

PLANNING ON EMPTY

Staffing struggles in local
planning authorities



Planning department capacity FOI

For many years, local authorities, home builders, and all other businesses involved in the planning process have called for increased resources for local authority planning departments, with all interested parties citing that an ongoing lack of resource is one of the main causes of delay in decisions on planning applications and the discharge of planning conditions.

Financial restrictions, large workloads, and an ageing workforce meant that a quarter of local authority planners left the public sector between 2013 and 2020, with 82% of local authorities citing difficulties with hiring planners.¹

Since the current government came to power, ministers have devoted considerable attention to planning policy reform, in particular in redrafting and consulting on a new National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). While these changes to the overarching system are welcome and will help to drive increases in housing delivery, the impact will always be limited unless authorities are sufficiently staffed and resourced to process the planning applications they receive.

The Government has so far announced plans to support local authorities with 300 additional junior planning officers across the country, with confirmation of this – and the funding to support it – announced at the Budget in October 2024. However, as the results of this FOI demonstrate, this is just a drop in the ocean compared to the vacancies planning departments currently face.

HBF is calling on the Government to increase the number of additional planning officers it is currently aiming to recruit to local authorities so that it more accurately reflects the current skills gap, through an increase in funding to the Planning Delivery Skills Fund.

Elsewhere, local authorities need greater funding if they are going to be able to address an increase in planning applications as a result of the Government's recent changes to the NPPF. Fixing the broken planning system is as much about adequate resource as it is procedural changes.

While this research focuses on the lack of planning department resource, it is also important to recognise that other local government functions, which may also be under-resourced, can also have a bearing, both positive and negative, on the timescales for obtaining a planning permission. For instance, a lack of expertise can slow down the processing of Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) statements while insufficient legal resource can slow down the signing of a Section 106 agreement, and local highways departments will be required to sign-off the design and construction of new roads. However, as the main gateway to a planning consent, planning departments are all-important in determining timescales and efficiency of the end-to-end planning process.

Methodology

HBF carried out a survey of local authorities in England and Wales using the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act. The survey asked questions regarding local planning department vacancy rate, use of agency workers and staff turnover for the most recent financial year. HBF received responses from 134 local authorities.

¹ RTPI, [State of the Profession 2023](#)



Staffing levels

The FOI revealed that 80% of councils are operating at below full staffing capacity. On average, council planning department staffing levels are 12% below capacity.

More than half of councils (55%) are operating at staffing levels of 90% or below normal capacity, with nearly a quarter (23%) operating at 80% or below. Fewer than 20% of councils are operating at or above full capacity.

The top ten understaffed councils compared with the notional staffing capacity levels are:

Council	Staffing level as percentage of capacity for 2023/24
Birmingham	47%
North Devon	53%
Waverley	54%
Guildford	58%
Haringey	60%
Trafford	63%
East Sussex	64%
Chorley	65%
Fenland	66%
Tandridge	69%

The Government's proposals for 300 additional local authority planners average out to around one additional planning officer per local authority. However, the FOI survey has demonstrated that a much more significant intervention is needed.

The capacity issues average out to the absence of more than seven full-time equivalent officers per council. Extrapolating this across all local government in England and Wales, it is possible to plausibly estimate a national shortage of over 2,200 planners in local authorities – meaning that the 300 new 'graduate and apprentice' planning officers announced at the Budget represent less than 15% of the current shortfall.

And the problem goes deeper still. Planning departments are already underperforming, with the rate of planning permissions being approved around a third below the 375,000 needed across the two nations to achieve Labour's planning ambitions. Planning permissions need to increase by 152% to reach this level, and so the resource and capacity of planning departments also need to increase.

Therefore, set against the scale of the ambition, the planning skills gap in local authorities may be as much 7,500 full-time equivalent officers – an average of over 23 people per local authority. This is more than 25 times more than the 300 junior officers expected to be recruited with support from the £46 million announced in the Budget.

The lack of resource within local planning departments is manifesting itself in many ways, all of which contribute to the ever-deepening housing crisis.



Just 19% of major decisions are made within the 13-week timescale set out in legislation. between July 2022 and June 2024, a third of councils determined 0 applications within this target timeframe. ²

Additionally, recent research from HBF on Section 106 developer contributions found that there are billions of pounds of developer contributions unspent across the country, with local authorities citing a lack of resource to allocate and monitor these funds as one of the reasons for this. This means that communities are not benefitting from the social and economic benefits that new homes bring, in turn prompting opposition to new homes and blocking housing delivery further.

Turnover

Compounding the short staffing issues is high rates of turnover in some councils. Although the national average of 12% may be seen as relatively low for the public sector, a quarter of councils had a turnover rate of 15% or more in 2023/24.

Almost half of all councils reported that they saw a staff turnover of more than 10% in their planning department in the previous year.

The councils with the highest turnover rate were:

Council	Turnover rate 2023/24
Castlepoint	33%
Wrexham	32%
Cheltenham	31%
Waverley	31%
Teignbridge	31%
Guildford	30%
Gedling	29%
Lichfield	27%
Adur & Worthing	27%
Harborough	25%

Agency workers and spending

As a result of understaffing, a significant number of councils use agency workers for parts or all of the year, and 60% of respondent councils to the FOI indicated that they use agency workers for planning services. While this might present a short-term fix, using agencies is significantly more expensive than the cost of permanent staff. Additionally, agency workers, who may stay just a few weeks at any one council, may be less able to offer the knowledge and experience of how the council works, the local area, development plans, and individuals that longer-term workers can, which also reduces productivity and efficiency.

On average, councils employed approximately four agency workers for 141 days each during the 2023/24 financial year. This is equivalent to 7% of the total workforce.

This means that there was a total of 185,000 days worked by agency workers in the last financial year, the equivalent of more than 730 full time workers.

² MHCLG, [Planning application statistics](#)



In the 2023/24 financial year, there was an average of £200,000 spent per council on agency workers in local authority planning departments, amounting to an estimated total for councils across England and Wales of just under £64 million.

Some councils saw costs significantly above this average:

Council	2023/24 spending on agency workers
Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole	£1,479,076
Haringey	£1,124,475
Waverley	£1,093,392
West Northamptonshire	£1,028,448
Islington	£969,709
Hertsmere	£926,138
Tonbridge and Malling	£906,241
Enfield	£814,588
Uttlesford	£789,936
Blaby	£724,514

With the average graduate starting salary for planners working in local authorities around £26,000, this agency spend could fund almost 2,500 additional planners.

