seCNewgate
Insight. Communications. Advocacy.

National Planning
Barometer **2024**

Contents

About SEC Newgate

We are an insights and research-driven global strategic communications and advocacy group. We work at the nexus of business, politics, communities, markets and media to deliver positive outcomes. We are the people you come to with an opportunity to seize or a problem to solve. Our advice is delivered by circa 1,400 professionals across five continents, providing clients with around the clock counsel and support, implementing campaigns locally, nationally and internationally.

Introduction

The Housing Crisis

Recent reports from the Centre for Cities[1] and Home Builders Federation[5] estimate that Britain today has a backlog of 4.3 million homes waiting to be built, with plummeting numbers of units and sites receiving planning permissions in 2023 – including a 20% decrease in unit permissions delivered compared to 2022, and the number of site permissions the lowest on record since 2006. At the same time, timely decision-making continues on a downward trend that started in 2010, with only half (49%) of applications decided within statutory time timeframes in 2021.

At this rate, it is estimated that, using the Government's current target of 300,000 new homes per annum, it would take at least half a century to address the deficit. Filling this deficit any sooner would require a substantial increase in the number of new homes being built every year: in England alone, you would need 442,000 homes annually across 25 years, or 654,000 homes across 10 years.

This shortage has a direct impact on housing affordability. Across England, the average home now costs more than ten times the average salary and space per person for private renters has dropped substantially in recent decades[1]. At the same time, almost 250,000 households are sleeping in unsuitable temporary accommodation or on the street[8]. SEC Newgate's recent nationally representative research[13] found that two-thirds of Britons report being very concerned about housing affordability and availability, cited as one of their top national concerns.

The National Planning Barometer

For the fourth year running, SEC Newgate presents the only nationally representative study of councillors sitting on planning committees across England and Wales, exploring their perspectives of housing delivery and the planning system.

Last year, our study revealed a complex and frequently combative planning system that is failing to meet the housing needs of the nation. This year, our research goes deeper, seeking to untangle the complexities and challenges faced by the planning system, and to identify opportunities for driving change and easing pressure.

For the first time, our study of councillors has been elevated by the voices and views of multiple stakeholders from across the planning system. We explore the unique perceptions of a range of planning and development specialists from the private and public sectors, understanding their perceptions of the issues affecting the planning system - and what they think should be done to improve the situation.

The 2024 expanded edition of the National Planning Barometer reveals a planning system that is reaching a critical tipping point – and delivers a clear call for change from those working to deliver the homes our country needs.

For the list of contributing planning organisations interviewed, please refer to the Appendices.

Methodology

SEC Newgate conducted a two-stage program of quantitative and qualitative research focussed on a range of planning topics, including planning priorities, the issues affecting delivery in the planning system, and what can alleviate the situation.
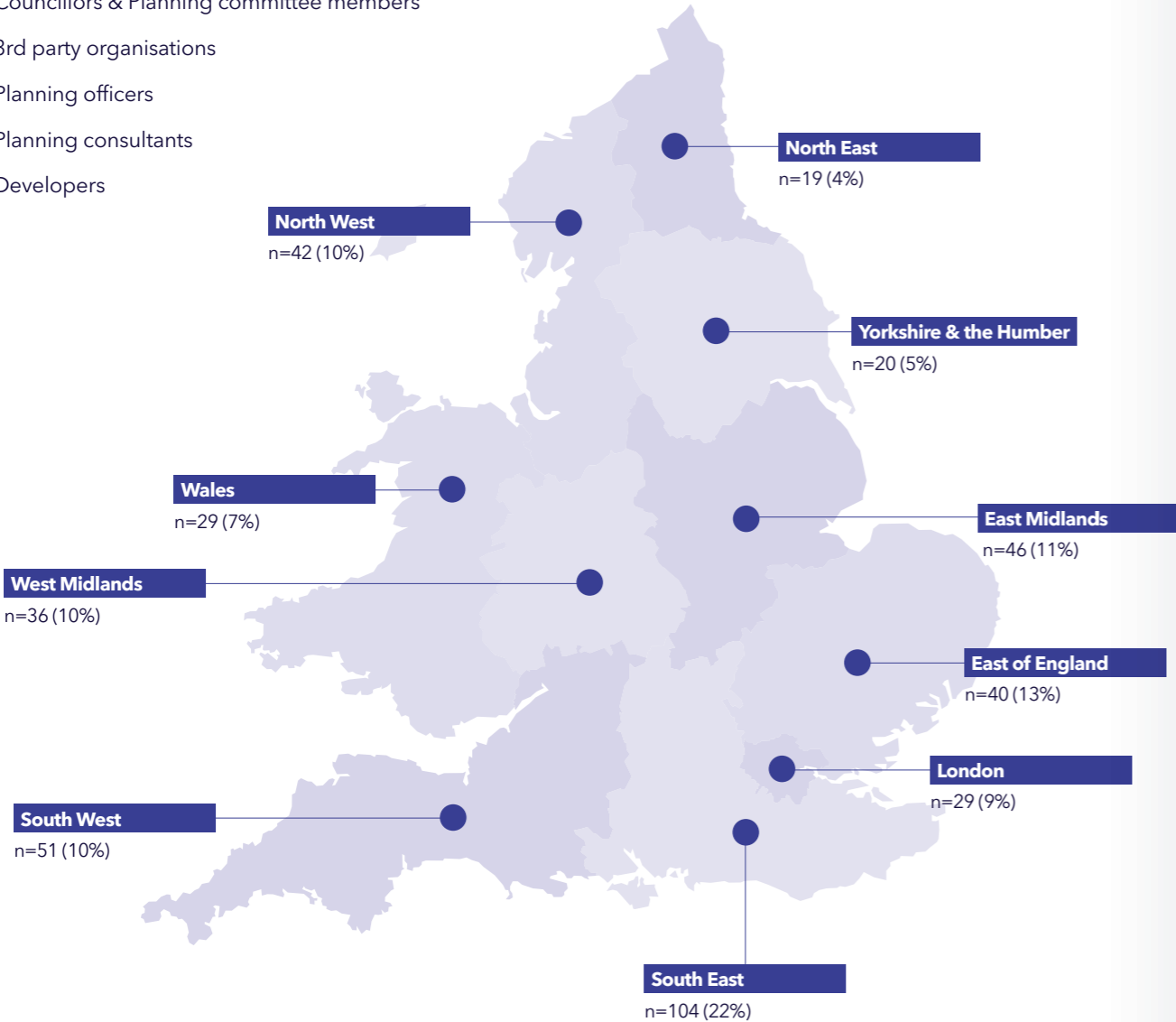
In-depth interviews

Interviews were conducted with 21 planning and development specialists across England and Wales, including councillors & planning committee members, representatives from 3rd party organisations (such as those in the housing industry, professional member bodies, architects, and residents' associations), planning officers, planning consultants, and developers. Quotes from these specialists are identified throughout the report using the following colour accents:

◣ Councillors & Planning committee members

◣ 3rd party organisations

◣ Planning officers

◣ Planning consultants

◣ Developers

Online survey

An online survey was conducted with a total of 416 councillors sitting on planning committees, from a population of 5,079 councillors across England and Wales. The survey was conducted from 6 February - 5 March 2024. Data was weighted to represent the proportional spread of councillors across England and Wales regions. After weighting is applied, the total effective survey base size is n=404. The unweighted sample distribution of participants in our National Planning Barometer 2024 study is illustrated on the map below.

North East
n=19 (4%)

North West
n=42 (10%)

Yorkshire & the Humber
n=20 (5%)

Wales
n=29 (7%)

East Midlands
n=46 (11%)

West Midlands
n=36 (10%)

East of England
n=40 (13%)

London
n=29 (9%)

South West
n=51 (10%)

South East
n=104 (22%)

For the list of contributing planning organisations interviewed, please refer to the Appendices.

Executive summary

Against the backdrop of a worsening UK housing crisis—marked by a deficit of over four million homes, plummeting planning permissions, and increasingly delayed decision-making—SEC Newgate's National Planning Barometer 2024 report explores the critical barriers to housing delivery.

This year, our research synthesises the views of stakeholders across the planning system with the results of our unique survey of councillors on planning committees and seeks to untangle the web of challenges to identify ways to drive change, ease pressure and build more homes.

Councillor priorities and perspectives on the housing crisis

Mirroring the 2023 results, a large majority of planning committee members in 2024 identify a severe crisis in their local authorities, with many calling for more affordable and social housing to tackle the issue. However, despite councillors' top priority for their local authority being 'providing affordable homes for future generations,' they give little comparative weight to 'delivering on housing targets', exposing a disconnect in their perception of the route to adequate housing delivery.

What's really impacting housing delivery?

Planning committee members recognise the multi-faceted issues preventing housing delivery, particularly in regard to affordable housing. Claims of lack of viability by developers, as well as lack of funding, are viewed as the biggest challenges for this housing type. Additionally, slow build-out, community opposition, and a lack of suitable sites are seen as lesser, but still critical, challenges.

There is an existing narrative which decries the planning system as 'broken'. However, stakeholders tell us that the system does not exist in isolation—rather, it sits at the nexus of the social and economic need for housing and the response to this need, which is fulfilled by public policy and market provision, but then tempered by discretionary decision-making at planning committee. As such, the actions and agendas of multiple actors make the issue of housing delivery a highly complex one to grapple with.

1 The structural factors impacting housing delivery

The majority of new homes are delivered through the 'speculative model' of housebuilding. This market-dominated supply side is at the mercy of macroeconomic conditions, including fluctuating interest rates and inflation, which have, in recent times, negatively impacted borrowing and building costs. These factors strongly impact the ability of housebuilders to bring forward and complete schemes.

Against this macroeconomic context, our research reveals contention between councillors and other stakeholders on building timescales. Planning committee members describe issues of slow build-out and land banking in their local areas as 'profit-driven'. However, a range of different planning stakeholders counter that such perceptions demonstrate a fundamental lack of understanding of the reasons for slow build-out, including shortage of land supply, planning application delays, and onerous pre-commencement conditions, in addition to wider market conditions.

The impact of funding cuts also hampers the ability of local authorities to deliver effective planning services. In the last 15 years, there has been a dramatic fall in local authority spending power, driven by reductions in central government grants. Local authority net expenditure on planning has fallen by 43%, from £844m in 2009/10 to £480m in 2020/21, amounting to just 0.45% of local government budgets allocated to planning services.

2 The planning policy labyrinth

In December 2023, the UK Government introduced updates to the National Planning Policy Framework. In our survey, councillors exhibit mixed responses to two key updates: a slight majority (55%) express support for advisory local authority housing numbers; meanwhile, a large majority (81%) display marked disregard towards the proposal to publish league tables of local authorities' planning performance. Stakeholders view these reactions as an indication that planning has become a 'political football', where the lack of a strong policy framework reduces the planning process to one of negotiation, pulling focus from the overarching goal of meeting local housing needs.

Indeed, frequent changes to national policy are reported to have created competing priorities affecting the consideration of planning applications—causing confusion for developers and placing a greater burden on planning officers.

Patchy strategy and implementation of local plans are also perceived to be critical issues. It is estimated that 75% of English councils will not have an up-to-date local plan by the end of 2025. While some councillors and stakeholders feel that local plans are being used effectively, many state concerns about the preparation, adoption, and validity of local plans—and bemoan a lack of community engagement at the crucial phase of local plan design. Where local plans are not prioritised, stakeholders see a strategic foundation being absent in local decision-making, fuelling delays and uncertainty around application approvals.

3 Blockages in the application process

Half of councillors surveyed point to increasing workload and resourcing issues as the top barriers to timely determination of applications. Other notable barriers include the burden of national policy updates, the inability for committee members to provide earlier feedback, and slow responses from statutory consultees.

Using stakeholder insight, SEC Newgate have created a journey map of the key pain points in the planning application process (found on page 30), covering five overarching themes:

- **The crunch of public planning resources** is cited roundly by councillors and stakeholders as the main barrier to achieving timely determinations, driven by the challenge of recruiting and retaining planning professionals.

- **The increasing administrative burden** for planning departments which need to review a growing mass of information to determine whether a project is policy compliant, while also dealing with the impact of information delays from external stakeholders e.g. statutory consultees.

- **A lack of communication**, specifically between developers and planning committee members prior to committee meetings, leading to a combative style of engagement and everything riding on the short window of committee proceedings.

- **The additional burden of pre-commencement conditions** requiring further processing time and increasing planning department workload.

- **The rush to appeal** can seem inevitable in the face of frequent application refusals, and yet proceeding to appeal takes up further planning department time and resources.

4 Tensions at planning committee

Though councillors view the planning committee process as broadly satisfactory, a striking disconnect is revealed through examining their perceptions and behaviour. A large majority say they believe that their local planning department has high expertise (85%), yet a similar amount (80%) admits to voting against planning officer recommendations in the last 12 months, with 46% voting against three or more times. However, planning committee members feel that they take a broad range of considerations into account when making application decisions, focusing particularly on a development's impact on the community and surrounding environment.

Meanwhile, councillors consider the quality of applicant speeches to be the most poorly performing element at planning committee, while other stakeholders cite concern about a lack of councillor education on planning policy, calling into question whether councillors are making genuinely informed decisions.

…And where are the public?

Community education and engagement is considered vital to supporting successful outcomes in the planning system. Despite this, most councillors surveyed agree that it is difficult for members of the public to navigate the planning system. This view is echoed by stakeholders, who also feel that the public has a very low understanding of the planning system and planning policy, with the result that opposition on a case-by-case basis becomes inevitable.

Stakeholders believe increasing public awareness of the need for local housing delivery is a critical first step to bringing the community along the planning journey, advocating for extensive community consultation by local authorities in the development of their local plans. Many see both need and opportunity to re-vamp communications and engagement to be more innovative in methods of delivery (e.g. with the use of digital tools), along with being more frequent and consistent in outreach.

Driving change: How can we reduce burden and improve efficiency in the planning system to deliver more homes?

Integrating feedback from both councillors and stakeholders across the planning system, SEC Newgate identifies ten key changes to reduce pressure on the system and support housing delivery:

1 Greater consistency on national planning policy with a return to delivery of housing targets

2 Better preparation of Local Plans that respond to local housing needs in a timely fashion

3 Tackle the housing crisis by identifying and delivering different types of housing to meet local needs

4 Recognition that planning department resourcing is a key contributor to the housing crisis, and more funding is crucial

5 Broader recognition of the market factors impacting housebuilding—with understanding of the market risks taken by developers

6 Earlier and more transparent communication across the planning system, empowering meaningful conversations that focus on meeting local housing needs

7 Increase and innovate public engagement in local plan making and specific development proposals

8 Ongoing training for planning committee members on current planning policy and processes

9 Highlight the material impact of application refusals and out-of-date Local Plans—track housing delivery numbers, appeal costs and the length of housing waiting lists

10 Better use of industry best-practice, including design guidelines, to support application development

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Setting the scene:

Councillor priorities and perspectives on the housing crisis

The housing crisis:
From the national to the local

Councillors see the housing crisis, both nationally and with their local areas, as having become significantly worse over the last 12 months.

> *"There is a severe housing crisis. More needs to be built."*
>
> **Councillor (survey)**

Three-quarters of councillors believe the UK housing crisis is getting worse in 2024 (compared to 67% in 2023).

This year, only 1% of councillors think the housing crisis is getting better. This minority view is more likely to be held by councillors from Yorkshire and Humber (5%, vs. 1% all regions).

There is also a small proportion of councillors who do not think there is a housing crisis in the UK—a perspective more common among councillors from the South East (9%, vs. 4% all regions).

This sense of a rapidly worsening crisis is reflected at the local authority level. Two-thirds of councillors rate the degree of the housing crisis in their local area as severe (a rating of 7 or more out of 10). This marks a significant increase from 2023, where just over half perceived there to be a severe housing crisis.

> *"We are in serious trouble, this country is hopeless at building and everything is too expensive and down to red tape."*
>
> **Councillor (survey)**

Perception of the UK housing crisis as getting better or worse over the last 12 months (%)

Year	Do not think there is a housing crisis in the UK	Don't know	Worse	About the same	Better
2023	5	2	67	24	2
2024	4	1	74	20	1

■ Do not think there is a housing crisis in the UK   ■ Don't know   ■ Worse   ■ About the same   ■ Better
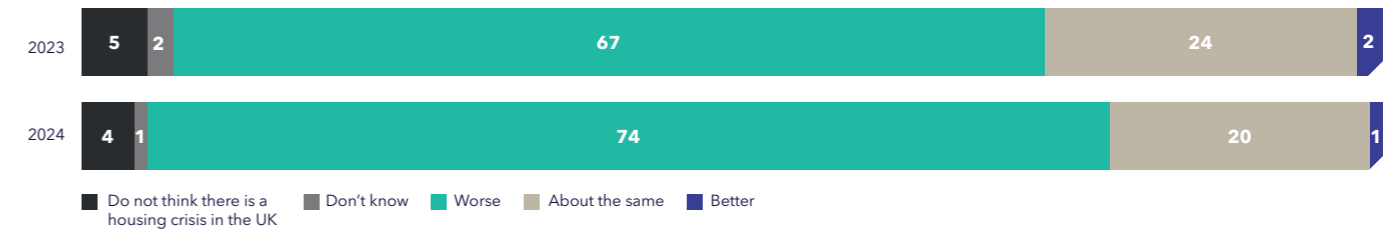
Survey question: Over the last 12 months, do you think the UK housing crisis is getting better or worse?
Base: All survey participants (2024: n=416, 2023: n=311)

The housing crisis: From the national to the local **continued.**

In particular, councillors from Wales are more likely to perceive their local authority area as being affected by a severe housing crisis (93%, vs. 66% all regions). This may underline why a higher proportion of councillors from Wales prioritise housing delivery targets.

Notably, the proportion of those who believe their local authority area isn't affected by the housing crisis (rating of 2 or less out of 10) has halved since 2023, demonstrating the spread of the crisis across the nation.

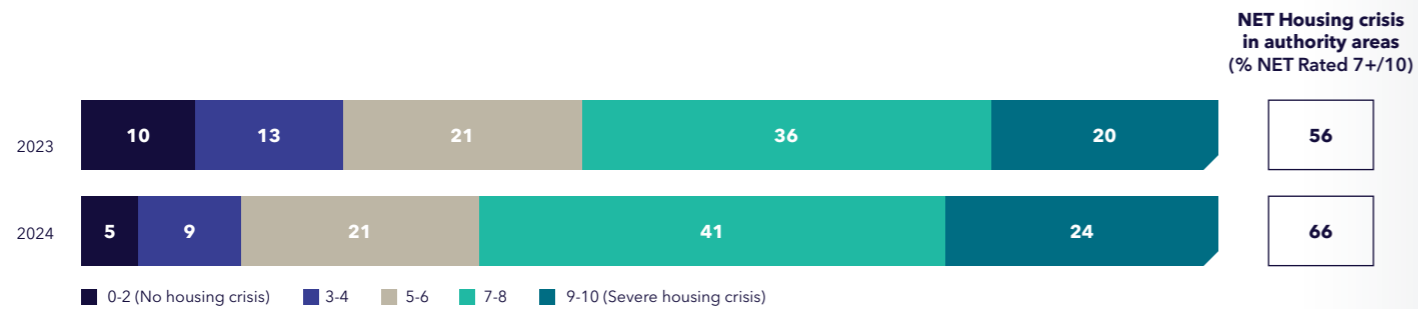> *"We've had numerous developers go bust mid-build recently, so the area is littered with half completed schemes or housing and even roads and roundabouts… We have thousands of homeless households on the council housing list desperate for somewhere decent to live."*
>
> **Councillor (survey)**

> *"I think the 'Right to buy' scheme has decimated the housing stock in my town. The rush to build new homes with budget pressures has meant that the housing stock we have has not been maintained properly. There is an increasing shortage of affordable rental accommodation."*
>
> **Councillor (survey)**

Perception of the degree to which there is a housing crisis in your authority area (%)

Year	0-2 (No housing crisis)	3-4	5-6	7-8	9-10 (Severe housing crisis)	NET Housing crisis in authority areas (% NET Rated 7+/10)
2023	10	13	21	36	20	56
2024	5	9	21	41	24	66

■ 0-2 (No housing crisis) ■ 3-4 ■ 5-6 ■ 7-8 ■ 9-10 (Severe housing crisis)

Survey question: To what degree would you say there is a housing crisis in your authority area?
Base: All survey participants (2024: n=416, 2023: n=311)

Councillor priorities

Against the backdrop of a national housing crisis, the provision of affordable homes stands out as the top priority for councillors sitting on planning committees across England and Wales.

Around a third state this as their number one priority, with this top priority ranking being significantly higher for councillors in the South West (43%), compared to all regions.

Meanwhile, delivering on housing targets is a much lower priority, similar to 2023 feedback—with less than one in ten councillors say they are primarily focused on delivering housing targets.

Though still at lower levels, councillors in Wales are significantly more likely to hold delivering on housing targets as their highest priority (17%, vs. 7% all regions).

> *"There should be a return to the provision of affordable council housing funded by the government."*
>
> **Councillor (survey)**

> *"I want to provide new sites which provide what communities need: affordable family housing."*
>
> **Councillor (survey)**

Top priorities for local authority area for 2024

Priorities	Proportion rated as a Top 5 priority (%)	Proportion rated as #1 priority (%)
Providing affordable homes for future generations	**70**	**30**
Sustainability e.g. climate change & delivering on net zero	58	14
Economic growth & job creation	52	11
Developing thriving town centres and filling empty retail units	46	5
Protecting the environment & clean streets	42	3
Delivering on housing targets	**40**	**7**
Access to health and social care services	40	7
Tackling the cost-of-living crisis	36	8
Safeguarding essential services, e.g. sports centres and parks	29	4
Tackling crime and anti-social behaviour	28	3
Investing in public services	25	4
Creating more school places	4	0

Survey question: What are the top five priorities in your authority area for 2024? / And which of these is your number one priority?
Base: All survey participants (n=416)

Councillors on their housing needs

Councillors emphasise the critical need for housing that will provide a roof for those who are more economically vulnerable, or in need of supported living arrangements.
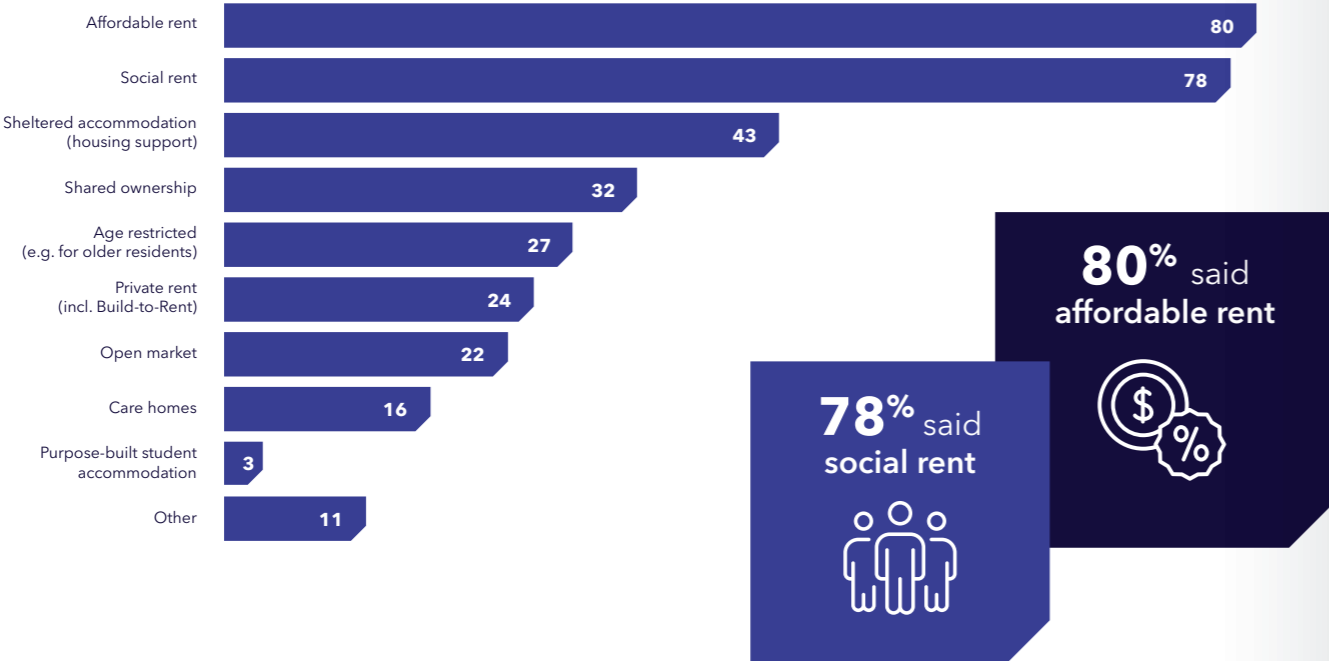
By far, affordable and social housing are perceived by councillors to be the most needed in local authorities, both cited by eight in ten. The former are cited as needed specifically by councillors from the South West (92%, vs. 80% all regions).

Lower on the list of local authority housing needs are private rentals and open market housing.

These were felt to be needed by just under a quarter of councillors; by contrast, however, open market housing is deemed to be a more urgent need according to councillors from London (59%, vs. 22% all regions).

> *"We should massively increase the minimum percentage of social and affordable housing included in development of any size."*
>
> **Councillor (survey)**

Type of housing your authority area needs more of (%)

Type	%
Affordable rent	80
Social rent	78
Sheltered accommodation (housing support)	43
Shared ownership	32
Age restricted (e.g. for older residents)	27
Private rent (incl. Build-to-Rent)	24
Open market	22
Care homes	16
Purpose-built student accommodation	3
Other	11

78% said social rent

80% said affordable rent

Survey question: Which type of housing does your Authority need more of?
Base: All survey participants (n=416)

The focus on affordable housing

The presumption in favour of sustainable development states that:

> *Succinct and up-to-date plans should provide a positive vision for the future of each area; a framework for meeting housing needs and addressing other economic, social and environmental priorities; and a platform for local people to shape their surroundings.[3]*

As evidenced in this year's National Planning Barometer, councillors—along with many other planning and development specialists who were interviewed for the study – understandably place a core focus on building affordable and social housing in response to the current UK housing crisis. Affordable and social housing supports those whose needs are not met by the private market. It is an essential element in tackling homelessness, meeting a variety of accommodation needs and helping people to get a foot on the housing ladder.

However, stakeholders note that, increasingly, the nuance of what counts as "affordable" in the context of a housing crisis has been challenged. And while local planning committee members perceive affordable and social housing as the key housing need in their local authorities, some stakeholders questioned this heightened focus as not recognising that there is **a range of housing types that could also ease the strain of housing availability and affordability.** Several suggested instead that a focus on increasing competition and delivering stock in the open market would ease supply issues, diverting some of the housing need from affordable housing.

Affordable housing is also deemed to be at the mercy of the thorny issue of 'viability'. Some councillors and 3rd party organisations who took part in the study note that the consequence of increasing regulation and higher costs of development is that there is greater use of viability assessments by applicants to reduce their liability to deliver affordable housing.

> *"The focus on affordable homes is really strong in terms of intent but I'm not sure if it is followed through. When you start looking at viability it starts to get diluted. It's interesting—talking from the London context—when we were really hard on affordable housing, you can say that there were much higher levels of affordable housing delivered. That has now changed. It's got diluted. It became about just building homes."*
>
> **3rd party organisation**

> *"Surely it's about housing for people who need it? It's wrong to only think about affordable housing. Instead think about more housing in total that meets a range of different needs e.g. BTR, owner-occupied, student etc."*
>
> **3rd party organisation**

> *"Outwardly councillors want affordable housing; but when you bring them an 100% affordable scheme, they aren't so keen."*
>
> **Developer**

Please refer to the Appendices for full references to the background literature mentioned

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The planning break down:

Examining the issues affecting housing delivery

Barriers to housing delivery: Councillor views

Councillor responses to the National Planning Barometer 2024 survey demonstrate a broad recognition of the multi-faceted and complex challenges to housing delivery.

The majority, however, underline the core challenges as centred around affordable housing. Claims of lack of viability by developers, as well as lack of funding for affordable housing are viewed as the key challenges, with slow build, community opposition and a lack of suitable site as lesser, but still critical, challenges.

> *"We need to be able to trust developers to deliver what they promise. All too often there is an application which promises everything… [but] then we get the viability game with a reduction on promises."*
>
> **Councillor (survey)**

Perceived key challenges to housing delivery in your authority area (%)

Challenge	%
Developers claiming lack of viability for delivery of affordable housing	68
Lack of funding for affordable housing	62
Slow build-out by developers	40
Community opposition to schemes	33
Lack of suitable sites in local area	33
Resourcing issues in the planning team	27
Submitted schemes do not align with the character of local area	20
Policy constraints e.g. Green Belt	20
Lack of up-to-date Local Plan	17
Insufficient communication between key parties in the planning system	15
Submitted schemes are not in the Local Plan	13
Lack of schemes coming forward	13
Submitted schemes are not compliant with planning policy	12
Slow response from statutory consultees	9
Other	15

Survey question: In your opinion, what are the biggest challenges to housing delivery in your authority area?
Base: All survey participants (n=416)

Structural factors impacting the planning system

There is an existing narrative which decries the planning system as 'broken'. However, the system does not exist in isolation—rather, it sits at the nexus of the social and economic need for housing and the response to this need, fulfilled by public policy and market provision, and is also tempered by discretionary decision-making at planning committee.

As such, the actions and agendas of developers, local and national government, and local authorities make the issue of housing delivery a highly complex one to grapple with.

To understand a holistic picture of the causes preventing the adequate delivery of housing, stakeholders interviewed for the National Planning Barometer stress a need to acknowledge the range of external—and historical—factors that sit outside of, yet directly impact, the function of the planning system itself.

At the crux of these external factors lies:

- An issue of supply and demand
- Conflicting views on building timescales
- The impact of local funding cuts

An issue of supply and demand

The 2023 Centre for Cities report 'The Housebuilding Crisis'[1] describes housebuilding rates in England and Wales as having dropped by more than a third after the introduction of the Town and Country Planning Act 1947, from 2 per cent growth per year between 1856 and 1939 to 1.2 per cent between 1947 and 2019.

The report tracks factors contributing to the housing crisis back to the mid-20th century:

- The introduction of the discretionary planning system under the Town and Country Planning Act 1947.

- The UK having the lowest average private sector housebuilding rate of any similar European country in the post-war period, combined with a simultaneous decline in social housebuilding rates, which fell from 1.1 per cent growth a year in 1968 to 0.6 per cent in 1979.

- Post-1980 with 'Right to Buy' and the further subsequent decline of council house building.

With a market-dominated supply side, current housing delivery in England and Wales is at the mercy of macro-economic conditions. Despite the establishment of the Affordable Homes Programme 2021-2026[8] to support building for housing needs which are not met by the market, the majority of new homes are still delivered through the 'speculative model' of housebuilding, whereby housebuilders buy land in advance of the construction and sale of homes, for profit, and without knowing the final price they will sell that home for[2].

The characteristics of this delivery model are victim to the fluctuating increases in interest rates and inflation, affecting borrowing and building costs. And the result is an overall negative impact on the functioning of the supply side. Some councillors interviewed as part the National Planning Barometer 2024 study even speak of developers going bust mid-build, leaving behind half completed schemes and road infrastructure.

On the demand side, some stakeholders interviewed argue that the type of homes needed by local communities is not taken into proper consideration, leading to an adverse outcome where the available homes are not serving to ease pressure on housing demand. Related to this is councillor criticism of housebuilders, claiming that their focus is to squeeze in as many homes as possible to gain the biggest financial return.

However, other stakeholders suggest that the issue may be more complex, and that the current method of calculating housing targets is flawed, supported by the Competition and Markets Authority's research[2], reporting concerns that current targets do not reflect housing need.

Some suggest that a more nuanced approach to understanding population demographics is required, taking factors such as international and domestic migration and 'hidden' households into account, to give more accurate regional and local figures on which to base housing targets.

Supply and demand issues are set to become even more pressing, as the Office for National Statistics projects the UK population to rise by 6.6 million over the next 15 years, a 9.9% increase, and the housing market needing to accommodate 73.7 million people.

> *"There is a tension between developer profits and the need for local authorities to build economies and healthy communities."*
>
> **Councillor (survey)**

> *"The narrative is always there is a housing crisis and what can we do to the planning system to fix it, but in reality, the planning system doesn't build homes. Developers do."*
>
> **3rd party organisation**

> *"Instead of development benefitting communities, volume housing developers and large commercial developers only aim is to make as much profit as possible."*
>
> **Councillor (survey)**

> *"Developers in planning get a bad rap in the press when they're trying to do something good and are held to such a high level of due diligence. I think it comes down to communication."*
>
> **Planning consultant**

Please refer to the Appendices for full references to the background literature mentioned

Conflicting views on building timescales

Adding to the pressure on housing delivery is contention around building timescales. Four in ten councillors who responded to the National Planning Barometer 2024 survey state that 'slow build-out' is one of the biggest challenges to housing delivery in their authorities.

Some councillors describe issues of land banking in their local areas as 'profit-driven'. However, a range of stakeholders interviewed counter that there is a fundamental lack of understanding about the timescales that are involved in housing development and the fundamentals of the housing market. Their view is that councillors sitting on planning committees should be cognisant that developers, by their nature as commercial enterprises, must be profit driven—and that build-out is a complex, and market-led, issue.

Stakeholders cite a wide range of reasons for slow build-out, including shortage of land supply, delays in the planning application process, onerous pre-commencement conditions, and wider market conditions, e.g., needing to slow down the process to prevent potential loss at sale.

The Competition and Markets Authority's 2023 Housebuilding market study[2] also suggests that negative perceptions of landbanking could be misguided:

> *We do not see evidence that the size of land banks we observe held by different housebuilders individually or in aggregate either locally or nationally is itself a driver of negative consumer outcomes in the housebuilding market. Rather, our analysis suggests that observed levels of land banking activity represent a rational approach to maintaining a sufficient stream of developable land to meet housing need, given the time and uncertainty involved in negotiating the planning system.*

"Slow build-out – that is something that is a real misconception of reality. If you got £4-5M site… you don't really want to sit on it, you would want to get it done. I don't disagree that some will ease their production because of interest rates… because of the market, sometimes they will need to cut their production in half. You can't do anything about that."

Councillor & planning committee member

"The problem is builders and their slow build-out rate… It really annoys me when we give lots of permissions out and nothing happens, and then the local authority is blamed for lack of delivery."

Councillor (survey)

"Development is a complex thing to do and councillors making decisions need to understand this. No developer wants to sit on a site and not develop it."

Developer

The impact of local funding cuts

62% councillors cite 'lack of funding for affordable housing' as one of the biggest challenges to housing delivery in their authorities, and 49% cite 'lack of resource' in planning teams as preventing the timely determination of applications. While these are different types of barriers to housing delivery, funding at a local government level sits at the heart of both issues.

In the last 15 years, there has been a dramatic fall in local authority spending power, driven largely by reductions in central government grants. These grants were cut by 40% in real terms between 2009/10 and 2019/20, and despite a brief reversal through COVID grant funding, the fall in grant income was still 21% in real terms between 2009/10 and 2021/22[2].

Planning departments are victims of these swingeing cuts. RTPI research[13] reports that significant budget cuts have resulted in recruitment, skills and performance challenges for public sector planning. Local authority net expenditure on planning has fallen by 43%, from £844m in 2009/10 to £480m in 2020/21, amounting to just 0.45% of local government budgets allocated to planning services[10].

"Planning budgets are usually the first ones to get slashed—it's seen as second class in comparison to other committees and systems, but it is so important."

Developer

Stakeholders interviewed for the National Planning Barometer 2024 study also highlight another key issue inherent to local funding issues. Some felt that while there are councils that are managing to build their own affordable housing (especially within London), regeneration projects are now front of the queue for existing funding. They discuss a lack of investment from central government as having shifted the onus for new affordable housing onto developer contributions, making the provision vulnerable to viability issues.

Stakeholders cite this funding issue as exacerbated by the profits of sales from Right to Buy going back into the general local revenue, rather than being used to replenish authority-owned stock. Not only does the share of revenue now go back to government with the 100% allowance scheme having ended, but there is also a cap on the amount that can be used on replacement homes.

"How much you can spend on builds for council housing depends on how much money you have to also maintain your existing stock. Housing associations aren't really able to afford to build anything due to everything they have to do for regulations, like fire stairs and cladding."

Planning officer

"Currently council housing is going straight into Landlord rented houses… instead we should maintain it going back into local stock…but the government would have to put their hand in their pockets."

3rd party organisation

Planning policy: Councillor views on recent updates

In late 2023, the UK Government introduced the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act, alongside its latest updates to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) [15]. Both initiatives seek to support the management, reform, and clarification of the plan making process at national and local levels.

One update to the NPPF states that local planning authorities will no longer be subject to mandatory housing targets as calculated by the standard method– so long as their Local Plan is less than five years old[2]. Instead, the standard method is to be taken as an "advisory starting-point", allowing local authorities more control and flexibility as to how they deliver housing in their local areas.

Our research reveals that councillor responses to this revision presents a mixed picture–though the slight majority support for advisory housing targets highlights a break with policy intentions on how these should be viewed and deployed.

Support for this update is predominantly fuelled by a desire from councillors to see housing targets which take into account changing local needs and circumstances.

> "It should be down to the LPA to determine the numbers we require, not set from the top down. As Local Councillors, we know what is needed and where it's needed."
>
> **Councillor (survey)**

On the other hand, those who opposed the update express concern that the lack of mandatory targets would reduce accountability at a local authority level. Some suggest it would become too easy for planning committee members to make excuses for, or ignore, poor levels of housing delivery.

Extent of support for the National Planning Policy Framework update deeming housing numbers to be advisory rather than compulsory (%)

Overall, **55%** of councillors **support the NFFP update** to advisory housing numbers

Overall, **25%** of councillors **oppose the NFFP update** to advisory housing numbers

- 20
- 22
- 16
- 33
- 9

■ Strongly support ■ Somewhat support ■ Neither support nor oppose ■ Somewhat oppose ■ Strongly oppose

Another key update in the National Planning Policy Framework **was the proposal to publish league tables of local authorities in regard to planning performance.** These league tables are intended to identify speed of response, level of approvals and delivery against targets for each local authority.

When asked how the publication of these league tables might affect the decisions made at planning committee, the large majority of councillors firmly believe their planning committee decisions would not be influenced.

Several offered specific views on the league tables, though the majority of these responses suggest negative sentiment towards the league tables.

> "I would continue to make decisions by going to planning armed with the facts, have an open mind to reasonable debate, and decide an application on its merits. I could never support making a decision based on government targets."
>
> **Councillor (survey)**

> "League tables are nonsense unless we're comparing like with like. Maybe if the government funded councils equally, that would be a good start."
>
> **Councillor (survey)**

> "I will do my best to make decisions based on planning considerations but published league tables would be very demotivating."
>
> **Councillor (survey)**

Likelihood of decision-making at committee being influenced due to government publication of league tables for local authority planning (%)

81% of councillors say poor performance within published league tables would **not** change the way they make decisions

14% express a mix of views about the league tables

Only **4%** say it **would** encourage **more** approval of schemes

2% say they didn't know

The planning policy labyrinth: Is there a way through?

Stakeholders interviewed for the National Planning Barometer 2024 study demonstrate a striking consensus around policy pain points that impact the functioning of the planning system, feeding into the issue of housing delivery.

At the intersection between national and local policy, stakeholders are increasingly concerned that planning is a 'political football', where the lack of a strong policy framework reduces the planning process to one of negotiation, losing focus on the overarching goal of meeting the housing needs of local communities.

Seeking to navigate through the planning labyrinth provokes encounters with:

- The push and pull of planning policy
- Local plans: patchy strategy and implementation

> "You have the planning system being laden with more burdens. Things that were historically assessed by other authorities now need to be determined by planning departments… Issues about energy efficiency, embedded carbon–all these things are being layered on year by year. There is a policy and legislative creep and underneath this you have overlapping organisations that don't talk."
>
> **3rd party organisation**

The push and pull of planning policy

Stakeholders cite frequent changes to national policy via updates to the National Planning Policy Framework[3], alongside the introduction of the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act (2023)[15], as creating competing priorities affecting the consideration of planning applications. This is creating confusion for developers submitting applications, and increases the burden on planning officers, now dealing with increasingly complex considerations, e.g., needing to assess biodiversity net gain.

Overlaid on these changing national mandates are specific local priorities, where additional standards beyond existing regulations on environmental sustainability and housing provision are slowing the planning process down even more. And, once again, this extra burden is exacerbated by a lack of funding, which is required to provide the resource and expertise needed to deal with the increase in requirements.

> "I think what we have seen is a lack of clear direction from central policymakers and central government. There are lots of conflicting messages which makes it harder for local planning professionals to ensure that local planning politicians have that clarity as well in terms of housing numbers, need and deliverables."
>
> **Developer**

> "Planning should be locally led, but some places will decide 'we have enough no more here', so it is a difficult dilemma that needs top down push."
>
> **3rd party organisation**

Building on the issue of complexity, some stakeholders who interact with planning committees state their concern that councillors are not 'up to speed' on policy requirements and changes. Instead, councillors are perceived to be making decisions based on limited policy knowledge and too influenced by their political agendas.

Other stakeholders feel that it is affordable housing that becomes the loser as regulations, and requirements increase. They speak of developers only being able to integrate so many new requirements presenting a trade-off situation to make a development viable from a profitability perspective.

Stakeholders understand the key to this issue to be the conflict between a national approach to policy vs. local decision-making powers. It is felt that without a more defined framework, blockages and tensions will persist.

> "The constant cycle of reform creates more delay and uncertainty."
>
> **3rd party organisation**

> "The fact that there isn't a stable or clear national framework is a problem and adds to complexity. Planning reform changes all the time. All elements of the sector–councils, members, developers–would like clarity and direction."
>
> **Planning officer**

> "With the housing crisis, we know how many homes need to be built but in terms of where they go, I'm not sure there is any clarity from central government. I like what Scotland and Wales do with defined planning rules. The National Plan for England would be much more structured."
>
> **Planning consultant**

> "We had the issue of having to put two staircases in buildings and the uncertainty around that. There was an edict–that wasn't a rule–that said you can't build tall buildings without two staircases. But when the actual decision was made, we had to have lots of applications changed."
>
> **Planning officer**

> "It's national political intervention and local political intervention. And it's becoming toxic and stressful in certain areas, for those dealing with authorities. That's a major issue there, usually in the areas having aging local plans and large pressure on greenfield sites. There's a correlation between the huge pressures on local authorities and not having an updated local plan for 5-year supply."
>
> **Planning consultant**

Please refer to the Appendices for full references to the background literature mentioned

Local plans: Patchy strategy and implementation

While some stakeholders interviewed (notably those based in London) feel that local plans are mindful of the needs of the community and are being used effectively, many stakeholders cite concerns about the **preparation**, **adoption** and **validity** of local plans.

The NPPF[3] states that preparing and maintaining up-to-date local plans should be a priority. Most stakeholders and councillor survey respondents recognise local plans to be a critical framework for housebuilders to bring forward the right sites and successful planning applications. When planning committee members play an active part in local plan production, stakeholders experience a more helpful and efficient environment.

However, research by Lichfields[11], a planning consultancy, reports a startling lack of up-to-date local plans in England, estimating that 75 per cent of English councils will not have an up-to-date local plan by the end of 2025.

Where local plans are not prioritised, stakeholders see a crucial strategic foundation being absent in local decision-making, causing delays and uncertainty around application approvals. Some bemoan that when planning committees take too long deliberating, members will change during the review period and slow the process down. Others also feel that politics is at play where councillors may not want adopt a local plan that they know will incite community opposition (e.g. recommending building on greenbelt) and tend to delay decision-making.

Adding to these issues is a lack of community engagement at the critical stage of local plan design. The public are felt to be disengaged from local planning, compounded by a lack of effective engagement from planning actors.

However, stakeholders believe that public engagement would effectively stem future opposition to schemes on a case-by-case basis, helping to speed up the process of approval overall.

Aside from the challenges of political agenda and public engagement, the lack of resource persists as the fundamental issue in maintaining up-to-date local plans, adding to planning department workloads.

> *"Local communities need to realise that new homes need to be built, the local plan should be clear and well publicised."*
>
> **Councillor (survey)**

> *"A key problem is the way local plans have been drafted. They can be very superficial and loosely written. It's all driven by developing more housing. Better standards should be set in strategic planning."*
>
> **3rd party organisation**

> *"There is a nationwide shortage of planning officers. Currently, all my authority's planning officers are contractors. One officer, worryingly involved in developing our next local plan, lives hundreds of miles away and has no understanding of local needs/issues whatsoever. We need more planners!"*
>
> **Councillor (survey)**

> *"Local plan preparation—that has slowed down dramatically… and we'll have to scrutinise the 5-year supply in the local plans as a result of policy changes."*
>
> **Planning consultant**

Please refer to the Appendices for full references to the background literature mentioned

Exploring the blockages in the application process

Those operating in the planning system cite a broad range of pain points and barriers which obstruct the timely and efficient determination of applications.

Regardless of role or function in the planning system, stakeholders interviewed quickly identify similar pain points causing disruption or frustration. These challenges—often overlapping—are felt to arise at multiple points throughout the planning process, creating cycles of delays, wasted effort, and industry burn out.

Half of councillors surveyed in the study point to increasing workload and resourcing issues as being key barriers to application determination. This is followed by the burden created by frequently changing policy, and issues with the application process itself, e.g. an inability for committee members to provide feedback earlier and the impact of slow responses from statutory consultees.

Stakeholders interviewed for the study strongly echo these councillor frustrations.

Councillors' perceived barriers to timely application determination and delivery of planning policy (%)

Barrier	%
Increasing workload	51
Lack of resource	49
The burden of implementing changes to planning policy	26
Inability for committee members to feedback earlier (pre-committee)	26
Slow response from statutory consultees	24
Level of expertise within planning team	16
Poor communication with key stakeholders	11
Other	12
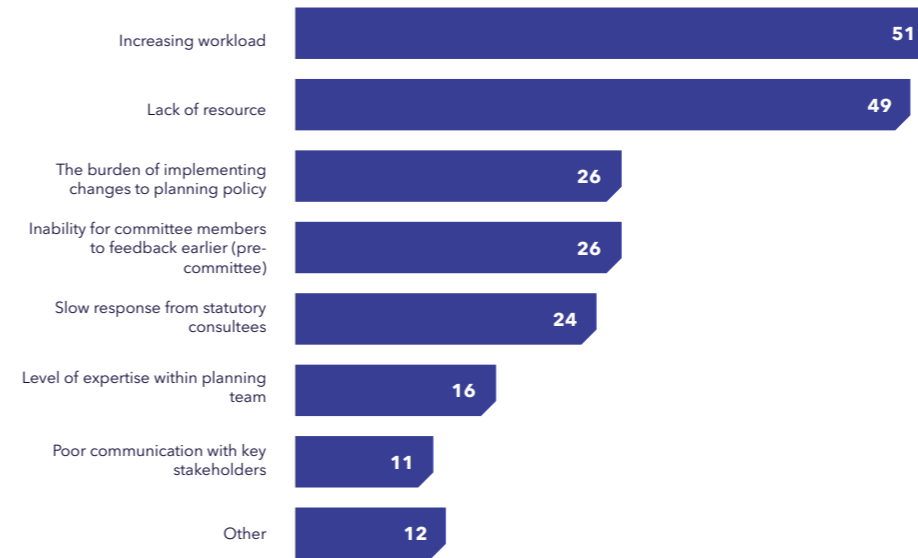
42% of councillors feel that resourcing in their local department has got worse over the last year – especially those from Wales (62%)

Survey question: In your local planning department, which of the following do you feel are barriers to the timely determination of applications and delivery of up-to-date planning policy, if any? / Over the last year, how has resourcing within your local planning department changed, if at all?
Base: All survey participants (n=416)

Pain points:
An in-depth look

1 The crunch of public planning resources

Under-resourcing within the planning system is a highly prominent issue mentioned by many stakeholders and planning committee members—with sympathy notably expressed for staff in planning departments. According to analysis conducted by the RTPI[13], 25% of planning officers left the public sector between 2013 and 2020. High workload and stress levels, low pay, and lack of career progression are all factors seen to contribute to this high churn. Additionally, some stakeholders feel that local planning is viewed as an undesirable profession by graduates, with local authorities in regional areas particularly struggling to recruit. These recruitment and retention challenges exacerbate the stress on remaining resources in planning departments, which are becoming ever more thinly stretched.

"Lack of resourcing is true… Schools and education aren't encouraging people to get into it. Enough people aren't being brought in. "

Developer

2 Increasing administrative burden for planning departments

Larger-scale development applications require large amounts of information to demonstrate how a project meets policy standards. The Housing Forum's report[7] on planning validation requirements found that local authorities typically request between 21 to 42 supplementary documents to validate an application. With some validations dependent on reports delivered by statutory consultees and other external consultants, stakeholders highlight an industry 'domino effect' of delays driven by reliance on a network of actors to provide information. These delays exacerbate stress on already stretched resources. Some stakeholders further point out tensions in policy where different areas, such as sustainability and infrastructure, can compete for priority. This adds pressure to rounds of application design, review, and amendments for all operators to meet the planning system's growing checklists of authoritary requirements.

"There is pressure due to so many new requirements—it makes it very complicated to manage for the local authority, and for developers to submit planning applications."

Planning officer

"It is slow responses from consultees. We got annoyed with an environment agency and we couldn't get sign off. I think they took so long because they had reductions in their team – and didn't have capacity to get back in 21 days like they should."

Planning officer

3 A lack of communication

For many stakeholders, the disconnect between actors in the planning system is fuelled by poor communication. Specifically, they perceive a lack of understanding between developers and councillors. Many emphasise the need for earlier and more transparent consultation, particularly at the pre-application stage. Better communication would facilitate collaboration, helping to avoid surprises and opposition at the planning committee stage. However, a few believe that some councillors are unwilling to engage due to concerns of bias, as well as community pressure. There is also concern about lower levels of knowledge regarding planning policy and market conditions among councillors, limiting their ability to engage in planning discussions in a genuine way.

"There needs to be a lot of discussion locally with [the planning committee and developer] before it goes into pre-application. In my experience, I don't think they talk or work together anymore. "

3rd Party organisation

4 The additional burden of pre-commencement conditions

Pre-commencement conditions are imposed at the discretion of local authorities following approval of an application and must be satisfied prior to building starting. Policy guidelines state that any pre-commencement conditions must be necessary, relevant and reasonable. However, some stakeholders stated concern that councillors are largely unaware of the impact of imposing pre-commencement conditions on timely housing delivery, as they require additional processing time, increasing planning department workload. Applicants may also encounter challenges to providing the information regarding pre-commencement conditions at the right time, leading to further delays to when a development starts.

"Pre-commencement conditions add difficulties with resources … Often it's time processing on council side—it doesn't stay a priority because the fees they gain are really small, but they use a lot of officers on that front."

Planning consultant

5 The rush to appeal

For some planning officers, consultants, and committee members interviewed, the frequent refusal of planning applications by planning committee members makes the path to appeal almost inevitable. However, proceeding to appeal takes up further planning department time and resources, required for the review and decision-making. Some feel that councillors are unaware—or even uncaring—of the extra burden and costs incurred by appeal. Others also worry that some committee members seek to avoid the responsibility of decision-making by refusing an application, knowing the final decision will be dealt with at the appeal stage—a behaviour they see as driven by local political agendas and community pressures.

"Councillors can't keep refusing [applications]… They need to make sure they understand the implications—how much that's actually going to cost the local authority when they go to appeal."

Planning officer

Please refer to the Appendices for full references to the background literature mentioned

The application journey:
Mapping stakeholder pain points

The map below provides an overview of the typical journey and pain points experienced in the submission and decision-making of an application for a proposed development, as identified by the planning stakeholders interviewed.

Stage	Pre-application	Application submission and validation	Planning officer recommendations	Application review: by Planning Committee OR Delegated Authority
Key activities	• Applicant may informally consult with other actors, such as committee members, planning officers, and local communities, on potential application	• Consultation with statutory consultees • Consultation with community • Application registered with supporting documents	• Further consultation with affected parties • Application negotiations and amendments may be made based on planning officer recommendations	• Application presented to planning committee or Delegated Authority • Further consultation with affected parties, as needed
Who's involved	• Developers • Councillors • Planning officers • The community	• Developers • Councillors • The community • Statutory consultees • Third party experts	• Developers • Planning officers • Statutory consultees • Third party experts	• Developers • Planning officers • Planning committee members • Delegated Authority
Resourcing		Lack of resources across industry adds workload pressure and stress in validating applications	Under-resourced planning officers may create delays in provision of recommendation	Low resources across system, especially in planning officers and committees, can create delays in application review
Efficiency		High frequency of delays in receiving and providing supporting documents		Applicants not provided enough time or multiple points of engagement with planning committee during review
Communications	Lack of pre-application engagement between developers and councillors (and public)	Councillor opinion may not be delivered to applicants through planning officers	Local community often excluded at this stage, adding to concerns about lack of community engagement	Concerns raised by members at committee meetings that have never be shared with the applicant before
Policy / politics	Guidelines from Local Authorities on consultation with community can be vague	Changing policies and local policy creep adds burden to application validation requirements	No guidelines for affected party consultation	

Key pain points and barriers

Stage	Application decision	Refusal / Approval — Pre-commencement	Approval — Development	Appeal of committee refusal (within 6 months)	New application (restart process)
Key activities	• To be made within 8-13 weeks, depending on project size	• Local Authorities may request pre-commencement conditions	• Developers begin development	• Applicants may appeal to the Planning Inspectorate, if they have legitimate reasons for objection against a refusal, or a decision has not been made within the relevant timeframe	• Any amendments to a proposal require re-submission of a new application
Who's involved	• Planning committee members • Delegated Authority	• Planning committee members • Developers • Third party experts		• Developers • Planning Inspectorate • Planning committee members	
Resourcing	Under-resourcing in planning departments may lead to delays in application decision-making				Restarting process adds workload to stretched planning resources
Efficiency		Further pre-commencement documents add to work burden in planning departments		Appeals process is vulnerable to use by planning committee wanting to avoid an application decision	
Communications					
Policy / politics	Councillors may face community pressure to vote against application		Planning permission timeframes too restrictive e.g. to factor in market impacts		

2.4 Planning committee

What's going wrong at planning committee?

As the elected voice representing local communities, councillors maintain an important democratic function in helping to determine the value and impact of a proposed development in a local area.

Our research demonstrates that councillors view planning committee process elements as broadly satisfactory. The majority rate the various elements positively, with two-thirds believing that their fellow committee members are well prepared for considering an application. However, some stakeholders outside of planning committees do not feel that councillors are always prepared enough for committee hearings, which is further hampered by lack of communication with planning officers and developers regarding applications prior to committee.

Councillors are most likely to vote against applications based on their impact on neighbouring amenity and infrastructure (such as roads and utilities), design of the proposed development (including height, mass and lack of contribution to the surrounding community), and the risk of unsustainable density and overdevelopment.

Refusals based on design are often cited as a key pain point for developers and planning consultants, questioning whether issues of personal taste play too strong a role in decision-making. The use of design codes is thought by some to alleviate this issue, although others fear that these codes can also be too prescriptive and fall victim to personal preference.

> *"Massive improvement in design quality is needed to reflect local area (not same designed block of flats all across the area) and this can be achieved by really early discussions with local councillors."*
>
> **Councillor (survey)**

Councillors' perceptions of planning committee process elements NET Positive ratings (% rated 7+/10)

The quality of planning officer presentations to committee	76
The process for asking questions during the consideration of an application at committee	69
Overall preparedness of committee members to consider applications	63
The length of time an applicant is allowed to speak at committee	60
The quality of applicant speeches to committee	45

Some stakeholders state concern about the impact of frequent committee changes, implying differing levels of planning experience. They also cite concerns about a lack of councillor education on planning policy, calling into question whether councillors are making genuinely informed decisions. Feedback from interviewees suggest a pattern of councillors with longer tenures on planning committees being more likely to refuse an application, due to having higher levels of confidence on what they believe is needed for their local area.
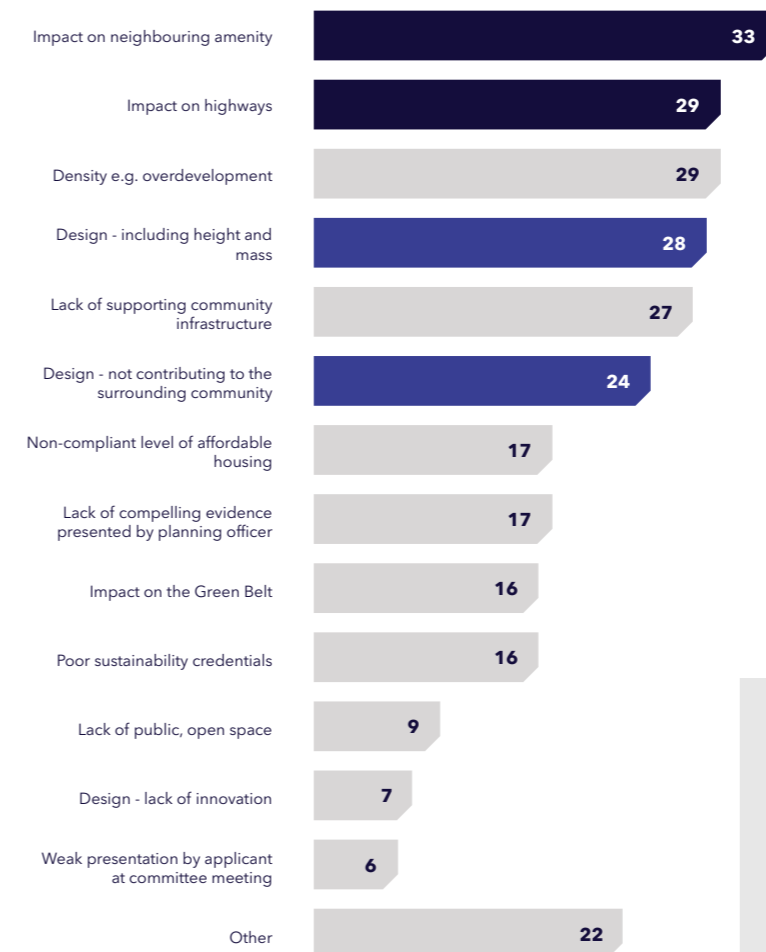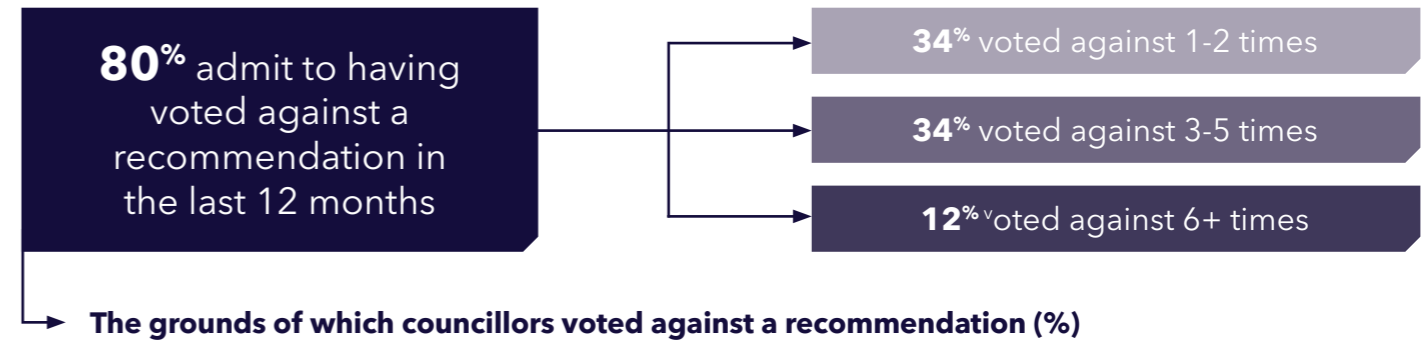
Finally, councillors interviewed confirm perceptions of poor applicant presentations, believing some applicants need demonstrate greater preparedness and more holistic thinking about the application.

> *"There is an element of developers and planning officers needing to come to the committee more prepared and with better presentations to ensure we are getting the full idea. A lot of them look messy and are a bit reductive in their approach."*
>
> **Councillors & Planning committee member**

Self-reported frequency of councillors voting against planning officer recommendations (%)

80% admit to having voted against a recommendation in the last 12 months

- **34%** voted against 1-2 times
- **34%** voted against 3-5 times
- **12%** voted against 6+ times

The grounds of which councillors voted against a recommendation (%)

Impact on neighbouring amenity	33
Impact on highways	29
Density e.g. overdevelopment	29
Design - including height and mass	28
Lack of supporting community infrastructure	27
Design - not contributing to the surrounding community	24
Non-compliant level of affordable housing	17
Lack of compelling evidence presented by planning officer	17
Impact on the Green Belt	16
Poor sustainability credentials	16
Lack of public, open space	9
Design - lack of innovation	7
Weak presentation by applicant at committee meeting	6
Other	22

In total, **48%** cited issues with access to local amenity and infrastructure

In total, **38%** perceived an issue with an application's design

> *"It is imperative that infrastructure is already in place to support any further developments. Ageing gas and water networks are in dire need of updating. Planning officers and the Inspectorate need to take these considerations into account when determining an application. Let's put the horse before the cart."*
>
> **Councillor (survey)**

Survey question: In the past 12 months, how often have you voted against your planning officers recommendations to approve, approximately? On what grounds did you vote against your officers recommendations
Base: All survey participants (n=416)

Planning officers & Planning committee members: A flawed relationship?

Although councillors surveyed express a high regard for the expertise of planning officers, they nevertheless admit a high frequency of voting against planning officer recommendations.

This seemingly common practice of refusal leads to a question of whether councillors genuinely recognise the industry and policy expertise of planning officers.

Some stakeholders interviewed find this lack of regard to be frustrating, suggesting that there should be penalties to dissuade and limit planning committee members from voting against planning officer recommendations too often.

85%

of councillors believe their local planning department has high expertise (NET rated 7+/10)
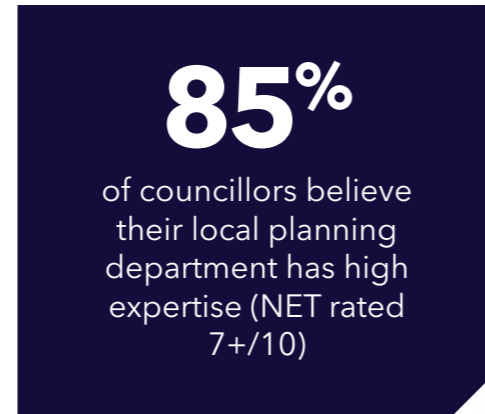
"Councillors will just turn down planning officers' suggestions. Is it because they are uneducated in how the system works or is it a political decision?"

Developer

Unsolvable tensions? Planning committees vs. Developers

For many stakeholders, there is a palpable tension between planning committee members and developers.

Less than half of councillors rate the quality of applicant speeches to committee positively, suggesting unrealistic expectations of the (often) only time when a developer is able to make the case for their proposed development.

Some developers describe frustrations with trying to consult with councillors, and believe they oppose applications on purely political grounds, rather than judging an application based on its merits.

On the flip-side councillors also want to see developers engaging in genuine consultation with the community, which they find often feels rather like a tick-box exercise.

"The good thing about our planning team is they drive a hard bargain—they are tough with developers and don't take it."

Councillors & Planning committee member

What councillors consider in a new application from a developer (%)

Demonstration of genuine engagement with community	70
Commitment to high quality design	65
Commitment to positive social and economic impact within communities	58
Track record in delivering developments with good sustainability credentials	52
Applicant's local track record and industry reputation	44
Timeliness of engagement with the community	39
Approach to governance within their organisation	9

Survey question: Aside from the detail of the application itself, when considering a new application from a developer, which of the following do you take into consideration, if any?
Base: All survey participants (n=416)

Survey question: How do you rate the level of expertise within your local planning department?
Base: All survey participants (n=416)

3

Where are the public?:

The importance of community education and engagement

Can the public navigate the planning system?

Stakeholders interviewed in the study are strongly aligned in the belief that the public have a very low understanding of the planning system and planning policy.

The majority of councillors surveyed agree that it is difficult for members of the public to navigate the planning system. This view is echoed by the stakeholders interviewed.

For some, there is a fundamental lack of public understanding of housing needs in their local area, only having contact with planning when a new development is proposed rather than having an appreciation for the bigger picture. Stakeholders believe increasing public awareness of the need for local housing delivery is a critical first step to bringing the community along the planning journey.

Many stakeholders advocate for extensive community consultation by local authorities in the development of their Local Plans. This would develop understanding of specific housing and related infrastructure needs.

To support this education initiative, stakeholders suggest that local plans and policies must be available, accessible and engaging to the public.
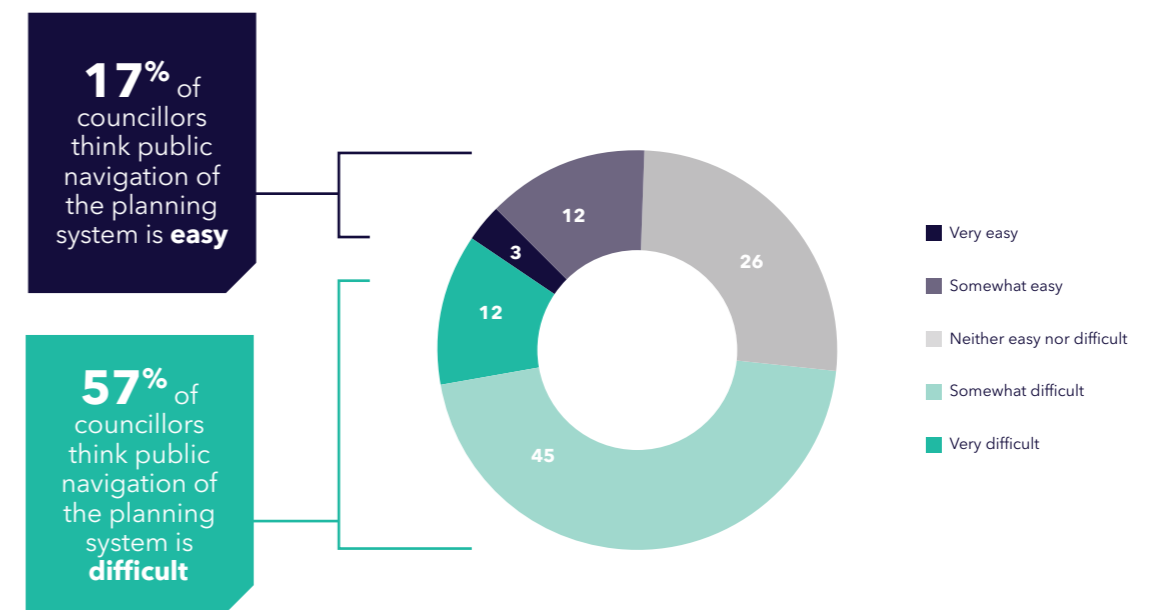
"What is difficult in planning legislation is getting genuine engagement with local communities… My experience is that you can have sensible conversations with the community - knowing that we need new housing, understanding the red line, and what can we actually do. I think it can actually be more of a positive conversation. Especially now there aware more digital ways of doing things. But again—it's money to get those systems in order."

Planning officer

"There needs to be more community awareness of, and input into, the process of making the local plan."

Councillor (survey)

"Councillors' perception of the ease or difficulty for the public to navigate the planning system (%)

17% of councillors think public navigation of the planning system is **easy**

57% of councillors think public navigation of the planning system is **difficult**

■	Very easy
■	Somewhat easy
■	Neither easy nor difficult
■	Somewhat difficult
■	Very difficult

Survey question: How easy or difficult do you think it is for members of the public to navigate the planning system in your local authority?
Base: All survey participants (n=416)

Can the public navigate the planning system? **continued.**

Considerations that councillors think will make the local community more likely to be supportive of plans for new homes (%)

Considerations for the development of new homes	NET Would make community more likely to support (% Rated 7+/10)
Attractive design, in keeping with local character	84
Inclusion of public open space	82
Genuine understanding of what a community needs and how development can deliver that e.g. parks, play spaces	80
Improvements to highways	79
Comprehensive community engagement and consultation programme	79
Level of affordable housing provision within a scheme	75
Financial contributions to mitigate the impact on the community (CIL, S106)	68
Sustainability measures (environment, energy)	65
Net gain to biodiversity	56
Reputation of applicant	42

Councillors feel that community support for development is highly dependent on whether the application design is perceived to fit with and elevate the local surroundings, offers open space, and is felt by the community to meet their needs. However, noting the subjectivity of design taste and that the community may not understand the rationale for developments, many stakeholders re-emphasise the importance of community engagement on development applications.

Multiple stakeholders call for local authorities to take a more active role in educating the public about the planning system and planning policy. Community communications and engagement are felt to need a re-vamp, striving to be more innovative in methods of delivery, along with more frequent and consistent.

At the same time, stakeholders recognise that the persistent issue of planning department resourcing acts to constrain any attempt at meaningful engagement. Some suggest working more closely with better-resourced developer as one way to overcome this issue, both during local plan-making and for individual applications; however, it was noted that the public would require reassurance on the benefits of this collaboration, which might otherwise be construed as inappropriate.

"All the planners I've spoken to as of late are using outdated communications methods. What are they doing to genuinely reach people? You make a clear campaign and target—stop communicating with public through lamp posts and start with clear communications plan."

3rd party organisation

"There is so much public misunderstanding about what planning is and how it works. Councillors and local authorities should have this key role in educating their members, and also the wider public on what planning is, how great it is, and why it is necessary for public benefit."

Planning officer

A roadmap to better public engagement with planning

Stakeholder interview feedback pinpoints key stages and avenues in the planning process for meaningful engagement with the public. The synthesis of these insights forms the roadmap below on how to educate and better engage communities in the planning journey.

Local Plans: Integrating the voice of the community

Community consultation and involvement in the development of a Local Plan is vital to ensure that local needs and priorities are reflected, whilst providing an opportunity for the community to understand and access planning priorities in a supported way. As part of consultation, local authorities could undertake a community education initiative to explain planning policies and processes, and evidence the need for housing development in their local area. This would support informed community discussions about future housing developments.

Pre-application: Starting the conversation

Developers and local authorities could collaborate to consult and involve the community at the pre-application stage. This will ensure that the application takes the local context into account and evidences this to members at planning committee (including any design considerations and infrastructure impacts.)

Consultation & Decision: Ongoing communication

Throughout the application review and decision process, the community could receive frequent and ongoing notices of updates regarding the development application from local authorities and developers. Keeping the community informed about updates enables them to feel included in the proposed development journey, ensuring their needs are met and potentially reducing opposition.

Future innovation

As methods of online communication become increasingly prevalent, leveraging digital tools will offer more opportunities to engage with the community. This may include use of social media platforms, online surveys and engagement portals, and digital microtargeting.

4

Driving change:

Identifying how we can reduce the burden and improve efficiency in housing delivery

"People want to tear up planning, but they don't realise what they are actually tearing up… All that red tape they want to cut into is someone else's area. We are going to need to make some difficult calls."

3rd party organisation

A call for change: Easing the burden in the planning system

The councillors surveyed and stakeholders interviewed express a strong call for positive change to drive greater efficiency and collaboration in the planning system. Their top desired changes are summarised below.

Improving **the structural and policy factors**

1 **Greater consistency on national planning policy with a return on delivery of housing targets** – more collaboration and discussion to streamline the process, minimise refusals, and avoid costly appeals

> "There needs to be some kind of national plan and the recognition that this country is imbalanced. We need that properly put into planning policy, with housing and employment targets to then filter into planning system. We need a proper policy for growth in the South and accelerated growth in the North. Back it up with funding and resourcing. "
>
> **Developer**

2 **Better preparation of Local Plans that respond to local housing needs in a strategic and timely fashion.** Developers need an up-to-date framework to operate within, while robust community consultation needs to inform plan development, with the recognition that early public engagement is fundamental to driving change and reducing opposition

> "I think that public education is huge and there is massive misunderstanding. I see it every month at events. Local Authorities ideally would be doing more - we need to be doing a lot more with on the front foot and putting out the positive comms message and getting ahead."
>
> **Planning officer**

3 **Tackle the housing crisis by identifying and delivering different types of housing to meet local needs** - whilst maintaining accountability for the delivery of affordable and social housing

> "Don't just have a conversation about what you want to do, have a conversation about what's going on or not going on in the community and what they need or don't need, and let's see if you can answer the problems in a certain area that they tell you about in the first instance."
>
> **Councillors & Planning committee member**

4 **Recognition that planning department resourcing is a key contributor to the housing crisis, and that more funding is crucial to solving this** – this will reduce the current crunch to ensure the delivery of safe and secure homes that create sustainable communities

> "Recruitment and retention have to have sustainable funding for local authorities in general, but the connection between planning and local authorities in general is so important. Proper funding is crucial."
>
> **Planning consultant**

5 **Broader recognition of the market factors impacting housebuilding** – generating understanding of the market risks taken by developers, and seeking to de-myth the combative narrative of slow buildout and land banking

> "We need recognition that a housebuilder is investing a significant amount of money and risk before the first legal completion takes place. It takes at least two years before the first house ever gets sold. Housebuilders aren't just a cash machine."
>
> **Developer**

Improving **planning education and engagement**

6 **Earlier and more transparent communication across the planning system, especially between developers, planning departments, and councillors** – seeking to have meaningful conversations that focus on meeting local needs

> "Meet us at the outset, tell us your red lines and must haves, and we can factor them in. We have to understand where you are coming from - what are your political pressures? Let's have this at the beginning so that you feel involved and we listen."
>
> **Developer**

7 **Increase and innovate public engagement in local plan making and specific development proposals** – developers and planning teams to use a range of local and digital media to reach as many different community groups as possible, adopting a more meaningful approach to community engagement

> "Communities and councillors need to feel part of the journey. Take a partnership approach. We have to use digital engagement to reach young people. Get genuine community input into the design, reaching people we don't usually reach."
>
> **Planning officer**

8 **Ongoing training for planning committee members on current planning policy and processes** – encouraging engagement with the wealth of existing resources available from planning professionals will ensure all parties have the knowledge to make informed decisions

> "Everyone should take more education opportunities and do a refresher training once a year. I did viability around a month ago. It would be good if there is some training specifically targeted at committee members. "
>
> **Planning officer**

9 **Highlight the material impact of application refusals, and of out-of-date Local Plans** through regular tracking and dissemination of housing delivery numbers, appeal costs and the length of housing waiting lists

> "Planning committee leadership said to their members, 'You can vote whichever way you like'. So they turned down an allocated site, headed to appeal, and now they're going to get done for costs which they could've saved and used for funding to planning officers."
>
> **Developer**

10 **Better use of industry best-practice, including design guidelines, to support application development** – focusing on quality and sustainability, modelled on existing examples of good building design

> "There are good examples of the Design Code. Trafford Council has just done a great job. It is ongoing and iterative – they are listening to developers and the public. It provides benchmarks and expectations."
>
> **Planning consultant**

Reflections from SEC Newgate

'Your feedback is invaluable to us', we tell often sceptical communities. In this case, we are indebted to the 400+ members of planning committees who completed our survey, to the more than 20 stakeholders we interviewed on a 1:2:1 basis and to our expert panel (Cllr Barbara Blake, LB Haringey; Scott Hudson, Savills; Andrew Taylor, Countryside; Mike Kiely, Planning Officers Society) who guided us on the themes we should explore.

A few surprises apart, much of what we heard was familiar to us from our day-to-day conversations with communities and their representatives. In many ways it is reassuring to learn that our own experiences and reflections are mirrored by other players in the planning system. And yet also frustrating that four years into our National Planning Barometer—which itself is only the tip of the iceberg—any meaningful change is yet to occur. If anything, considering councillors' views of the scale of the housing crisis, things are moving backwards. And recent reports of councils now rushing to reduce their housing targets ahead of a future Labour government that is pledged to tighten the rules, makes for depressing reading.

The golden thread running through our participants' call for change is the need for better communication between parties. We would echo that and add to it: trust and responsibility. The planning system is far too adversarial in its approach.

Community consultation works so much better when residents are properly informed, not just about our clients' proposals but also about the adopted Local Plan, within which the site is being brought forward. But local communities also have a responsibility to participate in the plan-making process and to make some difficult decisions, as many have done with their Neighbourhood Plans. And for that to realistically happen, district councils need to make participation inviting and as accessible as possible.

Developers could bring the community on the journey earlier in the process, seeking genuine input into their evolving designs and listening to what residents actually want. The design workshops we run are well received and, through digital outreach, often attract a broader demographic with a more enthusiastic outlook. For bigger infrastructure projects, an 'evidence first' approach is now our default starting point, employing a range of research methods to understand community sentiment and establish a narrative that recognises their needs and priorities. Why start on the back foot when you can deliver messages that resonate from the outset?

Councillors do have a difficult job: one eye on the housing numbers and another on community sentiment. Understandably, that can lead to caution around engagement with applicants. But can it be right that a scheme comes to committee uninformed by councillor opinion, and relying solely on officer interpretation and policy compliance? In theory yes, but in reality, no.

When we work with officers to host plenary briefing sessions with councillors prior to submission we often learn where the limits of support lie and the outcome at committee is far more positive. Making sure that applicants speak to what councillors want to hear is also key – as evidenced by the low rating that members gave to applicant presentations to committee. We work closely with our clients to ensure they speak well and on message.

They do, however, need a receptive audience. How often have we heard at consultation events that the developer is 'only interested in making money' or been told that viability is being 'gamed'? 'Making money' is of course how upwards of 700,000 jobs are sustained by housebuilding, both directly and in supply chains, and how more than 30,000 affordable homes were delivered via S106 agreements in 2022-23 in England, just short of half of all affordable housing delivery that year. The total value of developer contributions in 2018-19 (latest data available) was estimated at £7 billion by DLUHC. That housebuilding is by and large not a social enterprise and involves risk and return is either ignored or not understood. There is an important piece of education that needs to be delivered to communities and to councillors.

This has been a great conversation. But one that we have had with the different parties. The next step is for them to talk to each other.
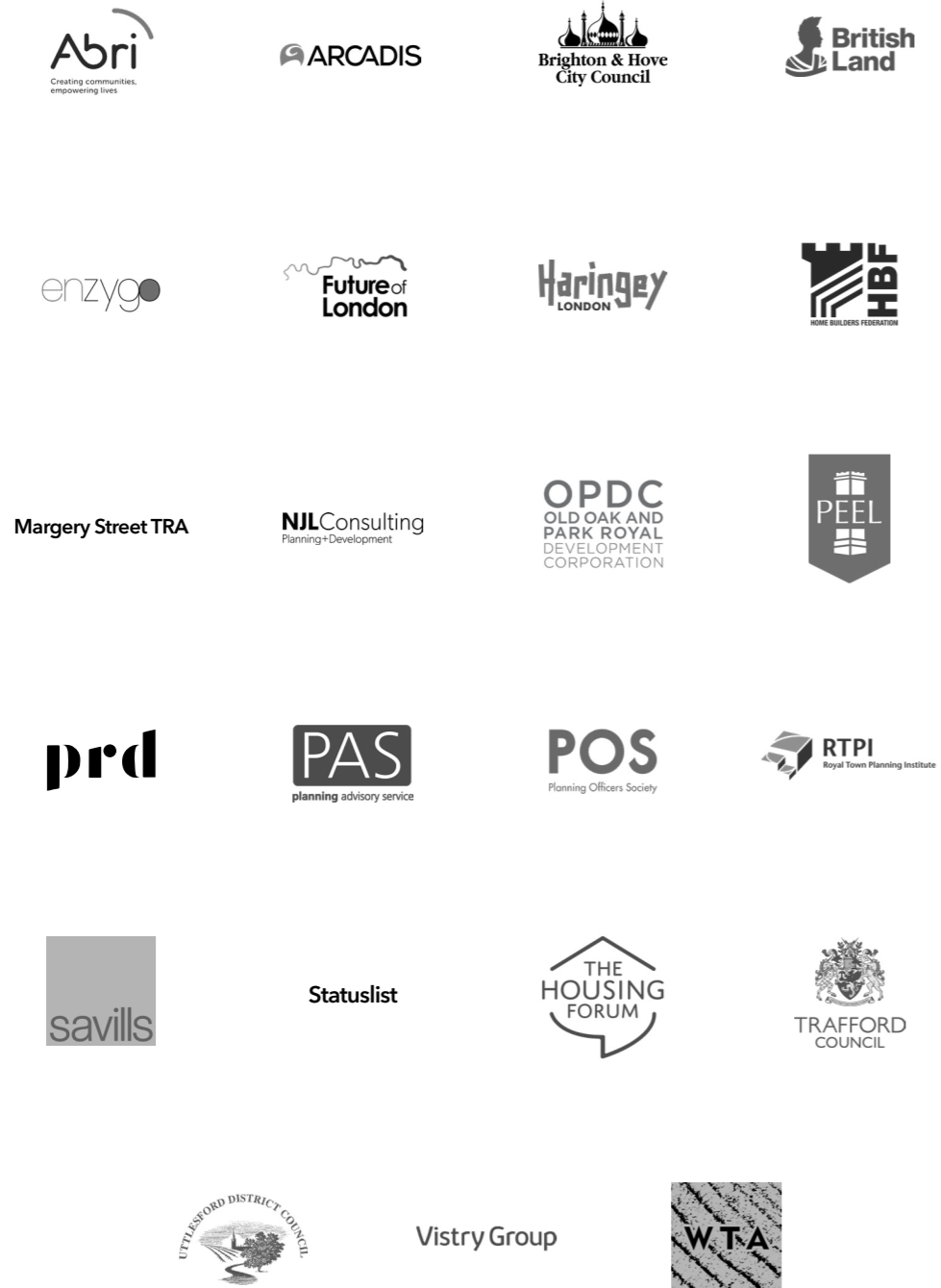
Appendices

Contextual background literature: Key planning and housing documents and reports

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Credits & Acknowledgements

SEC Newgate deeply thank the representatives of the following organisations that we interviewed for their participation, insights, and contributions to the National Planning Barometer 2024 research.

Abri — Creating communities, empowering lives

ARCADIS

Brighton & Hove City Council

British Land

enzygo

Future of London

Haringey LONDON

HBF — Home Builders Federation

Margery Street TRA

NJL Consulting — Planning+Development

OPDC — OLD OAK AND PARK ROYAL DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION

PEEL

prd

PAS — planning advisory service

POS — Planning Officers Society

RTPI — Royal Town Planning Institute

savills

Statuslist

THE HOUSING FORUM

TRAFFORD COUNCIL

LITTLESFORD DISTRICT COUNCIL

Vistry Group

W.T.A

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BEST HANDLING OF AN IPO
PR WEEK CCPA AWARDS 2022

BEST PLACES TO WORK 2024
THE SUNDAY TIMES

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