

'Trust me... I'm a planner'

Article

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‘trust me... i’m a planner’

Gavin Parker and **Emma Street** consider the implications of systemic change and a fragmented regulatory environment for the skills and knowledges that are expected of planners

In a recent book discussing planning careers,¹ Richard Willson highlights how planners are likely to need a whole range of skills and knowledge in a rapidly changing professional environment. The Raynsford Report² published by the TCPA in November 2018 also highlights education, skills and training of the profession as requiring attention, just as the Egan Review Skills for Sustainable Communities in 2004 attempted to tackle this area.

All of the above stop short of arguing that individual planners are never likely to hold all the required skills to operate effectively. Yet the recurrence of the topic and chronic grumpiness surrounding the subject brings into view the challenges of planning in an environment of rapid change; and the challenges of establishing what the role(s) and implications are for planners within such a context.

The Raynsford Report argues that ‘because planning is operating within a dynamic set of social forces, planning education and Continuing Professional Development need to be able to rapidly reflect such changes’. In this short article we contribute to the long-running debate regarding skills and knowledge in planning, but do so while recognising that the demands of the planning system have shifted, and that, furthermore, so too have the skills, knowledge and professional backgrounds of the personnel involved. Equally it needs to be acknowledged that many operating or contributing to the operation of the system are not formally trained or recognised as planners.

Overall, we are seeing a shift in the sources, breadth and composition of planning ‘expertise’, which in of itself reflects the range of matters that ‘planners’ are either individually, or in clusters, involved in addressing.

These changes – both systemic and professional – have consequences for how we regulate and scrutinise planning, including oversight of the activities of ‘planners’ servicing

the system. We also question, given the extent and breath of change, whether one individual can master the multiple requirements of contemporary planning in the UK. This provokes the difficult question about whether maintaining a unified view of ‘the planner’ is still tenable. And what might moving away from this notion usefully mean for the future of planning education? And more widely in releasing planners from some kind of existential angst.

In what follows, we consider some of these questions and suggest that clearer recognition of the multiple inputs to planning processes is needed. We suggest that the planning profession may actually benefit by acknowledging that planners, rather than being masters and controllers, are at best synthesists, partners and contributors in various ways; an acknowledgement which, of course, has bearing on the skills and knowledge that are expected of planners.

Planners as synthesists and specialists

Planning, as both a profession and a system of governance, is built upon an uneasy social contract in which the ‘expert’ status of planning and planners is largely based upon trust. Clients (and other actors who interface with planners) are part of a process by which expertise and responsibility is accorded to planners. This is as much an act of faith as anything given that ‘experts are primarily judged by clients, not necessarily by peers ... and they rely on trust by their clients’.³

This highlights how private clients and the public confer trust and status upon planners, who may be working in and for the public and/or private sectors, perhaps both concurrently. As Rydin notes, ‘the status of planners as experts resides in their command of specialist knowledge’.⁴ How different clients validate ‘success’ and accord trust (for example by the award of repeat work) to planners is likely to vary according to factors such as how the work suits prevailing conditions. It is increasingly clear that over the course of their professional lives planners might service at least different four ‘clients’ or interests: the local planning authority, central government, the public (interest), and the developer who has paid for a decision or advice – and in some instances all of the above simultaneously (and while seeking to deliver sustainable development).

Moreover, many of the tasks of planning are no longer serviced by ‘planners’ in the traditional or narrow sense (for example either public sector or Chartered Planners),⁵ but rather by a range of specialist consultants that are drawn from a broad church of professions and disciplines, including architecture, surveying, landscape planning, conservation, engagement, and engineering. Even tasks that are still serviced by those identifying as

planners are often carried out by private ‘planning’ consultants who may or may not hold Chartered Town Planner status.

Frameworks such as those organised and applied by the RTPI act to give shape and ascribe institutional integrity, but they relate to individual competencies and are also necessarily generic. As the following quote suggests, historically membership of a professional body (primarily the RTPI in the case planning) has been the main way of demonstrating professional competence:

‘For over 100 years, membership of the RTPI has been the hallmark of professional expertise and integrity. Employers, clients and the wider community recognise the high quality of skills and experience that are held by Chartered Town Planners (MRTPI). They know that they can rely upon the designation MRTPI as a sign of competence and professionalism.’⁶

The breakdown of what a professional planner is deemed to need is set out in several places, including the RTPI competencies, and, of course, these requirements have changed over time. However, all iterations seem to implicitly maintain an increasingly unstable fiction that an individual planner can hold general and specialist skills and operate ‘alone’ and across the entire system. In the next section we examine some of the professional skills frameworks present in planning and make the following arguments:

- that explicit recognition of ‘planning dependencies’ and the multi-sectoral nature of planning today is needed (i.e. public, private, community/volunteer); and
- that the widened scope and mutability of the planning environment (i.e. the extent of range and change) needs to be acknowledged.

Professional education and competencies

Most professional bodies have some form of skill and knowledge requirements for membership. These are important tools of governance and indicate the boundaries of professional scope and conduct, and the features that competent professionals are expected to demonstrate.

Requirements are not static, and intermittently professional bodies update or amend them in recognition of, and in an attempt to respond to, change. For example, the RTPI’s 2005 planning education competencies (which students progressing to Chartered membership are required to meet) are noticeably general in nature and are designed to accommodate

diversity. A refreshed set of competencies were deployed in 2015, with 13 learning outcomes deemed necessary for an accredited ‘spatial’ planning programme plus a set of ‘specialist’ competencies needed to qualify as a ‘combined’ programme (and thence overall fulfil the ‘initial education’ stage for RTPI membership purposes). This reflects weakly a distinction between generalist skills and competencies and specialist ones – as discussed below.

Table 1

Competencies for successful attainment of RTPI Chartered status (2005 and 2015)

RTPI competencies as at 2015	RTPI competencies as at 2005
Professionalism and the RTPI Code of Conduct	–
The spatial planning context	An understanding of context
Identifying and analysing issues	An ability to identify and analyse issues
Gathering appropriate information	Competence in gathering appropriate information
Identifying and evaluating a course of action	Competence in identifying and evaluating strategies
Initiating and implementing a course of action or (for academic applications) dissemination and application of knowledge (research experience)	Competence in initiating action to implement strategies (or dissemination and application of knowledge – for research experience)
The legal framework	An awareness of the legal framework and ethical challenges of the work
Ethical challenges	(See above)
The political framework	–
The economic context	–
Reflection and review	Engagement in a process of monitoring and review

Thereafter RTPI candidates are judged against a set of assessment of professional competency (APC) criteria. Table 1 presents these APC requirements, noting the

modest alterations made in 2015. The main changes in the period from 2005 to 2015 were in the competencies relating to political challenges, the economic context and the RTPi Code of Conduct (shown in blue in Table 1). Similarly, ethical challenges were separated from the legal framework to put more emphasis on the ethical dilemmas that planners can face.

The refreshed approach to competencies for the APC in part reflects a concern to bolster the professional code of conduct and to alert planners to, and ensure more awareness of, the political and economic factors influencing planning. The changes do not, however, indicate any significant shift or recognition of the diverse and frequently changing nature of planning work or the breadth and depth of the legal, political and economic factors implicated (and therefore required as the operating knowledge of the planner). One way to help this situation is to focus even more on learning and development throughout a career that is likely to involve numerous jobs, roles and other changes (policy, structures, etc.), as identified in the Raynsford Report.

An attempt to reflect the changing nature of the planning environment is found in the idea of lifelong learning, whereby professionals continue to develop and add to or refine their skills and knowledge – most often labelled as ‘CPD’ (Continuing Professional Development). The drivers for, and implications of, a lifelong learning approach in relation to planning practice appear to be less well rehearsed. In 2013 a National Competencies Framework for Planners (NCFfP) was drawn up on behalf of the then Department for Communities and Local Government (now MHCLG) and was hosted by Planning Advisory Service. This work focused on three groups or facets – *behaviours* (attributes), *knowledge* and *skills*⁷ – as outlined in Table 2.

Table 2

A precis of the National Competencies Framework for Planners (NCFfP) 2013

<i>Planner attributes (behaviours)</i> (x4) The attributes of an effective planner:	- o focusing on outcomes and results; - o being professional; - o showing leadership; and - o having a positive attitude.
<i>Knowledge</i> (x6) Knowledge is taken to include ‘understanding’ and is used to mean both the	- o professional approach; - o planning for sustainable

factual and professional information that a planner needs to know. This includes knowledge of <i>processes, legislation, and elements of practice</i> gained through initial and continuing education and through practice-based experience:	development; - o planning for the environment and climate change; - o planning for communities and neighbourhoods; - o planning for services and infrastructure; and - o specialist knowledge.
Skills (x7) Seven key skill areas required by an effective planner are involved. The term skills is used to denote particular techniques required to apply specific knowledge to a particular circumstance in order to achieve a required outcome:	- o core planning skills; - o spatial plan-making skills; - o place-making skills; - o development management skills; - o evidence and evaluation skills; - o communication and engagement skills; and - o transferable skills.

The concept of ‘behaviours’ was also used in the Egan Review, and, while it did not define planning behaviours with any specificity, it related behaviours to ‘ways of thinking’ and ‘ways of acting’. In 2017, the RTPI also drew up a list of professional development priorities aimed at addressing possible deficits in professional skills and knowledge arising from a changing planning environment. These were directed at professional planners’ lifelong learning or CPD priorities and included:

- o understanding and practising in a market economy;
- o health and inclusive planning;
- o delivering housing to meet national needs;
- o understanding land as a resource (demand for energy);
- o communication, mediation and negotiation skills;
- o effective decision-making;
- o management and business skills; and
- o professional ethics.

Planning competencies in a changing environment

The above demonstrates iterations of thinking about planning competencies, some of which (for example the addition of the ‘political framework’ and ‘economic context’ in the 2015 RTPI competencies) represent an attempt to reflect changes to the planning operating environment. What does the fragmentation of planning seen in recent years really mean for the so-called ‘generalist planner’, though?

It seems to us that planners’ ability to arbitrate and strike a balance between interests depends on them maintaining oversight of the different tasks and inputs involved – as well as being mindful of the prevailing political and economic contexts. What we see in the production of requirements around planning education, lifelong learning and professional conduct is an attempt to package up and distil the blend of skills (generalist, specialist, personal) that modern planning professionals are deemed to need. These surely cannot be comprehensive, however, (or held simultaneously) and, while attempts have been made to adapt to recent changes, we argue they will not adequately reflect the challenging realities of practice, and may also act to disillusion or undermine planners’ confidence given there is, we argue, a disparity between lived experience and the formal requirements of the profession.

As such, the centred perspective of the ‘generalist planner’ is, it seems to us, in continuing danger of being devalued, discredited and marginalised. The conceptualisation of the planning environment and the reasons for needing generalists as well as recognising specialisms (held variously) are important for an effective system. This therefore also implies a need to rethink how the profession views itself; lest the competencies are seen, on the one hand, as unrealistic, or, on the other, as unachievable.

So what, and so what next?

The planning environment has changed significantly in the last 20 years. The professional skills required by an increasingly complex and fragmented system have changed and seem likely to continue to do so. We perceive the different views of competencies and different stages at which these are expected and see evidence for our argument, and of a problem: ultimately the existing approach may miss a key issue of multi-sectoral and multi-disciplinary/specialism integration which appears to be prevalent in plan-making certainly, and to a degree in other elements of the system.

As such, this fragmentation needs to be recognised and appropriately reflected in both professional governance and the orchestration of training – particularly post-qualification (i.e. the ‘lifelong learning’ stage) as well as possibly a more ‘modular’ role-specific approach

towards competencies in practice. Thus a better-fitting set of ongoing requirements which are in part reflective of the job are required to alleviate the tension between the ‘total planner’ and the reality of the changing, complex environment and multi-role careers.

Overall, we argue there is a need to properly distinguish between skills, capacity, knowledge, and trust. As the NCFfP intimates and the Raynsford Report highlights, the ability to address and deliver combinations of the competencies and different roles across iterations of policy and system reform is integral to what may be termed ‘expertise’.

This brief critique of the status of professional planning knowledge and skills raises further vexing questions. In a context whereby planners (particularly those working in local authorities) are under considerable pressure, how do planners strike the right balance between specialist knowledge in different areas and wider understanding and competencies? What do the significant (and ongoing) changes that we have seen in the operation of the planning system in recent years actually mean for planning education, lifelong learning, and professional development? If it is now time to review the RTPI’s approach to competencies and lifelong learning once again (and we think so), could this exercise now acknowledge, reflect and support the necessarily collaborative requirements in present-day planning?

To close, there are four remaining issues that we argue need urgent consideration by professional bodies and government. First, there needs to be agreement on how we recognise the inputs and the skills and knowledge involved in planning. Secondly, we need to consider how skills and knowledge are to be accounted for in the way that professional institutes and government seek to govern planning. Thirdly, we must examine how best to organise competencies around roles and inputs rather than ‘individuals’ *per se* – an important change of emphasis, we think. Lastly, how do we train those (including ‘non-planners’) involved directly in planning, particularly post-qualification? In order to address these four issues, we argue that the following (difficult) questions need to be addressed:

- o If planning expertise now lies beyond the scope of what we can reasonably expect an individual alone to hold, how do planning governance structures need to change?
- o Who *actually* plans? What roles and forms of professional recognition exist for the different actors inputting to planning?
- o How can education, training and systems of professional accreditation best be designed to cope with rapid and ongoing systemic change?
- o How can we better tie CPD/lifelong learning to roles and jobs over time – i.e. develop a more bespoke approach that is more reflective of the varied ways in which individuals work in private and public practice and in collaboration with non-planners?

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Notes

- 1 R Willson: *A Guide for the Idealist: Launching and Navigating your Planning Career*. Island Press, 2018
- 2 *Planning 2020 – Final Report of the Raynsford Review of Planning in England*. TCPA, Nov. 2018, p.61. www.tcpa.org.uk/raynsford-review
- 3 R Grundmann: ‘The problem of expertise in knowledge societies’. *Minerva*, 2017, Vol. 55(1), 25-48 (see p.27)
- 4 Y Rydin: ‘Re-examining the role of knowledge within planning theory’. *Planning Theory*, 2007, Vol. 6(1), 52-68 (see p.53)
- 5 See RTPI member surveys from 2018, 2017 and 2013; and *RTPI Education Commission: Final Report*. RTPI, Jan. 2003. <http://ln-institute.org/downloads/Project%20Outputs/LN2outputs/Tuning/GeneralDocumentsforTuning/Education-Commission-Final-Report.pdf>
- 6 *Assessment of Professional Competence (APC) Guidance: Licentiate Guide to RTPI Chartered Membership*. RTPI, Mar. 2015, p.6. www.rtpi.org.uk/media/1283765/apc_guidance_2015.pdf
- 7 *The National Competencies Framework for Planners (NCFfP)*. Spatial Effects, for Planning Advisory Service, Royal Town Planning Institute, Planning Officers Society and Asset Skills, Nov. 2013. www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/complete-national-competence-51e.pdf

[Pull-out quotes]

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