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The Role of Planning Aid England in Supporting Communities' Engagement in Planning.

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Abstract

In considering the position of community engagement within planning in a time of neo-liberalism and a context of 'neo-communitarian localism' (cf. Jessop, 2002; DeFilippis, 2004), this paper reviews the role and relevance of Planning Aid in terms of its performance and aspirations in guiding and transforming planning practice (Friedmann, 1973; 1987; 2011) since its inception in 1973. In doing this we reflect on the critiques of Planning Aid performance provided by Allmendinger (2004) and bring the account up-to-date following on from past considerations (e.g. Bidwell and Edgar, 1982; Thomas, 1992; Brownill and Carpenter, 2007a,b; Carpenter and Brownill, 2008) and prompted by the 35 years since the University of Reading produced the first published work reviewing Planning Aid (Curtis and Edwards, 1980). Our paper is timely given renewed attacks on planning, the implementation of a form of localism and reductions in funding for planning in a time of austerity. Our view is that the need for forms of 'neo-advocacy' planning and community development are perhaps even more necessary now, given the continuing under-representation of lower income groups, minority groups and to allow for the expression of alternative planning futures. Thus further consideration of how to ensure that Planning Aid functions are sustained and understood requires the attention of policymakers and the planning profession more widely.

The Role of Planning Aid England in Supporting Communities' Engagement in Planning.

Introduction

Thirty-five years ago colleagues at the University of Reading produced the first published review of Planning Aid; prompted in part by an emerging interest on the part of central government in the role being played by early manifestations of the service and its volunteer base (Curtis and Edwards, 1980). That review was set-up to see how Planning Aid in England might help meet priorities and needs in relation to community engagement – questions that had become more apparent as the statutory land-use planning system had evolved in the UK since 1947 and moreover to consider how it had performed in its first seven years. Subsequent work has both praised the intent and recognised the need for a Planning Aid service, while also pointing to its limitations and difficulties in solving the challenges that it has sought to address.

The early proponents of Planning Aid aimed at a lofty set of transformative aims; ostensibly to empower the public but particularly to help those who lacked the means to participate effectively in shaping their own environment. Such aspirations have been recognised and supported by a variety of voices subsequently, both to ensure that powerful interests are challenged and in order to ‘widen participation in planning’ (Carpenter and Brownill, 2008). It has been a part of the Planning Aid project over the past 42 years that staff and volunteers have sought to empower members of the public to be meaningfully involved in the planning of their own areas and the service has cohered around a concern to provide assistance freely to those without the means to marshal their own interest effectively. Latterly this approach has been affected by shifts in funding and governmental agendas relating to community involvement in planning in an era of ‘localism’ and through a neo-liberalisation of the local governance and policy frameworks.

The burgeoning literature on community involvement in planning and the published work on Planning Aid specifically, both point to ongoing challenges surrounding effective, durable and inclusive engagement. Moreover the history of Planning Aid shows that, in common with much of the voluntary and community sector, it is fragile and has been susceptible to manipulation by funders. Furthermore, its reliance on volunteers is both an asset and a challenge; providing flexibility and low overhead costs but the network of volunteers also

needs to align with organisational decisions and foci. Indeed the literature indicates that the types of activity undertaken by Planning Aid have been shaped by a variety of constraints and obstacles over time.

Drawing on this legacy the paper reviews recent experience of Planning Aid England (PAE) and recent research which has explored how communities, volunteers and local authorities view its work currently. It is worth noting that the challenges posed by the present time follow a period when much of the activity of PAE focussed on neighbourhood planning in England (see Parker et al, 2015; Parker, 2015). We discuss how the aims of Planning Aid are still relevant and yet have not been stabilised as a necessary part of inclusive planning and in civic education. In doing this we also take the opportunity to critique the political and institutional context in which Planning Aid has operated and build on a series of (sympathetic) critiques expressed as early as 1980 (Curtis and Edwards, 1980), and subsequently picked up by others including Bidwell and Edgar (1982). The literature offers different perspectives on PAE, including an overview of operational practices across the UK (Mordey, 1987), analysis from the perspective of volunteers and their rationales (Thomas, 1992) and the actual impact of Planning Aid on communities (Allmendinger, 2004). More recently still, research has explored how Planning Aid has functioned and who it was reaching in the New Labour era (Brownill and Carpenter, 2007a; Carpenter and Brownill, 2008), the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition (Parker and Street, 2015b), or indeed how similar services could be extended outside of England (e.g. Peel, 2013).

Thus, while the focus here is largely on Planning Aid *England*, similar conditions and conclusions may well apply elsewhere, given that, as noted, a service exists separately for London, Scotland and for Wales. The paper also adds to our understanding of the stubborn challenges for a more inclusionary planning, particularly in the light of renewed interest in participation under the conditions of ‘variegated neo-liberalism’ (Brenner et al, 2010; Newman, 2014; Ghose, 2005) where a mix of formulations, assemblages and loci create a range of different conditions; arguably because there is no consistent or unified political philosophy that binds the range of tools and techniques in circulation (Hall, 2011; Newman, 2014). Yet it is contended that all the varied tools share a market orientation or privileging that enables capital accumulation to proceed above all else. Under these conditions, the project pursued by David Cameron as prime minister involves a particular form of ‘localism’

as a constituent element of this variegated neo-liberal *effect* (Clarke and Cochrane, 2013; Davoudi and Madanipour, 2013).

We contend that the current environment, which favours some groups in society over others, appears to plead loudly for a form of advocacy: an advocacy that is knowingly aimed at addressing the *immediate* needs of those who are excluded; as well as ensuring and enabling and capacity-building sensibility that raises knowledge and social capital (Holman and Rydin, 2013). We see this as forming part of what we term a ‘neo-advocacy’ approach that reflects a need for locally and temporally appropriate hybrid responses that defend and nurture alterity, voice and capacity. As part of the development of such a model, the paper contributes to the debate about where Planning Aid does, could or should feature in the landscape of community planning in the future and in its context. We now outline the development of Planning Aid since its inception.

Planning Aid: then and now

The ambitious aims of Planning Aid were inspired initially by advocacy planning theory – a set of ideas made most prominent in the United Kingdom fifty years ago by Paul Davidoff. This view reflected concerns about inequalities of access to decision-making processes in the United States. Similar concerns existed in England as a direct result of experiences with traditional, rational top-down planning shaped in post-WWII conditions. Davidoff’s (1965) perspective is nicely reflected in the following, a concern which notably still resonates today:

‘The recommendation that city planners represent and plead the plans of many interest groups is founded upon the need to establish an effective urban democracy, one in which citizens may be able to play an active role in the process of deciding public policy. Appropriate policy in democracy is determined through a process of political debate. The right course of action is always a matter of choice, never of fact. In a bureaucratic age great care must be taken that choices remain in the area of public view.’ (Davidoff, 1965: p424).

Given that various groups in society have different needs, it is quite possible that clumsy attempts to integrate different needs or conflicting preferences could result in the concealment of difference and conflict and the mediation of plans and decisions where less powerful interests lose out - not due to force of argument but by force majeure. This has been established as a firm critique of much community involvement activity led by powerful

interests (e.g. Gaventa, 2004; Mouffe, 2005; Bailey, 2010; Allmendinger and Haughton, 2012).

It is also understood that elites and other articulate and powerful groups have the resources and ability to draw in relevant skills to shape city plans to serve their own interests and, following Davidoff and others such as Mazziotti (1974), it is also established that others do not have such capacities, or at least that such capacities are latent and cannot be brought to the table without active encouragement and preparation. The type of urban democracy envisaged by Davidoff echoes the consideration of dialogics featured in the work of theorists such as Chantal Mouffe (e.g. 1999; 2005; 2007) and are based on the assumption of a more developed participatory democracy. Thus, Lane (2005: p293) argues that advocacy planning:

'was to ensure that unheard or invisible interests were articulated and, as far as possible, accommodated in decision-making. Implicit in the approach is the rejection of the notion of a unitary public interest. Beginning with the assumption of political plurality, advocacy planners are essentially facilitators whose central task is to either catalyse the participation of inarticulate actors or, alternatively, advocate their interests directly'.

This view sees advocacy planning as acting to bring the plurality of voices to the table, rather than necessarily working to build capacity within communities with a view to activating a more inclusive co-production of plans. As new experience and thought has been applied to planning practices over time, the advocacy model has been somewhat supplanted or at least subsumed by the collaborative turn and post-collaborative thinking that identifies questions of empowerment and capacity building as being desired pre-requisites, as well as revealing power and conflict as being unresolved matters. Furthermore how apparently inclusive engagement processes may be subverted, or act to obscure persistent acts of exclusion (Cleaver, 1999; Cooke and Kothari, 2001).

Such issues are considered later in the paper where the series of tensions within Planning Aid's performance over the past forty years and the attitude of government in the past decade towards community involvement in planning are highlighted. This is seen in the way that the role and purpose of planning has been reshaped in a period of localist restructuring, budgetary cuts and privatisation, as well as in an era of the local entrepreneurial state (Mazzucato, 2013). This tends to maintain orthodox engagement by local government or that orchestrated by developers and their agents and which reflect longstanding concerns over

tokenism on the one hand and a post-politicisation of planning on the other; early forms of which served to inspire Davidoff and others to promote the advocacy model.

Rational planning processes, and the outcomes delivered as a product of the conditions that have supported that paradigm, had considerable influence on planning and the politics of planning. Numerous efforts to respond to claims of elitism, anti-democratic behaviour and spatial injustice were triggered since the 1960s and this produced a legacy of planning practice critique which still echoes loudly today. By the mid-1960s a more inclusive and open type of planning was increasingly viewed as a political necessity, as much as real anticipation of substantive improvement to outcomes. This was reflected in the UK by the Skeffington Report of 1969 which examined the role of the public in planning and which led to subsequent, if limited, accommodations to afford opportunities for participation (see, for example; Fagence, 1977; Rydin, 1999; Parker and Doak, 2005; Brownill and Carpenter, 2007b; Monno and Khakee, 2012). The rather tokenistic responses, which amounted to little more than ‘consultation’ and have influenced participation modes since, also served to foster ideas about how a non-partisan organisation, beyond governmental interest or control, could act as an advocate for those otherwise unable to access the necessary specialist skills, knowledges and resources needed to engage in planning issues effectively. In other words, how to use and extend *rights* to participate in planning, or to challenge apparent injustice or exclusion more fully and *inclusively* in the service of a pluralistic form of planning.

This environment of slow response from government and a richness of ideas and radical intent prompted professionals concerned to support, inform and empower those disenfranchised by the operation of the system provoked innovation. As early as 1971 the then RTPI (Royal Town Planning Institute) president Jim Amos called for the establishment of a form of ‘planning aid’ service in England (Amos, 1971) and not long afterwards it was the Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA) who established the beginnings of a service based in London¹ (Curtis and Edwards, 1980; Thomas, 1992). Subsequently various English regions and in parallel Wales (1978) and Scotland (1993) established separate Planning Aid services, with London retaining a separate service from the latterly RTPI-led Planning Aid England (see also; Evans and Gardiner, 1985). Northern Ireland also operated a

¹The RTPI assembled a Planning Aid ‘timeline history’ during the 40th anniversary in 2013, with key event-stages highlighted, see: <http://www.rtpi.org.uk/planning-aid/what-we-do/our-history/>

service between 2000-2004 and the recently reorganised local government and planning system there has acted as a prompt for calls to re-establish a similar service once again (Peel, 2013).

By the late 1970s, Planning Aid in England had become an agent for advocacy in one-off planning disputes as well as offering an education service, with volunteers working directly with communities and individuals in both instances. By 1980, central government were taking an active interest in looking to see how such services might be supported and extended (Curtis and Edwards, 1980). Since then the history of Planning Aid has seen different types of support activity carried out and, given the limits of resourcing and capacity, has been seen as a necessary service. The Planning Aid organisations have all been operating with similar but yet also distinctly different values and practices (Thomas, 1992). Over time the various organisations have also developed different structures, staff/volunteer mixes and funding models. Indeed finding appropriate and stable funding for Planning Aid has been a consistent theme which has influenced each service. Yet it is arguable whether the service in England has achieved much more than ephemeral change and a somewhat uneven, if positive, coverage, while also developing skills and experience for volunteers. Some have argued this was the case even when levels of funding for Planning Aid services were significant, and indeed this is the mainstay of the critique levelled by Allmendinger (2004) and is seen in the review by Curtis and Edwards (1980) and the Brownill and Carpenter work (2006; 2007a).

The work of Planning Aid has corresponded to a number of categories of ‘advice giving’, advocacy and education, through to wider community development work as conceptualised by Bidwell and Edgar (1982), refined by Thomas (1992) and then reconceptualised by Peel (2013). This corresponds in a broad sense to the range that Friedmann (1987) identified through parallel notions of planning as ‘guidance’ as opposed to ‘transformative’ planning activity. For the latter to occur he argued a more fundamental shift in the relationship between planners and ‘client’ needed to take place - where the client becomes an active partner in planning (Friedmann (1973: p172). This position itself was a precursor to considerations of co-production in planning (see Friedmann, 2011) and as discussed latterly by Harris and Boyle (2009); Albrechts, 2013; Watson (2014); and Parker et al (2015) and has been expressed variously as requiring education and capacity-building inputs.

Throughout the life of Planning Aid, a consistent issue has been that of securing stable and adequate funding and also of the operating constraints or conditions associated with the scope and level of funding available. This is a particularly challenging, if mundane issue, when set against aims to provide ‘more than technical’ planning advice. While so much has been written about community engagement in planning over the past few decades, it is clear that central government and the local state have failed to either consistently support or integrate different interests in policy and subsequent decision-making. This is despite numerous short-lived attempts to address this, variously by ‘frontloading’ inputs to local plan-making through the 2004 Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act and providing tools such as Community Strategies in the 2000s to capture ‘community’ views and priorities (see Raco et al, 2006; Bailey, 2003). There has also been no appetite to create an independent agency to perform the Planning Aid role either - a desire expressed in the 1970s (and an arrangement that was brought close to reality in the period in 2003-2010). The advantage of this being stability and the ability to focus on those in most need of support.

The last published piece on the subject of Planning Aid predates the Coalition government (2010-15) and the introduction of their localism agenda. And hence the operational context of Planning Aid activity may be usefully updated to take into account this shift and also given the changes to planning structures and institutional arrangements in England seen since 2010. There is a larger debate therefore, and in which this discussion subsists, over how the planning system in the UK and England specifically is organised, to what effect, and how any efforts to remedy what are seen as long term and systemic problems of exclusion and a lack of knowledge about the process are confronted. This is not only a concern for Planning Aid organisations but for the profession more widely and also for government both centrally and locally. From a market-liberal perspective, this argument may be sustained for very different reasons. It may be to ensure that agents are well-informed and are more able to act as rational actors in a market. For others it may be about enabling a participative democracy as an autotelic benefit. In any case, an aim is to generate outcomes based on a richer set of knowledges that can lead to higher quality environments, and in this sense, both perspectives see public benefit derived from a heightened capacity to engage. As such there may be grounds to anticipate widespread political support for Planning Aid in principle - even if arguments about how to achieve this, who should provide such services and the basis of any prioritisation of resources, are likely to persist. Beyond such matters lies the issue of how

efforts to deal with community involvement are set alongside changes in policy, structures and processes which can undermine such activity, let alone the credentials of the activity itself. It is clear that the often contradictory policies of government in relation to planning conspire to residualise community involvement, for example just recently in England we can see this in; changes to permitted development, to the waiving of affordable housing provisions, continued pressure to speed-up planning decisions and simultaneous cuts to planning staff and other resources. These circumstances all highlight the potential contradictions between rhetorical aims towards empowerment on the one hand, and the retraction of capacities and modes of support on the other, and indeed there are similar processes being pursued and experiences being reported beyond the UK (see for example; Haughton and Allmendinger, 2012; Peters, 2012).

It is apparent that many changes are being shaped by an ideologically-inspired agenda associated with the neo-liberal turn and associated neo-communitarianism / localism, with an accompanying rescaling and privatisation agenda for planning. These can be discerned through associated policy mechanisms (Raco, 2013a,b) and are producing instability and challenges for those engaged in planning activities. These include the introduction of the National Planning Policy Framework (2012) with its aim to reduce guidance and presume in favour of development and the Localism Act (2011) aiming to 'empower' neighbourhoods on the condition that they accept growth (Parker et al, 2015; Rydin, 2013). Within this change environment, funding for Planning Aid England has been variously reduced, removed or shifted since the end of the New Labour years. For example, funding for PAE shifted to be conditional on support for Neighbourhood Planning activity in the period 2011-15 under the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government.

Given that Planning Aid was initially set up as a result of deliberations over how to support and give voice to those who were not well served by planning outcomes and to benefit those who had difficulty in engaging in decision-making processes, it is this which should be the main criterion for assessing past action. The present Planning Aid England retains the initial aim stating that: *'Planning Aid England offers planning advice and support to individuals and communities. We believe everyone should have the opportunity to get involved in*

planning their local area and provide people with the knowledge and tools to achieve this' (Planning Aid England/RTPI, 2015: no pagination).

Supporters of Planning Aid have claimed that it can be the moral voice of contemporary planning practice and such a sentiment calls attention to the potential of Planning Aid more perhaps than the role it has *actually* played. The case in point here being how the service in England has performed since 2011, i.e. during the Coalition government of 2010-2015 and then the Conservative government in the UK (2015–), as well as the longer period under the New Labour administration and in particular the second term and latter period (i.e. 2003-2010). Writing just after a funding agreement between Planning Aid England and the Labour government had been concluded, Allmendinger (2004: p270) observed that: 'what Planning Aid does is postpone crises in and challenges to...planning...by helping assure those dissatisfied or excluded from the system that they eventually had a 'voice' or a 'fair say''. This comment highlights how, while Planning Aid is founded on the principle of democratising planning, its operation may be seen as a product and symptom of a deeper structural malady. As an organisation in England, it has been without the wherewithal to provide a more pervasive system of support and maintain a consistent challenge to a system loaded towards powerful and well-organised interests – including it must be said, professional planners, local authorities and politicians. Planning Aid has also found it challenging to work consistently with the most deprived or other minority groups in society. As such, an important point is whether Planning Aid can be independent or should act as a bolt-on for existing planning agencies as highlighted by Bailey (2010: p319) who recognises that: 'the traditional view is that community involvement can be added onto existing decision-making and service delivery bodies but increasingly it is being argued that these agencies need to be completely recast in order to give primacy to service users'. This appears to give credence either to calls for radical reform and/or to sustain specialist agencies whose main role is to inform and empower.

So while authors such as Davidoff have highlighted the existence of the inequality of resources and position(s) of different actors in relation to decision-making in planning and development, it is important to remind ourselves that Allmendinger strikes a necessary and cautionary note about how Planning Aid interventions may obscure structural inequality in planning, rather than resolving it. This critique shares some similarity with the 'post-political' analysis sparked by the dominance of neo-liberal policy and this has highlighted tactics or

technologies of government which can evacuate antagonistic politics (cf. Mouffe, 2005; Swyngedouw, 2010; Allmendinger and Haughton, 2013; Parker and Street, 2015a) and which may be detected in different participatory forms (Brownill, 2009). Such analyses of course echo longer standing scepticism with progressive or welfarist policy. The relevant point here being that Planning Aid has lacked a clear framework for progressive action and has never had unequivocal support from either the state or determined support from within the profession to keep up pressure for a more inclusive approach to planning. Yet the counter argument is that (at least) Planning Aid by its existence provides a reminder and a platform for action in response to elite power as per Davidoff (1965) quoted above. If a fairer, more inclusive planning is to be constructed the question then becomes: what kind of Planning Aid do we need and what exactly should be advocated for? It may be that the profession needs to advocate for the advocates. That is to say PA needs a firmer footing to operate from and the kind of acceptance that an independent body with a defined role can perform – much in the way that the Planning Inspectorate acts to check and balance decisions or draft plans at the other end of the planning process (Shaw and Lord, 2009).

The Planning Aid model has developed over time; from a small group of volunteers anchored by one paid staff member in the early 1970s, to a larger operation still relying on a relatively small number of paid staff who supported and maintained a large cadre of volunteers. The Planning Aid volunteer role was to work with individuals or groups in a pro bono system typically on objections. Given that four main functions have been identified for Planning Aid England, that is: to provide advice, act as advocates, fulfil a responsibility as public educators and to perform a more fundamental community development role, there is a need to assess how PAE has been able to deliver on these functions as part of the overarching aim. By 2012 the organisation had around 800 planners registered as volunteers - although only a relatively small number were regularly active and indeed a review carried out in 2015 indicated around 500 were still 'on call'. The reasons for this and what activity PAE has overseen, are explored further below.

Most accounts of Planning Aid have identified more expansive roles as educator and community developer and recognised these as being the most important tools for a transformative effect but these have tended to form the minority part of PA activity as highlighted in the literature. Thus PAE has operated elements of its service in a reactive mode; responding to the requests of those who approach the service. These have most often

been to help resolve a planning dispute or advocate on behalf of an individual or group where a development proposal was progressing through the planning system. Other activity has been more proactive and developmental, particularly in the New Labour period where the use of traditional means such as roadshows, events and school visits to engage communities in planning were deployed. These activities tended to coincide with periods when central government funding has been available.

The New Labour government recognised deficiencies in previous attempts to involve the public in planning on the part of Local Authorities and central government itself. In reforming the planning system in their second and third terms in power (2001-2010), they wanted to both streamline and legitimise decision-making. As part of this agenda they sought to widen participation. These reforms to planning first culminated in the 2004 Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act and featured the ‘frontloading’ of community involvement in plan-making. It was clearly stated in the Government’s prospectus on community involvement in 2004, that New Labour hoped to address the engagement of previously excluded groups. They reasoned that:

‘many people may feel excluded in such a system because the process appears bureaucratic and forbidding, and because it seems too difficult and expensive to obtain legal information or advice. By simplifying processes, with clear opportunities for community involvement, we create [sic] a more effective, efficient and user-friendly service’ (ODPM, 2004: p9).

Government saw Planning Aid as a key partner in helping to realise this intent, gave explicit mention to the service and had committed substantial resources to extend their work prior to the passage of the Bill (Brownill and Carpenter, 2007b: p622; ODPM, 2004: p10). As a result, Planning Aid England was funded by central government to the tune of £3.8m in 2003-2006 alone; such funding allowed the organisation to grow to such an extent that upwards of 60 people were employed at its peak with regional offices spread across England.

Even in the heyday of New Labour funding, building up such skills and knowledge, embedding the repertoires and confidence in staff as well as volunteers, and those being supported and empowered, took time and could be both fragile and challenging. Volunteers were directed towards specific case work and the advice-line activity, both of which fell in the category of advocacy and advice giving. This was often however in service of individuals who could have accessed support elsewhere; it appeared that for many actual users they had the confidence and a critical amount of knowledge or social capital to approach the local

authority directly i.e. not necessarily those, who under the more expansive and radical aspirations of Planning Aid, or even as part of the advocacy model, should have been the focus for attention and support. Indeed the evaluation report produced to assess Planning Aid England in 2006, while positively disposed towards the range of activity undertaken, also highlighted a key issue in the ongoing difficulty of reaching intended target audiences. The findings suggested that Planning Aid was working often with people who already have some knowledge of the planning system and not those most disadvantaged in the community. Brownill and Carpenter (2007b: p630) recognised that:

'even with the sustained efforts of the organisation's community planners are putting in to increase participation, barriers still exist. For example Planning Aid monitoring data showed that only a small percentage of community groups worked with were from black and ethnic minority groups. Similarly a large number of telephone callers to the Planning Aid information lines did not meet Planning Aid's criteria for assistance, which exclude those who can afford to pay for professional support'.

Indeed our study has indicated that this has not been resolved. Furthermore, with the shift towards Neighbourhood Planning activity seen since 2011 (see below), more support for neighbourhoods who may not have really needed PAE has been apparent while 'target audiences' (i.e. hard to reach groups) are in the minority in their use of the advice line service. Early assessments of Neighbourhood Planning have indicated a skew towards rural and less deprived areas in the early years of activity (Parker, 2015; Parker et al, 2015).

The second period between 2010-15 saw the Coalition government usher in their own brand of Localism featuring Neighbourhood Planning (NP). This was to be a tool that sought to reconcile the twin growth and localism agenda, a feature of the Coalition administration that was made explicit in the 2011 Localism Act (DCLG, 2011; Davoudi and Madanipour, 2013). Again Planning Aid was seen as a useful vehicle to assist with the delivery of the government's agenda that intrinsically required the cooperation of communities (Padley, 2013). The rollout of Neighbourhood Planning, and the withdrawal of funding from central government for its wider work since 2004, saw volunteers plus staff acting as a direct support provider for NP groups as this was where government specified the funds were to be directed. One consequence of this was that it left very little capacity or resource for other activity and a much reduced presence across the regions, because of the restructuring of staffing and the roles that were to be resourced under a 'Neighbourhood Planning only' support contract. Thus the period up to April 2015 saw PAE take-up direct support for any Neighbourhood

Planning groups that applied for support funding; this has meant that much of the support has gone to parished areas situated in more affluent areas (Parker, 2015; Gunn et al, 2015).

Conclusion

The PAE experience in this period is not unique when compared to other VCS organisations and can be set within an emerging account of how planning is being changed and reshaped as a result of government spending cuts under the umbrella of austerity and through a growing reliance on privatised provision (see, for example; Lowndes and Pratchett, 2012; Raco, 2013b; Parker et al, 2014). One reading of austerity is that, as a result of difficult economic conditions created by government measures to reduce public expenditure, further resource cuts are reproduced and legitimated. Furthermore there is a strong suspicion that the discourse of austerity may actually be used as a tool to reinforce a market-based logic of neo-liberal governmentality (Newman, 2014; Rose, 1999).

This also begs a question therefore about what difference does this period of austerity really make to Planning Aid if it is judged against a claimed role to empower, to educate and develop community capacity? The first and second periods described above indicate how the organisation has continued to struggle in terms of resources and reach. Moreover at a time when resources had been squeezed and PAE had directed much of its efforts towards neighbourhood planning activity, the wherewithal to engage in other activity i.e. education, community development – even advocacy work - had somewhat withered. This review places into view therefore a series of critical questions relating to how Planning Aid has performed against its own criteria and aspirations and how it has reacted to the various community involvement agendas presented by government. While the current government (elected May 2015) has now effectively discarded Planning Aid as a partner, the irony is that it is needed more than ever by communities. This is a particularly strong plea if we are to take the 2004 agenda discussed above to represent a clear exposition of the necessity of a community development and planning education support agency – in order to hold the system to account in ways that local authorities and the Planning Inspectorate signally cannot. This therefore also leaves a suspicion that the role envisioned in 1973 is one that cannot be reconciled with current neo-liberal governmentalities and for this reason, if no other, requires the presence of an institution of neo-advocacy to hold dominant interests to account.

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