

Housing

Summary

February 2006

# The planning system

Matching expectations and capacity

- 1 This report aims to help councils and others involved in the planning system address the issue of capacity in planning departments. It seeks to:
  - assess current expectations of the planning system;
  - evaluate the extent to which the government's expectations have been communicated to stakeholders; and
  - identify how councils can increase capacity.

## Key findings

- a) The government's objectives for the planning system are clear and consistent and have been well communicated to stakeholders. However, not all stakeholders agree with the agenda and this poses a risk to delivery, particularly in relation to new housing.
- b) The government's focus on speed, particularly in relation to major planning applications, is having negative effects on the quality of services in some councils.
- c) There is a shortage of experienced planners affecting councils' ability to provide planning services, but the private sector can provide comprehensive services under the direction of the planning authority.

## Background

- 2 The government has put planning at the centre of its vision to create sustainable communities. It has introduced wide-ranging reforms, designed to speed up the system and recast planning as a strategic, proactive force. These reforms are taking place at a time when planners are the second most difficult post to recruit to in local government. This places a strain on a system charged with responding to increasing user and government expectations and dealing with nearly 700,000 planning applications each year.

## Main findings

- 3 There are five main elements to the government's policy objectives for planning:
  - to support housing growth in the areas identified for such growth;
  - to support regeneration/market renewal in other areas;
  - to ensure that all development is socially, economically and environmentally sustainable;
  - to move from the periphery to the centre of councils' activity; and
  - to deliver change quickly.
- 4 The Commission found that these objectives are clear and largely consistent across the range of planning policies and, in general, are effectively communicated to stakeholders. However, not all stakeholders support the objectives.
- 5 The study found that local people and some councils are not always comfortable with the scale of change associated with significant new housing or major regeneration proposals. The reforms to the planning system are designed to streamline and speed up the process while giving communities greater involvement in the decision-making processes through their

councils. To realise these ambitions, councils will have to be very clear with their communities about what issues are for debate and when. They will need effective engagement strategies appropriate to each stage in the process to ensure this happens.

- 6 The Commission has found that the government's emphasis on speed is having negative effects on the quality of services delivered by some planning departments. While we believe that targets on speed are important in improving standards of service, where councils have effective pre-application agreements in place the government should look at changing the basis for measuring council performance. In addition, government action is required to ensure that planning applications which have gone beyond their target date are not neglected.
- 7 Councils are obliged to consult with highways authorities and government agencies on technical and specialist aspects of planning applications. These agencies are known as statutory consultees and they face their own pressures as they start to respond to stricter performance management regimes. Many consultees are devolving greater responsibility to councils. For example, English Heritage expects councils to decide whether proposed changes to some listed buildings are acceptable, without consulting the agency directly. While appropriate, such a move has resource implications for councils already struggling with limited capacity.
- 8 The government is starting to address the shortage of planners. Unfortunately, many of its initiatives will not result in sufficient numbers of planners entering the system in the short term. Given this, councils need to look to other solutions to close the gap between what is expected of the system and their limited capacity. Use of pre-application processes and sharing resources with other councils can certainly help. However, to make a significant contribution to their capacity councils need to consider contributions from the private sector.
- 9 The market for private sector planning consultancies has grown significantly over the last ten years and councils now regularly use external organisations to assist them with specialist work. What remains less common is using the private sector to deliver mainstream planning services such as processing applications and appeals work.
- 10 However, the Commission found examples of councils successfully using consultants to assist with mainstream work, including an example where the whole development control service was provided by a private sector partner, under the direction of the planning authority. These models can have a significant impact on performance and can free up council staff to work on more contentious or strategic issues. Importantly, in all these instances, responsibility for the decision still rests with the council as the planning authority.

## Recommendations

### Councils should:

- balance their inclination to provide planning services in-house with consideration of:
  - solutions available through the private sector, given the current shortage of planners and skills; and/or

- sharing planning resources with other councils, particularly to support the preparation of local development frameworks.
- develop effective approaches to pre-application discussions, which involve councillors, to ensure that the issues relating to proposed planning applications are identified and addressed early in the process; and
- engage effectively with their local communities at each stage of the planning process having clarity about what issues are open for debate at that stage. Concerns about strategic housing numbers should be properly expressed and debated as part of the development of the regional spatial strategy. Debates outside of this stage need to be managed to ensure that delivery of housing to those in need is not frustrated.

### The government should:

- continue to provide strong national leadership and encourage councils to assume the role of community leaders in promoting the need for housing growth and in allaying fears around such growth;
- continue to address supply side issues through measures such as funding university places to ensure that the number of planners entering the system rises in the longer term;
- amend the performance indicator relating to processing major applications so that it measures compliance with planning delivery agreements (where these exist) rather than monitoring performance against the 13-week target; and
- introduce a performance indicator to measure the ratio between the number of current planning applications and the number of applications determined by a council in any one quarter, to prevent the build-up of backlogs.

### Developers should:

- engage with councils at the pre-application stage and develop their proposals sufficiently to allow meaningful discussion of the planning issues.

### Statutory consultees should:

- produce clear guidance and support to councils in developing their new role of determining more technical planning matters at a local level.

**i** Copies of the full report are available at: [www.audit-commission.gov.uk](http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk) or to order a printed copy telephone: **0800 502030** quoting stock code: **GNR3312**

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