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Do Town Planners in England feel a professional responsibility for a climate-resilient built environment?

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Abstract.
With global warming already underway and the sense of urgency around climate breakdown growing, delivery of a resilient built environment is critical. Town planners are crucial intermediaries in this work but there is little recent work in the UK exploring their role in climate change resilience. In addressing the gap, the objective of the study was to examine resilience and professional identity of town planners. Interviews were conducted with 19 planners working in England who had at least seven years' experience. Thematic analysis of the data found a strong professional and public service identity but little awareness of resilience. Many participants were unfamiliar with the concept, with the exception of specific actions such as planning for flood protection, and almost none were aware of resilience thinking incorporating conceptualisation of places as complex, interconnected, dynamic systems. We conclude that the built environment in England is not being prepared for imminent and future climate risks, and that the gaps on climate-resilience pose a threat to the profession's jurisdiction.

1. Introduction

The latest report of the IPCC, detailing the difference between a global mean surface temperature rise of 1.5˚C versus 2˚C above pre-industrial levels, carries stark evidence for a world changed dramatically by global warming [1]. The term 'climate breakdown' has been suggested as an appropriate description of the degree of change underway. The level of risk depends, in part, on the extent of mitigation and adaptation that are pursued and both adaptation and mitigation are crucial. Even if global commitments to greenhouse gas emission reductions made as part of COP21 are achieved, global warming is still likely to surpass a 2˚C threshold [2]. In the UK, risks have been identified from flooding, higher temperatures and extreme weather to people, business, infrastructure and buildings [3]. A more resilient built environment has a key role to play in reducing vulnerability to risk and capacity to recover in these domains [4]. Amongst the range of professionals involved in the delivery of the built environment, town (urban) planners are key [5]. We examined the question of whether planners in England feel a sense of professional responsibility to improve resilience to climate breakdown in the built environment.

Resilience has been seen as an aspect of sustainability, in that a sustainable system will also be resilient [6]. The two terms however have taken somewhat different paths in academic and policy discourse (ibid.). Definitions of resilience of the built environment are still evolving. Earlier conceptualisations referred to capacity of an urban system to maintain its functions under disturbance [7]. More recent thought has extended the definition to "a whole spectrum of global environmental change" [8], including social, economic and political crises, in addition to climatic [9]. Quigley et al. [6] suggest that definitions to date can be viewed as dichotomous. Definitions with what they term as an engineering focus define urban

resilience in terms of robustness, ability to predict and plan, capacity to withstand disturbance and to return to the status quo in an efficient manner. In contrast, socio-ecological approaches to resilience emphasise capacity to adapt, to maintain function after disturbance while evolving through feedback and learning. Acknowledging resilience as a disputed term, Davoudi et al. [10] proposed a four-dimensional framework comprising learning capacity, robustness, innovation and flexibility. Of importance in these and other recent papers is the notion of resilience as an approach which recognises the essential interconnectedness of social and ecological systems, and of urban places as non-linear, dynamic, complex systems [11]. While resilience is seen as a useful concept for climate change adaptation by scholars, there is evidence that implementation of resilience thinking is not yet happening in practice [12, 13]. While a number of studies have explored practical advances in Ghana, other African cities, Asian countries and the Netherlands, there is little current empirical work on progress in the UK. The current study aimed to address this gap,

In England, local authorities are responsible for determining what development may take place. In compliance with national policy, planners employed by local authorities gather evidence to develop local policy and manage its introduction, offer guidance on compliance, and provide judgement on applications for development. While they have 'delegated powers' to decide on typically small developments, their work is set within a wider context of local planning committees comprised of elected officials and a planning inspectorate which oversees appeals against planning judgements. The Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) grants the professional qualification of Chartered Town Planner. To attain this status, planners are required to complete an accredited, planning-related postgraduate degree and to have achieved relevant experience. The RTPI also requires its chartered members to continue to update their knowledge through systematic and recorded Continuing Professional Development (CPD).

The role of town planner thus meets the definition of a 'profession' by Freidson [14], Evetts [15] and others, at least in part. Writers on the subject of professions have listed attributes of professions including: a representative body which accredits qualifications and determines membership; an agreed code of conduct; a specialised body of knowledge; and complex or specialised work, typically with exclusive jurisdiction. Most also specify an overarching aim of working for social good. This latter point is emphasised in a current and comprehensive work on professionals in construction which argued that "the wider public benefit…[is] an essential characteristic of all the professions [in the built environment]" (Foxell, 2019, p. 6). Foxell [16] explicitly links a sustainable and climate-resilient built environment to the notion of public benefit.

Much previous work on the concept of the profession, such as Abbott's [17] 'system of professions' and Freidson's (2013) 'third logic', has been sociological in approach, exploring the how 'professions' have developed in societies over time. Less attention has been paid to the lived experience of a profession, in particular how internalisation of the profession, or professional identity, may motivate behaviour. Additionally, whilst the importance of thinking about resilience in the built environment has been outlined, this leaves open the question of how it becomes part of the profession's body of knowledge.

Identity theorists have argued that social structures, such as a profession, shape identities and that an individual identity represents subjective processes or responses to such external institutions (Burke & Stryker 2016). Thus to identify as a particular type of professional is to act in a manner consistent with that identity. As the professionals who enact the planning regime, through application of national policy, formation of local policy and

judgements on development, planners have the potential to be critical mediators of resilience and to influence the extent to which it is seen as key part of the profession's body of knowledge. We sought to explore whether planners in England saw themselves as professionals, and to what extent their overall aim was that of public good. Positioning a climate-resilient built environment as a public good, and applying the theoretical lens of professional identity, the research question was: To what extent do town planners in England feel a professional responsibility for a climate-resilient built environment?

2. Method

Experienced urban planners were recruited through communications with alumni of accredited programmes in planning at the authors' institutions, and through authors' professional networks. The recruitment advertisement sought planners with more than seven years' experience working in England. Semi-structured interviews were conducted during 2018 with a total of 19 planners. Their experience ranged from 7 to 19 years. All but one worked in local authorities and eight were women. Job titles encompassed Senior Planning Officer or equivalent (4), Principal (5) and Manager (5) as well as employer-specific titles such as Commissioner for Planning. Four participants worked primarily in development management (control), seven worked in policy and six combined both (this categorisation was not applicable for two participants). Interviews lasted approximately 1 hour, were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, and had prior ethical approval. The interview schedule included sections on meanings of professionalism and of sustainability and resilience, which are analysed here. Using NVivo, thematic analysis was conducted [18]. The accounts were read and re-read, and phrases, sentence or short sections relating to resilience and professionalism were coded. The codes were clustered into more general themes and the most relevant of these to the research question are outlined below. All names are pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

3. Findings

In this section, the theme of planning as a profession is first presented, before considering evidence for professional identity. Evidence on the theme of meanings of resilience is then presented, including planners' perceptions of responsibility in this domain.

3.1 Planning as a profession

Participants were asked whether they considered the role of planner to be a profession or a job. Although a few participants felt that planning may be treated as a job by a small number of colleagues in their experience, the majority stated definitively that they viewed planning as a profession: "*Definitely a profession. Absolutely.*" [Heidi]. Given what Freidson [19][19] (2004:17) refers to the "gentlemanly status of the traditional… professions", it is unsurprising to find near-unanimous claims to membership of a profession. However, when asked to elaborate on their reasons for this belief, the participants described a number of features of their occupation and career path that accorded with characteristics of professions defined by scholars of professionalism such as Freidson (2013), Evetts (2012), Foxell (2019) and others. All of the participants had complete university education, most to post-graduate level. Many referred to the professional body (RTPI) and membership or chartership as indicators of professional status.

In exploring whether planners applied a unique body of knowledge, participants were asked what expertise planners bring to their job. The participants referred to the legislative framework, and beyond that, to the breadth of knowledge they require:

> *Planning is a broad church, isn't it? It covers a whole array of different fields of expertise and knowledge, ranging from anything like highways and traffic, all the way through to dormice and flooding issues.* [Harry].

Some acknowledged the overlap of their expertise with other professionals, describing themselves as having some but not extensive knowledge of many areas. Nevertheless, they also described how they brought a possibly unique perspective in considering how places interact and how cities develop over time: *"I think when [an engineer and an architect] do it, they're doing it on specific projects or a bridge or a building, but we're doing it for a whole place."* [Beth].

They went on to outline skills in integration of varied and often technical or complex information, "*form[ing] a judgement based upon a balanced view of those*" [Jean], communicating with multiple stakeholders and negotiating an optimal outcome. Thus they referenced many of the attributes of a profession including a representative body, accredited qualifications, arguably a specialised body of knowledge, and complex work, primarily within planners' exclusive jurisdiction

An additional professional characteristic described by several was the need for continuous learning. This related to the constantly-changing political landscape, but was also evident in the narratives of participants of developing additional specialisms and broadening their expertise along their career trajectory. This appeared to relate to internalised professional identity as well as being an institutional requirement:

> *You do look to develop as a planner, and develop your knowledge, because you just have an interest in it. ...Obviously, most people I know, even though they didn't have [CPD requirements] hanging over them, would still want to develop their knowledge.* [Gail]

The broadening and deepening of knowledge as they progressed in their careers contributed to perceptions by others of their experience and authority, and enhanced their perception of being treated as a professional in their daily work.

3.2 Professional identity

Further aspects of professional identity were in evidence in the participants' accounts of their day-to-day dealings with stakeholders ranging from developers, to elected local politicians to members of the public. Transparency, fairness and balance were seen as important. There was a sense of a shared set of values, evidenced in references to the RTPI's Code of Conduct, to ethics and to impartiality. Of particular interest with regards to the research question was the extent to which reference was made to the social good of planning. The notion of planning as contributing to public benefit emerged spontaneously in most of the interviews. One participant said: *"There's a sense of your professional principles as well in terms of is what you're doing ultimately going to be for the public benefit."* [Jack]. Some referred also to an identity as a public servant: *"I see myself as a public sector, a public servant first and a planner second"* [Harry]. Another positioned social good as a driving motivation for planners in general:

> *Most people I know who have been successful as planners all share certain characteristics. It is that kind of dogged determination to get on with things, and oh, it sounds really hippyish, but make the world a better place.* [Gail]

Participants referred to design quality, happiness and well-being in the community, protection of the green belt[1] and provision of housing. Several linked public good to sustainability in the built environment in broad terms although only one referred directly to resilience: *"if you're a planner and you're not thinking about longer term issues of resilience, you're really not a very good planner"* [Jack].

3.3 Responses to resilience

When asked about the applicability of resilience in their work, there was no initial recognition of the concept by almost half of the participants and in a few cases, there was acknowledgement of lack of knowledge on the topic:

> *Researcher: I was wondering is resilience something that you do talk about and what it might mean for the built environment.*
> *Participant: Not really. As a word we don't really use that, so I'm not sure how I would apply it to planning. Yes, it's not a word that appears in any of our policies, that I know of, and it's not something that really crops up* [Ella]

However, more than half of the participants went on to provide some associations with the concept. Some confounded it with climate change mitigation and others referred to a wide range of factors including accessibility of homes, an ageing population, economic outcomes and biodiversity. Just over half connected the concept with a response to climate change, referring to planning for flooding, water stress and heatwaves. One talked about emergency planning and a number interpreted the concept in terms of future proofing, coping with adverse conditions and an ability to adapt: *"The ability for our developments to be able to mitigate, and adapt to, some of the issues is going to become more important."* [Debbie]. Of note here is positioning the issues around resilience in the future tense ("is going to become"), in the same way as [Kevin] says: *"we don't yet know what it means properly…But it's early days."* Understanding of resilience was markedly different to knowledge of sustainability, which all participants readily discussed and could explain how it was embedded in policy.

A small number of participants saw resilience as a concept with a broader meaning than preparing for climate breakdown, and incorporating flexibility to deal with change in market conditions and political contexts. One had attended RTPI-supported information sessions on resilient cities and another saw it as a goal:

> *Coming back to resilience, it's a big part of what we're trying to achieve and it's a very useful way to view some of those issues and a way to group things together and get people thinking about that longer term* [Jack].

With the exception of this participant [Jack], there was little evidence of activity relating to resilience in planning work currently. Participants noted the absence of national policy and the corresponding gaps in local plans. Some also pointed to the challenge in development management of applying the overarching aims of resilience on a single development: *"We think very development specific, and the short term, in terms of from the point of receiving an application to granting consent, that's one of our thought processes really"* [Beth]. Where they offered a view on where responsibility lay for increasing resilience in the built environment, participants considered that planners had a role to play but that responsibility extended to all stakeholders:

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[1] Green belt land is designated for the explicit purpose of preventing urban sprawl by severely restricting development on previously undeveloped 'greenfield sites' beyond existing settlements.

I think it's a shared responsibility. I don't think that it resides in planners, though we have it. I don't think it's just a political thing though certainly politicians have a responsibility. I don't think there's anybody who's not touched by the issues of resilience. [Jack]

4. Discussion and conclusions

In the current study, 19 planners in England were interviewed, each with at least seven years' experience. There was near unanimous agreement that urban planning is a profession. In deeming it as such, the participants made reference to attributes of professions described in the academic literature, including academic qualification, a professional body and a shared code of conduct. Departing somewhat from previous definitions, not all participants were members of the professional institution as membership is not a mandatory for practice as a planner in the public sector, although eligibility for chartered membership is expected for advancement. While the body of knowledge was not exclusive as some scholars have implied [17], the planners argued that their holistic perspective which integrates knowledge and information across multiple sources and relates solutions to place and over time is specific to their profession. Further, they stressed the requirement for continuous learning and development over the course of the careers. They saw this as a common motivation amongst the planning community which contributed to how others recognised their authority and professional status.

Of particular interest for our research question was the evidence for social good as a motivator for most of the participants. The interviews showed a common sense of purpose among the planners involved, to provide an improved living and working environment for the local community. A particular theme in the participants' responses was a sustainable built and natural environment and this supports Foxell's (2019) argument for sustainability as an important public benefit to be delivered by professionals associated with the built environment. The shared sense of purpose represented one facet of professional identity, which was also expressed through reference to standards of impartiality, transparency and fairness. The evidence here then demonstrates an internalised professional identity in which the purpose of delivering social benefit is a central tenet.

The notion of resilience was not familiar to nearly half of participants, aligning with recent work with planners in Ghana (Poku-Boansi & Cobbinah, 2018). When invited to consider the concept in interview, most could make some associations, more or less tenuously related to the term. However, the level of familiarity was markedly different from that of sustainability. There was little evidence of understanding of underlying principles of complex, non-linear, dynamic urban systems and of the relationship between social and ecological systems. The approach of 'resilience thinking', heralded as having the potential for a paradigm shift in planning [20], was not evident. In a small number of cases, participants used the future tense, positioning resilience as something that will have to be addressed in the future. With strong current evidence for weather patterns affected by anthropogenic influence and the long-term impact of planners' decisions, as referenced by the participants themselves, this is a worrying finding. If planners today are not developing local policy and making judgements based on enhancing resilience, the impacts of the changing climate will have greater adverse impact into the future than could be the case.

In the UK, there has historically been a wide separation between town planning and health and emergency/disaster preparedness, with national policy being focused on civil emergencies (whether arising from accidents, natural hazards or human threats). Although the

Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act of 2004 was meant to re-integrate health and wider concerns back into a new spatial planning approach, it would appear from the evidence here that this has been limited. It is possible that planning for climate change resilience may be being conducted within other functions of local authorities such as environmental health or emergency planning, and that there is greater knowledge and understanding in such areas. However, such an approach would indicate an engineering approach to resilience, that is, a reactive approach, planning to protect against change and aimed at returning a system to its original state with greatest efficiency. The potential benefits of an evolutionary approach, of developing learning, robustness, innovation and flexibility, are seemingly not being pursued. Resilient thinking, of necessity, should involve town planners, given the necessarily future-orientation of local development plans, which typically look 20-25 years ahead.

With few exceptions, there was little evidence of reference to urban resilience in national or local planning policies. However, the participants considered responsibility for sustainable and resilient environment to be shared, and including planners, government and other stakeholders in the built environment. Although the evidence demonstrated lack of detailed knowledge and action, the theoretical framing of professional identity showed an underlying motivation is there.

5. Conclusions

The conclusion from the analysis is that while planners' professional identity drives a strong purpose of delivering social good, there is too little knowledge, awareness or requirement around climate-resilience for the concept to inform day-to-day planning policy and decisions. This holds important implications for the profession, its professional body and policy makers.

Development of the built environment is guided by planners' expertise and long-term view. If planners nationally are unaware of the predicted impacts of climate breakdown on urban and other development, then the built environment now and into the future is not being prepared for future risks.

As the planning profession derives part of its body of knowledge from its perspective over time as well as space, the gaps on climate-resilience could pose a fundamental threat to the profession. If the profession does not fully cover its claimed jurisdiction, other professions may encroach on its traditional domain.

Led by the professional body (RTPI), and drawing on experts within relevant economic sectors and from academe, it is imperative that the predicted risks to the built environment from climate breakdown and principles around urban resilience are disseminated. Resilience thinking must become embedded in day-to-day work of planners.

When knowledge of principles and approaches to resilience becomes professionally disseminated, the evidence from this study suggests that planners have the motivation, through their professional identity to serve the public good, and the skills, of integrating knowledge from disparate disciplines, to seek strategic national and local policy that incorporates requirements to ensure greater resilience.

National planning policy requires urgent updating but policy changes are not only top-down. Without a bottom-up drive from planners and their representatives, national policy will not develop in the direction needed.

Further questions to consider might be: given the political context of planning, are professional knowledge and motivation alone sufficient to ensure that best practice is pursued and implemented? Is the current structure of planning departments and processes in itself part

of the problem? What would resilience planning mean, and look like, if emergency planning coordination was brought within UK town planning departments? And would such a shift strengthen or erode the professional identity of town planners?

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