— THE RISK OF AUSTERITY CO-PRODUCTION IN CITY-REGIONAL GOVERNANCE IN ENGLAND

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Abstract

This article examines the risk of what we term 'austerity co-production', a weak form of collaborative governance shaped by resource scarcity and fragmented, multiple forms of expertise. Despite the hope that co-production has radical potential to solve governance challenges across city-regions, not enough attention has been paid to the institutional contexts in which co-production is developed. We argue this institutional context is crucial in shaping how co-production comes to ground and the conditions it reproduces. We draw on a critical case study of metropolitan policymaking in Greater Manchester, England, to examine the gap between imagined and actual institutional contexts for co-production. We develop a framework that can be applied in different policy areas to assess the potential implementation of co-production in city-regional governance. Whilst the promise of co-production remains, we conclude that austerity co-production risks operating as an already-existing default solution to urban problems that constrains more innovative approaches to the governance and politics of the city-region.

Introduction

Recent urban scholarship has focused on co-production's radical potential (Chatterton *et al.*, 2017) as a way to address long-standing urban governance failures (Davies, 2011). In an international policy context, the New Urban Agenda now makes explicit reference to the need for local authorities to promote 'enhanced civil engagement and co-provision and *co-production*' (United Nations, 2017, italics added). In England, shortly after his election as the first city-regional mayor for Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham noted that 'devolution means that you don't just create a new form of top-down politics ... there's a hunger for some real change ... you need to involve people in the co-production of services and government' (Burnham interview, Taylor, 2017: 23).

Co-production apparently offers the promise to address intractable urban governance concerns, as the pinnacle of participatory governance (Rosen and Painter, 2019). Within urban studies, a particular application has been in the field of strategic spatial planning where emphasis has been on the bottom-up mobilization and empowerment of community groups (Mitlin, 2008; Albrechts, 2012; Parker and Street, 2018). However, fewer studies have focused on the emerging institutionalization of the co-production discourse and the contexts and conditions in which any 'radical' potential could be realized (*cf.* Perry and Atherton, 2017).

This is of particular concern in the English context. England has been 'a landscape of almost permanent administrative reconfiguration ... during the last 50 years' (Ayres *et al.*, 2017: 863). During the 2010s this manifested in the 'devolution agenda' in which English city-regions developed City Deals with central government in exchange for enhanced powers and responsibilities. In an era of widespread 'austerity urbanism'

(Peck, 2012), however, devolution has gone hand-in-hand with dramatic reductions in funding for local authorities, impacting the most vulnerable (Hastings *et al*., 2017).

This article advances the argument that the promise of co-production at the urban level is strongly mediated through such institutional contexts. Rather than co-production operating as a radical solution to existing deficits in urban policy and governance, the combination of devolution plus austerity policies in England raises the risk of what we have termed 'austerity co-production'. We define austerity co-production as a weak form of collaborative governance reshaped by resource scarcity and fragmented, multiple forms of expertise. We do not dispute the potential of co-production per se—indeed we are motivated by concern with how progressive urban alternatives and social imaginaries can be brought into being in real institutional contexts (Fainstein, 2010). However, we argue that the failure to recognize how promise is mediated though institutional contexts leaves metropolitan authorities both determined and required to do more with less, whilst lacking the necessary resources and expertise to deliver.

This article next discusses the promise and radical potential of co-production as a solution to key governance challenges. We examine the distinctive context around devolution and austerity policies in England, before outlining the factors which constitute the risk of austerity co-production. In the third section, we draw on a case study of spatial policymaking in Greater Manchester, England, in order to illustrate these risks in practice. We ask how this understanding of existing institutional contexts modifies our assessment of the radical promise of co-production. Finally, in the concluding section we summarize the theoretical and actual risks which constitute the conditions in which austerity co-production may become the norm for English city-regional governance.

Austerity co-production in England

Co-production has been described as an 'essentially contested concept' (Flinders *et al*., 2016: 263) referring to numerous processes and contexts, such as service delivery (Bovaird, 2007), policy design (Durose and Richardson, 2015), political 'hell-raising' (Cahn, 2008: 4) or forms of transdisciplinary knowledge production (Hemström *et al*., 2021). In this article we are concerned with co-production in urban settings, specifically related to (1) urban policy, decision making and governance in general, and (2) urban planning in particular.

–   Two lineages of co-production

In her seminal 1996 article in *World Development*, Elinor Ostrom set out her understanding of the notion of co-production as 'the process through which inputs used to produce a good or service are contributed by individuals who are not "in" the same organization' (1996: 1073). Charting the genesis of the term from the 1970s, when scholars were 'struggling with the dominant theories of urban governance underlying policy recommendations' (*ibid*.: 1079), Ostrom argued that the delivery of urban services was both more efficient and more democratic when the 'great divide' between 'regular' producers (usually the local state) and passive 'clients' as the recipients of such services were broken down. To achieve such aims, Ostrom set out four conditions which would help realize the promise of co-production, when (1) there is synergy between different entities such that 'each has something the other needs' (*ibid*.: 1082), (2) options are available to both partners, (3) there is credible commitment based on reciprocal and mutual contributions, and (4) there are incentives to encourage and enable inputs from officials and citizens. Several scholars have built on this tradition over the years to focus on designing for co-production (Durose and Richardson, 2015) and to develop further categorizations, such as co-creation, co-governance, co-design and co-implementation (Voorberg *et al*., 2015).

In such accounts both the effectiveness and outcomes of policy are at stake. Ostrom notes that co-production is 'crucial for achieving higher levels of welfare in developing countries, particularly for those who are poor' (Ostrom, 1996: 1083). More recent work has also prioritized the urgency of including those who have most at stake and who are most affected in the co-production process. Mitlin (2008) has focused on co-production as part of the struggle for 'choice, self-determination and meso-level political relations' (*ibid*.: 347), where co-production is a fundamentally political process in which citizens seek to change the basis of their relationships with central agencies in addition to improving basic services. As such, co-production is seen as a means to redress the complexity of urban governance systems (Mitlin *et al*., 2019).

Others have emphasized the need to ensure that those with 'lived experience', of severe and multiple disadvantage for instance, are involved in service and policy design and delivery alongside professionals. For Rosen and Painter (2019), co-production is the gold standard of citizen participation. Fifty years since Sherry Arnstein developed her 'ladder of participation', they argue that Arnstein's ladder is flawed in failing to tackle power differentials, overlooking issues of problem framing and oversimplifying participation as a binary between inclusion and exclusion, where inclusion implies greater power. They argue that co-production is a higher rung on the ladder of citizen participation, as collaboration alone cannot deal with such power asymmetries.

A second lineage of co-production has been developed in planning debates with justifications relating both to efficiency and democracy. On the one hand, co-production is seen as a way of dealing with the challenges of complexity and contestation around spatial issues. Spatial planning is a domain of substantive, strategic and institutional uncertainties which necessitates the need for transdisciplinary expertise and new modes of enquiry (May and Perry, 2018). On the other hand, co-production has also been seen as a means to increase participation in and the scope of planning thought (Watson, 2014). Albrechts (2012) charts the movement from co-production of public goods to empowerment and argues that: 'the use of co-production as a central concept for strategic spatial planning is looked upon as a process of becoming, a process of negotiating and discussing the meanings of problems, of evidence, of (political) strategies, of justice or fairness and the nature of outcomes' (*ibid*.: 57). In the field of spatial planning, co-production has been positioned as an alternative form of state–society engagement central in the debate around the context, conditions and outcomes of the 'post- collaborative' turn (Parker and Street, 2018).

– 'Solutions' and preconditions for co-production

We propose that co-production has been seen as a 'solution' to particular sets of urban challenges—relating to longstanding urban inequalities, the deficits of democratic processes and the increasing complexity and 'wickedness' (Head and Alford, 2015) of urban issues. However, if co-production is to 'solve' urban problems and deliver its radical promise, we posit that a number of institutional preconditions need to be in place (see Table 1).

The issue is that existing literature on co-production has tended to pay little attention to the institutional contexts of implementation, in which the radical promise of co-production would be realized. Many studies have focused on examples of bottom-up mobilization or empowerment from within communities, rather than on existing institutions. This work is critical, but we argue, does not take into account how co-production operates and is mediated through organizational settings. Work on the 'just city' for instance focuses on the need to think about alternative institutional designs as part of a pragmatic politics of social reform (Fainstein, 2010: 184) and the need to consider actual rather than imagined institutions (Young, 1990: 22).

Far greater attention needs to be paid to actually existing institutional contexts and to understanding the extent to which such governance settings meet the three sets

TABLE 1   'Solutions' and preconditions for co-production

Challenges to which co-production is posited as a solution	Institutional preconditions to realize co-production as a 'solution'
The failure of existing processes to deal with chronic urban injustice	Structures and processes for those who have 'most at stake' to be engaged as equal partners; bespoke and tailored processes for participation; time and resources for engagement; active tackling of structural inequalities
The lack of transparency and exclusiveness of existing processes of decision making	Transparent and legible decision and policymaking processes; options to contribute and change outcomes; clear understanding of parameters and timeframes; space for contestation and debate
The complexity of urban issues requiring diverse skills and expertise	Cultures of epistemic equality; different inputs recognized as valuable and distinctive; openness to new ideas.

of institutional preconditions. To illustrate this further, we turn now to the example of how devolution, neoliberal state restructuring and austerity policies in England mediate co-production's radical intent.

–   English city-regionalism in an era of austerity

In the UK, regional governance has been in a long phase of flux. Initiated under a Labour government in 1999, a process of regionalization began with the creation of Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) outside London. The seeds for the reconfiguration of spatial governance at the city-regional level were also put in place with a range of initiatives such as Multi-Area Agreements and Local Strategic Partnerships (Tallon, 2010). With the election of a Conservative-Liberal coalition in 2010, the abolition of the RDAs swiftly followed, replaced by a new tier of multi-actor governance structures across local authority boundaries. City-regions began to enter into bilateral 'city deals' with central government to secure devolved powers and responsibilities, granted on the basis of strong cross-boundary partnerships and certain imposed conditions (such as the direct election of a city-regional mayor). The 2016 Cities and Local Government Devolution Act provided further policy architecture to underpin such developments, although metropolitan areas could select limited options (Sandford, 2017).

Scholarly critique has centred both on the extent to which different processes of decentralization have actually led to greater opportunity for local participation, and the economic orthodoxy of what is produced (Baker and Wong, 2013). The UK is still 'super-centralised' (Hambleton, 2017: 3); indeed, the tendency has been to see the devolution of responsibility without resource, with high maintenance of control from the centre. Devolution from central and regional governments to local levels is a common feature of neoliberal governance (Jones and Ward, 2004), whilst others argue that decentralization efforts in England have failed to address issues of democratic disaffection and exclusion (Blunkett *et al.*, 2016). The risk is of greater spatial differentiation and inequality (Waite *et al.*, 2013) which presumes that city-regional authorities and councils can 'earn autonomy' if they follow the rules set down by central government (Tait and Inch, 2015), reflecting an ongoing strategy of 'elite localism' (Cochrane *et al.*, 1996). The effect of these changes is to re-energise questions over forms of urban governance and decision making (Ayres *et al.*, 2018). Described as a 'devolution deception' (Hambleton, 2017), or 'disorganized' (Shaw and Tewdr-Jones, 2017), scholarly critique suggests the manifestation of devolution to date does not provide the conditions for genuine democratic empowerment in the English city-regions.

In England, devolution has run alongside a rollback in state funding. 'Austerity urbanism' (Peck, 2012) has produced new forms of urban governance (Davies *et al.*, 2018). Research has examined austerity's multi-scalar effects (Kitson *et al.*, 2011), as well as variegated impacts on everyday life practices (Hall, 2019). The reduction in

public funding by the UK Coalition government was described as the most significant in over 50 years (Taylor-Gooby, 2012). For Hastings *et al.* (2017) the implementation of cuts through local government is a central element of urban austerity attacks in England, alongside the growth of neoliberal agendas (Fuller and West, 2017). City-regions inherit the implications of austerity, whilst central government cuts the purse strings and simultaneously devolves responsibility, further reinforcing the new 'centralism' (Prosser *et al.*, 2017). Devolution pushes responsibility downwards, whilst austerity removes the capacities with which cities could act (Lowndes and Pratchett, 2012). Without regional planning agencies and strategies, local authorities have had 'few alternatives' but to institute austerity policies (Peck, 2012: 648).

–   The risk of austerity co-production

In England, there are profound implications of the opening up of governance to 'co-production' in the austerity urban context outlined above. The simultaneous devolution of responsibilities and reduction of resources means metropolitan authorities must respond to the 'perfect storm' (Chatterton *et al.*, 2017: 226) in increasingly complex urban environments. The conditions under which austerity devolution is being instituted means some councillors worry that there will be 'nothing left for government to devolve to' (Colomb and Tomaney, 2016: 12). With these critiques in mind, Watson's (2014: 65) reminder that co-production in planning can be 'cost-effective state service delivery rather than community empowerment as an end in itself' is timely. During austerity conditions, co-production may engender a 'race to the bottom', rather than a means of democratizing public services (Fotaki, 2015).

In the English context, the spectre is raised of what we have called 'austerity co-production', a weak form of collaborative governance for dealing with resource scarcity and fragmented, multiple forms of expertise in the context of devolution and austerity. Austerity co-production risks reproducing austerity whilst promising a radical solution. The context of austerity urbanism perpetuates and is perpetuated by 'deficit, devolved risk and destructive creativity' (Van Lanen, 2020: 221), which results in municipalities being urged to do 'more with less' in imperfect governance settings. Under such conditions it is unsurprising that municipalities are looking for new forms of service delivery and governance—such as co-production—that can help them achieve this.

What might co-production look like, produced under such conditions? We argue that the risk of austerity co-production is heightened by the dramatic reduced capacity and capabilities of metropolitan governance under conditions of austerity devolution. The result is an increasingly challenging context for the institutional preconditions of co-production to be met. First, in order to centre the needs of those most affected by a particular policy problem, local authorities would be required to have a clear understanding of who would need to be involved and what mechanisms could facilitate participation. This in turn would require designing bespoke processes which would best enable specific groups to be involved. Structures for engagement would be required with the time and resources available for officers to develop meaningful forms of participation. This means not only providing the *opportunity* to participate, but addressing *the structural barriers* and power inequalities that prevent them from doing so and which pre-date austerity conditions. In a context of austerity devolution, where fewer public officials are required to deliver more with less, there is a risk that participation is layered on top of existing structures and processes, with cost-efficient one-size-fits-all solutions and with few incentives or resources to aid engagement.

Second, co-production requires transparent and open decision-making processes in which partners can take part as equals, with a shared understanding of the parameters and timeframes for policymaking. This also means spaces for debate, processes for navigating disagreement and contestation and the possibility of new alternatives being

developed. The risk is that the emergent and imperfect devolution agenda in England, and the specific manifestation of the 'City Deals', prioritize negotiations with central government and across local authority boundaries, rather than with citizens, service users or affected community groups. Furthermore, austerity and devolution combined create a landscape that shapes spatial decision making, whereby the 'crisis of consensus governance' 'forecloses, all but narrow debate and contestation around a neo-liberal growth agenda' (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2012: 92). The evolution of policymaking processes and structures under devolution has left decision-making processes unclear, potentially rendering strategy-making opaque and specialized.

Third, the neoliberalization and politicization of both devolution and austerity policies shape the potential for institutional cultures to value different forms of expertise. Whilst multi-disciplinarity and cross-sectoral knowledge is needed to address complex issues, particularly in areas of spatial planning (Vigar, 2012), 'technical knowledge' is prioritized over more social and contextual forms of expertise (Mazza and Bianconi, 2014). Following the deregulation, liberalization and privatization of key elements of urban infrastructure—including planning, housing and transport—there is a risk that an austerity context leads to the dominance of market forces and private sector interests as privileged policy inputs. Running alongside austerity cuts to public sector budgets since 2010 has been a parallel programme of 'simplification' of planning regulation, incentivizing new development, reducing legislation, accelerating planning decision making and facilitating private sector growth—measures which run counter to the aspirations for meaningful and genuine participation.

So far, we have argued that institutional contexts matter in the search to realize the radical promise of co-production. We have set out a series of institutional conditions that would be conducive to co-production, and reassessed these in light of the actually existing context of devolution and austerity policies in England. In so doing, we highlight factors that raise the risk of austerity co-production. We now turn to an illustrative case study of an actually existing policymaking context in a specific devolved city-region in England, Greater Manchester. How issues are negotiated and organized in practice shapes the potential of co-production as a 'solution' to urban governance challenges.

Examining austerity co-production through an actually existing policymaking context

In examining existing policy processes and institutional contexts, our empirical research further substantiates the concept of austerity co-production as a risk looming over English city-regional governance. Nonetheless, we contend that working from the actual to the potential is an important step in moving 'beyond critique' (Perry and Atherton, 2017). We draw on a critical case study of an actually existing metropolitan policymaking process in order to assess the conditions in which the promise of co-production might be realized. A critical case study approach is deliberately selected to provide detailed empirical analysis of a particular phenomenon, taking theoretical or conceptual notions and deconstructing them as practices in specific contexts (Harvey, 1990; May and Perry, 2011). The goal of analysis is to examine a critical case as a resource for exploring wider issues, 'with the purpose of "confronting" theory with the empirical world' (Piekkari *et al.*, 2009: 569). For the purposes of this research, it is important to emphasize that the object is not to study co-production, but to assess actual institutional processes of policymaking against those pre-conditions we set out above.

Our critical case is of the process of strategic spatial planning in Greater Manchester, England, between 2017 and 2019. Greater Manchester is a city-region comprised of 10 individual local authorities or districts—in North West England (Manchester, Salford, Trafford, Bolton, Bury, Wigan, Oldham, Tameside, Rochdale and Stockport). Greater Manchester is seen as a 'first mover' (Coleman *et al.*, 2016: 377) amongst English city-regions, as the first outside London to sign a 'city deal'

with central government and establish a Combined Authority across local authority boundaries (GMCA, 2014). One of the first joint actions of the new combined authority was developing the Greater Manchester Spatial Framework (GMSF), intended to provide a blueprint for development across the region. In the context of institutional flux and uncertain boundaries and legitimacy, this was seen as an important test-bed for the new governance arrangements. Furthermore, Greater Manchester is often posited as a test case, where dynamics are illuminated and magnified (Peck and Ward, 2002; Hincks *et al.*, 2017). In the English context, this is due not only to Greater Manchester's desire to fulfil its 'destiny' of metropolitan greatness (Coleman *et al.*, 2016: 377), but also the result of long histories of municipal partnership working (Kenealy, 2016). Indeed, the 'Manchester Model' has been presented and critiqued as a set of governance arrangements and mode of economic development which other city-regions should either aspire to, or should learn from (Haughton *et al.*, 2016).

The wider context for the case study of the GMSF as a policymaking process is further set against the backdrop of Greater Manchester's mode of city governance' (*ibid.*) funding urban redevelopment through an 'entrepreneurial turn' (Peck and Ward, 2002; Ward, 2003). As a posterchild for such forms of private sector led redevelopment, the city-region's 'success' in channelling international capital is clear from the changes to the urban centre and housing financialization (Silver, 2018). As the case study shows, the legacy of Greater Manchester's famed collaborative governance arrangements, and the relationships with private sector developers, are key factors alongside austerity policies which constrain the potential of co-production.

Between 2017 and 2018 we undertook 12 situated interviews with strategic planners across all 10 local authorities in Greater Manchester and within the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA), providing unique access to and insight on the internal dynamics of policymaking. Whilst a small sample, all of these interviewees directly worked on producing the GMSF and were taking part in its rewriting. Situated interviewing took place in participants' usual places of work, enabling participants' interactions with the setting to contribute to the dataset. We also undertook four focus groups and workshops attended by 32 individuals with links to a wide range of community groups, campaign groups, local authorities, consultancies, housing developers and citizens over the period coinciding with the consultation on the second re-write of the GMSF (January–March 2019). At the same time, GMCA was interested in the research, and facilitated interview access, participated in policy events (September 2018), and attended community focus groups (January 2019). We include this process of engagement as a source of data for the case study, seeing the role of the researcher to 'co-construct perceived reality through the relationships and joint understandings we create in the field' (Simons, 2009: 23). Interviews were recorded and transcribed; the data was coded and analysed according to the three preconditions outlined in Table 1: structures and processes for participation, the transparency of decision-making processes, and cultures of epistemic diversity.

–   The GMSF: 'the plan for jobs, homes and the environment'

The development of the GMSF took place against the background of multiple reconfigurations of scalar strategies for strategic planning since the 1980s. From regional spatial strategies, unitary development plans, local plans and core strategies, planning in the city-region had already been subject to the shifting priorities of successive governments. In the 2010s local authorities were placed under new pressure to develop a local plan to deliver on Government's concern to address housing shortages. Such plans needed to show a 5-year pipeline of land for new housing in line with government targets, with consultation a statutory requirement alongside a duty to cooperate (Haughton, 2018). Any local authorities unable to show an up-to-date plan and associated statistics could be penalized, facing the prospect of experts being brought

in to develop one. Salford, Bury and Tameside were all at risk, with local plans that were out of date or not adequate for current requirements.

Given the strong history of metropolitan voluntary collaboration through the Association of Greater Manchester Authorities (AGMA), planners across the 10 Greater Manchester (GM) districts had already been collaborating around issues such as transport and waste, and decided to instigate a joint spatial plan in August 2014, for intended submission in 2017. Motivated by an increased need to prove housing supply, and a greenbelt which had not been reviewed since the 1980s, the decision was made to develop a strategic 20-year plan. Nonetheless, the development of the GMSF had to follow National Planning Policy guidance within the context of a planning system based on common law and precedence.

The draft GMSF was published in October 2016 to cover the period to 2035 described by Hodson *et al.* (2020) as being based on 'heroic' GVA growth assumptions of 2.5% year on year, with population growth of 294,800, an additional 199,700 jobs and a requirement for 227,200 net new homes. The plan started life as a joint development plan, 'more of a super local plan' (interviewee) than a spatial strategy, with the intention that regulation introduced as part of the devolution deal would subsequently enable a more strategic view. Unlike other areas of policy in the devolution agreement—and in contrast to the London mayoral model—any decision on the GMSF required unanimity between all 10 local authority districts and the Mayor.

The first public consultation document on the GMSF elicited widespread dissatisfaction, from greenbelt groups, the developer lobby and an 'awakened citizenry' (Hodson *et al.*, 2020: 14). Andy Burnham was elected as the first metropolitan mayor in 2017 and promised a 'radical rewrite' of the GMSF. The regulations for a spatial development strategy were still not in place, so the process continued as a joint development plan. A second consultation document was produced and went to consultation from January–March 2019.[1]

Our research took place between the period of the 'radical rewrite' and up to the second consultation period. As noted above, the object of our case study is not co-production per se, nor the content of the GMSF, but what the process reveals about the institutional conditions for policymaking in which the promise of co-production might land.

–   Inclusive structures for participation and engagement?

Consultation is a statutory requirement for planning within a clear legal framework. Each of the 10 districts had a Statement of Community Involvement which shaped the way that different authorities undertook engagement. Overall, during the consultation on the first public draft, there were more than 80 public events and over 27,000 consultation responses submitted online, by letter and email. An online portal—mappinggm.org. uk—was developed to support the GMSF through the creation of interactive maps. This involved a 'call for sites' between 2015 and 2017 to be considered as options for both the 2016 and the revised 2019 draft of the GMSF. Alongside local events, determined by respective Statements of Community Involvement, social media was relied upon initially as a 'cost effective' means of communication. One planner noted a sense of pride that they had managed to 'go beyond legislative requirements of a notice in a newspaper ... or on a lamppost ... none of us are that limited'.

In reflecting on the first consultation period, the context of austerity was foremost in planners' minds. Between 2008-2018 budgets within local authorities in Greater Manchester had been dramatically reduced, with direct implications on the

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1   The original plan was that there would be a further consultation on the GMSF in June/July-September 2020, with examination by Government in 2021. There are now suggestions this will be delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic. See https://www.placenorthwest.co.uk/news/mixed-messages-over-gmsf-future/ (accessed June 2020).

capacity of planning officers responsible for the GMSF, in some districts reducing from 12 to 3 full time equivalent planners. This meant that the time to think about participation in the process diminished: 'we weren't even treading water; we were going backwards'. This planner reported that most of their time was spent dealing with 'complaints' and 'ombudsmen' rather than 'core work'. Comparisons with London were often made—one interviewee reporting that the development of the London Plan was supported by 60 planners, compared with just 3 full-time planners in the GMCA. On top of fraught and often difficult negotiations between local authorities, planners stated that the reduction in staffing and increased responsibility meant that there was little time for innovative approaches, creating a tension between the demand to 'work and manage' rather than 'time to think, when there are other things to do'.

Miscommunication regarding the first consultation had led to a popular misconception that using online consultation forms carried less weight than letters, resulting in a heavy postbag which had to be physically input: 'that took months and really did slow us down'. With both time and financial scarcity, officers relied on simplest and most familiar methods, whilst acknowledging their deficits. Public events were not always well attended by people, or indeed by relevant officers able to offer coherent explanations to members of the public. One planner spoke about being 'outgunned by housing developers and under siege by public opposition, when there are no resources to engage communities effectively'.

Time and resource issues were exacerbated by internal cultures which prioritized 'messaging' over 'engagement'. With no parallel in-house expertise around public participation, engagement was managed by the communications team involving public relations managers and branding, digital and social media officers. Recognizing that they were failing to handle social media engagement during the first consultation, communications consultants had also been brought in at the last minute to develop a media campaign—however, this did little to mitigate the sense from the public that the GMSF had 'come from nowhere', with the GMCA process perceived as about information control, rather than participation and engagement.

The result of these conditions and constraints was a risk-averse and stifled process of decision making, which 'stops people trying new things … we are pushed into the sort of conservatism of just doing things as we have done them in the past'. One result was to potentially exacerbate rather than address inherent structural inequalities across districts. In the context of economic disparities between areas of Greater Manchester, particularly between the northern and eastern districts and those in the central and southern core, some planners had hoped that a collective approach would 'rebalance that in terms of economic growth', or enable housing allocation targets to be addressed across districts. However, under conditions of austerity, in which resources depended in part on the strength of the local tax base, some districts were more able to represent their interests in the GMSF process than others. All districts were asked to second one full-time equivalent planner to work on the GMSF; however, not all had the resources to do so, resulting in differential levels of influence. Those that were able to easily access GMCA offices in central Manchester were perceived to enjoy further advantage, compared with those more distant districts that experienced a reduction in day-to-day policy influence.

Alongside spatial imbalance in structures for influence and participation, the process was marked by no clear sense of whose interests were really at stake. In general, some groups felt largely excluded, with few routes for participation, which was reflected in one community focus group: 'we are very conscious of, I am anyway, about hitting the institutional barriers and that when you get so far, trying to get into a system, you'll find that the doors are closed and you're not treated as an equal'. Specifically, some voices were seen to be more valuable than others. With the perception that the first round of consultation had been dominated by greenbelt

activists and 'shouty environmentalists', officers within GMCA sought to redefine who mattered in the consultation: 'we want to move focus away from people at the edges, away from the angry green belt people, more towards young people *who really have a stake*' (italics added). Whilst the engagement strategy had initially embraced social media, paradoxically, these same responses were simultaneously dismissed by officials, precisely because of the way they had been submitted. The twitter sphere was disregarded as enabling the loudest voices to steal airtime and written responses were dubbed as irrelevant for commenting on spatial issues that were 'out of scope'—despite the 'scope' never being clear in the first place.

Following the first consultation, GMCA undertook a 'risk workshop' to 'scope out what worked well and didn't work well last time', facilitated by the Consultation Institute. This led to a more coordinated communications and engagement strategy for the second round of consultation in 2019, including a new consultation hub (gmconsult. org), web pages, newsletter and mailing list, a mayoral event, drop in district events, and information cards. Three sector specific consultations took place with greenbelt groups; the voluntary sector, community and social enterprise sector, and disability groups. In all 67,000 comments were received on the second consultation document in 2019, from around 17,500 people (GMCA, 2019).

–   Transparent decision-making processes?

As noted above, decisions on the GMSF required unanimity between all 10 of the local authorities and the city-regional mayor. This meant that each district had to represent their own aims in the joint plan, in a manner that would gain approval from the others. Levels of being 'in the know' about the process varied from district to district and few could articulate clear decision-making processes. The fluidity and uncertainty of the changing context, particularly given the novelty of the new Mayoral arrangements and the resulting politicization of the GMCA, meant that institutional landscapes and processes were unclear and evolving. Requests made by the research team for decision-making flowcharts or diagrams were not able to be met; our own efforts to represent the process elicited uncertain responses. Some planning interviewees reported that they were 'not senior enough' or 'didn't need to understand the structures further up', whilst others referred to the 'not linear, but collaborative' process of plan making.

For those in positions of authority, the safety net on which such uncertainties could be navigated was the strong 'origin' story, or 'myth' (Haughton *et al*., 2016) articulated and rearticulated across the city-region. The 'Manchester model' established over the last 30 years has advocated for the city-region as the appropriate scale for devolved powers. Although this story and model has been widely debated and critiqued, with local actors challenging this regional scale (Deas *et al*., 2020), it remains entrenched. Each of the planners interviewed—even those more recently in post—told their own version, as a response to specific questions about how decisions got made: 'with all the districts in Greater Manchester there's been a long history of collaborative working in GM. I think it dates back to the Greater Manchester Council in the eighties, long before my time'. Collaboration and co-working was the bedrock, the certainty, on which new governance uncertainties could be managed. Often this origin story, such as in the example above, was offered in lieu of any account of how authority and decision making *actually* worked. Whilst district planning groups had their own ways of creating statistics and political processes, differences between districts were only identified in the process of reaching common agreement, as one planner noted: 'we hadn't really quite appreciated that because we'd thought everybody must be the same'.

Within the process there was little space for, or value associated with, contestation and debate. In a heavily regulated, quasi-judicial process, the need for unanimity drove contestation underground behind a process of watering down and trading up between local authorities. There was no formal process for dealing

with differences between districts; instead, it was left to planners to deal with 'non-meshing' of interests. This absence of a clear process for recognizing and dealing with difference further tended to a lowest common denominator approach: 'you almost dance a minimum bottom line', with most people seeking to defend their district's position. Some particularly contentious issues were initially left off the agenda, such as housing affordability. Here there were clear differences between a Manchester-centric approach focused on attracting affluent, young professionals and highly skilled workers, and an approach championed by district leaders concerned with deprivation, accessibility and affordability. One official noted that 'you would have to read the 2016 consultation document very carefully to find the sentence which mentioned affordable housing ... there was a very strong view from the leaders that that was an issue which should be left to the local planners'.

The process of negotiating across authority boundaries was both time-consuming and hidden, reducing time to engage in wider participation or engagement around a strategic vision for the city-region. The intention to address both strategic planning and regional housing allocations introduced a competing rationality at the heart of the GMSF, between the long-term vision and imaginaries required of a future-oriented plan, and the short-term practicalities of allocating land for housing. This led to a sense from planners that the public was having the wrong kind of debate. Of the 27,000 responses to consultation on the 2016 draft of the GMSF, the majority concerned specific site allocations: 'we are getting comments on housing sites, but what we actually want to know is what views do people have on what sort of housing we should be building, on what sort of housing younger people think they'd be comfortable with now in 5, 10, 15, 20 years' time?' Not acknowledging the fundamental competing rationality, one officer framed this instead as being about people's interpretive capacity and ability to understand sites in terms of 'direct impacts, but not policies'. The same issue manifested during the second consultation, where 79% of responses were on allocations rather than thematic priorities (GMCA, 2019).

The parameters and framing of the consultation as both about strategic priorities and housing allocations were not clear or well served by a one-size-fits-all approach. Alongside the absence of discussion about the greenbelt since the 1980s and the context of austerity policies, the consultation on the GMSF was informed by people's prior experiences of local planning decisions where one community participant noted that plans are 'being done to us rather than for us'. Against this background, one senior official noted that 'when they [the public] got the chance to comment on something like the spatial document, all these issues came out'. This was generally framed by planners as their failure to educate, or the public's failure to understand—rather than a failure of the overall process with its lack of parameters, unclear scope and spaces for debate.

The impact of the negative response to the first round of consultation and widespread press coverage (*Manchester Evening News*, 2017; BBC news, 2017) led to more 'managing' and 'messaging', than processes to identify and deal with tricky issues. Our own research workshops were evaluated positively by participants for providing spaces for debate and engagement across sectors that were otherwise missing, enabling 'a new kind of forum ... not the usual groups that I come across'. For officials, lack of 'noise' was considered a 'success', rather than any indication of disengagement with the long, arduous and ever-moving process of consultation. Contestation was not only discouraged but also actively avoided, underpinned by a nostalgia for past eras where people were 'more deferential ... working within a local authority, you are now challenged on absolutely everything'.

–   Culture of epistemic diversity?

The process of power-sharing, in a context of veto politics and a race to find minimum agreements, was accompanied by the marginalization of planning expertise

and the dismissal and devaluing of citizens as experts. First, planners were concerned over how their roles had changed and their function in mediating competing knowledge claims: 'you're an expert in making sense of a lot of different competing demands on physical land use and so on ... it has changed because it has got a lot more technical'. Recent changes in national planning policy had led to an absence of sufficient guidance whereby the task of mediating competing claims was increasingly challenging, pushing planners to agree certain conditions, exacerbated by the increased pressure to make rapid decisions and ensure continued growth and development. Critically, this undermined the legal basis on which relations with the private sector could be negotiated and maintained. Cuts to departments led to an outsourcing of parts of the planning process, but with a parallel increase in workload around managing the integration of private and public expertise.

The shift from strong to weak guidance and regulation with a focus on targets encouraged officers to make assessments based on numerical viability, rather than long-term visionary local planning. Another planner reflected that this focus on targets meant that 'the sand is constantly shifting beneath your feet'. Such insecurity meant that planners deployed their expertise not in service of the best possible planning outcomes, but to navigate such constantly shifting terrains of practice. Independent consultants were mobilized to play a key role in the context of reduced in-house capacity. One planner lamented the 'parachuting in' of experts, making processes both 'more generic and slower'; at the same time, other districts had moved to establish their own planning consultancy which could then provide paid services to others, generating revenue. Many planners also reflected on the need for 'experts' to carry out various reports and assessments as they did not have the skills in house, and they would need to prove expert input, for example through landscape or environmental impact assessments.

Planners widely noted the decreased ability to resist the pressures of developers in the context of reduced resources and limited devolved powers. Some planners had absorbed private sector rationalities with a need to perform an 'intelligent client role', 'go for growth' and 'move to delivery and deliverability'. Others however were acutely aware of the limited capacity of planners to resist such pressures: 'the view that as a council official, I should just be able to tell the developer what to do, you know, and stop them from doing what the residents don't want them to do. It doesn't quite work like that'. Developers able to employ professional representors to advise them were at a distinct advantage: 'where you draw the line on a map can make a difference between agricultural land values ... when that's the case, people will put a lot of time and resource into trying to get what they want'.

Second, the marginalization of professional planning expertise went hand in hand with the devaluing of community knowledge. The time-consuming nature of local authority negotiations with developers and consultants led to an 'invisibilization' of community expertise. Community engagement was pushed to the end of the policy-development timeline. Planners saw their roles as 'balancing community interest with the private interest', but the language, process and legal frameworks limited the accessibility and understanding required for communities to express 'interest' in the first place. One community member recognized the need to change tactics to game the system by enrolling developers themselves, noting that if you 'come back with a developer ... we will find the doors will open again because we're not just a community group'.

Some planners recognized that planning was too complex for lay members of the public to understand without adequate translation, but noted the absence of time to do this: 'it's asking a lot of people without giving them any training or knowledge to start out with'. Planners held contrasting opinions on the integration and value of citizen expertise, as well as what sort of knowledge was valuable. One planner noted that citizens were 'very familiar' with their own areas and it was therefore 'important to

listen to what people have to say', although this local knowledge was difficult to translate into a planning framework. This was a view reinforced by citizens involved in such processes: 'when it came to planning applications that the council was trying to push through, we actually knew more than they did about the land'. At the same time, some planners dismissed expertise from citizens, as telling planners 'what we already know'. Planners also acknowledged that certain groups had more time to examine applications than planners working in austerity conditions: 'some retired people, who will spend time, probably more time, looking through what we've put up online, than any one of us has time to do'. The consequence is that only those with time on their hand or skills to translate community knowledge into accepted forms of expertise are able to be heard.

The deep sense of place that communities could offer as inputs to a strategic vision and spatial planning process was largely dismissed. Citizens themselves articulated the value of their expertise clearly. It was a knowledge that proposals were 'impractical': 'that simple homespun understanding of the implications that planners—with their theoretical mappings and models that they might base upon incorrect population growth figures or whatever they might be—simply don't appear to take account of'. This 'grainy sort of grounded knowledge' was seen as critical, without which places 'lose sight of what we understand by community'. The consequence was that 'people feel as if they are spoken down to'.

Some planners lamented the inability of formal planning processes to value such inputs, whilst feeling unable to change the systemic, structural conditions which shape engagement:

> All this constrains you from actually trying to deliver what it is, not just what the districts want, but what residents want. It's almost like this perception that all of your evidence has to be really objective and technical. Those voices get lost amongst all of that ... we would like to give them much more weight and much more emphasis. But you always come back to how you can defend it, because that's how the Inspector, or the government, or developers, or whoever, interpret this particular issue.

– Discussion: imagined and actual institutional contexts for co-production

The above case study illustrates an actual institutional context of policymaking inside the new metropolitan governance structures of the GMCA. The case study of the GMSF reveals a context in which officers must 'do' rather than 'think', in cultures that are risk averse and stifled. With little time or dedicated resources to support bespoke forms of participation for those with most at stake, officers relied on tried-and-tested forms of consultation and the in-house skills of communications and media experts to manage messages and control information. This led to certain groups being prioritized as having more at stake than others, such as the 'young'. Spatial diversity was not actively addressed, compounded by unequal staffing across districts which exacerbated structural inequalities. With differential access to resources across districts, the parameters and scope for influence were not clear.

Complex negotiations between local authorities in the context of fluid and uncertain institutional arrangements meant that decision-making processes were not legible, even to those within the system. In the context of devolution and austerity, there were clear limits to the actual powers and responsibilities of city-regional officials. Rather than a binary 'them' and 'us' that pits public against planner, our interviews revealed how planners are making do and muddling through. Austerity and devolution combined created a landscape that shaped and foreclosed spatial decision making. Timeframes were unclear, goalposts changing and, with little space for contestation or discussion, 'local voice is downgraded' (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2012: 98).

Undertaken through the 'landscape of antagonism' (Newman, 2013: 3297) planners' expertise was eroded, with the consequence that private expertise was elevated and community participation and collaboration in planning de-privileged. In order to speed up development, the expertise of many non-planners was enrolled in the process whereby 'developers mobilize a very diverse set of specialized firms with expertise spanning heritage, environmental impact assessments, economic development, community engagement, landscape architecture, transport' (Robin, 2018: 8). Furthermore, planners themselves had to employ such experts, in order to justify that they had met planning requirements. Alongside the marginalization of planning expertise, we found the devaluing of community expertise, seen as neither unique nor distinctive in its own right.

Austerity policies compounded existing factors militating against any realization of co-productive policymaking. The interviews drew attention repeatedly to the legacy of the 'Manchester Model' origin story and how, in the context of the GMSF, this had led to a close relationship between the property industry and local political leaders, and strengthened the overall growth-first strategy of the city-region. Whilst the austerity context is critical in shaping constraints on local authorities, these other structural factors further challenge co-production's potential in policymaking. Furthermore, when the austerity context of policymaking is situated as an institutional and political *necessity*, opportunities to think differently are sidelined.

In Table 2, we contrast the existing institutional context revealed through the case study (column 3) alongside the institutional preconditions imagined for co-production in the first section of the article (columns 1 and 2). Our case study casts strong doubt on whether the institutional conditions exist in which the promise of co-production could be realized. Both Greater Manchester's first mover status in devolution and the spatial planning process as a 'first test' of the new mayoral powers make this a critical case for generating wider insights and developing our conceptualization of 'austerity co-production'. Table 2 offers an analytical tool and set of criteria which could be mobilized by others to assess the fit between existing institutional policymaking contexts and the promise of co-production. Further research is needed to test the wider applicability of the austerity co-production thesis, across different policy areas and city-regions in England and internationally.

TABLE 2   Imagined and actual contexts for co-production

Challenges to which co-production is posited as a solution	Institutional preconditions for co-production	Actually existing institutional context
The failure of existing processes to deal with chronic urban injustice	Structures and processes for those who have 'most at stake' to be engaged as equal partners; bespoke and tailored processes for participation; time and resources for engagement; active tackling of structural inequalities	Participation layered on top of existing structures; cost efficiency prioritized; one size fits all processes; few incentives for engagement; structural inequalities shaping engagement not addressed
The lack of transparency and exclusiveness of existing processes of decision making	Transparent and legible decision and policymaking processes; options to contribute and change outcomes; clear understanding of parameters and timeframes; space for contestation and debate	Unclear decision making; changing goalposts; conflicting rationalities; no processes for managing conflict; foreclosing debate; opaque and specialized processes; dominance of national-local and cross-local negotiations
The complexity of urban issues requiring diverse skills and expertise	Cultures of epistemic equality; different inputs recognized as valuable and distinctive; openness to new ideas	Marginalization of professional expertise; epistemic closure; no clear value attached to citizen knowledge; little time or space to think; closure to new knowledge inputs; privileged inputs from private sector and consultants

Risks realized? The challenge of austerity co-production

Our analysis and findings suggest caution in embracing the radical promise of co-production without understanding the institutional contexts in which it would be implemented. Having set out the context of English devolution and austerity policies since 2010, we identified three institutional preconditions necessary to avoid the risk of what we have called austerity co-production. Our case study of the actually existing institutional context for spatial planning in Greater Manchester suggests the risk is real: that the institutional preconditions for a radical implementation of co-production are not currently met in a devolved, austerity-shaped metropolitan governance system.

Austerity co-production, we argue, is the manifestation of doing 'more with less', a variant of collaborative governance, underpinned by the rule of consensus and with a prioritization of certain forms of expertise over others. We have defined austerity co-production as a weak form of collaborative governance for dealing with resource scarcity and fragmented multiple forms of expertise. Austerity co-production draws attention to the dark side of co-production, as urban decision makers are urged to do more with less in the context of ever decreasing resources and support from national government. Personal engagement and dedication from officers to perform their public duties in the face of cuts—in this case demonstrated by planners—then become ways that austerity co-production is reformed, and reborn, rather than contested. 'Temporary' solutions and attempts to *make do* become the new benchmark, upon which further cuts can be made.

The co-productive turn reflects an attempt to develop processes which deal both with uncertain and changing environments and the diverse integration of expertise. However, in the context of national-local relationships, planning regulations and new devolutionary arrangements, the legitimacy to act for English city-regions is seriously delimited, reducing the scope for co-production. Power-gaming across authorities is informed by access to and levels of resources, favouring those better equipped. Austerity co-production highlights the risk of co-production as a universal solution to urban governance issues: whilst the radical promise of co-production centres those with most at stake at the heart of decision-making processes, attention must be paid to how co-production is shaped by existing policy practices and institutions.

The problem and challenge we raise here is not with the idea of co-production per se, but the conditions under which co-production takes place and what it (re) produces. In the English context, co-production may be insufficient, and even produce counter-intended effects, in reproducing elite forms of governance. The danger is that the discourse and imperfect practice of co-production become part of the silencing or sidelining of community voices—they can only be heard if they are continuing business-as-usual development, not if they question it. Co-production involves multiple parties, and there is wider concern that ideas, policies and priorities that emerge from within neighbourhoods are being 'rescripted' to ensure conformity to a bounded form of collaboration (Parker *et al.*, 2015). The double bind is clear: co-production can be a short-term solution to urban austerity, but it can also reproduce it.

Co-production has many potential benefits as a way to address messy, complex and multi-scalar problems, as well as a way to relate and challenge the everyday impacts of austerity and inequality. Yet to realise the promise of co-production in challenging contexts, more attention should be paid to the way that contexts operate, so that processes do not reproduce the very challenges that they wish to address. This suggests that widespread caution is needed in the embrace of co-production without concern for wider institutional contexts and conditions. Whilst such different contexts will equally mediate the promise of co-production—for instance, in terms of degrees of decentralization, extent of neoliberalization or cultures of policymaking—there are pressures on local authorities world-wide to do more with less in a context of increasingly fragmented governance systems and forms of expertise. This means

prioritizing the governance, institutional and cultural changes necessary to contribute to the radical possibility of co-production.

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