



Planning at the Coalface: The Planner's Perspective Survey **Preliminary Results**

Executive Summary

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– Executive Summary*

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Planning at the Coalface: The Planner's Perspective Survey

Executive Summary

This executive summary overviews key findings from the 'Planning at the Coalface' questionnaire survey. Complete results are available in the full report.

0.0 Overview and Key Findings

Planners are on the frontline of delivering across a range of government initiatives, and planning reform to help deliver some of these is an ongoing process across Great Britain. As local authority employees, planners are also subject to a range of other changes in the delivery of public services. It is thus of great interest to investigate how planners as a professional group are responding to the reform processes. In order to investigate this, a questionnaire was sent out by post to 1,987 members of the Royal Town Planning Institute who work in the public sector across Britain. The planners surveyed were chosen on the basis of a random sample. A healthy response rate yielded 612 completed surveys and this report overviews the data from those.

Although attitudes and opinions are heterogeneous, quite a nuanced picture emerges. Typical of similar professions, planning is dominated by highly qualified white males (although the percentage of females is much higher in younger age groups). Respondents report that their prime motivator for being planners is a genuine desire to make a difference to people and places but there are concerns their profession is becoming bogged down in bureaucracy. Overall the majority (63.1%) of planners are not convinced the reform agenda helps speed-up and simplify the planning system. There is concern that reforms increase red-tape and have not been properly resourced but there is also support for the reform agenda in principle.

Attitudes towards central government are quite clear-cut with most respondents (54.5%) feeling there is too much central control of planning and complaining central government is not sufficiently joined-up. In terms of planning guidance, responses indicate that front-line planners find it hard to keep track of all the guidance issued and feel they do not have sufficient say in writing it but there is also a feeling guidance helps maintain national standards and improves planning. Furthermore, many planners felt better guidance would help deal with 'big issues' such as climate change and urban regeneration. Linked to concerns about central control, there is a feeling that targets and audit are too obsessed with speed (89.8% agree or strongly agree) and cause stress without properly assessing actual planning outcomes. Nevertheless, planners also report targets have improved the performance of the service and many reject the idea of abolishing targets altogether.

Finally problems or severe problems with recruitment are reported by planners working in 75.1% of authorities across Britain and problems or severe problems with retention of planners are reported by 53.6%. Better pay, better training and career development, and more respect for the profession are suggested as factors that could help tackle these problems. Further research involving in-depth interviews will help expand the preliminary analysis presented here.



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1.0 Introduction

The planning system is undergoing close examination across Great Britain with planning reform agendas being pushed by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), the Scottish Executive Development Department (SEDD) and the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG). There is also interest from HM Treasury, as evidenced in the Barker Reviews (Barker, 2004; Barker, 2006). Increasingly, there seems to be a desire for the planning system to deliver across a range of policy fronts from urban regeneration to environmental protection to delivering economic development. Yet there have been concerns about the skills of those staffing the profession, the planners, which led to the Egan Review (Egan, 2004). The focus on planners is interesting since it is planners who are the focus of this research. This report outlines preliminary results from a questionnaire survey sent out in summer 2006 to planners nationwide examining their attitudes and reactions to planning and wider public sector reform.

The questionnaire with which this report is concerned was sent out as a key component of my PhD project, which is entitled "Planning at the Coalface: Local Authority Planners, Planning Reform and the New Public Management". The research project is joint-funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the DCLG and aims to understand how ongoing reforms of the planning system and of local government and the public sector more generally are affecting the quality and performance of planning in Britain. In order to do this I concentrate on planners working in British local authorities and conceptualise them as 'street-level bureaucrats' (after Lipsky, 1980).

1.1 A Geographical Note

The survey was sent to planners across Great Britain, i.e. in England, Scotland and Wales. Although planning is now a devolved matter, this research focuses on how planners are responding to change rather than specifically assessing the reforms themselves. Thus, it can easily be extended across Britain despite slight differences between planning in England, Scotland and Wales. Given the focus of the research being on the profession, I do not break down the majority of questions by nation when reporting results. Indeed in many areas, such as attitudes to public participation, a quick check revealed no significant differences between planners in England, Scotland or Wales in their attitudes and my interest is in planners as a professional group represented by the RTPI. I have, however, broken the results down when considering direct attitudes to planning reform and central Government since there are clearly differences between the three regimes here that might be of interest. In the questionnaire, it was made clear that 'central Government' referred to the DCLG, SEDD and WAG.

2.0 Mechanics of the Survey

The PhD project that this research is part of is using a mixed methods approach to build up a full picture. Research is being conducted in stages, the initial stage being 17 'exploratory interview's with Directors / Heads of Planning from a cross-section of British local planning authorities (LPAs) to identify how they responded to the major themes of the research. The results of these interviews formed the basis of the survey, the purpose of which was to establish a rigorous, large-scale picture of the planning profession as it stands in Britain today and opinions on key changes occurring in the profession. The questionnaire was administered as a postal survey and was sent out to a random sample of 1,987 planners who were identified as working in the public sector in the RTPI membership list (in 2003 there were 11,500 public sector planners in total (RTPI, 2003) so this sample represents approximately 17% of all British public sector planners). Some 612 questionnaires were received back, representing a response rate of 30.80%, which is healthy for a postal survey. More importantly, almost all of these questionnaire were answered in full, yielding a great deal of useful data. The questionnaire data was entered into computer program



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SPSS allowing initial analysis – including a range of descriptive statistics, frequency tables and graphs – to be produced. Key results are reported below and all results are available in the full results report. Further statistical testing will give more results and analysis in the final PhD thesis.

It is important to note that results reported here are preliminary. Although effort was taken with regards to obtaining a 'representative' sample of planners and the survey responses yielded a vast amount of data, there are some areas where a deeper understanding of the issues will also require more in-depth interviewing which is the next key stage of the research project as a whole. Nevertheless, the survey results alone contain a wealth of information which I am sharing through this report as I feel this will be of interest to a number of people.

3.0 Results and Analysis

The results paint an interesting picture of the planning profession at a time of change and intense pressure to deliver and cover a number of interesting areas. The survey yielded a healthy response rate and various indicators suggest a sample that covers a good range of planners in terms of factors such as location, age, and job type and seniority. The questionnaire used a mixture of closed and open questions, although the vast majority were closed allowing for ease of analysis and for useful numerical data to be produced. Likert agreements (May, 2003) were widely used to allow people to express how much they agreed or disagreed with certain positions.

3.1 Mapping the Profession: Who are the planners?

Results concerning who the respondents were, where they worked, how they became planners and how long they had been planners allows us to paint a sketch map of the planning profession in Great Britain. Responses were received back from planners in all parts of Great Britain, as illustrated by table 1 (overleaf). More of the responding planners worked in the South-East of England region than any other single region but this is in line with the number of questionnaires sent out, and given the random sample, suggests that more planners work in this region than any other. This is hardly surprising given the region's high population and economic prosperity which means development pressures are constant. Planners from all types of Local Planning Authority are present in the response.

The demographic data suggests an overwhelmingly (97.5% of respondents) White profession, with 62% of responding planners aged over 40 years old. Nearly 70% of responding planners were male but a break down of gender against age suggests a higher percentage of female planners amongst the younger age groups. The mean length of service as a planner was 18.1 years in practice, indicating a profession in which people probably work for most of their lives.

The level of qualification is quite evenly split between those with a Bachelor's degree in planning, those with a Diploma in planning (normally taken after a Bachelors in another subject) and those with a Masters in planning, but overall this suggests a highly qualified profession. The majority of planners put their job focus down as either Development Control or Plans and Policy (with slightly more in DC) but a good number suggested varying other focuses for their jobs, from sustainability and environmental planning to regeneration, economic planning, conservation and design. The responding planners came from the junior, middle and senior ranks of the profession, suggesting a representative sample of opinion. Results indicate that the vast majority – 82.2% – of respondents had worked for more than one employer as planners. That said, only 14.1% of those had worked in the private sector, indicating that most local authority planners move from one local authority post to another.

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Table 1 – Part of Great Britain in which responding planners worked and response rates

		Sent Out		Received Back				Response Rate (%)	% of British ++ Population	
		Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Valid %	Cumulative %			
Valid	E Midlands	127	6.39	36	5.9	5.9	5.9	44.09	7.25	
	E of England	185	9.31	56	9.2	9.2	15.1	19.46	9.36	
	Gtr London	159	8.00	58	9.5	9.5	24.6	36.48	13.06	
	NE England	104	5.23	34	5.6	5.6	30.2	32.69	4.37	
	NW England	224	11.27	66	10.8	10.8	41.0	29.46	11.69	
	SE England	365	18.37	122	19.9	20.0	61.0	33.42	13.90	
	SW England	214	10.77	69	11.3	11.3	72.3	32.24	8.56	
	W Midlands	180	9.06	62	10.1	10.2	82.5	34.44	9.15	
	Yorkshire	109	5.49	28	4.6	4.6	87.0	25.69	8.80	
	All England*	0	0	3	.5	.5	100.0			
	Scotland	207	10.42	48	7.8	7.9	94.9	23.19	8.80	
	Wales	113	5.69	28	4.6	4.6	99.5	24.78	5.04	
	Total		1987	100.00	610	99.7	100.0			100.00
		England +	1667	83.9	534	87.3	87.3		32.03	86.16
Missing	99 **			2	.3					
Total				612	100.0			30.80	100.00	

* - NB – this category relates to people who answered that they worked throughout England on planning matters. It is not a sum of English results. To avoid confusion, these 3 results have all been recoded as 'Greater London' and are included in Greater London results from now on (since all 3 respondents were based in that region)

+ - Calculated by summing those for each region detailed above

** - 'Missing' means that that respondent did not complete that particular question, which is represented by the code '99'. This was relatively rare, with the vast majority completing all sections of the questionnaire

++ - This column shows the population of each part of Great Britain as a total of the population of Great Britain according to the 2001 census (Wikipedia, 2006)

3.2 Views on the Profession: Motivated but not respected

As a group, the majority of the responding planners are members of a trade union (59.4% were members of UNISON) and a strong majority (77.4%) see membership of the RTPI as central to their professional status. When reflecting on their peers, most of the respondents agree that local authority planners are motivated by their work (76.6% agree or strongly agree) but most also believe that they are overworked, underpaid and bogged down by bureaucracy and red-tape. Two statements in particular stand out from the results on the Local Authority Planners Likert. One is “planners are resistant to change”, a statement that nearly 70% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with, perhaps unsurprisingly given that planners are in a time of change at the moment and are unlikely to look in themselves in such a negative light. Yet the other statement that nearly 70% disagreed or strongly disagreed with is the statement “planning is a well respected profession”. It is interesting that the vast majority of planners do not associate with this statement and possibly reflective of their own experiences.

A 'Professional' Likert asked responding planners how important they thought various factors were to their sense of being a 'professional planner'. Interestingly, a wide range of factors were all considered either important or very important by a majority of planners. Distinguishing between factors, however, the factor with the highest mean score and by far the greatest number of planners considering it very important is “a sense of making a positive difference to people / places”. This is followed by “freedom to make professional judgements”, “a sense of providing a good service to customers” and “a sense of serving the public at large”. The factor with the lowest score was “ability to work to targets” (rated very important by just 10.9% compared to 68.9% for a sense of making a positive difference to people/places).

This seems to suggest a profession genuinely motivated by ideals of public service and with a genuine motivation to 'make the world a better place'. This is not something easily measured by audit and targets and may cause frustration when planners think they cannot fulfil these ideals. Indeed, in an open question on what could help planners better tackle 'big issues' such as climate change and urban regeneration, one

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of the two most frequently cited answers was 'more time and resources', often commented upon in a manner suggesting many planners feel they have much more expertise and could make a much greater contribution to delivery on these fronts if they were not spending so much time on more mundane bureaucratic tasks and trying to meet endless targets (illustrated by figure 1, below).

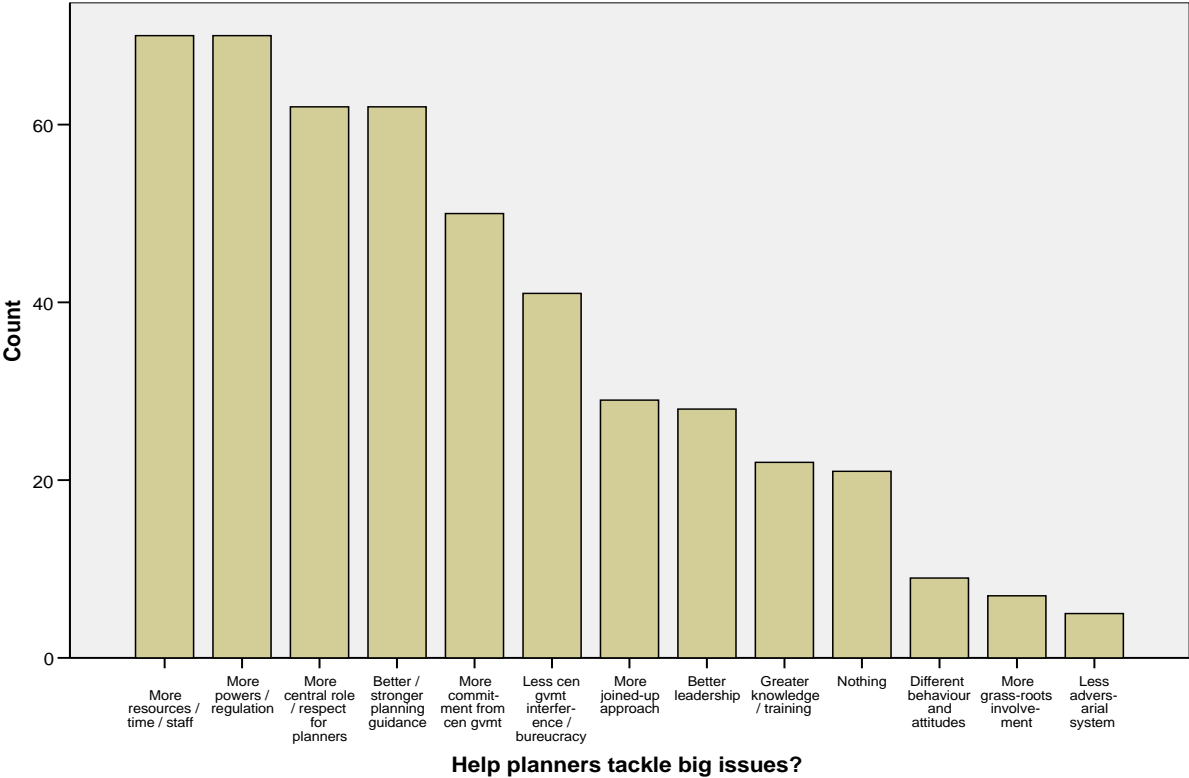


Figure 1 – Factors respondents thought could help them tackle ‘big issues’ (Groups created from responses)

3.3 Planning Reform: Support in principle but red-tape concerns

The recent (and ongoing) programme of planning reforms being pursued by central government planning departments (i.e. the DCLG, SEDD and WAG) provides the background to the whole PhD. It should be noted that the survey was sent out prior to publication of the Barker Review (Barker, 2006).

Opinion is fairly evenly split between the responding planners as a whole as to whether the current planning reform agenda is, on balance, a good thing or not, with, across Britain as a whole, 35.0% thinking the reforms were, on balance, a good thing, 31.2% thinking the reforms were not a good thing and 33.8% unsure either way. That said, when asked if they thought the reforms would help the objectives of speeding up and simplifying planning a strong majority of 63.1% of respondents answered they thought the reforms would help neither objective (compared to 11.6% believing the reforms would help both objectives, 19.9% believing the reforms would help speed up the planning system and 5.4% believing the reforms would help simplify the process).

The exception to this was planners in Scotland, who were much more likely to be in favour of the reforms, possibly because they feel more involved in the reform process or because the reforms are at a different stage there compared to England and Wales. This is illustrated by figure 2, overleaf, which breaks down opinion on reform by location. Similarly, younger planners across Britain were more likely to favour the reforms than older planners, perhaps because they are less used to old ways of doing things or because they are more willing to embrace change.

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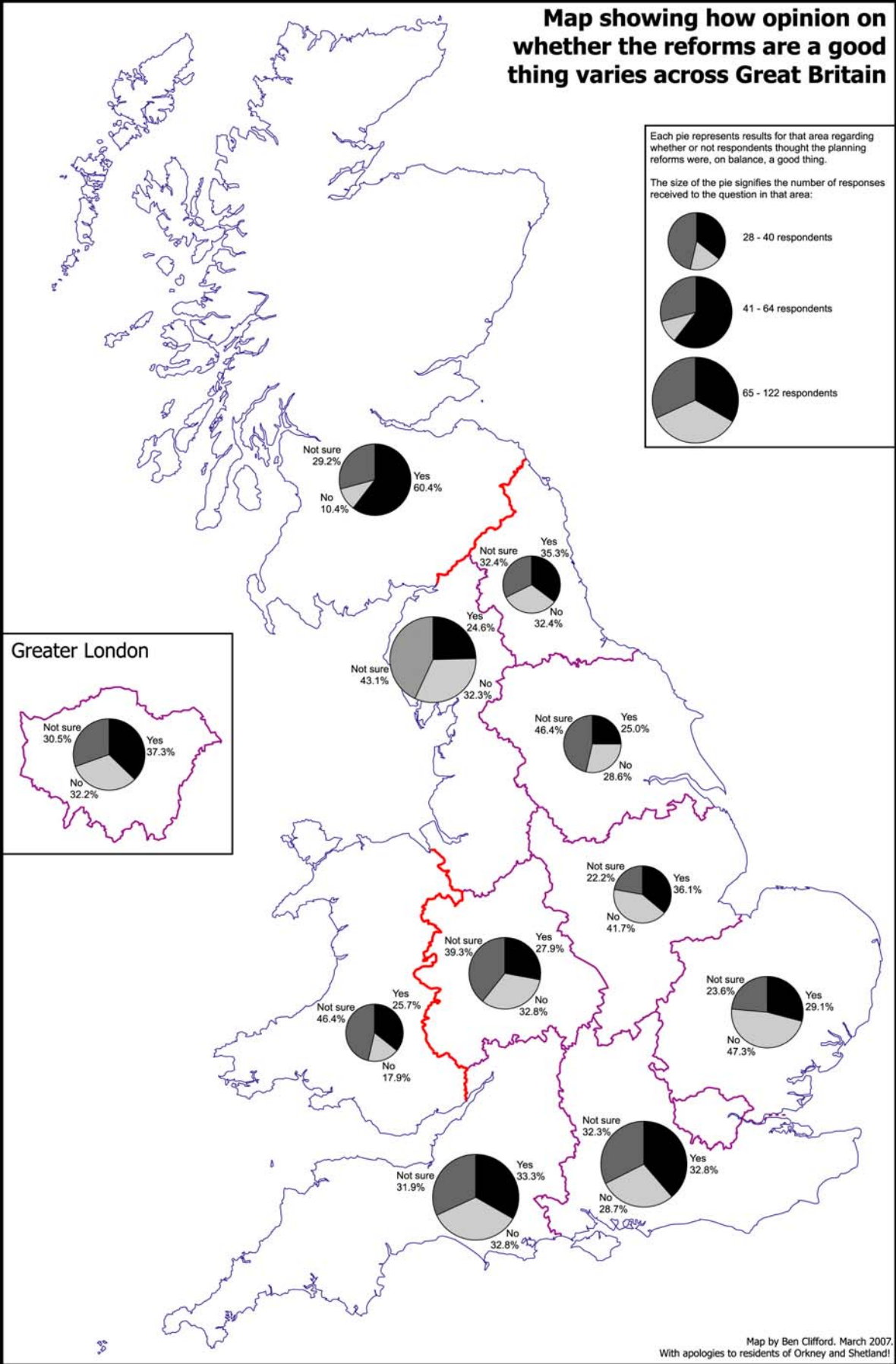


Figure 2 – Map illustrating the relationship between opinion on the planning reforms and location in Great Britain

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When examining reform opinion in more detail via a Likert agreement, it becomes clear that there is concern that the reforms do not, overall, improve the outcomes of the planning process (37.7% disagree or strongly disagree and 42.0% undecided) and strong agreement amongst responding planners (66.6% agreeing or strongly agreeing) that the reforms increase red tape. Yet opinion is not entirely negative about the reforms. Thus despite the uncertainty surrounding whether the reforms have improved planning outcomes, more respondents agree than disagree that they support the reform agenda (45.2% agree or strongly agree – figure 3). Overall, the statements with the strongest agreement are that “the resource implications [of the reforms] have been underestimated” (by some margin; figure 4) and “the reforms increase red tape”, whilst those with the strongest disagreement are that “the reforms are part of a coherent agenda” and “the reforms make me consider changing jobs”. Such resource underestimation might help explain why there was a balance of opinion that the reforms were making people feel stressed whilst the conflicting messages sometimes seen between planning departments and HM Treasury might explain the views about a lack of a coherent agenda.

Despite such concerns, the balance in favour of the reform agenda and not wanting to change jobs due to the reforms suggests to me that the profession as a whole is inclined to embrace and accept change where they perceive a need, and thinks there is a need for some sort of reform, but they are just not entirely happy with the reforms they have got. This is consistent with preliminary interview results.

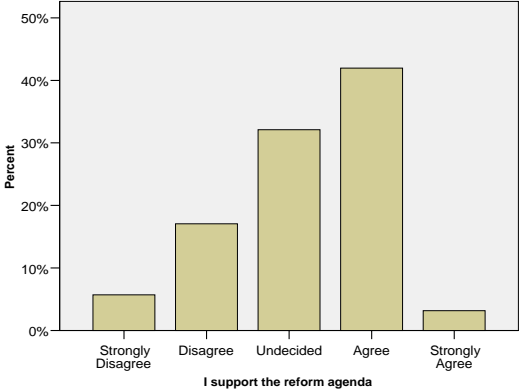


Figure 3 – Opinion on whether respondents supported the reform agenda

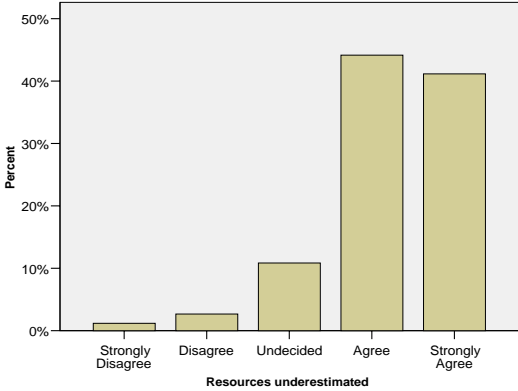


Figure 4 – Opinion on whether the resource implications of the reforms had been underestimated

The Likert agreement was also broken down between England, Scotland and Wales. This reduces the sample size, but this can be balanced against the fact that interesting patterns might well exist. This exercise showed that opinion trends are broadly similar across all three parts of Great Britain with respect to agreement that the reforms increase red tape, agreement that the resource implications have been underestimated, and disagreement that the reforms are part of a coherent agenda, make the planners want to change jobs or improve planning outcomes (but with significant numbers undecided on the last point, especially in Scotland).

Differences can be seen with regard to whether or not planners feel stressed by the reforms (less agree in Scotland and Wales than disagree, unlike England), whether or not planners feel well informed about the reforms (more respondents in England felt well informed than did not, completely unlike Wales, with opinion fairly divided in Scotland) and whether or not the pace of change was too fast (more planners agreed in England than disagreed, unlike Wales or Scotland, in particular). In terms of whether or not the reforms have been radical enough, Scotland differs here in that more planners think they have not been radical enough than think they have been. Opinion on whether or not the reforms have raised the profile of planners and interest in the planning system, finally, also differs between all three with what might be considered a more upbeat assessment in Scotland and Wales with regard to the first statement and in Scotland alone with respect to the second statement.

3.4 Central Government and Planning Guidance: Necessary co-ordination taken too far?

Although planning is a function delegated to LPAs, central Government continues to oversee the system, control the appeals process and issue planning guidance and, as such, central Government is obviously a key figure in the professional life of a front-line local authority planner. Asked about central Government and central Government initiatives, the statement which responding planners most agreed with was “there is too much central control of planning”, with over 54% either agreeing or strongly agreeing (figure 5). Similarly, the statement with which planners were least likely to agree was “central government is sufficiently joined-up”, with over 75% of respondents either disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with the statement. This suggests a quite negative view of central government amongst local authority planners. Given that central Government control seems to revolve increasingly around prescriptive guidance, audit and targets, this is probably unsurprising.

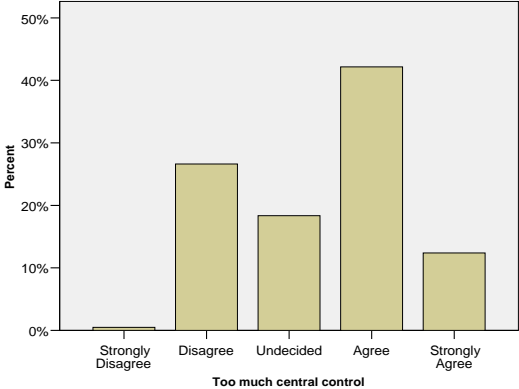


Figure 5 – Opinion on whether there was too much central control of planning

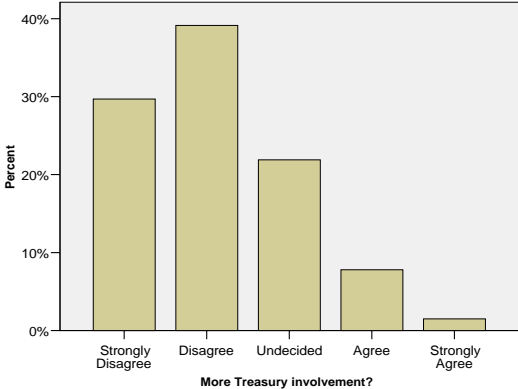


Figure 6 – Opinion on whether HM Treasury should be more involved in planning

In the light of the recent Barker publications, it was interesting to see that the statement there was the second strong disagreement with was “I think HM Treasury should be more involved in planning”, which almost 70% of responding planners either disagreed or strongly disagreed with (figure 6). This may reflect a perceived anti-planning agenda, with the idea that the Treasury wants to slim-down planning (seen as a barrier to increased economic competitiveness), which would obviously be bad for the planning profession. This could also symbolise that planners do not believe economic motivations should be the sole purpose of planning.

That said, the Treasury was not alone in being perceived negatively. Planners were also asked if they trusted their relevant central Government planning department to manage the planning system. In England, 52.1% disagreed or strongly disagreed that they trusted DCLG to manage planning compared to just 11.8% agreeing or strongly agreeing. In Scotland the picture was not much more positive, with just 18.4% agreeing or strongly agreeing that they trusted SEDD to manage planning compared to 40.8% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. The one exception was Wales where 41.3% agreed or strongly agreed they trusted WAG to manage planning compared to 37.9% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. This may be linked to the fact WAG is a much newer institution (the old Scottish Office having dealt with planning prior to devolution) or possibly it is linked to personality factors such as the first Planning Minister in Wales being herself a former local authority planner turned politician.

On a more positive note, a majority of planners agreed or strongly agreed that new spatial planning documents (including Regional Spatial Strategies, the London Plan, the Scottish National Planning Framework and the Wales Spatial Plan) were useful planning tools.

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On the topic of central Government's planning guidance specifically, opinion can best be described as 'mixed'. Most responding planners seemed to think that the government issues too much planning guidance: 60.2% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that government did not issue enough guidance (untangling the double-negative here, most planners seem to think government issues too much guidance). Thus, it seems planners find it hard to keep track of it all – nearly 80% agree or strongly agree they find it hard to keep track of all the guidance, as illustrated by figure 7. A majority of responding planners also agreed that they felt front-line planners did not have enough say in writing guidance, implying it is seen as too 'top-down'.

Nevertheless, healthy majorities of respondents agreed that guidance helped maintain important national standards, said that they regularly used guidance notes (69.2% agreed or strongly agreed) and felt that overall guidance improves the quality of planning (61.2% agreed or strongly agreed, see figure 8). Furthermore, when asked what one thing could help planners better tackle 'big issues' such as climate change and urban regeneration, better planning guidance was the answer given by a large number of respondents. This suggests support for guidance notes in principle, for the idea of national standards, but unease with the quantity, and possible quality, of that currently produced.

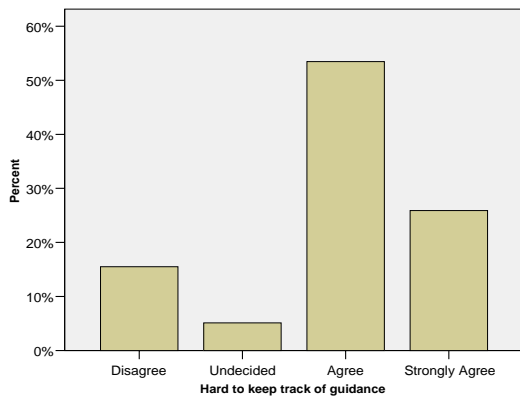


Figure 7 – Opinion on whether it is hard to keep of all the guidance issued

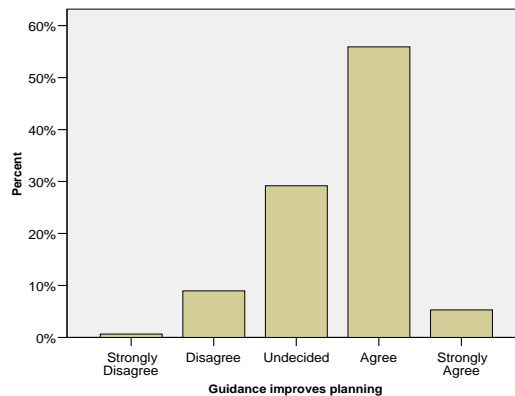


Figure 8 – Opinion on whether guidance notes help improve the quality of planning

3.5 Audit and Targets: Improving performance but at what cost?

Through Best Value and related schemes for local government, auditing and targets have increasingly become a feature of the life of the local authority planner in recent years. The story with auditing of, and targets for, planning services is quite – but not wholly – one of negative perceptions. In an open question on which reforms of local government generally had most impacted planners, audit and targets were by far the most common answer. This was usually accompanied by negative commentary saying that the current targets were too blunt as a tool to measure performance and a number of examples were cited where respondents believed the obsession with speed had actually led to them delivering a worse service overall. Another common answer in England was to mention the Planning Delivery Grant, sometimes positively noting extra funding received but more often commented on negatively for being linked to targets to access the funding. This really does suggest a dislike of the current targets in planning.

More information was provided by a specific section on audits and targeting. These statements showed that the balance of opinion is in favour of auditing having improved the performance of planning services (figure 9, overleaf), having raised their profile within authorities and having altered the way planners work (79.4% agreed or strongly agreed auditing had changed the way they work), but this seems to have been at a cost of greatly increasing the stress staff are under. Indeed 87.3% of responding planners agreed or strongly agreed targets had increased the stress for planning staff. Additionally, almost 60% disagreed or strongly disagreed that auditing had improved their relations with the public.

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Instead, most planners seemed to believe that targets did not correctly assess planning outcomes (over 83% disagreed or strongly disagreed, as illustrated by figure 10) because they were too obsessed with speed as the sole measure of quality (a very strong 89.8% agreed or strongly agreed). Even so, by a small margin the balance of responses disagreed with the idea of abolishing targets all together. Similarly, a clear majority also disagreed or strongly disagreed that targets restricted their scope for professional discretion (71.9% disagreed or strongly disagreed). This suggests to me that planners are not totally adverse to targets, indeed perhaps seeing providing a timely service as part of their professional responsibilities, but the tendency is to reject what is seen as too much of a focus on speed alone and the resulting stress that this can cause. This is coupled with concerns that a focus on speed alone can result in actually providing a worse service to ‘customers’ of the LPA.

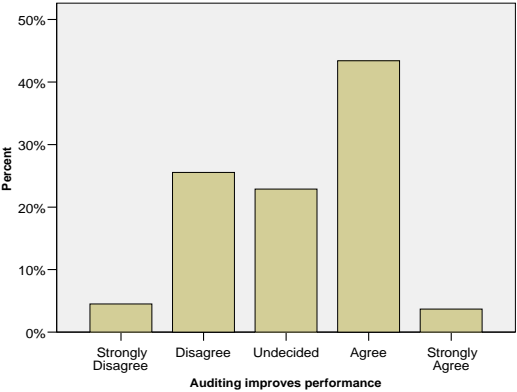


Figure 9 – Opinion on whether auditing has improved the performance of the service

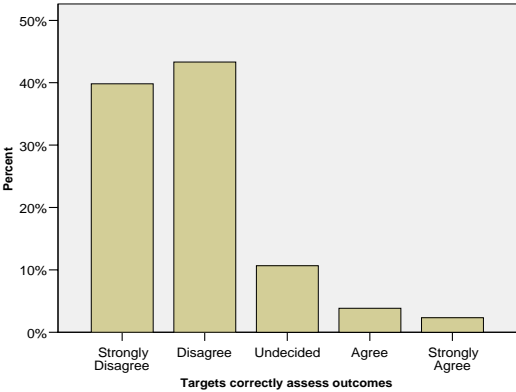


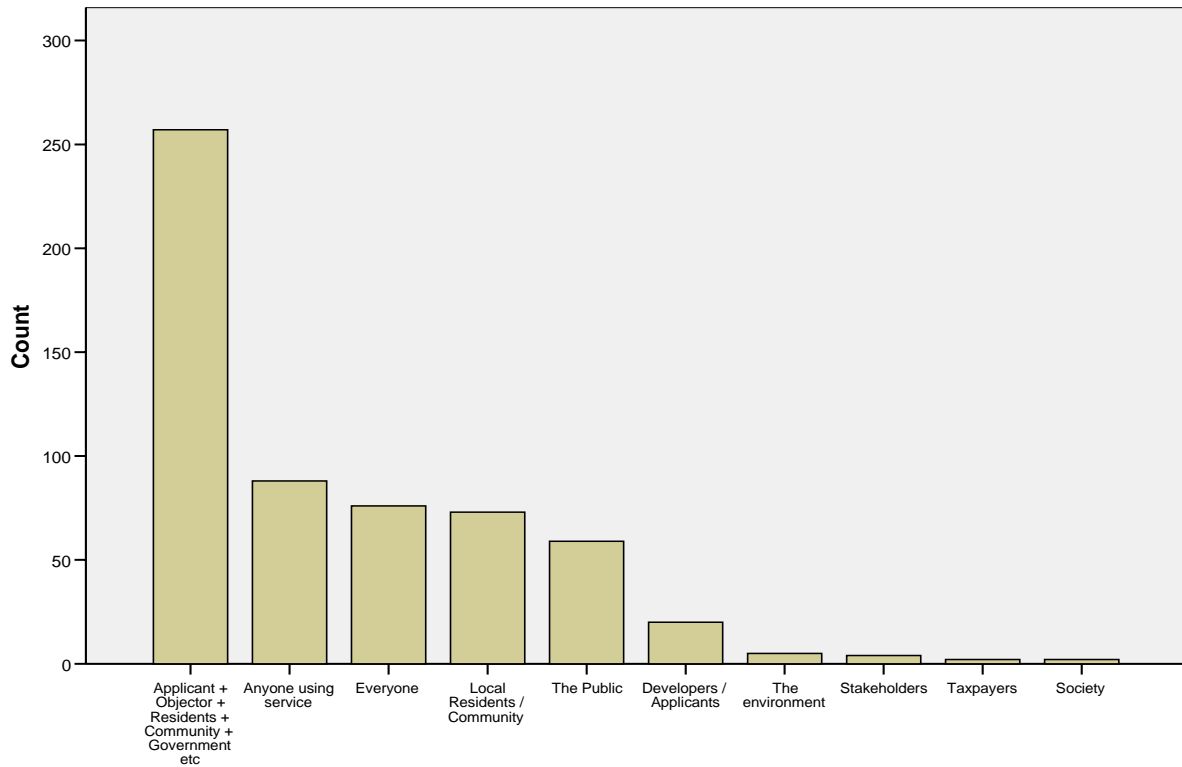
Figure 10 – Opinion on whether targets correctly assess the quality of planning outcomes

3.6 Customers, Culture and Community: Providing a public service in a customer-focused setting

Alongside the growth of audit, the rise of the rhetoric of the ‘customer’ has been a salient feature of the modernization of public services in recent years (linked to the New Public Management (Ferlie *et al.*, 1996). A majority of 60.4% of responding planners reported that they do use the term ‘customers’ in relation to their own work. That still leaves a fairly significant minority of 39.4% who do not use the term. This may be linked to confusion about the applicability of the term in planning, since with both a responsibility to applicants and objectors, as well as wider community goals, planners find it hard to define exactly who their ‘customers’ are in the traditional sense of the word. Indeed, asked to define who they thought the ‘customers’ of LPAs were (in an open question), the vast majority of respondents offered a long list of various parties such as applicants, objectors, the community, residents, businesses, government agencies and even the environment. Other popular answers included ‘everyone’, ‘local residents’ or ‘the community’, ‘the public’ and ‘anyone using the service’ or ‘anyone affected by planning matters’. The idea that developers were the primary customers of LPAs did not get much support (figure 11, overleaf).

A ‘customers and planning’ Likert revealed a clear majority of 88.9% of responding planners either agreeing or strongly agreeing that ‘customer satisfaction’ is important to them (figure 12, overleaf) yet 82.8% agree or strongly agree with the statement “it is important to strike a balance between ‘customers’”. The latter seems a strange statement when viewed in the light of the traditional idea of one set of ‘customers’ and ideas such as ‘the customer is always right’ but instead suggests planners are viewing applicants, objectors and the wider community all as ‘customers’ and all with competing interests and needs that must be balanced.

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Who are 'customers' of LPAs?

Figure 11 – Who respondents thought the 'customers' of LPAs were (Groups created from responses)

Nevertheless, despite concerns over the applicability of the term 'customers' at all (37.2% of responding planners disagree or strongly disagree that the term is useful in planning compared to 38.1% who either agree or strongly agree), most responding planners agreed with the statement that “the applicant pays so has a right to a good service”. Overall, then, these results suggest that planners are keen to provide a good service to all those they come into contact with – which may well link back to professional and public service ideals – yet this can be difficult when different 'customers' can frequently have contradictory demands.

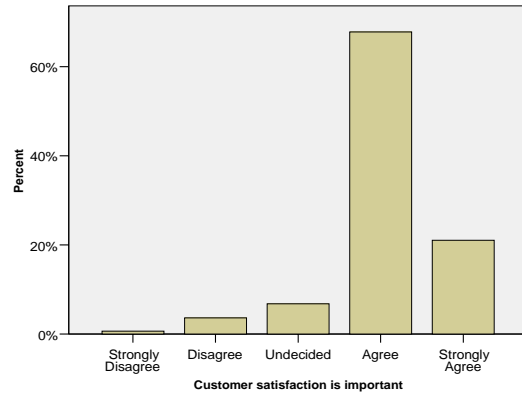


Figure 12 – Opinion on whether 'customer satisfaction' was important to responding planners

Interestingly, while the results suggest planners rate highly the idea of providing a public service and many see the community as their key customers, the results also indicate some heterogeneous views with respect to responding planners' views about public participation (also known as 'community involvement' or 'community engagement'). The two statements with which most planners agreed or strongly agreed in respect to this topic were “public participation exercises are useful” (63.2%) (figure 13, overleaf) and “in practice, public participation is dominated by NIMBYs” (70.1%) (figure 14), which is an interesting contrast. The statement with which there was the highest level of disagreement and strong disagreement was “Being involved with public participation exercises is easy” (72.8%). Similarly, the balance of opinion seems to be against more public participation being needed to improve planning, even though many agree they can save hassle later in the process.

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Several factors are probably in play here: on the one hand, many planners seem to have an ideal of serving the public yet they also like the freedom (and discretion) to make decisions based on their own professional 'expertise'. This in itself may create some conflicting views. Additionally, however, most responding planners think that in practice public participation exercises are dominated by NIMBYs, so while they might support the idea of participation as a community-minded principle, their views of participants is much less favourable. This may also indicate support for the idea of public participation but difficulties for planners faced with putting it into practice and a feeling planners already do public participation (and have been doing so for some time, in particular contrast to some other local services).

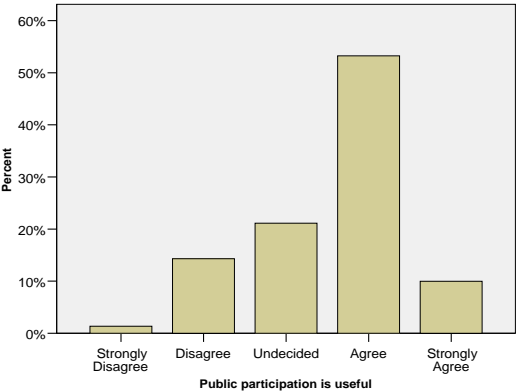


Figure 13 – Opinion on whether public participation exercises are useful

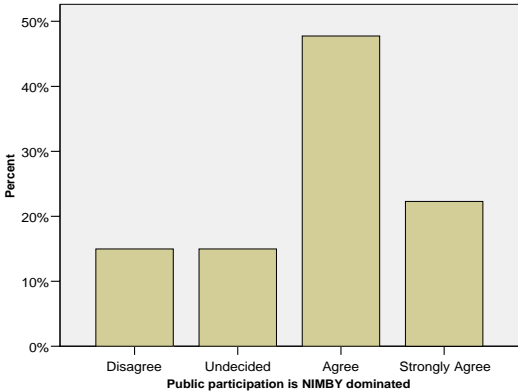


Figure 14 – Opinion on the statement 'in practice public participation is dominated by NIMBY's'

A focus on community engagement has been part of the package of promoting a so-called 'culture change' in planning which has been a key part of the recent moves by central Government to reform the system. Two-thirds (67.7%) of planners reported that they were aware of the 'culture change' agenda. In terms of how much they thought a culture change was needed in planning, the mean average score on a scale of 1-5 (with one being 'not very much' and 5 being 'very much') was 3.26. This indicated a balance of opinion favour of there being a need for culture change although the median of 3.00 indicates this opinion is quite mixed. Figure 15, below, illustrates these results.

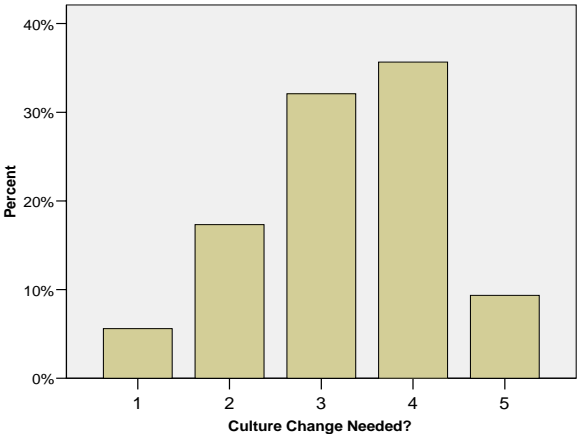


Figure 15 – How much, on a scale of 1-5, respondents thought there was a need for culture change in planning (with 1 representing not at all and 5 representing very much)

Respondents were also given the chance to comment on what they understood the 'culture change' in planning agenda to involve. This was an open question and results were put into categories and coded according to what people wrote in response. Figure 16, below, illustrates the range of answers. An increased focus on community engagement was the most common answer in the question but also frequently cited were further streamlining the process, becoming more 'customer' orientated and being more pro-active and concerned with management rather than control. This range probably reflects fairly

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well the various messages being put out by central Government about planning reform. However, a number of respondents expressed concern that the culture change agenda was too focussed on putting the interests of business over other concerns, feeling the job of planners was always to balance economy with society and environment.

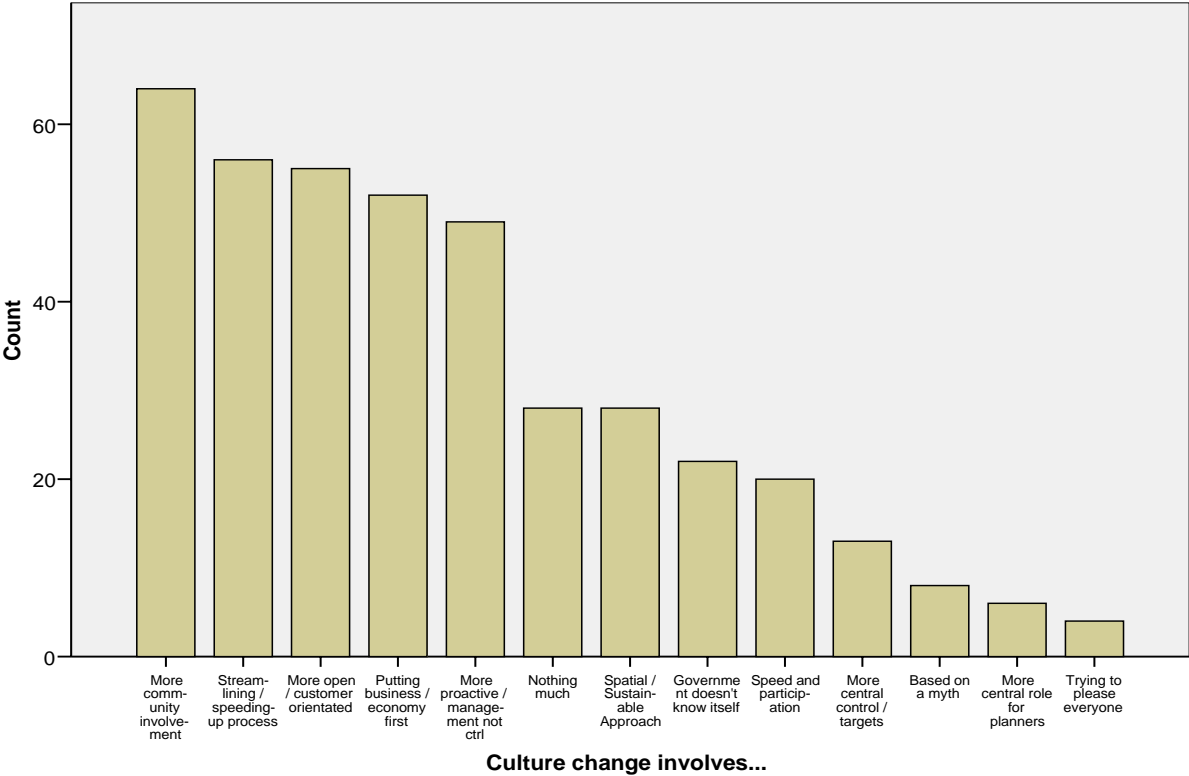


Figure 16 – What respondents thought 'culture change' in planning involved (Groups created from responses)

3.7 Recruitment and Retention Issues: Problems and possible solutions

Alongside resourcing issues surrounding the implementation of planning reform, staffing issues were another major area of concern highlighted by planners in their survey responses. Recruitment and retention have previously been reported as problematic for a number of planning authorities (Durning and Glasson, 2004). When asked in this survey to rate to what extent they had problems with recruitment and retention at their authority on a scale of 1-5 (with 1 being no problems at all and 5 being severe problems), the mean score for recruitment problems reported was 3.93 and the median was 4.00. This indicates that the majority of authorities have some problems with recruiting planners (figure 17, overleaf). In terms of retention, the mean score was 3.47 and the median here was also 4.00, indicating that more authorities experience problems retaining planners than do not experience problems but that is less of an issue than initial recruitment. Figure 18 illustrates the results for recruitment problems. Cross-tabulation of both recruitment and retention with location revealed 'severe problems' were reported by respondents in all parts of Great Britain.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, many respondents answered that their authority was increasingly using agency staff – perhaps to fill the gap. 53.5% of respondents reported an increase in agency staff in the last 5 years compared to 26.5% reporting no change and just 4.9% reporting a decrease. Similarly, the use of consultancies was also reported to have increased by a strong majority of responding planners, with 67.3% reporting an increase, 17.6% reporting no change and only 2.8% reporting a decrease. This increasing trend to use consultancies may well be linked to problems getting sufficient skilled staff to do

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work in-house, or perhaps linked to increasing complexity required in planning documents. Another reason might, of course, be local authority planners being too busy with 'routine tasks' (especially due to the need to meet targets) and so having to put out more specialist tasks to consultancies.

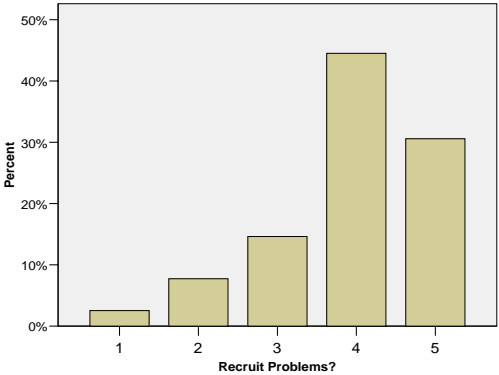


Figure 17 – How severe on a scale of 1–5 respondents judges problems with recruitment at their LPA to be (with 1 representing no problems at all and 5 representing severe problems)

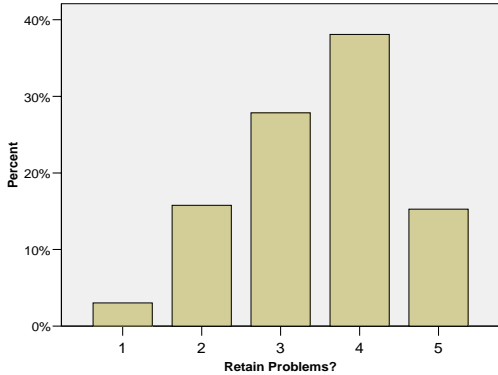


Figure 18 – How severe on a scale of 1–5 respondents judged problems with retention at their LPA to be (with 1 representing no problems at all and 5 representing severe problems)

Given the focus on planners delivering various objectives which is so central to much of planning reform, these staffing problems must be of major concern. A mixed closed and open question addressed this topic by asking respondents what they thought could ease recruitment and retention problems in planning authorities. Respondents were asked to rate six factors on a scale of 1-6, with 1 being the most important and 6 the least, with the added instruction to leave any blank they did not think applied at all. This data was then reversed so that scores of 1 became 6, 6 became 1 and so on (with blank remaining blank). The total scores for each factor could then be added and a mean calculated for each factor, with a higher sum or mean indicating more planners thought that factor was important (see figure 19). The results indicate that responding planners thought that better pay was the key to solving recruitment problems, followed by better promotion prospects within their authority and more respect for the profession. This last topic is something I have written on previously elsewhere (Clifford, 2006).

On the open section, respondents could make their own suggestion of what would help with recruitment and retention. Factors mentioned included a better working environment (including less bureaucracy, perhaps via a mixed upskilling and deskilling process in development control, and better leadership), better training opportunities and an increased public understanding of planning (for example through a school-based initiative). Nevertheless, it seems there are no easy solutions to this difficult problem.

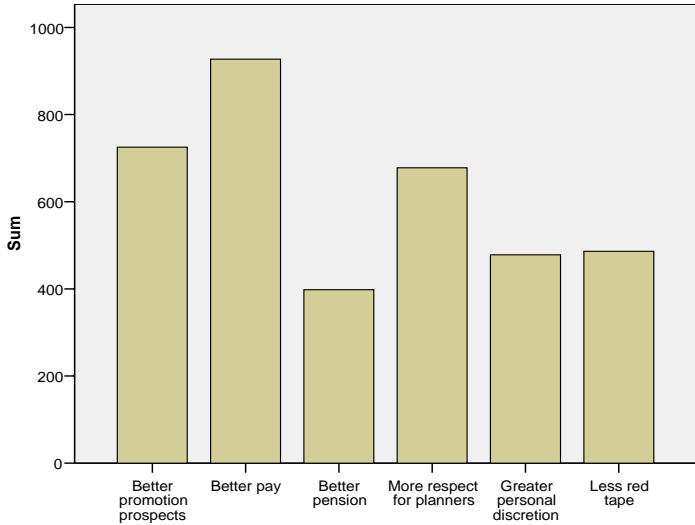


Figure 19 – Graph showing factors respondents thought most important in helping ease recruitment and retention problems with sum of scores for each factor illustrated. Higher score means more responding planners thought that factor important.



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3.8 The next steps? Further in-depth interviews

At the back of the survey instrument planners were asked if they wanted to comment further on any of the issues raised through the medium of in-depth interviews or a focus group. The plan for the PhD research sets out individual in-depth interviews as the next stage of the research but I included focus group participation as well so as to keep my options open. A very encouraging 27.9% of responding planners – 171 people – agreed to be interviewed whilst 13.9% - 85 people – said they would be willing to participate in a focus group. This included respondents in all regions and nations covered by the survey.

4.0 Conclusion

The questionnaire survey has yielded a large amount of good quality data. From this, a picture emerges that the planning profession clearly includes a large number of highly qualified staff who genuinely wish to make a difference to people and places and to serve the communities in which they work. The vast majority see the local community (including residents and businesses) as their key 'customers'. Yet there are concerns that planning is becoming too bureaucratic, with targets that are obsessed with speed and a lack of time and resources to enable planners to play a bigger role in delivering agendas such as sustainability and regeneration. English and Scottish planners do not seem to trust their central government planning departments and planners in England, Scotland and Wales tend to feel there is too much central control and too much planning guidance issued, making it hard to keep track of. Nevertheless, there is support for the idea of guidance (just as there seems to be support for the idea of some sort of audit). Similarly, there is support for an agenda of planning reform but concern that the reforms that exist are increasing bureaucracy and have not been properly resourced. Problems with recruitment and retention are reported across Great Britain, which must be tackled if planning is to help deliver across the range of policy fronts it could help with. Better pay, working environments and public understanding are all suggested as ways of helping tackle these recruitment and retention problems. Further study will flesh-out the preliminary findings here.

These findings will be complemented and enriched by further in-depth interviews with planners across Britain. The results of this further data collection and analysis will be published in due course.

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Ben Clifford, March 2007

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