the extent to which market discipline and economic methods can be relied on to realise public interest objectives. Ultimately perhaps principles of democratic planning may take on renewed value in the search for pathways out of late neoliberalism.

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### Notes

1. Due to devolution, the UK government makes planning policy for England.
2. The ‘Housing crisis’ is a complex political construction that cannot be understood solely through the economic logics of supply and demand. A well-evidenced shortfall in new housing has, however, been a key concern of successive governments.
3. The coalition government did not set a national target, but in ‘Laying the Foundations: A Housing Strategy for England’ (HM Government, 2011) projected household growth of 232,000 per annum. Two hundred thousand should therefore be considered at the lower estimate with general agreement that a completion rate of 240,000–300,000 is needed to keep up with new demand and the backlog (Archer and Cole, 2016). Significantly, the private sector has never built at this rate during the post-war period, suggesting a need to reconsider a role for the state in direct housing provision, something that has been ideologically opposed under neoliberal government.
4. Rationalities are defined by Dean (2006) as a

form of thinking which strives to be relatively clear, systematic and explicit about aspects of ‘external’ and ‘internal’ existence, about how things are or how they ought to be... there is a multiplicity of rationalities, of different ways of thinking in a fairly systematic manner, of making calculations of defining purposes and employing knowledge. (11)

5. Despite extensive reforms since 2010 that have substantially and regressively redistributed funds, local government funding in England at this time remained reliant on a central distribution rather than the local tax base, a fact that arguably shaped local government attitudes towards growth.
6. This included the introduction of resident-led ‘neighbourhood development plans’ with statutory status which government promoted as a symbol of localism. Perhaps tellingly, however, neighbourhood groups are not allowed to propose any reduction in the housing allocations set by local authorities and have been incentivised to plan for higher levels of housebuilding. Two neighbourhood plan areas were included in the research reported here but responses to DBs were consistent with other locations.
7. In the UK, ‘planning gain’ refers to the extraction of development value by public authorities to fund the provision of infrastructure or services.
8. Whilst such reasons may act as a cypher for outright opposition (Field et al., 2012), for present purposes we understand them at face value as key contemporary discourses of objection.
9. The theoretical evaluation report remained unpublished until a Freedom of Information request led to its disclosure in July 2017.

10. This section of the paper develops loosely from Foucault's ([1980] 2008: 91–95) suggestive remarks about the failure of socialism to develop an 'autonomous governmentality', considering the implications of our argument for the development of an autonomous planning rationality as an alternative to the neoliberal problematisation of planning.

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