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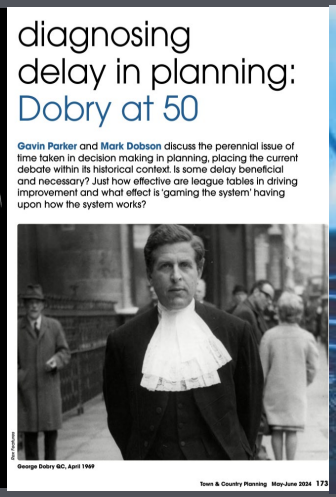
Time in and for planning: timescaping planning, what's the problem, and who loses out?


diagnosing delay in planning: Dobry at 50

Gavin Parker and Mark Dobson discuss the perennial issue of time taken in decision making in planning, placing the current debate within its historical context. Is some delay beneficial and necessary? Just how effective are league tables in driving improvement and what effect is 'gaming the system' having upon how the system works?

George Dobry QC, April 1969

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planning in time, time for planning, and time to plan— 'timescaping' and its implications for practice

Gavin Parker and Mark Dobson consider the impacts of time, its organisation and its control within the English planning system, arguing that control of time spent in planning, in order to prioritise speed and efficiency goals for the sake of 'growth', can undermine the time needed to plan well in the service of inclusion, public interest and sustainable development goals

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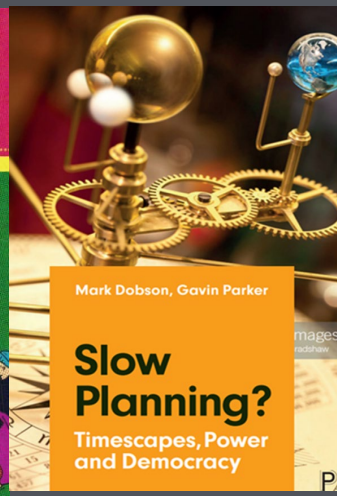

Gavin Parker and Mark Dobson

Community Planning Alliance – June 2025

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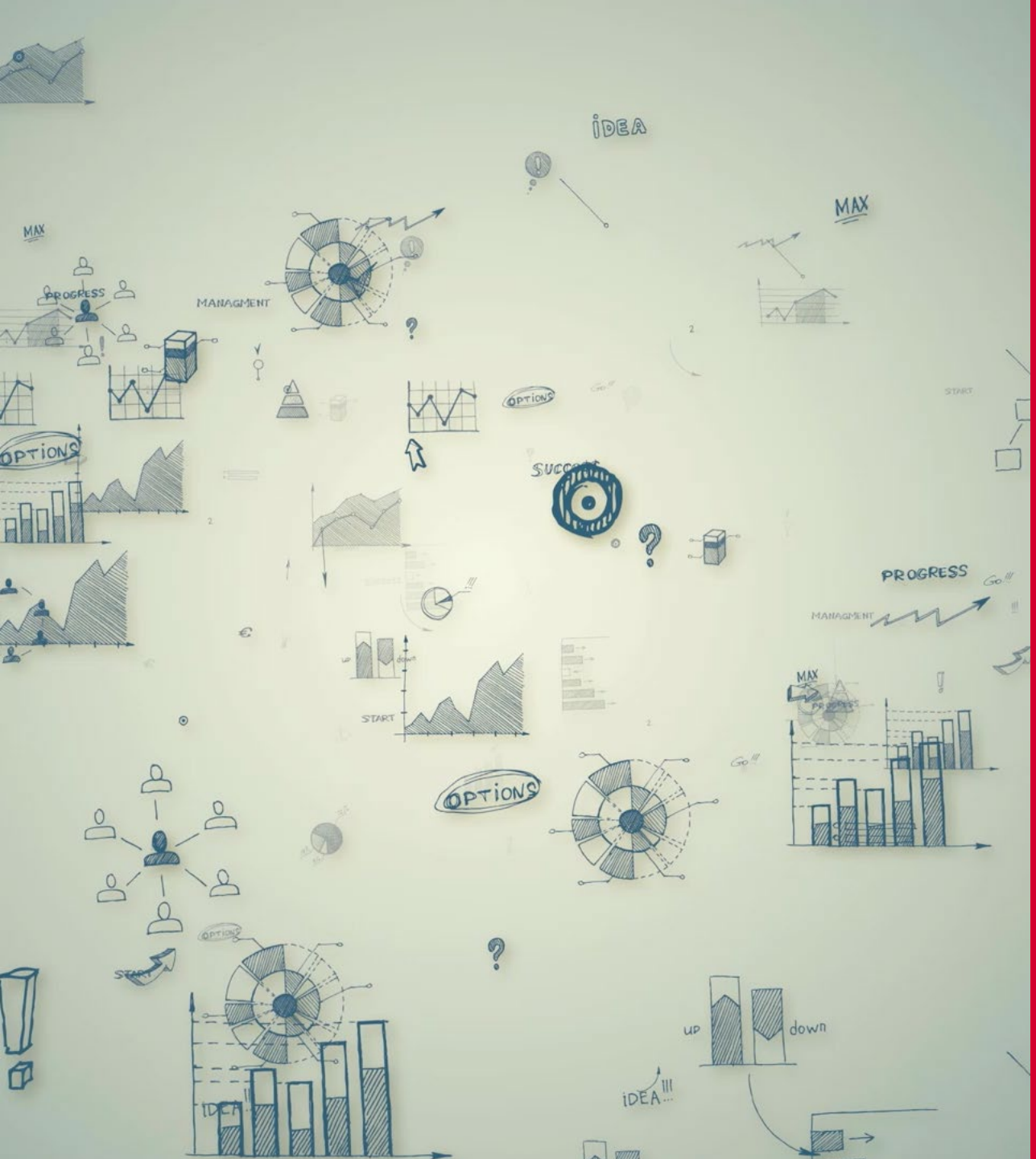

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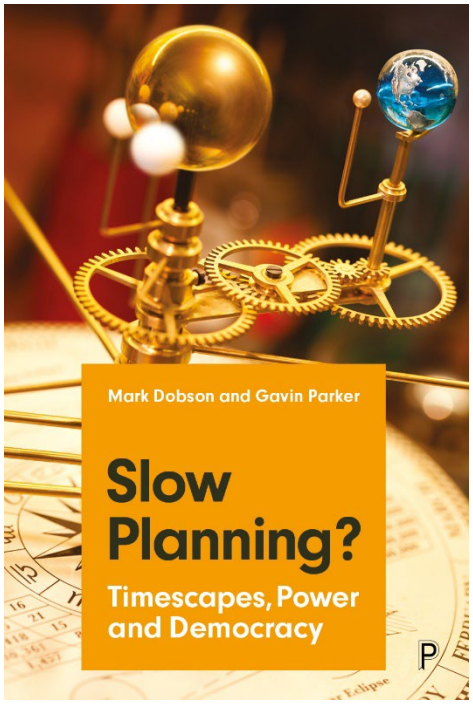
- Speed agenda
- Planning & Time
- Delay
- ‘Proper Time’



Slow Planning?

Timescapes, Power and Democracy

By Mark Dobson and Gavin Parker

"This book makes a considerable contribution to studying temporalities in planning research."
Town Planning Review

Paperback version available May 2025

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*"Growth is **now our national** mission. There is **no time to waste**…Nowhere is decisive reform needed more **urgently** than in the case of our planning system. Planning reform has become a byword for political timidity in the face of vested interests and a graveyard of economic ambition. Our antiquated planning system leaves too many important projects getting tied up in **years and years of red tape** before shovels ever get into the ground. We promised to put planning reform at the centre of our political argument…taking **immediate** action to deliver this government's mission to kickstart economic growth; And to take the **urgent** steps necessary to build the infrastructure that we need, including one and a half million homes over the next **five years**."*

(Rachel Reeves, 8th July 2024)

"***We have no time to waste*** *in bringing the housing crisis we've inherited to an end...That's why it is so crucial that we* ***get Britain building*** *and the return of the landmark Planning and Infrastructure Bill to Parliament today represents another step forward in achieving this goal…But to ensure we can prove the naysayers wrong, and deliver on our Plan for Change target to build the* ***1.5 million homes and crucial infrastructure*** *this country needs,* ***we need to make our planning reforms law as quickly as possible***"

(Angela Rayner, 24th March, 2025).

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Governmental push for Speed…

The research and its point of origin

- **Little attention has been paid by researchers to how time is deployed and managed in planning practice**, yet it has become an increasingly important tool for governing the planning system in England and beyond.

- The regulation of time affects interests differently – there is not one planning time but many that can conflict with each other between actors / interests (i.e. there are multiple temporalities).

- Weber (2002, p.518) ***'[t]he temporal horizons of investors, developers, and residents rarely coincide'***.

- The temporal governance of planning - what we term 'timescaping' – can have profound consequences for policy and communities.

- More research needed and emerging…

History of Delay in Planning

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- Concern over time and delay in the UK planning system has a long history…
- Early expression of the 'delay' question had already appeared in the debates over the 1968 Town and Country Planning Bill, with increasing planning delay claimed in reaching decisions and administrative burdens.
- In 1973 the Heath government produced Circular 142/73 *Streamlining the Planning Machine* aimed at ***'a targeted reduction of planning delay'***.
- This also led the government to commission the **Dobry report (1975)** to provide an independent assessment of the development control system.
- Whilst citing delay as an issue in his interim report, Dobry argued that '***not all delay is unacceptable: it is the price we must pay for the democratic planning of the environment***' (1973, p.3).
- Wilkinson (1974, p.561) also notes that Dobry recognised how '***the quality of decisions is more important than speed***'.

History of Delay in Planning

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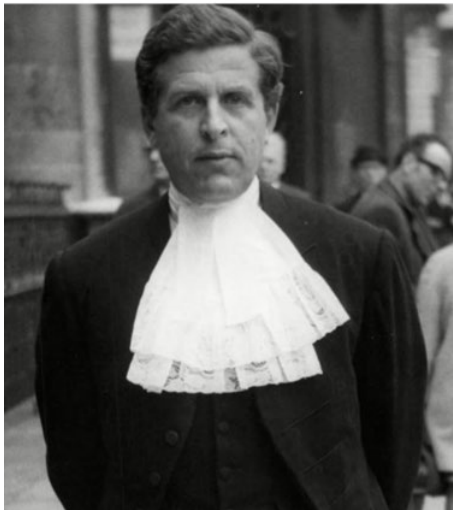
- Jowell (1975) observed that:

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



- Lord *et al.* (2020) are careful to make the distinction between unavoidable and avoidable **delays**, in noting that:

- ‘***Delay remains a hallmark of the system. However, it is important to distinguish between unavoidable delays – those that are an inherent aspect of the negotiation of planning obligations – and avoidable delays that result from LPA capacity, skills and resourcing or as a tactic to negotiate a reduction in the developer contributions requested***’.

- Calderon *et al.* (2022) draw attention to ‘*the double pressures for swift and slow planning as two competing and seemingly incompatible demands that result in* ***a tension for either swift yet exclusive, technical-based and market-driven planning or slow participation and deliberation****’.*

- Such ‘either-or’ tensions are seen in the UK - **planning agendas promote participatory planning but also extol the need for swift decision-making**, without explaining how the two can be made compatible…

Slow Planning?...

- **Planning is participatory**, but time squeezes on plan and decision making undermine wider participation and deliberation - as well as impact the substantive aims of the planning system (ostensibly) to serve **public interest** and deliver **sustainable development**.

Question: how does participation and deliberation fit in a context that priorities the speed of decision making?

'*…the most sensitive political questions are raised by time-related regulations dealing with citizenship, judiciary and democratic representation ...If time is used in an unjust manner, why do citizens not rebel? Why are time-related regulations hardly ever an object of political bargaining, if not conflict? …* ***Time, like any other democratic good, should be made 'by' citizens, and not merely 'for' citizens by their respective governments***' (Zielonka, 2023: p41–5).

Developer view?

'Speed and planning aren't two words that you generally associate with one another…the politics, local residents, consultees, resources, and then I would add into that the planning system, and all of those things together, at any given time, will slow the process down…But it's not necessarily speed, it's certainty, I think that's what we really lack; I would take a more certain system for a quick system any day of the week' **(Housing Developer).**

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

Letwin review (2018)

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Stage	Sub-stage elements	Time taken
1 -'Regulatory stage'	**A** – From application to outline permission granted	**A** =3 months
	B – From outline permission granted to first detailed application	**B**= 5 months
	C – From first detailed application to first detailed permission	**C**= 25 months
		Stage total =33 months
2 – 'Build out stage'	**A** – From first detailed permission to first start (dwelling)	**A** = 9 months
	B – From first start to final completion (actual, projected)' (p.283, emphasis added).	**B** = 163 months
		Stage total = 172 months

Large sites… total of **205** months (17 years) – 3 years for planning stage

Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government

Policy paper

Planning Reform Working Paper: Speeding Up Build Out

Published 25 May 2025

- Latest govt. policy paper shows some recognition of the role of developers in delaying delivery (as well as local planning authorities).
- Yet focus remains on housing delivery and building quickly…
- We are currently researching different aspects including: the end-to-end development pipeline being undertaken to investigate what takes time in the overall development process – not just the specific planning phase which attracts most attention. Also ‘Extensions of Time’ and their use…

- Mainstream economic / political narrative of delay / time in planning seems overly simplistic and depicts delay as always intolerable without any basic deconstruction of ***why*** time is taken.

- We should be concerned with timely decision-making, but the way forward is to properly understand the dynamics of delay rather than **uncritically condemning time taken without understanding the specific situation and contexts in which it is manifest**.

- Overall, we need to question what (and whose) problems is time / scaping being used to solve?...

Pity the Planners? 1/2

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'What does the government want us to achieve out of this [performance] treadmill? Is it quality outcomes?...Or is it just stacked up decisions that were in time? The fact that proper engagement does take time if it's going to be quality, if it's going to be valued, if we're going to change the perception, and make sure that people feel involved. They've got a voice, and that is all areas of society as well. So how do we reach the groups that don't generally engage… if the planning system is not valid, and it's seen as a creature of statute, well, what's the point in it?... Time pressure being expectation and perception, that it means different things to different people. It's subjective. Delay as a concept is subjective. You could frame something as delay, or you could frame something as engagement and collaboration' (Local Authority Planner).

Pity the Planners? 2/2

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"That's what planning does, it balances [competing interests] and that takes time. If you do that properly, that takes time. And I think the kind of obsession with making things quicker and faster means that actually some of the quality is lost from the process. When I started [in planning], it was more about getting schemes and proposals and trying to improve them and to work with an applicant to make things better. And increasingly, that's where you get extension of time notices and all the other mechanisms, the focus on time means that you're focusing less on quality, in my view, very often. So, it's understanding that kind of balance between, you know, the opportunity for engagement and being part of the process; but if you are part of the process, it may mean that the process is longer" ***(Local Authority Planner).***

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Main findings:

- control of time in planning is tantamount to **control over planning**;
- time and its deployment in planning discourse and practice shows how powerful narratives of **'Project Speed' can belie the nature of the problems** faced and the ability to generate appropriate solutions;
- time is not neutral but **constitutive of power relations**, which shape practice;
- each actor has their own proper time when participating in planning and p**rioritising one set of time interests has a knock-on effect on all others** in the timescape;
- Planners feel squeezed between governmental efforts to organise planning using deadlines, limits or other 'timescaping' actions - creating a situation where (good) **planning itself is being squeezed**.

Slow Planning?

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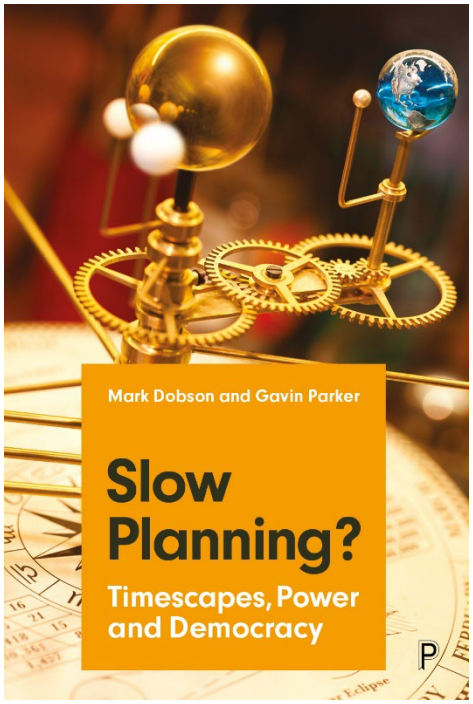
We recommend:

- more nuanced understanding of the needs of planning and of particular actor groups, specific issues or activities involved in planning;
- development of 'proper' planning that features not only considered deceleration but also improved resources, tools, institutional structures and clear organising principles;
- time and resources for proper democratic and technical oversight of policy and development;
- policy makers work towards a co-evolved timescape that enables purposive aims of planning to be realised democratically and ensures that quality of life is improved, inequalities addressed, healthy outcomes fostered, and the environment enhanced;
- more considered, time-aware approach to practice and that governments create '**proper time**' for different aspects of planning activity which consider the impacts of timescaping on all involved…



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