Towards a virtual statecraft: Housing targets and the governance of urban housing markets

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A B S T R A C T

In this paper we draw on the findings of a mixed methods research project that has examined the production, regulation, and delivery of housing in London. Our aim is to develop fresh insights into the growing mobilisation of numbers and targets in contemporary planning systems. More specifically, we bring two fields of literature into conversation. First, drawing on recent contributions from Pike et al. (2019) we develop their notion of 'city statecraft or the art of city government and management of state affairs and relations (p.79). We discuss how and why their framing of contemporary urban governance captures current trends in contemporary cities, including: the financialisation of housing and infrastructure; the rolling-out of delivery-focused public private partnerships; and the broader political projects that underpin planning priorities. The paper combines these insights with wider writings in urban studies on *virtualism* or the analysis of theories and governmental practices that seek to make the world conform to pre-existing ideas, rather than describing and explaining its formation. We argue that target-based forms of governance represent the implementation of a *virtual statecraft* in which the material realities of actual places become simulated worlds, ripe for calculation and re-making. We show, through in-depth research on housing regulation and investment/development trends in London, the ways in which virtual forms of statecraft are developed and implemented and with what effects on the material outcomes of urban development processes. The findings are of comparative significance as planning systems across Europe and beyond are becoming increasingly focused on market-oriented oriented forms of planning in an effort to boost the production of housing and to deliver social policy outcomes.

1. Introduction

Major cities have been faced with unprecedented development pressures over recent decades as their populations and economies have expanded and their built environments have become highly attractive locations for global investment. These pressures have been particularly acute in the production and consumption of housing, much of which is increasingly inaccessible and less affordable to residents, prompting policy-makers and analysts at multiple scales to talk of an urban housing crisis (Gallent, 2019). The urban housing sector has been subject to persistent policy failures in terms of access, fuelled on the one hand by growing demands for 'affordable' housing and on the other the expansion of housing for relatively well-off middle classes or at the extreme for top-end, luxury units or buy-to-let for small households, short-term

visitors, or students (Forrest & Hirayama, 2015; Aalbers, 2019). Governments and planning systems in multiple contexts have failed to address the crisis, whatever mix of public, private, and voluntary measures are adopted. Research by The Economist (2022) highlights how price growth has outpaced incomes in 11 of the largest economies over the last decade, with the number of new houses completed falling to a historical low of just 4 per 100,000 of population (in the early 1970 s, the figure was closer to 11). The result, they argue, is that 'housing supply has become ever more inelastic: increases in demand for homes have translated more into higher prices, and less into additional construction' (p.60). The social, economic, and environmental impacts of these policy failings are being felt by a growing range of urban citizens and have longer term structural implications for the competitiveness of urban economies and the social and political cohesion of cities. It is a planning problem that is becoming globalised and affecting high income cities in Europe along with other long-established housing markets in countries such as the USA, Canada, and Australia and emerging markets including China, India, Russia, and Brazil.

In this paper we draw on the findings of a mixed methods research project that has examined the production, regulation, and delivery of housing in London, a city in which there exists a much discussed housing 'crisis' (Edwards, 2016). Our aim is to develop fresh insights into one type of planning technology that has come to dominate policy responses to housing market problems - that of *housing targets*. Whilst targets have represented a core component of post-war planning systems in multiple contexts, their role in more market-oriented planning arrangements has remained under-discussed. Whereas previously targets were set by governments to guide the actions of state institutions, new forms of target-setting fulfil a different function, that of coordinating and directing the activities of private sector and civil society institutions and actors towards the objectives of public policy. The expansion of target-based metrics and numbers has become the standard governmental vehicle through which this is to be achieved. Their deployment is designed both to give clarity to private sector actors operating in real estate sectors and simultaneously to make public sector agencies and welfare systems more corporate-like in their organisation and structure.

More specifically, we bring two fields of literature into conversation. First, drawing on recent contributions from O'Brien et al. (2019) and Pike et al. (2019) we develop their notion of 'city statecraft' or 'the art of city government and management of state affairs and relations' (p.79). We discuss how and why their framing of governance captures many of the trends taking place in contemporary cities, especially: the financialisation of housing and infrastructure markets; the rolling-out of delivery-focused public private partnerships; and the broader political projects that underpin planning priorities. However, this literature is less concerned with the analysis of the specific *managerial mechanisms within planning systems* that are designed to co-ordinate the actions, outlooks and practices of actors. To address this, we draw on insights from urban studies literatures that have addressed questions of the use of numbers and the importance of virtually-defined targets, or the analysis of theories and governmental practices that seek to make the world conform to pre-existing ideas, rather than describing and explaining its formation (Miller, 2005). In this, we extend current planning debates on city statecraft by developing some of James Scott's (1998) classic insights into how modern governance operates by making objects of governance legible and stripping them down to uniform and highly reductionist and essentialising quantitative-technical measures. We argue that what is happening in contemporary planning is the implementation of a *virtual statecraft* in which the material realities of actual places become re-imagined through the calculative language and coding of targets.

In short, we ask the question - what role do virtually-prescribed numbers and targets now play in operationalising planning reforms that aim to boost private finance in the delivery of new housing? We argue that rather than acting 'as an important arena where knowledge is presented, discussed, examined, and constructed as evidence' (Rydin,

2020, p. 219), virtual forms of statecraft aim to impose numbers and targets as epistemic instruments to convert deliberations, especially at the local scale, into narrow discussions of deliverability and house-building. They represent what Alfasi (2018) views as 'a quiet revolution' in planning 'reflected in the growing tendency to use codes and abstract principles as regulatory devices' (p.375). Their objective is to convert the complex messiness of places into carefully managed and de-politicised development spaces (Raco, 2018).

Moreover, the deployment of target-based planning systems for housing delivery is designed to enable greater reliance on market actors beyond-the-state, such as developers, investors, and house-builders to get on with the task of building new units and generate surplus finance that can then be captured and used to deliver public and social policy objectives. The extent to which these mechanisms of co-ordination have impacts on both the politics and practices of planning *and* investment flows by private actors remains underdeveloped in the wider planning literature. We show that attempts by planners and policy-makers to 'see like a market' draw on schematic views of what markets consist of and how the ecosystems of actors within the real estate sector operate and act (Henneberry & Parris, 2013). It is assumed that inflated housing targets will stimulate action, thus turning the virtual into the real. The deployment of housing delivery targets therefore reflects and re-produces a fundamental political and ideological project that views *supply-side opportunities and constraints* as the principal objective of planning policy, with the market assumed to work efficiently in meeting needs, if allowed.

However, we also show that despite efforts to make realities conform with virtually-prescribed targets, place politics and material conditions continue to play a fundamental role in planning deliberations and outcomes. We illustrate the *dialectical tension* between description and prescription. We go beyond the work of writing on Public Management, much of which relates to earlier periods of governance reform and are overly-focused on narrow framings of how planners conceive of top-down targets (*e.g.* Clifford, 2016), to explore planning as a mode of situated governmental practices and modulations. Attempts to present planning outcomes and processes as derivative of the imposition of virtual targets only capture one part of a more nuanced and complex politics of virtualism that are also shaped through situated practices and 'the political spaces in which they function, are produced, and modified' (Crawford, 2016, p. 79). Efforts to impose virtual forms of statecraft thus become emplaced in specific contexts and come to play a variety of functions. This includes a thus far neglected focus on how targets are being mobilised as a co-ordinating mechanism for private sector actors with their own specific modes of calculation (Crosby & Henneberry, 2016) and the political actions of civil society groups beyond the state.

The paper begins by examining and synthesising broader literatures on city statecraft and virtualism respectively. It develops understandings of virtual statecraft before turning to writings on targets and development planning. We then draw on our case study work in London that examines the inter-relationships between regulation and landscapes of housing investment. Our research was undertaken between Spring 2019 and Spring 2021 and brings together quantitative and qualitative forms of evidence to assess the rise of virtual forms of statecraft in the city. It consisted of: interviews with over 100 public, private and civil society actors; in-depth analysis of purchased property industry datasets on real estate investment (from Real Capital Analytics ltd and MSCI); the mapping of targets across London and their correlations with local political representation and control; and the systematic analysis of policy documents, plans, and corporate strategies. We develop the discussion by situating the rise of planning targets in housing policy reforms at national level before assessing processes of target-setting across the city and their effects on housing delivery. We also draw on qualitative evidence of the impacts of targets on the practices of policy-making and deliberation within both the public and private sectors, before concluding with some reflections on the contributions of the paper to literatures in planning and urban studies and directions for further

research.

2. Towards a virtual statecraft

2.1. Planning and city statecraft

In the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, governments across the world have been re-focusing their planning systems in ways that prioritise the promotion of economic growth, expedited development, and market-led regulatory reform (World Bank, 2020). A recent OECD (2019) report documents land use policy reforms in a range of countries and the growth of more 'flexible', market-oriented planning reforms reliant on property taxes and land value capture mechanisms. These, it is claimed, have qualitative and quantitative impacts on local planning politics as they 'create the incentive to convert low value land to higher value uses and to attract new residents and businesses' (p.94). In France for instance, 55% of local government revenue is generated through value-capture mechanisms attached to land-use and development. In the Netherlands the Crisis and Recovery Act 2010 similarly aims to speed up planning processes and encourage new forms of market-friendly flexibility in local plan-making, a policy that has been extended in further rounds of national reform since 2017. In other countries such as Australia and the US there also has been a resurgence in the adoption of Tax Increment Financing for local projects and the introduction a range of value-capture measures and these models have found fertile ground in which to grow elsewhere (Baker et al., 2016).

In England, these agendas are particularly well advanced. A dominant narrative has emerged, reinforced by neo-liberal think-tanks (*cf.* Airey & Doughty, 2020) and government proposals for reform (MHCLG, 2020b), that views overly restrictive planning regulation as a limit on new housing and infrastructure development and a brake on national and urban competitiveness (Rodríguez-Pose & Storper, 2020). Reforms have been embedded in a series of regulatory changes over the 2010 s in which new alignments have been put in place between public sector policy priorities and private sector outlooks, capacities, and practices (Vogl, 2017). These widely documented shifts in approach destabilise traditional models of hierarchical co-ordination in which state-led planning systems drew on imperative controls to shape the use of land and the building of places. They have given way to new models of more relational and network-based co-ordination and control, or what Jessop (2002) characterises as *inter-systemic steering mechanisms* or 'efforts to steer (guide) the development of different systems by taking account both of their own operating codes and rationalities and of the various substantive, social and spatio-temporal interdependencies' (p.228).

For O'Brien, Pike, and Tomaney (2019) one way of characterising the emergence of these new modes of urban planning is through the concept of *city statecraft* or 'the art of city government and management of state affairs and relations…open to the involvement of multiple state, para-state and non-state actors'. These can include 'local and national governments, agencies, public-private partnerships, international organisations, private businesses, and civic associations' (p.15). Their work develops earlier writings by the political scientist Jim Bulpitt (1986) in the 1980s who argued that central-local state relationships were constituted through forms of devolved statecraft, in which national governments sought to maintain, expand, and develop their powers of control over local and regional actors (Ayres, Flinders, & Sandford, 2018). Influence was exercised through, for example, threatening (or undertaking) the abolition of resistant local governmental organisations or imposing sanctions on actors that strayed too far from central government priorities.

Much of the subsequent work on statecraft continues to examine the relationships between central government and the 'peripheries', and explores wider questions of devolution and power (Buller & James, 2012; James, 2016). Gamble (2015), for instance, sees the rolling out of cuts to local government budgets across England in the early 2010 s as a classic form of statecraft, or an attempt to assert central government

power to meet party political objectives and to reinforce the dominance of central government over the local scale. Similarly, the creation of Regional Development Agencies by a Labour government in 1998 and their abolition in 2010 under the Coalition government reflected differing attempts to use central powers and reforms to re-orientate the spatial organisation of English governance and planning (Bradley & Sparling, 2017).

O'Brien et al. (2019) however, take the statecraft framework further and use it to explore the mechanisms through which contemporary *urban* 'practice[s] of government and governance' can be best understood in an era of financial cuts and the requirement to mobilise private actors and resources in the delivery of policy (Pike et al., 2019). Whilst Bulpitt's framework assesses the structures and power relations underpinning forms of devolution across nation-states, O'Brien et al. argue it lacks sufficient attention to more relational understandings of place-making, governance, coalition-building, and political diversity found in different cities and regions. Their approach therefore examines 'how state authority and power is accumulated and deployed by city government[s], and how its affairs are administered in relations with other state, para-state and non-state actors at various scales' (p.16). City statecraft is a way of conceptualising urban and regional governance that 'introduces a stronger sensitivity to agency and incorporates the wider set of actors involved in (re)producing the structures of which they are part and within which they practice their statecraft'. Most significantly, it draws attention to 'the capacity, capability, resources and skill of state actors in efforts to wield' their influence and authority and highlights the geographically variegated character of such processes and capacities.

In short, a focus on city statecraft sets out a framework to examine how urban authorities seek to craft policies and programmes to deliver on policy objectives and co-ordinate and steer the activities of a diverse range of actors (Davies et al., 2020; Thompson et al., 2020; Harrison, Galland, & Tewdwr-Jones, 2021). It addresses the wider question of 'how to promote legitimate, effective and active participation in the work of regulation by the private regulated parties themselves without devolving into deregulation' (Lobel, 2012, p. 65). It also focuses attention on the processes through which governance models are generated and in which regulators are seeking to develop approaches that represent 'legal strategies outside the traditional command-and-control toolbox that has the potential to increase the effectiveness and legitimacy of social regulation (p.69). These models may, for example, seek to harness the capacities of private actors and other policy delivery agencies in a more relational way, whilst maintaining an effective role for law and public policy.

Beyond these regional and urban governance literatures, the term statecraft has also been used in anthropology and sociology to explore the mechanisms through which states establish simplifications to enable modern form of bureaucratised governance to function (Du Gay, 2005). In Scott's (1998) influential work on 'seeing like a state', statecraft represents a series of mechanisms in and through which the complex realities of societies and economies are converted into narrow schematic categories and planning projects. Much of Scott's work focused on modernist, top-down command and control forms of governing, pioneered in colonial and post-war Socialist settings. It examined the 'intellectual filters' applied to enable modern governance to operate. In particular, it documented the deployment of uniform types of measurement and typifications and their attempts to strip down the complex realities of places into essential elements that can then be worked on and re-made through top-down interventions. Such simplifications were 'indispensable to statecraft…represent[ing] techniques for grasping a large and complex reality…reduced to schematic categories' (p.77). In carrying out this function, policy reduced 'the infinite array of detail' found in real places and converted them into 'a set of categories that will facilitate summary descriptions, comparisons, and aggregation' (*ibid.*). This way of governing was never intended to 'successfully represent' the actual activities of the society they depicted but 'only that slice of it that

interested the official observer…[which] when allied with state power would enable much of the reality they depicted to be re-made' (p.3: see also Mitchell, 2002).

In the next section we bring these writings on statecraft into conversation with those on virtualism and virtual modes of governance before moving on to a closer inspection of planning reforms and target-setting. We develop the argument that whilst writings on statecraft valuably highlight the significance of central-local state relations and the types of actor-centred practices and arrangements that shape governance activities, a stronger focus on the relationships between the virtual construction of policy priorities and targets and their clashes with the situated practices of place-based planning can add two important elements: it takes the analysis beyond the urban scale; and draws attention to the ways in which the centre-local relation is navigated from the centre through specific governmental technologies that aim to provide inter-systematic steering not only between centre and local but across the public-private divide.

2.2. Virtualism and modern governance

A growing body of writing across the social sciences has examined the rise of *virtualism,* or the suite of theories and governmental practices that are used to *make the world conform to them*, rather than merely describing them (Miller, 2002; Thrift & French, 2002; Callon, 2021). Virtualism, in short, recognises the gap between abstraction and practice which makes technologies like targets effective tools of statecraft. We use it in this paper to refer to the types of planning technologies and techniques that convert complex places into calculable development spaces, to be re-made in the image of quantifiable targets. There are two elements to this literature that are particularly insightful for our analysis.

First, writings in accountancy, management, and organisational studies examine and explore the *double-function of numbers-based modes of calculation* within institutions and management systems. On the one hand, numbers and calculative mechanisms play a role in *describing* the managerial and governmental problems facing imagined actors, derived from imagined models. They establish selective virtual representations of fields to be governed and what they consist of and how they can best be understood. On the other hand, they also have performative power in *prescribing* a set of actions and solutions through which realities can be re-made to address virtually-defined descriptions and representations (Bourdieu, 2003). This dialectic of description and prescription sets in train governmental interventions, that at their most pervasive, seek to completely replace the real world with the virtual and transform the former into the latter (Miller, 2002).

Within the public sector these dialectics are often converted into targets and financial mechanisms that represent 'intentional attempts to manage risk or alter behaviour in order to achieve some pre-specified goal' (Black, 2017). During the 1990s and 2000s the structures of urban governance and planning in many western cities, especially in the UK and North America, were systematically re-configured by *systems-led public management* theories and practices (Clarke & Newman, 2012). Public institutions responsible for planning and urban policy were required to re-imagine themselves as corporate-like, private sector agencies delivering services to citizens-as-consumers, defined through 'a narrow conception of the consumer, imagined in neoliberal terms as a rational self-maximising economic individual' (Bevir & Trentmann, 2007, p. 1). Within this wider set of reforms, virtual frameworks were mobilised to create new norms and guidelines by which actors can be judged and judge themselves (Porter, 1994).

Managerial techniques often take the form of idealised, abstract, and quantitative metric-based models of action and calculative practice, and are designed to shape, in detail, the actions of individuals and whole groups of professionals (Thrift, 2005; Miller, 2008, 2020). They act as technologies for both future-casting - predicting and providing - and back-casting - identifying longer-term trends and the evolution of places

up to the present (Abram & Weszkalnys, 2011). They can be used to calculate how to govern and regulate in a pre-emptive manner, using data to predict real-world conduct in line with policy objectives (Kitchin, 2016). Or at other times they can be more reactive, in responding to existing trends and requiring those being governed to account for their track-records of delivery and (re)evaluate their existing practices (Rose & Miller, 2010). The deployment of virtual numbers therefore possesses a governmental power in *structuring possibilities* as the processes involved in their creation 'define which information is to be included in the analysis; they envision, execute, and plan for data transformations' and they act at as 'filters and mirrors' able to deliver 'results with a kind of detachment, objectivity and certainty' (Ananny, 2016, p. 107).

Second, a body of writing has examined the ways in which *private sector* actors, as businesses or individuals, establish corporate models and virtual framings of practice and markets to create 'a fit between the real (market) world and the model world' (Svetlova, 2012, p. 419). These models become powerful vectors in bringing about the worlds they describe, rather than acting as passive, abstract descriptions (Mackenzie, 2015; Robin, 2018). Boldyrev and Svetlova (2016, p. 7) call such models a 'reality in the making' and highlight the types of performativity and calculative practices that underpin their power and influence. For Crosby and Henneberry (2016) much of the recent work in urban studies on financialisation and the built environment does not 'engage with the detail of monetary calculations or with how the calculations may affect their subjects – land and buildings (p,1425). They note that financial valuations inform decisions in establishing what rent to offer/agree and that 'in order to make goods [such as housing] tradeable, their properties must be stabilised and singularised: they must become defined, distinct objects and consequently, calculable ones' (p.1425). Explanations of contemporary urban development that lack an understanding of how such processes operate, and/or are actively performed by actors on the ground are, they claim, of limited utility.

Similarly, for Svetlova (2012) risk management within the real estate sector is shaped by what she terms quantitative enthusiasm and quantitative scepticism, or that 'some risks are not quantifiable, so models are adjusted in concrete market situations; they are manipulated regularly over-ruled by humans and used as tools to obtain the results that their users consider to be correct' (p.420). Her research on Swiss Investment Banks found that decision-makers 'know what is behind the numbers, and they are aware of the fact that not all relevant information is in the numbers'. They consequently look to a range of influences and 'must decide whether the numerical assumptions and input data, which provide a basis for the valuation, fit with qualitative views they hold concerning asset classes or companies' (p.432). What Svetlova (2012) terms the *qualitative overlay on the use of numbers* is especially acute in the housing sector in which all investments are emplaced, fixed, and locationally situated (Gallent, Durrant, & May, 2017).

Whilst these wider trends are having a transformative impact on the contexts within which urban governance is being enacted, it is important to highlight their limitations. As with all modes of governing, numerically-based forms of management and intervention are subject to a range of failures in their encounters with place-based economic, social, and political relations and practices. Whilst much of the writing cited above has been inspired by Foucauldian interpretations of top-down forms of numerical control, the delivery of any type of virtual system involves a process of active 'doing' in the real world, temporal flows of action, and a degree of embeddedness in *situated practices*. Outcomes thus emerge from 'a continuous string or stream of interpenetrating – prior and subsequent – actions that compare, swap, sort, allocated, administer, and so forth' (Introna, 2016, p. 21). Attempts to establish and impose numerical forms of virtualism are prone to mis-understandings and disconnections, as well as forms of contestation and challenge, especially when applied to actual places. As Crawford (2016) notes, virtual calculations are 'rarely stable' and are constantly 'in flux and embedded in hybrid spaces' (p.79). They are always

implemented in and through politically-mediated processes of deliberation and selection. Moreover, virtually-derived numbers and targets can work to generate unexpected outcomes, acting for instance as 'a spur to forms of creativity that can transgress these standard forms of classificatory arrangement' (Thrift & French, 2002, p. 328).

These inconsistent and situated drivers of difference impact on the success or otherwise of state projects. Scott's (1998) writings showed that their failures resulted from the inability of simplifications to account for the informal place-based relations that make all social action possible. Indeed, for Scott, formal agency is always dependent and/or parasitic on the latter. The descriptions and prescriptions of virtualism are therefore always politicised and subject to being re-shaped and re-made in their application to real world problems. Their bluntness and reductionism generates structural tensions when applied to *actual places* and their path-dependencies, spatially varied physical environments, and social relations. When planning policies seek to generate uniform and standardised approaches to problems, such as those relating to urban housing crises and the need for more 'numbers', they inevitably make a series of politicised selections over what is and what is not to be counted and prioritised. These in turn collide with alternative approaches and market trends and practices that evade simple characterisation and definition. The virtual construct of a thing (the metric) can come to obscure and replace the actual thing – such as the meeting of competitive performance targets (Birch, Cochrane, & Ward, 2021). For instance, the impacts of the UK's *Equality Act 2010* make visible, through published metrics and formal Equality Assessments, the differential nature of employment in the public sector between different social groups and this in turn has triggered a broader debate over recruitment practices and 'fairness' (Payne & Bennett, 2015). Similarly, algorithm-based numerical systems in education or welfare provision are increasingly seen as 'unfair' by broader publics and are acting as focus for challenges by civil society groups (The Economist, 2019).

In the next section we bring these writings on virtualism together with those on city statecraft to reflect on broader market-oriented changes in urban planning systems. We focus especially on the processes involved in generating *targets*, and how these are applied to shape all aspects of the planning, but with a specific focus on housing and the relations between planning interventions, investments and development practices. We discuss how virtual statecraft underpins wider modes of meta-regulation - the integration of broader regulatory systems and structures – down to micro-regulations, the place-based practices of individuals and actors in multiple locations. This draws attention to the tactics, strategies, and governmental systems and structures that seek to shape the practices, outlooks, and understandings of actors working at multiple scales and the production and drawing-up of a range of tools, regulations, and mechanisms to incentivise and/or coerce action on the part of others. We discuss the ways in which the deployment of numerical targets seeks (but often fails) to transform the material realities of actual places into simulated worlds, ripe for calculation and re-making.

2.3. Planning as a form of virtual statecraft

There are four primary uses of targets as forms of virtual statecraft in planning. These are not mutually exclusive but come together to form a broader process. They occur to differing degrees in different contexts, depending on a range of social, economic, and political conditions, and undertake different types of governmental work. They demonstrate the ways in which targets undertake governmental work within the broader context of political projects and understandings of how planning works and what its primary purpose consists of.

First, targets have long acted as vehicles of *hierarchic control* within top-down modes of statecraft and planning systems. In post-war planning systems they were used by governing agencies, especially central government and formal regulatory bodies, to 'delimit, unify, stabilise and reproduce their objects of governance as the precondition as well as

the effect of governing them' (Jessop, 2002, p. 231). They reproduced what Sayer (2011) terms 'sedimented values', or particular attitudes and dominant understandings of what governance fields (such as planning for housing) should prioritise and how. As Scott (1988) argued, target-setting processes were used by modernist planners to compartmentalise and marginalise alternative perceptions of value creation, and privilege quantitative counting and selective representations of reality for a broader policy purpose. In post-war Socialist countries governments introduced prescriptive top-down Five-Year Plans driven by the setting of targets over clear time-frames (The Economist, 2019). Even in less authoritarian contexts, targets have cast what Jessop (2016) terms, an ever-present 'shadow of hierarchy' over the conduct and governmentalities of actors at multiple scales, in which formal and informal structures of surveillance remove the need for the constant open assertion of authority. Targets played a particularly important role in the foundation of the English planning system. Local and regional bodies were formally required to set out predict and provide targets for the provision of infrastructure and the distribution of public and private sector employment and housing. The ambition was to meet demographic and economic demands and control broader processes for a collectively defined set of public interests (Cullingworth & Nadin, 2006; Harrison, Galland, & Tewdwr-Jones, 2021).

Planning targets were deployed to meet three principal objectives: *floor targets* used to set a standard below which performance is deemed unacceptable; *percentage targets* calculated in relation to specific fields; and *benchmarks* in which the unit being measured is compared and contrasted with combinations of historic trends, similar units within the same system (such as other local planning authorities), and units in other systems or policy fields in which delivery can be compared (Barber, 2016). These typologies have been synonymous with formal modes of organisation, especially those found in northern European countries. For writers such as Chiodelli (2019) and Zanfi (2013), their presence (or absence) has long been seen by academics and policy-makers as a clear dividing line between the formal, regulated, and efficient planning systems of Northern Europe and the informal, weakly governed systems of Mediterranean and East European countries – a claim that they contest as being stereotypical and ossifying.

From the late 1970 s the form and character of planning targets underwent significant change. They were treated by the Thatcher governments of the 1980s with growing suspicion and seen as vehicle for the imposition of bureaucratic priorities and restrictions on people and businesses (Davis & Thornley, 2010). However, during the 1990 s and 2000 s there was something of resurgence as they came to play a structural role within Third Way reforms (Giddens, 1994). They were re-tooled to act as mechanisms of top-down statecraft that could co-ordinate and re-configure the relationships and activities not only of public sector planners but also of other actors in the private and civil society sectors. A specialist Delivery Unit was established, led by managerial strategist Michael Barber (2016) who argued that focused targets should be the basis for all reform of government policy. Their presence, it was claimed, could act as a 'motivational' force for agents of governance and serve a 'moral purpose' around which diverse interests could coalesce and work towards collective outputs and approaches. They would help create 'better governance' through the delivery of tangible outputs that 'matter to citizens' (p.24). They could provide new yardsticks around which the effectiveness of public policy could be judged and held to account.

Despite appearing to endorse new types of decentralisation, the presence of targets – especially in relation to planning - acted as a mode of statecraft that expanded hierarchical forms of control. These hierarchies, in turn, were underpinned by econometric models of social policy and market-oriented narratives that viewed policy problems, such as housing delivery and affordability, as a consequence of supply-side constraints, rather than more structural processes of financialisation and land speculation. A number of influential publications have had a powerful bearing on housing and planning in the English context

(Mulheirn, 2019; Airey & Doughty, 2020), even though the evidence from multiple cities around the world shows that incentivising supply has at best a marginal effect and at worse inflates the costs of housing and reduces its utility value (Rodríguez-Pose & Storper, 2020). Despite this evidence, the deployment of target-led, supply-side prescriptions continues to play a powerful virtual narrative that abstracts from the complexities and messiness of place-based practices and meanings to create governmental spaces of action.

Second, targets can also be deployed to act as *corrective policy instruments that enhance state capacities*. Their presence enables planners and state actors to tackle some of the structural imbalances that exist between regulations and the actors they are seeking to regulate. For Gerber et al. (2018) planning systems have long wrestled with the fundamental difficulty that the laws and codes they seek to implement consist of a relatively weak mode of coordination when compared to the interests of capital and asset ownership. Within Anglo-Saxon common law systems in particular, the property rights of individuals are enshrined in legal codes founded on 'constancy and predictability' and build on relatively predictable precedents and case law and 'pragmatic, less theoretical approach[es] to legal problem solving' (Wacks, 2015, pp.11–12). The legitimacy and authority of state intervention, conversely, is dependent upon the mobilisation of collectively agreed projects, binding interests, and politically-charged claims to be operating in a public interest (Baker, 2021).

In this wider context targets represent a strong mode of policy articulation with the potential to shape the actions of actors beyond-the-state and redress imbalances between public and private interests. They have the potential to empower planners and civil society groups to tackle vested private interests, in some cases being allied to powerful forms of intervention. By using the planning system and delivery targets to craft market opportunities, planners are able to influence the actions of others, whilst indirectly enhancing state capacities by creating new subjects to act as partners who develop, finance, and/or implement policies (Jessop, 2016). A growing literature has also emerged in more applied sciences that demonstrates how virtual metrics can assist planners to design more inclusive and public urban spaces, both from technical and more socially-oriented perspectives (Ewing & Clemente, 2013; Nazarian, Acero, & Norford, 2019). There are also attempts, for example, to measure the value of green spaces in cities and urban nature or to develop liveability scores that compare the quality of urban environments (Ahern, Cilliers, & Niemelä, 2014; Carmona, 2020).

Third, targets also have impacts on modes of *performativity*. Ethnographic accounts of planning highlight the importance of collective norms in shaping planning practices and outcomes. The deployment of terms such as 'stretching targets' and 'aiming high' are used in multiple contexts to re-focus agendas around delivery, even though it is widely acknowledged that there is little possibility that they will be met (Riles, 2008; Abram, 2014). Such narratives represent a specific type of performativity, that of *self-reflexive irony* that, for Jessop (2002), constitutes a mode of political deliberation in which it is recognised that there is a 'likelihood of failure but proceed as if success were possible' (p.245). It is because of their ironic character that stretching targets possess significant performative power. They can be agreed upon in the knowledge that there is little requirement to deliver and/or take the difficult political decisions that may be necessary for their enactment. Moreover, a failure to meet them generates demand for yet higher targets and better performance but in ways that are collectively understood to be unachievable. There are echoes of ironic target setting in work on infrastructure planning. Flyvbjerg (2008) has powerfully demonstrated the role of 'optimism biases', especially in contexts in which there are vested interests in wilfully and collectively underestimating the potential financial (and other) costs in proceeding with a project. In the case of housing, optimism biases can act as a source of collective action and used to highlight failures to justify more radical modes of statecraft and supply-side intervention.

Planners, in a more public way than found in some other professions,

are left with the difficult task of being forced to meet delivery targets whilst de delivering on other objectives such as the creation of 'liveable' or 'sustainable' places. This is compounded by the deployment of selective forms of visibility in which numbers become comparative between places and jurisdictions, further embedding market principles of competition and corroding those of cooperation and collectivism (Déjean, Gond, & Leca, 2004). They create 'value practices' that seek to generate an alternative production of place, by excluding those values that cannot be incorporated into delivery-based calculations (Skeggs, 2014). The implementation of numerical targets on performance often therefore leads to 'goal displacement' or an 'emphasis on the wrong activities and encourages creaming and other means of 'making the numbers without improving actual outcomes…and is most likely when consequences rest upon a program's performance in meeting its numbers' (Perrin, 1998, p. 372). The pressure to improve results can lead to distortions in the focus of policy, the disruption to collective and co-operation actions, and a shift away from more qualitative reflections and forms of decision-making.

The same types of incompatibility relate to the wide range of meanings and performative work ascribed to the word *delivery*. On the one hand it is seen as being a quantitative practice, focused on the physical production of units to meet targets. On the other, the delivery of planning objectives is also concerned with a wider range of 'deliverables' or outcomes that may not lend themselves to quantitative valuation. For instance, for planners and civil society groups, it is not only the number of developed units that matters but where such developments take place, whom they are for, how they contribute to broader agendas of environmental and social justice, and the difference they make to perceptions of place and liveability. It is this ability, in Miller's (2008) terms, 'to simultaneously occupy both ends of this apparent polarity' that makes delivery-focused planning an arena of conflict and political contestation. It represents an extension of the principle that the planning system does not exist to give legitimacy to the state and governments, but exists to serve the market and indirectly to meet the needs of citizens as consumers through the market (Bevir & Trentmann, 2007; Miller, 2012). Outcomes and legitimacy become judged through the lens of virtual producers in the private sector.

Fourth, targets also influence *geographical imaginations and territorial outlooks* by encouraging actors to think about their places as self-contained units of action, rather than facilitating broader understandings of the connections and relations between places. Whilst for Pike et al. (2019), a focus on city statecraft draws attention to forms of relationality between places, the development of virtual forms of target-setting do the opposite by compounding governance fragmentation, whilst mediating territorial relationality *via* centrally-imposed calculations. Moreover, there is little discussion over what is *not* counted. Under contemporary modes of statecraft there is little option to plan for reduced growth but, instead, a focus on what is increasingly termed 'levelling-up' or a positive sum game in which it is imagined that territorial growth is self-contained and generated within places. Planners, policy-makers, and civil society groups are required to plan for local growth, whatever the wider economic, social, and environmental impacts on places within and beyond their territories. There is, therefore, an active disincentive for thinking about the spatial patterns of growth and/or addressing wider normative questions over whether or not growth *should* be taking place in a particular location, rather than elsewhere. In policy terms targets are designed to encourage local entrepreneurialism. In so doing, however, they exacerbate existing spatial inequalities as those in areas of strong market growth are encouraged to provide space for more development in order to meet demand.

To summarise, this section has argued that a focus on the relationships between targets, modes of statecraft and the virtualism associated with them opens up new ways of thinking about recent debates over planning reforms. With a growing emphasis on market-oriented interventions, the work that targets are being asked to do within planning

systems is being stretched in new ways. Post-war systems in which targets acted as a focus for more technocratic types of intervention are still evident, with plans and projects underpinned by predict and provide forms of coordination. However, targets are also being used to usher in new forms of *market coordination*. Whereas in the past many of the financial and governmental levers of power were under the control of the state agencies, under recent reforms it is increasingly the task of investors and developers to deliver planning policy priorities, especially in regard to construction of new housing (of multiple types) and associated infrastructure. Rather than 'seeing like a state' they are designed to 'see like a market', that is to provide a frame of reference that is more 'market-like' and inclusive of private sector outlooks. These trends are taking place not only in countries such as England but in other European and North American contexts in which, as noted above, there are growing attempts to 'financialise' planning systems and develop mechanisms that capture private profits for public gain.

Despite this growing role for the private sector, their views, perceptions, and responses to targets remain curiously under-discussed. There is relatively little work on how private actors of different types internalise and act in response to policy priorities and market-building initiatives. It is widely accepted within more critical writings that the presence of high delivery targets drives inequalities by empowering market actors and crafting a clear space for them to build more units for sale or rent (Colenutt, 2020; Madden & Marcuse, 2016). But there is less recognition that the presence of targets can undermine the legitimacy of private actors in (actual) local contexts and bring them into the orbit of politically-charged debates over housing. Different types of private actors also stand to gain or lose from the presence of targets, with investors and developers, for instance, possessing different needs and time-scales of returns. Little is also known about the work that targets do in shaping actual forms of private sector-led housing delivery (in terms of types, affordability, and locations) and profit-making.

In it is within these wider political and scholarly contexts that the following sections of the paper are set. We draw on our case study work in London that examined the inter-relationships between landscapes of planning regulation over housing policy and landscapes of residential investment. We use the findings to examine the ways in which central government has sought to implement planning reforms that use virtual forms of statecraft and target-setting to direct a supply of new homes, built mainly by private sector actors. We demonstrate the ideological underpinnings of these approaches and show how the dialectic of prescription/description operates in the calculation of planning targets, and how the qualitative overlay subsequently required entails power and statecraft. The planning system is central to statecraft as mass home-ownership has been fundamental to socioeconomic changes associated with the neoliberal era through asset-based welfare, and the promise of homeownership is seen as essential to the ruling Conservative party's electoral offer (Saunders, 2021). The discussion begins with a focus on national housing policy and the rise of target-driven planning. We then explore city-wide agendas and strategies, before moving on to examine the impacts of policy on patterns of housing development and qualitative evidence on understandings of targets.

3. Targets and changes to national planning policy in England

This section examines the forms of statecraft that have underpinned English housing policy and highlights the powerful role of *centrally-directed localism* in requiring local planners, citizens, politicians and communities to consider how the planning of (their) places can be re-shaped to address national policy. It demonstrates that priorities are founded on a structural ideology – one that sees housing market failures as a direct consequence of a lack of supply and the inability of planning systems and planners to deliver sufficient sites and opportunities for development. They are underpinned by a wider political project of remaking local planning as an entrepreneurial practice that in Scott's (1998) terms, 'makes simplification pay' (p.8). As Askew's (2018)

comparative work demonstrates, the English system is uniquely centralised in a European context as 'instruments are created by central government and apply to the whole country…[along with] the centralisation of planning regulations that have to be adhered to by planning authorities; local regulations cannot be made' (p.87). It is assumed that the promotion of market-led planning will incentivise local authorities, especially in cities facing a housing crisis, to adopt boosterist approaches to development, with investment attracted to those places with the most developer-friendly authorities (Eisenschitz & Gough, 1996). This form of policy thinking has close parallels with historically-embedded systems of land and development taxation in the United States and the much-documented analysis of urban regimes, growth-machines, and entrepreneurial local economic development policies (Cox, 1993; Savitch et al., 2002). City authorities depend on development tax revenues to a greater extent than found in most European systems in which there is greater central state redistribution of funds.

The promotion of a supply-side approach has long underpinned housing policy in the UK. Even during the high watermark of state intervention in the provision of social housing in the 1950 s and 60 s governments were torn between the allocation of housing based on need and the objective of boosting the property market and home ownership (Boughton, 2018). During the Thatcher period (1979–1990), much social housing was sold off to tenants at reduced rates in a populist political programme, while from the 1990 s councils have been pushed to transfer remaining stock to para-state Housing Associations (Crook & Kemp, 2019). Under Labour governments from 1997 to 2010 a series of new virtual prescriptions and forms of legibility were mobilised to justify a modernisation of the housing and planning systems. *Planning Policy Statement 3: Housing*, published in 2006, and the commissioning of a formal review of housing markets, known as the *Barker Review of Housing* (2004), were used as a justification for the re-tooling of the planning system to create 'the necessary step-change in housing delivery, through a new, more responsive approach to land supply at the local level' (p.5). The *Barker Review* had given a figure of 260,000 homes per annum as a basic requirement to meet housing needs and the Labour government adopted an annual figure of 200,000.

These changes were to be underpinned by the introduction of regional targets for the delivery of housing, with planners required to ensure a mix of tenures and types to create balanced and sustainable communities (Raco, 2007). Regional planning authorities were also required to produce policy that was evidence-based. As a result, housing policy became strongly linked to the outputs from the Strategic Housing Market Assessment [SHMA] (which identified housing needs) and the Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment [SHLAA] (which identified potential land supply). These evidence documents, in theory, were to be used to coordinate local planning priorities for housing but focused almost entirely on for-sale, to-buy markets. There were no additional national planning targets for *social rented or market priced affordable housing* (Bowie, 2010). The overall approach was to be governed by the principles of public management and what were termed 'Plan, Monitor, and Manage' arrangements, designed to set out predicted development needs and monitor the territorialised delivery of housing in line with targets.

With the election of the Coalition government in 2010, the planning system underwent a series of further transformative changes. Whilst Labour governments had sought to give the private sector a stronger role, the Coalition adopted a stripped-down model of regulation and saw attempts to oversee the activities of private actors as the major reason for poor rates of house-building and policy failures. During the period 2004–2014, the decade after the *Barker Review*, the average number of homes constructed averaged 145,000 per annum meaning that in the words of the House Builders' Federation (2014) 'measured against the middle of Barker's three price inflation targets, the shortfall of homes over the decade now stands at an estimated 953,000 homes. This is on top of a backlog that was already large (estimated at between 93,000

and 146,000) – and growing – in 2004' (p.3). This virtual number and its legibility became the focus of policy reform and, with broader concerns over the affordability of new units, whom they were being constructed for, and the extent to which they met or contributed to housing shortages being relegated to secondary considerations (The Economist, 2020).

To streamline regulations, the Coalition (2010–2015) abolished Planning Policy Statements and Guidance and replaced them with a single *National Planning Policy Framework* [NPPF]. All regional tiers of government were abolished, except in London (see below). This was done ostensibly to break down divisions between policy-making and communities that were the '*result of targets being imposed, and decisions taken, by bodies remote from them…dismantling the unaccountable regional apparatus and introducing neighbourhood planning addresses this*' (DCLG, 2012, p.i). The reform of targets thus took centre-stage in policy shifts, with interventions seeking to incentivise and discipline local authorities and communities to adopt higher targets to boost overall delivery. As stated in 2011:

'Local authorities have a central role in facilitating this economic and social growth. In housing this means building strong partnerships with the private sector, writing ambitious development plans, releasing land for development and engaging with their communities to ensure their plans are based on their views' (DCLG, 2011, p. 4).

The most notable instrument the Coalition introduced was the *New Homes Bonus* in 2012 designed to provide extra funding for 'successful' local authorities where new homes were being constructed to pay for associated costs and infrastructure. It was designed to boost the funding for local growth and by 2020/21 some local authorities were receiving significant payments. For example, the London Borough of Tower Hamlets was paid £ 21.981million under the scheme in 2020, reflecting its high levels of delivery, especially in areas of the London Docklands (MHCLG, 2021b).

The core focus of these reforms was to introduce modes of statecraft that re-tooled the planning system into a vehicle to *facilitate* urban investment and development, rather than being a perceived constraint. The NPPF, in particular, established new types of coordination with private actors and was supplemented by a range of other reports and policy interventions such as the commissioned *Montague Review 2012*, that set out 'regulatory accommodations' (Crouch, 2013) to elide the needs of patient, long-term investors, with emerging property market demand in cities like London (DCLG, 2012b). Other significant reforms included the freeing up of property development rights to allow the owners of commercial property to convert it into residential use without local planning approval, which has had significant impacts on some urban centres (Ferm et al., 2020). Most significantly, the NPPF underpinned a wider shift towards viability-led planning, with local planners required to negotiate planning gains with developers on a site-by-site basis, whilst taking into account a site's economic viability and profitability for the latter (Ferm & Raco, 2020). Negotiations enabled developers to 'cost-in' their planning gain commitments through viability calculations and negotiations, which led in many cases to a significant reduction of affordable housing to maintain the viability of the whole scheme. Subsequent revisions of the NPPF and the Planning Practice Guidance have tried to address this issue although it remains yet to be seen with what success.

Since the election of majority Conservative governments in 2015, housing delivery and supply has become even more significant as a political issue. Under Theresa May's administration (2016–2019) a policy statement *Fixing Our Broken Housing Market* iterated a virtual target of 300,000 units but brought about relatively few tangible reforms beyond tinkering with the NPPF in 2018. It was claimed that the planning system and the lack of action from local authorities continued to act as a constraint on the private sector, despite all of the interventions set out above: 'The problem is threefold: not enough local authorities planning for the homes they need; house-building that is simply too slow; and a construction industry that is too reliant on a small number of big players' (DCLG, 2017). Other more disciplinary forms of statecraft were introduced, most notably the implementation in 2018 of Housing Delivery Tests that prescribe centrally-determined targets on local authorities. A failure to meet the targets triggers a local *Action Plan* in which an authority has to explain how it will remedy the failure and what measures should be put in place.

By 2019 the Conservative Manifesto was even clearer in its ambition to '*continue to increase the number of homes being built*' and the need to rebalance the housing market towards more home ownership: '*we will continue our progress towards our target of 300,000 homes a year by the mid-2020 s. This will see us build at least a million more homes, of all tenures, over the next Parliament – in the areas that really need them*' (Conservative Party, 2019). The elected Johnson government has similarly championed new home construction and sought to implement yet more changes. In 2020 two key pieces of reform were initiated. First, a new radical reform to planning policy was proposed, *Planning for the Future* (MHCLG, 2020b). It called for the imposition of new types of zoning to promote housing delivery and supply, in part because it was increasingly apparent that the housing needs identified through SHMAs may (and often was) very different from the development capacities of places. The document pronounced that the Planning System:

'simply does not lead to enough homes being built, especially in those places where the need for new homes is the highest. Adopted Local Plans, where they are in place, provide for 187,000 homes per year across England – not just significantly below our ambition for 300,000 new homes annually, but also lower than the number of homes delivered last year (over 241,000). The result of long-term and persisting undersupply is that housing is becoming increasingly expensive' (p.14).

Traditional post-war policies that attempted to link housing targets to social needs were abolished in an extension of reforms that dated from the 1990 s (Boughton, 2018). These needs, policymakers argued, should be met by market-generated supply, not through planning policy prescriptions. The result is one of conflict and tension between (virtual) spatial targets and the (actual) place-based politics of planning and delivery.

In 2020, a 'new standard methodology' was introduced that would increase assessed housing need from 226,000 new homes to 337,000 per annum. This proposed re-calculation created a 36% uplift across English authorities (MHCLG, 2021a). The new methodology takes average demographic growth projections for each area over the next ten years as its baseline and adjusts it according to the median workplace-based affordability ratios - how many times over the median annual wage those working in an area would have to pay to afford a house there. Every 1% adds a quarter per cent to the housing need target, so that an authority with a housing affordability ratio of 8 times the median wage will have an increased target of 25% (ONS, no date) Any such increase is capped at 40% over the housing need number arrived at in local strategic policies, making Local Plans (written by local authorities) and their assessments based on housing site delivery capacity a crucial component in arriving at housing targets. The new standard methodology also proposed to 'adjust for market signals' by incorporating the difference in affordability from ten years ago to the affordability ratio adjustment today – meaning local authorities are responsible for responding to macroeconomic and national policy changes through supply side provision. It would remove the cap on numbers placed by local strategic plans on the basis that 'in order to significantly boost the supply of homes and address the past undersupply as quickly as possible, a step change is needed' (MHCLG, 2021a).

However, the dramatic increase in housing numbers this would create across England provoked a strong response amongst politicians and communities, especially in rural areas. Faced with a backbench

rebellion within its own party led by former Prime Minister Theresa May, who described the methodology as a 'mutant algorithm', the government opted not to implement the proposed changes. Instead, in December 2020 it announced that it would be retaining the existing Standard Methodology while achieving the boost in targets it sought by applying a 35% uplift (applied after the cap) only in the top 20 most populous urban centres (MHCLG 2021a). The MCHLG's explanation for this was that it targeted housing growth by creating density in cities where most jobs are, but it also had the effect of shifting any extra housing burden away from the Conservative's own rural and suburban political base onto urban areas.

This approach is indicative of the lack of strategic spatial coordination in the planning system more broadly and the logical implications of a market-led, delivery-focused approach in reinforcing uneven development, rather than seeking to rebalance spatial economies (McGuinness, Greenhalgh, & Grainger, 2018). It also reflects and reproduces core tensions at the heart of government and its statecraft. On the one hand a pro-market section of the Conservative Party has been pushing for more development and new supply. Whilst on the other, traditional Conservative home-owning voters, in more affluent rural and suburban areas, are often resistant to new-build (Baxter, 2021). The most significant tensions have arisen in areas of high demand surrounding London. In response the government therefore announced that the new calculations did not reflect *binding targets* on local plan-making '*but instead provides a starting point for determining the level of need for the area*' (MHCLG, 2021a, p. 1). Those opposed to new development could make a careful consideration of the new figures '*alongside what constraints areas face, such as the Green Belt, and the land that is actually available for development, that the decision on how many homes should be planned for is made*' (p.1). Reassuringly for such opponents, the new targets do '*not override other planning policies, including the protections set out in...strong protections for the Green Belt. It is for local authorities to determine precisely how many homes to plan for and where those homes are most appropriately located*' (p.1).

In this section we have set out the policy trajectories underpinning the rise of target-driven approaches to housing during the 2000 s at national level. Whilst virtual targets have always formed a part of the statecraft of (spatial) governance and policy, it was with the modernisation of government management systems under the Blair administration of 1997 that they took on a more significant and directive character. Conservative governments have increasingly used them align the actions of the private sector with those of public policy priorities through the application of stronger target-driven forms of virtual statecraft Other considerations over affordability and quality have gradually been downgraded, with local actors required to find ways to meet centrally-directed targets. As discussed earlier, this in turn prioritises quantitative calculations over more qualitative outcomes, that become secondary considerations, dependent on the production of financial values. In the next section we explore the ways in which these broader shifts in central government statecraft have had an impact on the politics and planning of housing in London specifically and in turn how the city's experiences have influenced dominant understandings of national policy.

4. Targets and regional planning – the London case

London's housing market has exhibited characteristics of a crisis for decades (Brownill, 1988; Watt, 2016). As Edwards (2016) argues, the current situation is the outcome of financialised strategies that privilege private rental income over the right to collective housing, based on need (Beswick et al., 2016). London's market is therefore a crisis for many but also one in which mortgage-free buy to let landlords are safe and many ultra-wealthy are able to shelter their capital in real estate (Fernandez, Hofman, & Aalbers, 2016). There are also millions of home-owners, many of whom have benefitted from increases in asset values and are increasingly reliant on continued expansion to meet their welfare

demand. Moreover, for the lowest income groups, a context of extensive 'right to buy' sell offs of local public housing, dispossession during the regeneration of social housing schemes, and the failure to leverage planning gain to provide sufficient quantities of new social housing has exacerbated London's housing crisis further (Boughton, 2018). More recently, the crisis has also become one of housing quality *vis* reduced size and the limiting effects of private finance initiatives in areas of regeneration (Hodkinson, 2020).

As will be discussed in this section, the characterisation of London's housing market as being in crisis has been converted into a problem of statecraft consisting of two principal elements. First, for central government, the city faces a *lack of housing supply* with a failure to build enough new housing units to meet demand (Brill & Raco, 2021). The policy prescription is a freeing up of planning and the imposition of new targets to facilitate private investment and development. Such representations view the city as a development space, or an object seen through the lens of housing numbers and delivery potential. There is a downplaying of place dynamics and the presence of complex political, economic, and social geographies. The latter are viewed pejoratively as impediments to growth, that city-wide and local authorities should work to contain in order to meet broader virtual ends. Second, planners and policy-makers at multiple scales have been required to meet diverse objectives simultaneously – delivering on a London-wide set of targets and development agendas, whilst also meeting the demands, needs, and priorities of residents and communities. The outcome of these deliberations is that the setting and meeting of virtual targets has become the focus for political conflicts. We explore this further in the next section by outlining the governance arrangements that shape planning and housing policy in London, before discussing the software and technologies that are used to generate targets.

4.1. London's governance system

The creation of the Greater London Authority [GLA] and the elected Assembly and Mayor in 2000 established a tier of strategic planning coordination that had been absent since the abolition of the Greater London Council in 1985. With the abolition of RDAs in 2012 discussed above, the capital became the only place in England in which national priorities and virtual targets for housing were to be implemented through negotiations between three tiers: central government; regional (city-wide) authorities; and local government - the London Boroughs. Both the Mayor and Boroughs have the task of preparing strategies that '*set out a housing implementation strategy for the full range of housing describing how they will maintain delivery of a five-year supply of housing land to meet their housing target*' (p.13), along with targets for the re-use of brownfield sites. The forms of statecraft that exist to establish coordination and cohesion over housing policy are therefore complex and highly contested. They reflect a constant relational battle over: the amounts of housing required across the city as a whole and how it should be distributed between different Boroughs; the different political cultures and affiliations of governments at all three scales; the diversity of housing needs and circumstances in different parts of the city; competing outlooks over place-making and new housing; and contrasting visions over what types of housing contribute to local, city-wide, and even national priorities. Allied to these fundamental sources of tension are wider differences in the physical environments of places across the city, different development cultures and histories, a highly variegated and complex housing market, and the availability of land for new types of house-building.

This unique set of governmental arrangements has an ambivalent effect. On the one hand it provides a clear, strategic coordinating structure embodied in the production of *London Plans*, the needs-based Strategic Housing Market Assessments [SHMAs] and the development capacity-based Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessments [SHLAAs]. The GLA acts to situate development proposals and deliberations within a broader city-wide context in, for example,

discussions over how they contribute to London's global economic performance. In addition, Mayors have the power to 'call-in' projects that have been assessed by Boroughs and overturn local decisions if proposals do not meet with the strategic priorities set out in the *London Plan*. The Mayor and GLA are also required to use their assets and targets to encourage Boroughs and citizens to agree collectively on what new housing is required and to distribute new units across the city as a whole. However, they have relatively limited powers of delivery. Whilst the *London Plan* sets strategic targets for the types of housing it would like to see delivered, it cannot compel compliance unless Boroughs concur and negotiate them into site-by-site planning deliberations (as per the NPPF discussed earlier).

On the other hand, London's governance structure also generates systemic forms of antagonism and conflict around housing, increasingly manifest in politicised interventions. Central government, through the Secretary of State, is empowered to overturn the Mayor's decisions, if they are seen as lacking compliance with national policy to build more housing units and meet agreed targets. At Borough level, attempts to impose London-wide strategic priorities are highly politicised processes. Greater London's local government boundaries were established under the *London Government Act 1963*, that followed the core recommendations of the *Royal Commission on Local Government in London*, chaired by Sir Edwin Herbert.[8] They comprise 32 Boroughs and the City of London and were designed to reflect the political composition and make-up of the city and to provide a 'balance' between different types of authority areas, that whilst politically and socially diverse, were functionally integrated (Hatherley, 2020). The political complexion of the Boroughs and their approaches to housing delivery (or restrictions on new build) is a strong variable in shaping these deliberations. Fig. 1 shows the geographical make up of control in 2020. With the exception of a strong core of Conservative controlled authorities in suburban London (Bromley, Bexley, Barnet and Hillingdon) and some in Inner London with high concentrations of affluent housing (Kensington and Chelsea and Westminster), and pockets of Liberal Democrat control in South West London, the city's politics has tended to be Labour dominated. In 2020 Labour controlled 21 boroughs to the Conservatives 7 and Liberal Democrats 3. This political geography is reflected in a diverse range of approaches to housing delivery. As the Mayor is also elected through a Party System, there is much potential for disagreement and highly politicised forms of virtual statecraft. Since 2000 the Mayors have been Ken Livingstone (Independent then Labour, 2000–2008); Boris Johnson (Conservative, 2008–2016); and Sadiq Khan (Labour, 2016-present).

What this division of powers and political control leads to is constant process of politically-mediated crafting and re-shaping of the virtual spaces of regulation and deliberation in which housing policy and targets are set. London's political geography demonstrates that it is not one space of (virtual) action but a series of places. There is a restless search to create market 'confidence' for investment, although as we will see below there is also a danger that too many targets and numbers is generating what Thrift and French (2002) call the 'categorical saturation' of the policy field and an inability to prioritise or to take account of broader needs beyond the reductive view of housing as a delivery-focused, quantitative unit-based exercised. This saturation is found in the evolution and implementation of virtual software, in the sense of institutionalised calculative practices that are used to establish targets for housing, especially the SHLAA and Local Plans and it is to their production that we now turn.

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[8] The Commission called for the establishment of 52 local Boroughs to establish a closer connection between local communities and representatives, but this was rejected by the Conservative government at the time as being too complex and fragmented (Sharpe, 1961). Since 1965 the Borough boundaries have remained unchanged, with the exception of a village, named Knockholt, that moved from Bromley to Kent after a local referendum.

4.2. Assessing housing capacity and need at regional level: the SHLAA and the SHMAA

The *Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment* (known as SHLAA) was first introduced in deliberations over the *London Plan 2008* and followed on from the *London Housing Capacity Study* of 2004. The GLA (2017a) stated that the SHLAA is not a site allocations exercise but can be conceptualised as a form of statecraft designed to '*provide a robust indication of aggregate housing capacity at local planning authority level and across London*' (p.9). Most notably, it is based on '*the assessment of overall capacity on potential sites to provide an aggregate, probability-based estimate of the future contribution from this source at a local planning authority level*' (p.13). It also seeks to take account of what it calls 'constraints' on development in different parts of the city, including green spaces and conservation areas that are protected from most new development. This focus on probabilities is used to generate a list of targets on a geographical basis, in a way that is both designed to meet a strategic planning need – the delivery of more houses across the city – and a variegated geography in which place-based differences in physical environments are accounted for. The original SHLAA was designed '*in essence [as] a study of aggregate capacity derived from constraint based probabilities of this coming forward from sites of over 0.25 ha which are not currently in residential use*' (GLA, 2009, p. 3). The focus was on brownfield sites and especially larger sites that were to take the bulk of new housing. In each case, the SHLAA would be used to provide assessments of site locations, their deliverability potential, the quantity of housing that could be delivered, and any potential constraints (and recommendations on how these could be overcome).

Despite its technical character, these land availability assessments have acted as a site of contested disagreements, misunderstandings, and questions as to its core purpose, both in London and the rest of England (Gallent, Hamiduddin, & Madeddu, 2013; Freire-Trigo, 2021). GLA planners have long been aware of its limitations and the fact that many sites are reported in error, with respondents unable to highlight the land-uses and/or the potential for deliverability (GLA, 2009). Archival documents reveal that by 2011 the GLA had started to re-assess its software and target-setting processes as the principal mechanism through which it would address London's housing crisis and meet the NPPF's requirements. A position paper set out the case for target-led forms of regulation arguing that '*historically, increased housing output was usually related to higher targets (and when it was not, in the late 1980's, this was because the targets were not based on sufficiently authoritative estimates of potential capacity)*' (Goldberg, 2011, p. 1). It also noted that targets were less effective where the target-setting process was not '*sufficiently flexible to take account of variations in local circumstances or the importance of inclusive, consensual working in deriving them*' (p.1). What was required was a better methodology that took account both of London's diversity and the perception that its housing market '*takes scant regard of Borough boundaries*'. A re-imagined virtuality was therefore required drawing on an '*approach that acknowledges that in London, the concept of 'localness' embraces the housing needs not just of individual neighbourhoods and boroughs but also of the capital as a whole*' (p.1).

The main tensions identified were over the relationships between a city-wide strategic level of target setting, that concentrated mainly on the capacities of large sites across East and North East London, and Borough-level discussions over locally-defined needs and place-capacities whose connections to broader strategic concerns were erratic and at times contradictory. These tensions have remained a consistent source of antagonism since the SHLAA was introduced. The GLA therefore set-up a working group known as the Strategic Housing Market Partnership [SHMP], drawing on a range of private sector, local government, and academic representatives, to work on reforming the SHLAA to update the definition of deliverable and developable sites with the requirement that,
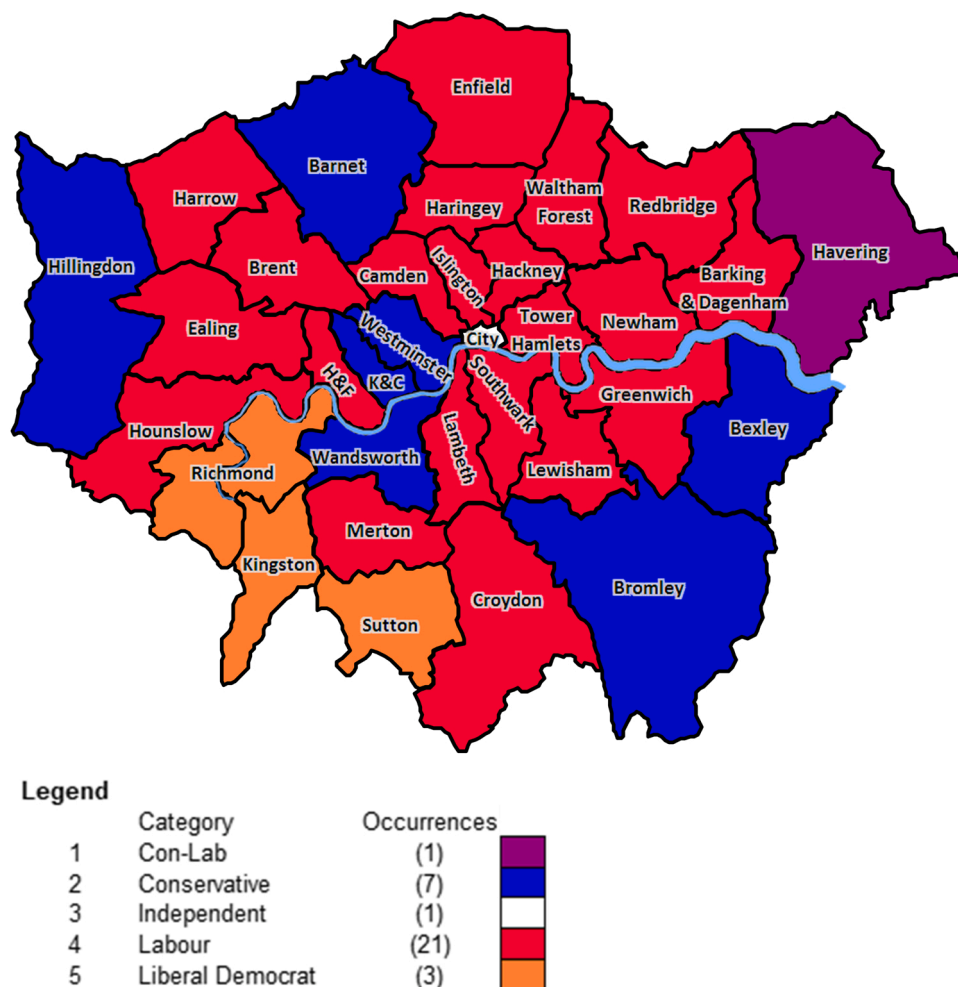
Legend

	Category	Occurrences	
1	Con-Lab	(1)	
2	Conservative	(7)	
3	Independent	(1)	
4	Labour	(21)	
5	Liberal Democrat	(3)	

Fig. 1. Political Map of Borough Control in Greater London, 2020.

'future housing target setting will have to take close notice of the tenor of the NPPF; in particular the focus on growth and the need to plan to meet the full, objectively assessed needs for market and affordable housing, as far as is consistent with the other policies in the NPPF. Therefore we are seeking to develop an approach to the SHLAA that fully reflects the London Plan's aim of optimising housing output on individual sites and other sources of housing capacity' (SHMP, 2012, p. 2).

This change in emphasis reflected Paragraph 159 of the NPPF (DCLG, 2012a) that required local plan makers craft a formal Assessment '*to establish realistic assumptions about the availability, suitability and the likely economic viability of land to meet the identified need for housing over the plan period*'.

It was this desire to establish a stronger link between virtual forms of statecraft and place geographies and politics that led to a push for a '*new SHLAA that is both more robust and more locally sensitive through close collaborative working with the boroughs and other stakeholders. This will inform a review of the housing targets which will be brought forward as an early alteration to the London Plan* [2016]' (Goldberg, 2011, p. 2). It was also driven by a *capacity-led approach* informed by an intensive, site-by-site recognition assessment process. GLA and Borough Officers were tasked with identifying potential major sites for housing delivery and assessing their capacity to absorb new housing. This estimate would then be checked against other estimates of housing need to decide whether more land capacity should be found, before the final housing targets in each Borough could be established.

During the 2010 s, the SHLAA has been further reformed and revised. Following '*the principles set out in the Planning Practice Guidance*' (GLA, 2017a, p. 10) London SHLAA methodology has adapted this national guidance to recognise the fact that most of the capital's potential land for housing development is brownfield land (GLA, 2017a). As a result, the housing capacity contribution of large 'windfall sites' is estimated according to their potential density as well as their delivery probability, which is based on the impact of planning policy, environmental, and delivery constraints (see Fig. 2). This 'constraints model approach' is designed to provide '*a robust method of estimating overall housing output*' (GLA. (2017)) because it can lower the 'notional housing capacity' of those sites in light of identified constraints, or even render some sites 'unsuitable' for housing. However, Boroughs are encouraged to revise constraints during stage 3 of the large site assessment process (see Fig. 3) in case some initially unsuitable sites can be counted again for assessment.

The Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) 2017 is the other key study that forms part of the evidence which informs the housing policies of the London Plan 2021 and Boroughs' local plans (GLA, 2017b). As mentioned above, the SHMA estimates the overall current and future housing needs across London, both in terms of tenure and type. These needs are calculated using demographic projections, market trends, and the 'backlog need' for new homes. Some authors have raised concerns about the confusion between the concepts of demand and need that underpin the SHMA calculations (Adams & Watkins, 2002). Others have also questioned the soundness of this methodology, due to the huge growth variations between different demographic sources. Moreover, the sources used in the SHMA calculations and its findings do not reflect

Constraint	Variables
Planning Policy	• Designated open space
	• Strategic industrial land
	• Locally significant industrial locations
	• Protected industrial/employment sites
	• Safeguarded wharves
Environmental	• Flood risk
	• Aircraft noise pollution
	• Health and Safety consultation zones
	• Pylons/high voltage power lines
Delivery	• Land ownership
	• Local infrastructure
	• Contamination

Fig. 2. Constraint Categories on Sites for Housing.
Source: Adapted from GLA (2017a, p. 15).

Stage	Assessment Process
1	Initial compilation of site approvals, site allocations, and 'other large sites' to a computer system.
2	Site status, density, and probability established by system.
3	Borough site assessment of status, constraints, land-use mix, density, probability, and phasing
4	GLA review & feedback; 'sites for discussion' flagged where there is disagreement on capacity.
5	Borough-GLA one to one meetings to discuss individual sites.
6	Final GLA Review and Consistency Check

Fig. 3. Stages of the large sites assessment process.
Source: Adapted from GLA (2017a).

place-based realities, but London-wide trends and needs – in tension with the SHLAA.

The SHLAA identifies a total housing capacity across London of 649,350 new homes over a period of 10 years, or a capacity for 64,935 new homes a year (GLA, 2017). This represents a remarkable 53% increase on the overall estimate for the London Plan 2016 and brings the annual capacity figure close to the estimated housing need identified in the SHMA 2017 – *i.e.* between 59,900 and 69,600 homes a year. The correlation between housing capacity and housing need is not a fortunate coincidence but the outcome of an iterative process, whereby capacity is revised if it does not meet the identified need (HM Government, no date). Finding new sites or changing the development assumptions – *i.e.* density, constraints, land-use mix, and probability – are the two ways in which national guidance suggests local planning authorities can increase their estimated housing capacity. However, in a highly constrained physical and policy environment like London this approach means that many Boroughs have "*come under more pressure to do the impossible*", as one Planner noted. Boroughs have been prepared to release some greenfield land for development in exceptional circumstances, but in most cases attempts to remove constraints have been fiercely opposed. As a result, there has been a growth of denser taller buildings in central areas, whose sites become identified as key locations for 'intensification' (Craggs, 2018). In addition, the pressure has also led to the controversial designation of council estates or industrial areas as 'brownfield land', as a way to create land for growth (Freire Trigo, 2020). In this sense, the SHLAA process breaks down the complexity of place-based land-uses and re-defines them through the lens of their developability, which facilitates the distribution of the London-wide housing need to specific places.

This section has analysed the governance arrangements surrounding target-setting and planning in London and the types of calculative practices that are used to inform deliberations. It has demonstrated the ways in which target-setting reflects and reproduces ongoing tensions in statecraft and politicised disagreements between multiple levels of government, with national governments since 2004 consistently pushing for higher numbers to meet an imagined supply-side shortfall, whilst also boosting economic activity; city-wide planners and Mayors seeking to increase numbers by promoting developments in places identified in *London Plans* as strategically significant for the global competitiveness of the city as a whole; and all of this overlaid onto a city whose complex political, economic, and social geographies are mediated through the sub-politics of Borough-level planning. There is a core tension between the drive for higher absolute numbers to meet need and the contested and place-centred character of the planning system. Rather than providing a virtual mechanism for the eradication of conflicts, the SHMA and the SHLAA have acted as a lightening-rods for tensions and disagreements. The process requires planners to identify sites for new development and give priority for development on them to meet the requirements of local plans. The effects on what housing targets are set and where are discussed in the next section.

5. Housing targets in London and their impacts

In this section we discuss the outcome of the deliberations over target-setting. Fig. 4 demonstrates absolute housing targets by Borough in the four *London Plans* dating from 2004 to 2021. We have represented the changes through cartograms below. The data indicates three key trends: (i) an overall growth in the target numbers across the city, reflecting an attempt to boost supply and make available sites for development and investment; (ii) higher absolute numbers in central London boroughs, especially in areas that have been subject to regeneration pressures in the East and North East; and (iii) shifting geographies of target setting with Outer London Boroughs required to take a greater number of new-build houses under the most recent Plan.

These housing targets represent a reconciliation between the statistical assessment of housing need, based on London wide demographic
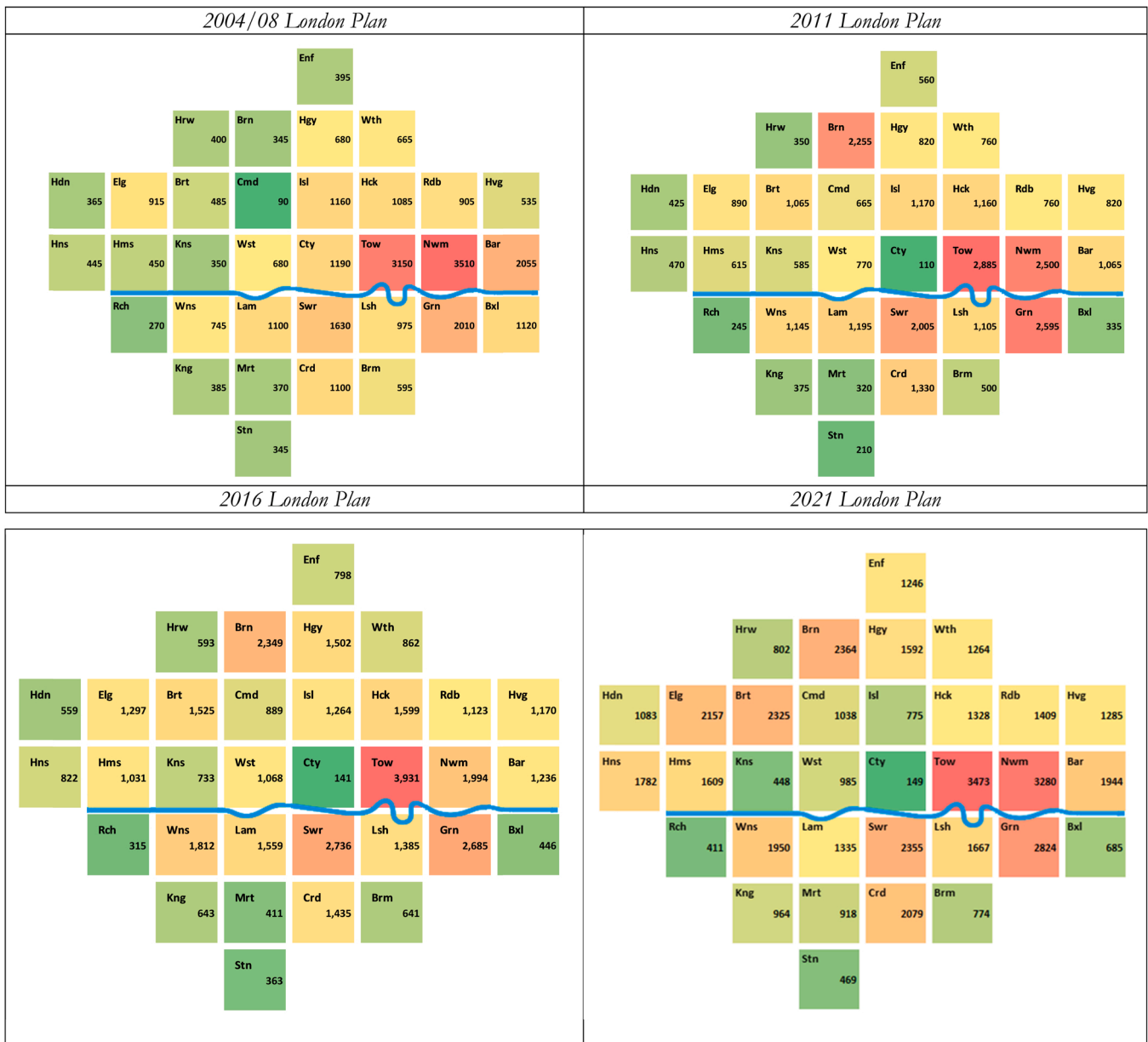
Fig. 4. Absolute Housing Targets by Borough in London Plans, 2004–2020.

projections, market trends, and economic forecasts; and the geographical assessment of housing capacity, based on site analyses as well as density and land use mix assumptions. In other words, the allocated targets for each borough result from a complex set of place-based negotiations around the SHLAA and are founded on combinations of: land-uses and the materialities of places; longer-term back-casting of Boroughs' housing delivery track-records; strategic priorities over what sites should be developed to meet city-wide objectives; fulfilling a wider national agenda to find new sites for housing completions to ameliorate a national housing crisis; and responding to political forms of control and varied agendas across London. Due to the way the SHMA and SHLAA studies are produced, planners at the local level have focused less on *demands/needs* for different housing in their Boroughs and more on the *identification* of potential sites for development. This has led to a higher concentration of targets in and around central areas that have undergone de-industrialisation since the 1970 s and in which there are fewer constraints – *i.e.* places with high amount of industrial and/or brownfield land. Undertaking separate studies of need (SHMA) and capacity (SHLAA) therefore creates a series of disconnections between

where new housing is required for specific needs, and where housing is finally provided because of the existing land capacity of a particular location. In the succinct words of one interviewee involved in setting the process "*the purpose of the whole plan was to satisfy the targets*" regardless of who the housing is for and what purposes it serves beyond the meeting of targets.

Evidence for such insights is reflected in deliberations over the most recent *London Plan 2021*. It sets an agreed target of over 52,000 homes per year for ten years, a figure that reconciles the overall findings from the SHLAA and SHMA studies. This overall target is then distributed across the London boroughs and presented in the Plan (see GLA, 2021, p. 163) but the breakdown of the overall target does not indicate what type of housing should be built and on which sites. Instead, the London Plan provides general housing policies with recommended percentages for each housing tenure, which local boroughs should heed when producing their own local plans. As mentioned above, the specific housing targets for each borough is therefore connected to their land capacity, not their need.

There are also strong party political dimensions to target-setting

which are, again, disconnected from definitions of need or the 'objectivity' that is alleged to accompany virtual and technical definitions. Fig. 5 shows the correlations between political control and average targets. It shows that Labour controlled authorities, especially in central London, have consistently experienced the highest targets and that the differential grew under Mayor Johnson's London Plan 2016, and then under the 2017 consultation by Mayor Khan. It also indicates that the most recent iteration of the London Plan *2021* involved a revising down of overall target numbers, with disproportionately larger reductions in Conservative and Liberal Democrat-dominated Boroughs. It also shows that targets have come down in the final 2020-1 Plan as compared to its 2017 consultation draft targets, even though demands for affordable housing and homelessness have continued to increase. This is especially true in locations with relatively few large sites, even in central London such as Lambeth. Other Boroughs such as Southwark and Tower Hamlets have had major increases in their targets for the opposite reasons – physical sites exist that have been identified for new housing, irrespective of whether or not local demands have changed. Their targets are driven by widely accepted numbers, such as London Council's claim that 'by 2021, over 800,000 new homes will need to be built in London'. This disconnection between the virtual and the actual is accentuated by the narrow focus of target-setting practices and their supply-side driven ideological framing.

At the same time the *Plans* have been failing to boost supply, even as measured in their own terms: '*the combined delivery for 33 Boroughs across London over the past five years equates to an average of 32,935 homes per annum, 37 per cent lower than the newly accepted housing target*' (Simmie, 2020, p. 1). Beyond these absolute numbers the focus of new build housing has been in more expensive types of units. Fig. 6 below highlights the limited impacts of the Plans' Affordable Housing targets on delivery across the city between 2001 and 2019. Whilst overall completions have shown a moderate overall increase, especially in Eastern and Western areas, the affordability gap has grown. There was a significant dip in affordable housing delivery after 2012–2013, that briefly recovered in 2014–2014 but then plunged again from 2016

onwards. This is especially significant, given that recent increases in overall numbers have been driven by developments on major sites in areas targeted for growth – the very locations in which policy has been designed to deliver greater supply of such houses. This is a consequence of a fetishization of supply (unit) numbers and the relegation of targets for affordability and mixed types of tenure to the realm of 'strategic' aspirational targets, rather than a statutory requirement. The problem is both one of governance structures in that the GLA/Mayor does not have the power to force affordability targets onto local actors, with deliberations instead being carried out on a site-by-site basis and political, in the fear that increasing the pressure on market actors and systems to make their housing less profitable would lead to the delivery of fewer units.

The affordable housing targets are based on calculations which combine the three-year average of previous delivery, assessment of need (through the SHMA) and assessment of capacity (through the SHLAA). A heavy weighting towards previous delivery gives the targets an empirical basis but means that they are also often out of sync with markets that are subject to constant changes and shifts in investment flows and demands. Previous attempts to consider more granular things like market dynamics led to technocratic arguments over the precise calculations, so the standard methodology has simplified these calculations but this in turn has created a disconnect between current conditions and posited delivery. Boroughs which have to deliver large projects but do not have many further sites do not face inflated targets, but this does not necessarily follow where the market wants to bring sites forward, tending to fall on more deprived East London boroughs. As such, there is a tendency for high targets to fall on Labour areas: thus a median shortfall of 10% for Labour boroughs, while Conservative boroughs delivery reflects realist target-setting at a 2% over delivery.

Under Mayors Johnson and Livingstone, central London and regeneration areas along the Lea Valley to the North East and the Thames Gateway to the East, along with Thames-side developments in central and West London were seen as the primary locations for major new housing developments, partly because they possess relatively high levels
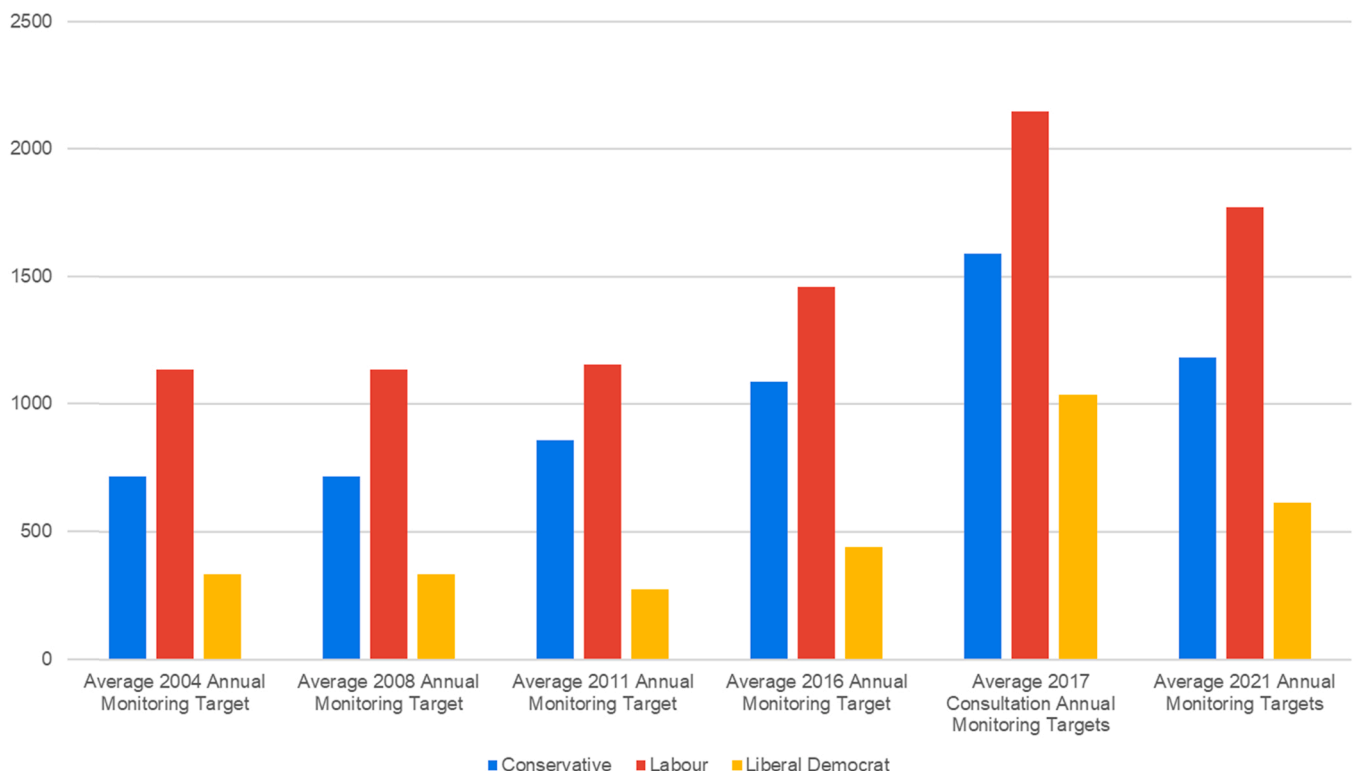

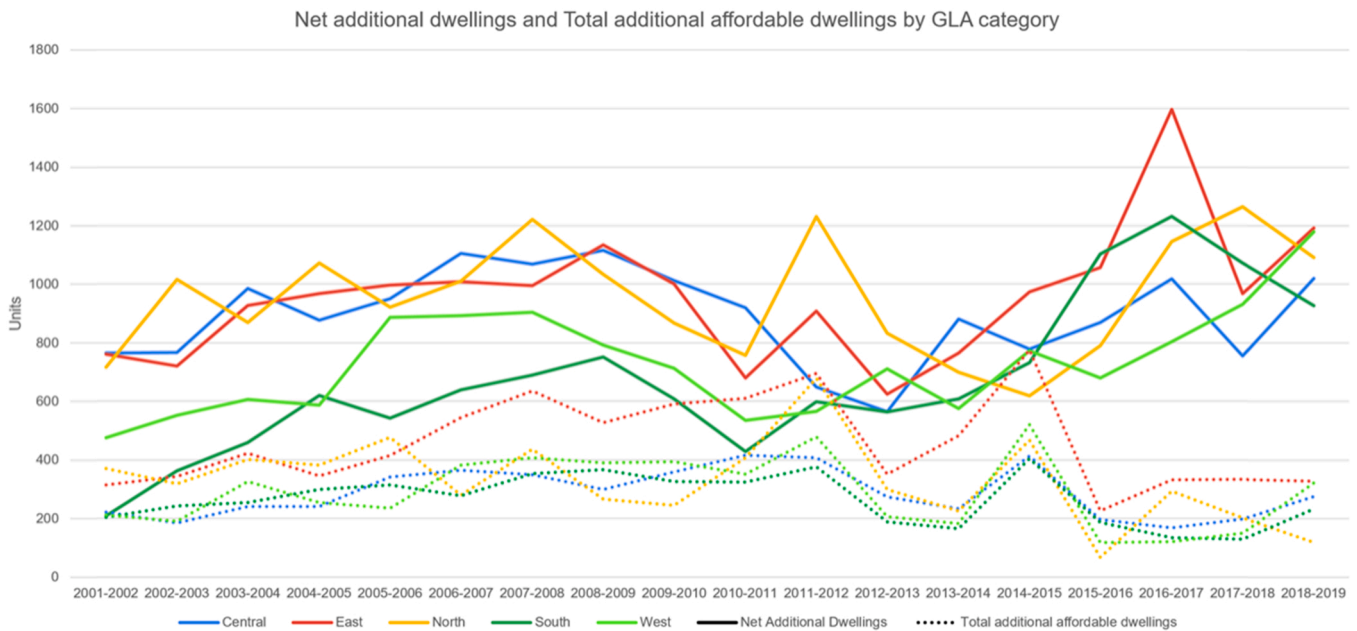**Fig. 5.** Housing Number Targets and Political Control.

Fig. 6. Housing Delivery and Affordable Housing London 2001–2019.
Source: London Datastore (2021).

of available land for new housing and could help boost supply. Social housing estates also became a target for broader regeneration as they were re-classified as brownfields, as mentioned above, thus opening them up to wholesale clearance and re-development, a relatively powerful example of the deployment of virtual forms of statecraft in shaping the form and character of places. In Boroughs possessing large-scale post-war housing schemes there is an opportunity to lever in both

private developers and public sector funds for new projects, and ally these to the resources of third sector institutions such as Housing Associations (Watt, 2016). Conversely, those Boroughs without large estates, in which home ownership is distributed amongst private homeowners, and in which there are significant physical constraints on development (such as the presence of protected land), have tended to have lower targets. Many of these are in suburban areas and under
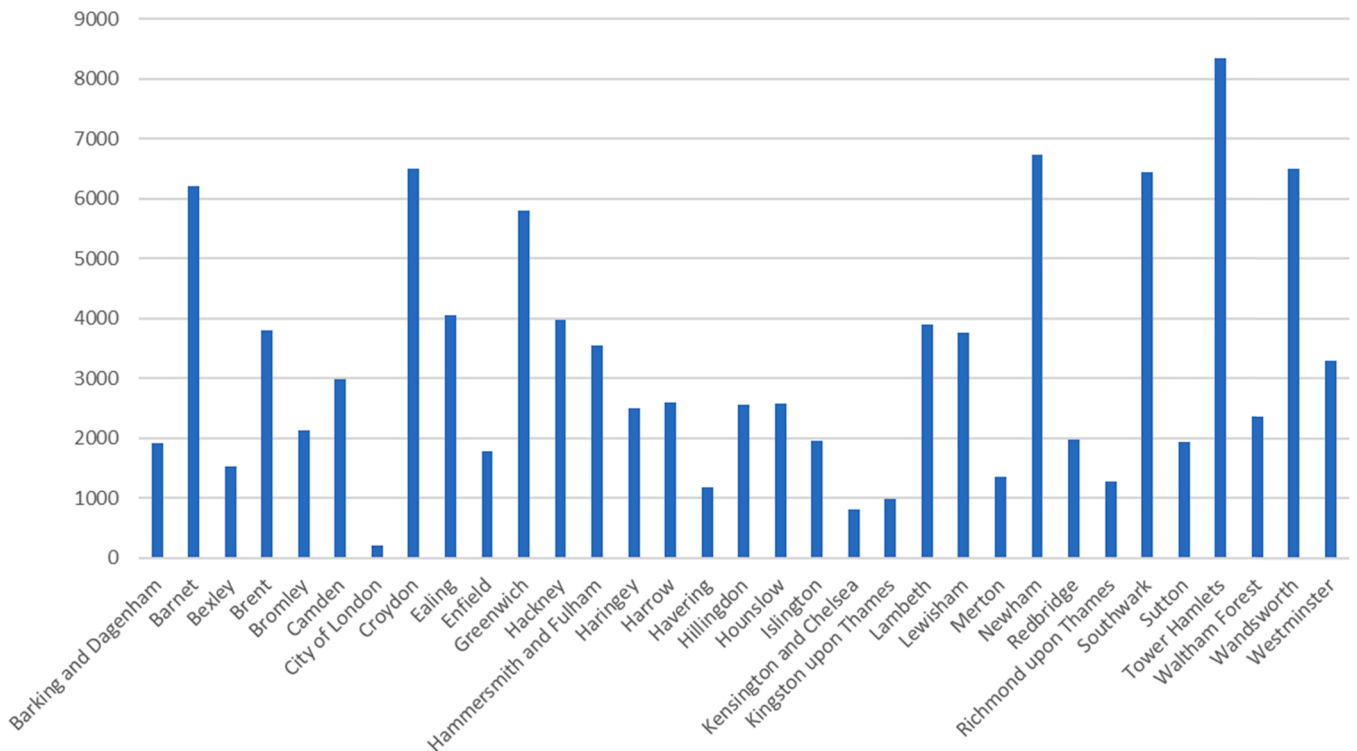

Fig. 7. Number of Houses Built 2017–2020.
Source: Graph derived from data by Lichfields: https://lichfields.uk/grow-renew-protect-planning-for-the-future/how-many-homes-the-new-standard-method.

Mayor Johnson there was a concerted effort to limit development pressures in these areas to fulfil electoral promises and reflect the interests of the voters who supported his election. Even in inner London large estates, there has been a growing acceptance that new homes are principally meeting virtual delivery numbers, rather than meeting needs. It is these trends that have helped shape the variegated delivery of housing across London between 2017 and 2020 as shown by Fig. 7 below.

Under Mayor Khan targets were re-shaped again through a different set of political priorities and the deployment of new practices. There was an attempt in the *London Plan 2021* to increase numbers and in turn market activity towards suburban and smaller-scale schemes that would be more evenly distributed across the city. The core drivers behind this move were both political and pragmatic. As a range of interviewees recounted, there was a feeling that central London Boroughs, many of them Labour controlled and with voters who back Mayor Khan's election, were being asked to take on a disproportionate share of the costs and disruptions of delivering more housing for the strategic priorities of London as a whole, and that outer Boroughs should 'contribute' more. As noted above, the SHLAA methodology mitigated against this, with its emphasis on the development of large sites for major housebuilders. The response was to initiate a 'small-sites' strategy that would encourage smaller scale developments delivered by a diverse range of builders.

In 2017 the publication of *London Plan Consultation Annual Monitoring* targets reflected this wider shift in development pressure and represented a challenge to Boroughs in outer London, with high levels of greenfield land and communities that have consistently voted for limiting new housing development (Bowie, 2010). Fig. 8 highlights the effects of change and the levels of increase with targets for outer Boroughs almost doubling from 20,000 to 38,000 from the 2016 London Plan to that proposed in 2017, and ultimately increasing by almost a third to 27,000 while inner London borough targets decreased in the same period. Rather than explicitly politicising the shift as a formal political and planning choice, the justification was framed in terms of a technical 're-calculation' that would better reflect the true character of the city's physical environments and help planners to meet national and city-wide virtually-prescribed targets. Discussions were therefore displaced from the realms of more openly political processes, to one of virtual technicalities and the wider claim that by extending a small-sites

policy, new forms of co-ordination mechanisms could be put in place to capture and incorporate the knowledge and expertise of a more diverse and innovative set of private sector actors.

In order to further delegate decisions and responsibility for the delivery of affordable housing to local negotiations, a concurrent policy has been to introduce *threshold-led* measures in which private actors are offered a 'faster-track' planning route for development, and less public scrutiny, in return for meeting a virtual target for the provision of affordable housing units on individual applications. A threshold of 35% affordability on proposals was set in 2017 as what one city planner described as "*basic carrot and stick planning*", built on assumptions over what private developers and investors could and were prepared to accept as a baseline for negotiation. For publicly-owned land sold for housing development a threshold target of 50% was set (Mayor of London, 2016). Mayor Khan's election campaign in 2016 was underpinned by a critique of the house-building sectors and their failure to provide homes for citizens. Setting threshold percentages and using targets to shift development to outer London and away from central sites with excessively high land-values (and therefore residential market values) was a political response that sought to use targets as a principal mode of statecraft. It was an attempt to re-code existing target-setting software that in the words one GLA officer "*set signals*" to the private sector and were designed to be a market-friendly form of governance that was clear and unambiguous. Or, as another commented, thresholds could help set precedents that then become accepted industry standards and norms, "*Once a couple of affordable housing sites start coming in at the 35 per cents, which was what we were trying to do with the threshold approach, a whole different thing, then you'll find the market responds and they start paying reasonable prices for sites and they start delivering affordable housing, it's really that simple*".

However, following a period of intense deliberation, the final published *London Plan 2021* saw the target figures for all Boroughs revised down from the first iteration, as reflected in the figure above, although still significantly above the numbers in earlier plans. These downward revisions were a consequence of what one central London Planner termed "*political pushback*" in which there was a growing recognition even within the Mayor's Office that the availability of sites in some parts of London was below what was required for the delivery of housing targets and that there would need to be some 're-balancing' towards
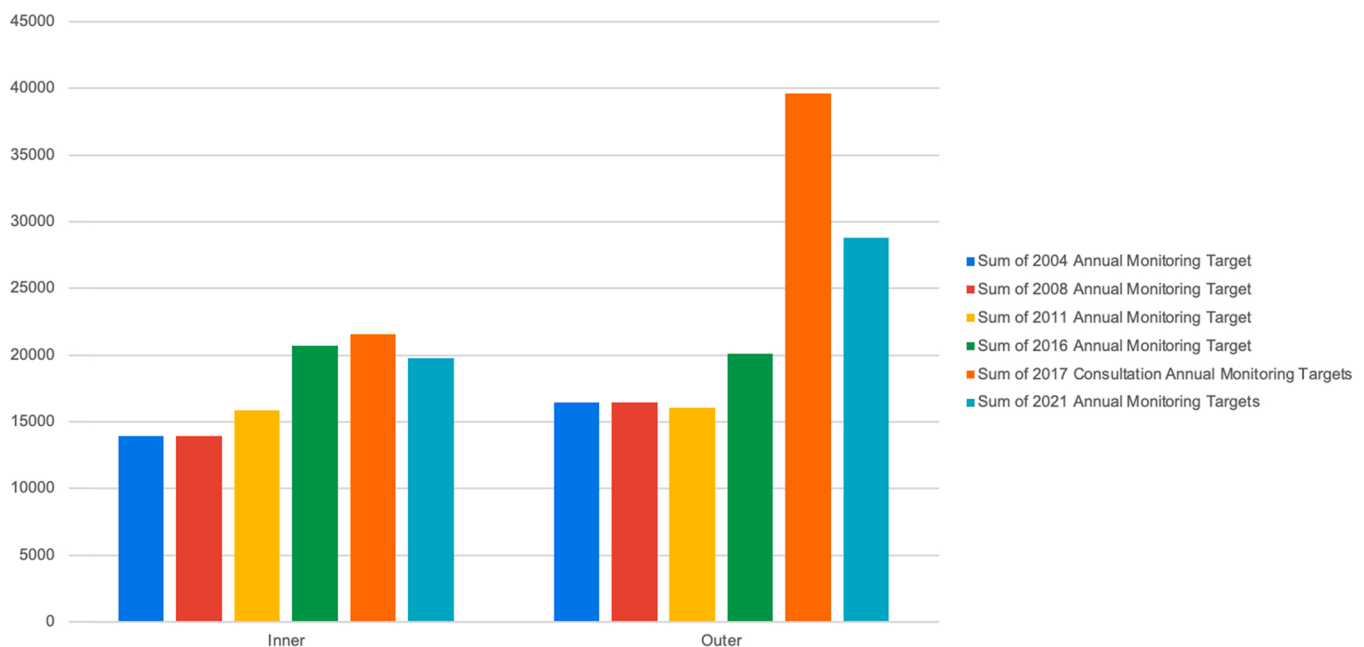

Fig. 8. Sum of London Plan targets, Inner/Outer London.
Source: London Datastore (2021).

central London and regeneration sites (and Opportunity Areas) where targets could realistically be fulfilled. The largest decreases were in Conservative or Liberal-controlled outer London Boroughs, and central London authorities were still expected to provide the majority of new housing units. This was justified by the push to find new sites for housebuilding as a priority and the recognition that in Outer London Boroughs the constraints on site development, including greenfield sites, were much greater.

One final influence was the more directly interventionist role played by central government after the election of Boris Johnson in 2019. In January 2020 central government took the unprecedented step of withholding agreement for the new *London Plan* and pushed for the Mayor and GLA to publish revised, higher target numbers. As the Secretary of State noted in an open letter to the Mayor, the finally agreed figure of 52,000 homes per year:

> 'is significantly below your own identified need of around 66,000 homes and well below what most commentators think is the real need of London. As I have set out, the shortfall between housing need in London and the homes your Plan delivers has significant consequences for Londoners' (Jenrick, 2020a, p. 2).

It was claimed that the lack of adequate targets was '*inconsistent with the pro-development stance we should be taking*' so that '*in aggregate this approach ultimately only serves to make Londoners worse off*'. The Mayor and GLA were accused of not taking '*the tough choices necessary to bring enough land into the system to build the homes needed*', in other words giving due weight to new construction at a scale required. Such evidence indicates the strength of central government pressure on urban actors to modify and change their behaviour and meet numerical targets and requirements. But it also highlights the ambivalence of central government (virtual) policy over whether housing policy should be concerned principally with meeting identified needs or the of boosting units of supply, both of which are set out in the critique of the Mayor's Plan. The ideological solution is the use of targets to generate more supply, through which it is assumed the market will work to meet need.

In January 2021, following a re-submission of the *Plan* with amended targets, the government finally approved its publication, but again focused on the need to prioritise target-setting and delivery with the expectation that the planning system starts '*working to dramatically increase the capital's housing delivery and to start considering how your next London Plan can bridge the significant gap between the housing it seeks to deliver and the actual acute housing need London faces*' (Jenrick, 2021, p. 1). But some of the core tensions in central government's statecraft are also evident in its reading of the *London Plan*. It has been increasingly critical of high-density tall buildings in the city and has sought to develop a wider narrative around 'beauty' and quality in the urban environment (MHCLG, 2020a). In its acceptance of the *Plan* it is sceptical of policies that seek to boost density in order to deliver higher housing numbers. It is stated that, '*such developments are only brought forward in appropriate and clearly defined areas, as determined by the boroughs whilst still enabling gentle density across London. I am sure that you share my concern about such proposals and will make the required change which will ensure tall buildings do not come forward in inappropriate areas of the capital*' (Jenrick, 2020b). This emphasis on 'gentle density' is at odds with a set of target-based regulations and publicly stated agendas that seek to promote new housing delivery as a core priority. Such examples demonstrate the tensions within central government's approach to housing in seeking to govern through abstract virtual frameworks that boost market activity, whilst also dealing with place-based concerns and political pressures. In the final empirical section of the paper we examine our qualitative evidence, derived from interviews and documentary analysis, that examines the perspectives, views, and impacts on approaches to housing delivery amongst a wide range of public, private and voluntary sectors. It shows that the biggest limitation of a reductionist focus on delivery targets is in their representation and

understandings of the real estate investment and development market in London, how it works, what private sector actors 'want' from the planning system, and how targets succeed (or fail) in coordinating public and private objectives.

6. Targets, delivery, and the politics of planning

Setting regulations and establishing forms of statecraft that can support the right types of investment, in the right places, at the right times in cities such as London is an especially difficult governmental challenge. The views and perspectives of private actors are especially significant as targets have been designed to act as virtual forms of inter-systemic coordination (*cf.* Jessop, 2002) between different institutions and groups or to empower private sector actors to invest in and build new housing. The discussion here is divided into five sub-sections examining the themes of: targets and the governmentalities of delivery-focused planning; targets and the politics of housing delivery; private sector coordination and the assetisation of housing investment; performativity, reflexive irony, and fantasy planning; and re-shaping territorial imaginations and governmentalities.

6.1. Targets and the governmentalities of delivery-focused planning

Our research found much evidence of the tensions that planners face at the local scale in trying to establish resolutions and alignments between the virtual demands of central government and the complex places that they oversee. In the words of one Borough interviewee "*numbers are universal – they are what we share*". They are used to 'quantify judgement' (*cf.* Porter, 1994) as the presence of crude targets "*overrides everything and leads to bad planning*" defined in this case as the inability to give weight to multiple priorities. Their virtual presence created what one interviewee termed "*an atmosphere of development*" that reduces deliberations to a core focus on housing delivery. Complex place-based arguments and discussions, it was claimed, have become reduced to a constant "*scramble of asking the question 'where can we find those sites [for new housing]*?*'*", meaning that whenever spaces for new development emerge, the default position of many local politicians and planners is to ask how much new housing they can support, whatever its quality or social and environmental impacts. As one respondent from a land-owning public organisation noted, the setting of "*heavy targets*" had both quantitative and qualitative outcomes, in generating more intensive uses of land, delivering smaller housing, and creating governmental conditions that "*completely led our behaviour*" in everything the organisation did. Such insights reflect Miller's (2008) work on virtualism discussed earlier in which he found that a focus on accountability through numbers 'has the effect of turning the attention of [planning] officers back upwards to forms of evaluation such as performance indicators and the common language or jargon' (p.247). It is also indicative of the power of governmental framings associated with targets in which local actions and deliberations over priorities are always conducted in the shadow of hierarchy, that is central government or Mayoral/GLA hierarchies of power.

Similar views existed amongst Borough level planners. One, whose view echoed those across the sample, noted that "*all MHCLG just want to see is unit numbers, it doesn't matter what it is, what quality it is...that would have just completely been undeliverable*". However, when asked if they could imagine planning without targets, planners found it difficult to respond. A typical insight was that "*it's a difficult one. I think you need something to aim for*". Such points were iterated by others who argued that the presence of targets had acted as a particularly important challenge to Borough politicians and citizens in outer London who had been resistant to the building of new homes and had hidden behind London-wide targets, with the expectation that most new development would happen in inner urban Opportunity Areas and on 'brownfield sites'. Others also claimed that if targets were more effectively linked to wider objectives, such as the provision of state-provided social housing, rather

than market housing, then they would have more value in being closely aligned to evidence-based needs as produced through the SHMA. For instance, the latter consistently highlights the need for more housing at a lower rent and this could be delivered through more direct housing provision. However, the presence of *market-oriented* targets, serves to make these problems more acute by producing housing delivery that meets different needs.

At the same time other weaknesses of network-based forms of co-ordination were also evident, especially in tensions over the *responsibilities* associated with targets. Boroughs are required to provide numerical evidence on large scale developments and their "*lead-in times, build-out rates, approval times and the like*" and that "*these become public-facing evidence on when things can, realistically, be expected to happen*" (Borough Planner). Whilst it is principally the private sector and a small clutch of other providers who are responsible for the delivery of housing, it is Borough politicians and planners who are subject to measurement and made accountable for their fulfilment, or lack of it. The result is that "*Boroughs have the targets but don't have capacity to actually develop the sites*" (Borough Planner), meaning that rather than acting as a management tool to 'render predictable' (*cf.* Déjean, Gond, & Leca, 2004) the creation of new housing, the disconnections between the virtual and the actual create new forms of unpredictability.

Planners in interview noted that some major projects, especially in central London, could take decades to come to fruition as land ownership and financial disputes repeatedly undermined the plans of house-builders and developers and yet it was the local authority that took criticism for being too slow and failing to get units delivered. Others noted that investor priorities and funds were also subject to constant change, making it difficult to encourage private sector activity and connect private sector time-frames with those of the planning system and local political demands. In pushing responsibilities on to local actors, central government and the Mayor seek to shift the character of local political discussions over housing and generate new alignments between virtual spaces of planning and place change. It was highlighted consistently that the presence of targets limited the ability of actors to address wider questions of social justice and encouraged a bounded set of highly territorial governmentalities. At the same time, targets also became focal points of Boroughs' own forms of statecraft in seeking to apportion blame for housing failures to the Mayor and/or central government.

6.2. Targets and the politics of local housing delivery

In many London Boroughs virtual targets are continuing to have a direct impact on the conduct of local planning deliberations. On the one hand, they act as a political lever that some planning departments use to try and extract more affordable housing and planning gain payments in negotiations with private sector actors. Part of the logic of setting targets is that they re-frame debates through the language and metrics of markets to encourage more interactive public-private dialogue and co-ordination. Inner London planners, in particular, highlighted that the Mayor's opening up of a 'fast-track' for proposals that promised to deliver 35% affordable housing (however provided) had required bigger house-builders to be more proactive. It was also claimed that targets helped planners to obtain leverage with local politicians as they convert complex housing criteria into more technical deliberations in which professional planners have a stronger knowledge base and are seen as experts. One of the peculiarities of the English planning system is the distribution of responsibilities between planning officers and politicians. The former negotiate with private sector actors and report to the latter with recommendations, based primarily on whether or not the technical requirements of a planning proposal have been met and conform with planning policies. Local politicians (Council Planning Committees) then either approve or reject the proposals, adding a strong degree of local variation in what types of projects are approved and rejected.

In the words of one outer London planner, the perceived robustness

of the SHLAA process carried out by GLA planners in consultation with Borough officers meant that "*having them helps with how you approach your discussions with members [elected Councillors]. I think they know that this is what the London Plan does, it gives you the target and focuses all on delivering it*". In converting contested questions over housing to the realms of the technical, planners were able to claim wider legitimacy for their actions. In such instances, rather than seeing virtual targets as a regressive top-down form of control, it was described by some London planners as "*an effective tool…to get everybody thinking about what's going on [in a local area], why the diggers and cranes aren't happening in the right way. If you have leadership buy-in and they start to bring in all other functions of the council and really focus housing as a delivery priority…then they know about the number which is the number the calculation generates*". At the same time, however, they bemoaned that the politics of local housing all too often becomes a "*a numbers game*" defined as "*policy officers manipulating a spreadsheet and potentially being over-optimistic… and focusing to get to that magic number, that's not really properly planning about what's going to happen*".

In local authorities with relatively high levels of housing need and inflated markets, targets also play a political role in helping to legitimate controversial schemes and shifting responsibility for the granting of new development permissions onto policy-makers at higher levels. Debates over the setting of targets have generated genuine tensions, especially for central London Boroughs that possess both the greatest housing needs and the fastest-growing housing markets. Some authorities, such as Lambeth or Kensington & Chelsea have embraced growth as a vehicle for generating income for social housing. In other Boroughs, notably Haringey, market-led developments are viewed with a higher degree of critical doubt. As the head of Ealing Council, for example, recently argued, 'facing these challenges [of a housing crisis], Ealing has to negotiate hard. When private developers propose new schemes, we do everything we can to get the best possible development, maximise genuinely affordable homes, and get the money we need to make improvements for the community, to fund schools and support our health service' (Mason, 2020, p. 1).

Moreover, those Boroughs with a statistically more 'successful' approach to meeting targets have used this as political capital to reject projects that are less popular with local electorates or disconnected from housing priorities. One experienced planner claimed that their Conservative-run authority had "*quite a lot of clout in agreeing what target should be with the GLA, so we've done pretty well on that, whereas I think other boroughs, where they really don't have the resources to do it – and those will be the outer London boroughs, I suppose, most of the time – will be the ones that end up with targets that they're perhaps not happy with*". Planners in some contexts also act reflexively to take advantage of the opportunities opened up by the new arrangements. As one inner London politician noted "*we need to be growth-driven – it's the only way to link our activities to local needs…we need to accept the good stuff in order to say no to the bad stuff*". In other words, planners in some Boroughs claimed that they approve developments to give them the political legitimacy to then reject developments that they feel are not in the public interest. The presence of a city-wide, strategic authority was also used politically by some respondents who argued that it enabled them to displace responsibility for potential controversial projects and housing policy failures, as well as giving them more authority to challenge local resistance to new schemes:

> "It's true because if the Mayor sets a target and the planning officers in that borough have to commit to that target and move it forward and the politicians are resistant, you have a get out, you have a get out which is, 'sorry, the Mayor says so' and whilst you might have planners arguing that in the public realm that it's a problem or this would be a problem for this local authority, it's very useful for that kind of leverage to go to your Members [local Councillors] and say, 'yeah, we've got to do this, we've got to crack on."

On the other hand, there was also evidence of targets skewing priorities within Boroughs and over-determining what planning and housing policies should focus on. Even in areas where there had been some success in using targets to elicit planning gains, officers claimed that their presence was having a negative overall effect on place-building. Investment was being channelled into new asset classes, especially student housing and new classes of condominium-style Built-to-Rent developments, both of which meet virtual 'affordability' and 'delivery' targets and appear to show evidence of local planning policies working but were failing to meet social needs. We will return to the issue of assetisation (Ward, 2018) in the discussion of the private sector below but it is important to highlight that planners in interviews admitted that the desire to meet volume units is generating housing for specific groups of temporary users and not meeting the wider social demands of residents or feeding sub-markets of limited value in tackling housing needs. One noted that whilst their authority was now seen as one of the most active at delivering housing in London, the reality was that "*a lot of it has been through delivery of student housing and that would be a big factor in why affordable housing hasn't gone up*", meeting a virtualistic target but not reflecting local political priorities, needs, and/or demands that are focused on the availability of affordable housing for larger units. The scale of both has now reached extraordinary levels, in part reflecting and reproducing virtual representations of the city and its housing markets. Build-to-rent developments, for instance, now accounting for 20% of new build investment nationally and across London (Brill & Durrant, 2021) and have been used to drive forward new regeneration programmes in sites alongside public transport infrastructure, such as Wembley in NW London.

And finally, whilst targets were subject to much criticism from planners, civil society groups viewed their presence as a form of statecraft designed to limit political debate and shut down alternative, more challenging forms of thinking over what housing should be provided and for whom. As one respondent noted, "*most planners could never conceive of a world without targets*" and the growth assumptions that underpinned them. The presence of virtualism required Borough officers to legitimate their activities and practices, but through the prism of targets and numbers: "*if you're going to say certain things about when your sites are coming forward and at what rate and what's stopping them or accelerating them, you've got to have the evidence base behind it*". Evidence of how virtual targets are being met (or not) becomes part of how such targets not only describe the world but seek to re-make it. Consultant specialists have emerged to help planners develop their evidence bases, not so much for their dealings with private sector firms, as argued by writers such as Parker, Street, and Wargent (2018), but meeting the virtual requirements set down by higher tiers of government. In the words of one consultant, working for a multinational consultancy, their role is to help Boroughs navigate through the "*difficult job of prediction*" and "*the persistent tendency to be over-optimistic about the ability of sites to come forward as quickly as you might want them to*" and wider questions over the capacity of authorities facing austerity cuts to mobilise sufficient resources to meet and respond to targets. If they are able to do so, it was claimed by respondents, then they could give confidence to market actors and attract new investment, not principally because the new types of housing were needed *per se*, but because it would help them achieve their targets and re-define themselves as successful, output-centred planning authorities. It was also noted in a number of interviews that there is a fundamental tension facing local government as it has both a politicised social agenda – supplying housing which is affordable to residents or responding to political pressure to protect heritage and conservation – at the same time as it has an interest in maintaining and promoting the property values from which it derives income through value-capture agreements.

6.3. Private sector coordination and the assetisation of housing investment

Perhaps the most significant limitation of target-setting is the disconnection between processes of number-setting and the *real estate trends and markets* that they are designed to be governing and coordinating. Targets and other forms of statecraft are deployed to create *alignments* between public and private activities, interests, and needs. The virtual expectation is that the real estate sector as a whole represents a relatively coherent group, with a set of outlooks and approaches to development that respond to the creation of targets and the freeing up of sites for development. However, the investment landscape that funds new housing in London is complex. For many, especially institutional investors, new build sites are principally viewed as potential asset classes, rather than developments that meet social needs or wider planning objectives. In Fig. 9, we draw on RCA data to show the total value of residential investments by investor category in London, 2001–2020. It demonstrates that institutional investors, ranging from investment management firms to pension funds, have become important players across the city. Their outlooks are principally to provide finance for projects that will generate and establish stable and consistent returns. As much of the real estate literature shows, residential property is a particularly complex and difficult asset from which to extract returns, and is subject to periodic shifts in markets and regulatory environments (Baum & Hartzell, 2012; The Economist, 2020). The implementation of delivery targets represents part of a wider mix of variables that investors are required to consider and incorporate into practices as a form of calculable risk, rather than a priority.

Despite the expectation on the part of central government that real estate actors want higher supply-side targets in line with their market demands, our research reveals that there were strong differences across the sector. For investors looking for lower risk and consistent returns, the crisis of under-supply and over-demand in the London market represented an optimal situation. In interviews, respondents expressed concern that if the planning system made available all of the sites and opportunity spaces, as the calculation of targets presumed, then this would "*swamp the market*'" which in turn would lower values and reduce the attractiveness of residential property for further investment and development. For developers and house-building firms, the opposite is true – the more units that can be constructed, the more profits there are to be made and the bigger the market that they serve. Such tensions are reinforced by simple, unit-number focused targets, rather than resolved by them (Brill, 2020).

For instance, during the 2010 s, purpose-built student accommodation and high-rise buildings have expanded rapidly in London, in part because of the growing presence of specialist international finance and investors/developers but also because since 2014, their construction has counted towards the meeting of housing targets (Brill & Durrant, 2021). Investment in these housing assets creates simultaneous alignments that meet: the priorities of investment institutions who generate profits relatively quickly and easily from this simple to construct and operate type of housing; the business models of specialist developers, who are able to build replicable, template-style developments in sites across London; and the political agendas of Boroughs, who are able to meet targets in a relatively straightforward and rapid manner, using surpluses gained for other investments. In the words of one interviewee: "*it has a much higher profit margin than normal market housing and affordable housing as well and…it's quite high in numbers because student accommodation can be quite compact*" making such opportunities both lucrative and attractive for certain types of firms. Such points chime with those of planners described above over how the presence of 'quick wins' and the delivery of units had become attractive to local politicians. Development interests were aware of this and used the language of unit delivery "*as an excuse to force development through or argue that development should come forward that may not necessarily fit*" with wider planning deliberations and priorities.
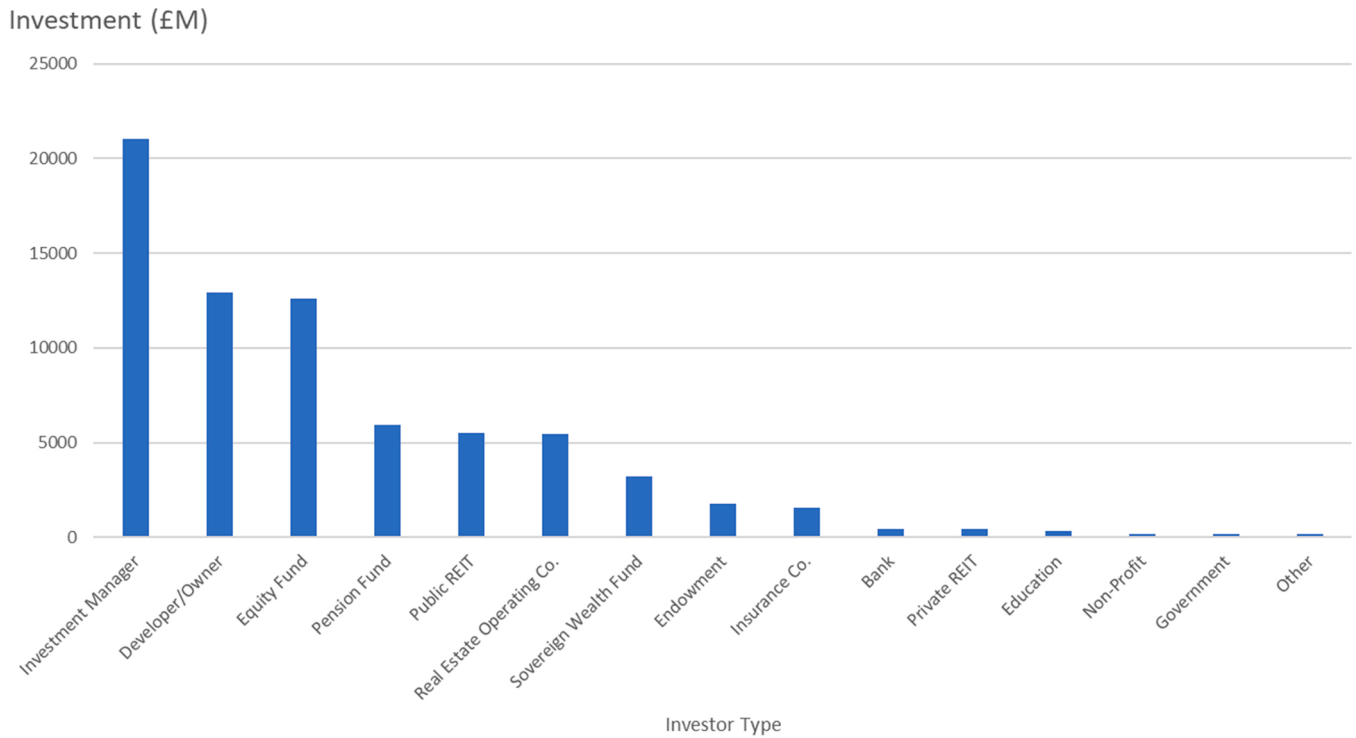
Fig. 9. Investment in London Residential Property by Investor Category.
Source: RCA (2021).

These wider investment trends are having material effects on housing delivery across the city. Fig. 10 demonstrates how much of the recent residential investment has been focused on student housing, rather than the delivery of homes for a range of more settled residents as imagined in various *London Plans* or in central government definitions of the housing crisis and how it should be tackled. The Figure shows acquisitions of apartment types of all tenures and how, overall, these have grown in number, especially after early vacillation within national government over whether or not student housing contributed to net unit housing numbers at the local level. In 2014 the Coalition government confirmed

that '*all student accommodation, whether it consists of communal halls of residence or self-contained dwellings, and whether or not it is on campus, can be included towards the housing requirement*' (Hansard, 2014: Column 28 W). The argument was used that it contributed to overall supply and was even eligible for the New Homes Bonus subsidy for local authorities: '*Our approach reflects the fact that increases in dedicated student accommodation has a beneficial effect on wider housing supply, by taking pressure off private rented accommodation*' (*ibid.*). In some central London Boroughs, such as Camden, new housing delivery targets have ostensibly been met, but this is primarily because of investments in purpose-built
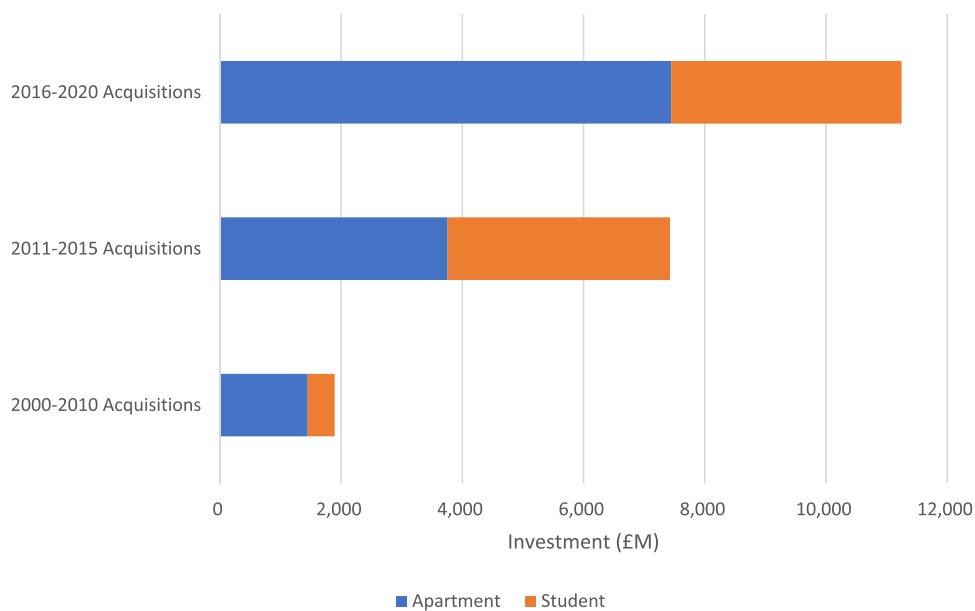

Fig. 10. Investment in London Residential Property by Time Period.
Source: RCA (2021).

student accommodation, that takes advantage of the co-presence of major universities. Rather than acting as a stimulus to broader house-building, the targets have opened up an asset class for investors, and resources have flowed in to where returns can be made, whether or not this is meeting broader housing needs. In the London Plan 2021 it is asserted that there will be demand for new student housing at 3500 units per annum over a period of 25 years. For local planners and politicians it has the potential to take student demand out of local markets, but it also re-focuses investment and uses up potential sites.

Similarly, in relation to Build-to-rent housing, the existence of a new asset class that meets planning targets also generates (in relatively quick time) stable income returns and higher unit volumes. However, it is aimed at a narrow class of renters – mainly high-income professionals and in some instances professional public sector key workers. It is not geared up to the provision of family housing or the addressing of acute housing needs across the city, as set out in the SHMA and homelessness data. Moreover, the expansion of BTR, along with student accommodation, is having significant impacts on the form and character of place environments – both physical and social. The associated social infrastructure that goes with them is geared to the needs of the specific groups that reside in them and less focused on the wide range of public and private sector services that constitute functioning places (Latham & Layton, 2019).

Another area of divergence between virtual constructions and the real estate sector is over the relationships between target setting and firm size. Local authority targets are expected to free up markets and, in turn, allow for the expansion of a diverse range of market actors to participate in house-building. In line with liberal orthodoxies it is imagined that reduced regulation and higher targets will open up markets to greater competition and improve their functionality (Crouch, 2013). However, throughout our research we uncovered evidence of the opposite, with the presence of targets reinforcing the privileged status of larger firms with the capacity for volume delivery, whilst actively discouraging smaller projects. As one niche house-builder commented, "*London's just a different market completely, it's a world market, it's really quite dense and it's a different skill set, completely, so we stay out the way… so you use your skills, you use your money in different areas and create different solutions*". Or as one SME noted, "*it is complex, you cannot really be in and out of London, it's a long-term play…because of the amount of capital required, the timescales for the planning and all the challenges have been quite excessive*". Such examples indicate the difficulties in creating integrated and coordinated modes of statecraft, designed to generate relationships with multiple actors beyond-the-state but with relatively little understanding of their needs and what shapes their activities.

There are also significant divergences *within* the real estate sector meaning that target setting acts differentially and sometimes has contradictory outcomes. For developers and house-builders the planning and regulatory landscape is of more significance than for investors. Rather than targets being seen as a coordinating mechanism resolving tensions and facilitating housing delivery, private sector interviewees expressed distrust. Interviewees Interviargued that development was being restricted as policymakers had "*designed the planning system in such a way that it doesn't make it conducive for us to build at the rate they want*", complaining that 'too much' policy was creating complexity that could not easily be quantified or built into risk profiles. In particular, planning risk, defined as the impact that regulatory changes might have on profit margins and development capacities, was seen as high in London, which was viewed as an 'over-governed' space but in which the public sector is under-resourced and has insufficient capacity to support project delivery. In the words of one house-builderbuilder: "*there is now too much policy in it and it's becoming far too complex…because there is a tendency for lots of public sector organisations and quangos to pursue their own policy agenda, everybody is piggy-backing and they want a policy in there to deliver their particular agenda*". The claim that the profits generated through housing delivery and planning gain were being used for multiple planning objectives was viewed as a problem as it further politicised the

setting of targets and delivery numbers and put burdens and responsibilities on to private companies that should be being co-ordinated by the state.

Despite the promise of targets as a form of release from the complexities of place politics, the need to navigate local complexity and tacit knowledge remains. As one interviewee noted, with the presence of an active Mayor, Boroughs and an interventionist central government, the regulatory landscape had "*more layers of policy which is often more confusing to everyone than anything else*". Local authorities and civil society groups have also built-up experience of working on negotiations and there was a growing track-record of valuations being challenged by judicial reviews and litigation, so that as one major developer noted "*typically, you'll put more into the review of a planning application in London [than elsewhere]*". We might more accurately characterise London as paradoxically heavily regulated but under-governed, in that competing scales of government have extensive rules through development which can impact development negotiations across competing agendas, but in which planning departments lack resources to enforce consistently regulations and ensure certainty in the planning process.

Another consequence was that the activities of real estate sector actors in London were subject to a level of intense politicisation not seen in other locations and this was blamed on the visible failures of the planning system to meet delivery targets and alleviate the housing crisis. Rather than acting as a mechanism of steering and co-ordination, the presence of virtual targets in such circumstances creates political tensions and divisions that shed new light on the activities of the private sector and its perceived failures. This, in turn, creates political risks and challenges that many private firms are ill-suited to address. As Black (2017) notes, the legitimacy of any form of regulation has a degree of liquidity and relies on collectively-agreed norms and understandings over what should be achieved and how it should be done. The introduction of targets is designed to create certainties, but the lack of coherent, resourced delivery mechanisms has undermined their credibility amongst respondents, with the widespread view that "*there was no realistic prospect of it [the targets] being delivered*".

The complexities of the London planning environment also require firms to engage in their own forms of statecraft and the delicate process of weighing up competing political interests and risks. One major housebuilder noted that they were constantly weighing up the different approaches of the Mayoral and Borough level priorities and ensuring that they understood the political outlooks of both tiers:

> "You have parallel discussions…Ideally, you keep both happy and therefore…in other places, you'll just have one, but at the end of the day, you've always got to think that if it's approved or recommended for approval by the local authority, the mayor can call it in, so you've got to make sure he's happy or the officers are happy with it at the GLA".

Political risk was also becoming accepted and described by one firm as "*a part of your due diligence, you're looking at the policies that are going to be relevant across the site and therefore, that does look at politics and the drivers behind it*". These risks have been compounded by the empowerment of local planning authorities by national government and the Mayor of London to oversee decisions over individual proposals, especially over development densities, which would further corrode the practices of developers. As shown in Fig. 11 the Mayor has taken an active role in overturning the decisions of local Boroughs of different political persuasions, usually on the grounds that Boroughs were unable to negotiate adequate planning gain agreements, although sometimes acting in favour of developers. Whilst this acts as a potential opportunity to use target numbers to overcome local challenges to schemes, the presence of the Mayor adds a layer of politicisation that needs to be accounted for.

Mayor Khan also insisted, for example, that all housing projects on former social housing estates would require the passing of a local ballot

Borough Leadership	Yet to decide	Yes	No
Conservative		9	
Labour	4	7	2
Liberal Democrat	1	1	
Conservative/Labour	1		
Totals	6	17	2

Fig. 11. The Results of Mayoral Call-ins on Projects Across Boroughs of Different Political Parties, 2016–2020.
Source: Greater London Authority (2020).

of tenants, '*to make sure that GLA funding only supports estate regeneration projects if residents have had a clear say in plans and support them going ahead*' (Mayor of London, 2018, p. 1). It is up to developers to organise and negotiate these ballots, with interviewees noting that there had been an uptick in challenges to their plans and the growth of resistance and scepticism. It was noted that more general scepticism was frequently amplified through debates over numbers and details, especially in relation to affordable housing and the potential of value-capture arrangements to deliver them in sufficient numbers. Developers frequently complained about the arbitrary nature of political decisions at planning committee stage, with one developer noted that "*you have a lot of noise behind you going on and the councillors, quite often, play to that gallery*". Where local complexities are not captured in formal modes of legibility, they are left to *ad hoc*, politicised decisions where perception management is the foremost concern, and so planning risk is unavoidable.

Target-based forms of planning have meant that private sector firms are increasingly *reliant on the capacities of planners* to manage developments and the politics that surrounds them. The wider attitude was one of viewing local government and Planning Departments as key actors in the establishment of modes of effective state-market co-ordination. In the words of one developer, there was considerable frustration with cuts to local authority budgets and resources: "*not enough planning officers in post to determine the applications and deal with them, so each officer is dealing with too many applications, therefore, they don't have sufficient time to devote to it and therefore, things drift because they're focusing on that one and then they've done that one and then they focus on something else, so that's the key thing, just delays, process and progress*". Or as another noted, "*they haven't got enough time to just deal with the applications and process them and that is a big struggle…so that's a big frustration*". Or as one housebuilder noted, "*We want certainty and clarity, that's what the developer/the private sector wants. We want to be able to see our way through*". This certainty and clarity, it was claimed, could be delivered through a well-resourced and supportive state planning system that gave clear direction to private actors, rather than generating virtual targets that bore little relation to the challenges the real estate industry faced or provided practical support to take virtual targets out of the realms of what we describe below as 'fantasy planning'. In addition, local authorities play a key practical role in the use of compulsory purchase powers to create spaces for housing projects, especially in former social housing estates. Earlier rounds of Right to Buy legislation in which tenants purchased social housing units have created a highly fragmented and fractured landscape of ownership. This has paradoxically required local government to re-purchase assets that it previously owned in order to set up and deliver joint venture programmes (Watt, 2016). For major housebuilders, in particular, who lead on such programmes, the presence of well-resourced planning units is a pre-requisite for policy delivery. Planning targets act as a key tool to promote horizontalized, market-oriented governance (Jessop, 2016).

6.4. Performativity, self-reflexive irony, and fantasy planning

One of the most striking aspects of virtual statecraft is the creation of unrealistic targets built on what Jessop (2002) terms 'self-reflexive irony'. As will be discussed in this section, the presence of unachievable

targets does not represent weak implementation or a lack of due diligence on the part of local actors. Instead, it represents a deliberate and purposeful mode of statecraft, designed to undermine the legitimacy of planning regulation and place-based political demands, whilst helping to generate the 'atmosphere of development' discussed in sections above. Throughout the research, unrealistic targets produced value by inculcating new forms of delivery-focused practice on the part of state and civil society actors, whilst also circumscribing potential resistance to the construction of new housing units. As a senior planner admitted, the politically-constructed *London Plan 2021* target of 52,000 homes per year was designed "*never to be achievable but it set the bar high as something we could aim to develop*". Or as another senior planner noted "*everyone knows that they are aspirational and will never be delivered*". Similarly, as a representative of TfL noted, their own target for the building of 10,000 units was selected as a it "*sounded good*", rather than being based on any carefully documented metrics or discussions of needs and capacities.

The setting of unrealistic targets plays multiple functions in the planning system. They act as a visible source of failure and allow central government to devolve the blame for housing policy failures on to local (and metropolitan) government actors. In the words of one planner the targets are based on probabilities and whilst they are something to 'aim at', their abstract reductionism fails to "*take account of how long things take to come forward and the likelihood of them being delivered or anything to do with economic cycles, so it's not really that surprising that they don't get delivered*". So, whilst there is formally a collective optimism over the setting of targets the paradoxical reality is that these forms of optimism become internalised by actors and conceptualised as unachievable. They play a virtual and political role rather than a practical one. What one planning officer described as the pressure to prioritise and trade-off different objectives led to pressure to "*deliver exemplary homes in a number of different ways*". This, in turn, forced a type of pragmatism and meant that "*part of my role was about understanding that you couldn't achieve everything that you wanted to achieve and that, for example, if you wanted to deliver more affordable housing, it was likely that that would compromise the design quality and being able to articulate those tensions and make decisions about priorities is really key to that job*". Or as an Adviser to Borough planners commented, the effect of virtual forms of statecraft is to create "*a culture of optimism bias*" in which numbers are proposed as being possible, only to find that the complexities of actual sites make this challenging: "*you won't know before you start looking at a site what is actually there or the kinds of things you discover as you gradually invest more time and money in the preparation and due diligence work*". The bias works to reinforce central government-led modes of statecraft, in which local authorities are compelled to take unpopular planning decisions in order to meet the broader objectives of building more housing supply and generating more local income.

These criticisms of target-setting processes are especially powerful given that the process of setting up and using quantitative targets is premised by national and city-wide planners as the basis for co-operation between public and private sectors. In other words, the fantasy/irony component of the target allows for mutual cooperation and demonstrates the ways in which the virtual shapes the real. In the words of a planner in an inner London authority:

"it's kind of accepted in my sector that those targets are a fiction, so we go through this game every time there's a revision of a London Plan and it was particularly dramatic in the most recent round where the GLA produces some numbers, the boroughs say, 'are you crazy?' The numbers kind of get tweaked a bit, maybe, but they still sit at a crazy level. The boroughs don't deliver them and then we just go around the same loop again".

One local planner from an East London Borough claimed that the setting of targets and thresholds was principally designed to "*give a clear steer to the market – a certainty*". In what was described as "*a game of psychology*" planners sought to read and address industry standards and expectations and build these into their virtual calculations. Others likened the discussion of virtual targets to a form of "*ritual exchange*" in which participants would perform by submitting their views, knowing that the numbers produced would have relatively little meaning or provide a focus to development projects and activities. Or in the words of one inner London Councillor, the strategic application of targets and permissions was undertaken to "*accept some mediocre stuff so that we can then say no to projects we don't like*". The virtualism of targets thus facilitates the governance of complex horizontal arrangements, regardless of their correspondence to real life. By strategically over-promising what could be delivered, planners were being proactive in trying to shape what types of private investment and developed took place and where. However, if too unrealistic they can lose their legitimacy.

The optimism biases that shape planning deliberations also influence how landowners, investors, and developers represent the development potential of their sites in an attempt to game the system. Private actors are more likely to obtain planning permission if they inflate expectations over delivery and then later downgrade the amount of profit (and therefore planning gain payments) once projects go to market. There is, therefore, an incentive to over-promise and legitimate this through the presence of supply-driven targets. As one developer noted, it was in their "*interests, within reason, to set out a positive vision for why their site is going to deliver all these benefits as quickly as possible because then the local authority goes, 'great, that's really going to help me the Borough meet my housing targets'*". This reflexive approach, it was claimed, was not evidence of "*dishonesty or anything like that*" but reflected the power of virtuality to shape planning inputs and outcomes with a strong incentive for all to put forward, what one termed, a "*positive case for the development*".

The form and character of these optimism biases go beyond those outlined in other writing on public infrastructure projects and finance (Flyvbjerg, 2008). The majority of private sector respondents were highly critical of planning targets, or what one termed "*fantasy planning*", in setting development priorities and felt that the failure to meet them was undermining their wider political legitimacy and generating new forms of planning and political risk. Rather than acting as an ironic form of regulation (*cf.* Jessop, 2002), or the basis for the construction of co-ordinated optimistic assessments, it was widely claimed that targets acted as a mechanism of responsibility displacement from the public to the private sectors that in the words of one house-builder re-shaped "*the function of the planning system to allow political leaders to evade responsibility, to blame somebody else*". This creates political difficulties for private actors as the publicised 'failure' to meet targets focuses attention onto those who are expected to build the housing. The more 'fantastic' the target setting, the more expectation there is that houses will be built and the greater the political focus on the role and work of the private sector. Market failures are blamed where the fundamental problem is one of a political ideology that believes that the market can deliver state policy. Moreover, it was also noted by interviewees that the optimism biases of targets, especially those dedicated to Opportunity Areas, were used by developers to justify housing schemes with high unit output but which failed to meet other policy objectives in relation to dwelling type, size or affordability (see Bowie, 2010). The push to larger and higher densities was in effect a bias towards larger developers and away from

smaller infill scheme which would attract smaller firms.

These views were reflected in wider criticisms of the types of targets that are set in London and the ways in which they act as a form of what one house-builder called "*false planning*". Rather than incentivising and simplifying new development, unrealistic targets undermined the confidence of market actors. If a Borough has allocated unviable sites for political reasons then they are able to "*blame the market for not delivering it…that's just ticking a numbers box, but you can never deliver it*". Such targets do not act as a focus for a collective optimism bias, but become fiercely politicised through the prism of place politics. They act as a mechanism for shifting the focus on to market actors, who are required to take responsibility for the delivery of public policy objectives. As another house-builder commented "*The targets would help, if there was measurement against them. The targets don't help if they don't matter.*" Or as another noted, "*you've got a lot of layers in this, so you've got central government, you've got local government, you've got the officials that are trying to do their jobs and you've got politicians. There's four variations on quite what should be a completely lined up theme*". Collectively, the situation in London meant that there was seen to be too much of an overlap between planning and politics, partially manifest in a lack of delivery on targets.

6.5. Re-shaping territorial imaginations and governmentalities

And finally, the presence of targets has had an impact on the territorial framings used by actors to address housing questions and problems. Each set of planners and politicians is focused on their own territory and the boosting of outputs *within* their spaces of jurisdiction. The ability to reflect on whether or not growth *should* be prioritised and delivered, or even take place at all, remains beyond the boundaries of contemporary frames of governance, which instead focus on how targets are to be met. One central London councillor noted in interview that questioning fundamental assumptions over the territorial pattern of new growth is beyond the permitted scope of local authorities and had disappeared from planning deliberations:

"the one thing we don't have the ability to control in London, in policy terms, is the idea that we should grow London at all. Now, I don't have the ability to say that the jobs market in London is overheated and the jobs market in pretty much everywhere else, in the rest of the country, is underheated and therefore wouldn't be better, rather than just building lots of houses in London to support a demand that is only ever going to grow that's more equitably and fairly distributed across the country and that other parts of the country get a degree of good grace that means that we don't get the worst excesses of it. I don't have that control".

In other words, the forms of legibility through delivery targets that are fundamental to statecraft in contemporary planning, limits the capacity of local actors to establish more progressive and territorially-just governmentalities and outlooks. Instead, this approach supports an internal focus on how to boost investment and delivery or, in some cases, how to prevent it. In a fragmented national landscape of governance, central government is able to impose their priorities *via* targets, but in ways that undermine strategic city or regional planning and local deliberations.

There is a strong concern from private sector respondents, especially developers and house-builders, that the creation of targets focuses political attention on the delivery of brownfield sites within London, at the expense of a wider discussions over the releasing of Green Belt sites beyond the city's boundaries. The focus on identifying deliverable sites meant that negotiations would take place between the GLA and the Boroughs over complex SHLAA calculations, but with the underlying assumption that sites should be valued by what they could contribute to meeting delivery targets and little else. The dissonance between government policy that is seeking to deliver more housing in cities, and the

needs of the private sector are brought into sharp relief as planning priorities run counter to the business models of many firms. As one house-builder noted: "*it would be good to see national policy giving clearer guidance that the growth of London should occur both within its urban footprint, but also on the edge of its urban footprint in appropriate locations, while served by public transport*". The problem with current targets was that,

> "As a national housebuilder, on the one hand, we're disappointed that the targets in London are so high, that they won't be met and they won't be met by 20/30,000 a year and those dwellings could be built somewhere else, instead of being locked up in unrealistic targets in London".

For many house-builders and larger developers it is greenfield developments that represent the most attractive and lucrative projects for new development, rather than investments in the complex and highly politicised environments of central London. Greenfield sites tend to be larger, with fewer development constraints, and open up spaces for the construction of high-return, lower-density housing. As a representative noted in interview "*it is more in the industry's interest to have a fundamental, comprehensive review of London's Green Belt or to try and foster better cooperation with local authorities in the Home Counties, to try and find other solutions to meeting London's housing need, whether that is new towns or urban extensions to the principal settlements in the wider South East [of England]*". It was noted that this was a "*far more realistic*" approach to tackling the housing crisis than the setting of undeliverable virtual targets for cities, despite the latter being mobilised to create certainty for private actors to give them confidence to bring their developments to market. Other housebuilders were hopeful that virtual targets might generate greater political pressure for development restrictions outside of the city to be challenged as "*the higher you place targets in London, the greater you increase the pressure to expand the urban footprint of London into the greenbelt over time…if there's a 90,000 [unit] target and you're going to get 30/40,000 units, surely that increases the pressure for a more pragmatic approach to greenbelt*". But were also concerned that the focus on place targets precluded wider discussions over the spatial distribution of new housing or challenged anti-development local authorities and residents within the Green Belt.

Borough boundaries are also virtual spaces that do not always correspond to physical environments and the emergence of development opportunities, yet private sector respondents felt that their views on this were widely ignored and that the Mayor and GLA were unable to challenge local nodes of anti-development politics. Where project sites cross boundaries, developers and project managers have to face two sets of targets and sets of place politics. As noted earlier, central government has become increasingly concerned that Conservative-majority outer London Boroughs are being targeted by the Mayor to provide sites for dense forms of housing and have therefore called for 'gentle densification', a policy that will lend support to new restrictions. For house-builders these political debates increase political risks as they "*put the local authorities back in the driving seat…being able to determine what's an appropriate density*". In our research we came across recent examples in outer London Boroughs such as Bromley, Enfield and Richmond, and increasingly in inner London locations such as Wandsworth and Lambeth, in which projects were refused planning permission by local politicians, despite gaining the support of planning officers and local private sector stakeholders. This re-assertion of place politics is, in part, triggered by the visibility given by debates over targets. They can act to focus the mobilisation of anti-development political interests, as well as pro-development groups. Across London there is evidence of social movements becoming more active in taking on target-based forms of planning, becoming politically active in challenging planning mechanisms that they perceive to reinforce housing inequalities (see 35% Campaign, 2021).

There was widespread concern amongst both public and private

sector actors that the presence of targets actively displaced political attention away from patterns of *land-ownership* and some of the structural differences in outlook between different types of owners. One major housebuilder noted in interview that land speculation was the biggest impediment to getting housing numbers delivered, especially affordable housing, a finding brought out in recent research (*cf.* Ryan-Collins, 2019):

> "It is a global capital with lots of people wanting to own land there, lots of people with ideas about building there, lots of people wanting to be millionaires on the basis of buying and selling land there, highly politically charged, lots of people wanting to build 30 storey skyscrapers, other people don't want anything to be above five storeys, so it's very, very difficult".

In other words, the application of models of delivery are undermined by secondary cycles of land acquisition, speculation and control. Or as another house-builder noted:

> "it's a simple model, it's the landowner that wins, not the house-builder, you just put your values in, you take your costs out and the rest goes to the landowner, it's a simple model, it applies fairly even-handedly to housebuilders across the country, it's only in London where it's much more complicated and much more lucrative for landowners".

Landowners often acquire planning permission on a site before selling it on to developers, with investors often also involved in concerted attempts to inflate values to increase returns (Ferm & Raco, 2020). Such activities complicate the practices of planning delivery in ways that are not sufficiently acknowledged or understood in the setting of virtual targets or a focus simply on the 'capacity' of sites.

There are also limited understandings of the financial models that firms are working towards. Firms are required to deliver shareholder returns and maintain income streams across their portfolio of sites. The timing and releasing sites for sale and build is essential and financial targets become more significant than 'planning targets' or the delivery of social needs. They are working closely to their own targets, so that in the words of one housebuilder:

> "Fundamentally, it comes down to profit, but they're targets based on the numbers of homes delivered and both in terms of affordable, in terms of sales, so it's all mapped out and that's no different to any other housebuilder, but fundamentally, it comes down to profit that you're reporting out to the City and forward sales and forward order book and pipeline and things like that".

The lack of available grants to cover the financial gap between profits and affordability generates tensions that cannot be overcome without further public sector investment and yet within London and across England comprehensive urban regeneration funds to prepare land for development have been abolished under Conservative governments since 2010. Or in the words of one major housebuilder.

> "So one of the things that any business or any organisation strives for is stability and predictability and if you're in a position where the politics can shift every four years, that's really difficult to plan for. I'm not picking any particular persuasion, but really saying stability and predictability is what a business would like when it's trying to plan for the long term and most property projects are long term".

There were also questions over the *when* of housing delivery and the timescales that exist within and across the real estate sector. As one housebuilder noted, "*the natural timescales to get sites up and running and then to get them built for them to contribute, most of the targets aren't really time focused, in terms of housing delivery. They forget about the lead in times for the projects*". There is often a poor alignment between the 5-year timescales of the London planning system and the needs of developers, with a mis-match between the political imperatives of local authorities

and citizens and business cycles and strategies.

7. Conclusions

The paper has examined the work that targets do in market-oriented planning systems. Whilst there is a flourishing literature on the institutional mechanisms underpinning contemporary shifts in urban governance and financialised urban housing markets, the paper has argued for a stronger focus on the mechanisms in and through which modes of statecraft are enacted. In particular, too little attention has been paid to the role of virtualism, or mechanisms of *virtual statecraft*, that go beyond descriptions of the world and seek to remake places and cities in the image of abstract models and simplified representations. Combining these writings provides fresh insights into the broader functioning of the state, the co-ordination mechanisms of governance that shape contemporary planning processes, and their impacts on places and actors. The UK national government has re-tooled and re-deployed virtually-defined targets as a mechanism to shape what it is that (situated) planners, policy-makers, and communities are required to consider in their deliberations at the local and regional level. Whilst targets have always played a key role in post-war planning systems, the work they are required to do has shifted markedly in an era of greater financialisation and the rise of a politics of crisis in which housing is becoming increasingly unaffordable and unavailable to those in need. In earlier eras of planning, targets were principally used as mechanisms of hierarchic control, designed to shape how state actors could both 'predict' and 'provide for' employment, housing, and infrastructure in line with centrally-determined policies. However, under financialised and market-oriented reforms targets are being required to do more work than this. They form part of a wider set of co-ordinating arrangements that are designed to 'see like a market', that is to create the conditions in which market actors can be incentivised to invest and build in new housing.

The growth of market-led forms of intervention has given targets a new governmental power and made them less a means-to-an-end and more of an end-in-themselves. They play a double function – both *describing* spatial patterns of housing market supply and demand and acting as a *prescriptive* mechanism for the creation of new realities and market conditions. They therefore act to establish (virtual) representations of places that convert their messiness and complexities into clearly defined spaces of delivery and opportunity sites for investment and development. Housing numbers become the overriding governmental priority and are 'identified, observed, recorded, counted, aggregated and monitored' (Scott, 1998, p. 183). They constitute forms of technical or cadastral mapping in which places are re-imaged through narrow fields of vision so that only those factors that are of significance to the meeting of policy objectives, such as their capacity to absorb new housing, are seen as relevant and worthy of consideration (Seidlová & Chromčák, 2017).

However, this study has also shown that there lies an ambivalence in the work that targets are required to do. They have the potential to create certainty because they are simplified constructions of complex realities but they also generate risks and forms of inconsistency when applied across levels of the state. Rather than establishing themselves as a cornerstone for the implementation of delivery-focused planning, we have shown that in *actual* situations (as opposed to virtual framings) they act as lightning-rods for broader discontents and arguments over where new housing should be built and for whom. They impose a form of statecraft that asks planners to identify land for development, even though the relationships between available land and housing needs are entirely contingent (Bowie, 2010). The politics of planning itself therefore becomes re-aligned in the image of reductive target-setting processes so that debates become focused on questions such as: what should and should not be counted in the setting of housing policy priorities?; how well are local planners and policy-makers performing in relation to their targets and each other?; what land can be identified and

brought into use to help meet delivery numbers?; and how can sites be prepared for new investment and development to maximise the building of new units? The focus on these questions diverts attention away from other priorities such as unequal land ownership, along with wider questions over the provision of welfare services, the building of quality urban environments, and the provision of new social infrastructure. Rather than enabling more 'flexible' approaches to be adopted, in the image of imagined markets, it is the inflexibility of targets and their all-encompassing character that precludes creative thinking about how to tackle a crisis of affordability and availability within (urban) housing markets.

The use of targets is also failing in other ways. Whilst the implementation of virtual modes of statecraft is justified as a form of market-building or crafting, the responses even of private actors indicates a widespread dissatisfaction with reforms and the damage that 'unachievable' targets do to the credibility of the real estate sector. The paper provides evidence that private actors see targets as unworkable. The consensus amongst our private sector interviewees was that targets *made visible* the apparent failures of developers and investors to deliver the right types of housing in the right places. This, they argue, displaces critical attention away from the planning system and generated resistance to new housing projects. As with other recent research (*cf.* Adams & Watkins, 2014) we found evidence that private actors want a better functioning and resourced planning system, rather than one built on the construction of ironic targets that had little practical value. There was awareness that housing numbers are highly politicised and a visible form of centrally-prescribed statecraft designed for political purposes and the pursuit of market-driven ideologies (*cf.* Airey & Doughty, 2020), rather than a deep understanding of the functioning of markets and the needs of the industry. Added to this, the use of targets underplays the differences found within the private sector. Some house-builders are particularly resistant to the idea that they should focus their attention on complex and difficult-to-realise projects in London (and other urban centres in England), in order to meet virtual targets, when their preferred types of project are large-scale greenfield developments. The presence of targets represents a hindrance to this wider aim and has in part encouraged new investment to follow emerging asset classes, such as build-to-rent and student accommodation, rather than prescribed needs or the building of more balanced communities and places.

On a broader canvass there is also much scope for cross-national research on how planning systems across Europe and beyond are drawing on numbers-based types of planning and statecraft. As noted earlier the OECD, the World Bank and others have been pushing for greater 'flexibility' in how territorial planning systems work so that they align more closely with the needs of market actors. In countries such as the Netherlands, for instance, new housing projects in large cities will only approve proposals if they meet prescribed percentages of different types and tenures (Tasan-Kok et al., 2019). In the French case, housing developments are similarly shaped by national and regional targets for social housing delivery and the generation of new private sector housing supply (Le Galès, 2020). Similarly, in countries such as the US, Canada, and Australia, housing policies are increasingly driven by new fiscal and financial measures designed to incentivise local governments and citizens to prioritise new house-building.

And finally, the paper has also highlighted potential directions for alternative modes of planning practice and statecraft. A more *needs-based and place-based focus* for housing planning could act as a starting point for reformed modes of policy-shaping and delivery. Our evidence indicates that statecraft could operate in a less virtual and more situated manner, through for example devolving powers and resources to actors at multiple scales to establish their own priorities, networks, and relationships. More attention could also be paid to *housing demand and ownership structures* and what could be done to limit multiple forms of ownership and open up under-used housing, especially in cities. The market-orientation of target-based statecraft also precludes a broader debate over alternative sources of funding and development, for

example, the construction of public housing paid for (and controlled by) public actors as part of a broader mix of housing provision. The last time that 300,000 homes per annum were built in the England was in the late 1960 s and early 1970 s, with approximately 40% built by local authorities (Smith, 2022). Moreover, there needs to be a shift from simplified views of the market regarding how private actors respond to (and desire) planning targets. Our research found evidence that targets had a marginal or even discouraging impact on their willingness to invest, especially when perceived to be based on undeliverable 'fantasy' numbers. A less target-oriented approach might also give more space to the consideration of broader issues affecting the real estate sector, such as the availability of skills, resources, and capacities.

Conflicts of Interest

Acknowledgements

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