

Councillors' Attitudes to the Planning System

An LGiU – National Trust survey

Introduction

Ward councillors provide an essential link between communities and the council, particularly with regard to decisions around planning. But their voice does not receive the attention that it needs in national debates about housing and planning policy. From August to October 2016 LGiU surveyed all ward councillors across England to find out their views about how well planning works in their local area.

Planning policy has undergone a series of major changes since 2010, most notably the introduction of the National Planning Policy Framework and significant changes to permitted development rights

All this is taking place against a background of changes to local government finance that make house building crucial to financial sustainability and economic growth, especially for district councils.

The survey was intended to help understand how recent changes affect the ability of councils to take a holistic, place-based view of development, which balances need and economic development priorities with concerns about quality of life, the environment and respect for the unique character of local areas.

In general councillors who responded to the survey felt that Local Plans were having a positive impact in their areas. The majority of respondents also said that they felt either involved or very involved in the process of designing their local plans.

There is a clear view that the planning system is controlled too much from the top and that too much power is in hands of central government and developers. Local people and their representatives are relatively disempowered. Recent changes to the planning system, such as to permitted development rights, are seen as having a largely negative effect on their area, while the National Planning Policy Framework has not had the positive impact it was intended to have on design quality.

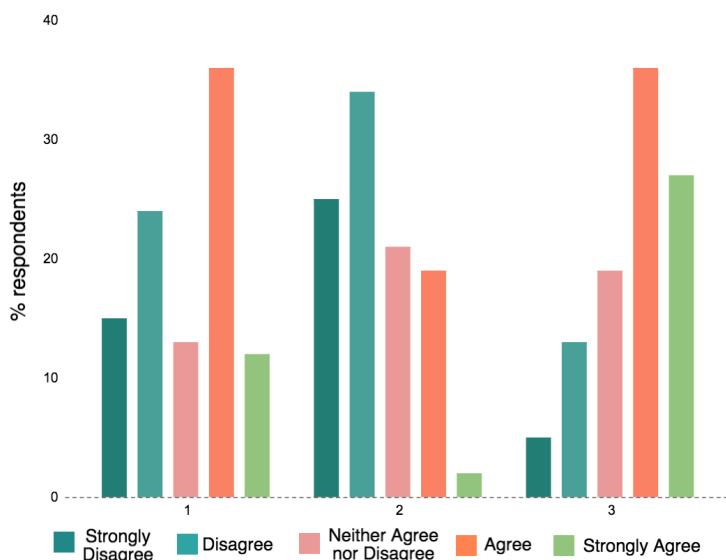
Question 1 – Localism and land availability

The Coalition Government’s National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), introduced in 2012 to free up the planning system and promote sustainable development, reflected a strong commitment to people-led planning. The NPPF reasserted a commitment to a plan-led system based on Local Plans that the government has described as “produced by communities” and the “keystone of the planning system”. This research however, suggests that, four years after its adoption, councillors are not convinced the new system is putting communities at the heart of planning. In 2014 the National Trust’s “Positive Planning” report¹ showed that plans are often undermined even when councils have allocated sufficient land.

There was general agreement that the planning system is too top-down in nature. 63% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed with the statement “The current planning system is too top-down.” This sentiment is reflected in the fact that 58% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement “It is easy for residents in my ward to influence the planning process”. When asked about the land available to meet housing need, the result was more evenly balanced. 48% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “My authority has sufficient suitable land to meet local housing need”, while 38% disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement.

How far do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

1. My authority has sufficient suitable land to meet local housing need
2. It is easy for residents in my ward to influence the planning process
3. The current planning system is too top-down



¹ National Trust (2014) *Positive Planning: The NPPF and plan-led development*

Respondents from areas with high housing demand, such as the South West, South East and the East tended to agree or strongly agree that the planning system is too top-down. 66% of respondents from the East and South East and 65% of respondents from the South West agreed with the statement “the planning system is too top-down”

In the East 53% of respondents agreed that their authority has sufficient land to meet housing need, as opposed to 36% from the South East and 44% from the South West. Meanwhile 22% of respondents from the East agreed or strongly agreed that it was easy for residents to influence the planning process. This compares with 20% from the South West and 19% from the South East.

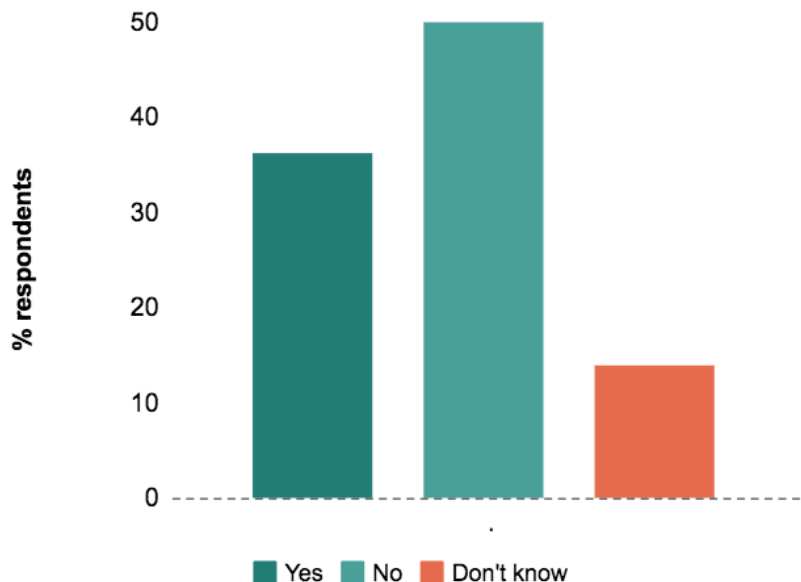
Question 2 – Resourcing of council planning teams

Planning departments across the country have been significantly affected by cuts in funding to local government. In many areas there are huge capacity issues and skills gaps, which make it challenging for councils to fulfil their planning function fully and effectively.

A recent National Audit Office study² of the financial sustainability of local authorities in found that, on average, local authority planning and development faced reductions in spend of 53% between 2010-11 and 2015-16. A Royal Town Planning Institute study³ in the North West of England found that since 2010, overall staff in planning departments had fallen by a third, with a reduction of 37% in planning policy staff, and 27% in development management staff. The report concluded that services are surviving on the goodwill and professional integrity of officers, but this cannot be sustainable, and could impact on delivery and levels of development.

To the question “Is your planning authority adequately resourced?” half (49.92%) of respondents (632) answered “No”, while 36.15% (458) of respondents answered “Yes”. 13.9% said they did not know.

Is your planning authority adequately resourced?



² National Audit Office (2016) *Overview 2015-16: Local Government* Accessed November 2016

<https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Overview-Local-government.pdf>

³ Royal Town Planning Institute (2016) *Investing in Delivery: How we can respond to the pressures on local authority planning* Accessed online November 2016

<http://www.rtpi.org.uk/knowledge/research/projects/national-and-regional-research-projects/investing-in-delivery/>

Areas with high demand for housing, such as London, the South West, the South East and the East were more likely than other regions to say their authority was not adequately resourced.

The table below shows the regional variation in responses to the question “Is your planning authority adequately resourced?”

	South West	South East	London	North West	Eastern	East Midlands	West Midlands	Yorkshire & Humber	North East
Yes	27%	38%	22%	36%	22%	50%	34%	35%	41%
No	64%	52%	66%	40%	66%	36%	51%	49%	45%
Don't Know	9%	10%	12%	23%	12%	14%	16%	16%	14%

Comments from respondents raised issues about staffing levels and the workload of some planning officers. Enforcement was also mentioned fairly regularly, as was the pressure to develop from central government. Comments included:

- *There appears to be a national shortage of planning officers*
- *It is difficult for planning authorities to cope with fluctuations in the work load and meeting the time limit deadlines imposed on them*
- *Always a backlog of planning applications. Agency staff have been brought in to catch up*
- *Working to capacity, recruiting is difficult due to the demand for planning experience in the private sector*
- *We find it difficult to retain good planning officers.*
- *Austerity cutbacks mean all departments have lost staff this inevitably affects planning. There just isn't the staff backup to undertake all the tasks whilst listening to local people's views*
- *Councillors in [the council] don't take ownership of planning apps and rely on recommendations of planning officers*
- *I believe we are under resourced in terms of officers to consider applications and enforce planning conditions*
- *As a result of funding cuts there is a dire lack of staffing resources to provide anything other than a rudimentary enforcement regime.*
- *They are always worried about legal challenge to decisions to turn down consent and the costs involved.*

Question 3 – Councillors’ involvement in Local Plans

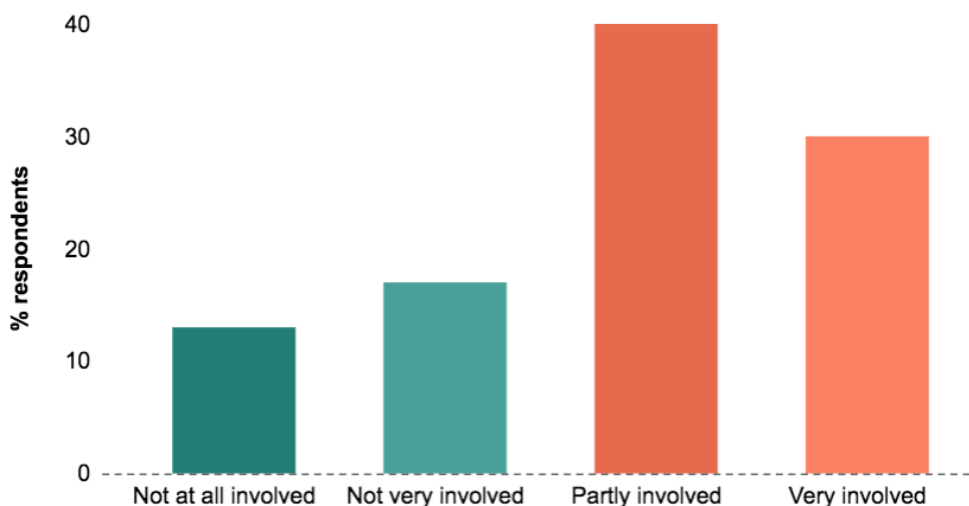
Local Plans provide a basis for the planning decisions that councils will make for years to come. Many authorities have already adopted their Plans, but there are plenty that have yet to do so. Councillors have an important role to play in the development of Local Plans, as emphasised by the Planning Advisory Service⁴. They ensure that the priorities and wishes of their local community are reflected in the Plan, as well as facilitating engagement with the communities themselves. Results suggest that most councillors feel they are playing this role.

More respondents (62%) said they felt partly involved or very involved in the local plan making process, than felt not very or not at all involved. In response to the question “How involved were you in the process of producing the local plan for your area?” 36% felt they were partly involved and 26% said they felt they were very involved.

70% of respondents from Yorkshire and Humber and 69% of respondents from the North West said they felt involved or very involved in the process.

Overall, 27% of all respondents felt they were not at all involved or not very involved, while 11 % said their authority had not adopted a Local Plan.

How involved were you in the process of producing the Local Plan for your area?



⁴ Planning Advisory Service (2014) *Good Plan Making Guide: Plan making principles for practitioners*
Accessed online November 2016
<http://www.pas.gov.uk/documents/332612/6363137/FINAL+PAS+Good+Plan+Making+.pdf>

Question 4 – Impact of Local Plans

Many local authorities already have a Local Plan in place, and those that do not will be required to do so by May 2017. The NPPF clearly sets out the principle that planning should “be genuinely plan-led, empowering local people to shape their surroundings, with succinct local and neighbourhood plans setting out a positive vision for the future of the area.”

The NPPF also makes it clear the local plan is the starting point for decision-making. It says “Proposed development that accords with an up-to-date Local Plan should be approved, and proposed development that conflicts should be refused unless other material considerations indicate otherwise.”

The responses to this question show that where there is a plan in place 43% feel that impact has either been positive or very positive. Less than a quarter (24%) of councillors feel that the local plan has had a negative impact on their area.

Slightly more respondents (5.78%) said the local plan had had a very positive impact, than said it had a very negative impact (5.70%).

The region where the impact of the local plan was felt to be most positive was the East Midlands, where 48% of respondents said the impact had been positive or very positive (39% positive and 9% very positive). Just 19% said the impact had been negative. The impact was also seen as positive or very positive in the North West (47%) South West (46%), Yorkshire and Humber (45%).

Though the impact was generally seen as positive there was some variation in areas with high housing demand, such as the South East and the East.

9% of respondents in the South East said the impact had been very positive, but 27% said the impact had been negative or very negative. The most negative impact was reported in the East (31% negative or very negative) and the West Midlands (28% negative or very negative).

Question 5 – Green Belt

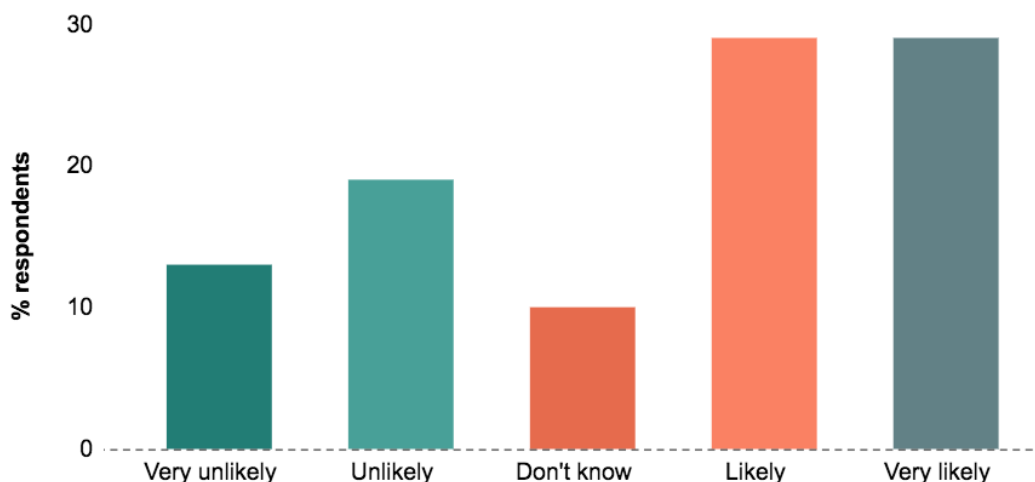
The NPPF states that

Local planning authorities with Green Belts in their area should establish Green Belt boundaries in their Local Plans, which set the framework for Green Belt and settlement policy. Once established, Green Belt boundaries should only be altered in exceptional circumstances, through the preparation or review of the Local Plan. At that time, authorities should consider the Green Belt boundaries having regard to their intended permanence in the long term, so that they should be capable of enduring beyond the plan period.

As of March 2016 the Government estimated that there was 1,635,480 hectares of Green Belt land in England, around 13% per cent of the land area. Some local authorities have started to review the Green Belt in their areas, however, and that number could be set to change again soon.

Around 20% of respondents said they had no Green Belt. These responses have been filtered to give an accurate picture of authorities with Green Belt. Of those with Green Belt, 58% of respondents said they thought it was likely or very likely that Green Belt land would be allocated for housing development in the next five years. This is an increase from 51% of respondents to the same question in a [2013 LGiU-National Trust survey](#).

Please rate the likelihood that your authority will allocate Green Belt land for the residential development in the next 5 years



The release of Green Belt land for housing development was seen as most likely in Yorkshire and Humber where 69% of respondents said it was either likely or very likely, followed by the East (63%), the North West (62%) and the South East (61%).

The regional variation is shown in the table below.

	SW	SE	L	NW	E	WM	EM	YH	NE
Very unlikely	13%	14%	26%	13%	12%	17%	10%	7%	4%
Unlikely	21%	17%	28%	18%	12%	23%	20%	18%	30%
Don't know	9%	8%	20%	7%	13%	11%	15%	6%	13%
Likely	35%	29%	20%	31%	25%	23%	30%	32%	13%
Very likely	21%	32%	6%	31%	27%	27%	24%	37%	39%

Question 6 – Permitted Development Rights

Permitted development rights are a national grant of planning permission which allow certain building works and changes of use to be carried out without having to make a planning application.

Recent alterations in how they operate include the 2013 changes allowing permitted development for new home extensions and barn conversions, and new regulations allowing change of use from office to residential, among other use classes, in 2015. Future changes are likely to include further alterations to change of use and increased permitted development for underground drilling and mobile masts.

When asked whether the recent changes to permitted development rights have had a positive or negative impact on the local area, almost half (45%) said that it had been neither positive nor negative. While 42 % said that it had been either negative or very negative. Just 12% said it had been positive, and less than 1% said it had been very positive.

The impact was seen to be most negative in London (46% said negative and 25% said very negative), while in the South West 44% said it had been negative or very negative. In the South East the same figure was 42% and in the North East it was 40%.

Comments from respondents tended to emphasise a sense that local people have less input or control of the process since the changes, though this was not universal. Comments included:

Local people feel their views are no longer taken into consideration as applicants can go straight to Central Government to get refusals overturned

In the past Residents could challenge a proposed development and would often approach their Ward Councillor to see if a site review could be held, even over a minor point. Nowadays neighbours get cross with each other, because no dialogue between them has taken place, therefore concerns have been aired, and often were settled amicably.

Very difficult to control developers & especially amateur developers - whole process skewed away from democratic and planning committee control

Results in neighbour disputes' and removes the councils ability to control amenity space

Permitted development rights appear to be working well here.

Question 7- Who holds power in the planning system?

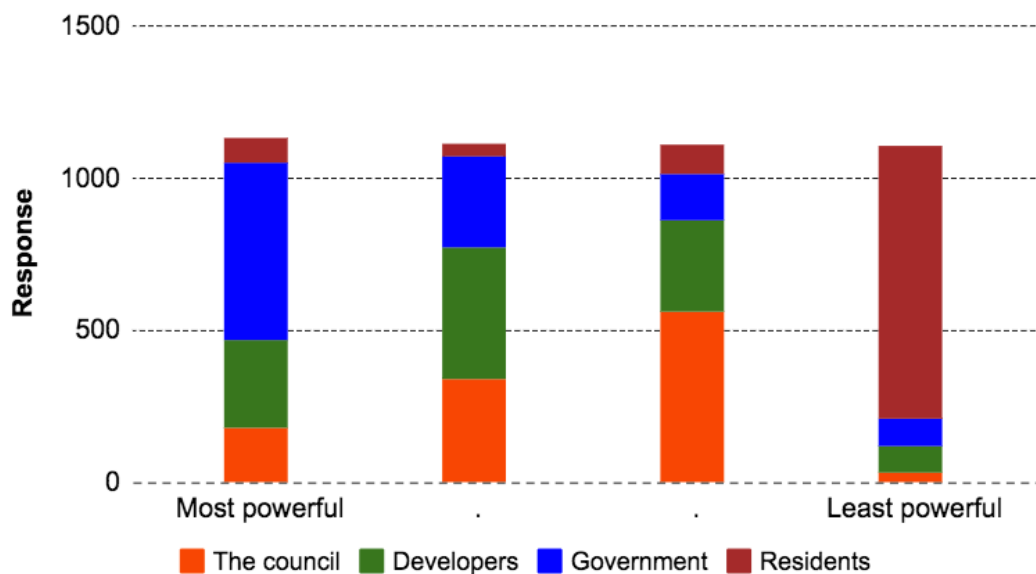
The NPPF says that economic, social and environmental gains should be sought through the planning system ‘jointly and simultaneously’. Since the passage of the Localism Act this Government and the last has been committed to a “Devolution Revolution”, devolving power from the centre to localities.

The Conservative Manifesto contained a headline commitment to “ensure local people have more control over planning” Yet responses to this question suggests that power still rests with central government and with developers.

When asked whether the council, developers, the government or residents hold more power in the planning process, more respondents felt that the government holds most power (52%) than others.

Respondents were asked to select these options in order of most powerful to least powerful. Developers were second, followed by the council. Residents were seen as the least powerful in the planning process. 80% said residents were the least powerful, though 7% and 4% placed them most, and second most powerful respectively.

In your view, who holds most power in the planning process? Please select in order, from the most powerful to the least



Questions 8, 9 and 10 – Off-Plan development

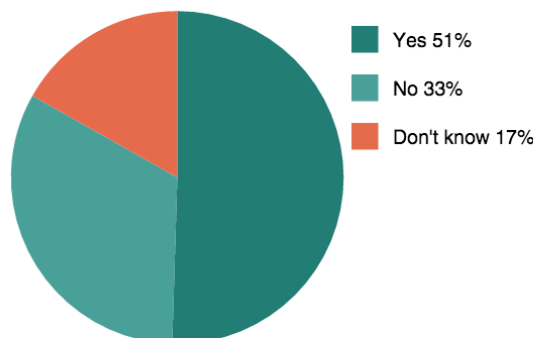
The NPPF states that ‘planning should be genuinely plan-led, empowering local people to shape their surroundings’, that Local Plans ‘should provide a practical framework within which decisions on planning applications can be made with a high degree of predictability and efficiency’ and that ‘proposed development that accords with a local plan should be approved, and proposed development that conflicts should be refused unless other material considerations indicated otherwise’.

A National Trust report of December 2014, *Positive Planning*⁵, suggested that this principle was not being delivered in practice. The report showed that many councils that have Local Plans in place are still under pressure to release unallocated land for housing development.

The responses to this set of questions also suggest that, even where local plans are in place, councillors do not have confidence that decisions will always be made in line with them. They also demonstrate that the number of successful appeals against local council decisions has not reduced since the NPPF’s adoption. In fact, in over 40% of cases, it has increased. Furthermore, losing an appeal makes councils more likely to approve subsequent applications.

When asked “Are sites that are not in line with the local plan being approved for housing development in your area?” 51% of respondents said yes, while 33% said no, and 17% said don’t know.

Are sites that are not in line with the Local Plan being approved for housing development in your area?



⁵ National Trust (2014) *Positive Planning: The NPPF and plan-led development*

The regional variation for the question “Are sites that are not in line with the local plan being approved for housing development in your area?” is shown in the table below.

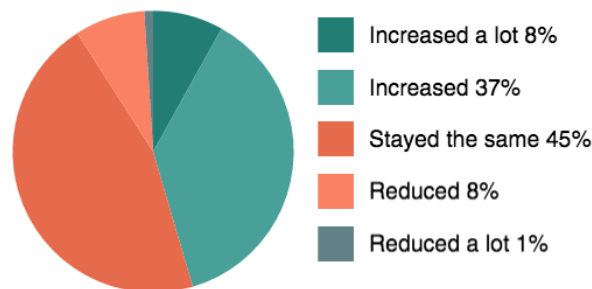
	South West	South East	London	North West	Eastern	West Midlands	East Midlands	Yorkshire & Humber	North East
Yes	56%	53%	33%	51%	56%	53%	48%	44%	37%
No	32%	36%	38%	29%	32%	33%	37%	35%	44%
Don't Know	12%	12%	29%	19%	13%	14%	25%	21%	19%

Question 9 - Appeals

Almost half (45%) of respondents said that the number of their council’s planning decisions that have been challenged and overturned at appeal since the NPPF was adopted has stayed the same.

However, 45% said that it has either increased or increased a lot (37% and 8% respectively). Just 9% said that it has reduced, or reduced a lot.

Has the number of your council’s planning decisions that have been challenged and overturned at appeal since the NPPF was adopted...



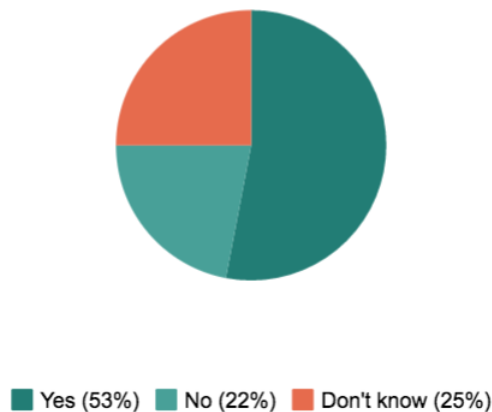
The regional variation for this question is shown in the table below. The number of planning decisions that have been challenged and overturned are seen to have increased the most in the East (51% of respondents), while in Yorkshire and Humber the number is seen to have reduced the most (57% of respondents).

	SW	SE	L	NW	E	WM	EM	YH	NE
Increased/ increased a lot	53%	45%	31%	48%	41%	47%	29%	47%	31%
Stayed the same	36%	45%	64%	45%	41%	39%	61%	24%	50%
Reduced/ reduced a lot	11%	10%	5%	8%	8%	14%	10%	57%	19%

Question 10 – Subsequent decisions

Respondents were asked whether the increase in decisions being overturned has made their authority more likely to approve subsequent planning applications. Of those to whom the question was applicable, 53% said it had, 22% said it had not, while 25% said they did not know.

If you have experienced an increase in your council's decisions being overturned at appeal since the NPPF, has this made your local authority more likely to approve subsequent planning applications?



The regional variation for this question is shown in the table below. More respondents (62%) from the North West than other regions said their council was more likely to approve subsequent planning applications, closely followed

by the South West (61%). In some regions, such as London, Yorkshire and Humber and the North East there was a high proportion of respondents who answered “don’t know”.

	SW	SE	L	NW	E	WM	EM	YH	NE
Yes	61%	52%	36%	62%	53%	43%	53%	40%	41%
No	22%	28%	15%	15%	22%	29%	21%	26%	18%
Don't know	16%	21%	49%	24%	25%	28%	26%	34%	41%

Question 11 – Quality

Ensuring good quality development is a key goal for planning. The NPPF states that ‘Pursuing sustainable development involves seeking positive improvements in the quality of the built, natural and historic environment, as well as in people’s quality of life’. This includes ‘replacing poor design with better design’ and ‘improving the conditions in which people live, work, travel and take leisure’.

Despite this, just 18% of respondents said that quality of design of new housing in their area had increased (16%) or increased a lot (2%). 56% of respondents said it had stayed the same, while 21% said it had decreased and 5% said it had decreased a lot.

In the East Midlands 23% of respondents said design quality had increased and 2% said it had increased a lot. However, in the South West 27% said it had decreased and 7% said it had decreased a lot.

Question 12 – Attitudes to the planning system

Our final question sought to elicit councillors’ views on a series of statements about the planning system. The responses show that the clear view of councillors is that the system is too weighted in the interests of developers, and there is strong support for the planning system in helping to deliver good development in appropriate locations.

Respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statements (1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree):

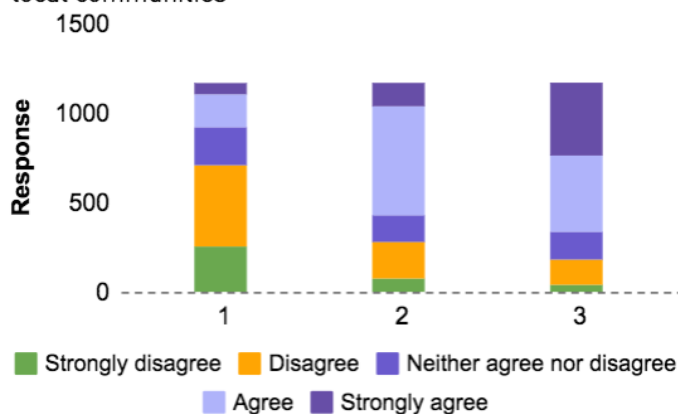
- The planning system is a main contributing factor to the shortage of housing
- The planning system isn’t perfect but it’s the best thing we have to make sure development takes place in the right locations
- The planning system has become too weighted in favour of developers at the expense of local communities

61% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement “the planning system is a main contributing factor to the shortage of housing”, while 63% agreed or strongly agreed that “the planning system isn’t perfect but it’s the best thing we have to make sure development takes place in the right locations”.

71% agreed or strongly agreed that “the planning system has become too weighted in favour of developers at the expense of local communities”.

To what extent do you agree with the following statements? The planning system is.....

1. a main contributing factor to the shortage of housing
2. not perfect but it’s the best thing we have to make sure development takes place in the right locations
3. too weighted in favour of developers at the expense of local communities



Appendix

There were 1278 responses to the survey, which took place from August to October 2016. The regional spread was as follows:

- 125 (10%) from East Midlands
- 183 (14%) from the East
- 91 (7%) from London
- 28 (2%) from the North East
- 180 (14%) from the North West
- 285 (22%) from the South East
- 169 (13%) from the South West
- 100 (9%) from the West Midlands
- 88 (7%) from Yorkshire and Humber

Q1. How far do you agree or disagree with the following statements?					
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
My authority has sufficient suitable land to meet local housing need	15%	24%	13%	36%	12%
It is easy for residents in my ward to influence the planning process	25%	34%	21%	19%	2%
The current planning system is too top-down	5%	13%	19%	36%	27%

Q2. Is your planning authority adequately resourced?	
Yes	36.2 %
No	49.9 %
Don't know	13.9 %

Q3. How involved were you in the process of producing the local plan for your area?					
	Not at all involved	Not very involved	Partly involved	Very involved	We do not have an adopted Local Plan
	12%	15%	36%	26%	11%
Of those that have an adopted Local Plan	13%	17%	40%	30%	

Q4. Has the local plan had a broadly positive or negative impact on your local area?						
	Very negative	Negative	Neither positive nor negative	Positive	Very positive	We do not have an adopted local plan
	6%	14%	28%	30%	6%	16%
Of those that have an adopted Local Plan	7%	17%	33%	36%	7%	

Q5. If you have Green Belt land in your Local Planning Authority area, please rate the likelihood that your authority will allocate Green Belt land for the following purposes in the next 5 years.						
	Very unlikely	Unlikely	Don't know	Likely	Very likely	
Development (residential)	13%	19%	10%	29%	29%	
Development (commercial)	19%	32%	15%	22%	12%	
Development (public institutions or leisure facilities)	11%	29%	24%	27%	9%	

Q6. Have the recent changes to permitted development rights had a positive or negative impact on your local area?					
	Very negative	Negative	Neither positive nor negative	Positive	Very positive
	11%	31%	45%	12%	1%

Q7. In your view, who holds most power in the planning process? Please select in order, from the most powerful to the least.				
	1	2	3	4
The council	16%	31%	51%	3%
Developers	26%	39%	27%	8%
Government	52%	27%	14%	8%
Residents	7%	4%	9%	80%

Q8. Are sites that are not in line with the local plan being approved for housing development in your area?	
Yes	51 %
No	33 %
Don't know	17 %

Q9. Has the number of your council's planning decisions that have been challenged and overturned at appeal since the NPPF was adopted...	
Increased a lot	8 %
Increased	38%
Stayed the	46%

same	
Reduced	8%
Reduced a lot	1%

Q10. If you have experienced an increase in your council's decisions being overturned at appeal since the NPPF, has this made your local authority more likely to approve subsequent planning applications?	
Yes	41%
No	17%
Don't know	19%
Not applicable	23%

Q11. Has the quality and design of new housing in your area since the National Planning Policy Framework was introduced...?					
	Increased a lot	Increased	Neither increased nor decreased	Decreased	Decreased a lot
	2%	16%	56%	21%	5%

Q12. To what extent do you agree with the following statements?					
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
The planning system is a main contributing factor to the shortage of housing	22%	39%	18%	16%	5%
The planning system isn't perfect but is the best thing we have to make sure development takes place in the right locations	5%	17%	13%	52%	11%
The planning system has become too weighted in favour of developers at the expense of local communities	3%	12%	13%	37%	35%