The role and significance of planning consultants as intermediary-actors: between and amongst government, civic society and the market

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Abstract

The paper discusses the role of private planning consultants as intermediary-actors and their implications in relation to planning theory and practice. To do so, the paper focuses on niche consultants involved in servicing neighbourhood scale plan-making in England, clarifying that they hold crucial agency in local planning processes and adding to understandings of consultancy roles and co-production dynamics in planning. ~~The instance of neighbourhood planning (NP) in England is discussed~~ The paper draws together the literature on private sector consultancy and on intermediaries, along with theoretical work highlighting the diversification of planning, the rise of the collaborative turn and the effect of regulation on creating niche markets in planning expertise. The conclusions drawn help clarify the 'action on others' that planning consultants, as intermediary-actors, have in collaborative governance and planning in and beyond neighbourhood planning.

Keywords

Intermediary-actors, planning, neighbourhood, consultants, agency

1. Introduction

For decades the planning theory literature has questioned the role and implications of various manifestations of citizen engagement in urban governance and planning. In the early 1990s, a shift in managing urban issues and spatial planning was identifiable in many European countries and beyond. Governmental actors have adopted forms of ostensibly collaborative governance and planning tools (Somerville and Haines 2008; Bragaglia 2021), aimed at intercepting and managing the socially innovative energies of civil society. In some instances, these have harnessed volunteer capacity in the context of shrinking states and economic austerity (Castell 2016; Local Trust 2022). These new tools partly reframe the 'rules of the game' between public authorities, the development industry and civil society and bring into

view the roles and influence of intermediary-actors, recognising that those new tools can also create knowledge markets for the private sector (Raco, Brill and Ferm 2021; Raco and Savini 2019). Sandercock (2010) has advocated for 'an epistemology of multiplicity' where knowledge is produced through dialogue and local expertise. Where different voices are heard, and interests are at stake. While this may not have appeared in some territories or planning system processes, where it has done so and governmental actors have recognised a need to manage participation. Additional broadening of scope has required new knowledge to be brought to bear on planning processes. As a result, planning has become a site where a multiplicity of technical, political and lay actors are actively involved together to some degree, albeit asymmetrically (Fung 2006; Eriksson, Fredriksson and Syssner 2022). This planning landscape has included an increasing professionalisation of participation (Bherer, Gauthier and Simard 2021) and a rise in planning consultants generally (Raco, Street and Trigo 2016; Wargent, Parker and Street 2020). Growth in participation experts, as a subset of private sector involvement in planning activity, has also been depicted (Barry and Legacy 2022). Governmental actors have recognised a need to manage participation in an era of eroding public sector capacity. Bherer, Gauthier and Simard (2021) recognised the emergence of 'public participation firms' that offer various support services and have 'become recognised as specialists in public debate and who, in turn, subcontract some aspects of the process to smaller firms' (p.700). They see how this approach has legitimised the 'delegation of the implementation of participatory process to a third-party organisation' (*ibid.*).

Barry and Legacy (2022) posit that participation motives can range between 'virtue and profession', that is to say drivers for participants can oscillate between competing notions of interest and normative goals – namely, in concise terms, how questions of fairness and legitimacy of process and outcome may be tempered by positionality and moral/ethical boundaries. These sit in contradistinction to participation on the basis of marketable processes and procedures, given that a growing participation expertise has been developing in countries of the global north. Challenges to power relations that expressions of 'collaboration' maintain are wide, some are little more than tokenistic or contractualist, and others claim greater power-sharing or co-production credentials (Monno and Khakee 2012; Watson 2014). What is still in question, however, are the roles, influence and basis for different actor involvement, as well as varying motivations. While theorists in the past, such as Forester (1987; 1999), have identified the roles of mediator and facilitator for planners, there has been less attention paid to who is actually involved in episodes or structures of collaborative governance. Indeed, apart from

some recent contributions (see Guy, Marvin and Medd 2011; Loh and Norton 2015; Stapper et al. 2020; Raco, Brill and Ferm 2021), the role of planning consultants as 'intermediary-actors' (see below) remains largely under-studied in the planning debate. In this *milieu,* even more limited attention has been paid to niche participation consultancy (Loh and Norton 2013). Moreover, most literature on consultants focuses on consultants acting between developers and local authorities. This paper addresses a gap in examining the role of consultants acting in a refigured set of relations that involve civil society as well. It is, therefore, a triangulated process in which we observe and investigate the power emerging from these relationships and the 'action on others' (Burchell et al. 1991, 5) that planning consultants, as intermediary actors, have in influencing policy agendas in collaborative governance and planning.

~~As a result, our focus is on the role of particular types of consultants who act as intermediary-actors in a multifaceted collaborative planning environment~~ The article addresses this theoretically and empirically using the instance of Neighbourhood Planning (NP) in England. NP is one of the most emblematic cases of collaborative governance implemented in Europe in the past decade, formally enabled by the 2011 Localism Act (Stanton 2014). In this context, private planning consultants involved in NP constitute a significant but still understudied intermediary-actor in that set of processes. ~~Thus, our aim is to investigate their role in influencing policy agendas in collaborative governance, identifying this agency as an 'action on others' (Burchell et al., 1991 5)~~

The paper ~~consists of several different elements. It~~ starts with an extensive literature review which deliberately draws on other fields of study where the discourse on intermediaries is already structured. This outlines the characteristics and types of intermediary-actors useful in the subsequent empirical investigation. Moreover, the section combines the literatures which have considered intermediary-actors with that considering planning consultants, as well as the more specific literature at the nexus of participation, consultancy and NP. The methodological section explains the empirical material, and the following section applies lessons learned through several contributory studies and which are drawn into the research findings section. The latter acts to frame the instance of NP in England and focuses on the crucial role that planning consultants play in shaping community agendas and navigating national and local government requirements. The discussion and conclusion sections bring the key findings together and include suggestions for further research.

2. Literature(s) review: planning consultants as intermediary-actors

The study of intermediary-actors in collaborative governance processes and, more specifically, in collaborative planning processes is an incipient aspect of planning research. In theoretical approaches that are being increasingly applied in planning scholarship, notably actor-network theory (ANT) (Callon 1991; Latour 2005; Rydin 2010; Boelens 2010; Rydin and Tate 2016) and Science and Technology studies (STS) (Guy, Marvin and Medd 2011), there is a focus precisely on this type of actor and their inter-systemic positioning within policy processes. However definitions of intermediaries differ, Callon (1991, 134), writing from an ANT perspective, deploys a widely cited definition of intermediary as 'anything passing between actors which defines the relationship between them'. Such a perspective goes beyond traditional views of human agents acting in intermediary roles. However the ANT literature also makes a clear distinction between intermediaries and mediators. The crucial distinction is between those who hold agency and those who more simply carry information and establish connections. Latour (2005, 39) argues, in the ANT tradition it is held that intermediaries 'transports meaning or force without transformation' and as such the intermediary simply maintains relations between actors. Conversely, ANT authors argue that *mediators* 'translate, distort or modify the meaning or elements they are supposed to carry' (Latour 2005, 37). This sets up potential for confusion across literatures that are relevant and are being applied to planning. Hence, we attempt to avoid confusion by adopting the label of 'intermediary-actor' here in order to highlight that we are discussing actors who are also intermediating i.e. they have agency. Such a role or performativity sits amongst the types of roles that Forester (1987) perceived for planners acting as mediator, negotiator, resource, regulator, or advisor where none of those accord with the more limited ANT view of the intermediary.

It is no coincidence that a focus on a more expansive conceptualisation of 'intermediaries' has taken root in domains where there is a recognised or market need for 'inter-mediation' between other actors, processes or interests and to bridge lay-expert divides. This sits with only some overlap with the 'intermediary as function' or teleological explanation found in the ANT literature. Beyond planning studies and straddling both these definitional types, the literature on intermediaries and the intermediation process has been mainly linked to innovation systems and technology studies (e.g. Bessant and Rush 1995; Howells 2006; Hyysalo, Juntunen and Martiskainen 2018); and to environmental and energy transition (see, for example, Moss 2009; Hargreaves et al. 2013; Kanda et al. 2020; van Veelen 2020; Owen 2021). Others have more

broadly posited complexes of actants, such as 'nature' as an intermediary (Kinder 2011), or whole tiers of government (Stapper et al. 2020). Looking across these contributions, one can see various types of identity constructs considered as intermediaries, from professional actors, state agencies, networks, third sector actors, civil society groups, and even technologies such as web platforms. As several authors have noted, it is not the organisational structure that determines the status of an intermediary-actor. It is the modes of operation and their transmission and filtering skills and knowledge that determine their intermediary-actor status (Guy, Marvin and Medd 2011; Hargreaves et al. 2013) and is indicative of their agency. Building on Moss's (2009) concept of 'in-betweenness' and intermediaries, van Veelen (2020, 118) recently observed that:

> the spaces intermediaries occupy are, by their very nature, relational spaces in two ways. First, in connecting different spaces, and co-shaping the relational forms of the wider network of which they are part. Second, through these actions, and the relations with other spaces, intermediary spaces are themselves (re)shaped.

By introducing the idea of 'relational spaces' in intermediation van Veelen (2020) highlights, as do other authors (see Medd and Marvin 2008; Moss 2009; Guy, Marvin and Medd 2011; Kanda et al. 2020; Owen 2021), that most 'intermediaries' are far from neutral in their affect. ~~In contrast to the ANT literature, where intermediaries are not assumed to have agency~~ These authors explicitly emphasise the agency that intermediary-actors bring into processes . The planning literature has thus expanded or problematised on Callon's (1991) definition, or labelling at least, given that intermediary-actors not only act as a conduit to 'pass between' but may filter and modulate the relationship between public authorities and civil society within instruments of collaborative governance or, indeed, act to support a particular set of interest positions and assumptions (Stirling and Gallent 2021). [TEXT MOVED]

We start from this crucial theoretical premise when looking at the role of intermediaries in NP in England. Intermediary-actors in this context are unlikely to be mere facilitators or 'carriers', but rather pursue an agenda; maintaining their own interest and variously translating and influencing the behaviour of the actors with whom they engage. ~~In other words, within the process, intermediary-actors have power.~~ Indeed, Moss (2009, 1485) pointed out that such actors are 'political players in their own right'. Intermediary-actors use their agency ~~have and how they use it~~ to influence the process and this also depends on how specifically these intermediary-actors are configured. For example, whether it is an institutional or non-

institutional intermediary-actor or the type of relationship this intermediary has with the other actors in the process. Equally, the terms of engagement with their client and the terms of the 'game' or the 'enactment space' (Metzger, Soneryd and Linke 2017) also shape the positioning of agency. For example, the consultant as an intermediary-actor may be expected ultimately to represent the interests of a given actor. It may result from the fact that they are paid to do so and have a formal mandate. Alternatively, they may take on the intermediary role in an informal manner and non-profit basis (Moss 2009; Hyysalo, Juntunen and Martiskainen 2018; Kanda et al. 2020) yet still be acting as advocates.

The intermediary-actor element of the literature review showed a further crucial element in distinguishing intermediary-actors which related to the 'level' of their activity. This means that their agency may cross scales and silos to some extent, or act specifically to bridge between knowledge forms. Such distinctions must also be complemented by considering the variety of roles that intermediary-actors play in context - if we are to understand their agency in policy implementation and with the intermediation of interests in planning. Raco, Street and Trigo (2016) add professional bodies into the complex of intermediaries influencing planning, along with think tanks as producers of knowledge which are often funded by sectional interests to influence government and others (Foye 2022; Haughton and Allmendinger 2016; McCann 2011). Drawing from van Lente et al. (2012), we also recognise intermediary-actors who, along with other positionings, maintain bilateral relations too; operating to act between scales (vertical integrators) or across sectoral actors (horizontal integrators). A further form is labelled 'systemic' intermediary-actors act not to link between scales or actors but across fields (i.e. boundary spanners) and impact knowledge diffusion and potentially as change agents. In reality, there are many factors in play which may orient the intermediary, yet when focussing on the consultants as below, we can more clearly discern how the three types and functionalities can become fluid and multiple, with consultants acting to serve vertically or horizontally while also acting to integrate and apply different forms of knowledge.

Easy depiction of consultants, therefore, does not sit neatly with the dominant strands of intermediary literature, given it seems clear that a wide set of roles are being undertaken by a diversity of consultants in, and in service of, planning activity. Indeed, the literature indicates how consultants are acting to service not only private sector actors (typically developers) but also the public sector and now civil society. The focus of work on the public sector use of private consultants indicates several roles played or functions served (Wargent, Parker and Street 2020). Cross-over between all sectors, as well as their presence in town planning practice

from the early 20th century (Inch, Wargent, and Tait, 2023) indicates a long-term and evolving set of roles and functions. There are several reasons for consultancy expansion, in the UK at least, not least resource constraints and lack of relevant knowledge sub-fields present in local government (Wargent, Parker and Street 2020). Loh and Norton (2013; 2015) discuss consultant values and inputs to local plans in North America, with Linovski (2019) discussing Canada, Barry and Legacy (2022) on Australia and Canada. Raco, Brill and Ferm (2021) discuss the intermediary/ing role of consultants, as does Stapper et al. (2020), who discern different approaches in identifying the needs and problems of citizens by consultants. Owen (2021) highlights the role that some consultants play in applying regulatory compliance, indicating this as an intermediary role, and noting that the environmental consultants studied had roles 'working as trusted facilitators of interactions between regulators and the regulated and as guardians of public value' (Owen 2021, 238). Inch, Wargent and Tait (2023) also point to the consequential blurring of role and the extent to which public/private interest is served. In terms of consultants and the recent recognition of specific participation consultants (Barry and Legacy 2022; Bherer, Gauthier and Simard 2021) the rise of niche consultants. Overall the body of work demonstrates a complicated and hybrid role for consultants is apparent. This activity has become an important element of the functioning of planning in England and increasingly so in other countries (Bherer Gauthier and Simard 2021). Together this body of work is pointing toward consultants, in at least some countries, seemingly 'holding it all together'.

We take from the review that consultants are often positioned to act between multiple interests and are implicated, if not conflicted, given they depend on regulatory spaces to create and exploit market opportunities and rely on clients' sponsorship. The emerging literature discussing the diversifying role of consultants in planning practice includes NP, but what we reveal is the agency that is apparent. Thus, we discern that consultancies have not only grown in number and importance, but they are entangled in and across sectors. The various roles need further research, but certainly so in the case of our focus on intermediary-actors operating 'across the lines' of public and civil society. The breadth of the review also confirms an increasing role of consultants as intermediary-actors in managing inputs and outputs of policy goals and priorities across and between sectors. Our examination considers NP consultant roles in light of the review. We now explain the methods supporting the empirical element of the paper.

3. Investigating intermediary-actors in the instance of English neighbourhood planning

Although most of the literature on NP focuses on how power is managed, used and tensioned between lay communities and local planning authority (LPA) (see, for instance, Brownill and Bradley 2017; Salter 2022; Parker et al. 2023), there is also much to be said about how this power is filtered and shaped by planning consultants.

To provide analysis the article draws on a wide literature, while the primary data drawn upon are the result of a cross-fertilisation between your two separate studies looking at NP experience and use of consultants, which involved some 30 semi-structured interviews conducted between 2020 and 2022 with community members involved in NP production and with consultants who have acted in support of NP activity. The data which is utilised draws on the theme of intermediation that emerged in both studies. Additionally data is used from two focus groups where NP and consultancy was explored, with a total of ten NP consultants in England is drawn again where the perspective of the consultant as intermediary-actor featured. This indicates the multiple roles and influences involved in neighbourhood planning from the consultant perspective.

~~The depiction in *Figure 1* sees consultants intermediating between three key actors.~~ English National government is keen to see NP progress on their terms; LPAs tend towards a more ambivalent view because of the 'duty of support' imposed by the national government in supporting communities, but they also want NPs to align with their own agendas. The individual NP group, which is ostensibly the consultant's client, ultimately wants the consultant to advise and produce all or part of the neighbourhood plan such that it will reach adoption. Consultants are also translators of English national government policy and guidance on NP and are used by the national government to 'govern at a distance'. In this sense, consultants are operating amongst huge pressures. They may block/filter claims coming from NP groups that do not comply with the local policy while attempting to comply with national government requirements and simultaneously maintain LPA relations.

Figure 1: Intermediary position of consultants in Neighbourhood Planning

FIGURE ABOUT HERE

In examining the case of NP, we have explicitly decided to focus on the small professional intermediary-actors i.e., niche planning consultants, who, for-profit, support NP groups in evidencing, writing the neighbourhood plan and, more generally liaising with the LPA in the various phases of the planning process. In NP the figure of the niche planning consultant, constitutes a link between expert and lay knowledge found embodied in both texts drawn up by the English national government and requirements of LPA plus the assessment of the subsequent neighbourhood plan examiner. This stage is even more relevant considering that the credentials of NP indicate that the degree of control and orientation of priorities posits it as a form of 'centralism effected locally' (Boddy and Hickman 2018; Parker, Salter and Hickman 2016).

These intermediary-actors are who NP groups most often resort to, with around 3 of 4 neighbourhoods making use of consultancy input (Parker et al. 2020). Although we are aware that intermediation in NP is not reduced exclusively to this sub-category of actors (see again Figure 1). For instance, there are also forms of intermediation provided by government-sponsored consultants, meaning large consulting companies offering standardised services and who perform different roles; they effectively police English national requirements for NP planning due to the nature of the support contract they have maintained with the UK government since 2016 (see Parker et al. 2023).

Niche planning consultants in NP, however, operate a multilateral relationship: on the one hand, with the groups they assist and, on the other, with the LPAs as well as with central government and the consultancies employed by them. They do not merely interpret the will of communities but also bring their agency into the process and reflect the power of other actors. Indeed, this is one of the reasons that neighbourhoods perceive a need for support; they are bringing in expertise rather than simply 'labour' or a form of 'overseer' input, to help navigate not only the technical dimensions of NP but the political.

Therefore, it is the knowledge/power that niche planning consultants maintain that is brought into view as the object of interest here. Not surprisingly, power is an important theoretical tool for understanding participatory planning practices' (Eriksson, Fredriksson and Syssner 2022: 997). From a methodological point of view, ~~we draw on a Foucauldian perspective which aligns to the view that '[p]ower exists only when it is put into action, even if, of course, it is integrated into a disparate field of possibilities brought to bear upon permanent structures' (Foucault,~~

~~1982: 788)~~ we identify power as an 'action on others' (Burchell et al. 1991, 5), and we specifically look at the action on others of planning consultants. In this sense, we place our focus on the way power is generated in the neighbourhood planning process and performatively implemented (Metzger, Soneryd and Tamm Hallström 2017) through planning consultants as intermediary-actors. In planning, this is clearly evident as it governs the uses and behaviours of the various actors for the management and development of the territory. It, therefore, places a series of ('soft' and hard) rules and requirements on the actors involved in the process of space production, which are then negotiated and navigated with the aid of others. As Foucault (1982, 1987) stated, which is clearly applicable to planning, a vast repertoire of strategies, technologies and techniques come into play through which knowledge is produced, figurated and challenged (see also; Lukes 1974; Dean 1994; Haugaard 2020) and therefore becomes instructive when examining how action on others is effected.

4. Planning consultants in English Neighbourhood Planning

Neighbourhood planning is most notable as an innovation in local governance in England because for the first time lay-people were offered the opportunity to co-produce a neighbourhood development plan (an 'NDP') with legal status. Within a decade, more than 2,600 communities had engaged in the plan-building process, and over 1,000 NDPs had been activated by 2021 (MHCLG, 2020; Locality, 2022).

Neighbourhood planning has been widely discussed in the planning literature and beyond, also pointing out credentials that suppose this policy a neoliberal approach (see, among others, Besussi 2018; Wargent 2021; Dobson and Parker 2023). Without entering into this specific area of critique in this paper, there is no doubt that NP has given communities certain freedom of action without clarifying what communities *could do* but merely saying what they *could not do*. This assessment helps to understand why intermediary-actors play such a crucial role in the NP process - the scope of action prescribed was vague and restrictions couched in technical planning language. The Annual Report of the Royal Town Planning Institute's (RTPI) Independent Consultant Network (2021) shows, from 2011 to 2022, an exponential growth of small consultancies specialised in NP. The market for this private, professional group has expanded as more and more communities have expressed the need to be supported in the process. Most had little idea of how to construct a neighbourhood plan formally, with this reflecting the more or less 'sink or swim' approach that government took towards

neighbourhoods successfully completing a Plan (Brownill and Bradley 2017) and which has remained largely intact throughout its existence (Parker et al. 2023).

Although many neighbourhood activists have a great deal of experiential knowledge of their area, they often lack technical skills and know-how. Very few NP groups have professional planners in their ranks to help guide their actions and those that do may not have fully comprehended the new requirements of NP. Studies of NP have highlighted that groups found the process complex and burdensome (cf. Parker et al. 2014; 2020). First of all, it is difficult for them to deal with the technical language of the higher-level plans and policies and the regulations bounding NP to which the NDP has to be compliant. Furthermore, translating community aspirations into formal policies is another demanding step for lay actors. In this sense, planning consultants are crucial to perform a task that could be described as a form of 'translation from practices to texts and a reduction of the inconvenient complexity of experience-based knowledges' (Demszky and Nassehi 2012, 76). Indeed, citizens' experiential knowledge can hardly be used in the policy sphere in its novel form in collaborative governance processes (Elling 2017). On the contrary, it requires filtering and systematising by intermediary-actors. This highlights the role of brokerage, communication and translation of other actor needs and this too has been recognised in NP, where consultants act to interpret policy requirements for groups of citizens (Parker, Lynn and Wargent 2015; 2017) and where 'rescripting' may take place to reconcile the needs of active parties. Such actors sit uneasily within clear or discrete definitional boundaries - they are not necessarily or only 'participation professionals' (Barry and Legacy 2022; Bherer, Gauthier and Simard 2021) but they do reflect a growth of small consultancies as well as larger support organisations that offer a range of planning services (Brill and Raco 2022). This subset provides one formulation of an apparent growing diversity of size, type and flexibility of planning consultants in the English context.

In recent years, English national government has provided various types of support to NP groups, ranging from support from the government-sponsored third sector body Locality to grants to finance communities active in this activity. The planning consultants' role is often seen as crucial by NP groups (Parker, Lynn and Wargent 2015; Brownill and Bradley 2017; Yuille 2020). Most NP groups have hired a planning consultant to assist them in writing policy and navigating the process. A large-scale study of NP showed that '84% of NP groups indicated that consultant input was 'essential' to their progress' (Parker et al. 2020, 13). In this sense, the reflection of this consultant is emblematic of the situation:

> Often Neighbourhood Planners groups realised that this is a very technical process that needs to be followed, technical language that needs to be of a certain quality. So, several groups have appointed external consultants to help them. It is an interesting dynamic between how the groups see the role of the planning authority and the role of the consultant. Because most of the groups need the support of both, they need the consultant to help them writing the plan, but then they need the local authority to advise on the overall parameters (Interview, Consultant).

Academics have begun to question the role of the LPA in the neighbourhood planning process too (see, for example, Salter 2022). Focus group evidence with planning consultants highlighted that 'having consultants on board helps to mitigate the impacts of unhelpful LPAs' (focus group, consultant). The role of planning consultants *vis-à-vis* the communities that hire them is sometimes described as that of a 'critical friend' (on this, see also; Forester 1987; Healey 1997; Innes 1995), explaining to people what they can and cannot do with the NDP. While this contribution is essential to avoid the process becoming bogged down in technical obstacles that communities cannot overcome, there is also a risk that the plan (re)written by the consultant may become a copy of a higher tier plan policies or is otherwise rescripted. The consultants themselves have a degree of awareness of this: 'planning consultants are fairly ordinary people that usually have no direct relation with the local context in which they operate, so they often write the plan in a standardised way' (Interview, Consultant) and 'I feel responsible for closing down innovation' (Focus group, Consultant). Consultants appear aware of how they manage the process so that the end-point clients (national government, local government and the NP group) are delivered of a result that could be regarded as successful on each of their (sometimes conflicting) terms. This is particularly important to the consultant as negative market intelligence about their ability to steer Neighbourhood Plans towards 'success', could impair their business viability.

Research findings across the neighbourhood planning literature clarify that a significant number of innovative policies are expelled from the neighbourhood plan by planning consultants before the plan is submitted. This highlights a stifling of innovation, favouring a-spatialised and sometimes pre-packaged solutions (see Parker, Lynn and Wargent 2017; Wargent 2021), coupled with a form of 'policy myopia' (Lee et al. 2022) which can stem from early inputs - as one consultant put it 'we are brutal at the outset about scoping [the Plan] and then we can start talking about where you can bend...' (Focus group, Consultant). This may be partly motivated by the fact that the main objective of planning consultants is to get *a plan* for

the community that employed them *approved,* as this sentiment underscores: 'At the end of the day, we are employed to get their Plan through examination - so we have to make sure they stay on track…' (Focus group, Consultant).

In this sense, it is important to stress that planning consultants work ostensibly for neighbourhood planning groups and are the most crucial intermediary-actor involved, but they also work for themselves and their external reputation. Theirs is, in fact, contract work for profit, so whether or not a specific NP group succeeds or fails also affects the consultants' reputation and future employability. It is for this reason that the work of translating NP groups inspiration into plan policies, that will be acceptable to the state, is what planning consultants are called upon to do and very often, this has seen a rejection of innovative policy. The latter would risk making plan approval more complex or perhaps impossible. It is one of a set of reasons why certain options are prioritised to the detriment of others, and in this pragmatic sense compromises are effected (McGuirk 2001), in this the intervention of the planning consultants is crucial. Otherwise, the examiner can 'fail' or the compromises are deferred as the examiner can insist on modifications to the plan.

5. Discussion: 'action on others' of planning consultant as intermediary-actors

The role of niche planning consultants as intermediary-actors and both their agency, and 'action on others' is reflected upon. From the excerpts of interviews reported, it is evident that, on the one hand, the niche planning consultant in NP the context plays a translating role between the technical and lay worlds and vice versa, and acts to reduce communication distortions (see, on this Van Herzele 2004). On the other hand, however, the intermediary-actor is also a filter that acts to shape the planning process and promote the intentions of local communities with tangible outcomes that can be seen as progressive by that neighbourhood. A third point here is that such actors are also attempting to reconcile actions on behalf of the neighbourhood amongst exercises of power from central and local government. This highlights the synaptic model of power that operates through and between social actors and their relations (Foucault, 1980).

This positionality and the 'action on others' that niche planning consultants perform is a focus that sits in line with the literature that sees intermediaries not only as go-betweens but as actors with agency (see Medd and Marvin 2008; Moss 2009; Guy, Marvin and Medd 2011; Kanda et

al. 2020; Owen 2021). The 'action on others' of planning consultants will depend on different factors. The first relates to the working relationship that niche planning consultants have with their clients, NP groups. On the one hand, NP groups hire them to put their expert skills at their disposal and serve those communities' interests. On the other hand, however, the money communities pay planning consultants most often comes from government grants for NP contingent on, if not explicitly so, on production of a NDP that is successful on the terms set out by the State. This complex dynamic between planning consultants' clients and the funding source makes planning consultants immersed in multi-faceted dynamics of power relations. As per Foucault (1987), power is immanent and intermediary-actors are both subject to exercises of power and are able to exercise power, or as Foucault also argued, power is exercised through an individual's actions only to the extent that other actions remain appropriately aligned, in this sense they are 'actions on other actions' (Rouse 1994, 108).

The second order of factors, which illustrates the above, relates to the unavoidable techno-political constraints of the NP system. On the one hand, the whole NP scenario is imbued with a constraining pro-development *orientation* that planning consultants must embrace to navigate the process. On the other hand, communities that rely on planning consultants look for corrective lenses (Parker, Lynn and Wargent 2015; 2017), to understand the somewhat opaque and complex NP process. In this context, planning consultants seem to be crucial in providing 'correction' to the community and, consequently, they gain great steering power.

The third order of factors for planning consultants relates to process management and reputation. These are matters related to the management of the time spent with each local community working on the plan draft, reputation, future income, etc. Planning consultants, it follows, will try to optimise the time spent and construct a plan with as much chance as possible of approval. If this is not the case, it may undermine the planning consultant's reputation and, consequently, future chances of engagement.

A fourth relates to reconciling the needs of multiple client groups. Reputation is also crucial in managing relations with actors, especially in the intermediary role that planning consultants play between the public sphere of the LPA, national government and the grassroots of a local community. To effectively exercise their role as intermediaries, they have an interest in ensuring their familiarity with both and in enjoying their trust (Fehren 2010) and, as Linovski

(2021) and Owen (2021) have remarked, how consultants can become a guardian of public interest.

Although it may seem that all this limits the action of niche planning consultants, in reality, it is precisely these aspects that shape their 'action on others' (*Table 1*) and on the NP process. By writing or rewriting the plan policies, the planning consultants have a de facto veto on what can and cannot go into the plan and on which innovations can be accepted and which cannot. Thus, their influence on the prioritisation of NP groups' agendas involves their agency but is informed by the powerful inscriptions of central government guidance and extant boundary conditions.

Table 1: **Neighbourhood Planning consultants influencing 'action on others'**

Input type	**Detail / examples**
Expert skills and knowledge	Acting on neighbourhood (Technical planning knowledge, negotiation skills, policy writing skills, specific expertise on certain topics, professional ethical standards)
Clarification / interpretation	Acting between neighbourhood and government (Explaining 'rules of the game', rewriting of policy, interpretation of local needs)
Process management	Acting on community and neighbourhood group (ensuring adherence to process rules and national requirements, liaison with LPA, prioritisation of issues, time management)
Reconciliation of client needs	Acting across all interests (modulating between neighbourhood and local policy, liaison, flexibility and priorities)

6. Conclusions

Planning theory and practice are increasingly based on "an open and hybrid approach that involves the cross-fertilization of 'expert' and 'locally produced' knowledge" (Maranghi 2023,

1; see also OMITTED, in press). In this sense the paper has highlighted that much more attention needs to be paid to intermediaries, as well as arriving at a clearer conceptualisation. In many European states, the recourse to both private sector and civil society actors has become more prominent in the past decade or so. This view is accompanied by a conceptual rationale, given the growth of attention to ANT, which provides a distinct ontology that highlights that intermediaries are more precisely things *passing between* actors and yet have also been implicated in the *relation between things* (Race 2020, 174). Care needs to be taken to discern agency in the relationship. We have attempted to explicitly distinguish between these by labelling actors who intermediate as intermediary-actors.

In England and elsewhere, more and more planners are positioned as intermediary-actors and yet the planning literature carries little reflection on this dynamic, despite the reported growth in the number, type and roles of consultants as intermediary-actors. Among these, planning consultants are becoming more powerful (see Loh and Norton 2015; Stapper et al. 2020) because they are increasingly adept at accumulating and deploying relevant knowledge, but it appears they have also developed expertise in making 'things work' in their brokerage activity, particularly in our focus here; acting to discern and interpret central government priorities and find ways of organising policy fixes for neighbourhoods.

Using the instance of NP, our main contribution is to show how niche planning consultants influence 'action on others', what traces they leave in the planning process and the emerging power relations. Intermediation, in this view, is not only between actors but also in terms of knowledge, relationships, and interpretation of needs with a very precise agency on the part of these planning consultants. The process of exploring the activity of niche planning consultants in NP has helped reveal a wider research agenda to investigate the roles and impact of consultants in support of planning activity, given the increase in their type, focus and roles.

In an increasingly dynamic operating environment, in terms of the types of consultants who act and plan, this discussion applies not only to NP and more research is needed to better understand the apparently fluid dynamics between consultants, consultant types and other actors. The roles and potential influence of consultants has caused questions to be raised about their accountability, of their complicity with creeping privatisation of planning activity, as well as their necessity in the above conditions (Wargent, Parker and Street 2020). The basis of claimed objectivity/rationality and the ethics and priorities of planning consultants' action

versus public servants carry risks of planning agendas increasingly being dependent on this new 'consultocracy' (Stapper et al. 2020; Saint-Martin 1998). [<<TEXT MOVED]

Given their prominence, we offer suggestions not only for further research. These strands include a closer examination of other forms of intermediation i.e. the actual roles and affects in planning, how power is brokered and results altered depending on agency in context (e.g. university-assisted communities in co-constructed planning processes, or consultants hired by developers to 'facilitate' community engagement). In addition, more attention to cross-national examples would also help understand whether and how intermediation in planning takes shape and is maintained according to different planning systems and governmental traditions.

Declaration of interest statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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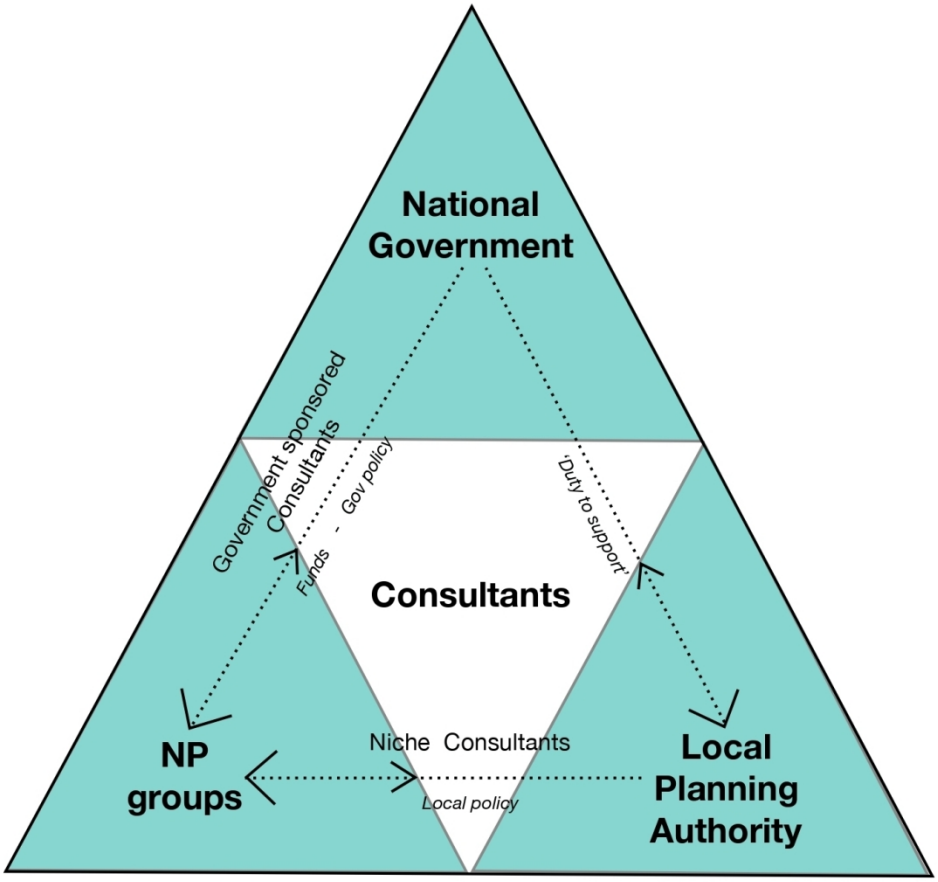

Figure 1: Intermediary position of consultants in Neighbourhood Planning

252x237mm (150 x 150 DPI)

Table 1: **Neighbourhood Planning consultants influencing 'action on others'**

Input type	Detail / examples
Expert skills and knowledge	Acting on neighbourhood (Technical planning knowledge, negotiation skills, policy writing skills, specific expertise on certain topics, professional ethical standards)
Clarification / interpretation	Acting between neighbourhood and government (Explaining 'rules of the game', rewriting of policy, interpretation of local needs)
Process management	Acting on community and neighbourhood group (ensuring adherence to process rules and national requirements, liaison with LPA, prioritisation of issues, time management)
Reconciliation of client needs	Acting across all interests (modulating between neighbourhood and local policy, liaison, flexibility and priorities)