Creating "a generation of NIMBYs"? Interpreting the role of the state in managing the politics of urban development

Dr. Andy Inch, Department of Town and Regional Planning,

University of Sheffield, Western Bank, Sheffield S10 2TN

Tel: 01142226926

a.inch@sheffield.ac.uk

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Abstract

The traditional relationship between politics and policy-making has been challenged in recent years, highlighting how policy itself can generate political action (Hajer, 2003). This raises questions about how conflict produced or mediated through the policy process is managed, particularly within what has been described as a "post-political settlement" where fundamental politico-ideological issues are liable to be 'displaced' rather than opened up for debate. This paper argues that such displacement generates its own distinctive politico-managerial logic. Drawing on the discourses and practices of planning reform in England it is suggested that ongoing systemic reform might be understood as a product of a politics of displacement that seeks to cover over the causes of the antagonism generated by the logic of urban development. Tracing this logic through the policy process, it further suggests that displacement has a range of under-examined effects on local democracy and the legitimacy of local government.

Keywords: planning reform; antagonism, politics of displacement, 'thick skinned' governance

Introduction

This paper sets out to explore the relationship between politics and policy-making in the light of recent debates about post-politics (Swyngedouw, 2007) and the uses of land-use planning as a form of post-political governance (Allmendinger and Haughton 2010; Metzger, 2011). It starts by analysing the rhetoric of planning reform in England during the last ten years, suggesting that the recurrence of reform under successive governments can be seen as a displacement of the fundamental political conflict generated by urban development. The

paper then goes on, through a case study of planning for housing in the south east of England, to further trace this politics of displacement and the range of different effects and responses it generates. Overall, further evidence is provided of the ways in which policy reform and the policy process are used as mechanisms for defusing and managing the conflict generated by controversial issues such as urban development. Further to this, however, the paper argues that significant analytical attention should be paid to the work required to repress such conflict, focusing on the range of often unappreciated, negative effects this may have on local democracy and the legitimacy of local government, and highlighting the ongoing and cumulative costs of the attempt to sustain a post-political settlement.

Creating "a generation of NIMBYs": the rhetoric of planning reform and the displacement of politics

Whilst in opposition, the Conservative Party claimed that the then New Labour Government was responsible for creating "a generation of NIMBYs[1]" in England (Shapps, 2009a), fostering conflict around urban development through land-use planning reforms that centralised control and denied power to local people. In response then shadow minister for housing Grant Shapps promised that they would empower local people to take greater control over the development of their local areas, whilst transforming them into a "nation of homebuilders" (Shapps, 2009b). At the time of writing, as part of a governing coalition with the Liberal Democrats, they are introducing planning reforms that they claim will fulfil this promise as an exemplary part of a wider 'Big Society'/ Localism agenda that will transform the landscape of English governance by dispersing power away from the state into civil society (Cameron, 2010). Putting aside the coherence or otherwise of the Big Society or

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[1] NIMBY comes from 'Not in my backyard' and has become widely used as a pejorative descriptor of localised and typically self-interested opposition to development (see e.g. McClymont and O'Hare, 2008)

localism[2], Shapps' NIMBY/ homebuilder dualism identifies the levels of conflict and controversy new housing development frequently generates as central to the framing of planning as a problem area of public policy that requires "radical" reform.

The planning system in England has long been charged with bringing forward the levels of new development that successive governments have deemed necessary, amidst frequently expressed concerns that excessively restrictive land-use policies are acting as a brake on growth and economic competitiveness (e.g. Barker, 2006). However, this involves managing the levels of antagonism generated by this development, and particularly the reality of concerted opposition in many of those parts of the country (particularly the south-east) where growth pressures are highest, and increased levels of development are seen as critical to (restoring) economic growth. The claim that the solution to this rests in the empowerment of local people adds a further, paradoxical dimension to this "problem of planning": how to square the circle between commitment to more collaborative forms of policy-making – where participation is now seen as crucial for the legitimation of planning decisions - and the reality of increasingly intractable opposition to development.

Shapps' speeches, and the wider rhetoric of planning reform under the Coalition government, provide an exemplary articulation of this, constructing a narrative through which they claim to be able to transcend the development/ participation knot and address the problem of planning. Central to this is the claim that the 'big state' approach of New Labour has been responsible for generating much of this antagonism, turning the fundamentally reasonable citizens of middle England into NIMBYs who are justifiably opposed to development imposed from above without their consent. The heavy-handed central state is therefore

[2] Both terms have been adopted as key policy ideas or frames by the Coalition, however, their substance remains unclear. Such framing ideas have been identified as increasingly fluid in recent years, subject to abandonment once they are challenged or their political value has been outlived (and as discussed below the idea of localism has been challenged in relation to planning). In this context it seems advisable to avoid attributing any essential character to them.

responsible for alienating people and contributing to the development of undesirable characteristics within the population.

The construction of a narrative that lays the blame for the development/participation knot in New Labour's centralising approach to government does a considerable amount of political and ideological work (see Finlayson, 2009), not least in positioning planning reform as a necessary and distinct response to the failures of the previous government. However, it also obscures important continuities with reform dynamics under New Labour. Indeed, it is striking that Conservative/ Coalition rhetoric about the "broken planning system" (Conservative Party, 2009) closely mirrors that which motivated wide-ranging reform under New Labour (see e.g. DTLR, 2001). Both describe a system that is bureaucratic and inefficient and that thereby causes considerable discontent amongst *both* affected communities, *and* business and developer interests. Each therefore identifies the development/ participation knot as being close to the crux of the problem of planning. Moreover, each also claims that they can identify and address the causes of this dissatisfaction through reform that will lead to the creation of a system able to achieve a range of desirable sounding outcomes for all of its users, including for example: sustainable development; efficient decision-making; a strong economy; successful democracy; and empowered citizens.

Underpinning governmental rhetoric in both cases therefore is an idealisation of the way in which the system *should* perform were it to operate properly. For both this requires a resolution of the conflict represented by the development/ participation knot that will empower citizens, whilst also freeing up development; restoring the 'natural' relationship between communities and development, and thereby (re)creating a consensual reality[3]. In the

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[3] The rhetoric of planning reform here has intersected with a wider Conservative/ Coalition idealisation of the underlying organic order that has been destroyed by too much central state intervention (see Raban, 2009).

case of Shapps, the narrative is completed through the rolling back of the heavy-handed state and its replacement by a new governmental rationality that reshapes behaviour by offering citizens economic incentives to accept development[4]. Under New Labour, meanwhile, in keeping with the logic of their 'third way' ideology (see Mouffe, 1998), the antagonism between development and participation was at times simply denied. For example, Lord Falconer, as the minister responsible, gave evidence to the Select Committee inquiry into the 2001 Green Paper on planning reform in which he refused to accept that there was any necessary contradiction between speeding up decisions in the interests of business and economic development, and increasing levels of public participation in the process. For both New Labour and the Coalition then, systemic planning reform provides a means of resolving the development/ participation knot, allowing for the reconciliation of development and participation and effectively turning NIMBY's into homebuilders – a rhetorical move that constructs opposition to development as a perverse effect of flaws in the existing planning system that can be corrected through reform.

Rhetorically this allows the contradiction between development and participation to be resolved, and government to claim to pursue *both* goals for the planning system through reform: responding to continued criticisms of planning from pro-development interests within and around government, whilst also appealing to key electoral constituencies and maintaining a commitment to collaborative processes. However, concerns about the impacts of sustained growth on the environment and quality of life in the south-east of England might suggest a different interpretation where conflict emanates from citizens acting not just in response to their disempowerment by the central state, or in "selfish" defence of property values (though this may be the response of the good citizen as rational economic actor, see e.g. Watson,

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[4] Though it is necessary to note the contradiction between the continued use of central government powers to create 'good' citizens through incentives, and the claim that reform will empower people to shape their own conception of the 'good'.

2009), but out of a more complex set of anxieties about the negative consequences of continued development. In this way the citizen-subjectivities generated can be understood as a complex response to the contradictory spatial logic of urban development itself, with planning an issue which reveals the ways in which the supposed beneficiaries of continued economic growth often feel threatened by it. In these terms, the continuing problematisation of the planning system might be seen as a means of displacing more fundamental questions about both the sustainability of this growth model, and the possibility of further sustained development (Gunder and Hillier, 2009, chapter 8), with the system itself, rather than the goals it is seeking to achieve, being constructed as the cause of conflict and "policy failure".

The paper takes this analysis of the rhetoric of planning reform as a starting point, viewing the motor of ongoing change as an expression of governmental inability to confront the politics generated by urban development. In this context the labelling of certain citizen-subjectivities as desirable (homebuilder) or undesirable (NIMBY) can be seen as one strategy through which governments have sought to manage politically difficult conflict (cf. Burningham, 2000). The argument therefore opens up wider concerns about the relationship between politics and policy-making, and the range of mechanisms available to governments to manage conflict produced or mediated through the policy process. It is to these mechanisms that the rest of the paper now turns. The next section reviews recent debates about the uses of policy to stabilise the contradictions within what has been described as a post-political settlement (Allmendinger and Haughton 2010; Metzger, 2011; Swyngedouw, 2007). This provides a conceptual framework through which the subsequent case study is then assessed. Overall, the paper argues that theories of post-political policy-making, premised on the use of policy to displace politics, need to be sensitive to the full range of different effects that the repression of conflict may generate.

Politics and the management of conflict in the policy process: the case of planning for housing in England

In recent years, the traditional relationship between politics and policy-making has been contested, questioning the assumption that policy-making and implementation follow from political decision-making. Hajer (2003) for example suggests policy-making is itself generative of politics, with citizens emerging as subjects in response to particular policy initiatives. In land-use terms this often happens late in the process, only after their local impacts become apparent. This leads him to suggest that policy processes need to be opened up to political contestation, with more flexibility built into the system to allow for "end-of-pipe conflicts" (page 110). In similar terms Owens and Cowell (2011) argue that conflict in the implementation of policy, symbolised by public inquiries in the planning process, can serve an important and often underappreciated purpose in opening up 'apertures' through which significant challenges to policy discourses can be raised.

However, whilst the legitimacy of public participation has become an unassailable pillar of the planning system and fostering more collaborative modes of policy-making an explicit goal, the legitimacy of such end-of-pipe challenges to planning policy has often been resisted by governments. This has typically been framed through frustration at the delays they can cause to economically important decisions. This suggests the ambivalent nature of the relationship between politics and policy-making. The planning process both produces and mediates politics and conflict, and can be used to either open up or close down spaces in which such antagonism can be articulated as political resistance (Metzger, 2011). This is, of course, not a new phenomenon. The use of the policy process to manage or frame what issues make it onto policymakers' agendas has long been recognised (Schon and Rein, 1994). Planning too has long stood accused of acting as a mechanism for depoliticisation, masking value-based decisions in rational-technical or professional justifications as a means of

defusing conflict and imposing development without fully examining its social or environmental consequences (e.g. Reade, 1987; Hague, 1984). The rational legal logic of the policy process, moreover, tends to treat the articulation of opposition as an unhealthy problem to be managed out of the process (Pløger, 2004), necessitating the use of a range of devices to delegitimize opposition including, for example, the use of the label 'NIMBY' (McClymont and O'Hare, 2008; Burningham, 2000).

The case of planning for housing in England provides an example of some of the mechanisms through which governments have sought to manage the end-of-pipe conflicts that development frequently generates. The controversial nature of housing development has worked against the emergence of effective local governance or participatory practices in many places, relying instead on the continued exercise of the top-down powers of central government to prescribe the levels of housing provision required in local development plans (Cowell and Murdoch, 1999; Murdoch and Abram, 2002). Though there has been some attempt to justify this in terms of an overriding national interest in ensuring economic growth, or the provision of affordable housing, central government has nonetheless sought to pursue a range of strategies that have limited the spaces and forms of contestation available. Aside from directing development towards areas where resistance is less marked (which is increasingly difficult within a political economy that seeks to prime key spatial assets), the most notable of these has involved transposing the political issues raised into a process of rational-technical argumentation over how much housing is needed in different parts of the country. This has narrowed the scope for contesting development beyond the terms of the "numbers game" it creates, and whose rationalities actors at the local level are forced to accept, allowing central government to exercise power at a distance, insulated to some extent from the conflict generated (Murdoch and Abram, 2002; Vigar et al, 2000). At the same time this has therefore created an attendant politics of blame as responsibility for housing

allocations is passed between different layers of government. Whilst this may represent a pragmatic means of mediating inevitable tensions over difficult decisions, it also represents a technocratic fix that seeks to contain conflict, allowing only limited space for political challenge (Vigar et al, 2000). However, the centrality of housing as an issue within recurring planning reform initiatives since the early 2000s suggests that the housing numbers game has increasingly struggled to provide a stable basis for governing by containing antagonism and guaranteeing desirable levels of development (cf. Vigar et al, 2000).

In related terms, planning has recently been considered part of a putative "post-political condition" (Gunder and Hillier, 2009; Allmendinger and Haughton, 2010), entailing a managerial approach to government that seeks to defuse conflict, asserting consensus, and shutting out questions that raise more fundamental challenges to the logic of market-driven politics (Swyngedouw, 2007; Zizek, 2006; Mouffe, 2005). Within the contemporary post-political consensus (Swyngedouw, 2007), it is possible to see planning as having been tasked with defusing the conflict generated by an unquestioned commitment to economic growth through promises of more integrative or participatory policy-making (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2010). This suggests that the long-standing role of the policy process as a mechanism for managing conflict, rather than for opening up political spaces, may have been enrolled as a mechanism of post-political conflict management – working to stabilise the contradictions within a hegemonic settlement.

The logic of the post-political condition suggests, however, that where political antagonism is suppressed or denied it is likely to re-appear in other arenas, staged as different forms of protest. In this way, it is necessary to see any putative post-political consensus as premised on the displacement of fundamental political questions, but therefore as likely to generate its own micro-politics of displacement. For radical commentators suppressed conflict is likely to surface in forms of direct action (Swyngedouw, 2007). However, conflict that is channelled

into or generated through the policy process may also re-appear in other ways. Owens and Cowell (2011) suggest the metaphor of air in a balloon, where squeezing one end increases pressure at the other. Whilst Allmendinger and Haughton (2010) suggest that the regulatory spaces of development control within the planning system offer multiple different points of resistance to dominant logics of growth. Metzger (2011) further points out that displaced political energies may generate new political arenas and forms of politics that might enrichen democratic debate (though it should equally be noted that such new forms of politics may also surface in a range of less attractive ways [Owens and Cowell, 2010]).

In addition, however, the effects of the displacement of politics, and the managerial work required to repress conflict, may not only prove disruptive to the stability of particular policy discourses (as in the case of the housing numbers game), or to formal political spaces. A range of research also suggests that displaced antagonism and the social anxieties that it stems from are likely to be projected onto, and internalised within the state agencies charged with implementing policy (Lipsky, 1980; Hoggett, 2006, 2010; Fotaki, 2010). This suggests that there may be further, often under-appreciated ramifications of a politics of displacement that have significant implications for understanding the roles of public organisations and both elected and unelected officials. The paper now moves to the local level to explore these issues through the experiences of one local planning authority charged with managing the high levels of conflict generated by housing development. In doing so it seeks to trace some of these 'displacement effects', adding further dimensions to existing accounts of the complex range of impacts generated by a politics of displacement, and the work required to sustain a post-political settlement through the policy process.

Local planning cultures in the face of conflict: thick skins and thin governance

Within a hierarchical policy system one of the effects of a politics of displacement is that conflicts can be passed down through the system to be dealt with at lower levels. As Lipsky (1980, page 41; Hoggett, 2005, page 172) suggests: "a typical mechanism for legislative conflict resolution is to pass on intractable conflicts for resolution (or continued irresolution) at the administrative level". In the case of planning for housing the effects of government projecting idealised resolutions of the development/participation knot onto local governance cultures is to pass responsibility back to the sites where such conflict is most fiercely felt and contested, and its political resolution most difficult (Vigar et al, 2000). In the rest of the paper, through one 'extreme case' study (Flyvbjerg, 2001) that strongly exemplifies the politics of conflict over urban development, the paper explores the effects of this on local government planning practice and particularly its impacts on the organisational and governance cultures through which development is mediated.

The case study was conducted as part of a wider project that sought to understand New Labour's planning reforms and how they were influencing local planning cultures in England. Wokingham Borough Council (WBC) in the County of Berkshire was selected as a case study because it characterised what the Town and Country Planning Association (2001) has labelled the "NIMBY local planning authority", where opposition to development has become a key local political issue (indeed, the local civic society revels in the label, extolling citizens to embrace NIMBY-ism as a symbol of their concern for the area). As a case WBC therefore exemplified many of the qualities the then government had sought to problematise in framing the need for planning reform, but also provided a context within which to explore how reform responded to political conflict over development. The case study involved a series of twelve interviews with planners working in plan production and development management, senior executive officers including the chief executive and heads of other services, and local politicians. This combination of interviewees was intended to allow an in-

depth exploration of the local planning culture and its operation. Interviews were further supplemented by analysis of a wide range of local policy documents and local press reports, and observation of public meetings. Additional follow up interviews with key contacts in the planning department were also conducted to consider how work was progressing, this meant that the study was able to follow events over a period of a year and half between 2006 and mid-2008.

Located adjacent to the fast growing town of Reading, within the M4 corridor and the much vaunted 'western crescent' of high-tech and knowledge based economic development to the west of London, Wokingham is in the heart of the economically dynamic and affluent south-east (Short et al, 1987; Wokingham District Council, 2002). The Borough is characterised by nationally and regionally low unemployment rates, and high rates of average income, car ownership and educational attainment (Wokingham Borough Council, 2008). This picture of 'success' was reinforced by the results of polls by the Halifax Building Society and the Royal Bank of Scotland that described the Borough as amongst the best places to live in the UK in 2007 (Tinker, 2007)[5]. Such prosperity brings with it distinct advantages, but also particular challenges: the then south-east regional plan[6], for example, suggested the need to carefully manage the impacts of high growth pressures on the qualities that are central to the area's appeal, suggesting an understanding that growth has caused some strain to the area's infrastructure.

Due to its privileged location, the Borough and surrounding areas have been subject to enormous growth pressures in the last forty years. Between 1971 and 2001 it witnessed a 50% increase in population and an 85% increase in households. This was sustained by the

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[5] The case study was conducted before the full implications of the current economic crisis had become apparent which may have led to subsequent shifts in understanding of this 'success'.

[6] The coalition government has made abolition of the regional level of planning a particular priority. Due to legal challenges, at the time of writing this has not yet happened but is a key part of emerging legislation.

building of some 22, 200 houses, representing 38% of the Borough's housing stock (WBC, 2008). However, growth has also been subject to long-standing local opposition, with an articulate and educated population regularly opposed to and willing to mobilise against further development (e.g. Short et al, 1987). As a result the accommodation of housing development has long been central to local politics in a pattern similar to that witnessed in other parts of the region (Short et al, 1987; Murdoch and Abram, 2002), indeed local politicians suggested in interview that the political culture of Wokingham was defined by "*the threat of large housing numbers from the government*".

The political profile of development means that planning issues are subject to high levels of scrutiny from the council, local press and population. This creates a political and policy climate, within which local politicians and officers seek to pursue a range of strategies that will allow them to manage the antagonism generated by development. Below some of the key dimensions of this antagonistic political culture are explored under the post-2004 planning regime created by New Labour. These demonstrate the politics of displacement at the local level, their implications for policy implementation, relations within the authority and between the state and citizens in the putatively collaborative spaces of the planning system.

Opposition, othering and the management of blame

During the late 2000s when the case study was conducted WBC was controlled by a Conservative administration with a strong electoral majority. In large part this represented a legacy of the decision by the Liberal Democrats to agree to the levels of housing proposed in the revision of the then county-wide Berkshire structure plan in 2005. By drawing on a discourse of opposition to growth the Conservatives were able to take a firm grip on the council. Their administration subsequently refused to accept the allocation of housing for the

area, forcing the Secretary of State to intervene to impose the numbers, but allowing the Conservatives to displace blame for the decision onto "nationally imposed" housing targets.

Housing targets were again at the centre of controversy over the production of a core strategy for Wokingham in 2006-8 (the central element of the new system of local plan-making introduced in 2004). This was particularly focused around the implications of political opposition to the then emerging South East Plan (SEP) which was to replace the structure plan in defining strategic policy, including housing numbers. The SEP proposed to maintain the share of housing for each Berkshire authority established under the previous system. This implied an increase in the Borough's allocation from 523 to 623 houses a year. The council meanwhile maintained that the figure should be set at 320, the projected capacity on previously developed land within Wokingham. The fact that neighbouring Reading had consistently exceeded its housing allocation, and would sign up as a 'growth point' promising to deliver 10% above their SEP targets as part of a government drive to deliver more housing, added to a sense of injustice about the allocations. The imposition of these figures by an unelected regional body, meanwhile, stoked further indignation.

As a result the leader of the council, Frank Browne, wrote to every household in the district in October 2005 inviting them to respond to a questionnaire. This yielded some 18, 000 responses, a 31.8% response rate. A further letter was sent in May, 2006 urging residents to make their opposition to the allocation for the district known to the panel of inspectors reporting on the SEP. Entitled, "Housing numbers: can our district cope?", the letter argued that this opposition rested on two key principles: the high levels of growth seen in the last thirty years, and the impacts of further development on the Borough's already stressed infrastructure. This provided the council with a strong mandate to argue for lower numbers and was further backed up by research commissioned from the consultancy Ove Arup in 2004

that suggested there was a requirement for some £818 million in infrastructure investment to accommodate growth over the life of the proposed SEP.

The commitment of resources to opposing housing numbers and mobilising the citizens of the Borough to campaign against the regional planning process shows the politics of resistance at work in Wokingham - a central tactic in the local politics of growth management (Short et al, 1987). Mobilised around the image of the 'infrastructure gap' and the injustice of Wokingham continuing to 'take' high levels of growth that could be more sustainably, and justly incorporated elsewhere in the country (Wokingham District Council, 2005), this discourse was further reinforced through appeals to the environmental qualities of the area, and fears that its quality of life (and therefore success) may be endangered by continued development. Officers were licensed to explore a wide range of arguments that could be used to argue against the logic of the SEP.

Resistance to growth was politically popular, and the administration was successful in galvanising strong local participation to their cause in what could be considered a powerful mobilisation of local political energies. However, this discourse was also unlikely to succeed in re-shaping the regional agenda. If, when they were first elected in 1997, New Labour had won a share of south-eastern shire county seats in parliament, making the politics of enforcing housing development a potentially difficult issue (Allmendinger and Tewdwr-Jones, 2000), by the mid-late 2000s ministers had made it clear that increasing housing 'delivery' was a key priority. Labour's support for local autonomy/ collaborative policy-making had therefore been circumscribed, with central government's office for the south east (GOSE) outlining a series of 'givens' (including housing delivery) – non-negotiable policy priorities on which local government was expected to act, regardless of local political considerations. In this way the government had come to rely on the housing numbers game to enforce development in the face of resistance, with ministers constructing opposition to

house-building as an unacceptable form of NIMBY-ism that threatened the stability of the economy, and denied opportunity to future generations by driving up prices and making housing increasingly unaffordable (e.g. Cooper, 2005).

The discourse of opposition was therefore only effective in fairly limited terms. It succeeded in displacing local political conflict, insulating the ruling conservative administration from the electoral consequences of accepting growth. The rescaling of plan-making within the new planning system facilitated this by shifting conflict and blame to the regional level, and central government (who ultimately determined the allocations in the regional plans). However, as the paper now goes on to describe, this was a short term displacement that required careful management of the political fall-out when housing numbers came back from the regional level and moved through to the level of development control decision-making. Moreover, it was also a partial displacement that brought local elected members into conflict with planning officers.

Managerial solutions and 'thin governance'

The short term nature of the strategy of opposition was particularly apparent to officers and managers within the authority who were under pressure from GOSE to produce a core strategy that would provide a framework for delivering housing in the Borough, and were acutely conscious that opposition was unlikely to succeed and would do little to increase public acceptance of 'inevitable' development. By 2008 once the SEP process had run its course and the housing numbers had been largely determined this became a problem that the ruling administration also accepted it needed to manage. It was clear that they would need to accept the levels of growth the government had determined, and that they needed to shift from a discourse of opposition to one of reluctantly managing growth (cf. Short et al, 1987),

this was facilitated by Frank Browne standing down as leader of the council before the local elections of that year.

This significant change coincided with the appointment of a new chief executive who brought a new managerial ethos to the authority, leading to the appointment of a new management team that sought to improve strained relations between officers and members, but also to challenge the power of elected members, many of whom had developed an entrenched authority through long periods in office. Formal mediation processes were used to move beyond what were described as the negative discourses defining WBC, towards a more positive vision of how the council could seek to shape change. Central to this was a desire for members to "take control of the development agenda". Thus the arrival of the new chief executive indicated a managerial challenge to the authority of traditional, elected local government within WBC (cf. Cochrane, 2004).

In relation to planning policy there was a concerted effort to shift the authority towards a discourse of controlling growth. The new leader of the council was elected arguing that delivery of a core strategy was the "*number one challenge*" facing the Borough (Wokingham Times, 2008). Key arguments were forwarded to gain popular support for the new approach including the need for more affordable housing for local young people, and proposals to revitalise the town centre of Wokingham. Presented as key to safeguarding the area's potentially fragile 'success', they sought to define the benefits of development, and perhaps also, subtly, to mobilise resident's anxieties about the future of their quality of life, and that of their children. Senior managers meanwhile claimed that the new, positive agenda spoke for the silent majority of residents who were willing to accept change.

Officers welcomed this shift as a means to develop a more positive culture, moving off GOSE's "concern list" of non-performing authorities, and taking advantage of the incentives

available to authorities that met government objectives. They saw this as a recognition of the "rules of the game", exemplifying central government's power to govern local authorities "at a distance" by controlling the conditions in which they are able to exercise autonomy (cf. Murdoch and Abram, 2002). These wider shifts within WBC therefore created space within which it was politically possible to make progress on the previously stalled core strategy. The strategy that emerged from this positioned growth as an unwelcome but unavoidable imposition, and sought to argue for large scale planned redevelopment areas that would effectively "take the hit" of growth, rather than spreading the pain more widely. This represented a long-standing local solution to managing growth that seemed more acceptable to the Borough's population.

Officers also however, recognised this as a fragile settlement that did not necessarily reflect any underlying shift in political or popular feeling. This new discourse was therefore a 'thin' form of governance, framed within WBC and in relation to governmental logics, but with little confidence that it commanded popular legitimacy. It involved the construction of different 'publics' (the reasonable, silent majority; the hard working family whose children could not afford to live in the area) as a means of managing the spectre of opposition (represented by the 'vocal NIMBY minority' of the 'usual suspects'); strengthening the "thick skin" that Hoggett (2010) identifies between public authorities and citizens in contemporary governance, and insulating managerial decisions from the public. Politically the Conservative administration sought to displace blame onto central government and the unelected (and therefore illegitimate) regional assembly where the SEP had been produced. With further housing targets accepted at the plan-making level, however, attention would also be shifted further down to the level of implementation.

Further displacement and deferral: planning by appeal vs. managing 'staged' opposition

It is widely understood that development becomes progressively more politicised and harder to manage the closer it gets to 'the ground'. Hajer (2003) speaks of 'citizens on stand-by' to describe the tendency for people to be 'ignited' by issues once their effects become visible to them. At this level local opposition is also often at its most emotive as people mobilise in response to a perceived threat to what they value in their local area. This may be characterised as NIMBY-ism, however, such a pejorative label may also be unhelpful, masking rather than illuminating the range of different motivations, including interests, beliefs, emotional attachments and even unacknowledged anxieties about the future, that development might generate (cf. Ellis, 2004; McClymont and O'Hare, 2008).

In Wokingham, given the unpopularity of development, public scrutiny of development control decision-making is extensive. The local paper, *The Wokingham Times* facilitates this, often covering controversial development in emotive fashion, for example, taking on the role of a community organiser by reminding readers to register their opposition to applications with the council before key deadlines have passed (e.g. Corbett, 2007a; 2007b).

As such development control (DC) officers acknowledged that Wokingham was a "tough patch". Relations between them and councillors were often therefore put under considerable strain. A period of particularly marked conflict over the interpretation of national policy on housing density had recently resulted in the introduction of a new DC manager who had initiated a process of "big time culture change" that had led to the departure of several long-serving officers.

Though they understood the pressure that councillors faced, officers' main concern was whether elected members were "*brave*" enough to grant permission in the face of often concerted and well-organised opposition. They felt that, in the past, politicians had often been afraid to take the unpopular decisions that they "*needed to*", and as a result the council had

been reduced to "*planning by appeal*". For the planners this was professionally unsatisfying, resulting in a loss of control over development and high costs incurred in fighting appeal hearings. Recently this had led to an attempt to persuade councillors that, in the face of policy and officer advice, they should pursue a strategy of what might be considered 'staged' opposition – speaking out against development but "*sitting on their hands*" rather than voting against proposals. This was framed as a pragmatic response at a stage in the planning process where the system left little room for politics -decisions without a sound basis in planning policy and rationality would be subject to potentially costly appeal proceedings. However, it also seemed a further reflection of the growing claim to power of managerial discourses within WBC, and certainly represented a managerial 'fix' to the political antagonism generated by development within the Borough. The same depoliticising logic was also reflected in a substantial increase in the proportion of applications being determined by officers under delegated powers rather than being voted on by councillors, providing another means of circumventing what was considered undue or disruptive political influence. Nonetheless, these developments represented a further form of displacement within the planning system, and a closing down of potentially politicised spaces as a response to antagonism that could not be easily contained within the policy process.

Prophylactic practices: organisational and personal defences

The previous section described how antagonism over development puts considerable pressure on the planning process in Wokingham. It also referred to some of the pressures that these issues place on relations between councillors and officers (cf. Tait and Campbell, 2000). In this section the paper goes on to further describe how the external pressure generated by opposition impacted on both the internal organisational culture of WBC, and on the spaces of engagement between WBC and the local population.

As described above, public service organisations often become containers for a range of wider antagonisms and anxieties that are projected onto the state and its activities (Hoggett, 2006; 2010). Public officials are therefore required to manage relations with the public that are overdetermined by different meanings and expectations. This frequently leads to the emergence of a range of 'coping devices' through which organisations and individuals seek to deal with what Lipsky (1980, page 152; also Hoggett, 2006, page 186; cf. Fotaki, 2010) called the "assaults on the ego which the structure of street-level work normally delivers".

In Wokingham where planning was understood as a thin form of governance that often operated against popular wishes, such coping devices were both a resource and a resort for planners as they sought to respond to the perpetual return of the repressed conflict generated by development. The relationship between planners and the public was marked by a deep ambivalence on both sides: for citizens who consistently voted against public intervention and viewed the council with suspicion, but who also sought strict public control of development activity; and for planners, who were committed to the principle of public participation and could understand the local population's concern about new development, but who also saw new housing as both inevitable and necessary and had to confront the hostility that was often directed towards them as 'planners' and representatives of 'the council' responsible for 'allowing' development. All of the planners had personal anecdotes of having faced angry citizens, and the story of one consultation event in which the assembled citizens had to be talked out of walking out en masse was frequently referred to. The *Wokingham Times* was a potent symbol of this difficult relationship, regularly directing fears over development into questioning of council decision-making, with frequent recourse to a 'them and us' discourse that positioned the council as failing to protect the Borough against development.

In this context, a range of what might be described as "prophylactic practices" – coping devices through which the planners sought to safely manage relations with the public - could be discerned. These worked as a means of maintaining the "thick skin" (Hoggett, 2010) between planners and citizens, insulating both professional decisions and personal feelings against hostility. For the planners these devices played an important role in helping to sustain organisational and personal commitments in the face of the antagonism that was often directed towards them. These included:

- Most striking were the ways in which the planners constructed 'the public' and sought to appeal to it (cf. Newman and Clarke, 2009). Whilst professing to understand why residents objected to development, the planners also sought to present this opposition as often narrowly focused NIMBY-ism that should be dismissed. Appeal was frequently made to the more reasonable silent majority who did not participate in consultation exercises, or to future generations whose interests the planners had to represent – rather than those of the 'usual suspects' (the largely wealthy, retired residents who did respond to policy consultations). Sometimes the public were also constructed as incapable of acting in their own best interests, or as hypocritical, or ignorant of the needs of the local area and the pressures the planning system imposed. This allowed an appeal to a higher wisdom, beyond immediate self-interest to justify working against local sentiment.

- A range of 'others' were constructed as responsible for the hostility that characterised relations between planning and the local population. This included: the wider crisis of public services and negative public perception of the council; central government and local politicians' failure to deal with the politics of development; and the complexity of the recently reformed planning system that naively presumed the possibility of reaching a consensus with local communities through consultation. The fact that

these factors were beyond their control allowed planners to distance themselves from feelings of responsibility for 'failure' or citizen dissatisfaction.

- Conflict and hostility were therefore naturalised by many as an 'inevitable' feature of the job that although frustrating could not be influenced and so had to be accepted – another means of distancing personal commitments from likely outcomes. This also helped to construct a shared, embattled identity across the council that emphasised how good intentions were frequently not understood outside the council offices, contributing to an understanding of planners as part of a wider public sector workforce that had become an 'easy target' and whose contribution was not widely appreciated.

- For those individuals who identified particularly strongly with the principle of participation it was sometimes possible to select specific tasks that allowed this identification to be expressed. For one senior member of the team this involved working with local people in the construction of village design guides. Another junior officer meanwhile devoted considerably more time than others to dealing with queries from the public desk as a means of fulfilling an increasingly ambivalent commitment to public service.

Whilst these defensive responses can be understood as coping devices, they also operated as mechanisms of control, allowing planners to justify their interventions in the face of conflict[7]. In this regard they interacted with the more traditional systemic defences that the planning system provided for the planners. These included the strict delimitation of the terms on which consultation events and responses would and would not be considered relevant – often

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[7] For example, similar appeals to the public's "false consciousness" were noted by Davies (1972) who viewed these as legitimating the imposition of planning. In this way such 'prophylactic practices' can be viewed as long-standing tactics, working both as coping mechanisms and as potentially questionable claims to power.

densely argued in legislative and policy detail. This represented a retreat into a longer standing bureaucratic role, some way distant from the ideal of the collaborative planner (Healey, 2006), but was a further resource that allowed planners to defend themselves against difficult exchanges, and demands that they were obliged to refuse. Whilst officers accepted this as part of their working reality, all also admitted to a sense of frustration at the effective structuring of their work and relations with the public by conflict that they felt powerless to mediate.

Below the implications of this case study are considered in the context of both the construction of planning reform and the development/participation knot, before the paper concludes with a wider consideration of what this suggests about how politically and ideologically intractable conflict is managed through the policy process, and as part of a putative post-political settlement.

Assessing the role of the state in managing conflict over urban development

The case study shows the experience of one local planning authority in the south-east of England seeking to manage the particularly intense antagonism generated by new housing development. As such it shows a politics of displacement at work as local politicians and officers sought to manage conflict that central government had refused to accept as legitimate, or acknowledge as a factor influencing the implementation of planning policy, and that could not be readily mediated within the 'rules of the game'. This involved a search for a political and organisational 'fix' that would allow conflict to be repressed and the negative consequences of this game to be further displaced. Ultimately this was facilitated by the power of managerialism within contemporary local government to shift the internal discourse within the authority towards an acceptance of these rules. This solution was carefully staged by the ruling Conservative administration, but nonetheless represented only a thin form of

governance, premised on the maintenance of a 'thick skin' separating local government from citizens. This promised little more than a temporary solution that would further displace this antagonism onto other targets – including the regional planning process; central government, the development control process and, significantly, the local authority itself and its relations with citizens. This in turn produced a range of prophylactic practices through which planners and other officials sought to manage the public, and to defend their decisions and personal commitments against the consequences of implementing policy in the face of strong local opposition.

From these experiences it is possible to see something of the immediate political appeal of the Conservative/ Coalition targeting of further planning reform – sold as a promise to change the rules of the game and empower citizens to shape development. Central to this has been a reaction against the setting of central targets, the illegitimacy of the regional planning process (and perhaps implicitly the 'thick skin' that has separated an increasingly managerial culture within local government from the citizens it has claimed to serve [cf. Hoggett, 2010]). This agenda had clear and immediate electoral appeal in areas like Wokingham that represent the heartlands of Conservative support. Moreover, the case study suggests that Grant Shapps' claim that the planning system has been responsible for creating a generation of NIMBYs contains an element of truth since, within the logic of the housing numbers game, all opposition to development prescribed at higher levels is constructed as illegitimate. In this context NIMBY is used by a range of actors within the policy process as a label that allows opposition, and the politics that this might generate, to be managed out of the process.

However, it is also necessary to question Shapps' claim that further systemic reform can resolve the development/participation knot by transforming NIMBYs into homebuilders. The contradictions within this claim have already begun to emerge with the Coalition pulling back from promises that groups of local citizens might be empowered to determine appropriate

housing levels, and committing itself to an agenda that privileges growth (leading to a backlash from traditional Conservative supporters over proposals for a pro-growth National Planning Policy Framework in 2011). This suggests that the politics of planning reform remain fluid, however, the idea that financial incentives can act as a mechanism to transform citizen-subjectivities in the way the rhetoric of reform has suggested seems unlikely. It rests on a 'thin' understanding of citizens as rational economic actors that elides the complex range of anxieties and motivations that planning produces (exposing the contradictory subjectivities of otherwise core beneficiaries of pro-growth politics). Moreover, it re-states the implicit assumption that to be a good citizen is to be a "homebuilder". In this way the reform agenda can be interpreted as a search for a systemic fix that will eliminate conflict without disturbing the prevailing model of spatial development.

The problematisation of the planning system itself can therefore be seen as a means of covering over the underlying causes of conflict with fantasies of the consensus that a fit for purpose planning process will create (cf. Fotaki, 2010; Gunder and Hillier, 2009). The motor of ongoing planning reform therefore comes to be understood as a symptom of the failure of the planning policy process to find a means of containing the conflict generated by new development; part of a post-political search for a means of defusing the complex and contradictory politics generated by development. However, the rescaling of planning decision-making within any further reform agenda is likely to produce a range of unanticipated outcomes as it shifts the politics of displacement and blame within the policy process.

In this context, the role of local government, and the planning process, as a container for the antagonism and anxieties generated by development requires further exploration so that the costs repressed conflict imposes can be understood and opened up to examination. The case study suggested that these have partly been felt democratically – as the spaces of democratic

accountability within the planning process become carefully managed in ways that undermine

formal channels of responsibility and accountability. However, it also explored the

organisational and personal costs associated with managing conflict. The defensive responses

that this provoked seemed to exacerbate rather than resolve the problematic relation between

the state and citizens, as planners came to terms with the impossibility of consensually

resolving the development-participation knot within a system that did not recognise it as a

legitimate problem. Though these costs are hard to assess, there is a sense that they contribute

to the attrition of trust in the state and the planning process as a democratically accountable

guarantor of the public interest; and in the planning profession, which is blamed for failing to

either deliver development, or act democratically to protect the environment. They also

undermine the promise of collaborative governance which increasingly comes to be seen

more as a way of "winding people up" (as one planner described consultation in the system),

than of allowing them real power to shape the future of the places where they live[8].

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the politics of planning reform and of planning for housing in

England can be seen as an exemplar for exploring how states seek to manage ideologically

and politically controversial issues through the policy process.

Though the depoliticising potential of planning/ policy has long been recognised, the paper

further develops the argument made elsewhere that recent planning in England has been part

of the management of a post-political settlement which seeks to close down sites and sources

of antagonism that might open up fundamental political questions about the sustainability of

contemporary urban development (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2010). Also in keeping with

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[8] It is beyond the scope of this paper to consider whether such power *should* be given to local people, and there are good reasons to think any such power should be qualified by extra-local concerns (see e.g. Owens and Cowell, 2010).

others, the paper has argued that the displacement of such questions does not destroy political energies, but instead generates a range of displacement effects whereby conflict is channelled in different directions (Owens and Cowell, 2010; Allmendinger and Haughton, 2010; Metzger, 2011). The management of any putative post-political settlement therefore requires a considerable amount of political work, much of which is premised on dealing with the return of repressed conflict.

Debates about post-political planning have focused critical attention on emerging forms of planning practice (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2010), and have, more normatively, considered the nature of a politics of displacement and the scope for realising an agonistic politics within the planning process, opening up rather than closing down political questions and spaces (Metzger, 2011) [9]. The present paper has linked the dynamics of displacement to the motor of continuing systemic planning reform in England. More than this, however, the paper has tracked the politics of displacement through the policy process, drawing attention to a range of mechanisms used to manage antagonism, but also to the often unexamined effects that the repression of conflict may have. It has highlighted the considerable pressure that this can put on public sector institutions, the officials charged with delivering development in the face of often fierce conflict, and relations between citizens and the state. Analysis of the displacement of politics in and through the policy process should therefore be sensitive to the full range of impacts repressed conflict may have on the legitimacy not just of policy outcomes, but of the state, and collaborative approaches to governance too; highlighting and examining the ongoing and cumulative costs of sustaining a post-political settlement.

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[9] Though as one reviewer suggested the policy process is also a realm of decision-making where closure is necessary. The balance between opening up, and closing down is therefore a question for debate.

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