

Article

Identities as Enabling Conditions of Sustainability Practices in Urban Planning: A Critical Realist Exploration with Planners in England

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Abstract

The case has been made in reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change for the crucial role of the built environment in mitigating the worst excesses of a warming global climate. Urban planners are essential actors in delivering a sustainable built environment. Alongside macro influences such as policy, practices in urban planning are influenced by underlying mechanisms at the level of the individual. Adopting a Bhaskarian critical realist approach, in this study we examined enabling conditions of sustainability practices. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 19 planners in England with at least seven years' experience. The analysis found evidence from the planners' experience of tensions between the three strands of sustainability, and of practices which could be understood from theoretical perspectives of collaboration/consensus, dissensus and pursuit of specific outcomes. A professional commitment towards a better environment appeared to be a generative mechanism for sustainability practices and underlying conditions included professional identity, identity as a public sector worker, organisational and team identities, and personal commitment. Constraining conditions were found to include stakeholder and political pressure and weak policy. The findings suggest points of leverage for the professional body, local authorities and planners themselves, in order to strengthen sustainability practices and potentially lead to transformation.

Keywords

built environment; climate change; critical realism; identities; professional identity; sustainability; urban planners

Issue

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1. Introduction

Climate breakdown, predicted by environmental scientists over the past 40 years, is increasingly permeating public consciousness. Friday strikes by schoolchildren around the world and a growing campaign of civil disobedience have been widely covered in the UK media. These campaigns are united in their objective of far

greater policy intervention on greenhouse gas emissions and biodiversity.

Unlike other sectors with weak environmental regulation, such as aviation and shipping, the legislation called for by civil campaigns is—in part—already in place for the built environment. The built environment has major impacts on the natural world (IPCC, 2014). Greenhouse gas emissions are created in the manufacture and delivery

of construction materials, particularly cement and steel. In operation, buildings consume an estimated 40% of energy globally (IPCC, 2014). In addition to contributing to global warming, the built environment is a major factor in pushing conditions beyond another planetary boundary, that of biodiversity loss (Rockström et al., 2009).

In the face of these consequences, there is a clear argument that the pursuit of environmental sustainability is fundamental to the idea of urban planning as “fundamentally about making choices, with and for others, about what makes good places” (Campbell, 2002, p. 274). To this end, the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), introduced in England in 2012, describes itself as having a “golden thread” of sustainable development running through it. However, outside of specimen developments with strong sustainability credentials, there is little evidence that recent planning legislation has succeeded in achieving a widespread sustainable built environment. Despite the rhetoric of declaring its goal to be “the greenest government ever” (Cameron, 2010), the UK Coalition Government of 2010 subsequently removed the previous government’s target for new homes to be zero-energy from 2016. Nevertheless, the NPPF remains the current policy framework for planning in England: It was revised in July 2018 with further amendments in February 2019.

Policies are enacted through an ecosystem of actors and institutions. Lipsky (2010) argued that policy regulation is created in the day-to-day practices of what he termed “street-level bureaucrats,” that is, public service workers whose role it is to administer and conduct the processes through which policy is realised. Consequently, the current study sought to examine the role of the urban planner as one such ‘bureaucrat’ of substantial importance to a more sustainable built environment. The context in which the planner in England operates is now briefly described. We then move on to previous research on the central construct for the current study, that of identities, before describing our philosophical and epistemological position in the Method section.

1.1. The Professional Urban Planner in the English Planning System

In England, the regulatory and policy functions of urban planning remain primarily the responsibility of local government. Local authorities gather evidence to develop local policy and framework plans in compliance with national policy and legislation, and manage their implementation. Planners working for the local authority offer guidance on policy and provide judgement on applications for development. While they have delegated powers to decide on typically small developments, their work is set within a wider context of local planning committees comprised of elected officials and the Planning Inspectorate which oversees appeals against planning judgements. The Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) grants the professional qualification of Chartered Town Planner. To at-

tain this status, planners are required to complete an accredited, planning-related postgraduate degree and to have achieved relevant experience. The RTPI considers sustainability as a key aspect of an accredited planning education, specifically identifying the relationship between climate change and the built environment as something that planners should be able to explain (RTPI, 2012). The RTPI also requires its chartered members to continue to update their knowledge through systematic and recorded continuing professional development.

1.2. The Role of Identities

Lipsky’s notion of the “street-level bureaucrat” draws attention to the role of individuals within regulatory systems. From a sociological perspective, the urban planner administering the processes which enact policy and legislation exemplifies the individual agent operating within societal structures. As Archer (2003) argued, social agency mediates the causal power of social structures—the individual may reflect on his/her position and may choose different stances in relation to the prevailing societal forms. Consequently the motivation of the individual planner can affect their behaviour and, in turn, the outcomes of planning practices in which they are involved.

A particularly influential aspect of motivation is that of self-identity. Within the self, individuals manage a hierarchy of multiple social identities, such as employee, professional, parent or environmentalist (Stryker, 1987). In the working environment, the professional identity is likely to be most salient (Stryker, 1987). Individuals will tend to act in a manner that aligns with their professional identity, in order to lay claim to a potentially valued identity and to express who they are (Marra & Angouri, 2011) and to fit in and be accepted by society, that is, by the Lacanian ‘Other’ (Gunder & Hillier, 2004). Conceptually, the professional identity overlaps with the “planner’s ego-ideal,” described as developing during education and in the course of experience of work (Gunder, 2004). Scholars in social psychology have long examined the processes of the self (Mead, 1934) and an interest in identities in organisational studies has been mapped from the 1990s (Koot & Ybema, 2000). Where Koot and Ybema (2000) argued that, in post-traditional society, the old certainties were gone, leaving identities as continuously evolving personal projects, Stryker and Burke (2000) and others have viewed the internalisation of social roles, and their assimilation into the self-concept, as the foundations of identities. Whether seen as actively pursued personal projects or as subjectively assimilated roles, identities are viewed as guiding meaning, cognition and behaviour.

Writers on the subject of professions have listed attributes of a profession, including: a representative body which accredits qualifications and determines membership; an agreed code of conduct; a specialised body of knowledge; and complex or specialised work, typically

with exclusive jurisdiction. The role of urban planner to a large degree meets the definition of a profession by Evetts (2011) and others. However, much previous work on the concept of the profession, such as Abbott's (1988) "system of professions," has been sociological in approach, exploring how 'professions' have developed in societies over time. Less attention has been paid to the lived experience of the identities of the professional and few studies have considered built environment professionals. Addressing the gap, in part, Foxell (2019) focused on three professional groupings in the built environment (architect, engineer, surveyor), describing their institutional history and current challenges and, in one of the small number of studies on professionalism in planning, Campbell and Marshall (2002) usefully explored specific aspects of professional experience. However, there is little work to our knowledge which examines, in particular, identity-congruent behaviour relating to the sustainable built environment. Our research question was: How do planners' identities influence their work on sustainability? We began with a particular focus on the professional identity, given its salience in the work context.

1.3. Public Interest and Sustainability in Planning Theories

The notion of sustainability is linked in planning theory with that of public interest, both contested concepts. Foxell (2019) documented the long-standing assumption that professionals, including those in the built environment, should work in the public interest. Although urban planning continues to be defined as having the public interest at its core (Slade, Gunn, & Schoneboom, 2018), the concept has been shown to be problematic in its assumption of a single, homogenous public (Sandercock, 1998), a problematisation reflected in the wider evolution of planning theory.

The post-1960s move away from understanding planning as a technical-rational process, based on technical evidence, toward understanding planning as value-led, where decisions are inherently subjective in nature, has strongly disrupted the traditional idea of the professional as knowledge-wielding 'expert.' In the absence of a specialised body of knowledge, it has disrupted too the planner's claim to a profession. In this paradigm, the positioning of sustainability as fundamental to better places underpins the argument that the pursuit of sustainability should be a key value, forming a fundamental part of the planner's professional identity. However, Campbell's (2002) use of the words "with and for others" hint at a key tension in how contrasting approaches in planning theory envisage this being achieved in practice.

Several key strands of contemporary planning theory seek to understand the agency of the professional planner, strands that are commonly taught as part of a planning education. Arguably the crucial distinction between them is in how they position the professional judgement of the planner in relation to the roles of other stake-

holders, including the wider public, with consequences for how they operationalise sustainability. On the one hand, collaborative planning (Healey, 2006) is representative of a communicative approach, where decisions are a matter of consensus reached by multiple stakeholders, rather than the 'expert' judgement of the planner. Similarly concerned with the role of dialogue is an agonistic approach, addressing concerns that a communicative focus on consensus may cause participants to hide their true interests (McClymont, 2011). In an agonistic approach, participants are adversaries with conflicting interests (Mouffe, 2005), leading instead to dissensus. However, the logic behind collaborative planning is that the decision is based on consensus, so that there is no space for a judgement to be made about whether the outcome of the decision is truly sustainable.

Conversely, other theories of planning maintain a focus on the idea that planning should pursue substantive outcomes. This is encompassed in Fainstein's (2010) approach, setting out key principles such as equity and diversity that underpin the "just city," which may be positioned as the substantive outcomes that sustainable planning should strive to achieve. Superficially, such an approach appears reminiscent of the traditional model of the expert. However, this is not intended to return to the fallacy that planning is a technical matter, but, instead, defines the role of the professional planner to make judgements, such that it becomes the role of the planner to use the mechanisms at their disposal to influence sustainability much more directly. Understanding planning as value-led means that no one theoretical approach can automatically be privileged over the other, and an analysis of how the professional identity of planners is practiced in relation to sustainability might expect to find elements of each.

Exploring how these theoretical tensions play out in relation to the public interest, Maidment (2016) draws on the typology proposed by Campbell and Marshall (2000), which positions the public interest as either substantive outcomes that constitute a common good, as exemplified in Fainstein's (2010) *The Just City*, or as arrived at through a dialogical approach, as exemplified by collaborative planning (Healey, 2006). Maidment's argument is for the importance of the common good based on a set of fundamental values shared by a notional public at scale, within which the interests of more localised publics can be accommodated. That is, some common values and interests may be attributed to a large and heterogeneous public, representing also the values of those who cannot articulate their own interests (such as future generations and non-human living organisms). The common good, therefore, describes, inter alia, reduction of greenhouse gas emissions to mitigate climate change and other forms of sustainable development (Maidment, 2016). This is the concept of common good which will be used in this article. While the literature has debated the difficulties of defining what is meant by sustainable development (Rittel & Webber, 1973), the NPPF (2012, p. 8)

references five principles, including living within planetary environmental limits and a fair and healthy society and, with minor changes of wording, these principles remain unchanged in the 2019 version.

In this section, we have outlined the global importance of sustainable development, the regulatory context in which planners in England work, and provided a brief overview of previous work on theoretical perspectives on identities, public interest and sustainability. A gap has been identified on the identity-driven motivations and behaviours of planning professionals. In the next section, we set out our research philosophy and method.

2. Method

2.1. Research Philosophy

Underlying pre-suppositions guide any approach to research, even if these remain unexamined. Such assumptions include questions of ontology, epistemology and methodology. Critical realism (CR) offers a meta-theory of scientific research which makes explicit its philosophical stance on what is real, what can be known and what can be observed. In seeking to examine factors influencing sustainable practice in the current study, and adopting a post-positivist approach (Allmendinger & Tewdwr-Jones, 2002), CR offered a rigorous and logical framework that is appropriate to the subject matter. Of the sometimes contending schools within CR, developed over the last 50 years, our approach was guided by that of its leading exponent, Roy Bhaskar, and by the later refinements of Margaret Archer. The essential features are now briefly outlined.

CR posits human society as an open system in which observable events are engendered by underlying and enduring structures. Due to the non-deterministic nature of open systems, prediction is not possible (Bhaskar, 1998). However, explanation of the generative mechanisms and associated conditions of events is not only valuable but in fact essential in order to achieve change (Bhaskar, 1998). Generative mechanisms and causal powers may be uncovered through research aimed at identifying factors without which events could not take place—the notion of natural necessity (Bhaskar, 2015)—and such mechanisms may become the new phenomena to be explained (Bhaskar, 1998). CR proposes a stratified reality (Porporo, 2015) comprising three conceptual domains: the domain of the real—existing independently of human society; the domain of the actual—where events occur of which people may (or may not) become aware; and the domain of the empirical—data on events which may be observed or gathered. Thus empirical research has access only to data which are distinguished from the events giving rise to them. The events are generated by mechanisms and conditions within the domain of the real which are the ultimate focus of useful research (Collier, 1994). CR research offers “a non-arbitrary procedure for arriv-

ing at (fallible and iteratively corrigible) real definitions of forms of social life” (Porporo, 2015, p. 162).

The non-deterministic nature of open systems is summarised by Bhaskar (1998, p. xii): “Generative mechanisms...may be possessed unexercised, exercised unactualized, and actualized undetected or unperceived.” Whether generative mechanisms do indeed give rise to actual events depends on contextual conditions, termed “constraints” and “enablements” by Archer (2003). Conditions do not exist in isolation, rather they are potential causal powers arising from structural and cultural emergent properties (Archer (2003). They are wholly contingent upon their setting, that is, they may or may not exist as potential influences, and if they exist, they may or may not impact on generative mechanisms to cause events, in any particular context. To examine the conditions which could exist is to add to knowledge of the underlying processes through which events may occur. Further, knowledge of particular conditions may suggest routes through which conditions may be altered, bringing the potential for changing observed events. CR’s fundamental embrace of uncertainty acknowledges that intervention on conditions cannot bring certainty in changing outcomes but the approach argues that change and indeed transformation in society cannot happen without understanding of the underlying causal powers (Porporo, 2015).

By rejecting perspectives which reduce the person to practice, habitus or discourse, CR positions people as conscious and feeling actors (Porporo, 2015), a perspective which accords with our argument above for the critical agentic role of planners in realisation of policy. Further, the theoretical pluralism of CR is compatible with exploring value-led approaches to planning that might be manifested through dialogical and/or substantive-outcome focussed modes of planning.

2.2. Procedure

We conducted semi-structured interviews with 19 practicing town planners in England, each of whom had at least seven years’ experience. Ethical approval was gained before data collection. The participants were recruited through communications with alumni of accredited programmes in planning at the authors’ institutions, and through the authors’ professional networks. Participants’ experience ranged from seven to 19 years. Eight were women and 18 worked in local authorities. Job titles included Senior Planning Officer or equivalent (4), Principal Planning Officer (5) and Planning Manager (5). All but one worked in local authorities. Four participants worked primarily in development management (control), seven worked in policy and six combined both (this categorisation was not applicable for two participants). Interviews, lasting on average one hour, were audio recorded with permission and transcribed verbatim. Nine interviews were conducted by the first author and ten by the third author based on the same

interview schedule. The interviews included questions on: career to date; perceptions of planning as a profession and of current planning policy; and the concept of sustainable planning. First, thematic analysis was conducted (Braun & Clarke, 2006) using Nvivo Pro 12, in which extracts referring to professionalism and to sustainability were coded. Where appropriate, causal powers or conditions were identified. Second, in order to examine salient conditions in greater detail, we chose two cases to explore in more depth, one with a planner who worked on policy and the other with a planner who worked in Development Management. Only two were chosen in order to balance depth, breadth, and traceability. Following the approach of Naess and Jensen (2002), we then took two sample 'events,' in CR terminology, and attempted to map the generative mechanisms and conditions which may impact them. All names below are pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

3. Findings

3.1. Meanings of Sustainability

The participants in general understood sustainability to encompass environmental, social and economic aspects and described the challenges in seeking outcomes that satisfied all three dimensions. However there was recognition that a balanced outcome may be an ideal and in reality, there may be pressure to achieve housing or other targets. The following quotation alludes to not only mutually exclusive goals (here: economic versus environmental objectives) but also a "political" pressure:

I suppose you've always got the political angle as well, [that] is that something might not be in the best location, say, environmentally. But if it brings a lot of jobs then....You know, it's a tricky one. (Anne)

In CR terms, this would suggest that political focus or pressure is a condition influencing the interpretation of policy. Given the context in which elected public representatives, most of whom are aligned with national political parties, form the planning committees which decide on large proposed developments, it is to be expected that party politics and local power struggles will influence outcomes. This is the setting which planners must navigate.

Examples were given of sustainability objectives in the realm of transport, local economy and biodiversity. However, many of the participants questioned the usefulness of the term that has come to be seen as "a form of tokenism...a buzzword" (Gail):

It's so elastic that it can mean anything to anyone....I would never do this, but you could almost write a committee report...and find and replace 'sustainable' with 'good,' and it wouldn't actually make much difference, because that's how watered down the definition of sustainable has become. (Kevin)

This lack of detail and precision in the term was linked to the view of the core national policy document (the NPPF) as not useful, despite its stated objective of placing sustainable development as a core construct. The vagueness of critical concepts meant "it's a lawyer's dream, because there's just so much you can interpret and fight the meaning of" (Fliss). A further condition therefore may be the precision and defensibility of written legislation. This quotation also references the "fight" described in many of the interviews, with dissenting views on planners' judgements from developers, the general public, local elected members and even other parts of the local authority.

Despite their dependence on inadequate policy, many of the participants saw planners as jointly responsible for the achievement of sustainable development. Planners were not seen as solely responsible: When asked who they viewed as responsible for delivering a sustainable built environment, the interviewees referred not only to central government but also to local government, council partners and specialist advisers such as Highways England. A few argued that everyone involved in the built environment shared responsibility, from citizens submitting a request for planning, to developers and advisers.

The view that planners had an important role in achieving sustainability was echoed in the sense from many of the participants of a personal commitment to protecting the environment. For example, Neil said: "as a personal thing, I have massive ambition to deliver the next Hampstead Heath." Many others spoke of a personal drive to "leave everything in a better state than [they] found it" (Gail). This illustrates how personal motivation and commitment may drive professional decisions. Personal commitment, then, may operate as a condition enabling sustainable practice.

3.2. Meanings of Profession

Almost all participants were unequivocal in their view that planning is a profession, "definitely a profession—absolutely" (Heidi). Their view was based in part on the characteristics of professions cited in the literature (Evetts, 2011). All referred to the requirement for a relevant degree. Most mentioned membership of a professional body, although interestingly not all were members themselves. Many of the participants described their profession as rewarding and fulfilling, particularly in its breadth, variety and multidisciplinary nature. One point of departure from previous definitions of profession was on a specialised body of knowledge. Rather than a profession-specific set of knowledge, the participants emphasised their role as integrators of knowledge from multiple sources: "We have to have that broader awareness of a whole range of issues, from sustainable drainage through to residual land values for the development of land. So, it is a very broad area" (Rob). The planners' contribution was described as that of moving

between micro-level detail and macro-level strategy at a place-wide level and there was a general view that this ability was uniquely that of the planner. This may be seen as a claim for unique skills, perhaps substituting for a jurisdictional claim for a specialised body of knowledge.

One theme common to all participants was that of shared professional values and principles, in particular, transparency, openness and fairness. While a few participants noted that, in reality, objectivity and independence are not always achievable, most described independent judgement as an essential characteristic of the planning professional: “I do not think that planners think in a way that the NPPF wants us to think. I think we are too independently minded and too professional to be influenced in that way” (Harry).

3.3. Professional and Other Identities

This quotation also shows the shared identity of the planner: The legislation (in the form of the NPPF) is positioned as expecting a particular approach but “we,” “planners” are not to be influenced due to a neutral stance inherent in their sense of professionalism. The common identity was referred to in many accounts: “There’s a recognition amongst planners that we’re all in the same boat together, particularly in the public sector” (Jack).

Jack’s quote demonstrated multiple salient identities—that of planner but also that of public sector worker, and these multiple identities were in evidence in other accounts: “I see myself as a public sector, a public servant first and a planner second” (Harry). This speaks to the theoretical understanding of identities as multiple and arranged in a rank order of salience (Stryker, 1987). Further, there was plentiful evidence of a sense of individualised professional identity. Participants used phrases such as “I, actually, as a planner” (Beth) and “my duty, as a professional planner” (Rob), providing evidence for the internalisation of the professional identity.

Aligned with and part of their professional identity as a planner, most participants described a sense of purpose related to contributing to society. They referred to their influence on the happiness and well-being that people can experience in their lives and work. Most participants phrased such concepts in terms of public good or community betterment: “There’s a sense of your professional principles as well in terms of is what you’re doing ultimately going to be for the public benefit” (Jack). This professional motivation often appeared closely associated with the sense of personal commitment discussed above, exemplifying the theoretical understanding of role identities as internalised through assimilation with the self-concept. Identities then—as professional planner and as public sector employee—may form enabling conditions for sustainable practice.

3.4. Critical Realist Analysis of Two Cases and Two Events

As described in Section 2.2, we attempted to map the generative mechanisms and influencing conditions for two cases (one policy planner and one development management planner) and two events:

- Inclusion of an environmental requirement in a local plan or policy;
- Determination of a planning application which imposes a requirement to take action to protect or enhance the environment.

Table 1 presents the events and an initial set of generative mechanisms and conditions, illustrating a number of the points made above and extending the list of conditions. For reasons of focus and space, only the conditions and supporting evidence for one mechanism in each case are presented in detail.

The first event is the inclusion of an environmental requirement in a local plan or policy:

- Generative mechanisms which may impact positively or negatively on this event include national legislation, other local policies, the requirement of the local authority to produce such a plan or policy and the actions of the planning team in its production. We propose that a further generative mechanism is a planner’s professional commitment to improvement of the physical and natural environment, a “professionally correct belief” (Gunder & Hillier, 2004);
- Amongst the conditions which act as constraints and enablements are professional identity, personal commitment and other identities. Each may vary in strength and hinder or enhance the generative mechanism depending on context;
- The illustrative quotations for professional identity in Table 1 show an alignment between personal motivation and the choice of profession (a), a perceived professional norm of seeking a better world (b) and motivated action to improve the natural environment (c). Gail positions herself within the grouping of professional planners in extract (d) and explicitly notes her personal commitment (e). The participants in general agreed that planning is a team activity without individual ‘stars’ and many responses showed an identification with the work team, illustrated by (f). Beyond professional and team identities, participants showed stronger or weaker identification with their employer organisation. While Gail in extract (g) appears to identify as a local authority employee, she also sees the planning team as being outsiders (h);

Table 1. Critical realist analysis of conditions underlying professional commitment to improvement.

| Generative Mechanism | Condition | Supporting Evidence |
|--|-----------------------------|---|
| Event 1: Environmental requirement included in local plan/policy (all supporting quotations from Gail, working in planning policy). | | |
| National legislation Local policy Requirement to produce plan/policy Planning team drafts plan/policy | | |
| Professional commitment to “make the world a better place” | Profession identity | (a) I think socially, I knew I wanted to try and make things better, if you know what I mean? So, that was really what drew me to planning in the first place. (b) Most people I know who have been successful as planners all share certain characteristics..., and oh, it sounds really hippyish, but make the world a better place. (c) There are other things we look to do as well. I mean, air quality, that’s a big one ...But, I think with that, it’s very, very airy-fairy....So, one of the ways we thought we’ll deal with it was, “Well, we have to provide mitigation. We can make sure that we include trees as part of our mitigation.” |
| | Personal commitment | (d) They go into planning because they want to make things better than they found them, whether that’s environmentally or socially. I think I’ve got a bit of that in me. (e) I do obviously care about the environment. |
| | Team identity | (f) I’d say we’re a small team....I would say things like our involvement in trying to get funding for things....So, that’s probably been where we’ve had most influence in terms of trying to get things done, whether it’s simple things like cycle lanes, cycle schemes ...working with other authorities to do joint working for mitigation. |
| | Organisational identity | (g) You have to be quite dogged, I think, to be a planner, because you are so often, especially in the local authority, you’re so often on the end of abuse from one party or another, even your own local members, members of the public. (h) We still, as planners...we still get the same sort of opposition that we get from members of the public sometimes, from in the authority itself. So, whilst they’re happy to put us through the education, they still sometimes see us as a barrier. |
| | Level of autonomy/authority | (i) I don’t see that we’re anything other than hierarchical. That said, things get delegated...I would say [applying own judgement] fits within the hierarchy. |

Table 1. (Cont.) Critical realist analysis of conditions underlying professional commitment to improvement.

| Generative Mechanism | Condition | Supporting Evidence |
|---|-------------------------------|--|
| Event 2: Determination of application which demands environmental action (all supporting quotations from Ella, working in development management). | | |
| National legislation Local policy Requirement to determine applications Determination completed and signed off | | |
| Professional commitment to “make the world a better place” | Professional identity | <p>(j) The fact that you do need to be educated, and you need certain qualifications, makes it a profession to me. I’m a member of the RTPI as well, so that makes me feel a bit more like I’m part of some kind of profession. Not that I feel that I get that much out of that, but it makes me feel like I’m signed up to a profession rather than just a job....There’s nothing that I can think of specifically that’s made me think that [education or experience has contributed to the feeling of profession].</p> <p>(k) We don’t want to not allow people to stay in their houses and extend to meet their needs, but we’ve got to protect the built environment. We’ve got to do our job.</p> <p>(l) Sometimes I think as a DM officer you have to accept that you may have a personal opinion on something, but you have to make the decision based on policy, upon experience, other decisions being made locally, and appeals as well....Like with the barn conversions....Morally, in principle, I think it’s wrong, but the point is I have to make decisions in accordance with policy.</p> |
| | Personal commitment | (m) The decisions I make I think about the consequences, because I’m a local resident, and because I just care, and because I’m going to see the consequences. |
| | Public sector worker identity | <p>(n) [<i>For you as a professional, what values are important in what you do?</i>] To me, bearing in mind I’ve always worked in the public sector, certain morals are trying to achieve what’s best for the built environment and the community.</p> <p>(o) I suppose as a DM officer I’m very much struggling with that. How can we protect the green belt, how can we achieve sustainable development, when the NPPF allows so much in the green belt?</p> |
| | Team identity | (p) So we’ve certainly had [NPPF] in mind, and tried to use it to prevent unsustainable development and protect rural land in recent years. |
| | Organisational identity | (q) In terms of the details of what’s been built, then yes, I think I and we as an authority can influence and do influence a lot on what’s built, but it’s only a certain amount. |
| | Level of autonomy/authority | (r) Each week maybe 15 to 20 planning applications will come to me to then sign off and make that final decision on. |

- A final condition which appears salient to the exercise of professional commitment is that of the level of authority or autonomy available to a planner, illustrated in extract (i).

The second event is the determination of a planning application which imposes a requirement to take action to protect or enhance the environment.

- Generative mechanisms which impact positively or negatively on this event include national legislation, local policies, the requirement of the local authority to determine a planning application and the actions of the planning team to make and sign off the decision. We propose that a further generative mechanism is a planner's professional commitment to improvement of the physical and natural environment;
- Many of the same conditions as for Event 1 apply. Ella demonstrated an understanding of profession in line with definitions in the literature (Foxell, 2019) although she appeared to have a somewhat ambivalent perception of the profession in extract (j). Here she appeared to contradict the expectation that education and early career shape professional identities (Gunder & Hillier, 2004). Nevertheless, she implied a robust relationship between the role of the planner and protecting the built environment in (k). In (l), she described an ongoing tension between personal morals and the requirement for a planner to decide based on policy, which speaks to the argument of McClymont (2011) that professional behaviour requires hiding personal interests;
- Her use of the term "DM officer" could reference a planner identity but could also relate to an identity as a public sector worker. This latter identity is clear in extracts (n) and (o), in which she specifically discusses objectives around protection of the built and natural environment. References to team and organisational identities are made in extracts (p) and (q), and in (r), her role in taking decisions on cases and signing off on the decisions of more junior planners is described.

4. Discussion

The findings presented the analysis of 19 interviews with planners in England, exploring the themes of sustainability and professional identity, and examining enabling conditions of sustainability practices.

The participants' accounts showed universal awareness of the ubiquitous definition of sustainability as requiring a balance between the 'triple bottom line' of environmental, social and economic sustainability. The participants also described their experience of the dynamic tensions inherent in the triad, as recognised by Campbell (1996). They further highlighted the shifting

and contested meanings of sustainability, speaking to the Lacanian notion of sustainability as a 'master signifier,' a term requiring no further thought while serving as a 'professionally correct' belief with normative implications (Gunder & Hillier, 2004). Many of the participants positioned planners as sharing joint responsibility for delivery of a more sustainable built environment with other actors including developers, specialist advisers and the general public, but accepted accountability for part of the process, a finding which echoes that of Campbell and Marshall (2002). Thus the agents of change towards sustainability potentially include these actors, alongside social and cultural structures including government, local authorities, the planning system and the planning profession.

In their description of everyday work and sustainability, the planners' responses could be seen to illustrate several theoretical perspectives. Seeking consensus with numerous stakeholders speaks to a communicative/collaborative approach. References to battles with stakeholders speaks to dissensus (Gunder, 2003) and references to requirements for trees and cycle schemes speaks to pursuit of specific outcomes. The evidence points to the salience not of a binary, 'either-or' theoretical stance, but of the relevance of a 'both-and': planning practice as collaborative, incorporating consensus and dissensus, and also aimed at specific outcomes. CR's theoretical pluralism accommodates such diversity, arguing for appropriateness and specificity of theory and method to the research question.

The examination in detail through CR-informed analysis of professional commitment showed a complex set of factors which influence sustainable outcomes in planning, in many ways reflecting the ongoing tension between strands of planning theory. Our initial focus on professional identity led to a more nuanced and inter-related set of conditions. We found identities beyond the professional which had the potential to influence sustainable outcomes. We noted a personal commitment to improving physical, social and natural environments, in some cases acting as a motivation to become a planner. While we expected a strong identity as a planner, we found instead that a number of participants more readily described themselves as DM, local authority or planning 'officers,' and they grounded rationale for motivations for improvement on this identity. Relatively little work has explored the public sector worker identity, particularly in the UK after almost a decade of policy aimed at reducing the resourcing of local government. For some but not all participants, this additionally overlapped with an organisational identity—seeing themselves not just as planning officers but also as representing their employer. This stands in contrast to previous work on professional identity in the built environment which has documented tensions between professional and organisational identities (Foxell, 2019; Janda & Killip, 2013). Finally, there was a strong sense of a team identity in the accounts. The identities were overlapping and it was not always

possible to isolate professional identity, consistent with Stryker and Burke's (2000) identity theory. A CR explanation would suggest that sustainable outcomes are more likely to occur when a strong professional, local authority, team and organisational identity and personal commitment which share a commitment to improving the physical and natural environment co-occur. Conversely, where one or more of these identities are weak, or are not motivated to achieve better spaces, sustainable outcomes are less probable. The CR layered structure sets such understanding in the context of other generative mechanisms including national and local policies and processes of planning, each of which also have multiple constraining or enhancing conditions. Thus it can be argued that professional identity, identity as a public sector worker and other identities, are potentially influencing factors on sustainability in planning while not claiming that this list is comprehensive or deterministic in its effect.

While identities which align with sustainability goals may operate as Archer's "enablers," conditions may also act as constraints. The participants referred to policy pressures such as the current focus on housing, but also to political pressures. This was understood to refer to the institutional context of planning committees comprised of elected representatives, as well as the requirement to comply with government policy and direction. It is possible that the political pressures also encompass the multiple stakeholders involved in the planning system who will have varying access to resources and power. The participants referred to many of these stakeholders in their response to questioning on where responsibility lay for greater sustainability. A number of participants had talked about joint responsibility and this can be seen as reflecting the theoretical concerns of communicative/collaborative planning with involving other stakeholders. However, this is at odds with claims to a position as professional planner in its traditional sense of planner as expert, highlighting the practical implications of theoretical tensions. As knowledgeable and specialised integrators of knowledge, and providers of professional judgement, a clearer position of responsibility and even of leadership might have been expected. The diffusion of responsibility amongst multiple stakeholders may operate as a constraining condition or problem mechanism, impinging on the ability of enabling conditions to generate action. The proposition of diffusion of responsibility as a constraint condition leaves open the question of whether it is willingly accepted by planners, perhaps even as a defence against taking greater responsibility, or if it is a societal constraint within which planners have little agency. In either case, it serves to weaken the claim to professional status, given that professions may be expected to prioritise their duties to the wider world (Foxell, 2019).

Another construct in evidence which appeared to operate more as a constraining rather than enabling condition was that of (weak) policy. The participants noted the ineffectiveness of the NPPF. Where effective policy which

is clear, directive and unambiguous is likely to function as a generative mechanism for change, inadequate legislation which does not withstand scrutiny in court operates as a problem mechanism, preventing positive change.

As noted at the outset, a critical realist approach posits "fallible and iteratively corrigible" (Porporo, 2015, p. 162) definitions. Thus further work should explore other generative mechanisms and the conditions which may influence them. For example, to what extent and how does each structural component (the employing organisation, the planning committee, the RTP) potentially influence a planner's professional practice? Further, there is a need to extend the enquiry in the empirical realm. A stated motivation to pursue sustainability goals cannot be equated with their achievement and data on aspects of sustainable outcomes would be valuable.

Based on the findings, recommendations and cautions may be offered for practice and for policy. Professional identity as a generative mechanism of action towards sustainable development offers one 'lever' by which to increase efforts, but appears unlikely to be effective in a situation where planners are unclear on their responsibilities in a context of weak policy and the competing influence of multiple stakeholders. Development of the professional identity, increasing its salience, enhancing its value to individuals, and clarifying its remit within the wider context may extend the circumstances in which it operates to drive practice towards sustainability. In general, professional identity is developed through education and socialisation at work and so educators of planners and the organisations in which they work are essential facilitators of enhanced professional identity. The professional body too has an important role to play, in part due to its close association with perceptions of professional status and recognition, and also due to its capacity for continuing professional development. The unexpected finding from the study was that of identity as a public sector worker. As identities as a public sector worker, organisational employee and team member also may act as enabling conditions, the local authority as employer organisation has an important role to play here. Valuing their professional planners, supporting planners' professional development and recognising their professional judgement may strengthen beneficial effects on sustainability outcomes. Finally, planners themselves have much to gain in developing their profession, strengthening its jurisdiction and showing greater leadership, in order for the demonstrated commitment to the concept of sustainability to act more clearly as a generative mechanism for sustainability practices.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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