

Managing Policy Change and Implementation: The Role of Local Authority Planners in Local Housing Delivery

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1 Introduction

The housing affordability crisis is affecting major urban agglomerations across the world [Wetzstein 2017](#). There are key structural factors drive the crisis, including concentration of employment and amenities, widening wealth inequality within metropolitan economics [Baum-Snow et al. 2018](#), and rising investment demand for real estate from international capital flows [Stirling et al. 2022](#). These pressures will likely intensify as technological change makes global cities even more attractive to firms and capital [Kemeny et al. 2022](#).

Under this pressure, many local governments across different contexts are under considerable pressure to increase local housing supply [Raco et al. 2022](#), [Rink & Egner 2021](#). A typical situation is that local government primarily relies on private developers to enhance local housing delivery, over whom they do not hold administrative control. This poses challenges for officials who are functionally responsible for housing development within local government: local government planners.

This research is interested in understanding how local authority planners can enhance local housing delivery through private developers in the context of high-pressure urban housing markets. Following this interest, the study intends to examine the phenomenon of planner-involved policy entrepreneurship related to local housing delivery. There are three critical aspects this research is particularly focused on. The first is how planners can be involved in the process of policy change. The second is how planners can manage the process of deciding strategic policy directions. The third is how planners can manage implementation in ways that support local housing delivery.

All three are fundamental for planners to enhance local housing delivery, based on the understanding that planners play a bureaucratic-advisory role in local government. The planned empirical inquiry includes field work in London's local authorities, the UK's most "high stress" housing markets. The field work will afford case studies of three London boroughs.

2 Methodology

This research adopts Design Recovery in Cases (DRC), an extended case study approach developed by [Barzelay \(in press\)](#). Case study methods are particularly appropriate for examining how local authorities implement housing targets, given both the specificity and complexity of the challenges they face and the processual and relational nature of implementation processes [Healey 1997](#). DRC offers specific advantages for this research: it provides structured guidance for developing mechanistic explanations within cases based on new mechanical philosophy, while also offering methods for characterizing empirical phenomena, identifying explanatory targets, and translating case-specific findings into domain knowledge applicable to other contexts. The approach also facilitates systematic case comparison to enhance theoretical contributions.

Figure 1 offers an overview of how DRC is operationalized. The process begins with case data, such as observations, interviews, and documents. These materials are examined through three phases. The first, characterization, involves organizing information about activities, contextual conditions, and outcomes. The second, designation, identifies which outcomes meaningfully reveal how the case functioned as a whole. The third, explanation, develops accounts of how activities and conditions were responsible for those outcomes. At this stage, existing social scientific theories can be drawn upon to sharpen analytical clarity, showing how particular activities and conditions generated specific outcomes without imposing predetermined findings. This process yields what DRC terms "recov-

ered designs,” an account of how the arrangement of activities and conditions made the case’s functioning possible.

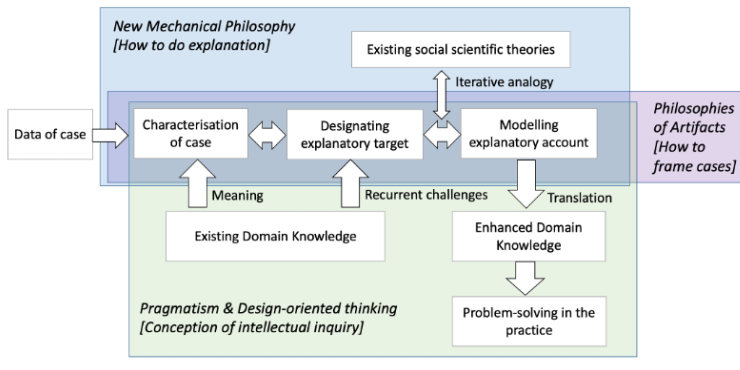


Figure 1: The operation of DRC research, by author

Case selection followed two stages: identifying an appropriate type of phenomenon to study, then selecting specific cases within that phenomenon for comparative analysis.

To restate, the research intends to investigate the phenomena of planner-involved policy entrepreneurship in response to local housing supply. The research has interest on investigate in the context of major urban agglomerations, where housing delivery pressure is particularly severe. To investigate this, this research selects London borough’s response after the 2018 introduction of Housing Delivery Test (HDT) as targeted phenomena of inquiry.

There are two reasons for selecting London borough’s post-HDT response as targeted phenomena as inquiry:

First, selecting London boroughs is of both practical relevancy and academic interest, for the practical relevance is London in general are experiencing one of greatest housing delivery pressure within England. For academic interest, the London’s housing market condition, including high land values, market financialization, and concentrated developer power, makes findings relevant to other major cities in wider context.

Second, selecting borough responses after the introduction of the HDT fits with this research’s purpose. The phenomenon under investigation is policy entrepreneurship in local housing delivery, where planners are deeply involved. The post-HDT context is appropriate for two main reasons. On the one hand, because the HDT imposes a mandate based on actual housing delivery that goes beyond theoretical land supply, borough responses are more likely to

address practical delivery challenges. This makes it more likely to observe efforts focused on actual housing delivery, rather than merely demonstrating compliance with technical land requirements. However, this research admits political and administrative coping behaviours may still occur. On the other hand, the HDT introduced a moment of institutional change that opened up a policy window, creating an opportunity for policy entrepreneurship. In this window, planners are especially likely to take an active role. The technical complexity involved in delivering housing targets gives planning and housing officers considerable discretion in shaping how implementation unfolds. As [Haas \(1992\)](#) argues, conditions of uncertainty and complexity tend to increase the authority of experts compared to elected politicians, enabling professionals to exert greater influence over the direction of policy responses.

Within post-HDT implementation, this research examines three London boroughs: Waltham Forest, Southwark, and Westminster. One borough will serve as the focal case with intensive interviews, while the other two provide comparative analysis. These cases were chosen to capture variation in how local authorities respond to similar regulatory pressures under different conditions. The design aims to generate both practical framework for planners addressing specific challenges and framework that is broadly applicable to broader contexts.

Table 1 presents the characteristics of the three case boroughs. From 2018 to the present, all three councils have responded to the Housing Delivery Test (HDT) by drafting action plans, adopting new local plans, and revising site allocations. These shared activities reflect the broader institutional response to increasing central government pressure on local housing delivery.

3 Data Collection

This research employs a sequential mixed methods approach to data collection, examining housing target implementation processes from 2018, when the Housing Delivery Test (HDT) was introduced, to present. The data collection strategy follows an iterative design in which archival analysis is used to construct a chronology of implementation and identify potential turning points [Abbott 2004](#). These turning points then inform the selection of targeted expert interviews. Figure 2 illustrates this sequential relationship.

The rationale for this strategy is that seven years of post-HDT responses generate a substantial volume of data, making it necessary to focus analytical attention. The archival study functions as a screening tool to pinpoint major episodes that may signal shifts in strategic direction or changes in how implementation is

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	Waltham Forest	Southwark	Westminster
Land availability	High	Moderate	Lower
Land Value	Lower	Moderate	High
Housing Target	Moderate	High	Low
Party Control	Labour majority council, with Conservatives as the main opposition	Labour majority council, with the Liberal Democrats as the main opposition	From Conservative control to Labour majority in 2022
Delivery Pattern	More big sites	High small site. High council-led development; High large scheme; Major infrastructure coordination (Bakerloo line extension)	High small site and windfall development
HDT Measures	None	2018 Buffer; 2019 Action Plan; 2020 Presumption; 2021 Action Plan; 2022 Presumption; 2023 buffer	2020 Action Plan

Table 1: Comparison between Waltham Forest, Southwark, and Westminster, by author

managed. Once these key moments are located, expert interviews are conducted to examine in detail how those changes unfolded in practice.

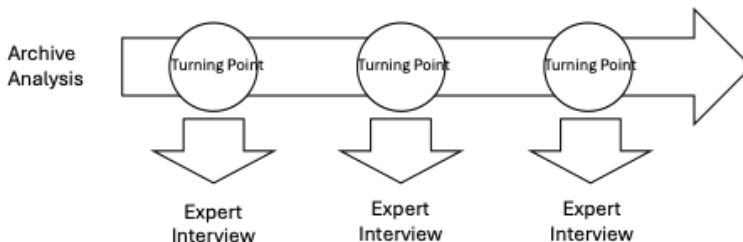


Figure 2: Data collection strategies, by author

4 Indicative Findings

Field works has not been carried out by the time of the submission. Preliminary examination of case characteristics identifies three contrasting contexts that could shape how planners respond to Housing Delivery Test requirements.

Waltham Forest presents an unusual case: it voluntarily produced an HDT Action Plan without being formally required to do so. This is the only London borough to take such action. This voluntary compliance beyond regulatory requirements raises questions about what drives such proactive behavior and how planners justify additional work without external mandate.

Southwark's context involves multiple intersecting pressures. The borough shifted strategy around 2018 from its previous position as England's largest council housing provider, having delivered one-third of all council homes in England in 2021/22, toward increased collaboration with private developers. This shift coincided with fiscal mismanagement at the council. Simultaneously, Southwark manages exceptionally high housing targets, diverse development types, and coordination requirements for the Bakerloo Line Extension. These overlapping challenges create a complex implementation environment.

Westminster experienced unprecedented political change with Labour gaining majority control in 2022 for the first time in the borough's history. This political shock combines with the borough's distinctive reliance on windfall sites for housing delivery, creating dual uncertainties, both political and market-based, that planners must navigate simultaneously.

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