



town & country planning

The Journal of the Town and Country Planning Association
July-August 2024

Volume 93 ● Number 4

- Special issue - Colin Ward
- Planning for youth

- Town planning apprentices - a new type of tradesperson?
- Design Matters

do rural planning authorities have the resources to support affordable housing delivery?

Nick Gallent and **Andrew Purves** report on a survey of resource constraints affecting rural planning authorities in England, and the impacts on small local needs housing projects

It will come as news to no-one that planning authorities are overworked and overstretched. The recent Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) report into the operation of the housing market concluded that planning authority capacity is a major impediment to housing supply.¹ Without additional resources, authorities cannot produce the plans and deliver the permissions that housebuilders need to increase output up to the local market absorption rate (i.e. planning has a role in helping developers build what they want to build whilst achieving their target return). It is also the case that, without enough staff with the right skills, authorities are unable to support the delivery of non-market housing. This was the subject of a recent survey conducted by a team at University College London (UCL), which was part of a wider study into the factors underpinning the delivery of affordable homes on rural exception sites (RES) across rural England.²

The survey sought a clearer picture of resource constraints, their impacts, and potential mitigations. Using Defra's distinction of urban and rural areas, three types of authority were targeted: mainly rural, largely rural, and urban with significant rural parts. Responses from a broad geographical mix, and from different authority types, were sought. To that end, an online questionnaire was dispatched to 157 authorities with the help of the Rural Services Network. A number of authorities came back to us, saying they had neither the time nor the resources to complete the questionnaire! Fair enough – we treated this as valuable feedback. However, 40 full responses were received, and the pattern of these responses is shown in the table below:

We asked lead planning officers (respondents had a variety of roles and titles, noted below) to answer 61 questions divided between the following themes:

- The nature and severity of resource constraints affecting each local authority.

- The impacts of those constraints on the general planning service and on the delivery of small rural housing sites.
- Perceptions of the operability and value of different mitigation strategies, leading to an assessment of resourcing priorities.

Respondents tended to be senior, having spent an average of 24 years in the sector and 12 years in their current authority. Most were directors or heads of planning. Some were more junior, having been delegated the task of answering our questions. As the table at the bottom of this page shows, the authorities were a mix of districts, larger unitaries, and national parks. This meant that the size of planning teams varied considerably, but the average reported team size was 37. The smallest comprised three officers and some had more than 100 staff in planning.

Unfilled posts

All of the authorities reported unfilled posts – an average of just under four per authority. They claimed to be struggling to recruit senior and experienced planners, which led many to bring in less experienced recruits, often through the degree apprenticeship route, which they greatly valued. It was noted that authorities often lacked specialists, experienced in particular types of project or able to deal with specific technical issues, and this tended to slow planning decisions. The recruitment crisis is rooted in pressure on budgets, preventing authorities from offering competitive salary packages or recruiting the experienced staff they need. Outsourcing jobs and tasks to private companies tends to leave planners in those authorities with fewer opportunities for progression and promotion. It also limits the range of experience gained by newer professionals.

About the resource constraints

Two-thirds of responding authorities claimed to lack the resources – workforce and skills – needed to perform statutory duties. They couldn't develop relationships with their development partners or with their local communities. This tended to result in a more remote planning service, less understood and therefore less valued.

'All of the authorities reported unfilled posts'

For small projects, some of the authorities had suspended their pre-application services whilst others noted a 'reduced capacity' to provide advice ahead of applications. The majority reported increasingly protracted timescales for pre-application enquiries.

Service pressures and negative impacts on staff are of course closely correlated. A significant majority of authorities (80%) drew a link between workload pressures and higher rates of staff turnover. And yet, morale seemed to be holding up at a mid-point between extremely good and extremely poor, with planners feeling that the work they do is valuable. Despite the pressures, job satisfaction remains high.

Working from home more regularly has been identified in some quarters as a challenge for the planning service – it can weaken personal relationships. Whilst our respondents agreed that this was a risk and felt that active learning between colleagues could be reduced, they pointed to time savings from not having to travel to the office – time that could be spent dealing with higher caseloads. On reflection, this may not be a positive: overworked officers cutting themselves off from colleagues, communities and clients so they can

Regional distribution of responding authorities, and type of authority

Regional responses	Total	District	Unitary	National Park	Within Combined
East of England	7	5	2		
South East	8	4	2	2	
South West	9	2	5	2	
North West	3	1	1	1	
North East	2		2		(2)
Yorkshire and the Humber	3		1	2	
East Midlands	2	1		1	
West Midlands	6	5	1		



Only 17% of all rural authorities delivered affordable homes on rural exception sites in 2021/22

simply plough through a mountain of cases, which would of course be lessened, and made more deliverable, if authorities could recruit to those unfilled posts.

Besides staffing, new duties placed on planning authorities, dealing with nutrient neutrality for example, was cited as an added pressure. But it was not an unwanted pressure:

'The wide range of duties is what makes the planning role interesting; there is always something new, bio-diversity [sic] net gain and nutrient neutrality. This should be attractive to professionals.'

Impacts on the planning service and smaller rural housing sites

Despite staff vacancies and pressures, two-thirds of authorities felt that the planning service continued to be timely and high-quality. The right decisions were being made within statutory time scales for major and non-major applications. Planning performance data for the respondent authorities confirmed that the vast majority of applications were being turned around on time. Respondents also felt that they were able to deliver local plan commitments, even if this sometimes meant outsourcing and using consultants.

In relation to small sites, particularly RES, there was limited awareness of how these worked or recent experience of their delivery. This finding was reported by the National Housing Federation in February. Only 17% of all rural authorities delivered affordable homes on RES in 2021/22. Responses to the survey may reflect this pattern, and also the

practice of prioritising larger sites against the backdrop of resource constraints. However, only two respondents explicitly stated that their authority had made a conscious decision to support larger development opportunities over RES.

'An improved planning system requires changes to the system of planning fees and to departmental budgeting'

Concerning community consultations around small rural sites, respondents tended to point to the responsibilities of housing colleagues and rural enablers (independent ones or those embedded in housing departments) to run consultations and build evidence of local need for affordable homes. They were quick to point out, however, that constraints affecting planning were also felt in other departments. They suspected that capacity in housing might be a factor limiting engagement with RES projects: a suspicion borne out by recent delivery data.

Mitigation

How might resource constraints be mitigated? The planning officers responding to the survey drew attention to the importance of 'rural housing enablers', based either in the local authority or funded by Defra and engaged by a branch of the Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE) network. Half of all respondents said that these lend

capacity and momentum to small housing projects, being able to advise communities and deal with a range of planning and housing questions prior to the submission of a planning application (though of course, enablers are not in a position to give pre-application advice).

For rural authorities, the enabling service takes some of the pressure off planning, but this is not a general mitigation. That usually comes from the outsourcing of broader functions (where authorities are able to pay for that outsourcing) to relieve pressure and allow officers to focus on less routine tasks.

'Overworked officers cutting themselves off from colleagues, communities and clients so they can simply plough through a mountain of cases'

Where there is no budget for outsourcing (and also where there is) a key mitigation involves local authorities sharing good practice. Nearly 80% of respondents listed shared learning as key to increasing planning service capacity and most of these said that this was already happening.

They were less enthusiastic, however, about sharing staff or more formal 'shared service' arrangements. Such arrangements – officers splitting their time between neighbouring authorities – supported the training of new staff, but it did not raise the delivery capacity of authorities. Every officer shared was a half full-time equivalent reduction in capacity as far as many respondents were concerned.

But somewhat contradictory to this, just under half of all respondents noted the general value of 'changing working practice, partnering with others, and making less go further' as a necessary response to resource constraints. Our sense was that whilst authorities want to learn from each other, and occasionally pool some skills, they believe that a good planning service requires in-house resource.

What do rural planning authorities want?

Much of what planning authorities want, and what they need to deliver an improved planning system, requires changes to the system of planning fees and to departmental budgeting. They want to be able to recruit and retain senior staff, who play a key role in guiding and inspiring more junior colleagues. More than 90% of authorities stated that staff retention and upskilling were their main resource priorities, next to clarity in planning policy and a stable system, which was not constantly changing and placing further pressure on limited resources. Note: respondents welcomed the widening goals and

duties of planning, which they saw as enriching their jobs; but constant changes to policy, only weakly justified, caused added pressure without discernible benefit. More especially, respondents from our rural authorities wanted the following:

- changes to application fees and budgeting that support increased planning capacity and upskilling;
- Incentives for the retention of senior staff, encouraging them to stay in public sector planning or return to the sector;
- flexibility in the work-life balance available to planners, which increases the appeal of the sector for new entrants;
- continued support for degree apprenticeships, which were seen as a way of equipping people already working in planning, often as assistants, with the skills needed to make a bigger contribution to local authorities;
- an end to the denigration of planning by government, which often colours communities' and clients' expectations of local services, fueling negativity (and adding to the pressure on public planners) even before that service has been experienced.

Our survey, undertaken as part of wider research into the delivery of affordable homes on rural exception sites, provides some insights into the pressures facing the public sector. The CMA report into the functioning of the housing market, noted at the start of this article, highlights the need for a well-resourced planning service able to work closely with development partners. There is continuing uncertainty around how the planning system might be reformed, to deliver against social and economic goals, but there seems to be no doubt that a greater level of resource for planning is urgently required.

● **Prof. Nick Gallent** and **Andrew Purves** are based at the Bartlett School of Planning, UCL. All views expressed are personal.

Notes

- 1 *Housebuilding market study: Final report*. Competition and Markets Authority, 26 Feb. 2024. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65d8baed6efa83001ddcc5cd/Housebuilding_market_study_final_report.pdf
- 2 N Gallent, A Purves, I Hamiduddin: *Factors in the Effective Delivery of Rural Exception Sites in England*. UCL and National Housing Federation, Feb. 2024. <https://www.housing.org.uk/globalassets/files/rural/factors-in-the-effective-delivery-of-rural-exception-sites-in-england-8.pdf>