

# Planning services and the private sector



## Myths explored

Planners are the most difficult staff to recruit and retain after social workers. Does the private sector have a role in delivering council planning services?

## Background

After social workers, planners are now the most difficult council staff to recruit and retain.

Planning services are increasingly stretched, with limited numbers of staff dealing with high numbers of planning applications, growing complexity and a new planning system.

In response to the pressure on the system the Audit Commission has produced a report, *The planning system: matching expectations and capacity*. Based on a national study, the report includes an assessment of the extent to which the private sector can provide services in support of councils' planning functions. You can access the full report at [www.audit-commission.gov.uk/planning](http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/planning).

The Commission is not advocating that all councils should seek the comprehensive involvement of the private sector in providing planning services. However, we have found clear evidence that private consultancies can make an important contribution to improving the performance of council planning services. As a result, when looking to improve planning services, councils should give serious consideration to alternative approaches rather than automatically following the traditional route of simply employing more staff.

## Using the private sector – the myths

Councils have got a track record of using the private sector to support planning services. The majority of this work has involved buying in skills not available in-house, in order to



support policy development (for example, landscape appraisal and retail impact assessment). However, councils have rarely used the private sector to provide mainstream planning services such as processing planning applications and dealing with planning appeals. This is because councils perceive a number of barriers to doing so: these are set out below.

### Myth 1: The private sector is not interested in providing development control services

True

False

There are a number of firms which will carry out development control and related services. These range from sole practitioner planners through to large-scale firms specialising in providing comprehensive service solutions to councils. The private sector can, and does, provide a full range of services from processing minor applications through to major ones and taking in enforcement and appeals work along the way.

### Myth 2: The private sector cannot deliver a comprehensive planning service on behalf of councils

True

False

One council has adopted a new approach to its development control function. The service is provided entirely by a joint venture company between the council and the private sector. The joint venture is operated for profit and has been in existence since February 2005. During this time performance has improved along with user satisfaction.



### Myth 3: There may be a market for that sort of thing in the South but not in the North

True

False

The joint venture company referred to above operates in the North of England. It is providing its services to other local councils, as well as on a national basis.

### Myth 4: Using consultants ruins service to users

True

False

With the effective use of information technology there is no reason why using consultants should reduce service to users. For example, the hard copy of a file might be with the consultant but if the information is recorded electronically it can be made available to members of the public at the council's planning reception. If the information is not available this points to a failure of the council's systems rather than a problem linked to the use of consultants. In some cases, use of the private sector has greatly improved the user experience, with consultants meeting with applicants and neighbours at times and locations convenient to the users.



## Myth 5: Using consultants for development control increases workload because you have to supervise them so closely

True

False

All council development control services have built-in checks to make sure that recommendations are the right ones based on the material considerations and merits of the case. This is true of delegated planning applications up to committee reports dealing with major applications with section 106 agreements attached. There is no reason why consultants should not fit in with existing sign-off procedures. Councils do not need to invent new ones.

## Myth 6: Consultants cannot do development control because of conflict of interest

True

False

It is true that using consultants does present potential for conflict of interest. For example, where an application is submitted for processing to a council's consultant from one of the consultant's private sector clients. However, where there is a potential conflict, the consultant should declare it in advance, in much the same way that councillors declare interests and therefore do not vote on some planning applications. Councils that use the private sector for development control work stress the need to be aware of potential conflict of interest but have



experienced no problems in this area. In some cases, using consultants can reduce potential conflicts of interest, for example where the planning application relates to land in council ownership.

## Key questions for councillors and staff

Do we need to increase the support for our planning department?

What are our options for doing so? How do we decide what solution is most appropriate?

Does the council perceive the use of the private sector for planning – particularly around development control – as an opportunity or a threat?

Given the national shortage of planners, can the private sector usefully contribute to mainstream routine planning tasks as well as more specialist work?

The Commission has produced a tool to help councils engage the services of the private sector in the provision of planning services. This is called *Dos and don'ts of buying planning services* and is available alongside the national report at [www.audit-commission.gov.uk/planning](http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/planning).

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