

Planning on Empty

Examining staffing levels, vacancies, staff turnover and the use of agency workers across planning departments in councils in England and Wales during the 2025/26 financial year.

paragon

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Contents

Forewords

Introduction

Findings

Staffing levels

Vacancies

Turnover

Agency Staff

Conclusions and recommendations

2

5

6

6

7

7

8

8



Forewords



“Without sustained investment in planning teams, there is a real risk that the benefits of planning reform will not be fully realised”

Neil Jefferson, Chief Executive at the Home Builders Federation

So often when talking about planning reform, the conversation focuses on the NPPF and the government’s national housing targets. While this ambition is welcome, it neglects to acknowledge just how important the machinery underpinning these things is in increasing housing delivery.

A well-functioning planning system depends on local planning authorities having the people, skills and resources needed to process applications efficiently, prepare local plans and implement an increasingly complex range of planning responsibilities. This report demonstrates that many councils simply do not have the capacity to do so. Despite efforts to strengthen planning services, staffing shortages remain widespread, recruitment continues to be challenging, and many authorities are relying on costly agency staff to fill critical gaps.

The findings provide clear evidence that the capacity gap is widening at a time when expectations of local authorities continue to grow. Without sustained investment in planning teams, there is a real risk that the benefits of planning reform will not be fully realised and progress towards the Government's ambition of delivering 1.5 million new homes will be slowed. At a time when Government has set an ambitious target of delivering 1.5 million new homes and introduced significant planning reforms to support that ambition, ensuring local authorities have the capacity to implement change is more important than ever.



The report also makes clear that this challenge is solvable. Sustained investment in planning capacity, alongside reforms that properly recognise the resource implications of new policy and regulatory requirements, would help create a more resilient planning service capable of delivering timely decisions, supporting sustainable development and enabling the Government's housing and growth ambitions to be realised.

We hope this report contributes constructively to the ongoing discussion about planning reform and serves as a reminder that successful reform depends not only on changes to policy, but also on the people responsible for putting those policies into practice.

“Even the most pragmatic housing targets will remain out of reach if local planning authorities lack the people, expertise and capacity” required to meet the scale of the challenge”

Neal Moy, Managing Director at Paragon Development Finance



The UK cannot solve its housing shortage without a planning system that is properly resourced. While policy reform rightly gets a lot of airtime, the reality is that even the most pragmatic housing targets will remain out of reach if local planning authorities lack the people, expertise and capacity required to meet the scale of the challenge.

This report investigates how the issue is playing out across regions. Throughout the nation, councils are operating at an average of just 80% of full staffing capacity whilst vacancy rates continue rising and planning teams manage an increasingly complex regulatory framework on top of existing workloads. Over time this has created a culture where delays are entrenched, creating increased costs and uncertainty for developers and ultimately stalling housing delivery.



What's more, our experiences at Paragon have taught us that staff shortages in planning departments don't just lead to delays. Where there is not enough manpower and skilled experience, we often see inconsistencies in decision-making too. A significant amount of the clients we work with have had their planning applications rejected but ultimately win consent after appeal. The six months or longer typically spent waiting for that appeal decision places significant strain on their cash flow and holds up the delivery of homes that are often in short supply.

When planning decisions take longer than they should, capital stays tied up for extended periods, reducing developers' ability to reinvest in future projects and restricting the pace at which lenders can support new schemes. Often, delays aren't even caused by the merits of a scheme, but by stretched planning departments lacking the resource needed to process applications efficiently.

Paragon serves hundreds of SME developers delivering homes, regeneration projects and specialist schemes nationwide. A large proportion of our clients are repeat customers because we recognise their expertise and appetite to build. What often holds them back is a planning system that is struggling to keep pace with demand.

This has consequences not only for housing delivery but also for the economy. Our new Government has said it wants to deliver growth in every postcode and housing is a proven driver of that growth, with every new home supporting jobs, investment and local supply chains.

Investing in planning capacity should therefore be central to delivering that ambition. Ensuring local planning authorities have the talent and resources to operate effectively is one of the clearest ways Government can support housing delivery, bring economic growth and ensure communities receive the homes and infrastructure they need.

This report is a timely call to action, and Paragon is proud to back the HBF's recommendations.



Introduction

The effectiveness of the planning system is fundamentally dependent on the capacity and capability of local planning authorities (LPAs). While recent reforms to national planning policy and infrastructure delivery have sought to accelerate housing delivery, persistent staffing shortages within planning departments continue to undermine the ability of councils to process applications efficiently and implement proposed changes effectively.

To better understand the scale of the challenge facing local authority planning teams, the Home Builders Federation (HBF) conducted a Freedom of Information (FOI) survey of councils across England and Wales. The survey examines staffing levels, vacancy rates, staff turnover, and the use of agency workers within planning departments for the 2025/26 financial year.

The findings reveal a growing and systemic resourcing crisis. Planning departments are operating significantly below full capacity, with widespread vacancies across planning officer and senior leadership roles. Despite Government commitments to increase planner numbers, the staffing gap has widened considerably over the past year, leaving councils increasingly reliant on costly agency staff and struggling to recruit and retain permanent employees.

Compounding this issue is the significant increase in additional duties introduced in recent years, such as biodiversity net gain, nutrient neutrality and flooding, as well as the implications of multiple major planning reforms and local government reform, embedding uncertainty about future workloads and expectations for planning departments.

Only around 20% of major planning applications (applications for developments with 10 or more units) are decided within the statutory 13-week period. These staff shortages are having tangible consequences for the performance of the planning system. Delays are becoming embedded throughout the development process, from the determination of planning applications to the completion of legal agreements.

Prior research from HBF has concluded exactly how severe these delays can be, with S106 agreements taking an average of 515 days to complete. Additionally, there is £9 billion in S106 contributions currently held unspent by local authorities, partly due to insufficient resources hindering councils when it comes to monitoring and allocating funds, leaving communities without important infrastructure. Throughout our research into these issues, local authorities have consistently cited staff and resource



constraints as one of the major reasons why certain duties are unable to be fulfilled, or statutory timelines met.

It is clear that without a much more significant intervention into resolving LPA resource constraints, the backlog in local authorities is only going to continue to pile up. This is particularly relevant given the Government's renewed ambition to significantly increase local plan coverage, and the new 30-month timetable for LPAs to prepare and adopt local plans. Without expanding resources, LPAs will remain unable to process and respond to planning applications, prepare local plans, and ultimately help the government achieve its 1.5 million new homes target.

Findings

Staffing levels

The FOI found that across the country, councils are operating at an average of 80% of full staffing levels. The average local authority planning department in England and Wales has just under 36 staff. At full capacity, this number should be 44. Of the councils we received responses from, 90% are operating at a staffing level below full capacity. Almost half of these (44%) have a staffing level that is 80% or less than full capacity.

This has worsened compared to the results of the same FOI exercise just a year ago. In 2025, 80% of councils were operating at below full staffing capacity (2026 = 10% increase year on year) and under a quarter were operating at 80% or below (2026 = 21% increase).

While the Government has significantly increased its investment to improve LPA capacity – with an aim of 1,400 new planning officers this parliament – this is still just over 50% of the required amount, and the reality of this being achieved is slipping further away, with the planning skills gap increasing year on year.

This commitment represents, on average, just over 4 additional planned per local authority. However, the actual number required is an average of 8.4 additional planners per local authority – nine times the government's target. In total, 2,660 planners are required to bring LPAs up to full staffing capacity. This shortfall has increased since HBF undertook the same FOI exercise last year. Then, the staffing gap was 2,200. In a year, this has increased by 20% to 2,660.



While the Government has made efforts to resolve some of the overarching issues with the planning system, and changes introduced by the new NPPF and Planning and Infrastructure Act are welcome, little attention has been paid to how these well-intentioned changes can be practically implemented. At the same time, an increasing number of new regulations are being introduced at the planning stage, increasing the administrative burden on planning teams.

Vacancies

Planning officers and department leads are facing the biggest challenges when it comes to staff resources. 28% of vacancies were for planning officers, and 21% were for team leads/principal planners. A further 20% of vacancies were for technical and administrative staff. Just 3% of vacancies were for director-level roles.

Although the vast majority of local authorities are understaffed when measured against their own full capacity quantifiers, one third of local authorities do not have any vacancies advertised, and almost a half (45%) had fewer active vacancies than would be required to reach full capacity, suggesting that many authorities are operating with sustained staffing shortfalls that are not being actively addressed through recruitment. This may indicate that budget constraints are limiting the ability of local authorities to recruit to their full establishment.

This is resulting in teams continuing to operate with prolonged vacancies and increasing pressure on existing staff while, at the same time, the role and responsibilities of planning teams continue to expand, with additional demands arising from new requirements such as Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) and the forthcoming Building Safety Levy (BSL). These changes increase the technical and administrative responsibilities placed on already stretched departments.

Turnover

Across local authorities, there was an average turnover rate of 11% - i.e., 11% of the total headcount had left the department in the past 12 months.

Almost a third of councils (30%) had a turnover rate of 15% or higher for the last year. This is an increase on the previous year, where a quarter of councils had a turnover rate of 15% or more.

A small sign of improvement can be found in the number of planners that have left and that have been recruited to local authority planning departments in the last financial



year. On average, council planning departments were 0.85 people bigger in the 2025/26 financial year than in 2024/25.

Of those that were recruited into planning departments in the last year, 80% were into permanent roles while 20% were for fixed-term roles.

Agency Staff

As a result of understaffing, a significant number of councils use agency workers for parts or all of the year, and 55% 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 or local area works that longer-term workers can, which also reduces productivity and efficiency.

Even taking into account that almost half of councils did not use agency staff, there was an average spend among all respondents of almost £200,000 per council.

Some councils saw agency costs significantly above the average. Charnwood Council spent over £1.7 million on agency staff, while North Herts Council spent £1.2 million in the last year.

Conclusions and recommendations

The findings of the FOI demonstrate that the resourcing pressures facing local authority planning departments in England and Wales are continuing to worsen and planning teams are operating increasingly below full capacity.

The scale of the staffing gap now far exceeds current Government commitments. While the pledge to recruit 300 additional planners is welcome, it represents only a fraction of the estimated 2,660 planners required nationally to restore full operational capacity. Moreover, the staffing shortfall has increased substantially over the past year, indicating that recruitment and retention challenges are currently outpacing efforts to address them.



Persistent vacancies, high turnover rates, and growing reliance on agency staff are reducing continuity, experience and knowledge, and overall efficiency within planning departments. At the same time, councils are being expected to manage an expanding and increasingly complex range of policy requirements, including Biodiversity Net Gain, nutrient neutrality, flood risk, building safety, and wider planning system changes.

Delays to planning decisions, Section 106 negotiations and discharge of conditions are becoming entrenched across the development process, undermining efforts to accelerate housing delivery and subsequently economic growth. Without sufficient staffing and resources, the objectives of recent planning reforms risk being significantly constrained by LPAs' limited capacity to implement them effectively.

To successfully address these issues, there are a number of steps government could take:

- Increase long-term funding for local planning authorities to allow councils to recruit and retain permanent planning staff, rather than relying on short-term or project-based solutions. Additional funding should reflect the growing complexity and volume of responsibilities placed on planning departments. process covered, and whether agreed performance milestones were met. This would improve transparency, enable benchmarking between authorities and help assess whether PPA income is delivering measurable improvements in planning performance and housing delivery.
- Ensure that any new planning policy, regulatory requirement, or legislative reform is accompanied by a clear assessment of the resourcing implications for local authorities, with additional capacity funding provided where necessary
- Monitor and report annually on local authority planning capacity, including staffing levels, vacancies, turnover, and performance metrics, to provide greater transparency, enable applicants to plan more easily and allow government to respond more effectively to emerging pressures.



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The Home Builders Federation (HBF) is the principal representative body for private sector home builders and the voice of the home building industry in England and Wales. HBF member firms account for some 80% of all new homes built in England and Wales in any one year, and include companies of all sizes, ranging from widely recognised national firms, through regionally based businesses and small local companies.

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