

Examining the discourse of ‘delay’ in urban governance: project speed and the politicisation of time in the English Planning System

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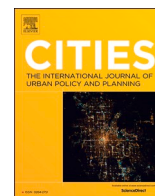
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Examining the discourse of ‘delay’ in urban governance: Project speed and the politicisation of time in the English Planning System

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ABSTRACT

While a growing body of work has been produced on the temporalities of urban governance and planning, limited attention has been paid to questioning how time is deployed through the application of chronotechnologies (Nowotny, 1994). Drawing on governmental and industry grey literature and empirical data, this paper examines the discourse of delay and ‘project speed’ surrounding planning policy and practice in England. Prompted by sustained accusations of planning ‘delay’, we chart how the use of political time (Howlett & Goetz, 2014) and ‘time talk’ (Lazar, 2019) features heavily in shaping urban discourse, and becomes subject to storytelling (Sandercock, 2003a, 2003b) and prevailing chronotopes (Mulčec et al., 2015). It is demonstrated how long-run temporal narratives focussing on speed and delay in planning are signifiers for securing a governmentality that asserts certainty and growth as overriding priorities. This politicisation of time and practice holds significant implications for democratic governance more widely.

1. Introduction: time and delay in urban governance and planning

There has been a long run history and deployment of a discourse of ‘delay’ and associated temporal narratives aimed at urban governance and planning within mainstream economic and political debates. Despite this, delay has seldom been defined by those propagating such narratives or examined closely in the urban studies literature. Without effective challenge to the basis of delay narratives, the deployment of ‘delay’ has been used to condemn any process, input or issue in urban governance that is deemed to ‘slow down’ or ‘reduce the efficiency’ of decision-making. Thus ‘delay’ is held up as a barrier to - or enemy of - development and growth. The implications are significant as alternative approaches in urban governance and decision-making that appear to conflict with the mainstream speed-growth discourse can be marginalised, including participation and deliberation, reducing the scope for urbanists and communities to engage in effective and inclusive place-making, promote the public interest and/or deliver sustainable development (see Dobson & Parker, 2024a, 2024b).

The mobilisation of temporal imperatives has long been a feature of political rhetoric across numerous policy arenas. In urban governance and planning this reflects part of the search for ‘spatio-temporal fixes’ (Berry & Hay, 2016; Brenner, 2004; Neuhaus, 2015), including how

decisions over land and its use have been implicated in serial attempts at policy fixes (McCann, 2003; Moore-Cherry & Bonnin, 2022; Raco, Henderson, & Bowlby, 2008). Some such ‘fixes’ are promoted as new or radical, while others are more mundane; obscured in regulatory amendment and operate as part of a wider patchwork of measures or which seek standardisation (Peña, 2015). Given that the technologies of urban governance shape future outcomes, and that policy priorities will be deemed successful in terms of their implementation, it is also true that imperfect outcomes can be blamed on ungovernable actors or conditions (O’Brien, Pike, & Tomaney, 2019) and prompt further fixes; including the introduction of ‘fast’ policy or renewed calls for reforms and application of standardised solutions, regardless of the context (cf. Lennon & Waldron, 2019; Peck & Theodore, 2015).

Considerations of time in and for urban governance practice have been gaining increased attention in recent years, with Madanipour (2017), Raco, Durrant, and Livingstone (2018), Laurian and Inch (2019), Hutter and Wiechmann (2022), Lennon and Tubridy (2022), Calderon, Mutter, Westin, and Butler (2024), and Jensen, Galland, and Harrison (2024) all highlighting the role and import of time and temporalities in various ways. Such authors have focussed on; alternative futures, the implicit marginalisation of interests, environmental change, overt questions of service delivery and manipulation of the ‘timescape’ (Dobson & Parker, 2024a, 2024b). While each of these aspects have been

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under-researched, a ‘temporal turn’ seems to be taking place which itself springs from a much wider and longer-run attention to temporalities (cf. Abram, 2014; McCann, 2003; Strassheim, 2016); as well as a significant body of work on time and its role in capitalist societies (cf. Adam, 2004; Castree, 2009). Despite this, little attention has yet been paid to *the use of time as a political resource in planning*, and particularly how this assists in shaping approaches to urban governance and policy/reform agendas. Raco et al. (2018) recognised a lack of research and engagement on the politicised nature of temporalities in planning and noted that ‘when addressed [these] have been dominated by simple binaries between the speed of planning and decision-making processes and project outcomes’ (ibid., p.1190).

This work forms part of a wider sustained critique of the political project of neoliberalising planning. This ongoing, if variegated or mongrel, process forms part of the wider backdrop to the focus of the paper (cf. Jessop, 2015; Peck, 2010). While we cannot expend space here recounting this fully, it has been recognised how ‘in a neoliberal era when state planning processes are seen as imposing unreasonable restrictions on market forces, hindering private development and thus economic prosperity. Attempts to limit regulations and speed up decision-making have been central to neoliberal reform initiatives’ (Laurian & Inch, 2019, p.274). The discourse of delay is a central component in political attempts to remake planning.

While time and temporalities provide a meta-frame for the work, the focus here is on both specific measures examined and their promotion through storytelling *about* planning (cf. Sandercock, 2003a, 2003b; Van Hulst, 2012). This storyline offers up the planning system’s primary role as the delivery of growth (Fear & Davoudi, 2022; Ferm & Raco, 2020). The dominant discourse forms a critique or moral tension based on neoliberal tenets, which are set apart from any projection of progressive alternatives (Bulkens, Minca, & Muzaini, 2015; Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, & Roselle, 2014). The narrative of planning causing or being equated with delay has been constructed with little effective counter and has provided legitimation for a variety of ‘chrono-technologies’ (Nowotny, 1994) which signals where time-related measures are imposed to regulate practice and shapes political and public discourse, notably on the ‘need for reform’.

Given the above, the first contribution of the paper is to reveal how temporal narratives which deploy speed and delay applied to urban governance and planning, have been constructed and mobilised within advanced capitalist and neoliberalised political economies. These have been used to justify and assert a pro-development and economic growth agenda as the primary objective for cities and urbanists. We assess this by drawing on a range of critical social theory on ‘chrono-technologies’ (Nowotny, 1994), ‘political time’ (Howlett & Goetz, 2014), ‘time talk’ (Lazar, 2019), ‘storytelling’ (Sandercock, 2003a, 2003b) and ‘chronotopes’ (Mulčec, Osman, & Seidenglanz, 2015) to evaluate and critique the discourse of delay. The second contribution is empirical and springs from the delay discourse apparent in the UK and evidenced from the debates and perspectives of successive national government administrations, economic think tanks, the development industry and public sector planning authorities.

The impetus for the paper stems from a context of serial calls to combat ‘delay’ in planning in England, going back at least half a century to the 1975 Dobry report. We see that claims about delay have been developed by successive UK administrations and business-interest clusters into a wider narrative that helps justify policy shifts, including serial reform of the English planning system. Policy debates concerning the time taken to navigate the planning system in England has gained renewed attention in recent years (Policy Exchange, 2020; DLUHC, 2022; MHCLG, 2024), with delay again being a central feature, prompting claims to enact a ‘project speed’ for planning. While the examples cited here are specific to the English experience, the implications are more wide-reaching for urban governance and planning processes across international contexts and systems; not least because long-run narratives focussing on speed and delay are signifiers for securing

governmentalities that assert certainty, standardisation and growth as overriding priorities. This paper highlights the need for more attention to be paid to the politicisation of time and ‘timescaping’ of practices, not least to implications for democratic accountability and the equity of real world outcomes.

2. Political time and temporalities

Political time is a useful concept here precisely because it draws attention to the power relations enacted through the control of time. The idea of political time and its deployment has been discussed from beyond urban studies, with Howlett and Goetz (2014, p.477) summarising political time as the specific historical-temporal location in which a policy exists. They highlight the significance of policy legacies, sequencing and trajectories on political actors which, as we discuss, all impact on the nature of, and response to, temporal framings and associated actions. Lazar (2019, p.211) highlights, that there is utility in assessing ‘temporal-rhetorical framings’ to broaden analysis of political rhetoric and action, and in this case as applied to urban studies research:

“temporal frames are important among framing practices more generally, and an empirical research agenda that looked at the impact and uptake of broad narrative structures such as temporality would surely be rewarding. Attention to the ways temporal frames generate meaning and to the ways temporal structures work to naturalize or denaturalize what is socially and politically constructed generates a range of analytical tools useful for understanding political behavior”.

The scrutiny of how time is being politicised is clearly an important endeavour and has been highlighted in the political sciences. For example, Miskimmon et al. (2014) argue that political actors seek to shape order through narrative projection, while Strassheim (2016) has discussed how a central mode of political action is temporal manipulation. Similarly Zielonka (2023, p.29–30) asserts that “[i]n the world of politics, the crucial question is: who makes time, and how?...Time is a powerful political instrument because our life is dependent on it and...it is regulated by governments”. In highlighting the role of ‘time talk’, Lazar (2019, p.212) highlights how “attention to contrasting political frames may clarify what’s at stake in certain kinds of political engagement [and] approaches to politics framed in opposing temporalities structure how a political problem is understood and what will count as a solution”. This is significant for urban governance and planning because as Weber (2002, p.518) recognised, “[t]he temporal horizons of investors, developers, and residents rarely coincide”.

Drawing on these perspectives, we assert that social theory on political time, and specifically consideration of how time is used to support political projects, can be brought together to assist in unpacking how storytelling about planning have been sustained. Yet we should also be concerned with political storytelling at a more general level because of its significance in political discourse and policymaking. As Grube (2022; p.3) notes, ‘What politicians say defines who they are. It shapes a government’s policy agenda. The words we use to describe a problem go on to influence the story about what the government should do about that problem’.

Some temporal narratives can play a positive role in promoting certain planning activity. For example, Gwiazdzinski (2014, p.58) defines a “time-based urbanism” as “*the ensemble of plans, schedules, and agendas that coherently act upon space and time, enabling the optimal organization of technical, social, and aesthetic functions in the city, in an attempt to create a more human, more accessible, welcoming city*”. Yet, while there has been much interest in forms of ‘chrono-urbanism’ in shaping cities, this has largely focussed issues such as transport-accessibility within urban places and with an emphasis on sustainability, or on policy labels such as ‘15-minute cities’ (cf. Moreno, Allam, Chabaud, Gall, & Pralong, 2021). Such treatments are closer to a ‘chronotopic’ approach to urban timespace (Mulčec et al., 2015), and

the idea of the ‘chronotope’ (cf. Allan, 1994; Bakhtin, 1981; Crang, 2005). Gwiazdzinski (2014, p.58) views the chronotope of the city as “a place for the convergence of the spatial and temporal dimension”. We see the use of chronotopes, as a dominant configuration of the relationship between time and space presented through discursive language - or storytelling - as far less benign, and which can be deployed to sustain a planning system timescape which maintains policy and practice oriented towards achieving neoliberal ideals of speed and growth.

The temporalities of urban governance and planning are much more significant than speed and growth objectives alone: “the temporalities of planning lie at the heart of broader debates over contemporary forms of urban governance, democratic engagement and policy outcomes... temporalities are not just about time but about the socially and politically situated experiences of time embedded in specific power relations and conjunctions...” (Raco et al., 2018 p.1190–91). Given the import for developing further understanding of the temporalities of urban governance, and the underpinning politics of planning, we focus on how planning discourses are shaped and how time has formed a critical component of storytelling about planning. Our view is that how time is organised and governed impacts on planning practice. This highlights attention to the relationship of time with practice, drawing from Bourdieu’s (2000) argument that time makes practice and the theoretical assumption of a recursive process of practice shaping time (i.e. here that *political time* makes practice, and vice versa).

3. The discourse of delay and speed in English planning

Temporal framing has become a feature of modern political discourse particularly regarding urban planning and as part of the promotion of policy agendas. An indicative example of how time becomes bound into such political discourse and in relation to urban governance and planning can be seen in the quote from Boris Johnson, while UK Prime Minister, in urging the need for ‘Project Speed’:

“Time is money and the newt-counting delays in our system are a massive drag on the prosperity of this country. And so we will build better, build greener and we will also build faster. That is why the chancellor and I have set up Project Speed to scythe through red tape and get things done”.

(Boris Johnson, 30th June 2020, no pagination (Johnson, 2020))

When a particular discourse is sustained over a significant period of time and by successive authority figures it become a ‘truth claim’ (cf. Kornberger, 2012) acting to normalise a particular presentation as fact. The discursive rehearsal of planning being a source of ‘delay’ is one such example. Governments have struggled to reconcile stories about ‘planning’ as both a *solution* and a *problem* given the multiple functions and concerns that planning systems are oriented to address in modern societies. This is notable for both setting out what is wrong and what needs fixing, with stories tending to talk about *what is* and about *what ought to be* (Rein & Schön, 1977). Planning in England has been cast in multiple character roles; including hero in the delivery of sustainable development, a knave in stymieing beauty, or as a villain in barring development; and, as we examine here, also a laggard acting to slow growth. We now unpack how storytelling and assumptions of delay form part of this wider political discourse.

3.1. The story of delay

Sandercock’s work (2003a, p.12) has highlighted that ‘the importance of story has rarely been understood, let alone validated in planning’, and that this is important because stories form ‘an all-pervasive, yet largely unrecognized force in planning practice’. We share Sandercock’s concern that stories need to be interrogated and held up for scrutiny given the political work that is often attempted through them, and the power relations embedded therein. Taken-for-granted narratives, such as planning delay, are likely to be but one representation of a

problem which needs to be questioned; especially to draw attention to Sandercock’s call to consider “how power shapes which stories get told, get heard, carry weight. We need to understand the work that stories do, or rather that we ask them to do, in deploying them, and to recognize the moral ordering involved in the conscious and unconscious use of certain plots and character types” (Sandercock, 2003a, p.12). Bulkens et al. (2015) illustrate how storytelling can be activated in service of alterity, but few have discussed the politicisation of narratives about planning and urban governance. Van Hulst (2012, p.299) has pointed out that there are many instances of ‘storytelling as a model of the way planning is done’, but that research which ‘looks at storytelling as a model for the way planning could or should be done’ is needed. Bulkens et al.’s work points to the existence of competing narratives and Van Hulst to prefigurative planning (see also Davoudi, 2023), yet what we can perceive is a less critical perspective in the literature thus far; one which centres on the utility of stories to justify particular *modes of planning*, without engagement with critical storytelling about planning. Moreover, (temporal) engagement with ‘persuasive storytelling’ about planning and the future is needed because powerful actors can ‘strive to eliminate or marginalize competing stories’ (Throgmorton, 2003, p.127).

Grube (2022) argues that having a ‘good’ policy idea is never enough in itself and from this viewpoint, the story is just as important as the substance, particularly if it is to gain political traction and develop support, and where “the purported policy solution on offer doesn’t match the complexity of the issue involved” (Grube, 2022, p.3). This is important for our purposes because planning systems involve complex professional practice issues (cf. Jupp & Inch, 2012; Moroni, 2023). Therefore, any successful critical narrative of delay must simplify or mask this complexity first in order to present planning, or elements of it, as ‘unnecessary’ – a key implication of delay and time talk. Then, as we highlight, frame it as a de-legitimised barrier to economic growth as the desired aim. In order to assist in breaking open such a process, the theoretical framing of stories in and of planning, as depicted by Sandercock (2003a), is helpful in arguing that five key properties of stories, which include a temporal dimension, are proto-typically involved:

- 1) ‘a temporal or sequential framework’ that provides tension and the need for action through a ‘ticking clock’.
- 2) an element of ‘*explanation or coherence*’ to the narrative that is presented to the audience.
- 3) the potential for ‘*generalizability*’ from the particular aspects of the story outward to the universal.
- 4) conventional elements such as plot, characters and ‘*shape or structure*’ (such as a beginning, middle and end).
- 5) some ‘*moral tension*’ that shapes the story.

Taking these in turn, the elements which Sandercock identifies for storytelling are clearly present in the discourse of planning delay in England. Firstly, the *temporal framework* that provokes a need for action is shown through the claims such as holding back housing development and exacerbating a ‘housing crisis’, or stymieing commercial development and so hindering economic growth. Secondly, the element of ‘*explanation or coherence*’ to the narrative that is presented to the audience is discernible in the repeated claims of delay being an unnecessary burden which accompanies policy reforms – and that propose variations of the same solution in different guises to target ‘delay’. The question of ‘*generalizability*’ from the particular aspects of the story outward to the universal can be seen in the way that little or no attempt is made to consider the specific situations or contexts in which delay is being created and why this is the case. Instead, any time taken is equated with delay. The story of planning places planners and local authorities as the conventional plot characters that ‘*shape or structure*’ the narrative as the source where such delay emanates by taking too long approving permissions. The final element of ‘*moral tension*’ that shapes the story is apparent in the argument that the planning system is failing a young generation of aspirant homeowners, or putting a brake on the country,

and that this is being done unnecessarily, hence prompting ‘legitimate’ grounds for ‘radical’ political intervention.

While the first of the five story properties outlined above is most obviously related to temporal framing, the others also play a role in terms of the effect/affect on their (intended) audience. In effective storytelling, there is a need to explain what the issue or problem is (i.e. delay is equal to inefficiency and an ‘unnecessary’ burden to growth), as well as simplify it, and then denote that it has wider implications and lessons if unaddressed. To be successful the (policy) story should follow a recognised pathway from a start point to a conclusion (i.e. to pursue reforms and enforce compliance) and imbue the narrative with clear ‘moral’ stakes for inaction.

3.2. The assumption of delay

It is also necessary to comprehend how planning delay has been defined or assumed in the wider urban studies literature. In his 2011 paper on planning delay, Ball makes little attempt to define delay, instead simply referring to ‘the time taken to achieve planning permission’ (Ball, 2011, p.350), and this is offered as a sufficient basis for understanding and evaluating delay. Prior work had taken more care to recognize the likely complexity of delay, but not to unravel it. For example, Keogh and Evans (1992, p.688) recognised that: “...planning is only one potential source of delay amongst many...an assessment of delay costs attributable solely to planning must occur in the context of the wider development process”. Indeed, they also cite Pearce, who argued that “an overall conclusion to be drawn on delays is that the issue is more complex than many people realise or are prepared to admit” (Pearce, 1987, p.15).

It is abundantly clear that multiple factors impact upon the development process and end-to-end pipeline of delivery beyond plan-making, or even the time taken to determine a planning application, and so other reasons for ‘delay’ are necessarily of interest. This is important here as the use of time is often linked directly to accusations of delay in planning and urban governance, without unpacking either definitions of delay, the actual use of time taken or other factors which shape *how* time is taken. It is notable that much of this critique has been derived from economic analysis resting on neoclassical, and subsequent neoliberal, assumptions about markets and costs of regulation (and see Mitchell, 2007 for a review).

The refrain about delay and speed has been taken-up by politically right-leaning think tanks to help justify market-based approaches to system reform in England (see also Foye, 2022). These frequently espouse “contemporary neoclassical economics framings of planning as merely imposing delays, risk, cost and uncertainty on developers” (Shepherd, McAllister, & Wyatt, 2024, p.1909). For example, previous interjections via the Policy Exchange held that:

“...delay means that investment takes place later than it should (if it has not been abandoned), with a consequent loss of efficiency. Associated with the delays built into the system is the level of detail which the British planning system tries to control, a factor which, of itself, builds in delays...the planning system was one of the main features of the UK economy which inhibited economic growth”.

(Evans & Hartwich, 2007, p.10)

Aside from the normative assumption about something happening ‘later than it should’, the way in which delay is presented, and indeed obscured, in the narrative is an important cornerstone of the critique of planning as an obstacle to growth. Reformist ideas applied to planning are routinely referred to questions of reducing ‘delay’ and promoting speed, to ‘unblocking’ the system and expediting growth, with these perpetuating a tried and tested narrative to maintain this truth claim.

As we chart here, serial accusations of delay applied to the English planning system have been made over several decades. Such claims to a lack of market responsiveness have provided a convenient reason for successive UK government administrations to lament perceived delays

in the production of local planning policy and to achieving planning decisions. Such apprehensions have tended to focus on both the time it takes to *produce* planning policy and site-allocation documents and to navigate the decision-making *process*. In both cases the primary assumption, or problematisation, of delay rests on de-risking development projects. We explain the underpinning research below before discussing how delay has been presented in the English case.

4. Methods

While the review has illustrated the import of political time and role of stories in the discourse of delay, there has been limited debate and a knowledge gap concerning delay in urban governance and planning. The research here draws on primary and secondary data to contextualise and evaluate how delay has been presented and highlights the claimed implications for outcomes derived from both government policy and industry debates.

The secondary data is underpinned by an extensive literature considering time across the social sciences, including a targeted review of delay in UK policy and practice debates over the past 50 years. The primary data is derived from two focus-groups drawn up from a purposive sampling strategy. The first group consisted of six senior practitioners from across the largest volume housing developers in England; the second group consisted of six senior public sector planners from local authorities across England. The theme of exploring delay in planning was introduced so that participants discussed how they understand and have experienced delay in professional practice. The key questions posed in the focus groups explored how delay has been framed, the implications for their work and what actions have been taken to manage delay. The developer and planner group responses were analysed using open and thematic coding and triangulated with the grey literature review.

The findings inform a typology of temporal strategies constructed to examine examples where time is deployed across three variations or ‘fixes’ styled as: *temporal flexing* or smoothing, *temporal fixing* or standardisation, and *temporal fitting* or accommodation in the English planning system.

5. Discussion: ‘fixing, flexing and fitting’ time to a growth-oriented planning in England

Government administrations in the UK have expressed a recurrent concern to target ‘delay’ in planning, with political rhetoric repeatedly returning to questions of time taken and subsequent implications being a ‘burden’ on the economy. Here we demonstrate, firstly, how this trope of delay has been deployed consistently to justify reform since the 1960s. Secondly, how this serves to enable a suite of actions oriented to perform the English planning system. The focus on time related measures has been neglected (see for example, Davoudi, Galland, & Stead, 2020). Nowotny (1994) has termed the types of interventions in focus here, as ‘chrono-technologies’. This is where time is used to double-down on, accommodate and otherwise manipulate (or mask) delay. In exploring such technologies, we outline the rhetoric and accompanying instantiations of delay since 1968, and then highlight examples of chrono-technologies as applied to planning in England.

Early expression of the ‘delay’ question appears in the 1968 Planning Act, with timeliness of decisions raised as an issue. The Heath government, elected in 1970, produced the 1973 Circular 142/73 ‘*Streamlining the Planning Machine*’ which envisaged that “a targeted reduction of planning delay” was to be pursued (Hansard, 1973). The same administration commissioned the 1975 Dobry report to provide an assessment of the development control system. This review was conducted in the context of the late 1960s property boom, which saw a large increase in planning applications and consequent ‘delay’ (see Flowers, 1986, p.43; Booth, 1996, p.27). Dobry (1975) starts his final report citing delay in the first paragraph and, in his interim report, he had argued that “not all

delay is unacceptable: it is the price we must pay for the democratic planning of the environment” (Dobry, 1973, p.3). At that time Wilkinson (1974, p.561) noted that Dobry recognised how “the quality of decisions is more important than speed”, while Jowell (1975), in reviewing the final report findings, observed that:

“Diagnosis of the condition depends in large part upon one’s perspective and interests. A developer would say that delay is the prime problem... Others concern themselves with the way decisions about development are made...A third group is concerned not with delay or decision-making procedures but with the substance of decision...The three main criticisms of development control are mutually contradictory; more participation inevitably causes more delay, more predictability means less flexibility and less tailoring of decisions to suit a particular local situation”.

(Jowell, 1975, p.543–544)

Perceptions of delay emanating from this period underpinned the 1980 Circular 22/80 ‘*Development control: policy and practice*’, which recommenced a process of improving efficiency and speed in decision-making (Griffiths, 1986). The Circular was supplemented in 1985 by the ‘Lifting the Burden’ White paper, which appeared to ignore much of the Dobry report, in seeking further simplification and efficiency improvements in planning; and which was to help “...enterprise to grow by reducing burdens imposed on business by administrative and legislative regulation” (cited in Home, 1991, p.293). The subsequent 1986 White Paper ‘*Building Businesses...Not Barriers*’ and the linked Green Paper, ‘*The Future of Development Plans*’, proposed reform to the system of plans once again, and cited delay as a key concern (see McConnell, 1987, p.104).

By 1997 the incoming New Labour administration had registered local government modernisation as a priority and began to work on measures to encourage strategic leadership from local government and to impose performance measurement. In 2001 the Labour Party’s Green Paper ‘*Planning: Delivering a Fundamental Change*’ led with four elements for reform, one of which was titled ‘speed of delivery’, and in assessing this element Le-Las (2002) argued:

“what matters to local communities, and that includes existing businesses, is the quality of decision-making. Targets should be the servants of good decisions, not an end in themselves. Bad decisions inflict costs, direct and indirect, on the locality for many years to come. Speed, simply for the sake of it, is a false economy”.

(Le-Las, 2002, p.136)

The Green paper paved the way to the 2004 Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act, which removed structure plans and introduced both the purpose of sustainable development for planning, while emphasising a need for economic growth (see Baker & Wong, 2013). Influenced by the Conservative Party Green paper ‘*Open Source Planning*’ (2010), the incoming Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition (2010–2015) argued that “whole layers of bureaucracy, delay and centralised micro-management will disappear” (Conservative Party, 2010, p.2). Further performance targets were embedded, and funding cuts imposed, with ‘delay’ firmly in the crosshairs. Since this time the pitch of the delay narrative/story has been continued, if not dialled-up, although with some recognition of multiple sources:

“We accept that parties other than the local planning authority can be a cause of delay – but such circumstances again point to the need for bespoke timetables to be agreed between the parties where justified”.

(DCLG, 2013, para. 36)

This acknowledged opportunities for parties to negotiate time through bilateral arrangements, such as Planning Performance Agreements (PPAs) (see MHCLG, 2019, NPG), or agreed ‘Extensions of Time’ (DCLG, 2014, NPG). However, pressure was directed towards local planning authorities in England to determine planning applications

within imposed statutory time frames, under threat of ‘special measures’ being applied (see DLUHC, 2022).

Further emphasis on time and delay came in 2020 with the publication of the Planning White Paper ‘*Planning for the Future*’, which contained eleven references to delay and argued that:

“decades of reform have built complexity, uncertainty and delay into the system. It now works best for large investors and companies, and worst for those without the resources to manage a process beset by risk and uncertainty. A simpler framework would better support a more competitive market with a greater diversity of developers, and more resilient places”.

(MHCLG, 2020, p.10)

While many of the policy proposals contained in the 2020 White Paper have not been realised, the overarching ‘project speed’ agenda remains in political rhetoric and policy iterations. A prime example being a proposed shift to a 30-month local plan production timeline, with the then government stating under the heading of ‘Speeding up the process for preparing a plan’ that: “We propose to set a timeframe of 30 months (two and half years) to prepare and put in place (adopt) a plan. That is much faster than currently” (DLUHC, 2023, no pagination). This approach is indicative of a persistent and temporally infused critique of planning. The accompanying UK government consultation in 2023 indicates this:

“Our vision is for local plans... to be prepared more quickly and updated more frequently to ensure more authorities have up-to-date plans that reflect local needs. And we want them to make the best use of new digital technology, so that people can get involved without having to go through hundreds of pages of documents at council offices and to drive improved productivity and efficiency in the plan-making process”.

(DLUHC, 2023, no pagination)

Most recently, the UK Labour government, elected in July 2024, has continued to focus on time and delay in planning. This discourse continues to form a central component of governmental policy agendas directed towards economic growth:

“Growth is now our national mission. There is no time to waste... Nowhere is decisive reform needed more urgently than in the case of our...antiquated planning system [which] leaves too many important projects getting tied up in years and years of red tape before shovels ever get into the ground...planning reform [is] at the centre of our political argument...taking immediate action to deliver this government’s mission to kickstart economic growth; And to take the urgent steps necessary to build the infrastructure that we need, including one and a half million homes over the next five years”.

(Rachel Reeves, 8th July 2024, no pagination)

This overview demonstrates that an emphasis on time and delay has been expressed by successive UK governments on both the political right and left over at least the past 50 years. The pressures to reform planning have emanated from governmental pressure to increase the delivery of housing and promote growth, and from the development industry seeking to assert greater control and reduce uncertainty. In support of change, the Home Builders Federation (HBF) have also been attempting to cost ‘delay’, and one of the leading planning consultancies in the UK have argued that “The costs of delay are real. The continuing malaise in plan-making locks up growth...” (Lichfields, 2023, no pagination).

When considering the perspective of volume housing developers on time in planning, they appear to centre in on questions of *uncertainty*, such that the time taken can be more elastic:

“Speed and planning aren’t two words that you generally associate with one another...the politics, local residents, consultees, resources, and then I would add into that the planning system, and all of those

things together, at any given time, will slow the process down...But it's not necessarily speed, it's certainty, I think that's what we really lack; I would take a more certain system for a quick system any day of the week'.

(Housing Developer, #03)

"The uncertainty for us means it's very hard to plan; and you think you are planning, you are doing the right thing, and then something else hits you, a change of policy, a change of attitude, a change of politics, and you have to change direction and respond to that. That lack of certainty makes a big difference".

(Housing Developer, #02)

This indicates how the deployment of simplistic delay narratives can serve to mask a priority to *control* time in planning, where the time taken in planning is less important than either having control of the timeframe overall, or else gaining other assurances that provide greater certainty over how long the regulatory process will take. In such cases, any planning delay that is brokered with certainty may not be an intolerable or unnecessary burden, and not least may assist with a more primary concern over whether a development scheme will be considered favourably in policy terms and set out what issues or evidence require the most attention.

When compared with the perspectives of local authority planners on time in planning, there is resonance with Dobry's findings in highlighting both the apparent simplification of 'delay' and how pressure to act speedily can compromise system legitimacy:

"What does the government want us to achieve out of this [performance] treadmill? Is it quality outcomes?...Or is it just stacked up decisions that were in time?...if the planning system is not valid, and it's seen as a creature of statute, well, what's the point in it?... Time pressure being expectation and perception, that it means different things to different people. It's subjective. Delay as a concept is subjective. You could frame something as delay, or you could frame something as engagement and collaboration".

(English Local Authority Planner, #01)

And recognising how failure to meet time parameters impacts on outcomes for planners also:

"...massive delays in plan-making mean that we are in a difficult position in terms of five year housing land supply... the ability to have a continually up-to-date local plan is massively impacted by the amount of time it takes to do that [work]...the impacts of the delay are potentially no five housing year land supply... as soon as you didn't have a five-year housing land supply you would be hit with lots of speculative Greenfield applications".

(English Local Authority Planner, #04)

Such practice insights acknowledge a more complex and nuanced position on delay than political narratives are often willing to admit. The multiple factors that combine to add 'clock time' to planning outcomes was highlighted in the 2016 *'Delivering the value of planning'* study, which pointed out that "...a key criticism of many studies of delay...is the narrow focus on timescales of decision-making with little appreciation of how other aspects of the market can contribute to slow performance (such as the supply of credit, developer behaviour and structure, and broader land market operations)" (Adams et al., 2016, p.18). Those authors also noted that the "framing of delay as a cost arises from an economic position that factors time as a major component of market decisions...influenced through theories based on transaction costs, which are often in direct contradiction to theories of welfare economics that tend to focus on outcomes" (ibid, p.18). This distinction between 'transaction costs' associated with time spent in the planning process, set against the 'outcomes' of planning decisions, was evident in the developer and planner perspectives we elicited. This underscores the tensions and conflicts in the development process that are often omitted,

unknowingly or not, in the dominant discourse of delay.

The examples we highlight below from the English planning system provide instances where different types of action are provoked by and help to sustain the planning and delay discourse. If the story told is one of delay, the solution is posed as speed, but as above the actual prescriptions applied are more mixed. Table 1 sets out three instances of temporal measures, with explanations regarding their underlying logic, and which reflect governmental attempts to 'bring the story of speed to life', across the three-fold typology of *flexing*, *fixing* and *fitting* time. The purpose is to highlight indicative examples of how chrono-technologies are applied in the English system.

Each example type indicated in Table 1 gravitates back to the control of time and the certainty of the planning process, rather than 'reducing'

Table 1

Combatting delay: examples of 'flexing, fixing and fitting' of time by smoothing, standardisation and accommodation.

Examples	Explanation	Logic
Determination deadlines for planning applications & 30-month local plan production	Setting standardised time frame for decisions – 8 or 13 weeks for minor and major developments. Pressure on LPAs to meet statutory determination periods. Setting a standardised time frame for local plan production putting pressure on LPAs to collect evidence, write and consult on policy.	' <i>standardising delay</i> ' FIXING time Performance management to standardise time taken - to reduce the uncertainty aspect of 'delay' over decision and policymaking.
5-year land supply for housing	This involves converting the quantum of housing need calculated for a local area into a housing temporality i.e. numbers both in space but also in time. The LPA needs to demonstrate an up-to-date 5-year land supply or else be open to speculative/unplanned housing development. Quantification of planning performance by number of residential units becomes the arbiter of good planning for housing over a rolling-period.	' <i>smoothing delay</i> ' FLEXING time Pipelining of development is institutionalised. Temporal - rhetorical framing of a 'crisis politics' made manifest in meet set housing figures to resolve the 'housing crisis'. Pressure is on LPA and enabling Developers to propose other sites where delivery is not sustained.
Extensions of Time	'EoT's' – time extensions where there is a specific need/agreement for a more bespoke timescale. This effectively tolerates 'delay'. "Extension of time agreements are useful in exceptional circumstances to allow additional time for unforeseen issues to be resolved to the benefit of all parties. However, the reasons should be legitimate... We understand that the existing metrics and the use of extension of time agreements do not adequately reflect performance of planning departments or the experience of customers" (DLUHC, 2023, para. 49–50).	' <i>accommodating delay</i> ' FITTING time Developers agree that time used is helpful to 'growth'. In this way the state negotiates power with the developer.

or ‘eliminating’ supposed delay. To sustain the discourse, policy tools can be amended where they are not performing according to the political story being told. Instances of delay can be variously explained away, accommodated, manipulated or masked where this is supportive of sustaining underpinning (economic) logics. This results in a ‘symbiosis’ between the political project, narrative and policy tools set in a constantly shifting relationship negotiated to manage alignment and justify action in service of a broader growth agenda.

6. Conclusion: challenging the discourse of delay

The contributions made in this paper have been to demonstrate how the use of a pervasive and persistent, but ill-defined and evidenced discourse of delay has been promoted as part of a storyline about planning system failure. This work is part of necessary attention directed towards time and delay in urban governance as a relatively neglected area of research. The theoretical perspectives on the politicisation of time presented here assist in examining how such discourses are constructed and mobilised through sustained rhetoric by governments when seeking to promote decision-making speed as part of securing a governmentality that asserts certainty and growth as overriding priorities.

We have shown how serial accusations of planning creating delay have been deployed in the UK to problematise plan-making and planning decisions, and thus justify market-led reforms that promise speed and efficiency as appropriate solutions. Despite such long-run claims, the perspectives of developers presented here highlight that time taken or ‘delay’ is not seen as the main issue at stake, but rather the level of (un)certainly for private sector actors that shape development risk and financial costs. The three forms of ‘flexing, fixing and fitting’ time to suit development objectives influence attitudes towards planning delay, when equated with uncertainty. In contrast, the perspective of public planners has focussed on outcomes. This is where time is needed in service of good decision-making and quality of tangible outcomes.

Delay may be a nebulous idea at best, and commentators have struggled to apprehend it; but, furthermore, the apparently enduring ‘problem’ of delay has seemingly evaded effective resolution. Critiques of planning as a problem which is to be mastered suffers from a fallacy that society is itself inadequate or incompatible with neoliberal reason. Governmental appeals towards broader neoliberal-informed discourses (such as the speed/delay nexus) are only one component of a much grander discourse of claims to economic competence and securing ‘essential’ growth. Planning is implicated in these meta-narratives by virtue of efficiency being perceived as necessary for market operation and delay as a barrier to economic growth. Overall what is shown is that the tensions and wider costs of development activity that planning systems are tasked to address are often missing or denied in simplified and politicised claims regarding delay as they sit uncomfortably with the political story being presented.

Such a situation lends credence to a conclusion that an overall temporal discourse (i.e. time talk, chronotope, storyline) must be sustained and defended to maintain political legitimacy. Governments must demonstrate their commitment to market actors through narratives that constitute attempts to impose political time, and which filter down into a specific set of policy reforms, prescriptions and tools that are claimed to achieve such aims, including template approaches or reinforcement of deadlines, targets and prioritisation. The consequence is a preferencing of (assumed) market temporalities over all others. What can we say about this? Is it an indication that the institutional arrangements, issue, story, prescription or (chrono)technologies applied to tackle delay are at fault? If so, we need to abandon simplistic assertions of delay and replace them with a more critical inquiry into the causes and implications of time taken. In reflecting on the role of planning 50 years ago, Jowell (1975, p.549) provided a series of resonant questions about time and delay in posing: “[W]hat is it all about? What are we trying to achieve? How is it all proceeding?” and pointed out that there was no baseline or “yardstick by which to evaluate” them. We see the discourse

on delay has not developed much further since then.

In critically examining the discourse of delay here, the paper seeks to encourage a research agenda to challenge and counter hegemonic political and economic discourses on ‘delay’ in urban governance and planning that focus on achieving a speed-growth agenda over other substantive purposes. This necessitates engaging with political time, power relations and multiple temporalities to shape ‘proper time’ for urban governance and planning practices (see for example, Dobson & Parker, 2024b).

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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