**Opening up planning? Planning reform in an era of ‘open government’**

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**Abstract**

English planning reform is a highly politicised process involving diverse bodies seeking to influence the direction of future national policy. Drawing on a conceptualization of multi-scalar metagovernance ‘in the shadow of hierarchy’, this article provides insights into how external bodies seek to influence policy reform. The article also examines the flip-side, that is how policy-makers view the efforts of external bodies to influence national planning reforms. The findings reveal how the rhetoric of opening up government and reducing central direction in favour of local discretion collided with the reality of retaining strong central direction and privileging developer interests.

**Key words:** Planning reform metagovernance governance multi-scalar

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**Introduction.**

In the context of successive UK governments claiming to be moving towards more open government, this paper examines how this policy direction has influenced the shaping of national planning policy for England. The analysis raises critical questions about whether ‘open government’ masks continuing power asymmetries across different external bodies as they seek to influence reforms to the national planning system, in part reflecting the different constitutional constraints under which they operate. Planning is interesting as an example of the trend towards more open government, as its mixture of regulatory and strategic functions means that the planning system demonstrates characteristics of both hierarchical, directive governmental behaviour and governance traits, such as involving networks of stakeholders in strategy-making, coordinating and resource-sharing.

Whilst there has been considerable academic analysis of how planning debates are shaped at local level by the combination of national and local influences, there remains a gap in our understanding of the detailed advocacy work that goes into reforming national planning systems, something we begin to address here by examining pressures to reform English planning. To be clear, there are several useful and very detailed accounts of how national planning policy has been reformed and some of the shaping influences (e.g. Nadin 2007, Allmendinger and Haughton 2013, Lord and Tewdwr-Jones 2014, 2018) but few have used interviews with those responsible for shaping national policy (but see Delafons 1998 for an insider’s account), typically instead drawing on secondary source materials such as government documents, those of lobbying groups and media accounts. By contrast, this paper uses primary data from key actors to explore how national planning policy is formulated, informed by a theoretical framework that emphasises tangled, multi-scalar and multi-dimensional networks involving government, governance and metagovernance, but which remain nonetheless ‘in the shadow of hierarchy’ that is the state still steers when it chooses to (Scharpf 1994, Jessop 2016).

Metagovernance is sometimes referred to as the governance of governance, that is the processes for shaping governance mechanisms, setting out remit, rules, membership, accountability and evaluation criteria. Crucially, metagovernance is not just a codified set of rules to enable evaluation and justify disciplinary interventions by government, it also involves contestations over how governance is best performed and by whom, drawing on diverse understandings of what is appropriate behaviour for para-state organisations charged with taking on some aspects of policy strategising and policy delivery. These debates about the nature of governance and the modalities of metagovernance are necessarily multi-scalar, negotiated and contested, not just a top-down imposition of rules by national governments (Jessop 2016).

The importance of governance and metagovernance in planning becomes clearer if planning is viewed as a series of strategy-making processes which aim to shape and coordinate the actions of others, for instance home builders and infrastructure providers. In governance terms, local plans are more likely to achieve their objectives if they are developed by working towards agreement across diverse actors, not least those with the capacity to facilitate or inhibit future development. Likewise, national planning reforms are more likely to prove durable if they secure buy-in from the main stakeholders in planning, including those officials and politicians responsible for delivering planning activities at the local and regional scales. The metagovernance of planning is multi-scalar therefore, and also multi-directional: planning is not simply about top-down direction and rarely can it be characterized as bottom-up. Instead there is a more complex set of cross-sectoral, multilevel set of negotiations always in motion, not least as planning rules are regularly being reinterpreted, through local plan-making, practice, legal challenge, advocacy and central clarification or revision.

Though the English planning system has many admirers around the world (Rivolin 2017), domestically it is a topic of continuous critique and reform, leading to a widespread perception that the English planning system has been the subject of continuous change over the past half-century (Waterhout *et al*. 2013, Lord and Tewdwr-Jones 2014). To help explain this process of on-going reforms, many commentators have noted the influence of the advocacy activities of a range of actors, from thinks tanks to pressure groups, which typically call attention to what are claimed to be planning failures and resistance to change as a basis on which to present their own case for radical reform (Vigar et al. 2000, Haughton and Allmendinger 2016).

The result is a system seen by some as resistant to reform whilst others complain that it is forever being reformed (Communities and Local Government Committee 2011). This is an outcome that in part reflects the democratic foundations of English planning policy, since there are few votes to be gained by reducing the ability of local communities to protest against unwanted development being imposed on them. The democratic nature of planning decisions is consequently presented simultaneously as a defining *strength* of the English planning system, as the public looks to planning to help provide protection when under threat from unwanted development, and as a *weakness,* as a cause of development delays and burden on business.

Ministers and civil servants find themselves caught in the middle of these debates, called upon by different interests both to implement radical reform and to defend the system from changes that might undermine the benefits associated with the existing system. In effect, ministers need to work with cognitive dissonance, sending out different signals to different interests: that they are ‘pro’ development whilst being mindful of those who wish to see development carefully controlled. As the arm of government which allocates land development rights, planning reforms are subject to intensive scrutiny from various interested parties, but there remain concerns that, like other aspects of government policy, planning reforms may be shaped in ways not readily revealed by academic research, from the opaque funding of some right wing think tanks, to the sometimes shadowy role of corporate lobbyists, the propriety of paying for access to government ministers at party conference dinners, and the link between party donations and membership of the House of Lords (Blake 2011, Monbiot 2011a, 2011b, 2015, Wainwright 2014). The Daily Telegraph did much to help reveal these networks of private influence during its campaign against the initial draft of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), finding for instance that:

The Conservative Planning Forum raises around £150,000 a year for the Tory party and charges members £2,500 to meet senior MPs to discuss policy and planning issues.

Mike Slade, its chairman, has given more than £300,000 over the past decade, individually and through his property firm, Helical Bar. (Blake 2011)

Online investigative journalism outlet [www.ourcity.London](http://www.ourcity.London) has been focused on the tensions involved when private interests are seen to be too closely involved in shaping government planning policy, and the procedures the government has put in place to ensure that such discussions remained private (Turner 2016).

In this paper, however, the focus is on the more public dimensions of lobbying for planning reform, that is the re-shaping of how the planning system works, rather than the less transparent processes of influence in the shadows. In particular the research examines how three of the main categories of external lobbying institutions, think tanks, advocacy groups and professional bodies, set out to shape the future direction of national planning policy. Our aims are to examine how these bodies seek to influence the direction of reforms and how such activities are perceived by policy makers.

Interviews were undertaken with 28 individuals (2013-2017), including several who had worked in multiple roles, for instance in both think tanks and in government. An initial list of prominent organisations and policy actors was developed, with further interviewees emerging through a process of snowballing. All interviewees provided informed consent and were given the option for anonymity, which most asked for so all quotes here are anonymized. Interviewees included 15 individuals who had worked in think tanks (nine at the time of interview), six working for leading professional and advocacy groups operating in the broad area of planning, housing and urban policy, three senior politicians, including a former planning and housing minister, someone closely involved with two national independent reviews, three ministerial/prime ministerial advisers with interests inplanning-related issues, plus senior civil servants past and present.

Those seeking to influence government reforms were asked who they sought to influence and how, whether they worked with others, working at what scales, and which approaches they felt worked best for them. Those in government were asked about which external organisations were felt to be most successful in influencing reforms and which approaches tended to work best. Both sets of actors were asked to give examples of approaches that were felt to have been effective and any that were felt to have been ineffective.

**Planning as government, governance and metagovernance.**

Two recent reviews of the literatures on governance, metagovernance and governmentality have addressed the conceptual challenges of recent trends in the opening up of government and the implications of this for the role of policy networks at a range of scales in influencing government policy reforms (Bevir 2011, Jessop 2016). Bevir (2011) provides a useful reminder of the origins of the governance literature in work on the growing influence of pressure groups and policy networks, arguing that seeing the concept of governance as an extension of this earlier work allows us to move beyond accounts that emphasise the rise of governance in the context of the hollowing out of the nation state or the weakening of the core executive. He also draws attention to the potential for a productive dialogue between the governance and governmentality literatures, arguing that the benefits of this exchange are already emerging, for instance as more interpretative approaches to governance begin to engage with how policy actors operate not so much as ‘rational pursuers of power or as cogs in institutional wheels’ (p.457) but more as actors drawing on historically, and we would add geographically, contingent webs of meaning.

It is helpful at this stage to introduce Jessop’s (1997, 2000) work on the strategic relational approach, which conceptualises the state as a politically neutral setting for diverse forces to seek to shape future state strategies, backing certain economic, political, environmental or social strategies over others, for instance, certain governance scales over others (e.g. regions or city-regions), or certain types of actor over others (Jessop, 1997, p.63). From this perspective, the state is not of itself a source of power, but rather an arena in which power struggles take place, where diverse actors might coalesce for a while to promote a particular form of strategy only to be broken up over time and superseded by new coalitions with different strategic goals. This is an inherently strategic and selective process, in which certain forces come to hold more sway than others, privileging certain critiques over others, and certain policy goals over others. The nation state may choose to lend powers and resources to other organisations, vertically or horizontally, but crucially it can reclaim or remake the conditions in which these are exercised. This suggests the need to develop a more sophisticated understanding of the remaking of the state through variegated processes of restructuring government, governance and metagovernance.

More recently Jessop (2016) has focused on the importance of what he refers to as multi-scalar metagovernance, including the way metagovernance can be seen as containing elements of both the government of governance, and the governance of governance. Particularly in the latter interpretation, the emphasis is on how the state engages with diverse actors, coalitions and networks seeking to influence emerging reforms, in other words metagovernance is not simply a process for asserting sovereign authority over governance bodies. Rather governmental actors engage with tangled hierarchies involving complex networks of actors, with each actor bringing its own mix of symbolic and material resources in to play. Nonetheless, the potential for the more directive shaping actions, or metagovernance ‘in the shadow of hierarchy’, as governance systems are remade both through elements of self-organisation and in response to the possibility and the actuality of central direction. Drawing on Dunshire (1990), this is seen as involving processes of collibration, in which the state want to give the impression of promoting the self-organising capabilities of free markets and governance bodies, whilst creating rules which privilege certain interests over others. Dunshire refers to this as the government ‘putting its finger on the scales’ to give advantage to those who can help it meet its strategic objectives. Metagovernance then focuses attention on how coalitions of interest emerge which seek to work with and through the state to alter its strategic direction, including attempts to define what is within the legitimate domain of state intervention and regulation, for instance the role and remit of planning. These coalitions of interest will often be temporary and sometimes will often quickly dissolve or mutate in light of the kinds of support, apathy or opposition their advocacy work generates.

Jessop’s SRA and metagovernance provides a context for understanding moves towards the promotion of ‘open source planning’ (Conservative Party 2010) as part of shifts towards what is now widely referred to as Open Government, intended amongst other things to encourage greater civic engagement and public access to information[[1]](#footnote-1). Where rational choice theory and New Public Management thinking informed attempts to rethink the roles and methods of government in the 1980s and 1990s (Hood 1991, Gruening 2001), recent moves to promote Open Government have drawn on ideas about open source policy-making hoping to unleash the creativity of a wider range of actors (O’Reilly 2011, Rutter 2012).

Although strongly embraced by the Coalition government which came to power in the UK in 2010, it is important to emphasise that government practices for many years had already begun to ‘open up’ in various ways, responding to growing pressures to move from expert ‘in-house’ processes of policy formation in favour of more transparent and more open systems for engaging with the views of the public when developing future policy. The growing clamour of voices, in particular the rising media prominence of advocacy groups and think tanks in commenting on the need for and direction of policy reform created new pressures both on ministers and civil servants seeking to navigate through potential information overload. One response to this has been the appointment of more political special advisers (SpAds), engaged to work with senior ministers alongside but separate to civil servants, acting as commissioners and intermediaries in providing information to ministers (Gains and Stoker 2011, Craft and Howlett 2013, Pyper 2013). Taken together these pressures led to an increase in the number of entry points for those seeking to influence government policy, from more widely advertised government policy consultations to calls to opening up the processes for responding to Parliamentary Select Committee hearings on policy reforms (Craft and Howlett 2013, Veselý 2013).

Since 2010 powerful voices such as the Institute for Government have found a receptive hearing from government ministers about the need to further open-up policy advice beyond the civil service, for instance by creating external review bodies, bringing outsiders in to work with government department, creating safe spaces for innovation and crowd-sourcing by releasing more data in open source formats (Rutter 2012). Running parallel to this opening up were pressures to reform the civil service, both in the context of austerity cuts to their numbers and political calls to reign in their influence. Particularly notable is the 2012 Civil Service Reform Plan, which proposed breaking-up what was portrayed as the monopoly of civil servants on giving advice to Ministers, leaving ministers exposed to a much broader range of ideas about policy (HM Government 2012, 2013, Pyper 2013).

In contrast to more celebratory accounts about the liberating potential of open government, recent work in political economy has tended to be sceptical, viewing the new ‘open government’ processes as in fact carefully controlled and choreographed, privileging access by certain groups and those whose ideas most readily chime with the preferences of policy-makers (Columbo and Gargiulo, 2016). In effect there is a structured marketplace for ideas (Schlessinger 2009), in which certain ideas and certain framings are more likely to attract a positive reception at particular moment than others. Claims about ‘open government’ then are best seen as credibility claims based on particular ideological framings which reimagine government policy-making as an arena in which diverse interests can compete to have their say on an equal basis, a self-equilibrating market for governance and government innovation. However, once we think of metagovernance in relation to collibration it becomes apparent that there may well be a patterning process at work as decisions are taken on whether and how to respond to calls for government reform. It is also worth noting that ‘open government’ may prove to be something of a passing fad, as governments learn more about the limits and costs of outsourcing expertise.

The next section draws on the interview material to examine how external organisations have sought to engage with government actors in order to bring about change to the English planning system, from those seeking radical reforms to what they see as a broken system to those seeking to improve a system which they agree with in principle but feel needs improving. This is followed by a section which examines how policy-makers viewed the varied efforts of diverse advocacy groups. Examining both sides of the process begins to reveal how metagovernance ‘in the shadow of hierarchy’ works in practice, specifically how a multi-scalar perspective is necessary to understand the realities of rolling-out national planning reforms.

**How external institutions seek to influence planning reforms**

Attempting to bring about major reforms to planning usually involves work on two fronts, setting out a critique that exposes the failings of the existing system in terms that policy-makers might recognize, and putting forward proposals for reform. Our interviews with think tanks, professional bodies, advocacy groups and a lobby company uncovered a diverse range of practices. For think tanks and advocacy groups these typically involved publishing in-house or commissioned reports that provided combative critiques of existing policy and new policy proposals. These reports would be backed up where possible with extensive media coverage, ideally being launched at specially arranged high profile seminars and conferences, where possible involving leading political figures as speakers in order to attract media attendance. Other reported activities included political networking, meetings with civil servants, responding to media requests to respond to topical news items which might include new government policy initiatives, presenting or convening events at party political conferences, and presentations at independent public events.

Interestingly, a clear distinction emerged from our interviews between how think tanks work compared to professional and advocacy groups. For think tanks, there was a general view that trying to gain influence on planning through the civil service rarely worked and was not a good use of time:

We don’t really try to lobby them. They’re not that important to the process of getting your ideas acted on. Its more through the media to ministers and SpAds. (Think tank 11)

As this respondent indicated, for most think tanks effective use of the media to stimulate public debate about their ideas was seen to be crucial, along with taking whatever opportunities came available to meet ministers and seek to influence them. Though not all think tanks relied on the media, most did as a means of getting their ideas into the public domain, at which point it was felt that ministers and their advisers would be able to see if the idea was likely to attract public and political support: “if you get it in the press it becomes much more credible to the politicians” (policy adviser 2). Whilst an ideal case of a successful policy launch for a think tank would be to see an idea adopted directly into political manifestos or government policy reforms, most think tanks accepted that a more realistic goal particularly for their more radical critiques and proposals would be to begin to alter the ‘mood music’ of political debates in their favour. As such a report that generated public debate but no action might be deemed a success if a few years later it was seen as having paved the way for similar reforms being adopted (Haughton and Allmendinger 2016).

For both professional bodies and advocacy groups cultivating good contacts with civil servants, politicians and ministers was seen as central. For professional groups in particular this meant finding ways of working with the government of the day, sometimes coming out publicly in opposition to a particular reform but more generally working to find ways of improving policy:

We have…regular meetings at various levels and we have regular meetings from ministerial level right the way down to officials. And that can be on specific issues, specific topics, or as a general sort of catch up chat about what’s going on with the industry…. being at the table we think is a better opportunity to achieve things than standing on the sidelines shouting (professional and advocacy group 5).

Advocacy groups were more varied by their nature, some more willing to adopt adversarial approaches in their dealings with the government of the day, whilst others placed more effort into building relationships with civil servants and politicians. More generally interviewees from professional and advocacy groups claimed to have strong relations with and respect for civil servants at all levels. They also tended to recognise the structural limitations within which the civil service operates, not least following recent cuts to the numbers of professional planners in central government.

Our interviews pointed to the pivotal role of alliance building for all those seeking to influence policy, whether think tanks, professional bodies or advocacy groups. Sometimes these alliances might be with like-minded organisations and individuals but a noteworthy finding was that in an attempt to unsettle expectations that they would come at an issue from a particular ideological position, they would sometimes seek to build broader-based alliances with others:

people expect us to say a particular line or a particular thing, and therefore we sometimes find it quite powerful to have other people from a different perspective saying the same thing. (Professional and advocacy group 5).

It became clear from interviews with professional and advocacy groups that if workable alliances were to be achieved, it helped if a robust evidence base was robust:

you’ve got to use all the tools that are available to you in terms of influence: alliances, getting the right focus, campaigning and so on, but at the end of the day unless you’ve got a really well-shaped, well-articulated, evidence backed proposal that you are prepared to put your collective weight behind and take the risk on then it’s not going to work (professional and advocacy group 6)

Both professional bodies and advocacy groups claimed part of their legitimacy in engaging with government came from their ability to develop and draw on a strong evidence-base, in part seeking to differentiate themselves from other types of lobbying organizations. Think tanks for the most part also claimed to be committed to an evidence-based approach to their work, but acknowledged that with limited in-house resources often they drew heavily on existing reworking secondary data and drawing on material in published academic work. The exception was one right-leaning think tank which argued that “on the whole you need ideas-based policy, not evidence-based policy” (Think tank 2)..

What we begin to see from this section, is that in general our interviewees from think tanks, professional bodies and advocacy groups all felt that they made valuable contributions working as individual organisations in terms of generating public debates about planning issues. However the techniques they adopted were often very different, with think tanks tending to work more on getting their work publicized through the media in order to generate public debate that might precipitate change, whilst advocacy and professional groups tended to put more effort into developing good relations with civil servants and national politicians both individually and through parliamentary interest groups.

Whilst responding to national consultation processes about proposed reforms tended to be viewed as core functions for both advocacy and professional groups, think tanks were generally less interested in engaging with processes such as select committee inquiries unless there was a good chance of gaining media coverage. Changing the ‘mood music’ of political debate was often central to how think tanks perceived their mandate, whilst for professional and advocacy groups, by contrast, the emphasis was more often on ensuring that reform proposals were subject to critical scrutiny, both philosophically and also in terms of the practicalities. Responding to those politicians and lobbyists who seek to change the mood music by making inaccurate or unsubstantiated claims, the Royal Town Planning Institute in particular has recently devoted considerable work to tackling misconceptions about planning, including misleading statements from government ministers and think tanks, notably in their 2011 campaign about planning myths.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Few of our interviewees could point to specific successes in terms of direct influence on planning reform. This is in part because planning reforms tended to involve widespread consultation with multiple organisations and the public, with emerging ideas and opinions weighted and assessed through the civil service and SpAds, then subject to debates in parliament and scrutiny through parliamentary committees. Perhaps unsurprisingly then most of our interviewees pointed less to direct impacts and more to their successes in shaping the broad trajectory of reform, be this to push it in a more radical direction or to smooth out the wrinkles of draft proposals. It was in this context of the diffuse sources of influence on policy shaping that many of our interviewees told us of the effort they put into working as individual organisations, as this improved their institutional profile and might help funding efforts, whilst also building broader coalitions to support their wider intellectual agendas.

This section points to the differentiated world of policy advocacy, in terms of the types of approach favoured by differing types of actor. Though most inevitably felt they had success in their own terms in influencing government policy, this was largely based on anecdotal evidence and in the case of think tanks an acceptance that much of their influence might come indirectly, through how they influenced the terms of debate which might in turn influence who governments politicians and officials might turn to when looking to justify future proposals for reform.

**Influencing planning reforms: views from the centre**

In this section we examine the views of a range of individuals involved directly in developing and implementing government reforms, including politicians, civil servants and ministerial policy advisors. The first point to emphasize is that policy-makers in general tended to distinguish very clearly between those external bodies that were seen as effective in influencing their thinking and those that weren’t. Interestingly, however, they did not always agree on which institutions were more effective. For instance, one former planning minister lauded the contributions of a particular advocacy group, whilst an advisor working in Cabinet Office (which reports directly to the Prime Minister) at the same time found them to be largely irrelevant. One of the interesting issues hinted at here is the difference between the government department covering planning, and the Treasury and Cabinet Office, with the latter intervening when important issues were at stake:

CLG [Department for Communities and Local Government] would be allowed to set policy in as far as Treasury didn’t care. If they cared, or Number 10 got interested, then they got involved (policy adviser 3).

Public policy consultations, for instance government White Papers, were widely acknowledged as a useful way of testing public and political sensitivities when testing out new policy directions. However interpreting the results of these consultations and using them to reformulate policy was far from straightforward and raises questions about how useful some of the public consultation exercises were in actually influencing government thinking:

the meaningless consultation process that exists currently. … as someone who used to receive the submission on the back of them. Firstly how do you summarise, really, what are qualitative documents in a simple submission to a minister? That’s an intellectual challenge, that is very subjective as well. And they would be dry as hell. And they didn’t matter. So you wouldn’t spend that much time on them (political adviser 3).

Interestingly, whilst planning reform is often seen as being influenced by certain politically favoured think tanks (CPRE 2006, Spiers 2012, Haughton and Allmendinger 2016), our interviewees from within the government machine were more cautious in accepting that such lobbying influenced the direction of policy reform. In part this was because the arguments of many think tanks were believed to be poorly evidenced and therefore easily dismissed once put through the scrutiny processes of the civil service, politicians and their special advisors.

Perhaps inevitably the role of civil servants in receiving and filtering external views received a lot of unfavourable comments from some quarters, but interestingly this was typically also tempered with the view that this process of filtering information might also have some benefits. As a former planning minister saw it, whilst there were issues about the quality of advice sometimes on offer, the best civil servants were outward-looking and brought to ministers a range of ideas not just those from within the civil service:

I don’t think the answer is…outsourcing policy advice, because you are setting to one side the traditional strength and capacity of the civil service. The civil service has probably not done itself a favour in the past... it could have done a much better job to make it clear that they are playing the field... they’ve drawn on a wide range of ideas... rather than feeling like their job is to provide an answer to the minister (former planning minister).

But there was also a more structural issue with planning in relation to its legal role, which led to ministers needing to be very cautious about being seen to be influenced by external bodies over particular decisions, which under planning appeal processes might ultimately come to the Secretary of State for judgement or end up in High Court at Judicial Review. For this reason, both special advisers and civil servants acted as important filters in terms of information getting through to ministers. As one former ministerial advisor told us, planning is:

one of the few areas of policy making that is incredibly tangled up with the law. It’s not an easy hit for anyone who wants to lobby or shape. (policy adviser 1).

Interestingly, the influence of private lobby companies working on planning and housing policy was generally dismissed by those we interviewed, several referring to them using dismissive terms such as ‘guns for hire.’ One political adviser told us that people in his role tended to avoid private lobby companies to avoid any suggestion of impropriety.

Several interviewees were at pains to explain to us that how government politicians and officials reacted to external advice and lobbying was very much context dependent, with the timing of interventions particularly important. The common view amongst our interviewees, both those in government and those outside, was that external reports lobbying for change were most likely to have an impact in the period running up to an election, a period when politicians were looking for new ideas that might make their way into party manifestos. This was said to be particularly true for parties in opposition. One political adviser who had worked in Cabinet Office on planning-related issues argued that, nonetheless, in practice he had struggled to find good ideas and was largely dismissive of the influence of think tanks in generating workable policy solutions. Professional bodies and advocacy bodies were seen as useful in terms of building coalitions of support for potential new policies, for testing out new ideas on and for helping make proposals workable in practice, but were seen as less useful in terms of generating fresh thinking. Particularly valued as sounding boards for the workability of potential policy reforms were senior players in local government networks alongside a handful of influential chief officers in local government. This was one important dimension in the multi-scalar nature of metagovernance and the shaping of planning reform by combinations of local and national actors.

Once a new government was elected, the opportunities for effective intervention by external bodies tended to diminish, as ministers and their advisers sought to implement their election promises rather than take on new challenges. At this stage ideas would be worked up into potential legislation and new opportunities would open up for influencing the direction of policy. However, by this stage the battleground would have shifted from *advocacy* around new thinking, to *lobbying* around the proposed changes by vested interests, typically said to be oriented to ensuring any changes would not harm them.

The policy advisers and some of the civil servants we interviewed all acknowledged that a good media campaign with a hard-hitting message associated with a new report from an advocacy group or think tank being published would cause them to sit up and take note, if only so they could brief ministers about how to respond. Whilst there was an acknowledgement that certain think tanks aligned to the government of the day might be important in influencing government thinking on planning, most of our interviewees who had worked within national government tended to be very cautious in attributing success to any particular type of organization.

Government-sponsored expert-led reviews of the planning system, intended to be seen as independent, were felt to pose a number of challenges for policy-makers. At one level being set up by government and experts selected by them, they were viewed as a relatively soft way for setting the scene for future policy change proposals. The danger was that they might go ‘off-message’ and produce reports highly critical of the government. Our interviews revealed a mix of support for external reviews, which sometimes appear to have genuinely challenged policy thinking and helped move political debate along, allied to a rather cynical view of the motives for setting them up in the first place, particularly during the New Labour period:

Then you commission reviews. And you choose someone who is apolitical, Wanless, Barker, Edington, to give you the political space to do what you wanted to do anyway… They are Treasury-led, nominally with the relevant department. (policy adviser 3)

Even at the preliminary stage of setting up a review body it seems, processes of collibration are at work as metagovernance operates ‘in the shadow of hierarchy.’

The approach to commissioning external reviews began to change with the election of the Conservative/Lib-Dem Coalition (2010-15) and Conservative (2015-17) governments. Four major expert planning panels emerged during these years, all ostensibly independent, but also much more influenced by private developer interests than previously. The first of these was the Practitioners Advisory Group, created by the planning minister in 2010 to provide a draft National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), a major exercise seeking to reduce and simplify official planning policy. The group contained just four members, all appointed directly by the minister, one a private consultant advising mainly developers, one from a major house builder, one from local government and the other from an NGO, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (see Rutter 2012 for a detailed account). This was followed by the Taylor (2012) review of planning practice guidance and the Local Plans Expert Group (LPEG, 2016), which followed up the NPPF with proposals for further reforms, in part to tackle some of the issues created earlier reforms. A Planning Sounding Board was also established on a semi-permanent basis, which though more broadly constituted than the other three initiatives, is seen by its opponents as developer dominated and lacking transparency (see Turner 2016).

One of the features of the LPEG (2016) report was that it was created to address some of the failings created by the 2012 NPPF which had was intended to simplify planning by massively reducing the amount of previous national-level technical planning guidance and giving greater autonomy to local planning authorities. In practice, the reduction of national guidance in some areas proved deeply problematic. For instance lack of national guidance on how to conduct Strategic Housing Market Assessments, meant that at local level planning authorities found that their methodologies for predicting future housing needs in their area could be contested at planning inquiries by developers. In their evidence to the House of Commons Select Committee on their work, two of the LPEG authors argued that local planning debates had become mired around highly technical matters about appropriate methodologies, fuelling a growing consultancy sector producing reports for local authorities and those wishing to oppose their plans[[3]](#footnote-3). Ironically, in simplifying national planning guidance in order to reduce over-long and over-technical guidance, the local planning process had been forced into increasingly technocratic forms of debate, in this case about how to identify the best methodology for predicting future housing needs. Once again, the inter-play of local and national influences emerges as central to developing a more nuanced understanding of how planning reforms play out in practice, with metagovernance revealed as a dynamic, multi-scalar process of continuous adjustment as ideologically-motivated reforms run into the realities of planning implementation.

This section reveals how despite the early influence of thinking about ‘open source planning’ and ‘open government,’ in practice this opening up has been conditional. Whilst rhetorically justified as a means for promoting innovative thinking from all quarters, rather than achieve more expansive view of what planning could potentially be, instead what emerged was a narrowly framed set of debates about making planning more effective at promoting and supporting development. Successive governments have sought to give the appearance of opening up to outside views, whilst privileging those voices most likely to tell government what it wants to hear: collibration in practice, as metagovernance continued to operate in the shadow of hierarchy

**Conclusion**

You might think it bizarre, but my best understanding of how government works is Bob Jessop’s state theory ….. basically, that government is a moment of interests coalescing around power at certain points and that ultimately the government doesn’t hold absolute power, is absolutely true. (political adviser 3)

In this paper we have attempted to open up one part of the ‘black box’ of central government policy-making around English planning, focusing on the role of external bodies seeking to shape future planning policy. Our theoretical framing highlighted the complexities of the planning system, which we argued need to be seen as involving elements of government, governance and metagovernace, a system involving diverse actors working in multiple ways to influence the ways in which national planning reforms are justified, proposed, countered and on occasion enacted. Focusing on metagovernance in an era of open government, we examined how external actors, working both independently and through building coalitions of support, sought to influence the direction of national planning policy and how policy-makers viewed the success of such activities.

With its focus on the lobbying work of think tanks, professional groups and advocacy groups, this research cannot claim to have covered all the activity that goes on behind the scenes to influence government policy, however our work is important in shedding some light on the claims made by those who would like to be thought of as shapers of policy. In particular we add valuable new insights into how lobbying works and how it is perceived by those responsible for implementing national planning reforms. The findings reveal the importance of people and organisations outside the formal processes of consultation about policy reforms, and how this is not a separate process: explicit lobbying goes hand-in-hand with cultivating relationships informally. Timing proved crucial: lobbying is most likely to be successful however in the run-up to national elections, when political parties are searching for new ideas to incorporate into their election manifestos.

These insights are particularly important in the context of national planning being both a lively source of national political debate currently, particularly in terms of housing shortages, and the ways in which claims of a move to ‘open government’ give the impression that the government is keen to solicit and where appropriate respond to new thinking. In practice our research suggests that whilst policy-making is becoming more open to diverse voices, these are not all regarded as being of equal value.

Our research reveals the importance of the multiscalar nature of metagovernance. Systems for influencing national reforms to planning were opened up in multiple ways, not least with more public consultation exercises about government proposals and calls for public input to parliamentary select committee inquiries on planning reforms. Since 2010 successive national governments have introduced reforms intended to create a less directive, less bureaucratic national planning apparatus in conjunction with a rhetorical commitment to using this to give greater power to local planning authorities and those creating neighbourhood plans. In practice, however, where these reforms failed to achieve one of the government’s main ambitions, higher levels of house building, new reforms were set in motion to seek to reassert national direction, as happened with the LPEG review and subsequent reforms to NPPF. These led to a rapid abandoning of the free-for-all chaos of allowing any actor to put forward a preferred methodology for calculating future local housing needs with a new national methodology. In short, reforms for opening up planning by allowing greater local ‘freedom’ were soon reversed if these did not further national interests.

In summary, the research adds insights into the multiscalar nature of collibration, that is how government orchestrates the processes of policy reform to favour certain interests over others, and certain scales of policy-making over others. To conclude, despite claims of opening up government, in the case of planning policy much of the work which goes on to influence the direction of future national policy reform remains opaque. Our work goes some way to revealing some of the more open aspects of how outside bodies seek to influence the remaking of policy but in the process reveals that there is much that remains unclear.

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